

San Francisco Ballet
Frankenstein
War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco
February 17, 2017

San Francisco Ballet gave the West Coast premier of choreographer Liam Scarlett's *Frankenstein*, a co-production with the Royal Ballet, on February 17 at the War Memorial Opera House. Although I had had an extremely interesting interview with both Scarlett and scenic and costume designer John Macfarlane the week prior, the finished production wasn't at all what I had anticipated and was a missed opportunity for Scarlett to have an undeniable success when making his debut in the evening-length form.

Scarlett has taken great care in coaching the dancers in the dramatic side of their performances, making sure that all the characters on stage play their roles to perfection by understanding the motivation behind every movement. Of particular note is the excellent dancing and acting from Joseph Walsh as Victor Frankenstein, France's Chung as Elizabeth Lavenza – Victor's childhood friend, fiancée, then wife, and Vitor Luiz as the Creature. Special kudos to Max Behrman-Rosenberg as the seven-year-old William, Victor's younger brother. He performed with an artistic maturity far beyond his years, meeting and surpassing the level of many of the adults on stage.

The sets and costumes by Macfarlane, plus the lighting of David Finn and video projections by Finn Ross, were brilliantly executed, particularly for the third act. The utter simplicity of the Turner-esque backdrop and an unadorned staircase sweeping upwards were stunning and supported the drama on stage. It was then I wished the earlier scenes had had the same stripped down evocative look instead of the more realistic sets. As for the sumptuous late 18th century costumes, the only troubling detail was the glittering stiff tulle skirts on the ladies at the wedding ball.

The choreography, particularly the three pas de deux between Victor and Elizabeth, and especially the final duet for Victor and the Creature, were very accomplished. Scarlett has a genuine talent for using movement to provide a voice for the dancers. While he stays almost exclusively within the classical ballet vocabulary, he could have very successfully introduced more modern or naturalistic movement for the Creature who is not really human.

In a work lasting close to three hours, many of the scenes are either overly long, irrelevant, or underdeveloped, and hence the balance of the narrative arc is drastically skewed. A number of them could be eliminated entirely – the maids and butlers dancing at Victor's home (the staff would never consort with their employers in an era with a rigid class system), the women in the anatomy theater (maybe one woman could have been in medical school at that time, if any at all, but certainly not four), the scene in the tavern with the prostitutes, and the additional guests at the birthday party for William, Victor's brother. The entire subplot of the housekeeper's daughter Justine Moritz being accused of William's death and her subsequent hanging are an unneeded distraction from Victor's own conflicted feelings about his role in the creature's making and his abandoning him. All those cumulative minutes could have been better spent exploring those issues, which were instead reduced a short scene of an ill Victor writhing in bed with nightmares, and his repeated distancing himself from Elizabeth.

The commissioned score by Lowell Liebermann did not contribute much more than a rough

framework for the dancing. It may be that he was completely out of his depth in writing a ballet, or that Scarlett didn't really have the experience to communicate effectively the necessary parameters in composing a ballet. Scarlett's use of music in his other choreography illustrates his high degree of musicality and it is unclear why it didn't carry over into this supposed collaboration. At times there was a complete disconnect between the tone of the music and the action on stage. Another shortcoming was the music occasionally sounded like warmed-over Prokofiev or Shostakovich or any other number of composers. Here imitation is not a sincere form of flattery, but a lack of imagination.

A bit of patience and forgiveness for an inexperienced young choreographer would be misplaced. The Royal Ballet could have given more support and guidance for Scarlett's first attempt at an evening-length ballet. So many older artists, who were steeped in the Ashton and MacMillan traditions, are still alive and working with that company. Surely one or two of them could have provided valuable feedback. At the very least he would have benefitted from a dramaturge to keep the narrative flow intact by eliminating those elements that aren't absolutely essential to Victor's story. One also wonders why Scarlett didn't make more substantial revisions before the San Francisco premiere given the specific criticisms that appeared in the press after the London opening.

I do congratulate him for his bravery in tackling such a difficult task as translating Mary Shelley's novel into a ballet and hope his next endeavor benefits from the lessons learned from *Frankenstein*.