

Automantastic!

by Johnna Adams

The Mechanical reviewed April 24, 2009

Historic con artists, gothic ghosts, duplicitous chess-playing automatons, slapstick-infused 18th century Austrian royalty, and ingeniously used pop-up books are just a few of the wondrous delights that intersect in Bond Street Theatre's *The Mechanical*. Writer and director Michael McGuigan has created an endlessly inventive experience with an outstanding ensemble of actors in his sprawling historical and fantastical epic.

The kaleidoscopic script centers around a mechanical hoax that toured Europe and America between 1770 and 1854. Known as The Turk, this Automaton Chess Player was invented to amuse Empress Maria Theresa of Austria and consisted of a box and a metal mannequin dressed to resemble a Turkish mystic. An accomplished chess player hid inside the box and made chess moves for the "thinking automaton," defeating the likes of Napoleon and Benjamin Franklin. McGuigan's script combines the historical Turk with a re-imagined working of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

In the play, Mary Shelley's ghost discovers that her legacy is endangered because the Creature resurrected by her Victor Frankenstein deserts her story and hides inside the automaton as the master chess player. She enters the world of her own, and McGuigan's, fantasy to bodily possess characters and try to lure the Creature back into the plot of her own novel.

The actors in the ensemble create all the magic and mystery required with their highly physical and expressively energetic performances. In particular Joanna Sherman and Anna Zastrow are called upon to serve as exotic scenic elements, dancing sailors, Austrian and French royalty, and slapstick narrators straight out of a classic *Three Stooges* episode. Sherman and Zastrow make their diverse roles look effortless with impressive athleticism and the precise, physical specificity of Ninja masters or, well, at least, veteran vaudeville jugglers.

Meghan Frank is also delightful in a dual role (Mary Shelley's ghost and Victor Frankenstein's wife Elizabeth). She is referred to in the play as "quite beautiful, quite charming, and quite possibly deranged." That seems to fit Frank's evocative gothic creepiness and her aura of restrained mania.

Frank also served as the designer of a gorgeous puppet made of book pages (portraying the drowned little girl, whose death is blamed on the Creature). And with McGuigan, she designed projections that run throughout the play and provide fascinating context and ambience for the play.



Anna Zastrow and Empress Maria Theresa and Brian Foley as Wolfgang von Kempelen

Photo Credit: Photo by Jonathan Slaff



Meghan Frank as Mary Shelley
Photo Credit:Photo by Nadia Kitirath

Actors who can be magically captivating during long scenes where they have no lines but grunts—and do so working under a head wrapping that binds their face into grotesqueries—deserve special rewards in heaven. Joshua Wynter, as the Creature, turns his own body into passionate sculpture and embodies a deliciously sinister but compellingly vulnerable bundle of resurrected flesh.

McGuigan's direction is the real star of the evening, though. The scope of vision for the play is broad and dazzling. The enchanting physicality of the choreographed transitions, the skillful use of puppets and flowing scenic elements, and the surprise introduction of pop-up books with miniatures of set pieces—it all combines into a uniquely exciting and charming journey.

Costume designer Carla Bellisio and a wonderful soundscape (uncredited) also contribute greatly to the allure of the piece.

McGuigan's script, however, suffers a bit in comparison with the other outstanding design and performance work on the production. While the first act is almost entirely absorbing, the second act loses focus quickly. An unfortunate decision to bookend the script with an unnecessary sub-plot about a theatrical renovation contributes to a sense of messiness and makes the ending of the play seem drawn out. There are also a few moments where it feels as if McGuigan is writing a research paper on *The Turk* and not a dramatic portrayal.

For theater-goers who like a sense of adventure to their drama and the warm feeling of falling into a meticulously crafted (if occasionally over-sprawling) fantasy world, *The Mechanical* is certain to impress and entertain.