

# VENTURA COUNTY STAR

## High Street Arts Center looks into a monster's melancholy soul in 'Victor'

By Rita Moran

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*Courtesy photo Director Rolland Petrello has assembled an excellent cast for "Victor," including, from left, Jenny Cariker, Will Shupe, James Castle Stevens and Nancy Finn.*

In an era when one successful film seems to deserve another and another, it's not surprising that British playwright Alistair Faulkner decided to revisit the classic novel "Frankenstein" and explore what became of the monster and its creator. The result is "Victor," now playing at the High Street Arts Center in Moorpark in what is said to be its second U.S. engagement.

Naturally spooky, but with a touch of the philosophical underpinning that distinguished the original, "Victor" picks up with the mysterious Victor rescued by a ship that comes ashore on a remote island off the far north coast of Scotland. In a sea of Scottish accents, Victor is obviously not from the neighborhood. Rather, he admits to being Swiss but is pretty close-mouthed about further personal information.

Victor finds himself among a small family group who, for the most part, are content to live out their lives on an island at the edge of the world. When his past catches up with him, he is caught again in the horrifying dilemma. A small chest has been delivered to the cottage of the Gifford family, which has welcomed him and nursed him back to health. He refuses to open it until James Gifford, the island's only physician, is brought home with a horribly mangled arm. Having heard Victor speak of his scientific studies and knowledge of medical skills, Agnes, Gifford's sister, implores him to use his abilities to save her brother's arm, and perhaps his life.

Reluctantly, Victor pulls out the chest and uses what to the others seems like alchemy to anesthetize Gifford, then re-create his arm and its functions. Once his secret is out of the

box, Victor is increasingly concerned that the being he has created out of random body parts and a mix of scientific expertise and futuristic experimentation will not only never leave him alone, but will also destroy those whom he loves, as he has from the beginning of his wretched "life."

When the creature, so frightening to look at that he shrouds his visage, accosts Victor, it turns out he has the makings of a philosophical soul, if only his creator, and the world around him, would quit rejecting him. His haunting "Where is my brother?" wafts through the foggy, rock-strewn land. What he wants most of all is a companion, a wife fashioned like himself, that he is convinced Victor could create for him. He is a creature with no past and no future, and Victor is responsible for his presence on Earth.

It's a shivery story of man's overreach and lack of concern for the consequences of his actions. The monster, who keeps wondering "What if?," offers his solution for man (taken from the young Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" novel): "Seek happiness in tranquility; avoid ambition."

High Street Arts Center and director Rolland Petrello are ambitious, but don't overreach in their selection and staging of the haunting play. Jeff G. Rack puts his years of design experience to work in a set that establishes a comfy little cottage interior on one side of the stage, and an expanse of looming rocks across the rest. Lighting is effected with precision under the guidance of designer John J. Grant, and Ami Shupe comes up with some attractive period dresses for the women and handsome, more formal attire for the men, perhaps more so than might be expected on an isolated island.

Contributing special skills for a play that demands them are Julie Pound as makeup designer, who manages to make the monster appealingly appalling, and Maeve McGrath, who coached the cast in clipped Scottish brogues.

Nancy Finn's Agnes is a nervous chatterer who delicately forms a bond with Victor. Her vivacity provides the energy behind many of the scenes, which of necessity are often grim in keeping with the enveloping tragedy. James Castle Stevens is the brooding, remorseful Victor, Will Shupe the wary James Gifford, Seth Allen the assured "laird" of the island, Jenny Cariker Gifford the restless young wife, Freya, and Eric Harris the eerie creature who won't let Victor shake off the consequences of his acts and who movingly and elegantly speaks the melancholy lines that define his shut-off life. Elixio Flores is the stalwart ship captain who delivers the news, and tools, that start the narrative.

Despite its serious undertow, "Victor" is full of surprises, and even the occasional release of laughter. It may not jolt audiences with swift action or dramatic effects, but it's bound to provoke some thoughts about humankind, its possibilities and its limits.

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