

School of the Art Institute professor Mara Tapp brought students in her New Arts Journalism course to one of the previews for The Hypocrites' *Frankenstein*. Following are a few samples of Ms. Tapp's students' reviews, which shed light on how today's culturally-connected younger audiences are reacting to the show:

Review: The Hypocrites' *Frankenstein* at the MCA

by Amanda Aldinger

Well-known for his provocative remakes of classics, The Hypocrites founder and artistic director Sean Graney goes for broke with his adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*, running at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Retelling the famed 19th century novel in his own world-premiere adaptation, Graney's ambitious production is done in promenade, with the audience onstage with the actors, and encouraged to experience the play from different angles by moving about the space. Graney's adaptation is crudely melded with bits of Shelley's original novel, resulting in a script that is disjointed, choppy, and sloppy in its execution. The production's overwhelming and elaborate display of multi-media and theatrical effects distract rather than enhance, dreadfully outshining both the story and Graney's four-person cast.

Tom Burch sets a vast stage for *Frankenstein*, whose set centers around a large bed suspended from an over-sized metal frame. Crowning the bed is a massive projection screen which plays James Whale's 1931 film version of *Frankenstein* throughout the show - edited to mirror the play's climactic moments. The film proves more effective than the 100-plus bloody baby dolls suspended from the rafters, though primarily because it's often the only action the audience can see from within the overly-crowded stage. Graney has successfully pulled off promenade theater before (*4.48 Psychosis*, *Edward II*) but for *Frankenstein*, it fails. The too-big audience alienates most from enjoying the play, while proving an obvious navigatory challenge for the actors.

As Daemon, Matt Kahler's performance leaves no room for a sympathetic bad guy. Yelling most of his lines and relying more on his physical presence than his stage presence, Kahler's performance falls flat - failing to enliven the already dead monster. Dr. Victor Frankenstein (John Byrnes) navigates the promenade poorly and sloppily, while giving a performance that is fairly staid - his love for Elizabeth (Stacy Stoltz) wanting for passion, and his fear of his monstrous, destructive creation, as soulless as Daemon himself. Both actors show little motivation for their actions, their performances generally one-note, and decidedly ineffective.

Although forced into an bizarre caricature of youth, Jessie Fisher is the production's sole marker of vibrancy as the Strange Girl. Her presence is as strange as her name, but Lewis exhibits a stage presence and adept capacity for theatrical movement - like when she's made into Daemon's undead wife, hooked up to electricity, and falls (literally) between stages of awakesness as she's plugged and unplugged while sitting atop a see-saw - beyond that of the rest of her cast. Stoltz's Elizabeth is unmemorable, save her fascination with colored elixirs and a Shakespearean-inspired suicide. Although her acting is forcibly passionate, Stoltz spends more time jumping inanely from bench to bench than grounding herself within the scene.

Frankenstein is a classic tale that portrays elements of brilliant storytelling. But in this production, the story is lost in a mish-mash of theatricality that resonates as little more than blood-soaked white noise -- tragic, considering The Hypocrite's strong and well-deserved reputation. Perhaps if Graney had focused more on the acting and the production's dramatic momentum, instead of an overwrought need to make *Frankenstein* "edgy" and "modern," his adaptation could have worked. Unfortunately for The Hypocrites, and this disappointed reviewer, Graney's production of *Frankenstein* fails to rise to life.

Contemporary Gothicism

by Dana Boutin

Absurdity is appropriate for a time when terror is color-coded. Director Sean Graney's creepy play adaptation of Mary Shelley's classic novel *Frankenstein* crosses the visual elaboration of a "Day of the Dead" celebration with a sensational horror movie aesthetic. As fake tombstones decorating American houses recently betrayed morbid fascination, fall is an apt time to embrace Gothicism.

No curtain separates audience and performers in the theater of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. Hanging instead are fragmented, bloody-looking dolls under which the audience does not so much promenade—the term for theater in which the performers move around a common space with the actors—as scurry away from the pouncing, red-and-green-liquid-spewing actors. "I have lots of paint in every orifice of my head," laughed John Byrnes, who plays Dr. Victor Frankenstein, in a post-performance talk with the audience.

Though gruesome, the performance is more comedy (and even musical) than Shelley's cautionary tragedy. The humorous hubris begins when Victor epitomizes the scientist as god and madman by blessing and eating a Eucharist wafer he finds in a television stand. Viewers absorb television's simulated reality, hence narrating their lives according to rehearsed scenarios like the reiterated

Frankenstein story, itself an echo of Greek and Roman mythology. Victor's consecration conflates Christ and Prometheus, the symbol of scientific and artistic creation whom Shelley, who subtitles her book *The Modern Prometheus*, identifies with Victor. This deranged apotheosis deflates the Christian tradition to a myth illustrating man's desire to give life, if only risen in bread.

Matt Kahler incarnates this let-there-be-life conceit à la Frankenstein, the monster who sends his master a prostitute, also known as "Strange Girl," pertly played by Jessie Fisher. When "Strange Girl" first appears, she flirts with Victor, who shies from both her sexual advances as well as the pleading and pressuring of his fiancée, played by Stacy Stoltz, to come back to civilization and marry her. In his blue jeans and t-shirt rather than a lab coat, Victor resembles an everyday commitment-phobic bachelor more than a mad scientist. The audience moves with Victor as he scrambles away from his bed—chains hanging from his bedposts like a Promethean Caucasus. Once murdered by the monster, Fisher coils through the crowd trailed by an extension cord protruding from a white mesh laundry hamper adorned with stuffed animals, and falling limp when Frankenstein, described in the program notes as "Daemon," unplugs her.

Evocations of playing god in plastic surgery and reproductive technology a given, *The Hypocrites* instead update the story with wonders of science like lost cordless telephones and artificial cheese. The everlasting life of cheese delights more than science and sanctimony.

Overarching systems like science and religion limit humans with definitions. With costumes for plays and holidays, individuals transgress everyday identity. Breaking the audience's suspension of disbelief, Frankenstein highlights his identity as performance when he fast-forwards scenes from the film adaptation projected on patchy fabric reminiscent of his own motley mass. With torn pages of Shelley's novel pasted on the walls, these earlier versions of the story provide a background for the performance and the arc of the story.

Greek and Roman authors of Prometheus—bearer of light and civilization—might wince with horror at Shelley's Frankenstein. Shelley conflates creator and creature in a fiery, ultimately mischievous and yet pitiable deviant. Like John Milton's "light bearer," Lucifer, Frankenstein's ambition and dissatisfaction with the injustice of the world are universal problems. If Shelley defies Classicism and Christianity by demonizing Prometheus and showing sympathy for this devil, *The Hypocrites' Frankenstein* takes blasphemy a step further, embracing doom as comedy.

Review #2

by Mia DiMeo

Dismembered, bloody dolls dangle over a collection of old dressers, cabinets, and static televisions. A 1931 film version of *Frankenstein* is projected over a bed, suspended by chains. Screams interrupt electronic organ music. Is this the MCA Theater, or in a thrift store in hell?

It's a production of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* by mastermind Sean Graney, of The Hypocrites theater group. He dusts off the classic 1818 novel and gives it a jarring, contemporary gothic twist, laced with humor and suspense.

Doctor Victor Frankenstein is obsessed with bringing life to his grotesque, lab-created "son." When the creature rises, big questions about God and technology begin. People start dying, not so mysteriously, and Victor is distracted enough to allow the systematic crumbling of his romantic relationship with Elizabeth, his adopted sister.

The four-actor, promenade-style production puts the audience on the set, and forces movement, and experiencing the story amidst the action. This can involve straining to see or hear the actors at times, depending on where the scene is, and how tall the other audience members are. On the flip side, there's an exciting risk of being close enough to a death scene to be splattered with stage blood.

Graney's script is like the monster, a composite project of many pieces, given new life. It draws from a wide canon of literary influences, including *Prometheus Bound*, *Paradise lost*, and *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, while also keeping some of Shelley's beautiful language intact.

The production is meant to take place in no particular era, and the costumes range from a full Victorian petticoat to a clothes hamper with stuffed animals attached, worn as a dress. Like the set, it's intentionally messy and confused, but it works.

The music throughout is well-done and haunting, but the two original songs are a surprising element. The production doesn't intend to be a musical, and the songs add another charming inconsistency to Graney's production.

Jessie Fisher, who plays the character only called Strange Girl, sings out a catchy, melancholy tune about being a resurrected rag doll, and Frankenstein's unwilling bride. Later, Frankenstein, called Daemon in this production, (Matt Kahler) belts out his sadness at being a lonely, misunderstood monster.

The songs aren't the play's strong point, but the actors' voices and performances carry the concept through.

Victor Frankenstein (John Byrnes) is believably tortured over his creation of the monster, but he fails to save his love Elizabeth (Stacy Stoltz) from her promise of suicide. She sees the monster, fading in her wedding dress, she mistakens him for the devil coming to take soul. Stoltz and Kahler give sympathetic performances. Heart-broken, they are both destructive with fatal consequences.

The final sequence finds all four actors in the North Pole, in fur-lined parkas against the sound of blustery wind. Knowing Shelley's original text is most important here. The Hypocrites aren't after clarity though; they seek to offer an evocative, imaginative theater experience, and effectively achieve this with *Frankenstein*.

Frankenstein's bride pulls the string on her talking baby doll, animating it with her own eerily recorded human voice. Theater is like this for Graney. Life is given to dead texts through the actors' performance, and audience experience. Through the macabre set design and a dynamic ensemble cast, the presentation of *Frankenstein* is a perfectly seasonal hybrid monster, brought to life by The Hypocrites.

A Participatory Review of The Hypocrites: *Frankenstein*

Taleen Kalenderian

The Museum of Contemporary Art's (MCA) theater that hosted performance group The Hypocrites' production of *Frankenstein* had all the trappings of a haunted house, _____ (nicely, overwhelmingly) appropriate for the Halloween season.

Mangled, bleeding dolls were suspended from the ceiling as though from a noose, perhaps to _____ (echo, mock) the number of times Doctor Frankenstein attempted to kill his monstrous creation by shooting it. The gun went off five minutes into the production, and seldom did it stop the flow of adrenaline to the audience members _____ (enticed, smothered) by its proximity.

There were benches, desks, stands, and columns of varying heights spread throughout the stage for actors and audience members alike—at any moment, an audience seat could be transformed into an actor's stage, and clusters of people had to be ushered aside to make room for the dramatics at hand. This _____ (democratic, sensationalist) approach to performance space was one layer of many employed by the production.

The original 1931 *Frankenstein* film was streaming in the background for any _____ (curious, wandering) eye, sometimes syncing up to the action, mostly _____ (transforming, devolving) into a conceptual _____ (endeavor, gimmick). The most notable “live-to-movie-sync” was toward the end of the play (and film), when Frankenstein’s bride was dying on stage. Crowds of people in the film were scurrying up and down stairs and hallways, _____ (mirroring, parodying) the live audience’s _____ (spectatorship, rubbernecking) as they too followed the performers while they leaped around the theater.

Charcoal-colored blood splattered on the leaves of paper that had been torn out of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* novel to decorate the hind wall, which simultaneously _____ (celebrated, tarnished) the work’s origin and transformed it into a canvas. This literal performative gesture to mimic their reimagining of the Frankenstein mythologies had a _____ (striking, base) effect aesthetically.

In fact, The Hypocrites’ concepts seemed to congregate in order to offer a communal sense of the *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* history, _____ (and, but) it felt more like a _____ (dance, stampede) upon Shelley’s playground. In fact, the actors were literally running around the stage at all points in the show: the doctor and his bride (who he confusingly called sister), and the monster with his own disfigured bride were often so concerned with carnivalesque _____ (festivity, antics), their performance _____ (delighted, distracted) the audience. The _____ (melding, bastardization) of modern and Shelleyian dialogue _____ (engaged, undermined) the mythology of Herr Frankenstein, especially as the newfangled character pranced about the performance space while the original filmic actor streamed in the background.

But perhaps a production that aims so high as to integrate the histories of literature’s—and pop culture’s—most famous monster can only do so by _____ (paying homage to, breaking down) its conventions and stacking them in a _____ (playful, haphazard) manner, conceptualizing the Frankenstein in all its versions and interpretations.

Whether or not The Hypocrites’ *Frankenstein* completely _____ (succeeds in, fails at) living up to its own adrenaline-laced, self-generated hype, the entire production is worth the moment the film monster faces the audience head-on while the live Dr. Frankenstein shrieks, “IT’S ALIVE!!!!”

The MCA is Haunted: Frankenstein is Alive.

by Heather E. Liggins

Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art has a haunted house or a mad scientist laboratory. Plastic baby dolls covered in blood dangle from suspended cables intertwined with industrial light bulbs that hovers over the entire floor, as old-fashioned televisions flicker off and on and screams howl in the background. Benches and furniture dot the stage, outlining the pathway for the actors and the audience.

Sean Graney, founder and artistic director of The Hypocrites, and director of *Frankenstein*, dissects and reinterprets Mary Shelley's classic 1818 novel and the 1931 film starring Boris Karloff. The end result is a promenade-style, modern version of *Frankenstein*, with light comedy and serious tones, encompassing the overarching story line, along with themes of humanity and love.

Before the play starts, the audience is forewarned: "We're going to try so hard not to get blood on you" by actress Jessie Fisher who gives directions on how to best watch and experience the play. The promenade style keeps the audience alert and engaged as the actors perform, weaving through the audience.

The focal point is a bed suspended by thick, silver chains on a steel frame, as the classic 1931 black-and-white *Frankenstein* film, edited to mimic the similar scenes from the play is silently running above it. But, as the play proceeds, the props are just background noise. The actors command the stage.

Daemon, also known as Frankenstein, played by Matt Kahler, is the Hunchback- of-Notre-Dame-meets-Frankenstein. His disfigured face does not fit the stereotypical description of the monster, with bolts protruding from the sides of his neck, or the iconic square-bone structure with short, jet-black hair. Instead, this monster has abnormal facial masses bulging out from his forehead and cheek. Though the costume differs, the unifying connection between the two is the character's persona.

Kahler personifies Frankenstein a lonely, misunderstood monster seeking companionship. And his mate is Strange Girl, performed by Jessie Fisher, an innocent red-haired, pale-skinned girl with doll-like features, a round face, big innocent eyes and an inquisitive spirit. This odd couple's relationship doesn't last long. Daemon pulls the plug, as Strange Girl is too outspoken and acts against his master plan of seeking revenge on his creator.

As with Shelley's 1818 original plot, Victor, A.K.A. Dr. Frankenstein, (performed by John Byrnes), the creator of Daemon and Elizabeth (performed by Stacy Stoltz), who is his sister and fiancée, are to be

wed. But Elizabeth is misled to believe that Victor is dead and, in a true Shakespearean Romeo-and-Juliet ending, commits suicide.

In the last part of the play, Victor and Daemon brawl hopping on furniture and benches around the stage. The dramatic finale offers a perspective on humanity and creation, as the two dead characters -- Strange Girl and Elizabeth -- revisit Victor, briefly providing a reflection on his life.

Over the years, there have been numerous interpretations of Frankenstein, from cartoons to plays, but nothing compares to Sean Graney's contemporary adaptation. Lasting only 75 minutes, this play is lively and non-stop entertaining.

The cast of four presents a thrilling rendition of the classic *Frankenstein* novel. The promenade stage allows the audience to shadow the performance (but you have to pay close attention to the actors' instructions to move aside or they will perform around you) and interact with play. From the gory horror scenes to Elizabeth's special elixirs, this performance screams for attention.

R2: *Frankenstein* at the MCA

by Elise Merriman

The Hypocrites' *Frankenstein* at the Museum of Contemporary Art is a uniquely interactive play that will quite literally keep you on your toes.

Inspired by Mary Shelley's 1818 gothic tale, and adapted and directed by Sean Graney, it is performed in promenade, allowing actors free rein over both stage and audience space. Thus, one can engage in the action, standing so close to the actors that one could touch them—which one young man chose to do at the performance this critic attended—or scampering out of the path of a fearsome monster or a violent brawl. Although some scenes are difficult to hear and impossible to see, this thrillingly engaging rendition makes one feel like a 19th century bystander, witnessing terrifying events as they unfold.

The production's cast of four does an excellent job of bringing the haunting tale to life. John Byres brilliantly portrays Dr. Victor Frankenstein, whose angst, turmoil, and conflict are apparent as he grapples with the dire consequences of creating a monster he fears and despises—all the while clad in a t-shirt and jeans (by costume designer Meghan Raham). Notwithstanding his comic headpiece of bulging head and cheek deformities stuck together with safety pins (and attached at the neck with an elastic band), Matt Kahler makes a convincing Daemon, aka Frankenstein, evincing the isolated, wrongfully

misunderstood monster in retreat from a world that refuses to accept him. He becomes quite frightening as he grows increasingly incensed and vengeful towards his creator.

Stacy Stoltz, the only actor appropriately garbed in Victorian attire, plays the role of Victor's adopted "sister" and wife-to-be, Elizabeth. Jessie Fisher portrays a strange, bubbly girl clad in a pink doll dress—and later, predominantly lingerie—whom Frankenstein murders and later brings to life. Afterwards, in an amusing scene, the monster offers her Easy Cheese from an aerosol can, which she turns down for a more appetizing snack of her own flesh (if you happen to be squeamish, the guts, gore, and hanging appendages might come as a shock—not to mention the blood splattering).

Later, the monster later provides his lady with a resplendent wedding dress made of a mesh hamper decorated with stuffed animals, and they play on a symbolic see-saw that represents the power struggle of the creator and the created. Also symbolic are the bloody dolls hanging from the ceiling that represent the clash between life and death. Eerie sound effects of shrieking screams and booming thunder create a frightening atmosphere, and the flashing lights and clattering wheels of a passing train indicate transitions between scenes. The space is riddled with dressers, armoires, and benches, which function as stepping-stones and resting places alike. Composer Kevin O'Donnell's original and unexpected music (with lyrics written by Graney), is sung by Frankenstein and the Strange Girl at two significant turning points in the production.

According to the Hypocrites' website, Graney's play, like Shelley's novel, draws from various sources "to create [the] idea of a script being a Frankenstein in and of itself." The 1931 film version of *Frankenstein* plays upon a tattered screen. Pages torn from Shelley's book are haphazardly pasted onto the opposite wall, and actors quote lines from both it and Richard Brinsley Peake's 1823 play, *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein*.

Although the play deals with existential issues such as the principle of life and the cost of progress, it introduces a different—albeit physically involved—approach to *Frankenstein* that will terrorize, haunt, and disgust its audience, while inducing laughter and even empathy for the poor ugly fiend.

Review

by Kelly Reaves

Experiencing The Hypocrites' production of *Frankenstein* is kind of like having a bad acid trip-- there is a lot going simultaneously and everything is equally dramatic and confusing. The difference is that, while

watching the play, you never forget where you are because you are constantly re-evaluating your physical placement.

Director Sean Graney's inventive, ambitious, and deeply philosophical adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or A Modern Prometheus*, employs only four actors, but the stage is nonetheless densely populated. The venue is turned inside out for the production, putting the audience on the stage. The action is "in promenade," which means that performers intermingle with their audience, a style for which Graney has a penchant.

Frankenstein combines several historical versions of the tale, loosely weaving around them, retaining key concepts while tweaking the plot. Graney has likened his playwriting process to Frankenstein's process of creating a monster from bits and pieces. The resulting plot is simpler than Shelley's but loses clarity, with narrative "fat" (and some meat) cut off and existential angst played up.

On set, dressers and long wooden benches are scattered about, initially acting as seats for audience members but quickly turning into an obstacle course for the actors. Old men struggle to balance on benches and teenagers hop around from dresser to dresser to try to get a better view. Actors point in the direction they are about to lunge to warn gawking audience members to get out of their way.

Up front, a bed hangs by chains from a giant, industrial-looking steel frame. The 1931 film version of *Frankenstein*, starring Boris Karloff, is projected on a giant screen made of ripped up and reconstructed bed sheets as the iconic landmark to which the audience can compare the live action. The actors occasionally interact with the projection, pausing and rewinding key moments with a remote control. There are other references to modern technology, as well, like a cordless phone that the protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, (John Byrnes) repeatedly misplaces. His fiancé/step-sister/cousin/etc. Elizabeth, (Stacy Stoltz) is in Victorian garb, however, and marvels over the apparently recent invention of automobiles. This unclear placement in time is an imaginative and resourceful tool, one of many displays of an eschewal of naturalism, instead fostering a visceral tone.

Matt Kahler is powerful as the daemon (or "Daemon,") but not particularly frightening. He resembles a high-school shooter, sporting a trench coat and long, disheveled hair, complete with a victim complex. His only really monstrous feature is a rubbery tumor, full of safety pins, haphazardly stuck to his forehead. Jessie Fisher is gutsy and animated as his scantily clad zombie-bride-to-be, although her role seems slightly arbitrary. Perhaps the biggest divergence from Shelley's story occurs when the two share a sweet but disconcertingly fetishistic moment on a seesaw after the daemon animates her lifeless body.

The production is rich and enjoyable at the moments when we are able to see what's going on, which is about half of the time. The rest of the time, we are left to dejectedly gaze at the backs of heads. The use of the promenade style in this case seems a bit gimmicky, undermining the work. We are left wondering why the fourth wall was broken. How does audience-to-audience and audience-to-actor interaction relate to the concept of the play? I'm not sure it does. I don't even know how the play ended; I couldn't see it.

Review- *The Hypocrites: Frankenstein*

by Britany Robinson

Bloody babies and gun fire in a theater might sound like thrilling aspects of a play, but in the case of *The Hypocrites: Frankenstein*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the thrill fizzles out not long after the play begins, and the horror of the original creation story feels watered down.

Sean Graney's highly regarded artistic vision, combined with The Hypocrites consistent reputation for inventiveness, and the convenient timing for Halloween, created intriguing possibilities for the modern interpretation of Mary Shelley's classic novel, *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*, playing at the MCA from October 21st-November 1st.

The set is creative but on the verge of cliché, with bloody baby dolls suspended from the ceiling. The backdrop of the 1931 Frankenstein film is an enlightening tribute to one of the original interpretations, but also an unfortunate and ongoing reminder throughout the performance that this production was not living up to the well-known story.

The MCA's performance stage is littered with shelves, benches and dressers, all meant to be seats or perching places for audience members as the promenade style production requires actors and audience to share the same space. The anticipation of being surrounded by the action of the play is diminished quickly. Those lucky enough to have the action come to them, have the brief experience of being in the middle of some high-energy scenes. When an actor points at an audience member, they must move quickly to avoid being trampled, and just as quickly find themselves completely removed from the following scene that takes place. The frustration was visible across the audience as viewers strained their necks and stood on their tiptoes, trying to absorb as much of the action as possible, but frequently giving up and letting their attention wane.

It's disappointing to see such talented actors get lost in a failure of set design. When scenes were visible, the talent of the cast members did find a way to shine through. Jessie Fischer as "Strange Girl" presents

an impressive portrayal of a loveable whore. Her energy is captivating even as she's tossed around stage and brutally beaten by Victor, the modern interpretation of Dr. Frankenstein. The physical demands of her role look exhausting yet she never struggles to deliver a believable performance.

Stacy Stoltz plays Elizabeth, referred to as both the "sister" and "lover" of Victor. Her heartbreaking struggle to reign in the man she loves and bring him back to reality is endearing. As she brushes by audience members with the train of her wedding dress dancing behind her, one must resist the urge to reach out and hug her because she's just so helplessly lost in love. Still these moments can only be appreciated if one can actually see them happen.

Matt Kahler, Victor's modern monster, referred to as Daemon in this interpretation, wears a headpiece of deformity that lacks any believability. His booming monster voice makes up for it, especially for audience members lucky enough to find themselves face to face with the snarling character.

The Hypocrites: Frankenstein might just be an unfortunate reminder that even a talented cast and director run the risk of tripping over an overly ambitious production, or an unsuspecting audience member; a likely occurrence before production wraps.

A Gynormous experiment haunts the MCA

by Laurie Rojas

The Hypocrites: Frankenstein at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago is a gynormous experiment. Chicago's avant-garde director Sean Graney reanimates a 200-year-old novel, along with countless mutations, into a four-character 75-minute production.

Attendees must come to terms with their participation in the experiment as soon as they enter the MCA theater: They must walk past the theater seats, for they are not used in this production, into the backstage where dozens of amputated, disembodied, blood-smeared dolls hang upside down from the ceiling. Pages of Mary Shelley's 19th Century novel, *Frankenstein: or The Modern Prometheus* are plastered all over the back wall.

The Hypocrites attempt to stitch Shelley's 19th Century novel, and all its adaptations, into the same fabric. Dr. Viktor Frankenstein's creation, the grotesque monster, Frankenstein, performed by Matt Kahler, frustrated in his isolation from the rest of society, desires a companion for himself. Although his quest for happiness constitutes a universal human desire, the production lacks the deeply affective character

identification found in Shelley's novel. That kind of emotional weight and subjective reflectivity might only be possible in literary form, or in the hands of a master like William Shakespeare. Shelley fans beware: At times entire chapters of the novel are reduced to a brief monologue by the monster; Nevertheless, Kahler's performance, although often powerful, finds its limitations in the script. The novel merely provides the skeleton for the promenade-style production. Stage and seating are indistinguishable. Both actors and audience will have to move around the space. Given the task of keeping time and having to engage the mobile audience, the performers, including Stacy Stolz as Elisabeth and John Byrnes as Dr. Frankenstein, move around the room fully confident and engaged in their roles. The dialogue, however, becomes weak and unless one is willing to stalk or trail behind the performers, a lot is missed.

The 1931 black-and-white film adaption of the same, is also projected on stitched-up sheets above the bloody bed where the monsters come to life. On a few occasions the film is replayed from a remote control, scenes of which are not memorable enough to be retold. The production not only appropriates fragments, either visual or narrative, from previous cultures but also with more contemporary recognizable elements. It either humorously combines horrific popular culture adaptations of *Frankenstein*, or alternatively, in its pastiches, it combines the horrific sense of the humorous popular culture adaptations. Sometimes it is not clear which one is at play; the ambiguity between the whimsical and the horrific at points begins to border on satire. These older cultural specimens blend in with contemporary cultural--in a very postmodern fashion—including a digital clock showing current time placed next to the bed, a record player that plays some moody electronic music and a dorm-style hamper used as a wedding-dress. For all we know there are elements in the room taken from a cartoon network adaptation. After all, why those bloody dolls hang from the ceiling is never understood. It appears as if all these elements attempt to compensate for the lack of cohesion, from the lack of power in the rest of the production.

The Hypocrites' strength lies in recognizing that the original novel cannot exist in a vacuum. After all, how we read Shelley today cannot be detached of the hundreds of images popular culture has produced of Frankenstein, however, the stitching is too loose to survive the post-Halloween-themed entertainment season.

Review of The Hypocrites *Frankenstein* at the MCA

by Chrissy Turpin

"Why did you create me,"he "Daemon" asks Victor Frankenstein, his maker, in the final dramatic scene of The Hypocrites' *Frankenstein*.

It echoes the question many audience members had during the performance: "What was that?" Whether they were confused about the play's plot, straining to hear dialogue, or just confused as to why The Hypocrites chose to adopt Mary Shelley's novel, neither the Daemon's or the audience's questions are answered.

The show relies on its audience having read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as it skips over important character development, mainly Victor Frankenstein's explanation of his actions, and his psychosis, as he envisions himself a God-like figure. So the Frankenstein that The Hypocrites' audience meets is in a panic, already aware that he has done wrong before his creature comes to life. Without the development of Victor's ideas and emotional attachment to his science, the audience is left confused as to what is going on and why he would create a monster in the first place.

The production uses promenade theater, a concept that joins actors, crewmembers, and the audience within the same stage space. While it adds an original, dark and creepy aspect to Shelley's otherwise romanticized work, the production loses focus and effect rather quickly. Distracted by bloody toy dolls that hang from the ceiling, and an ongoing video of the 1931 film starring Boris Karloff, timed perfectly with the show's performance length, the audience is forced to move around the space with the actors. At numerous points during the play, an actor will point in a direction and the audience is expected to move. If it doesn't, well, the actor will move in on the space anyway. An audience member's participation in the play relies on the rest of the audience around them. If the people around you don't move the way you want them to or they end up blocking your view of a private moment of dialogue, you lose the effect and delivery of emotion.

The company and cast of The Hypocrites are good, but it feels as though either the piece or the Museum of Contemporary Art stage is out of their element. John Byrnes plays a decent Victor, but because the play relies on previous audience knowledge, his development of Shelley's crazy, scared and egotistical Victor is lost. Matt Kahler begins an interesting role as the Daemon, otherwise known as Frankenstein's monster, but as soon as the action picks up and the actors run around, he loses stage presence. The audience focuses more on trying to stay out of his way instead of listening to what he has to say. Jessie Fisher as the Strange Girl appears to be a mash-up of the drowned little girl and the future unnamed bride to Frankenstein's creature, both present in Shelley's novel. Her quirky, childlike approach to sexuality is uncomfortable and annoying. Stacy Stoltz' turn as Elizabeth, Victor's adopted sister and intended fiancée, attempts to be the moral center of the play, but when she appears, the audience is relaxed and many take a seat as the action is believed to have stopped any time she is on stage.

"Why did you create me?" I'd like to ask director Sean Graney the same thing.

Review

by Anna Wolak

Autumn is a harbinger for: an increased consumption of apples, a fascination with wigs and costumes, and theater adaptations of Mary Shelley's canonical story, *Frankenstein*. At least three versions of it are playing in the Chicago area right now. Remarkably, Sean Graney – founder and director of the theater group The Hypocrites – manages to make his rendition original.

Though he strays from the traditional text, and from conventional theatrical notions, Graney ultimately preserves the sentiments of this classic tale. The monster still resents his creator. And vice versa. The monster still longs for a companion. Everything else about this play, however, is a fantastic whirlwind of interpretation.

Using caution tape, Graney ropes off and eliminates all of the seating in the Museum of Contemporary Art's theater, leaving his audience no choice but to stand on the stage, uncomfortably close to the four actors and the grandmotherly couch, old dressers, and static tvs, which constitute the set. Overhead, hundreds of bloody baby dolls hang from the ceiling, casting grotesque shadows on everything below them.

The focal point of the stage is a blood-stained bed where Victor Frankenstein (played by John Byrnes) has pieced together his Adam, his monster. This “daemon,” whose cumbersome appearance belies his graceful erudition, is played brilliantly by Matt Kahler. Unfortunately, the acoustics in the venue hinder audibility, and the audience is left with a stunning view: the face of this creature, his flesh clumsily sutured together with safety pins, full of emotion, booming unintelligible vocals which the audience longs to understand.

This is a downfall of the promenade style of theater. But it can also be an advantage. Depending on where the action is taking place, a theatergoer can have the best seat in the venue or the worst. This style does add an element of excitement, though, when a cast member points in any direction, a signal that the actor is about to charge and the audience members had better get out the way if they don't want to share the spotlight or have fake blood or green elixir spilled on them during two memorable death scenes.

Above the action, the 1931 film version of *Frankenstein* is projected onto a white sheet that is patched together – a characteristic that is seemingly ubiquitous in this play, from the sheet to the daemon to the

script. Graney pulls dialogue and influence not only from Mary Shelley, but from classic literature and theater as well. He borrows from writers Aeschylus and Christopher Marlowe, and playwright Richard Brinsley Peake, among others. With the inclusion of this wealth of media, it is no wonder that the play is quilted as sloppily as the flesh on the antagonist's head (or protagonist's, depending on how much sympathy viewers have for the daemon).

Jessie Fisher flits around the stage, innocent and pink, as "Strange Girl" – a character readers won't find in Mary Shelley's novel. Strange Girl has been killed and revived by the monster, in an attempt to create a companion. Elizabeth (played by Stacy Stoltz), the fiancé of Frankenstein, also longs for companionship, but is similarly thwarted by the doctor, as he is consumed by his work. The scene shared by them is powerful, even moreso up close.

When the play can be both seen and heard – relish those rare moments – it is a mess, but a beautiful mess.

The Hypocrites' "Frankenstein" is Mad Science

by Caroline Liebman

If a play were a monster, then director Sean Graney would be Dr. Frankenstein. In an updated theatrical version of Mary Shelley's classic novel, performed in promenade on the stage floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Graney haphazardly sews together bits of Greek myth, Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, and the 1931 film version of *Frankenstein* to form one beastly tale that roots itself in the plight of human existence.

In the 1831 book version of the same title, Elizabeth is Victor Frankenstein's beloved adopted sister. In Graney's version, "the natural sciences are dead" to Victor. Elizabeth's desire for marriage to her brother is one-sided and ignored due to his overpowering obsession with creating life. When Elizabeth tells Victor, "I live not until you put your hands on me," it's uncomfortable for both Victor and the audience to take in.

Dr. Frankenstein is equally horrified by his creation in Shelley's novel, but, in Graney's version there are no means of escape to Geneva for the mad scientist (played by John Byrnes), whose costume, complete with tool belt and mismatched shoes, is more handy-man like and therefore easier to relate to than his film character's white lab coat. Placed in the crux of the play's action and scattered throughout the set like a mob of rubber-necking villagers, there proves to be no escape for the audience either.

On "a dreary night in November," all of Victor's problems literally show up on the doorstep of his apartment in sudden lapses of time: his "sister" and bride-to-be Elizabeth (played by Stacey Stoltz), an unnamed female identified only as Strange Girl (played by Jessie Fisher), his monster Daemon (played by Matt Kahler), and eventually, his death.

Hundreds of blood-spattered baby dolls suspended from the ceiling foreshadow the fate of Victor's many failed human experiments. In Graney's version, Victor has no Henry Clerval, no voice of reason, no human confidant; he is left alone to bear the burden of his choices. His brief moments of ease, through the lullaby-singing presence of his sister Elizabeth, end more abruptly as the play develops. "Do not betray me, love me or kill me," she warns, as threats of marriage or death replace her fond farewells, and Victor's ignorance of human interaction eventually poisons the potential for a real relationship.

Victor, and the audience watch in horror as Daemon beats and murders the Strange Girl. Although the retrieval of the prostitute's severed hand is as grotesque as Victor's Daemon, he misses the connection between himself and the "apocalypse goblin."

The monster Daemon in Graney's play is simultaneously everything that Victor is and is not: a highly determined, intuitive creature that longs for human connection, creation and power. The debut Hypocrites performance of Matt Kahler as Daemon gives the contemporary play a classical feel, as does his reciting of familiar lines of biblical truth and logic to his creator, like "God made me beautiful in his own image," and you "can't give life without the hope of satisfaction." Through external observation of the townspeople and the background projection of the 1931 film, Daemon realizes love and companionship are central to "who will give [him] life," a realization that his counterpart Victor lacks.

Graney's ending is more Faustian than Shelley's. In the final scene, Victor is at the mercy of his negligence; the monster, his "sister" Elizabeth, and the prostitute, who gradually reappear on stage as "death," clad in a uniform of ominous parkas-the updated version of the famous black-cloaked image. Victor is responsible for the creation and destruction of each character in the play, including himself. They all exist as his earthly failures, and his eventual death becomes his only success.