

# The Greatest Volcanic Eruption in Recorded History: Three Years of Chaos, One Literary Masterpiece, and the Play That Ties It All Together

The year is 1815. In the East Indies, a colossal volcano named Mount Tambora had been dormant for over 1,000 years. No human alive had seen even a whisper of rumbling. In April that year, the mountain erupted with apocalyptic fury, casing the Earth in volcanic gasses and ash that pierced the stratosphere. The sun-blocking particles of volcanic matter encircled the entire globe in a matter of weeks, plunging human communities into the most dramatic, sudden climatic shift in thousands of years.

For three years following Tambora's explosion, chaos reigned on Earth. "To be alive, almost anywhere in the world, meant to be hungry."<sup>1</sup> Flooding rains replaced sunny showers, bone-shattering cold rolled over fallow fields, and drought seized verdant land, turning all withered and dry. Not a corner of the world remained untouched by famine, disease, dislocation, and unrest.

In the turbulent summer of 1816, Mary Shelley (then Mary Godwin) and her lover Percy Shelley were ensconced at their lakeside villa on near Geneva. The ravaged world around them served as the inspiration for Shelley's greatest work, *Frankenstein*. Confined to their cabin by the terrifying weather, which their neighbour Lord Byron described as fierce "as an earthquake's birth," they amused themselves by sharing ghost stories. The 19 year-old Mary was struck by the vision of a horrifying phantasm, pieced together by eager, unknowing hands, deadened flesh stirring with faint pulses of warmth and life. Behold a monster carved in hazy imagination from the tall, foaming waves of Lake Geneva and the shattering lightning which surrounded Shelley's waking days.

Shelley's classic novel is inextricably enmeshed with the story of a world in ecological breakdown. The people of a blighted Europe moved through heart-wrenching stages of destruction. Children were abandoned or killed by desperate mothers. Roving mobs of people, barely human in their suffering, scoured the frozen fields for rotten food and waged bloody battles. The Monster of *Frankenstein* was made in their likeness: he bears the same shape as the deformed and diseased masses, and faces the same fear and hostility as the refugees of this global food crisis. The eruption of Mount Tambora offers us a vivid model of our world thrust into a sudden climate crisis, throwing into startling focus the interdependence between human systems and the natural world.

Exactly 200 years after Shelley first dreamed of her Monster, born in a storm wrought from global climate change, Superhero Clubhouse and Kaimera Productions adapt themes of Shelley's story to imagine a new kind of monster, in *JUPITER (a play about power)*, premiering at La MaMa E.T.C. in February of 2016. The modern world faces its own climate crisis, with promised consequences no less devastating than the Mount Tambora explosion. The story of

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<sup>1</sup> Wood, Gillen D'Arcy. *Tambora: The Eruption That Changed the World*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014. Print.

*JUPITER* is set into motion by a man named Joe who undertakes a radical action, isolating himself from human society in order to embody his vision of world that is seemingly unattainable. By removing all fossil fuels from Earth in one fell swoop, he seeks to reanimate humanity, doing what no individual has ever had the power to do: redefine what it means to be human in a world facing a global climate crisis fuelled by our own tragic flaws.

Sade said, "Nature permits everything, and authorizes nothing." Nature breeds monstrosity as often and as easily as it breeds beauty. The ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the Monster in *Frankenstein* resides in the fact that good and evil are relative positions. In *JUPITER*, Joe, like Frankenstein, sets the stage for his creation, Humanity, to discover its way into being, devoid of inherent goodness or evil. His monstrosity lies in his ability or lack of ability<sup>2</sup> to relate to human codes and signifiers, to harness language as access, as his medium of truth.<sup>2</sup> Joe creates an open channel of communication between himself and his creation, relinquishing any semblance of power he may hold over the progress of her discovery. We watch as Humanity grapples with the chaos of a world with its spine removed, trying to build herself into a being that can not only survive the horrors of the present, but alter the monstrous elements of her nature that would inevitably herald the drastic consequences of ecological collapse.

Two centuries ago, a volcanic explosion altered the climate of the world, plunging it into global turmoil. The fictitious story of a Monster and his creator was forged from the human drive to find principle and control in an unprincipled nature. Today, *JUPITER* interrogates a world on the brink of an impending climate crisis of a similar scale and scope. The play tells the story of Humanity, thrust into a new existence overnight by a man who had the power to do the impossible. It asks if this radical act, done in the name of the greater good, was ethical or even right. Did he create a monster, or did he create hope? In our age, where often it seems our very nature is at odds to our long-term survival on Earth, is it possible for a new kind of human to emerge?

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*JUPITER (a play about power)* is presented by La MaMa, created by Superhero Clubhouse and Kaimera Productions. It runs February 11-28, Thursdays-Saturdays at 7:30pm, Sundays at 2:00pm, at La MaMa's First Floor Theatre | 74a East 4th Street, Manhattan. Adults \$18; Students/Seniors \$13. Runtime: 70 min.

*Written by Lani Fu*

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<sup>2</sup> Brooks, Peter. "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts: Language and Monstrosity in Frankenstein." *New Literary History*. 9.3 (1978): 591. Web.