

# Mash-up of humor, horror in ‘Birth Breath Bride’

By [Don Aucoin](#) | GLOBE STAFF    FEBRUARY 26, 2013



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Stephanie Burlington Daniels in “Birth Breath Bride Elizabeth.”

‘I love science. And cake,’ an academic named Mary Shelley-Breath announces late in “Birth Breath Bride Elizabeth” to an audience that, by that point, can only be described as captive.

There’s no doubt that Mary loves cake. She furnishes abundant and messy proof of that in this strikingly original solo show by the Boston fringe company Sleeping Weazel, written and directed by Kenneth Prestininzi and presented last week as part of ArtsEmerson’s The Next Thing Festival.

As portrayed by Stephanie Burlington Daniels, who delivers one of the more fearless performances in recent memory, Mary is a creation as singularly unnerving as the monster in “Frankenstein,” a paperback copy of which she lovingly cradles against her cheek.

The premise of “Birth Breath Bride Elizabeth” is that Mary has been invited to deliver a lecture to young brides-to-be on “the relation of motherhood and the female imagination.” Her own imagination seems to lean toward the gothic, to judge by her dark lipstick and modified “Bride of Frankenstein” hairdo. She is attired in a ruffled violet blouse, black belt, black skirt, and black leather boots

(the costume is by Clinton O'Dell) as she commandingly assumes a podium from which a bridal bouquet, decked with streamers, trails down to the stage.

For the next hour, Mary travels a riddling, discursive path across the terrain of love, sex, feminism, ethics, aesthetics, etiquette, literature, the agonies of childbirth, the connection between reason and the soul, the specifics of the male and female anatomies, and the creation of life.

As she holds forth, the energy of her disquisitions is matched only by her unassailable confidence. She dilates upon celebrities as varied as Princess Diana (whose royal nuptials are signified by a commemorative Diana doll in a wedding dress) and Elvis Presley, but we get the sense that the subject Mary finds most interesting is herself. She likes to tantalize the audience with enigmatic utterances like "Often I wish I were dead. But not today."

Daniels further spices the mix by endowing Mary with an array of eccentricities that include a wheezing accordion laugh very reminiscent of Shelley Long's Diane Chambers in "Cheers." Mary drops her voice to a whisper; she rails at an unseen projectionist who ignores her demand for a clip from James Whale's film adaptation of "Frankenstein"; she struggles for breath; she unleashes sudden, horror-movie screams that rival the young Jamie Lee Curtis. You have no idea what she will do or say next — and you sometimes get the exhilarating sense that she doesn't, either.

Prestininzi is the associate chair of the playwriting department at the Yale School of Drama, while Daniels chairs the theater and dance studies department at Wheaton College. Perhaps that partly accounts for the zest with which the playwright-director and his star team up to satirize the opacity of academic jargon and the size of academic egos.

When she's not speaking in grandiose and impenetrable academese, Mary is portentously writing the words "Horror" and "Heart" on a whiteboard, aggressively challenging the audience as if they are dimwitted students, or posing sweeping rhetorical questions in an elaborately arch fashion: "A woman is not a flower. Then what is she? A wish? Perhaps. An ardent wish. Whose? Our mothers'?"

There's a certain darkness, though, lapping at the edges of "Birth Breath Bride Elizabeth." Every so often, Mary doubles over with mysterious labor pain. When she speaks in the voice of "Frankenstein" author Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, it is as the defensive daughter of a disapproving, larger-than-life mother: Mary Wollstonecraft, the British philosopher and champion of women's rights.

At the beginning and end of the play, Mary Shelley-Breath quotes an assertion by Wollstonecraft, from her famous "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," that "all the writers who have written on female education and manners, from

Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weaker characters than they would otherwise have been ...”

By the second time she quotes that passage, you just might get the sense that, for all the enjoyably unhinged humor of this freewheeling mash-up, Mary Shelley-Breath is both carrying and communicating the burdens of women’s history.

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