

'Mechanical' plot needs streamlining

At Theatre Project, play explores different ways of creating life

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Just like the inventor's assistant concealed inside a chess-playing robot, *The Mechanical* beats with a human heart and soul.

But there are so many distracting gears and wheels involved in this world premiere at Theatre Project, so many hidden compartments with false bottoms, it can be difficult for the audience to penetrate to the living core.

The MacArthur Award-winning Bond Street Theatre has a fascinating story to tell, a stunning visual theatrical vocabulary, and skilled performers to pull both off. The play, written and directed by Michael McGuigan, melds the familiar, fictitious story of [Frankenstein's monster](#) with the less well-known, but equally strange real-life story of a machine named "The Turk."

In the late 1700s, a con man named Wolfgang von Kempelin defrauded audiences on both sides of the Atlantic with his mechanical invention. The Turk played chess with volunteers from the crowd - including, in one case, [Benjamin Franklin](#) - and nearly always won.

We know now that a man was concealed inside The Turk, but the device was so cleverly constructed with mirrors and other special effects that it took years for the truth to be discovered. And in its claim that The Turk possessed artificial intelligence, von Kempelin's idea presaged the invention of the computer by two centuries.

What McGuigan really is trying to do in the play is to contrast three different approaches to creating life: by artists, scientists and inventors.

Author Mary Shelley used her imagination to write a novel that continues to live in the minds of readers 193 years after it first was published in 1816. Her creation, the mad scientist Victor Frankenstein, used human body parts to create a monster with super powers. Finally, von Kempelin used a human being to simulate a machine.

That's already an awful lot for just one play, and the show is most effective when it hews to these three story lines. Perhaps not coincidentally, these also are the scenes in which the acting is the most engaging and deeply felt, particularly by Brian Foley (who plays both Frankenstein and von Kempelin) and Meghan Frank (who is winsome as Shelley and as Frankenstein's spirited fiancée.)

The production also is a feast for the eyes, employing puppets, masks and video projections on both an unfurled sheet and overhead screen. In one evocative visual metaphor for death, golden sand streams through eye slits cut into a mask, leaving only the vacant sockets.

If only *The Mechanical* had stopped there. But no, the audience also must dig through a framing story involving a ghost lamp, a wardrobe of wonders, and a contractor assigned to demolish an old theater. We have to try to figure out what Ludwig von Beethoven is doing in this show. And we have to shuttle back and forth between shifts in tone, from naturalistic to highly stylized.

The Mechanical is intriguing and at times profound. But if the show is ever to reach a mass market, it will need a simpler blueprint.

The Mechanical runs through April 5 at Theatre Project, 45 W. Preston St. Show times: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 3 p.m. Sundays. \$10-\$20. 410-752-8558 or theatreproject.org.