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# Monster Mash

*The final minutes of the sporadically entertaining 'Frankenstein' deliver enough thrills and real drama to make the film almost seem worthwhile*

By Dave Becker  
STAFF WRITER

**A**CTOR-DIRECTOR Kenneth Branagh has proudly claimed that of the dozens of film adaptations of "Frankenstein," his new version is the most faithful re-creation of the original novel.

That may be true, but it's not the inherent virtue Branagh assumes it to be.

"Mary Shelley's Frankenstein," which opens today at Bay Area theaters, suffers from many of the same conditions that make the 19th-century novel indigestible to modern readers. (Honestly — how far did you get when you tried to read the book?)

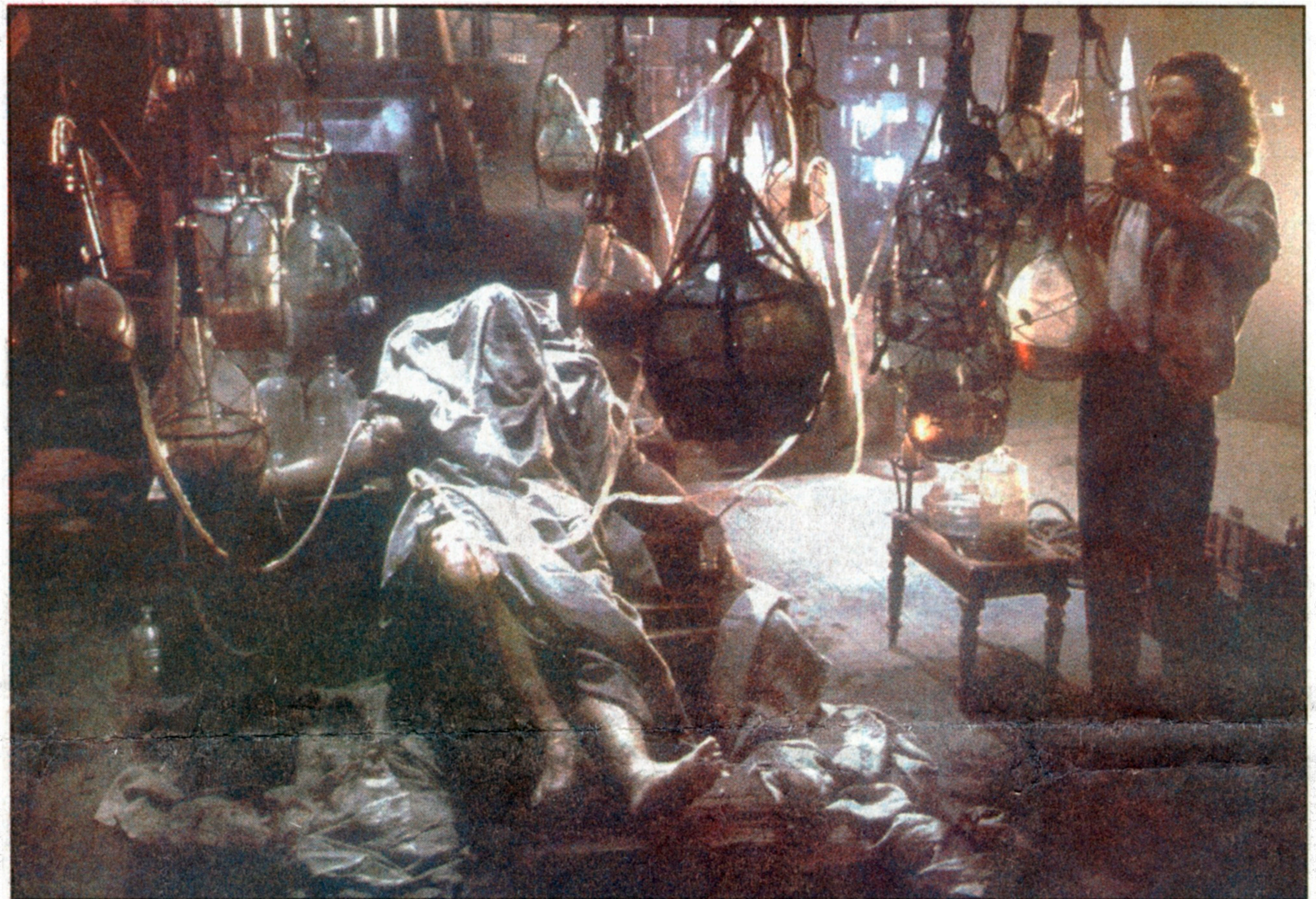
The pacing is uneven and irritatingly slow, at least by the standards of those raised on post-Hitchcock thrillers.

The moralistic tone is a leaden weight much of the time. Shelley's audience expected a clear right-vs.-wrong di-

chotomy, but we've come to enjoy a little more subtlety in the messages our entertainment delivers to us.

## REVIEW

- "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein"
- Starring Kenneth Branagh and Robert De Niro
- Directed by Kenneth Branagh
- Rated R
- ★★ (Muddled)



Victor Frankenstein (Kenneth Branagh) finishes his work on the creature (Robert De Niro) in "Frankenstein."

The film's vision of love is a sentimentalized, glorified Edwardian vision that may have gone over big with starry-eyed Lord Byron but hardly fills the bill today.

And Shelley's creature, whose dialogue is faithfully re-created in the

film, is the talkiest monster to ever stomp through a horror story.

For those who only made it through the first chapter of the novel, the story begins in late 18th-century Switzerland with the tragic death of the mother of young Victor Franken-

stein (Branagh), which inspires the budding mad doctor to dream of reanimating dead tissue. He pursues his dreams in medical school, at the expense of his relationship with Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter), his fiancée and adopted sister. (Shades of Woody Allen!)

Victor is eventually successful in stitching together assorted corpse pieces into a composite human, and,

Please see **Frankenstein**, CUE-4

# Frankenstein: Branagh offers entertaining mess

Continued from CUE-1

through liberal applications of electricity and amniotic fluid, pumping life into his ugly, misshapen creature (Robert De Niro). Life ain't easy when you're a monster, however, and Frankenstein's creature escapes and goes on a rampage, killing numerous people before Victor starts to think that tampering with life and death isn't such a hot idea.

Destroying the creature turns out to be tougher than creating it. Victor must literally pursue the monster to the end of the Earth before he can rectify his mistake.

Previous film adaptations have proved the story has the stuff for a solid fright flick, yet director Branagh's decision to go for a more stately, theatrical tone means long stretches where the action drags. He tries to make up for it with sweeping camera pans, swelling orchestral frenzies and lots of running and shouting by the actors, but it's a long hour between the dazzling sequence where the monster comes to life and the thundering climax.

The final 15 minutes deliver enough thrills and real drama to almost make the movie seem worthwhile, but good luck staying awake long enough to get there.

## Relevant references

The director's attempts to make the story "relevant" with references to heart transplants and modern genetics don't help, either. The message that man dare not tamper with nature is hammered home relentlessly. If you're looking for a moral excuse not to work in the garden this weekend, here it is.

Visually, the only truly stunning element is Victor's lab, which looks like an unholy cross

between a church and an Industrial Age factory. The film's R rating stems from large doses of goo and gore, including a scene where a heart is ripped from a living person. Too bad Branagh didn't try to balance the grossness with more moments of real suspense.

The acting is typical period work for Branagh ("Much Ado About Nothing," "Dead Again"), stately and noble with lots of breast-beating and tortured looks. He and Carter ("Howards End") have little chemistry, however, deflating the romantic undercurrent that's supposed to help keep the story afloat.

## Something to see

That leaves you with De Niro, who is something to see. His face is cosmetically butchered almost beyond recognition, yet you can catch a fascinating glimpse or two of "Taxi Driver's" Travis Bickle beneath the scars.

De Niro manages to breathe plenty of life into the role, too, turning the creature into a complex bundle of rage, confusion and pathos. If only he didn't have to recite lines like, "I have love inside of me the likes of which you can scarcely imagine."

Boris Karloff may not have been half the actor De Niro is, but at least he had a director smart enough to realize strong, silent types make the best monsters.

In the end, Branagh tries to do the same thing Francis Ford Coppola did two years ago in resurrecting another classic horror tale. Coppola (also one of "Frankenstein's" producers) turned "Dracula" into a riveting, highly stylized and deceptively modern masterpiece. Branagh only manages to make "Frankenstein" an interesting, sporadically entertaining mess.