

Monsters & immortals - seriously

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Soprano Sara Heaton and tenor Hal Cazalet in the opera "Death and the Powers,"...

Science fiction isn't normally encountered in the higher-brow realms of theater and opera, but when it is, the world is more likely to listen to their cautionary tales of a possibly disastrous future, and not just dismiss them as entertainment.

That's not to suggest that entertainment value is lacking in the National Theatre of Great Britain's *Frankenstein* (to be simulcast Sunday and Wednesday at Bryn Mawr Film Institute) and the Tod Machover opera *Death and the Powers: The Robots' Opera* (which had its U.S. premiere in Boston this month and is the talk of the opera industry).

Slumdog Millionaire Oscar winner Danny Boyle directs a more faithful adaptation of the original 1818 Mary Shelley *Frankenstein* novel, whose poetry-quoting monster is more in step with our time than Boris Karloff was. And, after a decade of research and development by technologically fearless M.I.T. composer Machover, *Death and the Powers* is a dazzling update of theatrical technology that tells the tale of a dying billionaire who downloads himself into his possessions so as to live forever.

Yes, we're back to the age-old desire to cheat death. Poet Robert Pinsky's *Death and the Powers* libretto begins with a world where all of that happened a long time ago and everything is now run by robots - not *Star Wars*-style humanoids, but strange triangular creatures who puzzle over the previous age of flesh and blood, and literally wonder what it means to suffer. The *Frankenstein* monster, as adapted by playwright Nick Dear, has been cast out into the world by its heedless creator, but thanks to having the brain of a 35-year-old, within a year or two is a fairly functional adult with diabolical blind spots.

The usual questions about whether the human race can handle the power over life and death isn't so evident here. In theory, we already have that power, even if the cloning of Dolly the Sheep ultimately proved to be more of a dead end than a scientific breakthrough. Death can be negotiated more than ever by medical breakthroughs, even if it can't be controlled.

The problem presented by both pieces is moral accountability: It goes out the window when the possibility of death is not hanging over us. Can you imagine the streets of Philadelphia if nobody feared reprisals for what he or she said and did?

In *Death and the Powers*, the billionaire disappears into what he calls the world of light but remains able to communicate with those who are still flesh and blood. The American Repertory Theater production - first tried out in Monaco and proceeding on to the Chicago Opera Theater in April - has fractured video images of baritone James Maddalena (the billionaire) appearing within the electronic set design so effectively that the plot's premise doesn't seem at all far-fetched. His amorphous state even seems desirable. But when the dissolution of his business empire causes a financial tsunami in the world economy, he has neither time nor interest in cleaning up the mess.

The new/old Dr. Victor Frankenstein is not much different. Though still a young man, Frankenstein's natural tendency is to barricade himself in his study; he seems puzzled when his fiance thinks that's a problem. So much is he in his own world that the creature he made during his medical training in London - the monster, apparently, was his doctoral dissertation - wasn't supposed to live, much less make its way from London to Switzerland, where the doctor now lives. Wasn't the creature a mere equation that got out of hand?

What makes such ideas worth discussing is their incredibly effective presentation. In the opening moments of *Frankenstein*, Boyle's monster flails around the stage floor, virtually naked, determining what his arms and legs are for, painfully teaching himself to walk, and learning to talk with the kind of aggressively jumbled stammer of a stroke victim. All too well, he also learns the violent ways of the street life he is forced to navigate at a point when he barely understands what it is to be alive, much less human.

The fact that he goes on to burn homes and murder children reflects the limits of knowledge when acquired without wisdom (the monster occasionally reminds us that he's not much more than a year old). And the fact that such incidents have unflinching cinematic impact is a testament to Boyle's use of the National Theater's state-of-the-art stage technology. Emotional resolution is possible with the monsters one creates, but as with other stories Boyle has chosen to tell, you might be too battle-scarred to find repose.

Death and the Powers is more significant both in its exploration of ideas and in its means of realizing them. Though Machover has successfully pioneered electronically augmented versions of classical instruments, including a "hypercello" for Yo-Yo Ma, he has also had his failures (remember his *Brain Opera*?) that perhaps taught him not to rush a piece onto the stage until it's fully ready. As it now stands, *Death and the Powers* doesn't point the way to a new era of opera. It's there. Now.

Everything works - the robots of the prologue and epilogue move fluidly and expressively; the set consists of large movable video panels that create all sorts of atmosphere but also come together for larger composite images, which are particularly effective when the billionaire is communicating from his world of light.

Machover's score is like an extension of the scenic design - subservient to the dramatic points at hand rather than calling attention to his own artistry. Yet you know the characters are on new ground when the music loses its mooring in tonality, proceeding beyond notes and into electronically generated sound. For all its high-concept nature, the opera is consistently direct. Because you don't have to really figure out the opera's mechanism, whether theatrical or musical, the bigger ideas more readily rise to the surface.

The most original among them isn't the philosophical implications of eternal life, but something practical: Do your nearest and dearest really want you around permanently? At a reception after the premiere, composer Machover put it this way: "My daughter is here. I love her more than anything. I'd love her to want to have everything about me on her iPod. But it's probably not what she wants on her iPod."

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The Bryn Mawr Film Institute simulcasts the National Theater of Great Britain at 1 p.m. Sunday and 7 p.m. Wednesday. Information: 610-527-9898 or www.brynmawrfilm.org.

"Death and the Powers: The Robots' Opera" plays Saturday, Wednesday, and April 8 and 10 at Chicago Opera Theater. Information: 312-704-8414 or www.chicagooperatheater.org.