

STAGES

What makes Frankenstein's Creature so monstrous, anyway?

At Merrimack Repertory Theatre, a new production tries to contextualize the creation of the famous story

By **Terry Byrne** Globe Correspondent, Updated October 31, 2024, 1:04 p.m.



Jay Wade and Jasimine Bouldin in "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein." MIKKI SCHAFFNER

Mary Shelley was only 18 when she first told a group the story of "Frankenstein," and the novel was published when she was just 20.

“In 1816, no one was clamoring for a woman to write anything, let alone ghastly, gothic horror stories,” says playwright David Catlin, whose adaptation, [“Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,”](#) will be performed at [Merrimack Repertory Theatre](#) in Lowell Nov. 8-24.

Although there have been lots of adaptations of “Frankenstein” over the past two centuries, Catlin said he wanted to know more about what inspired the story.

“I was curious about how the Creature became ‘monstrous,’ a word Mary Shelley never used,” Catlin says. “But also, I wanted to go back to Mary’s life, and the ideas and events that were influencing her imagination at that time.”

Catlin’s curiosity led him to research the group of five Romantics whose trip famously led to the creation of “Frankenstein.” The group had escaped to a villa, but found themselves trapped indoors for days because of bad weather and challenged each other to a ghost storytelling contest to pass the time. The participants included the poet and scoundrel Lord Byron, his sometime girlfriend Claire Clairmont, John Polidori (Byron’s doctor), poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Shelley’s wife Mary.

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Mary Shelley's tale told of a student sewing together pieces of body parts that could be 'galvanized' or reanimated. At the time, scientific experiments were attempting to bring dead prisoners back to life with electricity. While those experiments were a topic of conversation among the house guests, Catlin says Mary's personal situation — her father rejected her after she eloped with Percy Shelley, and Percy turned to other women while she was grieving the loss of their baby — informed the story's themes of rejection, loss, and abandonment.

"I read 'Frankenstein' in high school," says Jasimine Bouldin, who plays Mary Shelley in the production, "but I didn't know much about Mary. This play blends the relationships of the real people involved with the fictional tale."

"We use a framing device to open the play," says Catlin, "starting in the Villa Diodati, where the friends were staying, when it's Mary's turn to tell her ghost story."

As the listeners become drawn into her story, they become the characters in "Frankenstein." In the course of the drama, incidents pull the characters in and out of the play within the play, raising the stakes among the Romantics in the room telling the story, even as the Creature, Victor, Elizabeth Lavenza, and other characters within the tale move toward their tragic climax.

"Percy becomes Victor," says Bouldin, "and in the moment of storytelling, you can see how she's trying to show what loss is, to see what Percy is putting her through."

Although she plays the titular character, Bouldin says she does not feel the pressure of carrying the play.

"It's really an ensemble piece, since we shift back and forth between characters, time periods, and realities," she says.

Taking "Frankenstein" back to the moment of creation allows the audience to see layers of the story that still resonate today.

“It starts with the complicated relationships between these people at the villa,” Bouldin says.

“David Catlin’s adaptation is both theatrical and cinematic. There are moments when the characters in ‘Frankenstein’ are telling their story,” she says, “that knocks them back into the room where they have been partying, and you can see the ways in which Mary, by having her husband Percy play Victor, is trying to get her partner to feel some of her pain, to share their loss together.”

“I was fascinated by the Creature’s ability to live despite being constantly rebuffed and rejected,” says Catlin. “When you think about what Mary was going through at the time, and the losses she endured throughout her life, it made me think about where the impulse for creation comes from, and what we need to love.”

More than 200 years after it was published, the themes of “Frankenstein” still resonate.

“The beauty of theater is that each individual can take away something that is meaningful to them,” says Bouldin. “In terms of scientific advances, it’s easy to substitute AI for galvanism. But at the end of the day, it’s about accountability and responsibility for the impact the choices we make have on those we love.”

New Plays in Process

Fresh Ink Theatre offers their 14th season of Ink Spot Readings of new plays in development. On tap Nov. 1-3 are “Bone by Bone,” by Sharifa Yazmeen, which follows the efforts of a couple to navigate their relationship inside a haunted attic; and “Sugar,” by Tara Moses, which tells the story of a young woman working 90 hours a week and still coming up short on funds until she gets an offer she can’t refuse: The Sugar Bowl.

Sunday’s staged reading will be followed by a conversation with the artists and a reception. Tickets are “pay what you wish” starting at \$10.

<https://freshinktheatre.org/ink-spots>

MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN

Adapted by David Catlin. Directed by Brian Isaac Phillips. Presented by Merrimack Repertory Theatre, Lowell, Nov. 8-24. Tickets: \$15-\$50.

<https://mrt.org/show/frankenstein>

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