

Young Frankenstein

By Brian Scott Mednick

Seeing “Young Frankenstein” in a theater remains one of my earliest moviegoing memories. I couldn’t have been more than five or six – and surely I could not understand much of the adult humor – but I remember loving it. In black and white yet!

It has been several decades since my first exposure to Mel Brooks’ 1974 masterpiece, and my affection for the film seems to only grow with the years. And yes, I get all of the sexual innuendoes now. It is, quite possibly, the funniest movie I have ever seen.

“Young Frankenstein” was the brainchild of Gene Wilder. The idea came to him one winter in Westhampton, New York. “One afternoon, at 2 o’clock,” he recalled, “I took a long, yellow, legal pad and a black, felt pen – it may have been blue, but I think it was black – and wrote at the top of the page ‘Young Frankenstein.’ And I proceeded to answer a few questions about what might happen to me in the present day if I were left Frankenstein’s estate.”

“I called Mel and told him the idea,” Wilder said, but Brooks seemed less than enthusiastic, saying only, “Cute, that’s cute.” Shortly thereafter, Wilder’s agent, Mike Medavoy, called him and said, “How about we make a picture with you, Peter Boyle and Marty Feldman?”

“How’d you come to that idea?” Wilder asked him.

“Because I now represent you and Peter and Marty!”

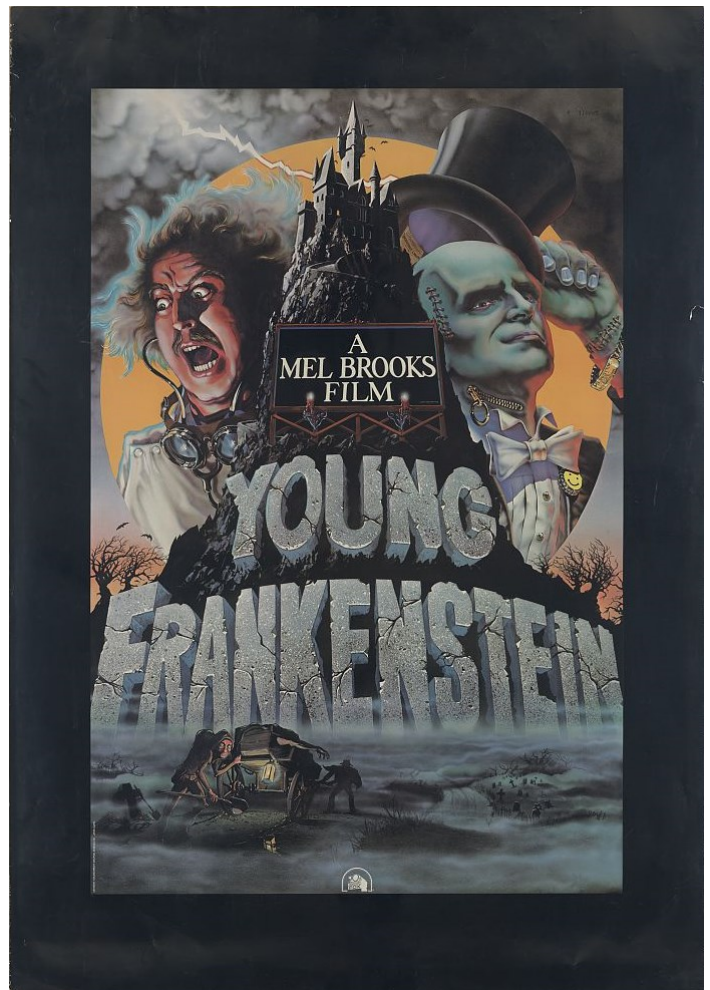
“Well, that’s a wonderful artistic basis for a film,” Wilder shot back, “and it so happens I do have something.”

A few days later, Wilder sent Medavoy a scene from “Young Frankenstein.” He loved it and suggested having Mel Brooks direct.

“You’re whistling ‘Dixie,’” Wilder said, “because Mel won’t direct something he didn’t conceive of.”

The next day, Brooks phoned Wilder and said, “What are you getting me into?”

Wilder wrote the entire first draft of the script, and then he and Brooks wrote several more drafts before filming began. The story involves Dr. Frederick Frankenstein, grandson of the infamous Dr. Victor



Original release poster features Gene Wilder as the doctor and Peter Boyle as his monster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

Frankenstein, who is so ashamed of his grandfather that he insists on pronouncing his name *Fronkensteen*. After being presented with the will of his great grandfather, Baron Beaufort von Frankenstein, Frederick journeys to Transylvania. When he arrives at his family’s ancestral castle, he encounters a number of oddballs: Igor (pronounced “Eye-gore”), a bug-eyed hunchback played by Marty Feldman in a career-defining performance; Inga, Frederick’s sexy Swedish lab assistant, played by Teri Garr; and Cloris Leachman as Frau Blucher, the sinister housekeeper whose name incites horses to whinny out of control. (*Blucher*, despite an early rumor perhaps perpetrated by Brooks himself, is *not* the German word for glue.)

While at the castle, Frederick stumbles upon a book by his grandfather detailing how he brought his creature to life. Frederick now becomes obsessed with creating his own creature, and with Igor and Inga’s help, gets a hold of a fresh corpse and the brain of a deceased genius. There’s only one problem – Igor

dropped the brain Frederick wanted, so, not wanting to return to the laboratory empty-handed, Igor provides Frederick with another brain that was labeled “abnormal.” This leads to what Wilder has said is his favorite scene in the film. After the newly animated creature nearly chokes Frederick to death, he asks Igor whose brain he used:

IGOR
Abby someone.

FREDERICK
Abby someone? Abby who?

IGOR
Abby Normal.

In addition to parodying Mary Shelley’s book and the first “Frankenstein” movie from 1931, Brooks and Wilder also use 1935’s “Bride of Frankenstein” for source material, most notably by having the monster nearly killed by the hospitality of a blind hermit (Gene Hackman in a hilarious cameo).

On a technical level, the film is clearly Mel Brooks’ best. Brooks and Wilder insisted on filming in black and white at a time when studios were strongly opposed to doing so because it would hurt sales to television and Europe. Brooks stood firm, though, and said if he couldn’t shoot the movie in black and white, he would quit. As a result, thanks to Gerald Hirschfeld’s moody lighting and camerawork and the actual lab equipment from James Whale’s original “Frankenstein” movie that Kenneth Strickfaden let Brooks use, “Young Frankenstein” actually looks just like the films it’s parodying. It also sounds as striking as it looks thanks to John Morris’ haunting, lulling score.

Brooks and Wilder brought “Young Frankenstein” to Columbia Pictures, but they turned the project down, citing that the proposed budget was too high. Twentieth Century-Fox ultimately agreed to do the film, and in the process signed both Wilder and Brooks to exclusive acting, writing, producing, and directing contracts. “Young Frankenstein” cost \$2.8 million to make, and grossed \$40 million in its initial December 1974 release, a substantial amount of money for the time. The film was so popular that many movie theaters around the country held showings around the clock. It capped off the best year Brooks and Wilder would ever have creatively – together or apart – as their previous collaboration, “Blazing Saddles,” also topped the box office at the beginning of the year.

The film also tickled the critics. Pauline Kael wrote in *The New Yorker* that “Young Frankenstein” is “what used to be called a crazy comedy, and there hasn’t been this kind of craziness on the screen in years. It’s a film to go to when your rhythm is slowed down and you’re too tired to think. You can’t bring anything to it (Brooks’s timing is too obvious for that); you have to let it do everything for you, because that’s the only way it works. It has some of the obviousness of ‘Abbott & Costello Meet Frankenstein,’” and if you go expecting too much it could seem like kids’ stuff – which, of course, it is, but it’s very funny kids’ stuff...”

“Young Frankenstein” received Golden Globe nominations for Cloris Leachman and Madeline Kahn, a Writers Guild of America nomination for Best Comedy Adapted from Another Medium, and Oscar nominations for Best Sound (Richard Portman and Gene Cantamessa) and Best Screenplay Adapted from Other Material, but Wilder and Brooks lost to Francis Ford Coppola and Mario Puzo for “The Godfather Part II,” which swept the awards that year.

Like any true classic, “Young Frankenstein” is a film that has and will continue to last for many decades to come. It is one of the most quotable movies ever made, with so many lines of dialogue now a part of the American lexicon: “What knockers!” “*Blucher!*” “Abby Normal.” “What hump?” “He vuz my *boyfriend!*” “You just made a yummy sound...” Need I go on?

Sometimes you can tell when the actors in a film are having a good time (“joy of performance,” Gene Siskel used to call it). The Rat Pack movies and George Clooney’s “Oceans” reboots are prime examples. But unlike those films, “Young Frankenstein” lets the audience be a guest at the party, not a mere observer. Frequent viewings will even reveal cuts right before what looks like Wilder is going to break up. It’s obvious they are having a ball. And so are we.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Brian Scott Mednick is a graduate of NYU film school. He is an author, critic, and filmmaker whose writing has appeared in many magazines and newspapers. He spent fifteen years writing and researching the biography Gene Wilder: Funny and Sad, which was released in December 2010 to rave reviews. His other books are the short story collection Drinking Games...and Other Stories (2011) and the novel Unnecessary Headaches (2013). He lives in New York City. Visit him online at brianscottmednick.com.