

So, first of all – Frankenstein is the name of the scientist, not the monster.

And second of all – is there a monster at all?

The classic, black-and-white movie image of *Frankenstein* conjures up Boris Karloff in full make-up, with the monster’s brooding brow, his square head, and the two bolts in his neck through which electricity runs—yielding that iconic moment when the doctor cries, “*It’s alive! Alive!*”

There’s no question the myth of *Frankenstein* is still very much alive, but with the production about to take the stage in the F. Scott Black Theatre at CCBC Essex, it’s a new vision—fresh, fierce, and philosophical—bringing Mary Shelley’s story of loss and creation into a new age.

The story of this creation begins in Theatre Professor Julie Lewis’s Writing for the Stage class, in Fall of 2019. The students in that class took on the original source material, the novel written by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, a well-educated English novelist, and wife of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. They dug into the novel’s structure, its many characters, and its full embrace of the horror of its story, and sought ways to bring the myth to life on stage.

Directing this production is Brad Norris, production manager at CCBC and co-founder of Cohesion Theatre Company in Baltimore. He went into these classes early on to explore what the students were thinking about, hear the scenes they had written, and facilitate discussions about how their project would be focused. Professor Julie Lewis, teaching the class and guiding the drafting of the script, settled with the students on a modern-day retelling of the story in Baltimore.

For the students involved on the writing team and in the cast, this setting opened up a variety of possibilities for making this classic story immediate for audiences today.

Mya Tamburello, assistant director and script master for the production, observes that Shelley’s story was constrained by her historical moment, by the need for the Frankenstein character to be male. In this production, she is Victoria Frankenstein, and this choice opened up room in the story to deal with “society’s views on gender” and to show Victoria “grappling with motherhood.”

Tamburello, who was in the Writing for the Stage class, and has been at every reading, every rehearsal, and every improvisation, points out that “a lot of the character development came out of improv” activities in the devising process, and so it “reflects the actors and their personal experiences.”

The cast affirms her observation. Ashley Mayfield, a member of the ensemble, shared that she empathizes with the character of Victoria Frankenstein, whose mother has just died at the beginning of the play. Mayfield lost her mother a couple of years ago, and remembers winning an award in her senior year of high school and thinking, “This is for my mom.” In the play, she points out, “Victoria does that, I feel it.”

Mags Carey, who plays Robert Walton, relates to the creature’s experience, because he says he understands “rejection from a parental figure simply because of who you are.” That experience, he and other cast members suggest, opens up the play’s emphasis on the importance of “found family and community.” This isn’t just about the story, he says, “That relates to theatre, to being on the queer spectrum, to just the human experience.”

Gray Sheridan, who plays the Creature, agrees with their cast mates, but feels a more personal connection as well. Because of their own medical history, they share, “I have often felt like a person who was put together wrong. And the creature struggles with not being put together the way he would prefer.” Playing the Creature, for Sheridan, has become a way to reclaim this experience of chronic illness. They hope that their performance can be validating for others sharing the same experience, so they can see themselves reflected on stage and know “That’s me.” “If you can relate,” Sheridan points out, “then you may not feel so alone.”

The experience of aloneness is crucial to the story of *Frankenstein*, of course—both in the isolation of the scientist, and the journey of the creature rejected by its creator. The cast and writing team at CCBC have found that story emerging again and again throughout the play. Becky St. Lawrence, who plays Victoria, remembers a specific improvisation that drove home for her the importance of platonic relationships: “Friendships are just as important as romantic relationships,” she shares, “and that ends up being crucial to Victoria’s mental state and her journey.”

Gray Sheridan expresses a similar perspective from the Creature’s experience: “I feel like as the creature grows and begins to learn ... [that] reminds me of how I’ve learned different definitions of belonging and safety. How will you find belonging in the world?”

For the cast, director, and writing team of this contemporary *Frankenstein*, it’s clear they’ve found their belonging on stage at the F. Scott Black Theatre at CCBC Essex. You’re invited to join the family as the play has its world premiere March 26-30, 2020.

The cast wants you to know, though: this is a horror story. Be prepared for blood and gore, nightmare imagery, and representations of self-harm. And adult language. A lot of adult language.

Frankenstein

Inspired by the novel by Mary Shelley

March 26 @ 11:10am

March 27, 28 @ 7pm

March 29 @ 3pm

March 30 @ 10am

Content Warnings: Adult language, depictions of mental illness, theatrical gore

Trigger warnings: Depictions of mental illness, images of suicide/self-harm, depictions of violence