Assignment #4

In the peer reviewed article “Transformations: A Folkloric Exploration of the Musical Comedy Into the Woods by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine,” Cara Hoglund explains the research process for this musical. Instead of reading countless versions of each fairytale portrayed in the play, Sondheim and Lapine read from non-folkloric sources that included analyses by both folklorists and psychologists. From there the creators were able to develop their own interpretations of the stories.

I find it interesting how they chose reading analyses from a scientific point of view rather than finding the original stories. We all have the general idea of what Cinderella’s tale is, know what Jack did with the beanstalk, and even how Rapunzel got locked in her high tower. With the basic knowledge of these stories we are able to delve even further and relate them to society today. The theme of knowing right from wrong and not stealing from another. Having the self-control to treat everyone with respect despite wanting to attain something so badly. These are all themes and ideas that play into the lives of everyone every day; this is what Sondheim and Lapine were conveying through their musical Into the Woods.
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Title

Transformations: A Folkloric Exploration of the Musical Comedy Into the Woods by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine (http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1723&context=theses)

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the use of folktales in Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's 1987 award-winning musical Into the Woods. In doing so, I hope to accomplish several directives. First, to enrich understanding of the musical for all audience members, especially those with a folklore or theater background. I feel that understanding the underlying goals and standards that Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine used in creating the musical will provide a much deeper understanding of the genius of their work. I also aim clearly to elucidate the merger of folk narrative and popular musical theater form in this innovative musical. My hope is that analyses such as this will encourage a greater exploration of the strong reciprocal relationship between folklore and theater. Into the Woods is based upon four traditional folktales: Cinderella, Rapunzel, Little Red Riding Hood, and Jack and the Beanstalk. A very brief synopsis of the plot runs as follows: Cinderella, Jack, and Little Red all wish for something, and must go into the woods to get it. Rapunzel, heroine of the fourth tale, already lives in the woods with the Witch, though she wishes to see the world. Added to these tales is the central tale created by Lapine, based on the first section of Rapunzel's tale—the Baker turns out to be Rapunzel's older brother, whom their parents had before the Witch acquired Rapunzel. The Baker and his Wife wish to have a child; only when the Witch visits them do they learn that they have not been able to have a child because when the Witch came to collect Rapunzel, she also curse the Baker's family. When the Witch appears she explains to the Baker how to reverse the curse. The Baker must collect: 1) the cow as white as milk; 2) the cape as red as blood; 3) the hair as yellow as corn; 4) the slipper as pure as gold, all of which belong to one of the traditional folk tale characters, before the end of the third midnight. Act One is comprised of the Baker and his wife searching for these items as the other four tales play themselves out according to Grimms' version they are based upon. Act Two begins after "Happily Ever After" and attempts to bring the characters back into real life. Rapunzel has psychological problems; the Princes' eyes stray elsewhere; Jack is bored; and Little Red Riding Hood has become violent. By the end of Act Two, almost every character besides Jack, Little Red, Cinderella, and the Baker have died, due to the fact that the wife of Jack's Giant has come to seek revenge for her husband's death. In Act Two, these four main characters learn to take responsibility for the selfish actions they committed while pursuing their wish in Act One. In the process, they mature psychologically and become part of a cohesive group, learning to work together for a common cause and realizing that everything everyone does affects everyone else in some way. No one is alone. My thesis begins with a chapter on the history of folk tale scholarship. Chapter Two gives biographies of Sondheim and Lapine, and discusses the history of the American musical comedy in order to put them and this musical into a theater context as well. Chapter Three summarizes the plot in detail and compares the Broadway and London productions of the show, including reviews of the musical soon after it came out. Chapter Four analyzes Into the Woods in terms of the theories of Vladimir Propp, and compares Sondheim and Lapine's versions of the stories to the Grimms versions (using Jack Zipes' translation) and Joseph Jacobs, from whom they drew their version of Jack and the Beanstalk. Chapter Five does the same thing using the scholarship of Axel Olrik and Max Luthi. Chapter Six explores Sondheim and Lapine's intentions behind the themes in the musical, focusing on the works of Bruno Bettelheim and Erich Fromm. In researching fairy tales for their musical, Sondheim and Lapine read several analyses by folklorists and psychologists. They drew mainly from non-folkloristic sources in creating their interpretations. They critiqued Bettelheim's as well as the Jungians' interpretations of the tales. As Lapine states, "Once we decided on choosing the stories, then the obvious thing was to have a point of view about them" (1991:3). They also drew from the works of Erich Fromm, a Neo-Freudian who primarily focused on the relationship between society and the individual and between individuals.

Disciplines

Folklore

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