

Frankenstein gets new life in mysterious 'Gravedigger'

John Monaghan, Detroit Free Press Special Writer 1:19 p.m. EDT October 7, 2014



(Photo: Chris Purchis)

Just when you're sure that Mary Shelley's monster has been viewed from every conceivable angle, along comes "The Gravedigger, a Frankenstein Story." The latest from Michigan playwright Joseph Zettelmaier remains faithful to its source material while achieving the impossible: It gives the creature, cobbled together from stolen body parts, something like a soul.

This world premiere at the Williamston Theatre is backed by Kirk Domer's stark, effective set. A white backdrop painted with bare, silhouetted trees can change color through lighting to render any time of day. The show begins with the after-hours delivery of a bag of spare body parts for Victor Frankenstein (Joe Seibert), a medical student who requires them for an unnamed experiment that he believes will change the world.

The reluctant supplier is Kurt (Mark Colson), a gravedigger who informs Victor that he no longer wants to conduct business. Victor agrees, but doesn't count on his creation (Alex Leydenfrost) instinctively returning to this same Bavarian cemetery some time later. And Kurt doesn't realize that he had a hand in the creation of the mysterious man who has shown up at the cemetery.

Kurt takes home the towering creature, his hideously scarred face wrapped in bandages, and offers him food, drink and a place to sleep. The next day the monster gets a name, Anton, and a job digging graves for Kurt, who has a debilitating leg injury whose origin will initially remain secret.

Playwright Zettelmaier envisions "The Gravedigger" as a long-lost chapter from Shelley's 1818 novel, set after the monster has murdered a handful of Victor's closest friends and relations, including his wife.

The monster, though surprisingly well spoken, begins the play with a child's view of the world, lashing out in response to Victor's abandonment. Though he feels guilty for the horrible things he has done, he doesn't fully understand right from wrong until he meets Kurt, who is also in a form of exile for past sins.

And while we know that Frankenstein's monster will not perish in the play, we wonder about those around him, including a young gypsy woman, Nadya (Alysia Kolascz), who figures out Anton's secret while reading his palms. This is one of many novel twists in Zettelmaier's script.

Directed by John Lepard, the production mines various moods, and not just creepy ones. This is due in no small part to the sound design, full of crickets and chilly breezes. The play also urges the audience to use its imagination, joining Anton as he feels the wind on his face and realizes that maybe there really is a God at work.

Some scenes work better than others, partly due to the casting. Younger actors Seibert and Kolascz don't always express the required world weariness. But there is genuine chemistry between Leydenfrost and Colson, who bring both humor and horror to the proceedings.

Simultaneously running at Chicago's First Folio Theatre, "The Gravedigger, a Frankenstein Story" further cements Zettelmaier's reputation as Michigan's best and most prolific playwright. While the launch of his plays is always an event, this one is poised to haunt theaters for generations to come.

'The Gravedigger, a Frankenstein Story'

Four out of four stars

8 p.m. Thu.-Fri., 3 & 8 p.m. Sat., 2 p.m. Sun

Through Nov. 2

Williamston Theatre

122 S. Putman Road, Williamston

517-655-7469

www.williamstontheatre.org (<http://www.williamstontheatre.org/>)

\$10-\$27