

Monster meets his maker in 'Victor'

Play Review

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What if man had the power to create life from inanimate forms? Should he?

The High Street Arts Center presents Alistair Faulkner's "Victor," a powerful play directed by Rolland Petrello that explores this question in a sequel of sorts to Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein." It's a moral fable more than a horror story, a tale where the protagonist, not the monster, goes mad.

The play uses the novel's framing device, in which Captain Walton (Exileo Flores), while sailing in the Artic Sea, encounters a strange man who tells his story, which we hear through flashback.

On the island of Norsay, in northern Scotland, Dr. James Gifford (Will Shupe) and his sister, Agnes Gifford (Nancy Finn), find a well-dressed man (James Castle Stevens) washed up on shore and near death. They nurse him back to health and wonder why he was on a ship in remote waters. The traveler, who only gives his name as "Victor," refuses to reveal his mission.

Act 1 is a mystery, the attempt to pry information from the closemouthed stranger who seems preoccupied and worried. Victor insists he must move on, but Agnes tries to discourage him from leaving. Victor finds the area calming, yet says that calamity will strike if he stays. Eventually, his unsettled spirit is drawn to Agnes.

Two other lovebirds are James' wife, Freya (Jenny Cariker) who lusts for the island's landowner Ewan Sinclair (Seth Allen). She only married the good doctor in hopes that he would take her away from the dreary isle. This subplot is not fully developed and seems to exist only to facilitate a plot point in Act 2. Still, it adds interest to the secondary characters.

Victor's secret leaks out when he's forced to save James' arm after an accident. The scientist holds the secret for regenerating dead muscle- and more.

Victor has created a living being pieced together from cadaver parts. This creature has followed Victor to the island- or is it the monster who leads his creator in a not-so-merry chase? Victor seeks to kill the beast who murders those the scientist loves.

Act 2 takes a philosophical turn as Victor confronts his creation (Eric Harris). The ugly beast, who, unlike in the movies, is highly literate, peppers Victor with questions of self-identity- "Where is my sister and brother?" "Why did you create me?" He's angry at the scientist for not giving him a mate to love. Is Victor the real monster for subjecting his creation to a life doomed with loneliness and ridicule?

Patrons may remember Stevens and Shupe as two of the jesters in last season's romp "The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Abridged." Here they pull out their acting chops in stunning performances as they verbally duel- James demands that Victor share his healing powers with the world while Victor yearns to erase his terrible knowledge. Stevens stalks the stage as a man haunted, trapped in his own interior hell. Shupe matches Steven's intensity, yet can also display jealousy at his wife's infidelity with a subtle turn of the brow.

The funny, charming Finn gives us a rich character, the strength of a woman in a harsh environment and tenderness in her exchanges with Victor.

The main actors carry their accents well, which enlivens the well-crafted script.

Harris skillfully embodies the creature, at first silently stalking his prey and then passionate in his pleas to Victor. This beast can see beauty and seeks love- does this not make him human?

The production uses lighting, fog effects and somber music to set a sinister mood.

Jeff Rack designed one of the best sets this critic has seen at this venue in the past two seasons- the rugged interior of the doctor's humble house with its ever-burning fireplace and also the rocky crags of the shoreline, which the actors climb in Act 2 to the gripping climax.

In a time when philosophers debate the ethics of reproductive technology and cloning, such a play raises important questions- but provides no easy answers. Those who dabble too far in uncharted areas, as did Victor, may find their discoveries more dangerous than enlightening.

Running time is two hours, 15 minutes. The theater is at 45 E. High St., Moorpark and the play continues through Sat., Nov. 3. For tickets, call (805) 529-8700.