

Robert Weinstein · April 30, 2009

Bond Street Theatre's *The Mechanical* begins in a dark, abandoned theatre. In the middle of the stage stands a large glowing orb on a stand about three feet high. In the back of the theatre stands a large cabinet, out of which emerge three ghosts, a man and two women. The women stand on opposite sides of the cabinet, striking presentational poses, excited smiles on their faces. The man approaches the phosphorescent sphere, places his hands around it, pushes his face into the light and grins mischievously. The image is nice one. It announces that we are about to hear a story and that the tale will be one full of mystery and amazement. And it is to writer/director Michael McGuigan's credit that the story he tells rises to the promise of that image. *The Mechanical* is a play busting with adventure and intrigue; and while the ends of these ideas are not always clear, the presentation of them is full of invention.

The Mechanical simultaneously tells two stories. The first story begins on a ship at sea, where a soaking Victor Frankenstein is hauled aboard after drifting for several days in pursuit of his runaway Creature. As Victor speaks, the story of the monster's creation is played out on stage with the help of the aforementioned ghosts using the now magical cabinet to great effect, presenting the lab where the Creature was made as well as the ghosts' exit from and entrance into several scenes.

The Creature's release into the world is full of wonder. We watch as he is taught to identify simple objects and modes of speech by Victor's fiancée, Elizabeth. Once situated, however, we also witness his introduction into the world's cruelty, as he tries to save a drowning girl but is instead blamed for her death based solely on his hideous appearance. He is soon exiled, but before leaving, Elizabeth's love and compassion literally strips him of all deformity, awarding him instant acceptance into society at large.

He soon finds himself employed by Wolfgang Von Kempelen, science advisor to the Empress Maria Theresa, Queen of Austria-Hungary. Von Kempelen, in an effort to impress the Empress, uses the Creature (now named Anton) as the chess master in a chess-playing Automaton known to history as *The Turk*, named for the mechanized mannequin on the machine resembling a Turkish servant. The machine is a hoax, a ruse played to such perfection that it tours the world to enormous fanfare. It defeats Napoleon in a game of chess and sparks the ire of Benjamin Franklin.

The Mechanical shifts back and forth between the worlds of Frankenstein and Van Kempelen, contrasting the former's obsession with creating actual life with the latter's attempts to create its mechanical counterpart. McGuigan deftly contrasts society's repulsion toward a very human beast and its animistic fascination with what is essentially a construction of finely tuned nuts and bolts.

McGuigan sweetens the deal with his fascinating use of double casting. He joins the obsessions of both scientists by casting the engaging Brian Foley in both roles. Foley nails both characters' temperaments and physicalities, which pays great dividends in a scene in which both his characters meet. Joshua Wynter moves nicely from the hideously vulnerable Creature to the thoughtful intelligence of Anton. And in a nicely played metaphysical shift, McGuigan transforms Elizabeth—sweetly played by Meghan Frank—midscene into Frankenstein author Mary Shelley and sends her on a journey in search of her own creation. By casting the production this way, McGuigan does an excellent job in probing the depth, purpose, and fluidity of his characters' identities.

The staging is never less than compelling. McGuigan knows his way around a theatre. He utilizes various styles and techniques (commedia dell'arte, melodrama, mask, puppetry) to tell his story. He creates dynamic stage pictures and moves his characters around the stage with ease and fluidity.

He is less successful when it comes to defining the thrust and purpose of his story. One reason he brings these two worlds together, according to the production's press release, is to "illuminate the conflict of the early 1800s between the Enlightenment, as exemplified by [scientist Isaac] Newton, and Romanticism...as exemplified by Shelley and William Blake." The philosophical question he chooses to explore is "can one understand the world through science, or must it be experienced first hand?" McGuigan, wisely, doesn't try to answer this question but the two worlds ultimately fail to coalesce. The function of the ghosts is never quite defined: their relationships to the "real" characters is not sufficiently explored. The friend I went to see this production with easily followed the plot and concepts at the heart of the play but found the fusion and logic of its world unsatisfying.

But this is a small disappointment in comparison to the riches to be found in the production, which is helped enormously by Carla Bellisio's wonderful costumes and Benjamin Tevelow's lighting, which creates a landscape that is haunting, mysterious, amazing and clear.
