

STAGE & ARTS

How Collide Theatrical makes Frankenstein's ungainly creature dance

A choreographer and dancer figure out how to get the monster to move.

By Chris Hewitt (<https://www.startribune.com/chris-hewitt/6370568/>) Star Tribune |

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Dancers use leotards and pirouettes all the time but in Collide Theatrical Dance Company's "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein," Renee Guittar will have something you don't often see: kneepads.

"I'm wanting the freedom to fall down on my knees when I need to. I will go from a movement that's very high up to very low," said Guittar, who plays what's sometimes called Frankenstein's monster but which Collide refers to as the Creature. "The amount of pressure I'm putting on my knees, it's a little protection. And the costume designer is making them look like bandages."

Guittar said she doesn't strictly need the kneepads but co-director Regina Peluso is glad she has them.

"It's incredibly athletic and she's doing a lot of stunt choreography. She's basically throwing herself around the stage for an hour and 15 minutes," Peluso said.

The choreography was designed collaboratively but all the artists involved agree that the Creature — assembled by Frankenstein from the body parts of dead people — should arrive unformed, like a baby does.

"In the beginning, I said, 'I'm really thinking of this as much more animalistic,'" said Peluso. "The Creature has a great arc in the show. She starts barely being able to walk, then learns how to move — like everyone does — right before she dies."

Peluso hopes the movement will be startling for audiences and teases that, since the Creature's arms and legs came from different people, one leg may not move the same way another does — an idea that will be amplified by a chorus of dancers who channel the unformed Creature.

"It all starts out with erratic movements. My arm might reach out without me realizing it and I have to pull it back in. Or I look at my hands and it's like, 'These aren't the hands I'm used to seeing.' It's difficult for her to walk or to move predictably," Guittar said.



WELLS FILM & AMP: PHOTO

"Mary Shelley's Frankenstein" at Collide Theatrical Dance Company features, from left, Betsy Nelson as Shelley, Renee Guittar as the

Difficulty to relating to the world makes sense for a baby, but Peluso and Guittar also note that people emerging from a lockdown need to relearn the way they approach society.

"The turning point in my arc is when I got outside for the first time and start observing people. That's where I realize what I'm missing," said Guittar. "That's when I start to learn about society and maybe even have some memories from my previous bodies."

No matter what Mel Brooks thinks (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGZRhejBZ8Y>), the monster never becomes graceful. But Guittar advances from needing to use her hands for balance to communing with humans. Even for monsters, it turns out, there is something to the truism that you have to crawl before you can walk.

Childbirth is central to the show, which is told from Shelley' (<https://www.bl.uk/people/mary-shelley>)'s point of view. The author was a teenager when she gave birth to a stillborn child. Not long after the tragedy, she began writing "Frankenstein," pouring her grief and love into it.

"Mary Shelley starts out the show, saying, 'I am the creature whose birth killed their mother,' because when Mary was born, her mother died in childbirth. 'And I also am the creator of five children, four of whom died.' She tells us all of this in the beginning: 'I am the creator and the Creature. And so are we all,'" said Peluso, who believes the narration will help audiences track the multiple levels of Collide's piece. "Who really is the villain? It's another question we ask. The Creature kills a lot of people, but is it her fault?"

Along with Shelley (Betsy Nelson) and the Creature, Dr. Frankenstein (Patrick Jeffrey) is a key character. Peluso thinks his fear of the Creature he dreamed up in a lab is not unlike parents' worries about children whose lives they know they can't control. The contrast between "parent" and "child" will be reflected in the way the Frankenstein and his Creature move.

"Patrick is never crouched or on the ground. He's very held up. Proper. Lifted. Obviously, dance partnering can look really beautiful. But that's not what this is. They aren't partnering to be romantic or beautiful," said Peluso. "There's a push and pull between them. We've been taking typical ballet moves and then tearing them apart. She's not going to be in a pretty ballet lift. He might lift her, but she's going to struggle. So we're taking a lot of the vocabulary we have, but looking at it in a very different way."

The disconnect between Shelley's world and the Creature's is also reflected in the music: string instruments playing classical pieces for Shelley; pop numbers such as ones by Lady Gaga for the Creature.

"She was never going to dance pretty. She can do some of the same moves but she's not going to execute them in the same manner," said Peluso. "She's doing modern, contemporary, a little jazz. But she's never doing ballet."

Both women speak of "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein" as a tribute to the 19th-century woman who took her broken heart and made it art (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6AzQRq-gppwL>), and who took grief over losing a baby and created another kind of "baby" that will live forever.

'Mary Shelley's Frankenstein'

Who: Co-directed by Heather Brockman and Regina Peluso.

When: 7:30 p.m. Wed.-Sat., 2 p.m. Sun. Ends Oct. 24. (Virtual version available Oct. 29-Nov. 2.)

Where: Southern Theater, 1420 S. Washington Av. S., Mpls.

Protocol: COVID vaccine or negative test required, along with masks (no bandanas or gaiters.)

Tickets: \$30-\$55, [collidetheatrical.org](https://www.collidetheatrical.org) (<https://www.collidetheatrical.org/>).

Theater critic **Chris Hewitt** previously worked at the Pioneer Press in St. Paul, where he covered movies and then theater. Also, he occasionally gets to write book reviews.

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