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THEATER REVIEW: "Young Frankenstein" lives again at UA

By [Mark Hughes Cobb](#)

Staff Writer

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If you walk into "Young Frankenstein" the musical expecting "Young Frankenstein" the movie, well, you're entering with the wrong attitude.

Walk this way.

As with any adaptation from one medium to another — book to film, myth to play, song to after-school special — don't expect literal, note-for-note translation. This grab-bag of shticky gags, mostly catchy melodies and joyful eye candy is like a celebration of a classic, almost a spoof on a satire. Much like "Spamalot," it loves its classic-comedy source material, stays in the same veins — which makes sense, given Mel Brooks' involvement — but alters enough to land a few surprise laughs.

And also like "Spamalot," it can't really be the original, seeming a bit like a once-edgy rock band playing a casino gig. The best jokes most will already know; anticipating them is part of the fun, but there is just a hint of letdown when a chance to re-live one passes by. Without getting too spoiler-y, let's just say: "My grandfather's work was doo-doo!"

Yet it mostly scores, and in a handful of moments, the musical exceeds and excels, with one notable highlight being the expansion of the "Puttin' on the Ritz" number, which by itself would make this University of Alabama production worth your time and money.

Director Stacy Alley, who also choreographed, cast a shining collection of triple threats, so it probably shouldn't be surprising when 6-foot-5 grad actor William Green, working atop boots strapped with five extra inches on the bottom to make an even more towering monster, performs a passable buck-and-wing in addition to tap ... well, tramp, given that footwear.

The chorus performs the fleet-footed, flashy, crowd-pleasing stomp Alley guides so well. It'll remind you that, especially in the past decade, UA has turned out numerous Broadway-level performers — a number of them actually working or having worked on the Great White Way, others touring, working in TV and film, or probably about to be discovered.

At moments when this show is really clicking, it's not only professional level, but about as good as it gets, the kind of thing you'd pay \$100 to see in N.Y.C.

Not too many shelled out to see this show on Broadway itself, though — especially after the monster smash of Brooks' musical from his film "The Producers," it was a

notable N.Y.C. flop. There are a couple of clear reasons why this occurred: While Brooks writes reasonable musical-theater pastiche, there's not much here to walk out humming. Songs are mostly setups for dance, or punch lines, and as such, they work. But a couple of the more forgettable numbers could easily be lost or seriously cut back. In the same way "Producers" felt bloated in spots, "Young Frankenstein" suffers the same malady.

For this production, there was one jarring choice of scenery, a drop to indicate Transylvania Heights and environs, that looked like a slapdash piece from a high-school production. It's odd in that the laboratory set is quite a lovely showpiece, a multi-functioning melange with lights, stairs, curtains and buzzy-whirring things; but its detail makes that rustic backdrop seem all the shabbier by comparison.

And perhaps because of opening night, or perhaps due to exhaustion brought on by near-constant singing, dancing and hysteria-level delivery, a couple of potentially golden comedic bits and punch lines were muffled, or tossed away. Again, this is a long show to sustain those edges, so pacing is an issue.

Happily, the second act has million-dollar trouper Green as the expressive, melancholic re-animated monster, and a terrific bit of work by Dylan Davis, as the lonely Hermit, to kick it into another gear, helping the proceedings dance to an all-smiles close.

It's already cooking nicely before, thanks to Daniel Hulsizer's charmingly off Igor, Will Erwin's upright Dr. Frederick Frankenstein, Chelsea Reynold's daffy egocentric Elizabeth and Drew Baker's scene-stealing Frau Blucher, one of the characters that revels in and deserves the expanded role.

Scarlett Walker's the secret weapon, though, as earthily sexy and not-so-dumb-as-she-first-seems Inga. Her "Roll in the Hay" number elevates mild giddiness to the sort of sustained silliness Brooks specializes in, setting new heights the show mostly sustains.

One of the smartest things Alley and her cast did was walk the fine line of paying homage to a film so many know and love — considered by many the highlight of Brooks' career, it shows up on numerous best-comedy lists, and was selected for preservation by the Library of Congress National Film Registry — while giving the actors room to create new interpretations. With such iconic performances from the film, it'd be a fool's errand to try and re-create them, not to mention that Gene Wilder's hair and Marty Feldman's eyes are practically special effects.

What UA has done is delivered a broad, splashy, delightful belly laugh of a live night, and frankly, it's an Abby- normally fun thing.

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