

Three Patch Podcast – Episode 106

Frankenstein Squee

July 1, 2020

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Frankenstein Squee

Consulting Fans: Cumbercookie, Emma, Sheri, Anarfea, and Iwantthatcoat, Iwantthatcoat,
Producer: Cumbercookie, Editor: DrinkingCocoa
– Fans get together to discuss and share their love for the National Theatre’s *Frankenstein* with Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller.

(Music intro: Frankenstein: Music from the Play by Underworld)

(Music fades)

Cumbercookie

Hello, lovely listeners! This month our episode theme is focusing on the goings-on of our favorite Sherlock actors, specifically their works on stage rather than screen. From April 30 to May 8, many of us had the amazing opportunity to see Benedict in his role as the monster and Frankenstein when the National Theatre released it for a limited time on YouTube. Today I'm here with:

Anarfea

Anarfea.

Emma

Emma.

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Iwantthatcoat

Iwantthatcoat.

Sheri

And Sheri.

Cumbercookie

And this is Cumbercookie. What did you think of the play as a whole?

Anarfea

I loved it. But I've been a big fan of Frankenstein for a long time. I read the novel when I was younger, and actually, when they put it on YouTube was the first time for me to see the show. I loved both productions.

Emma

I didn't see it until the National Theatre live tour. So I went with another fan and we had a lot of fun watching both versions of it.

Iwantthatcoat

I've seen the NTL live several times in the theater, and I was so thrilled to be able to watch it again. There is a cut, so it is slightly different. But it was really great to be able to have the experience to watch it at home and rewatch it at home, and really think about it. So I was really glad to see this coming around. And hopefully we'll get Hamlet too. I actually did see Hamlet in London.

Anarfea

Oh my god.

Iwantthatcoat

Yeah.

Emma

I did too. A bunch of us went from Three Patch. We went all together for a week to London and we went to see Hamlet in the middle of it. It was, it was really cool. It was 2015, which seems like a million years ago now.

Sheri

Yes, I know.

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Iwantthatcoat

I did not read it as a child or young adult. But I did reread it again recently. And it was fascinating to see some of the changes they made. And I just, I think it was a fantastic interpretation of it. I was really impressed with how much of the spirit of the original was kept, but made it somehow leaner, and much easier to stage.

Cumbercookie

I actually read the novel rather recently, and so it was pretty fresh on the mind when I was able to see it.

Sheri

I first read Frankenstein in high school. And I remember really loving the story more than I thought I would because, you know, it was written in the 1880s and it was really dry. I remember when I got into the Sherlock fandom, I of course learned that Benedict and Johnny Lee Miller had done this play, and I always wanted to go see it, but I didn't really have the opportunity until they put it on YouTube. I watched Benedict's version as the creature and I skimmed Johnny Lee Miller's because I just liked Benedict as the creature so much and it was so impressive. Like I couldn't stop watching Benedict and Johnny had such good chemistry and it was a really exciting experience for me. And the play lived in my head for quite some time after.

Cumbercookie

Both actors Johnny Lee Miller and Benedict both did a truly phenomenal job in their respective roles in both versions of the play. Did any of you prefer one version over the other?

Iwantthatcoat

I'm not saying this just as a Cumberbitch, mind you. But I did prefer Benedict in both roles. And I thought about it. And I actually have my own reasons for it. It's not just, oh, I like looking at him or, oh, I think he's, you know, it's Benedict! I think there were some really, really different choices made in how these roles were interpreted. And I prefer Benedict's interpretation to Johnny Lee Miller's interpretation of the creature. I find that there's more of a struggle for goodness I pick up from Benedict's creature, as opposed to almost like a teenage defiance that I get from Johnny Lee Miller's creature. It's a very different interpretation. I think it's valid, but I prefer the other one. And then as far as Victor goes, I think Benedict's Victor is more personally relatable for me. And the things that he has struggles with, I see more, a real inability to understand what love is, as opposed to just

rejecting it for pure science. So there's a different level of, for me, depth of character, but maybe that's not fair to say. Maybe it just speaks to me more.

Anarfea

I think that Benedict's Victor is a bit Sherlocky. And I think that may be the reason why I liked it so much.

Iwantthatcoat

I would agree.

Anarfea

That kind of unapproachable, ascerbic, sciency asexual vibe going on. And I like that. I actually prefer Johnny Lee Miller's creature during the section of the play where the creature is nonverbal. So I really liked the acting choices that Johnny Lee Miller made, you know, when it's just body language and when he's discovering the grass and the sky and the sun, all these things, the rain. I really liked that creature. But once they started speaking, I think that Benedict gave the more compelling performance.

Iwantthatcoat

I think that's fascinating because I never really thought to break it down that way. I looked at it overall. But now that you mention it, I probably do agree with you.

Emma

I loved Johnny Lee Miller was the creature. I found his performance incredibly compelling and significantly, it touched me a lot more than Benedict's performance did. What I really liked about it was he was so vulnerable. And he showed this growth and I think Anarfea mentioned it was sort of childlike. He was childlike to start. And there was this growth and so much like, drive and passion to be good, but often failing, right? That vulnerability that he showed every time he failed, or every time something went wrong, I didn't see that as much in Benedict's character. One example of what I'm talking about, the sort of vulnerability and this growth that I see that Johnny Lee Miller put in his performance of the creature was that early in the play when he kills the blind man and his family, he does it out of just rage and confusion. So he reacts, he lashes out and then later in the play, when he goes to kill Elizabeth, it's much more calculated. But you see, there's a moment when Miller pauses, and you see this regret in his face. He regrets what he's about to do. And he knows that it's wrong, but he also knows that he's committed to this. And I didn't see that in Benedict's performance. Benedict's performance, at that point, the creature, it was just cold revenge, which is a different interpretation, as I think Coat was saying before. But I found that raw vulnerability and that desire to be good and to be human in Miller's portrayal to

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be really appealing. On the Cumberbatch side I think I agree with Anarfea that I found Benedict's portrayal of Frankenstein to be very Sherlock-like and it worked for me. Benedict is so good at playing like a tortured genius and he put layers of tortured genius in this role that Miller didn't do. His just, determination, his drive, his single minded focus, his inability to like see the people around him and how he was hurting them. This drive to understand what was happening. All of these things Benedict did so well as Frankenstein and so watching both versions of it, the version with Miller as the creature and Benedict as Frankenstein is just so superior to me personally. And I just love them. I love them in those roles. I can watch the other one, but the roles don't ring for me as much as they do with Miller as the creature.

Anarfea

Yeah. I think that Johnny Lee Miller's Victor is more flat. There are nuances to Benedict's performance that, you know, we just don't see. I know I had an earlier conversation with Coat when they were saying that there's almost like a jealousy that Victor, or at least Benedict's Victor seems to feel towards the creature when he's making the female creature and the creature, you know, talks about how he will take care of her and love her. And you feel that Victor doesn't understand that at all, that he doesn't feel that for Elizabeth. And I don't see that subtlety with Johnny Lee Miller's Victor. Like, it was just really different watching Benedict's Victor in that, in that scene with the creature where you feel like he, in part, kills the female creature because he's jealous because he doesn't understand love. Whereas I feel like with Johnny Lee Miller's, it was just more like ah, you'll reproduce and there will be two of you and it will be terrible. And I didn't get the psychological feelings that there was more to it than that.

Emma

That beautiful tension between the two of them in that scene, where you really see that the big theme of the whole play is, who is the human? Who is the man and who is the monster, right? And they switch roles there in that moment for me. The creature becomes the human and the doctor becomes the monster. And it kind of remains that way. And that's what I love about Miller's performance when he goes and kills Elizabeth is that he's does it in a very-- This sounds really weird. He rapes and murders a person, but he's a human being while he does it. And I don't get that feeling when Benedict plays the creature. So there's something about that powerful moment for me.

Iwantthatcoat

You know, it's really interesting that you bring up that scene, because with the cutscene, with it not being there, I would tend to agree more with you on that. But with the rape scene in place, I find Miller's reaction much less regretful.

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Emma

Oh, that's interesting.

Iwantthatcoat

And not seeing it, I think, makes a big difference for me, because I found at that particular moment of the scene, much more regret in Benedict's performance than in Miller's performance, because I see much more teen angst in Miller across the board by that.

Emma

That's interesting.

Iwantthatcoat

To touch on what Anarfea was saying. There was a section where, after he's decided to bring the female creature to life and he was saying, Do you know what love is? Do you understand what love is? Tell me what love is. And I think in Benedict's performance, I really did get the impression that Victor's actually wanting to know. Whereas I didn't get that nuance in Miller. And it's really interesting to me because when I went back and read the original book, in the novel, Victor is devoted to Elizabeth. Absolutely adores her, truly loves her. And that whole aspect came through in a much different way in both performances to the point where I guess they both vary from the book, but perhaps Benedict's version of Victor was even more stylized away from the original text to the book to where he had much more character flaws, I guess, would be the right way of saying it, than Victor in the novel. Victor in the novel always struck me, as I was reading it, as a victim of his own pride and his own intelligence, but not so much that as, he dared to take chances and risks. And that seems to me much more central to the theme of the book than the theme of the play.

Cumbercookie

I am honestly gonna express a very much opposite kind of opinion. I very much preferred the entirety of the version with Benedict as the creature and Jonny Lee Miller, as the doctor, as Frankenstein. Earlier, we broke it down at the beginning as before he can talk and after he can talk. Something that struck me from the very beginning, because I watched Benedict's version first, is the physicality of it. Benedict is very, very physical. He's played so many characters who've like, done like drug overdoses and seizures. And so I think he kind of had a head start. As far as just kind of the physical aspect of that beginning scene. The contortions, the way he moves is so shocking and kind of sinister and a little scary. And that set the tone for me and throughout, I felt like Benedict's monster felt more. I felt more from Benedict as the creature. His Frankenstein, I saw the Sherlockiness of it, and it

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felt like the puzzle piece didn't quite fit right. But Johnny Lee Miller's Frankenstein... Again, it's just I felt it more. I could feel everything he was throwing out there. The pain and the fear. He's definitely less cold. Or at least he felt less cold towards Elizabeth. And that was something that was important to me. Like he was trying to love her and he was trying so very, very hard to be for her. And he just couldn't find it in him, whereas Benedict's, he felt very cold and it's like he wasn't even trying. And I think maybe part of that reason I didn't like it as much as that kind of hurt.

Anarfea

I think that's a fair assessment.

Iwantthatcoat

I think there's a very strong Ace dynamic that goes on in Benedict's version of Victor, that he just does not feel that. It's not in his wheelhouse. And I picked up on that probably more for personal reasons. But it felt to me like he was struggling to understand the concept of what was expected of him and what he was supposed to do, how it was supposed to go. And I can see how Miller's version is more like the workaholic version of it, of I'm wrapped up in my work and it means a lot to me, but you do too and how do I balance that, as opposed to, I really am not feeling this in the way that I theoretically should and I don't know how to navigate that.

Anarfea

Yeah, I was gonna say I liked the fact that Benedict's Victor didn't connect with Elizabeth really at all, because it just shows that Frankenstein doesn't understand love, doesn't know how to love, and the creature does. And then has that opportunity taken away from him. So yeah, I think we're seeing the same thing, Cookie. We just had a different reaction to it.

Iwantthatcoat

Probably so.

Cumbercookie

Yeah, to me, Johnny's Frankenstein, I think I felt an aceness that was more aligned to my aceness? Because I'm not aro. And I feel like maybe Benedict's Frankenstein is more aromantic.

Iwantthatcoat

Yes, absolutely aro.

Anarfea

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Yeah, I'd say that's fair.

Cumbercookie

And I think that's part of it.

Iwantthatcoat

The aro aspect is definitely what I was picking up on and just the whole societal, this is what I'm supposed to do and it just feels like the last thing on earth I want to do.

Cumbercookie

Yeah. It was hard for me to see it in that context, I guess, because like, I know plenty of aromantic people, but to see it portrayed, so... Like, it just felt very cold and I don't feel like aromantic people are cold.

Emma

I didn't get the sense that that coldness, though, came from-- I mean, I definitely picked up on the, I mean, the aro vibes too, but like, it was more he was playing sort of a Sherlock type character to me, like this person who was just so focused on themselves and on this work that they're doing. He got so easily consumed by the power of it. I mean, that's how the creature got him to make a female creature in the first place was just appealing to his desire to be powerful and to have his achievements recognized. Like he's achieved this incredible thing and no one knows and it's so frustrating to him because he should be famous and powerful for this. right? I didn't see the aro part as being the cause of his behavior. That was a piece of just who he is. But it was these other sort of base kind of instincts. You know about being power hungry and wanting recognition. It was very Trumpian in some way, maybe? There's just this sort of sense there of him not being focused on the people around him at all. It wasn't just Elizabeth. He was that way to everybody to me.

Sheri

Yeah, I feel Victor is similar to the creature in that he's kind of questioning things about being human like what love is, while being distanced from that. Because, as Emma said, he's this kind of power hungry and he wants to show off his genius, his power, his ability to be a god, even though that, I think, scares him. But I also think that I've seen Benedict do the kind of genius character that's kind of distant, kind of questions what love is so many times that I felt like seeing him as the creature and seeing his kind of physicality was kind of fascinating. And I couldn't really look away from that.

Cumbercookie

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The themes from the novel versus the play are vastly different. Because overall, the novel is kind of based in the Romantic era themes. He's playing God, and playing God is not a good thing to do. Whereas I feel like the play focuses a lot more on the black and white kind of good versus evil, monster versus man, the nature of love.

Iwantthatcoat

Definitely, I think you get this whole sense of usual if only my, basically, my dad loved me, and was there for me, like daddy issues, right? Then it would have changed the shape of my path. I also read a little extra bit into that, as a parent, I think, is you know, what are... Are we there for our kids? And how are we shaping their destiny too? So that theme and being treated a certain way and therefore reframing your self concept that way, came through much stronger in this adaptation than the novel.

Anarfea

The major changes from the novel to the play was that they made Elizabeth into an actual character. I mean, she's basically a prop in the play. She doesn't have, you know, much of a-- They actually have scenes, you know, with her and Victor talking, you know, about her desire for children. And so one of the scenes that I felt like is not present in the original is the difference kind of between the way that men and women create. So there's this idea that-- She says at one point, Victor if you wanted to create life, why not give me a child? Right? Because that's the usual way that humans go about creating new life. There were some things I didn't like about Elizabeth. I thought she was a little bit wooden and kind of two-dimensional, but at least she had, you know, lines. You know, in the book, she's very much a total non character. They also got rid of the, you know, burdensome frame story.

Cumbercookie

Yeah, I was just gonna say that.

Iwantthatcoat

Yes, the frame, the whole Antarctica letters at the beginning.

Anarfea

I mean, we still have Antarctica, but not until the end.

Iwantthatcoat

The letters from the captain that started off. Yeah, I do agree that was kind of burdensome, but it was an interesting read. I think for people who've seen this, it's actually really worthwhile to go ahead and pick it up and read it and look at some of the differences of what she originally intended when she wrote it.

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Cumbercookie

Yeah, that's something I kind of wanted to touch on. That's kind of my thing with the ending. I found the ending of the play to be a little, I guess, confusing, because the emotions don't feel like they tie in as well as they do in the novel. Like in the novel, it feels like closure. The play, the end didn't feel like closure.

Iwantthatcoat

Yeah, I think you're right about that.

Cumbercookie

You know, the death of Frankenstein and the monster mourning because he realizes what he's lost and how he could have tried harder and how as much as he hated him, at the same time, he was the only person he had and that pain isn't transferred into the play. It's one of the few things honestly that I really did prefer from the novel.

Emma

Can I just make a really shallow point?

Iwantthatcoat

Go for it.

Emma

At the very end, when they're going through the snow heading north, heading north, I was really shipping them at that point. That was the point where I was like, oh, there's a fic in here.

Cumbercookie

I had the same thought. That'd be kind of creepy, though.

Sheri

But I feel like their relationship at the end was so twisted. You feel like, in a way, they were all that they had left. Frankenstein was hunting the creature and the creature wanted Frankenstein to hunt him. And it's just so twisted because it's animosity, but it's also a connection of a really twisted kind. So in a weird way, I feel like you're shipper brain going off kind of makes sense in that context. I am actually writing a thesis on queerness and Victorian novels, which are obviously a bit later than Frankenstein was written. But one thing I found is that when they added a supernatural element, they really had more freedom to push the boundaries with relationships than would otherwise be acceptable.

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Emma

I feel so validated. Thank you.

Anarfea

I'm with Emma, and yeah, I think the creature loves Frankenstein. I don't know if that's reciprocated. But I think the creature definitely loves Frankenstein as much as he hates him. So I actually liked the ending. I agree that it's a less definitive ending than the ending of the novel but I like that because it's just like, the two of them are going to be chasing each other forever in the frozen north, and there is a twisted sort of happily ever after.

Iwantthatcoat

Yeah, that's true. That's really cool to me. I mean, it goes into different direction. But I think they're just trying to say slightly different things with it. And it's fascinating to me that you can take, in essence, the same story and just put a slightly different spin on it, to the same degree that you can take the same character and have two different actors play it and have a slightly different spin on it. And it really just kind of sends your brain in different directions.

Cumbercookie

How would you all recommend this play to someone who hadn't seen it before? How would you entice them to give it a watch?

Emma

Well, I think just being shallow again, you get to see a lot of almost naked Cumberbatch and Miller. That's a good intro to the story. But also it's a classic. It's a classic story, right? I mean, even if you haven't read the novel, you know the story of Frankenstein. There's been a gazillion adaptations, right? There's Frankenweenie, there's Young Frankenstein, there's the original Boris Karloff version. And it's a wonderful twist on the original story, but it's different from every other version you've seen. So it feels like fanfic a little bit in that way. And so I think that people who like fanfic in general would enjoy that aspect of it, even if they hadn't read the novel.

Cumbercookie

It's interesting that you mentioned how many adaptations of Frankenstein there have been, because I don't think there's a single one that is anywhere near as accurate as this one.

Emma

That's interesting. Yeah.

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Iwantthatcoat

Well, they took his voice away entirely. I mean, it's ridiculous. When you read it and then you look at how the monster is portrayed in popular culture, it's just, yeah. It just floored me the first time I actually was exposed to the original work. I was like, wait a minute. He not only talks, he reads Milton. You know, this is not the creature I was expecting. But from a Sherlockian perspective, there's a lot of Sherlock in Victor. There really is. And if you like that kind of character -- and I'm a sucker for it -- I would probably say you like that earlier season Sherlock who's trying to come across this way, but maybe there's something underneath it and how do you express that and who do you trust with it? That part of it is very much in evidence. So I'd probably bring that to mind and also just the struggles with morality. What constitutes a good person? What's a good man? Right?

Cumbercookie

Yeah, I think I'm gonna speak just for the Benedict-is-the-monster one, because that's the one that I just personally preferred. A, you get to see a whole lot of Benedict. Just like, not just acting but just a whole lot of Benedict. Like his body, and everything. I feel like if, even if you don't like his version of the monster or if you get creeped out by it or tired of it or whatever, I feel like everybody should see that first scene of him. Because he... The physicality of it is so impressive, like he moves his body in ways that I didn't think it was possible to move, like voluntarily? And it's amazing and it's beautiful and it's disgusting and I love it.

Sheri

It's like watching a birth in many ways and seeing someone without even words just discover how to move, how to crawl, how to walk, and then how to run, and the joy of that. Yeah, not even sensing that there was something to be afraid of. But when Victor comes and immediately reacts with horror, that's what wrecked me and it didn't let up.

Cumbercookie

I wanted to thank you all for taking the time to have this conversation with me. I'm grateful we all had the chance to see this amazing play

Multiple speakers

Bye!

(Music outro)

Transcription Team

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