Once Upon A Time: Making Fairy Tales Relevant In Contemporary Theatre For Young Audiences

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ONCE UPON A TIME:
MAKING FAIRY TALES RELEVANT IN
CONTEMPORARY THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

by

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ABSTRACT

As a theatre for young audiences (TYA) practitioner and artist, I have noticed the prevalence of edited fairy tales on TYA stages. Artists tend to present versions of traditional tales that do not explore the dark places found in the original forms, the very same parts of humanity that young people often yearn to understand. Within TYA, fairy tales have become a safe option because many are well-known titles that generate audiences and income. Theatre practitioners and producers frequently present selections from the canon of fairy tales without exploring its many layers of meaning; failing to recognize the message that is being communicated to the audience. This thesis will explore how and why theatres continue to present these tales to contemporary young audiences. How do TYA companies create productions of fairy tales that capture the attention of a contemporary audience and still remain true to the traditional psychological framework?

The staying power of fairy tales points toward a common human connection. Parents pass the stories down to their children, generation after generation. There must be a reason for this and I would like to examine it. Research on the long-term effects fairy tales have on young people focuses on the psychological values and ramifications of exposure to these classic stories. This thesis will explore the use of fairy tale structures in theatre for young audiences and where this author feels we can produce fairy tale shows in a manner that considers the developing psyche. I will consider the underlying significations in fairy tales and how theatre artists can provide young people a means to explore and understand these meanings, while avoiding metanarratives that reinforce submission and oppression. Guided by an understanding of research in psychology, productions already performed, and the definition of a contemporary young audience, I will look beyond the simple tale and find
ways to create fairy tales onstage responsibly. I will analyze the works of Bruno Bettelheim, Jack Zipes, and Maria Tatar, compare and contrast their differing views on the place of fairy tales in a young person’s psychological life, and define what a child gains from hearing these stories. Finally, I will interview three directors from around the world about their approach to directing fairy tales, then synthesize the information to create a view of how some companies currently present fully-actualized fairy tales. The prevailing presentation of fairy tales follows an edited and lighthearted way of looking at these classic tales. However, a growing movement exists to re-imagine our view of fairy tales. The work of three of these innovative directors--Kevin Ehrhart, Dougie Irvine and Andy Packer--inspired this thesis with their fearless approaches to teaching young people through the lessons created in fairy tales.
To Tracy Iwerson for suggesting I try children’s theatre.

“To live in hearts we leave behind
Is not to die.” –Thomas Campbell
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of theatre for young audiences (TYA), the presentation of fairy tales has been a common practice in many theatres across the United States. Well-known fairy tales are perceived as safe productions because their material does not challenge the norms of society. On the surface, it appears they do not address serious issues and always culminate in a happy ending. The established titles and assumed safety of fairy tales typically draw large audiences and financial gain for a theatre company. However, many theatre artists see fairy tales as containing less dramatic value than other, more contemporary forms of TYA. After completing a course on children’s literature, I decided to further explore fairy tales in order to find meaning beyond the superficial, and connect to the psyche of the young audience member. In this thesis, I will analyze theoretical research correlating young people and their perception of “fairy tales.”

For the purposes of this thesis, I define the following key terms that will be used throughout my research:

- Fairy tale: story written that fulfills “two criteria: (1) bracketing the time and place of the narrative outside of reality; and (2) the use of magic elements (enchantment, miracles) and otherworldly beings” (Wardetzky 160-61); my research and attention will focus primarily on the classic fairy tales written by Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm (1786-1859) Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875), as the most well-recognized tales in American society
- Theatre for young audiences (TYA): shows created by professional theatre artists for young people; formerly referred to as “children’s theatre”
• Contemporary young audience: school-age children of today, the target age range for fairy tales is commonly ages four to ten, and those who accompany them to plays (i.e. family, teachers, caregivers)

• Metanarrative: an implicit message presented in a story

Fairy tales began as an oral tradition around campfires. The Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen originally published the Western European tales in 1869 and 1835, respectively (Dalton v-vi; Wullschlager i). The tales have since become the most commonly referenced versions in American literature and popular culture. Upon reading these original publications, today’s reader is often struck by the brutality of many of the tales. Contemporary society has grown accustomed to the expurgated versions popularized through movies, television, and picturebooks. However, in their original form, the Little Mermaid does not get the prince and is turned into sea foam. Snow White makes the Queen dance in red-hot shoes until she dies. These endings appear savage compared to the endings with which Americans are most familiar.

When applying the theories of psychological therapists such as Bruno Bettelheim, and academicians such as Jack Zipes and Maria Tartar, it seems these simple tales offer more than sheer malice. A primary argument against fairy tales is the perceived cruelty is more than the young audience can handle. Contemporary American society has created versions with the fear carefully removed and the “happily ever after” prominent on the horizon. Why do adults shy away from presenting profound subjects to young people? Why protect the target audience from topics such as death, abandonment and fear? Adults’ desire to protect comes from a need to keep the seemingly helpless children safe from harm. This has led to the sanitization of tales designed to soften the reception of the child. However adults try to protect them, young people do experience fear and
they cannot be sheltered from everything. Therefore, I will use theoretical research to explore theatrical productions of fairy tales as a way to present fear to young people in a responsible manner so they know how to cope with it.

To develop an understanding of the present state and future of theatrical productions of fairy tales, I will delve into the past relationship between TYA and fairy tales. The dominance of the classic fairy tale in published scripts throughout the first half of the twentieth century established the prominence of fairy tales for young audiences. Many of these shows pushed the metanarratives of beauty and conformity in ways that some scholars believe is harmful to the young audience member.

Further, I will explore the influence and credibility of fairy tales on the lives of contemporary young people through a three-pronged examination: 1) the research literature on the psychology of fairy tales and the benefits of fear on the psyche of young people, 2) the intrinsic differences between childhood today and the time when the tales were first published, and 3) what theatre professionals are currently doing to move beyond the face value of fairy tales and present ones with a deeper meaning.

In order to develop an understanding of contemporary productions, I will interview three professionals whose work reflects the research on young people and fairy tales: Kevin Ehrhart, Director, Teaching Artist and Dramaturg at the Omaha Theater Company in Omaha, Nebraska, Dougie Irvine, Artistic Producer of Visible Fictions in Glasgow, Scotland, and Andy Packer, Artistic Director of Slingsby Theatre Company in Adelaide, Australia. These three professionals have all directed shows that reach beyond the edited tales often presented to young people. I have witnessed the work of these men capture the attention and imagination of audiences around the world, through classic tales and original works alike. Their interviews offer insight into how they approach
their work. The interviews will then be compared with the theoretical research into psychological benefits of both fairy tales and fear to understand their presentations of fairy tales.

By viewing fairy tales as a psychological tool and significant art form, the tales can be elevated to equal importance on the TYA stage as new original works. Reframing artists’ and audience’s opinions of fairy tales must first begin with an understanding of their meaning and purpose.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the research arguing the inclusion or exclusion of fairy tales in contemporary society focuses on the stories as literature. This approach presents the opportunity for theatre artists to emphasize the worth of the story itself. By first developing a deeper appreciation for the story before the production, the focus shifts from away from simple stage spectacle and toward the psychological needs of the audience. My evaluation of fairy tales will explore the underlying metanarratives in common stories seen on the TYA stage.

In Favor of Fairy Tales

Bruno Bettelheim was once viewed as the leading authority on the psychoanalytical view of fairy tales and his book *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) remains a significant work in the debate over fairy tales. He justifies the necessity for exploring such a topic because parents often expect a child’s mind to function as that of an adult. In reality, a mind must also go through a slow development process, as a body does. Through his work with young people, diagnosed as “severely disturbed,” Bettelheim began incorporating fairy tales into therapy and found it reached an innate need in the early formation of life’s meaning:

For a story truly to hold the child’s attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. (Bettelheim 5)
Having found a marked positive difference in the young patient’s ability to communicate about their emotions when they were presented with fairy tales, he began to analyze the deeper meanings found in the “simple” stories passed down for centuries. He examined plot structure, characters and situations commonly found in fairy tales, and uncovered hidden attachments that one’s subconscious finds in these stories.

According to Bettelheim, the archetypes of the evil stepmother and absent father are the catalyst for events in many fairy tales. These characters symbolize the strife a young person feels when a parent, who should protect and love the child at all times, suddenly reprimands him/her. This sense of abandonment from the parent is manifested through the death of the “good mother” and appearance of the “evil stepmother.” Fairy tale metaphors create a language the young person can use to cope with conflicting emotions about caregivers at a developmental point when they cannot comprehend such a contradiction. A child can preserve the idealized view of their parent if another person temporarily steps into the place of that parent. This is most commonly found in the early stages of development before a child can logically comprehend the changes a person’s emotions evoke in his/her demeanor.

Bettelheim also stresses the child’s need to experience situations vicariously in order to find his/her own place in the world. Many fairy tales explore circumstances that are too dangerous for a young person to explore and experience on his/her own. Stories afford a child the chance to be kidnapped by a witch and slay dragons while remaining in the safety of his/her world: “Then, using thought processes which are his own…the story opens glorious vistas which permit the child to overcome momentary feelings of utter hopelessness” (Bettelheim 58). Essentially, through the magical world of fairy tales, children learn to navigate the real world. Currently, many theatrical
presentations of fairy tales try to skip those areas that seem frightening while highlighting the funny and happy moments. While this is done with the best of intentions, according to Bettelheim’s research, it causes more harm than good. By depriving young people of the vicarious experience, we are taking away their chance to seek solutions to problems and fears they face daily.

In *The Uses of Enchantment*, some of Bettelheim’s assertions point toward an unhealthy Oedipal complex between all children and their parents. His sexualizing of parent-child relationships often seems forced to prove a point. For instance, in writing about “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” he asserts: “The number three stands in the unconscious for sex also in a quite different way, as it symbolizes the oedipal situation with its deep involvement of three persons with one another—relations which, as the story of ‘Snow White’ among many others shows, are more than tinged with sexuality” (Bettelheim 219).

This may hold true for some young people who experience fairy tales, especially in Bettelheim’s work with “severely disturbed” preschoolers. However, I question the validity of his point because of the attachment of sexual desire to every fairy tale. It is the only subtext infused into all of his interpretations.

While I do not agree completely with Bettelheim, theatre artists would benefit from consulting this work before producing a fairy tale. I have found *The Uses of Enchantment* took the view I had of the canon of TYA scripts and restructured it. I see the need to look beyond the surface value of a story and find those connections we grasp onto on a subconscious level.

Jack Zipes, Professor of German Studies at the University of Minnesota, is a leading scholar of fairy tales. He has translated *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* and * Beauties, Beasts and Enchantment: Classic French Fairy Tales*. Through his study of fairy tales, Zipes challenges some of the
arguments formed against reading classic fairy and folk tales to contemporary young people. He looks at the tales with an inquisitive eye, rather than that of a psychologist, and still finds many of the same underlying forces that drive the continued popularity of such tales.

In his book *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994), Zipes looks at the messages contained and hidden in these tales as well as the implications of the contemporary, commercialized versions. Specifically, he deconstructs “Rumpelstiltskin.” According to Zipes, many scholars misconstrue the relationship between Rumpelstiltskin and the miller’s daughter to oppress women into being subservient to men, and paint women as lying and conniving. Zipes views “Rumpelstiltskin” as a “tale about a persecuted woman and female creativity symbolized by spinning” (Zipes 49) and the character of Rumpelstiltskin is “obviously a blackmailer and oppressor” (Zipes 49). While the heroine of the story is set to advance through society and initiate herself into adulthood, Zipes claims a small, inane man (Rumpelstiltskin) intercedes and prevents her from accomplishing the initiation on her own. She then attempts to free herself from oppression by foiling the plans laid out by the oppressor by guessing his name. Hearing this story has the ability to free all young women from the shackles laid upon them. Even at that, I cannot help but notice that she frees herself from one man to cling to the side of another—the prince. The heroine never really becomes a free and independent woman as Zipes claims.

Extensively quoting Zipes, Joanna Weiss (2009) considers the sanitization of fairy tales through the commercialization of the stories. After her daughter received a Rapunzel play set, she noted, “the old fairy tales are being systematically stripped of their darker complexities. Rapunzel has become a lobotomized girl in a pleasant tower playroom; Cinderella is another pretty lady in a ball gown, like some model on ‘Project Runway’” (Weiss K1). The adult avoidance of fear has created a
sub-genre of fairy tale that glosses over the aspects deemed “too scary” by adults; the same areas Bettelheim and Zipes praise as being helpful in terms of advanced development. When adults are willing to look beyond the happily ever after, Weiss asserts we “come to see the stories’ dark elements as the source of their power, not to mention their persistence over the centuries…When we remove the difficult parts—and effectively do away with the stories themselves—we're losing a surprisingly useful common language” (Weiss K1). According to Bettelheim, Weiss and Zipes, if we continue to present tales absent of fear, young people’s perception of life becomes skewed and they lose vicarious experiences that help them as they learn to navigate through the ever-present fears in life.

In Opposition to Fairy Tales

Conversely, Maria Tatar challenges many of Bettelheim’s assertions. In Off With Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood (1992), she calls for a release from Bettelheim’s view of fairy tale psychology. Instead, she accuses adults of placing self-serving meaning onto the tales. In “Little Red Riding Hood,” for instance, Red Riding Hood learns not to stray from the path as her mother instructed, making Red Riding Hood’s actions worse than the adult wolf (Tatar, Off 8). Tatar asserts that such analyses perpetuate the tendency to place guilt onto another party, “Bettelheim’s Uses of Enchantment is of special interest for my purposes because it is so deeply symptomatic of our own culture’s thinking about children” (Tatar, Off xxv). Adults place blame on Hansel and Gretel for requiring too much from their poor father and stepmother; however, these same parents abandon their children in the elements alone to face an evil witch. The “happily ever after” finally occurs when the children return with enough money to support the entire family. Tatar states, “Most adult
readers are drawn to this…kind of reading, a psychoanalytic interpretation that turns the child protagonist into egocentric villains who are forever projecting the dark side of their fantasy life onto unwitting adults” (Off xx). With adults as the primary producers of TYA, the possibility to subconsciously push blame onto the young people the productions are trying to serve. Tatar urges us to re-examine fairy tales through the eyes of the child instead of the adult, as she claims prevails in the works of Bettelheim.

Fairy Tales as Published Works

In considering the intention behind the original publications, Tatar questions why contemporary adults present fairy tales at all. The publication of fairy tales coincided with the commercialization of children’s literature in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many of these children’s books attempted to create malleable children through moral tales. If the desired outcome was an obedient child, then the horrific violence in such tales may be seen as a deterrent to undesirable actions. Tatar quotes Charles Perrault, a celebrated French folklorist, in his “Le Petit Chaperon Rouge”:

From this story one learns that children,

Especially young lasses,

Pretty, courteous, and well-bred,

Are wrong to listen to any sort of man. (qtd. in Hard Facts, 9)

Perrault’s agenda is not a thinly veiled psychoanalytical dream; instead he lays out a didactic reasoning for the young people listening to the story to grasp onto and change their lives. However, Tatar challenges the pure lesson we see. She speaks often of a nineteenth-century book, Struwwelpeter, “. . . a book whose appeal can be traced not just to the need of parents to coerce their children into
docile behavior, but also to the desire of children to hear stories as sensational in their own way as the ones once told around the fireside” (Tatar, Off 13). The authors understood the audience that would be reading their stories and would tailor stories to fit the needs and desires of these particular people. Tatar states:

All printed fairy tales are colored by the facts of the time and place in which they were recorded. For this reason, it is especially odd that we continue to read to our children—often without the slightest degree of critical reflection—unrevised versions of stories that are imbued with the values of a different time and place. (Off 19)

Fairy Tales as Drama

It is not only the children in fairy stories who have become the subject of scrutiny, according to feminist theorists, adult heroines also perpetuate negative stereotypes. Melissa C. Thompson, in her Youth Theatre Journal article “If the Shoe Fits: Virtue and Absolute Beauty in Fairy Tale Drama,” (2000) specifically discusses TYA productions of “Cinderella” and the metanarratives put forth about the virtue of beauty. In many productions, the heroine’s positive attributes of even-temperedness and her willingness to take punishment until she is saved is manifested in her universally true physical beauty. Therefore, to physically manifest the opposite of Cinderella’s beauty, the evilness of the villains manifests as ugly stepsisters. Even though the Grimms’ version of “Cinderella” featured beautiful stepsisters, “in order to maintain an ideology of absolute beauty, the Cinderella dramas have reconciled this apparent conflict in a number of ways. The most obvious way of maintaining beauty as the domain of the virtuous is to simply make the stepsisters ugly…” (Thompson 119). By continuously presenting this story of the beautifully submissive heroine, are we
perpetuating the metanarrative that women need to be subservient in order to find happiness?

Furthermore, does the metanarrative reinforce that a woman can only find happiness when she finds a man who recognizes her beauty?

Studying the literature surrounding fairy tales compelled me to examine my own stance on presenting fairy tales. Are fairy tales infallible stories maintained over many centuries that should be presented to young people without editing and rewriting? No. Should we abandon fairy tales all together? No. While fairy tales reflect the time in which they were written, explorations of important issues such as abandonment and the struggle for independence still need to be presented to children. Through carefully crafted stories, young people can vicariously navigate their way through a world they are still trying to understand. Following the positive framework of fairy tales and writing new stories that question and challenge children to grow as strong, independent people is possible. With today’s American society moving toward a strong and independent child, whether male or female, as being the desired child, the presentation of classic tales as theatre needs to move in that direction as well. A constant revision of fairy tales would be required to push the vision of childhood in the direction society is moving. Contemporary theatre artists should allow for further evolution of fairy tales to create a stage adaptation that connects with the contemporary young audience. With each rewriting, theatrical productions of fairy tales can move closer to serving the child audience in the way they need.
CHAPTER THREE: FEAR AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Artists create opportunities to teach life skills through experiences with their art. The Greek philosopher Plato viewed artists as the idyllic teachers: “Although one might think that the philosophers would do educational work in the ideal Platonic state, one would be surprised to learn that Plato placed this responsibility on artists (not philosophers) because the arts have hidden messages, delivered not only in cognitive ways but also via emotional channels” (Shonmann 30). This emotional avenue gives theatre its unique power with young people, one that is enhanced through metaphor. Teenagers have reached an age where they understand their reactions to fear. Those who enjoy the feeling that fear generates will commonly seek out situations that present them with this false fear: i.e. horror movies or haunted houses. Such blatant fear is beyond the developmental stage of younger children. A fairy tale such as “Hansel and Gretel,” which exploits the fears of abandonment and abduction, offers real fears in a magical and metaphorical way onto which children may find solutions.

For many years, psychologists explored fear using fairy tale references as a metaphor, to expose young people to their fears, as well as to provide the tools to overcome those fears. Fairy tales provide young audience members an opportunity to subconsciously scrutinize fears and then gain the courage to face their real-life struggles and anxieties. The fairy tale presents a metaphor of fears from which an understanding of the world stems. In their Journal of Counseling and Development article “The use of metaphor in clinical supervision,” Douglas A. Guiffrida, Rachel Jordan, Stephan Saiz, and Kristin L. Barnes describe the use of metaphor for clinical psychologists:
Metaphor, the Greek word meaning transfer, appears throughout the ages in stories
designed to elicit growth or change, including biblical parables, myths, legends and
fairy tales. One reason for the broad appeal of metaphor as a means of eliciting
growth and change is that it allows new knowledge and ideas to be conveyed using
frames of reference that are familiar to the learner. By relating a seemingly new idea
to something the learner already knows, metaphors give familiarity to the unfamiliar,
thus making new information seem less overwhelming and more easily understood.
Metaphors also allow people to ascribe affect to language by evoking past emotions.
Additionally, … the metaphoric process of thinking about and describing one thing
in terms of another actually helps create their own new ideas. (393)

This same clinical approach to metaphor translates well to the stage. By viewing fairy tales as
powerful metaphors in a young person’s life, theatre artists begin to consider fear in a fairy tale as an
opportunity for teaching.

**Why Present Fear to Young People?**

Fear is a part of every person’s life. “The 16th century poet Robert Wever (1550) may well
have been romanticising the lives of many children when he stated so categorically that ‘In youth is
pleasure.’ But his words certainly sum up how the British have usually wanted to think about or
remember childhood, however often the evidence may have been to the contrary” (Tucker 200).
Similar to British society, American society views childhood as a time of unabashed pleasure without
the complications that weigh down adulthood. However, the most uncomplicated child’s life still
holds natural fears associated with development (Bettelheim 13). The proposition to present fairy
Children do experience fear. The original publications of the Grimm Brothers’ and Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales acknowledge and explore the fear encountered by their audience, especially young people. Contemporary theatre artists can use these versions to guide presentations in a way that allows the audience to explore and resolve the frightening aspects of the tale. “Within the framework of such a tale, children may discover ways of dealing with their own fears, of objectifying inner conflicts, of confronting danger through vicarious means, knowing that in the end the danger will be safely resolved” (Trousdale 78). The make-believe world of fairy tales provides a safe arena for the young audience member’s psyche to evaluate the hero/heroine’s journey throughout the show. “What comes over as primarily fantasy in literature for some children however can still sometimes act as effective guidelines for others” (Tucker 202). A young person’s imagination can take the fairy tale and subconsciously relate it to his/her real world, creating an understanding of the world through fantasy. Using the lessons gleaned from the tale, children internally develop their own understanding of how they will react when confronted with their real life version of a Big Bad Wolf.

Becoming a Real Life Fairy Tale Hero

Often the hero/heroine of a fairy tale is a child or young adult. He/she is also commonly small in stature or perceived as weak and helpless by those around him/her. A young person trying to prove him/herself in a society ruled by adults who are bigger, stronger and more powerful can identify easily with such a hero/heroine. When the fairy tale world mimics the real world, a young person sees the fantasy versions of his/her life and subconsciously ascribes meaning to the onstage
events. The eventual triumph of a small hero/heroine over the ominous villains gives hope to an audience member who feels small and powerless. Through this hope, he/she receives the courage and self-assurance that he/she too can accomplish great feats and overcome fears. For instance, in “The Valiant Little Tailor (Seven at One Blow)” (the original Grimm Brothers title of the story now known as “The Brave Little Tailor”) the Tailor’s ability to defeat seven small flies in one blow leads him to abandon his shop and seek an adventure that pushes his bravery to the limit. Eventually, this small and weak tailor uses his wits and small stature to defeat giants, a wild unicorn and boar. By rising above what may seem hindrances to greatness, the Tailor became a King. To a child this achieves the ultimate happiness “. . . to run his kingdom—his own life—successfully, peacefully, and to be happily united with the most desirable partner who will never leave him” (Bettelheim 147).

This ability for the hero/heroine to identify and defeat the villain in many fairy tales gives hope to the young audience member. Knowing a tailor can become King signals the American metanarrative that hard work and ingenuity will earn an individual status and material wealth. “Those children living in poverty and often without much hope in their actual lives could still relish the fantasy of high achievement against the odds common in British children’s literature and summed up in fairy tales like Jack and the Beanstalk and The Story of Dick Whittington. Fatalism was largely left to stories from abroad; in Britain and America, agency was all” (Tucker 202). The promise of a better life to come encourages children to work harder and reach higher for goals that seem originally unattainable.

By confronting an element of fear, the audience sees the hero/heroine overcome the conflict in a stronger position than he/she began. “Books with strong messages of hope of better things to come can always seem particular allies for child readers such as these who once felt they were
missing something important in their lives” (Tucker 200). The hero/heroine’s accomplishments are diminished without placing him/her in imminent danger. The relationship of hero/heroine and villain creates an atmosphere of hope that evolves from an initial fear. By denying fear, that unique hope has been denied.

Defeating a Real Life Fairy Tale Villain

In his book *Tree and Leaf* (1989), J.R.R. Tolkien maintains the most important components to a fairy tale are fantasy, recovery, escape and consolation. The hero/heroine escapes the evil experienced through the villain and comes out stronger because of his/her experiences. Bettelheim expounds upon Tolkien’s premise: “It seems particularly appropriate to a child that exactly what the evildoer wishes to inflict on the hero should be the bad person’s fate—as in ‘Hansel and Gretel’ who wants to cook children in the oven is pushed into it and burned to death . . .” (Bettelheim 144).

As harsh and gruesome as the punishment of a villain seems to contemporary adults, the notion of justice remains a crucial part of the ending of a fairy tale. If the fear of a villain is presented, but not properly eliminated, it can lead to a child’s increased anxiety. “It seems, rather, that adults should question the value of attempting to soften the fairy tales by removing any violence from them. The punishment of the villain in the tales does not seem to have a pathological effect upon children—but it is quite possible that the lack of resolution of the danger that is presented may have such an effect” (Trousdale 77).

Ann Trousdale (1989), Associate Professor of Children’s Literature and Storytelling at Louisiana State University, witnessed the negative consequence of a sanitized fairy tale ending when a friend’s daughter obsessed over the Big Bad Wolf in a “The Three Little Pigs” book she read at bedtime. In a version published by Disney, the Wolf lands on the Pigs’ fire and runs away into the
woods. With the villain still alive and not boiled as the original touts, the daughter of Trousdale’s friend knew that the Big Bad Wolf would return. An adult attempt to avoid the more unpleasant points of the story actually created a villain more frightening than if he had been killed. A child’s mind has not developed the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy, making a villain that has not been conquered an especially threatening force in their life (Trousdale 77).

If theatre artists allow young people the opportunity to experience fear vicariously onstage, the young people are given the chance to safely address and then understand their fears. By creating their own versions of the tales, young people can explore and make sense of those points they may have found troublesome. In 1986, Trousdale conducted a study on children’s reactions to fairy tales. She interviewed small groups of preschoolers asking each child to tell her a fairy tale. She would then show the child a television adaptation of that same fairy tale. One week later, the child met with Trousdale and told her the same fairy tale. Trousdale recorded each child’s interpretation of the tale, determining his/her inner text:

These studies have indicated that there were varying interactions between children and media, but that regardless of the medium of presentation, the children were actively constructing their own inner text for tales. This inner text, as represented in their own telling of the stories, was influenced by the version or versions they had had exposure to as well as by their own active, selective, imaginative, and interpretive mental processes. It is the inner text that seemed to be the key to the children’s responses to the dangerous or evil elements in the tales. (Trousdale 72)

Similar to the young girl who could not resolve the Big Bad Wolf’s disappearance and saw it only as an opportunity for him to return, a caretaker’s attempts to assuage the danger can create a
personal narrative that frightens a child more than the villain itself. Humans develop courage and the desire to use that courage through conquering their fears. Depriving young people the chance to experience the total conquering of fear deprives them of the chance to develop courage to stand up to fears they experience in real life.

Every child will react differently to a fairy tale. Twentieth century psychologist Carl Jung studied extensively the therapeutic use of symbols, including those found in fairy tales and myths. “In myths and fairy tales, as in dreams, the psyche tells its own story, and the interplay of the archetypes is revealed in its natural setting as ‘formation, transformation / the eternal Mind’s eternal recreation’” (Jung 72). TYA artists can use their expertise in theatre to create a safe place for the child to vicariously find his/her own reaction to fears and his/her own way to defeat those fears encountered in real life.

When young audiences are engaged in experiencing fear as an audience, it creates a learning experience. Theatre artists have not always supported graphic theatrical presentations of fairy tales. Historically, TYA productions of fairy tales did not present frightening images onstage, and instead embraced cheery adaptations that focused on the joy of the tale. The history of TYA and fairy tales continues to affect productions in contemporary theatres.
CHAPTER FOUR: HISTORICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAIRY TALES AND THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES IN AMERICA

In order to explore new possibilities for the presentation of fairy tales to young people, one must first examine the inexorable connection that exists between fairy tales and TYA in the United States since its inception at the turn of the twentieth century. To understand the origins of TYA is to understand the current perception of “fairy tale.” This chapter will explore the specific influence of popular pantomimes in America and the Junior League’s Children’s Theatre on the American understanding of fairy tales in TYA. The early twentieth century informed the American understanding of children’s theatre with the belief childhood should remain free of all hardships. “Backed up by the growth of 20th century developmental psychology, childhood as described in contemporary child-rearing manuals is now seen as ideally an entirely positive time for all concerned, other things being equal” (Tucker 200).

Immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century brought with them fairy tales from their native countries. As the immigrants retold the stories, the tales began to morph and change to reflect more American ideals than those of their original nationalities. “It [America] has too evolved a particular optimistic strain of 20th century children’s literature, in tune with the national American dream of ultimate success. Immigrants over the years have been happy for their own children to experience such stories, largely untinged by the pessimism common to some of the traditional tales told in their own countries of origin” (Tucker 201). Theatres presented Americanized fairy tales onstage since the stories reinforced the American ideals adults wanted young people to adopt.
Pantomimes in the United States

Pantomimes, still popular around Christmastime in the United Kingdom, are “…zany extravaganzas [which] began to include fairy tale stories and characters, slapstick humor, and large doses of exuberant fun, they gradually became popular with children and adults alike” (Bedard, Dramatic Literature 22). By the end of the ninetieth century, pantomimes in America had become entertainment for children instead of adults. The frivolous nature of pantomimes spoke to the idea of a happy childhood: “Critics concurred with parents and youth: theatre for children had to be jolly and not too complex. The entertainment value of a piece was the ultimate criterion for judging a production for children: the sillier the piece, the more the children would like it” (Salazar 32). When considered in this jovial manner, the Grimm Brothers’ and Hans Christian Andersen’s versions of fairy tales do not fit the definition of suitable entertainment for young people. In order to attract audiences with the “jolly and not too complex” frame of mind, fairy tales were changed and softened by removing frightening or disturbing images and adding in more magic and frivolous humor.

Turn of the century TYA productions met with opposition if they presented frightening or challenging elements. In her article “Theatre for Young Audiences in New York City, 1900-1910: A Heritage of Jolly Productions,” Laura Gardner Salazar recounts the story of a heartfelt scene about sacrificing for loved ones for an audience of Little Mothers. The Little Mothers was a club founded for young girls who did not attend school because they had to stay home and care for their younger brothers and sisters. The women who created this production for the Little Mothers did not intend for a scene in which a married couple has only one pork chop for dinner to become a comedy. The husband leaves the pork chop for his young wife, she then cries over the gesture of love, which
elicits laughter from the audience of Little Mothers. Salazar speculates “…the children certainly seemed trained to look for the comic, and to use it for recreation and restoration” (Salazar 31). While this production was not a fairy tale, it demonstrates how theatre was viewed as simple entertainment for children who could not and should not cope with difficult subject matter. The newly re-written versions of fairy tales, which match this vision of TYA, created a common view of fairy tales as lighthearted fare.

As the popularity of pantomimes grew, the productions that best fit the definition of suitable entertainment for young people saw remarkable success. These most sought-after productions would have multiple revivals: “By the beginning of the twentieth century, pantomime in the United States generally went by the new name of ‘extravaganza’ or ‘spectacle.’ Sleeping Beauty and the Beast, a ‘fairy extravaganza,’ opened in November 1901 and ran through May 1902. The play was revived in September 1904, and again in September 1905” (Salazar 26). Financially, this created another reason to focus the attention of theatre artists toward lighthearted versions of fairy tales; to see continued success, producers must create theatre parents/caregivers will want to bring their children to see. “During Easter week in 1900, an adult in New York had the choice of amusing a child at seven different shows recommended by the New York Times: Jack and the Giant; Kindergarten; Rip Van Winkle; Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show; Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus; some ‘clever artists’ at Keith’s; or Linus II, the equine wonder, at Huber’s Museum” (Salazar 25). Residual effects of this mentality on the theatrical fairy tales are still apparent in those scripts created for young people’s entertainment in the twenty-first century.

The popularity of edited fairy tales generated a niche in the creation of fairy tale productions. Artists created theatrical productions of fairy tales for commercial success, a trend which continues.
today. Most well known are Walt Disney’s re-envisioned fairy tales. The Disney Corporation’s success is due, in part, to understanding the American public’s desire to see an antiseptic version of fairy tales.

Disney, of course, has long been a fairy tale re-packager par excellence, turning classic folklore into enduring animated films. And like all fairy tale retellings, Disney movies have reflected their times. The 1937 version of ‘Snow White’ celebrated that era’s ideals of American beauty. ‘The Little Mermaid,’ from 1989, replaced Hans Christian Andersen’s helpless heroin with a spunky redhead – and while the movie didn’t shy away from darkness, it softened the edges for family viewing. (Weiss K1)

Similarly, popular TYA playwrights such as Charlotte B. Chorpenning (1872-1955) wrote scripts that are still being produced over seventy years after initial publication.

Chorpenning worked in amateur theatre, a theatre that did not promote experimental or innovative styles. Amateur groups were interested in producing children’s plays with recognizable titles and with subjects that would not be controversial to the parents who brought their children to the theatre. Chorpenning and the other playwrights of this time wrote plays to meet this demand. (Bedard, Dramatic Literature 139)

These scripts focus on the morality of the tale and it denies the audience the opportunity to interpret the meaning. “In [The Emperor’s New Clothes], as in all of her plays, Chorpenning changed the ending of the story so that the ‘bad’ character, Han, is punished for his deeds. It is a very clear cause-to-effect relationship that is not a part of the original story” (Dramatic Literature 141). Chorpenning’s script creates a villain, while Andersen’s villain is the pride and vanity of the
townspeople. When a child points out the Emperor’s nakedness and in his humiliation, continues walking to the castle, the punishment for his vanity. Chorpenning’s adaptation removes a majority of the guilt from the Emperor and places it on Han. In the end, the Emperor banishes him from the city. However, after that the morality of the ending becomes muddled. Does good defeat evil? Is there a difference between good and evil? The ending focuses instead on the humor of a naked and oblivious Emperor.

At the same time elaborate pantomime productions became more popular larger cities, smaller cities featured scaled-down versions of fairy tales. Most prevalent amongst these production groups was the Junior League.

The Junior League’s Penchant for Fairy Tales

Many of today’s TYA companies owe their existence to the Association of Junior Leagues International (AJLI). Founded in 1901 by Mary Harriman, the Junior League was an organization for wealthy young women who wanted to contribute to the betterment of society (Bedard, “Junior League” 35). Today the number of Junior Leagues has reached 294 across America, Canada, Mexico and the United Kingdom (AJLI). By providing an escape for children in orphanages and settlement houses, League productions were concerned with presenting the carefree American dream. Initially they focused on volunteering in settlement houses; however, many League chapters turned to children’s theatre as their primary activity. Both drama classes and performances occupied League theatres at a time when young people were rarely the focus of theatre artists. Today’s prominent TYA companies began as Junior League projects, including Nashville Children’s Theatre, Lexington Children’s Theatre and Omaha Theater Company.
The Junior League filled a void in American arts. At the time, few theatres across the country dedicated their work for young audiences. Outside of large cities, young people rarely saw theatre created for their age group. The lack of scripts written specifically for young people prompted the Junior League to encourage playwrights to submit scripts for publication to increase library holdings available for Junior League productions. This solicitation has colored indelibly the types of plays produced for young people for years afterward.

This group thus nurtured playwrights and disseminated plays at a time when there were few other avenues available. However, as the association sought plays appropriate for league productions, their library holdings and their contests reflected a narrow view of children’s plays. AJLA [now known as AJLI] generally handled only plays with familiar titles and plays that used small casts and minimal technical requirements. (Bedard, “Junior League” 47)

When the Junior League first began working in children’s theatre, they were “…an organization that occasionally presented ‘a little fairy play, requiring the simplest of scenic arrangements’” (Bedard, “Junior League” 37). While many leagues moved beyond “simple” shows, the “fairy play” remained paramount. “Thus, while the association greatly increased the number of plays available, and—within their often narrow definitions of appropriate plays—sought the application of rigorous play-writing standards, AJLA essentially perpetuated the need for the familiar fairy tale as the subject of children’s plays” (Bedard, “Junior League” 47). By training early TYA audiences into expecting fairy tales as standard fare for young people, the Junior League created a bond between TYA and fairy tales that, 109 years later, is still intertwined.
All historical information on Junior League performances of fairy tales focuses on the technical achievement and the creation of artistically interesting shows for young people. Selections for Junior League productions were based on titles that attracted large audiences of families and children. Tempered fairy tales deliver perceived safety in a non-threatening package.

The majority of fairy tales presented on stages across America continue to promote the belief children want and deserve nothing more than escapism. By breaking through this misconception, contemporary theatre artists can challenge young people to think and problem solve their way through fairy tales on a psychological level and experience theatre as more than frivolous entertainment with no legitimate purpose beyond distraction from their lives.

The historical connection between TYA and fairy tale plays is inescapable. This connection continues to influence TYA practitioners as they produce scripts based on fairy tales. Many theatre artists, however, have moved away from this carefree version of fairy tales and opted to create productions that delve into the deeper meanings found in fairy tales. The following chapter discusses three of these directors: Kevin Ehrhart, Dougie Irvine and Andy Packer.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONTEMPORARY USE OF FAIRY TALES

While many TYA companies across America continue to produce psychologically hollow stage adaptations of fairy tales, there are directors who approach classic and contemporary fairy tales with the deeper meanings in mind. Kevin Ehrhart, Dougie Irvine and Andy Packer are three directors with whom I have either worked on productions or met through conferences, festivals and workshops around the world. During discussions about the contemporary use of fairy tales, these gentlemen sparked my interest into the affect fairy tales have on the young audience members who watch TYA productions.

I chose to interview these three directors about their approach to directing fairy tales as well as their personal reaction to frightening and fearful images onstage. They represent a segment of TYA directors who strive to present fairy tales beyond the sugary depictions that were prevalent in the twentieth century.

Kevin Ehrhart, Omaha Theater Company

Kevin Ehrhart, who works as both a director and dramaturg at the Omaha Theater Company in Omaha, NE, has been highly influenced by Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment* and Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette’s *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*. Bettelheim and Moore’s exploration of the psyche provide Ehrhart the academic backbone from which he bases many of his dramaturgical and directorial courses of action.
A Psychological Approach to Directing Fairy Tales

Ehrhart’s passion for a psychological view of fairy tales became apparent with his directorial debut of James Still’s *Jack Frost* at the Omaha Theater Company. During this process, Ehrhart researched fairy tales and found deeper meanings that could be used easily to create a multi-faceted work that would fulfill both the artist’s meaningful expression and the audience’s subconscious.

The structure of a fairy tale evolved over centuries of telling and retelling before the eventual publication and subsequent retelling through stage productions, movies, television and music. To Ehrhart, the elements that endured throughout the centuries deserve serious consideration. “It’s like how diamonds are so valuable because of the evolution they took in a geological sense” (Ehrhart Personal Interview). An understanding of fairy tale evolution leads to an understanding of how it affects young audience members.

Moore and Gillette’s book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover* states the generations of evolution created four fairy tale characters (or “quadrants”) that work together as parts of one person’s psyche. The first step Ehrhart takes in directing a fairy tale is to examine how the characters fit together to create a single psyche. The imbalance of the four quadrants produces conflict within the story and finding the balance brings about resolution. For instance, in “Jack and the Beanstalk,” the king quadrant (symbolized by the domineering mother) dominates the warrior quadrant (symbolized by Jack’s inability to assert himself). The warrior finds balance with the king by climbing the beanstalk, defeating the giant, and restoring order to the household. By allowing Jack the inept warrior to take control of a situation, a submissive young person finds the courage to assert himself/herself. Unraveling the characters in this way allows Ehrhart to see how each quadrant works together to achieve perfect balance in the end.
Moore, a psychologist, uses the four quadrants of the psyche as a means of aligning one’s personality, and points to fairy tales as a subconscious way to achieve this end. The fairy tale characters’ conversations become a metaphorical representation of a dialogue between quadrants. Balancing out the power between characters onstage helps to achieve the same balance within one’s psyche. The characters in fairy tales begin out of balance and, by the conclusion of the tale, each character should work in harmony with the other three. Ehrhart’s understanding of Moore’s approach allows him, as director to “... think about the different areas to open a dialogue with these different quadrants” (Ehrhart Personal Interview). The puzzle pieces of the psyche lay the foundation of his approach.

He also embraces the seeming nonsensical nature of fairy tales. The imagination of a child controls the fantasy world that Ehrhart’s productions create. He sets aside his preconceived notions to let the imaginative child step forward in his productions of classic fairy tales.

Fairy tales are great for kids to deal with their own psychological issues. These things are ridiculous in the rational adult world. ‘Oh good, this guy’s going to throw beans into his yard, grow a giant stalk up above the clouds and find a giant up there.’ But its not meant to be literal, it’s fantasy and that’s how it should be. But in the psyche of the mind it is rational. (Ehrhart Personal Interview)

The use of fantastical elements plays a subconscious role in a young person’s conscious life. A child’s mind grasps the metaphors presented in the imaginative world of fairy tales glean real life lessons. Ehrhart welcomes the supposedly irrational metaphor and allows it to guide his creation of the magical fairy tale world.
In 2007, Ehrhart directed *Little Red Riding Hood and the Three Little Pigs* by Moses Goldberg. The original script is set in a modern world with realistic characters. Turning to his research of Bettelheim and Moore, Ehrhart directed the production in the magical world of fairy tales. Rather than attempting to calm the audience by saying that the characters were actually actors who were never eaten, he allowed the young people to experience the psychological benefits of the metaphoric tale. “It’s not realistic, but for kids it’s very calming to know that Grandma might be gobbled up by a wolf for a second and hop back out and be Grandma again” (Ehrhart Personal Interview).

Through his insights into the young person’s mind, Ehrhart hopes to create plays that teach the audience and allow them to grow from the experience. “The most well-adjusted, confident people are those who have had that [cathartic] experience” (Ehrhart Personal Interview). The fairy tale world remains relevant to the real world because of the underlying message that comes through. This drives Ehrhart to ask, “What’s the fear? What’s the outcome?” (Ehrhart Personal Interview) before deciding whether or not to include fear in his productions. Often the fear in a tale connects directly to a conclusion that grants young people courage to face that fear in real life. “If it doesn’t happen in a fantasy world, it happens in their real world” (Ehrhart Personal Interview). Ehrhart finds the gratuitous fear to be what many parents/caregivers abhor. Unfortunately, parents/caregivers often mistake the gratuitous and harmful form for the structured fear that Ehrhart embraces. “I am a strong believer that the catharsis is needed. Any time you soften those it just weakens the effects” (Ehrhart Personal Interview).

Fairy tales have evolved to give a unique survival skill to those who listen to them. Ehrhart advocates the happy ending, even through the darkness found throughout the tale. “Surviving today
takes a lot of courage, and a lot of courage to see the world in a positive light. The hallmark of a good fairy tale is that people will be there to help you along the way” (Ehrhart Personal Interview).

The Playwright and the Dramaturg

In addition to his work as a director at the Omaha Theater Company, Ehrhart also served as dramaturg for playwright-in-residence, Brian Guehring. Ehrhart’s primary role was to act as an advocate for the story. During the development workshops for Guehring’s adaptation of *The Brave Little Tailor*, Ehrhart offered his unique understanding of fairy tales into the discussion. This allowed the generations of evolution to be worked into the script. “I don’t know why it’s in there, but it should be because it survived that long” (Ehrhart Personal Interview). As a dramaturg, Ehrhart resists taking a heavy-handed approach with the playwright. “I don’t want to try to force that on them, but I did want to initially bring it up and consider that this has made it through hundreds of generations because of the way it addresses the youth psyche. Then they could take it from there and do what they want” (Ehrhart Personal Interview).

When working on script development, Ehrhart encourages the playwright to view the fairy tales as a benefit for the family. He appreciates a fairy tale’s ability to create a common language between parents and their children. “Kids do not see the world the same way we [adults] do and parents do not have the tools to speak to kids with metaphor the way fairy tales do” (Ehrhart Personal Interview). Fairy tales can create a dialogue in metaphor and ultimately become an opportunity for young people to speak more candidly, considering the parents are open to deciphering the metaphor.
Dougie Irvine, Visible Fictions

Dougie Irvine, Artistic Producer of Visible Fictions in Glasgow, Scotland, directed TYA productions that toured internationally, including the United States, providing him a distinct worldwide view of theatre audiences.

Irvine, who guest lectures at Strathclyde University in Glasgow, proposes the following question to undergraduate students: “Would you make a show for kids about child abandonment, robbery, kidnapping, imprisonment, murder and cannibalism? What if it was called ‘Hansel and Gretel?’” (Irvine Telephone Interview). Irvine’s work challenges the young audience to make connections the show and their own lives, and prepares them to successfully understand their world. He views fairy tales as a marriage of challenge and preparation for the future.

Challenging a Young Audience

In describing his directorial approach to fairy tales, Irvine stresses the importance of the subliminal challenges the story presents to the young person. Through a magical world, fairy tales create obstacles, such as a wolf or witch, that young people are able to identify as they face on a daily basis. While not as surreal as dreams, fairy tales offer an otherworldly atmosphere that the subconscious can explore. The mind can then create meaning from the fantasy world offered by the theatre artist. “Ensure that your artistic images open up resonances rather than shut them down. I don’t want to spoon-feed it” (Irvine Telephone Interview).

Because fairy tales are “. . . sweeping in their emotional and intellectual scope” (Irvine Telephone Interview), Irvine can tailor the tale to find the most effective way to communicate with the show’s audience. By opening up this line of communication, theatre artists challenge their audiences to think on a deeper level. The child is raised to a higher philosophical plane, which leads
to further self-understanding and self-reliance. “It [a fairy tale] gives them a point that they connect. Young people can be challenged by subject matter but a responsible theatre-maker speaks to their age” (Irvine Telephone Interview). This responsibility is paramount; fairy tales can help achieve the goal.

The fantastical and magical elements of fairy tales provide adults a way to reach young people. By removing the audience from the real world, they can then explore the ramifications of actions for those characters in another world. “They’re so rooted in the ‘other’ that makes it safe to explore real issues” (Irvine Telephone Interview). This safe distance from the real world opens the dialogue to explore challenging issues, difficult to approach with young ages.

Irvine stressed the importance of using fairy tales to explore the frightening aspects of life, in order to avoid a lopsided view of the world as perpetually happy. Rather than avoid such topics, people need to explore the fairy tale world to protect themselves in the real world; understanding the dark side of fairy tales provides tools to conquer the dark side of humanity. “I’m interested in finding the best way to protect them” (Irvine Telephone Interview). By removing dark topics from the fairy tale, Irvine fears we negate an important element, which remained integral to the tale through generations of storytelling. Ultimately, the removal of fear removes the opportunity to teach the young person how to overcome it. The stage becomes a safe space, even when a show presents danger. “It’s crucial that we allow young people to experience that [fear] safely and become as round a people as possible” (Irvine Telephone Interview).

Preparing a Young Audience

Fairy tales challenge young people to step toward the ultimate goal of becoming well-adjusted adults. According to Irvine, the power of the fairy tale begins with the structure it offers.
Through the re-creation of essential elements of life, fairy tales mirror real life in a metaphorical manner. “[A fairy tale] touches on those archetypes. They give a scope for a youngster to latch onto” (Irvine Telephone Interview). The relevance of fairy tales in contemporary life lies in their ability to create benchmarks in the audience’s minds.

Upon identifying those benchmarks, the theatre artist must create an onstage world that invites the young audience to experience the challenges proposed by the story. “It’s about how you find a way to keep the archetypal patterns” (Irvine Telephone Interview). The “how” captures the attention of the target audience. It enables the practitioner to create a connection between an ancient tale and a contemporary audience, making it relevant to modern society. The classical structure of the tale creates the foundation from which a TYA practitioner builds a production that speaks to the audience. By incorporating the identified psychological patterns into the creative presentation of the fairy tale, theatre artists both challenge and entertain.

The first step to creating a production that provides the audience with the necessary tools is capturing the attention of the contemporary audience. “Those archetypal energies are all within us. The challenge of the theatre-makers is finding a form to make them extra-relevant today. That’s why they’re still told today” (Irvine Telephone Interview). Without an artistic approach well suited to the audience, people look at the tale as antiquated and irrelevant and quickly become disengaged.

If the audience does not join in the journey, they lose the psychological benefits contained within it. The culmination of fairy tales ends in what Irvine believes is “... the nearest thing to a cathartic experience” (Irvine Telephone Interview). He considers catharsis from the Aristotelian view: “A common interpretation of this term observes that katharsis [sic] is a Greek medical term and suggests that, in response to Plato, Aristotle avers that tragedy does not encourage passions but
in fact rids the spectator of them” (Carlson 18). Aristotle viewed the catharsis as a necessary component and indispensible benefit of tragedy. Similarly, fairy tales purge damaging emotions from young people in a controlled environment.

Fairy tale heroes may face impossible odds, but the catharsis occurs when they successfully overcome the obstacles. This feeling of success purges all the anxiety and fears built up throughout the show. To create these anxieties in order to release them allows a vicarious experience of a real life situation. Later in life when the young person is faced with similar anxieties, he/she will then understand the state of mind and feel prepared to handle it.

Adults may attempt to protect and shelter young people, however it is crucial to their development that young people are exposed to fear in a controlled manner. The real world can scare young people. The frightening world in a fairy tale shows the young audience how a hero overcomes fear and darkness. Irvine believes young people need to see that triumph. “I’m not advocating a blood and guts horror show for eight year olds, but a bit of controlled fear is good for us” (Irvine Telephone Interview).

Exposing young people to fairy tales creates learning experiences that stray from the didacticism of contemporary “issue” plays. The challenges the tales present allow the audience to learn about themselves and the world around them on a subconscious level that proves more effective than didactic scenarios. “Fairy tales equip us for life. There are dark forces in the world and its part of life” (Irvine Telephone Interview).
Andy Packer, Artistic Director of Slingsby Theatre Company in Adelaide, Australia, directs shows that have toured internationally, including North America. *The Uses of Enchantment* influenced Packer in both the creation of Slingsby and in each show he has directed for the company. “Crafting sophisticated, emotionally complex and original theatre productions for audiences aged ten through adulthood, Slingsby produces ‘tour ready’ shows that have extremely high production values with the capacity to perform in a variety of theatres and spaces” (Slingsby Theatre Company). While Packer has not produced classic fairy tales with Slingsby, the fairy tale structure of each show is evident, and makes their shows modern fairy tales.

The Creation of New Fairy Tales

The body of work Packer creates at Slingsby is geared toward an older crowd than the standard fairy tale audience. Ages ten through adult are invited into wondrous worlds, all of which are influenced by Packer’s use of *The Uses of Enchantment*. “Our aim is to make theatre for adults and people beginning their career as adults. We make work that’s complex and metaphorical about the trials of life and speaks to the infinite” (Packer Telephone Interview). Packer believes that no matter what a person’s age, he/she can find a lesson in a fairy tale. Fairy tales are not obsolete, and theatre artists should use the structure commonly found in fairy tales to create new shows that speak to the audience.

The psychological goal of fairy tales is to create well-rounded and well-adjusted adults through the tale’s magical experiences that will forever remain suitable lessons for young people. According to Packer, the metaphorical nature of fairy tales creates a way to speak to people at various stages of their emotional development. “They’re very difficult to pin down. They don’t mean what
you think they mean. Children or an audience will identify with a character at different points in your life. So that means they remain relevant. They also assist children to overcome challenges and fears” (Packer Telephone Interview).

Slingsby’s inaugural production, *The Tragical Life of Cheeseboy* by Finegan Kruckemeyer, provides an interesting example of creating a contemporary fairy tale using the structure of classic tales as explored by Bettelheim. As the title indicates, the main character, Cheeseboy, moves from one tragedy to another. Similar to Aristotelian tragic heroes, Cheeseboy’s decisions lead him down a tragic path. It begins with a planet made of cheese, which a meteor obliterates. Everything on the planet is lost, except for Cheeseboy, who finds himself on a new planet looking for a way to survive.

This show speaks to that point in one's life when one struggles to be free from parental control. “It’s really a very extreme version of when we all have to eventually leave home and be independent. Around [age] ten or twelve, young people are having a bit of tension with their parents: they love them but need independence” (Packer Telephone Interview). Through the teenage years, people continue strained relationships to prove their ability to survive. *The Tragical Life of Cheeseboy* provides its preteen and teenage audience the opportunity to experience vicarious independence.

This journey also speaks to an adult audience on a different level. Adults have gained the independence for which teenagers fight. Separation from parents is no longer the desired outcome. For many adults, it becomes a feared outcome. “When your parents actually do die, you’re alone in the world” (Packer Telephone Interview). Cheeseboy’s eventual triumph over loneliness and his ability to survive without his parents becomes a comfort to those confronted with losing loved ones.

Watching an outlandish tale about a boy made of cheese has the same benefits as a tale about children eating a house made of candy. The surrealism draws the attention of the audience
and immerses them in a far-away world. This allows one’s inner self to connect to the story without the danger of it interfering with the real world. “I’m interested in the epic. We can make domestic work, but I’m more interested in what’s going on in our internal world. Fairy tale does that a bit better, I think. It’s a space I enjoy working in” (Packer Telephone Interview).

Packer literalizes the audience leaving the real world and stepping into one of fantasy. “The whole performance space for Cheeseboy is a magical place to be. And we set that up at the beginning and I think that makes a difference” (Packer Telephone Interview). A storyteller enters the lobby and beckons the audience into a tent to sit on rugs and benches. The tent exists in a world with no specific time or place. The purpose of this place is to tell the story of Cheeseboy. This immersion in a fantastical world takes one out of his/her previous space and into one that exists for that moment and only that moment. “It needs to have a sense of timelessness. We’re not trying to make über contemporary work, even though they’re new stories” (Packer Telephone Interview).

Despite the tragedy that dominates the world of Cheeseboy, Packer strives to create a feeling of happiness by the end of the show. “We want to give them something that ultimately gives them a sense of hope, giving a young audience the emotional tools to cope with their own lives” (Packer Telephone Interview). Watching Cheeseboy make the decision to venture out on his own teaches the audience that while the journey may be difficult, it will eventually lead to having the tools and courage to survive independently. This happy ending does not present the characters in an ideal situation. It is open-ended. However the audience senses Cheeseboy will live happily ever after, without explicitly stating so. “We create honest work that’s ultimately joyful and uplifting” (Packer Telephone Interview). The trials and misfortunes experienced throughout the show create the
payoff of a happy ending. Through the darkness and bleakness, the promise of better times encourages the audience.

Packer aims to create emotional work with which the audience can identify. While he does not shy away from fearful elements, he does not seek them out. “I think it’s about how [fear] is handled and concluded. A young audience loves to be frightened to a certain extent. I don’t want to psychologically harm them. I try to be honest but not gratuitously terrify. Not to scare but maybe to induce tears of sadness and joy. But to scare in a truly psychological way is definitely not our aim” (Packer Telephone Interview). An emotional connection to a story can create apprehension within the audience. “Some people find it too emotional to present to young people. We’re making work that in a way is inspired by Danish theatre that doesn’t shy away from darkness. In North America, some are a little more cautious” (Packer Telephone Interview). However, caution need not mean resistance. A shift toward the acceptance of international TYA presentations in America has created a niche for these productions to succeed there.

Packer’s understanding of the psychology of fairy tales drives his work. “By viewing or reading a fairy tale, you can overcome your own fears and concerns in the situation. The solution is when something magic happens. Completely impossible. The impossible tends to occur in life. I think that’s the optimism that we love. Slingsby itself was the impossible” (Packer Telephone Interview). By embracing the impossible, Packer theatrically investigates the inner journey of his audience. “Theatre and art explore a different part of the human experience, so there’s plenty to explore. Fantastic challenge and opportunity for us to make work really” (Packer Telephone Interview).
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Fairy tales have been a fundamental form of entertainment for centuries. From generation to generation, storytellers have molded and shaped their tales in order to fit the needs of their audience, constantly revising stories originally spoken while sitting around a campfire. This important evolution has created tales with a deep psychological significance that can still capture the attention of contemporary young audiences.

According to Bruno Bettelheim and Jack Zipes, fairy tales naturally provide a deeper understanding of one’s humanity. For TYA practitioners interested in creating thought-provoking and challenging theatre, fairy tales are filled with metaphors that speak subconsciously to a young audience in a way that ignites psychological growth and change. By producing adaptations designed to embrace the psychological benefits of fairy tales, theatre create theatre that stimulates growth within the audience’s psyche.

While creating fairy tales with psychological benefits, theatre artists carefully consider the metanarrative present within the story. Stories such as “Cinderella” can easily reinforce unrealistic goals of great beauty or encourage an audience member to rely on others in order to solve his/her problems. Scripts with unattainable metanarratives are generally inappropriate when performed on a TYA stage for an impressionable audience.

A desirable adaptation would ideally utilize the information gained through an understanding of the psychological ramifications of fairy tales. TYA practitioners can present shows that will guide young people through the confusing path toward adulthood and challenge the audience to
subconsciously navigate their way through the fairy tale conflict and how that conflict relates to the real world.

Tatar posits that a published fairy tale reflects the values of the era when it was first printed. This does not, however, negate its usefulness today. TYA practitioners can still find relevance in contemporary society by understanding and deciphering the metaphor. An exact replication of the Grimm Brothers or Andersen’s tales is not the best course of action, considering societal differences. However, through careful examination of the original published works, contemporary theatre artists would benefit from the time-tested structure. This structure in turn becomes the foundation from which contemporary productions are built. As with previous generations, there is an allotment for some evolution to reflect the norms and values of the modern era. This creates dynamic and compelling storytelling that speak to a contemporary young audience while the fairy tale remains grounded in previous generations of evolution and development.

Adults are often astonished by how frightening fairy tales can be. They are not the foolish and uplifting little stories people often associate with fairy tales. Rather, they occur in hostile lands where the hero must fight for survival. Witches and wolves seem to inhabit even the most benign places and exist only to wreak havoc on the unwitting person or animal that happens upon them. Adults may see this world as outlandish; however, a child may see the world in which he/she lives as an equally hostile land.

With the powerful inclusion of an element of fear in fairy tales, the overall story’s strength intensifies if it concludes with an uplifting ending. If a tale provides hope for young people, it provides even more benefits. When a young audience member witnesses a hero go through the trials and eventually triumphs, he/she knows that they too can triumph over the evils in their world. The
fairy tale hero’s victory over the fear proves to the child that the child too can triumph over his/her fears. To show the hero constantly failing shows the audience they too will certainly fail. Life is frightening enough without believing failure is inevitable.

Presenting controlled fear through a fairy tale can also benefit the psyche of young audiences. Allowing a young person to experience controlled fear while watching a show onstage creates an environment in which he/she can also begin to understand his/her response to fear, which begins the process of conquering the fear. When parents/caregivers shelter young people from experiencing this vicarious form of fear, the young person becomes even more vulnerable when experiencing that same fear in the real world. Allowing a controlled exploration of age-appropriate fright provides a young person with a set of tools necessary to overcome it. A fairy tale creates a magical world where anything can happen, where all evil can be conquered, and where the hope for the happy ending pulls the hero and the audience through even the darkest of moments.

The fairy tales provides a unique way to explore fear with the use of extensive metaphor. By setting real-life fears and emotions in a fantasy world, a young person can enjoy the tale as entertainment while his/her subconscious learns new and valuable life lessons. Fear always feels more dangerous when rooted in the real world young people inhabit everyday. The witches and wolves from a fairy tale world represent real-life villains without the danger of actually meeting one in reality.

Restructuring the role of the fairy tale in the TYA landscape will take time because it is historically entwined with theatre in America. From the inception of TYA as a discipline in theatre, fairy tales have provided an anthology of ready-made stories to present onstage. Being caught up in the world of princes and princesses, early projects shifted the focus away from many beneficial
aspects. Spectacle was the primary purpose of TYA and the magical kingdoms created in fairy tales were spectacles in themselves. The prevailing school of thought advocated the need for flashy sets, costumes and lights but not much more.

Many contemporary TYA practitioners look deeply at a story’s metanarrative and strive to create work that is relevant in the life of their audience. With this characterization of TYA, fairy tales often are viewed as antiquated relics that no longer have a place onstage. However, a serious look into the psychology of the tale reveals pertinence to the twenty-first century audience. The challenge of fairy tales now becomes how an artist will present the tale in such a way that is relevant to the life of an individual in the audience. The production will either capture the audience and create an invaluable learning experience, or the production will lose the audience's attention and squander the opportunity.

Theatre artists such as Kevin Ehrhart, Dougie Irvine and Andy Packer have had success in their productions where the audience subconsciously interacts with the stories at a higher level of thinking. Often garnishing critical and commercial success, these directors demonstrate the need for fairy tale productions that keep the psychological needs of their target age group in the forefront. The inclusion of social and emotional development of young people in the production process creates timeless shows that can affect audiences across generations and around the world.

Ehrhart’s, Irvine’s, and Packer’s productions demonstrate there is a place for fairy tales in contemporary TYA. Their productions also illustrate the need to re-envision the purpose behind fairy tales in order to find success on today’s stage. Whether a new work or classic fairy tale, the psychologically powerful adaptations that speak to a young audience will allow them to grow from the experience.
As long as TYA companies continue to produce sanitized fairy tales, audiences will never understand the sweeping benefits one receives from the stories. TYA practitioners should challenge themselves to move beyond the tame tales commonly offered and seek out adaptations or new works that will subconsciously teach young people about the world around them. Only then can the stereotype of fairy tales as a lesser form of entertainment for contemporary audiences be remedied.
APPENDIX: IRB PERMISSION LETTER
Not Human Subjects Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board  
FWA0000351, Exp. 10/8/11, IRB00001138

To: Amanda H. Kibler

Date: May 18, 2009

IRB Number: SBE-09-06187

Study Title: Once Upon a Time: Making Fairy Tales Relevant to Contemporary Audiences

Dear Researcher:

After reviewing the materials that you have submitted, the UCF Institutional Review Board has determined that your project does not fit the definition of human subjects research/research because you will be seeing the opinions of professionals/experts in your field. Therefore, IRB review is not needed.

Thank you for your time in resolving this issue. Please continue to submit applications that involve human subject activities that could potentially involve human subjects as research participants.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 05/18/2009 12:10:56 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator
REFERENCES


Ehrhart, Kevin. Personal interview. 8 Feb. 2010.


Visible Fictions: Vibrant, high quality and accessible theatre for young people and adults alike. 2010. Visible Fictions. 16 Feb 2010 <visiblefictions.co.uk>.

