

Seattle's Noveltease Theatre combines burlesque and literature

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Fosse Jack and Sailor St. Claire, Noveltease Theatre's co-artistic directors. (Meneldor Photography)
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Burlesque and classic literature may seem like strange bedfellows. But when you're telling a story about the Romantics, a creative group who strayed far from the strait-laced standards of the Regency era, it makes perfect sense that the play would be produced by a burlesque theater company.

Seattle's Noveltease Theatre, a literary burlesque company, is presenting "A Metamodern Prometheus" Oct. 5-7 at Theatre Off Jackson. Combining theater, burlesque and modern dance, the fully scripted, two-act production by company founders and co-artistic directors Fosse Jack and Sailor St. Claire takes as its primary source material the foreword to the 1832 edition of "Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus," in which Mary Shelley first claims authorship of the novel.

"It's our origin story as much as it is 'Frankenstein's' origin story," said St. Claire, who has a Ph.D. in American literature. In 2018, she and Jack had already worked together in the local burlesque scene (most notably on "Tennessee Tease," inspired by Tennessee Williams' memoir) when Jack wrote an early version of "A Metamodern Prometheus" that incorporated St. Claire's existing Mary Shelley act.

"We looked at each other and said, 'Is this what we want to be doing?' and the answer was yes," recalls Jack.

They formed Noveltease Theatre as a nonprofit company with a mission to create original burlesque adaptations of classic literature from sex-positive, queer, feminist and anti-racist standpoints. Noveltease productions combine striptease, which developed in the 1920s, with America's earliest burlesque traditions. In the late 19th

century, literary burlesque consisted of all-female troupes who produced political parodies of classic dramas while wearing scandalously ankle-revealing costumes.

For the current production of “A Metamodern Prometheus,” Jack and St. Claire expanded their original play to include excerpts of texts by other writers in the Shelley circle and key scenes from the novel itself. These scenes are presented through modern dance choreographed by company member Trixie Paprika.

“Working with literature as your source material does not always feel popular or populist. But it’s not a book club,” said St. Claire. “I like to think of our work as an invitation to explore.”

Making the literary canon inclusive for audiences starts with exploring the diversity of its authorship. As a young woman in 1818, Shelley had to publish her novel anonymously for it to be accepted, while Hollywood adaptations of Tennessee Williams’ plays eliminated overt references to homosexuality.

“In burlesque, we’re playing with that balance between what is hidden and what is revealed,” said Jack. Burlesque is well suited to a story about the Romantics, whose belief in free love is ignored by the popular image of the Regency period inspired by Jane Austen.

“It’s very well documented that Lord Byron had many, many affairs — potentially including a romantic and possibly sexual relationship with Percy Shelley [Mary’s husband]. We’re dealing with those things that won’t necessarily come up in your high school English class,” said St. Claire. While Byron is a natural target for teasing, a tragic character like Frankenstein’s monster is not suitable for the satire inherent in burlesque. Instead, both Victor Frankenstein and the monster he created are fully clothed roles performed by trans actors.

“We are interested in casting in ways that playfully work against the grain and produce interesting and novel understandings of who these characters might be. ‘Frankenstein’ is a narrative about creation. I think there is something really interesting to be said to put trans figures at the center of that narrative,” said St. Claire. Burlesque frequently draws from literary sources, but Noveltease’s approach of adapting books into full-length narrative productions is still uncommon.

“We are interested in creating, first and foremost, works of theater. We are using striptease as a vocabulary for storytelling,” said Jack, drawing a comparison to musical

theater — only instead of breaking into song, performers with Noveltease burst into burlesque at moments of high emotion or when dialogue will not serve.

“To us, this is a story about female authorship. This book is thinking so much about the work of creation. A lot of anxieties about creation and responsibility come through in the novel,” said St. Claire.

“I think it’s a really cool blend of existential dread and horror and then absolute joy in creation,” said Jack. “Our hope is that once someone sees the work that we do, maybe they’ll go back and read the book and see their own way of interpreting that story.”

“A Metamodern Prometheus”

Oct. 5-7; Theatre Off Jackson, 409 Seventh Ave. S., Seattle; \$25, limited number of pay-what-you-can seats available; accessibility: please email novelteasetheatre@gmail.com for wheelchair-accessible seating; 206-340-1049, novelteasetheatre.org

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