At the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester

Frankenstein: Exciting production marks 200 years since publication of Mary Shelley's work

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A new adaptation written by April de Angelis, directed by Matthew Xia, showing at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester—until April 14.

Frankenstein playing at Manchester's Royal Exchange theatre marks two hundred years since the publication of Mary Shelley's remarkable novel on January 1, 1818.

Mary (1797-1851), wife of radical poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), was just 19 when she completed her novel, set in the Alps and the Arctic. It was a revelation to readers when first published, anonymously and in three volumes, reflected by its immediate success.

The story has been the inspiration for numerous stage and screen productions, including 58 theatre adaptations, television plays and numerous films. Actors forever linked to the story include Boris Karloff, who provided the monster in James Whale's 1931 production and subsequent films, and Peter Cushing, who played Victor Frankenstein in Hammer Horror productions from 1957-74.

In 1974, Mel Brooks turned gothic horror into a wonderful spoof, with Gene Wilder playing a descendant of Frankenstein. In 1994, Kenneth Branagh created a close adaptation of the novel in his film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*, with himself as Frankenstein and Robert De Niro as the creature.

Mary Shelley's narrative continues to fascinate and resonate with audiences today. This latest adaptation in Manchester's Theatre in the Round remains faithful to the novel, managing to successfully capture the story's universal appeal.

The play begins with a clap of thunder, revealing Captain Robert Walton (Ryan Gage), an ambitious adventurer, on board a ship bound for the yet to be explored North Pole. His quest is "in the country of Eternal light… to discover the wondrous power [magnetism] that attracts the needle."

His ship entombed by ice, he takes on board a mysterious stranger on the brink of death. The stranger, Victor Frankenstein (Shane Zaza), is in pursuit of a "demon" over the icy wastes. Fevered, he is in a delirium peopled by loved ones long departed.

In a series of letters to his sister, Walton retells the misfortunes of Frankenstein, a man grief-stricken and broken, who declares himself a murderer.

Victor was 17 when his beloved mother died of scarlet fever, leaving him bereft. A burning passion for science, beginning with anatomy, led him to reanimate a being reassembled with body parts reclaimed from the dead. He says in the novel, "If I could bestow life on inanimate matter, I might in process of time renew life where death had devoted the body to corruption."

One sight of the being he has created (Harry Attwell), however, fills him with horror and disgust, with its "shriveled complexion and straight black lips." It is to him forever a monster, demon, wretch and, finally, adversary.

Cast out by his 'father,' the creature observes from a distance the ways of men, even learning to read. Eavesdropping on a family of cottagers, he hears "of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty," and realises that being property-less made a person "a vagabond and slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of the chosen few."

The creature dreams of becoming part of this loving family and, in secret, collects firewood for them. However, when they see him, terrified by his appearance and unable to appreciate his humanity, they drive him away.

Shunned by all, in despair he vows revenge, cursing his creator. In one chilling scene, employing puppetry, the creature meets Victor's younger brother, William. The child/puppet screams "hideous monster" and the creature strangles him.

Later, Victor breaks his promise to his creation and destroys a female creature that was to be consolation to the "demon" in his loneliness. The latter responds that he will take revenge, with a prophetic, "I will be with you on your wedding night."

The wedding night arrives. Petals fall on the heads of Victor and his new bride Elizabeth (Shanaya Rafaat), as the guests join them in dance. Their joy is short-lived and the creature makes good his threat.

The final scene is acted with much pathos. *Frankenstein* has shown us that the creature was not born "evil" but was treated inhumanely, a tortured soul condemned to live alone. His natural inclination towards kindness was not nurtured. A grave injustice was done, his villainy fashioned by the cruelty of men.

As he grieves over his creator's lifeless body, the creature determines to end his own life by self-immolation: "Some years ago when I felt the cheering warmth of summer… I should have wept to die; now it is my only consolation."

This fresh, energetic production of Frankenstein does justice to Shelley's novel, employing theatrical devices to dramatic effect. It

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looks darkly gothic, is well choreographed, and moves elegantly from scene to scene thanks to the combined efforts of director Matthew Xia, the actors and technicians. When the actors take on multiple roles it is barely noticeable. They become the different characters and take the audience with them, maintaining both pace and tension.

Critics have long pondered how someone so young as Mary Shelley could conjure up such a mature and enduring narrative as *Frankenstein*.

Mary grew of age against the backdrop of immense societal changes. The French Revolution of 1789 left the European ruling class reeling in horror and fear, while inspiring the oppressed. France suffered final defeat in the Napoleonic wars at Waterloo in June 1815, and the rule of monarchy was bolstered throughout Europe in the following decade.

At the same time, the influence of religion, already undermined by the materialist philosophy of the Enlightenment, was to suffer further blows at the hands of science. On the cusp of great developments, the possibilities for progress in science seemed infinite.

The influences of the age were refracted through Mary Shelley's remarkable parents. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, born in 1759, died just 11 days after Mary's birth in 1797. Wollstonecraft is best remembered as the author of *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) , though she also wrote a polemic against Edmund Burke in support of the French Revolution (*The Vindication of the Rights of Men)*. Courageous and free-spirited, she travelled to France during the upheavals.

Heartbroken after her death, husband William Godwin (1756-1836) set about writing her biography, which proved scandalous to the hypocrites of the day because it revealed details of Wollstonecraft's non-conformist lifestyle.

Godwin was a well-known radical, educated in the works of the revolutionary Thomas Paine and author of *Inquiry concerning Political Justice and its influence on Morale and Happiness.* In the latter, he argued that human progress was impeded by private property, marriage and monarchy.

The young radical poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, sought Godwin out and this is how Mary met him. The same year, 16-year-old Mary and the already married Shelley eloped to France. Godwin's response was to sever contact until they were able to marry in 1816—after the death of Shelley's first wife.

Mary felt cast out by her father. An atheist and socialist, Shelley was socially ostracised for his beliefs and even refused custody of his children from his first marriage.

The origin of the novel *Frankenstein* is something out of fiction. The Shelleys had travelled to Geneva, to be joined by the poet Lord Byron and his entourage.

Both Byron and Percy Shelley's work were read widely and avidly by the working class. Byron was a fearless critic of modern society—a defender of the Luddites and Irish Catholics, and later a fighter for first Italian, then Greek independence. Shelley's poem *The Masque of Anarchy,* which execrated the Peterloo Massacre in 1819—in which 15 were killed and hundreds injured in Manchester by government troops—was adopted by the revolutionary Chartist movement.

Many and long were the discussions between the Shelleys and Byron. "During one of these," Mary recalled, "[V]arious philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life."

As tradition has it, one stormy night in 1816 found this extraordinary company sitting in a candle-lit drawing room, with a view over the lake to the mountains lit up by lightening, when talk turned to the supernatural, science and the possibility of reanimating a corpse.

In those days, early death was an ever-present threat with childhood mortality commonplace—Mary herself had already lost one child and two more were to die.

The scientist Luigi Galvani had demonstrated in the 1780s that electro-stimulation could produce movement in a dead frog's legs. Shelley had experimented with electricity while a student at Oxford.

Byron challenged his companions to each write a ghost story. Thus were born the seeds of the first science fiction novel, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* .

To return to the contemporary relevance of *Frankenstein,* it is worth quoting from Percy Shelley's review of the book: "Nor are the crimes and malevolence of the single Being, tho' indeed withering and tremendous, the offspring of any unaccountable propensity to evil, but flow inevitably from certain causes fully adequate to their production. … Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked. … It is thus that, too often in society, those who are best qualified to be its benefactors and its ornaments, are branded by some accident with scorn, and changed, by neglect and solitude of heart, into a scourge and a curse."

These Enlightenment ideas speak forcefully to a modern audience. We can empathise with something created as an articulate rational being that is reduced by society to a "monster." It is no surprise that the Murdoch press attempted a hatchet job to undermine the novel in its anniversary year. A March 5 article in the *Sun* sneered at "snowflake" students who, quoting Professor Nick Groom of Exeter University, "are very sentimental towards the being. But he is a mass murderer."

In answer, Professor of Literature and Culture at Lancaster University Catherine Spooner posted the following tweet:

"Frankenstein has always been used as a metaphor for political rebellion. Is it really a surprise that *The Sun* devalues sympathy for the monster, particularly during the UCU [University and College Union] strike [by 40,000 UK lecturers]?"

The play successfully evokes Mary Shelley's stand against prejudice, inequality and injustice—and also her warning to use science responsibly. These are very contemporary issues at a time when humanity stands at a crossroads.

If society's wealth remains under the ownership and control of the profit-driven ruling elite, disaster will ensue. Scientific knowledge is increasingly misused to build weapons of mass destruction and to oppress, rather than solve the world's problems. The very existence of life on this planet is under threat due to global warming and, more immediately still, nuclear war. This raises the necessity to take the productive forces out of the hands of the capitalist oligarchy and to establish a socialist society run for the benefit of all.

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