Catalyst Theatre’s *Frankenstein*: Vivifying the Voice

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**Abstract:** This article examines Catalyst Theatre’s highly successful musical adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, mounted last spring at Toronto’s Bluma Appel Theatre. Drawing upon some recent work by Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, and focussing on the topic of voice, I seek both to explore the production’s unusual aesthetic dynamics and to illuminate its social consciousness. I also extend upon Craig Walker’s analysis of “hopeful monsters” in Canadian drama in order to suggest how Catalyst’s peculiar “lyricization” of Frankenstein’s story invites a new—and potentially catalyzing—mode of engagement with Shelley’s central themes and conflicts.

Catalyst Theatre’s adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* had already surpassed one hundred performances by the time it arrived at Toronto’s Bluma Appel Theatre in April of 2010. The Edmonton-based company, under the artistic direction of Jonathan Christenson (who also wrote and composed *Frankenstein*), has earned an increasing national and international reputation in recent years for its ambitious and highly popular musical productions. Its 2009 hit *Nevermore* has travelled to London and New York, and a new production, *Hunchback*, debuted last spring in Alberta.

Shelley’s novel, as critics such as Anne K. Mellor have pointed out, is pervaded with themes of vision and perception.¹ Psychoanalytic approaches to the story have taken an especial interest in what Jacques Lacan calls the gaze, evoked so memorably in Shelley’s descriptions of the creature’s watery eyes (“if eyes they may be called”)² when they first come to life.³ The Catalyst adaptation certainly offered much for our gaze. Bretta Gerecke’s production design—combining mere paper and translucent plastic into a seemingly endless array of dreamlike formations and gothic contortions—was widely lauded by reviewers for its innovation and visual impact. What my analysis will focus on, however, is the gaze’s psychoanalytic counterpart—the *voice*. 
If Lacan’s own writings on this topic are notoriously enigmatic, my approach, influenced by the recent work of Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, seeks to show how psychoanalytic explorations of the voice can enable us to engage in revealing ways with a popular, accessible musical production like *Frankenstein*. At stake here, as will soon be apparent, is not simply the issue of vocal *quality*, a topic which might seem best left to voice trainers or musicologists. The voices to be pursued in this analysis are not reducible to vocal sounds, tones or characteristics, or even what Roland Barthes has called “the grain of the voice” (“the body in the singing voice”). For theorists like Žižek and Dolar, the voice is a vital topic insofar as it pertains to the very notion of *subjectivity*, and it is in this respect that an exploration of voice can illuminate not only the aesthetic dynamics of Catalyst’s *Frankenstein*, but also its social consciousness. If, on the level of narrative, Christenson’s show offers a more or less faithful reduplication of Shelley’s tale, I argue that what it stages for us in the theatre is
productively understood as a progressive interaction between three modes of voice: the sublime, the monstrous, and the hopeful.

**Sublime Voices**

In Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, as is commonly known, a mute pile of inanimate bodily bits and pieces is brought to life, made to see and to speak. But my focus in this first section is on the vivification of a different voice—Victor’s. What the first act of Christenson’s production stages is the emergence of a voice that simply doesn’t fit into the characters’ existing world, a voice that strains against that world’s structures and derails its rhythms.

“We close our eyes, we cover our ears,” sing the Chorus in an opening prologue that confronts the audience with powerful reminders of impending disaster: war, famine, poisonous hazes, malignant plagues, “and still the horrors grow and grow.” As Jay Clayton notes, “virtually every catastrophe of the last two centuries—revolution, rampant industrialism, epidemics, famines, World War I, Nazism, nuclear holocaust, clones, replicants, and robots—has been symbolized by Shelley’s monster,” and the Catalyst production was immediately intent to animate this range of associations. But no sooner do Christenson’s characters begin to *speak* than the prologue’s daunting images are disavowed. Transporting us “far away and long ago,” the opening scenes depicting Victor Frankenstein’s upbringing seem a strange and sudden reversion from the desperate immediacy of the topics raised previously. This section of the production was most commonly criticized by reviewers, primarily for its cold, “sneering” camp. Narrated by chorus members in “irritatingly smug” rhyming couplets set to music, the early scenes seemed more intent to “mock” the source material than to extract poignancy or value from it, rendering the hardships and sufferings of Shelley’s characters “emotionally blank.”

Then again, with the opening choruses still echoing in our heads, it is all too easy to recognize in the campy detachment of this sneering world—with its insistence on keeping so mindlessly aloof from reality—a most accurate reflection of our own times. These characters, if not actively closing their eyes or covering their ears, dramatize a disturbing failure to register what is directly before them. The world surrounding young Victor is one of great trauma and disintegration. Abuse, abandonment, a girl held hostage by her alcoholic father, a young boy stuck alone with his mother’s decaying corpse—these tragedies are everywhere but they are gentrified with enticing visuals and rhyming phrases, staged in a way that saps them of their depth. This is a world where tragedy itself becomes a charming sing-song between children. “For want of a nail the shoe was lost,
for want of a shoe the horse was lost,” chime Victor and Lucy, moronically indifferent to the mounting horror that is the subject of this verse (it climaxes in the destruction of an entire kingdom). Singing, in this world, never rises beyond a lullaby, a sweet motherly voice encouraging sleep since “there’s nothing left for you to do.” Numerous characters die in these early scenes, but what predominates is the deathlessness of the theatrical medium itself. Performers are simply resurrected after each of the deaths they sneeringly enact, raised up and given another role to play. Victor’s father, having died from grief at his wife’s own senseless passing, is instantly reanimated as a grotesque five-year-old. The production, in short, is speaking from a place of detachment that deprives the narrated events of any substantiality, and though these scenes are often amusing, there is also something monstrous in this theatrical immunity to death and trauma.

It is in opposition to this world of detachment and deathless repetition that Victor’s voice emerges. Those reviewers who criticized the first act’s “moon-June” rhymes were equally eager to extol the sublimity of Andrew Kushnir’s solos, the impact of which was indebted to the contrast. This voice erupts from a forceful encounter with something real amidst an all-too theatricalised world. Victor’s first song is a response to his mother’s death and its horrifying mystery: “that the brightness of her eyes can be extinguished … and the sound of her voice, so dear to the ear, can be hushed, never more to be heard.” Song is here a registering of the trauma that the presentation’s universe has until now conspicuously distanced itself from—the reality of death, “that most irreparable evil, the void that presents itself to the soul.” Victor does not simply speak of this trauma—his singing voice itself constitutes a break or rupture in the texture of his social reality, opposing its complacent, numbing rhythms and its uncanny excess of life. His registration of death is correlative to the introduction of unresolved chords, rupturing the false harmony of this world of resolving couplets.

Lacanian psychoanalysis has often been identified with the “structuralist” notion that human beings, while appearing to speak on their own, are actually being spoken through. What Lacan calls the symbolic order (the order of language and social conventions) structures what we perceive as our reality, determining the vantage point from which we see it, and, like a type of ventriloquist, speaks through us, determining what kinds of things we say and how we say them. But what most interests Dolar and Žižek is Lacan’s later emphasis on voices that signal dimensions of subjectivity irreducible to this symbolic order. Subjectivity, here, suggests a voice that is “out of joint” with the existing order, derailing its rhythms—and in this sense, the Catalyst production stages the birth of subjectivity long before the famous monster’s awakening on the laboratory table. The voice emanating in
Victor’s solos marks the dawning of self-consciousness in what was formerly a vapid, mechanical doll. Until this point he has been no more than a marionette, a Burtonesque puppet entirely animated by his symbolic order. His first words on stage had simply filled in the blanks of a pre-established sentence. Justine the tutor begins: “In the final years of the last century, the great Italian physicist …?” and Victor responds: “Luigi Galvani.” “Electromotive force equals?” and Victor responds: “E2 minus E1.” Parrot-like, he was spoken by the order of knowledge, not yet a site of learning and seeing that will disrupt and derail existing thought. His singing, conversely, announces a voice which, in its sublime intensity, does not belong in this world, reverberating out of joint with it.

The word “sublime,” as Immanuel Kant famously insists, applies to things that are not only amazing, transcendent or breathtaking but also dangerous, terrifying or destabilizing, threatening to overwhelm us. And while we often identify singing voices with the first part of this definition, Dolar reminds us that historical perceptions of the voice have linked it equally with the second. Supplementing Derrida, he notes that the voice has frequently received a metaphysical vote of non-confidence: “it undermines the social fabric, its laws and mores, and threatens the very ontological order.” We might recall Plato’s “truly apocalyptic vision” of song as disruptive of all law and control, capable of bringing about “the end of civilization, the return to chaos.” Or consider the controversy surrounding the voice in religious devotions—does it spring from God or from the Devil? The context of Catalyst’s Frankenstein prompts a parallel between these dimensions of the voice and Victor’s increasingly “monstrous” scientific obsessions, voiced here in songs that defy the existing rhythms and harmonies of his social world. Announcing both “the supreme elevation and the vilest damnation,” the singing voice has often prompted the same questions as science: “how to strike a balance between its beneficial and dangerous effects, where to draw the line between redemption and catastrophe.”

On the Catalyst stage, however, the soaring power of the voice predominates over intimations of catastrophe in the first act. I know very well that Victor’s promethean creation is a most lamentable enterprise—that his quest for mastery over the secrets of human life will bring only suffering and death—but all the same, the sublime heights to which his voice soars whilst he pieces together his infamous monster leave me more inspired than a passionate commencement-day address. Against the backdrop of his insipid social reality and its mindless detachment, the assembling of this monster appears not as a tragic mistake we keep repeating but as a rupture of repetition. It promises to break the inane rhythm of this emotionally blank realm in which no substantial change ever takes place—song is here correlative to an act of true creation.
Monstrous Voices

For all the ways in which this creative impulse, voiced in song, is something exceeding the contours of Victor’s social universe, its fundamental thrust in this production is ultimately defensive. What drives Catalyst’s Victor is the desire to evade a troubling void in the fabric of his reality; the ultimate object of his creation—“a world without death”—reflects not simply a rejection of socially-determined limitations but a defensive reaction to a traumatic breach within symbolic reality, an encounter with something that evades all definitive symbolization. Here the Catalyst show departs subtly but significantly from Shelley’s novel, in which Victor’s creation of the monster—an act predating the death of either parent—represents a more clear-cut rebellion against the conventions structuring social reality. The world of Catalyst’s Victor is already deprived of its structural stability. The irony, of course, is that the very success of Victor’s enterprise will lead to an even more traumatic encounter, one which, in the Catalyst production, is conspicuously correlative to a new mode of voice.

For many reviewers who were critical of the show, its best moments came in the second act, so different from the first in tone. This act commences with Shelley’s own most surprising inversion, in which the creature—previously no more than a voiceless freak haunting Victor, a lurking otherness illuminated in its deformity by flashes of lightning—is given a voice. Having drawn his tormented creator to a solitary mountainside, the creature voices the tale of his own “wretchedness,” his mistreatment and rejection by all humanity: “I was kind and good, but misery made me bad.”

The creature’s rough and laboured voice presents, of course, a conspicuous contrast with the transcendence of Victor’s singing. But to grasp the relationship between voice and subjectivity as understood by Dolar and Žižek—and to grasp how these theoretical considerations shed light on social relations in our own “normal” world—I suggest we begin by examining the visual dynamic of the creature’s mask. The photograph above captures Gerecke’s unusual design for the monstrous countenance. Consisting of uneven whitish material that encases the skull and face, the mask leaves open the space of George Szilágyi’s mouth, and it is this space that comes to define the character. Stretched to a painful extreme for most of the performance, the performer’s (abnormally large) mouth is a gaping cavity against the off-white surface, a black void dominating the observable features. From my place near the front of the theatre, there was something horrible about the edges of this mouth, stretched, quivering, framing the abyss at the centre of the face—the most real thing in this theatrical world of crunched paper and translucent plastic. Ironically, the most monstrous aspect of the creature is, in this sense, the part that is not masked.
The mask’s effect, in short, is to accentuate the unfathomable place, the mysterious internal depths beyond all observable features, from which the voice emanates. Framed and foregrounded in this way, the place of the voice achieves unusual prominence and proximity, taking on a life of its own, appearing oddly (and disturbingly) disconnected from the material body on stage. This incongruous effect is of course most appropriate for Shelley’s monster, whose voice emanates from a source which has no proper place within the body that Victor has given it. The story of Frankenstein is the story of a voice that does not belong where it finds itself, alien to the very body from which it escapes.

With the work of Žižek and Dolar in mind, what is perhaps most revealing about this “monstrous” incongruity—between the visible body and the abyss that is the voice’s source—is its resonance with us “normal” human creatures. There is, as Žižek puts it, “an unbridgeable gap” that “separates forever a human body from ‘its’ voice.” A voice “never quite belongs to the body we see,” such that “a minimum of ventriloquism” pertains to the voice of a regular human being—it “hollows him out and in a sense speaks ‘by itself,’ through him.” Even if we grow used to a person’s voice, the source of that voice, Dolar reminds us, “can never be seen, it stems from an undisclosed and structurally concealed interior, it cannot possibly match what we see.” In this regard, what the monster’s theatrical face most effectively accentuates is the operation of masking correlative to our engagement with “normal” human faces. Insofar as its uncanny force resides in the gaping space of the mouth, this mask functions not primarily by adding something to the face, some horrible surplus feature, but by depriving it of something. The face is stripped of its regular status as mask—it is denied its regular ability to mask the impenetrable and (for Lacan) terrifying enigma of the voice’s source within another person. The absolute darkness and unknowability of this abyssal dimension of subjectivity—a dimension in human beings out of rhythm and harmony with their material appearances—is what Lacan had in mind when he spoke (in Seminar VII) of the neighbour as Thing.

One way to clarify this conception of the neighbour—which plays a highly important role in Žižek’s complex theoretical edifice—is by contrasting it with Emmanuel Levinas’s sublime conception of the face. Levinas, famously, speaks of the other’s face as something dazzling in its “absolute authenticity,” an “epiphany” from which the call to ethical responsibility emanates. For Žižek, the problem with this “sublimation” of the neighbour is that it covers over and disavows the monstrous or inhuman dimensions of human beings—it risks stripping the other of his or her real otherness, blinding us to the dimension of opacity and impenetrability that is “the ultimate reality of our neighbour.” Perhaps a true act of “opening” ourselves to the neighbour requires that we go further,
acknowledging “something which remains opaque and resists inclusion in any narrative reconstitution of what counts as ‘human.’”22 For Žižek, the true face of the neighbour is thus something that we glimpse when we stumble upon an unmasked other, a face which “confronts us when the neighbour ‘loses face’”—when the masks correlative to socio-symbolic identification are denied or stripped away.23 In other words, to confront the neighbour as Thing is to face something which, like Frankenstein’s monster, is irreducible to any determined position within our existing symbolic order—a part that is “no-part,” a thing that is “out of joint” with any symbolic network which could mask its fundamental otherness.

We can further clarify this dynamic through reference to what is perhaps the most affecting and memorable moment of the Catalyst production: the creature’s encounter with the blind man De Lacey (captured in the photograph above). Having singled out De Lacey as the only living person who might respond to him compassionately, the creature gathers the courage one evening to approach the man in his home. Christenson’s staging of this scene includes a vital detail not contained in the original novel. This version of the De Lacey character does not remain blinded but reaches out to touch the monster, gradually registering its deformity. We have here a moment of traumatic unmasking. Initially shielded by De Lacey’s blindness, the monster is forcibly “unmasked” by the man’s touch, losing face—he loses the screen which had enabled him to participate in the exchange, the screen which had endowed him with a “human” identity and covered over his otherness. In this painful moment of unmasking, the creature, this no-part, hovers on the brink, totally exposed …

This powerful theatrical moment sheds revealing light on Žižek’s own intriguing if enigmatic description of the voice as “object.” If, he argues, the exemplary case of the gaze “is a blind man’s eyes, i.e., eyes which do not see,” then the exemplary case of the voice “is a voice which remains silent, i.e., which we do not hear”—a voice which remains painfully mute, “stuck in the throat.”24 In this liminal moment of traumatic exposure, the creature cannot speak, yet the gaping void of its mouth reverberates most forcefully, filling the entire theatre with the intensity of something which cannot come forward. In the “true object-voice,” explains Žižek, “what effectively reverberates is the void.”25 Dolar offers the example of the silent scream in Munch’s painting, wherein “the black opening is without the voice which would mollify it, fill it, endow it with sense, hence its resonance is all the greater.”26 In Catalyst’s Frankenstein, likewise, the silent voice represents the voice all the more, evoking a direct correlation between a voice “stuck in the throat” and the abyss of subjectivity, a
“thing” in the neighbour that is (monstrously) irreducible to any socially recognized place, escaping all symbolic inscription.

The challenge posed here, as in Žižek, resides in confronting and being transformed by this “monstrous” dimension of the other—the otherness of a human being stripped of all symbolic identity and thus “reduced to inhumanity.”

**Hopeful Voices**

In this light, what is most interesting in the Catalyst production is its dramatization of a shift in voice—a progressive transformation of the place from which the production itself speaks and sings. If the creature’s tale is a tale of a monstrous no-part, he achieves, in the process of its telling, a very definite place within a different socio-symbolic world. If, on the level of fiction, the whole social universe rejects him, he is reached out to—in his otherness—by the theatrical community on stage around him. The Chorus, which in the first act had detachedly and complacently spoke Victor’s world, begins in the second act to speak with and for the creature, accepting the place of his voice as the very site of theatrical enunciation. The sense of community becomes increasingly clear through physical intimacy between the Chorus and the creature, and also through song, the creature’s harsh tones gradually incorporated into a mix of voices on stage. On the level of fiction, Victor feels compelled to neutralize or kill this monstrous Thing which lacks any defined place, an excess at odds with the social universe. On the level of theatre, the creature, in the telling of his story, is actively accepted, finds a home here upon the stage. It is from his place—a no-place—that the production itself begins to speak.

This shift in voice reflects a substantial transformation in the Chorus, what we could call its subjectification. Having formerly perceived the action as no more than a “ghastly joke,” treating it as a grim but distant and darkly comic debacle in which they had no personal investment, they emerge in the second act as contemplative and empathetic, willing to take action. Previously their raison d’être had been their sheer strangeness, the oddness of their white paper-mâché hair, their entrancing contortions and unusual diction, but increasingly they seek to move us, to advocate, to fight for something, galvanized by a common struggle. The creature, in this sense, is not simply accepted into the theatrical community—he creates it as such, animating it, bringing it to life as a community.

In this regard, Victor’s eventual destruction of the bride that he has agreed to assemble for the creature is highly anti-theatrical, a blameworthy refusal to create (a new artwork, character, story), to animate new possibilities. In the novel, to terminate the creature’s bride is to act on behalf of his
social order, refusing to introduce an element which could further disrupt its existing equilibrium. In performance, however, to terminate this bride is to destroy something that fits perfectly into the aesthetics of the new community that has developed before us. The world which Victor was part of has changed its voice, and consequently it is Victor himself who now has no place, increasingly alienated on the stage, rejected by the Chorus and, most notably, deprived of his songs. In the entire second act he is granted no more than a few staccato notes.

When, at the close of the show, the Chorus eventually returns to the opening number (“We close our eyes, we cover our ears”), they will revive it as a very different song. The initial rendition had taken a certain obscene delight in assailing us with hyperbolic horrors (a “strange, malignant plague” that “annihilates ten thousand men,” a “record-breaking storm” that “claims a hundred thousand more …”). Much more stirring is the finale’s simple and genuine recognition of human mortality, expressed in an unaccompanied a cappella phrase—“We end alone”—accentuated by the silent spaces preceding and following it. Ironically, this acknowledgement of death (“the void that presents itself to the soul”29) vivifies this assemblage of previously inhuman, detached observers. Their opening number had simply enumerated the horrors afflicting human beings, setting forward our willed ignorance as the defining feature of our race. The finale, by contrast, draws the show to a close with a series of active (if open-ended) verbs, expressing a struggle that unites us as a human community: “We live, we love, we dream, we pray, we try to find a better way…”

In a recent article, Craig Walker identifies in Canadian drama “a preponderance of hopeful monsters.”30 He draws the term from evolutionary theorists to describe an optimistic attitude toward biological abnormality or genetic mutation in dramatic characters. If Shelley’s monster originally has the status of what Walker calls a “doomed freak,” and if its abnormality leads only to “social alienation and/or death,”31 the on-stage dynamic of Catalyst’s Frankenstein converts this freak into a highly hopeful—and in Walker’s sense, Canadian—monster. Indeed, in an ending quite different from Shelley’s, Victor himself (following the lead of the on-stage community) learns to relate to the “hideous progeny” as his own “child.”

Walker’s analysis is intent to draw a link between biological or genetic monstrosities and the prospect of “variations or mutations in the social codes” of a society,32 and it is here, I would argue, that the “hopeful monster” can become a tricky affair. Simply put, we can be open to the idea of a genetic transformation that would restructure humanity’s biological codes, without necessarily being open to a drastic mutation of the social codes and structures of thought that govern our relation to reality. Similarly, a play can demonstrate openness to genetic transformations that would expand
what we consider as physically normal or progressive, without doing anything, or much, to prompt a transformation in our socio-political consciousness. We could ask whether, or to what extent, Catalyst’s *Frankenstein* is “hopeful” in this latter sense.

It seems to me that Shelley’s tale of monstrous creation, when brought to life upon a stage, can always be understood, at least minimally, as a tale about theatrical creation *per se*. The tensions and complexities surrounding Victor’s creative act and its relation to his society are reflected into the larger act of creation that we witness and experience in the theatre. *Frankenstein*’s union with theatre calls to mind theatre’s own desire for sublime transcendence—as well as its potential for vacuous, undead repetition. It recalls theatre’s own “monstrous” ambitions: to threaten established conceptions, to assemble new forms, to give *voice* to a no-part, enabling it to speak as such—as well as theatre’s potential for *masking* trauma and evading otherness. In this light, perhaps the element of hope consists not simply in an optimistic outcome to the tale but in a production’s capacity to register and reflect theatre’s own confrontation with these tensions and complexities, or more specifically, to grapple with the issue of its own *voice*. With its creative ambition, as a conglomeration of many, varied and changing voices, the Catalyst revivification of Shelley’s tale brings to life this internal drama of the medium. In the process of entertaining us, it also models a transformation in theatrical voice—from detached representation to subjectification.

*Frankenstein*’s monster can never really be a “doomed freak,” regardless of what happens to it on the narrative level of a given adaptation. Of all creatures in the arts it has demonstrated an uncanny instinct for survival and reproduction, refusing to die and engendering ever new progeny (as I write, a large-scale production has opened in London, boasting the direction of Danny Boyle). The numerous revivifications of Shelley’s story over the past 198 years is, on one hand, a tragic testimony to our continuing inability to reconcile ourselves with the monsters we create. From an inverse angle, there is something essentially hopeful in this repetition as such, a repetition not simply of tragic blindness (unseeing eyes) but of a certain *voice*. The scope and aesthetic ambition of Catalyst’s *Frankenstein* testifies to a desire for preserving, and revivifying, this voice which speaks from a no-place.
Notes

2 Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1992), 51.
6 Frankenstein, by Jonathan Christenson and Catalyst Theatre, directed by Jonathan Christenson, Bluma Appel Theatre, The Canadian Stage Company, Toronto, ON, May 6, 2010. All other references to the production pertain to this performance.
12 Shelley, Frankenstein, 35.
15 Ibid. 45.
16 Ibid. 50.
17 Ibid. 47.
19 Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More, 70.
23 Ibid. 113.
25 Žižek, On Belief, 58.
27 Žižek, The Parallax View, 112.
29 Shelley, Frankenstein, 35.
31 Ibid. 19.
32 Ibid. 29.
33 Ibid. 19.
Works Cited


