

Arias with touches of James Brown & jazz — opera's got a brand new bag

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SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

Think of opera and one tends to think of Spanish barbers and French bohemians. The life of Mary Shelley, author of "Frankenstein," probably doesn't come to mind. Nor, for that matter, does James Brown-style funk.

But two troupes are shaking up the traditional black-tie genre, goosing the proverbial fat lady with new, cutting-edge works.

"The Sandman" is an experimental production (Connolly Theatre, 220 E. Fourth St., through June 1), based on a story by E.T.A. Hoffmann that blends an operatic score with modernist touches, including an onstage deejay who samples rock songs by the Strokes and Metallica.

"The Mary Shelley Opera" (New York Society for Ethical Culture, 2 W. 64th St.), which premieres tonight, taps into the seemingly nonoperatic story of how "Frankenstein" — the novel, not the character — was born. The score has snippets

of jazz, and the production design — by Oscar winner Stephen Hanoock (for visual effects, "What Dreams May Come") features video projections of his surreal paintings.

"Shelley" composer Allan Jaffe remembers when librettist Deborah Atherton first pitched the idea of a Shelley opera to him nine years ago. "I just wanted to go on the road with my funk band," he recalls. Jaffe had enjoyed success playing with James Brown but had never written for a band bigger than a jazz quintet, let alone for an orchestra.

"Shelley" is sponsored by the Parabola Arts Foundation, which had previously produced an opera about Malcolm X. "It's always exciting to be part of something new and original," says Anthony Turner, a seasoned opera professional who plays William Godwin (Mary Shelley's father) and who toured with Laurie Anderson's cutting-edge opera "Moby Dick." And with Lincoln Center packing up



HOW ROMANTIC! Barbara Rearick and Scott Murphree in "Mary Shelley"

his pipes and Beverly Sills stepping down as chairwoman of Lincoln Center, opera as we know it is undergoing at least superficial transformations.

"In 'The Sandman' you get all of the beauty, melody and passion of opera, but it's totally unpretentious and fun," says David Herskovits, 41, artistic director of Target Margin, the experimental theater company producing "Sandman." "If you've never liked opera, here's a chance to understand what everybody else is so excited about."

DAILY NEWS
Thursday, May 16, 2002