



Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-
speaking world

11 | 2015

**Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture /
Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British
Literature and Culture**

Gods and Monsters — Southwark Playhouse, February 27th, 2015

Performance Review

Marie Pecorari



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/miranda/7652>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.7652

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Marie Pecorari, "*Gods and Monsters* — Southwark Playhouse, February 27th, 2015", *Miranda* [Online], 11 | 2015, Online since 21 July 2015, connection on 08 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/7652> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.7652>

This text was automatically generated on 8 September 2022.



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Gods and Monsters — Southwark Playhouse, February 27th, 2015

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Artistic Team

- 1 *Gods and Monsters* — Southwark Playhouse, February, 5th to March, 7th 2015

Director: Russell Labey

Set and Costume: Designer Jason Denvir

Lighting Designer: Mike Robertson

Sound Designer: John Chambers

Projection Designer: Louise Rhoades-Brown

Producer and Casting Director: Danielle Tarento

Cast: Will Austin, Lachele Carl, Ian Gelder, Joey Phillips, Will Rastall

Southwark Playhouse website: <http://southwarkplayhouse.co.uk/>

Review

- 2 Why bother adapting for the stage a novel already turned into a cult-classic film version? The premise behind *Gods and Monsters*, written and directed by Russell Labey, reprising the title of a 1995 novel by Christopher Bram adapted to the screen by Bill Condon in 1998, would not lend itself to this question, had it been performed in the West End. Such transfers between media (novel-film-stage, with no particular order) are indeed increasingly customary on the London and New York commercial stages—brand recognition and marketing imperatives *oblige*.
- 3 But this iteration of *Gods and Monsters* is performed at a fringe theatre, Southwark Playhouse, on a stage that, in spite of its name, the Large—as opposed to its even more diminutive neighboring house, the Little—, is on the smaller side. This reduced scale and economy of means, alongside an artful exploitation of theatre-specific features, is

what enables the playwright-director to expose the inner workings and self-defeating enterprise behind the biographical genre. The central character, played with subdued gusto by Ian Welder, is James Whale, a British émigré in Hollywood, best remembered for directing a series of Frankenstein film versions starring Boris Karloff in the 1930s. The play is based on Christopher Bram's fictionalized account of the real-life Whale's final days in 1957, as the director, grappling with dwindling mental faculties following a series of strokes and shock treatments, engages in turn with two young male visitors.

- 4 A former warehouse near Elephant and Castle converted to a temporary performance venue in 2013, the black box theatre is here configured as a ground-level thrust stage surrounded by a few tiered rows of folding chairs. The sense of intimacy conferred by the setting is offset by the scenographic choice of an open expanse of white floor dotted with select pieces of realistic-looking furniture endowed with a clear, plot-related function. Although the set mirrors the spirit of the breezy Southern California home inhabited by the main character, none of the pressure-cooker effect often produced by a fixed location is at work here. The circulation between house and garden, the master of the house and his visitors, is seamless. Two young men representing opposite masculine archetypes take turns interacting with Whale, with their *chassé-croisé* framing the play and advancing the plot. The first one, Kay, an overeager, openly gay, USC film student, coaxes Whale into reminiscing about his film career. His narrow focus on the Frankenstein series prompts an irritated Whale to demand payment in the guise of a stripping game: the removal of one item of clothing for each question asked—a proposal raising neither objection nor eyebrow from the young man. The delicately built intellectual stands in stark contrast to the beefcake, diffident gardener, Clayton Boone, a former Marine initially wary of Whale's attempt to lure him inside the house and offer to paint his picture.
- 5 A giant painted monster head overhangs the set, occasionally flashing, as in a kitschy wink to the ham-handed special effects of old Hollywood, serving as a reminder of the titular figure casting his shadow over the play: the creature crafted by Frankenstein. Its metacritical reflection can be read to encompass both Whale as a director, fashioning a screen character he had little respect for but that became attached to his name beyond what he considered to be his more serious work; and the biographer as mad scientist, here in the guise of a playwright, attempting one more time to piece together fragments of a life resulting, however clever the reconstruction, in a monster defying the laws of nature. The theatrical presentation, with its impossibility to rival the film medium and create convincing special effects hidden from view, calls attention to that process.
- 6 Bram's fiction was not merely an attempt at providing fodder for a biopic of a film director. Its purpose was heuristic in essence, positing that what Whale himself dismissed as minor work—the Frankenstein series—contained deeper clues about his mindset and his contemporaries'; and that Whale had unconsciously drawn on his experience as a combatant in the First World War to portray the horror in the fantasy world of his movies. Memory sequences featuring scenes of male camaraderie from art school and the battlefield—Whale and his fallen first love—are woven into the fabric of the play in a montage structure, with the actor playing Kay doubling as the younger Whale.
- 7 The rehabilitation of lowbrow, escapist material is also reflective of the queer/Camp/Ridiculous tendency to appropriate cultural castoffs and give them a positive,

meaningful spin. This underpins more obvious references to homosexuality and gay male culture, with the two visitors embodying two identifiable stock types, the fey, wiry intellectual, and the brawny, sexually desirable straight man.

- 8 Much like a stripping game in reverse, the attempt to peel away at the layers of Whale's biographical circumstances to map out his creative mindscape achieves little more than shrouding it further. Whale's increasingly cloudy mind leads him to demand that Boone put an end to his misery by killing him, gladiator-style, with his bare hands. The earthy *Spartacus* fantasy finally gives way to another scenario: an onomastically predestined, nautical end, with Whale drowning in his own swimming-pool, the location where he had tried to lure comely young men for a naked swim— replaying the opening of another Hollywood-centric, metacinematic cult-classic released a few years before Whale's death, *Sunset Boulevard*, about another reclusive former screen glory. Right until the end, the play lives up to its potential as an ironic riff on the title, a quote from *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), "To a new world of gods and monsters". Archetypes and preexisting myths and narratives frame and entrap any attempt at originality and novelty, displacing the youthful, romantic aspirations from art school, and entrenching a creative postulate that Labey, via queer and post-modern sensibilities, embraces rather than rejects, content to patch together the old monster once again, stitches and all.

ABSTRACTS

Theatre review, February, 27th 2015

Show: *Gods and Monsters* at Southwark Playhouse (London) - February, 5th to March, 7th 2015

Critique théâtrale, 27 février 2015

Spectacle: *Gods and Monsters* au Southwark Playhouse (London) - 5 février au 7 mars 2015

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Subjects: Theater

Mots-clés: critique de théâtre, adaptation, théâtre grand public, théâtre des marges, Hollywood, Frankenstein, metafiction, biographie

Keywords: theatre review, adaptation, commercial stage, fringe theatre, Hollywood, Frankenstein, metafiction, biography

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