

## THEATER REVIEW

## It's 'Franken-STEEN'!

MCT brings the laughs with production of 'Young Frankenstein'

By Joanne Engelhardt

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People either love puns – or they don't. And they either think Mel Brooks is the greatest thing since sliced bread – or find him not the least bit amusing.

On opening night of Mountain Community Theater's current production of "The New Mel Brooks Musical Young Frankenstein," it's obvious the audience loves – maybe even adores – all of the above.

It's easy to see why. Daria E. Troxell meticulously selected the right actors to play the key roles, and then a hardworking crew – and a crackerjack sixpiece orchestra – did their magic as well.

The result is an exuberant evening of merriment with sight and spoken gags galore. This Mel Brooks/Thomas Meehan creation, turning Brooks' 1974 movie into a musical (in 2007), includes a boatload of clever Brooks-written puns (many definitely not intended for the younger set).

Other than the first scene at a New York medical school where the main character, Dr. Fredrick Frankenstein, is the dean of the School of Anatomy, the story takes place in the Transylvania of 1934 after Dr. Frankenstein inherits his grandfather's castle located in a quaint village called Transylvania Heights. That's as much of the story as is helpful to know before seeing the show.

Well, that and the fact that Brooks' inspiration for writing the film and subsequent musical was to parody the horror film genre in general and 1930s Frankenstein pictures in particular.

As Frankenstein ("FrankenSTEEN," he protests frequently and unsuccessfully), redhaired, boyish Benjamin Canant has arrogance and charm in relatively equal amounts, and he quickly has the audience rooting for him to lose his stuckup fiancé Elizabeth (a terrifyingly terrific MarNae Taylor) for the cute-as-a-button, sexy Morgan Peters who plays Inga, a yodeling German maid, when they're literally and figuratively thrown together on a rollicking hayride.

There are at least three more scene stealers in this production: Galen James-Heskett as the exquisitely hilarious and manipulative hunchback servant Igor, riotously droll Karen Solomon as grandpa Frankenstein's "housekeeper" Frau Blucher, and deadpan Dave Halper as the one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged Inspector Kemp.

James-Heskett slithers around the stage effortlessly, looking both totally in control yet feigning wide-eyed innocence at the same time. And yes, his hunch does slip from side to side (although if it was a little larger, this bit would be even funnier).

As for Soloman, she leaves the audience in stitches with her deep, deep singing voice in the unexpectedly witty song "He Vas My Boyfriend." Don't ask; it just is. Halper, who sports excessively long sideburns that connect to his moustache (on opening night he tried many times to hold it in place because it slipped every few minutes) shows up before the play begins to give

## 'YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN'

Presented by: Mountain Community Theatre

Directed by: Daria E. Troxell  
When: Through April 17

Where: Park Hall, 9400 Mill St., Ben Lomond

Tickets: \$25 general; \$20 senior/student; Community Night (March 31): 2 for \$22  
Details: www.mctshows.org

all the usual announcements, and makes them enjoyable.

Singing voices run the gamut from fine to mediocre, with Taylor and Peters at the top of the list. After a very wobbly first song ("The Brain"), Canant seems to find his vocal footing and sings much more melodically from then on. And while another audience favorite, Phillip Heskett, is a disarmingly sympathetic blind Hermit, his rendition of "Please Send Me Someone" is achingly off-key.

But Taylor brings down the house belting out the raunchy "Deep Love" number after being seduced by Dr. Frankenstein's "monster" (a tall – thanks to high platform shoes – very green and authentically monster-ish Scott Kravitz). Kravitz successfully manages to be menacing, fearful and lovable, so that when he and the good doctor don top hats, tuxedos and canes to sing "Putting on the Ritz," the Park Hall theater audience goes ballistic.

Much of the musicality of this production is due to the fine conducting of Arindam Krishna Das together with his "Transylvanian Maniacs." Special mention for drummer Richard Karst who keeps a zippy beat going that moves the action along.

It's somewhat surprising that so few of the actors even attempt a German accent. Halper and Solomon are the exceptions, although Peters starts out with one and then loses it. Alaina Boys' costumes look authentic for the era and location, with dirndl skirts and perky white blouses for the female villagers, Igor's swashbuckling black cape and hood, and Inspector Kemp's smart black-and-red uniform.

While there were a few small scenery miscues on opening night, in general most of the set changes work well. Troxell and Mark Hoagland are credited as co-set designers, and they entertainingly came up with a way to make the hay wagon look as if it is being pulled by two horses, as well as creating impressive wooden doors at the Frankenstein castle entrance. But the bookshelf of "books" looks phony, and some of the lab experimental machines don't have enough of a gee-whiz effect to impress the audience.

Steve Edmonds' sound and Alyssa Glenn's lighting are reliable, and Whitney James-Heskett's choreography, while not spectacular, is about right for the dance level of some of the ensemble players.

A production of this magnitude takes a village, as the saying goes, and it's apparent that MCT's dedicated staff, actors and musicians gave their all to make it happen. Mostly it works. Besides, what's not to like about a show that keeps you grinning all the way home?