

Life, Death, and Other Mindsets

Written by Alex Baer

Thursday, 31 October 2013 12:50

You're never too old to read a love letter. It's not embarrassing, either. It's downright invigorating. Even at my age. Or yours.

Age is just a state of mind, anyway. In a year that's been filled with keen reminders of just how tenuous this whole business of breathing and remaining upright really is, Mark Twain comes unshakably to mind: "Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."

I'm not usually so accepting of such homilies and bromides, especially the ones bordering on such blind, positive-thinking alleyways and perky, overly-caffeinated boulevards -- but there you go. The effects of reading last night's love letter, I suspect.

The love letter was called *Young Frankenstein*, first rolled out on its electrical scroll, way back in the Dark Ages (as some would say) of 1974. Hard to believe almost four decades has slipped through consciousness since, the years as easy to misplace as handfuls of lake fog gathered just before dawn.

(Maybe that's why we use up so much dry ice on this side of the vale -- or veil, as you envision that separation -- celebrating the mysterious, the spooky, the unknown, the eternal. On some instinctual, déjà vu level, we understand those chill wisps that rumble and roil, clinging to Mother Earth, always moving, searching, and restless, emulating our own days here.)

That love letter, by the way, also happens to be one of the most crackling, besotting parodies to grace mortal awareness, and one of the funniest films of all time to boot. The script, tone, and mood all scream with silliness and laughter -- two commodities I believe are international treasures to be supported, nurtured, and swathed in as many luxurious grants as we can pry loose from bankers and bean counters who last cracked a bare-bones grin around the time of the Crimean War.

Not to cheapen things, but to Madison-Avenue-ize this notion for a moment: *Laughter and silliness open the mind to learning, calm the heated mind, mend the tattered spirit, dissipate stress, and bring fast, fast relief!*

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The ability to laugh is one of the better holdovers from our primate upbringings and one of the few reflexive gifts worth a hoot from the reptilian brain we lug around. How powerful is this elemental, universal force? Well, for one thing, it makes me feel good about people -- even crowds of people. For an accidental curmudgeon such as me, that's powerful, indeed.

(I suppose all curmudgeons are accidental, come to think of it: We live, we age, we gather experience, we get to know the ropes, we pay our dues, get our Human Membership cards punched... And, at some point, we feel not only logically entitled to issue opinions and vent excess cranial steam, but somehow imagine this altruistic public service will be well received by the world at large. Sure.)

Before I forget, I should -- in the spirit of Dave Barry -- mention that "Cranial Steam" would be a very good name for an indie rock band. Just saying. Or, in a curmudgeonly demonstration that proves itself, I'd say, *Here you go. ☐ Help yourself. ☐ You'll never find a better name, nosirree. Go for it.*

I would simultaneously do my best to abstain from that standard cantankerous refrain, *Hey, you kids get off my lawn!*

* * * * *

Unlike myself, *Young Frankenstein* has aged incredibly well. Each and every humorous moment, wisecrack, and gag has the same crack-of-a-whip snap to it that's the surefire sign of dazzling genius firing on all cylinders, fed by that rarest fuel, a labor of love.

While the script is awash with humor and laughter, each frame of the film is also a heartfelt homage -- an open love letter -- to those wonderful, atmospherically-drenched films loosely herded under the descriptive umbrella as *those Universal monster movies*.

The lighting, cinematography, and sets are all soaked in loving appreciation for a time when

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"suspenseful horror movie" didn't automatically equate to "spurting gore fest," and referred far more to a certain mindset and mood of the piece than to the depth and degree that latex can be trained to substitute for all manner of blood-steeped, flesh-and-bone injuries and insults.

To blend the two indelible energies -- howling humor doled out at a rapid-fire, modern clip, along with a deep, prolonged, and sincere bow to those great old films -- increases the already immense power of both. With *Young Frankenstein*, you get to laugh yourself into a coma while warming your heart's hands on the warm fires of nostalgia.

In the words of many sharper philosophers and pundits: *There's nothing better than that -- except for, maybe, sex and chocolate.*

And pizza. And let's not forget craft beers.

Even curmudgeons know better than to argue with perfection.

* * * * *

Sometimes, even curmudgeons can be momentarily baffled. This is usually a sign of very short-term jamming of the neural pathways, brought on by situations or news stories in which there are far too many directions to go, and all at once...

... like the disagreement in Ohio between a family and a cemetery president over a seven-foot, 26-thousand-dollar set of SpongeBob SquarePants headstones -- one erected on a family member's grave, with another one standing by for a deceased member's sister to use, when her time comes.

Speaking as a card-carrying curmudgeon, I can only say the best course here is judo -- to take the energy from that one story and, in a glancing shift of that energy, address something dimly related, to help veer away from dark and dangerous pitfalls.

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In this case, I'd recommend using the stunning-but-dreadful humor angle in that original story, and then trying to salvage some comfort here by re-directing things and going with some humor capable of doing its own distinctive, and distracting, brain-jamming.

As your curmudgeon-opinion-steward, I'd suggest pairing that story with a vintage Steven Wright quote: "Sponges grow in the ocean. That just kills me. I wonder how much deeper the ocean would be if that didn't happen."

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However, curmudgeons hardly ever know when to shut up or allow a natural ending to things, like the couple two or three we've already shot past. Allow me to continue to prove my point, if you will:

Epilogue, Afterthoughts, Postscripts, Sidebars, and Catchbins of Stray Thoughts:

In art, the canvas matters greatly. *Young Frankenstein* is shot in black and white, as were the films it so warmly hugs and salutes all along the way. Black and white film stock, when handled by masters, has a palette and range unmatched in the world of color film.

I have found, in my curmudgeonly life, that people either immediately, unquestioningly understand and embrace this concept, and at some unspoken cellular level in their own being, or they do not.

Instead, contrarians lobby for color's appeal, film colorization (shudder), and proudly broadcast their disdain with black and white, vowing to take a sword in the nether regions -- or some such -- before ever viewing a black and white film.

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I can only meet such braggartly, boneheaded views with a painfully-learned, time-tattered response: total silence and a complete write-off of any hope for that person's artistic disposition and immortal soul. The jagged rift and sharp fissures between Republicans and non-Republicans is more likely to be joined and healed first.

Speaking as a person who is immovable and unchangeably solid in a righteously-formed, hardened-lava-and-bedrock opinion -- in other words, as a curmudgeon -- I can only say that shouting one's slack-jawed, mouth-breathing ignorance has become a popular pastime in this country. Fox News may not have started it, but they sure have dumped a crapload of fuel rods on that nuclear pile.

* * * * *

I wasn't going to mention politics this time. Honest. As a curmudgeon, however, I am finding out, some things are simply inevitable and not worth fighting. Learning to pick one's battles -- one of the more formative traits in forging any curmudgeon -- has put a keener edge on that whole business.

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Maybe, to file down some of the pricklier points, I should call these opinion pieces, collectively, *Curmudgeon Corner* -- only spelling it with *K* s and not *C* s, making it *Kurmudgeon Korner*. And then, to additionally and typographically signal the general harmlessness, and potentially wacky-zany nature of the proceedings, tilt each letter this way and that -- like in the *Toys-R-Us* logo or in *Jumble, That Scrambled Word Game!*

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Why it is that tilted letters means fun and frivolity, and somehow equates to instant and casual good cheer and happy informality, I really can't say -- not even as an opinion-burdened curmudgeon. I could make a host of fair guesses at it, though, if my curmudgeonry were on the line. However, like you, I just try to live in this culture. I didn't invent it.

I mean, if I *had* invented it, you can bet some things would be vastly different around here. Except *Young Frankenstein*.

As I say, even curmudgeons know better than to mess with perfection.

Young Frankenstein, the trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bc4rRCS1FSU>

Young Frankenstein, the delightful summary-spoiler:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p5AG0Tqh3A>

A quick salute to the maker of the original equipment used in the film *Frankenstein*, and rescued for use once more, in *Young Frankenstein*, to Kenneth Strickfaden, sometimes called *Dr. Frankenstein's Electrician*

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Strickfaden

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Young_Frankenstein

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_Monsters

SpongeBob HeadStone: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-24629801>

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steven_Wright

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film_colorization

<http://www.jumble.com>

Oh, and: *That's Fronkensteen*. Happy Halloween.