

TNT BRITAIN

FRANKENSTEIN

Director's Note

There are very few authentic modern myths, Frankenstein is one of those few. The Monster disturbs us in a way that Dracula merely frightens. Frankenstein's monster is clearly a prototype of a very real terror: the fear of a new more powerful life form created by our own hands.

That this monster has changed shape and now may lurk within not just the animal but the insect and the vegetable is all the more disturbing. Gene manipulation, stem cell research and cloning are part of our every day lives. The Monster is among us and it is made all the more frightening by those who do not see it as a monster. Of course, science progresses whether we like it or not. Any research that is thwarted in America or Europe will be carried out in Korea or China. Nor is the case clear cut. What right have we to prevent the eradication of malaria or prevent the introduction of vitamin A enriched rice in India (which would prevent the massive incidence of blindness among the very poor). When the Environmentalists of Europe are in alliance with the Christian Right in America, alarm bells ring. This dilemma is at the heart of the myth and our play.

Mary Shelley led the way when she had Frankenstein recoil from his own creation as soon as it was made and deny him his bride. The Hollywood movies did the same. The Frankenstein myth is not about a mad scientist above morality who is out of control. Rather, the myth is about a scientist who instantly sees his folly but is led ever onward by forces he has unleashed. We have tried to follow and develop this theme. Not only Victor but his fiancée' Elizabeth explore the contradictions and conflicts that scientific progress forces upon us. Should artificial life be created? Should the dead or dying be revived? Once the Monster is created does he deserve a bride? Is killing permitted if it saves life? (something that relates to embryo research as well as murder!).

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At the same time the play and theme are not sterile or academic, there is a great thrill in creating life and remaking the world. The atom is split, DNA deciphered, stem cells cultivated –the genie is out of the bottle and it is thrilling magic. Why then so much comedy? (At least until the Monster appears). Frankenstein is a story of human folly and we are ripe for satire. Folly is at the root of most serious comedy. The Hollywood movies admit this and merrily intertwine comedy and melodrama to make such memorable horror. Mary Shelley employs melodrama in her Gothic novel. On stage melodrama is comic. The Gothic hovers close to the grotesque. When Hamlet meets the Gravedigger comedy results. Comedy and melodrama allow us to explore the myth of Frankenstein. We try to avoid parody (this has been done too well in Mel Brook's YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN). Our central characters never make jokes, the comedy arises from the situation.

In terms of visual and physical style we have looked to the Expressionist films that provided the model for James Whale's original movies and were in turn inspired by the European Gothic tradition in which Shelly writes. THE CABINET OF DR CALIGARI, METROPOLIS and even Charlie Chaplin's CITY LIGHTS offer us a style that suits the myth. It is extreme, but then the tale is extreme. We live in extreme times, science offers us salvation or annihilation. Is the idea of the first head transplant a joke or a horror story? The answer may be that it is both.

BY PAUL STEBBINGS
