What Makes a Monster and What Makes a Man: Uncovering the Key to Disney Theatrical Productions's Success in Transferring Animated Films to Broadway

by
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Dedication

To Cozset Jones, without whom I would have never found my love for theatre and wouldn't have had opportunities to work on Disney musicals in my formative years as an artist. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

All our dreams can come true, if we have the courage to pursue them."

-Walt Disney

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Abstract

What Makes a Monster and What Makes a Man: Uncovering the Key to Disney Theatrical Productions's Success in Transferring Animated Films to Broadway

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This thesis explores the critical and commercial success of Disney Theatrical Productions on Broadway. Specifically, the six stage adaptations of animated films on Broadway are examined in order to find the key points of success. Extensive research from critic reviews, academic journals, scripts, and financial reports have shaped this thesis. With all of this information, I was able to determine that Disney Theatrical Productions's success is found through the inclusion of nostalgic elements to support beloved, timeless stories; contextually-motivated spectacle with substance; strong concepts with unified creative teams; and involvement of the audience in the narrative in order to best appeal to two separate, important target audiences and to prove artistically innovative enough for critical approval.

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A Whole New World: Mickey Mouse Finds a House on Broadway

"I only hope that we never lose sight of one thing–
that it was all started by a mouse."
-Walt Disney

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there was a man with a sketch of a mouse and a dream. From these humble beginnings, a multi-billion dollar corporation was formed, full of talking animals, enchanted objects, princesses, and magic. This is the Walt Disney Company, one of the foremost entertainment companies in the world and known for animated films and theme parks, both domestically and internationally. When an entertainment giant has become a master in themed entertainment, films, and television to the point of entertainment monopoly, what media form can it turn to next? The Walt Disney Company decided to shine its spotlight on theatrical productions on Broadway; after all, their movies are musicals, so surely they would translate to the stage with ease. Still, how exactly did Mickey Mouse find a house on Broadway? Disney opened up a whole new world for theatre in New York City, but this magic carpet ride experienced some turbulence along the way.

This thesis serves to examine the historical and cultural influences and the critical and consumer opinions that have shaped the canon of Disney Theatrical Productions. Six Broadway adaptations of Disney's animated films will be mainly focused on, as these reveal Disney's commercial and critical reception and successes or failures in the theatrical field. These shows are *Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King, Tarzan, The Little*

Mermaid, *Aladdin,* and *Frozen.* Before delving into the logistics and the artistic developments of the theatrical division's Broadway productions it is essential to understand the history that brought Disney to Broadway in the first place. Additionally, this history allows a timeline stretching from 1993 to early 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in which to place the successes and failures discussed herein.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a highly profitable era for Walt Disney Animation, even being called "The Disney Renaissance" (Consequence). Disney CEO Michael Eisner's decision to hire theatrically-trained Alan Menken and Howard Ashman to create music for *The Little Mermaid* catapulted Disney back into its prime of "music-driven, ornately drawn fairy tales," which the company sustained for a decade of success in film (Consequence). In fact, five out of the six theatrical productions discussed in this study are adapted from animated films from the Disney Renaissance: *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Lion King*, *Tarzan*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Aladdin.* These five films combined grossed a worldwide total of approximately $1,986,382,000 during their initial releases (Box Office Mojo). At the same time, however, the Parks, Experiences, and Products division of the company was taking hits right and left.

Following the success of Tokyo Disneyland after its opening in 1983, Disney turned its eye to another international location for a theme park: Paris, France. Euro Disneyland was doomed to fail before it even had its opening day on April 12th, 1992, with prominent figures in France declaring the park a "cultural Chernobyl" which served as a "plot to indoctrinate the French, and French children in particular, in the decadent American cult of kitsch-worship." In the opinions of the French people, Disney favored

"uniformity, superficiality, and commercialism" over "invention and artistry" (Mikelbank). Soon after opening, France suffered an economic recession leading to billions of dollars lost on Euro Disneyland. In 1991, Disney announced a three billion dollar expansion for Disneyland in California following the failed concept for a theme park on the water at Long Beach Port in California. "Bullish" Disney would be charging ahead with a remake of Walt Disney World's Epcot for the West Coast, affectionately termed "Westcot" (*Los Angeles Times*). However, Westcot was soon canceled due to the failure of Euro Disney.

During the Disney Renaissance, the company faced the unique issue of cultural saturation. The highly successful films led to toys, video games, spin-off television shows, commercials, and even licensing agreements with companies like McDonald's. Disney was accused by many of being a "huckster" and "slapping the Mickey Mouse ears" on anything that could be used to further the Disney brand, regardless of the original creator (Connor). This cultural ingratiation created a kind of split in the worldwide society. "Many Americans reserve this special place in their heart for brand names. A Mickey Mouse watch isn't just a watch. It embodies all the things we associate with Disney -- happiness, childhood, innocence ... *magic*" (Connor). At the same time, however, the Europeans showed obvious distaste for the Mouse, wary of Disney's cultish pull over the American people. Something had to be done to restore the consumers' and critics' opinions of the Walt Disney Company. CEO Michael Eisner seemed to believe the solution could be found in the legitimacy of artistry by turning to the world of theatre.

Eisner had been approached by other executives on a few different occasions with ideas to bring Disney to New York City for theatre, but Eisner was wary of associating the Disney brand with "the porn-plagued, drug-infested, crime-ridden block of 42nd Street" (Davies). Additionally, Eisner was newly burned by the failure of Euro Disney and not exactly eager to have another flop attached to his name. However, Eisner's opinion about Disney forming a theatrical branch changed completely when *New York Times* critic Frank Rich released his 1991 "The Year in the Arts" and declared that "the best Broadway musical score of 1991 was that written by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman for the Disney animated movie *Beauty and the Beast.*" Rich even went so far as to call it "The Hit that Got Away" (Rich). This glowing opinion from a renowned critic of *theatre*, not film, was enough to convince Eisner to find the Mouse a house on Broadway.

In early 1993 Disney CEO Michael Eisner approached Ron Logan, the executive vice president of Walt Disney Entertainment, to assist in bringing Disney to Broadway. Logan's role in Walt Disney Entertainment had required him to create, cast, and produce all of the live entertainment seen in the Disney theme parks. His prior experience in both the corporation and the entertainment business at large made him the prime candidate, within the existing Disney infrastructure, to helm this venture to Broadway. Because of Eisner's lack of theatrical experience and Logan's wealth of knowledge in producing live entertainment, they agreed that Logan would become the founder and first president of Walt Disney Theatrical Production, Ltd. (UCF). Logan gathered his team from the staged version of *Beauty and the Beast* in the parks and created a pitch for the company's

leadership which soon landed Logan and his new-to-Broadway design team in New York City (Scrimgeour). In his role as president of Walt Disney Theatrical Production, Logan led the creative team through its debut Broadway production of *Beauty and the Beast*, which received mixed reviews from critics but was generally commercially successful, grossing $429,158,458 during its thirteen-year run (Culwell-Block).

When this success revealed further opportunities for Disney in New York City, Eisner decided to switch gears and fully commit to Disney's foray into theatre by appointing Peter Schneider and Thomas Schumacher as co-presidents of Disney Theatrical Productions. Schumacher served as president of Walt Disney Feature Animation for most of the Disney Renaissance, with Schneider serving as vice president. Prior to working for Disney, the theatrically-experienced Schumacher had been the associate director for the Los Angeles Festival of the Arts where he helped present the American premiere of Cirque du Soleil; he had also been employed by the Mark Taper Forum, the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival, and the Los Angeles Ballet (American Theatre Wing). The previous partnership between Schneider and Schumacher brought a higher level of teamwork to Disney Theatricals. Their previous work overseeing the animated films brought a greater depth and connection to the story to the theatrical branch. Schumacher's previous theatrical experience also made him well suited for the position, which he still holds today. About this strategic hiring move, Eisner stated, "*Beauty and the Beast.*..(was) not done by Peter (Schneider) and Tom (Schumacher). We just sort of did them out of corporate. When theater became a more strategic direction for the

company, we had to make a more formal arrangement...*The Lion King*...enhanced our brand...We got lucky. But Peter and Tom made that happen" (Singer).

Schneider and Schumacher also helped the Walt Disney Company create a second theatre division in order to "guide [Disney's] audiences to the projects...right for them" (Simonson). In January 2000, Hyperion Theatricals was formed and, along with Disney Theatrical Productions, would fall under the Buena Vista Theatrical Group. This division would allow Disney, under the moniker Hyperion Theatricals, to produce adult-driven content like *Aida*, in which there is an infamous rape scene that would not appeal to Disney's family-friendly crowd. At the same time, Disney Theatrical Productions would continue to produce mainly adaptations of Disney's animated films marketed to families. For the purposes of this research, only adaptations of animated films produced by Disney Theatrical Productions will be explored; anything else is outside the scope of this thesis. After Schneider departed in 2001 to form his own production company, Schumacher became the sole president of the, once again re-named, Disney Theatrical Group, a position which he still holds today.

Disney's typical consumers and the average Broadway theatregoers did not exist in a perfect Venn diagram, so Disney had to find a way to marry together the expected magical Disney experience and the experience of live theatre. After all, in 1994, the year of Disney Theatrical Productions' Broadway debut, a single-day admission to Walt Disney World cost $36 (Scipioni), while the advance ticket sales for *Beauty and the Beast* the same year had ticket prices ranging from $20-$65 (Witchel). The considerable uptick in prices for the best seats did not correlate to the lessened aspects of the

experience; after all, a Broadway show is a much shorter experience than a full theme park day and without much of the draw of a fully-themed experience at the parks. Because of this, the entire team at Disney Theatrical Productions had to figure out how to warrant asking a consumer to spend the same amount of money on a roughly two-and-a-half-hour stage play as on a full day frolic through a fully-realized, immersive theme park experience with rides, interactions, and experiences. In order to merge the theme park experience with the theatregoing experience, DTP had to create a full family experience out of the theatre-going outing: from dining, shopping, transportation, and exterior ambience to front-of-house and in-house decoration, management, and theming. To accomplish this, the Walt Disney Company had to commit to enhancing the theatre district in New York City.

On February 3rd, 1994 Disney CEO Michael Eisner, New York City mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, and New York governor Mario M. Cuomo announced a revitalizing deal: the Walt Disney Company, mere months ahead of its first Broadway opening, would acquire the historic New Amsterdam Theatre as part of the 42nd Street Development Project. At this point, Disney had already committed to opening *Beauty and the Beast* at the Palace Theatre. However, the executives agreed that they wanted to have a permanent theatrical home and turned their focus to the New Amsterdam. The New Amsterdam had long been known as the home of Florenz Ziegfeld's Follies, but the Great Depression marked the beginning of the New Amsterdam's five-decade decline before it fell into complete disrepair. When Disney acquired the theatre, it was long past its days of glory; mushrooms were growing in the house, the boxes had collapsed, and there were

two feet of standing water in the basement. It took over 400 technicians two full years to restore the theater. The New Amsterdam reopened in 1997 with the premiere screening of Disney's animated film *Hercules* followed by *The Lion King*, which opened on November 13th, 1997 (New Amsterdam Theatre).

Even prior to Disney's acquisition of the New Amsterdam Theatre, plans for the revitalization of the theatre district had been discussed ad nauseam. In the late 1980s plans for the redevelopment of 42nd Street had been scrapped after a massive real estate collapse, but a new plan for entertainment and retail in the district was adopted in 1993 (Weber). After much discussion as to the future of the district and options for revitalization, Disney, the New York City government, and the state of New York finally came to a deal in which Disney would furnish $8 million to renovate the theatre. The state and city would lend $21 million at 3% interest on a 30-year loan. In return, Disney would return a mere 2% of the New Amsterdam's gross ticket receipts to the city and state (Nelson 72).

The city and state would still receive their fair share. This massive renovation would create 490 jobs with $16.8 million in wages and salaries, and an additional $1.8 million in tax revenue would go to the city and state. After opening, the theatre was estimated to bring in $53.1 million annually, with 385 jobs created (Martin). Choosing this deal and this particular location, with its centrality to Times Square, allowed Disney to have a certain level of control over their neighbors in order to shape this now-metropolitan mecca to their specifications as the development project was desperately in need of big corporations like Disney to revitalize the area.

However, due to the advantageous nature of Disney's acquisition of New York City's New Amsterdam Theatre through these tax benefits and the low-interest loan, theatrical producers in the city caused an uproar against Disney and the largely controversial deal. First, the existing theatre production entities were angered that Disney acquired this deal that had been withheld from them in previous inquiries as to the future of the New Amsterdam. Additionally, the issue of territorial East Coast versus West Coast preferences intermingled with the problems of the seemingly low brow nature of Disney's themed entertainment compared to the high brow Broadway theatre scene. In a 1995 *The Drama Review* article, Steve Nelson writes, "Can America's foremost purveyor of family theme parks and movies find a home in New York City's foremost sleaze zone?... the New Amsterdam Theatre [is] collecting dust on a block largely the province of porn emporiums and the homeless." Many critics were annoyed with cocky CEO Eisner, who stated, "Often where we go, other people will follow. You'll see 42nd Street become the Great White Way that it was" (Weber). Disney was quite obviously sanitizing and romanticizing 42nd Street and the theatre district and taking New York City away from its citizens and giving it over to tourists. This was infuriating to the critics and producing entities of New York.

Despite the extremely vocal negative opinions of some of the critics, many artistic leaders in the city seemed to support the Disney deal. Actors' Equity Association president Ron Silver stated that the Disney deal was "a much needed public-private initiative to revitalize our commercial theatre," and Municipal Art Society president Kent L. Barwick said, "There is no more powerful magnet than Disney for bringing other

entertainment uses to 42nd Street" (Martin). Although certain members of the 42nd Street Development Project disagreed with Barwick's claim, they could not deny that "the Disney deal gave [them] leverage in negotiations with [other developers in the project]" (Martin). This leverage assisted greatly in the cleaning up of the 42nd Street area and the astounding growth of Times Square as it quickly turned into a tourist-driven area of the city. In this way, the deal between the city/state governments and Disney truly only brought benefit to the area by creating jobs, generating tax revenue, and supporting the economy by attracting tourists. However, the critics of the deal focused only on losing the New York they were accustomed to experiencing. This sharp contrast of public opinion about Disney before they had even renovated a theater is reflected in the fairly steep difference in critical and commercial opinions once Disney was actually producing shows on Broadway.

With corporate financing, it was hardly surprising to see the concessions offered to Disney through this deal. It is clear that the corporation broadly supports and funds DTP, but it is important for this study to determine how DTP contributes financially to the Walt Disney Company as a whole, despite the small subsidiary's difficulty to make a large scale difference in the corporation's annual revenue, which for fiscal 2019 was 69.6 billion USD. In the fiscal year financial reports for the company, Disney Theatrical Productions falls under "television/subscription video on demand (TV/SVOD) distribution and other" in the studio entertainment segment. In fiscal 2019, this section brought in a revenue of 4.7 billion USD. However, this number does not reveal much about Disney Theatrical Productions, as the Walt Disney Company does not divulge great

detail as to the individual contributions to the revenue. However, through reading the Fiscal Year 2019 Annual Financial Report one can assume an approximation of DTP's fiscal 2018 revenue. In fiscal 2018 TV/SVOD distribution and other in studio entertainment saw a 9% increase in revenue with 3% being attributed to the theatrical group; based on the figures, this means that DTP contributed a revenue of at least $113,160,000 to the Walt Disney Company in fiscal 2018.

Today, Disney Theatrical Group as a whole has a "global annual audience of more than 20 million people in more than 50 countries" as well as successful educational programs, including Disney Musicals in Our Schools and "The Lion King Experience". The group also supports profitable theatrical licensing ventures both domestically and internationally (The Walt Disney Studios). In fact, as of 2018, approximately 38% of the United States population had engaged with a Disney Theatrical production, whether as cast, crew, or audience (Fierberg). The Disney Theatrical Productions division of the group currently has two shows running on Broadway--*The Lion King* and *Aladdin*--as well as North American tours of *The Lion King* and *Frozen*, West End productions of *The Lion King*, *Frozen*, and *Mary Poppins*, and countless international productions (Disney Theatrical Sales).

While Disney has revolutionized many aspects of theatrical production and grown into its own large-scale producing entity, soaring above the critical backlash of its history, the company has still faced artistic struggles and tasted its fair share of both critical and commercial failure. It is clear from the company's storied past and the theatrical group's rocky history that DTP is in need of a formula for success. This

convergence point of success on such constantly tipping scales will be explored herein by examining the need for the inclusion of nostalgic elements to support beloved, timeless stories; contextually-motivated spectacle with substance; strong concepts with unified creative teams; and involvement of the audience in the narrative in order to best appeal to two separate, important target audiences and to prove artistically innovative enough for critical approval.

Everything the Light Touches: Theme Park Spectacle versus Animated Film Narrative

"Look, Simba: everything the light touches is our kingdom. A king's time as ruler rises and falls like the sun. One day, Simba, the sun will set on my time here and rise with you as the new king…"
"What about that shadowy place way out there?"
"That's beyond our borders. You must never go there."
(Irene Mecchi, Jonathan Roberts, and Linda Woolverton, The Lion King)

The Walt Disney Company has garnered worldwide success for its animated films and broadly showcases the peak industry standard for themed entertainment and consumer experiences. Above all, the company prizes its "iconic brands, creative minds, and innovative technologies" which have allowed Disney to become "the world's premier entertainment company, home of the most respected and beloved brands around the globe" (The Walt Disney Company). As an entertainment giant, Disney does not want any venture that is profitable and innovative to exist in that "shadowy place beyond [its] borders" (*The Lion King*). It is difficult, however, to branch into different areas of entertainment without a certain amount of blurring the boundaries.

At the time of Disney's premiere on Broadway in 1994, Disney was fifty-six years past the premiere of its first full-length animated film and thirty-nine years past the opening of its first theme park. These influences can not be overstated, but the same elements that made the theme parks and animated films successful will not be what makes the theatrical ventures successful. In order to succeed on Broadway, Disney needs to construct a more nuanced telling of its beloved stories. While Disney has a knack for updating olden fairy tales for film purposes, Broadway also asks for a more high brow,

deepened dimension to the plot and characters, so to cross over to Broadway, Disney must adapt its two-dimensional films into a fully three-dimensional story with fleshed-out characters.

Disney has a marked attachment to and reverence for its distinguished brand image in order to uphold the return rate of its target audience. Disney's business model and marketing strategies revolve around its brand, with the company focusing on "how the potential client community sees them, feels about them, and talks about them…[with the goal of delivering] an emotional connection to their services" (Schoultz). The marketing field notes Disney's focus on personalized, exciting content with continuous promotion and lifetime value as well as the customer's direct engagement with the story through continuous theming and immersion (Schoultz). Disney's brand has fused "entertainment and fun with commodification and consumption" in order to manufacture "stories, characters, and experiences that reinforce the key elements in mainstream U.S. culture" (Wasko 2). Disney's brand upholds universal themes such as the powers of friendship, true love, and family while incorporating fantastical elements like magic and talking animal sidekicks. The Disney brand has become a crowning jewel of American culture as it reflects the cultural beliefs and values while pioneering innovation and creativity. This brand image is important and must be recognizable in any and all of Disney's business ventures.

In order to pinpoint a recognizable brand, it is important to define the target audience engaging with the brand. Walt Disney himself lived on a farm in Marceline, Missouri from 1906 to 1910. The taste of farm and rural life that Walt experienced

influenced the foundations of his brand. He "idealized and romanticized these memories (from Missouri), which provided a basis for his attachment to small-town America and its values" (Wasko 8). Disney's brand is built around the idealized image of the middle-class American family with community-centered values. Walt himself was quoted as saying, "You're dead if you aim only for kids. Adults are only kids grown up, anyway" (Disney). Disney has had great success reaching its target middle-class family audience through its theme parks and animated films, seen through the focus on varied franchises such as the Disney princesses, the Marvel superheroes, and the Disney Jr. television station as well as adult-only experiences like spas and resorts and exclusive dining experiences in the parks like Club 33.

Appealing to the target audience has not historically been a struggle for Disney, but the target audience for theatrical productions on Broadway looks quite different from the typical middle-class family. Middle-class families, with ages ranging from young children all the way up to senior citizens, are significantly more varied in age than the average age of a Broadway theatre goer, which has floated between forty and forty-five for the past two decades. Essentially, while Broadway audiences skew older, Disney has to appeal to all ages concurrently. In the same vein, the average household income for Broadway audiences has been well above middle-class, sitting at a healthy $261,000 in the 2018-2019 season (The Broadway League). In order to heighten or at least maintain the return rate of the target audience as well as appeal to the, on average, older, richer Broadway patrons, Disney has had to temper its showmanship and spectacle seen in its theme parks while adding depth to the nostalgic narratives seen in the animated films.

Pleasing the two wildly different target audiences and their tastes has caused notable variations in Disney's artistic choices on Broadway.

The necessity of watering down a theme park level of spectacle was seen to be necessary after the critical reviews of *Beauty and the Beast* began pouring in. According to the *New York Times* critic David Richards, Disney immediately went too close to the theme park realm with *Beauty and the Beast*, writing, "Nobody should be surprised that it brings to mind a theme-park entertainment raised to the power of 10" with "lavishness close to delirium…[and] giddiness beyond camp" (Richards). *Variety's* Jeremy Gerard agrees, calling *Beauty* "bloated, padded, gimmick-ridden, tacky…utterly devoid of imagination…obvious and heavy-handed…[and] relentlessly two-dimensional" (Gerard). Director Robert Jess Roth was plucked out of the stage shows at Disneyland to direct this Broadway spectacular despite having no Broadway credits to his name. It was the "most expensive Broadway show ever mounted at the time" –with the budget estimated at around 12 million USD–with pyrotechnics worthy of hazard pay and a dedicated firework crewmember and a looming, rotating castle set (Snetiker). In order to combine the drive for artistic innovation and creative pioneering with the need to appease the critics, Disney would have to find a way to marry the spectacular designs for which it is known with the given circumstances of the script.

In contrast to *Beauty and the Beast*, a Broadway-scale musical meant for the family target audience of Disney can not rely on story alone with very little spectacle, as the company learned with the premiere of *Frozen* on Broadway. *Frozen*'s reliance on the success of the animated film was obvious, with reviewers criticizing, "For anyone

expecting more than a straight-up rehash of the movie on stage, however, this pricey production will seem low on inspiration…it ends up being merely adequate, a bland facsimile when it should have been something memorable in its own right" (Rooney). It was panned for having too many different looks for ice, less than effective special effects, and "over-tailored" moments while being "often dull" and "alternately dopey and anguished" (Green). In short, the company anticipated the same level of success for the Broadway adaptation as the animated film without making any major changes. By this point in Disney's theatrical history, critics came to expect wild spectacle or at least an elevated story and were left disappointed. While *Beauty* had relied on spectacle to enrich the story, *Frozen* relied on the prior success of a story not apt for a theatre stage; where *Beauty* was reminiscent of Disney's theme parks, *Frozen* was no more than its animated film.

In light of the critically-panned examples of unsuccessful discipline-blending between theme park and animated film, how can Disney avoid the "anything-goes animation aesthetic" that prevents theatrical elements from "blending, visually, musically, or emotionally"? (Green) Disney Theatrical Productions's biggest struggle has been found in grappling between these extremes of theme park-level spectacle and recognizable stories from the animated films. The answer to this ongoing issue can be found in the far past of theatrical production. For centuries, playwrights and theatre practitioners relied on the guidance of Aristotle in his *Poetics* to shape a theatrical production. Based on observation of the great plays of his time, Aristotle lays a groundwork for the proper crafting of a play, including six parts. These six parts, in order

of greatest to least importance are “plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, song” (Aristotle 25). In Disney’s case, it is important to note that spectacle and song must fall far lower down the ranks than in its prior theatrical adaptations. The focus should be on developing the top elements in order to integrate spectacle and song properly. These changes will allow for a more sophisticated, heightened adaptation.

In order for Disney to create a Broadway-scale production out of an animated film intended for families, the plot must sustain a familiar, nostalgic narrative while crafting a logical through-line free of plot holes or magical fixes. Additionally, the characters must be three-dimensional with thoughts, feelings, wants, and, most importantly, motivations. The motivated plot and characters will lend themselves to a heightened, sophisticated spectacle with substance. The final product will seamlessly blend Aristotle’s six elements while enrapturing both the target audiences of Disney and Broadway. Despite the aforementioned missteps of Disney Theatrical Productions, the proper elements can be found throughout its adaptations but seldom altogether.

Due to the importance of brand recognition to Disney’s corporate image, crafting a recognizable story is the top priority of the company’s theatrical adaptations. The appeal of the finished product to the typical, targeted consumer is the driving force behind the work. Disney has found such success among families because of generational cycles of watching the movies, experiencing the stories, and passing them on to children and grandchildren. In this way, the theatrical adaptations must fulfill the same purpose: beloved, endearing stories which can, historically, entertain all ages while acting as an

opportunity for inter-familial engagement. This is not to say the plot cannot adapt to the circumstances, but the narrative must retain the nostalgia of the animated film at its core.

If the narrative has devolved from the animated film before its stage adaptation, it can be difficult to go back to the timeless story that the consumers have come to expect due to its significance in their childhood. The chronological distance between the animated film and its theatrical adaptation can cause this devolution of the plot. In the least devolved scenario, the animated source material with an already lauded narrative is slightly tweaked and sent on to Broadway. In contrast, in the case of older movies with greater distances between film and stage premieres, the plot has possibly been diluted and muddied by sequels and spin-offs, which pull away from the nostalgic timelessness of the tale. Two of Disney Theatrical Productions's most commercially successful musicals, *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King*, had a three-year difference between the premiere of the animated film and the musical's premiere on Broadway. This allowed the company to capitalize on the success of the animated films while allowing time to make fixes to the plot.

Conversely, *The Little Mermaid*, the harkening of the Disney Renaissance in its animated iteration, delayed nineteen years between its film premiere and Broadway premiere. In this time, *Mermaid* had evolved into a media franchise that included a sequel film and a three-season television series, with a prequel film following soon after the Broadway premiere. Disney had strayed too far from the familiar narrative of *Mermaid* in order to form this media franchise. As a result, the musical struggled to find a coherent plot within the originally praised narrative of the film. This led to critics calling it, "a

perverse process of devolution" from the "Broadway-caliber" animated film with no "coherence of plot" (Brantley, "Fish"). *Beauty* and *The Lion King* had arrived on Broadway before their less-successful sequels and spin-offs were released, allowing a clear narrative to form, free of extended plotlines. Because of these clouded or diluted plot issues, Disney should note the importance of timing in releasing their Broadway adaptations to avoid any such devolution from a successful plot structure.

The distance from the recognizable narrative can also harm the formation of a logical through-line. Animated films are often formulaic, reflecting similar plot structures, universal themes, and similar stock foundations for characters. In Disney's case, the animated films are often lighter versions of more serious or tragic origins: *The Lion King*, while taking inspiration from *Hamlet*, employs talking animals and musical numbers rather than constant gloom and doom. Each of the six animated film adaptations explored herein originated in fairy tales or other prior literature. One would be hard-pressed to find a Disney animated film that did not employ some fantastical element, commonly magic and/or inanimate objects or animals made human-esque, but in theatre, plot issues can not be magicked away as easily as they can in animated films.

Because of the company's vast expertise in the animated film genre, Disney's theatrical endeavors are often accused of being "formulaic" with "familiar mechanics of [a] central storyline" (Isherwood). The solution to this criticism requires some change to the plot while upholding that familiar story. Interestingly, two of the previously discussed shows, which faced negative critiques due to their reliance on theme park-level spectacle or on sticking close to the film, include the strongest examples of making changes to the

plot without diverging from the familiar storyline. One notable example can be found in *Beauty and the Beast.* In the animated film, the enchantress casts a spell on the castle, instantly turning all the servants into objects; however, an actor can not play a clock, teapot, or candelabra with no character motivation or arc.

Because of this issue, director Robert Jess Roth decided that the enchantress's spell would only start the process of dehumanization; as the character Lumiere says in the musical, "Slowly but surely, as every day passes, we will all gradually become…things" (Woolverton 29). Because of this fix, Roth was able to "[give] the characters stakes in everything" and allow for a "human story" (Snetiker). This minor change solved a plot hole related to the timing of the spell as well as heightened the emotional stakes and conflict of the musical. The issue of an undefined magical spell and its limitations is also fixed by this change, aiding in the creation of a logical through-line.

Additionally, *Frozen* on Broadway solved the issue of a mediocre, rushed opening in the animated film with a "rejiggered..masterly first 20 minutes…[which gets] the backstory squared away swiftly" in an "unusually coherent" style for Disney (Green). This allowed the show to begin with a clear through-line while adding more of a background to Anna and Elsa's relationship with each other, their conflict, and their environment. These minor changes create a more logical through-line with fantastical elements explained and limitations formed in order to avoid any glaring plot holes from minor problems. In this way, the element of plot from Aristotle continues to be enriched, though not perfected, in Disney's theatrical ventures.

Adding depth to such repetitive plots has remained an issue for Disney. Critics have even asked, "[Does] Disney, with the endless resources and talent at its disposal, [want] to make its own magical transformation into adulthood[?] Does it want to create serious, coherent modern musicals instead of cartoons that hedge all bets?" (Green) Disney has demonstrated some success in making small changes to the plot to construct a through-line, but it has yet to truly add depth to the entire plot of its musicals. One could assume that Disney can not truly deepen a plot without changing a beloved story beyond recognition. After all, *Beauty*, *The Lion King*, and *Frozen* had their original films' screenwriters serving as playwrights, but it seems as though Disney, with all its resources, would stretch beyond the original writer to update the script. It would be intensely difficult for a writer experiencing success from a film to note any changes for the stage. At the same time, however, notable playwright David Henry Hwang served as a playwright on *Tarzan* without prior work on the film, but critics called his writing "abrasively wiseguy" (Brantley, "Tarzan"). If Disney's screenwriters and seasoned playwrights new to Disney can not deepen the plot in these stories, who can?

Perhaps the answer lies in the content of Disney's musicals. *Aladdin* was praised for "[joshing] the somewhat exhausted conventions of the genre with a breezy insouciance that scrubs away some of the material's bland gloss" while "[putting] a greater emphasis on broad comedy than most of Disney's other stage musicals (Isherwood). Unlike Disney's previous shows, *Aladdin* did not take itself too seriously, and therein was its benefit. *Aladdin* was considered to have an updated, refreshing plot

not because of adding depth through complex themes or ideas but because of shifting the plot's focus to the fantastical elements and humor.

Where depth of plot has fallen short, however, depth of character has shone through. One such example can be found in *Beauty and the Beast*. In the animated film, the audience gets little characterization of the Beast besides very literal and surface-level anger. In the musical, however, the audience sees the Beast's pining for humanness and connection and his inner hatred for himself through his songs "How Long Must This Go On?" and "If I Can't Love Her" (Menken and Rice). Belle also gains a depth of characterization through "Home" as she shares her inner turmoil at being trapped by the Beast and "Change in Me" as her character arc is punctuated by her new-found feelings of affection towards the Beast (Menken and Rice). Additionally, the enchanted objects share their motivations and want for freedom in "Human Again," a song previously cut from the animated film (Menken and Ashman).

Likewise, in *Frozen* there is an added song for Elsa called "Monster" where the audience is able to see more depth of emotion, adding characterization and motivation where the animated film lacked (Anderson-Lopez and Lopez). In both *Beauty* and *Frozen*, Disney was able to add a bit of family entertainment through beautiful melodic songs while also adding a level of depth to the narrative. Despite also having previous work on the film, the songwriting teams for the musicals seem to have a good deal more success at furthering the plot and deepening character than their playwriting counterparts. Again, this success shows how Disney should lean into what is familiar when translating

a show to Broadway; in this way, the two elements of character and song from Aristotle's *Poetics* can be developed.

In Disney's monopolization of the entertainment business, the company has overlooked some opportunities for specialization in the realm of theatre. The company has found great success in its nostalgic, recognizable stories and has maintained this level of familiarity in its stage adaptations. However, the company often struggles to deepen the plots of these stories, even when Disney has had strong examples of character depth, mostly accomplished through the music of the musicals. To answer the earlier question from critic Jesse Green, Disney should revert from its "magical transformation into adulthood" in order to remain true to its brand. The depth to be found in a fairytale has already been found through the animated films; it is time for Disney to add depth through embellishment or a greater focus on the absurdities found within its stories. For example, in order to remain appropriate for children, Disney can not include Rapunzel's rape and her Prince's blinding by thorns from the original fairytale, but it can otherwise add motivations for Rapunzel and moments of emotional connection between her and her prince, now Flynn Ryder, in any adaptation of *Tangled* in order to still be relevant for children while adding another dimension to engage adults.

Based on this analysis, changes should be made to Disney's artistic model. First, Disney should shift focus back to their target audience and adjust the adaptations accordingly. A focus on deepening plot through songs while dialing back spectacle to more accurately fit the plot will benefit the company. Additionally, Disney should focus on the timing of stage premieres; the premiere should follow within the first five years of

the animated film premiere but before any subsequent spin-offs or sequels. Disney has found critical success in updating through-lines for the stage and should maintain the formation of these logical through-lines moving forward. With a greater focus on the target audience of families, brand recognition through memorable stories, character and plot depth through a focus on child-like wonder and basic human emotion, spectacle motivated by the story, focus on release schedules, and the hiring of the most appropriate playwrights for the source materials, Disney can begin to find a middle ground between theme park spectacle and animated film narrative with which to plant the seeds of theatre.

Two Worlds: Disneyfication vs. Conceptualization

"Put your faith in what you most believe in
Two worlds, one family
Trust your heart
Let fate decide…
To guide these lives we see."
-Phil Collins, Tarzan

Disney has had a penchant for fairy tales since the company's inception. Even today, Disney has created and retained a "market stronghold on fairytale films." In fact, "any other filmmaker who has endeavored to adapt a fairytale for the screen, whether through animation or other means, has had to measure up to the Disney standard and try to go beyond it" (Zipes 89). Indeed, fourteen of Disney's major animated feature films have been adapted from fairy tales. Four of the six musicals discussed herein are based on fairy tales, with the other two being adapted from other genres of prior literature. Disney has achieved the brand recognition and timeless stories discussed before by planting itself firmly in this fairy tale realm.

However, Disney has struggled between two worlds in transferring animated adaptations to the stage; as discussed before, Disney has to find its place between theme parks and films, but it also has to find its artistic foothold between Disneyfication and conceptualization. It can be difficult to portray enchanted objects, talking animals, mythical creatures, and magic onstage without falling prey to showing these elements in literal forms without any true depth or artistic innovation. On Broadway, though, realism appears to be the preferred genre, without such fantastical elements, and this, combined

with the lessened tendency of adults to fully suspend disbelief, has asked Disney to craft a spectacle which falls between these two worlds of Disneyfication and conceptualization.

"Disneyfy" refers to the process by which a piece of media is created or altered in a "simplified, sentimentalized, or contrived form or manner." A Disneyfication can also occur when something is "transformed into trivial entertainment for tourists" (Collins English Dictionary). In order to appeal to children, Disney has adopted a simplified, streamlined, romanticized style of art and design; at the same time, the adults of the target family audience prefer to engage with Disney through sentimentalized means. Disney's theme parks and live entertainment ventures, like Broadway, tend to tap into the contrived and trivial spectacle mentioned above. This idea of Disneyfication can lead to the sensationalized spectacle seen in *Beauty and the Beast*, gorgeous to look at but difficult to support thematically.

On the flip side, there is another type of design known as conceptualization. Conceptualization occurs when a show's design is based around an intangible concept rather than a literal interpretation of the design aspects called for in the script. A concept is a broad vision of an idea, rather than the show-don't-tell style of Disneyfication. Conceptualized design is more often favored in theatre as it grounds its designs in abstract, minimal ideas. For example, *Starlight Express* is a musical about train cars. However, the actors are not in Thomas the Tank Engine costumes; instead, they are attired in stylized suggestions of their particular car and on roller skates. This style of design leaves something to the imagination and, more aptly, allows for a suspension of

disbelief. In Elinor Fuchs's *Visit to a Small Planet*, she introduces the idea that "the stage world never obeys the same rules as ours, because in its world, nothing else is possible besides what is there" (Fuchs 6). This idea requires that the world of the play be fully examined and every detail considered in order to achieve a fully realized concept for the show. If any minuscule detail is overlooked in the creation and realization of the concept, then the show could suffer from a lack of a cohesive design.

In this way, a strong concept requires the full unification of the design team in order for the design to read well to the audience. In order to create a cohesive design of the show, an effective design team will include a director who approaches the show with an appropriate, clear concept–and answers to Fuchs' *Small Planet* questions–which can be more aptly realized by the various designers all working towards this one concept. In the more sophisticated theatre of Broadway, designs need to allow room for imagination in the space while making the original concept clear. The in-between and the outskirts is where Disney struggles to land. This problem is best seen through the failed abstract ideas seen in the designs of *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid.*

Tarzan was the first widespread failure for Disney Theatricals. The stage musical was adapted from the 1999 movie, which was itself based on Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes.* Both prior iterations had been overall successes, so the same critical praise was expected for the 2006 stage adaptation. However, Disney doomed itself from the start. In the DVD commentary for *Tarzan* the creative team noted that animation was essential to "create the physically protean Tarzan of Burroughs's imagination. A live actor…could never begin to capture the ape-man's animal artistry" (Brantley, "Tarzan").

In this way, Disney admitted that *Tarzan* would be an insurmountable task to demonstrate in three dimensions without losing the allure of swinging through the trees.

This issue led the *Tarzan* design team to focus primarily on the "airborne aerobics" of the adaptation; however, the lack of a clear concept for the physicalities led to a "fidgety and attention-deficient" show without "the art of focus" which "ain't got that swing." Part of the problem stemmed from a lack of "dramatic weight" between the flying sequences (Brantley, "Tarzan"). Aside from Tarzan himself, various other animals, Tarzan's parents, and his love interest also found themselves swept into the air, but not all of these flights were meant to represent swinging through the trees as Tarzan did. This ambiguity led to a lack of connection between moments which incited confusion in the audience. The regularity of such bouts of physical kinesthetics meant that "any tension or excitement [was] routinely sabotaged by overkill and diffuseness" (Brantley, "Tarzan"). Disney had placed such focus on getting the concept of swinging through the trees to read to the audience that it never stopped to notice where this concept led the show astray. In this way, trying to follow a very literal concept of flying caused the show's design to suffer.

Aside from the concept of flying, the remainder of *Tarzan*'s designs–except for Natasha Katz's highly praised lighting design–also suffered from unclear concepts. The apes were outfitted in stringy costumes vaguely reminiscent of fur, which read as a "cross between heavy-metal band refugees and Daryl Hannah in 'The Clan of the Cave Bear'" (Brantley, "Tarzan"). Additionally, the set was made of layers of green fabrics and scrims with no clear break to the eyes. In a word, it was an unimaginative way to represent the

majesty of the jungle. After all, for leading lady Jane to sing about "all the beauty before (her)" and the "wonders of nature," the audience would surely enjoy seeing these same treats for two hours and twenty minutes (Collins). Of course, being a Disney design, though, there were "Fantasia"-esque "floating, singing flowers" to drive home the "reality" of Tarzan's "oppressive jungle" (Brantley, "Tarzan").

Tarzan's major design problem was found in trying to create literal concepts for flying through the air instead of creating any form of innovation. Additionally, the high frequency of flying occurrences led to no uniqueness or wow factor on any given occasion. This wow factor is the basis for Disney's allure in its live entertainment designs and, when absent, speaks volumes to the failure of a show's design. By attempting to follow an intangible concept, *Tarzan* doomed itself as the design took away from an already weak script and served to tank the plot and any semblance of a character arc. However, this is just one example of how Disney's foray into the conceptual side of spectacle led a show to failure.

The Little Mermaid, in its animated iteration, was the heralding of the Disney Renaissance as the animation division began its most artistically successful, and most profitable, era since Walt Disney's death in 1966. The stage musical, though, saw barely an iota of this success. In perhaps the most scathing *The New York Times* article yet written about Disney Theatrical Productions, Ben Brantley called the stage adaptation "a perverse process of devolution" from the animated film, "stripped of the movie's generation-crossing appeal…[having] been swallowed by an unfocused spectacle, more parade than narrative" ("Fish"). This review reveals the need for a spectacle motivated by

the plot, instead of being driven by a concept for the design. *The Little Mermaid*'s stage adaptation was the poor unfortunate victim of a failed design concept by trying to demonstrate the movement of the ocean and the appearance of sea creatures while working with humans and no real water.

The Little Mermaid's set design, in its attempt to follow a comparatively weak concept for the ocean world, included "an aggressive ocean that appears to be made of hard plastic [and] the get-out-of-my-way water…periodically slides in like so many push-button car windows…[as an] obstruction to be wrestled with" throughout the performance (Brantley, "Fish"). The set detracted from the story as it became intrusive; instead of the actors moving around the set, the actors actually had to avoid the set, which negatively impacted performances. Additionally, it became impossible for the plot to make any true impact when the set overshadowed the story and distracted the audience. In this way, once again, the spectacle's detachment from the plot negatively impacted performances and led to the show's failure.

The most confusing and negatively reviewed aspect of *The Little Mermaid*'s design was the costumes. The show utilized unsightly, seemingly metal tubes to represent mermaid tails which were just one facet of the "ungainly guess-what-I-am costumes," and it was "hard to figure out here just who and what [the supporting sea creatures] were supposed to be." The performers were so focused on manipulating the "tails, flippers, and wings" that even "a pull-out-all-the-stops number like the calypso-flavored 'Under the Sea' fails to hold the attention" (Brantley, "Fish"). Once more, the lack of a strong design concept led to confusion amongst the designers with unrecognizable characters and

settings being presented to the audience. The only consistent element of the design was "sparkly garishness," which served to prove, "You can never go broke underestimating the taste of preschoolers" (Brantley, "Fish").

In both *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*, designers were tasked with creating a non-realistic scenario in a realistic sense. In *Tarzan*, the concept of flying was over-exploited and, thus, fell short while the whole show suffered from a lack of innovation or creativity in the design. In contrast, while *The Little Mermaid* tried an interesting and innovative concept for sea creatures, the concept's realization was confusing and did not live up to expectations. Because of this, Disney has found the drawbacks of representing fantastical elements through conceptual means. However, Disney has also found itself criticized for moving too far into the Disneyfied realm of fairy tale stories.

While the garish level of spectacle seen in *Beauty and the Beast* has already been mentioned, the Disneyfication of the source material must be examined. The animated film had one highly talked about moment of spectacle unforeseen before: the ballroom sequence for the title song. In this scene, Disney's then-typical use of hand-drawn animation was combined with an "unprecedented use of computer-generated imagery." This scene was picked so that the computer-generated imagery would punctuate the "heightened emotional moment" and "bookended" this unique moment in the characters' arcs (Rannie). In this way, the use of spectacle was both supported by and supporting the plot. This same thought process would prove necessary in the stage adaptation.

Beauty and the Beast on Broadway was described as having an "eye-boggling spectacle" with "nothing [being] left to the imagination." Nothing was "beyond the capabilities of the show's special effects engineers" with "everything [being] painstakingly and copiously illustrated" with "amazingly little resonance." In finality, "you don't watch it, you gape at it" because it was "hardly a triumph of art, but it'll probably be a whale of a tourist attraction" (Richards). In this way, the grounded, story-supported spectacle seen in the animated film was tossed aside for the Broadway adaptation. In Disney's first Broadway foray, the creative team seemed more concerned with going all out and "throwing money at the American public…[to demonstrate] the boundless ingenuity of Team Disney" than they were about motivating the use of such "lavishness…delirium…giddiness…camp…[and] hallucinogenic lunacy" through the plot (Richards). Because of this garishness, the overall production suffered negative critical reviews as the design did not seem to fit the underlying meaning of the story. How can one accept the message of not judging a book by its cover–or a prince by his beastliness–when every costume and set is elevated to the nines?

A slightly scaled-back design motivated by the story would appear to have helped this production rise to the top. After all, the musical was praised for its ability to transform human actors into objects through a slower process, a plot device introduced for the stage adaptation and applauded for filling plot holes. It was certainly a challenge to portray actors as objects without looking like "the envy of a Beaux-Arts ball," but one must ponder how the design could have been scaled back to fit the piece. Perhaps Disney should have opted to leave some elements to the imagination and allow for suspension of

disbelief rather than illustrating each aspect, leading to "the hard sell and the harder sell" (Richards). Additionally, it seems as though a major issue at hand was the grandeur of this spectacle compared to the other major musicals at the time.

The 1980s saw the rise of spectacle-heavy shows like *Cats, Phantom of the Opera,* and *Les Miserables,* so surely the next decade would face no issue with high spectacle work. The problem for *Beauty,* however, was that the monstrous castle set on a turntable, the multiple instances of pyrotechnics, and the garish, grandeur costumes only served to lessen the climaxes of the plot. The ballroom scene was one of the only moments of toned-down spectacle, while in the animated film it was the highlight. Additionally, the Beast's transformation into his princely form, while highly innovative and still unknown in its methods, blended into the rest of the show's spectacle where it should have stood out as a high point. In this way, *Beauty* seemed to face the same issue as *Tarzan* where it could not decide which moments of the plot to heighten using its design elements, so it simply caused all plot events to read the same.

Disney's overarching issue in the designs of these productions is that it hires designers based on individual merit without thinking of the importance of group cohesion and unity. In *Tarzan*'s case, the design is disjointed and leaves the lighting designer Natasha Katz to pull the weight, thereby receiving the only praise. *The New York Times*'s review for *Frozen* highlights this issue, "Ms. Katz's moody lighting, all amber and gold and sepia on Mr. Oram's Scandinavian storybook castle, suggests Rembrandt, even if Mr. Grandage was going for the feeling of Shakespeare's pastoral comedies" (Green). Here, four different ideas are being conveyed–moody, but light-hearted storybook, but dark, but

comedic–and neither the "somber [or] silly elements are blending visually, musically, or emotionally" (Green). If Disney utilized its management and leadership principles seen in the rest of its business model, especially in its animated films, to construct a design *team*, it would see a revitalization in its spectacle.

Additionally, the designers must return to the source material and find places to deepen the story using spectacle. In Aristotle's elements of drama in *Poetics,* spectacle is ranked far below plot, and this is the mindset with which a new work should be created. Because of this groundwork, the plot should always be prioritized over spectacle, and the designs should serve to support and develop the plot, rather than detract from it. The plot must motivate the spectacle, so the spectacle should not outshine the story. For example, a large amount of *The Lion King*'s success as an artistic piece can be attributed to the fact that its concept is strong, appropriate, *and* grounded in humanity-centric source literature. Consumers return to Disney because of their familiarity with the source materials as well as the sentimentality and timelessness of the animated films, as discussed before, so Disney needs to tap into these source materials to enrich the plots and, thereby, motivate the spectacle.

Between Disneyfication and conceptualization, Disney should land on a balanced middle ground of plot-motivated spectacle by finding a level of cultural or historical depth without being either too literal or too abstract in its interpretation. For example, *Beauty and the Beast* could have taken more design inspiration from the Rococo period in which it is set instead of reverting to a Gothic theming. This inspiration would have allowed for a more sophisticated design that is informed by the setting of the musical.

Tarzan and *The Little Mermaid* would benefit by moving closer to literalism in their designs and could have benefited from finding environmental inspirations in depicting the jungle and ocean, respectively. The most successful design endeavor for Disney on Broadway has been *The Lion King* because of these guidelines.

The Lion King was directed and helmed by artistic visionary Julie Taymor; Taymor deeply understood the source material and approached the show with a very strong concept. Taymor's concept was vastly different from Disney's other theatrical ventures because of it included various types of puppetry. There are wearable puppets used to represent different animals as well as uses of traditional Noh influences, Bunraku, and shadow puppetry to add depth to action sequences. This design choice allowed for cultural depth through director and puppet designer Julie Taymor's past training in Eastern styles of theatre even though *The Lion King* is set in Africa. However, Taymor's use of puppets to represent animals led the musical away from "the usual Disney cuteness or the Disney idea of animism," resulting in a show full of animals with "dreamlike beauty" and "elegant diffidence" which are both "ostentatiously unreal and absolutely authentic" (Canby).

In this way, the use of cultural influence through the puppets avoided the problem of representing talking animals onstage by finding the humanness within the animals; "Frequently in Taymor's designs and staging, the puppeteer and the mechanics of manipulation remain visible behind or within the puppet, or both the mask and the face of an actor perform simultaneously, creating a 'double event'" (Struve-Dencher 2). This visible manipulation allowed for a more sophisticated spectacle that was motivated by

and fed back into the narrative. Essentially, the plot required the animals, and the lack of literal animism combined with Taymor's use of the "double event" led to a deepening of the plot and its themes. By revealing the human within the animal thereby connecting the narrative to a more human experience, the design equipped the stage adaptation to "realize serious concerns that in the movie seemed simply obligatory but here gives real shape to myth" (Canby).

Additionally, the costumes take direct inspiration from traditional South African clothing. The lionesses' costumes connect to a monochromatic palette of reds, oranges, browns, and yellows that are typical of this South African garb. The use of masks for the lions also connects to the traditional African theatre origins found in the Egungun masquerade. Taymor's connection to the "ritual forms of theater from Asia and Africa collides with that of Disney, where visual spectacle is harnessed in the service of heartwarming storytelling" which results in "a visual tapestry" that "offers a refreshing and more sophisticated alternative to the…tourist-oriented shows" (Brantley, "Cub"). In this way, Taymor's use of cultural influences greatly and positively impacts the design of *The Lion King* by adding depth to the plot through the connection with the human experience as well as connecting to the setting of the work.

The set of *The Lion King* also connects to the African savanna while retaining some of the Disney flair. For example, Pride Rock, the throne of Mufasa and Simba is painted in the same monochromatic palette with interesting, traditionally inspired markings. However, instead of simply being on stage or wheeling in, it slithers across the ground and expands upward as it turns, allowing for grand reveals of Mufasa, Scar, and

Simba at various points in the show. This allows for a greater feeling of majesty and the themes of rising into the throne while retaining that cultural inspiration. Additionally, the influence of Taymor's Eastern methods is seen specifically through the design of the wildebeest stampede that kills Mufasa. Here, a simple Asian puppetry-rooted trick of rolling fabric creates the illusion of a massive wildebeest stampede without literally having actors prance around. In this way, the set retains cultural influence while staying balanced between literal and abstract.

Throughout Disney's time on Broadway it has struggled with its identity in design, tipping the scales between Disneyfication and conceptualization. Only *The Lion King* balanced the two extremes perfectly, bringing in cultural influences to reinforce the setting and further the themes while keeping some of that signature Disney flair. This perfect medium is possible because the entire production team, united by a visionary director, rallied behind a strong, appropriate concept and paid attention to every little detail. For Disney, the visual of the piece is important; after all, the company's entire creative history is rooted in the artwork of its films. However, it is vital to Disney's success that the company's focus on heartwarming storytelling is prioritized over the allure and expense of extravagant spectacle. Disney should refer to Aristotle's elements of drama and tap into the cultural and historical influences of both its animated films and their source literature in order to create a spectacle with substance and motivation that will prove sophisticated enough for the critics while still dazzling the consumers in the target audience.

Part of That World: Audience as Spectator vs. Active Participant

"When's it my turn?
Wouldn't I love, love to explore that shore up above?
Out of the sea, wish I could be, part of that world"
-Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, The Little Mermaid

Long before the creation of the theatrical division, the Walt Disney Company had been creating immersive theatre spaces in its theme parks. The level of immersion ranges from character meet and greets and impeccably decorated, themed resorts and restaurants all the way down to simple terminology: Disney's employees are called "cast members", the theme park itself "onstage," and the break rooms and mechanical spaces "backstage." Bob Iger, Chief Executive Officer of the company from 2005 to 2020, stated, "Our guests want to be amazed, delighted, and entertained. They are looking for the kind of magic that will transport them from their everyday lives into worlds that can only be created by Disney" (Kinni 8). The company has effectively created a reputation and an expectation for this transporting magic. The guests have come to expect a level of immersion from Disney's live experiences based on this reputation from the theme parks.

The level of immersion seen in the theme parks compared to the experience of sitting and watching one of the animated films in a movie theater has created a natural spectrum whereupon the consumer is either "a passive recipient of commercialized falseness" or experiencing Disney's construction of these "enormous immersive theatre spaces where guests perform as actors" (Kokai and Robson 7). In the theatrical field, immersive experiences "combine the act of immersion–being submerged in an alternative

medium where all the senses are engaged and manipulated–with a deep involvement in the activity within that medium" (Machon 21). The expectation for immersion in Disney's live experiences combined with the innate human desire for autonomy leads to "more demonstrative performances" as a tourist-actor as the "identity as tourist…liberates [the consumers] from normative behavior (Heim 131).

All of these elements combined to cause pressure for the theatrical shows to pull the audience into the story in order to uphold the transporting magic of Disney. Effectively, each interaction with one of Disney's "cast members" is viewed by both the company and the consumer as a "magical moment," which "builds guest satisfaction and increases brand loyalty," leading to "organizational growth and success" (Kinni 9). Of course, there are certain physical limitations within a theatre which are not present in a theme park setting. These limitations must be considered when discussing fully immersive spaces. However, the need for constant development and retention of the target audience has driven the theatrical division to find moments of immersion to most effectively engage the audience as an active participant in the narrative, rather than the typical passive spectator of a theatrical performance.

When viewing the large percentage of young children in Disney's target audience, there is a perceived concern for constant engagement in the stage shows, which has perhaps motivated the use of such dazzling spectacle, as discussed prior. However, any child who has taken a trip to Walt Disney World and interacted with Belle and her story at the attraction "Enchanted Tales with Belle" will be confused why she must sit in the audience instead of engaging directly with Belle's story, not to mention the inner child

within adult consumers, who also craves acceptance into the story from the characters. Disney Theatricals has had mixed reviews as to its effectiveness at keeping the young audiences engaged during the hours-long performances, despite the noted ability of the theme park stage shows to keep children involved in the performances.

Tarzan had its fair share of problems, but one of the most puzzling was the juxtaposition between the physical exuberance onstage and the calmly seated audience, aside from a few notable outliers. One reviewer noted that "*Tarzan* feels as fidgety and attention-deficit as the toddlers who kept straying from their seats during the performance" (Brantley, "Tarzan"). This behavior could perhaps be chalked up to a theatre etiquette issue, but one must reexamine the frequency with which animals and humans took the air to fly through the trees. Could some of these occurrences not fly over the audience? After all, Disney's production of *Mary Poppins*, in which the titular character flies out over the audience, had already opened in London and was months away from opening on Broadway. Simply put, Disney could have solved both issues of none of the flying moments feeling more important than each other *and* losing children's attention by such a small change. By learning from their own previous examples of spectacle, Disney could have more aptly engaged the audience in the story.

As already seen multiple times, Disney puts misplaced weight into the spectacle of its Broadway musicals. The company could reasonably believe that dazzling designs would hold the audience's attention, but in actuality, this may not help at all. In the case of *The Little Mermaid*, the amount of confusing spectacle negatively impacted audience engagement. As noted before, "Even a pull-out-all-the-stops number like the calypso-

flavored ‘Under the Sea’ [failed] to hold the attention” (Brantley, “Fish”). Once again, this show could have been improved upon by finding moments to draw in the audience. Perhaps the “sea” could have stretched out into the audience, or the sea creatures could have been stationed in the aisles. Additionally, the “incomprehensible” ending with its “war-of-the-elements” climax could have involved the audience by looming Ursula’s tentacles over the crowd (Brantley, “Fish”).

Even some of Disney’s most successful films that delight both children and adults are reduced to little more than “sometimes rousing, often dull” when translated to the stage (Green). This quote refers to the stage adaptation of the nearly $1.3 billion dollar-grossing *Frozen*. Of course, this number loomed large over the artistic team’s heads, but a theatrical setting seemed actually to take away from the magic of the work. Despite *Frozen’*s best efforts, it was truly impossible to replicate ice on stage effectively. Again, the story lacked any updates or additional depth, and as such, the audience’s attention span could not stretch longer than the animated film’s length. In fact, “the second act seemed to put some of [the kids] to sleep” (Green). The second act of *Frozen*, in particular, suffers from a lack of the most memorable songs from the movie, and it lacks anything gripping, plot, music, design, or otherwise. Any of these elements could have been used to Disney’s advantage to support audience engagement.

It has been demonstrated herein that the theatrical genre requires a deeper plot and more sophisticated design than the realm of animated fairy tales. Because of this observation, some might say that the level of audience engagement described in this chapter might somehow cheapen the entertainment or reduce it to mere theme park fare,

but this could not be further from the truth. Two of the longest-running and most praised musicals of all time include instances of audience immersion and engagement. *Phantom of the Opera* concludes its first act by sending a chandelier crashing to the stage right over the audience's heads; it utilizes the theater's boxes, surround-sound voices, and pyrotechnics to draw in the audience. In *Cats* the actors dressed as cats crawl through the crowd to bring the audience into the story. Disney should find such ways to immerse the audience in the story in order to fulfill its reputation of immersive theatre spaces seen in the theme parks as well as to increase audience engagement and attention.

Even soliloquizing–a character's intimate thoughts being revealed to the audience while feeling alone in their thoughts or physically alone on the stage–can lead to a connection with the audience. In *Beauty and the Beast,* there are two notable instances of this. First, in "If I Can't Love Her," the Beast bares his shriveling hope and despair as well as the first inklings of burgeoning love. Here we see both the motivation for his anger and his hope to break free from his despair and his curse. The audience is brought into his thoughts and feelings which the other characters are not privy to, causing the audience to feel more connected to the story. Second, in "Change in Me," Belle reveals how her attitude towards the Beast and the world as a whole has changed during her time at the castle. In this instance, we see Belle reaching the end of her character arc as she has grown out of judging by appearances and looked into the heart of a beast. This example allows the audience to view just how much Belle has changed, and they once again gain insight to the inner workings of a character, which not all the characters know. The use of

soliloquy through song allows the audience to feel more connected to the characters' stories by understanding the characters' motivations, thoughts, and feelings.

Sometimes the key to audience interaction is tapping into the fantastical characters that bend the rules of theatre by nature. For example, the Genie in *Aladdin* can morph time, space, and the future at will; who is to say he can not also break the fourth wall and interact with the audience? This element is one facet of what made *Aladdin* on Broadway so successful. In an interview with *The Independent*, actor Michael James Scott, who played the Genie on Broadway and on tour, stated, "I love that the Genie gets to break that fourth wall. From the jump, there's jokes and things, and it really sets the tone for this journey we're going on for the evening. Once you give [the audience] permission, they let loose" (Kane).

The Genie serves as the audience's narrator, guide, jokester, and point of connection, and the connection to this character deepens the audience's engagement with the story. In the words of previous Disney CEO Michael Eisner, Disney has the ability "to sweep people off their feet, out of their busy or stress-filled lives, and into experiences filled with wonder and excitement" (Kinni 9). In order to successfully help the audience escape from their lives, there must be a guide to pull them onto a magic carpet and spirit them away, and the Genie does exactly that with flair; in this way, *Aladdin* is an excellent example of how Disney can use its own already-written characters to include the audience in the story. The fact that the audience feels connected to the characters they see on stage is the point of audience immersion and, to a point, theatre

itself; the audience's perceived connection to the players affects the entire experience of and engagement with the show.

While *Aladdin* demonstrates how to use characters to immerse the audience, *The Lion King* utilizes blocking and the physical space to its advantage. The show opens with "Circle of Life," where spiritual leader Rafiki calls forth all the animals for young Simba's presentation. However, most of these animals do not enter from the wings of the stage but from the aisles. "Virtually life-size elephants and a rhino," among other animals, "lumber serenely down the aisles," allowing the show's "first spectacular sequence [to expand] the mind for all that follows" (Canby). Even Ben Brantley, who is the critic behind the negative reviews of *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid*, found himself caught up in the "transporting magic" of this opening, writing, "Suddenly, you're four years old again, and you've been taken to the circus for the first time" (Brantley, "Cub"). The use of the aisles during "Circle of Life" allows the audience to begin the experience by being transported directly to the world of *The Lion King*; essentially, the audience feels like a part of the ritual taking place, which connects back to the roots of African theatre in the Egungun masquerade which parades through villages.

This engagement keeps the audience afloat for a while, but when this energy starts to wane midway through the first act, the staging draws the audience back in once again. First, in "I Just Can't Wait to be King" the giraffes on which Young Simba and Young Nala ride dip their heads down into the audience as a kind of wake-up call for attention. Then, in "Be Prepared," the menacing hyenas march down through the aisles as Scar looms over the audience on a walkway of elephant bones. Each time the performers "take

to the aisles, their puppet appendages in tow, the show takes on a celebratory carnival feeling," which furthers the audience's immersion with each interaction (Brantley, "Cub"). The second act begins similarly as the performers, now in traditional African garb, take to the aisles with puppeted birds on tall poles. The birds dance around the audience as music fills the air, and when the birds return to the stage, so too does the audience's focus. In this way, director Julie Taymor masterfully "seduces the audience" at every turn (Canby).

Aladdin and *The Lion King* demonstrate Disney's ability to include the audience in its storytelling and should serve as models for the other stage adaptations. Simple blocking choices, use of the physical space, and freedom to allow these fantastical characters to bend the rules of theatre and break the fourth wall can have huge impacts on audience engagement. As the audience engages with the story, transporting magic is evoked which increases guest satisfaction, thereby increasing brand loyalty and the rate of return (Kinni 11). In this way, Disney can greatly benefit by immersing the guests in its stage adaptations as effectively as it immerses them in its theme parks.

What Makes a Monster and What Makes a Man: Looking Ahead

"Now, here is a riddle to guess if you can…
What makes a monster and what makes a man?"
-Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz, The Hunchback of Notre Dame

Since its entrance on Broadway in 1994, Disney Theatrical Productions has loomed large, casting its shadow not only over New York City but over the entire theatre industry. As seen throughout this study, Disney has often relied on eye-popping spectacle with looming set pieces and outrageous, bedazzled costumes, and the company has rooted itself in the fantastical realm with talking animals, princesses, and magic. In this way, in the eyes of the critics from Broadway, Disney has demonstrated the monstrous side of *Hunchback*'s riddle. Regarding the other half of the riddle, however, Disney has rarely pulled back the curtain on uncovering the human experience, which theatre serves to illuminate. When adapting a stage show from an animated film adaptation, it is difficult, but not impossible, to please both target audiences of adults and children while also satisfying the theatre critics. As seen through every aspect of theatrical production that has been explored herein, Disney has had to balance the duality between "monster" and "man" in order to be truly successful amongst the target audiences.

This is not to say that Disney has not found widespread success in theatre or has not revitalized the American musical theatre and its techniques. Disney deserves all of the applause it has received and should be held up as a standard set and a bar raised for the American musical theatre genre. In fact, in an interview with *Playbill*, DTP president Thomas Schumacher said, "[Disney] is the new American songbook…this new era of

Broadway." *Playbill* agrees, adding, "Disney-animated musicals practically raised the next generation of ticket-buyers" as these musicals "are changing the landscape of the American musical theatre" (Fierberg).

However, as the findings suggest, Disney should not lose sight of its brand image with its timeless, nostalgic stories as well as story-motivated spectacle and engagement with the audience. Also, Disney should place greater emphasis on the hiring of the production team in its role as a cohesive unit rather than a group of individuals in order to strengthen the execution of a production concept. Perhaps, the best examples of these necessities can be seen through the shortcomings of Disney's previous shows, discussed throughout the study and summarized here in chronological order.

Beauty and the Beast's main problem was the extreme spectacle without supporting the story. The overdone designs throughout actually lessened the dramatic tension in climactic moments like the final fight between Gaston and the Beast. In order to improve this adaptation, Disney could dial back the spectacle, motivate the spectacle by adjusting to the setting, and lean into the moments of dramatic tension. A new United Kingdom tour of *Beauty*, which started its run in the fall of 2021, has been completely re-designed by the original design team. This is typically unheard of, but this choice has actually allowed for greater improvement overall. The remastered production is being described as a "mini masterpiece" which is "startlingly effective…fundamentally irresistible…[and] firing on all cylinders"; the production includes "phantasmagoria…German expressionism…[and] baffling legerdemain" (Brown).

The highly scaled-back production's critical success illuminates the necessity for such changes. The story and meaning are able to shine more effectively through when the spectacle is not so distracting. Additionally, this production–and many other non-Broadway, regional productions–take inspiration from the Rococo period in which the work is set when designing the scenery and costumes. The setting is revealed through stage directions and context clues in the script. The opening number takes place in "a charming, provincial French village, " and a joke from Cogsworth later in the first act further illuminates the time period: "...this is yet another example of the late neo-classic baroque period. And as I always say, if it's not baroque, don't fix it!" (Woolverton 60) These given circumstances tell the audience that the show takes place in recently post-baroque France, which would be the Rococo period for France. The new United Kingdom tour is a prime example of using these narrative cues to dictate the design, and it serves to keep the audience engaged in the story while still dazzling the eye. If Disney continues leaning into these inspirations for future productions of *Beauty and the Beast*, it is certain to find continued success.

This study revealed *The Lion King'*s need for consistency in driving the plot forward and ensuring that the stakes remain elevated throughout the work. Indeed, "many of the strongest scenes in this *Lion King* are edged in mortal darkness…[but] it's when *The Lion King* decides to fulfill its obligations as a traditional Broadway book musical that it goes slack" (Brantley, "Cub"). *The Lion King* has a strong concept that unified the design team into creating a work of art that has endured over twenty years on Broadway, and its design should be praised. The only aspect that can be heightened in this adaptation

is punctuating the moments of calmness which reveal character motivation so that they do not lessen the pace of the story.

"He Lives in You" is a prime example of one such moment being handled appropriately. This song is a pivotal moment where Simba reunites with Rafiki and sees his father within himself. In the staging, puppeteers spin in with portions of LED lights which combine to form Mufasa's face amongst the stars. Just this small moment punctuated this shift in character for Simba that could have otherwise lagged the pace of the show. While the design of "He Lives in You" supports the message of the song, the design of the scene around the song "Endless Night" does not support the underlying meaning, causing this moment to drag and lose the audience's attention, so finding a way to punctuate this scene could prove beneficial to the artistic longevity of the show. Disney is constantly making new innovations in the entertainment business and can use the years of new advancements to refresh its long-running shows and their designs.

While *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Lion King* do not present any major fundamental problems, some of Disney's shows require more revision: enter *Tarzan*, swinging. Due to *Tarzan*'s focus on the flying aspect of the show, there is a certain requirement for a strong concept that the entire production team is onboard with. As Ben Brantley revealed in his review, there was, specifically, a certain want for variance in the flying moments; "all instances of swinging (and they are countless) have been created equal" (Brantley, "Tarzan"). Perhaps the flying could be achieved not from traditional wired flying but by taking influence from cirque origins, specifically trapeze. Indeed, much of the work seen in cirque could be used effectively to represent animalistic

behaviors. One can imagine the Cyr wheel being used in “Trashin’ the Camp”, for example. In this way, a stronger concept for flying and animal behavior would be adopted, allowing for greater variance in methods and a more sophisticated and artistic outcome.

Of course, *Tarzan* also had issues with the script. The “abrasively wiseguy tone of the script” combined with the fact that “no moment seems to carry more dramatic weight than any other” leads to the script’s downfall (Brantley, “Tarzan”). The show took itself too seriously while also not bringing in the laid-back humor of the animated film. The script could benefit by taking a leaf out of *Aladdin*’s book. The show can be humorous in a way that appeals to both children and adults without losing any dramatic significance.

The playwright could develop the book using the Aristotelian plot structure, building up to a strong, clear climax and developing a powerful, even poignant, resolution. Perhaps, though, Disney could most benefit from finding a playwright who fits the energy of the source material. David Henry Hwang had previously worked with Disney on *Aida*, and he is a highly talented playwright. However, his skills fit best with adult material, like *Aida* and his non-Disney works, instead of material meant for family audiences. Disney has a tendency to rehire its screenwriters as playwrights, and *Tarzan* could have benefited from this treatment to best fit the spirit of the story.

Tarzan is not Disney’s only show in need of major revisions, though. *The Little Mermaid*’s highly unfortunate reviews demonstrate the need for changes. Like *Tarzan*, *The Little Mermaid* suffered from the lack of a strong concept, specifically, for the ocean and its creatures. *Mermaid* is a difficult movie to adapt to the stage, with both the human

world and under the sea being important, and unfortunately, the design team did not seem to all be following the same concept for the sea as there was no unifying aspect.

For future iterations of the stage adaptation, Disney could find a strong director, like *The Lion King*'s Julie Taymor who can uphold a strong concept amongst the design team. The design of this show needs a total overhaul in order to do the material justice. Perhaps it could take a note from the United Kingdom tour of *Beauty and the Beast* and involve some video work and projections to remind the audience of the 1989 film. After all, the film was the launch of Disney Animation's most successful years, so staying close to the original in terms of design could prove to be fruitful. There is much work that needs to be done on *The Little Mermaid* to bring it to the level of artistry Broadway demands. However, it is entirely possible to completely revitalize the production just by deciding on the correct concept for the ocean world.

Aladdin, like *The Lion King*, is a rare jackpot for Disney. *Aladdin* leaned into its humor instead of taking itself so seriously and leaned into cultural influences for design choices. The success of *Aladdin* is very likely due to the strong directorial presence of Casey Nicholaw. Nicholaw, like Taymor, had a strong vision for the show and even served further in the production team as choreographer. In this way, it seems that the strongest productions for Disney are directly tied to the strongest directors who also work on the production team in other roles. There is nothing that should be changed about *Aladdin*; it should just lean into those influences and the fun that is present. Because *Aladdin* leans into its fun side, the moments of dramatic tension are heightened in contrast.

Despite *Aladdin*'s noted success and acclaim with the full family target audience and critics, the most recent Disney show on Broadway, *Frozen*, diverged from this path and requires a few changes. *Frozen*'s animated film told two separate stories–that of Anna and of her sister Elsa–but in a film, it is easier to switch back and forth between two perspectives. On Broadway, this split perspective leads into a kind of road trip musical where the story is constantly moving around. The stage show was unable to reconcile the two stories as the "separate adventures" are a "structural problem no one has solved" (Green). There is no clear way to solve this plot issue aside from simply choosing not to adapt *Frozen* to the stage. Additionally, the show struggles with how to show ice on stage. It utilizes many different techniques, including projection mapping on the floor, but it seems as though the most effective instances of ice were the simplest: "a stunning curtain of Swarovski crystals" (Green). Perhaps Disney put too much stock in *Frozen* because of its film success without stopping to think if it could *really* translate to the stage well.

When looking back on Disney's past productions, both the high points of artistic achievement and the problem areas can be seen, and solutions can be suggested based on analysis. However, it is much harder to decide what comes next for the production company. To this end, this study must extend beyond the previously given parameters to examine Disney's other intellectual properties as well as stage adaptations that have proven successful off of Broadway. By looking at these successes which were not on Broadway, it is possible to lay forth a ground plan for Disney's future successes on Broadway.

Recently, Disney has produced some fantastic work that would primarily appeal to adults. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* for example, is a story about eternal damnation, prejudices, monstrosity, and the duality of man. It does not attempt to lighten itself up for children, not even in its animated film adaptation; it is truly a dark story with very high stakes. The animated film, based on the 1831 book *Notre-Dame de Paris,* was released in 1996. Soon after, the stage show premiered in Germany in 1999 as *Der Glöckner von Notre Dame* and quickly became one of Berlin's longest-running musicals, playing for three years. The first English language production was staged at La Jolla Playhouse in California in 2014 with a revised libretto. The most recent major production in the United States, staged at the Paper Mill Playhouse in New Jersey in 2015, again featured a revised libretto. At the time of writing, the show has not transferred to Broadway or even announced a potential transfer.

A "polished and ponderous" show like *Hunchback*, with its "surprising self-seriousness...[keeps] with its creators' intentions to return the story to its darker roots" (Isherwood). This solemnity leads the show to end unhappily and seemingly without meaning–the chorus even sings, "We wish we could leave you a moral"–choosing instead to end on the same riddle which began the show, "What makes a monster and what makes a man?" (Menken and Schwartz). This pondering as to good vs. evil and the duality of man hardly lends itself to a light-hearted children's tale, so to this end, *Hunchback* and similar adaptations of Disney films seem more in line with Hyperion Theatricals as they lean more fully into the adult target audience.

On the flip side, another possible path for Disney moving forward is to fully commit its productions to the Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) genre. One such example is the Off-Broadway *Winnie the Pooh* which opened in late 2021. The musical has been marketed as a TYA piece and utilizes puppets to represent the beloved characters. It has "perfection in its simplicity. There is no sense that the show is trying too hard; its wonder and magic are real and palpable." It was reviewed by *BroadwayWorld* as being a "wholesome, delightful, enchanting piece of theatre," which appeals to both "the young and young at heart" (Sibilsky). Subjectively, *Pooh* has received perhaps the kindest, gentlest reviews for a Disney production. *Winnie the Pooh* is an intellectual property that, by its very nature, will always appeal to young children; *Pooh* specifically includes psychological aspects that can appeal to adults. It feels as though if Disney commits to the TYA genre for some of its shows, critics would be more forgiving as they know they are putting on their "young at heart" side. Just a simple advertising change towards marketing its shows as TYA would allow Disney to present itself more effectively to the target family audience.

It is certainly a challenge to appeal to two vastly different audiences–adults and children–at once. Because of this, Disney should shift its more adult-driven productions to Hyperion Theatricals while moving DTP more towards the TYA genre. This compartmentalization allows both production entities, DTP and Hyperion, to more fully support their productions as one focuses its resources on TYA and the other focuses on more adult-driven productions. In this way, the target audiences of children and adults, as well as the combined family audience, are both adequately engaged by the overarching

Disney Theatrical Group. Additionally, Disney is most effectively utilizing its resources and its staff by introducing this specialization in its production entities.

Both audiences can also be supported by the use of effective education and engagement. Disney has a healthy education department that supplies study guides and discussion tools for each show as well as leading Disney Musicals in our Schools which regionally helps produce Disney Jr. titles in underserved school communities. The engagement side includes social media and marketing aspects. It is up to these two sectors to connect with the target audiences in order to provide quality service for each guest. Disney also supports the occasional Kids' Night on Broadway event, which allows a child to get into a show for free with a paying adult; this includes pre-show activities, dining discounts, and educational resources. Although Disney did not found Kids' Night on Broadway, this event began just two years after *Beauty and the Beast* opened and only a year before *The Lion King* opened, and it has become a foregone conclusion that Broadway will have a children's offering solely because of Disney's influence on American musical theatre. Disney could lean into these opportunities and more events because they are a great outreach with the potential to grow and retain the audience. There could be pre-show crafts on a regular basis, costume contests for kids around Halloween, other seasonal activities, and educational opportunities like behind the scenes tours and skills workshops in order to support and educate burgeoning artists and future audience members.

Looking forward, which intellectual properties would be the best fit for Disney to adapt for the stage next? Of the six shows examined herein, five are from the Disney

Renaissance period, which lasted from 1989 to 1999: *The Little Mermaid* through *Tarzan*. This statistic alone implies that the Renaissance birthed the most theatrical-seeming films, which in turn best translated to the stage. These films' success on stage is partially because the music of the Renaissance was largely composed by Alan Menken with lyrics by Howard Ashman, who were Broadway trained with a theatre sound. It is also because the Renaissance films were fantastical without a huge reliance on *showing* such elements throughout the work.

One of the major Renaissance films which has not yet made its way to Broadway is *Hercules*. It was adapted in an outdoor production by Public Works in August 2019 and has been confirmed as coming to Broadway, possibly in 2022. *Hercules* was praised for being a "low-key production that feels in many ways like the polar opposite of Disney's string of megawatt Broadway hits–which is a big part of its charm" (Derschowitz). In this way, *Hercules* follows in the footsteps of Disney's previous theatrical productions, dazzling the audience with the realization of a beloved childhood tale in front of their eyes in a three-dimensional, live form. The success of the stage adaptations birthed from the animated films of the Renaissance period shows that Disney should continue to develop these stories for the stage. They are the most successful animated Disney films for a reason, and they most effectively translate to the genre of theatre.

In contrast, however, are the post-Renaissance films. These films tend to rely on visible, tangible magic or fantastical settings, which simply can not be replicated on stage without falling below the audience's expectations formed from the movies. For example,

in *Princess and the Frog,* the main characters are turned into frogs for over half of the movie; this would not work well on stage. *Moana* relies on traveling an ocean and fighting a volcanic lady and a large crab, and it, like *Tangled* and the already-adapted *Frozen,* is a road trip musical, all about the journey from place to place. There has been a lot of chatter about the newly released animated film *Encanto* being adapted for the stage, but there is much reliance on visible, tangible magic and effects, which would not translate well on the stage. Because of this, the major animated films post-Renaissance would be more challenging to adapt into theatrical musicals.

However, some of Disney's most beloved and enduring stories come from decades before their Renaissance began. *Cinderella* has already been turned into multiple different stage shows by other entities and should, thus, remain untouched by Disney. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* contains problematic elements for the modern age. *Sleeping Beauty*, though, could work well as a stage show. There is certainly enough fantastical flair with the color-changing ball gown and the fight with Maleficent in dragon form. Yet, the original film left enough of the plot and music vague enough that there is still room to improve, expand, and deepen the work. In this way, *Sleeping Beauty* and other pre-Renaissance films might be the best options for Disney's next stage adaptations. It certainly would help in bringing certain marketing and merchandise out of the vault. Additionally, these films invoke a sense of nostalgia without interfering with most consumers' childhood visions. It is challenging for Disney to adapt the Renaissance and post-Renaissance films as the consumers feel a greater sense of connection to these stories. By using films from before the majority of the Broadway audiences' childhoods,

Disney can adapt a beloved tale without a perceived feeling of encroaching on someone's childhood memories and expectations.

After all, the opinions of the guests are vital to Disney's success as success, by the Disney standard, is dictated by consumer-based and critical opinions, longevity, and net profit. By these guidelines, Disney has been generally successful throughout its time on Broadway. However, the findings of this study reveal further opportunities for artistic advancement in Disney's theatrical productions. Again, this is not to take any applause away from Disney but rather a way to illuminate what could come next for the company in terms of creative innovation. Additionally, other burgeoning production entities could learn from Disney's successes and failures in order to develop themselves for Broadway. Disney majorly influences Broadway, so its technologies, designs, adaptation choices, and general successes affect the entire field. This study has found that if Disney can continue to find opportunities for advancement and engagement through the inclusion of nostalgic elements to focus on the beloved stories and intellectual properties of the company, contextually-motivated spectacle, strong concepts with unified designers, strong director-designer collaboration, and involvement of the audience in the narrative, the company will only continue to be successful and innovative, influencing the field for years to come.

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