

YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN

...a witty tribute to those black-and-white movies of the past that never made anyone's blood run cold...

YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN A 20th Century-Fox Release. 12/74. 105 minutes. In Black & White & Plywood. Produced by Michael Gruskoff. Directed by Mel Brooks. Screenplay by Gene Wilder and Brooks. Director of photography, Gerald Hirschfeld, A. S. C. Music composed and conducted by John Morris. Orchestrations by Jonathan Tunick. Violin Solo by Gerald Vinci. Edited by John Howard. Production designer, Dale Hennesy. Set decorator, Bob De Vestel. Assistant director, Marvin Miller. Makeup artist, William Tuttle. Costume designer, Dorothy Jenkins. Special effects, Henry Miller, Jr. and Hal Millar.

Dr. Frankenstein Gene Wilder
 Monster Peter Boyle
 Igor Marty Feldman
 Elizabeth Madeline Kahn
 Frau Blucher Cloris Leachman
 Inga Teri Garr
 Inspector Kemp Kenneth Mars
 Blindman Gene Hackman

For those who spend quiet Saturday afternoons watching age old horror flicks on the television set, **YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN** should be a pleasant surprise. Gene Wilder, who plays the young Frankenstein can take major credit for scripting this umpteenth take-off on the Mary Shelley novel and he seems to have a profound influence on the director. Instead of the usual tastelessness of Mel Brooks' other films, **YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN** is a witty tribute to those black-and-white movies of the past that never made anyone's blood run cold but still had a unique style that has not been recaptured in contemporary films.

The film is best described as a homage to those ancient horror films. It is a homage rendered with impeccable fidelity. The improbable glimpse of the distant castle sitting atop its very own pinnacle, the cobwebby interiors, the music—both eerie and corny—the specific borrowings (as the hairdo of Elsa Lanchester as **THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN**) all bespeak a loving familiarity with the objects of their affection.

Peter Boyle's monster is based lovingly on Boris Karloff's incarnation in the 1931 James Whale classic, but what Boyle lacks is a hint of terror. Karloff's monster would either elicit fear or pity from an audience, but this new "monster" brings out nothing but love. Even in his rampages he is a gentle creature easily stilled by soulful violin music. The secret lies with Boyle's shifty idiot eyes. Confined to muttering variations on a "Mmmuuuummmmm" theme throughout the film, Boyle must constantly rely on expression to form the comedy and the compassion of his role. When Gene Hackman's well-meaning blind man repeatedly pours soup into the monster's lap, Boyle's agonizing combination of stricken eyes and the revealed rubble of gnashed teeth constitutes an excruciatingly funny expression of victimization. With Brooks, the Boyle-Hackman hi-jinks work beautifully as physical vaudeville: the blind man and the monster exchanging toasts only to have the blind man smash the monster's wine mug; the bulky exuberance of Boyle and Hackman literally igniting the monster's exasperation by lighting up the monster's thumb instead of his cigar. Bill Tuttle, one of the best makeup artists in Hollywood, created Boyle's wide-brow monster mask complete with zippered neck (very Gucci). Boyle is physically perfect for the part, so perfect that the makeup seems a caricature of his own features, especially the domed head.

Gene Wilder, as the new Dr. Frankenstein (the grandson of the original), is not as convincing in



his transition from respected university lecturer to mad scientist but is as funny as ever in slapstick routines. In a part calling for straight charm and wit, Wilder descends too often to his familiar brand of desperate whimsicality and manic moodiness.

Fortunately he is admirably supported by a cast including Marty Feldman as Igor the assistant, a pop-eyed British comedian playing a hunchback (though the hunch switches shoulders a few times). Cloris Leachman is outstanding as the ancient German mistress of the Frankenstein mansion. Madeline Kahn is her usual frigid-hussy self in a cutesy-poo version of Elsa Lanchester. Terri Garr is the invaluable Inga with a roving libido and Kenneth Mars' execution of Inspector Kemp, who is reminiscent less of Transylvanian constables than of Peter Seller's Dr. Strangelove, simply cranks up no discernible comic purpose while his impenetrably Mittel-European accent calls attention to itself by having the villagers complain in unison "Whadidee Say?"

YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN wends its way through the thicket of modern all-or-nothing moviemaking. It is amazing that there is as much honest craftsmanship in the movie as there is. The music hall performance of Young Frankenstein and the monster is nothing less than enchanting. Peter Boyle's Frankenstein makes his first entrance in a bathrobe much as Sid Caesar used to do on "The Show of Shows" with which Brooks used to be involved as writer. And when Wilder and Boyle go into their version of "Puttin' On the Ritz," all of Brooks' smoldering affection for showbiz performers seems to burst into flame.

The film also reflects the old dream man's had of immortality, which itself partly reflects a wish for God-like power. The screenplay not least is a commentary on intolerance and mob action. The messages are not pressed, but are there.

YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN is strewn with sight gags, old jokes and slapstick, yet the film plays much more as a warm and congruent piece, the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Yet it takes more than admirable acting, a clever screenplay and a director's respect for a genre to make a movie successful. An appreciative audience is also necessary. To be enjoyed to its fullest, **YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN** should be seen with a packed house, preferably at midnight, a set of circumstances you should not find hard to arrange, for Mel Brooks' film is attracting the general public in throngs as thick as a mob of angry Transylvanian villagers.

Joel Thingvall

