



CULTURE, REVIEW, THEATRE

## THRILLING AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING: FRANKENSTEIN AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE, ENCORE SCREENING

NOVEMBER 14, 2014 CONNY KAUFMANN 5 COMMENTS

It does take skill to adapt Mary Shelley's gothic classic *Frankenstein* for the stage without turning it into a caricature of the Boris Karloff films. But that is exactly what director extraordinaire Danny Boyle (*Slumdog Millionaire*), and screen writer Nick Dear, managed to do.

Their *Frankenstein*, which had its original run from February until May 2011 at the National Theatre in London, is a true theatrical masterpiece, both thrilling and thought-provoking.

So popular was the play's original run that Encore screenings of a recorded performance have been shown worldwide every year since 2011. The two lead actors, Benedict Cumberbatch (*Sherlock*, *War Horse*, *The Hobbit*) and Jonny Lee Miller (*Elementary*, *Trainspotting*, *Dark Shadows*) alternated nightly between the roles of Victor Frankenstein and his creation.

This version starred **Benedict Cumberbatch** as The Creature and **Jonny Lee Miller** as Frankenstein, and it's one of those rare performances that is so powerful and thought-provoking that it needs to be digested for a while before all the facets of the play's brilliance fit together like a puzzle.

As the Creature, Benedict Cumberbatch is simply outstanding. His performance is simultaneously mesmerizing and uncomfortable to watch for how real his portrayal is, from child-like curiosity to the horror of isolation. Normally famed for playing highly intelligent characters, he brings a rawness and vulnerability to a Creature that is learning what it means to be alive and different.

In this very physical role he never seems to stand still, forever moving, twisting, shaking and contorting as the Creature learns the use of its limbs and logic. For the opening 10 minutes, he manages to captivate the audience's attention as the Creature is born, all the while never uttering a word.



*Frankenstein's Creature (Benedict Cumberbatch) is born. Photo: Catherine Ashmore*

Cumberbatch's Creature has an intelligent mind, hindered by the lack of knowledge on how to use it properly. The only one to accept him fully is blind De Lacey (Karl Johnson), and with his help, the Creature goes from grunting and moaning to citing Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

The monster's creator, Victor Frankenstein, doesn't feature much until the second half of the play, but once he enters the scene the obvious chemistry between the two leading actors becomes apparent.

Jonny Lee Miller as Frankenstein wanders that fine edge between fear of his creation and morbid fascination with ease. Scenes that feature both, Miller and Cumberbatch, are powerful indeed, as the actors play off the nuances the other gives to his performance, much like the symbiotic relationship between creator and creation. Miller's mad scientist is just as human, and just as flawed at heart, as the Creature.



photo by catherine ashmore

*Jonny Lee Miller as Victor Frankenstein at the National Theatre. Photo: Catherine Ashmore*

**Danny Boyle's** return to theatre would not be complete without an inspired stage design that makes excellent use of the theatre's built-in drum revolve, allowing parts of the floor to rise and fall away and change the setting in an instant.

A ceiling full of hundreds of light bulbs makes for amazing light effects and the soundtrack by **Underworld** is so engaging, it keeps the audience as much on the edge of their seats as the performance itself.

*Frankenstein* is unique as it is mainly told from the Creature's point of view: a Creature that is hurt by the rejection and betrayal of his creator, and society as a whole.

On stage, it takes a blind man to understand that being different is nothing to be ashamed of and he is the only one who accepts the Creature the way he is. De Lacey, unlike even Frankenstein himself, understands the human part inside the monster, the scared child who wants to be good, learn and belong. Unlike the rest of the townfolk, he does not run away and thinks of the sutures and scabs on the Creature's body as battle scars.



*Victor Frankenstein (Jonny Lee Miller) and his Creature (Benedict Cumberbatch). Photo by Catherine Ashmore*

This play struck a perfect balance between big and bold scenes against small, intimate ones, and the impact it leaves on the audience is palpable.

*Frankenstein* focuses on a lonely monster. But maybe the humans were the real monsters all along.



*Jonny Lee Miller as Victor Frankenstein and Benedict Cumberbatch as The Creature. Photo by Catherine Ashmore*

For screening venues and dates, visit **National Theatre live**.

Rating: ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥