

Williamston's 'Gravedigger' more than a ghost story

Kate O'Neill, For the Lansing State Journal 4:31 p.m. EDT October 9, 2014



(Photo: Chris Purchis)

Mary Shelley's novel, "Frankenstein," written almost exactly 200 years ago, has inspired innumerable revisions, sequels, and more by authors, playwrights, and filmmakers. Just last month, Mel Brooks' comic sequel to the Frankenstein story played at Lansing's Riverwalk Theatre.

Now a very different take on the Frankenstein legend, "The Gravedigger, A Frankenstein Story" by Michigan playwright Joseph Zettelmaier, has its world premiere at the Williamston Theatre.

In its graveyard setting, shrouded in fog and gloom, the monster Frankenstein has created (Alex Leydenfrost) rises out of the open grave where he has taken refuge to loom over the crippled, embittered gravedigger (Mark Colson).

Light designer Daniel Walker and sound designer Michelle Raymond have created all the elements of a ghost story on Williamston's small stage. But Zettelmaier's retelling of the Frankenstein legend is far more than that.

In "The Gravedigger," the playwright focuses on the torment suffered by Frankenstein's monster who has lashed out blindly at his creator, killing both Frankenstein's wife and brother. Now the monster is wandering the countryside, knowing Frankenstein is pursuing him.

While at first both repulsed and terrified by this huge, monstrous-appearing man, the lame gravedigger, who in time reveals the horrors of his own past, takes pity on this homeless, nameless creature. In the end, this play, for all its haunted setting, is about redemption.

John Lepard's direction manages to bring out all the elements of Zettelmaier's complex script, with magnificent support from the two leads, Colson and Leydenfrost. Both actors inhabit their characters completely. The connections made by their two characters — the embittered gravedigger and the monster tortured by the very facts of his creation — provide some of the most poignant moments in the play.

Others in the cast are Joe Seibert as Dr. Victor Frankenstein, seeking revenge on the monster he has created, and Alysia Kolasz as Nadya, a gypsy.

Seibert's Frankenstein seethes with anger; yet he seems too young to portray a man who has been through so much. Kolasz makes the most of her few scenes, as another lost soul living on the edge, doing what she must to survive.

Without giving too much away, I can say there are hair-raising moments throughout the play — moments that are intensified by the intimacy of Williamson's theater.

But most of all, Zettelmaier's script uses the familiar Frankenstein monster legend to raise some profound questions about an individual's capacity for good or evil.

Whatever the message, "The Gravedigger" provides spine-tingling drama, which will give audiences much to ponder on after they leave the theater.

If you go

- **What:** "The Gravedigger, A Frankenstein Story," by Joseph Zettelmaier
- **When:** 8 p. m. Thursdays and Fridays, 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays through November 2 at Williamston Theatre, downtown Williamston.
- **Tickets:** \$22-\$27, with \$2 off for seniors and military; student tickets, \$10 for all performances; at 655-7469 or at www.williamstontheatre.org or at the theater box office.

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