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UTILIZING DRAMATURGY TO
ACTIVATE CREATIVITY IN YOUNG AUDIENCES

by

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B.A. Brigham Young University, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of Theatre
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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Major Professor: Julia Listengarten

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ABSTRACT

Theatre for Young Audiences companies in the United States rely heavily on recognized titles to bring in audiences. As a result, most of their productions are adapted from recognizable titles, including films, television series, and popular literature. These adaptations draw audiences in that may not otherwise go to the theatre, which is especially important within the world of TYA where the target audience (children) only gains access to a theatre through adult caregivers. Additionally, most children go to the theatre as part of school field trips, further encouraging season selections that will fill educational needs in addition to providing theatrical experience. The intersection between theatres, the adapted works they produce, and the educational responsibilities of these theatres were the inspiration for this thesis. How can theatres help audiences move away from simple compare and contrast between a book and a play? How can theatres promote more meaningful interaction with the artistic process? This thesis seeks to provide a pathway for practitioners seeking to foster more meaningful audience engagement. It begins with a history of how Theatre for Young Audiences, dramaturgy, and adaptation theory evolved in the United States. That context provides a foundation on which to explore how the intersectionality of each of these domains can be harnessed to engage audiences in purposeful critical thinking about the art they see and drive them toward becoming thoughtful creators on their own.

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INTRODUCTION

Like many children, some of the earliest exposure I had to classic literature came through film adaptations of texts I was too young to read independently. My earliest memories involve watching the 1980s adaptations of Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, the 1993 version of *The Secret Garden*, and the 1994 version of *Little Women* to the point where I had them essentially memorized. In fact, the first book I remember buying for myself was a cloth-bound copy of *Little Women* complete with ribbon bookmark. Once I was skilled enough to read the texts that inspired these films, I noticed the subtle (and not so subtle) differences that existed between the book I knew and the version that I loved so much on film. I discovered scenes that hadn't been shown on film or wondered why favorite scenes from the film were not in the book. This pattern repeated as I read each book inspired by a beloved film. Mary Lennox's parents died of cholera in the book, but an earthquake in the film. Anne Shirley's beloved puffed sleeve dress was blue on film but brown in Montgomery's text, and Gillian Armstrong's Beth March never went to Lawrence house to play the piano as Alcott's did.

Still, my love of these films (and the books that preceded them) remained intact. I had, after all, first encountered these stories as films. It wasn't until I was older that I experienced adapted literature in chronological order of publication by reading a book *then* seeing the film. That was also when I started having conversations where my friends and I declared that "the book is always better" when compared to the movie being discussed. The phrase was spoken as a fact—a regrettable one, perhaps—but a fact nonetheless. That "fact" seemed to shut down additional conversation, and any enthusiasm for the adapted version seemed to be tempered by a

quiet expectation that preferring a book somehow made you smarter or more cultured. As someone who dearly loves any form of storytelling, printed or otherwise, eventually that phrase frustrated me. *Always?* Really? Was it true that a book was *always* better than an adapted version of its story? If so, then why did my friends keep seeing movies or plays they felt sure would disappoint them? When did society decide that books were “always” better? What did it say about *me* if I enjoyed both, even when the adapted version made radical departures from the source?

I continued wrestling with these questions while earning my BA in English Education. During this time, I was introduced to dramaturgy, a world full of the same kinds of questions I asked about how time, place, and format impact audience experiences with storytelling. I was fortunate enough to have a production dramaturg as my instructor for the Introduction to Theatre class I enrolled in. The work she did to help orient our class to the university’s production of Lope de Vega’s *Fuente Ovejuna* helped to unlock a completely different kind of theatrical experience for me. While earning my degree, I also took several classes focused on adaptation, including an introductory course on literature and film and another specifically on transmedia adaptations of Shakespeare. These classes fascinated me. While my roommates ended their undergraduate studies with Chaucer, my capstone course was *The Lord of the Rings* and Film—a recent addition to the university after the Academy Award winning adaptations directed by Peter Jackson were released. I poured over every one of the behind-the-scenes features available on my copies of the director’s cut version of Jackson’s adaptations—more than 24 hours’ worth of footage, interviews, and commentaries. Hearing Jackson and the rest of the cast and production team discuss the dramaturgical processes they utilized that brought Tolkien’s world to life

significantly changed how I interact with adapted media. I came to believe that books were not better than films or vice versa—they were just *different*, and that when I took the time to explore each, my experience with both versions immensely improved.

I sought to provide experiences like these for my students as a secondary English teacher whenever we interacted with stories as adaptation. I think my students assumed that, as an English teacher, I would promote books over adapted media and expect them to as well, but I worked hard to challenge those perceptions. I taught basic adaptation theory principles and my students and I would discuss the impact of each version on our experience with the story. Most films we watched within the context of adaptation studies came with supplementary materials that helped explain the process of making the film to some degree, and even without those features we were able to pause or rewind scenes to look at specific moments of storytelling as often as we needed. I did my own dramaturgical research on what the filmmakers said about the pre-production and production process, hoping to help my students learn more about the number of choices that are involved in transforming literature to a visual medium. When I took my students to the theatre, however, I struggled to lead productive discussions. I did my best to prepare my classes to think about the decisions a theatre made in the context of how different spaces, budgets, and mediums impact storytelling and provided them with lessons about basic design principles with how color and shape impact storytelling. I wanted to give them context and scaffold their experience as much as I could so that, while we were at the theatre, the experience would be entertaining but *also* enriching educationally. However, our post-show discussions generally relied on our own memories and guesswork about the artistic processes of the artists involved in adapting stories for the stage. We needed more resources.

The exception to this lack was when we visited the Utah Shakespeare Festival. Held in Cedar City, Utah, Utah Shakes is a Tony Award Winning regional festival with shows that run throughout the summer and early fall in three different theatres. Their repertory includes eight shows each season, half of which are works by Shakespeare or one of his contemporaries. Each summer, I took interested students and parents to five of these shows over the course of three days. We attended the free pre-show orientations and post-show talkbacks where audiences could ask questions of the directors or cast members about the productions they attended. We also purchased tickets for the behind-the-scenes tours of the festival. These incredible tours are led by various members of the company including actors, designers, and technicians. Every year we learned something new on these tours. Our tour guides would take us backstage to each theatre and show my students dressing rooms, prop storage, costume shops and the stages themselves, pointing out fun features as they went (like how to store sets for three shows at the same time in one space).

Why, I thought, couldn't *every* theatre experience be so magical for my students? Only a fraction of all my students were able to attend the festival during the summer. Utah Shakes was several hours away and required a year of fundraising to cover the cost of travel, hotels, food, and tickets to all the shows we saw. What about the performances everyone saw during the school year? Some of the plays we saw during the year included short talkbacks, but they were often focused more on how actors got their parts or memorized their lines than on the processes of crafting the production itself. As a teacher seeking to inspire all her students to become confident creators, I wanted more of my students to have experiences like those provided

through the Utah Shakespeare Festival. Was it possible to capture some of that impact without so much time and money required from participants?

Though my career path has shifted, my desire to engage students with critical thinking around storytelling has remained the same. In choosing to leave full-time work as a public-school teacher, I have worried that I would have nothing to offer the field of TYA while also feeling as though my experience holds value I don't want to ignore or disengage from. I want to leverage what I learned as an English teacher to something valuable within the world of theatre—but how?

I began my research by returning to my interest in the connection I detected between adaptation theory and dramaturgy during my undergraduate studies and as an educator for a starting point, hoping to find some coherent link between them and the world of Theatre for Young Audiences. I started with what seemed obvious: TYA and dramaturgy are both inherently educational. TYA companies regularly engage in developing adapted productions. Dramaturgy and adaptation both thrive in liminality, with dramaturgy existing between production and audience and adaptation studies focused on the transition from one version of a story to the next. These fields seemed obviously interconnected as pairs, but what would, if anything, come of blending each field together? I was curious to discover what, if anything, might live at the core of these fields and how that might change the way theatre companies approach the way they work with youth.

During my research, I came across an idea posed by Suzan Zeder in her essay, “The Once and Future Audience.” Her words have haunted me ever since. She states:

[TYA] programs are excellent examples of dedicated theater professionals finding a place for young people within the home of an essentially “adult” theater. Young people are invited guests, rather than family members within their own rooms. [. . .] If theatergoing is to become a life-long habit, children and young people must be fully franchised participants in the theatrical event, not necessarily as performers, but as audience members who see their lives, their concerns, their perceptions and points of view reflected on the stage. Plays must provide opportunities for young people to find something of themselves within the dramaturgy, and must make these depictions intellectually challenging and stylistically interesting. Our task, as playwrights, dramaturgs, and directors, is to make theater as exciting as sports, as accessible as television, and as relevant as one’s own reflection in the mirror—for all ages of our audience. (Zeder 448)

This image of children as guests in theatre spaces dedicated for them resonated with me. I felt like I had an idea of what it meant to be fully franchised citizens in a school classroom. During our time together, I worked hard to keep my students at the center of the classroom experience. We worked all year to prepare for the end of year gala we sponsored for the community. This event, part fundraiser for our sister school in Kenya, part academic showcase, was one in which my students were given the chance to determine what from the year they wanted most to share with those who attended. One year, they staged a mock trial where the audience would determine if Edmond Dantès from *The Count of Monte Cristo* was admirable or not. Another year they wrote a fifteen-minute play depicting the French Revolution, complete with costumes and guillotine rented from a local theatre. Each year, they did more than I ever would have asked them to do on my own.

What, though, does it look like for an audience to be fully-franchised in a theatre—especially one that caters to youth? As a classroom teacher, I had hundreds of hours to work with students. The time youth spend with theatre practitioners is far more limited. While many theatres provide spaces for youth to create and devise within workshops and classes, so many more youth experience theatre as audience members. What structural practices need to be utilized by practitioners to allow full participation in young audiences? What tools do youth currently lack that would allow them to participate fully in theatrical spaces? How can theatres take better advantage of such little time with audience members?

In many ways, this thesis seeks to provide suggestions on how theatres might more fully center youth perspectives in their programming. While I believe these principles are applicable to any theatrical experience for youth, my work focuses on the specific opportunities inherent in the setting of TYA to use dramaturgy to help youth interact with adapted theatre in ways that maximize their connection to the artistic and educational potential of the work in highly engaging ways. Adaptation studies are broad, and consist of research about a wide range of topics, including traditional translations between languages as well as more modern examinations of how films inspire video games or current trends in adapting historical events for the stage (like *Hamilton* or *Come From Away*.) For purposes of this study, I focus primarily on how to craft educational experiences that respond to transmedial adaptation—the transfer of a story from one mode of telling into another. In theatre for youth as in theatre for general audiences, the most popular form of transmedial adaptation has long been literature to stage, though film to stage and even history to stage fall under this umbrella as well. I believe that adaptation provides fertile ground for focused study of artistic decision making that connects

well with youth and will set them up for success as they continue to engage with adaptations on their own outside of formalized educational experiences. I also believe that the practices and perspectives of dramaturgy are the perfect tools practitioners can use to activate deeper artistic encounters for the youth in their care. Knowing that both full time educators and theatres are often short on time and funding, I have also sought to identify cost-effective solutions that work in tandem with educational standards to encourage ease of implementation.

Finally, as a dramaturg myself, I believe that we must understand where we have come from in order to know how we can create desired structural changes. To that end, the first half of my thesis is itself a work of dramaturgy. Chapter One provides historical background for the development of children's theatre, particularly noting the historical demands that TYA faces to provide strong educational experiences and excellent artistry while engaging youth and satisfying the paying gatekeepers of those youth. Chapters Two and Three focus on the evolution of dramaturgy and the world of adaptation respectively to better contextualize the intersectionality of how each interacts with the world of Theatre for Young Audiences. The last two chapters provide concrete, practical, cost-effective steps for arts educators to implement for audiences at each stage of interaction with a production. These suggestions, inspired by the practices and principles of dramaturgy in tandem with the structure of Bloom's Taxonomy work to provide a new perspective on what it means to encourage youth to be active participants in theatrical experiences.

CHAPTER ONE: THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

Introduction

Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) in the United States has, from its beginning, had to wrestle with tensions among competing interests that other theatrical organizations don't have to face. Should a production be an artistic, diversionary experience? An educational one? What responsibility does TYA bear in guiding the social-emotional awareness and development of children into adults? Does TYA exist to shape future arts professionals, as an exciting extracurricular compared to the more serious work of studying and test taking, or some hybrid of the two?

Ultimately, I believe there are four unique demands made of Theatre for Young Audiences in program selection and implementation that are not made of theatres that primarily serve adults:

Education: Because children's theatres rely heavily on field trip performances, TYA companies have specific educational demands on their programming that theatres for general audiences don't face. Specifically, they need to cater workshops and seasons to state and national standards of education in order to secure audiences.

Artistry: TYA companies seek to produce art at a high standard and to be seen by the theatre community as a legitimate contributor to the field. They may also want to develop better artistic skills in the youth that participate in their programming. However, because they serve a

younger target audience, tend to produce plays inspired by children's stories, and don't have the same presence within Broadway that shows for general audiences do, that artistry may be seen as less progressive or valuable in the development of the field as a whole.

Engagement: By virtue of working with youth, children's theatres face additional responsibility in helping to shape the development of youth in making good choices and in facing conflict. Children's theatres are uniquely suited to provide a space for children to explore choices and conflicts theoretically through active participation in creative play.

In addition to these primary demands that impact the creation of artistic content, children's theatres must satisfy gatekeepers (including schools and parents who must pay and provide transportation) to reach their target audiences. Because of the power that gatekeepers have over the financial viability of the theatre, theatres may feel pressured to include or avoid certain themes, topics, or stories altogether. Although gatekeepers do impact the financial viability of TYA spaces in ways that are separate from theatre for general audiences, this thesis will focus on what I consider the three primary pursuits of TYA theatres more universally: creating artistic excellence that engages and educates young audiences.

To understand how these tensions have evolved and how they impact current practices of children's theatres in the United States, this chapter will spotlight key moments in the development of TYA in this country. Using this context, the chapter ends with recommendations on how theatres might work with these competing forces to develop better programming for youth.

Children as Miniature Adults: Exhibition Theatre

The heritage of recorded theatrical history in the United States has two main branches. In the southern colonies, theatre was heavily influenced by British traditions. Williamsburg, Virginia, for instance, opened their first theatre in 1716. Through the influence of Lewis and William Hallam, Williamsburg gained a dedicated, professional acting troupe made primarily of trained European actors in the 1750s. These performers mostly brought live performances of Shakespeare to the city, which were extremely popular (“Theatre in the United States”). Southern theatre was a decidedly adult space where British traditions and artistic standards were paramount.

In contrast, the northern colonies had a more tumultuous opinion of theatre, largely due to the Puritan religious beliefs of the colonists. A branch of Christianity that grew out of the Church of England, Puritans sought to “purify” the Church and the people in England, abolishing singing in churches and other elements of worship too closely associated with the Catholic church. Puritans abhorred any sign of immoral behavior including the drunkenness, gambling, and pickpocketing around The Globe and other theatres of the day. Many of the early Puritan colonists of Massachusetts had left their homes to escape the perceived corruption of Europe in the early 1620s, but those that remained behind managed to take over control of parliament by the 1640s and set about abolishing theatre in London. In the colonies of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania, Puritan (and Quaker) led governments had laws prohibiting theatrical performance for audiences of any age throughout the 1700s. Most of the original 13 colonies established similar laws by the Revolutionary War with the support of the Continental Congress. While theatre in London was made legal again after Charles II ascended to the throne, theatre in

America remained extremely rare and largely focused on building patriotism throughout the 1700s (“Theatre in the United States”).

Theatre specifically for children was born primarily out of these northern Puritanical traditions. Because of the negative perception of theatre as an activity for adults seeking a salacious night on the town, theatre for youth began less as an artistic endeavor and more as an educational one. Teachers in the late 1700s and early 1800s who sought to promote the value of education and to develop their students with skills in public speaking would put on evening performances for the community featuring music, poetry, and short scenes, generally written by themselves. To help avoid being seen as immoral, these performances were quite purposefully *not* advertised as “plays” though they borrowed from British theatrical structures and were undeniably theatrical (children were tasked with taking on characters and memorizing lines, after all). Sometimes these plays were adapted from popular fairy tales, other times they served as a vehicle to teach and practice moral behaviors and reflected social situations of the time. These presentations were intended to please parents and to encourage continued financial support for the school from within the community.

One of the more prolific of these playwrights was Charles Stearns. Based out of Lincoln, Massachusetts, the educator and theologian wrote collection of plays for children called *Dramatic Dialogues* that he published in 1798. This volume contains not only a series of scenes (called “dialogues”) for children to perform, but also instructions for educators on how to go about actually crafting the “exhibition” (preferring that term over “play” or “production”) (16). Chapters include advice on selecting performers, rehearsing, knowing when the performers are ready for their exhibition, and his opinions on the benefits of hosting school exhibitions. Of note,

he also includes advice on how to combat prejudice in the community against such events. Stearns suggests that educators begin with only a few pieces and to allow any community member to review the dialogues in advance for offensive content, which, if identified, should be “struck out without mercy” (9). This may point in part to Stearns’ own educational philosophies, but also speaks to the early need to seek the approval of the community to engage in any kind of formalized theatrical experience for youth. Art for arts’ sake was not considered. These exhibitions relied heavily on educational content to be permitted at all, and the content was focused on building children into moral adults.

Stearns gained community support through the content of his dialogues, which feature children portraying adults engaged in uniquely adult situations and conflicts, often through adaptations of works by Shakespeare. In *The Triumph of Temper*, for example, the children took on roles inspired by characters like *The Taming of the Shrew*’s Petruchio and Katerina, *The Merchant of Venice*’s Portia, and *Hamlet*’s Horatio. The focus of the dialogue leans heavily on the role of men and women in marriage with a reinforcement of patriarchal gender roles. For instance, at the end of the play, Horatio states that “the great secret of managing a wife is always to treat her kindly; and keep your temper; then if she be not a perfect fury she will do very much as you please to have her [. . .] a man of harsh temper may kill a woman, but he cannot govern her” (93-94). Other dialogues in the collection also feature themes of parenthood and marriage, including *The Discontented Wife*, *The Father of the Family*, and *The Mother of a Family*. Stearns’ writings identify the early emphasis of education over artistry in early theatre for youth. Further, this education is a specific one: these children are meant to prepare for adulthood and

not dwell on childish things. To that end, the texts focus entirely on the adult lives children should strive to emulate in the future rather than addressing any of the concerns of childhood.

Stearns' instructions omit any mention of special costuming or set dressings, and only limited mention of adding "gesture" or "motion" to the scenes (19-20). Instead, educators are given advice on maintaining propriety and minimizing suspicion in rehearsals—avoiding keeping students out too late or allowing them to fall behind on their studies, for example. Stearns understood that he and others would be met with suspicion and that the goal of his dialogues was less to develop acting skills so much as to foster intelligent, poised youth who could make the leap gracefully into adulthood upon leaving their formal schooling. His exhibitions did offer children an opportunity to participate through role play, but in a context that was only somewhat supported by artistic growth or immediate educational value. While mature themes like conflict within family relationships are relevant at some level no matter the age of a performer or audience member, these youth were years away from needing to solve conflict within their own marriages. As a result, Stearns' mark on the history of theatre overall is limited but does represent well the foundational ties of theatre for youth as an extension of education. In America, education, theatre for youth, and adaptation have always been mixed.

Children's Theatre as Diversionary Spectacle

In the years after the Civil War, American theatre (and subsequently, children's theatre) changed dramatically. While theatre in the 1800s was much more vaudevillian, by the late 1800s and early 1900s, more recognizable Broadway-like productions emerged. The recitations and careful avoidance of anything *too* lavish gave way to highly elaborate costumes and sets, designed to create the ultimate diversionary spectacle. Enhanced technological ability including

the expanding railway system and the development of electricity increased the public desire for entertainment as well as their access to it. This created a “climate [that] was right economically, socially, and artistically for theatre for youth to flower” (Salazar 25). Children’s theatre at this time expanded beyond school concerts and spread to children of a variety of economic and social standings. The extraordinarily wealthy Astor family, for example, hired an acting troupe to come perform *Cinderella up to Date* for their daughter Ava (and sixty of her closest friends) at her birthday party in March of 1908, indicating not only the continued popularity of adaptation but the elevated status of theatre within society (25). Theatre also became a popular philanthropic gesture, with several recorded events being sponsored specifically for orphans, including a musical adaptation of *The Pied Piper* in New York City in December of 1908, which played free of charge for approximately 400 orphaned children, who all received a gift and treat after the performance (Salazar 28). As a result, children’s theatre shifted away from being quite so dogmatic and educational (though it retained elements of both) and began its spread into the world of novelty and charity, reaching both the very rich and the very poor in society.

On New York City stages, early musical adaptations of popular children’s stories met with great success. L Frank Baum, for instance, wrote a theatrical version of *The Wizard of Oz* that was so successful as a family musical that it was revived three times in as many years in New York and opened on London’s West End between 1903-1905. This musical was constructed with the intention of being fit for all ages of playgoers and advertisements specifically encouraged parents to bring their children to the show. There is no denying the early attention on spectacle and attempts to please crowds with diversion in this production. Baum’s theatrical text got rid of the witch and included an older Dorothy (now with a pet cow instead of a dog), a

romance between the tin woodsman and a “lady lunatic,” and a chorus of female dancers (in tights!) as the Wizard’s army (Salazar 27). Baum’s *Oz* stands as a wonderful representation of how far theatre for children had traveled since teachers like Stearns (who would certainly not have been allowed to have a chorus of scantily clad dancers in his classroom). The stage had become much more beautiful to look at, but in losing its association with schools and dogmatic educational lessons, there was a shift toward frivolous indulgence. Theatre had found a way to be more visually impressive but had done so without achieving its full potential quite yet.

One play that does seem to have managed to find some balance between spectacle and maturity was James Barrie’s *Peter Pan*. Unlike Baum’s work, now long overwhelmed by variations of musicals all inspired by the 1939 film, *Peter Pan* is still performed with its original text today. Having opened in London in 1904 as a massive success, American audiences eagerly awaited its opening in Washington D.C. in October of 1905 and, later, in New York in November of the same year. Even though a *New York Times* review declared the play as unfit for children, the show proved to be extremely popular in audiences of all ages, with families often attending the show together. Maude Adams, famous for her role as the titular Pan, performed the role for eleven years either in New York or in traveling productions around the country (Salazar 30). With its exciting story of flight and imagination, *Pan* managed to incorporate mature themes through Wendy’s anxiety about growing up and leaving the nursery. Even with criticism that the show was too mature for children, *Peter Pan* serves as an early example of theatre managing to balance artistry with meaningful educational opportunities for audience members by including content immediately relevant to the lives of youth.

Toward a Higher Purpose: Professional Children's Theatre Practitioners Emerge

While professional theatre in New York leaned toward large spectacle and diversion for children, around the rest of the country, chapters of the Junior League started developing theatres of their own. Founded in New York in 1901, this women's group required its members to volunteer in a wide range of charitable ventures with the intention of improving their communities. Children's theatres became an important part of that service as early as 1912 when the Boston chapter of the league presented performances of *Aladdin* for area children (Bedard 36). Largely without any formal theatrical training and fueled by good will, by the 1920s, children's theatre was a project in nearly every Junior League around the country. The Chicago League led the way when they made theatre their primary work. The women in Chicago took the development of theatre more seriously than other chapters and saw the development of productions for youth as more than diversion or charity. Playwright and member of the Chicago League Alice Gerstenberg stated:

The young and uninformed members entering the League must not look upon [the play] as just a show for children for fun and charity. Those executive few chosen as leaders must inform themselves as to what has been going on in the world in the history of drama for the last quarter of a century and link their theatre creditably to the best of the day [. . .] The Junior League Children's Theatre must stand for more than charity, for more than the fun and play of self-expression; it has a spiritual obligation toward the grown-up audience of the future. (Bedard 37-38)

This foundational belief that art plays a role in developing youth into discerning adults indicates a shift in the purpose for why artists involve children in formal theatre experiences. While theatre

had once been utilized as training ground for appropriate adult behavior or primarily as exciting entertainment, the League set in motion the idea of a higher purpose for the work of theatre practitioners working with youth. Their belief that artistic experiences play formative roles in the overall development of children has remained core to the beliefs of many children's theatres around the country today. For the league, it wasn't enough that theatre be beautiful diversion—it ought to serve a higher purpose that would last long after the final bows.

To fulfill this vision, the Junior League sought to unite the resources and knowledge of the various chapters. In 1926, the Chicago branch of the league hosted a conference for all chapters involved in creating children's theatre. As a result of this conference, a Bureau of Information was established “to compile statistics and to facilitate communication about children's theatre” (Bedard 38). The bureau proved a very useful hub of information for leagues across the country, giving advice for creating scenery, blocking, play selection, and even assisting with purchasing costumes at wholesale prices. By 1932, 109 of the total 114 Junior Leagues were involved in children's theatre in some form or another, and the involvement of the League continued through at least the 1950s to have a direct impact on the growth and scholarship of intentional children's theatre (Bedard 40). Their impact on children's theatre continues through many companies founded by the League that are still in operation today, including Stage One of Louisville, Kentucky, Birmingham Children's Theatre in Birmingham, Alabama and The Rose Theatre of Omaha, Nebraska.

In addition to the work done by the women of the Junior League to advance the quality of theatre presented to children, several other individuals and organizations around the United States formed to develop children as active performers themselves. Edith King and Dorothy Coit

of the King-Coit School and Children's Theatre, the Karamu House (founded by Russell and Rowena Jelliffe), the work of Charlotte Chorpenning through the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and the scholarship of Winifred Ward with the Children's Theatre of Evanston all made significant advances in the breadth and depth of modern practices in theatre for youth. Karamu House, for instance, pioneered work in diverse and underserved communities. The King-Coit School believed that the theatre would impact the critical thinking, imaginations, and professionalism of children as they grew, regardless of whether or not they pursued careers in the arts, and thus approached theatre education with a holistic approach. Chorpenning's prolific work as playwright widely increased the number of texts available for children to perform, and Ward's pioneering efforts in Creative Drama helped establish the importance of arts education in the United States as well as its curriculum.

As the broader acceptance of and demand for children's theatre solidified around the country, a wide range of approaches to the craft developed. What has been consistent, though, are the demands first mentioned in this chapter: balancing the needs of art, education, the engagement of children, and the caretakers who provide access to it all. Due to the highly localized nature of children's theatres, there are no universal answers on how to manage all three in every situation. Theatres must regularly check in with their communities and ask difficult but necessary questions on their own practice. Should the work of the theatre's season focus on challenging the educational growth of participants, or should the theatre allow pieces that serve as escapist entertainment? When children participate in the theatre, how much autonomy should they be given in its creation? What topics are (or are not) appropriate for children in the community to explore through theatrical involvement?

Contemporary Children's Theatre

Modern children's theatres still juggle the competing priorities of artistry, education and engagement that satisfies caretakers in the programming they provide. Unfortunately, the overbearing pressure of securing funding can distract from finding a balance in those demands in search of ways to keep the doors open at all. A June of 2019 first of its kind conference with the National Endowment for the Arts, Theatre for Young Audiences/USA (TYA/USA) and the Theatre Communications Group drew attention to this specific problem in their conference report. They point out that many dedicated TYA theatres are non-profit entities that keep their doors open primarily due to grants but existing in blended space means that securing funding can be difficult. They state:

While the arts funding community in the United States offers support for artistic development, leadership training, and accessibility of theater, it rarely devotes a proportional allocation of resources to the TYA sector. In fact, many exclude work for young people from their funding portfolios entirely. Funders often exclude TYA from their grants on the basis that TYA is classified as education work rather than art, while education funders often exclude TYA from their grants by interpreting the work as art and not primarily education. TYA companies want to talk about the high artistic quality of their theater work as well as the work's educational benefits, yet they often struggle in getting funders to understand that the work exists and excels at this intersection." (Shmidt Chapman 1)

As a result of these challenges inherent to securing funding from places that other organizations would have simpler access to, many children's theatres depend heavily on

traditional ticket sales to stay viable. Season selection is critical to the long-term success of TYA companies. Thus, companies often focus on producing recognizable titles that are more likely to spark community attention and support. This is especially true in connecting with local schools. Many children now enter the doors of a theatre for the first time not with their parents or guardians, but with their teachers. Theatres, then, are especially likely to choose materials that will attract schools either through direct connection to their curriculum (perhaps through performing a play that is based on a book the students read that year like *Charlotte's Web*, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, or *The Giver*), or by performing stories familiar enough to young audiences to garner excitement and support from the many gatekeepers that must make way for youth to see any performance. Because mid-day school field trip performances are, for many children's theatres, the bedrock of their financial viability, producing plays with obvious curricular connection helps theatres stand a better chance of securing both audiences and funding.

There are social and pedagogical benefits for children to attend these productions. The sheer novelty of seeing beloved characters come to life on stage creates a positive theatrical experience for new theatregoers. These productions are easier to market to gatekeepers than productions without title recognition, and that excitement is critical for generating audiences. Presenting adapted literature may also help encourage students to read the texts that inspired the play, encouraging greater overall literacy. The benefit that gets most neglected, however, is what this thesis aims to address: Theatres producing plays adapted from literature have the perfect foundation to inspire early analytical, critical thinking, and creative skill development in target audiences—if they know how to capitalize on the opportunity.

The Future of TYA

As adults dedicated to creating meaningful theatrical experiences for youth, practitioners have the responsibility to do so in a way that gives children the tools they need to be successful. This means addressing the world in which they live now as well as preparing them for the world they will inhabit in years to come. Some may shy away from embracing this task. After all, why upset the apple cart? If theatres have made enough in ticket sales to stay open and pay employees for another year, isn't that reason enough to celebrate? Why take unnecessary risks? TYA companies already face misconceptions and cultural prejudices of any work undertaken by or for children as having less cultural impact or value—isn't getting children into the theatre at all enough?

Of course, adults passionate about the arts believe that *any* exposure to the arts has value, especially when funding for arts programming remains weak. However, youth who attend the theatre are far more likely to attend as adults, and we are foolish to ignore the potential long-term impact of purposeful, well-structured early artistic experiences for youth in many areas of their lives. A study conducted through The New Victory Theater (a TYA dedicated theatre based out of New York City) and the cultural research firm WolfBrown found that children who experience live theatre before the age of eight are more likely to believe that theatre is a place for someone like them (Shmidt Chapman 3). Another study conducted by The New Victory through ERM Research found that adults who attend theatre currently are twice as likely to have attended when they were children (and those who attend most often were twice as likely to have seen a production before they had entered elementary school) (Shmidt Chapman 12).

If we want to create discerning adult audiences, then we must begin by developing those skills in young audiences. These studies provide wonderful evidence about increased attendance and associated academic and social development benefits, but they also provide some exciting possibilities for the artistic growth of children as well. What I find most exciting about these studies were reports that children who saw a production *and* attended a pre-show workshop were more likely to be inspired to go home and engage in artistic projects of their own—making their own puppets after seeing a show that included puppetry, for example (Shmidt Chapman 9). The New Victory’s research suggests that TYA companies seeking to develop children as artists will be better able to do so when the programming they provide encourages youth to engage not only with the story of the theatre they see, but more directly with the artistry behind its creation.

Concluding Thoughts

As a classroom teacher, there were many days (or weeks. . . or months) when I felt mentally and emotionally exhausted. The demands of grading, of lesson planning, of attending meetings and trying to problem solve ways to reach my students meant that I often felt as though I should be doing more than I was but didn’t have the energy to figure out what that “more” would be. I have found the same to be true as a teaching artist. Like schools, TYA companies striving to remain financially viable have many demands placed on their time outside of the work of producing a season. What the research of The New Victory suggests, though, are that small, cost effective, simple adjustments to the kind of programming we provide can have an enormous impact on the artistic growth of our audiences.

To create the best, most wholistic theatrical experiences for youth, practitioners must strive to incorporate artistic excellence, didactic education, and meaningful engagement in every

experience, as often as possible. Without attention to each piece of the artistic experiences, young audiences especially miss out on important opportunities for growth. If an experience focusses solely on artistic spectacle but does not incorporate the appropriate educational context or involve participation from youth, then the piece might be beautiful but not particularly wholesome—the theatrical equivalent of white bread instead of whole grain. To only be educational but not incorporate artistry or participation risks being boring. Theatre is a magical place, and as students and teachers spend more time focused on meeting educational standards, the loss of that artistry just *feels* wrong. Even Aristotle, as focused as he was on the development of plot and character, recognized that theatre needed to have a bit of spectacle to give it life. Creative participation without artistry or educational scaffolding is unfocused play—better suited for recess than for the educational purposes and goals of children’s theatres. The challenge theatres face now is in incorporating all three elements while *also* appealing to the gatekeepers who provide the funding to keep the theatre functioning.

CHAPTER TWO: DRAMATURGY

Ancient Origins of Dramaturgy

I believe that by incorporating the practices and principles of dramaturgy, children's theatres will be able to bring each of these pursuits together to create well-rounded, purposeful experiences that do more than entertain. Dramaturgy, from its inception with Aristotle's *Poetics*, has sought to address how theatres can balance the needs of artistic excellence, didactic education, and meaningful participation in theatrical works. Best known for setting forth a sort of order of artistic priority, *Poetics* is distinct for its early dramaturgical critique and evaluation of the different artists of his day, thus setting a pattern that later dramaturgs and playwrights often follow or emulate. *Poetics* also notably engages in early adaptation theory as Aristotle proposed theories of why poets seek to tell stories and audiences seek to hear them. These reasons, he believed, came from "the instinct of imitation. . . implanted in man from childhood" (15). Additionally, Aristotle felt that people were drawn to imitation because "in contemplating [imitative art], they find themselves learning or inferring" (15). Just as more modern adaptation theorists have posited, humans seem intrinsically drawn to imitation in a myriad of formats. The challenge for Aristotle then, was in creating imitative art where the actions of learning and inferring are valuable for audiences.

Throughout *Poetics*, Aristotle sought to establish what, exactly, makes theatre (described throughout as poetry) "noble" (good) versus "ignoble" (bad). For Aristotle, the foundation of all good theatre rests in the establishment of a good plot. Aristotle placed the highest artistic value on stories that relied on reality—no coincidental last-minute rescues from the gods would do. As a dramaturgical guide, *Poetics* set the standard for future playwrights, including an outline of

what makes a good plot, how to develop characters that support the development of that plot, and how to instruct performers in expression and gesture that support the text. With what seems to be some begrudging admittance of frivolity, Aristotle does make allowance for song (which “holds the chief place among the embellishments”) and spectacle (which, “of all the parts. . . is the least artistic [. . .] (and) depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet”) but is clear that these “embellishments” are less important to him than other dramatic elements (30-31). Aristotle especially promoted stories that inspired authentic “pity and fear” in audiences and extolled the work of Sophocles (especially *Oedipus Rex*) while criticizing what he saw as shoddy character of Menelaus in Euripides’ *Orestes* (accused of being inconsistent, indecorous, and inappropriate) (55).

Although other scholars offered their own perspectives on playwriting and acting methods in the millennia and a half that passed between *Poetics* and the official establishment of dramaturgy, no theorist had greater impact on the foundation of dramaturgical practice than Aristotle. *Poetics* put forward three primary goals that still resonate in modern dramaturgical practices: 1) *Poetics* challenges theatre practitioners to foster artistic excellence. 2) *Poetics* promotes meaningful participation through pieces with plots and themes that relate to audiences both intellectually and emotionally. 3) Because stories are integral to the education of audiences, *Poetics* encourages works that are created with attention to accepted standards of quality.

The Introduction of Formal Dramaturgy in Germany

The term “dramaturg” was first introduced into the theatre by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing through his publication of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* in 1797. Charged with improving the quality of the theatre being produced at the Hamburg National Theatre, Lessing, who was

himself a playwright, set out to establish a standard for theatrical criticism within individual companies, especially when developing new works. Lessing developed his new role within the theatre as advisor on the selection of plays and in-house critic of productions in process, all with the intent of improving the quality of art produced by the company. While he was heavily inspired by *Poetics*, which had re-gained popularity during the Age of Enlightenment, Lessing also added some key components to his practice that remain part of modern dramaturgy. For Lessing, a dramaturg was an educator of the public whose job was to teach audiences how to experience art, not just artists how to create it. He did not want to develop theatre that merely reflected popular ideas back onto the audience. Instead, he wanted to challenge public tastes and ideas so he could improve upon them. By giving audiences not what they wanted but what he felt they needed, Lessing intended to raise the standard of artistic productions throughout Germany (Romanska 2). He believed that artistic excellence could only be achieved when it was accompanied by an appropriately prepared audience.

After the First World War, there was another major shift in the role of dramaturgs and the practice of dramaturgy in Germany, this time with renowned playwright Bertolt Brecht. Like Lessing, Brecht sought after theatre that inspired political and social changes. Brecht was especially interested in creating theatre that was relevant to the early 20th century audience. He also sought to broaden this audience to reach a broader range of socio-economic groups than only the wealthy bourgeoisie. To this end, he developed a new style of play called “epic theatre,” which utilized stories of political drama to add emphasis to the audiences’ perspective and response to the piece. British Drama Professor Robert Gordon explains:

Brecht was interested in self-consciously retelling a story rather than realistically embodying the events of a narrative. His techniques encouraged the spectator to view the way in which playwright and actors presented the tale, exposing the mechanisms of theatre, and promoting an attitude of curiosity rather than the emotional and empathetic response to the acting typical of naturalistic and expressionistic forms dominant in German theatre at the time. (“Brecht, interruptions and epic theatre”)

What Brecht saw in audiences was emotional response without critical thinking, and during the tumult of the political climate of Germany in the 1920s and 30s, Brecht wanted to do much more than entertain his audiences. He wanted the experience in the theatre to transform audiences outside of it and to inspire them into political and social activism. Because he believed in theatre as a mechanism for creating change, he needed his audiences to think as intensely about the performances they saw as they would as spectator of a sporting event: simultaneously concerned about the outcome of a match while also able to engage in critique of the skills each team used to win. This was theatre designed not to suspend disbelief under the illusion of spectacular flights of fancy and beautiful scenery—it was theatre meant to reflect the world back onto its audiences. To meet these goals, Brecht heavily utilized dramaturgs.

While Lessing’s dramaturgy was focused on tasks that might now be considered literary management through exploring and identifying texts of value, Brecht brought the dramaturg into conversation with the production itself. His dramaturgs worked as critical members of the director’s collaborative team at all stages of production. Brecht wanted his dramaturgs to help support his desire for improved audience engagement through research and contextualization of all aspects of the play. Within his theatres, dramaturgs were “to participate in rehearsals and to

convey [their] research and knowledge to other members of the production team, particularly the director, before and during the production process. [They also functioned] as a liaison between the team and the audience, writing program notes and theoretical articles on the production” (Romanska 2-3). It is from this tradition that the role and function of a modern dramaturg within a production begins to gain more international attention and credibility, with dramaturgs taking on many different roles, all intended to strengthen and improve artistic creation and audience experience.

Through Brecht and epic theatre, dramaturgs gained a new, deeper purpose and involvement in theatrical spaces of Germany. The art of dramaturgy expanded and specialized. Under Brecht’s influence, dramaturgy became a central part of theatrical creation by linking audience engagement, brilliant artistry, and contextualized education into one cohesive experience.

Dramaturgy in the United States

Dramaturgy first came to the United States in the 1960s through the establishment of a theatre criticism program beginning at the Yale School of Drama in 1966. Eleven years later, the first MFA in dramaturgy was awarded at the school, an event that is generally seen as the largest turning point in the establishment of dramaturgy as a profession within American theatres. Yale continued to promote the practice through additional academic work and research (including an issue of the Yale *Theater* magazine wholly dedicated to dramaturgy in 1978). Following the pattern set by Yale, dramaturgy around the country in other academic settings and in the growing regional theatre movement largely followed in the same pattern as its German roots with

dramaturgs assisting in both the selection of seasons and the development of individual productions.

In America, dramaturgs tend to live in liminal spaces. They work between production and audience, between story and historical fact, between theory and practice. Their role depends on a “fluid and elastic roster of tasks” that serve as a “reminder of theatre’s enduring refusal to honor rigid distinctions between work and play, and knowing and doing” (Switzky 174). Oscar G. Brockett’s essay, “Dramaturgy in Education” states,

One of dramaturgy’s primary goals is to promote integration of the knowledge and perception learned from theater history, dramatic literature, and theory with the skills and expertise needed to realize the potential of a particular script in a particular production in a particular time and place for a particular audience. It discourages isolation from each other of specialized areas of study and skills, and perhaps more importantly it raises penetrating questions about what is being done, why it is being done that way, and whether the processes being applied are achieving the desired results. (Brockett 42)

Brockett identifies the breadth of a dramaturg’s potential skills while also addressing what makes dramaturgy so easy to misunderstand: there are so many kinds of tasks dramaturgs can actually do that a concise definition is something of a moving target. Dramaturg Lawrence Switzky says that dramaturgy “is a job perennially in search of a description” (173). The sheer breadth and isolation of the development of most theatrical tradition in the United States thanks in large part to the development of regional theatres (not to mention the sheer size of the country) has led to widespread misunderstanding of what dramaturgs do because what they do varies widely. They have sometimes been relegated to the role only of fact checker and researcher, with no

opportunity or invitation to contribute to the creation of the art itself. Their ability to connect to an audience may be limited to only program notes and occasional talkbacks. I, myself, didn't hear the word "dramaturg" until my freshman year of college, even after more than ten years of theatre classes, participation in my school productions and active community theatre involvement. In the seventeen years that have passed since then, I still have not performed in a production myself that had a dedicated dramaturg. In the United States, access to a dramaturg is a luxury afforded to few. This may be because of budgetary constraints or a general lack of knowledge about dramaturgy or access to qualified dramaturgs. The lack of broader dramaturgical tradition may also be because theatre within the United States generally perceives directors as the individual solely responsible for overseeing the creative vision and artistic development of a piece of theatre. Some, then, may feel that dramaturgs usurp or infiltrate the role of director.

The Intersection of Dramaturgy and the Objectives of Theatre for Young Audiences

Whatever the reason, the limited access to dramaturgs or a broader understanding of the practice of dramaturgy has a particularly detrimental effect in Theatre for Young Audiences companies where dramaturgs are essentially nonexistent. While dramaturgy has found success in the professional regional theatre movement throughout the United States, dramaturgy has not yet made a significant mark in the practice of children's theatres. While playwriting initiatives like New Visions/New Voices through the Kennedy Center and the Write Now festival through Childsplay incorporate dramaturgy in the development of new work, most "official" dramaturgy related to TYA is conducted in adult spaces. The most dramaturgical involvement many children experience comes from talkbacks or printed materials (lobby displays or printed discussion

questions). Children's theatres seeking to promote audience engagement and education alongside artistic excellence would benefit greatly from increased understanding of and utilization of dramaturgy. Dramaturgy bridges the gaps between audience and artist, between community and production company. The act of dramaturgy seeks to center conversations on how each play holds relevance for the specific audiences the production will reach. While most educational materials theatres provide help students engage with the plot of a show, dramaturgy takes another step forward and invites audiences to think more about the artistry of the production itself. Dramaturgy, then, is the key for children's theatres in the United States seeking to maximize the connections between art, education, and engagement in their young audiences.

Dramaturgy at its best aims to support the product of theatre by promoting an informed process of creation for artists and audience members alike. Theatre for Young Audiences is rooted in the world of education through its reliance on the support of local schools and as an extension of the role that these companies play in training future artists and audiences. Thus, both the process and product of dramaturgy is ideally positioned to assist in meeting these primary objectives of TYA companies and productions. Dramaturgy supports the development of artistic excellence. By working outside of the labor of directing or designing a play, dramaturgs are able to ask important questions that connect a piece to the audience it is for. They support didactic education in their work as liaison between audience and production, providing context for both. They are uniquely positioned to assist in the development of purposeful audience engagement opportunities and outreach to gatekeepers. If Theatre for Young Audiences aims to meet each of these demands, then incorporating the practice of dramaturgy is vital in weaving the intentional link between process and product.

Although dramaturgs would be beneficial to the development of any production, they can offer particular assistance when a theatre stages an adapted piece. Adaptation theory expert and dramaturg Dr. Jane Barnette of the University of Kansas explains:

A production dramaturg. . . works to communicate, clarify, and refine the director's vision for his particular staging of a play; a new play dramaturg communicates, clarifies, and refines the playwright's vision through the script development process. If we consider these categories as points on a continuum rather than silos, we can begin to see the significance of analyzing the process/product of dramaturgy for the adaptation of literature for the stage, as this sort of dramaturgy moves between both points, creating a more holistic understanding of both stage adaptation and dramaturgy itself.

(Barnette, "Literary adaptation" 295)

If children's theatres are dedicated to creating engaging, educational and artistic spaces, then they *also* have an ideal setup for dramaturgy to thrive. However, most modern TYA theatres have little if any regular access to professional dramaturgs. Instead, education departments are charged with filling some of the tasks that dramaturgs may be responsible for without the additional benefit of inclusion as members of a production team like a dramaturg would have. Education departments often create lesson plans for teachers to use before or after their field trip, addressing some of the themes the play includes and possibly some suggestions on expected theatre etiquette. There are often questions for further discussion or supplementary books related to the play in some form but without the benefit of key insights into the development of the production itself, these guides are limited in their impact.

One example of an existing educational program with potential to help encourage production-specific interaction is the REP Readers program, used through the Orlando Repertory Theatre (or Orlando REP) prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Orlando REP children's theatre only produces adapted work for their main season (see Appendix A). As with many TYA companies, their primary audiences are based out of school field trips during the week, although they do have additional performances available to the public. REP Readers aimed to bring in more audiences to their public performances while also encouraging literacy. Held in libraries around Orange County, REP Readers offered a free story drama class on Saturdays where children and their parents would come to hear a picture-book version of the story being told at the theatre. Teaching artists introduced vocabulary words and employed creative drama techniques like teacher-in-role, pantomime, and tableau to engage audiences in a brief lesson. Afterward, the adult chaperones were able to collect a coupon that would provide free admission for a child with the purchase of an adult ticket to the show at the REP. Those who redeemed this coupon were also given a complimentary copy of the book used in the story drama class at the library. This program helped encourage vocabulary development and interaction with the stories of the show as well as some of the themes both the plays and storybook shared. However, the scope of this program and others like it in other companies is somewhat isolated from the actual production itself. As a teaching artist for this program, I had not always seen the production prior to teaching the lesson, so my own ability to make any connections was also limited. The Orlando REP offers other workshop options for youth surrounding their mainstage season including Young Designers in the Spotlight and Field Trip Plus. Young Designers in the Spotlight "creates opportunities for students to respond to season shows through visual art projects. Participants

receive free tickets for the show and their work is displayed in [the] lobbies for audiences to enjoy” (“Young Designers”). For the Orlando REP’s 2022 production of *Pete the Cat*, students at a local middle school designed costumes, sets, and lighting plots inspired by 1970s. Field Trip Plus offers pre- and post-show arts integration opportunities for an additional \$50 fee for classes. The digital pre-show materials involve information on theatre etiquette as well as content “featuring important social, historical, or cultural contexts of the production” and content “specific to this production” to help audiences prepare for a show. Post-show workshops, led by a teaching artist, involve a 50-minute lesson utilizing “interactive theatre strategies” to inspire student writing. (Recent curriculum for *Cinderella* involved persuasive writing activities while *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* focused on narrative writing) (“Field Trip Plus”).

Programs like these are valuable. Arts integration workshops that promote literacy, creativity, and cross curricular connections through the lens of theatre are incredibly valuable educational experiences that contribute to the social, emotional, and intellectual development of youth. They also do much to create positive relationships between the theatre and the community. Though each of these programs is inspired by and connected to the mainstage productions of the Orlando Repertory Theatre, they highlight programming inspired by the themes and plots of each show. The benefits of programming connected to the adaptation process of a show remain unrealized. Whether through stage or through film, audiences interact with adapted stories so often that programming dedicated to dramaturgical exploration of adaptation processes will help set up young audiences to engage critically with art throughout the rest of their lives.

Spotlight on Possibilities

Although education efforts and dramaturgy do go hand in hand, dramaturgy serves a different purpose within a theatre than an education department. Dramaturgical perspectives link artistry, education, and engagement together at every level of a production process. Dramaturgy challenges artists to think critically about the work they do and to anchor that work within the contexts of their specific time, place, and community. Dramaturgy also connects with audiences, engaging them not only with context and provocative questions about the themes of a piece but also in the creative process of how the production they see came to be. Current structures within children's theatres often exclude education departments from involvement on production teams, resulting in materials created separate from or in reaction to a production instead of alongside it. This leaves opportunities on the table for children's theatres to act as hybrid educational and artistic companies and to further expand their programming to include additional dramaturgical focus on the specific productions put on by theatres. Whether through a dedicated dramaturg or through reimagining the scope and training of education departments to include the practices and structures of dramaturgy, theatres can do more to encourage youth to engage with art.

To maximize the potential impact of dramaturgy in children's theatres, both children's theatres and dramaturgy will need to adapt their practices for the needs of younger audiences. Younger audiences have vastly different skills, worldviews, and perspectives on artistic experiences compared to the adults that create for them, and those realities need to be acknowledged for practitioners to meet children where they are. Dramaturg Milan Zvada writes, "The impact of a performance on the spectator very much depends on his or her expectations, needs, and attitudes towards the theatrical event, framed in a prevailing concept of theatre. As

concepts of theatre and dramaturgy differ from culture to culture, so does the experience of the spectator” (203). The world of childhood creates its own culture complete with rules, perspectives, and language separate from the adults involved in the creation of the production. As such, I believe that the best way to approach dramaturgy for youth is to step back from intensive focus on textual analysis and to spend more time on strategies that are more suited for encouraging interactivity in children and the adapted works they see. This means exploring a dramaturgy where the world of the play “is linked with the audience’s world through an invisible thread of energies, which are constantly being exchanged and navigated” (Zvada 204). By investing more in the experience and perspective of the children our theatres serve, we will be better equipped to not only provide them with experiences at a developmentally appropriate level, but also help them become the artistically savvy and discerning adults we want them to grow up to be.

Through greater attention to dramaturgy, children’s theatres will improve the impact of their artistry, the potency of their educational contribution, and the strength of their ability to engage young audiences as creators themselves. However, in light of the Covid-19 Pandemic and already limited funding available to children’s theatres, the implementation of a full-time dramaturg (or team of dramaturgs) may be an impossibility in the immediate future. It is worth noting that if theatres are unable or unwilling to bring on dramaturgs for mainstage productions, that members of education departments should be included in production meetings and rehearsals so that their influence can be included in the artistic development of a piece and reflect on the materials created for audiences to interact with. When productions are experienced as adaptations by audiences, they come with specific expectations and hopes for what they will see

that influence their experience for better or worse. Whether created by trained dramaturgs or by education departments employing dramaturgical practices, the goal of audience engagement when treating a show as an adaptation involves demystifying the adaptive processes undertaken within theatres. Skilled dramaturgy can take advantage of the combination between the qualities of a particular adaptation and each individual's expectations for that adaptation in ways that magnify the potency of the artistic, educational, and engagement experiences of each audience member. By employing this type of dramaturgy in TYA, organizations can promote deeper critical thinking not only about the adaptation itself but strengthen the connection to the artistry of those who helped bring it to life.

CHAPTER THREE: HISTORY OF ADAPTATION

What Defines an Adaptation?

Prominent adaptation theory scholar Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works; a creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging; an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (Laera 5). Stated more simply, adaptation takes one form of storytelling and translates or transforms it into a different mode of storytelling. While the traditional vision of what an adaptation may look like lives between a written text and a visual mode (stage or screen), the reality of adaptation involves many more possible interactions and exchanges. In addition to more standard shifts between novels and films and stage, adaptation theorists’ studies also include interlingual adaptation (commonly referred to as translation where the mode of telling remains the same), intramedial adaptations (adapting one play into another play as in *Romeo and Juliet* to *West Side Story*), intercultural adaptations (transferring a story to a new culture for re-telling), and intralingual adaptation (a re-wording of a story within the same language) (Laera 5-7).

In many ways, all theatre is adapted. The nature of theatre requires a world of various artists negotiating a vision of a production in concert with budgetary constraints, locational quirks, and the current events that all influence the resulting audience experience. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* playwright Simon Stephens believes these circumstances in theatrical experiences challenge the “purity of text” that may be found in relationship between book and its adaptation. Regardless of whether the script was original or inspired by previous work, “the director will adapt the script through the bodies of the actors and the image of the

designer, and the audience will interpret that adaptation through their own experience,” suggesting that all scripted theatre involves the experience of adaptation on some level (Stephens 267).

Collaboration and Conformity: Shakespeare to Molière

Although there are some that bemoan what feels to be a recent surge of adapted theatre, adaptation played a critical role in establishing the art form. The earliest form of theatre could arguably be the telling of tales around campfires, long before official stages, professional actors, and ticketed audience members. Later, communities presented popular religious stories or folktales for the benefit of those who did not have access a religious text, much less the ability to read one. Shakespeare was, of course, famous for borrowing and re-purposing stories for his own use in all but one of his plays, many of which had been borrowed by writers prior to him as well. For instance, the 12th Century French tale of *Tristan and Iseult* likely played a large part in the inspiration not only for the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe featured in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the entirety of *Romeo and Juliet*, but also for the evolution of the story of Lancelot and Guinevere in Arthurian myth.

What is less commonly known is how popular adaptation was not done just by Shakespeare, but by every other playwright of the day. While modern audiences expect a certain level of authorial originality and innovation, those standards were non-existent in Elizabethan theatres. The demand for plays was so high that “collaboration as well as plagiarism were rife” as playwrights all over London worked to meet the growing demands of hungry audiences (Emig 30). As a result, all but one of Shakespeare’s plays are adapted in one form or another, and the vast majority have been adapted since then into films, operas, ballets, and abridged productions

for youth. These practices seem to have continued well into the Classical era, where copying the techniques of other artists not only provided an opportunity to learn from an accepted master but also signified conformity to expected standards of artistic convention. The concept of the original genius was not fully established until the Romantics took up the artistic torch.

The Romantics and the Original Genius

The trend of adapting popular novels to the stage began almost as soon as the novel itself, with Gothic novels often staged the same year they were released in text, sometimes prior to the serializations having been completed. This related largely to different copyright laws prior to the Berne Convention of 1886, which first secured authorial rights to any adaptation of their work, including translations, arrangements, performances, recitations, broadcasts, or audiovisual works (“Berne Convention”). Before the Convention, authors only maintained rights to their work in its original format, leading to a veritable free-for-all when it came to artists re-interpreting each other’s works.

Contrary to the belief that adaptations steal attention away from more “legitimate” artistic work, the reality is that many now canonical works of literature would likely not be as highly regarded or even recognized as culturally significant without this early adaptation frenzy. Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* is an excellent example of a text that has benefitted through adaptation. Because Shelly was a woman, her book was published anonymously in 1818 with a limited run of only 500 copies. The story may well have fallen into silent obscurity were it not for the number of stage adaptations—15 in total—that were produced between 1823-1826, the most famous of which was Richard Brinsley Peake’s version, *Presumption; or, The Fate of Frankenstein*. This play made major departures from the Shelly text that forever altered public

perception of the story. Dr. Frankenstein's nameless creation, in Shelly's text, functions as a profound, well-read philosopher. Peake's creature was rendered dumb, and the doctor acquired a comical assistant named Fritz, who morphed into the hunchbacked Igor in later films. This version of the tale and the many that followed spent less time with Dr. Frankenstein and more time on the creature, perhaps a reflection of the popularity of Gothic literature and the public appetite for the morbid and macabre (Szwedky 132). This switch of attention is likely how the name "Frankenstein" eventually left the doctor and was conferred onto his creation.

In his book *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, William St. Clair points out that Peake's play opened at The English Opera House, which housed approximately 1,500 patrons. Another adaptation, *Frankenstein of the Demon of Switzerland*, which opened a month after at The Coburg Theatre (now The Old Vic) could hold over 3,800 patrons, thus bringing the adapted versions of *Frankenstein* to more people per night than could access the book itself for the next decade at least while printing lagged behind (369). Were it not for the popularity of *Frankenstein* on stage through Peake's adaptation, Mary Shelly would likely not have ever had a public writing career, or a writing career at all. Future publications of her work were no longer anonymous.

Frankenstein's popularity as a stage adaptation continued, with at least 96 recorded versions produced through 1986. Film adaptations now number at over 100 (Szwedky 132). It is thanks to these adaptations of *Frankenstein* that Shelly's authorship was made known. If her identity had never been discovered and the popularity of her story established, modern readers may never have encountered the text in its printed form. Prior to the 1970s, the book was largely not studied or seen as a text of great literary value. It wasn't until the surge of feminist critique

that the book started appearing on syllabi again. Since then, it has remained a regular feature in English classrooms nationwide as a standard example of early Romanticism, with high school and undergraduate students learning every year that Frankenstein is not the monster, but the creator (Szwydky 136). *Frankenstein* proves that adaptations are not soulless vampires, but instead extend the life of a text for the audiences that encounter them—no matter where they happen to encounter the story first.

That is not to say that all authors were happy with the way that popularity came their way due to these staged adaptations of their work. Shelley benefitted in a number of ways from the increased attention to her story. Prior to her authorship being known, she was a social outcast. Afterward, she was financially able to dedicate more of her time to writing due to increased sales of her works. On the other hand, Charles Dickens was particularly annoyed by the practice. The fact that his works were serially published worked to call attention to a flaw in copyright law, as several of his books were adapted for stage before he had finished publishing the story himself. *The Pickwick Papers*, for instance, was first staged in March of 1837, when the novel wasn't even half completed. *Oliver Twist* met with a similar fate, with some scholars suggesting that Nancy's death may have been inspired by the poor performance of two different stagings of the text by the end of 1838. In fact, by 1840, there had been 60 adaptations of Dickens' novels on London stages. Dickens benefitted financially from the intense popularity surrounding his stories—but not as much as he could have. Authors were not paid any royalties on adapted versions of their works, which, for an author like Dickens who supported himself entirely on the sale of his work, must have been infuriating. In fact, he seems to have been so frustrated with the fact that other artists were financially benefitting from his characters and ideas that he later

attacked the practice in the story of *Nicholas Nickleby*. He later banded together with other popular authors of the day (including Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade) to change structures so that authors would have some control over these adaptations, but the changes were abandoned after Dickens' death. (Szwydki 134-135). It wouldn't be until the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works in 1886 that long-term change would happen for artists with the introduction of Intellectual Property.

Aiding the eventual passing of the Berne Convention copyright laws were shifting attitudes throughout the 1800s away from the Classical structures of conformity and standardization in art toward the Romantic ideals of prioritizing the individually inspired, wholly original genius artist. In the literary world, British author William Hazlitt first proposed this separation in 1825 in his text *Spirit of the Age*, in which he compared Lord Byron with Sir Walter Scott, ultimately proclaiming Byron to be the better writer. Both were extremely popular, but Byron was more original. Byron, Hazlitt states, "is, in a striking degree, the creature of his own will. He holds no communion with his kind. . . He cares little of what he says, so that he can say it differently from others" while Scott was "servile to nature and to opinion" (Jellenik 184). Scott had, according to Hazlitt, committed the sin of only employing half of his intellect in his art. What was Scott's art? Adaptation. Scott's most popular writings were works of historical fiction. These attitudes disparaging adaptation did not leave as Romanticism gave way to Realism at the turn of the 20th Century. For instance, a letter published in the *Scenario Bulletin Digest* in 1922 declared that "The reason an 'adaptation' is bad is because a good one cannot be made. This has been proven, and when a thing is proven it ought to settle all arguments" (Elliott 18).

Regardless of their continued popularity, the most lasting impact of Hazlitt and the Romantics' approach to art was the establishment of a perceived hierarchy of artistic merit and value that remains more or less in effect today. This perceived hierarchy has particularly negative impact on adaptation as the "original" will always be superior to the "copy". The Romantic ideal of art was one that came through an individual as if from the gods, where the labor behind the process of creation was obscured and the product the result of a singular talent or divine gift. Adaptation renders art an object to be played with rather than the near sacred offspring of an inspired creator. Ironically, as artists themselves sought financial benefits resulting from copyright protections and intellectual property law, the perception of adapted art morphed from being a key part of an arts education to being "parasitic, [. . .] dully derivative, [. . .] hubristically ambitious, [. . .] opportunistic and money-driven" (Babbage 2). In other words, the value placed on art shifted from the quality of the art itself to the assumed purpose and originality of its creation.

The challenge adaptations face is that they exist in time and space while also existing between times and spaces. They are both products of their time and reflections of or responses to the times and spaces in which their source materials were created. They straddle "many disciplines and [leap] across the globe and centuries." They are "disciplinary, national, and historical bastards" (Elliott 21). How do you begin to properly contextualize an adaptation? From what academic or historical lenses should the examination begin? Rather than art that simply reflects other art, instead, adaptations become a fully participatory part of artistic critique and analysis. Adaptations are not passive constructs: they are a dynamic instrument through which we can explore our own artistry.

Adaptation also provides an opportunity for addressing or even dismantling narratives that are steeped in racism and gender biases. For example, consider the evolution of *Oklahoma!* This foundational work of American musical theatre which debuted in 1943 was itself an adaptation—a musical version of a 1931 play called *Green Grow the Lilacs* by Lynn Riggs. In addition to writing original music (the original play utilized folk songs of the era), the Rogers and Hammerstein version of the story further developed the character of Will Parker as a suitor to Ado Annie and changed the name of Jeeter into Jud Fry. The 1943 musical also re-framed the end of the show. While the musical sends Laurey and Curly happily off in their fringed surrey toward wedded bliss and the matter of Jud Fry’s death neatly finished with Curly’s name cleared, Riggs’ play ends with the trial yet to come and tensions between the two groups of settlers still steaming beneath the surface (Riggs). Since the original production, *Oklahoma!* has been revived on Broadway four times, mounted numerous times around the world, been adapted into a film, and played a regular part in regional theatre seasons as a perennial favorite of even casual theatregoers. The Tony Award winning 2019 revival of *Oklahoma!* made significant changes to the traditional presentation of the story without making any adjustments to the book or lyrics. Now set in a modern community hall-like setting, this *Oklahoma!* was designed to bring the audience in as part of the community. The lights remained up on the audience and the production was staged in the round, simultaneously inviting the audience to join in (many sang along with group numbers or could be seen clapping or stomping feet along with the seven-piece Bluegrass band on stage) while also taking away the anonymity usually enjoyed in a night at the theatre. At intermission, audiences were invited to come on stage to enjoy cornbread and the chili that had been cooking in bright red crockpots throughout the first act. This version of *Oklahoma!* seemed

at first to exchange the full orchestrations and refined choreography for homespun twang and rowdy two-stepping communal experiences for all in attendance.

Still, this façade of joyful community gathering was surrounded by hundreds of mounted guns underneath the glittering streamers. Beneath the surface of the peppy *Oklahoma!* score has always lived a subtle commentary on the assumed superiority of the (white) settlers watching their territory emerge into the dawn of statehood, but the 2019 revival chose to expose those truths far more openly. In this version of the story, Jud Fry does not fall on his knife. Instead, he is shot intentionally by Curly, who sings the title number and finale of the show still covered in Jud's blood after a hasty trial by the town. "Oklahoma" becomes an anthem not of joyful territory pride but of battering down the hatches in a community determined to protect their own at the expense of the other.

This violent, impassioned end to what has otherwise been considered a family musical met with mixed audience response, but the creators believed the reimagining was still faithful to the intent of the source material. Rogers and Hammerstein were both descendants of European Jews, after all, and would likely have been excluded from the dominant white Protestant culture their musical explores. Furthermore, the musical premiered during World War II, while Jews faced the impact of Hitler's concentration camps, the Japanese were quartered into Internment Camps in the United States, and black Americans faced the ongoing impact of Jim Crow. Beneath its feeling of American nostalgia lives a world that assumes white superiority as natural, and God given. It is no wonder that Curly can sing of a beautiful morning in which everything goes his way. In this world, as in other versions of *Oklahoma!*, everything *does* go Curly's way, but it is only through adaptation that these attitudes of white supremacy were challenged.

Engaging with Adapted Theatre with Youth

I believe that there are almost instinctive reasons that we, as humans, return to stories again and again through re-reading, re-watching, and re-telling. Polish director Grzegorz Jarzyna put it best when he said that “the stories which our ancestors wrote down are still valuable for us . . .there’s something like DNA, a genetic code, some emotional code in our bodies. We think we have changed greatly, but in fact, we haven’t. We have just changed our clothes and the set up around us—that’s all” (Jarzyna 41). Whether because such stories are familiar or nostalgic or something else, there is something about humanity that is drawn to well-known tales. The lure of financial benefits and artistic opportunity do not alone address that audiences, even the one that complain of an adaptation “never getting it right”, will still engage with a favorite story in a new medium, and this allure is particularly strong within children’s theatres.

The dismissal of adapted theatre as purely mercenary not only overlooks the heritage of adaptation in the theatre’s history, but also minimizes the artistic innovations of the playwright, director, actors, and the many designers involved in expanding the *mise en scène* of a text onto a stage. In the adaptation of children’s literature, this often means finding ways to expand the story or to create convincing human versions of anthropomorphized animals or objects. Adaptation requires making hundreds of “decisions about what to make visible and audible; and if everything that is staged accrues significance, it is equally true that audiences only access that significance through what is done and shown” (Babbage 33). Inevitably, change happens when stories are passed from one form to another. Those changes present exciting opportunities for new perspectives, but only when creators and audiences are willing to embrace the medium in which they work rather than focus on the medium of the source.

There are many practical benefits to be had in companies utilizing these beloved stories. Many of them are royalty free to adapt, and thus ideal for theatres to adapt in-house for youth performers to workshop and hone their own acting skills or dramatic play. Additionally, these stories are well known, often from many variations as each generation gains a new adaptation of the original. These stories are not without pitfalls, however, and theatres would be wise to consider carefully how they choose to present these stories to the youth in their care.

During the summer of 2020, I had the opportunity to lead a “Lost Boys” theatre camp with the Orlando Repertory Theatre. This story drama camp, conducted over Zoom due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, was co-taught with another teaching artist and assigned to us by the REP. For story drama camps at the REP, children’s books are selected that go along with the theme for the camp itself, and the books are used to inspire the theatrical activity for each day. Sometimes several books are utilized, other times only one, which is broken down across many days of adventure. In this case, our book was the Little Golden Books version of *Walt Disney’s Peter Pan* by R.H. Disney, illustrated by Al Dempster. After reading the text, my co-teacher expressed concerns about the racism inherent to the text and asked that we find a different version of the book. She was right—the text, like the film that inspired it, and the play that inspired the film, was laced with racism against the Indigenous People of the United States. We found a new text to use for the class, ultimately skipping any reference to Tiger Lily or the rest of her tribe to focus instead on the battle between Peter and Captain Hook for the week.

This experience brought up several questions for me. As I create arts experiences for youth, are there stories that, however beloved, ought to be set aside for good? Having had some particularly profound experiences with the story of *Peter Pan* at formative moments in my own

life, I recognize my bias in not wanting to symbolically fly away from Neverland forever, but as a white artist striving to support the expansion of our programming to better include diverse voices, should I step aside here and banish the Lost Boys and their pirate enemies to history? Would such a thing even be culturally possible at this point, given how common references to the story are in film, television, music, and psychology?

Although I don't believe there is one right answer on whether children's theatres should still create content inspired by traditional (if problematic) stories, I do believe that the principles of adaptation coupled with sound dramaturgical practice can assist theatres in doing so in ways that are better attuned to the present.

Theatre, for all its artistic goals, is nonetheless a business that hundreds of artists in any given production depend upon for daily work. Art cannot be fully divorced from the demands of commerce and claiming otherwise or faulting a theatre on the grounds of seeking to make money is rather petty. Adapted works may not always be the most artistic or innovative works of theatre, but the fact that they are adapted is not what makes them less artistic or innovative, any more than an "original" creation.

Concluding Thoughts

In order to re-frame how we approach adaptations critically, one of the first steps that has to be taken is to more purposefully challenge the Romantic notions of what makes art original, and therefore, valuable. If not, then we risk audience and critical interaction with adapted media being stuck in a "compare and contrast" feedback loop. Comparing and contrasting art forms has value but offers little in higher-level critical thinking, and adaptation provides incredible opportunities for TYA companies to engage youth in developing deeper critical thinking skills

about the art they see. Glenn Jellenik suggests that adaptation theory invites an opportunity to move beyond traditional “definitions of originality that rely on binary rhetoric: source/copy, original/derivative, pure/contaminated” (183). These theoretical explorations ought to happen throughout the process of production, from the selection of a season through to after audiences have left the theatre itself. Theatres seeking to provide engaging, intellectually enriching artistic experiences for youth would be wise not to ignore the foundation that adaptation studies provides to support this work.

Dramaturgs and the processes of dramaturgy are particularly well suited to oversee this work. In fact, “The questions and possibilities surrounding adaptation demand dramaturgical reflection, since the craft of dramaturgy shares compelling characteristics with that of adaptation” (Barnette, “Literary Adaptation” 294). Dramaturgy, like adaptation, thrives where artistic tensions and negotiations are not some kind of threat to originality but an exciting world to explore. The foundations of dramaturgical thought are based on questions of why specific works of art are produced in the present, and how those works reflect or push back against current thinking. There may be no better place to begin this practice than within the artistic and educational spaces of children’s theatres to train young audiences to be deeper, more critical thinkers of the performances they see—adapted or otherwise.

CHAPTER FOUR: HARNESSING ADAPTIVE CHOICES

A Plan for Practice

The remainder of this thesis serves as a primer for ways to approach adaptation through the lens of dramaturgy within existing education department structures. Because audiences still interact with literature adapted to film more often than transmedia adaptation for the stage, I begin with an analysis of the ways in which each medium of storytelling impacts audience experience. Audiences accustomed to exploring film may not be fully aware of how creative processes differ and how that impacts creation, thus impacting their ability to know how to discuss adaptation beyond baseline comparison from one version of a story to another. Throughout this analysis, I refer to examples from film as well as the stage. These film examples are used because of their universality and the convenience of referring to specific moments or choices that everyone can refer to and witness in the same way. When artists expose various points of choice along the creative path, we can help establish possible points of dramaturgical engagement with audiences.

Inherent Complications of Reality

When *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was first released to film in 2001, fans of the book series noticed what was considered a major, significant oversight of the filmmakers that cut at the heart of the original series. It was a small detail: Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe's eyes were blue, not green. In a film that could bring trolls and the flying sport of Quidditch to life, it seemed ridiculous that Harry's eyes, regularly described as being green like his mother's, could not be green too. Surely it was an easy detail for filmmakers to get right.

Unfortunately, it *wasn't* an easy detail. Daniel Radcliffe's eyes were unable to tolerate colored contacts, which he described as "excruciatingly painful" to wear (Radcliffe). As filmmakers for the Netflix series *The Crown* later discovered after the change from blue-eyed Claire Foy to brown-eyed Olivia Coleman portraying Queen Elizabeth I, digital color correction of eye-color is not only a time intensive process, but also one that seemed to deaden an actor's performance (Kerr). In the end, both production teams determined the same thing: the eye color didn't matter as much as originally thought. In the case of Radcliffe, the team determined that Harry's eyes looking like his mother's could still be referenced, but why couldn't his off-screen mother have blue eyes instead? Was the color really that significant and necessary to the core telling of the story? When stories are shifted from one mode to another, "fidelity" to the source text becomes a matter of negotiation, but the process of that negotiation can leave audiences in the dark. Harry Potter fans didn't know why Radcliffe's eyes weren't green. Surely if a production team could create flying broomsticks and trolls it could also change eye color. Additionally, the books weren't fully published yet. The culture of early Potter readers was built on mining Rowling's text for clues for what was to come in future books. When *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was released into movie theatres in 2001, only the first four books in the seven-book series had been published. Potter fans knew that the look of Harry's eyes held significance, but not *why*, and Rowling offered no real clarification until much later. Even with the very practical reasoning for the change, the effect on the audience was distrust in the

filmmakers. Potter fans cared deeply about the books to the point of familial protection over the characters.¹

Authors, too, can struggle when stories are adapted into a new medium. A beautiful portrayal of this process is featured in the 2013 film *Saving Mr. Banks*, which adapts the story of how the Walt Disney Studio worked with *Mary Poppins* author P.L. Travers to secure the rights to adapt her books into a film. Travers, who had spent twenty years denying Disney the right to produce her books onto film suddenly faced a certain level of financial strain that encouraged her to at least *consider* the idea out of sheer desperation. She was still anxious about changes being made to her books (and particularly against the idea of animation being involved at all) and insisted the meetings between herself, writer Don DaGradi, and the famed songwriting duo, Richard and Robert Sherman, were recorded to ensure her desired fidelity (“P.L. Travers”). These recordings provide a fascinating insight into the negotiations involved in an adaptive process. A particularly good scene in the film features a scene in which DeGradi and the Shermans show Travers initial artist renderings of the locations and costumes proposed for the film in hope that seeing these visuals will help assuage some of her concerns. The opposite happens, as Travers finds problems in the Banks’ home (“It’s too grand!”), Mrs. Banks (“Why in the world have you made Mrs. Banks a silly suffragette?”), and eventually Mr. Banks, who sports a moustache. Travers exclaims: “I told the illustrator I didn’t like the facial hair but she chose to ignore me. This is MY film and this time around I shall have MY way.” Clearly

¹ Another great example of this passionate audience response came with the release of the fourth Potter film, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. After Harry’s name is pulled from the goblet for participation in the Triwizard Tournament—a competition between competing wizarding schools—the selected students retreat to an anteroom for instructions to prepare for their first task. In the book, Dumbledore is described as “calmly” asking Harry if he put his name in the goblet. In the film, Dumbledore actor Michael Gambon’s performance is far more forceful. I know of almost no better way to rile a Potter purist than to reference this scene.

frustrated, Robert Sherman “buries his face in his hands and let’s [sic] out a long, loud, unashamed moan” before saying: “Does it mattterrrrrr?!” This, predictably, ruffles Travers’ feathers and she sends Robert out of the room in a huff (Marcel).

This scene and Sherman’s question echo through my mind often when I approach an adaptation and the question of fidelity to the original. Every step of the adaptation process involves the need to ask again and again: Does “it” matter? What *is* the story? What does telling the story in a new form allow or prohibit? What does being faithful to the original actually mean? Is it even possible?

Writer Brian McFarlane relates an experience with this question in which a colleague described enjoying the 1993 film adaptation of Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* while simultaneously saying that “Of course it’s not nearly as complex or subtle as the book,” thus assuming literature always has the upper hand on other artforms in its ability to portray nuance and depth (3). Critics and audiences alike have long debated the concept of fidelity to source in adaptations, generally giving more favorable reviews to those deemed more faithful to the original. What, though, does being faithful to the original mean in reality? As playwrights and screenwriters stage literature, what are they meant to be faithful to? The theme of the original story? The plot? In longer stories with multiple plots and themes, which one should they select? In shorter stories or picture books prepared for young audiences, does being faithful to the original mean presenting plays or films no longer than it would take to read before bed?

Adaptors find themselves in an impossible Catch-22. How do they address the expectations of audiences, especially those who have experience with the source text? Adaptors know that “critics’ bias has skewed to favor fidelity, which is to say accuracy (as defined by the

critic) to the original author's intent (as understood by the critic) . . .it is difficult to align this fidelity model with poststructuralist ontology, yet the desire to get the source 'right' persists" (Barnette, "Adapturgy" 76). Unfortunately, getting it "right" is a moving target impossible to hit for every audience member. Some audiences of the earlier *Harry Potter* films thought the movies too literal to be interesting. Some thought later films strayed too far off the mark of accuracy. In essence, adaptation theorists argue that debates about the fidelity of an adaptation "are based on value judgments that cannot be substantiated and, therefore, are theoretically inconsequential" (Barnette, "Adapturgy" 10). What playwrights and theatre-makers are left with is a paradox of demands to be met from an audience both hungry *for* adaptation while also extremely skeptical about its value.

Adaptation "is a subject on which everyone feels able to have an opinion, and most opinions from the casually conversational to exegeses in learned journals, still tend to foreground the criterion of fidelity whether in explicit terms or by tacit assumption" writes Brian McFarlane (6). He is right: audiences are the authority on audience response, no matter how educated the response may be. Audiences, especially in children's theatres, *will* interact with adapted theatre as adaptation. While it's probable that adults see a production of *Les Misérables* or *The Phantom of the Opera* without reading the books that inspired the musicals (thus experiencing the staged version as the original version of the tale), it's extremely likely that children will have familiarity with the story prior to witnessing an adapted staged production, which means they will experience that production *as* an adaptation. Of the 163 productions put on between 2016-2022 by six of the major TYA companies within the United States, I counted 141 adaptations (86.5%) with 112 (69%) adapted from literature (Appendix A). While this is hardly a comprehensive

study of all TYA companies, I believe the prominence of adaptation generally throughout theatre and film would be difficult to minimize. Thus, children's theatre practitioners cannot escape the need to consider the impact of how expected fidelity impacts audience experience.

However, this conflict between expectation and reality, instead of serving as an obstacle, can be a crucial catalyst to energize the way audiences are engaged artistically and educationally. Regardless of why changes were made, by whom they were made, or under what circumstances they were made, these changes provide opportunity to open dialogue and encourage critical thinking in audiences about the way stories are told and address how adaptive choices impact the effect of the story. This helps audiences move beyond assessing the value of a production only on whether or not they "liked" it or if they perceived it as "faithful" to the original. When audiences are prepared to approach an adapted performance as an adaptation, theatres have a valuable opportunity to peel back the curtain on artistic choices and let audiences examine the implications of those choices more actively.

Exploring Choice

Before children's theatres can invite audiences to consider the effects of artistic choices in relation to an adaptation, it helps to consider the general principles and logistics of adapting stories between different mediums. Although there are examples of films, books, and plays that challenge these norms,² these general principles of how different artistic mediums are experienced and created highlight where changes between mediums are often made. Those changes then provide creative soil that TYA practitioners can utilize in crafting dynamic artistic

² Elevator Repair Service's adaptation of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (*Gatz*) is a good example of a theatrical production that broke theatrical norms. Rather than do a more traditional, scripted version of the classic novel, ERS's production involved reading the entire book, cover to cover, every performance.

education opportunities for each production. Because the majority of adaptations presented on stage evolve from books and movies, a baseline exploration of these mediums individually helps provide a starting point for examining adaptive changes.

Book and Film

Creation

- Books are generally created in solitary settings: a single author working with support of an editor and publisher (and, with children’s books, an illustrator) to craft the final text. Once published, the text and any accompanying illustrations are identical for each copy of the book.³
- Films and theatrical productions are the product of hundreds of people bringing their own artistry to the finished product. The number of voices involved alone impacts an artistic development process. Everyone witnesses the same finished product no matter where, when, or how the film is watched.

Creative Limitations

- Books are unbound by the laws of physics or financial constraints that may restrict visual modes of storytelling. If a narrator states that the main character is happy and wearing a purple sweater, the reader has no reason to believe that either of those statements are false. If the author wishes to invent a mythical creature, send characters into space, or

³ Later editions of books will sometimes include some small changes. There are also branches of adaptation studies that examine how language translations impact the reading experience. I’ve also done some interesting reading of researchers studying how the printing of a book impacts reader experience (including hardback or softback, the illustrations included if any, the fonts used, the size of the fonts and the margins etc.) These are all fascinating to me, but I believe the general principle of books being “set texts” still applies for purposes of my research.

provide them with the ability to change their appearance at will, they can do so freely through the imagination of readers.

- Films have the assistance of CGI, animation, and other technology to make the fantastical worlds of a story come to life on screen but are limited by budgets and production deadlines. Additionally, the performances of actors give an audience more room to interpret how a character feels than a book.⁴

Cost to Participate

- Books are relatively inexpensive and can be shared easily, whether through libraries or friends.
- The cost to see a movie in theatres may be prohibitive for some families, but there are many less expensive ways to access films. In particular, increased access to streaming services has made access to a enormous libraries of films more cost effective.

Physical Experience

- Children's books may be read out loud by parents or teachers to the children in their care, or perhaps the child practices reading out loud to an adult. Otherwise, most forms of literature are consumed in relative solitude and quiet. Without the aid of illustrations, the

⁴ The inherent skill of an actor or past performances of an actor can also impact audience experience. Audiences may not be able to accept certain actors cast against their typical role or see an actor as anything other than one particularly defining character. Mark Hamill, for instance, found little success in films after his role as Luke Skywalker and has spent the majority of his career since the early 1990s as a prolific voice actor.

reader must conjure the world of the story in their own head, resulting in a highly individualized reader experience.

- Films are experienced in many ways, both communal and alone. The experience of viewing the film may shift widely based on how and when the film is watched (a horror film home alone at night may feel more frightening than with friends in the daylight, a comedy may feel funnier when in a theatre full of laughing strangers than alone on a plane, a blockbuster film in a packed theatre on opening day may feel more exciting than several weeks later in an almost empty weekday matinee.)

Length of Time

- Readers can take as much or as little time to read a text as they would like or need to finish a book. Generally, people read in their heads far faster than people can speak coherently out loud. Readers can take unlimited breaks, pause to have conversations with others, or change the location in which they read as many times as they want. Longer books may have very fragmented reading experiences over several days, weeks, months (or years!).
- Films will always be the exact same length. Modern films are presented in theatres without intermission, which also sets relative limitations on the length of time available for storytelling (generally between about 80 -120 minutes long).⁵

⁵ It is worth noting that with more movies released to streaming services after the Covid-19 Pandemic began in 2020, home audiences have had access to more control over their viewing experience (like pausing for bathroom or snack breaks). However, regardless of the age or experience of a viewer of a film, the film itself, while being watched, will take the same amount of time to finish. Two readers, on the other hand, may take vastly different lengths of time to read the same page.

Audience Perception

- Novelists have total control over what a reader “looks at” within a scene. If characters attend a party, for instance, the author determines which moments a reader sees or hears, as if turning the head of the reader within the scene at any given moment to the exact close-up visual they want a reader to observe. Readers do not have the freedom to focus elsewhere. Even in illustrated works, the illustrator has control over what is shown and not shown within a fixed, unmoving image.
- Films can use close-ups to help direct audience attention, but audiences are still free to look wherever they like within the shot. Additionally, films are a more efficient medium. While literature may take pages to describe a setting, films require only seconds to establish place. This creates a demand on designers to invent a broader *mise en scène* than writers, including a range of concrete visual and aural experiences for their audiences beyond what the author may have found necessary to describe in the book.

With this understanding of how literature and film are traditionally created and experienced, how theatre is both distinct from other forms of storytelling as well as how it interacts with other mediums becomes clearer. However, simple identification of how theatrical storytelling differs from other modes is not dramaturgy so much as good basic observational trivia. Children’s theatres looking to activate and train the next generation of critically engaged thinkers and artists can do more to encourage higher ordered thinking from their audiences, and Bloom’s Taxonomy provides the perfect framework inspire the building of these experiences.

The Bloom's Taxonomy framework, designed in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom along with additional collaborators, establishes major domains of academic ability and serves as a reference point for how education can be structured to support intellectual growth through appropriate scaffolding. The steps of Bloom's Taxonomy include (in order of difficulty from easiest to hardest):

1. Remember: The ability to recall basic facts. This skill is shown through tasks like defining a word, memorizing information that can be repeated, or making a list.
2. Understand: The ability to explain. This skill is shown through tasks like the ability to describe a concept, classify various items into categories, or explain how to do something to another. The ability to compare and contrast information can also demonstrate understanding.
3. Apply: The ability to use information in a new setting. This skill is shown by tasks like demonstrating, implementing, or executing a new concept outside of its initial structure. (For instance, using a new vocabulary word in a contextualized sentence.)
4. Analyze: The ability to make connections between ideas. This skill is shown through tasks like experimenting with information to draw conclusions, or through forming a hypothesis that is then tested.
5. Evaluate: The ability to take a position on an idea. This skill is shown through tasks like defending an opinion, weighing options, or justifying a decision.
6. Create: The ability to produce new, original work. This skill is shown through tasks like designing, developing, or authoring a new work of art ("Bloom's Taxonomy").

With these steps in mind, dramaturgy can help practitioners use the unique elements of theatrical creation compared to the processes of literature and film for more than just recognition of difference. Instead, practitioners can engage young audiences in the artistic and educational facets of the production in ways that move them through Bloom's Taxonomy to higher order thinking skills.⁶

Stage

Creation

Unlike books or films, individual theatrical productions experience various creative evolutions. Sometimes plays are written with no particular production house in mind. Others are commissioned by theatres. Theatrical works are often workshopped as well, sometimes undergoing revisions for years before the text is considered "set." This workshopping is far more common with shows that intend to pursue a path to Broadway, however. As a result, it is most common for children to experience a theatrical piece that has evolved under two separate creative teams with two separate processes: first in the creation of the text, and then with a separate group interpreting the text for their stage. For an adapted play especially, this gives several layers of opportunity for dramaturgical questioning. In particular, the many processes involved in the creation of theatre provide the perfect playground for children to learn about how theatre evolves as more voices are added to its creation. Theatres can help inspire youth to

⁶ Further discussion on how education departments can utilize dramaturgical principles to activate deeper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy in audiences within a single production will be elaborated on in Chapter 5.

analyze, evaluate, and create art themselves by doing more to peel back the curtain on their own creative decision-making processes.

One way that children's theatres might consider that helps demystify the creative process comes in the form of in-house workshops held either during the rehearsal process for a show or immediately after a production. One such workshop was held for the 2020 production of *Passage*, held at the Orlando Repertory Theatre. This play was composed by playwright Sage Tokach as part of the annual Writes of Spring writing competition held by the Orlando REP. Writes of Spring invites writers in public school (grades K-12) from around the state of Florida to respond to a prompt in a page of writing. Responses are then adjudicated, and winning submissions are used to form a new, original play that is professionally staged at the Orlando REP. The goals of this project include the desire to give K-12 students a "platform to share their writing talents, contributing to a collaborative work of new theatre" ("Writes of Spring"). Winners are selected from every age group and every school that participates is guaranteed to have at least one winner to help encourage a broad range of participants both in age and location.

Through my role as Education Coordinator for the 2020 project, the production team hosted a Winner's Workshop for the writers of the winning entries to attend. The workshop had been held before, and traditionally involved a tour of the theatre, an opportunity to submit ideas for future writing prompts, and other writing-based activities. In the spirit of collaboration, we added a new element to this workshop in the 2020 year that involved having the actors of *Passage* present a few of the scenes from the play to the writers. I explained to the writers that these scenes were still in the process of being rehearsed and that changes could still be made to the script and to the blocking. After the scenes were presented, we intended to give the writers a

chance to ask questions of the actors to learn more about their process since the majority of writers had no experience performing. Instead, the tables ended up turning and the actors started asking questions of the writers. The actors wanted to know who had written what stories and wanted to know more information about what had inspired their words. They wanted to know if the stories were fiction or non-fiction and if they felt accurately represented on stage.

This workshop ended up being highly influential in the experiences of both writers and actors, and nearly all the writers who came to the workshop also attended the final performance of the show. Additionally, this interaction influenced the production team as several attended the workshop and were able to participate in this discussion, directly influencing the success of the production. With some small adjustments, this type of workshop or a similar outreach effort made for audiences either before or after seeing a production would benefit both audiences and artists.

Creative Limitations

Theatres are bound by what is physically (and financially) possible. Without the benefit of CGI and with budgets far less than most films, most theatres also have to factor in the space in which a production is staged as well as consider the need to be repeat performances within the same day or week many times over. For instance, the memorable cake eating scene in *Matilda* can be accomplished with help from a spit bucket and few hours of shooting for film, but an actor portraying Bruce in *Matilda the Musical* must eat the cake in front of everyone for as long as the run of the show takes place without risking his health. Thus, directors need creative, theatre-based solutions to provide the illusion of Bruce eating the entire cake without requiring

the actor to do so over and over again, and solutions will be different if the show is staged in a proscenium stage compared to theatre in the round. Many youth theatres take shows on the road and perform in unconventional theatre spaces like cafeterias, gymnasiums, or classrooms. Additionally, some productions are staged on such a scale or with such specific requirements that theatres may find them difficult to put on at all.

On the other hand, these limitations also provide a unique opportunity to engage audiences. Consider, for instance, “found” theatre. Sometimes called “poor” theatre, “found” theatre is a method of storytelling unique to the stage, often utilizing minimal sets and props. Theatre can also cast the same actor in multiple roles within the same show. In “found” productions, it is common for actors to change in and out of various roles in front of the audience through small costume pieces like hats and scarves. The original production of *Peter and the Starcatcher* employed both techniques. For instance, they used a rope to indicate hallways, doorways, and other parts of the set, inviting audiences to use their imagination to fill in the rest of the scene. Actors wore the same base costumes throughout most of the show with hats, bonnets, and scarves providing most of the visual indication of a role change for an actor. Books and movies have no conventions that utilize anything akin to either of these techniques.

Theatres wishing to engage audiences with deeper levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy might prepare young audiences for challenges like Bruce’s cake by presenting them with the opportunity to predict how the moment might happen on stage, then later evaluate the effectiveness of how the theatre actually managed to make the cake moment happen. They might also engage children with the conventions of found theatre by prompting them to consider how

they might transform different objects like buckets or ropes to serve different purposes in their imaginations, allowing students to engage in creative problem solving.

Cost

Of these three modes of storytelling, theatre is generally the most expensive for audiences. Touring Broadway productions often have their least expensive ticket option still over \$50 per audience member with less than ten opportunities to see the show before it moves to the next venue. Compared to the casual atmosphere of seeing a movie or reading a book, going to the theatre is still very much an *event* for most audiences. While you may read a book or see a movie many times, theatre is lightning in a bottle. Even if an audience member attends the same production multiple times, the live element of theatre will result in subtle changes that do not exist in the permanent nature of literature and film, including casting adjustments, technological glitches, or different perspectives on the stage itself based on seating. Because theatre is a one-time viewing event, education departments might use pre-show engagement activities to provide some special things for children to watch out for in the show. In the case of an adaptation, students might be challenged to use inexpensive materials to craft a prop that features in the book and compare their creations to their classmates as well as the show they see. Theatres might also consider changing how post-show talkbacks are structured, allowing audiences to request that certain moments they enjoyed or had questions about to be repeated. Additionally, including photographs and other media of the show in educational materials, where possible, may help remind students of specific elements of the production as they engage in post-show activities.

Physical Experience

Unlike reading or watching a movie, the theatre still maintains a feeling of prestige and privilege as a special, once-in-a-while event. Most theatrical events are limited in run and will not be duplicated in their current form for later consumption, creating a particular kind of excitement around live theatre that doesn't occur with more ubiquitous forms of storytelling. Most potently, though, theatre relies more than literature and film on its role as a communal experience. The live feedback from the audience creates an interactive energy both between the audience and the performers as well as among the audience themselves.

I experienced this energy during one of the early preview performances of *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* on the West End. Under strict orders to “Keep the Secrets” of the show and in possession of the hottest ticket in town, all 1,400 seats of the Palace Theatre were filled with eager audience members anxious to hear the continuation of the beloved Potter stories. Not a single phone went off during either night of the two-part play. The energy of everyone around me seemed to lean forward, wholly focused toward the stage at all times. At one point, one character revealed shocking information to another character, resulting in a collective gasp from the audience—and then a short giggle *about* the gasp. It was as if everyone realized at once just how invested we all were with the world playing out on the stage and was able to embrace the humor of treating a fictional story with such gravity as a group of strangers.

Of course, not all theatre-going experiences are quite that focused, and that is especially true for audiences filled with children that respond differently than most adult audiences do. The physical experience of live theatre with an audience of youth generally has a completely different energy than that of adults, perhaps especially when seeing the show also involves an escape from

their normal routine of classes. As a secondary English teacher, I once took my classes to a matinee production of *The Glass Menagerie* during our class time. When I have seen this production before in primarily adult audiences, the climactic moment where Jim kisses Laura has generally been received with silence. With youth, the moment was met with whistles and cheers and laughter. The subsequent betrayal of Jim admitting that he was engaged left the audience so upset that they booed the actor at the curtain call—something I’ve never experienced with adult audiences. Children are also more likely to interact back with a show. I recently took my niece to see *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* through Childsplay in Tempe, Arizona. Modeled after the 1964 claymation classic, the show opens with Sam the snowman addressing the audience. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “Haven’t seen a talking snowman before?” My seven-year-old niece, well versed in Disney’s *Frozen*, audibly responded, “Actually, I have.” Her response wasn’t as loud as an audience of giddy teenagers, but it did create a ripple of laughter in the area around us and cause the actor to smile and nod to her. Her impulsive contribution subtly influenced the production.

The physical, communal experience of seeing live theatre and the interaction from audiences can serve as a valuable dramaturgical opportunity, perhaps especially when theatres work with the uninhibited candor of youth. Rather than only ignoring or working against these reactions, they can serve as the foundation for asking questions. The audience of *The Glass Menagerie*, for instance, might be asked why they laughed and cheered when Jim kissed Laura, and why that response shifted. For those who laughed, why were they laughing? What about the moment was amusing? Whether or not they responded audibly, how did that moment impact their perception of the storytelling on stage? For audiences who interacted with the play prior to

seeing the show, how did the experience of reading the story compare to the experience of seeing it live? It is worth addressing and evaluating the reactions of audiences because those audiences help shape the meaning-making of storytelling.

Length of Time

Theatrical performances and films watched in theatres do not have the same “pause” option that readers and at-home movie watchers can employ, thus limiting the length of time in which stories can be comfortably told for audiences. This is particularly true in TYA, where performances for elementary audiences are generally kept to no more than 75 minutes. While younger audiences will generally see adapted productions where additions need to be made to a story, older audiences will interact with stories where cuts from the original are more common. Either way, the challenge of telling a story within a set length of time provides opportunity for engaging students with the challenge of evaluating the most important parts of a story or in creating their own additions to a story, all inspired by the world of the play that they see.

Audience Perception

Unlike film, the world of theatre is one of constant change and reinvention. The same script can be produced at the same time in the same city and each production will still be unique in every way *other* than the text. Additionally, working actors may be sick, on vacation, or leave a show to pursue other projects. Audiences are also often given the opportunity to meet performers at the stage door after a show. Each of these practicalities of the world of theatre

impact the audience perception of theatre as “pretend” in different way than literature and film seem to manage.

Audiences are also much farther away from the action than film tends to feel, even though theatre is live. (Even in black box stages or interactive theatre, audience members are unlikely to experience an extreme close-up!) In this way, audiences experience theatre at a perpetually wide angle, even with lighting and staging choices that help direct focus. This difference in perspective impacts how audiences respond to and accept the performances of actors.

The recent stage to screen adaptation of *Dear Evan Hansen* has faced scrutiny for the casting of Ben Platt in the titular role. Although he originated the role on Broadway (and won a Tony for his performance), critics have bemoaned his age as disrupting the believability of his performance on film. IGN’s Kristy Puchko called Platt “comically miscast” and pointed out that performing on stage and performing on film require vastly different skillsets. She is correct. An actor on stage has to give a performance that is sustainable and replicable over eight shows a week for many weeks for live audiences viewing from several balconies away, while film acting can be more spontaneous and requires more subtlety. Puchko states, “Even when Platt is not singing, he seems on stage. His performance of youth is made up of practiced awkwardness. Every twitch and shrug looks rehearsed, as if Platt can’t shake the routine worn in from eight shows a week” (“Dear Evan Hansen Review”). British film critic Corey Atad concurred with Puchko, saying that “Platt attempts to appear teenaged and awkward in outright theatrical style, hunching his back, clutching his limbs, walking and running with stiltedness turned to eleven” (“Dear Evan Hansen – First-Look Review”). Contrast these reviews with the reception Platt

received on Broadway, where critic Adam Feldman said that Platt gave “one of the greatest leading performances I’ve ever seen in a musical” (“Broadway Review: Dear Evan Hansen Is Lit by a Dazzling Star Turn”). Different times, venues, and modes of storytelling can all vastly impact audience perception of a performance, even from the same performer in the same role.

Theatres seeking can utilize the distance between audience and character during a show and the ability to connect actor to audience outside of the story to deepen the critical thinking of their young audiences. For example, theatres could play back specific moments to audiences utilizing different emotions or performance techniques and invite them to analyze which style they preferred and why.

Concluding Thoughts

Early in my undergraduate studies while serving as a TA for a ninth-grade English teacher, I observed a unit on *Romeo and Juliet*. Students had been given an assignment to watch both the 1968 Zeffirelli and the 1996 Baz Luhrmann adaptations and to compare and contrast each film. It’s a fairly common assignment in schools in any classroom where a film adaptation exists of an assigned reading, though one that I’ve never found particularly effective at eliciting more than surface-level observation. This assignment was no different and full of basic observations like “One film had guns, one had swords.” One particularly memorable essay had a paragraph stating she liked the ’68 version because Romeo looked like Zac Efron. When I approached the classroom teacher about how to issue the grade for that assignment, I was told to give it full points and move forward. Surely, I thought, we can expect more of our students than *this*.

It seemed to me that this teacher, although giving an assignment that involved a skillset traditionally demonstrated within the “analysis” section of Bloom’s Taxonomy, was not requiring more than the ability to state facts. Was that because he didn’t care, or because he, himself did not have the tools to know how to analyze the impact of those adaptive choices? (What impact does the gun have compared to a sword? How does a Romeo that looks like Zac Efron change your connection to his character?)

I’ve realized since that, aside from the burnout that many teachers face, it was very likely that this teacher did not know himself how to navigate a discussion of comparison on different adaptations of a text. For as often as we are exposed to adaptation, there has been very little push within schools to explore this particular branch of comparative studies, perhaps in part because the arts themselves are undervalued. Whatever the reason, as artists armed with the tools to help educators educate, we have an opportunity to help create artistic experiences that are not only fun diversions from regular classroom study, but also part of a well-rounded education.

Whether through workshops conducted within the theatre or later in schools, the lack of communication from young audiences back to the theatre itself represents a huge gap in the educational and artistic development of those audiences. Kristin Leahey, Assistant Professor of Dramatic Literature and Dramaturgy at Boston University writes, “TYA Professionals appear too easily satisfied with informally acquiring feedback from teachers and occasionally soliciting answers from children leaving the theatre to determine audiences’ responses to their work” (325). Playwright Suzan Zeder describes children as audiences

armed in ignorance of the true nature of art” who are “questing for adventure, for new languages of expression, for ideas that overturn expectation, and images that reflect a world

of contradictions. [. . .] The delicate balance of our cultural ecosystem depends upon finding informed, intelligent audiences, receptive to new work and enthusiastic about experimentation. For many theatres it is a life-and-death matter of survival. Unless we can develop strategies to cultivate the audiences of ‘once upon another time’ there may not be another time. (Zeder 447)

As adults dedicated to creating theatrical experiences for youth, we have a responsibility to do so in a way that gives them the tools they need to be successful in the world in which they live *now* as well as preparing them for the world they will inhabit in years to come. This means increased attention to how children interact with the performances they see, not just while they are in the theatre, but before and after the show as well.

CHAPTER FIVE: ACTIVATING AUDIENCES

The *Tangled* Tantrum

In 2010, Walt Disney Animation released *Tangled*, an adaptation of the Brothers Grimm recording of the story of Rapunzel. As with all Disney adaptations, significant changes to the original tale were made, generally to lead to a happier ending and less gore. Rapunzel's prince, for instance, no longer blinds himself falling out of her tower into some bushes, nor does Rapunzel give birth to twins and spend years wandering the wastelands in misery. No, in this version, Rapunzel's dashing prince becomes the rogue Flynn Ryder. Armed with a frying pan and her trusty sidekick, a chameleon named Pascal, Rapunzel and Flynn escape the tower Mother Gothel (the sorceress) has kept Rapunzel in so that Rapunzel can see floating lanterns over the Kingdom of Corona for her birthday. When Rapunzel learns of her true identity as the lost, kidnapped child of the king and queen, she stands up to Mother Gothel and refuses to obey her any longer, effectively saving herself. Flynn's only assistance is in cutting Rapunzel's hair, an act once undertaken by her sorceress captor. This action leads to the death of Mother Gothel, who has used the magic of Rapunzel's legendary hair to keep her youth and beauty. While the previous version of the tale was rife with tragedy and loss, this Rapunzel was full of hope, catchy music, and far less gore. Additionally, *Tangled* brought to light a supremely nuanced take on the villainous Mother Gothel. Rather than wielding physical or magical strength like previous popular Disney villains Gaston, Scar, or Maleficent, Gothel's treatment of Rapunzel through verbal manipulation offered viewers of all ages an exploration of the impact of abusive relationships, leading to a much more modern, grounded fairy tale for a new generation.

I was in my second year of teaching when the film was released. During one of my classes while talking about the movie and what the students had thought about it, one of my students commented, “It was really good, but the guitar music wasn’t really from that time period and it really distracted me.”

I almost did a double take. “Wait,” I said. “She has magic hair that glows when she sings, that she swings on without ripping off her scalp, and that works like a Band-Aid to heal wounds. . . but the guitar music was too much for you?”

“Yup,” he said. “I just didn’t buy it.”

“What about *Aladdin*?” another student piped in. “They didn’t have jazz music in . . . whenever that movie is set.”

“Or the rock music in *Tarzan*? N’Sync was definitely not around when Tarzan was.”

“I mean—I guess—but—” the student stuttered a bit over his response, clearly outnumbered by his classmates.

“Hey,” I chimed in, not wanting him to feel too put upon, even if I didn’t agree with him. “You’re allowed to have personal preferences on what you like or don’t like,” I told the group. I tried to steer the conversation in a new direction, hoping to keep things positive for everyone.

If I were to lead that conversation now, I would do it a little differently. I would ask my students why the writers of *Tangled* may have chosen to use that singer-songwriter style of music for the movie, and what that said about Rapunzel’s character. I might ask what other options there could have been, and how those different choices may have impacted the tone of the film. I may even have given them the assignment to find samples of music (instrumental or

otherwise) that we could play while watching a muted version of a film so we could explore how different music impacts scenes.

In short, I would have approached this discussion about an adaptive choice like a dramaturg and would have encouraged my students to consider the decisions of these artists like dramaturgs as well.

Impossible Choices

As discussed throughout this thesis, there are times when pure fidelity to a source is impossible or not desirable. Sometimes, as with the case of stories like *Peter Pan*, changes need to be made to acknowledge the racial insensitivities of the original story. Other times, the laws of physics simply require change. For instance, a large portion of the children's books adapted for stage involve bringing to life anthropomorphized, often highly stylized illustrated animals. Artistic teams have to determine how they bring characters like Mo Willems' Elephant and Piggie to life off the page or determine what to do about the world of *Charlotte's Web*, where the animals interact with humans. Production teams have to make many decisions as they design the world of the play. For instance, they must decide whether or not to utilize puppets or humans to portray the animals. If they decide to use puppets, they have to choose whether or not the puppets should strive to emulate the illustrations from the book or not. The popular *Very Hungry Caterpillar Show* and the recent *Winnie the Pooh: The New Musical Adaptation* both incorporated puppets that reflected the original texts while the Kennedy Center's 2013 production of *Elephant & Piggie's We Are in a Play!* did not. If the team decides to have humans portray the characters rather than puppets, teams will need to decide if actors should change how they interact physically around any human characters. When I played Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*,

the other animals stood the entire show, while I crawled. Other productions, like March 2022 staging at the Des Moines Playhouse, had all the characters stand.

When a theatre stages a production that either makes a significant departure from a well-established tradition or brings to life a world that requires major changes relative to the realities of the world, education departments in theatres have a particularly wonderful opportunity to help their young audiences learn how to engage with artistic experience as more educated dramaturgs. We can ask youth to consider the decisions that were made, the impact of those decisions, and how other options may change the impact on a show. Right now, most theatres create some materials for parents or educators to use after they've seen a show, often a few discussion questions or a list of other books to read. These materials can do much more to get young audiences thinking much more critically about the theatre they see and move them toward becoming savvy creators themselves.

The rest of this chapter will include several specific suggestions on how we can better prepare our audiences to approach adapted productions engaged artistically and educationally both prior to seeing a show, and after the show is over. Since the majority of youth interact with TYA through field trips, these recommendations are made with a field trip audience in mind, though simple adaptations could be made for general audiences. Additionally, while I have made reference to some specific productions, I have sought to present these activities with enough specificity to be useful while also applicable to any adapted play. Finally, although I have not employed every one of these specific activities in classrooms within the stated contexts of each specific show, I *have* utilized each of these activities within classrooms of various age groups

enough to be confident that they both meet educational standards and engage students well with critical thinking about artistic decision-making processes.

Each of these activities assume that the audience will experience the play as an adaptation by first engaging with the source text. Thus, the full progression through Bloom's Taxonomy happens in three primary stages: approaching the text, experiencing the adaptation of the text, and post-show analysis and creation. Because introduction of new concepts generally requires the most scaffolding, I have presented the pre-show engagement suggestions as mini-lesson plans. Post-show engagement suggestions are far more flexible and need to be catered so intensely to the needs of each group that those ideas are presented more theoretically.

Step One: Approaching the Text

As shown in Appendix A, about 87% of plays produced in TYA companies around the nation now are adapted with roughly 69% from literature. Most of these adaptations come from children's picture books or short chapter books and feature beloved characters like Pete the Cat, the Very Hungry Caterpillar, and the Grinch who stole Christmas. While some children may approach these characters and stories in the theatre for the first time and experience the play without that reference point, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of children in our audiences will encounter these stories prior to seeing the show.

As a way to begin activating critical thinking and creativity from audiences prior to shows, I recommend engaging in some basic dramaturgical work with the original text(s) represented on stage. These activities can be done through in class workshops or through materials provided to schools and families coming to see the show.

For example, students might normally engage with an adapted play prior to seeing the production by reading the book, hearing a little about the history of the book, and learning a bit about the etiquette of attending a show. To encourage students to move beyond “Remembering” and “Understanding” in Bloom’s Taxonomy and into higher order thinking skills earlier, teachers and other caretakers could employ basic dramaturgical activities developed by education departments like these. Note that the Bloom’s Taxonomy skill-set has been underlined in the objectives for each activity:

Suggested Activity One: Who Would You Cast? (Mid Elementary-High School)

Objective: Students will be able to analyze important traits of characters within a text and identify actors that might embody those characters well in an adapted performance. Then, students will be able to evaluate the merits of their own chosen cast as well as the casts of their classmates.

1. As a class, make a list of characters present in the text.
2. Alone or in small groups, have students chose actors that they might cast in different parts. Adults may choose to limit the number of characters students cast for, or provide a limited number of available “actors” to choose from to simulate real-world casting situations.
3. As a group, discuss and reflect on some of these casting decisions. What do the students see in those specific performers that leads them to believe that they would embody the characters well? Did the class have any choices that were similar or different? Were there any casting decisions that were particularly difficult or easy to make? What do the differences among our casting choices as a group teach us about how directors cast plays?

4. Possible adaptation for younger students might include providing pictures of actors (either known actors in or out of roles they've played), or stock photos of individuals they might be able to choose from. This can also help simulate the realities of casting for a show and give older students the opportunity to gain greater understanding of the role of a casting director.

For theatres producing shows in which major casting departures have happened through the addition of new characters, elimination of others, or changes to the traditional presentation of a character's gender or race, then they might target their pre-show materials to help prepare audiences for those changes. For younger students, this may look like exploring pictures of other productions of the play they are about to see to become acquainted with the various ways that a story has been told and making some predictions about the show they are seeing. For older students, that could look like designing costumes for humans playing animals or learning more about storytelling with puppetry if the play utilizes puppets.

Students could also be challenged to engage with creative, imaginative play within the world of the story to prepare them for the expanded stories often presented on stage. While plays for adults and older children often involve eliminating plot points in order to tell a story within the traditional timeframe, stories inspired by picture books generally need to be elaborated upon, with additional characters or plots added. In this case, students might do an activity like this:

Suggested Activity Two: Scene Improvisation (Early Elementary)

Objective: Students will be able to explore adaptation by applying their knowledge of characters within a text to new scenarios related to the play they will see.

1. Review the concept of stories having a beginning, middle and end.

2. Select a scene between two or three characters from the book or devise a situation that these characters might face. (For instance, Elephant and Piggie from Mo Willems' book series, or Pete the Cat and Gus the Platypus from the series by James and Kimberly Dean.)
 - a. Example situations: Pete the Cat lost his shoes! Piggie is bored and wants Elephant to help her find something to do.
3. Depending on the ages and experience levels of the students, it may be helpful to provide them with some structural supports in developing their scenes. Kenn Adams, Artistic Director of Synergy Theatre, has a particularly user friendly structure that works for all ages. Students fill in the blanks:
 - a. Once upon a time. . .
 - b. Every day. . .
 - c. But one day. . .
 - d. Because of that. . .
 - i. This step repeats as needed. I've also found that including "fortunately" or "unfortunately" as an additional prompt for the middle of a story may help some older students.
 - e. Until finally. . .
 - f. And, ever since then. . .
4. Depending on the ages, abilities, and interests of the students as well as the needs of the class, the teacher can provide ways for students to engage in creating their own story

within the established world. Perhaps they draw out their story as a comic strip, write their own script or short story, or improvise a scene with another classmate.

5. If there are specific changes in the play that the theatre wishes to prepare students to be able to discuss, this activity could be modified with specific challenges included relevant to the changes made in the play. For instance, if a conflict in the original text happened between the primary protagonist and a character that had been cut from the play, then perhaps the proposed scene offers students the opportunity to imagine what might happen if the protagonist were to have that same conflict with another character instead. What might change?

Ultimately, the goal of all pre-show activities when exploring an adaptation *as* an adaptation should encourage examination of various areas of choice. Depending on the ages and grade levels of students and how much time is available to prepare before the production, students could be encouraged to write their own dialogue between characters, to design their own costumes and sets, come up with solutions to parts of a story that might be particularly challenging to stage, or even engage in budgeting activities related to the world of crafting theatre. Some activities could easily be extended and take several lessons or weeks to complete, while others could be accomplished in a single day. All these activities can be tied directly to state or national standards of education to further incentivize participation.

Whatever the restrictions of time or budget, our theatres can and should encourage thinking about the show prior to the day of the field trip. Through relatively general activities that could apply to many shows, or through more specific materials designed to help prepare students for particular changes or themes of the play itself, we can encourage audiences to come

see our shows not only for the fun and spectacle and novelty of a theatrical experience, but for clear educational benefits as well.

Incentivizing Pre-Show Participation

One of the challenges faced by many dramaturgs is in finding ways to craft materials that are not simply thrown into ether but to do the work to see what actually connects with and inspires audiences. When working within the world of TYA, the challenges seem to increase, as our target audiences may not be able to read on their own yet, and nearly all depend on adult cooperation in some way. Adding an additional step in the theatre-going process may seem like too much for already overwhelmed classroom teachers, and theatres themselves may not always have the resources to send teaching artists into classrooms to conduct the activities themselves.

I do believe, however, that there are ways that innovative theatre practitioners can work with their community partners to encourage this pre-show engagement. For instance, if a pre-show activity invited audience members to submit costume design ideas for different characters in the show, these costume designs could be collected for a gallery in a local art museum or business where students could go and see their work on display in the public, or they could be placed on display at the theater itself. Or perhaps participants have their drawings entered into a competition, where winners receive tickets to see the next show, gift certificates from a local sponsor, get a backstage tour from one of the company members, or an opportunity to take a class at the theatre itself. Students who bring their drawings to the play could receive a sheet of stickers, some bubbles, or some other small prize. Maybe teachers who have classes participate get a special pre-show recorded message from one of the characters in the play, receive a copy of the book that will be featured in the next production for their students, or another book in the

series that inspired the play for their class library. Whatever the incentive, it need not be expensive or time consuming. With a bit of finesse, the motivation can help build relationships with the community, reflect state educational standards, or expand the themes of the show.

Encouraging participation in pre-show activities will require patience, and careful attention to and discussion with community partners. Theatres should reach out to local teachers and parents to see what might make these activities more attractive for them to participate in and should actively seek feedback on activities from both adults and children on what was or was not engaging.

Step Two: Experience the Adaptation

On the day that children arrive to see a production, most houses have little to no time available to them to engage in too much dramaturgical work that you may be able to do with adult audiences. While adults are generally able to order a pre-show cocktail and can wander among traditional lobby displays at will, children's audiences are less free to roam. Teachers and chaperones worry about keeping their students accounted for in a new space and ensuring that everyone has time to use the bathroom before the show can take up all the time available for any pre-show interaction. Some theatres could consider utilizing paid employees or volunteers to do some kind of orientation for each group, but if materials for the pre-show work are crafted well, then allowing the excitement of the show and the novelty of a new space to take the focus is fine. Other than brief reminders about show etiquette and things to think about while watching the play, the time between arrival and curtain up should be one of building excitement and setting the stage for the environment of the show.

After the show is over, a brief dramaturgical talk-back can help round off the experience before children go home. While many talkbacks are conducted with whole audiences, I would suggest that we encourage cast members talking with smaller groups to encourage more participation and a more intimate opportunity to discuss. Dramaturg Jodi Kanter suggests that rather than only setting time aside for audience members to ask questions, we also encourage members of the production to ask questions of the audience as well. Kanter and others have written about being tired of questions about how actors memorize lines or know when to come on stage, but these questions should be honored and respected in younger audience members who may be experiencing theatre for the first time. As a result, I do believe there is educational value for young audiences in being able to ask questions about the world of acting and other roles within a production. However, I appreciate Kanter's suggestion of utilizing a talkback to gain audience feedback on more than just basic comprehension of the themes and actions of the play. Following principles laid out in Bloom's Taxonomy, she suggests utilizing talkbacks to encourage deeper critical thinking and reflection on how the world of the play reflects the communities in which we live. Using *Romeo and Juliet* as a sample text, Kanter suggests that a post-show talkback could include a drug counselor. This drug counselor as well as one of the teenagers in the audience could both be asked whether the world they live in now or the world of *Romeo and Juliet* was more violent. Audiences could also be asked whether or not it is easier to love now or during the Capulet and Montague feud (488). Even if discussions are brief, post-show talkbacks that are well structured and invite youth to do more of the talking can play an important part in developing the critical thinking skills of our audiences centered around the

foundational question of dramaturgy: Why this play now? Theatres can also use this as an opportunity to encourage awareness of and participation in available post-show activities.

Step Three: Post-Show Response Activities

As with pre-show activities, post-show activities could be held in several ways, either by providing classroom teachers with resources to hold the discussions themselves or through workshops and/or residencies held by teaching artists. The focus of a post-show discussion should be to move toward evaluation and creation in Bloom's Taxonomy. In initial post-show discussions, it is especially valuable to refrain from assigning judgement to decisions that were made. Work to refrain from comments about what was liked or disliked until later in the discussion. One of the goals within the Bloom's Taxonomy framework of developing critical thought is to encourage analysis that separates basic likes and dislikes from assessing the quality of a piece. This is not to say that the goal of artistic evaluation is to stop people from enjoying what they enjoy or disliking what they dislike, but instead to encourage students to appreciate a broader artistry. I used to tell my literature students that if we got to the end of reading *Animal Farm* and they were obsessed with Napoleon then I would be extremely concerned for their wellbeing. Then I told them that *Animal Farm* wasn't a book people generally read because it was enjoyable but because it had value beyond "fun."

In his book *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy*, dramaturg Michael Mark Chemers suggests dramaturgs utilize Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's method of performance analysis when reviewing productions. Goethe, a student of Lessing, developed three critical questions to use in show analysis: "What were they trying to do?", "Did they do it?" and "Was it worth doing?" (115). Chemers suggests that professional dramaturgs should probably

have done preliminary research on the production before seeing it enough to have a framework for what a play attempted to accomplish. He writes

In order to answer the first of Goethe's 3, "What are they trying to do?" you must have already done some preliminary research before you even get to the theater. At the very least, you have already read the script, if it is available, and executed a primary structural analysis. What is the play's action? What kinds of choices do the characters make? What are the lines of conflict? How are they resolved? What is the theme of the play? What moral, spiritual, psychological, cosmic, sexual, social, or intellectual weight does the play carry? (Chemers 115)

When working in the context of an adapted play, particularly for youth who will be very unlikely to have access to a script of the production, asking some of these questions at age-appropriate levels of the source text would be a wonderful way to set up some of the pre-show activities.

Returning to those questions after the show can help remind students to treat the play as its own work of art. During these discussions when it is so tempting for students (and adults) to focus on what was lost, relying on this foundation of dramaturgical work can help encourage discussions to move beyond observations about differences. Through identifying places of change, however, audiences have the opportunity to open discussion and identify the artistic choices made by a production. Here, it is helpful to acknowledge where choices were made in the process of the production. For instance, within the same conversation, students may point out a costuming decision and a missing scene from the original story. It would be valuable to take time to acknowledge that the writing of the script may have been done outside of the theatre, and that a production team may have to find ways to highlight themes or relationships that aren't as

developed in the script as they were in the source text. Still, the focus of early post-show analysis should be less analytical and more factual: what, in this production, were the goals? What choices were made to help meet those goals? Questions like these draw on the skills of evaluation promoted within Bloom's Taxonomy, and help scaffold activities involving original creation.

Older audiences may be able to produce these responses with little prompting, but teachers of younger students may help frame the discussion by returning to the Story Spine model to help remind students of the action of the play.

Once the parameters of what the production was trying to do have been established, the discussion can progress to identifying a few of the choices the production made that stood out to the students. Here, the teacher may prompt students ("What did you notice about the lights? Did any of the costumes stand out to you? What did the stage look like when _____ happened?") or add to the discussion themselves ("Did you notice that of all the animals on stage, only one of the actors had to crawl?")

After discussing the facts of what the show was trying to do as well as some of the decisions the production made to accomplish that objective, the discussion can move on to Goethe's second question: Did they do it? Here, I would still recommend keeping the analysis free of personal preference as much as possible. Focus on the overall impact of decisions and how those decisions impacted the experience of the audience and how well they understood the story. In *Ghost Light*, Chemers suggests considering questions like the following, which can be adjusted to age-appropriate levels:

1. Was the action of the play clear? (Are students able to recall the plot?)

2. What was the moral of the story? (Are students able to identify the big lesson or lessons?)
3. What did the actors do to help tell the story? (Were there any choices the actors made that helped tell the story well or not so well?)
4. Were there any changes in the adaptation that helped the story be more clear or less clear? (Try to focus here on specifically what the *play*'s story seemed to be if there was a shift of purpose between source text and stage.)
5. How did the audience respond to the show? Did they laugh when things were funny? Did they care about the protagonist? How did you know? Was your response ever different than the group? If so, how did that make you feel? How does the response of the audience influence your experience?

These questions can be discussed in a more traditional discussion, or teachers can consider using different methods to allow students to share. Kathryn Dawson and Bridget Kiger Lee's book *Drama-Based Pedagogy* has some excellent resources on activating discussion, and activities like "Exploding Atom" or "Vote With Your Feet" help students of all ages respond to questions at the same time rather than relying on the comments of a few invested participants.

In "Exploding Atom," for instance, the teacher establishes the center of the space as the place of strongest agreement, and the edges of the room as the strongest disagreement (96-97). They may use a practice question to help ensure comprehension before posing the questions above phrased as statements instead. ("The costumes helped tell the story." "I wanted the protagonist to succeed." "I had a good time at the show.") Students can spread themselves around the room based on their level of agreement with a statement, then think-pair-share their responses with the group. It is important for the teacher, especially if they represent the theatre

itself, to create an environment in which all responses are welcomed, both those between classmates who had different opinions of a production and those who share critical remarks about the show itself. All responses, whether positive or negative, should provide the instructor to move toward Goethe's 3rd question through asking follow-up questions to student responses. Why did they like or dislike something? If they liked it, how did the choice help the play meet its goal? If they didn't, what choice might they have made instead? How would that have helped the play meet its goal?

To fully progress along Bloom's Taxonomy, students still need an opportunity to create. Ultimately, the final step is one that requires scaling based on the amount of time a regular classroom teacher may be able or willing to provide to teaching artists. What they create and how much time they spend in its creation can also vary greatly depending on the show itself and what pre-show activities they engaged in already. Students may be charged with designing a costume for a character from the world of the book that was not featured in the play or creating their own puppets after the style of the show. Perhaps they are given access to a page or two from the script and could rehearse and perform themselves to learn some acting skills. They might also begin exploring adaptation of other stories that they love by creating original plays, songs, or stories in a longer culminating unit project. Younger students might be encouraged to draw their favorite scene from the play, or, with a short amount of time, the class might create a series of tableaux representing how the show made them feel, an image representing overall themes, or favorite moments.

The most important part of this process, though, is its purpose in creating a change of habit in audiences as they approach and respond to stories for the rest of their lives. As theatre

practitioners, we have an opportunity to peel back the curtain on the world of artistic creation within our theatre spaces at every level with a depth that regular classroom teachers are not able to accomplish on their own. Doing so does not need to rob our productions of their surprises, nor does this process ignore the power of novelty and fun for youth getting to participate in something rare or special. Instead, it offers practitioners the opportunity to encourage youth to gain a broader appreciation for the work that so many do to help bring stories to life and to think more critically about those artistic decisions. If we focus on developing excellent artistry that is connected to educational programming that engages youth directly with the artistic process of adaptation, practitioners can deepen the impact of their educational content beyond individual productions, providing students with analytical skills and creative insights they can draw upon for the rest of their lives.

Incentivizing Post-Show Activity Participation

As with the pre-show activities, there are many simple, cost-free, or inexpensive ways to incentivize participation in post-show activities, though the evaluative responses may be the easiest to collect in the short term. Photos or short videos of creations by audience members responding to the show can be collected and used on social media marketing for the theatre or posted on the theatre website in a gallery. Teachers who participate in post-show workshops could be given access to early booking for the next production, or students could be given discounts on future classes.

Closing Thoughts

Whenever I see a TYA production, I stay in the house or in the lobby of a theatre for a while. I like to listen to what the audiences say as they leave the theatre. What do they talk

about? Are they excited? Restless? What parts of the show stood out to them? The most common thing I hear comes from adults asking their young audience member: “Wasn’t that fun? Didn’t you like it?” Most of the time, the child replies in the affirmative. Yes! It was fun. Yes! They liked it.

That is wonderful. With so much despair in the world and increasing pressure within schools to incorporate high stakes testing and minimize non-academic activities, I believe that fun is, in and of itself, a worthwhile experience for youth at the theatre. After all, if they have a positive experience, they are more likely to want to return. I fear, though, that theatres dedicated to work for youth lean too heavily on theatre as an exciting diversion. To truly fulfill the purpose of Theatre for Young Audiences, our youth need to engage with profound artistic connected to educational activities that teach them to become more discerning consumers and makers of art. When we work to help young audiences think critically about the art they see, these youth can, in turn, help us to provide them with experiences that will resonate with them. They are, after all, our primary audience.

CONCLUSION

I began my work wondering how I might contribute to the work of centering youth in my work as a theatre practitioner. After my research on the intersections among TYA, adaptation theory, and dramaturgy, I believe that when practitioners employ dramaturgical principles to explore adapted theatre, they can create arts experiences that move beyond simple comparisons and toward the employment of higher order thinking skills. Youth cannot be fully franchised participants if they are not adequately prepared to contribute, nor can they contribute if their experiences and perspectives are not prioritized.

I believe that theatres stand only to benefit by encouraging deeper commitment to dramaturgical engagement with audiences throughout their seasons. While this research has focused primarily on reacting to previously completed adapted productions, there are wonderful possibilities for further study for theatres seeking to welcome youth as full participants. Playwrights and theatres could invite young audiences to attend workshops and readings of developing work. Youth could be involved in helping to choose the mainstage season. Older youth might participate in helping create props or paint set pieces, giving them an opportunity to see their work on stage. I also wonder how these programming suggestions might serve companies to build more diverse, equitable, inclusive spaces. How can greater attention to adaptation theory and dramaturgy influence the creation of new works for youth? How might this work serve as a conduit for highlighting marginalized voices more fully?

I hope this work inspires theatre practitioners to do more than create theatre for youth, but also *with* them. Utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide for dramaturgical practices, theatres can

help create spaces where youth are artistically fulfilled, educationally enriched, and fully franchised participants in the act of creation.

APPENDIX A: SEASON ANALYSIS

Analysis of TYA Mainstage Theatrical Productions in 6 Major TYA Companies

163 Total Productions
141 Adaptations (86.5%)
112 Adaptations from Literature (69%)

- * = Adapted from book/written fairy tales
- ~ = Adapted from film
- ^ = Adapted from history
- # = Adapted from other Source

This data was collected as a convenience sample and gathered by the author in October of 2021.

For this analysis, only productions that were part of the mainstage season produced by each theatre between 2016-2022. Special appearance shows (one-night only or guest performances) or shows by non-professional performers (like teen performance workshops) were not considered. Additionally, shows postponed due to the Covid-19 Pandemic as well as any shows produced in the 2020-2021 season were not considered due to the unique circumstances most theatres operated under (generally producing shows only online.) Most shows that were originally inspired by literature are included in the “Adapted from book/written fairy tales” category, but some are classified otherwise if the story has an intermediary adaptation that has more recognition (*It’s a Wonderful Life*, for instance, is based on a short story called “The Greatest Gift” that is rarely read, and the stage adaptation is more directly inspired by the Capra film.)

Children’s Theatre Company, Minneapolis

33 Total Productions
30 Adaptations (91%)
23 Adaptations from Literature (70%)

- 2021-2022
 - Annie - #
 - Comics
 - Bina’s Six Apples
 - Original, co-production with the Alliance Theatre of Atlanta, Georgia
 - Circus Abyssinya - ^
 - Something Happened in Our Town-*
 - Diary of a Wimpy Kid: the Musical - *
- 2019-2020
 - Circus Abyssinia - ^
 - Snow White - *
 - Cinderella - *
 - Bob Marley’s Three Little Birds - #
 - Jukebox Musical

- Spamtown, USA - ^
- The Rainbow Fish (Postponed) - *
 - Not included in count
- Annie (Postponed) - #
 - Not included in count
- 2018-2019:
 - The Best Summer Ever
 - Original
 - Last Stop on Market Street - *
 - I Come from Arizona - #
 - Original to CTC, adapted by the playwright from his original play, Augusta and Noble
 - Dr. Seuss's How the Grinch Stole Christmas - *
 - Mr. Popper's Penguins - *
 - The Biggest Little House in the Forest - *
 - The Hobbit - *
 - Roald Dahl's Matilda the Musical - *
- 2017-2018
 - The Abominables - *
 - Balloonacy
 - Dr. Seuss's How the Grinch Stole Christmas - *
 - The Wiz - *
 - CTC on Tour: Seedfolks - *
 - Corduroy - *
 - Dr. Seuss's The Lorax - *
- 2016-2017
 - Pinocchio - *
 - Elephant & Piggie's We Are In a Play! - *
 - The Last Firefly - # (*?)
 - Inspired by Japanese Folk Tales
 - Cinderella - *
 - CTC on Tour: The Snowy Day and other stories by Ezra Jack Keaton - *
 - Dr. Seuss's The Sneetches The Musical - *
 - A Year with Frog and Toad - *
 - CTC on Tour: Seedfolks - *

Childsplay, Tempe

35 Total Productions

30 Total Adaptations (86%)

23 Adaptations from Literature (66%)

- 2021-2022
 - Selena Maria Sings
 - Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer - ~
 - The Very Hungry Caterpillar Show - *
 - Schoolhouse Rock Live! - ~
- 2019-2020
 - The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane - *
 - Chanto's Kitchen - *
 - Ella Enchanted: The Musical - *
 - Elephant & Piggie's We Are In a Play! - *
 - Suzette Who Set to Sea (tour)
 - The Snowy Day (nt'l tour) - *
 - Maddi's Fridge (nt'l tour) - *
- 2018-2019
 - Charlotte's Web - *
 - The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus
 - Ella Enchanted: The Musical - *
 - And in this Corner. . . Cassius Clay - ^
 - The Very Hungry Caterpillar Show - *
 - Schoolhouse Rock, Live! - ~
 - Tomas and the Library Lady (nt'l tour) - *
- 2017-2018
 - The Phantom Tollbooth - *
 - Tomas and the Library Lady - *
 - Go, Dog, Go! - *
 - A Christmas Carol with Katie McFadzen - *
 - The Snowy Day and other stories by Ezra Jack Keats - *
 - Maddi's Fridge - *
 - Flora and Ulysses - *
 - Go, Dog, Go! (nt'l tour) - *
- 2016-2017
 - Junie B. Jones is Not a Crook - *
 - Rock the Presidents - ^
 - A Very Hairy Javelina Holiday - *
 - The Cat in the Hat - *
 - The Yellow Boat - ^
 - Inspired by author's own story
 - Interrupting Vanessa
 - The Grumpiest Boy in the World

- Wonderland: Alice's Rock & Roll Adventure - *
- Rock the Presidents (nt'l tour) - ^

Dallas Children's Theater

24 Total Productions

21 Adaptations (88%)

19 Adaptations from Literature (79%)

- 2021-2022
 - Paddington Saves Christmas - *
 - Dragons Love Tacos - *
 - The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe - *
- 2018-2019
 - Treasure Island Reimagined - *
 - Magic Tree House's Holiday Musical - *
 - The Snowy Day and Other Stories. . . - *
 - Ella Enchanted: The Musical - *
 - Tuck Everlasting - *
 - The Island of Skog - *
 - Diary of a Worm, a Spider, and a Fly - *
- 2017-2018
 - Goosebumps the Musical - *
 - A Charlie Brown Christmas - ~/#
 - The Very Hungry Caterpillar Show - *
 - Yana Wana's Legend of the Bluebonnet
 - Blue
 - Jungalbook - *
 - How I Became a Pirate - *
- 2016-2017
 - Seussical - *
 - A Charlie Brown Christmas - ~
 - Junie B. Jones is Not a Crook - *
 - Tomas and the Library Lady - *
 - Blue
 - James and the Giant Peach - *
 - Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters - *

Seattle Children's Theatre

26 Total Productions

21 Adaptations (81%)

19 Adaptations from Literature (73%)

- 2021-2022
 - Red Riding Hood - *
 - The Best Summer Ever!
 - Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus: The Musical! - *
 - The Watsons Go to Birmingham - *
 - Air Play
- 2019-2020
 - Black Beauty - *
 - Corduroy - *
 - Snow White - *
- 2018-2019
 - The Very Hungry Caterpillar Show - *
 - And in This Corner: Cassius Clay - ^
 - The Velveteen Rabbit - *
 - The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane - *
 - Baloonacy
 - The Diary of Anne Frank - */^
- 2017-2018
 - Go, Dog, Go! - *
 - Mr. Popper's Penguins - *
 - The Little Prince - *
 - The Journal of Ben Uchida: Citizen 13559 - *
 - Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed - *
 - The Lamp is the Moon
- 2016-2017
 - The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe - *
 - Stلالuna - *
 - The Snowy Day (etc.) - *
 - Into the West - ~
 - Seedfolks - *
 - Fire Station 7

Metro Theater Company, St. Louis

17 Total Productions

11 Adaptations (65%)

8 Adaptations from Literature (47%)

- 2021-2022
 - Jacked! - *
 - Jack and the Beanstalk meets hip hop and substance abuse
 - The Very Hungry Caterpillar Show - *
 - Digging Up Dessa - ^
 - The Last Stop on Market Street - *
- 2019
 - The Hundred Dresses - *
 - The Girl Who Swallowed a Cactus
 - It's a Wonderful Life - ~ (/*)
- 2018
 - Bud, Not Buddy - *
 - Frida Libre - ^
 - Inspired by the childhood of Frida Kahlo
 - Wonderland: Alice's Rock and Roll Adventure - *
- 2017
 - Out of the Box
 - Company Devised
 - Games Dad Didn't Play
 - Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates - *
- 2016
 - And in this Corner: Cassius Clay - ^
 - Story of Muhammad Ali
 - Out of the Box
 - Company Devised
 - New Kid
 - The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane - *

Orlando Repertory Theatre

28 Total Productions

28 Adaptations (100%)

20 Adapted from Literature (71%)

- 2021-2022
 - The Legend of Sleepy Hollow - *
 - Cinderella - *
 - Bob Marley's Three Little Birds - #
 - Pete the Cat - *
 - Disney's Freaky Friday: The Musical - ~
- 2019-2020
 - Tuck Everlasting - *
 - How I Became a Pirate - *
 - Miracle in Bedford Falls - ~/*
 - Anne of Green Gables - *
 - Pete the Cat - *
- 2018-2019
 - A Year With Frog and Toad - *
 - Junie B. Jones is Not a Crook - *
 - Elf The Musical - ~
 - Ella Enchanted: The Musical - *
 - Beat Bugs: A Musical Adventure - *
 - Seussical - *
- 2017-2018
 - Polkadots: The Cool Kids Musical - ^
 - Inspired by Civil Rights movement, LR9/Ruby Bridges
 - The Best Christmas Pageant Ever - *
 - Flora and Ulysses - *
 - Madagascar - ~
 - Judy Moody & Stink The Mad, Mad, Mad Treasure Hunt - *
- 2016-2017
 - Nancy Drew and Her Biggest Case Ever - *
 - Curious George: The Golden Meatball - *
 - Geronimo Stilton: Mouse in Space - *
 - James and the Giant Peach - *
 - Henry Connick Jr.'s The Happy Elf - ~
 - Rock the Presidents - ^
 - Llama Llama - *

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