National Theatre Collection

Frankenstein – Rehearsal Insights

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About

This learning pack supports the National Theatre's production of *Frankenstein*, directed by Danny Boyle, which opened on 22nd February 2011 at the National's Olivier Theatre in London.

These insights were prepared during rehearsals by staff director Abbey Wright. They introduce the process of creating, rehearsing and staging this play.



Rehearsal Diary

Week One

Nick [Dear, writer] has been writing his version of *Frankenstein* for nearly 15 years – I have heard a rumour he is on draft number 147! Actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller will alternate the roles of The Creature and Victor Frankenstein.

Over the years, he and Danny [Boyle, director] began to see aspects of the Creature's character and situation as relating to autism. Danny is keen for Benedict and Jonny to be able to meet children with autism and Asperger's syndrome as part of their rehearsal process. We visit Queen Elizabeth II Jubilee School to look at how this could work. The school is a wonderful place, and we are able to meet some of the students and teachers.

Back at the rehearsal room we meet with Underworld, who are composing the music for the production. Rehearsal room one is big with a high ceiling and its own revolve to imitate the stage of the Olivier.

Danny suggests to Underworld the idea of a train representing Ingolstadt and the Industrial Revolution, to run down the central tracks from the Upstage doors and shoot out into the audience. Rather than taking the Creature outside onto the street, we bring the town to him. The train can have both live and recorded sound and be a powerful presence physically.

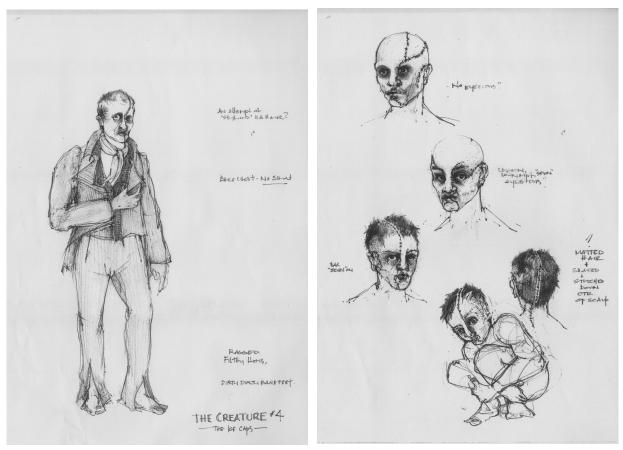
Toby Sedgwick, the Director of Movement begins work with Jonny and Benedict by exploring the neutral mask. The Creature is an innocent. He is like an adult baby, with no sense of who he is or the world around him, and he must discover everything. Being able to start from a position of neutrality is a useful tool for this.

I join Alastair Coomer (Deputy Head of Casting) to meet some actors for parts which are yet to be cast, and for understudy roles.

Danny is keen to start immersing the actors in other elements of production as early as possible and we do a make-up test for the

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Creature. There is discussion about the pattern and size of the scarring but it is apparent that the concept for the Creature make-up is a work of art.



Designs by Suttirat Anne Larlarb

Week Two

We work for a week just with Benedict and Jonny. This is concentrated work, which Danny keeps fresh by mixing up research trips, text work, and physical work with Toby. Danny says the play is a two-hander and he wants the two of them to dominate the cavernous Olivier auditorium.

During this period of rehearsal, before the rest of the company join, they have the opportunity to work intensively with Toby.

They each begin to find their own distinctive physicality for the Creature

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through a series of organic physical exercises; levels of tension, fear and joy, and work with elements. Both are playful and physically intelligent actors and this work provides the basis for devising a sequence of movement which will represent the Creature's birth.

Danny and Nick want to tell the story from the Creature's point of view and to give him his voice back, so it is important that we begin the production at the start of the Creature's journey and watch him learning to speak and discover the world. This work is very exposing for the actors and very personal, and it is thrilling to watch it develop.

Speech therapist Annie Morrison visits rehearsals. She talks about the stages of development in a child's brain and stresses the rapidity of the development of speech in a child. Danny suggests that the Creature exceeds our expectations, and one of the great strengths of the play is that every time we see the Creature he has shot forward. Through the De Lacey scenes he learns to speak and he always surprises us, knowing more than we expect him to. Nick and Danny want the audience to feel great empathy for the Creature – we shouldn't see him as a monster but as a child who learns from others.

The rehearsal room walls are covered in images which have inspired Danny and his design team and which act as a portal for the actors, offering them a visceral reference of the world we're creating. These images are of skin, stitching on the body, strange tattoos, foetuses, autopsies, death and are horrifying but human and compellingly beautiful. Using these images the company can begin to get a sense that it isn't a naturalistic world we're creating, but more of an adult fairytale. Danny feels compelled to give the Creature his voice back, and strip away the crude monster ticks of the movies.

Rehearsing the roles of Victor and the Creature in tandem with the two actors is a fascinating process. I heard Danny say that it breaks the monolithic concentration an actor has on his own role within the process. The rewards of working this way, with two such extraordinary actors, are huge. They are extremely generous with one another and

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share the discoveries they make about each character. But the major advantage, I would suggest, is that they know the play and these two characters inside out. When they are on stage together, they are really listening to each other, and the connection between them is electric.

Week Three

This week we welcome the rest of the company into rehearsals. It's wonderful to hear the play as it will be and to meet the cast. We start some initial ensemble rehearsals and research before a break for Chistmas. At this stage we aks a lot of questions about the play. Why does Victor agree to make the Female Creature? Why does he then destroy her? Why does the Creature rape Elizabeth? We talk a lot about Victor's fear of love and the Creature's great capacity for love. Perhaps this is why Victor destroys the Female Creature.



Week Four

Back in the New Year and the production is fast upon us... We work intensively, stitching scenes together and Benedict and Jonny have little time to stop. The play thrives on a muscular, fast-paced delivery and so we are working towards achieving that.

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Danny encourages the company to look at how they use the word 'Monster' when it appears in the play. He doesn't want any general monster-bashing. We explore the specificity of that term and why each person says it; is it out of fear? And fear of what? Difference?

Danny also asks the company to look for wonder in their performances. His big note of the week is 'Why so serious?' The company are enjoying discovering the humour of the play.

Week Five

We are now into running the play and it is thrilling. It strikes me as a bleak journey from the womb to some sort of purgatory. We focus on goodness. Are we all born good? What about self-destruction and the human tendency toward vice? This is what constitutes the tragedy of the play for me: the fact that the two men destroy themselves.

I start to work with the understudies, which is rewarding on a show this powerful. They are enjoying finding their way through the play, and embracing the more physical elements.

Week Six

We open our rehearsal room doors to other people from the building. The double-casting of course means double the runs. With each run the piece feels fuller, faster and more moving.

Danny and Mark Tildesley (the Set Designer) have designed a huge mirror wedge decked with three and a half thousand light bulbs to hang over the stage and auditorium. Danny explained that he wanted the advent of electricity to be hanging over the production. Each light bulb will be wired individually in situ in the Olivier.

We are now at the point where the company need all of the elements: the fire, the birds, the rain, the revolve. And we are all excited to move into the theatre.

Interview with Danny Boyle

Interview with Danny Boyle, Director

Why Frankenstein?

There have been so many versions of it. Nick and I have been working on this one for a long time but stopped because of the latest cinematic version, the Kenneth Branagh/Robert De Niro one which just scared everybody off for a bit. So we actually dropped it for a number of years.

It was the fact that it's a great story. The adaptation was a chance to do two things. One was to give the Creature his voice back which he clearly does have in the Shelley book and yet the movies often ignore that. More recently, they've given him his voice back but he's retained the monster ticks – so he evokes pity often, but rarely do you see things from his point of view. So it was a chance not just to give him back his voice but to actually make him the engine of the whole story, he's the axle of the story because you begin it with his birth – which is dissatisfying to a lot of scholars. In fact that's some of the criticism of the adaptation: how can you do this if you don't really know what Victor feels early on? But the whole point was to start it with the Creature. And you see as much of Victor as he sees of Victor. Until he is articulate and then the more conventional side of the storytelling kicks in, with the plot to build a female.



Interview with Danny Boyle

Why stage not film?

I never considered it for film at all and I wouldn't want to do it on film because I think the baggage you carry around on film from other movies is so burdensome. The approach of giving him his voice back is very theatre-based. He can speak at length, in long scenes, about what it's like for him. The problem with cinema is that because it's a visual medium you reduce him inevitably to a visual spectacle. Which is of course why he became 'the monster' in the way he did. Whereas this adaptation makes it clear he is a 'living creature', as he argues, with inalienable rights like all other living creatures. I always thought of it as a theatre piece. It was a wonderful opportunity to try and use the language of theatre to try and illustrate his life, how he learns, how he grows – and that that stuff is more interesting than how he is born. And more interesting than the guy who created him, in a way.

How is it different directing actors for theatre and film?

The thing about film is that what you're trying to do is to generate moments which make up the jigsaw puzzle which you put together in the editing room. In a theatre rehearsal, you're fuelling the actor for one single moment which happens to last two hours. You're fuelling them for a one-take wonder – except they're going to repeat it night after night after night. Whereas on film you can be fuelling them for literally as little as two seconds sometimes. A moment, a reaction, a glimpse of understanding. Actors are tools for a film director – even though most of the people who go to watch movies go to watch actors, the mechanics of the process means that they are tools in your hands. Whereas in theatre, you're very much a supplement to the actors' needs.

You're part of their toolbox. You're not all that they need. They need other things. They need an audience.

How different is it preparing an actor to perform for an audience?

I noticed in rehearsals in this process, as soon as the actors did anything good, I stepped towards it. Because that's how you film, the camera moves in. As an actor, you don't have to present anything on film, the camera does it for you. All you have to do is inhabit it. In theatre

Interview with Danny Boyle

it's the opposite. The audience is fixed in one spot and the actors have to take it out to them. In the Olivier, most extraordinarily, more so than many other auditoriums, there is such a difference between the front row and the back row. And the actor has to engineer the evening for every seat. In the cinema, you're all in the same seat. Because the camera has done all that work for you. The close-up is cinema's most radical invention. All the CGI in the world isn't as radical as the close-up. Because we don't see in close-up. Close-up is the intimacy of lovers. The only person you get that close to is a lover, or a child. It's really amazing. And then, it makes that close-up forty feet high!

Hence the obsession the film actor has with the interior life of the character because you look at them much more intimately. You look for them lying. It's why often theatre actors find it difficult to act on film because they have to interiorise everything.

How do you like to work in rehearsals?

Because I came from the theatre in the first place, I like to work through actors. You have to do a lot of preparation but you can only do so much. You can sit at home reading it at night, and reading every expert in the world, and learning the script backwards on your own and it means nothing compared to actors going 'A' 'B' 'A' 'B' on a few lines of dialogue and you learn 'Oh my God that doesn't work' or 'Oh I see what that means now'.

When you have lead actors like Benedict and Jonny, I like them blocking it themselves. I don't want to block it because I think it's restrictive. The thing you notice with lead actors is they send out yoyos all of the time. They can send out multiple yoyos. A lead actor will be thinking about three or four different things at once, not just about his own performance. That's what's been the joy about doing this, with those two actors; seeing their ability like that.

Why double-cast the two lead roles?

Because it emphasises the nature of the story which is that these two men decide to create life without women. Mary Shelley was surrounded

Frankenstein – Rehearsal Insights Interview with Danny Boyle

by Shelley, Byron – obsessive, egotistical men – both obsessed with their own ability as romantic poets.

What is amazing about her writing and why it would be fake to turn Elizabeth into a femininst, is that Mary writes it without vanity. She writes as an observer and hides the characters of Shelley and Byron in Victor and the Creature and she exposes their nihilistic egotism.

What is the play about for you?

It's about two things. Science and Love – and the wonder they both cause, and the tension between the two.



Interview with Nick Dear, Writer

I know you've been working on this play for a long time. What drew you to *Frankenstein*?

Dramatists are always looking for big ideas and big stories. *Frankenstein* is a hugely famous English story which was ripe for adaptation. It hadn't been done in the theatre for a very long time, only in the movies. The movies don't allow for the kind of intellectual debate that we've got in this play.

I always thought there was something very dramatic about the centrepiece of the story; the confrontation between the scientist and his experiment, the creator and his creation, between God and Man. On the top of a mountain, man meets his maker and says, why did you make me in this appalling state and then abandon me? All of these things seemed to me to have enough immediate resonance to make me think, there's got to be a big scene there. Stories are hard to find –especially if you've been at it for thirty years or more, as I have. When you get hold of a good story, you think, 'I'm not going to give up that one, that's mine!' I've been working on this for a long time, thinking we'd eventually get it done, and that Danny was the right person to do it in an exciting and original way.

How do you decide what you're going to strip away when you're adapting a novel for the stage?

It's a long process deciding what's going to be stripped away. You could write *Frankenstein* for the stage as a conventional historical epic, and keep all of the original characters ,and you'd need about thirty people to do it. I think it would be quite slow and quite long. You could write it for three characters. I tried at one point to make the show simply out of the three narrators in the book; Walter the Sea Captain, Victor and the Creature. I tried to do it as cross-cutting monologues, sort of like Brian Friel. This was a long, long time ago. It didn't work!

You try to identify what is genuinely interesting about this story for now. For me, it was always about the debate between the Creator and his

Interview with Nick Dear

Creation – it wasn't about the sub-plots, of which there are several. They seemed to me to be generic, early-nineteenth-century, romantic period fiction. Mary Shelley was 18, 19 years old when she wrote *Frankenstein* – those subplots are frankly rubbish!

I thought long and hard about including Clerval [a close childhood friend of Victor and Elizabeth]. I think there's quite a strong argument that Victor is homosexual and that the great love of his life is Clerval, hence he won't go near Elizabeth. But then I thought that to include Clerval may detract from the central idea of Victor's obsession with his Creation. Also, if we gave Victor a confidant, we would be led towards including discussions about how Victor was feeling, and increasingly through discussions with Danny, we became convinced that we wanted to focus more on the Creature and tell the story from the Creature's point of view.



Once we'd made that firm decision, the parameters of the story we were going to tell were defined by that decision. That is why in our version we see the Creature on stage experiencing birth, rather than Victor on stage experiencing in real time the sensations described in Chapter Five at the moment of Creation. Victor has the opportunity to explain in retrospect how he did it, and why he did it - which is the main reason I wrote the William dream sequence.

Why did you decide to tell the story from the Creature's point of view? To the best of our knowledge, it's never been done – which is often a good reason for trying things. The versions Danny and I had seen in film were always predicated upon the dilemmas of the scientist; his guilt and remorse about what he's done. It struck me that it might be very interesting to approach the story as an early example of 'outsider fiction'; a story about someone who is outside society but wants to get in and finds it very difficult to absorb the normal discourses of human society. It was thinking not so much about the experimenter but the experiment. How does the experiment feel about being experimented on? In this case the experiment is a sentient being that develops feeling, intellect and memory quickly. Therefore he has a point of view. This approach gave me the first half of the play. The first half is the Creature's experiences of growing up; the Seven Ages of Man done in Four Ages!



Interview with Nick Dear

How much translation is involved in adapting an historic novel for now?

I have found that there are a few phrases in my text which survive from Mary Shelley, but not very many. For the most part, I have in a sense, translated it. I haven't translated it into modern, television language but I've translated it into something else. It's not English as we speak it, but an English which is stripped of modernisms, or modern swear words, or modern sentence construction. On the other hand it's not accurate 1818 Mary Shelley dialogue as Mary Shelley wrote it. Then again, I'm quite sure that what Mary Shelley wrote is quite different from what she said. The literary style of that period was very highly constructed and I don't think people spoke like that.

Whilst writing the play, did you find there were certain themes you wished to draw out from the novel, such as paternity?

The more you explore the work you're going to adapt, the more it seems to chime with things you're thinking about. Over the course of my work on this adaptation, my children have grown up! I do see the book very much as being about fathers and sons. Mothers don't figure. I think if mothers had the status in the novel they commonly have then Frankenstein wouldn't need to go and create life artificially.

Ideas about parenthood differ through the ages. Mary Shelley had a very enlightened upbringing and she was so rebelliously precocious that at 16 years old, she ran off with married man! I would like to is abuse people of the idea that people who lived in previous epochs were any different from us.

Whether you're talking about the Ancient Greeks or Shakespeare's time or now, people behaved the same way, and experienced jealousy, ambition, grief in the same way. Only the detail was different. I don't sellotape on themes, but themes emerge from the story and chime with what one's thinking about anyway.

Interview with Nick Dear

How did you approach the famous moment from Chapter Five when Victor brings the Creature to life?

I ducked it! The important thing to say about that moment is that if you start to ask yourself the question, 'how does he do it?', there is no answer. Somehow, in order to adapt that moment, you have to find a way around the fact that we don't know how he did it. So either you duck the question altogether by not showing it, or if you are trying to show it you have to find an imaginative way to suggest that he infuses this inanimate object with the spark of life. Then the question is how do you do that? As I say, I chose not to do it. It's far too difficult!

It's not that it's not do able because, of course, all of the films do it, in what have become very stereotypical ways. I think the most interesting starting point for creating that moment might be to imagine that you have almost no props. Imagine your set is minimal and your props are minimal and how would you do it then? Because if you try and get into the technological reality – either the science of 1818, or the science of now, or the science of some Victorian Gothic moment in time – for me that detracts from the real interest of the scene, which is the hubris of the scientist. Technology doesn't interest me very much. I don't think it interested Mary Shelley that much. As we know in Chapter Five, there is very little detail. Of course, she's got no real idea of how it's done. She's got an idea that electricity probably comes into it somewhere – but I'd say, how are you going to do it with language?



Interview with Suttirat Anne Larlarb

Interview with Suttirat Anne Larlarb, Costume Designer

How did you come up with your concept for how the Creature should look?

We know he's cobbled together from human remains, dead body parts and I loved the idea of his skin, the outer sack of all these experiments, illustrating that he came from different people, so at first we were toying with the idea of making his skin from different patches, like a patchwork jacket, making it obvious that he came from different people. We also thought about the effect of diseases on the skin, yellowing and decay, as well as the traumatic effect of surgery on skin. Victor's hand has been inside him. We wanted to make this apparent in the way he looked. This play is written from a perspective that invites you to treat the creature with more empathy than other adaptations so I wanted him to look human. Everyone around him is more monstrous than him. I felt it was important that even though on first glance he appears repulsive and shocking, it wasn't so much that the audience couldn't get over it. We, the audience, have to live with the Creature for the duration of the play and we have to be able to empathise with him.

How is the Creature's 'look' achieved?

To create the Creature's skin, we use two kinds of scars; one is made from latex, hugely visible textured scars with bits of metal and painted, thick black stitching. These are premade and attached to the actors. The second kind are finer scars made by a silicone gun, which is then coloured to match the actor's existing skin tone. It takes two hours to make the creature up each day.