

FRANKENSTEIN

The Gym, The Arts Centre, Worcester Boulevard,
Christchurch

17/06/2016 - 02/07/2016

[Production Details](#)



Intriguing pageant of ideas and theatrical wizardry

Review by [Lindsay Clark](#) 19th Jun 2016

Finely balances spectacle, performance and audience engagement

Review by [Erin Harrington](#) 18th Jun 2016

It's fitting that Free Theatre's *Frankenstein* opens 200 years almost to the day (or maybe to the day, if you want to be generous about time difference) an evening with Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, experienced the notorious waking dream that inspired her book *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus* in 1816.

This show uses her iconic source text as a springboard rather than a framework, and turns her nightmare into, perhaps, a vision for the future. Here, our modern day Dr Frankenstein (George Parker), with the help of a Prezi presentation and a clicker, runs us through the history of his much-maligned family, as well as the context and scope of his current work: the quest to create the perfect human.

It's part TFD talk and part sales pitch, and delivered in a charismatic and genial style that

the past – rain and parasites prior, and delivered in a dramatic and general style that creates a connection with the audience that I haven't always found to be as obviously present in some of the company's past shows.

The good doctor's been at it a while, though, and he guides us through his work to date. Each of these creations are, in their own ways, 'firsts' of their kind. Amongst others we meet Frankenstein's misshapen, Milton-spouting Igor; Pandora (lugging an empty ammunition box and rendered as a bride or first woman); Tiki, the first man in Māori mythology (not Frankenstein's, but a found contribution from 'our neck of the woods'); and Prometheus himself, bandaged and bound, hanging from the set like *Mad Max: Fury Road's* guitar-playing Doof Warrior. We also witness the birth of a few of the creations that have been hanging from the ceiling in gestation, some of which aren't quite what the doctor was anticipating.

Frankenstein combines rich spectacle, movement and puppetry, haka and waiata, song and dance, some terrific sound and music, and a good deal of impressive work on aerial silks, all bound together by a diverse range of textual snippets from Shakespeare through William S Burroughs and Stephen Hawking to Nick Cave. The Free Theatre ensemble, showcasing a range of technical expertise, develops a strong relationship with the audience and interact with us in a manner that is confronting without slipping into alienating.

The magnificent set (Stuart Lloyd-Harris) sits us in the snow near the prow of a ship, alluding to the Arctic sea voyage setting that frames Shelley's novel, and surrounds us with the flotsam of Arctic and Antarctic research stations. The show leverages the capabilities of The Gym at the Arts Centre to create a wholly coherent and rich sense of environment.

A friend calls this show Falkenstein, for the director Peter Falkenberg, and I think that's delightfully apt, for apart from anything else this show serves as a sort of tongue-in-cheek mission statement for Free Theatre. It opens with a shameless shake of the hat, highlighting the intense financial constraints independent companies such as this operate within, especially given the anaemic state of arts funding.

It discusses the human and intellectual contexts within which such creative processes take place. Then, in its search for the perfect human – or, perhaps, the state of perfect theatre – it works its way through a set of 'creations', and in doing so offers a genealogy, or family history perhaps, of the company's work and ideas.

Finally, it arrives at a point of dissolution, recreation, and rapture that highlights the work of Antonin Artaud, whose theoretical corpus is immensely important to the company's overall project, alongside the expansion of his concept 'the Body Without Organs' by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

So far, so technical. If you're into that side of things (which I certainly am) then that's great. Nerd away! If not, don't worry, because there's more than enough to go around. In any case some of the more abstract and conceptual moments are softened with a degree of bathos and humour, and my companion is still snickering at a joke about egg

yolks well after the show has finished. The group of people I attend with each find something different to get stuck in to and enjoy.

This is a really fun, wry and accessible show that finely balances spectacle, performance and audience engagement, and the show's terrific opening image alone is worth attendance. I enjoy it more than any other Free Theatre production I've been to.

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