pzazz



FRANK

CHERISH MENZO / GRIP

The construction and implosion of violence



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Gezien op 24 mei 2025
KVS Box, Brussels, during Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2025
RECENSIEWORKSHOP
This review was written in the framework op 'Playwatch'

Where does ‘FRANK’ begin and where does it end? Cherish Menzo invites us to experience the very limit between dance and theatre. I had the chance to witness it together with my Playwatch peers at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels on 24th May. The result is this essayesque review, heavily based on the author’s feelings, combined with a re-reading of Frankenstein and Donna Haraway’s manifesto for cyborgs.

31 MAART 2026

As we enter the black box auditorium, ‘FRANK’ is already on stage. We walk in to tense sounds, three transparent plastic tissue walls made up of some sort of supple plastic, barely concealing a human figure within them -their face not visible, are they human?-, and a couple of stanzas from Percy B. Shelley’s ‘Alastor’ in the background. We have entered ‘FRANK’, but what is FRANK? “Welcome, good evening… or is it day…? Tonight’s program takes us backstage to witness first-hand the creation, start to finish, of a concoction of imaginations mounted on the frightening. FRANK does not exist.”

“[…] I have watched
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,
And my heart ever gazes on the depth
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black death
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee,
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost
Thy messenger, to render up the tale
Of what we are. […]”
‘Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude’, by Percy B. Shelley (1816)

‘FRANK’ does not exist, yet we are meant to experience it as we witness its construction, implosion and ultimately, its destruction. Four performers (Menzo herself among them) will guide us as they march, scream and fear, interacting with each other, interacting with tools at their disposal, and interacting with us. Building on Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein daemon, Cherish Menzo explores how, just as Frankenstein infuses life into a creature that dooms him, contemporary societies create even more fearful systems where the only impossible is the thought of escape. Because we are not living within them: it is they who are living within each and every one of us.

The duality of the observer and the observed is omnipresent yet transformed until there is no longer a way to distinguish one side from another.

To this purpose, Menzo´s proposal masterfully combines horror and tragedy, dance and theatricality, so that we collectively witness and experience the monster that haunts contemporary societies. The performance follows a linear, in-crescendo narrative that culminates in a cathartic moment of sensorial violence, followed by an epilogue marked by pain and desolation. Three characters march around the squared setting, that same stage we only see through plastic fabric. They create a common language, drop dark dust, stay focused on their endeavour, and are soon joined by a fourth one, who quickly learns to follow them and imitate their movements.

From then on, Menzo walks us through an emotional path of joyous carnival, violent fighting and sorrowful grief. Only one character dares to exit, not only breaking this dystopian image but also ripping down the fourth wall. Through interactions with the public, a moment of comic relief based on metatheatre leads to the implosion of ‘FRANK’ as it has been understood so far, re-creating a path of violence and sorrow - we were warned at the beginning: “take notice of repetition”.

“A system breakdown is a function of stress”
‘A manifesto for cyborgs’, Donna Haraway (1985)

The duality of the observer and the observed is omnipresent yet transformed until there is no longer a way to distinguish one side from another. Movement and body quickly become inseparable from the set design in which they operate and from the words that are either uttered or projected. Technological mediation both enables communication and generates distortion.

“The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Myth and tool mutually constitute each other.”

‘A manifesto for cyborgs’, Donna Haraway (1985)

Menzo shines at maintaining the pulse of tension, making use of lighting, sound and most importantly, the performers (herself included). In terms of pacing, some passages might feel overly long due to the repetition of movement. However, they are necessary for what is to come: they allow us some space to think and even to question the validity of what ‘FRANK’ is proposing before we are swallowed whole by its power.

How can a body be more violent than the utterly violent act of attributing violence to it?

From researching how violence has been a key feature attributed to black bodies by the white gaze, ‘FRANK’ gets to the very deep essence of violence present in humanity. Who exercises it and who is its object? How can a body be more violent than the utterly violent act of attributing violence to it? Violence can only lead to violence, and thereafter to grief and suffering.

“I saw the purest forms grow ugly and deteriorate, I witnessed the devastating action of death gnawing and destroying life, I discovered vermin feeding on the eye and brain. I-I-I stared, I observed, I analysed in detail the causes and effects, the passage from life to death and from death to life.”
‘FRANK’, Cherish Menzo (2025)

“To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death. I became acquainted with the science of anatomy: but this was not sufficient; I must also observe the natural decay and corruption of the human body.”
‘Frankenstein or the modern Prometheus’, by Mary Shelley (1831 version)

‘FRANK’ pushes us to extreme feelings, to connect with our most terrible, fearful inner selves. It forces us to think and then deprives us of the capacity to think through sensorial overload. It pushes the limits of dance and theatre. And yet it does not exist. It ends. We should be careful not to take it with us, or to enter it. Or are neither of these a possibility? “Welcome, good evening… or is it day?”

“The cup of life was poisoned for ever; and although the sun shone upon me, as upon the happy and gay of heart, I saw around me nothing but a dense and frightful darkness, penetrated by no light but the glimmer of two eyes that glared upon me.”
‘Frankenstein or the modern Prometheus’, by Mary Shelley (1831 version)