Director’s Recommendation for “The Monster”

John Haman’s “The Monster” offers a unique and moving adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* that is appropriate for most audiences while maintaining the darkness and emotional connection expected of the gothic romance. The skillful adaptation of the story and integration of text from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* offers strong dialogue for the show’s lead characters and creates meaningful relationships between the characters.

This combination of strong dialogue and character relationships allows actors to delve into the complexities of human nature. The character of Victor challenges the actor to truly connect with the heart of the character.  The role demands a wide range of emotions and requires the ability to maintain emotional intensity believably throughout the show. The character goes through a significant journey as he arrogantly creates life and then must deal with the repercussions including the realization that the true monster in the story is himself. The actor must embrace the fallibility of human nature and be willing to explore vulnerability onstage to present Victor truthfully. One of the pivotal moments in the show is the creation of Frankenstein’s Creature, therefore the Creature’s portrayal is imperative. Haman’s Creature gives the actor the opportunity to explore the physicality of a newly created being discovering the world around him as well as the emotional impact of being rejected by your creator while trying to understand your place in life. For an actor the challenge and excitement of playing the Creature comes from being responsible for bringing the character’s developmental journey to life. The actor is tasked with physically and vocally representing the Creature at multiple stages -- at creation when he is like a child, through an adolescent like stage when he clings to knowledge and understanding gained from Elizabeth, and finally at maturity when he realizes his completeness depends on companionship and purpose.

The Creature’s desire for companionship, coupled with Elizabeth’s isolation and loneliness after the loss of her Mother and Victor’s constant distance, creates excellent opportunities for female actors. The role of Elizabeth asks the actress to connect with the character’s loneliness and isolation as she is part of the Frankenstein family, but still an outsider for most of the play. This leaves the actress to find the balance between Elizabeth’s vulnerability and need to care for others as a way of belonging. The character challenges the actress to commit fully to Elizabeth’s developing relationships with both Victor and the Creature. These relationships, in addition to her relationship with Henry, are central to what motivates and drives Elizabeth. The need to understand and embrace these relationships in order to realistically and believably portray Elizabeth make this role an exciting undertaking for any actress. In addition to the phenomenal female role offered in Elizabeth, the character of Mother is a constant throughout the play. In many ways, Mother functions as a physical manifestation of a conscience for Victor as he seeks to create something greater than himself. The relationship between Mother and Victor helps shape Victor’s quest for creation and thereby makes the role of Mother integral to the show. Mother’s dialogue and involvement in scenes often sets the emotional tone, which challenges the actress to play with a variety of objectives and tactics to create a realistic connection with Victor.

While these four characters are at the center of the story, there are several others that offer excellent opportunities and challenges for developing actors. The character of Henry adds levity and humanity. This character works well for the actor that can handle being a voice of reason while also understanding that humor has as much a place in guiding others to make correct choices as seriousness. The character of Father has a brief role, but significant as he pushes Victor to conform to traditional expectations, thus furthering his desire to embrace the innovation of creation. The brevity of Father’s lines pushes the actor to delve into the mind of the character and find the elements of his relationship with Victor while not being explicitly told in the script.  This poses an interesting and growth-inducing challenge for the right actor. Much like Father, the character of Lucia has a brief role, but she is integral in moving the story forward as Victor and Elizabeth flee from the Creature. This character challenges the actress in the requirement of an accent and use of the Corsican language.

In addition to the wonderful characters, this adaptation appeals to modern audiences as it skillfully addresses themes that never age.  The quest to be and do more is accessible to all audience members. Additionally, the tragic elements of the show - rejection by a parent figure, loss of a loved one, the need to belong, failure to find redemption and love - really resonate both performers and audiences as they seek to understand what it is that makes us human. The show specifically speaks to how tragedy can be transformative. The idea of transformation speaks to high school students who are on the cusp of adulthood and struggling to define themselves much like the show’s characters. The brevity of the one act format allows for excellent discussions to take place as the play ends without a clear fate for Victor after his hubris cost him everything.

In addition the many benefits as a character-driven performance piece, this adaptation also offers opportunities to incorporate stage combat, waltzing as well as creative set and costuming. For the purposes of scholastic theatres, the show is well-suited for both small and large programs. The show can be simple or complex based on the abilities and resources of the production program. While extravagant set and costumes add to the visual enjoyment of the work, Haman’s one-act is written in such a way that even the simplest of productions will be moving and thought provoking, which makes The Monster an impeccable choice for any theatre program.

--Tiffanie Jones, drama teacher, Gentry High School, Gentry, Arkansas