

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: TRANSFORMING THE BEAST: THE THEATRE LABORATORIES OF THE “DISNEY RENAISSANCE” 1984-1994

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This study investigates the ways that theatre professionals brought significant changes to the Walt Disney Company, from 1984-1994, in a period affectionately referred to, in popular discourses, as the “Disney Renaissance.” These individuals, including Peter Schneider, Linda Woolverton, Howard Ashman, Alan Menken, Bob McTyre, Ron Logan, Rob Roth, Matt West, Stan Meyer, and others came from Broadway, Off-Broadway, regional theatres, and local theatres, and represented a wide-cross section of theatrical disciplines, including production management, stage management, playwrighting, musical theatre, producing, directing, choreography, and design. In their respective Company divisions, such as animation and theme parks, they worked to transform their area of the corporation into theatre laboratories, where a series of experiments occurred. These tests challenged the lines of demarcation between theatre, animation, and theme park mediums, between the individual and the collective, between marginalization and the mainstream, and between spectatorship and participation. In 1994, these efforts culminated in the production of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway.

Through a combination of archival evidence and interviews with the surviving subjects listed above, my findings demonstrate a direct link between their theatrical knowledge and practices to the rapid growth and unprecedented financial, popular, and critical success, which the Walt Disney Company enjoyed during this era. Written in a year of Covid-19, when the American theatre industry was decimated, this dissertation tells the stories of theatre makers who, over thirty years ago, ventured into the non-theatrical contexts of Disney and transformed the culture, values, and ways of doing things at the large Company, making it a more collaborative, more empathetic, more innovative, and bolder place than it was before. In this way “Transforming the Beast” refers not only to the pivotal moment of *Beauty and the Beast* in on film, the theme park stage, or Broadway, but the value of theatrical knowledge in transforming a large entity like Disney to do better as a business, as a creative space, and as a collective of people.

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“DISNEY RENAISSANCE” 1984-1994

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Dedication

For my parents Patrick and Giovanna Mandracchia, who took me to see *Beauty and the Beast* in the movie theatre, when I was three - and to my little brother Thomas Mandracchia who watched that *Beauty and the Beast* VHS tape every day as a toddler, before his nap, so that I know this Disney text inside and out.

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I've been researching Disney since my parents bought a VCR player in 1991. I would like to thank my parents for introducing me to all things Disney as a child, which sparked a love of musical theatre, imagination, hope, and a belief that I have the power to create the world I want to see. Thank you for supporting me, in many ways, as I pursue a career in theatre and in academia. To my brother as well: thank you for always coming to see my shows (and sometimes tap dancing in them).

I want to thank my high school drama program for igniting my love of theatre and for taking our show choir to perform in Disney World. Returning, as an adult, and as a stagecraft instructor, I was able to experience, firsthand, the joys and challenges of staging *Beauty and the Beast*. Thank you for giving me my first theatre laboratory. And thank you to the many laboratories I have had the privilege to work in professionally over the years, especially Steel River Playhouse for allowing me to dramaturg *Beauty and the Beast* to enhance my research on this project.

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Introduction: The Walt Disney Company as a Theatre Laboratory

Prologue: 1923

On a cold January night in 1923, a writer named John V.A. Weaver experienced a night at the theatre that would change American entertainment in massive, tectonic ways. When he first told his wife that he was going out that night to see the touring Moscow Art Theatre perform *The Cherry Orchard* at Jolson's Theatre, she apparently protested, "What you want to see them for? It's only a bunch of dirty Bolshevicky that's tryin' to turn the country upside down the way they done to their own."¹ In that case, Weaver responded, he would go down there and "give the stuff the razz", (which is 20s-speak for "heckle"). Sitting in the theatre, with the intention of booing Stanislavski's Russian acting troupe, and barely understanding the action of a play where "hardly anything happen' at all," he found himself inexplicably moved by the play's shattering climax – he found himself in an emotional state that he could only describe, as childlike. "And--listen, I can't make out yet how it happened, but when that great big goof looked at the orchard, and I could hear the axes cuttin' the trees... I just sat there and blubbered like a baby... Just think of it, a bunch of low-down Bolshevicky that don't talk even a word of English makin' a hard-boiled egg like me cry like a kid!... Why did it get me?" He was not the only one.

Some of America's future titans of the performing arts were in attendance, and experienced something similarly intense. A young Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg, and drama critic Francis Fergusson would, from those days forth, dedicate

¹ John V.A. Weaver. "Re: Moscow Art Theatre," *New York Times* (1923-Current file); Feb 11, 1923; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index, pg. X1.

their careers to unlocking the answers to the same question that Weaver asked his readers: “Why did it get me?” How does a piece of theatre accomplish this kind of impact? Why hadn’t they seen anything like this on the American stage? What did the Russians have that Americans did not?

“Laboratories,” answered Richard Boleslavsky, a Polish immigrant, actor, and former student of the Moscow Art Theatre. “There are no laboratories of the theatre [in America], there are no tense experiments and achievements, no tedious labor discovering new forms, no flings of imagination, no joy of attainment.”² His assessment was shocking for his young disciples, because it was counter to the artistic trends of his day. In the roaring era of modernism, individual artistic expression was glorified, and collaboration, realism, and a scientific approach to art, such as a laboratory were rejected as being less creative.³ Challenging this, Boleslavsky argued that even the most independent artist-master can become complacent: too tired, too self-satisfied, can think too small, can stop seeking new points of view, can become isolated from new collaborators, new challenges, or become too short sighted without a laboratory for continuous “contemplation, searching, and creation.”⁴ “It is interesting to note,” he said, “that many of the great dramatic authors of the world have been workers in a collective theatre group; that their playwriting was, so to speak, their part in the collective work: Shakespeare, Moliere, Goldoni, Ibsen, Calderon, William Butler Yeats, Benavente,

² Richard Boleslavsky, “The Theatre Laboratory,” Theatre Arts Magazine, Volume 7, Number 3, 1923, 245.

³ See later section on “Disneyfication.”

⁴ What is the result?” Boleslavsky asks, “[Gordon] Craig sitting in his studio in Florence, spending his time building models for plays and Theatres which do not exist and trying to produce Hamlet with marionettes; Duse sometimes arranging intimate parties in her own home, where she plays bits of those parts which hold her imagination, not even playing them really, but reading them as she sits in an armchair. Reinhardt is wholly immersed in the theory of scenic expression and only once in a while, forced by life, comes forth to stage plays in foreign countries, repeating his former achievements,” Boleslavsky, 262.

Chekhov, [and] Vyspiansky.”⁵ Europe, he explained, had great resident companies for experimentation: the Moscow Art Theatre, the Abbey, the Old Vic, and the once great Comedie Francaise. America did not have a theatre like this.

Thus, Boleslavsky’s disciples would dedicate their careers to the creation of such an idea: that one group, who, through rigorous collaboration, emphasizing ongoing education, working towards the perfection of their craft, and the development of new works can “create new forms which will influence the world... raising the culture of the country through the main travelled road of the theatre.”⁶ They believed that the theatre, as a cultural institution, had the potential to be the main artery that propelled change into the world. Whereas modernism often rejected mainstream culture, the laboratory theatre philosophy saw mainstream culture (the “main travelled road”) as something that was – like the audience of *The Cherry Orchard* – moveable.

This idea that a dedicated group of theatre practitioners, by challenging the limits of their craft, can shape the culture at large is the general premise of this dissertation, which investigates the theatrical experiments of one unlikely theatre laboratory, in particular, which was founded in 1923, and would have one of the largest impacts on the American mainstream. Despite its prominence, the laboratory featured in this study remains one of the most unexamined or underexamined laboratories in the study of theatre history. I am not speaking of Boleslavsky’s American Laboratory Theatre, however. I am speaking, of course, of the Walt Disney Company.

⁵ Boleslavsky, 264.

⁶ Boleslavsky, 249.

Disney as America's Theatre Laboratory

Following Boleslavsky's prescription, there were many "laboratories of the theatre," which emerged in the United States to challenge the lines of demarcation between the individual and the collective, marginalization and the mainstream, politics and entertainment, reality and imagination, mediation and presence, authenticity and reproduction, cultural capital and accessibility, and the senses. Notably, these laboratories include the Group Theatre, the many theatres of the Regional Theatre Movement, theatres of the Off-Broadway and Off-off Broadway Movements, alternative theatre, performances art, and the avant-garde. These groups experimented with organizational structure, the creative process, technique, performance space, and applications of theatre knowledge and theatre processes in non-theatrical spaces and contexts. Because so much of theatre experimentation in the 20th Century pushed theatre outside of its traditional spaces, there are some "laboratories of the theatre" that did not take place in a theatre – or even with a theatre company. The Walt Disney Company would become one of those non-theatrical settings where tests, trials, errors, and theatrical discoveries would occur.

In October, 1923, (the same year of the Moscow Arts Theatre tour and Boleslavsky's bold declaration), Walt Disney and his brother Roy founded the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio in Los Angeles after their previous company Laugh-O-Gram Studio had gone bankrupt. Throughout its century of history, this studio – later called Walt Disney Productions, and later, the Walt Disney Company – was the site of many theatre tests that would push the boundaries of the same juxtapositions listed above.⁷ For

⁷ In this dissertation, I will refer to the Walt Disney Company as such, or as "Disney" or the "Company" for short. To avoid confusion with the several members of the Disney family discussed in this study I will refer to them by their first names such as "Walt" "Roy" and "Roy E."

example, one of the Company's most definitive theatre experiments happened during production for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* where animator Vladimir "Bill" Tytla incorporated the lessons of Boleslavsky's own acting book *Acting: The First Six Lessons* into his hand-drawn performances of the dwarves, so that they're acting would be grounded in motives, as per Stanislavsky's acting method.⁸ The result moved the audience to tears at the film's Hollywood premiere.

In the scene where the dwarves think Snow White is dead, word has it that even macho movie star Clark Gable cried when Grumpy broke down and sobbed.⁹ Many who saw Disney's first full-length film asked some variation of Weaver's *Cherry Orchard* question "Why did it get me?" After all, these weren't even people; these were drawings – these were cartoons! As Robert D. Feild wrote in 1942, "we were startled. With the advent of *Snow White*, something so challenging happened that we could no longer merely sit back."¹⁰ He recalls that there was an awareness that "here was something which might influence profoundly our contemporary culture," just as Boleslavsky once asserted that members of a collective, like Tytla, could change mainstream culture with his experiments on the application of theatre knowledge off-stage. This is just one example of a theatre experiment in the Company's hundred-year history. There are countless examples in Disney animation, theme parks, and other corporate divisions.

Most notably, however, a "perfect storm" of circumstances in the Company brought about a period of rapid, intense, and intentional theatrical experimentation,

⁸ J. Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 207.

⁹ Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2006), 272.

¹⁰ Robert D. Feild, *The Art of Walt Disney*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 2-3.

spanning from 1984-1994, in an era affectionately referred to in popular discourses as the “Disney Renaissance.” During this decade of change, the Company incorporated a resident theatre organizational model into their animation studio, and hired theatre practitioners, including professional production managers, stage managers, actors, writers, composers, and lyricists to apply their specialized skills into the context of Disney animation. These professionals came from regional theatre, Broadway, Off-Broadway, children’s theatre, and other avenues, bringing with them a way of doing things, which was informed by theatre practice and theatre history. Additionally, during this decade, Disney theme park entertainment – also managed by theatremakers – hired professional directors, designers, and choreographers from Off-Broadway, who expanded the parks’ theatrical offerings from variety shows and parades to include live “stage shows,” which reproduced animated film plots and integrated musical theatre elements. Finally, a group of these professionals from the theme parks and animation studio came together to stage a fully realized Broadway production of Disney’s animated musical *Beauty and the Beast* in 1994 – exploring the thresholds where animation and theatre begin, end, and intersect.

“Animation is a strange art form,” says animator and historian Tom Sito: “It is art and theatre produced in industrial quantities.”¹¹ In other words, animation is an inherent “laboratory of the theatre” by its very production, which blurs the lines between theatrical process and a non-theatrical product, between the performing arts and static drawings, and between the individual artist-performer and the company, which blends their art into a larger whole. Scholars like Donald Crafton, in his book *Shadow of a Mouse*:

¹¹ Sito, chap. 1, Kindle Edition.

Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation read animation “as performance,” and this dissertation, in tracking case studies of theatre development that occurred in the Walt Disney Company during its “Renaissance,” adopts a strategy of reading animation, specifically, “as theatre.” Performance theorist Richard Schechner asserts that “Something ‘is’ a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is.”¹² Theatre historians Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy maintain that same can be said for what designates theatre, as a form of art and entertainment, from other activities, such as political campaigns, holiday celebrations, sports events, religious ceremonies, and children’s make-believe, which contain theatrical or performative elements.¹³ “Just about anything,” Schechner says, “can be studied ‘as’ performance” if it has performative elements. Thus, this dissertation is enabled to read instances in the “Disney Renaissance” “as theatre” or “as theatre laboratories” or “as theatre experiments” in light of the theatre professionals involved, who ground these activities in the historic and social contexts, conventions, usage, and traditions of theatrical craft – especially the traditions of other theatre laboratories. Thus, each case study presented in this dissertation focuses on theatre people, practices, and dramaturgies in Disney animation, theme parks, and its first Broadway production, as well as historical information that situates these things into the larger context of theatre history.

“Dramaturgy” is a theatrical term that has been defined many different ways over the years.¹⁴ Using the word as a historiographical framework, informed by my own

¹² Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 38.

¹³ Oscar G Brockett and Franklin J Hildy, *History of the Theatre*, 10th Edition, (Boston: Pearson Education, 2008), 1.

¹⁴ Michael Chemers defines it in his book *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy* in three steps: “1) Determine what the aesthetic architecture of a piece of dramatic literature actually is (analysis) 2) Discover everything needed to transform that inert script into a living piece of theater (research) 3) Apply that knowledge in a way that makes sense to a living audience at this time in this place (practical

dramaturgical practice in the theatre profession, I use it to convey a history of *process*. “Process” can be defined, in its most accessible sense as “a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end.”¹⁵ In a theatrical sense, it is about objectives, obstacles, and strategies for navigating obstacles. In the tradition of the Moscow Art Theatre, and innovated by American acting studios, the concept of objectives, obstacles, and strategies (often referred to in the acting studio as “tactics”) are the basic building blocks of playwrighting, acting, and directing – unlocking a script in terms of what characters want, what stands in their way, and what they do to achieve their goals.¹⁶ Thus, when I say that my historiographical framework is informed by my theatrical training, I mean that I will approach each case study, reading Disney production “as theatre” in terms of the theatre professionals, their objectives, their obstacles, and the theatrical strategies they employed to solve the various problems of their area. I am, therefore, taking a Stanislavskian/Boleslavskian approach to the history of the theatre laboratories that emerged in the Walt Disney Company, at this time: exploring the dramaturgies of management, storytelling, theatre architecture, and cinematic staging that shaped this era.

Chapter 1 will focus on Peter Schneider, a freelance theatre production manager, and company manager, who had worked in regional theatres in the U.S. and abroad, who was appointed vice-president of Walt Disney Feature Animation, and changed the studio’s structure and way of doing things so that it would operate “as” a regional theatre. “I came to change,” he recalls, “I was the first outsider [to] run the animation company...

application).” Michael Chemers, *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁵ This is the definition that comes up from a Google search for “process,” February 28, 2021.

¹⁶ Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*. (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1948).

Work harder, draw better, self-critique, bring in outsiders, pick teams, have opinions: actually, become artistic players as opposed to... grunts... We brought a theatre discipline to it.”¹⁷ As this chapter will contend, Schneider’s conception of a “theatre discipline” reflects specific ideological and practical genealogies, which can be traced from Boleslavsky, to the Group Theatre, through the Regional Theatre Movement’s quest for a national theatre, and to his own history of theatre management before starting at Disney in 1985. After tracing each component of his “theatre discipline” to their theatrical contexts, this chapter will examine the ways that he tested the applications of this discipline in a non-theatrical film studio, how he created opportunities for additional theatre practitioners to work in Disney animation, and, in collaboration with theatre veteran Howard Ashman, dedicated Disney animation to becoming America’s new national laboratory for the creation of new musicals.

After the first chapter grounds the structure and creative process of Disney Feature Animation in a “theatre discipline,” Chapter 2 examines the unlikely combination of children’s theatre pedagogy and Off-off-Broadway political edge that manifested itself in the storytelling of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, through the collaboration of Linda Woolverton and Howard Ashman, respectively. Woolverton, coming from a background in creating didactic plays for family audiences, wrote the screenplay for *Beauty and the Beast* with the express goal of “updating” the folklore to impart feminist lessons on its early 90s audiences. Ashman, agreeing and supporting this endeavor, served as lyricist and producer, brought with him a queer cultural sensibility and politics, which had been

¹⁷ Cuny75, “Theater Talk: *Waking Sleeping Beauty* producer Peter Schneider and writer Patrick Pacheco,” Online Video Clip, Youtube.com, May 13, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yLPzPG-eS0>

manifested in his hit musical *Little Shop of Horrors*, and shaped by his career that grew from Off-off Broadway, to Off-Broadway, and to Broadway in the 1980s. Comparing the AIDS Crisis to a war, and battling and dying of AIDS-related complications, himself, in the middle of production on *Beauty and the Beast*, this chapter explores the ways that Ashman's collaboration with Woolverton yielded an intentional, psychological, and sophisticated "dramaturgy of empathy" – to borrow a phrase from theatre historian Michael Chemers' work in *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness*. This chapter will note how the film's "dramaturgy of empathy" drew specifically from theatre: Woolverton using theories of participatory theatre (*a la* Brian Way) and Ashman pulling from Bertolt Brecht's theories of alienation to simultaneously craft a journey for the audience to learn *with* the characters on what they believed to be the right way to judge others.

While the first two chapters examine theatre experiments in Disney animation, reading animation "as" theatre, Chapter 3 investigates Disney theme park entertainment from 1984-1994 "as" a theatre laboratory. Because there is no other comprehensive written history of theatre in Disney theme parks, this chapter begins with a brief history of theatre in this context from 1955-1983. This history is intended to illustrate the ways that theatre was viewed by the original theme park creators, or Imagineers, as an obstacle to the parks' design for free-flowing movement of guests. Theatre, therefore, existed as a secondary medium – a museum to the past. However, changes of leadership in the parks' Entertainment division in the early 1980s, coupled with executive changes in the Company at large in 1984 prompted a new age of rapid experimentation on developing new theatrical forms into the early 1990s. These new offerings not only boosted park

attendance but paved the way for *Beauty and the Beast* to go to Broadway. This change of view – from theatre being seen as an obstacle to progress to becoming the most relevant park attractions – is marked by changes in costumes, performance, theatre architecture, and specifically, the proliferation of purpose-built theatres, designed to make bold imagination a reality.

The expansion of theatre in Disney theme parks included, not only the incorporation of animated characters into stage shows, but an increased number of overall stage shows, an increase in the building of purpose-built theatres to house these shows, and, like in the animation studio, an increasing number of theatre practitioners from regional theatre and Off-Broadway to direct, design, and choreograph these shows. As Chapter 4 will explain, these professionals included freelance Off-Broadway director Rob Roth, Off-Broadway set designer Stan Meyer, and Off-Broadway/Broadway dancer and choreographer Matt West. When they arrived, Disney theme park stage shows were usually variety shows of sorts, with little, if any, plot. Roth and his team, however, saw themselves as an extension of the laboratories of Michael Bennett and sought to carry on his experiments in cinematic staging, after his death of AIDS in 1987. Because Disney theme parks had dedicated themselves to producing in-park stage versions of newly released films like *Dick Tracy*, the trio approached C.E.O. Michael Eisner (a former theatre major and aspiring playwright, himself) about creating a Disney division specifically dedicated to staging films on Broadway. After a series of back-and-forth conversations with the team, Eisner granted them seed money to develop *Mary Poppins* for the Broadway stage. After Frank Rich's review of the film version of *Beauty and the Beast* declared that it was "The best Broadway musical score of 1991" Eisner compelled

the team to take on *Beauty and the Beast* the first Disney-produced Broadway production. Thus, the first two chapters read Disney animation “as” theatre, and the second two investigate the processes by which Disney animation *became* theatre – each an experiment, rooted in a theatrical heritage, that builds on the last.

Just as each Disney theatre experiment built on previous projects and traditions, this dissertation adds to and builds on previous examinations of the role of theatre practice in the “Disney Renaissance,” including critics who have read Disney animated films “as” theatre – such as Frank Rich of the *New York Times* who, years before *Beauty and the Beast* was staged on Broadway, called the film “The Hit That Got Away -- The best Broadway musical score of 1991.”¹⁸ The contributions of theatre practitioners in the “Disney Renaissance” are becoming progressively more visible thanks to documentaries like *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, *Howard*, and the PBS documentary *Broadway the American Musical*, where Julie Andrews’ voice narrates, “Before the Broadway musical was resurrected by Disney, Disney had been resurrected by the Broadway musical. After more than a decade of lackluster films, Disney had a string of hit animated musicals; many written by Broadway veterans, and informed by Broadway storytelling.”¹⁹ This declaration references the influence of Howard Ashman, specifically, who incorporated musical theatre storytelling structures and conventions in to Disney animation, beginning with *The Little Mermaid*. This is the primary thesis of Peter Kunze’s 2018 dissertation from the Media Studies department at the University of Texas at Austin, titled “Staging a

¹⁸ Frank Rich, “The Year in the Arts: Theatre/1991; Throw Away Those Scripts. Some of the Greatest Moments Were Wordless,” *New York Times*, Dec. 29, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/29/theater/year-arts-theater-1991-throw-away-those-scripts-some-greatest-moments-were.html>.

¹⁹ Fields, Marc, Laurence Maslon, JoAnn Young, Jeff Dupre, and Sally Rosenthal. 2004. *Broadway: The American Musical*. Directed by Kris Liem, Adam Zucker, Nancy Novak, Buddy Squires, Mead Hunt, Michael Kantor, Julie Andrews, et al. PBS Home Video.

Comeback: Film and Theatre Convergence at Disney, 1982-1998,” which is one of the first scholarly in-depth studies on the textual composition of Disney animated musicals, and mapping of the role of musical theatre and Broadway in Disney’s corporate synergy. These previous studies, which will be examined in further detail in the next section, correctly assert the importance and vitality of musical theatre practice in its relation to the “Disney Renaissance.” This dissertation expands and builds on this assertion by moving the scope of the investigation beyond Broadway, beyond musical theatre, and beyond the creation of Disney musical scripts and librettos.

While a significant portion of this study, specifically Chapter 2, is dedicated to scriptwriting, the case studies in this dissertation cover experiments in various areas of theatre practice from production and stage management, to stagecraft and producing, to directing, designing, and choreographing. Each chapter will also cover acting in the unique ways and styles that it applies to each case study: animation-as-acting, voice acting in animation, theme park character acting, and Broadway acting. Casting, especially as it pertains to representations of race, class, and gender, is a topic discussed in Chapter 1, especially. As mentioned, these professionals came from many theatrical backgrounds besides Broadway, with special emphasis on regional theatre, Off-Broadway, and Off-off Broadway disciplines and dramaturgies. However, most notably, this dissertation follows a specific thread that connects these practitioners, as they choose to leave the theatre to work for a commercial powerhouse like Disney.

Each case study features practitioners, who expressed the belief that their art could change the world for the better, by shaping mainstream culture – they were each keenly aware of their newfound platform and the idea that any mass movement cannot

happen *without* a mass audience. In their anthology *The Sixties Center Stage: Mainstream and Popular Performances in a Turbulent Decade*, James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal provide a critical term for this ideological strain, which I trace, specifically, to Boleslavsky: the “mainstream experimental.” The term is designed to “pull the curtain” on the false dichotomy in the writing of theatre history that positions mainstream, commercial theatre on one end and the experimental and anticonsumerist on the other. In the case of theatre histories of the 1960s, Harding and Rosenthal argue that this kind of binary opposition, which was perpetuated by Richard Schechner, himself, and his publication *The Drama Review (TDR)*, “curtailed serious exploration of the rich tensions, dialogues, and exchanges that took place between the theatrical mainstream and the experimental performative avant-gardes during one of the most socially turbulent periods of the late twentieth century.”²⁰ The term, “mainstream experimental,” therefore, can also be applied to other moments in theatre history, where practitioners venture into mainstream and commercial venues with the intent to push boundaries of art and culture to the cutting edge. Whether they were aware of Boleslavsky’s declaration that one dedicated group could change the world through the “main travelled road,” or not, they practiced what he preached, and popular culture, and American theatre were undoubtedly changed.

Periodizing the “Disney Renaissance”

This project situates the popular narrative of the “Disney Renaissance” into the larger context of theatre history: citing its theatrical “sources”, if you will, and crediting

²⁰ James Martin Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, eds. *The Sixties, Center Stage: Mainstream and Popular Performances in a Turbulent Decade*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 8.

theatre practitioners with contributions which impacted the Walt Disney Company, the film industry, and the theatre industry. This section will historicize the phrase “Disney Renaissance” and map out this era of Disney history from various historiographic standpoints. The word “renaissance” implies a rebirth of artistic vitality, and the phrase appeared in popular discourses regarding Disney in the mid-1980s to refer, with a positive connotation, to changes that occurred *at* the Company and *for* the Company, when compared to where they had been in the two decades after Walt Disney’s death. As Disney historian Sean Griffin writes in his book *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*:

“Almost every account of the company’s history during this period [between Walt’s passing the ‘Disney Renaissance,’ from 1964 to 1984] comments that the phrase ‘What would Walt have done?’ dominated executive meetings. While it is impossible to know for certain what Walt would have done, his history as a risk taker and experimenter was definitely not what company executives took from the man’s memory. Instead, the Walt Disney Company retreated into a shell—churning out almost identical family comedies, letting the animation department run on its own inertia.”²¹

What followed was the period of experimentation – largely theatre experimentation – which this dissertation describes; however, the period following the appointment of C.E.O. Michael Eisner, in 1984 was filled with so many rapid and extensive changes and “victories” for the Company that the era has come to represent different things to different people.

The “Disney Renaissance” has become what postmodern thinker Frederic Jameson would call a “metanarrative:” a larger-than-life story, which shapes people’s

²¹ Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 102.

beliefs and practices.²² Although not universally beloved, the Disney corporation's comeback story has compelled academic scholars and public intellectuals, from multiple fields of study, to document and analyze these events. These fields include cultural studies, media studies, film studies, tourism studies, business, marketing, global economics, critical theory, and architecture, to name a few. As Kunze writes, "With the possible exception of Apple, no U.S. company has staged a comeback as impressive as Disney's over the past thirty years."²³ Because this decade is one of the most prolific reconciliation narratives in recent history, the "lessons" of this story have been made consequential to those who want to unlock the Company's methods for growth, financial, or artistic success.

Therefore, it stands to reason that different fields will prioritize different lenses of focus on the period. When theatre historian Thomas Postlewait talks about periodization, he explains how historians can look at the same time period with different priorities or focuses and get a different story. In his book *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, Postlewait says, "On the one hand, period concepts are defined by formal styles, rules of art, conventions, themes, iconographic motifs, semiotic codes and systems, and the intertextuality of artistic heritages while on the other hand, periods are derived from the social and political orders, economic forces, institutions, ideologies, and mentalities."²⁴ Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, the majority of histories of the "Disney Renaissance" focused on the economic success of the Walt Disney

²² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Post-Contemporary Interventions*, (Durham: Duke University Press 1991), 337.

²³ Peter Christopher Kunze, "Staging a Comeback: Film and Theatre Convergence at Disney, 1982-1998," Dissertation, (University of Texas at Austin, 2018), 1.

²⁴ Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography*, (Cambridge University Press 2009), 165.

Company, with a specific interest in C.E.O. Michael Eisner's leadership. As Kunze so poignantly articulates, "Extant histories of this time period have underestimated the role of theater in Disney's resurgence since the 1980s, favoring instead the visionary leadership of its executives."²⁵ There are several reasons why historians would focus on the executives' role in the "Disney Renaissance," not least of which is because the phrase was first used by Eisner, himself, in a 1986 statement to shareholders, where he promises "an enormous reawakening at Disney, a renaissance sure to occur when talented new people blend their fresh ideas with our company's traditional values."²⁶ Another early appearance of the phrase comes from Roy E. Disney, who, in a 1987 issue of the film magazine *Photoplay*, says that he thinks Disney's latest film *The Great Mouse Detective* will have paved the way for what one hopes will be a great Disney renaissance" that he predicted would come to fruition with their next film *Oliver and Company*.²⁷ As Kunze suggests, Eisner, who had just been made C.E.O. two years prior was able to flaunt early successes in his regime as a signal of good things to come; and he would continue to try to tie his name to the idea of a "Disney Renaissance" in the press throughout his tenure and through books published through Disney's official publishing company Hyperion Books, which Eisner co-founded.²⁸ A very simple explanation for the institutional focus in explorations of Disney in the 1980s and 90s is the fact that the executives were the most visible faces of the Company at this time, and for many years after – and that this was purposeful on the part of the executives.

²⁵ Kunze, 6.

²⁶ Kunze, 6.

²⁷ Ken Ferguson, "Family Ties: Ken Ferguson talks to Roy Disney," *Photoplay Magazine*, Vol. 38, no. 1, January 1987, 14-15.

²⁸ Kunze, 18.

To add to this mystification of the artistic history of this period, the details of the creative processes of the animation studio and theme parks were not public knowledge – aside from small glimpses into “behind the scenes” looks at the making of Disney films and theme park attractions, with little to none of the same archives available for *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway. Animation is, by nature, an artform that obscures the labor of its creators and distances the artist from the finished product. The voice actors are heard, but not seen, the artists’ hands are not visible, and their single hand-drawn sketches, copied onto painted cels, and photographed one-by-one on a multiplane camera. During the 90s, as Disney films became extremely popular, animators, screenplay writers, lyricists, and composers. Disney’s Broadway production team would find themselves on interviews and talk-shows to discuss or even showcase some of their process – like animator Glen Keane drawing a sketch of the Beast.²⁹ Sito explains that during this time, “traditional hand-drawn animation experienced a renaissance of interest. The public’s love of pencil-drawn animation peaked in a way not seen since the 1940s. This created in Hollywood a boomtown atmosphere” for animators, as cartoons became a mainstay of film and television, with multiple companies in competition for the first time since the earliest days of animation.³⁰ So while published books of the time period, and the following decade showed much interest in the corporate stories (some even calling the period the “Eisner Era”), it was this public interest in the animation of the period, which would eventually change the focus of the narrative from business to art.

²⁹ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

³⁰ Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*. (University Press of Kentucky, 2006), chap. 11, Kindle.

The shift in focus first gained traction on the internet in the early 2000s, largely on blogs. The majority of this content is dedicated to the notion that the “Disney Renaissance” was over and a new era, dominated by 3D computer animation was in process.³¹ These observations come with rigorous amateur research and analysis, including charts that visualize the difference between the high-earning films of the 80s and 90s and the low-earning (one might say ‘pitiful’) films of the early 2000s – with the writer (and the comments section) rigorously trying to figure out what the Disney films of the 90s had that the films of the 2000s *didn’t* have. “I’m eager to see whether or not *The Princess and the Frog* will be able to end this Cycle of Doom,” writes the author, in 2008, ultimately concluding that the key to Disney’s success in the “Renaissance” was the artistic style of 2D animation, referencing *The Princess and the Frog* as a return to 2D style, and pinning the success of his hypothesis on how well that film would do at the box office later that year.³² Something else happened in the early 2000s, which would shift focus to the animators, especially. In 2002, a push to make Disney animation fully 3D to compete with Disney’s new rival Dream Works (founded by former Disney executive Jeffrey Katzenberg), Michael Eisner laid off most of the Disney Feature Animation studio. In response, former Disney special effects animators Dan Lund and Tony West made a documentary film called *Dream on Silly Dreamer*, covering the history of Disney from 1980-2005 from the perspective of the animators. As a large

³¹ SDG, “Quo Vadis Disney? Notes on the End of the Disney Renaissance, circa 2001” Decent Films Blog, Accessed September 6, 2020, <http://decentfilms.com/articles/quovadisdisney>; ZeldaFan20, “The Golden Age of Pixar: An analysis on the Golden Age of Pixar Studios,” Retro Junk, 2002, <https://www.retrojunk.com/article/show/5375/the-golden-age-of-pixar>; Todd Gilchrist, “Double Dip Digest: The Little Mermaid: Disney’s renaissance woman enjoys a remastered new transfer and terrific bonus materials in this two-disc Platinum Edition DVD set.” IGN, 2006, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2006/10/03/double-dip-digest-the-little-mermaid>.

³² Anonymous, “The Disney Renaissance in Four Charts” Mad Mind Blog, 2009, <http://www.madmind.de/2009/07/26/the-disney-renaissance-in-four-charts/>.

ethnographic historiography, it was the first major projects to center the artists in the “Renaissance” narrative. This documentary emerged amid a confrontation between Roy E. Disney (Walt’s nephew and former president of Disney Feature Animation) and Eisner, where Roy launched the Save Disney Campaign to oust Eisner for mismanagement of the Company including “the slow, cruel and insidious death of Disney Animation over the past several years.”³³ After years of Eisner being the center of the “Disney Renaissance” narrative, Roy praised *Dream on Silly Dreamer*’s change of focus declaring, “*These* are the people who made it happen.”³⁴ Eisner resigned later that year after twenty years as C.E.O. and the public face of the Company. Roy rejoined the board, and traditional animation was reinstated at the Company in 2006. The role of *Dream on Silly Dreamer* and the Save Disney Campaign in this corporate power shift demonstrates the power of the “Disney Renaissance” as a metanarrative, which influences real world events – and the importance of who is included in it, and centered in it.

Tom Sito’s 2006 book *Drawing the Line the Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*, much like *Dream on Silly Dreamer*, tells the story of the “Disney Renaissance” from the animator’s perspective.³⁵ Sito, however, places the

³³ Jim Hill, “The story that “Save Disney” tried to hide,” Jim Hill Media, December 7, 2004, http://jimhillmedia.com/editor_in_chief1/b/jim_hill/archive/2004/12/07/507.aspx

³⁴ Hill, http://jimhillmedia.com/editor_in_chief1/b/jim_hill/archive/2004/12/07/507.aspx

³⁵ Another history book that reflects the historiographical shift that happened in the early 2000s is Chris Pallant’s 2011 book *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation*, which centers the history of the “Disney Renaissance” on the animators instead of the executives – this time from an artistic standpoint instead of a labor standpoint. The book designates the period in artistic terms, calling it a “return to Disney formalism.” He says, “Various studies, interested in issues of identity, have sought to tease meaning from the Renaissance period’s features, yet they provide little more than a fragmented foundation when approaching the period as a whole.” In other words, critical theorists have often engaged with Disney’s animated films from this period, usually in the form of semiotic readings, without defining or nuancing the period itself. These many books, which will be elaborated on in the next section on theoretical approaches to the “Disney Renaissance,” often assume the intended ideology of the films, theme parks, and Broadway shows of the era, based on what individual theorists can read and interpret in them – without studying the people who made them. Chris Pallant, *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation*, (London: Continuum International, 2011), 89.

era, as well as the story of the Disney 2004 layoffs, in the larger context of animation history; specifically, the history of labor struggles and unions in the field of (not just Disney) animation. His book, through a combination of archival and ethnographic research, including his own personal experience as an animator, is a thorough explanation of both the means and relations of animation production. While his window into this mysterious world mentions the role of theatre people and their transformation of the studio to model a “repertory company,” Sito is, however, not as interested in the aspects of theatrical-led experimentation that happened at the studio under their leadership, but their relationship with unions. “The good thing,” he says, “was that theater people were raised in a positive working relationship between Actors Equity and the theaters. They were much more respectful of artists' everyday union issues than the usual predatory film executive or social-climbing former artist.”³⁶ Nevertheless, his descriptions of the organizational structure of Disney Feature Animation at this time is foundational for this dissertation’s study of Disney-as-a-theatre-laboratory.

The power of the narrative would be proven once again in 2009 when Schneider and *Beauty and the Beast*’s film producer Don Hahn conducted over 150 interviews of people who worked at the animation studio during the “Renaissance” decade from 1984-1994 for their documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. Schneider says, “I was at Disney for 18 years, and after I left in 2001 I felt that there was a story there that no one had captured. It was well written about period of time — there was the James Stewart book [*The Disney War: Battle for the Magic Kingdom*] and all the drama covered in the mainstream press. But no one, I thought, had captured the essence of the emotional story

³⁶ Sito, chap. 2, Kindle.

of what happened.”³⁷ This documentary added to the perspectives of those featured in *Dream on Silly Dreamer*, in that it added the perspectives of Schneider, Katzenberg, Roy E. Disney, and Eisner, and introduced Howard Ashman as a major figure of the period – largely crediting him and his musical theatre background with the “Disney Renaissance,” while maintaining the collaborative relationship between animators, creatives, managers, and executives. While accounts of the period, such as Tom Sito’s own account, in his 2006 book *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*, had compared Disney animation to a “Broadway show”, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* mainstreamed this aspect of the narrative. Accounts of the “Disney Renaissance,” written from 2010, began to associate the period with musical theatre: something, which, aside from histories like Sito’s, had only informally been done in comments sections in blogs in the early 2000s was now part of scholarly, critical, and mainstream media discourses.

On the heels of *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, one of the first mainstream articles to connect the “Disney Renaissance” to musical theatre, was in *Entertainment Weekly* titled “*The Little Mermaid* and the rebirth of animation.” Repeating highlights from the documentary, this article centers the “rebirth” of Disney as the “rebirth of animation” – instead of focusing on profit margins, synergy, or Eisner. Specifically, the article credits Ashman with the incorporation of musical theatre-style songs and dramatic structure, claiming, “It worked and then some. *Mermaid*’s scores were off the chart after its first test screening. Even more impressive, those numbers soared higher when the film was

³⁷ Filmmaker. “Don Hahn, Peter Schneider on *Waking Sleeping Beauty*.” Filmmaker Magazine. 2009. <https://filmmakermagazine.com/6347-don-hahn-peter-schneider-of-waking-sleeping-beauty-by-scott-macaulay/#.WvsLW4AvyUl>.

shown to an audience made up entirely of adults. It was a genuine eureka moment for Hollywood.”³⁸ The author’s use of the word “eureka” implies a laboratory undertaking, but while *Waking Sleeping Beauty* had documented the often-tense creative process of trial and error at Disney Feature Animation, the critical response to the documentary in the press overshadowed the process of experimentation, and the tapestry of theatre disciplines, in favor of the idea that it was “Broadway” that saved Disney. One article titled “How Broadway helped animate Disney’s comeback” from the *Los Angeles Times*, published a few months later in 2010, recounts the history told in *Waking Sleeping Beauty* and suggests that Disney will be re-launching a new era of the Disney musical by bringing Alan Menken back to do the music for *Tangled*.³⁹ The implication is that once Disney returns to its “Broadway” roots, it will achieve the same popularity that it had enjoyed twenty years prior. Once again, a historiographical shift in the “Disney Renaissance” metanarrative is paired with real-time changes at the Walt Disney Company. Whereas an emphasis on animators led to the revitalization of the Feature Animation Studio in 2006, a new focus on the influence of Broadway-style musicals coincided with Alan Menken’s return to Disney.

In 2012, Disney animation hired Robert and Kristen Lopez to do the music and lyrics for their floundering project *The Snow Queen*, which would become, as a musical, the mega-hit film *Frozen*. Robert Lopez, like Ashman, who had done *Little Shop of Horrors*, was known for edgy political satire musicals like *Avenue Q* and *Book of Mormon*, which often makes intertextual references to the “Disney Renaissance”. In the

³⁸ Young, John, “‘The Little Mermaid’ and the rebirth of animation Disney’s 1990 classic won two Oscars, and helped relaunch the genre,” *Entertainment Weekly*, February 26, 2010. Accessed August 23, 2020. <https://ew.com/article/2010/02/26/little-mermaid-and-rebirth-animation/>

³⁹ Young, <https://ew.com/article/2010/02/26/little-mermaid-and-rebirth-animation/>.

2013, the book *How to Become Innovative* the authors credit musical theatre as the driving force of the “Disney Renaissance.” Later that year, the Disney animated musical *Frozen* premiered to massive success – surpassing Disney’s record holder, *The Lion King*. In 2014, *Time Magazine* uplifts this narrative again with an article titled “How *The Little Mermaid* Cued the Disney Animation Renaissance,” which not only credits musical theatre with the “Renaissance,” but proclaims that “Not until the return of the Disney princess musical — *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled* and *Frozen* — did moviegoers re-warm to the old pleasure of leaving a theater humming as well as smiling.”⁴⁰

Concurrently, the Disney project *Moana* was in production as a musical that was being written by non-theatre music artists – in the style of *Tarzan*, and other Disney musicals where the music had been written by pop stars. However, following the success of *Hamilton* on Broadway, Lin-Manuel Miranda was contracted by Disney to write songs for the film, which was released in 2016. *Moana*, like the musical films of what is now being referred to as the “Disney Revival” era, that have come before it, was incredibly successful, and so was *Frozen 2*, released in 2019. The popular and critical successes of these recent musical films is often pointed to as proof of the importance of musical theatre to the Company in the “Disney Renaissance.” In 2017, a group of musical theatre scholars contributed to the anthology titled *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen: Critical Approaches from 'Snow White' to 'Frozen'* and elevated the Disney musicals of the “Renaissance” to a place in musical theatre history. The 2018 documentary *Howard*, produced by the same people who made *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, tells Howard Ashman’s life story, emphasizing his massive role in the “Disney Renaissance.” Kunze’s

⁴⁰ Richard Corliss, “How *The Little Mermaid* Cued the Disney Animation Renaissance,” *Time Magazine*, November 17, 2014, <https://time.com/3589558/little-mermaid-disney-animation-renaissance/>.

dissertation represents the most significant study to date, which contextualizes the “Disney Renaissance” into the history of musical theatre, and Broadway, specifically.

As this section outlines, the “Disney Renaissance” metanarrative carries immense weight that influences real-world outcomes – especially in terms of Walt Disney Company policy and the allocation of its resources. It has also influenced the way that other companies have done business. As Alan Bryman explains in his book *The Disneyization of Society*, other companies tried to replicate Disney’s success by replicating what they saw as the key to the “Disney Renaissance:” often in terms of corporate synergy and theming. Bryman draws his inspiration from Joseph Pine’s book *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*, which correctly identifies aspects of “theatricality” in Disney films and theme parks as a key to their success. However, neither Bryman nor Pine is not a theatre scholar, and the extent of their analysis of “theatricality” is limited to the fact that Disney calls their theme park employees, “cast members.”⁴¹ What new opportunities could be unlocked if the additional theatre people and forms of theatrical practice were included in their rightful ownership of “Disney Renaissance” credit? Beginning a metanarrative with the “eureka” moment, such as the decision of historians to begin the “Disney Renaissance” with *The Little Mermaid*, undercuts the process of discovery that came before. As the chapters will expand on, and as the Conclusion will re-emphasize, this dissertation is not designed to be a narrative of progress, but a narrative of process. A narrative that begins with a “eureka” moment carries with it the same problems that Boleslavsky saw in a country that didn’t have a theatre laboratory: “there are no tense experiments and achievements,

⁴¹ B. Joseph Pine, and James H Gilmore. *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999), 141.

no tedious labor discovering new forms, no flings of imagination, no joy of attainment.”⁴²

Thus, this dissertation begins the period of this “Renaissance” era in 1984, with a change of thinking at the Walt Disney Company.

Theatrical Knowledge as a Corporate Asset

The change of thinking that started at the Walt Disney Company in 1984 can be recognized by the theatre historian as a prioritization of experimentation over preservation and the privileging of theatrical knowledge as a corporate asset. When an entity like the Walt Disney Company diversifies by moving into different markets it can be risky. A corporate or “strategic” asset is something that a company has that helps them navigate or gives them an edge in a changing or new market. To understand strategic assets, one can refer to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory on the three kinds of capital, (economic, social, and cultural), as things that can be leveraged. An asset can be a specialized knowledge set (cultural capital), a relationship with people or other companies (social capital) or having enough money to acquire these assets by hiring experts and consultants or creating new relationships (economic capital). For media companies like Disney, which are part of the culture industry, name recognition, popularity, and critical success are cultural capital assets, as well. As Constantinos C. Markides wrote in his article “To Diversify or not to Diversify,” in the *Harvard Business Review*, a company looking to diversify should ask themselves what assets they have that will allow them to do business better than all of their competitors in the new markets.⁴³ While he doesn’t mention Bourdieu’s theory, specifically, he explains how Disney is successful at diversification,

⁴² Boleslavsky, 246.

⁴³ Constantinos C. Markides, “To Diversify or Not To Diversify,” *New York Times*, November 1997, <https://hbr.org/1997/11/to-diversify-or-not-to-diversify>

citing the Company's relationships with other companies like Mattel and McDonalds, its relationship with politicians in Florida, and the cultural capital of their films, which they are able to license in new markets.⁴⁴ A company cannot successfully enter a new market with just one, or even two-out-of-the-three forms of capital; they *must* have *all* three. He gives the example of Coca-Cola's failed attempt to enter the fine wine business in the 1980s: "Having 90% of what it took to succeed in the new industry was not enough for Coke, because the 10% it did not have—the ability to make quality wine—was the most critical component of success."⁴⁵ As Jens Beckert, Jörg Rössel, and Patrick Schenk argue in their article "Wine as a Cultural Product: Symbolic Capital and Price Formation in the Wine Field," a discussion on the "quality" of a wine is social process of cultural consecration.⁴⁶ Coca-Cola's inability to make a quality wine signals a deficit of cultural capital, in this case, specialized knowledge of fine wine crafting and culture. Without it, they could not succeed. Theatrical knowledge offers cultural capital to whichever company recognizes its power.

When Walt Disney entered a new market by making full-length films with Snow White in the 1930s, Bill Tytla's theatrical knowledge on characterization, that he got from Boleslavsky's book, provided a specialized asset that allowed the Company to be seen as comparable to live-action full-length films. Despite the early theatrical experiments in Disney animation with Tytla and Boleslavsky's book, theatrical knowledge was not seen as a strategic asset at the Company until 1984 (with a few short-

⁴⁴ Markides, <https://hbr.org/1997/11/to-diversify-or-not-to-diversify>.

⁴⁵ Markides, <https://hbr.org/1997/11/to-diversify-or-not-to-diversify>.

⁴⁶ Jens Beckert, Jörg Rössel, and Patrick Schenk, "Wine as a Cultural Product: Symbolic Capital and Price Formation in the Wine Field." *Sociological Perspectives* 60, no. 1 (2017): 207, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26579800>.

term exceptions in theme park Imagineering, which will be discussed in Chapter 3).

When Roy E. Disney looked at the Company that his father and his uncle built and became frustrated that it was not using its creative assets to the fullest.

Indeed, the Company's expansions into cable television (the Disney Channel in 1983), into international theme park market (with Disneyland Tokyo in 1983 and the initial plans for a theme park in Europe), and into the mainstream, more adult live action film market (with Touchstone Pictures in 1984), were the biggest risks the Company had taken since Walt's death.⁴⁷ Even so, with the possible exception of Touchstone, they were not necessarily artistically or creatively risky: the Disney Channel replayed Disney classics, cartoons, and harmless content, Disneyland Tokyo was almost an exact replica of Disneyland, that was licensed by Disney but not owned by Disney.⁴⁸ Even with these changes, Roy believed that the Company was not doing enough to leverage its creative assets. He was determined to change that. He initiated the first "Save Disney" campaign in 1984 to oust his cousin-in-law Ron Miller, who he believed was responsible for the creative stagnation that the Company was experiencing, in the years after Walt's death. The campaign was both nostalgic and progressive, longing for a past era of experimentation and progress. As Disney veteran Jody Jean Dreyer recalled, when:

"In our meetings, inevitably someone would ask, 'What would Walt say?' or 'What would Walt do?' The one person who never asked that question was Roy. He would respond to those questions this way: 'The one thing I know Uncle Walt would do is push boundaries, try new things, utilize any new technology available to us to be on the forefront of creativity.'"⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Kunze, 91.

⁴⁸ Kunze, 91.

⁴⁹ Jody Jean Dreyer, *Beyond the Castle: A Guide to Discovering Your Happily Ever After*, (United States: Zondervan, 2017), chap. 3, Google Books.

It was a move away from “What would Walt do?” to a spirit of doing things differently, pushing boundaries, trying new things and new technology. Towards this end, he lobbied hard to replace Ron Miller with Michael Eisner from Paramount studio, who had turned the struggling company into a thriving success with a combination approach of ramping up production, incentivizing big-name stars, and partnering visionary artists like Stephen Spielberg and George Lucas (who worked with Paramount to create the *Indiana Jones* franchise). While framing Eisner as the sole architect, singular hero, (or singular villain) of the “Disney Renaissance” would be inaccurate, his role as the usher of this new way of thinking, and the impact that it had on sparking the theatre experimentation at the Walt Disney Company, should not be downplayed. Each case study in this dissertation seeks to de-center the Disney executives from the “Disney Renaissance” narrative; however, these executives are characters, of sorts, who appear in each scenario. It is important to give a brief overview of their role, in relation to theatre experimentation, so that each case study can focus primarily on the theatre people who came to work for these men. Meanwhile, the relationship that executives like Eisner had to the theatre (as an art, craft, and industry) is not something that “Disney Renaissance” accounts highlight.

Accounts of his tenure at Disney tend to celebrate his role as executive, and his marketing and business strategies. However, his business acumen was not his strongest attribute – as the questionable decision to lay off most of the animation studio in 2004 suggests. After all, he only ever took one business course and attended a three-day seminar called “How to Manage a Company in a High Inflation Era” to learn some vocabulary. Rather, in the context of theatre history, it is useful to read him as a dramaturgically inclined executive, whose primary objective, especially in his first

decade as Disney C.E.O. was the cultivation and development of original storytelling. Like the individuals, who are featured in the case studies of this dissertation, Eisner's approach was similarly shaped by his background and training in theatre, and his past collaborations with theatre people. He was an English and theatre major in college, and at one point, aspired to be a playwright. He recalls:

“I went back to college that fall for my senior year and began to write plays. I was reading all the great modern playwrights in my English classes—Miller, Tennessee Williams, Shaw, Pirandello—and I admired their work. I also loved the idea that what you wrote in a play literally came to life and that actors read your lines. The teamwork involved in producing a show also appealed to me, particularly when it was based on something that I had created. I could write a play in three or four days, and dialogue came relatively easily to me. By comparison, writing a novel seemed incredibly difficult, lonely, and isolated.”⁵⁰

In Eisner's self-professed view, a liberal arts education can provide a person's “direction” in their careers, even if they enter business or the corporate world. For Eisner, his direction was collaborative, dramatic storytelling – informed by his theatrical training and experience. When he eventually found the life of a lone playwright to be too isolating, he looked for a job where he could apply his theatrical and literary knowledge. He did early work as an FCC logging clerk at NBS, and traffic reporter on the radio, which was “show business” to him, and he enjoyed it. Working as a liaison between programming and sales for children's programs at CBS, he marketed himself with the line, “I was an English and theater major at college” to get into a more creative role.⁵¹ Not only did he wear his theatre experience as an identity, he framed it as a specialized asset. This was the pitch that he would make – in one way or another – to executives, corporate boards, and eventually the Walt Disney Company board and shareholders for the rest of his career:

⁵⁰ Michael D Eisner, *Work in Progress: Risking Failure Surviving Success*. (New York: Disney Book Group, 2011), chap. 2, Kindle.

⁵¹ Eisner, chap. 3, Kindle.

that his background in theatre and literature provided him with the cultural capital that he needed to sell himself as an expert on story structure, new script development. It is critical to understand this aspect of Eisner's rising career, because the association of theatre people with a standard of storytelling excellence is at the crux of understanding the role of theatre people in the "Disney Renaissance," and how he valued and even commodified theatrical knowledge as a strategic asset – as he commodified his own theatre experience, in his own career.

The commodification of theatre is a topic that has been written about extensively, often inspired by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's essay "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," which theorizes on the ways that culture is bought and sold.⁵² Recognizing that commercial theatre, film, and television are undoubtedly commodified labor and production, (as the theatre scholars who write about these works are quick to point out), there are fewer scholarly works dedicated to the commodification of theatrical *knowledge* or literary skill. This discrepancy exists even though each book or article published on the topic of theatre is a form of buying and selling theatrical knowledge. Philip Auslander argues that it is virtually impossible for any from of cultural discourse to "stand outside the ideologies of capital and reproduction that define a mediatized culture or should be expected to do so, even to assume an oppositional stance."⁵³ While there is little critical language for the commodification of theatrical

⁵² Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁵³ He is responding to Peggy Phelan, who in her book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, argues that live performance cannot be commodified because it is temporary. "Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction, it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology." Auslander continues, "I agree with Sean Cubitt (1994:283–4) when he says that 'in our period of history, and in our Western societies, there is no performance that is not always already a commodity.' Furthermore, as Pavis

knowledge, (outside of simply calling it “cultural capital”), dramaturgs, especially, have created a market for it. As Michael Chemers explains in his book *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy*, “Since the late 1990s, the artistic necessity of dramaturgy has become far better understood in America than it was previously, largely thanks to the courage and skill of the younger generation of dramaturgs.” He makes his case for the need for dramaturgy thus: “As American professional theater continues to become smarter, more topical, and more curious about what is going on beyond the borders of the United States; dramaturgs, with their analytic acumen and international perspective, are becoming more critical to the process.” In other words, if a theatre would like to remain relevant and competitive in a changing market, dramaturgs are strategic assets because of their knowledge and cultural capital.

Although Eisner never explicitly called himself a “dramaturg” or “dramaturgical executive,” he was someone who marketed his theatrical knowledge as an asset to make entertainment smarter, more topical, and more global. This was evident in Eisner’s earlier career, when he used this pitch to become head of programing at ABC, where he would oversee scripts, research and development, and promotion, with a special emphasis on plot structure and premise. According to Chemers, this is one of the most essential thing that a dramaturg does: to “Determine what the aesthetic architecture of a piece of dramatic literature actually is (analysis).”⁵⁴ The next two things a dramaturg does is research and practical application, which Chemers defines along terms of audience

(1992:134) observes, ‘the work of art in the era of technical reproduction’ cannot escape the socioeconomic-technological domination which determines its aesthetic dimension.’ It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media.” Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. Ingram Digital E-Books (t & F), 2008-2014. London: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203359433. 146; Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 61.

⁵⁴ Chemers, 3.

engagement. The concept of corporate research and development, or “R&D” might conjure images of data, charts, and product testing behind a two-way mirror. These kinds of tests (their own kind of laboratory) were part of Eisner’s job in programing. However, he learned, early in his time at ABC to not let testing be the determining factor in making creative decisions, after ABC passed on *All in the Family* when it tested poorly. The program was picked up by CBS, where it became one of the most successful shows in TV history.⁵⁵ He maintains that he and his collaborators, “tried to focus our attention instead on the basic premise for a movie and the script that grew out of it—the substance of the project, stripped of all other considerations. Nothing else, we soon learned, mattered nearly as much.”⁵⁶ Putting story first, he showed early in his career that he privileged theatrical and literary knowledge, and would hire fellow former theatre and English students, like himself, at ABC, and would carry on this practice when he became a studio executive at Paramount Studios.⁵⁷ By the time Roy E. Disney lobbied the board of directors to hire Eisner to replace Ron Miller as C.E.O. of Disney, Eisner had his dramaturgical pitch down to a science.

⁵⁵ Chemers 6.

⁵⁶ Chemers, 6.

⁵⁷ These individuals included Brandon Stoddard, who had done plays at Yale, and would be Eisner’s collaborator on highly successful shows at ABC such as *General Hospital* and *Roots*. He collaborated with English professor Frank Hursley on the long-running soap *General Hospital*, and was excited to have Yale Drama School alum Henry Winkler star in the show *Happy Days*. When he left ABC to become the head of the film division at Paramount, he collaborated with fellow former English major Don Simpson, who shared his love of script analysis. Together, they produced films that were not only popular, but were cultural phenomenon like *Flashdance* and *Top Gun*, further cementing Eisner’s philosophy that a good story, with identifiable and strong character objectives, is the basis for all other successes. “A low budget can never excuse deficiencies in the script,” he says, recalling that *Flashdance* was produced for under \$7 million and made \$94 million. “Not even the greatest screenwriter or actor or director can be counted on to save a film that lacks a strong underlying concept. And we should generally resist making expensive overall deals with box office stars and top directors, because we can attract them later with strong material.” This is the philosophy that would get Eisner hired at Disney. Eisner, chap. 3, Kindle.

“Companies like Disney are always founded by creative entrepreneurs,” he said to the board, who was reluctant to hire him for lack of business experience. “But eventually,” he pushed on, “the founder dies or gets pushed out, or moves on to something else. Inevitably the businesspeople take over—the managers—and they focus on preserving the vision that made the company great in the first place.”⁵⁸ In this way, Eisner echoed Boleslavsky’s premise: that even the most independently minded artist-master can come to a point where they stop making good art, for a bevy of reasons. Boleslavsky warned that turning creative entities into “museums” of an individual artist’s past achievements is one of the worst things they can do creatively. Eisner’s pitch to the Disney board is aligned with Boleslavsky’s ideals. Boleslavsky was not opposed to artists who sell their works commercially; in fact, Boleslavsky often did this, himself. The danger, Boleslavsky argued was when the artist, or in this case, the business executive, *only* focuses on business or lets it be their guiding determining factor. While the board’s biggest fear with Eisner was the fact that he was not a primarily business-oriented figure, Eisner convinced them this this was, in fact, his biggest asset. His argument worked, to an extent. He was appointed as C.E.O. under the stipulation that business executive Frank Wells would serve as President of the Company. Eisner was the creative mind, and Wells was the business mind: and the fact that this partnership mirrored the original partnership of Walt Disney and his brother Roy, who were the creative and economic minds

⁵⁸ He continued, “They don’t have any creative ideas themselves and they end up surrounding themselves instead with analysts and accountants to try to control the creative people and cut costs. In the process, they discourage change and new initiatives and reinvention. In time, the company begins to ossify and atrophy and die. It’s important to have financial parameters and never to bet the house, which is how we always protected Paramount. But in a creative business you also have to be willing to take chances and even to fail sometimes, because otherwise nothing innovative is ever going to happen. If you’re only comfortable running a business by the numbers, I can understand that. But then you shouldn’t get involved with a creatively driven company like Disney.” Eisner, chap. 5, Kindle.

respectively, was not lost on the board, and it was not lost on Eisner, forever the storyteller, who was able to promote this partnership to shareholders as the triumphant return to Disney's glory day.

Metanarrative aside, Marty Sklar, the head of Walt Disney Imagineering, at the time, asserts that the Eisner/Wells partnership was more collaborative than the Walt/Roy partnership. "I never heard of a story development meeting that Roy attended with Walt. By contrast, Michael Eisner and Frank Wells were frequently together in meetings, especially in the early years of their partnership at Disney."⁵⁹ Eisner's greatest strength at Disney came from his collaborations, and the "teamwork" that he so valued from his earliest days as a theatre major. One of his first and most important decisions as Disney C.E.O. was to bring on one of his former collaborators, Jeffrey Katzenberg from Paramount to be the executive of the Company's studio division. Katzenberg oversaw both Touchstone and Feature Animation, with Roy serving as chairman of animation, specifically. In the film world the phrase "literary manager" might refer to a business manager for screenwriters. In the theatre, it refers to the person who reads incoming new plays and helps the company decide what to produce. If Eisner was the "dramaturgical executive," Katzenberg was something of a literary manager for the Disney Studio, especially the Touchstone division. In 1988, he told the *New York Times*, "I will read 10 screenplays a weekend and be on the eighth script in the seventh weekend and have my heart start beating faster. Rarely is there a close call." As soon as Katzenberg would choose a script with a good premise, the *Times* article reports that "Disney grinds and polishes scripts like agates in a tumbler. According to the producer Robert Cort, the

⁵⁹ Marty Sklar, *Dream It! Do It! My Half-Century Creating Disney's Magic Kingdoms*. (New York: Disney Book Group, 2013), 245.

single biggest difference between Disney and other studios is that "once they decide to make a movie, nothing dissuades them. Other studios go fish; if a director wants to do it, they'll make a film. At Disney, if 22 directors or actors turn them down, they'll find a 23d." This report supports the idea that Eisner carried his philosophy of "story first" from ABC, to Paramount, to Disney, with Katzenberg as his field officer, and that they would use the story to attract directors (and not the other way around).

This approach did not only apply to the film studio. At the time of Eisner's ascendancy, Disney's theme parks provided a steady stream of revenue, which essentially helped to keep the Company afloat.⁶⁰ Viewing the theme park division, specifically its experimental Imagineering wing, as the cutting edge of Disney creativity, one of Eisner's first tasks was to meet with Imagineering, and plan a revamp of the parks with new attractions that embodied that spirit. Sklar maintains that even outside of film "Eisner's eye' could also pick out the holes in a story."⁶¹ The suggestions that Eisner would give the Imagineers were dramaturgical in nature: for example, the 3-D film *Mickey's Philarmagic* takes guests on a journey across the locations multiple Disney animated films, and Eisner suggested that it didn't have enough conflict, so he suggested that the film star the cantankerous Donald Duck. When it came time for the Imagineers to assess new stories that could be added to the new EPCOT park, Sklar notes that they realized there was a glaring omission: "there was no pavilion related to show business. Yes, the park itself was all about entertainment and fun—but what about exploring television, the Broadway stage, or how movies are made?"⁶² Pitching the idea of an "Entertainment

⁶⁰ Kunze, 71.

⁶¹ Sklar, 235.

⁶² Sklar, 250.

Pavilion” for EPOCT, Eisner and Wells suggested a separate experience – a half-day park dedicated to the “magic” of the backstage world of film, television, and theatre. The proliferation of live theatre that happened in Disney theme parks from 1984-1994, including the creation of this new park, which evolved from a half-day park idea into a fully realized film studio-tour-park called Disney-MGM Studios will be discussed at length in Chapter 3. For Eisner’s part, it is important to note the way that this suggestion privileges the cultural capital of theatre, and the way that this would inform his decision to create a subsidiary of the corporation specifically for staging Disney-Broadway musicals. It is worth noting that in the previous section on the historiography of the “Disney Renaissance” that there is no mainstream meta-version of the narrative that centers the story from the theme park perspective. This is likely to change in the next few years due to Youtube histories like *Defunctland* or *Yesterworld*, documentaries on Disney+ on Imagineering, which feature episodes on what the “Eisner era” meant for the parks. The third chapter of this dissertation will hopefully be part of this new wave of interest in theme park history, which centers the decade from a theatrical perspective, placing it into the larger history of theatre at the time.

As far as the role of the executives goes in the “Disney Renaissance,” Eisner would bubble with new ideas and Katzenberg and Wells would ground him, push back, or find a practical route to make them happen. By the parameters of this study, which examines the “Disney Renaissance” as a time of intense collaboration, the period ended in 1994, when Wells died tragically in a helicopter crash and Katzenberg, upset that Eisner did not promote him to President, left the Company. Being thrust into the role of C.E.O. and President, without his collaborators to challenge him, he became a self-

fulfilling prophesy of the master-creative who becomes complacent and makes bad decisions. This prompted Roy's second "Save Disney" campaign and the rest is history. To say that Eisner was the singular hero of the "Renaissance," who guided all Company divisions creatively, would be incorrect. Likewise, it would be incorrect to suggest that he has no impact on creativity at Disney. As the case studies will show, Eisner, Katzenberg, Roy E. Disney, and Wells are characters who makes a cameo from time to time and can influence the direction that the action takes. Eisner's own focus on centering himself in the historiography of the "Disney Renaissance" is a testament to his storytelling abilities, and his opinion on the importance of narrative.

The theatrical experimentation did not stop in 1994, but the year represents the culmination of a decade of experimentation, and the end of an era of collaboration at the top of the Company. There would eventually be personnel movements, and comings and goings, and hiring of new leaders, who did not share the same spirit. Sklar notes that losing Katzenberg was a huge blow to Imagineering, even though Katzenberg ran the film studio and not the parks. He claims that Imagineering lost an ally, "who understood that 'resting on your laurels' was the antithesis of the tradition in innovation Walt established."⁶³ The business-minded individuals like Mike Ovitz, who Eisner brought in to replace Wells were not as involved as Wells has been in creative matters – many, even those who came from other film studios, did not take the time that Eisner/Katzenberg/Wells had taken to learn to understand the nuances and workings of art forms that are specific to Disney like animation and Imagineering. I have also chosen to periodize this era from 1984-1994 because this is the decade chosen by the artists from

⁶³ Sklar, 297.

Feature Animation, who were there, and who made *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. “What was so special about that decade,” a reporter from the Los Angeles Times asks Alan Menken. “Simple answer,” he replies, “for a brief period of the time, we of the theater were given a great control of the sandbox.”⁶⁴

“Disneyfication” as the “Renaissance” Counternarrative

Notably, one field that is underrepresented in these examinations of the “Disney Renaissance,” is theatre studies.⁶⁵ Aside from a couple of initial articles, which examine Disney theme parks through a lens of immersive theatre, in *TDR*, in the 1970s, theatre studies did not become interested in Disney as a subject of study until after *Beauty and the Beast* premiered on Broadway in 1994. At face value it would seem that theatre scholars were not interested in studying Disney until Disney was interested in producing theatre – knowing now that there was a wealth of theatre practice at the Company before *Beauty* on Broadway. Nevertheless, the articles on Disney begin in 1995 with Steve Nelson’s article in *TDR* titled “Broadway and the Beast: Disney Comes to Times Square” was the first scholarly article to be written on the subject of Disney’s Broadway endeavors, and discusses the relationships between Eisner, mayor Rudolf Giuliani, and governor Mario Cuomo in the development of Times Square. John Bell’s 1998 article “Disney’s Times Square: The New American Community Theatre” was written a few years later, after *The Lion King* and *Aida* enter the scene, but is similarly focused on institutions, policy, and their larger impact on New York City. Mark Sussman’s 1998

⁶⁴ James Taylor, “How Broadway helped animate Disney’s comeback,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2010, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-apr-03-la-et-waking-disney3-2010apr03-story.html>.

⁶⁵ Kunze’s dissertation, while it is one of the first scholarly project that assembles a history of theatre practitioners at Disney, it is ultimately a media studies investigation of the delineations and convergences of a conglomerate.

TDR article “New York’s Facelift” follows in the same tradition, and Elizabeth Wollman’s 2002 article, “The Economic Development of the “New” Times Square and Impact on the Broadway Musical,” published in *American Music*, asserts that Disney’s success on Broadway has led to increased corporatization which negatively impacts the development of new work as the gap between the regional and commercial realms closes and American theatre evolves from “creative forms of artistic expression into products developed by committees and suitable for synergistic appropriation by the entertainment conglomerates that produce and market them.”⁶⁶ Some books on commercial theatre, such as *Stage Money: The Business of the Professional Theater* and *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way* follow Wollman’s lead and briefly mention *Beauty and the Beast* as part of the beginning of the corporatization of Broadway, referred to, in many scholarly and popular discourses as the “Disneyfication of Broadway.”

“Disneyfication”, as a word, first appeared in the 1940s, and simply referred to the Disney studio way of doing things – whether referring to sentimental adaptation of source material or realistic characterizations of animated figures (a way of describing the phenomenon of Bill Tytla’s adaptation of Boleslavsky, without knowing who either of these men are).⁶⁷ This would continue until the 1970s when the word began to refer to the commercialization or commodification that the Company takes part in – specifically, moving into a new market or territory.⁶⁸ In 1985, when efforts to “clean up Times

⁶⁶ Elizabeth L. Wollman, "The Economic Development of the "New" Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical," *American Music* 20, no. 4 (2002): 445-65. doi:10.2307/1350153, 462.

⁶⁷ Robert Emory Blackwell, *Handbook of American Popular Culture*. (United Kingdom: Greenwood Press, 1978), 6, Google Books.

⁶⁸ Blackwell, 22.

Square” were in progress, the word “Disneyfication” was used in the *New York Times* to describe this endeavor, and the fear of gentrification that would come with this “sanitation” of the sex tourism of the district.⁶⁹ When *Beauty and the Beast* would eventually come to Broadway in 1994, alongside concurrent changes to the district, it would be seen as the fulfilment of this prophesy. Before, this happened, however, the word “Disneyfication” was adopted by postmodernists as a skeptic reception of the “Disney Renaissance” narrative that was being put out by Disney executives like Eisner.

The “Disney Renaissance” narrative should be viewed, in this context, as what postmodern thinker Frederic Jameson calls a “nostalgic-Utopian triad,” narrative, meaning it features three parts: a “Golden Age before the fall” (in this case, Disney’s “Golden Age” under Walt’s leadership), followed by a kind of “Dark Age” (the creative stagnation following Walt’s death), and then whatever Utopian vision which replaces that (the “Disney Renaissance”). As Jean-François Lyotard wrote in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁷⁰ As the Walt Disney Company expanded under Eisner, some were concerned about what *kind* of culture was now becoming a dominant cultural force in both American and global markets. Under this point of view, there was no differentiation between “periods” of Disney’s cultural production history (such as “Golden Age”, “Dark Age”, or “Renaissance”). Rather, the history of the Company is views as consistently and continuously problematic, or even dangerous. While the use of

⁶⁹ William E. Geist, “ABOUT NEW YORK; THE PINBALL CAPITAL OF THE WORLD CRIES ‘TILT!’” *New York Times*, May 22, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/05/22/nyregion/about-new-york-the-pinball-capital-of-the-world-cries-tilt.html>.

⁷⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*, (United Kingdom: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11.

the word varies across just about as many fields as “Disney Renaissance” does, there are different ways that the lens manifests itself.

One of the most common critiques emerged from engagements with modernist theorists like Horkheimer and Adorno, who, in writing about commodification in the “culture industry”, expressed suspicion over a methodical approach to art, which, they argue, emerged after the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of the scientific method. “The mechanical reproduction of beauty, which reactionary cultural fanaticism wholeheartedly serves in its methodical idolization of individuality, leaves no room for that unconscious idolatry which was once essential to beauty.”⁷¹ For them, a scientific or laboratory approach to art conjures the cold, soulless assembly-line machinery, instead of the collaborative group-based approach that Boleslavsky championed. Modernists like Horkheimer and Adorno, predicted that mass-produced culture, controlled from the top-down, with no room for challenge or spontaneity, would inevitably become standardized, and that audience responses would also become standardized.⁷² Furthermore, they were very concerned about the ways that inequality was reified into real life through popular culture texts. While Horkheimer and Adorno were writing in the 1940s, their impact on Disney discourses in the 1990s should not be underestimated.

⁷¹ Horkheimer, 112.

⁷² Critics who echo Adorno include Dwight Macdonald in his essay “Masscult and Midcult” in his book *Against the American Grain* (1962), those included in Bernard Rosenberg’s anthology *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1963), which includes essays such as Ernest van den Haag’s scathing “Of Happiness and Despair We Have No Measure”, among many others. Other theorists who took up Adorno’s mantle include his Frankfurt School associate Siegfried Kracauer wrote his infamous essay “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies”, which presents audiences as small-minded, feminized subjects, and Adorno’s protégé Jürgen Habermas who took the idea of a mass audience and framed it as a bourgeois “public sphere”, formed by the mechanisms of a capitalist society in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. These are just a handful of people who have been influenced by his writing.

Stephen M. Fjellman's 1992 book *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America* argues that Disney represents the commodification, sanitization, and standardization of American culture, and that control over commodities represents control over people. His massive book analyzes every aspect of the parks from this point of view and he cites Adorno as one of his primary frames of reference. The 1994 anthology *Disney discourse: producing the magic kingdom*, edited by Eric Smoodin includes various scholarly critiques of Disney's cultural production and reception, including a chapter by Moya Luckett on the standardization of culture that the film *Fantasia* engenders, out of fear that it will standardize the audiences visualization of classical music to the images in the film.⁷³ The 1995 book *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World* was written by a group of anonymous, self-identified Marxist scholars, who go by the name "The Project on Disney", and is an account of their covert visit to Disney World and their observations and analyses of how the parks reify capitalist ideology. This book also cites Adorno, and rests on the notion that the Disney Corporation disseminates harmful ideology to passive audiences.⁷⁴ In the 21st Century, Henry A. Giroux's book *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* is firmly rooted in Adornian thought: that Disney texts, as part of mass culture, are didactic in nature, and created to standardize pedagogy for young children.⁷⁵ Janet Wasko's book *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* is another Frankfurt School-inspired critique of Disney's reach, focusing much time to

⁷³ Eric Loren Smoodin, *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*. Afi Film Readers. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 227.

⁷⁴ The Project on Disney, *Inside the Mouse: Work and Play at Disney World*, Post-Contemporary Interventions, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 68.

⁷⁵ Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 54.

breaking down the “Disney Formula” as the standardization of its cultural output.⁷⁶ Some of the theatre articles on Disney, listed above, quote Adorno directly, while the others cite at least one of these other books while forming their analysis of *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway.⁷⁷ Thus, themes of the “Disneyfication” critique include concerns over how much control the Company has (over markets, over employees, over consumers, and over children especially), standardization, the promotion of conformity and passivity, and specifically the reification in real life of top-down power hierarchies – that they assume exist at the Company.

What originated as critiques, that were designed to undermine the hegemony of the “Disney Renaissance” have become a metanarrative unto themselves. For example, many of these critiques rest on speculations of how power operates at the Walt Disney Company, specifically under Eisner. They assume top-down control. As outlined in the previous section on the executives, there are certain practices within the Company, which are certainly determined by who is at the top. Otherwise, there would be no consequence to the change of power that happened from Ron Miller to Eisner. However, when one examines the working relationship between the executives and the Company’s creative laborers, the evidence shows collaboration. As Eisner’s story reveals, there were

⁷⁶ Kunze puts it best when he explains that Wasko’s book details corporate practices which are designed to take away agency, but she is getting her information from popular publications instead of worker testimonies. Kunze, 17.

⁷⁷ All of these writings, while not necessarily featured in my dissertation, are important to understanding the larger framework of my research. For example, several Disney scholars who wrote about the “Disneyfication of Broadway” in the 1990s and early 2000s include Steve Nelson, John Bell, Mark Sussman, Ilka Saal, Ralph J. Poole, Elizabeth Wollman, Maurya Wickstrom, and Kristine Miller. Most of these scholars do not quote Adorno or the Frankfurt School directly, with the exception of Wickstrom, who quotes Adorno, and Sussman, who quotes Benjamin. John Bell’s 1998 article “Disney’s Times Square: The New American Community Theatre” cites Fjellman, Smoodin, and The Project on Disney. Wollman’s 2002 article “The Economic Development of the “New” Times Square and Impact on the Broadway” cites the ones that Bell mentions, as well as Giroux and Wasko.

dramaturgical development processes, and each of the case studies in this dissertation will reveal instances, which support this: from artists who say “no” to executives (and get listened to), to artists being encouraged to have and express their opinions, to the Company taking risks based on artist recommendations. The historiographical shift from executive focus to animation focus, challenged the idea of top-down control at Disney. Marty Sklar’s book on Imagineering specifically identifies Eisner as someone whose mind could be changed. Kunze’s work shows collaboration between Katzenberg and artists in the creation of screenplays for *Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, and Amy Osatinki’s book *Disney Theatrical Productions: Producing Broadway Musicals the Disney Way* details that the production practices of Disney’s theatrical subsidiary operate similarly.

The case studies in this dissertation will provide evidence of the same. However, due to the circumstances of writing this dissertation during the shutdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is worth noting that I had limited access to libraries and archives, which, in turn, limits the amount of archival evidence. Archives of this time period at Disney are becoming more readily available to the public, most notably, in the memos, correspondence, script drafts, and handwritten notes stored in the Howard Ashman Papers in the Library of Congress. For example, these documents allow the theatre historian to examine specific instances of creative tension and read for the way that power dynamics play out. Kunze’s dissertation, for example, utilizes these archives extensively to uncover collaborations between executives like Katzenberg and creatives like Ashman.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, I did not have access to these, as I had planned, when developing the idea for this project. Instead, this dissertation relied heavily on electronic sources and interviews with surviving subjects like Schneider, Woolverton, Logan, McTyre, and Roth. In the absence of physical archives, I am especially indebted to Disney fans, who have, over the years, saved documents, souvenirs, home movies, photographs, audio recordings, and other pieces of evidence to put in fan-created databases, blogs, and websites like Youtube. These sources not only offer multiple perspectives but reveal the massive size of the Disney fan community and how meaningful these cultural texts and sites are for these consumers, who have saved these things, and put them online for others to engage with, revealing histories that were previously obscured.

I did not realize, for example, the vast amount of theatrical performances in Disney theme parks over the years until I came across a website called Disneychris.com that had audio recordings of every stage show in the parks, going back to the 1950s. He delightfully calls it a “Magical Audio Tour.” Upon realizing that the scope of the history of theatre in the parks, and that it had never been covered by a theatre historian, and was not available in any library book, I knew that I would have to provide much of this context in my third chapter. The result is that Chapter 3 of this dissertation is the first scholarly comprehensive history of theatrical performances in Disney theme parks – and this might not have happened if I was not forced by the pandemic to think beyond sources available in libraries. While I intend to return to the more traditional archives for future iterations of this research, I suspect it will offer me more specific evidence of creative

tensions and power dynamics, but ultimately will only strengthen, not substantially change what has been learned from this study.

In addition to concerns of Disney reproducing top-down hierarchies into real life, concerns over Disney's control over audiences extended to the social messages that they were reproducing. Critical theory, which grew from Horkheimer and Adorno's plea that we be critical of the art we receive, is the process of analyzing things through various lenses and ways of seeing. Many of the books published on Disney, in response to the "Renaissance" era, approach Disney films through these lenses such as feminism, critical race theory, Marxism, psychoanalysis, disability studies, and so on, to identify the "lessons" which are being imparted to audiences, especially children. The approach is postmodern and utilizes structuralism and post-structuralism strategies with the idea that if we can identify the messages in Disney's cultural production, we can be more resilient to it. The 1995 anthology *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* was one of the first books to take this approach, and Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan's 1999 book *Deconstructing Disney* has become one of the most often-cited critical analyses of Disney films, utilizing multiple critical lenses.⁷⁸ Through this, and other books, Disney has been accused of perpetuating racism, sexism, and cultural imperialism through its texts and practices.⁷⁹ This leads one to ask what good theatrical experiments are if they support these harmful ideologies.

⁷⁸ Other books with this approach include *The Gospel According to Disney: Faith, Trust, and Pixie Dust* by Mark I. Pinsky, *Mouse Morality: The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film* by Annalee R. Ward, and *Dazzled by Disney? The Global Disney Audiences Project* by Eileen R. Meehan, Janet Wasko, Mark Phillips, which accuses Disney of cultural imperialism (which many scholars did, and still do, to this day).

⁷⁹ The question of cultural imperialism is addressed specifically in books like Aviad E. Raz's 1999 book *Riding the Black Ship: Japan and Tokyo Disneyland*, which troubles that notion more comprehensively.

In terms of reception, the image of the passive audience member has been troubled by Robin Bernstein's theory of a "scriptive thing" – meaning an object or text which "scripts" people's behaviors. Disney's films, theme parks, and Broadway shows are "Scriptive things," but, as Bernstein notes, a script – just like a theatre script – can be interpreted in many different ways.⁸⁰ These books do not provide evidence that the messages in these films are universally accepted by consumers. In terms of critical discourses on Disney, it is undeniable that the Company's cultural texts are recognized for their power to teach and enculturate. Critical studies of popular culture inform us that mass culture texts can reinforce dominant ideology, counter it, or, as theorist Jose Munoz points out, sometimes use dominant culture to subvert dominant culture, in what he calls "disidentification."⁸¹ Rigorous textual analysis of the films of the "Disney Renaissance," as will be demonstrated with *Beauty and the Beast* Chapter 2, for instance, evidence a combination of all three. Additionally, only examining the finished films (from one point of view) without investigating their production, presents an incomplete picture. In the 1970s, postmodern theorist Stuart Hall tracked racist news stories of "muggings" through each level of cultural production at a media corporation in his book *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. He reveals that the negative images (often unconsciously or unintentionally) made their way into the nightly news through a process of choices by multiple individuals, operating at relatively at low levels of power, who had

⁸⁰ As I argued in my own chapter "It's Good to Be Bad: Resistance, Rebellion, and Disney Villain Merchandise" in the Performance and the *Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor* anthology, Disney texts interpellate people and groups through "lessons" into social "roles" like any other mass culture text. However, consumer purchasing choices communicate varying levels of acceptance for these "lessons" – such as the case studies I present where audience members identify with villain characters instead of heroes and perform this allegiance with villain-themed merchandise.

⁸¹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics / Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas, V. 2. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), chap. 1, Kindle Edition.

to meet deadlines.⁸² The sooner analysis moves away from the assumption of a top-down model for the making of culture, and the sooner analysis takes the complexities of production in mind, scholarship on popular culture, including Disney, can more accurately pinpoint the ways that bad representations or nonexistent representations of marginalized people occur. In this way, this dissertation offers insights into the authorship, which should prove useful to meaningful theoretical analyses of Disney in the future.

For example, theoretical analyses of Disney texts often entail reading the text through a specific lens and situating it in the socio-cultural context in which it was released to determine what the messaging of the text is and whether it reinforces or subverts dominant ideology. In the article “A critical disability studies reading of *Beauty and the Beast*: Détournement in pedagogical practice,” Nicole Eilers reads the 1991 film through the lens of critical disability theory and determines that the Beast’s transformation into a human promotes a message of conformity for disabled viewers and determines that it is in line with the conformist ideology of George H.W. Bush and the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) the same year the film premiered. However, by bypassing any examination of the authorship or the process of creating the film’s message, Eilers misses two pieces of information, which might have provided a more robust analysis of disability in *Beauty and the Beast*. Firstly, is Howard Ashman’s

⁸² Hall’s assessment was that capitalism was at fault for creating deadlines and that the ideal solution (although he acknowledges its unlikelihood) was to abolish capitalism. However, at one point, he asserts that the most important part of the process were the people who turn the day’s information into news in a series of creative decisions. This dissertation, as a history of the processes that occurred at Disney, asserts that more historic exploration can be focused on these individuals, in large media companies, who make creative decisions as a way of highlighting the difference that social consciousness, cultural competency, and strategies for empathy can make. Stuart Hall, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, (United Kingdom: Holmes & Meier, 1978), 60.

battle with AIDS, which significantly impacted the film – as will be discussed at length in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. The erasure of the film’s most visible disabled author – recognizing that out of the hundreds of artists who made this film most likely included artists with invisible disabilities or ones that weren’t as publicized as much as Ashman’s – deprives the article of consideration of the artists’ positionality and troubled personal relationship to the conformist ideology of conservative America at the time, and social constructions of “normal.” The second is the fact that animated films often took a minimum of five years to complete: meaning that the ADA would not have been a defining current event in disability rights for the creators of the film, who would have been more impacted by events in the years leading up to it – most notably the AIDS crisis. What new possibilities for subversion or disidentification are present when considering not just the positionality of the authors but the long and arduous creative process of an animated film? This dissertation effectively documents much of these processes across this decade so that future scholars, interested in the social and cultural efficacy of Disney texts can add this weight to their investigations.

What one finds is a group of artists who were very aware of the cultural influence that they had working for Disney, and took much responsibility with that power, but still fell short, at times – and then tried to do better on future projects. Even the tracking of *Beauty and the Beast* from film to stage with the same writer, shows a process of making the musical’s treatment of gender and sexuality more complex than the film.

Experimentation naturally has stories of failure, and the histories told in these case studies hold space for it, for the same reasons my periodization of the “Renaissance” does not begin with the first “eureka” moment. Each creative endeavor of this era tried to do

something different and build on the lessons of the past through a collaborative laboratory process – much like the one Boleslavsky proposed – to create art that has moved mass audiences, in the same way that John V.A. Weaver was moved by *The Cherry Orchard*.

When works of art, especially works of art produced by a single Company have that kind of power over such large numbers of people, it can cause alarm. Furthermore, any kind of artistic experimentation, which forwards this effect can be seen as being in the service of insidious powers. My hope is that this study challenges and troubles some of the notions that the “Disneyfication” metanarrative pushes, while channeling the power of the “Disney Renaissance” metanarrative in ways that provide material opportunities for theatre practitioners of many backgrounds, as it has for others. I hope that the theatre practitioners who worked for Disney from 1984-1994 will be met with the same nuance offered to other practitioners and theatre companies in history, who were funded by and supported by the powers that be, in their own times, and used those resources to work towards the perfection of their craft.

Chapter 1: Bringing a “Theatre discipline” to Disney Feature Animation

Prologue: The Curse of “Uncle Walt’s” Ghost

“Now, where to begin? How 'bout, ‘Once upon a time’? How many times have you heard that to begin a story? Let's do somethin' else... Here's what we're gonna do. Why don't I just go back to the day things took a turn for the worse?”¹—

Disney’s *Chicken Little*, opening narration.

On December 15, 1966, Walter Elias Disney died, leaving a creative, managerial, and spiritual gap in the Company that bore his name. “We will continue to operate Walt's company in the way that he had established and guided it,” said Roy Disney in his brother’s obituary, in the *New York Times*.² “All of the plans for the future that Walt had begun will continue to move ahead,” he assured the readers. As mentioned in the previous chapter, for nearly twenty years after his death, Walt’s memory haunted every major decision in the Company.

However, this memory was selective.³ It privileged the version of Walt Disney that corresponded more with the Company’s marketing of Walt’s television persona, in the 1950s and 60s, than that of the bold artistic innovator and businessman, whose cartoons were banned in some parts of the country, in the 1930s for being too raunchy.

As Sean Griffin writes in *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from*

¹ Fullmer, Randy, Mark Dindal, Mark D Kennedy, Steve Bencich, Ron J Friedman, and Ronald Anderson, *Chicken Little*, (Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2006), Disney Plus.

² Special to the New York Times. “Walt Disney, 65, Dies on Coast; Founded an Empire on a Mouse.” *New York Times*, December 16, 1966. Accessed June 17, 2020.

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1205.html>

³ Theatre and performance historians like Marvin Carlson and Joseph Roach have talked about memory as a “haunting” or “ghosts” which linger over spaces, in their respective works of *The Haunted Stage* and *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Both assert that these memories are often selective. These works have inspired the use of the ghost metaphor for selective memory at the Walt Disney Company.

the Inside Out, “The project of making Walt into a father-figure that had begun during the 1930s press barrage was completed with his appearances on television. In Walt’s role as host for the [*Disneyland*] series, viewers grew to associate him more intimately with a kindly paternal image that both parents and children could trust to provide both entertainment and education.”⁴ In other words, it was the commodified version of “Uncle Walt”, which haunted the halls of the Disney studio, and led to the creation of art that struggled to resonate with mainstream audiences. As Disney animator and historian Tom Sito writes in his book *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*, “The Disney studio had become a self-replicating creation of its own publicity machine, where Dean Jones and Annette Funicello still smiled all day, women and minorities knew their place, skirts never rose above the knee, and no one uttered a swear word stronger than ‘gee whillikers.’”⁵ Animators were still using old cameras, rotoscopes, editing machines, and record players from the 1930s, while other studios had transitioned to cassette players and computers.⁶ This resolve to remain “frozen in time” defined the twenty year period between Walt’s death and the “Disney Renaissance.” This period, often referred to in popular discourses as Disney’s “Dark Age” was marked by financial woes and flop films, as described in the previous chapter, which put the Company on the brink of disintegration.

Despite the decline of the Company, it is not difficult to see why Walt’s public persona endured, especially in the animation studio. Firstly, by the early 1980s, there was

⁴ Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 45.

⁵ Tom Sito. *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), chap. 11, Kindle.

⁶ Sito, chap. 11, Kindle.

a new generation of artists working at Disney, who had never known Walt personally – they only knew him as “Uncle Walt” from the television.⁷ According to Sito, one of the reasons the artists of the studio clung to the “Uncle Walt” persona, is that despite the fact that the Disney animation studio exists in the midst of a large multi-national media conglomerate, the artists who work there have historically viewed themselves as more of a craft workshop than a factory assembly line. He explains, “Animation seems to need not merely a coordinating chief artist but a messianic father-genius. Animators are not just loyal, they want to be members of a novitiate in a studio's worldview.”⁸ Therefore, the relationship that the studio, in particular, had to the memory of the “Uncle Walt” persona was a deeply personal devotion to the development of their craft – the kind that they believed could only be unlocked while studying under a genius. In the 1970s, one talented animator named Don Bluth even tried to step into the role of Walt Disney (and even wore a mustache like him, as if to get into character) by attempting to be a more dominant artistic voice in the studio.⁹ However, after creative clashes, and unsuccessful processes, he eventually left Disney and took some animators with him to start his own studio.¹⁰ Without one singular father-genius, how could the craft continue?

By focusing on the crafted television persona of the man, instead of the corporeal Walt Disney who had once paced up and down their hallways they inevitably missed a key aspect of his personality that allowed the studio to create films like *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. As Sito notes, Walt was also an “artist-leader,” meaning he was not

⁷ Peter Schneider (Vice President of Disney Feature Animation 1985-1999), interview with author, April 2020.

⁸ Sito, chap. 2, Kindle Edition.

⁹ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, directed by Don Hahn (2009; Burbank, CA: Stone Circle Pictures), DVD.

¹⁰ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

only the best artist in the room, but one who was able to empower artists to bring forth their strongest work on their own:

“Like Alexander the Great or Henry of Navarre, the best generals lead from the front, and artists want to ‘follow the white plume...’ The battle metaphor is apt for describing a long production. Animation crews are like armies that can become demoralized short of a goal or inspired to go beyond their perceived limits and achieve things they never thought they could do.”¹¹

Thus, Disney animation had a strong historic precedent for complexity of authorship, which had been lost over the years. This is what the Disney studio needed, and what they couldn’t find: someone who could inspire their cultivate their own artistic visions and voices. They thought they needed a “father-genius” like to get the magic back, but their answer, instead, came from a theatre professional, who was determined to free them from this curse of “Uncle Walt’s” ghost.

The Young Man on the Spotlight

*“There was a young man on the spotlight for *Elegy* who was getting quite a bit of attention from the audience as well as the actors. He was striking looking, unlike anyone we had ever seen... The other compelling thing about him was his concentration. It was as if operating that spotlight was the most important task in the universe.”* -Albert Poland, Theatre Producer.¹²

This “young man on the spotlight” for *Elegy of a Down Queen*, at New York’s La Mama Experimental Theatre Club would become the Vice President of Disney Feature Animation. His name is Peter Schneider and he helped usher in the “Disney Renaissance” period by de-centering idea that they needed a singular “genius” to tell them how to make good and meaningful art. “I suppose my role, if I have a role, has always been in support of other artists,” maintains Schneider, and “empowering the artists to find their own

¹¹ Sito, chap. 2, Kindle.

¹² Albert Poland, *Stages: A Theater Memoir*. (United States: Albert Poland, 2019), 87, Kindle.

voices and reach for the stars.”¹³ In many ways, this image of him, as a young man on the spotlight at La Mama, “as if operating that spotlight was the most important task in the universe,” is indicative of the kind of manager he is. Not only did he dedicate himself fully to a task, but he is one who views *every* role in production, not just one, as the most important role in the universe – because in a collaborative form like theatre or animation, every role *is*.

As this chapter contends, Schneider’s vision for revitalizing the studio by empowering artists to cultivate their own voices, as opposed to searching for one singular artist’s vision, is firmly rooted in the theatre laboratory tradition, which was innovated by the Moscow Art Theatre and brought to the United States by Richard Boleslavsky, in 1923. While there have been theatre laboratories designed to center around one person’s vision, this Russian intervention, in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries was created to foster the formation of theatres which adhere to what Boleslavsky calls the “rules and to the laws of collective creation.”¹⁴ According to his foundational essay *The Laboratory Theatre*, he explains that this means that every member of an ensemble must give “the maximum of energy and talent, even for the smallest detail, which will be an item in the complete production; penetrating and uniting in a fundamental idea of the performance.”¹⁵ Not only is this ideal reflected in the way the young Schneider operated the spotlight at La Mama, it echoes the philosophy he brought to Disney. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Schneider enacted what he calls a “theatre discipline,” which he defines as “Work harder, draw better, self-critique, bring in outsiders, pick teams, have

¹³ Schneider, interview, April 2020.

¹⁴ Boleslavsky, 247.

¹⁵ Boleslavsky, 247.

opinions: actually, become artistic players as opposed to grunts.”¹⁶ In other words, he needed to re-train the artists of the studio to develop their own craft and determine their own artistic standards through collaborative creation among each other, as an ensemble, and guest artists from outside the studio, who can offer new and challenging perspectives.

Before examining how Schneider’s “theatre discipline” was enacted at Disney to achieve his goal of collective empowerment, this chapter will offer a brief genealogy of these “rules and laws of collective creation” as they were passed down from Boleslavsky to Schneider. From the Moscow Art Theatre to the United States, it was re-appropriated by Boleslavsky’s American students in the formation of the Group Theatre. The Group Theatre, in turn, inspired countless theatre artists in the generation following the Second World War, who formed their own theatres, including Joe Stockdale, who headed the regional theatre company at Purdue University and Marshall Mason, the founding artistic director of Circle Repertory in New York City. While a student at Purdue, Schneider learned under Stockdale’s mentorship, before going to New York City, where he interned at Circle Repertory under Mason.¹⁷ Rising in the ranks of Off-Broadway theatre laboratories like La Mama, and with the help of new friends like producer Albert Polland, he became a notable production manager in non-profit and commercial theatre in New York and on the West End. He eventually became the production manager at the St. Nicholas Theatre in Chicago, where his way of doing things was emulated by burgeoning new theatres like Steppenwolf.¹⁸ After leaving Chicago, he served as an associate director

¹⁶ Schneider Interview, April 2020; Cunytv75, “Theater Talk: *Waking Sleeping Beauty* producer Peter Schneider and writer Patrick Pacheco,” Online Video Clip, Youtube.com, May 13, 2011. Accessed, October 5, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yLPzPG-eS0>

¹⁷ Schneider interview, April 2020.

¹⁸ John Mayer, *Steppenwolf Theatre Company of Chicago: In Their Own Words*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 40, Kindle.

on the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival under Robert Fitzpatrick, the president of the California Arts Institute (CalArts).¹⁹ It is here that his path would cross with Disney.

That same year, Michael Eisner became the new C.E.O of the Walt Disney Company, Jeffrey Katzenberg became the new head of the film studio division, and Roy E. Disney, Walt's nephew, became the President of Disney animation. Fearing that Disney animation would disappear, Roy E. searched frantically for the next Walt – a “genius” who could pass their knowledge down. However, even the way that animators learned their craft had changed significantly since Walt's day. Walt had designed the operations of the studio to be self-sustaining, and in his day, mostly everything in the Disney animation studio had been done in-house from training, to invention, to mixing paint.²⁰ However the studio faced financial losses in the late 1950s, the studio had to cut personnel, and the animation training and courses that had once been offered in the studio, itself, were continued off-site at Chouinard Art Institute, an art and design school for people aspiring to work, mostly, in film.²¹ Before his death, in 1966, Walt and his family would invest heavily in transforming Chouinard into a permanent training ground for future Disney animators.²² This was the founding of CalArts, which was the first place Roy E. ventured to find the next Walt.

¹⁹ Schneider interview, April 2020.

²⁰ A detailed account by Robert D. Feild in this 1942 book *The Art of Walt Disney* suggests that the studio's Administrative wing was in charge of coordinating “the employment of talent and methods of apprenticeship and training, which as yet have not become sufficiently ‘co-ordinated’ to be recognizable as self-sufficient departments of their own.” Robert Durant Feild, *The Art of Walt Disney* (United Kingdom: Collins, 1947), 119.

²¹ Floyd Norman, *Animated Life: A Lifetime of tips, tricks, techniques and stories from a Disney Legend*, (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 29-50.

²² Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 79.

To Roy E.'s surprise, the school's president, Fitzpatrick, suggested Schneider.²³ "I came [to Disney] from a theatre background," says Schneider, "and it became very apparent to me early on, in this very early period that – not knowing anything about the film business – that there was so much *equivalency* to the theatre business: to a resident theatre company."²⁴ He must not have been the only one to make this connection. Roy E. brought the flabbergasted theatre maker to his office for an interview and determined that Schneider, who had successfully managed a large festival had the correct "battlefield general" personality to bring out the best in Disney animation. According to Roy E.'s biography by William Silvester, he concluded that Schneider was "perfect for animation because he was as crazy as they come and creative as they come and not willing to settle for something that's only fair or good enough."²⁵ It was a risky move to bring in a manager who knew nothing about film, let alone animation, but Schneider arrived at the studio on the heels of a film that is considered, to this day, to be Disney's biggest artistic and financial flop: *The Black Cauldron*. "I knew that I could do no worse than *The Black Cauldron*, you know," Schneider recalls in the documentary *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, which covers this period, "You can't fall off the first floor."²⁶ As the following sections note, Schneider entered a studio which was in disarray.

Warring Factions and Power Brokerage

The first challenge Schneider had to contend with was generational tension between veteran animators and the new generation, who had entered in the 1970s and

²³ Steven Morris, "Ten Weeks That Changed the City." *LA Weekly*. December 11, 2003. Accessed April 10, 2018, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/ten-weeks-that-changed-the-city-2137415>.

²⁴ Schneider, interview, April 2020.

²⁵ William Silvester, *Saving Disney: The Roy E. Disney Story*, (Theme Park Press, 2015), 79.

²⁶ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

80s, mostly from CalArts. The older generation of animators, who had worked directly with Walt Disney, called the Nine Old Men, had finally retired in their eighties. Different accounts of this period including testimonies in *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, the documentary *Howard*, the book *Demystifying Disney*, and animator Steve Hulett's account in *Mouse in Transition: An Insider's Look at Disney Feature Animation* tell the same story that the managers that ran the studio before Schneider, including Joe Hale, Ron Miller, and Wolfgang ("Woolie") Reitherman created an environment where artists could not express themselves freely. Schneider explains that the younger animators especially "couldn't express any strong opinions because if you, as an artist, expressed an opinion, [and] if Joe Hale said to you 'do you like a, b, or c better?'" and you said 'c' he would think 'a'" and artists would be penalized for expressing dissent.²⁷ Young animator Brad Bird, who would later become a big player in Pixar's history and the *Simpsons* got fired from Disney Feature Animation just before Schneider arrived for voicing his frustrations to management.²⁸ Meanwhile some members of the young class such as John Musker and Ron Clemens were being groomed to fill leadership roles like director, and older animators became jealous at the prospect that young animators would get promotions and tried to curtail these efforts where they could according to Hulett.²⁹ For some groups, advancement was seen by the administrators.

The tension over promotions extended beyond age, and notably into issues of sex and gender. The Disney animation studio had been notoriously segregated by sex for

²⁷ Schneider, interview, April 2020.

²⁸ Steve Hulett, *Mouse in Transition: An Insider's Look at Disney Feature Animation* (United States: Theme Park Press, 2014), 40, Kindle.

²⁹ Hulett, 41, Kindle.

most of its history until anti-discrimination laws were passed in the 1970s.³⁰ These changes forced Disney to hire more women to meet quotas in this decade, although there was much cultural resistance towards their equality or advancement. Sito offers an example: In 1977 “Background artist Annie Guenther trained a male artist named John Coleman. The studio wanted to promote John above Annie, but there was worry about the bad feelings that would ensue. The solution was to fire Annie.”³¹ The tensions surrounding gender and promotion will be addressed more in depth in the next chapter.

Although there was no formal policy for segregation based on race at the Disney studio, the complex barriers are evidenced by a severe lack of black, indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) working at the studio until the 1980s.³² Floyd Norman, who entered Disney in the late 1950s as a cleanup artist on *Sleeping Beauty*, was the first Black animator to work at the studio long-term and was promoted to storyboard artist while Walt was still alive. Devastated by Walt’s death, he left for a period and missing the creative work of the studio, returned to work on *Robin Hood* (1973).³³ At this time one of the only other Black animators was Bob Tyler, who was hired on *Robin Hood*.³⁴ The other Black people who worked for Disney were custodians or nighttime security guards, recall both Tyler and Norman.³⁵ Norman recalls that one of the custodians,

³⁰ Sito, chap 1, Kindle.

³¹ Sito, chap 1, Kindle.

³² Black Disney animator Dan Haskett, who was present at the studio for this period says that he was reluctant to apply to work at Disney because of the Company’s bad reputation in terms of its racist history. He also suggests that one of the reasons that black artists did not go into animation at this time was because of “well meaning” Black friends and family members who discouraged them, as they didn’t want them to get hurt or did not think they could make a viable living in animation.

Tom Bancroft and Tony Bancroft, “Dan Haskett,” *The Bancroft Brothers Animation Podcast*, July 3, 2020. Apple Podcasts. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/dan-haskett/id911802874?i=1000482394487>.

³³ Norman, 169.

³⁴ Sito, chap 1, Kindle.

³⁵ Norman, 169.

named Claude, who knew everything about the inner workings of the studio from what he was able to overhear, took him aside and warned him that things were not well in the animation department: factions were forming and the environment was hostile.³⁶ When asked about this period, Tyler vaguely references people at the top who did not want to relinquish or share power.³⁷ While he isn't as candid as Claude, he notably left the studio after *Robin Hood*.³⁸ Norman remembers, "It wasn't the best of times at the studio, and in the midst of all this turmoil, things began to look grim for me. Eventually, for reasons more business than personal, I was sacked a few months later. However, it was not without a warning from my inside man [Claude]."³⁹ He returned about ten years later expressing interest in working on *Black Cauldon*, but the production executive Ed Hansen pretended not to know him, showed reluctance in him coming for an interview at the studio, and ultimately passed him over for the job. Given the film's poor box office performance and its place in Disney history as possibly the worst film the studio made, perhaps he dodged a bullet.

"I remained in touch with many of the animators and listened to their complaints and their dissatisfaction with the film and the way they were treated," he says. "The stories they told were more than familiar. Top animators were cherry-picking the good scenes and leaving the more lackluster stuff for others. And, of course, politics ran hot and heavy. I had heard these same stories more than a decade earlier [on *Robin Hood*]."⁴⁰ At one point on production for *Black Cauldon*, two young CalArts grads named Andy

³⁶ Norman, 169.

³⁷ Norman, 169-171.

³⁸ Norman, 169-171.

³⁹ Norman, 171.

⁴⁰ Norman, 97.

Gaskill and Tim Burton, who would become a famous director in his own right, offered character designs that were based on a northern European visual concept, grotesque, expressionistic, and daemonic concept for the dark story. These efforts were quickly squashed by Joe Hale, who brought veteran animator Milt Kahl out of retirement to design the lead characters in a cute fashion instead.⁴¹ “The veterans remained territorial...and a touch paranoid,” Hulett recalls.⁴² Again, it is not difficult to see why the studio would want to find a singular “genius” to cut through the chaos, breakup the factions, and maintain a secure environment.

Wing-ism

Another challenge that Schneider noted, when he first arrived is what he calls “wing-ism” or the idea that people in different groups, under different directors, don’t effectively communicate or coordinate with each other on creative projects. Disney animation is a complicated process from start to finish, involving multiple teams and departments. When Walt Disney developed his animation studio, it was separated into three parts: Administrative, Creative, and Technical. Robert D. Feild described the studio and its division of labor, in depth, in his 1942 book *The Art of Walt Disney*. The Administrative Division, he explains, “acts as a sort of humanizing agency between the abstract end of things, problems of bookkeeping, and studio personnel.”⁴³ He details that this division also supervised employment of talent, methods of apprenticeship, and

⁴¹ John Culhane, “The old Disney magic,” New York Times. Aug. 1, 1976. Accessed July 12, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/08/01/archives/the-old-disney-magic-can-a-new-generation-of-artists-make-audiences.html>.

⁴² Hulett, 48.

⁴³ Feild, 70.

training, which was all in house at the time.⁴⁴ The Creative Group, he writes is essentially separated into the Pictorial Section and the Music Section. Because of animation's inherently visual nature, the Pictorial section houses the Story Department and the Story Research Department, where a team of ten or more develops the plot through a process called storyboarding, which is a Disney innovation that is used by most filmmakers today.⁴⁵ The process did not have a single screenwriter. In collaboration with the Dialogue Department, the agreed upon ideas move from the meeting transcriptions into lines that are performed by voice actors. The Layout Department "stages" the scenes: "It plans the action in accordance with the needs of the camera and supplies the animators with sufficiently detailed instruction."⁴⁶ The Character Model Department "establishes the 'individuality' of the character," in a way that can be described as character development. The Animation Department does the characterization based on the voice acting from the Dialogue Department, and the "direction" they receive from layout. Creative departments like the Background, Special Effects, and Music operate in a space between creative and technical expertise.

The Technical Division has three departments; "each has a quality of self-sufficiency, inasmuch as each has its own organization and recognizable responsibility."⁴⁷ The Ink and Paint Department draws the final pictures on top of the animators' sketches, onto celluloid. Then these cels are painted with tones determined by the Color Model Department, which acts like a costume design department for hand-drawn character. The Processing Department maintains pictorial quality and clean-up of

⁴⁴ Feild, 70.

⁴⁵ Sammond, 79.

⁴⁶ Feild, 73.

⁴⁷ Feild, 74.

these cels before they are transferred to the Camera Department, which puts them on a multi-tiered camera to achieve a three-dimensional effect. Feild marvels, “We are dealing with a cross-section of productive manpower, approximately twelve hundred strong, representing almost every kind of human activity from routine clerical work to the highest form of artistic and scientific accomplishment.”⁴⁸ By the time Schneider entered the studio, this description of the departments remained the same except for the fact that budget cuts had lessened the numbers of workers, and it was no longer the “highest form” of anything.

Because an animated film requires a lot of different groups and moving pieces to make, it is not unusual for one film to have more than one director to carry out work simultaneously. When Walt was alive, he would often be the person who would travel from department to department to keep them connected. He was very active in the creative process and is recorded in story meeting transcripts, which illustrate the way he was able to keep the work of many artists cohesive without being imposing. In creating the sequences for the song “Whistle While You Work” in *Snow White*, one of the creatives suggests a shot that would take the camera outside the house, “with dust coming out of the windows, etc.”⁴⁹ Another takes that idea and offers the idea of showing animals getting their heads stuck in things outside as a visual gag, and Walt urges them to keep the action focused on the plotline, “Yes that’s what we need, but don’t bring in gags that have nothing to do with cleaning.”⁵⁰ One transcript for a meeting for the “Night on Bald Mountain” sequence in *Fantasia* was not working well, and when the artists reached

⁴⁸ Feild, 75.

⁴⁹ Feild, 119.

⁵⁰ Feild, 123.

an impasse, Walt exclaimed, “If anybody has any thoughts, speak out. If you think it stinks, say so. If you think it needs something, well what about it?”⁵¹ Unlike those who succeeded him, he offered his artists opportunities to dissent, and encouraged them to assert their own visions, as long as it was dramaturgically consistent.

When Schneider arrived, he looked at the way that the studio was organized and saw parallels to the theatre companies he had worked with.

“If you looked at the animators, they were the actors. It was a group of actors. Animators are actors. They just happen to use a pencil to act as opposed to their voices but they were actors. Then you had the scenic department which was the background/layout department, then you have the sort of the lighting department, which was the effects department, you had the costuming department, which was the color model department.”⁵²

He said to himself, “You know what, there's a ‘theatre group’ here that is just in need of... *something*.”⁵³ That “something” would be his “theatre discipline,” but in his immediate circumstances, upon arrival, he had difficulty figuring out how all of the moving pieces of the animation studio worked in practice. For example, the first film Schneider oversaw at Disney was *The Great Mouse Detective*. He explains, “I had three directors and a producer, and it was clumsy and awkward. But it was not a bad movie... But I could never get my handle on who to hold responsible for anything.”⁵⁴ Schneider’s goal for *The Great Mouse Detective* was to simply get through the filmmaking process, learning as much as he can about it, and ending with less damage than *Black Cauldron*.

One thing that helped him was seen as a tragedy to the rest of the studio. Before Schneider arrived, Eisner and his new studio head Katzenberg made the decision to move

⁵¹ Feild, 123.

⁵² Schneider, April 2020.

⁵³ Schneider, April 2020.

⁵⁴ Schneider, April 2020.

the animation studio out of its building on Disney's main studio on the Burbank lot to warehouses in Glendale, a few miles away.⁵⁵ The area was an industrial park that was built on the site of Los Angeles' earliest airport.⁵⁶ Where everyone from Amelia Earhart to Clark Gable had once boarded glamorous aircraft, now Disney animators entered gutted wretches of buildings, with walls made out of cinder block, torn up carpet, barbed wire fences, and broken bottles in the parking lot.⁵⁷ While the animators believed that this move meant that they were on the chopping block, Schneider points out the silver lining: there were no more wings.⁵⁸ There were no more dark hallways keeping people apart. Now there were open spaces, where departments had cubicles.⁵⁹ In short, the Glendale space allowed for more open and more spontaneous communication.

While the newcomer Schneider took time on *Great Mouse Detective* to learn more about how the studio was organized and operated, the studio's next project, *Oliver and Company*, offered him an opportunity to reshape the creative process from start to finish. *Oliver and Company* was, from its inception, a symbol of new times at the studio. When Eisner and Katzenberg arrived, they initiated a policy they had used in the live-action film studio at Paramount, called a Gong Show. In a Gong Show, anyone in the studio from the top executive to the custodian had the opportunity to pitch an idea for a movie, and if chosen, would receive payment for a first draft treatment.⁶⁰ For this first one, Katzenberg told the artists to come with two ideas ready to pitch.⁶¹ Over the years, this

⁵⁵ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

⁵⁶ Norman, 121.

⁵⁷ Norman, 121; *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

⁵⁸ Schneider interview, April 2020.

⁵⁹ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

⁶⁰ Joe McGowan, "How Disney Keeps Ideas Coming," *Fortune Magazine*, April 1, 1996, https://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1996/04/01/210979/index.htm

⁶¹ Hulett, 85.

would become a more sophisticated process and the studio would offer coaching to those in the building who don't have writing or pitching experience.⁶² However, as crude as the earliest version was, the message was clear: the new leaders believed that everyone had the potential to contribute something valuable, and they were expected to. The senior members of the studio no longer had a monopoly on what kind of art the studio would make. The idea for *Oliver and Company* came from the first Gong Show, from an animator named Pete Young, who suggested a re-telling of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* with cats and dogs, set in contemporary New York City.⁶³ Katzenberg, especially, was very enthusiastic about this idea, "Dogs. New York City. I like it. We've got a modern update of a proven classic. And there's a nice twist with the dogs and the cat. Let's get to work on this."⁶⁴ Eisner, Katzenberg, (and eventually Schneider, who was on his way to the studio shortly thereafter) came from New York City, and it was clear that this was going to be a film that reflected the tastes of the studio's new leaders.

Schneider's task was to organize the production so that the process could bring about the kind of active contribution that was now desired. "So what I discovered was a group of people who were in their 20s and there were a couple people who were a little older but they were young and ambitious and had great passion but had no way of understanding how to do it anymore," he explains. "It was sort of decimated by the fact that, in my humble opinion, although no one will confirm, that the Nine Old Men really believed that animation would die with them."⁶⁵ The artists knew how to draw, mix

⁶² McGowan, https://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/1996/04/01/210979/index.htm.

⁶³ Hulett, 85.

⁶⁴ Hulett, 88.

⁶⁵ Schneider, April 2020.

sound, create effects, etc., but they did not know how to express themselves. Schneider could not help them learn how to draw, but as the next sections explain, he had been given a pedagogical method or “system” from his theatrical background that was designed to promote creative sustainability – one which had been developed, innovated, changed, and continuously perfected for about a hundred years, across continents.

The “System”

There are different kinds of theatre laboratories, with different goals, methods, and interests. Nevertheless, there are some common threads. As Brian Brown writes in his book *A History of the Theatre Laboratory*:

“Since the early 1900s, ‘theatre laboratory’ has been used variously to refer to a theatre company, an approach to theatre-making or a small, often secondary, theatre venue. Within and between these uses are a multitude of others, including continuous training regimes, research-led intensives and ad hoc rehearsal processes; pedagogical programs envisioned as catalysts for ‘the theatre of the future’; centers and residencies with an avowed experimental *raison d’être* to ‘do what no one else is doing’; as well as funding and marketing strategies that attempt to attract support through diverse means for vastly different types of performance.”⁶⁶

With its emphasis on training, development, research, learning, and experimentation, the criteria for a theatre laboratory correlates to Schneider’s “theatre discipline,” which similarly puts an emphasis on the development of craft, the cultivation of artistic standards, and expanding a worldview to create self-empowered artists. As this section notes, this type of theatre laboratory was a Russian intervention in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, which had an interest reinventing the role of the artist-master, or *regisseur*, from someone who dictates a vision to someone who cultivates a collective

⁶⁶ Bryan Brown, *A History of the Theatre Laboratory*, (Taylor and Francis, 2019), Kindle Edition.

work of art. In mapping out this genealogy I intend to root the “Disney Renaissance” in the contexts of theatre history.

Regisseurs, in the past, mainly had to make sure actors knew their lines, make sure actors were standing in the right spot, and make sure that the theatre’s books were in order, theatre management. The role of the *regisseur* evolved in the late 19th Century to meet the needs of theatre in the modern world. As the 19th Century progressed, however, the “moving pieces” became more than mechanical pieces and choreographed blocking. By the end of the Century the Western world had undergone rapid and seismic changes due to new technologies, social sciences, political revolution, and new cultural movements. As Oscar Brockett and Robert R Findlay explain in their book *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama since 1870*, theatre, as an industry and an art form needed to adapt to a world where audiences had increased awareness of social problems, disillusionment with institutions, new understandings of sciences, such as psychology and evolution.⁶⁷ Theatre practitioners needed a new set of comprehensive skills and training to operate increasingly complex stage machinery, psychological realist acting, and write plays that could meet the standards of new dramatic criticisms, including the emergence of a new way of analyzing drama called “dramaturgy.”⁶⁸ To meet these needs, the role of the *regisseur* grew into two separate tracks: one where he would manage all aspects of production according to one, singular vision, as “director,” and one that would encourage more collective

⁶⁷ Oscar G Brockett and Robert R Findlay, *Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since the Late Nineteenth Century*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991), 1-10.

⁶⁸ Michael M Chemers, *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy*, Theater in the Americas. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010).

autonomy, while keeping the project cohesive under the dramaturgical eye of a manager-mentor.

Figures like Richard Wagner, Adolphe Appia, and Gordon Craig developed and published theories which led to the transformation of the role of the *regisseur* into the role of the modern director.⁶⁹ There was a great deal of invention, experimentation, and innovation that occurred in theatre because of this approach, and even Boleslavsky writing decades later, contends that, “There is hardly a modern production where it is not possible to find the imprints of Craig's theory.”⁷⁰ However, the major problems with this kind of individual-centric theatre laboratory, according to Boleslavsky, is that when the central “genius” dies, becomes complacent, or becomes tired, the laboratory follows suit and either disappears or becomes a museum to past glories.⁷¹ This echoes the exact problem that Disney Feature Animation would run into after Walt's death almost a half a century later.

The collective laboratory model, developed at the Moscow Art Theatre, on the other hand, was innovated with long-term creative and material sustainability in mind.⁷² The training, research-led intensives, and rehearsal processes that Brown mentions as

⁶⁹ Brockett and Findlay, 32.

⁷⁰ Boleslavsky, himself would have experienced experiments with the *regisseur*/director at the Moscow Art Theatre when his membership overlapped with when Meyerhold was there. Boleslavsky, 246.

⁷¹ Boleslavsky 243-246.

⁷² As Nick Worrall writes in his book *The Moscow Art Theatre*, “Historically, the advent of the Moscow Art Theatre was not a uniquely Russian phenomenon but part of a European commercial and artistic movement which brought the new drama to new audiences. The parallels here are with the Théâtre Libre in Paris, the Freie Bühne in Berlin, the Independent and Court Theatres in London, the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and even the Intima Teatren in Stockholm. Just as these enterprises turned their backs on the unrealistic world of romantic comedy or extravagant melodrama with which Patent Houses such as Drury Lane and Covent Garden, or the Malyy and the Aleksandrinskiy, were associated, so the Moscow Art Theatre, like these other serious commercial theatrical enterprises, turned its back on the routine methods of nineteenth-century Russian theatre epitomized by the work of the Imperial Theatres. Nick Worrall, *The Moscow Art Theatre*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 14.

integral to the formation of theatre laboratories, was central to this endeavor. Founded by Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, this new theatre company did not have unlimited resources – in fact, compared to other theatres like the royal-run Imperial Theatres they did not have enough money to draw in the best talent in the city.⁷³ This was an obstacle for them because of Moscow’s own star system, where directors would focus their attention on leading actors, offering them training and development, while leaving the rest lacking.⁷⁴ Thus, and inability to afford stars meant that the new company would be doomed to only featuring untrained or undertrained actors, ruining their chances of competing with existing theatres let alone their dream of elevating Russian theatre.⁷⁵ Their solution was to take in the greenhorn actors and train them.⁷⁶ However, unlike other training programs, this one would not be dictated by an artist-master.

⁷³ Worrall, 60-62.

⁷⁴ Catherine Schuler, *Theatre and Identity in Imperial Russia*, Studies in Theatre History & Culture (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 92.

⁷⁵ Worrall, 60-62.

⁷⁶ They were not the first Russian theatre managers to attempt this. In her book *Theatre and Identity in Imperial Russia*, Catherine Schuler offers an example, where a Russian prince and theatre manager, Alexander Shakhovskoy, was one of the first, two generations earlier in the 19th Century, to try to innovate the role of the *regisseur* into someone who could elevate the craft of the whole ensemble. Shakhovskoy wrote: “The *regisseur* must observe the performers during rehearsals and bring them along until they know their blocking, can read without a prompter, and are trying to find the nuances and so-called effects. [The *regisseur*] does this so that, during the performance itself, [actors] will not hope for the kind of inspiration available to a few select geniuses... He must be respected as both a manager [*rasporiaditel*] and mentor [*nastavnik*]; they must listen to him not out of fear but from inner conviction.”

This quote suggests that his ideal version of the *regisseur* was not just someone who blocks a show but inspires actors to become stars or “geniuses” in their own right. However, because of his princely station, he held too much power in the rehearsal room, and did not allow for dissent or collective creativity – much like the Disney animation studio in the 1970s. Despite his wish that the company de-center the individual or “star”, there was no scenario, in a company full of Russian peasants, where he would not be the star. Schuler offers that “Shakhovskoy’s passion for acting pedagogy seems to have been part of a larger mission to raise the aesthetic standards and improve the quality of Russian actors and the national theatre. His objective was to shape a Russian theatre that could compete with the best foreign theatres, both at home and abroad.” While Stanislavsky and Danchenko came from a privileged class, they were not royalty, and Moscow Art Theatre, had an opportunity to get it right. There could be no princes among them. Schuler, 92, 101-102.

Stanislavsky and Danchenko began with ethnographic process: interviewing actors and tracking their progress, their questions, their challenges, and their contributions. From the beginning, their school or “studio” was centered around the ensemble and their active participation in the research and creative processes. In his writings, Stanislavsky likened the process to musical notation, each actor is taught to separate the dramatic action into "bits" or "episodes" (*kooski*) on their own time.⁷⁷ Over the development process, these combined “bits” make up the “score of the role” (*partitura*).⁷⁸ The final production, therefore is to be like an orchestra, performing the combined scores, while the *regisseur* is like the conductor, who brings “into common harmony all the creative elements of the performance, and in this harmony lies the strength of the theatre.”⁷⁹ The idea was to elevate the work of the whole company.

When the Moscow Art Theatre performed in New York City in 1923, as described in the previous chapter, this was one aspect of that tour that mesmerized American audiences. Because America had its own star system entrenched at that point, there would have been few opportunities for American audiences would have seen a theatre company where the talent was so equally distributed. Lee Strasberg, who would go on to shape the way that actors across the country would perform for the next century, was in attendance with his friends and future colleagues: Harold Clurman, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Cheryl Crawford. He later summarized his initial response, saying that the Moscow Art Theatre was “a superb ensemble able to fill each moment of a play with life, each

⁷⁷ Hobgood, Burnet M. "Central Conceptions in Stanislavski's System." *Educational Theatre Journal* 25, no. 2 (1973): 155. Accessed December 1, 2020. doi:10.2307/3205864.

⁷⁸ Hobgood, 155.

⁷⁹ Konstantin Stanislavsky, “Stanislavsky to his Players,” *Theatre Arts Magazine*, Volume 7, Number 3, 1923, 37.

actor concerned not with the importance of his part, but his relation to the scene, to the other characters, each moment played with full conviction and reality.”⁸⁰ The difference in quality was undeniable, and these future titans of American entertainment would dedicate the rest of their lives to replicating that kind of quality to American acting and directing, by attempting to revive the resident theatre model in projects like the American Laboratory Theatre, the Group Theatre, and regional theatres across the country.

The Resident Theatre Revival

When Schneider arrived at the studio, the first connection he made between animation and theatre was the studio’s resemblance to a resident theatre company, like the kinds of theatres he had been a part of at Purdue, Circle Rep, La Mama, and St. Nicholas. By the time he entered the field, he was part of the third generation of American theatre makers to experiment with fashioning resident theatre models in the style of the Moscow Art Theatre.

In the 19th Century, resident companies, in regional areas, were the dominant model, and provided specialized training to practitioners in-house. In a resident company, actors, directors, managers, and backstage workers were hired on a long-term basis, often by season, and sometimes lived in or near the theatre building, itself.⁸¹ This same group of artists would then perform a series of different plays in repertory. The repertory system depended on “stock” characters that could easily be portrayed in numerous productions by actors who specialized in various character types (lead, hero, villain, lover, etc.). This

⁸⁰ Smith, Wendy. *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1990). 25, Kindle.

⁸¹ Richard Hornby, “Regional Theatre Comes of Age.” *The Hudson Review* 46, no. 3 (1993): 529.

led these companies to also be referred to as “repertory companies” or “stock companies.” In the United States, this system disappeared in the 1870s when a major recession hit, causing resident theatre companies to dissolve all over the country.⁸² It became more profitable for actors to do single productions at different theatres that were rented on a show-by-show basis.⁸³ In a system where rental prices for theatre spaces are high, the pace of mounting a show must be fast-paced, and artistic decisions often need to be streamlined and synthesized – preferably by one person. With the rise of commercial rental theatres, such as those on Broadway, in the early 20th Century, the new idea of the regisseur as “director”, was a marriage of convenience, to be sure. This trend had been made popular by imported theories of Wagner, Appia, and Craig, while figures like Augustin Daly firmly planted this methodology in the United States.⁸⁴ Meanwhile the apprentice system in the resident theatre companies had disappeared with them and theatre training in the United States was decimated.

To fill the growing void in on-the-job actor training in the United States, the American Academy of Dramatic Arts (1884), and the National Dramatic Conservatory (1898), were established. According to Clifford Hamar’s 1952 study on the entrance of theatre in college curriculum, aspiring actors could also learn speech and elocution at schools like Wittenberg University, University of Idaho, University of Kansas, Smith, St. Ignatius, Wesleyan, Columbia, and Harvard.⁸⁵ These programs, however, were geared towards teaching an approach to acting that privileged “voice and speech” and techniques

⁸² Hornby, 529.

⁸³ Cary Gillett and Jay Sheehan, *The Production Manager's Toolkit: Successful Production Management in Theatre and Performing Arts*, The Focal Press Toolkit Series (London: Taylor and Francis), 116, Kindle.

⁸⁴ Brockett, (1990), 44.

⁸⁵ Heilman, Pamela Sue. “The American Career of Maria Ouspenskaya (1887-1949): Actress and Teacher,” (Dissertation: Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 1999), 3-4.

for movement from the Delsart system, brought to America by Steele McKaye in the 1870s. It was not until 1914, however, that a college, Carnegie Tech, began to offer a comprehensive degree in theatre training. Without proper training, the quality of American theatre depended on individual stars, in Broadway's star system to carry the weight of the show, supported by a largely mediocre ensemble. Boleslavsky takes aim at this uneven distribution of training when he says, "twenty little performances in one large disintegrated production which will not leave a trace on the hearts or the minds of the audience."⁸⁶ By the time the Moscow Art Theatre performed in New York, the generation of Strasberg, Clurman, Adler, and Meisner were so young that they had never experienced the kind of resident theatres that had existed prior to their collapse in the 1870s.

Boleslavsky and his associate from the Moscow Art Theatre, Maria Ouspenskaya, founded the American Lab Theatre to give their young American disciples a chance to experience Stanislavsky and Danchenko's version which rejected the idea limiting players to "stock characters" or "type." The actor in such a theatre must never play two parts identically. Because it is 'our Theatre' he must play Hamlet today, and to-morrow appear as a beggar in a mob scene. And both of these parts must be for him equally objects of creation and to both of them he must give all his force and all his talents."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Next, he blamed this individualistic model, which left so many practitioners with an underdeveloped craft for what we, today, might call "artist burnout." "Why do all these great souls, burning with the flame of the Holy Spirit, leave the contemporary theatre?" he asks. "The reason is very simple; it is because the contemporary theatre has become a shop, a department store, in which ready-made and labelled goods are sold. But where those goods are created, where their qualities are verified – nobody cares."⁸⁶ He is not so much problematizing the buying and selling of theatre as a commodity, but the *way* that it gets made as part of the show-by-show system, where instead of participating in processes of discovery, the director comes in with a "ready-made" vision. The problem wasn't so much the fact that theater was being sold, it was the fact that it was being sold no matter how poorly constructed it was. Boleslavsky, 249.

⁸⁷ Boleslavsky, 249.

Working against American traditions was both exciting and frustrating for students and donors. Although the Lab eventually disbanded from lack of funds, Boleslavsky successfully communicated the virtues of the “system” to the United States, and his school trained over 500 students.⁸⁸ Some of these students formed the Group Theatre as an opportunity to get it right.

One of the biggest gripes that these American students had was the fact that all of the plays performed by the American Lab were European, and not American. Boleslavsky had told them that they would be creating new forms, but they didn’t feel that they were. So, the Group Theatre would create their own artistic standards and plays as an ensemble. They would live together as a resident company, learn and grow together. Therefore, one of the major interventions the Group Theatre is known for is the development of new plays by American playwright such as Paul Green, John Howard Lawson, Sidney Kingsley, Irwin Shaw, Robert Ardrey, and Clifford Odets, who would be the Group Theatre’s most stand-out playwright, often considered their equivalent of what Anton Checkhov was to the Moscow Art Theatre.⁸⁹ The second intervention was to create an acting “system” that was more accessible to their own lived experiences that Strasberg called the “method”.⁹⁰ The third intervention was the political nature of their

⁸⁸ Riding the wave of the Moscow Art Theatre’s popularity in the 1920s, the American Laboratory Theatre was able to secure donations for what was dreamed to be the American iteration of the former. However, the donors became frustrated and disappointed when they did not see the theatre equal Moscow’s success in a matter of years. Boleslavsky tried to explain the necessity of time, but it was not enough to convince his donors to maintain the flow of necessary resources. Heilman,30-22, 105.

⁸⁹ Brockett, 502.

⁹⁰ According to historian Wendy Smith, “[Boleslavsky] said that an art theatre based on Stanislavsky’s acting principles needed to be grounded in American reality, to become ‘a living social force, recreating itself each generation from the thoughts and material of its own times. Strasberg didn’t think this goal could be achieved in a theatre run by Russian expatriates; he set out to see if it were attainable anywhere else.’” How could they tap into Stanislavsky’s “magic if” (“What would I do if I were the character?”) if their theatre’s choice of plays showed little regard for their own lived experience? One of the first changes manifested itself while Strasberg was still Boleslavsky’s student with an innovation on Stanislavsky’s

plays, reflecting the experiences of the working class.⁹¹ The fourth was the way their politics influenced their organizational structure as well.

Like the Moscow Art Theatre and the American Lab, the Group Theatre was committed to collective collaboration. Clurman wrote, “We believe that the individual can achieve his fullest stature only through the identification of his own good with the good of his group, a group which he himself must help to create.”⁹² Unlike their predecessors, however, the new generation was highly influenced by socialist and collectivist political thought, and their own ideology as first-generation Americans, who believed that their theatre could embody the concept of *e pluribus unum*.⁹³ Thus, they opted for a system with a loose hierarchy that did not have a *regisseur* at all. Without designating a person who could consolidate their many individual contributions, the

“magic if”. Historian Wendy Smith writes in her book *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America 1931-1940*, that while directing a theatricalization of the Biblical story *Esther*, “Strasberg told his actors to think of themselves not as Biblical kings and queens, which might seem impossibly remote to them, but as priests and nuns, who were more familiar but whose behavior would give them the appropriate dignity.” This was a technique that Strasberg adopted from Stanislavsky’s protégé Eugene Vakhtangov, in which the director suggests an “adjustment,” or “substitute reality” for what’s in the text – one which is more personally meaningful to the actor. Smith, 37-44.

⁹¹ Like Shakhovskoy, the Moscow Art Theatre, and the American Laboratory Theatre, they wanted to change their nation’s culture through high-quality, mainstream theatre. However, unlike their predecessors, their goals were not just cultural, but political in nature, focusing on the experiences of the working class. Knowing that a well-trained ensemble can change mainstream culture with art that “moves” audiences, Odet’s plays like *Awake and Sing!* and *Waiting for Lefty* dramatize the struggles of the working class and were designed to move their audiences into political action. *Waiting for Lefty*, for example was about a taxi union strike. One night the audience was so captivated by the play and its superb ensemble’s performance that they collectively shouted out “Strike! Strike!” Helen Sheehy, *Margo: The Life and Theatre of Margo Jones* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989), chap. 1, Kindle.

⁹² Smith, 20-21.

⁹³ For all of their talk of *e pluribus unum*, the Group theatre was racially segregated. In a time of American theatre history when ethnic groups, whether immigrant or first-generation, were often separated on different stages (Yiddish theatres, Italian theatres, etc.) the Group Theatre made strides bringing artists of these different backgrounds together, including immigrants like the future titan of film and theatre Elia Kazan. However, Black artists were not allowed to become full members and were excluded from the laboratory process for new play development and rehearsal. Even though they occasionally cast black actors in their plays, Wendy Smith explains that, “The Group, not as immune from the prejudices of the time as they should have been, didn’t make these distinguished black actresses members of the company, nor were their scenes rehearsed according to Strasberg’s method.” Their actors of color were not only excluded from company membership, they were excluded from the laboratory process. Smith, 83, 184.

process of creation became tense, and the group broke off into factions, eventually leading to the company's downfall.

The legacy of the Group Theatre, therefore, was mixed. On the one hand, they made theatre laboratories more accessible in the United States. On the other hand, the Group's association with socialist politics was perceived to be a failure of the ensemble-based laboratory. Combined with growing anti-communist fears in the following decades, the Cold War and the perceived failure of the Group Theatre were factors that prompted a return to centralized, individualism in the theatre industry in the United States. Many theatres in the United States were founded with the intention of replicating the national success of the Group Theatre and its members. While they were founded with the intention of training groups of actors and developing new, more accessible forms and plays for mass audiences, many of these new theatres were centered around individuals, such as Margo Jones and her theatre-in-the-round in Texas, in the 1940s. In addition to being one of America's first famous female directors, Jones is often credited with founding the Regional Theatre Movement and discovering famous playwright Tennessee Williams. "Her genius was to put her finger on the person with genius," says her friend Nione Carlson, showcasing the way that these new endeavors returned to the idea of "genius" and centered around individuals instead of ensembles.⁹⁴ When Jones died young in a strange accident, her theatre died with her.⁹⁵ This tragedy exposed, once again the vulnerabilities of a company that depends on one person's "genius" for survival.

⁹⁴ Sheehy, chap. 2, Kindle.

⁹⁵ Sheehy, chap. 10, Kindle.

Despite this, the Regional Theatre Movement continued into the 1950s and 60s, as the next generation received funding from corporate institutions like the Ford Foundation and fueled by the cultural nationalism of the Cold War, for the discovery of new American “geniuses”.⁹⁶ This is what Douglas Anderson called the “new play industry” in his article “The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America.”⁹⁷ However, he notes that of the millions of dollars that private foundations and public money from the National Endowment for the Arts poured invested into individual playwrights from the 1950s to the 1980s, and the thousands of plays that were performed, only about fifty plays reached the level of national fame that the Group Theatre had enjoyed.⁹⁸ While regional theatres struggled to find the balance between creative autonomy, funding, individualism, collectivism, popularity, and experimentalism, some regional theatres attached themselves to universities, which already had an existing apparatus for training and funding, that would give all members more room to grow.

⁹⁶ Of these, the most ambitious national theatre projects: the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre, with a board chaired by John D. Rockefeller, who was willing to fund the project. It was, in every way, an attempt to resurrect the success of the Group Theatre, while ensuring, through a list of corporate donors and board members that they would not want for time or resources. Now they needed leadership. They hired independent producer Robert Whitehead, who had ushered in many commercial successes on Broadway, and Group Theatre veteran Elia Kazan, who was the most famous director in the United States, at the time. The project, however, was deemed unsuccessful because critics did not understand the slower processes of the laboratory. Elia Kazan, Richard Schechner, and Theodore Hoffman. "Look, There's the American Theatre." *The Tulane Drama Review* 9, no. 2 (1964): 64. Accessed December 2, 2020. doi:10.2307/1125102.

⁹⁷ He notes, “the modern history of the movement begins in 1957, when real passion and real money for new work appeared in the guise of W. MacNeil Lowry of the Ford Foundation. He single-handedly underwrote the decentralization of the American Theatre, and in so doing created a vast new market for the American playwright... [and] the new American play.” With the proliferation of the regional theatre movement and new play development programs, Anderson notes that the Ford Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, the Jerome Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and others invested money directly into playwrights' pockets – sometimes in the five-figure range.⁹⁷ In 1983 the MacArthur Grant, often colloquially called the “genius grant” was founded, and benefitted playwrights who already had established commercial success stories. ⁹⁷ Douglas Anderson, "The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America." *TDR* (1988-) 32, no. 3 (1988): 56. Accessed August 30, 2021. doi:10.2307/1145906.

⁹⁸ Anderson, 74.

These included Syracuse Stage, Yale Repertory Theatre, and under the direction of a man named Joe Stockdale, Purdue Theatre, where Schneider, as part of the new and third generation enters.

“I had no ambitions in life,” Schneider explains.⁹⁹ “I did a little bit of theatre when I was in ninth grade in Santa Barbara and probably you see it: I was the Dinosaur in ‘Skin of Your Teeth.’ I was always gonna look like I was 12 years old but never mind that,” he chuckles. Thinking that there was no real future for him in acting, he says he didn’t have an interest in theatre – or really anything – until his mother enrolled him in a summer program at Purdue in 1969. This program was the Purdue Professional Theatre Company’s summer program – originally the Purdue Summer Theatre, which Stockdale founded in 1960 with *Tunnel of Love*, that “was to incorporate the talents of students and townspeople, plus apprentices selected from junior and senior high schools throughout the country.”¹⁰⁰ By the time Schneider entered the summer program (or, rather, was forced to by his mother), Stockdale’s assortment of students, amateurs, and professionals gained status as an official LORT theatre with a contract with Actor’s Equity union. They hired students, community members, high school apprentices, and now, rising stars like James Earl Jones (who would one day voice the character Mufasa in the “Disney Renaissance” film *The Lion King*, produced by Schneider) to play Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*, or retired starts like academy award winning actress Ann Revere to play Mary Tyrone in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Schneider, April 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Joe Stockdale, *Stages: A Life in the Theatre*. Danbury, Connecticut: Hyphenates Books, 2013), chap. 14, Kindle.

¹⁰¹ Jerry Richard Williams, *Fairy Tale: A Gay Adventure*. (United States: Archway Publishing, 2019), 123-127.

Because the Purdue Company was attached to an academic program, there was a heavy emphasis on training and artistic development. Students would rotate different jobs: sometimes acting in productions and/or serving in various roles backstage. Recognizing that there were theatrical roles off-stage, as well as onstage, Schneider discovered a talent for backstage work: technical roles, management roles, and he shadowed Stockdale, and watched him direct. “I was an eager beaver, as they would say, and I watched rehearsals I did all sorts of things that other people didn't do, because I didn't really like people,” Schneider jokes. “I didn't socialize well. I was an awkward kid,” he explains. Stockdale noticed Schneider’s talent and dedication backstage and cultivated it by giving him more responsibilities. “This was the first time that anyone had said, ‘This is what you should do with your life.’ I owe everything to him.”¹⁰² Although generations removed from the Moscow Art Theatre and the American Lab, these were lessons this can be traced to their rejection of “stock” or “type”, and the commitment to rotate leadership and roles. Thus, Schneider received his first lesson in how to empower artists: let them try different things and give them opportunities to lead.

Stockdale would leave Purdue in the middle of Schneider’s attendance there. Although he was not as fond of the next director Jim O’Connor, Schneider notes how he taught the students to challenge boundaries. For example, they performed the musical *The Roar of the Greasepaint – The Smell of the Crowd* in the paint room instead of a theatre.¹⁰³ When Schneider graduated and went to New York City to serve as the assistant to the artistic director at Circle Repertory, he would learn under Marshall

¹⁰² Stockdale, “Praise for Joe Stockdale”, Kindle.

¹⁰³ Schneider, interview, August 2020.

Mason, who fashioned his theatre to be the next generation of the Group Theatre. Mason writes in his book *The Transcendent Years: Circle Rep Theater & the 60s*, (the title of which is a play on Harold Clurman's memoirs *The Fervent Years* about the Group Theatre):

“Dictionary definitions could be seen as a description of Circle Rep's goals: 1) **Better**: superior in quality or achievement. 2) **Beyond** the limits of experience, therefore unknowable intellectually. 3) **Beyond** categories: a philosophy above all known beliefs. 4) **Independent** of the world: existing outside the material universe, and so, not limited by it.”¹⁰⁴

This language, along with the experiments that O'Conner led at Purdue, imparted a second lesson on Schneider. “We build on what you learned in the past,” he says, referencing the whole history of theatre laboratories. “It's not what we *should* do when you're watching somebody else's, what you should *not* do.” He says that when looking at the generational changes from Boleslavsky to Clurman's generation, to Stockdale and Mason's generation, “they were all trying to do things that differently, and not follow the same pattern.”¹⁰⁵ He says this meant that doing things like leaving the proscenium for the paint room, “gave me permission to break the boundaries. And I think that's what all these great people did. They were giving [us] permission to break the boundaries.”¹⁰⁶ Schneider's would eventually leave the boundaries of New York City for Chicago, where he and other members of his generation would break boundaries in the rise of “storefront theatres” – the history of which deserves its own book. For Schneider, his experiences in Chicago, managing at the St. Nicholas Theatre, were his opportunity to test his lessons without the older generation of mentors, and it was, for him, the first real indication that

¹⁰⁴ Mason, xii.

¹⁰⁵ Schneider, interview, August 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Schneider, interview, August 2020.

the lessons work on their own merit.¹⁰⁷ He would then leave the boundaries of the theatre industry and test his lessons at an animation studio.

The Theatre Discipline comes to Disney

As described earlier, while Schneider was learning these lessons in the early 1970s, the Disney animation studio was preventing artists (especially young, female, and/or BIPOC artists) from obtaining leadership positions; thus, depriving them of the chance to grow into their talents. There was also a reliance on “type” where certain animators were designated to draw certain roles like Glen Keane, a young animator from the new CalArts group, was “type-cast” into drawing gruff or rough characters.¹⁰⁸ They still defined their art by the boundaries set by older generations, and even their technology was exactly the same as it had been in the 1930s. Either they were still waiting for a singular “genius” to tell them how to draw, how to think, and how to create, or they were waiting for a chance to become that singular genius, or they were waiting for a chance to advance at all. Thus, the Disney animation studio was not only similar to a resident theatre company in terms of structure but in terms of its challenges. These were many of the same challenges that the theatre industry had been facing for decades, as well. The first thing Schneider did to organize the clutter was what any smart theatre person would do: hire a stage manager.

Kathleen Gavin had worked with Schneider at St. Nicholas Theatre in Chicago as a stage manager, and also worked with him on the 1984 Olympics. They were a battle-tested team. “Gavin was the first of the theater artists that I hired because I felt that

¹⁰⁷ Schneider, interview, August 2020.

¹⁰⁸ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

she really was strong and interesting and could bring something to the table that could help me structure. And every night at 6 o'clock, the rest had gone home we would sit in my office discussing how to restructure the animation department to make it make more sense.”¹⁰⁹ Based on his assessment of Gavin’s reports, and to combat the problem of wing-ism, one of the first decisions Schneider made on *Oliver and Company* was to have one director instead of two, who could help consolidate the group story meetings into more of a “score” – to use Stanislavsky’s concept.¹¹⁰ This was a project that had already been greenlit by Jeffrey Katzenberg before Schneider arrived, and was set to be directed by two men, Rick Rich and George Scribner. Schneider needed to choose the director whose vision was more aligned with his own.

Richard Rich, was a former Mormon bishop from Utah, and he was one of the two directors on the doomed *Black Cauldron* flop. He tended to be more conservative both socially and in his approach to Disney animation. George Scribner was born and raised in Panama and was, as Schneider explains, “as left-wing as you could make it.”¹¹¹ Scribner also had a theatre background, and approached animation through a theatrical lens: “I had done some direction in little theater in Panama,” he recalls, explaining that “It was also helpful, because I tended to view animation in terms of acting.”¹¹² Of the two directors, Schneider says that Rich was “belligerent” towards him, while Scribner showed enthusiasm for the idea of change-in-the-form-of-theatre.¹¹³ The choice for Schneider

¹⁰⁹ Schneider, April 2020.

¹¹⁰ Schneider, April 2020.

¹¹¹ Schneider, April 2020.

¹¹² Jérémie Noyer, “Once Upon A Time in New York City: *Oliver & Company*’s Director George Scribner,” Animatedviews.com. Animated Views. February 9, 2009. Accessed November 28, 2020. <https://animatedviews.com/2009/once-upon-a-time-in-new-york-city-oliver-companys-director-george-scribner/>

¹¹³ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

was clear, and George Scribner, who had never directed before, became the sole director of *Oliver and Company*.

Rich was not the only one who showed insubordination or resistance to Schneider and his new ways of doing things. Some, like Rich and Joe Hale, who had squashed so much expression quit. Others, like Ed Hansen, who was the same superior who had refused to hire Floyd Norman on *Black Cauldron*, were let go for refusing to change.¹¹⁴ In *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, Don Hahn explains, “Peter picked apart every piece of the production process... It had this feeling of a freight train leaving the station at light speed. You better jump on or jump off fast. Most people got on and it was a wild ride, an exciting time.”¹¹⁵ With the people who left, this meant that there were new leadership positions to be filled, and Schneider was ready to shake things up.

When Schneider adds “pick teams” to the list of his “theatre discipline,” he’s referencing the kind of anti-“stock” and anti-“type” attitude he learned at Purdue and across his careers. Instead of everyone doing the same kinds of jobs or holding the same kinds of positions as they did in the past out of seniority or expectation, he compelled directors to pick their own teams based on who they wanted to work with. For example, because it takes many years for an animated film to be made, *Oliver and Company* and *Little Mermaid* were being produced at the same time. Glen Keane, who was often type-cast to animate rough characters heard a demo of the *Little Mermaid*’s pivotal song “Part of Your World” and was determined to animate the princess Ariel. Ron Clements and John Musker were slated to direct *Mermaid*, and their first impression was “I don’t know

¹¹⁴ Hulett, 97.

¹¹⁵ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

Glen, this is supposed to be a pretty girl. Can you do that?” to which Keane responded, “Look. I *have* to do Ariel. I can feel it in my heart.”¹¹⁶ The directors gave him a chance.

In addition to breaking the limitations of type-casting animators to just one kind of character, Clements and Musker were told that they needed to pick their own design team. This was unusual, because, in the past, it was assumed that Jim Coleman would automatically be hired to be head of backgrounds (the animation equivalent of a scenic designer) as he had been on all of the Disney animated films since he was promoted over the woman who trained him, in the 1970s. “Who do you *want* to head backgrounds?” Schneider asked Clements and Musker who agreed with Schneider that all of Coleman’s backgrounds looked the same. They said, “Lisa Keene.” The two directors were perplexed that they were given this choice. “So, hire Lisa Keene!” Schneider declared.¹¹⁷ Coleman was not pleased and sued the Company even though he did not lose his job or his role as head of the department, he just didn’t get to head backgrounds on *Little Mermaid*, highlighting some of the resistance that the old guard enacted towards the simple change of letting directors choose their own collaborators.¹¹⁸ There were other changes coming.

Katzenberg wanted to do away with the story department and replace it with a screenwriter – as he was more used to, coming from a background in live-action film. This was met with too much resistance to come to fruition, so Katzenberg and Schneider compromised and brought screenwriters into the story meetings to consolidate the ideas, as Walt had done in the past. “We couldn't hire big-time writers, so we hired all these

¹¹⁶ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

¹¹⁷ Schneider, interview, April 2020.

¹¹⁸ Schneider, interview, April 2020.

low-time writers who turned out to be big-time writers,” says Schneider.¹¹⁹ Like Stanislavsky and Danchenko in the early days of the Moscow Art Theatre, the Disney animation studio did not have the budget to attract top talent, and decided, instead, to cultivate young, unknown talent. They brought in Tim Disney (Walt’s grandnephew), Jim Cox, and James Mangold, who would go on to receive critical acclaim for films such as *Copland* (1997) *Girl, Interrupted* (1999), and *Walk the Line* (2005), and Academy Award Nominations for films such as *Wolverine* (2013), *Logan* (2017), and *Ford v. Farari* (2019).¹²⁰ The addition of screenwriters – particularly unseasoned ones – into the story meetings was a catalyst for creative debate. This was mostly because the Disney story team felt like they needed to prove themselves or be replaced by screenwriters, and the screenwriters felt the need to prove themselves and that they deserved to be in the room. Disney producer Don Hahn recalls, “There was creative debate. You had to defend your ideas. It meant that more drawings went into the trash than went up on the screen.”¹²¹ The tensions in the story department will be covered in more depth in the next chapter. Nevertheless, in terms of breaking passive habits in the animation studio, the addition of screenwriters meant that the words “What would Walt do?” effectively disappeared from everyday dialogue.

Schneider’s decision to choose Scribner to be the director of *Oliver and Company* proved useful in the story room. Coming from the theatre, he privileged the idea of a written “script,” because in his opinion, he says “It’s a lot simpler to work out the story

¹¹⁹ Schneider, September 2020.

¹²⁰ Ken Miyamoto, “Screenwriting Wisdom from LOGAN Writer/Director James Mangold,” Screencraft.com. Screencraft. November 17, 2017. Accessed November 28, 2020. <https://screencraft.org/2017/11/17/screenwriting-wisdom-from-logan-writerdirector-james-mangold/>.

¹²¹ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

structure in pages than it is to try and board everything. It's a lot of work drawing out what could be simply done in beats."¹²² When he uses the word "beats" he is using the Americanized language of the Stanislavsky "system" as "beats" is the English-language variation on the Russian concept of "bits."¹²³ However, he also saw the value of storyboarding as well, saying: "Story ideas would come out of sketches. Vance Gerry, one of the story people there, did a sketch of Oliver riding on the base of a subway, and it became an entire sequence. It was so inspiring. Some story people are so gifted that they're stealing in a sketch really an entire story beat. So, they really went back and forth."¹²⁴ Thus, his theatrical understanding of "beats" as a form of organizing plot action allowed him to view the otherwise frustrating collaboration between the structure-oriented screenwriters and visual-oriented story boarders as a gift instead of a curse. He was able to successfully consolidate the two.

As Schneider's "theatre discipline" he lists "bringing in outsiders" as a key component. The screenwriters were an example of this. As Boleslavsky noted, one of the pitfalls of a theatre laboratory, especially a tight-knit resident theatre company, is that it can become insular. While Walt was alive, he used to bring in outside artists, scientists, philosophers, historians, and others to give lectures – sometimes spending up to \$100,000 on lecturers, because he believed it was worth it.¹²⁵ He even invested the studio's resources from *Snow White* profits to commission a series of lectures from theatre people

¹²² Noyer, <https://animatedviews.com/2009/once-upon-a-time-in-new-york-city-oliver-companys-director-george-scribner/>

¹²³ It is believed that the American usage of the word "beats" instead of "bits" came from American students misunderstanding their Russian teachers' accents when they pronounced "bits". Hobgood, 155.

¹²⁴ Noyer, <https://animatedviews.com/2009/once-upon-a-time-in-new-york-city-oliver-companys-director-george-scribner/>

¹²⁵ Norman, 51.

on incorporating the “system” into Disney animation.¹²⁶ Tom Sito contends that, “The lectures and classes that Walt provided for his studio It was the secret to Disney's studio outdoing every other studio in the world in terms of quality. The program was interrupted, however, by the [animator’s] strike, World War II, and the tough postwar period.”¹²⁷ Schneider brought back the tradition of lecturers and outside “guest” artists coming to work with the studio to broaden the artists’ horizons. He brought in Lakers’ coach Pat Riley to talk about teamwork.¹²⁸ He brought in one of the associate directors of the Mark Taper Forum to give a lecture on anthropology.¹²⁹ At one point, he brought in the radical communist San Francisco Mime Troupe to give a mime workshop to the animation team for the character Ariel in *Little Mermaid*, for the parts of the move where she can’t talk, so they could learn to communicate with physical gestures only.¹³⁰ For Schneider, “bringing in outsiders” was not just about bringing in people who didn’t work at Disney before, it was about bringing in people who wouldn’t have been given authorship on a Disney film before.

This extended to casting as well. *Oliver and Company* was the first Disney animated film to hire casting directors to find outside talent.¹³¹ Before, most characters were portrayed by in-house talent. Eisner and Katzenberg, following the same approach they used at Paramount, wanted to attract A-list talent to effectively mainstream Disney animation and make it more culturally relevant. Early concept sketches for *Oliver and Company* had the characters designed to look more like dogs in *Lady and the Tramp* – in

¹²⁶ Sito, chap. 8, Kindle.

¹²⁷ Sito, chap. 8, Kindle.

¹²⁸ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

¹²⁹ Schneider, interview, August 2020.

¹³⁰ Schneider, interview, April 2020.

¹³¹ Schneider, interview, August 2020.

other words, very generic, very White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant, and not entirely representative of the diversity of the film's New York location. Scribner explains, "[The character] Tito was originally a character called Scrapper and I felt, during the story process: let's make it more local."¹³² Inspired by his own Panamanian culture, he successfully pushed to make the character Latino, and in a process of open auditions, cast Chicano comedian Cheech Marin to voice Tito, now a Chihuahua. Billy Joel, who had never acted before, was cast as Dodger, adding his star-persona as a representative of the New York, Jewish working class to his character. The cast heavily featured Broadway veteran actors from different backgrounds in New York including Bette Midler, Dom DeLuise, Richard Mulligan, Robert Loggia, Roscoe Lee Brown, and Sheryl Lee Ralf.¹³³ In working with this cast, Scribner gave them freedom to interpret roles as they saw best. "You give them a direction and emotional context and they deliver something that you didn't expect, that's the mark of really strong, true and gifted performers, and these actors on paper are no exception... It was just a revelation to get scenes back and go 'I never would have thought of that; that's unbelievable!'"¹³⁴ This trust in the artists' own creativity led to an increase in ad-libs from the voice actors – so that they were not simply reading lines, but adding their own voices of authorship to their characters.

For example, Marin recalls, "I was encouraged to ad-lib, but I'd say I just gave about 75% of the lines as they were written," he explained in a 1988 interview in the *Los Angeles Times*. "The natural energy of a Chihuahua played right into that feeling. George

¹³² Noyer, <https://animatedviews.com/2009/once-upon-a-time-in-new-york-city-oliver-companys-director-george-scribner/>.

¹³³ Anonymous, Oliver and Company, IMDB., Accessed September 3, 2021. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095776/>

¹³⁴ Noyer, <https://animatedviews.com/2009/once-upon-a-time-in-new-york-city-oliver-companys-director-george-scribner/>

was very encouraging as a director: He kept the energy level high at the recording sessions.”¹³⁵ Thus, an estimated quarter of Tito’s character was authored by Marin, himself, with Scribner’s support.

The second aspect of a voice actor’s authorship on a Disney film comes from the fact that animators often watch them perform and incorporate their facial expressions and physicality into the drawn performances. Scribner, who had started as a character animator describes how even listening to the vocal performance inspires a hand-drawn performance: “You put headphones on and you listen to a line of dialogue over and over and over and over, and it just suggests a line of inflection; an accent; a rest point to it.”¹³⁶ He says, “It’s just a like performing on stage, you have a moment, you hit a mark, you hold that, and it’s someone else’s turn – it’s a dialogue of actors.”¹³⁷ Tito’s supervising animator was Hendel Butoy, who was born in São Paulo, Brazil, making the “dialogue of actors” between the voice actor and animator, a dialogue of Latino “actors” on a character whose Latin-ness was abstracted by the combined Chicano, Panamanian, and Brazilian composition of the director, voice actor, and lead animator.

One instance of collaboration is the incorporation of the salsa dance that Tito does, which was Scribner’s idea. “I grew up with [songwriter and activist] Rubén Blades in Panama and he agreed to let us use “Buscando Guayaba”, the salsa song Tito dances to.”¹³⁸ Butoy explains, “I had never danced salsa, but George, who’s from Panama, has: I

¹³⁵ Charles Solomon, “Cheech Marin as Animated Tito: Check It Out,” Los Angeles Times, December 27, 1988. Accessed April 10, 2018. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-12-27-ca-979-story.html>.

¹³⁶ Layer, <https://disney1x1.podbean.com/e/interview-george-scribner-director-oliver-company/>.

¹³⁷ Layer, <https://disney1x1.podbean.com/e/interview-george-scribner-director-oliver-company/>.

¹³⁸ Nicholas Sweedo, “George Scribner: A Conversation,” The MacGyver Project. July 17, 2015. Accessed November 29, 2020. <http://themacgyverproject.blogspot.com/2015/07/george-scribner-conversation.html>.

videotaped about 20 minutes of him dancing, then took it back to my room and watched it over and over. Once I got the idea of what was going on, I tried it myself--with the door closed, so no one could see me make a fool of myself.” He adds that he was able to adapt it to the dog character by having Tito’s back feet follow his front feet. “We felt we were trying a lot of things that Disney had not done before, and frankly we weren’t sure how it would be received,” Scribner explains. This was not the first Latinx character in a Disney animated film, and it is no secret that the Walt Disney Company has a troubled history of racialized portrayals in its films. However, what *Oliver and Company* represents is the first instance of collaborative Latino authorship on a Latino character. It was the kind of artistic cultivation that Schneider had hoped for: the artists had been given the freedom to experiment, express themselves, and push the boundaries of what Disney had done in the past.

It should be noted that Schneider did not create an equal playing field – nor was he trying to. His objective was to remove the barriers which prevented artistic expression, creative debate, and artistic accountability. These barriers included factions of old vs. young, men vs. women, and white vs. nonwhite, with specific hostility against black animators like Floyd Norman. It also included Wing-ism, and an idea that artists must stay in the roles prescribed for them by management. Not least of all, the phrase “What would Walt have done?” forced artists to imitate the ghost of a commodified public image Walt-Disney-the-genius instead of asserting their own visions. Schneider’s implementation of a “theatre discipline” helped to remove these barriers to creativity largely by rotating out the old guard, promoting people from excluded factions into leadership and prominent artistic roles, filtering in new artists from the outside, placing

artists in situations where they are incentivized to fight for their ideas and defend them, and giving them the permission to say “no” to those who have more power than they do.

The studio was markedly improved from before Schneider’s tenure, and Floyd Norman returned to the studio in the early 1990s, under this new system to work on one of the studio’s new films, the *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. This time, he made the choice to stay, and was inducted as a Disney Legend in 2007. “I’m sort of a Disney... kind of a troublemaker,” he says, “A story artist. Animator—tried to be an animator. But mainly writer, artist, and a guy who’s trying to learn his craft. Been doing it now for about 40 years and, just beginning to get the hang of it.”¹³⁹ His statement not only illustrates that he felt safe enough to return to the studio under Schneider’s tenure but demonstrates an attitude of continuous learning and troublemaking [read: challenging and dissent] that was valued under the new “theatre discipline.”

Nevertheless, this new system created its own hierarchy within the studio, where those who could most effectively fight for their ideas often dominated, and the studio ran the danger of new factions forming around these new creative leaders. *Oliver and Company* was formed in a crucible of volatile reactions when a new variable is added to an unstable environment. The real test of the theatre discipline would come after the film premiered.

¹³⁹ Anonymous, “Floyd Norman,” D23 Online Archive, Accessed, November 4, 2021. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150908003805/https://d23.com/walt-disney-legend/floyd-norman/>.

Becoming Artistic Players

Oliver and Company was not the blockbuster hit that future “Disney Renaissance” films would be. However, at the time, it earned double what any Disney animated film had made up until that point.¹⁴⁰ Scribner says he believes that if *Oliver and Company* had not done well, that Eisner and Katzenberg would have disbanded the animation division.¹⁴¹ The film’s success proved to the executives that animation was not only worth keeping but worth developing and innovating. It proved to the studio that Schneider’s way of doing things was working. The artists began to gain more confidence in their own creative choices and were emboldened to experiment more on their next film, *The Little Mermaid*.

Because the story process for *Oliver* proved to be intense for all involved, included director Scribner, they would try something new for *Mermaid*. In this case, Schneider did not bring in screenwriters to work with story artists and one director, but rather, brought in one musical theatre librettist, Howard Ashman, to work with story artists and two directors, Ron Clements and John Musker.

“Howard wasn't exactly the first guy who sprang to mind when you said Disney,” recalls Don Hahn, in *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. “He was born into a Jewish family in Baltimore, where he grew up on-stage in the local Children's Theater Association. He was gay, edgy, and loved musicals, especially Peter Pan.”¹⁴² Howard Ashman had been recruited by Schneider and Katzenberg to write the lyrics for the opening number on

¹⁴⁰ Sito, chap. 11, Kindle.

¹⁴¹ Layer, <https://disney1x1.podbean.com/e/interview-george-scriber-director-oliver-company/>.

¹⁴² *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

Oliver and Company called “Once Upon a Time in New York City” with music by Barry Mann and performed by Huey Lewis.¹⁴³ He was largely known for his massively successful Off-Broadway musical *Little Shop of Horrors*, where he created both the book, lyrics, and original direction. Ashman’s life and contributions to Disney Feature Animation, specifically his incorporation of musical theatre plot structures and storytelling conventions into animated films, is receiving an increasing amount of study, and is one of the most central focuses in Peter Kunze’s 2018 dissertation “Staging a Comeback: Film and Theatre Convergence at Disney, 1982-1998.”¹⁴⁴ As the next chapter will explain in detail, Ashman would have a lasting impact on Disney animation, in particular with *Beauty and the Beast*, before he died of AIDS in 1991. Ashman is often remembered as a “genius” in his own right, and “the closest thing to Walt” that the studio experienced since Walt.¹⁴⁵ Don Hahn noted that at the culmination of the “Disney Renaissance” decade, the *Lion King* became a sophisticated treatment of themes of growing into responsibility after the loss of a father figure, and that it seemed “almost

¹⁴³ Ashman had come to Disney for *Oliver* right after his own dreams fell apart in New York City when his first Broadway production *Smile* flopped miserably. The song, which plays over a sequence of Oliver being abandoned and facing a night in the city alone, reflects themes of broken dreams in New York City with lyrics like, “If it's always once upon a time in New York City/ Why does nightfall find you feeling so alone?/ How could anyone stay starry-eyed/ When it's raining cats and dogs outside?/ And the rain is saying, "Now you're on your own.”

Scribner, *Oliver and Company*.

¹⁴⁴ Ashman’s intervention was bringing the integrated musical back to Disney animation, in a way that was more intentional and better defined than past films like *Snow White*, which were made before the parameters of the “book musical” were established. Ashman and his writing partner on *Little Shop*, Alan Menken, met and received rigorous training at Lehman Engel’s BMI Musical Theatre Workshop, which focused heavily on structure and form of a musical. The integrated musical, or “book musical” is often attributed to Rogers and Hammerstein and their 1942 musical *Oklahoma!*. However, recent musical theatre scholarship in books such as *Reframing the Musical* have sought to redress this by pointing out that integrated musicals, where the songs further the plot and character development, such as *Shuffle Along* existed before Rogers and Hammerstein’s partnership. *Snow White* was also written before *Oklahoma!* However, when I say that the parameters of the “book musical” were not as clearly defined, I am referring to the fact that Rogers and Hammerstein gave the form an official title, which was not formally studied until the 1970s and 1980s. Sarah Kate Whitfield, *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity*. (United Kingdom: Macmillan Education UK, 2019); Kunze, 77.

¹⁴⁵ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

autobiographical.”¹⁴⁶ Not just Ashman’s death, but the entire process of learning how to stand on one’s own echoed in the film. Schneider says, “I came out of a story meeting and ran right into Frank Wells. And he asked me, ‘How are things going on *The Lion King*?’ I said, ‘Great! We’re making a movie about ourselves.”¹⁴⁷ The fact that Disney Feature Animation was still able to create their biggest success of the “Renaissance” era, *The Lion King*, after Ashman’s passing, is a testament to the sustainability of Schneider’s “theatre discipline” which allowed the studio to not only survive the death of another one of their “geniuses,” but thrive.

¹⁴⁶ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

¹⁴⁷ *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 2009.

Chapter 2: Beyond Recognition: Howard Ashman and Linda Woolverton’s “Dramaturgy of Empathy” in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*

Prologue: Who Could Learn to Love a Beast?

“Once upon a time, in a faraway land, a young prince lived in a shining castle. Although he had everything his heart desired, the prince was spoiled, selfish and unkind. But then, one winter’s night, an old beggar woman came to the castle and offered him a single rose in return for shelter from the bitter cold.

Repulsed by her haggard appearance, the prince sneered at the gift and turned the old woman away. But she warned him not to be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within.

And when he dismissed her again, the old woman’s ugliness melted away to reveal a beautiful enchantress. The prince tried to apologize, but it was too late, for she had seen that there was no love in his heart. And as punishment, she transformed him into a hideous beast and placed a powerful spell on the castle, and all who lived there. Ashamed of his monstrous form, the Beast concealed himself inside his castle with a magic mirror as his only window to the outside world.

The rose she had offered was truly an enchanted rose, which would bloom until his twenty-first year.

If he could learn to love another and earn her love in return by the time the last petal fell, then the spell would be broken. If not, he would be doomed to remain a beast for all time. As the years passed, he fell into despair and lost all hope. For who could ever learn to love a beast?”

-Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, “Prologue”¹

“You *almost* get me to tears at the end. Not. Quite.”² Jeffrey Katzenberg, head of the film studio division at the Walt Disney Company from 1984-1994, imparts his notes to the exhausted story team, in production for *Beauty and the Beast*. He had just watched a rough cut of the story, where the voice actors’ pre-recorded performances were edited together and matched with storyboard frames to give the viewer a sense of how the film

¹ *Beauty and the Beast*, directed by Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise (1991; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Feature Animation, 2019), Disney Plus.

² “20/20: *Beauty and the Beast*,” Walt Disney Animation Studios, August 27, 2009, video, 4:49, [20/20: Beauty and the Beast - YouTube](#).

would come together when it was animated. It was December 1990, and the film had less than a year to be completed. “My problem is the Beast’s character,” he explained. “We’re still - truly, I mean this - only 50% home with him.”³ For the directors, storyboard artists, and screenwriter Linda Woolverton, the question, “For who could learn to love a beast?” was more than a rhetorical question in the film’s prologue sequence. It was their intended performative outcome and their biggest dramaturgical obstacle.

Disney’s “Dramaturgy of Empathy”

The Katzenberg story meeting described above offers a snapshot of the process of making this musical, where they needed to push their strategies further to achieve their goal – in this case, making the audience identify with the Beast to the point where they can feel sad when he is sad, happy when he is happy, etc. “We’re still - truly, I mean this - only 50% home with him,” Katzenberg declared.⁴ To get to their goal, they would need to do something different than they were doing, and, this chapter will reveal the ways that theatrical theory and practice informed the creation of a new dramaturgical strategy for the film.

In many ways, Katzenberg was asking the team to do something that Disney animators had been committed to doing since Walt Disney was alive: invest in the humanity of their hand-drawn characters, so that the audience could do the same. Walt once said: “Our most important aim is to develop definite personalities in our cartoon characters. We don’t want them to be just shadows, for merely as moving figures they

³ “20/20: *Beauty and the Beast*,” [20/20: Beauty and the Beast - YouTube](#).

⁴ “20/20: *Beauty and the Beast*,” [20/20: Beauty and the Beast - YouTube](#).

would provoke no emotional response from the public. Nor do we want them to parallel or assume the aspects of human beings or human actions. We invest them with life by endowing them with human weaknesses.”⁵ One of his lead animators Vladimir (Bill) Tytla, who had a copy of Richard Boleslavsky’s acting book *The First Six Lessons* with notes scribbled in it, explains what Walt’s directive meant in practice when he animated the character Dumbo: “I don’t know a damned thing about elephants. I was thinking in terms of humans... Most of the expressions and mannerisms I got from my own kid. There’s nothing theatrical about a two-year-old kid. They’re real and sincere-like when they damn near wet their pants from excitement when you come home at night. I tried to put all these things in Dumbo.”⁶ Spectators are enabled to recognize the humanity of the baby elephant and cry with him – and surely enough, the scene between Dumbo and his imprisoned mother is one of the most affectual scenes in Disney history, inducing many tears over the years.

The process of human recognition that Walt and his team of animators incorporated in the 1930s, through theatrical acting techniques of Richard Boleslavsky, would become the guiding principle in Disney animation for decades to come. Nicknamed the “Illusion of Life” by veteran animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston, the technique was ahead of its time, and relied on neurological principles of emotional empathy that would be officially confirmed, half-a-century later, when Giacomo Rizzolatti discovered “mirror neurons,” in 1996. Rizzolatti’s studies revealed that parts of the brain, such as the anterior cingulate cortex, that create emotional empathy, defined

⁵ Crafton, Donald, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation*, (University of California Press, 2012), 82.

⁶ Derek Hayes, *Acting and Performance for Animation* (CRC Press, 2013), chap. 2, Kindle.

here as “feeling what others feel”, rely on a process of recognition, or mirroring. Different from compassion or sympathy, which is feeling “for” someone else without requiring that they identify with them, empathy is feeling “with” someone. If a person can recognize themselves and their humanity in another, they can feel empathy for them, participating in their emotions, crying when they cry, and being happy when they are happy.

Therein lies an inherent problem with empathy and a dramaturgical problem for the team of *Beauty and the Beast*: the process of recognition is centered on seeing ourselves in others, and, therefore, it is extremely biased in favor of people that we like, which are like us, and people who are part of our same groups. As Paul Bloom explains in his 2016 book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* emotional empathy operates like a spotlight, in that it “picks out a certain space to illuminate and leaves the rest in darkness; its focus is narrow. What you see depends on where you choose to point the spotlight, so its focus is vulnerable to your biases.”⁷ It was easier to expect audiences to cry when a cute baby elephant like Dumbo cries, modeled after a human toddler. It was another thing to expect them to cry along with a scary Beast.

Theatre and performance historian Michael Chemers explains this challenge from the perspective of theatre history in his book *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness*. Using performance theorist Joseph Roach’s theory of “surrogation” as a framework, Chemers notes that monsters in plays and media are often substitutes for some kind of social anxiety - often enabling spectators to self-identify through negation:

⁷ It would be noted that “emotional empathy” as “feeling other people’s feelings” is different from “cognitive empathy” which is “thinking what others are thinking”, Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, First ed, (New York, NY: Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2016), 87.

“I know who I am because I am not like that monster.” Historically, therefore, monsters have often existed at the line between identity and difference, often embodying traits associated with the marginalized: “foreigner, homosexual, cannibal, pervert, woman, racial other, or any other thing that can be easily identified as a threat.”⁸ Monsters exist between what Richard Schechner calls “make believe” and “make belief” in his book *Introduction to Performance Studies*. He says that “In ‘make-believe’ performances, the distinction between what’s real and what’s pretended is kept clear,” whereas in “make belief,” other actions such as performances of personal identity “create the very social realities they enact.”⁹ I borrow the phrase “dramaturgy of empathy” from Chemers work, which upholds that monster-stories are interpellative stories, which “cast” people into social roles, and exhibit lessons on how those positioned as “monsters” are supposed to be treated.

Therefore, the Beast, in this Disney film, exists at the periphery of identity and Otherness, and has, over the years, been read many different ways. Both scholarly and popular discourses have interpreted him to be a stand in for everything from racialized, to colonized bodies, to Nature, to sex, to AIDS victims, lesbians, and hypermasculine men, to name a few.¹⁰ It would be unscientific to assume that every or that even most audience

⁸ Michael Chemers, *The Monster in Theatre History: This Thing of Darkness*, (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 37.

⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013), 42.

¹⁰ See, Dorothy L. Hurley, “Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 74, no. 3 (2005): 221–32; M. A. Banter, “Desacralization of Image and Confusion of Sexuality in the Disney Studio’s Beauty and the Beast,” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 9, no. 1 (1998): 55–68; K.E. Smith, “‘It’s a Pity and a Sin’: Images of Disability, Trauma and Subverted Power in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast,” *Word and Text* 8, no. 1 (2018): 111–28; Kathryn M. Olson, “An Epideictic Dimension of Symbolic Violence in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast: Inter-Generational Lessons in Romanticizing and Tolerating Intimate Partner Violence,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 4 (2013): 448–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2013.835491>; Susan Z Swan, “Gothic Drama in Disney’s Beauty and the Beast: Subverting Traditional Romance by Transcending the Animal-Human Paradox,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16, no. 3 (1999): 350–69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295039909367100>;

members read the character the same way, which is why this chapter is more interested in his construction than trying to make a definitive statement about his reception. To study the “dramaturgy of empathy” in *Beauty and the Beast* is to investigate and historicize the ways that the creators viewed empathy as a concept and the dramaturgical strategies, which they employed to build and enact their intended social realities.

By invoking Chemers, I firmly root this animated movie in the larger context of theatre history, as opposed to film history, for two reasons. Firstly, because this film has been transformed into a stage musical, which remains, to this day, one of the most performed - if not the most performed – stage musical in the United States. Any study of its production history requires a comprehensive study of its formation as an animated film. Secondly, the film’s “dramaturgy of empathy” was shaped in significant ways by theatrical theories and practices. This chapter is an investigation of the latter.

Before *Beauty and the Beast*, the Disney animation studio’s “dramaturgy of empathy” was the one articulated by Walt Disney above, relying on recognition. It was something that was understood outside of the Walt Disney Company as well, including commentary from cultural theorist Walter Benjamin in his 1931 essay titled “Mickey Mouse,” where asserts that “All Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is... So the explanation for the huge popularity of these films is not mechanization, their form; nor is it misunderstanding. It is simply the fact the

Nicole Eilers, “A Critical Disability Studies Reading of ‘Beauty and the Beast’: Détournement in Pedagogical Practice.” *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 12, no. 2 (2020): 54–63; Cynthia Erb, “Another World or the World of an Other? The Space of Romance in Recent Versions of ‘Beauty and the Beast,’” *Cinema Journal* 34, no. 4 (1995): 50–70; A. Craven, “Beauty and the Belles: Discourses of Feminism and Femininity in Disneyland.” *Communication Abstracts* 25, no. 6 (2002): 755–909.

public recognizes its own life in them.”¹¹ The principle of recognition had been used successfully on non-human characters like Mickey Mouse, Dumbo, and even “cute” monsters like the flamboyant Reluctant Dragon, but it had not been developed or tested for a character like the Beast. The film was not trying to eliminate recognition-based empathy as an intended outcome, but in order for it to work, they would need to stretch the limits of their own understanding of how empathy works in real life and how far it can go with animated characters – and they were doing this five years before the discovery of “mirror neurons.”

Beauty and the Beast would need to interrogate emotional empathy, interpellation, and the structures and mechanisms that determine how humans make moral judgements about those who are “monsterized.” There was no precedent for this in Disney history, but there were theatre practitioners on the team for *Beauty and the Beast*, including lyricist Howard Ashman and screenwriter Linda Woolverton who had been trained in the lessons of theorists/practitioners like Bertolt Brecht, Isabel Burger, and Brian Way, respectively, who had long-since problematized the limits of emotional empathy and used their theatre laboratories to test more intellectual, more controlled approaches to compassion.¹² As discussed in Chapter 1, the authorship of an animated film is complex,

¹¹ Benjamin, Walter. “Mickey Mouse,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Volume 2: Part 1: 1927-1930, (Cambridge (MA): Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), Google Books.

¹² The closest Disney cartoon that comes to mind when thinking about a critical approach to empathy is one of the propaganda cartoons the studio made during World War II called *Reason and Emotion*. Through animation Disney explains how Hitler was able to manipulate the emotions of his people through tactics that evoked fear, sympathy, pride, and hate. In this context, “sympathy” can be read as “empathy” although, as the later section on the history of the usage of “empathy” notes, the cartoon was made before there was a popular understanding of it as “feeling another’s feelings.” The section on the history of “empathy” in the context of WWII and the Holocaust will expand on how Hitler was able to use empathy, specifically to sway his people, but *Reason and Emotion* can be seen as a proto attempt by Disney to “put Reason in the driver seat,” as the cartoon says. It does not, however, provide a blueprint for how to extend empathy to people who are “monsterized”, only that monsterization is an emotional process that can be

and this chapter is focusing on these two theatre practitioners as extensions of theatre laboratories at the Walt Disney Company from 1984-1994.

This chapter is primarily interested in the “how” of *Beauty and the Beast*’s experiments with empathy, and that includes a study of 1) how these two theatre people were positioned at Disney 2) how they were able to leverage their theatrical knowledge to shape creative decisions 3) how the influences of Brecht, Berger, and Way manifested themselves in their work pre-Disney and 4) how they incorporated these influences into the Disney adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* as innovations on Brecht’s defamiliarization techniques, Berger’s use of theatre for socialization, and Way’s approach to participatory theatre. Together, they partnered up to introduce a new, more sophisticated, more intellectual, and more theatrical “dramaturgy of empathy” that while *not* new or revolutionary for the fields of psychology, theatre, film, or Civil Rights, was certainly new and revolutionary *for Disney* and mainstream commercial animation.

Theatre People: The Co-conspirators

A few months before the Jeffrey Katzenberg story meeting listed above, Linda Woolverton wrote a memo to the executive asserting that, “The theme of this age-old fairy tale has always been ‘don’t judge a book by its cover’... We also have a supplemental theme of what it means to be human.”¹³ From this, the historian can ascertain that their intent was to teach viewers how to judge others, contending that there is a right way and a wrong way to do so. Secondly, the film’s emphasis was human

cured with reason. Kevin Campigotto, “Reason and Emotion,” Youtube.com. April 9, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvp3zAPraF4>.

¹³ Linda Woolverton and Howard Ashman to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Peter Schneider, and Don Hahn, January, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West.

recognition or “what it means” for the beast to be human. Placing recognition and emotional empathy as secondary to teaching spectators how to use deliberative reasoning to make moral decisions, Woolverton’s memo shows how the film embraced emotional empathy as an end goal but championed a kind of empathy that was led and guided by reasonable judgement.

This is an approach to empathy, which is championed in recent psychology. Paul Bloom writes in *Against Empathy* that, “Yes, we often favor those who are adorable more than those who are ugly. This is a fact about our minds worth knowing. But we can also recognize that this is the wrong way to make moral decisions. It’s this ability to critically assess our limitations—with regard to our social behavior, our reasoning, and our morality—that makes all sorts of things possible.”¹⁴ This sentiment is very consistent with the intended goal of *Beauty and the Beast*, and as Woolverton suggests, the fairytale has historically advocated for reason over emotion, especially in its famous Neo-Classical iteration by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, which the Disney version is most directly based on. It was very on-brand for Disney to add elements of empathy to the fairytale, since much of the Disney dramaturgy was centered on Walt’s principle of recognition. In fact, Howard Ashman is often credited with making empathy for the Beast an objective of the film to begin with.

Ashman, who was known for another famous musical about a monster, *Little Shop of Horrors*, was not able to attend the December story meeting described above. By December 1990, his health had sharply declined due to complications from AIDS, and he

¹⁴ Bloom, 229.

spent his final months in and out of St. Vincent's Hospital, contributing to the creative process, often over the phone from his hospital bed, when he could find the strength. This situation placed compounding levels of sadness and pressure on the team, but also strengthened their resolution, and fueled their passion to tell the story the right way - and they did not always agree on the best way to do that. However, one of the film's producers Don Hahn, confirmed Ashman's role in making the film focus on the Beast in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* as the film premiered, saying, "Howard, who served as executive producer and lyricist for the film, insisted--and Linda Woolverton, who wrote the screenplay agreed--that our version should be Beast's story."¹⁵ While it is difficult with any fairy tale to pinpoint an "original" version, the Disney version is one of the first to centralize the Beast's story and character arc as the central conflict of the story.

In a March 1991 memo to Katzenberg and Peter Schneider, Woolverton outlines the differences between the Disney version, they were still working on, and the 18th Century Beaumont version. She notes that in the French version, Belle only meets the Beast every night, when he comes to her room to ask for her hand in marriage – and that his character does not develop past this. Whereas, in the Disney version,

"The Beast's character has been developed to show his human side: his vulnerability, his insecurities, his successful as well as unsuccessful attempts to get close to Belle, his courage when he risks his life to save her from a pack of wolves. We watch his growth from being more-beast-than-man to more-man-than-beast. In doing so, we hope to create empathy for his character and to make it as much the Beast's story as Belle's."¹⁶

¹⁵ Charles Solomon, "MOVIES: Building a Magical 'Beast': Once Disney decided to make an animated musical of 'Beauty and the Beast,' it was up to the artists to really make it sing," *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-11-10-ca-2022-story.html>.

¹⁶ Linda Woolverton to All Concerned, "Re: The Character Arc of the Beast," November 12, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writer's Guild.

This change should be noted as something that was an intentional innovation on Ashman's part – one that Woolverton supported and fought for in his absence – as he had fought for her ideas.

It is not difficult to identify the parallels between Ashman, his battle with AIDS, and the Beast - as many have done, in countless articles, blogs, Youtube lectures, and documentaries like *Waking Sleeping Beauty* and *Howard*, produced by Don Hahn, himself, and available on Disney+. Historically, this has ranged from AIDS patients, at the time of the film's premiere, who requested pink roses, like the one in the film for their bedside tables to high-profile readings by figures like Dan Rather in his *Los Angeles Times* article from 1992 titled, "The AIDS Metaphor in 'Beauty and the Beast.'" The white, heterosexual, and powerful Rather writes, "The more I think about it, the more sense it makes. Think of the spell as AIDS, with the same arbitrary and harshly abbreviated limitations on time, and you feel the Beast's loneliness and desperation a little more deeply. He's just a guy trying as hard as he can to find a little meaning--a little love, a little *beauty*-- while he's still got a little life left."¹⁷ This reading of the film in relation to Ashman's authorship as a gay, Jewish man, who was dying and part of an ostracized and "monsterized" group is an accessible one, which has manifested itself in a large cross-section of positionalities and privilege – or lack thereof.

While there has been some question on whether the "AIDS Metaphor" was purposeful or conscious – questions that Ashman, himself can never answer because he died in March of 1991, before the film was released – his partner Bill Lauch maintains

¹⁷ Dan Rather, "MOVIE: GUEST FILM COMMENTATOR : The AIDS Metaphor in 'Beauty and the Beast,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-03-22-ca-7396-story.html>.

that “he wanted to present characters that cast some kind of light on certain topics.”¹⁸ Thinking of empathy as a spotlight, the idea of Ashman wanting to “shine a light” on certain topics suggests an intent to use the film to point the spectator’s own respective spotlights towards those impacted by AIDS. Meanwhile, Alan Menken, the composer for *Beauty and the Beast*, and Ashman’s long-time collaborator says, “All I can say is that the emotions that were bottled up and dealt with on a personal level by Howard and me and probably most everyone else working with us is reflected in our score to *Beauty and the Beast*,” confirming a direct causation between Ashman’s disease, the creative process, and the work itself.¹⁹ Hence, this chapter upholds the intentionality of Ashman’s emphasis on “the Beast’s story” as an extension of his lived experience. If this can be labeled as the “why”, for Ashman, this chapter is primarily interested in the “how.”

While the next two sections will examine the “how” in terms of his dramatic approach, this section explores the “how” in terms of the position of these two artists within the Disney Feature Animation Studio at the time of this film’s production. Outside the studio, Ashman was a gay Jewish man, who was dying of AIDS, at the intersection of multiple Othered identities. Inside the studio, he was not only accepted, but beloved. “Howard was *the* person,” Woolverton explains to illustrate just how much prestige Ashman enjoyed at the studio, on this production. “Howard was so beloved at that moment that Jeffrey Katzenberg actually leaned over and put his head on the shoulder; a loving gesture.”²⁰ Disney historian, and former Disney employee Sean Griffin

¹⁸ Don Hahn, *Howard*, documentary, 2018, Disney+

¹⁹ Sarah Ashman Gillespie, “Interview with Alan Manken, part one,” *Howard Ashman: Part of His World*, Accessed December 15, 2020, <https://www.howardashman.com/blog/interview-with-alan-menken-part-one>.

²⁰ Linda Woolverton (Screenwriter for *Beauty and the Beast*), interview with author, June 2020.

extensively details the working environment for gay and lesbian employees in the Eisner/Katzenberg era, in his book *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*. He writes, “Although surprising to some, by the early 1990s the Walt Disney Company was in some ways a few steps ahead of other studios in its attitudes about homosexuality,” eventually being one of the first studios in Hollywood to offer same-sex partner benefits.²¹ However, he warns that corporate policy does not reflect a uniform acceptance of the LGBTQ community throughout the company, citing how some departments like the music division were safer than others like the more conservative theme park division (discussed in the next chapter), and other areas where LGBTQ employees chose to remain in the closet to avoid further corporate barriers, especially queer employees of color.²² “Consequently,” he writes, “lesbian and gay employees often have to balance their self-identity as homosexuals with their self-identity as Disney employees,” and the burden is on them to reconcile this, often by putting their sexual-identity aside.²³ Schneider was determined to make the animation studio a place that did the opposite: that if a person had a problem with homosexuality that the labor of reconciling their personal views and their work as a Disney employee would fall on them, and not the marginalized. “When you have Howard Ashman in your world, you've got to accept the fact that he's a big gay man, right? And find a way of dealing with your beliefs and your personal beliefs to not impede the work.”²⁴ This was part of Schneider’s “theatre discipline,” discussed in Chapter 1, that included a directive to “bring in

²¹ Griffin, 98-99.

²² Griffin, 115.

²³ Griffin, 115.

²⁴ Peter Schneider (Vice President of Disney Feature Animation 1985-1999), interview with author, April 2020.

outsiders,” and extended the directive to not only bringing them in, but creating a safe place in the Company where they did not have to choose between their identity and their work.

The work was where Ashman especially excelled. For all intents and purposes, he had an incredible amount of creative power at the studio, after his previous experiments on *The Little Mermaid* proved successful beyond belief. As Peter Kunze explains in his dissertation “Staging a Comeback: Film and Theatre Convergence at Disney, 1982-1998,” the studio had never used musical theatre conventions as a roadmap for writing Disney musicals before *Little Mermaid*, and the unprecedented financial success of that film (which had broken all previous records by garnering \$233 million worldwide) cemented Ashman’s approach to musical theatre as their go-to template for the next decade.²⁵ This success offered him creative leverage on the two subsequent projects he worked on (*Beauty and Aladdin*); but, even more so, he had already built a rapport with the artists at the studio during the production process for *Mermaid*.

As described in Chapter 1, Peter Schneider and Katzenberg wanted to make the story writing process more structured and unified, so they did things like add screenwriters, lessening the number of directors, and creating an environment which had been likened to “war” or “Darwinism” where the “strongest ideas survive,” or – at the very least, the best argued ideas survive.²⁶ The process relied on an ability to convince

²⁵ Kunze, Chapter 2.

²⁶ As illustrated in the previous chapter, Peter Schneider had come into Disney Feature Animation as an outsider, looking to change the way that things were done, and run the studio more like a resident theatre company. This transition was, at times contentious, because while the younger generation of animators were looking for opportunities to come into their own artistic voice, they had difficulty breaking with tradition and the way that things had always been done. Historian Tom Sito, who had worked as an animator on *Beauty and the Beast* writes, “Animation seems to need not merely a coordinating chief artist but a messianic father-genius. Animators are not just loyal, they want to be members of a novitiate in a

the room that your idea was the best, and the room included story artists, writers, producers, and often Katzenberg and Schneider, who offered their own collaborative and dramaturgical contributions and notes. Those who worked with him, maintain that Ashman was strong in these rooms through a combination of theatrical knowledge and the ability to argue his points and effectively persuade his counterparts. One of *Beauty and the Beast*'s two directors, Gary Trousdale explains that there are things artists would fight for, but explains that when it came to questions of writing musicals, Ashman, and his composer Alan Menken were, "very persistent, and they're making very compelling arguments, and they know their stuff – so yeah we'll listen to them."²⁷ Just like the Introduction of this dissertation explains how Eisner had leveraged the cultural capital of his theatrical knowledge in his early career, Ashman was able to do the same – especially after *Little Mermaid*.

The respect that Ashman enjoyed in the story room, however, was in deep contrast to how Linda Woolverton was received and treated. As explained in Chapter 1, screenwriters were not welcomed at Disney yet, and were still seen by the animators as an imposition on their process, and a forced change from on-high that they were resistant to.²⁸ Academy award-winning writer James Mangold, whose first screenwriting job was

studio's worldview," in his book *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*, and this quote encapsulates the challenge that Schneider, Ashman, and other theatre practitioners like Woolverton faced when entering the insular world of Disney animation. "I realized that they had been completely sheltered. They didn't go to the theater, they didn't go out. They didn't do anything," explains Schneider. His goal, as outlined by the previous chapter, was to get them to find their own voice and develop their own way of doing things, instead of copying Walt's way or what they imagined Walt's way of doing things was. Schneider, interview, April 2020.

²⁷ Animation Guild, "TAG Interview Gary Trousdale 1," Youtube.com, October 23, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6fVE4aa-UkM>.

²⁸ Ken Miyamoto, "Screenwriting Wisdom from LOGAN Writer/Director James Mangold," Screencraft.com. Screencraft. November 17, 2017. Accessed November 28, 2020. <https://screencraft.org/2017/11/17/screenwriting-wisdom-from-logan-writerdirector-james-mangold/>.

Oliver and Company, was one example of this, as he claims, to this day, that he was not prepared to have to fight for every idea, and that it was an experience that led him to go to graduate school, so he could better hone those skills.²⁹ Woolverton echoes a similar experience, “I didn't know what I was getting into. I didn't know the way to win. I had to figure it out. And I was a screenwriter, and they weren't in Disney animation. [The animators didn't] want screenwriters... It was all done with the story department... So, Jeff [Katzenberg] dumped me in there.”³⁰ However, her experience was magnified by the fact that unlike other films, where there had been multiple screenwriters assigned to *Oliver and Company* and *Rescuers Down Under*, this film was the first time that there was only one screenwriter to become the bearer of all of the story team's frustrations, resentment, and rejection of screenwriters. “So, they were against me from the beginning. Yeah, from the first day. And it was the battle of my life, tell you,” she says.³¹ In addition to this, she had to contend with the labor of being the first female screenwriter in Disney animation.

The Walt Disney Company's history with women is complicated, to put it generously – especially in the animation studio. In Walt's day, women could not be animators, so they were relegated to the ink-and-paint department and often paid a meager \$18.00 a week to work up to eighty hours transferring the animators' drawings to celluloid and add the colors with paint.³² Retta Scott was the first woman to be credited as an animator in 1941. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, more female animators were

²⁹ Miyamoto, <https://screencraft.org/2017/11/17/screenwriting-wisdom-from-logan-writerdirector-james-mangold/>.

³⁰ Woolverton interview, June 2020.

³¹ Woolverton interview, June 2020.

³² Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production* (Rutgers University Press, 2017), 81, Kindle.

hired at Disney, including those who graduated from the newly formed California Arts Institute. However, as historian and former Disney animator, Tom Sito writes in his book *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* that “Before 1989, the largest single category of workers, by far, in an animation studio was ink-and-paint artists. They were, in the main, women who were held back by barriers to moving into the ranks of animator, layout, or direction.”³³ Some of the new policies under Katzenberg/Schneider worked to position women in more positions of leadership. As mentioned in Chapter 1, one of Schneider’s first actions was to appoint former stage manager Kathleen Gavin to help him run the studio. His policy of encouraging directors to pick their own teams based on merit instead of seniority and “who had always done it” led to Lisa Keene being promoted to head of layouts on *Little Mermaid*. Vera Pacheco Lanpher became the head of the cleanup department, and Brenda Chapman Lima was second-in-command behind Roger Allers in the *Beauty and the Beast* storyboard department, and they shared an office. Woolverton was not the only woman working on the film, nor was she the only woman in the story room. She was, however, the first woman to be given so much creative power all at once, as an outsider, who didn’t have to work her way up from ink and paint or cleanup.

To some on the story team, this read as inexperience. Allers recalls, “*Beauty* had a bit of a rocky beginning too because Linda Woolverton, the writer, wasn’t used to working in animation. There was a lot of misunderstanding. She would complain that we were changing her dialogue. But the process of doing animated boards entails one

³³ Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*. (University Press of Kentucky, 2006), chap. 1, Kindle.

important principle: things change!”³⁴ The tension was extended by the fact that Katzenberg had made it clear upon his arrival at the studio that he would like to replace the storyboard teams with single screenwriters like in live action film. This was met with too much resistance to become reality. For Katzenberg, Woolverton was a way to keep the script consistent and unified, and that is how she understood her job as well. She was assertive and fought for her vision, but unlike Ashman, who was praised and “beloved” for doing the same with ferocity, the story team often frame this behavior from Woolverton as entitled, uncollaborative, and uncooperative. “She does the script, and everybody is just expected to board it [without changing it],” explains Allers, “That’s generally what some people who get into animation without any experience do. They assume you get a script and then just make a movie. In animation, it’s the changing and the molding during the boarding process that makes something truly entertaining. It’s where the best ideas bubble up. It’s a constant sculpting process.”³⁵ Katzenberg would often privilege Woolverton’s point of view. For example, he once saw something he didn’t like about Belle in the storyboards and turned to Woolverton and asked, “Does that seem consistent with who Belle is, Linda?” often turning to her as a barometer.³⁶ At one point, Allers remembers Katzenberg saying “Do her script and don’t change a word.”³⁷ To the storyboard artists, this represented a threat. To Woolverton she says it meant one thing, “I wasn’t wanted.”³⁸ She often felt like she had to fight for her right to be there,

³⁴ Ron Diamond, *On Animation: The Director's Perspective* Vol 1. (CRC Press, 2019), 265-266.

³⁵ Diamond, 265.

³⁶ Jim Korkis, “In Her Own Words: Linda Woolverton,” *Cartoon Research*, December 31, 2014, <https://cartoonresearch.com/index.php/in-her-own-words-linda-woolverton/>.

³⁷ Diamond, 265.

³⁸ Woolverton, interview, June 2020.

and it seems that the storyboard artists felt the same way about their position. Misunderstanding indeed.

Woolverton and Allers eventually went to Schneider's office for an intervention. Schneider's solution was to involve Woolverton more in the storyboarding process, working more closely in the day-to-day with Allers and Chapman. For Allers, this was a turning point, "Suddenly, Linda not only saw the process, but she also felt more included than ever before. The whole dynamic changed. We were writing scenes together, laughing, and having a great time. I have to give credit to Peter [Schneider]. That was all because of him and his wisdom."³⁹ For Woolverton, who had been working on the project since the very beginning, the biggest turning point came when she met Howard Ashman, who entered the project later, after he was finished with *Little Mermaid*. *Beauty and the Beast* had undergone significant changes by the time Howard arrived.

The film was originally intended to be a non-musical film. It was being directed by British husband and wife duo Richard and Jill Purdum, who operated from Disney's London studio, while keeping in contact with their Burbank studio.⁴⁰ Wanting to stay as-true-as-possible to the de Beaumont version, the Purdum iteration, of which a twenty minute storyboard reel called the "Purdum Reel" still survives, opens with Belle's father, a merchant, going into town and promising to bring Belle back a rose.⁴¹ "Let's just say

³⁹ Diamond, 266.

⁴⁰ Condon, Bill. *ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY The Ultimate Guide to Beauty and the Beast*. Entertainment Weekly. 2017. 66.

⁴¹ This version's opening hook was, "Once there was a widowed merchant who had a beautiful home and many fine ships sailing the shining seas." The first few minutes focus on the father, how he loses his ships (and his fortune) in a storm, and how he, Belle, his youngest daughter, and his sister (in law?) have to move to a small house in the country. For Belle's 17th birthday he gives her a music box that belonged to her deceased mother, but her party is interrupted by the tax collectors who demand money and threaten to repossess their small house. Belle offers to sell the music box, and her aunt says that the best course of action would be for Belle to marry a rich man in town. Belle's father protests saying the music box is her

the castle walls were locked into the tradition in the past,” Woolverton says, explaining that at that point in the process, her primary focus was turning the prose of the fairytale into a workable screenplay, and figuring out how to work with the storyboard artists. Katzenberg viewed the “Purdum Reel” and expressed his overall disappointment. His next move was to bring Ashman and Menken onto the project to do for *Beauty* what they did for *Mermaid*. Woolverton says, “And then pretty much Howard came in, and I found a partner.”⁴² The project moved forward as a musical, Woolverton found an ally, and Ashman found someone who would fight hard for his work after he was no longer able to. Thus, two theatre people, two outsiders, teamed up to create the dual objective listed above: a musical about the right way and wrong way to judge someone, asserting that threatening appearances can lead to misunderstandings, and that taking the time to get to know people with a reasoned approach to empathy can lead to greater understanding. However, the process still lay ahead of them.

Historicizing Empathy

One of the reasons it was imperative for the team to find a new approach to empathy in Disney animation is the fact that the meaning and understanding of the word had changed significantly between the 1930s, when Walt articulated his theory of recognition and the 1990s when *Beauty and the Beast* was being made. While theatre

birthday gift, but Belle, ever humble, says “You could give me another present. If you see one, I’d love a rose.” The father goes off into town to sell the music box, while Belle is forced to meet with her potential suitor, a wimpy fop named Gaston. Belle’s aunt gets pushy: “Has my niece given you an answer?” “Not yet.” Gaston says, “I think she’s paying the coquette with me.” Meanwhile, Belle’s father gets lost and makes his way to the enchanted castle where objects are alive, but don’t talk. The objects assemble for a magical dinner and the father comfortably falls asleep. The last scene of the reel shows Belle and her sister worrying about her father, while her aunt tells her to go to bed. DRFMiscVideos. “Beauty and the Beast: The Purdum Reel (Alternate Intro)”. Youtube.com. December 8, 2011.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heAlxJsJAgI&t=253s>.

⁴² Woolverton interview, June 2020.

practitioners like Ashman and Woolverton were influenced by theatrical theories and practical applications on empathy from the likes of Bertolt Brecht, Isabel Burger, and Brian Way, it is also important to note that they didn't strictly apply these principles to their work. As happens when knowledge is transmitted by "doing", changes get made.⁴³ I identify their combined "dramaturgy of empathy" as being influenced by Brecht's defamiliarization techniques and Way's theories of conscious empathy and participatory theatre. Before explaining how their approach manifested itself in the action of Beauty and the Beast, it is necessary to showcase how each of these theatre artists understood and used these dramaturgical practices pre-Disney. In other words: What did 'defamiliarization' mean to Howard Ashman and what did participatory theatre mean to Linda Woolverton? Likewise, what did 'empathy' mean to Brecht and Way's work in the theatre and what did 'empathy' mean to Ashman and Woolverton's work in the theatre?

Ashman and Woolverton were both born in the early 1950s, around the time that the word "empathy" was entering popular discourses for the first time. In her 2018 book *Empathy: A History*, Susan Lanzoni explains that before World War II, the word "empathy" only really existed in academic writings and aesthetic psychological theories. Before World War II, empathy was understood in a largely aesthetic context, as "the projection of feeling and movement into art objects," according to Lanzoni. "Less frequently," she says, "it was understood as a direct and powerful form of emotional transference."⁴⁴ The idea is that through the spectatorship process, the audience becomes "one" with the piece of art or of "one" mind with the characters through "psychic

⁴³ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

⁴⁴ Susan Lanzoni, *Empathy: A History*, (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2018), 195.

identification.”⁴⁵ In the years leading up to, including, and immediately following World War II, the rise of fascism, and the Holocaust, the idea of spectators identifying with people or characters in mass media was a terrifying prospect to those who had seen their neighbors identify *en masse* with the worst of humanity and become “one” in their atrocities.

In this crucible, Bertolt Brecht innovated a new theory of theatre to process the way he understood empathy as mass identification. “The dramatic theatre’s spectator,” he recounts, “says: Yes, I have felt like that too—Just like me—It’s only natural—It’ll never change—I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.”⁴⁶ Consistent with other writings of his day, such as those of the Frankfurt School, he positions empathy as the spectator and character becoming of one mind, as if merged. He saw empathy, in terms of becoming “one” with another, as a bad thing, because as a political subversive in Nazi Germany, he directly experienced the dark side of empathy’s biases. Paul Bloom writes about, in his book *Against Empathy*:

“When scholars think about atrocities, such as the lynchings of blacks in the American South or the Holocaust in Europe, they typically think of hatred and racial ideology and dehumanization, and they are right to do so. But empathy also plays a role. Not empathy for those who are lynched or put into the gas chambers, of course, but empathy that is sparked by stories told about innocent victims of these hated groups, about white women raped by black men or German children preyed upon by Jewish pedophiles.”⁴⁷

Even though Brecht did not have the scientific language or knowledge that Bloom had in 2016, while writing his book, he knew enough from his own lived experience to know

⁴⁵ Lanzoni, 199.

⁴⁶ J.Chris Westgate, *Brecht, Broadway and United States Theatre*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. APA (American Psychological Assoc.) Westgate, J. C. (2007). 125.

⁴⁷ Bloom, 192.

that bad people can use empathy to scapegoat the marginalized, and that those who follow them can use empathy to justify violence against these “monsterized” groups.

He wants to avoid this, so he employed the tactic of “defamiliarization” or “distancing effect” to *discourage* identification or sympathy. These included narrators, breaking the fourth wall, breaking the action and flow of the play to make commentary, sing songs, or perform narrating gestures that he called “gestus” that would communicate the inner workings of a character’s mind, even if it seemed to contradict what they were saying. Much of Brecht’s work relies on contradictions and exposing contradictions, such as good people who do bad things with good intentions (much like how people would commit atrocities out of empathy for ‘victims’ as described above). For Brecht, the ideal spectator would say, “I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh,” instead of “I weep when they weep and laugh when they laugh,” as a sign of critical engagement with the contradictions he presents them with.⁴⁸ For Brecht, the intended outcome is to have audience members openly think and analyze how their actions are connected to their circumstances.

In his famous musical *The Threepenny Opera*, he has his character Mr. Peachum break the action at the end of the first act to inform his wife and daughter, and the audience as well, that “The world is mean and man uncouth. To be a glow instead of low, but you know circumstance won’t have it so.”⁴⁹ Brecht was of the Marxist belief that good people do bad things because of their circumstances and the best way to stop this is to change the factors that promote such behavior: in his case, he believed that capitalism

⁴⁸ Westgate, 125.

⁴⁹ Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht. *The Threepenny Opera*, Trans. Marc Blitzstein, (R&H Theatricals, 1982), 25.

needed to be changed. For him, the ideal spectator should not need to identify with the plight of his characters to feel compassion for them, but rather say, “The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary.”⁵⁰ In other words, one does not need to feel empathy to have compassion for the suffering of others and want to make their lives better. This is the argument of Bloom’s entire book, where he makes the case for, what he calls “distanced compassion,” which, although he does not reference Brecht at all in his book, plays upon the same notion of defamiliarization as a distancing effect.⁵¹ Bloom does not reject empathy as much as Brecht does, arguing that when channeled properly, it can be an incredible force for good.⁵² For Brecht, however, empathy is not a prerequisite to compassion, it is an obstacle, and it is a danger. Take for example, a play like Brecht’s *Man Equals Man*, where a good man Galy Gay succumbs to peer pressure and turns into the perfect killing machine by the end. Through his plays, he tested his theories in a theatre laboratory fashion, writing in his journal about *Man Equals Man*, “From what I learnt from audiences who saw it, I rewrote it ten times.”⁵³ He worked to perfect his lesson on how Galy Gay is so connected and so concerned with the feelings of others that he loses himself.

Echoes of this dramaturgical strategy can be detected in Ashman’s musical *Little Shop of Horrors* in the way that Seymour, a character that is the most identifiable, turns into a killer. In my 2020 article “Don’t Feed the Plants!’: Monstrous Normativity and

⁵⁰ Westgate, 125.

⁵¹ Bloom, 39.

⁵² Bloom, 22.

⁵³ Stephen Unwin. 2005. *A Guide To The Plays Of Bertolt Brecht*. Plays and Playwrights. London: Methuen Drama. <https://0-search-ebSCOhost-com.catalog.library.uarts.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=932307&site=eds-live&scope=site>. 102.

Disidentification in *Little Shop of Horrors*,” in *Studies in Musical Theatre*, I illustrated how Ashman took the character most likely to evoke identification from audience members and presented them with a story where he did monstrous things, procuring “fresh” bodies for a human-eating plant named Audrey II. In a musical that features a monster, who is racially coded to be read as African American, Ashman’s script attempts to monsterize Seymour, showing the slippery slope that this kind of unassuming protagonist enters to justify his actions – including empathy. Take for example, the song “Get It” where Seymour justifies his first victim:

“PLANT. *If you wanna be profound and you really gotta justify
Take a breath and look around a lotta folk deserve to die!*

SEYMOUR. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. That's not a very nice thing to say.

PLANT. But it's *true*, isn't it?

SEYMOUR. No. I don't know anybody who *deserves* to get chopped up and fed to a hungry plant.

PLANT. Mmmmmm... *sure* you do.”⁵⁴

The lights come up on Seymour’s love interest Audrey and her horrible boyfriend Orin who is verbally and physically abusing her. Seymour has a visceral response to this scene, moving towards the door and then stopping to look back at the plant in “mutual understanding,” signaling that he has decided, through his empathy for Audrey as a victim that Orin deserves to die. At this point, the audience might agree, being triggered by the same reaction to Audrey’s suffering. For Ashman the dehumanization of characters deemed “bad” and the ultimate decision that they “deserve to die” is a

⁵⁴ Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, *Little Shop of Horrors*, New York, (NY: Musical Theatre International, 1985), 53-54.

problem: one which, in the context of the AIDS crisis carries, a lot of weight with pundits claiming, as Lauch explains above, that people who contract the disease somehow deserve to die because of their immoral behavior or orientation. As the musical moves forward, Ashman, much like Brecht in *Man Equals Man*, pushes the limits of the audience's identification to "everyman" characters like Galy and Seymour to see how long it lasts as their acts become more and more depraved, and as justification over the death of a "bad" character leads to justifications of the deaths of other characters like Mr. Mushnik, and eventually Audrey, Seymour, and the entire world.

Ashman was undoubtedly influenced by Brecht, and has cited *Threepenny Opera* as not only an inspiration but as a musical that blazed a trail for him and *Little Shop of Horrors*. "There's a history in New York of Off-Broadway musicals. I guess it goes back to the *Threepenny Opera* at the Theatre de Lys in the mid-50s" he once said in an interview.⁵⁵ At Disney, Roger Allers recalls, "We talked about what influenced his work and Allen's. The next day, on my desk there was an album of [Brecht and] Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*."⁵⁶ There are noticeable musical similarities between the Brecht/Weill style and certain songs in the Menken/Ashman repertoire including "It's Just the Gas" in *Little Shop* and "Poor Unfortunate Souls" in *Little Mermaid*, which was the sequence Allers was storyboarding when Ashman popped his head in the door to discuss *Threepenny*. *Little Shop of Horrors* has additional defamiliarization/Brechtian nods, not least of which was the fact that its star actress Ellen Greene, who played Audrey in the original cast, had been known previously for her iconic performance as

⁵⁵ Howard, 2018.

⁵⁶ Diamond, 265.

Jenny in the 1976 revival of *Threepenny*, starring Raul Julia. There are also three narrators or street urchins, which are reminiscent of the “Street Singer” who opens up *Threepenny Opera* with the “Ballad of Mack the Knife” – both of which are designed to commentate on the action and judge the characters.

Understanding how Ashman used defamiliarization on *Little Shop* offers foreshadowing to how he would use the same structure on *Beauty and the Beast*, only instead of giving the audience a leading man they could identify with from the start and learn to judge, he would give them a lead who they judge at the start and learn to identify with the end. This is where Ashman departs from Brecht, was that while he problematizes emotional empathy at times, he doesn’t reject it entirely.⁵⁷ In fact, his work embraces emotion. He even organizes his scene outlines according to the intended emotions they are supposed to evoke.⁵⁸ However, his work showcases an interest in the different directions that emotion and empathy can be pushed and pulled, and *Little Shop* and *Beauty* can be read as experiments of his own theatrical laboratory instead of definitive conclusions against identification. Ashman didn’t want to avoid identification: he was counting on it, so he could explore its brightest and darkest potentials. Nevertheless, his move toward pushing empathy in *Beauty and the Beast* reflects the kind of understanding of the word that was prominent when he and Woolverton were growing up in the 1950s.

⁵⁷ It should also be noted that both Brecht and Ashman were interested in problematizing the biases of reason, and how it can also be used to justify violence, including songs like “The Meek Shall Inherit,” where Seymour does a cost-benefit analysis of continuing his heinous acts and determines that it benefits him more to continue. This is very similar to Brecht’s approach to *Mother Courage and Her Children* where the protagonist Anna only sees the world through the lens of transactions. In his book, Bloom argues that distanced compassion exists between empathy and reason – that swinging too far one way or the other could be disastrous, citing Nazi doctors in concentration camps who used deliberative reasoning to justify their atrocities in the absence of empathy. Bloom, 15.

⁵⁸ Linda Woolverton and Howard Ashman to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Peter Schneider, and Don Hahn, January, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West.

Lanzoni offers one of the earlier examples of the word trickling into popular discourses, where a 1952 article in *The Los Angeles Times* column “Take My Word” defined empathy as “mentally entering into the feelings of a person or thing; appreciative perception and understanding,” experiencing others’ emotions as if they were “real to us.”⁵⁹ This differs from the previous definition because it does not rely on identifying with another person and wasn’t positioned as emotional contagion. It was now a conscious effort towards understanding other people, where people could make to “put themselves in someone else’s shoes.” The definition broadened to include things like compassion, sympathy, and perspective. In the wake of the trauma from WWII and the Holocaust, empathy was reframed as the cure to prejudice, instead of one of its more dangerous elements. More importantly, it was positioned as something that can be learned, especially after Gordon Allport’s 1954 study *The Nature of Prejudice* was published.⁶⁰ Hence, there was a large scale movement towards teaching children, from an early age how to empathize. This extended into new fields dedicated to using theatre to develop empathetic children.

After all, part of enacting or “acting” drama can be seen as “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.” Lanzoni tells of multiple organizations like a Yonkers community theatre and the Philadelphia Early Childhood Research project which used drama as a tool to teach empathy and tolerance towards those with cultural differences, especially toward Jewish and Italian immigrants.⁶¹ One such program was a theatre laboratory,

⁵⁹ Lanzoni, 197-198.

⁶⁰ Lanzoni, 219-221

⁶¹ “Under the direction of a social studies teacher, community members in Yonkers wrote and enacted a play entitled *American Is You and Me*. One student revealed the impact of the program on his entrenched stereotypes: ‘I thought the program about the Italian contribution was the most important because up to that time I had no idea Italian and other races had helped America. I had thought it was Americans who helped

named the Children's Theatre Association, founded by a Baltimore woman named Isabel D. Burger. One of her students was a young Howard Ashman.⁶² Informed by literature from the 1910s on how drama or "creative play acting" can help develop mature American citizens, Burger used her laboratory to innovate, test, and hone these ideas, culminating in a list of ten attributes that make a good, moral person – among them "3. A deep sympathy and understanding for his fellow man," and "7. Controlled and balanced emotions."⁶³ In her book *Creative Play Acting Learning Through Drama*, she writes, "Becoming another character in dramatic situation involves feeling deeply the emotions of someone else."⁶⁴ However, she writes that in this process, "There must be release and control... he cannot give way completely to his feelings."⁶⁵ There is no evidence to suggest that Burger was familiar with Brecht, but they were similar in their notion that empathy should not be a complete surrender – nor should it be the leading guide on making moral decisions. She quotes another theorist in the field of children's theatre from her time, Hughes Mearns, who says, "The fine playing of an evil role can be done only by those who are at the same time inwardly repudiating evil."⁶⁶ It is difficult to say whether Mearns was influenced by Brecht, but it is aligned with Brecht's idea that an actor should be simultaneously judging a character while embodying them. It's an idea that judgement

and protected the "dumb foreigners" as I called them.' The intercultural workshop sponsored the Philadelphia Early Childhood Research Project, which trained teachers in two different curricula over fourteen weeks. One curriculum emphasized intercultural tolerance, whereas the traditional curriculum allowed stereotypes to stand uncorrected, and teachers reinforced the idea that certain groups had 'funny customs.'" Lnazoni, 225.

⁶² Howard, 2018.

⁶³ Isabel B Burger, *Creative Play Acting: Learning Through Drama*, (United States: Ronald Press, 1966), 11.

⁶⁴ Burger, 9.

⁶⁵ Burger, 9.

⁶⁶ Burger, 5.

and empathy are not mutually exclusive, and one which would manifest itself in the dual theme of *Beauty and the Beast*.

It is difficult for the historian to measure Burger's influence on Ashman outside of parallels between her philosophy and his work. However, when Ashman's sister Sarah Ashman Gillespie talks about her late brother she uses the following description, "What there really was with Howard was great empathy, which means he could put himself in the other person's place. It's not that he really wanted to be a mermaid who got legs, but he put himself in Ariel's position, in Ariel's life and that's empathy. And from that, from that place, he could write that character. I think that's the definition of an artist." Gillespie uses the definition that corresponds to "putting yourself in someone else's shoes," which echoes the 1950s definition, suggesting that he was impacted by the rhetoric of empathy in his youth – or, at the very least, those close to him were.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, the meaning of empathy as "stepping into someone's shoes" – so to speak continued, and was directly tied to the Civil Rights Movement and social justice causes. Lanzoni writes, "Empathy was linked to the aptitude for taking-the-role-of-the-other and was correlated with equalitarianism, a view of the other as an equal."⁶⁷ The notion of empathy-as-taking-the-role-of-the-other, or taking a role, can be read as theatrical, and in the 1960s and 70s, Brian Way, theorized and experimented with the use of participatory theatre in the development of empathy, or, as he calls it "social sensitivity" – a phrase, that according to Lanzoni, was synonymous with empathy in these decades, as well as "gift of understanding people," "the ability to

⁶⁷ Lanzoni, 223-224.

size up people,” and “social intelligence.”⁶⁸ If empathy, in a modern sense, is to be understood as a process of recognition of self in another, Way would interpret this as a “personal involvement in observation” or participation – watching as doing. Just as Walt Disney theorized on the spectator’s recognition of self in his animated films, Way recognizes that “all theatre,” not just children’s theatre, “depends upon the participation of the audience. For the majority of theatre experiences, the main areas of participation, however, are intellectual, emotional and spiritual.”⁶⁹ Children, who have not been enculturated to be silent during a performance are more inclined to participate with vocal and physical responses as well as the other invisible modes of participation. Way believes in using these responses pedagogically for children in the audience and children in his drama education programs. While Woolverton did not study with Way directly, she was trained in his methodologies in her Master’s program at California State Fullerton, and used them in her early career of staging theatre for young audiences and starting her own children’s theatre company.⁷⁰ Just as with Burger, the key to empathy in Way’s methodology is control and emotional balance.

In his book *Development Through Drama*, Way maintains that, “[Sensitivity] practice must be fully centered in practical emotional training aimed at helping each young person to become fully responsible for control of his own behavior within a framework of growing realization of the emotional self.”⁷¹ For Way, empathy starts out as unconscious, and through training and practice – one might say, “rehearsal” – it becomes more conscious. He presents exercises designed to create first, a basic

⁶⁸ Lanzoni, 223.

⁶⁹ Brian Way, *Audience Participation: Theatre for Young People*, (United States: W.H. Baker, 1981), 1.

⁷⁰ Woolverton interview, June 2020.

⁷¹ Way, 158.

awareness of others, which he appropriately calls “mirror exercises.” In these exercises, two or more people face each other and mirror the other person’s gestures.⁷² The goal is to get to a point where it becomes almost unconscious – to feel the other person’s rhythms and movements so that they work as “one” in an ensemble. Once the ensemble can feel each other’s feelings, the unconscious mirroring, which evokes the idea of the brain’s “mirror neurons”, is intended to then be a launching point for conscious exercises focused on circumstances. Way gives them a scenario and the group must react as one, and then he changes the circumstances, and the group must react accordingly.⁷³ While not quite as distanced as Brecht’s defamiliarization effect, Way is interested in having his students pay attention to circumstance and how it impacts the way that the group empathizes. Finally, exercises move towards embodying a character, which he says provides them with “the opportunity of being the characters of one’s imagination, mixed with the growing awareness of the real world and the discovery of ‘self’ and ‘not self’, which is part of the orientation towards becoming part of the real world.”⁷⁴ These exercises can be used for children or they can be used for adult actors in his plays designed for audience participation with children. Hence, Woolverton, as a practitioner of this method, was trained in these exercises for a conscious and controlled approach to empathy.

As an adult actor performing for children, she was also trained in Way’s methods for participatory theatre, which operate on controlled openness to the energy and suggestions from the audience. For Way, the purpose of opening up a play to suggestions

⁷² Way, 162

⁷³ Way, 171.

⁷⁴ Way, 173.

from a young audience is to build confidence in children by giving them responsibility and agency in shaping what they are watching. “Accept the suggestions made,” he tells his adult teachers and performers, “if there are several, then you need to make a quick decision as to which one will fit best with the story you are telling.”⁷⁵ This is in keeping with his thoughts on controlled empathy because this is both an open process that requires the actors to “sense the room” so to speak but make decisions that are consistent with the dramaturgy of the piece. Woolverton explains, “[In] participation theater, you actually leave holes in the play itself for the audience to tell you how it goes. And so, it has to be controlled, otherwise it will go insane. You have to have these controls built in. The whole thing is, it's very, very structured... But there are these moments where you actually have to open it up to your audience which means, as a performer... I would think of it as like taking the energy... and I fed it back. So, it was really an energy exchange.”⁷⁶ Thus, she describes it as an empathetic process of feeling the energy of the crowd, just as Way’s techniques for developing the “mirror” exercises are designed to create empathy with an ensemble or group to “feel what they are feeling.” The second element to this is judgement: making judgements on which suggestions are best to serve the story – and to do this very quickly in real-time. One can liken it to being in a Disney story room and keeping the many suggestions of the storyboard artists along the lines of a continuous dramaturgy.

Therefore, Woolverton entered Disney Feature Animation as one who was trained to empathize with a young audience in a controlled and conscious way, “It was a

⁷⁵ Way, 40.

⁷⁶ Austin Film Festival, “On Story: A Conversation with Linda Woolverton,” Youtube.com, April 21, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V-RdDsOuAg>.

remarkable growth and learning experience for me, because I can to this to this day, feel the child audience and know what I have to get out of the scene because they're going to be throwing things, running around. I can still feel the timing from that.”⁷⁷ She also came in as someone with an understanding of spectatorship as an active, participatory process, and an understanding of empathy as something that starts out as unconscious “mirroring” that can become increasingly conscious to things like circumstance in the real world. Performance theorist Donald Crafton’s book *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation* extends the same idea that Way had about empathy of the theatre spectator as a participatory process and applied it to animation, arguing that the spectator recognizes that, “Part of ‘me’ is up on the screen participating in the performance, at least as an active witness.”⁷⁸ After all, the word “engagement” suggests an active witnessing process, participation, or most poignantly: “playing a role in.”⁷⁹ When Woolverton talks about her characters, especially her more recent work like Disney’s *Maleficent*, where she, once again, takes a “monster” – in this case the villain Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*, and flips the script to make her a protagonist, she explains it as a participatory empathy, “Because you follow them. You are them. You suffer what they suffer... You understand them from their soul and then you can understand why they would do something which makes them the protagonist.”⁸⁰ Thus, Woolverton can be read, by the theatre historian, as someone who approaches film and animation as a participatory, active, and deliberative process, meaning that she views the

⁷⁷ Austin Film Festival, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V-RdDsOuAg>.

⁷⁸ Crafton, Donald, *Shadow of a Mouse: Performance, Belief, and World-Making in Animation*, (University of California Press. 2012), 49.

⁷⁹ Definition of engagement, according to Merriam Webster, Accessed December 12, 2020.

⁸⁰ Austin Film Festival, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V-RdDsOuAg>.

protagonist's journey as the spectator's journey, but for "hero-villain" characters like the Beast or Maleficent, she recognizes that it's about "a switch of point of view," requiring a conscious effort. She says, "I did it with the Beast," but "It was a huge challenge."⁸¹ As shift in perspective can be read as a defamiliarization technique or distancing effect as if to say, "Let's look at it from *this* angle," or "Let's step back and recalibrate."

For Woolverton and Ashman that can also be framed as reasoned empathy or controlled empathy. They were both interested in shifting perspectives and pushing audiences to see something differently – most notably to complicate a point of view or make it more complex. This is apparent in Ashman's work like *Little Shop of Horrors* and Woolverton's training that moved from intuition, to circumstance, to characterization/participation. The creation of the character of the Beast is important, and will be covered in the next two chapters, but as the next section elaborates on, their dramaturgies combined most notably in how the character Belle was written in *Beauty and the Beast*.

"A Beauty but a Funny Girl"

"Belle must be able to see the man behind the monster... and love him for it... to break the spell," Woolverton writes in a memo to Katzenberg, Schneider, and the film's producer Don Hahn.⁸² She writes explaining how Belle is a proxy for the audience's participation. That as the character gets to know the Beast, beyond her first impressions, she begins to recognize his humanity and even falls romantically in love with the person

⁸¹ Austin Film Festival, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V-RdDsOuAg>.

⁸² Linda Woolverton and Howard Ashman to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Peter Schneider, and Don Hahn, January, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West.

she sees. Woolverton writes that the audience must see the Beast’s vulnerability in scenes with Belle. “These are the scenes that will make us fall in love with him and then care so deeply when he lays dying later.”⁸³ For the creative team, it wasn’t enough to have Belle/the audience care *for* him, but fall in love *with* him, implying a deeper empathetic bond than compassion – and to cry with him by the end. However, recognizing that this is ultimately a story about judging people – or how “not to judge a book by its cover” – Belle cannot reach this moment of learning how to love without learning how to judge. Hence, Ashman and Woolverton needed to create Belle to be the Disney princess who judges.

“Disney had to change,” Woolverton says, “you couldn't present the 1950s passive victim-heroine and fairy tale heroine anymore. The women's movement had happened, right?”⁸⁴ In addition to being a self-identified feminist, Woolverton was also coming from a theatrical methodology that viewed the audience as active participants. The protagonist needed to be as smart, active, and critical as she viewed her audience to be. Brian Way, after all, had warned his followers to avoid the “trap of sentimentality” – which he defined as the idea that theatre for family audiences needed to be “dumbed down” or that they would accept a lower quality because they don’t know any better. He tells a story, “Stanislavsky was asked once: ‘How do you act for children?’ He replied: ‘The same way you act for adults, only *better*.’”⁸⁵ So Belle needed to be established early in the film as someone who can make good judgements and also feel reasoned empathy –

⁸³ Linda Woolverton and Howard Ashman to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Peter Schneider, and Don Hahn, January, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West.

⁸⁴ Woolverton, interview, June 2020.

⁸⁵ Way, 169.

and in a musical one of the best ways to establish character is through song and lyrics. That is where Ashman came in.

Now that Ashman's musical theatre structure was being used as a "template", it was understood that he would outline the story according to musical theatre storytelling conventions like an "I Want" song. He didn't have a screenwriter to work with on *Little Mermaid*, so Woolverton was added to the outlining process. The outline they created is close to the one used in the finished film, and was strikingly different from the "Purdum Reel," where Belle did not have much of a developed personality, and was merely polite, kind, and beautiful. The first thing about Belle that is established in the first Ashman/Woolverton outline is how she is perceived by her town: "Belle is beautiful... but different than other girls her age," "Always reading, always dreaming," "Wonder if she'll ever get her nose out of those books and act like a proper young lady."⁸⁶ Firstly, she is judged by her appearance, secondly she is not seen as normal, thirdly she reads, and finally, her actions are counter to her town's prescribed gender roles. This is a character who is not only intelligent but whose position in the given circumstances of the musical is complicated by contradictory degrees of privilege and ostracization – much like the two writers, themselves. Eventually, this sequence would turn into the opening number "Belle," the first number he wrote for the musical, which introduces all this information succinctly.

Her beauty, while admired, brings her unwanted attention from the handsome hunter Gaston, who, despite his looks is a bully – as opposed to the Purdum's version of

⁸⁶ Linda Woolverton and Howard Ashman to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Peter Schneider, and Don Hahn, January, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West.

Gaston whose worst quality was that he was a boring fop. “The Suitor (Gaston/Gerard) is a handsome, brutal hunk. He’s the real Beast,” Ashman emphasizes by underlining in his handwritten notes, “A boor-a hunter – a bully.”⁸⁷ Once again, Ashman shows an interest in defamiliarizing an easily identifiable character as a monster like he does for Seymour. Belle leads by example by judging Gaston on factors other than looks. In the finished film, Belle expresses her loneliness in her small town to her father, Maurice, saying she does not feel like she fits in.

BELLE. It’s just that I’m not sure I fit in here. There’s no one I can really talk to.

MAURICE: What about that Gaston? He’s a handsome fellow!

BELLE: He’s handsome all right, and rude and conceited and... Oh Papa, he’s not for me!⁸⁸

In one of her later outlines, Woolverton explains what this is intended to do dramaturgically, “Now we see that this girl does not judge books by their covers, and we know that if anyone is going to help the Beast that we saw in the Prologue, she is the one to do it.”⁸⁹ When this dialogue and opening song go to get animated, her judgement of Gaston is more emphasized through her facial expressions, most notably, her raised eyebrow. “This seems like he first real romance, yet she’s smart enough to know what she doesn’t want,” says one of Belle’s animators Lorna Cook. In the reprise of the song “Belle” she sings about her desire: “I want adventure in the great wide somewhere. I want

⁸⁷ “Important Stuff,” notes in the hand of Howard Ashman for Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, ca. 1989. (047.00.01) Manuscript. Howard Ashman Collection, [Music Division](#), Library of Congress (47.00.01) (047.00.00).

⁸⁸ *Beauty and the Beast*, 1991.

⁸⁹ Linda Woolverton to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Peter Schneider, and Don Hahn, August 27, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West.

it more than I can tell. And for once it might be grand to have someone understand. I want so much more than they've got planned." It's clear from this why she doesn't want Gaston: he doesn't understand her. "Which is kind of a refreshing female role... I like the way Belle thinks a little more... The most fun part is making a character *think*."⁹⁰ When the character thinks, she looks off to the side and furrows her brow. When she judges, she raises an eyebrow. When Gaston steals her book and expresses distaste for her favorite pastime, she is judging him with a raised eyebrow. When he throws her book in the mud, she is judging him, with a raised eyebrow. In many ways Belle's raised eyebrow can be read as a Brechtian "gestus" – a gesture that narrates the inner workings of Belle's mind without saying her thoughts out loud.

Belle uses her judgment of situations as well. This is established in the scene where Gaston asks – or rather demands – that Belle marry him. In the "Purdum Reel," Belle politely rejects him. In the first Ashman/Woolverton draft, she "turns him down flat."⁹¹ As this scene went to be storyboarded from the outline, it became another opportunity for Belle to show how she navigates situations. "Once everybody realized she wasn't going to be this typical Disney female, they would go to the extreme," Woolverton says, "When Gaston came, they had her dumping him in a closet. She became bitchy. My argument was that she shouldn't dump him in there, because she was too smart for that. She could get rid of him in other ways."⁹² In her next draft, Woolverton wrote her outsmarting him: when he leans against a door, with her in-

⁹⁰ Bob Thomas, *Disney's Art of animation: from Mickey Mouse to Beauty and the Beast*, (United Kingdom: Disney-Hyperion, 1991), 64-65.

⁹¹ Linda Woolverton to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Peter Schneider, and Don Hahn, August 27, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West.

⁹² Korkis, <https://cartoonresearch.com/index.php/in-her-own-words-linda-woolverton/>.

between, she smiles politely, rejecting him with flattery “I just don’t deserve you,” and opens the doorknob so that Gaston goes flying out the door.⁹³ This is the version that ended up in the final cut. She judges the situation and responds accordingly, ultimately using her intelligence to escape him.

When she discovers that the Beast has imprisoned her father, she makes her way to the castle, and when she finds him in the dungeon, she makes a bargain with the Beast to exchange herself for her father, citing that he is sick and could die. In the 18th Century version of the fairytale, and the “Purdum Reel”, Belle’s father makes the decision to exchange her for his freedom. In the early Ashman/Woolverton outline, the Beast makes the suggestion. That was written in January, but by June, one of Woolverton’s drafts has Belle making the decision herself after deliberating: “But he could die! Please, I’ll do anything to save his life... I... take me instead.”⁹⁴ In the finished film, some of the lines change, but otherwise is the same. Even though she is giving up her freedom, it is a rational decision based on a cost-benefit analysis that is conveyed through the “gestus” of her furrowed brow. She has judged the situation and given it thought. Her father would die if in prison, she would not. She would be a prisoner, but at least both of them would be alive.

The Beast suggests that he would be open to this exchange.⁹⁵ Raising her eyebrow in judgement, she asks him to “come into the light” so she can see him better and gauge

⁹³ Linda Woolverton draft of *Beauty and the Beast*, June 14, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West, 25.

⁹⁴ Linda Woolverton draft of *Beauty and the Beast*, June 14, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West, 25.

⁹⁵ The Beast agrees to this offer under the thought that she could break the spell, and that the only way to keep her at the castle to do so, is to imprison her. Unlike Belle, he does not rationally assess the situation or Belle. He makes an emotional judgement, out of fear, and misjudges her for her beauty, later remarking, “She’s so beautiful and I’m... well look at me” and “She’ll never see me as anything more than a

more of the situation. When she first sees him, her eyes widen with fear, suggesting that her instincts are jumping into gear. Belle's first encounter with the "monster" accurately represents brain function. As Chemers explains, "Rapid assessment of strangers to see if they present a threat occurs in the brain's amygdala."⁹⁶ Belle's wide eyes suggest a different brain function than her side-eye or raised eyebrow. This is a visceral response. She looks away. However, much like Bloom's advocacy of reasoned compassion, Chemers writes, "The brain also provides opportunities for control and retraining of those impulses. Beginning with awareness of the impulse, the brain can be conditioned with the collection of information... to a more thoughtful response based on reason and evidence."⁹⁷ As the film progresses, she must use her superior judgement skills, which are already established by previous scenes, including this one in the dungeon, to overcome what happens in her brain at this moment.

One of the first major transformations for her character happens after she tries to escape and is attacked by wolves. The Beast, feeling remorse that he frightened her, follows her and rescues her from the wolves, becoming seriously injured and passing out in the snow. She turns towards the path to freedom but, as her animation communicates, she thinks. She bargains with herself. Does she save the Beast's life or leave him there? Judging that the Beast no longer presents a threat – now that he's saved her life – she decides to take him back to the castle to help heal his wounds. It's a very similar cost-benefit analysis that she does for her father. Once again, she determines that she will lose

monster," doubting her ability to recognize his humanity. Gary Trousdale, Kirk Wise, Alan Menken, Howard Ashman, Linda Woolverton, *Beauty and the Beast*, (Disney Feature Animation, 1991), Disney Plus.

⁹⁶ Chemers, 169.

⁹⁷ Chemers, 169.

her freedom, but she will save a life. There is still no evidence that she feels empathy for him or recognizes his humanity, but she can show him compassion, nonetheless, and tends to his wounds. Woolverton writes in her memo to Katzenberg that she thinks this should be the moment that Belle first “sees a glimmer of humanity” in him, making this the moment of empathy. Katzenberg writes in the margin that he agrees and the scene just isn’t working for him... yet.⁹⁸ Storyboard artist Brenda Chapman wrote a scene here, where Belle and the Beast argue over whose fault it is that he is injured, with Belle, as usual, outsmarting her opponent. Ashman championed this, and Woolverton, open to suggestions that are consistent with Belle’s character, wrote it into the screenplay, writing in her notes that this scene now establishes them as equals, which is important to do before she falls in love with him.⁹⁹ This is the scene that made it into the final script. Belle is in control of her brain, and it is safe for empathy to be established.

In the following montage song “Something There”, Ashman’s lyrics allow Belle, the Beast, and the ensemble of Objects to make commentary at this point in the story. This is a part where Ashman’s contributions bring a distancing effect to the musical. Belle’s lyrics, again, judge the situation, but uniquely, here, she judges herself. “There’s something sweet, and almost kind, but he was mean, and he was coarse, and unrefined. But now he’s dear and so unsure. I wonder why I didn’t see it here before.”¹⁰⁰ Ashman’s lyrics convey several key pieces of information: firstly, that she is starting to see his vulnerability, and, therefore, recognize his humanity. This song conveys the beginnings

⁹⁸ Linda Woolverton and Howard Ashman to Jeffrey Katzenberg, Peter Schneider, and Don Hahn, January, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writers Guild of America, West.

⁹⁹ Linda Woolverton to All Concerned, “Re: The Character Arc of the Beast,” November 12, 1990, Woolverton Papers, Writer’s Guild.

¹⁰⁰ Howard Ashman and Alan Menken, *Beauty and the Beast*, (New York: Musical Theatre International, 2007), 67.

of empathy at about halfway through the musical. It is a process. Secondly, she interrogates the reasons why she didn't see his humanity before, citing his behavior but also more superficial aspects. In doing so, the lyrics bring her biases to light and shows the audiences how she is able to self-critique.¹⁰¹ Because the spectators are intended to participate in this journey with her, they are also intended to have these same self-reflections. It's not Brechtian in a strict sense, but it's Ashman's way of prompting critical analysis of the characters from his own characters. His use of the word "but" can be especially effective at bringing the contradictions of the situation to the forefront for the audience to think about. Throughout the *Beauty and the Beast* screenplay and lyrics, combined, the word "but" is spoken almost a hundred times, showing how the dialogue and lyrics work together, not just to create contradictions, but expose them and commentate on them – a quite Brechtian thing to do. Ashman provides additional commentary from the secondary character Mrs. Potts, the teapot, who sings the title song "Beauty and the Beast" to her son Chip, the teacup, while Belle and the Beast dance in the iconic scene. In the famous lyrics "tale as old as time" the song self-references the fact that the Disney iteration is one of many versions of the tale being told as she sings, "Ever just the same, ever a surprise," which is another way one might say

¹⁰¹ He has done this before with some of his previous heroines. Before Audrey offers herself to the plant monster in *Little Shop*, she sings about how she figures she'll be closer to Seymour as part of the plant, since he cares more about the plant than her.¹⁰¹ This is a moment when Seymour (and by proxy the audience) judges himself and realizes, too late, that he is too-far gone. In the *Little Mermaid*, Ursula and Ariel bargain over the conditions of the spell that will transform her into a human, and Ariel does a cost-benefit analysis of the deal, ultimately deciding to move forward with it. *Little Mermaid* uses secondary characters like Sebastian, the crab, and Flounder to offer commentary in not-quite-as-Brechtian a way as the street urchins in *Little Shop*, but their verbal and physical objections to Ariel's choice allow the audience to question whether the protagonist is making the right choice. With Belle, he takes these to the next level and gives her more awareness and more critical analysis than his previous heroines.

“defamiliarization,” alluding to the fact that there is always something new to discover in things that are familiar or repeated like fairytales.

After this number, Belle discovers that her father is ill, and the Beast insists that she leaves to help him – this time sacrificing his own freedom (from the spell) to save a life. Not only does she see more of his humanity in this moment, she says, “Thank you for understanding how much he needs me,” harkening back to her “I Want” song where she says she wants “someone” to “understand” her – signaling that the Beast is exactly what she has wanted all along, exemplifying how Ashman’s lyrics and Woolverton’s screenplay, once again, work together in a unified dramaturgy.

At this point in the story, Belle’s small-minded town discovers the existence of the Beast, and led, by the jealous Gaston, they sing the “Mob Song” and storm the castle to “kill the beast.” This is the song that is most-often references as Ashman’s commentary on AIDS, where the villagers sing “We don’t like what we don’t understand in fact it scares us and this monster is mysterious at least. Bring your guns bring your knives. Save your children, and your wives. We’ll save our village, and our lives. We’ll kill the beast!”¹⁰² The scene with the villagers marching with torches and pitchforks conjures very specific iconography from history, which Bloom talks about above, where in-group empathy leads to prejudice and violence against the Other. Gaston is able to stoke and manipulate their empathy. They sing, “We’re not safe until he’s dead. He’ll come stalking us at night. Set to sacrifice our children to his monstrous appetite. He’ll wreak havoc on our village if we let him wander free,” and he responds that it’s time to

¹⁰² Ashman, 92.

take action. This is unreasoned empathy, and at this point in the film it is clear that these characters are bad and should be judged negatively – drawing a connection that people who march with torches and intent to harm, in real life, should also be judged negatively: from Nazis to lynch mobs, and more recently to the alt-right in Charlottesville to the violent mob who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021. In this way, Ashman once again exposed the monstrous behavior of the “normal” characters, as he did in *Little Shop with Seymour*, defamiliarizing the quaint small town and showing how quickly they became life threatening for those who have been “monsterized.” Compare this moment to one of the other times in Disney history, when characters “storm the castle” in *Robin Hood* (1973), and the characters attacking the castle were framed as heroes. While “The Mob Song” is not revolutionary in terms of theatre or popular culture history, but in terms of Disney history, which idealizes “small town America,” as *Mainstreet U.S.A.* in its cultural production and theme parks, this song represented a monumental shift in Disney’s perspective.

In a fight with Gaston, the Beast is mortally wounded, and finally, this is the scene that will test to see if the experiment of empathy for a “monster” is successful. Would the audience cry for the Beast? Could the audience cry *with* the Beast? For each person in the audience, this might be different. Paige O’Hara, the Broadway actress who did the voice acting for Belle, cried real tears while recording the scene. Her voice can be heard cracking on “You’ll alright. We’re together now, everything’s going to be fine,” and, of course, the pinnacle line, “Please, don’t leave me. I love you,” which breaks the spell. If landing as intended the participatory moment where Belle empathizes fully with the Beast – as exemplified by O’Hara’s emotional performance, and the audience

participation with Belle, the scene can be very emotional. One of the most poignant records of an audience response was in 1990, when an unfinished version of the film (with pencil drawing) premiered at the New York Film Festival, the scene where the Beast transformed back into a human received a standing ovation.¹⁰³ It is rare that any film at the New York Film Festival would ever receive a standing ovation, let alone an [unfinished] animated one, but the emotional response can be attributed to the fact that this was the moment when the Beast's humanity was revealed most strongly.¹⁰⁴ A dramaturgical reading of this response can lead to the conclusion that the audience, in participating in the Beasts transformation are, themselves, transformed.¹⁰⁵ This is the "dramaturgy of empathy" in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* and how Ashman and Woolverton contributed to it through their theatrical training.

Conclusion

As powerful as the Beast's moment of transformation is, one of the more poignant moments between the two characters, in terms of the film's "dramaturgy of empathy" happens shortly *after* he has transformed into a human. The Prince says, "Belle, it's me," implying that she wouldn't recognize him. Over the years, this moment has struck some

¹⁰³ Hahn, Don. *Waking Sleeping Beauty*. Red Shoes, 2009. Documentary Film. DVD.

¹⁰⁴ In much of the literature cited in footnote 10, the transformation moment in the film is critiqued as reinforcing conformity at best and white supremacy at worst because the Beast transforms from a symbol of Otherness, with brown fur and horns into a white, Aryan-looking Prince. Without disputing the critiques, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the Jewish authorship of this film in Ashman, Menken, Schneider and executives like Eisner and Katzenberg who were involved at every stage of production. I would also like to acknowledge Robby Benson, the voice actor who performed the role of the Beast/Prince in the film, who is not only Jewish, but whose appearance in films like *The Chosen* had established his Jewishness as a feature of his public persona. I mention these individuals in the hope that their positionality will be more deeply explored in relation to this moment, in future scholarly engagements with this film.

¹⁰⁵ Glen Keane, the lead animator for the Beast, describes drawing the Beast's transformation saying, "It was sincere; it was real for me. It was very real for the Prince."¹⁰⁵ Keane is echoing words that Tytla had used to describe Dumbo as he connects his own reality to that of the character, and his creation of this moment. kyler1984. "Glen Keane on Beauty and the Beast transformation sequence" Youtube.com. April 24, 2015. Accessed November 30, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Wrc8Dck520>.

spectators as odd – in fact the 2017 live-action remake of *Beauty and the Beast* cut this dialogue out completely. After all, she saw him transform before her eyes, how would she not know it was the Beast?

However, this moment is a powerful reversal of the Disney principle of recognition, because instead of seeing herself or her humanity in the Beast, she is now looking to find the Beast in the human Prince. So, when she looks into the Prince's eyes and recognizes the Beast's eyes, saying "It *is* you!" it not only signals her empathy with the Beast, but that she has undergone a shift in identity: she has grown so much as a person that she identifies more with the Beast than the Prince. The decision to cut this moment from the 2017 remake – a decision which has garnered much ire from popular commentators – signals a lack of understanding of the moment's significance in the 1991 version.¹⁰⁶ Because *Beauty and the Beast* was fully animated, it did not qualify Woolverton for membership in the Writer's Guild of America, at the time. Therefore, she does not receive residuals from the film, and she has no say in how future iterations, such as the 2017 remake, are made. The writers and directors of the 2017 film did not consult her. "I wasn't totally thrilled with *The Beauty and the Beast* remake because I didn't think it was exactly true to the mythology of the storytelling," she says, "And I'm not happy that I don't get to participate. Who would be?"¹⁰⁷ As this chapter has demonstrated,

¹⁰⁶ Lindsay Ellis, "That Time Disney Remade *Beauty and the Beast*," Youtube.com, July 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpUx9DnQUkA>.

¹⁰⁷ Seth Abromovitch, "Original 'Lion King' Screenwriter Apprehensive of Remake: "I Wasn't Thrilled With 'Beauty and the Beast,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, December 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/linda-woolverton-lion-king-remake-beauty-beast-1165869/>.

Ashman and Woolverton were key voices who shaped the film and constructed its “dramaturgy of empathy,” based on theatrical methods.

The 1991 iteration broke both domestic and international box office records, and became the first animated film to be nominated for a Best Picture Academy Award.

While the individual responses, be they emotional, intellectual, or neurological, could never be fully documented, film reviews like Dan Rather’s piece on the “AIDS Metaphor” offers an example of the ideal response from a spectator:

“Say that the AIDS metaphor is just one way, a valid way, of looking at “Beauty and the Beast.” That means that millions of Americans, most of them children, are looking at a person with AIDS with a new kind of compassion. We’re crying when he’s sad, cheering for him when he wins. You can hope that huge audiences would feel the same way about a real Person With AIDS, Kaposi’s Sarcoma lesions and all the most visible symptoms of the full-blown illness. You can expect that we’d feel pity. But can you possibly imagine that we’d *identify* with him? Actually, now that we know how to identify with the Beast, maybe we *can* identify with people with AIDS.”¹⁰⁸

This is another poignant example of the film’s “dramaturgy of empathy” working as intended. What’s more is that his article in the Los Angeles Times also notes how much the movie made him think: “Maybe I’m more wrong in trying to find social significance in a Disney cartoon than I am in trying to write movie criticism. But “Beauty and the Beast” has given me a lot to think about – about love, about loneliness, about compassion and fear. And about hope.” Thus, there is evidence that, for some members of the audience, the dramaturgy worked on an intellectual level in addition to the emotional level, which, knowing the influences of Brecht, Burger, and Way, would be an ideal outcome. *Beauty and the Beast* was an experiment in empathy that used theatrical techniques to push the very foundations of animation principles – that were based on

¹⁰⁸ Rather, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-03-22-ca-7396-story.html>.

recognition and participation – past their limits into new territory. As the next two chapters reveal, the next test was seeing how far they could push theatrical conventions by introducing animated characters into theatrical spaces.

Chapter 3: Visions Fantastic: Theatre Museums and Laboratories of Disney Theme Parks

Prologue: In Search of America's National Theatre

In 1995, Carol Rosen wrote an article titled “The Ghost Lights of Our Theatres: The Fate of Contemporary American Dramaturgs” for the anthology *What is Dramaturgy*. Nearing the end of the 20th Century, she laments the fact that all attempts to replicate the European model of a national theatre in the United States, had “gone awry.”¹ Companies such as the Provincetown Players, the Federal Theatre Project, the Group Theatre, regional theatres like the Guthrie, and the National Theatre project at Lincoln Center had failed to become a home base: a place that could be, in her words, “at once a museum and a laboratory, a steady job, and a series of new adventures, all housed under one roof filled with sympathetic companions.”² In a bold move, she ends by identifying Disneyland as America’s “de facto National Theatre,” because, as she says, “it is the only place in America where I have stood in line for over two hours, along with 300 other smiling and patient ticket holders, eagerly anticipating a matinee.”³ While Rosen’s assessment is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, and framed as a failure, this chapter approaches the idea of Disneyland as America’s “de facto national theatre” completely unironically: investigating how an influx of theatre professionals to the Walt Disney Company in the 1980s elevated the parks to a place where they had a national impact.

¹ Carol Rosen “Ghost Lights of our Theatres,” in *What Is Dramaturgy?* Bert Cardullo, ed. American University Studies, Series XXvi, Theatre Arts, V. 20. (New York: P. Lang, 1995), 182.

² Rosen, 182.

³ Rosen, 183.

For all intents and purposes, this chapter does not argue that Disneyland *is* America's National Theatre. As theatre historian Marvin Carlson writes in his essay "National Theatres: Then and Now," definitions of what constitutes a National Theatre are diverse and ever-changing, along with the concepts of nationhood and national identity.⁴ The modern concept of a National Theatre originated in Europe, coinciding with the birth of modern nationalism in the 18th and 19th Centuries, although, as S.E. Wilmer writes in *National Theatres in a Changing Europe*, the 21st Century meaning is most often inclined to include the following criteria for a theatre that represents, "*the* apex in production standards and artistic creativity within the country, as well as reflecting the legacy of national theatre traditions."⁵ Wilmer adds that, "In a competitive economic climate with numerous alternatives for entertainment and diversion, National Theatres [also] seek new ways of attracting an audience, responding to the interests of culturally diverse populations, creating transnational and intercultural links, and trying to balance their budgets."⁶ It would be bold to assume that Disneyland represents the apex of American theatre. Instead, as this chapter articulates, Rosen's definition of a National

⁴ Carlson writes, "The term National Theatre is in such common usage around the globe that it seems fairly transparent, but as is the case with any term widely adopted across nationalities and cultures, when we consider individual usages we find that there are almost as many varieties of National Theatre as there are National Theatres themselves. There is certainly a general consensus of opinion about what a National Theatre is, but even the best known National Theatres do not generally fit this model in all particulars. The common image of a National Theatre is of a monumental edifice located in a national capital, authorized, privileged and supported by the government, and devoted wholly or largely to productions of the work of national dramatists. Naturally some National Theatres adhere closely to this ideal model, but the vast majority depart from it in one way or another and the reasons for their doing so provide interesting insights into how the ideas of nationhood and of theatre operate in different times and different places. Although my remarks will focus on the National Theatre in Europe, I will also look more briefly at some of the ways this essentially European idea was interpreted outside of Europe, since these variations often shed important light on the assumptions and dynamics of the concept itself."

Marvin Carlson, "National Theatres: Then and Now," in *National Theatres in a Changing Europe*, ed. S. E. Wilmer (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21.

⁵ S.E. Wilmer, "Introduction," *National Theatres in a Changing Europe*. *Studies in International Performance*, (Basingstoke England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1.

⁶ Wilmer, 1.

Theatre as both a “museum” and a “laboratory” of steady employment, that can attract many visitors, (a definition that closely aligns to Wilmer’s contemporary definition) applies to Disney theme parks at the culmination of the “Disney Renaissance” period. Like the first two chapters in this dissertation, this chapter is interested in “how” Disney theme parks came to meet these criteria. Specifically, this chapter tells the story of how the parks went from being a “museum” of American theatre heritage from 1955-1983 to include a more prominent “laboratory” element, which was dedicated to the discovery of new theatrical forms and function from 1984-1994.

After all, Disney theme parks were never intended to be America’s National Theatre – an American cultural center, perhaps, but not a National Theatre. But before I name this chapter “How to Succeed as National Theatre Without Really Trying,” it is important to note that one of the key components of “why” theatre in Disney parks gained the cultural capital of national recognition was because of a conscious ambition and effort to scale it up: to make more theatre, to make it more sophisticated, and to make it more culturally relevant. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the turning point for many of the stories of transformations in this dissertation was when Michael Eisner, a former theatre major, became C.E.O. of the Walt Disney Company, in 1984. This would spark a decade of theatrical experimentation in Disney theme parks from 1984-1994, in a period known as the “Disney Renaissance.”

Eisner recalls, “I associated Disney with fun, theatricality, magic... My purpose was to stress the importance of theatricality and innovation,” emphasizing the way that

theatre informed the way he saw the whole Company and his role in it.⁷ As discussed in previous chapters, the Company had fallen behind in the decades following Walt Disney's death. In these slower years, the theme parks were the Company's main source of income, as both live action and animated films performed poorly at the box office.⁸ This is one of the reasons that one of Eisner's first moves as C.E.O. was to improve the theme parks, with a specialized effort to make them more relevant to teenagers, like his son Breck, who didn't have much to do in a park geared primarily towards young children and parents.⁹ While Eisner recognized that divisions like television and film would need to be reorganized from the ground up, the theme parks could be updated, expanded, and renewed by simply building on existing foundations.¹⁰ Rosen's observation, therefore, was written at the culmination of a decade of rapid and intense theatrical experimentation in the Disney theme parks, that was built on and supported by dramaturgical, historic, and physical foundations, which will be discussed at more length in the next section. In addition to strong foundations, theatre evolved in Disney theme parks because of the allocation of resources, including time, personnel, budget, and physical space to the development of theatrical attractions.

By the peak of the "Disney Renaissance," places like Disneyland, Walt Disney World, EPCOT, and Disney-MGM Studios Theme Park embodied a "museum" of American theatre history, a "laboratory" of cutting-edge stagecraft, a place of

⁷ Eisner, chap. 8, Kindle.

⁸ Peter Christopher Kunze, "Staging a Comeback: Film and Theatre Convergence at Disney, 1982-1998," Dissertation, (University of Texas at Austin, 2018), 52.

⁹ Eisner, chap. 8, Kindle.

¹⁰ "Unlike movies and television, which needed to be virtually re-launched from scratch, when Frank [Wells] and I arrived, all the parks required was updating, expansion, and renewed excitement." Eisner, Michael D.. *Work in Progress: Risking Failure Surviving Success* . Disney Book Group. Kindle Edition.

employment for a large influx of theatre professionals and attracted millions of national and transnational guests each year. In short, while there was never an articulated goal of having Disney theme parks represent an American National Theatre, the efforts covered in this chapter detail a rare moment, when one of the answers to the question “how do we become more relevant?” was “theatre.”

Foundations

This section presents and investigates a paradox in Disney theme park history. On the one hand, theatre had been a marginal art form in the parks for or the first thirty years of operation. On the other hand, theatre had been embedded into many aspects of the park including its architecture, its iconography, its marketing, its public relations and personnel management – notably the use of theatrical terminology like “cast member” and “backstage” to describe the people who work at the parks and the areas not seen by guests.¹¹ This seeming contradiction occurred because the first generation of Disney theme park planners and designers, called Imagineers, borrowed heavily from theatrical traditions and inspirations, but they ultimately came from a background in animation, which informed their sensibility, and made theatre just one more tool at their disposal in service of a larger whole. The result was a strong foundation of theatre in park tradition, with much room for expansion and innovation, as theatre was viewed for so long as a less-important medium.

One example of this is the fact that the first building to be completed in Disneyland was the historic exterior of the Opera House on Main Street U.S.A., modeled

¹¹ Snow, Richard. *Disney's Land: Walt Disney and the Invention of the Amusement Park That Changed the World*. (Scribner, 2020), Kindle Edition, 323.

after the Carter Opera House of Walt Disney's childhood town of Marceline Missouri.¹² The interior, however, was being used as a lumber mill to complete other buildings and attractions, including the riverboat, the *Mark Twain*, which would serve as a "visual magnet" to draw guests to Frontierland.¹³ For Walt and his first generation of Imagineers, the "visual magnet" of the riverboat was much more important than having a working theatre on Mainstreet, because as Disneyland historian Richard Snow writes, in his book *Disney's Land: Walt Disney and the Invention of the Amusement Park That Changed the World*: "From the start, [Walt] Disney had been particularly interested in how crowds flow through public spaces. He wanted to ensure that Disneyland visitors were constantly tempted to keep moving."¹⁴ As first-generation Imagineer, John Hench explains, "The work of the Imagineers is an adaptation of moviemaking procedures" into a three-dimensional, narrative spaces that guests could walk-through.¹⁵ As with animation, the process starts with mapping a plot on storyboards, and then considering "the spaces though which [the] guests travel within and between attractions, and the time it takes them to do this."¹⁶ In an animated film, timing is incredibly important, and animators are able to choreograph, or "stage", animated bodies to move at a certain speed, in a certain direction, to correspond with a moment of action and emotion.¹⁷ Despite what some

¹² Robin, Seaton Jefferson, "Inside Walt Disney's Life in Marceline," Missouri Life Magazine, February 25, 2020, <https://missourilife.com/inside-walt-disneys-life-in-marceline/>

¹³ Snow, 123.

¹⁴ Snow, 123.

¹⁵ John Hench, *Designing Disney: Imagineering and the Art of the Show*, (Disney Editions, 2008), 5.

¹⁶ Hench, 5.

¹⁷ "Staging," is one of the "12 Principles of Animation" described by Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston in *The Illusion of Life: Disney Animation*. "Staging," writes Thomas and Johnston, "is the most general of the principles because it covers so many areas and goes back so far in the theatre. Its meaning, however, is very precise: it is the presentation of any idea so that is completely and unmistakably clear. An action is staged so that it is understood, a personality so that it is recognizable, an expression so that it can be seen, a mood so that it will affect the audience. Each is communicating to the fullest extent with the viewers when it is properly staged." Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston. *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life*. 1st ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1981), Scribd E-Book.

critical theorists like Umberto Eco say about Disney theme parks, the Imagineers cannot control the movements and actions of guests.¹⁸ They can only “script” them to a certain extent with things like “visual magnets” that inspire guests to want to move towards them – but even then, guests can choose to deviate from that scriptive path.¹⁹ Because the goal of the parks was to have guests move through narratives instead of merely watch them, the objective to keep guests moving was of the upmost importance, and all forms of theatre in the park were planned in accordance with, what I will refer to as this dramaturgy of movement.

Under this dramaturgy, the concept of a purpose-built stage – and by extension, many forms of theatre – where guests would have to stop moving to sit and watch a story, presented potential obstacles to the larger objectives of the park. The result was that park entertainment was, for the most part, designed to be open, and accessible, where guests could come and go organically. With this in mind, it is worth noting that the very first director of the Entertainment division, Thomas Walker, was not a theatre person. He came from a background in marching bands and college half-time shows, and these traditions were represented in the form of parades, marching bands, and fireworks – suited the concept of openness and movement.²⁰ The halftime metaphor is apt because these were forms of entertainment that were understood as interludes, momentary rest

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality: Essays*, 1st Harvest/HBJ Ed. ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 57 and 58.

¹⁹ I use the word “script” and “scriptive thing” in reference to Robin Bernstein’s work, which examines things that are designed to “script” behavior – recognizing that consumers can, and often do, create their own divergent readings and actions. I will discuss this in more depth in later sections of this chapter, in terms of identity formation.

Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 101 (2009), 69.

²⁰ Dana Parsons, “He Made the Music--Now She Wants Disney to Face It,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-04-10-me-56979-story.html>.

periods, and not main attractions. There were spatters of live theatre in other places in the parks, such as actors playing out dramatic conflicts on the streets of Frontierland in dialogue and pretend shoot-outs.²¹ These environmental theatrical productions, along with pop-up musical bands and other forms of street performance were strategically located in places where guests would be waiting in lines or waiting around to go to the next thing.²² Imagineers learned early on that their dreams of constant, seamless movement were not going to come to fruition, especially for lines for attractions. Thinking of ways to keep guests engaged while they waited in line was a question that would underline much of the Imagineering and its subset Entertainment division up to and including the “Disney Renaissance” period, affecting everything from waiting cue area theming, to line design, to sending actors and musicians to keep guests entertained while they were standing or moving slowly in a line.²³ Thus, Walker was building a foundation with these early Disney park environmental entertainments.

Even though Walker did not come from a theatre background, one of his interventions in park entertainment would impact thousands of theatre and performing arts students in the future – and should be recognized as one of the foundations that future generation built on. In the 1960s, he started the practice of inviting local high school and community marching bands to perform in Disneyland.²⁴ This was not necessarily innovative or revolutionary, but it was the start of a tradition that would grow to become a future powerhouse. Over the decades, into the “Disney Renaissance,” and still to this

²¹ Ted Linhart, “Summer 1968 Report to Disneyland’s Lessees,” *DizAvenue: It’s Not Mainstreet, but It’s Close to It*, Dizavenue.com, October 15, 2016, <https://www.dizavenue.com/2016/10/summer-1968-report-to-disneylands.html>.

²² Linhart.

²³ Linhart.

²⁴ Parsons, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-04-10-me-56979-story.html>.

day, the programs expanded to include theatre in the Disney Magic Music Days program, where students can perform in theme parks around the world and take workshops.²⁵ This fact, alone, could make the parks akin to a National Theatre: from the sheer number of artists from around the nation that have performed there. I, myself, had the opportunity as a teenager to perform in Walt Disney World, with my high school show choir twice – remembering the incentive that the trip gave many high school students to join the drama club, who would have never gotten on stage otherwise. Consistent with the park’s overall dramaturgy of narrative immersion and participation, these programs, first started by Walker, have given many young artists, and their families, a sense of achievement and ownership of entertainment in Disney theme parks.

Foundations like these would prove useful in the future, but in the 1950s, the Imagineers’ view of theatre was located primarily in the past, instead of the future – quite literally, theatre was relegated to historic sections of the parks’ many “lands”, including the unused Opera House on Mainstreet U.S.A. and the frontier dramas on the streets of Frontierland. This was another aspect of theatre’s first appearances in Disneyland that simultaneously built foundations, but also embodied limitations. Disneyland was innovative in many ways, but not in terms of theatre. Imagineers and corporate sponsors were busy designing transportation for the future, the house of the future, and even the “Bathroom of Tomorrow,” they were not envisioning “Theatre of Tomorrow”.²⁶

However, as stated above, one of the major components of a National Theatre is its

²⁵ Anonymous, “Magic Music Days,” Walt Disney Archives, Accessed April 10, 2021. <https://d23.com/a-to-z/magic-music-days/>.

²⁶ Here, I am referencing attractions in Tomorrowland such as Autopia, the Monorail, the Monsanto House of the Future, and the Crane Bathroom of Tomorrow.

reflection of a nation's theatrical past, and this is where the park's references to theatre history become a foundation for the future.

A "Museum" of American Theatre History

Shortly before Disneyland opened in 1955, Walt Disney explained to an interviewer: "I've always wanted to do American history. It's due. We have taken too many things for granted. I'm not really telling history, though. I'm telling about people; history happens to be going on at the time."²⁷ This quote reminds academic historians and theorists that Walt Disney and his Imagineers saw themselves, not as historians or museum curators but, first and foremost, as artists and storytellers. It also offers the historian a useful way of unlocking Disneyland as a "museum" of theatre history, by directing us on where to look for it. In Disney theme parks, history is what is happening in the background: in the settings, backdrops, and architecture and other narrative spaces which were designed for guests to walk through and interpret as they will. This section will, therefore, analyze these backgrounds, the way that they frame theatre history, and the ways that guest can both engage with these meanings and bring their own meanings with them.

Critics of Disney theme parks such as Stephen M. Fjellman, known for his oft-cited book *Vinyl Leaves: Walt Disney World and America*, have often problematized the way that history is presented in in these themed spaces, suggesting that the parks present a whitewashed and sanitized version of history. At this point in Disney scholarship, the Euro-American-centrism of Disney parks is undeniable, and covered at length in many

²⁷George Lipsitz, "The Making of Disneyland," in *True Stories from the American Past*, ed. William Graeber (New York: McGraw Hill, 1993), 192.

writings, most recently in Sabrina Mittermeier's 2021 book *A Cultural History of the Disneyland Theme Parks: Middle Class Kingdoms*. In exploring the ways that Disneyland has served as a "museum" of theatre history, this section maintains that any exploration of historical representation in the parks assumes a hegemonic framing. However, this section resists narratives of control, which often accompany this critique of history in Disney parks: for example, Fjellman's assertions that the parks operate as a force for social control by controlling information and context.²⁸ Rather, I embrace the concept of "framing" over the concept of "control". This is inspired by John Berger's book *Ways of Seeing*, where he talks about the ways that museums regulate the public's reception of information. This regulation, he argues, "mystifies" the past, making certain parts of it – in the cast of Disney theme parks, the more unsavory and racist parts of history – less accessible.²⁹ The important distinction is between "less accessible" and "inaccessible," of course, because, as he says, the way that humans encounter what we see is informed by what we already know. This discussion of Disney theme parks as museums, therefore, must consider the knowledge that guests bring to the parks with them, because the parks were designed with the guests' individualized experiences in mind.

As a "museum" of America's theatrical past, Disney theme parks should be read as being part of an experience economy, where the commodity is not simply goods and services (although they are part of the parks as well) but *memories* – conjuring them and making new ones.³⁰ Much of the Disney theme park experience is internal, individualized, which relies on memories of Disney properties, popular culture, American

²⁸ This theme is present throughout the multiple chapters of Fjellman's book.

²⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (United Kingdom: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 11-16.

³⁰ Joseph Pine and James H Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999),

history, and lived experiences. This is something that even critics like Fjellman acknowledge, articulating it efficiently as such:

“The form that structures our experiences at [Disney theme parks] is the cinema. As we move around we enter into a series of activities constructed as movie scenes. We are in the middle with the action taking place all around us. We stand in, walk, or ride through these scenes as we move through the possible movies of our visit... Disney simulations remind visitors of something they know, somewhere they’ve been, something they’ve seen or heard. We point things out, tell stories, argue about Disney’s take on things. We decide what to see next, argue about where to eat, complain about the lines, and we walk — endlessly.”³¹

Here, Fjellman demonstrates a keen understanding of the parks’ dramaturgy: how it was developed with cinematic principles of moving through space, how the spaces rely on and trigger memories, and how guests are tempted to keep moving. However, Fjellman asserts that guest experiences are essentially passive, and that guests have little control over their choices and interpretations.³² This is where my work departs from critics like Fjellman, and those, who use his theoretical framework as a methodology. Recognizing that Disney theme parks, like any museum that presents images of the past, is framed in ideology (in this case, Euro-centric, capitalist, middle-class, etc.) I also maintain that the contradictions and complications of American history and identity are ever-present, even if they are not explicitly stated – because they exist in the phenomenology that each guest brings with them in these sites.³³ I use this word “phenomenology” the way that Bert O. States uses it in his book *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* to refer to individualized experiences in audience reception. I am also taking this concept of presence as an audience-centered phenomenon primarily from theatre theorist

³¹ Fjellman, 44.

³² Fjellman, 44.

³³ This is where my approach leans into the phenomenology of the audience, as discussed by Herbert Blau. See note 33.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (Penguin Books, 1972), 11.

and practitioner Herbert Blau, who asserts that because the audience is present, whatever they bring with them is also present.³⁴ In this way, Disney theme parks have held millions of memories, including theatrical ones, as guests respond and engage with the backgrounds and settings of the park's structures. One of the strongest manifestations of this is Slue Foot Sue's Golden Horseshoe restaurant and dinner theatre.

This was the space where the idea of a permanent stage and the park's dramaturgy of movement reconciled. Imagineer John Hench writes, "The theory was that if all guests were seated and served at the same time, they would finish eating the main course together, allowing us to start the show during dessert at specific times for lunch and dinner."³⁵ In other words, the best place for a purpose-built stage, was in a space where guests would be sitting down *anyway* to eat, rest, and enjoy the air conditioning. Immersed in a concert saloon hall from the 1870s, guests could order ham and cheese sandwiches, beef and cheese sandwiches, tuna salad, Fritos, and, of course, a Pepsi from the show's sponsor.³⁶ The pre-show consisted of a sing-along of songs, from the 1860s, where guests could find the lyrics on a placard on their table and projected onto a screen behind comedian Jack Watson.³⁷ This exercise interpolated or cast the guests into participating roles in American theatre history: the history of the concert saloon, first popular in big coastal cities like New York and eventually in Western towns.³⁸ Drawing

³⁴ Herbert Blau, "The Human Nature of the Bot a Response to Philip Auslander," *Paj -Baltimore-*, vol. 70, no. 70, 2002, pp. 23.

³⁵ Hench, 58.

³⁶ VintageDisneyana, "1950's Disneyland Golden Horseshoe Menu Table Tent VERY RARE," Etsy.com. Accessed May 5, 2021, <https://www.etsy.com/listing/483891440/1950s-disneyland-golden-horseshoe-menu>.

³⁷ Jan Vincent, "Slue Foot Sue Proudly Presents..." Jan's World, Accessed May 5, 2021, <https://jansworld.net/gh-revue-55-86>.

³⁸ "Acts inherited from both the circus and the minstrel show had appeared for many years in concert saloons, the cheap beer-hall theatres found in many large cities, and in the exhibition rooms and "theatatoriums" attached to dime museums. Concert saloons, for the most part, began to develop in the

from theatre traditions like vaudeville, the main show, the “Golden Horseshoe Revue” featured the main character Slue Foot Sue, the proprietress of the establishment, and vaudeville veteran Wally Boag in the dual role of a traveling salesman and a Pecos Bill character.³⁹ This piece of theatre in the park was extremely popular and ran consecutively five times a day from 1955-1986, earning a place in the Guinness Book of World records as the longest running musical in human history – with more than three times as many performances as *Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway.⁴⁰ It’s success would inspire Imagineers to create other dinner theatre shows such as the Samoan, Hawaiian, and Tahitian dances performed at the Tahitian Terrace in Adventureland, or the Dixieland bands at the Blue Bayou Terrace in New Orleans Square.⁴¹ Not only do a performances like these create new theatrical memories, it conjures them as well in all of their complex forms.

Frontierland’s re-created saloon concert hall drew on histories of folk songs and vaudeville, but even though the content of the “Golden Horseshoe Revue” didn’t include

eastern states, particularly in New York, at around the middle of the nineteenth century. New York, in fact, could boast some three hundred after the Civil War, many of them located on the Bowery, in nearby Broadway, and in the so called "Hell's Kitchen" neighborhood. Gradually, however, these saloon theatres, with acts borrowed at random from minstrel shows and other forms, and with clearly bawdy elements often added for their mostly male patrons, began to become more popular in other urban areas and to move westward with settlers. They became fixtures in a number of western towns and later were often used as models in the design sets of Western movies.”

Brooks McNamera, “Popular Entertainment,” in Wilmeth, Don B, and C. W. E Bigsby. *The Cambridge History of American Theatre*. Vol. 2, 1870-1945. Vol. Vol. 2, 1870-1945, (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 390.

³⁹ The Mouse Castle, “Wally Boag and Betty Taylor in Disneyland's Golden Horseshoe Revue,” Youtube.com, July 4, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3XeI4RKDCM&t=172s>.

⁴⁰ The “Golden Horseshoe Revue” holds the record for the longest number of consecutive performances of a musical at roughly 45,000, while Phantom of the Opera has roughly 13,200 as of 2021.

Randy Lewis, “Disney Revue to Close After 31-Year Run,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1986. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-08-23-me-15953-story.html>

Playbill Staff, “Longest Running Shows on Broadway,” Playbill.com. March 9, 2020, <https://www.playbill.com/article/long-runs-on-broadway-com-109864>.

⁴¹ Strodder, “Adventureland,” Kindle.

offensive material, the history being invoked by the saloon concert hall setting, includes painful histories of racist minstrel shows and settler colonialism.⁴² Histories of colonialism are present at the Tahitian Terrace, and so are the (then recent) memories of the war in the Pacific, and stage renderings of it, such as the Broadway musical *South Pacific*.⁴³ Even if certain unsavory aspects of theatre history are omitted, the narrative spaces of a Disney theme park are still open to complex and multi-layered readings, where guests can fill in the blanks with their own memories and cultural knowledges. Just as a guest can write in painful histories into sanitized representations, they can also write in erased histories, such as those of the many black, indigenous, and people of color, who were part of frontier and Southern theatre histories.⁴⁴ An example of this is the performances in the New Orleans section of the park, and the Disneyland riverboat, the *Mark Twain*. The boat, especially, conjures the history of American theatre being performed on such vessels in the 19th Century.⁴⁵ It elicits both painful histories of minstrelsy and slave labor, but also liberatory histories of resistance, black performance and cultural expression, and how river boats were a key part of escape networks.⁴⁶ It also directly referenced the Broadway musical *Show Boat*, when Walt personally asked actress Irene Dunne, from the film version, to christen the ship on Opening Day.⁴⁷ A critical conversation can start by acknowledging absences, silences, and blank canvases, but Disneyland was designed to be a set, where the camera of the individual's mind

⁴² McNamera, 390.

⁴³ Mittermeier, 27.

⁴⁴ This topic is covered at length in books like McNenly, Linda Scarangella. *Native Performers in Wild West Shows: From Buffalo Bill to Euro Disney*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ Brockett, 331.

⁴⁶ Eric Arnesen, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁴⁷ Marchio Disney, "1955 Disneyland Opening Day [Complete ABC Broadcast]," YouTube.com, July 11, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuzrZET-3Ew&t=2304s>.

moves through stories, directing its own sequences and interpretations. The power of Disney theme parks as a “museum” of America’s theatre history is in how that conversation continues with the ways that guests have filled in those absences and silences with their own theatrical knowledge and memories. Thus, the foundation of Disney theme parks as a repository of theatrical memory was put in place since the beginning. The next thing it needed was theatre for the present and the future so that the “museum” could be combined with the “laboratory” in one place.

Stages of Tomorrow(land)

Just before Disneyland opened, 1955, Walt gave an interview with the Associated Press, and articulated his intention for the Opera House in the park was that it would “eventually” be used as a theatre, but for the time being, it was being used as a lumber mill.⁴⁸ Even though early theatre was being kept primarily in the past, there is evidence to suggest that it had a place in Walt’s vision of the future of the park, even if that future was undefined. The success of the “Golden Horseshoe Revue” led to other explorations of potential dinner theatres, where the park’s dramaturgy of movement and the construction of permanent stages could come together. One of the ideas was for a Polynesian-style dinner theatre in Adventureland that would eventually turn into the Enchanted Tiki Room attraction, featuring new technology of a song and dance performance by audio-animatronic birds.⁴⁹ When Walt Disney would eventually

⁴⁸ His exact quote was, “We’re using it for a mill now, but eventually it will be a theater.”

Thomas, Bob. *Magician of the Movies: The Life of Walt Disney*. Theme Park Press. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁹ The same logic would be used a few years later into Disneyland’s life when Walt, once again, recruited Goff to design another themed restaurant – this time for Adventureland. His original concept rendering featured a Polynesian theme with a menagerie of live birds in cages above, until, according to Imagineer Rolly Crump, Walt said, “John, you can’t have birds in cages... they’ll poop in the food.” Goff replied,

collaborate with other organizations for varying exhibits in the 1964 World's Fair, audio-animatronic technology would be a main attraction, including a lifelike robot version of Abraham Lincoln, who recited a thoughtful monologue about meeting national challenges.⁵⁰ A year later, the Opera House would be converted into a 400-seat theatre, featuring "Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln," debuting the animatronic former-president in the Disneyland. Had Walt's prophesy finally been fulfilled? Was this theatre? In a blend of history and futuristic technology, was this what Walt and his Imagineers believed was theatre for the future?

For some theorists, in the 1960s, the answer was "yes" – and this new technology was met with much negative criticism and fear that humans would be replaced. For Umberto Eco, animatronics represented the end of "realness" and the rise of perfect imitation of life, or "hyperreality" that reality could never compete with.⁵¹ For Richard Schickel, the pronouncement was even more dramatic, calling it "the dehumanization of art in its final extremity" and "a monster of wretched taste."⁵² While there were theatre scholars, in the 1970s, like James Bierman, who saw animatronics as something that could be added to live theatre to enhance it, animatronics have not become prevalent in contemporary theatre.⁵³ Furthermore, even though the animatronic humanoids would often be referred to as "actors" or in references to theatre, there is no evidence that suggests that Walt Disney and his Imagineers saw animatronics as the future of live

"Maybe they're little mechanical birds," and the Enchanted Tiki Room was born, allowing guests to sit and rest while the robotic birds moved.

Leslie Iwerks, "The Happiest Place on Earth," *The Imagineering Story*, season 1, episode 1, Disney +.

⁵⁰ Strodder, "Mr. Lincoln," Kindle.

⁵¹ Qtd in Cornfeld, 160.

⁵² Qtd in Cornfeld, 160.

⁵³ Cornfeld, 160.

theatre, or as a replacement for human bodies live theatre.⁵⁴ There is, on the other hand, quite a bit of evidence that they saw animatronics as an extension of animation, or animation in 3-D, and a useful tool to better immerse their guests in cinematic worlds. Walt said, “See, our whole forty some-odd years here has been in the world of making things move, inanimate things... It's just another dimension in the animation that we've been doing all our lives.”⁵⁵ Once again, the underlying dramaturgical concept is storytelling through movement.

There have been many theatrical experiments in Disneyland, since day one, but these have been geared towards fitting theatre into the larger vision of the park's dramaturgy. The parks were not yet a laboratory where theatre would be centralized, like it would be in the 1980s and 90s. Nevertheless, there were experiments in the 1960s and 70s that would eventually become essential foundations to theatre in the “Disney Renaissance.” One of the biggest theatrical challenges in the theme parks, since Opening Day, was bringing animated films, especially animated characters, into three-dimensional spaces. This was best done on dark rides like Mr. Toad's Wild Ride, Snow White's Scary Adventures, and Peter Pan's Flight, where Imagineers could put guests in a vehicle on a track and have more control over the staging and perspective.⁵⁶ Having animated character walk around the narrative spaces of the park was important in the overall dramaturgy of moving through stories, but it was also difficult to do. As Hench explains,

⁵⁴ For example, in the Introduction to the animatronic attraction the Carousel of Progress, sponsored by General Electric, the narrator's voice exclaims that the robot actors, along with the whole attraction is designed to show how robots can be of service in the home. Disney Chris, “46 - Carousel of Progress - General Electric Introduction,” Disneyland: A Magical Musical Audio Tour, Accessed May 11, 2021, <https://disneychris.com/15-disneyland-soundtracks/145-disneyland-audio-tour-chapter-16.html>.

⁵⁵ See, Iwerks, Disney+.

⁵⁶ Hench, 39.

“One of the greatest challenges in designing audio-animatronics and walk-around characters is the drastically restricted range of motion and expression compared to their film originals.”⁵⁷ Human bodies in costumes are not proportioned the way that animated characters are, and animatronics are limited and lack fluidity that animated and human bodies can produce. Most importantly, the eyes on costumes don’t move, and the eyes are where most of the performance of an animated character comes from.⁵⁸ But Imagineers found a way to make this work, by finding the essence of a character and transferring it to a costume or to an animatronic.

As Hench explains, this boils down to emotion: “Mickey, for example, is almost always genuine, resourceful, humble, confident, versatile, cheerful, adventurous, and well-mannered. In designing each walk-around, we have to find a facial expression and posture, an essential look for the body, hands, and feet that will enable a character to express such positive qualities and interact with a lively and persuasive way with both guests and other walk-arounds too.”⁵⁹ This means that the costume is designed with a certain facial expression, like Mickey’s smile or a villain’s evil grin, and the human actor incorporates a series of choreographed gestures to convey these essential personality traits. While there had been costumed characters in Disneyland since Opening Day, the costumes and characterizations evolved tremendously in the 1960s and 1970s, and dancers were hired to choreograph the gestures for parades and for brief stage show appearances in these decades.⁶⁰ These were theatrical experiments that animatronics were

⁵⁷ Hench, 88.

⁵⁸ Hench, 89.

⁵⁹ Hench, 91.

⁶⁰ When the park first opened in 1955, Walt Disney borrowed character costumes from the Ice Capades, who did a Disney montage. These costumes were not made with this kind of dramaturgical attention – in

a part of, although they could not match what the human body could do in terms of communicating personality and identity through movement – at least not in the 1960s and 70s. As later sections will elaborate on, these experiments would serve as a foundation for the principles behind staging animated films as theatre in the 1980s and 1990s, in the parks, and eventually on Broadway.

For the time being, however, animated characters appeared in parades and music stage shows around the park, and on new purpose-built stages in the Tomorrowland section. When Walt Disney passed away in 1966, there were already plans in the works for various park expansions, which included theatre expansions, as well. Robert “Bob” Jani succeeded Thomas Walker as Entertainment director in 1967, coinciding with the large Tomorrowland expansion, which included two new purpose-built stages: the Tomorrowland Terrace stage, and the Tomorrowland Stage.⁶¹ In the 1950s, Tomorrowland had one small temporary bandstand that would be wheeled out in the evenings in the area of the Space Bar fast food style restaurant.⁶² This removable stage was used for contemporary music concerts from surfer or garage-style bands, and was one of the closest things in the park that represented any kind of teen culture.⁶³ This stage and the restaurant would be removed to make room for the new animatronic attraction Carousel of Progress, and the Tomorrowland Terrace would take the concept of live

fact they had large holes in the faces of some of the costumes so that the ice skaters could see. The effect was almost frightening. Hench, 93.

⁶¹ Anonymous, “Robert Jani: Legends Award Category: Parks and Resorts,” Walt Disney Archives, Accessed April 10, 2021. <https://d23.com/walt-disney-legend/robert-jani/>.

⁶² <https://disneychris.com/15-disneyland-soundtracks/144-disneyland-audio-tour-chapter-15.html>

⁶³ Ibid.

music and dining that the Golden Horseshoe had perfected, and attempt to bring it into the future.

The Tomorrowland Terrace stage, designed by Imagineer Rolly Crump, worked with the same theory as the Golden Horseshoe stage. Because it was attached to a restaurant, and guests were sitting down to eat anyway, it was appropriate to include a stage, so guests could be entertained while they dined and rested. The performances on this stage, however, were primarily music concerts, instead of theatre. The most innovative and theatrical part of this theatre was its architecture. The Tomorrowland Terrace stage rose up out of the ground on hydraulics and looked like something out of the *Jetsons* with its curved arches and modernist shapes.⁶⁴ It was primarily used as a stage for contemporary music acts, and at night, the chairs and tables would be moved to free up 3,000 square feet for dancing.⁶⁵ At the time, Disneyland did not attract much of a teen fanbase, although the Tomorrowland Terrace stage, like the Space Bar bandstand before it, was one of the attractions that teens congregated around enthusiastically in archival photographs.⁶⁶ The Tomorrowland Terrace was certainly the most futuristic theatrical space in Disneyland, with the most contemporary performances – although these performances were not theatre or theatre-referencing. It was not quite the *theatre* laboratory that its setting suggested it could be.

The Tomorrowland Stage, a large, quite traditional outdoor theatre, aside from the futuristic shapes that flanked the proscenium arch, (which would soon be replaced by a large rainbow), featured more theatrical fare. As a traditional proscenium stage, located

⁶⁴ Strodder, “Tomorrowland Terrace,” Kindle.

⁶⁵ Strodder, “Tomorrowland Terrace,” Kindle.

⁶⁶ Strodder, “Tomorrowland Terrace,” Kindle.

outside, with metal folding chairs instead of permanent seating, the structure seems to be pushing the limits of the original rules of theatre and movement in the park – as if trying to see how far it can go. It is not attached to a restaurant or an already existing excuse for guests to stop moving. It is not even in air conditioning, because it is located outside. The most consistent part of the planned area was the non-permanent seating that could be moved to keep the walkways open if need be. Nevertheless, the Tomorrowland Stage was part of the first large scale effort to scale up entertainment in the park as a major draw as part of Disneyland’s Summer of ’68 festivities, which boasted 37 local, national, and international performance groups, and 800 total performers.⁶⁷ As a 1968 report to Disneyland Lessees reveals, the park’s high demand and increasing attendance rate sparked an added dramaturgical objective for theatre in the parks: the increased number of guests means an increased number of obstacles to free movement, in the park.⁶⁸ “No one, of course, comes to Disneyland to stand in line... they come to participate in as many adventures as possible in their six hours average visit,” the report reads. After citing the many street performances, initiated under Walker’s tenure such as the Frontierland shootout, they proclaim that, “Today, these little shows have become so much a part of the Magic Kingdom that guests may virtually watch one show, while waiting in line to see another.”⁶⁹ The performances on the sedentary Tomorrowland Stage, like many of the mobile performances of music in the 1950s, were primarily music-based, providing a soundtrack to this area of the park, and not requiring that people necessarily stop to watch, although portable metal chairs were added, as many guests

⁶⁷ Linhart.

⁶⁸ Linhart.

⁶⁹ Linhart.

liked to stop and watch. The Tomorrowland Stage can be read as part of this effort to keep guests entertained while they waited, because of its prominent location, where it can be seen, and more importantly, heard, from most areas of Tomorrowland, including guests on the move, riding the Skyway cable cars, the Monorail, and the People Mover. The nature of that “soundtrack”, however, encapsulated one of the largest contradictions of Tomorrowland itself: the settings were futuristic, but the content and material was nostalgic, and firmly rooted in the past – including all references to theatre, emphasizing, once again the “museum” aspect, but not the “laboratory.”

In his essay “‘The Future Is Truly in the Past’: The Regressive Nostalgia of Tomorrowland,” Tom Robson identifies the very specific ways that the attractions of this area like the Carousel of Progress reify traditional social norms and domesticity, by essentially cutting-and-pasting the present into futuristic settings with better technology.⁷⁰ The performances at the Tomorrowland Stage were no different on the chance that contemporary bands and performers were showcased there, but a lot of the time, the offerings went even further to celebrate the past. In the daytime, the main attraction at the stage was the Kids of the Kingdom show choir, which was a nod to the Mouseketeers of the 1950s, and directly modeled by the new Entertainment director, Bob Jani, on wholesome music groups like The Young Americans and The Kids Next Door.⁷¹ This group of mostly white college-aged performers (with two black performers)

⁷⁰ “By presenting a world centered around a man as the center of the family unit, and without acknowledging significant contributions by women, people of color, queer people, or any conception of family without a cis-gendered, heterosexual, white man at its core, the Carousel of Progress simply reifies traditional values.”

Tom Robson, “‘The Future Is Truly in the Past’: The Regressive Nostalgia of Tomorrowland,” in Robson, Tom & Kokai, Jennifer, *Performance and the Disney Theme Park: the Tourist as Actor*, (Palgrave Macmillain, 2019), 38.

⁷¹ Miriam Nelson, *My Life Dancing with The Stars*. (BearManor Media, 2015), Kindle Edition.

performed medleys and musical revues in song and dance of pop songs, Disney songs, and often old showtunes and patriotic tunes – and *especially* showtunes that are also patriotic *a la* Irving Berlin. One of the first major Kids of the Kingdom shows on the Tomorrowland Stage was “Show Me America,” featuring this particular Broadway/patriotic blend that resembled a U.S.O. show, came to define much of the entertainment under Jani’s tenure.⁷² Much of this can be attributed to Jani’s own theatrical background.

He held a degree in stage production from the University of Southern California.⁷³ He had worked alongside Walker in the 1950s, and left Disney in the early 1960s for a two-year stint in the United States Army where he served as Entertainment director.⁷⁴ When he returned to Disney, in 1967, he quickly rose in the ranks to become president of the Entertainment division. Just as Walker’s background in marching bands and halftime shows influenced entertainment in the parks, Jani’s background in production design and the military would be reflected in high-spectacle, patriotic, America-themed extravaganzas like “Show Me America” (1970), “Pooh for President” (1972), “Lady America/Center City U.S.A.” (1970s), and, probably one of his most notable marks on Disney history, “America on Parade” (1975), to celebrate the nation’s bicentennial.⁷⁵ As Mittermeier asserts, much of this was culturally relevant in the context of the bicentennial and the “heritage” tourism it inspired, but also reflected contradictions in how many American’s felt distrust and cynicism toward the nation in the late-1960s to

⁷² Disney Chris, “44 - Show Me America - Old Broadway Medley,” DisneyChris.com, Accessed May 11, 2021, <https://disneychris.com/15-disneyland-soundtracks/143-disneyland-audio-tour-chapter-14.html>.

⁷³ Anonymous, <https://d23.com/walt-disney-legend/robert-jani/>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Disney Chris, “44 - Show Me America - Old Broadway Medley,” DisneyChris.com, Accessed May 11, 2021, <https://disneychris.com/15-disneyland-soundtracks/143-disneyland-audio-tour-chapter-14.html>.

mid-1970s.⁷⁶ Jani's particular, personal obsession with "wholesomeness," further emphasized the gap between changing social attitudes and the conservatism of Disney parks. For example, Disneyland choreographer Miriam Nelson recalls that "Bob Jani had a notion that male dancers had to be virile. He equated 'virile' with 'straight' and made it clear to me that Disney didn't want homosexuals in the show... He told me to hire straight guys, even if they couldn't dance well, and teach them how to dance enough to get by. The girls could do most of the most difficult dancing."⁷⁷ Jani was willing to sacrifice quality of the performance for the appearance of gender and heteronormativity, so while he was responsible for making live entertainment, including theatrical-referencing show choirs a more prominent part of the park's offerings, which now included Walt Disney World in Florida, these performances remained ensconced in history instead of the cutting edge.

Jani would leave his position in the late 1970s, and Ron Logan. Logan started his Disney career in the marching band, in the late 1950s. He left Disney in the 1960s, and taught music and theatre locally. He returned during Jani's tenure and was gradually promoted until he became president of the Entertainment division.⁷⁸ Logan's views and tastes were much more progressive than Jani, and he oversaw the development for new entertainment for Disney's new park, EPCOT, in the early 1980s. Theatre in this new park followed the same rules as theatre in other parks, mostly relying on street performances or "trunk shows." For these, Logan hired Craig McNair Wilson and improv

⁷⁶ Mittermeier, 74.

⁷⁷ Miriam Nelson, *My Life Dancing with the Stars*. (United States: Bear Manor Media, 2009) chap. 13, Kindle.

⁷⁸ Logan Interview, May 2020.

actors from Orlando’s SAK Theatre Company.⁷⁹ Wilson and his troupe started out in the Italian section of EPCOT’s World Showcase, on a small-but-permanent purpose-built stage in the center of the replica of St. Mark’s Square – a structure that could elevate the actors to be easy to view, but still not obstruct pedestrian traffic. The brief comedy show was called “Il Teatro di Bologna” (Italian for “Boloney Theatre”) and through a series of gags, jokes, and audience participation and improvisation, referenced both Italian Renaissance theatre and the vaudevillesque American comedy stylings present in shows like “The Golden Horseshoe Revue.”⁸⁰ This was so popular that Logan asked Wilson to develop more shows for EPCOT, including the “UK’s Renaissance Street Theatre Co.” show, which was the same concept as “Il Teatro di Bologna” but for the English section of the World Showcase.⁸¹ Two poignant performances of the troupe included the Robot Show and Mr. Intelligence, which featured human actors performing as robots, in a triumph of the human body vs. the audio-animatronic – proving that robots would not be replacing human actors anytime soon.⁸² In fact, it was commonplace in EPCOT’s early years for animatronic stage shows like *American Adventure* to have technical problems and break down mid-show. Because the park’s Italian section and American section are located right next to each other, Wilson and his “Il Teatro di Bologna” troupe would be outside waiting to lure the disgruntled guests to Italy, saying in exaggerated Italian accents, “Right this way! It’s street theatre! It’s alive! It works all the time!”⁸³ Finally,

⁷⁹ Wade Sampson, “Craig McNair Wilson Remembers the Adventurers Club,” MousePlanet.com, October 29, 2008, https://www.mouseplanet.com/8558/Craig_McNair_Wilson_Remembers_the_Adventurers_Club.

⁸⁰ Sampson.

⁸¹ Sampson, https://www.mouseplanet.com/8558/Craig_McNair_Wilson_Remembers_the_Adventurers_Club.

⁸² Sampson, https://www.mouseplanet.com/8558/Craig_McNair_Wilson_Remembers_the_Adventurers_Club.

⁸³ Sampson, https://www.mouseplanet.com/8558/Craig_McNair_Wilson_Remembers_the_Adventurers_Club.

one of their most popular performances was two actors dressed as a senior citizen couple named “Gutfred & Myrtle,” who improvise being lost in the park’s Future World section.⁸⁴ “Gutfred & Myrtle” as two older people lost in the future, highlighted and parodied the dissonance that is often embodied by the past being present in the future-themed sections – the nostalgia feels misplaced and, in short, lost and laughable.

While previous theatre experiments in the parks had been dedicated to finding ways to make theatre fit into the larger goals and operations of the park rules, SAK’s endeavors were theatre experiments for the sake of theatre – one of the first movements towards Disney theme parks becoming a *theatre* laboratory. They called what they do "alternative high-touch theater," or “theater that tries to tear down the barriers between performer and audience.”⁸⁵ Terry Olson, the company’s founding managing director says, “High-touch is the opposite of high-tech. Television is high-tech -- there's nothing personal about it. But we break down walls.”⁸⁶ As a group of theatre practitioners that came from the outside, they were part of an early trend of theatre professionals coming to work for the parks – or, more accurately, being sought out intentionally and invited by managers like Logan. This was a trend that was about to skyrocket in the next decade of park history, from 1984-1994 and 60% of those hired under Logan were *openly* LGBTQ: a fact that would have made Jani faint.⁸⁷ SAK brought a kind of theatre to the parks that was self-aware, self-referential, critical, and decidedly postmodern. They represented a higher level of theatrical sophistication in their education and approaches, which was

⁸⁴ Sampson, https://www.mouseplanet.com/8558/Craig_McNair_Wilson_Remembers_the_Adventurers_Club.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Maupin, “The SAK Ensemble is Up Close, Far Out,” Orlando Sentinel, July 2, 1985, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1985-07-02-0310180136-story.html>.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Logan Interview, May 2020.

about to gain a wave of support from the highest levels of the Company, when Eisner ascended to C.E.O. in 1984.

The 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s saw a new wave of theatrical experimentation in Disney theme parks including audio-animatronic stage shows, new advances in costumed performance of animated films, futuristic stage architecture, and new ways of incorporating permanent architecture for performance into the park's existing dramaturgy of movement. It was a period that saw an increased value placed on the performing arts, but it also saw an increased value on the historic past as attempts to locate theatre in the future or the cutting-edge struggled to find a vision. Nevertheless, at the tail-end of this more conservative era, theatre practitioners in the park such as SAK started developing and self-defining their own purposes for theatre in Disney theme parks, building on foundations of the past – such as the concept of entertaining people in the streets – and challenging past conventions (often by self-referential and meta humor like Gutfred & Myrtle). Once again theatre in Disney parks faced the paradox of building strong foundations for future experiments, but leaving much room for growth, as they moved closer and closer to the cutting-edge.

We're Going to the Top – Videopolis

Where one of the defining challenges of Disney theme park dramaturgy in the late 1960s and early 1970s was increasing attendance (and its resulting lack of flow of movement), the problem facing the parks in the early 1980s was a lack of attendance – even with all of the brand-new attractions at Disney's new park EPCOT.⁸⁸ This can be

⁸⁸ Bruce Horowitz, "Seeking to Attract Affluent Adolescents: Disneyland Will Open Teen Nightclub," *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 1985, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-04-23-fi-11598-story.html>.

attributed to many factors, including economic recession. In response, one of the first things Eisner's team did, in terms of the parks, was complete a detailed analysis of their demographics with two new objectives: 1) give their existing customer base more of what they want and 2) offer new things to expand those demographics to include new groups of people.⁸⁹ This would lead to yet-another Disney theme park paradox of trying to reconcile the old and the new, where the cultural tensions of the past, present, and future would collide in one location: a new purpose-built theatre and nightclub called Videopolis.

“Disneyland had always been a local theme park,” explains Eisner, discussing one of the key components of their park demographics, at the time he came to Disney.⁹⁰ “For most guests, [including out-of-towners] Disneyland was a one-day experience. The most effective way to attract local customers back to the park was to regularly introduce new rides and parades and shows.”⁹¹ The success of past events like the Summer of '68, mentioned earlier, showed that a wide variety of entertainment not only kept guests engaged, but increased attendance, as well. However, it should also be noted that between the late 1960s, and mid-1980s, American cultural tastes shifted the demographics of “local” in Orange County, and Los Angeles, as a whole, transformed dramatically. The population more than doubled in size, and now included large percentages of middle-class immigrants from Asia (mostly from Vietnam after the war), the Pacific Islands, and Latin America.⁹² This included a black middle-class in Los Angeles, who largely came to

⁸⁹ Eisner, chap. 8, Kindle.

⁹⁰ Eisner, chap. 8, Kindle.

⁹¹ Eisner, chap 8, Kindle.

⁹²Roger David Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, *Ethnic Los Angeles*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996) 79.

the area in the 1940s, and whose prosperity increased by roughly 60% from 1969-1989.⁹³ Another significant change was that the older, white population was now outnumbered by children and teenagers, especially teenagers of color.⁹⁴ Therefore, while the Disneyland Entertainment division learned in the late 1960s that they can increase attendance with the performing arts, their reliance on nostalgic entertainments, discussed in the previous section, did not reflect the tastes of the local population, which was Disneyland's core demographic, especially the teenage population.

As Amanda Ann Klein writes in her book *Millennials Killed the Video: MTV's Transition to Reality Programming*, "There was little to differentiate the TV content consumed by teenagers and the TV consumed by adult viewers; prior to the 1980s, TV programming was not yet focused on the targeting of niche audiences, particularly teenagers."⁹⁵ Early efforts at creating programming specifically for teenagers emerged in the 1970s with Afterschool Specials – something that Eisner, himself, had produced, while working at ABC, before Disney.⁹⁶ As he had done at ABC, Eisner would actively look to expand Disneyland's offerings to include teenagers, especially local teenagers.

One of Eisner's first actions as the new C.E.O. was to visit the Imagineering headquarters in person with Company president Frank Wells, and a special guest, his teenage son Breck Eisner.⁹⁷ "Great!" joked Imagineer Tony Baxter, "My career depends on a fourteen-year-old!"⁹⁸ Baxter was, himself, inspired by the animatronic stage show

⁹³ David M. Grant, Melvin L. Oliver, and Angela D. James, "African Americans: Social and Economic Bifurcation," in *Ethnic Los Angeles*, 382

⁹⁴ Waldinger, 97.

⁹⁵ Amanda Ann Klein, *Millennials Killed the Video Star: MTV's Transition to Reality Programming*, (Duke University Press, 2021), Kindle Edition, 25.

⁹⁶ Klein, 28. And Eisner, Kindle Edition.

⁹⁷ Eisner, chap 8, Kindle Edition.

⁹⁸ Leslie Iwerks, *Imagineering Story*, 2019, Disney Plus.

“Great Moments with Mr. Lincoln,” at the Disneyland Opera House, as a young teenager, and decided to pursue a degree in theatre design so he could become part of the second generation of Imagineers.⁹⁹ Since Disney studios were not putting out successful films at the time, Baxter was working on a collaboration with George Lucas to bring *Star Wars* to Disneyland. Together, they planned an attraction called Star Tours, which would be an immersive film experience, simulating a flight in the *Star Wars* universe. This was the first project that Baxter showed to the young Breck Eisner, who showed much enthusiasm. The other project that Breck seemed to enjoy was a log flume set in the context of the less-offensive animated portions of the controversial Disney film *Song of the South*, which would eventually become Splash Mountain.¹⁰⁰ Michael Eisner, wanting to channel the power of MTV and A-list celebrity talent recruited Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola to direct a 3-D film, starring Michael Jackson, called *Captain EO*, and planned to demolish the Tomorrowland Stage (now called the Space Stage in relation to the Space Mountain roller coaster) to build a special indoor movie theatre for the attraction.¹⁰¹ However, these projects would take years to complete, and Eisner needed something that could combine MTV culture and Disneyland, while attracting local guests with nighttime entertainment, and bring in new guests with something that could be appealing to a middle-class cross-section of different backgrounds. The answer was Videopolis, which was built on an unused meadow in the park’s Fantasyland, and served as a state-of-the-art theatre by day and a nightclub, at night.

⁹⁹ Leslie Iwerks, *Imagineering Story*, 2019, Disney Plus.

¹⁰⁰ Eisner, chap. 8, Kindle; *Imagineering Story*, 2019.

¹⁰¹ Eisner, chap. 8, Kindle.

Unlike the Tomorrowland Terrace, which served as a restaurant bandstand by day and dancefloor bandstand by night, Videopolis was designed for state-of-the-art theatre that would be played during the day, most days of the week, and the space would serve as a nightclub only on weekends. The shows, which played to thousands of audience members at once in the large theatre, exemplified the same draw as things like Star Tours and Splash Mountain: technology, thrills, and recognizable culture. Shows like “Circus Fantasy” (1986) featured death-defying acrobatics, recognizable (contemporary) pop songs and showtunes like “Send in the Clowns” – showing the park’s Broadway references evolving a couple decades ahead from Irving Berlin to Stephen Sondheim, which brought an emotional gravitas to the concept of a theme park show that hadn’t been seen before.¹⁰² The show featured Broadway-style scene changes, which had never been done in a Disney stage show previously, due to the fact that scenery was usually viewed as the thematic or environmental setting. Finally, the show offered a simple, but complete plot with a beginning, middle, and end, as a young protagonist tries to join the circus, but can’t choose what kind of act he wants to do. As circus ensemble shows him their different kinds of acts and explain what each act means to them, the protagonist discovers that the “real magic” is not in the circus acts, but in his heart all along.¹⁰³ The thirty-five-minute show with a full plot and character arc signaled a move towards more plot and character-centric theatre that could still follow the “rules” of the park’s dramaturgy.

As a nightclub, this purpose-built theatre exemplified MTV culture with 90 television monitors wall-papering the 90-foot-wide stage, playing the same music videos

¹⁰² DisneyBatchman, “Circus Fantasy (1987),” Youtube.com, April 5, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cs8B7Ybh5nQ>.

¹⁰³ DisneyBatchman, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cs8B7Ybh5nQ>.

seen on the prolific tv channel, looming over three dance floors – one of which being 5,000 square feet.¹⁰⁴ As a narrative space, Videopolis immersed young guests into the world of MTV, with screens all around them and stage hands with cameras, who could project them onto the many screens as well in the middle of a Wham! or Madonna video.¹⁰⁵ There were other, significant overlaps between MTV culture in the 1980s and the already existing dramaturgy of movement in Disney theme parks. While Disneyland was founded on the principle of “family entertainment,” where parents and children could enjoy something together, the very dynamics of “family entertainment” were changing by the 1980s due to changing, more accessible, and more portable technology.¹⁰⁶ Smaller, portable, and eventually battery-operated television sets, in multiset households, allowed teenagers to be entertained while doing other tasks like dishes, and instead of watching TV with their parents, viewership often became a more solitary and highly individualized activity.¹⁰⁷ The creation of MTV in 1981 revolutionized the youth market by playing music videos all day, and giving teenagers the opportunity to watch as much or as little as they liked, at their convenience.¹⁰⁸ Because MTV played music videos that did not require very much attention to important plot points or characterization, it could serve as a “soundtrack” to other activities like chores – just like it served as entertainments for waiting in line or eating dinner in the park. Just like park-goers, watching gun battle as street theatre on the streets of Frontierland, in the 1950s, MTV was separated into short blocks of time that viewers can choose to keep watching, or move along to something

¹⁰⁴ Anonymous, “Videopolis - The 100-Day Miracle,” The History of Disney Blogspot, Accessed May 11, 2021, <https://thehistoryofdisney.blogspot.com/2011/05/videopolis-100-day-miracle.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Randy Lewis, “Videopolis Combines Flash n’ Dance,” Los Angeles Times, July 4, 1985, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-07-04-ca-9292-story.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Karen Ritchie, *Marketing to Generation X*, (Free Press, 1995), 86.

¹⁰⁷ Ritchie, 86.

¹⁰⁸ Klein, 30.

else – just like they could at this nightclub. The theatre/nightclub even had its own theme song that would play every night to signal that the dance floor was open called “We’re Going to the Top” and was decorated with lights that could be made to look like futuristic, three-dimensional holograms.¹⁰⁹ It was an artistically harmonious, dramaturgical, combination of theatre architecture, stage technology, and the cutting edge of a very specific cultural moment. It would, however, close in 1989, at the end of the decade that inspired it, to feature stage shows full-time.

There is much speculation over the reasons for the nightclub’s closure, with many analysts citing instances of violent clashes, culture clashes, and identity clashes, which further emphasize the theatre/nightclub’s role as the first cutting-edge attraction of a new era of experimentation.¹¹⁰ Disneyland was, and is, a “cultural landscape,” meaning that it

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous, <https://thehistoryofdisney.blogspot.com/2011/05/videopolis-100-day-miracle.html>.

¹¹⁰ One of the incidents that is often mentioned in relation to Videopolis closing is a shooting homicide that occurred in the Disneyland parking lot in 1987, resulting from teenagers fighting over cultural conflicts between Samoans and Tongans. Another is a stabbing that occurring in the Florida iteration of the nightclub called Videopolis East, which resulted in the death of another teen. The other incident is a lawsuit that was filed against the Walt Disney Company for discrimination, after two gay teens challenged the park’s long standing rule against same-sex dancing – with Disney lifting the ban shortly thereafter.¹¹⁰ None of these instances, however, have officially been mentioned as a reason that Videopolis was shut down, which happened years after they occurred. There is also no direct connection between these incidents and Videopolis. Of the three incidents, only one, the stabbing, happened inside the [Florida version of the] club (which unlike the California version, was just a club and not a theatre), with the shooting happening in the parking lot, and the dancing happening at the Tomorrowland Terrace bandstand. Of the media report on the club’s closing, the same-sex dancing incident is mentioned in passing, but is not cited as a reason for the club’s closing. The correlation between these incidents and the club’s end are more of a historiographical interpretation of the park’s mythology as being part of the 1980s zeitgeist. Often these historic analyses use the words “gang violence” to refer to the violent incidents even though there is no evidence to suggest that these teenagers were members of gangs – and they were not reported as such by the media at the time. The historiography of Videopolis often pits Disney’s wholesome image and white, middle class identity against the increases of racialized bodies that came to the park because of the club, and positions the club’s closing as a direct response to white fear or homophobia. While these things underscored larger conversations about gang violence and public dancing in the 1980s, especially in the larger context of the Reagan Era, there is no evidence that suggests that it was a motivation in closing the club. This is especially true given that there were multiple violent incidents in Disneyland before Videopolis was built (including one non-fatal mass shooting and one stabbing homicide) and after it was closed. Also, as Sean Griffin notes in *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: the Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*, there was an existing gay subculture and fandom at Disney theme parks before, during, and after Videopolis. See Griffin. David Koenig. *Mouse Tales: A Behind-the-Ears Look at Disneyland*. (Bonaventure Press, 1994), Kindle Edition.

a man-made location that has cultural meanings derived from the ways that people see it.

In particular, Disney theme parks can be classified as what Dennis R. Byrne calls a “nervous landscape,” because of the tension between the way that creators attempt to script behavior, and the potential for deviation.¹¹¹

LAT Archives, “Teen-Ager Killed, Another Wounded in Shooting in Disneyland Parking Lot,” Los Angeles Times, March 8, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-03-08-mn-13693-story.html>.

Sara Isaac, “2 Orlando Teens Stabbed at Pleasure Island Nightclub,” Orlando Sentinel, July 23, 1989, <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/os-xpm-1989-07-23-8907234709-story.html>.

Maria La Ganga, “Disneyland Drops Policy Prohibiting Same-Sex Dancing,” Los Angeles Times, August 14, 1985, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-08-14-me-2745-story.html>.

¹¹¹ Byrne specifically talks about “nervous landscapes” in reference to racial segregation and the “rules and devices that are set up to achieve this.” It is worth noting that there was never any official segregation policy in Disneyland, leading one to search for other “rules and devices” that may have contributed to a lack of diversity of guests. This can be difficult because of contradictions and a lack of evidence. In her essay “Disney’s Influence on the Modern Theme Park and the Codification of Colorblind Racism in the American Amusement Industry,” in *Performance and the Disney Theme Park*, Jill Anne Morri notes that, in fact, Disneyland was the only place in Orange County to be listed in the *Green Book* for black Americans wishing for a “vacation without aggravation.” Rather, she argues that the creation of the park as a “colorblind white space” is what has contributed to the white dominance of the crowds. Others such as Judith Adams-Volpe have suggested that the parks were unofficially segregated on purpose because of the fact that Disneyland was not accessible via public transportation. While it is true that the parks were not accessible in this way, there is no evidence that proves it was intentional to keep racial minorities out of the parks. In fact, as Sam Gennaway reports in *Walt and the Promise of the Progress City*, Walt lobbied the Los Angeles city council for an expansion of the Disneyland monorail into the downtown area and beyond – challenging the idea that Walt wanted an theme park that was exclusive to white, middle class patrons. Historicizing or making observations about race in the parks is similarly difficult for the 1980s because of a lack of documentation and archives on the subject, which is why I am refraining from making broad statements, other than the fact that the “local” population that Eisner wanted to attract included more people of color with means to access the park that it had before the 1970s. Videos of a night at the club from 1987 shows a predominantly white crowd of teenagers with a mix of black, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander teens integrated in a smaller percentage – but present, nonetheless. Anecdotal accounts of Disneyland’s competitor Club K at Knots park suggest that other clubs had higher levels of diversity, particularly among “Samoan and Hispanic” teens, but this is not verified (and video footage of Club K show a racial makeup that is similar to Videopolis, if not more white dominated. It is noticeable that there is more of an alternative fashion expression at Club K than Videopolis, which had an anecdotal reputation for being where the “nerds” go, although a Los Angeles Times article reports two “boys with mohawks” dancing with each other at Videopolis. While it is impossible to make definitive statements about the “rules and devices” that determined who was welcome and who wasn’t at Videopolis, Byrne offers a useful way of reading the fact that the very presence of marginalized bodies in a colonized space (like Disneyland, although he doesn’t use that example) is subversive. This opens the door to a potential reading of Videopolis as a subversive space in Disneyland’s history that invited script divergences.

Denis Byrne, “‘Nervous landscapes: race and space in Australia’, *Journal of Social Archaeology*, vol. 3, no. 2, (2003), 169-193.

Jill Anne Morris, “Disney’s Influence on the Modern Theme Park and the Codification of Colorblind Racism in the American Amusement Industry,” in *Performance and the Disney Theme Park Experience: The Tourist as Actor*, ed. Robson, Tom and Jennifer Kokai, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 214.

Much of this chapter has been dedicated to how Disneyland planning and design serves as a script, which “broadly structures” guest behavior, to borrow a phrase from theatre and performance historian Robin Bernstein, with things like “visual magnets,” line entertainment, and things like lyrics on place cards that encourage guests to sing along, etc. As Bernstein notes, however, and as Imagineers learned, scripts can be deviated from, and “scriptive things” like Disney theme parks simultaneously allow for “resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable.” In terms of park planning, it shows that no matter how much Imagineers plan for something or try to regulate guest behavior, even if it is towards a dramaturgical purpose, there are still going to be elements of unpredictability. By inviting teenagers to a space designed specifically with them in mind, Disneyland was opening the door to the unpredictability of a generation, who generally put a high value on cynicism, individualism, independence, and going against traditional scripts and categories. As a park designed for Baby Boomers and their parents, Videopolis, was the first space designed with a new generation in mind, who, by and large, did not have the same cultural memories that their parents and grandparents had, and had different conceptions of what “family entertainment” meant. Videopolis, as a theatre, was designed in the old Disney theme park tradition as a place where parents and children (young children, at this time, in the 1980s, being part of the Millennial generation) could consume entertainment together, while the nightclub portion was designed to be a place where Generation X

Adams-Volpe, Judith., Perkins, Edwin J.. *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills*. United States: Twayne Publishers, 1991.
Sam Gennawey, *Walt and the Promise of Progress City*, (United States: Ayefour, 2011), 114.

could consume entertainment with their peers or by themselves. By embodying both, the Videopolis theatre represented the liminality of a changing “cultural landscape.”

The Hollywood that Never Was

The ideas for Star Tours and Splash Mountain were just some of the ideas that were greenlit by Eisner on that first visit to the Imagineers headquarters in 1984. One idea that would heavily impact theatre in the parks were plans for a section of Epcot that would be dedicated to educating the public on the history and creation of entertainment. Epcot was designed to be educational, entertaining, and inspiring, with attractions often dedicated to how things work – or how things *could* work in the future. Marty Sklar, who was head of Imagineering at the time, recalls, “Yes, the park itself was all about entertainment and fun—but what about exploring television, the Broadway stage, or how movies are made? We began development of our “Entertainment Pavilion” for Epcot.”¹¹² Eisner called this idea one of their “most promising” and told them to develop it further.¹¹³ Whereas Disneyland in California catered to a large local population, usually attending for a day-trip, Walt Disney World in Florida attracted guests who were on longer vacations, and Eisner and team were looking for ways to offer them more attractions and parks for longer stays.¹¹⁴ This led to the development of a nightlife area called Pleasure Island (including Videopolis East), a new water park, and an idea for a half-day park, which would be a tour of a working state-of-the-art film studio on the east coast called Disney-MGM Studios Theme Park.

¹¹² Martin Sklar, *Dream It! Do It! My Half Century Creating Disney's Magic Kingdoms*, (Disney Editions, 2013), 250.

¹¹³ Eisner, chap. 8, Kindle.

¹¹⁴ Eisner, chap. 8, Kindle.

The idea of a studio tour was not new, even for Disney. In Richard Schickel's oft-cited book *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney*, he writes, "Disney always enjoyed showing people around his studio and explaining to them exactly how the exotic process of creating an animated film proceeded (eventually he made one film about it, *The Reluctant Dragon*, and several TV shows)."¹¹⁵ In fact, idea of Disneyland started out as an idea of a studio tour with added walkthroughs and small rides.¹¹⁶ Eisner dreamed of building a working film studio on the east coast, in the hopes that other studios would want to rent it at a much lower price than the west coast, and that Disney could offer tours, in combination with Imagineering's idea of having a park dedicated to the entertainment industry's history and "how it works."

This park was at once a "museum" and a "laboratory" presenting histories of film, television, and theatre in a wide array of attractions that used cutting-edge technologies to educate guests, and even give them participatory roles in live sound production, acting, and stunt work. The park became an entire theme park dedicated to the history of entertainment, and celebrating the creative labor of entertainment by taking guests behind the scenes of film and television in two ways: one, by taking them on a tour of a real-life working studio, and two, by theatricalizing the backstage in specialized stage shows like the "Indiana Jones Stunt Spectacular." Unlike the theatre history "museum" of

¹¹⁵ For example, in *The Reluctant Dragon*, Walt reveals the processes of Disney animation through eyes of comedian Robert Benchley, playing himself, in a story where he gets lost on a tour of the newly built animation studio in Burbank. Walt, his animators, and voice actors play themselves, and are interspersed with fictional characters like the over-zealous tour guide, and animated characters like Donald Duck, who interact with Benchley on his journey through the various department rooms. The film shows how animation works on a technical level, and although Walt does not give away all of his secrets, he is not afraid to demystify the ways that he creates illusions with animation. For Walt, this does not threaten the "magic" of his films; it enhances it. How does this "work"?

Schickel, Richard. *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (p. 163). Simon & Schuster. Kindle Edition.

¹¹⁶ Snow

Disneyland and past parks, however, Disney-MGM was very straightforward about the fact that it was an artistic and narrative immersion in the past, as Eisner declared in the park's dedication ceremony, "The World you have entered was created by the Walt Disney Company and is dedicated to Hollywood – not a place on the map, but a state of mind that exists wherever people dream and wonder and imagine, a place where illusion and reality are fused by technological magic. We welcome you to a Hollywood that never was – and always will be."¹¹⁷ The park's dedication articulates how the dramaturgy works for the Disney theme park "museums" as something that exists in the minds and memories of the guests, and, by explaining, in explicit terms, how it "works" is quite in line with the overall dramaturgical intent of Disney-MGM.

In past parks, Disney Imagineers borrowed from the theatre and made it work inside of a larger cinematically informed dramaturgy. The first generation of Imagineers had marginal theatre knowledge, but the second generation, which included theatre majors like Tony Baxter, led by former theatre major Michael Eisner, had a better working knowledge of theatre, and placed a higher value on theatrical "know how" – especially for a park dedicated to *how* entertainment works. Wilson and his SAK actors, who had been performing successfully in Epcot and other parks, were brought in as creative consultants on Disney-MGM (which is Disney-speak for "dramaturgs").¹¹⁸ Their acting troupe, was expanded greatly so that actors playing various caricatures from 1930s Hollywood could line the park's main street and improvise interactions with guests as

¹¹⁷ Eisner, Kindle Edition.

¹¹⁸ Chad Pennycuff, "022 McNair Wilson Former Disney Imagineer Part 1: History of Streetmosphere at EPCOT," My DVC Points Podcast, Apr 24, 2019, <https://mydvcpoints.com/022-mcnair-wilson-former-disney-imagineer-part-1-history-of-streemosphere-at-epcot/>.

they walked down the crowded thoroughfare.¹¹⁹ Once again theatre was a way of making something mundane, like walking down the street or waiting in a shop line, feel magical. Wilson also consulted on stage shows like the “Indiana Jones Stunt Spectacular,” making sure it fit the larger dramaturgy of the park as a behind-the-scenes look into how stunts happen through a theatricalization of a day on the set for *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. This theatre has a higher capacity than the Videopolis stage, and a much larger playing space, which now needed to be able to fit an ancient temple, a Cairo street scene (which includes audience participants in the “crowd” being directed by a stunt coordinator), and a Nazi plane that explodes at a safe distance from the audience. Gone were the days of needing restaurant to justify the construction of a permanent stage – although dinner theatre became a large part of Disney World offerings at resort hotels, including the “Hoop-Dee-Do Musical Revue” (a reference to the “Golden Horseshoe Revue”) at the Wilderness Lodge resort, which, like the “Indiana Jones Stunt Spectacular” is still playing to fully packed houses, to this day.¹²⁰ New factors like Disney-MGM’s construction and Wilson’s integration into Imagineering signaled that theatre was moving to the center of Disney theme park dramaturgy, instead of serving as just-another tool in a dramaturgical toolbox.

Staging Animation

By the late 1990s, the Videopolis stage shows became more and more sophisticated with new shows for different promotional events. This was part of Michael Eisner’s marketing strategy called “synergy,” where one area of the Company promotes

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

the work of other areas, and the different divisions need to communicate and collaborate with each other.¹²¹ While Disney theme park attractions had always been tied to Disney properties since the beginning, Eisner's version demanded theatricalizations of Disney films into stage shows, and close communication between the animation studio and the Entertainment division, led by Logan and Bob McTyre, who also had a background in theatre.

McTyre went to college for theatre at Michigan State and attended a graduate program in theatre at UCLA, when he got a job working at the Shubert Theatre in Los Angeles.¹²² After a disagreement with his MFA committee, he left graduate school to pursue a career as a full-time theatre manager, which he was excelling at – and was soon offered a job managing the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles, a large outdoor complex, not unlike some Disney theme park theatres.¹²³ He was soon offered a job at Disneyland because of his theatre background, and worked as a marketing spokesperson for new entertainment attractions like Videopolis. McTyre, who looked up to contemporary producer-directors like Hal Prince, brought a combination of dramaturgical vision and managerial know-how to make visions a reality – especially those that seemed impossible.¹²⁴ Some of the biggest tests would be part of Eisner's synergy strategy.

Logan recalls, “[Jeffrey] Katzenberg brought his folks [from the films studios] to our theme park hotel and Walt Disney World and to meet with everybody to show how good [the films] were. They had like, twelve movies, animated movies in process.”¹²⁵

¹²¹ Logan Interview, 2020.

¹²² McTyre Interview, 2020.

¹²³ McTyre Interview, 2020.

¹²⁴ McTyre interview, 2020.

¹²⁵ Logan interview, 2020.

Live action films would show clips, animators would bring reels and storyboards, and Logan and McTyre, along with Imagineers and other theme park creatives would discuss the best way to translate these films into theme park attractions, rides, and shows. The first theatricalization of a Disney live action film was a stage version of *Dick Tracy* in 1990, at the Videopolis stage and at the new Disney-MGM Studios Theme Park, on one of their many purpose-built stages. It was directed by Off-Broadway director Rob Roth, choreographed by Broadway veteran Matt West, with scenic design by Stan Meyer, who had also worked Off-Broadway.¹²⁶ This will be discussed at length in the next chapter, as this would be the team that would bring *Beauty and the Beast* to Broadway.

In 1991, Disney-MGM took the idea of synergy further than ever before with a theatricalized version of *Beauty and the Beast* that premiered the same day as the film. In the previous chapter I explained how cognitive and emotional processes for watching an animated film like *Beauty and the Beast* are highly complex and rely on the audience's ability to "recognize" the humanity of the non-human characters. As discussed in the previous section, on the 1960s and 70s, it is incredibly difficult to perform animated characters with human bodies in Disney theme parks, because – even though there is a human inside the costume, the costume often covers the human completely. Even actors who play human animated characters are molded into Sean Griffin, in his book *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: the Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* speaks to the unnatural-ness of actresses who "are stuffed into real-life versions of the characters' dresses and outfitted with wigs that have been shellacked into duplicating the hair styles

¹²⁶ Rob Roth (Director of *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway and Disney theme park director), interview with the author, March 2020.

in the cartoons.”¹²⁷ In the 1960s and 1970s the costumes evolved to a point where they could capture the general essence of an animated character, but could they reproduce the phenomenology that a spectator experiences while watching an animated film for a stage version that is cut from an hour and a half to thirty minutes, in a much more limited visual environment? After all, animation has the potential for unlimited spectacle. Not only is there a danger of a stage version falling short, due to the limitations of physics, but theme park stage shows have a much smaller budget compared to the animation studio, as a whole – and most of that budget goes into costumes (including having multiple costumes for outdoor stages where it rains).¹²⁸ This is where all of the past experiments on costumes, gestures, purpose-built stages came together in creating something that was so popular that it is still running to this day.

“In the parks, when you do a show, it's very much about music,” explains McTyre, “It’s not as much about the dialog, [and] not even as much about the story. It's about the energy and the pacing and the music, and the dance and seeing the characters and all that stuff in the theater... You have to feel the emotions.”¹²⁹ As McTyre explains, a show like *Beauty and the Beast Live on Stage* is primarily designed to be an affectual experience through music. Because of the film’s well-constructed Broadway-style songs by Off-Broadway veterans Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, they could easily condense the plot to its major emotional moments by simply performing the songs, since they were full of so much plot exposition and character development. The dramaturgy of the Disney theme park, which relies on memory, relies on the audience’s emotional

¹²⁷ Griffin, 72.

¹²⁸ Logan interview, 2020.

¹²⁹ McTyre interview, 2020.

memory of the film to trigger a similar affectual response.¹³⁰ In this way, it demonstrates a higher level of emotional sophistication than its theatrical predecessors in other parks. With the success of this show, Imagineers designed a special theatre for *Voyage of the Little Mermaid*, which staged *The Little Mermaid* animated film in an immersive, indoor permanent theatre, combining the previous experiments with concepts of guest immersion in narrative spaces. *Voyage of the Little Mermaid* was cutting edge theatre with its sophisticated incorporation of puppetry, laser lights, projections, live actors, and immersive architecture to transport guests into the action of the film. With this history of experimentation in the parks, it is no wonder that the idea to stage *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway came from a team of three theatre people, who worked in the Entertainment division of the theme parks.

Conclusion: Visions Fantasmic!

One of the advantages that Walt Disney World in Florida had over Disneyland was expansive space to build large stages that could accommodate epic stunt fights,

¹³⁰ Today, reviews on websites like TripAdvisor allow the theatre historian to get a sense of whether the production achieves the intended emotional response. A guest from Texas writes, “Okay, I admit it, I cried a little when the Beast came back to life...” One guest from South Carolina writes that his children “get a kick out of watching their tough father get choked up each and every time we see this show - and we see it every time we're at Disney World.” An international guest from Australia writes, “you couldn't help but cry at the end,” and another from Australia writes, “Despite reeeeaally not being musical theatre type people, our whole family enjoyed the show & even went back to see it again during our stay,” emphasizing not only the way that Disney theme parks (as America’s “de facto National Theatre”) appeal to a transnational audience, but also the way that they make theatre accessible to visitors who otherwise would not be experiencing theatre at all. In a reversal of the Golden Horseshoe format, these Australian visitors also want to let future visitors know that, “It's noting that food is available across the road & that you can take food in with you, so it's a great place to have a meal or snack whilst watching the show so that you're not wasting valuable Disney time!” Instead of brining food into a restaurant so that guests don't waste precious Disney time, guests were now bringing food into the theatre. Guests from Asia and South America declare that you don't need to know English to enjoy the show, because they already know the film – emphasizing the importance of memory. Some guests explain that they never saw the movie, and while they don't have powerful emotional responses, they explain that still enjoy the energy of the piece. Anonymous, “Beauty and the Beast Live on Stage,” TripAdvisor.com, Accessed May 7, 2021, https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g34515-d8563506-Reviews-Beauty_and_the_Beast_Live_on_Stage-Orlando_Florida.html#REVIEWS

scenes from animated films, or the ocean. If the theme park division wanted to build a new purpose-built stage in Disneyland, it often meant sacrificing something else, and as this chapter has revealed, this contributed to a dramaturgy of movement for how to move large groups of bodies through somewhat confined narrative spaces. In terms of theatre, this meant sacrificing spaces like the Opera House on Main Street to serve as a lumber mill to build other attractions like the riverboat, the *Mark Twain*, or confining theatre to places where guests would already be standing or sitting still. While important foundations were being built for Disney theme parks to become one of the nation's most prolific theatrical spaces in the decade between 1984 and 1994, theatre remained a historical and marginal art form in the parks until there was an Entertainment team and C.E.O., with theatrical knowledge, who saw theatre as a potential site for family entertainment, cutting-edge technology, nightlife thrill, access, education, engagement, emotional sophistication, and pushing the limits of what was previously accepted or thought to be possible. In 1992, one show would encapsulate all of these things in one place.

Disney parks in Florida were able to put on big spectacles because of ample space. Thus, the Entertainment division wanted to do something in Disneyland that could compete with Disneyland, and possibly surpass it. Shows like "Illuminations" in Epcot were an effective crowd draw, with the highest level of stage technology available, projecting laser images on smoke over water to classical music. There was no plot for a show like "Illuminations" which was, as the name suggests, a light show. Logan and McTyre figured that because space was limited in Disneyland, they could do something similar on the Rivers of America section in Frontierland. The River section was a circle

of water with an island in the center, and consisted of two ships, the *Mark Twain*, of course, and the sailing ship *Columbia* (both moved on underwater tracks, in a circle around the “river” area). In the center of the “river” was Tom Sawyer Island, designed as a walkthrough attraction where kids could roam free, which could be seen from the shores of Frontierland. The innovation of this new show, which would be called *Fantasmic!*, was to use all of Tom Sawyer Island as a massive stage that could be seen by thousands of guests standing on the riverbank. This would be an experiment that would blur the lines between an environmental narrative setting and a permanent stage. Tom Sawyer Island, while not a purpose-built stage, was a permanent structure now being appropriated as one, in a full upending of the traditional Disneyland hierarchy of space and theatre.

The show’s director Barnette Ricci started out as a member of the “Young Americans” show choir that became the model for Disneyland’s Kids of the Kingdom group. In 1969, she was hired at the park to choreograph and direct the Kids of the Kingdom, and many of Bob Jani’s big parade spectacles.¹³¹ Now she was tasked with creating something extremely unique that had never been done before anywhere in the world, let alone in Disneyland. She wrote a script for a plot that could feature many different Disney characters. Set in Mickey Mouse’s imagination, the spectacle is otherworldly, using technology that had rarely been seen before. If “IlumiNations” could project lasers onto smoke, surely, they could project lasers onto mist for a river show. “We had already gleaned all this information about mist screens on which we could

¹³¹ Anonymous, “Barnette Ricci,” Disney Archives, Accessed May 10, 2021, <https://d23.com/walt-disney-legend/barnette-ricci/>.

project light beams and lasers. Then we received a demo reel from a French company. It showed a water screen with film projected on it,” she recalls. “What if Disney animation was projected onto those screens?” she wondered, “It would be incredible!”¹³² And thus, Disney animation was projected onto screens made out of water, while live actors, with the help of pyrotechnics, moving stage lights, floating stages, and large puppets, told the story, mostly through movement and choreography, of Disney villains trying to hijack Mickey’s imagination, with good eventually overcoming evil. The grand finale featured the Mark Twain rounding the riverbend full of human actors in costumes of a plethora of animated characters dancing in unison with colorful ribbons, while Mickey Mouse (in his “Steamboat Willie” iteration as a nod to the first ever sound cartoon with Mickey) drives the riverboat. Like other theatricalizations of animated characters, this was a highly emotionally driven show that – still to this day – elicits big affectual responses from the large audience. In 1992, it was the cutting-edge of stagecraft, and experimental in the way that it combined so many elements in a unique location.

In conclusion, this paper has presented samples of the foundations that later generations built on, with a special focus on the 1950s and the early theatre offerings, buildings, and references. During the period between 1984-1994 there was an uptick in theatre experiments, led by theatre professionals, and the “museum” became a full-fledged “laboratory.” Where once the interior of a theatre building was once appropriated to serve the construction of a riverboat that would serve as a visual magnet to the past, *Fantasmic!* took that boat and appropriated it as a vehicle for a theatrical show, and a journey into the imagination. When *Fantasmic!* opened in 1992 all of these histories were

¹³² Ibid.

present, as the theatre history “museum” and the theatre “laboratory” came together all in one place with all of its complexities, complications, pain and hopes – much like the nation that it represented. The changes of the “Disney Renaissance” period allowed Disney theme parks to become intentional theatre laboratories, which gave the parks increased amounts of cultural capital that would give the Company a necessary asset for moving into a new market: Broadway.

Chapter 4: Beast on Stage: Cinematic Staging of Rob Roth, Matt West, and Stan Meyer in Disney Theme Parks and Broadway

Prologue: *Beast Onstage, Will it Work?*

“Beauty and the Beast’ is going ‘live,’” reported an article in *Variety*, in early, 1993.¹ “Talks are under way for the Disney award-winner and box office blockbuster (\$69,415,000, U.S. and Canada rentals) to head to B’way,” the famous industry magazine said, “Michael Eisner and Jimmy Nederlander have already met about bowing the legit musical here at the Pantages late this year, pre-N.Y.” The short blurb concluded with a prophetic vision: “It could be a perennial family show, eventually with countless local companies.” As it turned out, this last part eventually proved true. The stage version, like the film, became very popular among audiences – although not as popular with New York City critics – and would eventually become the most-produced musical licensed to local theatre companies in the United States.² Before that happened, the initial news of a Disney-produced musical on Broadway was met by theatre insiders with more questions than excitement.

The creative team of director Rob Roth, choreographer Matt West, scenic designer Stan Meyer, the film’s screenwriter Linda Woolverton, composer Alan Menken, lyricist Tim Rice, costume designer Ann Hould Ward, and illusionist Jim Steinmeyer became the topic of several industry queries. Shortly after the Broadway production was

¹ Army Archerd, “Beauty and the Beast’ may take to the boards,” *Variety Magazine*, February 28, 1993. <https://variety.com/1993/voices/columns/beauty-and-the-beast-may-take-to-the-boards-1117862132/>

² Archerd, <https://variety.com/1993/voices/columns/beauty-and-the-beast-may-take-to-the-boards-1117862132/>.

announced, Robin Rauzi of the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed theatre producers and articulated their questions. Firstly, there was the question of whether audiences would go to see a staged version of an animated film that they could watch at home on VHS for much less money. “The Walt Disney Co.’s plan to adapt “Beauty and the Beast” into a stage musical this year has some producers wondering if the story can be resold to audiences who already bought it on film and video,” she writes.³ The second big question she posed was whether a stage version could do justice to the beloved animated film, “Theatergoers who have seen the film, especially children, could be disappointed with a version limited by the conventions of theater.” These questions were encapsulated by the article’s title, “Beast Onstage: Will it Work?” This chapter will investigate the dramaturgical strategies that the musical’s creative team employed to not only make the musical “work” onstage, but in doing so, create a staging methodology that enabled it to become one of the most often produced musicals in the United States – particularly on a local level at community and educational theatres.

“Put the Movie Onstage.”

Just as in previous chapters, this one defines dramaturgy in terms of objectives and methods: by identifying the intended performative outcome of *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway, and observing the strategies – specifically the theatrical strategies – used to achieve it. When it come to the intended goal of bringing this animated film to the stage, the theatre historian is challenged to sift through the vague phrasing, marketing, and speculation surrounding this musical in the archives. For example, Disney film studio

³ Robin Rauzi, “Beast Onstage: Will It Work? Theater: Some are wondering if Disney’s saturation with the hit movie will prevent its resale as a live musical.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-05-08-ca-32857-story.html>.

head Jeffrey Katzenberg was quoted in *New York Magazine* saying that the goal was simply to “put the movie onstage.”⁴ Michael Eisner’s statement, in a press conference, asserted that the intent was “to bring the magic of the animated film version of *Beauty and the Beast* to stage audiences.”⁵ Rauzi of the *Los Angeles Times* asks if, “Disney’s saturation with the hit movie will prevent its resale as a live musical,” labeling the intent as “resale.”⁶ This study, however, is determined to center the artists’ goals first and foremost, in particular those of the trio of Roth, West, and Meyer, who had been working to make a Disney-Broadway production happen for years.

For these three, “putting the movie onstage” had a larger artistic goal than cutting and pasting the frames of the film into the theatrical proscenium. They were not interested in reselling the animated film – in fact, as described below, *Beauty and the Beast* was not even their first choice. However, just as the Disney theme park dramaturgy relies on the process of activating guests’ memories of cultural texts, the act of “bringing the magic of the film to stage audiences” meant that the production would need to both illicit and deepen the audiences’ already existing phenomenological responses to the film version. As the previous chapter noted, this had already been working, to an extent in the theme parks with the stage show *Beauty and the Beast Live Onstage*, which Rauzi’s *Los Angeles Times* article mentions briefly.⁷ But Broadway is different from the theme parks in terms of operation, budget, layout, purpose, and expectations – among other things that will become apparent as this story progresses. But the trio of Roth, West, and Meyer had

⁴ Goldstein, Michael. “Broadway’s New Beast: The Inside Story of How Disney Turned a Smash Hit Movie Into a Smash Hit Musical (They Hope),” *New York Magazine*, March 14, 1994, 43.

⁵ Rauzi, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-05-08-ca-32857-story.html>.

⁶ Rauzi, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-05-08-ca-32857-story.html>.

⁷ Rauzi, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-05-08-ca-32857-story.html>.

brought Broadway dramaturgies to the Disney theme parks, as part of an influx of theatre professionals that came to work there in the 1980s. If the intended performative outcome was to re-perform the film, on Broadway, including processes of human recognition, empathy, and deliberative reasoning, as discussed in Chapter 2, this trio had the appropriate theatrical knowledge to achieve this goal.⁸ All they needed was a theatre laboratory to do so.

The trio came from Off-Broadway theatres to Disneyland in the mid-1980s, as part of the influx of theatre professionals that flocked to the theme park division, discussed in the previous chapter. Like many of these professionals, such as Craig McNair Wilson and his improv actors from the SAK Theatre, from Chapter 3, the trio were hired as independent contractors on a per-show basis.⁹ This arrangement was ideal to these theatre practitioners, because it gave them a certain amount of freedom that full time Disney employees didn't always have to think outside the box of theme park dramaturgy and develop their own artistry. Theatremakers like Wilson, for example, were willing and excited to use the theme park environment as their laboratory to test and develop principles like "alternative high-touch theater" – making the theme park

⁸ For this case study, the language and theories of the performance studies field offers an efficient way of describing their intended goal of re-performance. In his MIT thesis "A Brief History of Re-performance," Nicholas Seaver defines re-performance as a "recreation" as opposed to a simple "playback." Diana Taylor also takes up this definition in her book *Performance* to designate between re-performance and reenactment, which she defines on Rebecca Schneider's terms as "the practice of re-playing or re-doing a precedent event, artwork, or act."⁸ A "re-play," in this context is akin to a "playback," but as Taylor suggests, a re-performance is more than a reenactment, it is a transfer of presence. Calling, *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway a re-performance is to assert that the goal was to quote the original, while standing on its own merit: to recreate it, with an emphasis on *creation*. West emphasized this intended outcome by saying, "we wanted to do a theatrical production, not a repeat of the movie, and that necessitated making some very different choices."

Seaver, Nicholas, "A Brief History of Re-performance," (Master's Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), 18.

Lassell, Michael, *Disney on Broadway*, (Disney Editions, 2002), 35.

⁹ Roth interview.

circumstances work *for them* instead of the other way around. Roth, West, and Meyer were no different, and saw the parks as an opportunity to further develop a new style of staging that had been innovated on and Off-Broadway in the years leading up to their move to Disneyland.

The trio modeled their working relationship on of the experimental Broadway trio of director-choreographer Michael Bennett, choreographer Bob Avian, and scenic designer Robin Wagner, who were known for successful musicals such as *A Chorus Line* and *Dreamgirls*, along with style which is often described as “cinematic” or “integrated” for its seamless transitions and stylized movements.¹⁰ When this group was coming into their own, in the 1960s, there was a growing trend towards making films into Broadway musicals including, *Calamity Jane* (1961), *Carnival!* (1961), *Here’s Love* (1963), *Illya Darling* (1967), and *Promises, Promises* (1968), of which Bennett choreographed and Avian assisted. Realizing that the choreographic opportunities in *Promises, Promises* were minimal, Bennett decided to put his energy into choreographing transitions so that the stage version would uphold the pacing of a story originally told on film.¹¹ While there was innovative choreographic experiments on the previous film-to-stage productions listed, Bennett is the first to be credited with dedicating so much choreographic attention to scene changes, and in doing so, adapted aspects of film to the Broadway stage that enhanced theatrical dramaturgy.

¹⁰ Ann Reinking, a dancer who worked with Bennett and later became a Broadway star describes it thus, “[Bob] Fosse had already introduced the idea of the cinematic segue in [*Sweet Charity*], and Michael used the turntable in *Coco* for cinematic segues, like a ‘bleed’ in film. It helped to take the bumps out of a musical. He was an advocate of this smooth, ‘all-one’ technique, a truly graceful segue.” Ken Mandelbaum, *A Chorus Line and the Musicals of Michael Bennett*. 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 52.

¹¹ Bob Avian, *Dancing Man*, (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), Kindle Edition, 46.

As Jeffrey Zacks writes in *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies*, film editing utilizes a specific language of cuts, fades, dissolves, wipes, and other transitions that can be used to communicate specific things such as the passage of time, internal thoughts of characters, flashbacks, focus, and perspective to name a few.¹² He says, “The average adult therefore has a lot of practice processing cuts. This means that processing film editing is a perceptual skill like the perceptual skills we acquire when we learn to drive or learn to read.”¹³ So when a spectator sees a transition in film such as a “dissolve,” which is a slow fade, where images overlap, many can understand this to denote the passage of time or a significant change where one thing “fades away” to be replaced by something else. So in the musical *Dreamgirls*, when the character Effie sustains the last note of the iconic song “And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going”, after finding out that she’s being replaced in the girl group, her arm reaches out towards the audience, her table moves upstage, with her on it, and the curtains part to make way for her.¹⁴ As she slowly moves further and further away from the audience, the girl group enters with Effie’s replacement from stage left, in real time, performing a number, while Effie is still seen, moving backwards, as if in slow motion. Finally, a gold curtain drops to obscure Effie, and the stage version of the “dissolve” is over. A lot was communicated during this scenic transition between musical numbers – not just the passage of time, but the fact that Effie is being left (literally) behind as the two stage pictures of Effie and the new girl group overlap as if fading over each other. Avian claims this was deliberate: “He wanted *Dreamgirls* to move at such a quick pace that the audience would feel like they were watching a movie, complete with

¹² Jeffrey M Zacks, *Flicker: Your Brain on Movies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹³ Zacks, 194.

¹⁴ Car2929, “#nowwatching Jennifer Holliday - Its All Over / And I Am Telling You,” Youtube.com. October 22, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs9ilZijQ4c>.

wipes and dissolves. At Michael's request, Robin began designing towers with the capability of turning, a refinement which increased both the fluidity and the number of possible locations."¹⁵ In this way, scenic transitions, in a show, which were largely considered throwaway moments before Bennett. Under Bennett, transitions which were previously covered by measures and measures of scene change music were now covered by unbroken and wild applause and vocal explanations from audiences, reacting to the emotion of this change. This example from *Dreamgirls* demonstrates the narrative, character, and thematic potential that exists in roughly fifteen seconds of staging.

Poignantly, neither Bennett, Avian, nor Wagner (of which Bennett is credited as the primary innovator) were academics or cognitive psychologists – in fact Bennett never finished high school, and was often labelled as “illiterate.”¹⁶ However, even though they did not have the scholarly or theoretical language to describe their dramaturgy, they recognized the ways that modern eyes had been conditioned by film and television and that they sought to create a theatrical language that accessed the visual vernacular. Movement was how they communicated, and it gave them an ability to distill complex characters, moments, concepts and meanings into compact – often described as “simple” – movements of bodies and scenic elements.¹⁷ For example, Avian recalls that in *Promises, Promises*, he and Bennett used the cramped scenery in the song “Grapes of

¹⁵ Avian, 121.

¹⁶ Joe Papp said of Bennett, “He was always very down to earth; there was nothing intellectual about Michael. He was more ordinary than ordinary people, but put him in his milieu and he was extraordinary. And that had nothing to do with anything that anybody learns in school. He sees it, he feels it, he knows it, and he does it. It's pure talent, and he had it. I think he's the greatest choreographer/director I've seen on Broadway.”

Kenneth Turan and Joseph Papp, *Free for All: Joe Papp, the Public and the Greatest Theatre Story Ever Told*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ Avian, 57.

Roth” to create a crowded and chaotic scene where, “each hip thrown left, or shoulder moved to the right, each swiveling body, or raised pair of hands—it was all aimed at highlighting the frantic New York singles scene that low-level corporate drone Chuck Baxter (Jerry Orbach) faced as he tried to maneuver his way through the crowd.”¹⁸ In *Company*, Bennett made it so that, “during ‘Side by Side,’ each of the husbands would dance a simple step and the wife would answer with one of her own; in Michael’s staging, when it was Bobby’s turn to dance, he performed his step and was answered by—silence. For Bobby, there was no side by side. He had no partner... The entire show had been summed up in those four counts of silence.”¹⁹ This efficient containment is also very filmic in nature due to the inherent differences in film and stage acting. “Instead of doing less [in film], we contain both movement and vocal delivery; the intention determination and the intensity to portray the character is the same for either [stage or film],” writes Roger Wooster and Paul Conway in their book *Screen Acting Skills: a Practical Handbook for Students and Teachers*.²⁰ For the Bennett trio, “putting film onstage” was not about cutting and pasting, frame per frame, movies to Broadway, but, rather, using theatrical techniques to *quote* films to achieve a similar or enhanced affectual or intellectual response from spectators that they would have while watching a movie. It is not difficult to see how such an approach would or could work effectively with Disney, given its similarities to many of the experiments in characterization that

¹⁸ Jerry Orbach would go on to do the voice of the character Lumiere in the film version of *Beauty and the Beast*, bringing an early connection between Bennett and the piece. Avian, 46-47.

¹⁹ Avian, 57.

²⁰ Roger Wooster and Paul Conway, *Screen Acting Skills: a Practical Handbook for Students and Teachers*, (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), Kindle Edition.

were happening in the theme parks around the same time that Bennett's team was operating on Broadway.

As discussed in more length in the previous chapter, the character actors, choreographers, and costume designers in Disney theme parks had to find ways to create believable representations of Disney animated characters like Mickey Mouse in extremely limiting costumes, with large heads, where the eyes and facial features can't move. The costumes were designed this way to create a version of the character that more accurately reflected the hand-drawn version – as human-proportioned characters did not look right. The performers, choreographers, and costume designers in the parks discovered ways in the 1960s and 1970s to communicate characterization through gestures and the work of capturing one expression on the character's mask that encapsulates their most important attributes. There is no identifiable connection to Bennett's experiments with Broadway choreography, movement, and direction; however, there are identifiable similarities that would allow artists like Roth, West, and Meyer to seamlessly integrate their Bennett-inspired methods to the park setting and eventually back to Broadway with *Beauty and the Beast*.

Motorcar Mania

While directing *In Trousers* Off-Broadway, at Playwrights Horizons, Roth went to the opening night of *Noises Off* (1983), and on the bus ride back to Rutgers, ran into Stan Meyer, a graduate design student, who also attended the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.²¹ The two bonded over their mutual love and respect for

²¹ Roth interview.

Michael Bennett and his often scenic designer Robin Wagner, who collaborated together on *Chorus Line* and *Dreamgirls*: “The two most integrated, beautifully designed shows in history,” Roth maintains, to this day.²² Roth asked Meyer if he would be interested in designing *In Trousers*, and maintains that the two made a pact to stick together like Bennett and Wagner – that they would go to Broadway one day – and, thus, began a thirty-five-plus year artistic partnership. For every show Roth directed, Meyer was the set designer, and when Meyer got a job in Disneyland as an art director, he called Roth to come join him, when they were seeking a director for a parade. Meyer wanted to keep the team together, but Roth expressed that he had no interest in directing Disneyland parades. He was much more invested in his work at Playwrights Horizons, especially the emerging programs for young artists.²³ “We can ride bikes through the park in the morning before the parks open,” enticed Meyer.²⁴ “And literally that is why there is *Beauty and the Beast* [on Broadway],” laughs Roth.²⁵ He applied for the job and was hired as a freelance director so that he could retain the option to leave Disney if an opportunity arose in New York.

After the Disneyland parade, the next project Roth and Meyer were assigned to was a new project in Long Beach, California, where the Walt Disney Company had acquired the retired RMS Queen Mary and the Spruce Goose Dome, holding the massive Hughes H-4 Hercules aircraft and various exhibits dedicated to its history.²⁶ During this time, the Walt Disney Company invested millions of dollars into refurbishing the Queen

²² Roth interview.

²³ Roth interview.

²⁴ Roth interview.

²⁵ Roth interview.

²⁶ Roth interview.

Mary, and surrounding area to make it a viable tourist destination as a prelude to a new theme park that Eisner wanted to build called Port Disney.²⁷ To do this, Eisner and the Imagineers filled the area with Disney theme park style attractions, including some new theatrical attractions including an immersive haunted boat tour that included live actors and special effects.²⁸ It also included an overall 1939 theme (the year that the Queen Mary launched) and actors who walked the ship as passengers and celebrities from that year to better immerse guests into that world. In the Spruce Goose Dome, this theme extended to include a vintage car show featuring the 1939 Packard car, and a permanent stage show featuring the Three Stooges (very popular in 1939), which Roth was asked to direct, and Meyer was asked to design.²⁹ However, even adopting Bennett's staging techniques for staging film, the Three Stooges felt too incompatible for a stage show.

Roth was puzzled by how to stage this request, because the Three Stooges' comedy relies so heavily on closeups – a part of filmic visual language that is more difficult to transfer to the stage. Roth simply explained to his supervisors, "I'm sorry, I don't know how I would do this," demonstrating his independence to say "no" within the Disney system, and remain honest to his dramaturgical instincts.³⁰ His supervisor responded, "All right, well what would you do then?" and after some research on 1939, Roth suggested filling the thirty minute show slot with a book musical, where a mafia boss and his nightclub-singer-girlfriend steal a U.S. government Packard, that could feature tunes and dances from the 30s, and replace the original lyrics with lyrics that

²⁷ Andrew Thompson, "Disney's Role in the Queen Mary," Los Angeles Times, April 19, 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-04-19-hl-1041-story.html>.

²⁸ Thompson, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-04-19-hl-1041-story.html>.

²⁹ Roth interview.

³⁰ Roth interview.

further the plot.³¹ “We don’t really do book musicals,” they said, explaining that many Disneyland tourists do not speak English, and they were concerned that they would not understand the plot. Roth, in Bennett fashion, maintained the accessibility of presenting a plot through movement and choreography: “This is going to have tap dancing and big, peppy, big band songs. You know, you don’t have to speak English. I mean, you’ll get what the story is, I think, visually anyway.”³² After other proto-book-musical experiments, mentioned in Chapter 3, such as *Circus Magic* (1986) and *One Man’s Dream* (1990), Disney Entertainment agreed to take the risk and *Motorcar Mania* (1990) was one of these early experiments in incorporating book musicals under the Disney theme park umbrella.

The plots of the prior Disney theme park musicals were designed to connect musical numbers, (usually pop songs or revamped pop songs) while with *Motorcar Mania*, the musical numbers were designed to center the plot. For this task, not only were lyrics to popular 1930s songs changed to be about the Packard car heist, but Disney Entertainment introduced Roth to a choreographer from New York who could design character movement in service of the story: Matt West. This was a name that Roth recognized from walking past the Shubert Theatre in New York City to look at the names of the actors featured in *A Chorus Line*: noticing that one actor, West, was consistently in the show for four consecutive years. “I later learned,” Roth says, “that Michael Bennett, my idol, loved Matt West as he was an amazing dancer.”³³ West and Roth became quick friends, and although Michael Bennett had died of AIDS related complications a few

³¹ Roth interview.

³² Roth interview.

³³ Roth interview.

years before *Motorcar Mania*, in 1987, the newly put together trio saw themselves as not copying, but continuing Bennett's experiments.

Motorcar Mania didn't feature the deep kind of character or thematic content that *Dreamgirls*, *Company*, *A Chorus Line*, or *Promises, Promises* did. Therefore, there wasn't as much for the Disney-trio to condense in an already-condensed 30min musical with a generic plotline and stock mafia characters. *Motorcar Mania* can, therefore, be read as a transitional moment between the show-choir musical reviews that were typically performed in Disney theme parks and the plot-driven Broadway book musical that the trio wanted to make. Nevertheless, chorography and blocking quoted musical theatre history – specifically famous scenes that Jerome Robbins choreographed in the 1930s and 1940s.³⁴ One of the most notable nods is a re-created version of “On a Sunday by the Sea/The Bathing Beauty Ballet” from the 1947 musical *High Button Shoes*. The original Broadway number featured a line of beach changing tents and a farcical, choreographed chase scene, with people going in and out of tent doors, bumping into each other, dancing around each other, a Russian kick dance, a Moulin Rouge can-can style kick line, and a football game.³⁵ Roth, West, and Meyer recreated this iconic number in the context of the

³⁴ I would like to thank Barby Hobyak Roche for lending me a choreographer's eye to identify the intertextuality of the moves in this rare clip of *Motorcar Mania*. This home movie available on Youtube is the only visual record of this show that exists for the public. Deux Spirit, ““Motorcar Mania” Disney/Queen Mary/Spruce Goose Dome Show 1990,” Youtube.com. September 24, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kj1oUBjxxVc>.

³⁵ These steps were recreated by Robbins in his 1989 musical Jerome Robbins' Broadway and available to view on Youtube. There is no footage of the 1947 production that is available to the public. Much of Robbins' original choreography for this number was reminiscent of silent film chase sequences, and even incorporated extra movements to make it look like the dancers were sped up on film. It should be noted that Robbins was one of Michael Bennett's inspirations and mentors, who may have influenced his eventual cinematic style. Cinematic choreography was not Robbins' claim to fame, although this number suggests it was present in his work. nathanjames1978. “Jerome Robbins' Broadway,” Youtube.com. May 8, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15Ab7mnnVpQ>.

plot of *Motorcar* with the melody of “On a Sunday by the Sea” plays with different lyrics. There were bath house doors instead of tents, and a New York City park instead of the beach. West incorporated the original elements and even added a tug-of-war sequence reminiscent of George Balanchine’s choreography in *The Nutcracker* party scene, which would be recognizable to many since his choreography is the version often reproduced in local productions of the ballet across the country, to this day.³⁶ It is likely that these scenes – not reproduced exactly, but quoted as re-performance – might have been recognizable to audiences in 1990 because Jerome Robbins, himself, had just reproduced an anthology of his work on Broadway in 1989, titled *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway*. It was still playing when *Motorcar Mania* opened.³⁷ For the trio this demonstrated an ability to recreate recognizable cultural texts.

“That was like a Broadway show,” exclaimed Michael Eisner to Roth, after being introduced after the show’s opening.³⁸ “Yeah, that’s exactly the point,” smiled Roth, who went on to introduce Eisner to West and Meyer explaining, “You know, we’re trying to do Michael Bennet. Michael Bennett, Bob Avian and Robin Wagner have worked together over and over and over and over and over and over again.”³⁹ Eisner was all-too aware of this fact: “I had to fire Michael Bennett,” he said.⁴⁰ As a young executive at Paramount, Eisner was involved in the studio producing two Broadway shows, the musical *My One and Only* and Bernard Slade’s drama *Tribute*.⁴¹ *My One and Only* was

³⁶ See Jennifer Fisher, *“Nutcracker” Nation: How an Old-World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition in the New World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

³⁷ Anonymous, “Jerome Robbins’ Broadway,” Playbill.com, accessed July 15, 2021.

<https://www.playbill.com/production/jerome-robbins-broadway-imperial-theatre-vault-0000006034#>.

³⁸ Roth interview.

³⁹ Roth interview.

⁴⁰ Roth interview.

⁴¹ Eisner, Kindle Edition.

created and directed by Bennett's friend and protégé Tommy Tune, and when the show was struggling artistically, Tune called in Bennett to help fix it. This was, however, after the success of *Dreamgirls*, and Bennett had been experiencing a rough period of post-show depression and drug abuse, so Eisner had to fire him for his erratic behavior.⁴² This all came out in the first conversation that Eisner and Roth had, along with Eisner's revealing his love of Broadway and his younger days as an aspiring playwright. The two bonded quickly, and despite Eisner's own negative professional experience with Bennett, the possibility he now had a Bennet-equivalent-team working for him, made him excited about future theatre projects for the theme parks. The trio of Roth, West, and Meyer, however, had bigger plans, and wanted a theatre laboratory of their own.

Videopolis as Theatre Laboratory

The very next day after the premier of *Motorcar Mania*, Eisner called the trio to meet with him, studio head Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Entertainment manager Bob McTyre.⁴³ As mentioned in the previous chapter, part of the expansion of theatre in the theme parks was connected to Eisner's strategy for company synergy: meaning that departments promoting things that other departments are working on. In 1990, the live-action studio at Disney had produced a film version of the Dick Tracy comics, featuring music by none other than prolific Broadway composer, Stephen Sondheim. Sondheim had collaborated with Bennett successfully on musicals like *Company* and *Follies*, with the two men heavily contributing to the success of the other.⁴⁴ Perhaps it was Eisner and Roth's conversation about Bennett, the night before, that made the wheels turn in his

⁴² Roth interview.

⁴³ Roth interview.

⁴⁴ See, Avian.

head, but he and Katzenberg asked Roth, West, and Meyer, if they would be interested in staging *Dick Tracy* in the theme parks.⁴⁵ After all, what better way to re-capture the magic of *Company* and *Follies* than to combine Sondheim with the closest thing they had to the Bennett trio? The problem was that the film's director, Warren Beatty was not finished editing the film, and would not let anyone, not even Katzenberg see the film or the script. This meant that, in the end, Roth, West, and Meyer would have to adapt the story from the comics instead of the film and would not have Sondheim's score after all.⁴⁶ Again, just as with *Motorcar Mania*, they made the most of it.

The trio put *Diamond Double Cross* together so that each scene looked like it could be a comic book page – an excellent prelude to the trio converting the two-dimensional animated drawings of *Beauty and the Beast* to the stage.⁴⁷ They were able to achieve a large diversity of scenic locations, and choreograph another epic chase scene using automated intelligent lighting and scenery at the Videopolis stage. Intelligent lighting instruments could not only move, but change color, project shapes with metal cutouts called gobos, and produce effects like strobing or bouncing. This allows for designers to create an almost unlimited amount of “looks” that can denote different locations, with fewer lights. It also aids designers in creating the illusion of movement, especially combined with actor movement, and moving scenery. At this time, the only

⁴⁵ Roth interview.

⁴⁶ Roth interview.

⁴⁷ Footage of *Diamond Double Cross* is available on Youtube thanks to people who took home movies in Disneyland and later uploaded it.

WorldofShows, “DICK TRACY’S DIAMOND DOUBLE CROSS,” Youtube.com. January 21, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMYFQnfxXwA&t=1053s>.

other theatres that had automated scenery were Broadway theatres or big companies – and theatres were not yet using automated intelligent lighting, even on Broadway.

From 1906-1980 various inventors in theatre, television, film, and the music concert industries developed and patented intelligent lighting units, which were controlled mechanically or with a remote control.⁴⁸ In the mid-1970s, computerized light programming boards were incorporated into theatrical lighting. The first Broadway musical to use this technology was, poignantly, *A Chorus Line*, directed by Michael Bennett.⁴⁹ However, these light boards only worked for traditional lights, by automating their dimmers and controlling fade time (something that was very important for producing the effects of cinematic fades on stage). Computer-controlled intelligent lights were invented by lighting and sound engineers in the rock concert producing company Showco, in 1980, and debuted to the world in 1981 on the tour of the band Genesis.⁵⁰ Intelligent lighting would quickly become a staple of concert lighting in the music industry by 1986, when these instruments and controlling systems were more readily available through several international companies.⁵¹ It would, however, still be almost a decade before it was adopted into the theatre industry, and Disney theme parks had a unique opportunity to experiment with this new technology.

In the meantime, Disneyland's experimental theatre Videopolis, built in 1985, which was a theatre by day and nightclub by night, spared no expense in making the

⁴⁸ Richard Cadena, *Automated Lighting: The Art and Science of Moving Light in Theatre, Live Performance, Broadcast, and Entertainment*, (Amsterdam: Focal Press, 2006), 33-48.

⁴⁹ Jesse McKinley, "Act II: Enter the Computers," *The New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/17/technology/act-ii-enter-the-computers.html>.

⁵⁰ Cadena, 48-53.

⁵¹ Cadena, 62-66.

MTV-inspired space the cutting edge of concert technology. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* describes the scene: “The 40 overhead rotating lights kick in with the second [music] video, sweeping arcs of green and pink diamonds past the dancers,” informing the reader that these lights include all of the newest features including movement, color change, and gobo shapes.⁵² This meant that those theatre professionals like the Roth, West, and Meyer trio, that had access to theatremaking in this space, had technology that would not be seen on Broadway’s theatrical stages until *Starlight Express* (1987), *The Will Rogers Follies* (1991), *Miss Saigon* (1991), and *The Who’s Tommy* (1993).⁵³ They could take advantage of rapid and precise scenic and lighting changes that accentuate cinematic transitions on stage, and incorporate actor blocking and choreography to integrate the whole picture.

Diamond Double Cross also gave the trio an opportunity to develop a creative relationship between Eisner and Katzenberg. As discussed in previous chapters, these executives – and especially Katzenberg – often played a participatory role in the creative labor of Disney animation and theme park theatre, communicating directly with artists and Imagineers, and offering notes.⁵⁴ As with other described collaborations with Eisner and Katzenberg, in the Company, Roth and the trio were expected to stand up for their artistic choices, defend them if necessary, and tell their bosses “no.” When Roth did this, Eisner would say something along the lines of, “Right. Next. You’re right that’s a terrible

⁵² Linden Gross, “Dancing at Disneyland: At the Magic Kingdom’s Videopolis Disco, Teens Find Cameras, Lights and High-Tech Action,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 28, 1987. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-06-28-tm-360-story.html>.

⁵³ James L Moody and Paul Dexter, *Concert Lighting: Techniques, Art and Business*, 3Rd ed. /ed. (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2010), 161.

⁵⁴ This is also discussed at length in Peter Kunze’s dissertation discussed at length in Peter Kunze’s dissertation “Staging a Comeback: Film and Theatre Convergence at Disney, 1982-1998.”

idea.”⁵⁵ These sessions with Eisner and Katzenberg during *Diamond Double Cross* taught Roth a lesson: even the two most powerful people in Hollywood can be wrong, and be smart enough to know when they are wrong. This was part of the Disney process that changed him fundamentally as a director. The director, he says, surrounds themselves with knowledgeable people who are experts in their specific area: design, dance, etc. It is best for the director to listen to these voices. “The director doesn't need to know what the answers, and so that was a really liberating thing.”⁵⁶ Here, Roth developed an intervention on Bennett’s style. Bennett was known as a strong collaborator, but not for his humility or critical generosity: he is remembered as a control freak who occasionally made creative concessions in the interest of pragmatic advancement.⁵⁷ Roth resolved to de-center the role of the director as the maker of a singular vision – much as theatre laboratories had done before him, in a “theatre discipline” that Peter Schneider had brought to the Disney Animation Studio a few years prior.

Ultimately, Eisner bestowed the highest praise on the production by declaring it “Michael Bennett-esque.”⁵⁸ However, the trio wanted to use the resources of this new Disney laboratory for plays that better matched their Off-Broadway backgrounds – and graduate from using these new technologies on low-stakes thirty-minute plots like *Dick Tracy’s Diamond Double Cross*. Eisner’s praise of their work, and their newfound working relationship, gave the trio the confidence to ask for an opportunity to use these new technologies to do work that was more meaningful to them.

⁵⁵ Roth interview.

⁵⁶ Roth interview.

⁵⁷ See the many interviews in Mandelbaum, which also report Bennett to be somewhat verbally abusive at times, and emotionally manipulative as well.

⁵⁸ Roth interview.

From Christopher Street to Disneyland

In order to identify what kind of work would be meaningful to them, one can look at where they came from before Disney. The trio not only came from Off-Broadway, they came from a very specific time and place at the intersection of American theatre history and American LGBTQ history. In the early 1980s, Roth was frequenting the Lucille Lortel Theatre on Christopher Street, in the West Village to see Tommy Tune's production of Caryl Churchill's gender-bending, queer, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist play *Cloud 9* (1982).⁵⁹ "I had seen it like five times," remembers Roth, "I was just obsessed... I just wanted to meet Tommy Tune."⁶⁰ Roth, who was a theatre student at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, had just been accepted for an internship program with ART New York, which paired college students with Off-Broadway theatres like Playwrights Horizons. He met with his internship coordinator, Bob Moss, the founder of Playwrights Horizons, who offered him a job instead directing at the newly founded Hangar Theatre Company in Ithaca, New York, under his direct tutorage.⁶¹ Moss also encouraged Roth to write to Tommy Tune, who had just finished directing and starring in, none other than Eisner's Paramount-backed musical *My One and Only*, and was getting ready to mount one of the musical's many national tours.⁶² For figures like Tune, who was mentored by Bennett, and who inspired figures like Roth, the radical theatre of *Cloud 9* and the corporate theatre of *My One and Only* were not seen to be in contradiction or conflict with the other. Both were seen as opportunities for meaningful

⁵⁹ Roth interview.

⁶⁰ Roth interview.

⁶¹ Roth interview.

⁶² Email correspondence with Rob Roth, June 14, 2021.

and open self-expression. To understand this, the theatre historian must place their work in the context of the politics of queer mainstreaming that proliferated after the Stonewall Riots in 1969.

In 1970 Martha Shelley wrote about the confrontational politics of mainstreaming in the *Gay Liberation Front Magazine*:

“[We are] refusing to pass for straight anymore... Understand this—that the worst part of being a homosexual is having to keep it secret. Not the occasional murders by police or teenage queer-beaters, not the loss of jobs or expulsion from schools or dishonorable discharges—but the daily knowledge that what you are is so awful that it cannot be revealed. The violence against us is sporadic. Most of us are not affected. But the internal violence of being made to carry—or choosing to carry—the load of your straight society’s unconscious guilt—this is what tears us apart, what makes us want to stand up in the offices, in the factories and schools and shout out our true identities.”⁶³

In the 1970s, Harry Hay wrote about the politics of mainstreaming or “coming out” for the Los Angeles chapter of the *Gay Liberation Front* saying, “We believe that, as quickly as possible, homosexuals should find ways to inform their friends, families, employers, and associates of their homosexuality, that through this confrontation might come freedom from gossip, blackmail, guilt feelings, and self-destruction.”⁶⁴ In the midst of these politics, queer theatre professionals like Bennett, Avian, Tune, and later Roth, West, and Meyer developed their own politics of mainstreaming.

Bob Avian recalls, “I used to go to the Stonewall bar and was actually there two nights before the famous riots in June of 1969. I remember hoping that the uprising was the start of a real movement and revolution, because I think coming out and obtaining

⁶³ Martha Shelley, “Gay is Good,” qtd in *The Stonewall Reader*. Edited by Jason Baumann and New York Public Library. (Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 186-187.

⁶⁴ Harry Hay, *Radically Gay*, qtd in *The Stonewall Reader*. Edited by Jason Baumann and New York Public Library. (Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 201.

equal rights is absolutely key.”⁶⁵ In his memoir *Footnotes*, Tune recalls that Bennett, who was bisexual, warned him of the dangers of being openly gay in the industry saying, “Always have a girl on your arm, even if it is Pat Ast” – a character actress, at the time, known for playing more butch roles.⁶⁶ When Tune brought a male date, costume designer Michael Stuart, to the 1974 Tony Awards, the TV camera did not cut to him and his date as the names of the nominees were being read. When Tune won the Tony, that night, for his performance as the openly gay choreographer, in the musical *Seesaw*, (written, directed, and choreographed by Bennett, with Avian as assistant), he used the bulk of his acceptance speech to do what was essentially a commercial for the musical and its coming tours.⁶⁷ “I suppose coming with Michael Stuart as my date was radical behavior,” he says.⁶⁸ *Seesaw*, as a commercial musical with a simple plot about a love affair, is no *Cloud 9* in terms of its political content or goals, but it offered Tune a change to publicly perform queerness both onstage and off.

For these figures, the politics of the personal could not be separated from their work in the commercial sphere even if they wanted it to be, and this was the world that the trio of Roth, West, and Meyer came from.⁶⁹ Tune, and his co-director of *My One and Only* Thommie Walsh, invited Roth to assist them with the tour, but the financing fell

⁶⁵ Avian, 22.

⁶⁶ Tune, 50.

⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMn3PkaXaeI>

⁶⁸ Tune, 50.

⁶⁹ IN an incident during *My One and Only* with his romantic co-star Lucie Arnaz, where she changed the blocking of a love scene, one night, without warning: she refused to kiss him for fear of getting AIDS. Her fear exemplifies both the medical misinformation and anti-gay prejudice that was rampant in the 1980s: Tune, who did not nor has ever had AIDS, was assumed to be contagious because he was gay, and Arnaz was under the impression that she could contract it from kissing. “I felt contaminated, judged, guilty, hurt, shocked, puzzled, and worse, under rehearsed!” Tune explains of the sudden change in staging. Tune, 46, 48

apart, and Roth found himself without an internship.⁷⁰ “Tommy felt bad,” says Roth, remembering the advice that Tune gave him about show business being unpredictable: the seemingly sure things are often not and vice versa.⁷¹ Roth understood the kind of risk that Eisner articulated when he turned down the idea of Touchstone Theatricals. Ironically, their mutual understanding of loss in the theatre overlapped on the same musical. Tune, however, also left Roth with an additional lesson on perspective and patience: “Your time will come... You will work your way up and form great friendships and collaborations,” he said to that effect, referencing the practice of investing in one’s peers that allowed Tune to reach such a point in his career.⁷² Roth had yet to find the rest of his trio, at this time, but in these early years, he was developing ways to express himself by directing queer-themed new plays.

He wanted to start by directing *March of the Falsettos* at Rutgers: a musical by William Finn about a father who realizes he is gay and the effect that this has on his relationship with his son.⁷³ When this plan fell through, because a directing MFA student at Rutgers was slated to direct instead, Moss informed Roth that there was a prequel to the musical called *In Trousers*, which similarly explored themes of “coming out”. Playwrights Horizons had produced a small workshop production in 1979, and Moss put Roth in contact with Finn to gather materials to do a fully realized production, which would develop the play further. It was during this production that Roth connected with Meyer and they had their first artistic collaboration. Meanwhile, West had been working directly with Bennett in *A Chorus Line*, which also explored themes of “coming out.”

⁷⁰ Email correspondence with Roth, June 14, 2021.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Roth interview.

This was work that was important to them, and when they came to Disneyland, Ron Logan affectionately referred to them as “the Three Gay Caballeros” – after the bird trio in Donald Duck buddy flick from 1944.⁷⁴ The playful nickname communicates three things: 1) the fact that the trio were open about their sexuality at Disney, 2) that the three men were inseparable from each other, and 3) that their identities were inseparable from their work at Disney, and what they wanted to achieve there. This is not to suggest that they went to Disney specifically to mainstream queerness – after all, Meyer convinced Roth to join him there with the promise that he could ride his bicycle in the park before opening – but that no conversation about the intended performative outcome of their work, including *Beauty and the Beast*, can be divorced from these politics.

Touchstone Theatricals

The trio of Roth, West, and Meyer leveraged their successful theme park productions, when they proposed the creation of a new, independent theatre company, called Touchstone Theatricals to then C.E.O. Michael Eisner, in 1990.⁷⁵ Under this proposal, the company would operate as a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company, and be dedicated primarily to adapting films to the Broadway stage.⁷⁶ The name Touchstone Theatricals was a reference to Disney’s subsidiary film studio Touchstone Pictures, which had been created to make more “grown up” films. As Sean Griffin writes in *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*, there was a notable amount of queer characters, themes, and intertextuality in Touchstone films – reflecting the kind of subject matter that Roth and his collaborators had initially intended

⁷⁴ Logan interview.

⁷⁵ Roth interview.

⁷⁶ Roth interview.

to make.⁷⁷ The team formally pitched their idea to Eisner and Disney studio head Jeffrey Katzenberg, asking for a developmental budget so they could look through the Disney library, the Touchstone library, and even non-Disney properties to see which stories could be adapted into Broadway musicals.⁷⁸ They envisioned something that did not yet exist at Disney: a division dedicated solely to theatre and theatrical development.

However, when the trio made their pitch for Touchstone Theatricals to Eisner and Katzenberg, the reviews, so to speak, were mixed. “Michael let's do it,” Katzenberg urged, in his famously abrasive style, “He’s only asking for a million dollars. Fuck it.”⁷⁹ Eisner, on the other hand, was more cautious and reserved. He emphasized his own love of theatre, and his appreciation for the talents that the trio brought to theme park stage shows. But he ultimately said that Broadway was a bad investment. “Most shows fail,” he said, “The ones that are even the biggest hit takes a year to pay back.”⁸⁰ Eisner knew this personally.

“Among all the arts, theater had been my earliest passion, but I was also aware of its limits as a business,” he explains.⁸¹ Of the two Broadway shows he had produced while at Paramount, he explained that “*Tribute* lost money even though it was based on a

⁷⁷ As Griffin notes, the Touchstone film *Down and Out In Beverly Hills* features a gay character coming to terms with “coming out” to his parents. It also featured an early film appearance by trans performer Alexis Arquette – then known as an “underground drag queen.” Other films like *Big Business* also featured queer characters, and others had queer directors and other artistic leaders make them. Many Touchstone films starred actress Bette Midler who had a contract with Disney, and started her career singing in gay male bathhouses. She brought with her a queer audience base.

Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out*. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 150-160.

⁷⁸ Roth interview.

⁷⁹ Roth interview.

⁸⁰ Roth interview.

⁸¹ Eisner, Michael D.. *Work in Progress: Risking Failure Surviving Success*. Disney Book Group. Kindle Edition.

fantastic script.” This loss might have been particularly jarring for him, since, as mentioned in the Introductory chapter, his whole philosophy of corporate management was based on the idea that a good script will lead to financial success. “*My One and Only* was moderately profitable, but the investment of time and effort proved far out of proportion to the financial gain.”⁸² When Katzenberg suggested, early on, in their tenure at Disney, to move into Broadway production, Eisner shut the conversation down: “I didn’t rule out theater forever, but I was determined to wait for the right moment—and the right project.”⁸³ Maybe it was the lack of specificity in the trio’s proposal for Touchstone Theatricals that made him hesitant, but he offered them, instead, the opportunity to look at the next five-years-worth of movies that were in production at Disney and have their pick of ones to adapt to the stage – as long as it was within the limits of the theme parks, where it was more financially safe to experiment.⁸⁴ He ended the meeting by saying to the trio, “You can ask me again about Broadway.”⁸⁵ As it turns out, they absolutely would.

Early Transformations

This rejection of Touchstone Theatricals was “depressing”, according to Roth.⁸⁶ The trio had their heart set of having their own theatre laboratory. He maintains, however that the silver lining was getting additional opportunities to learn how to make the most of the new technologies available at Disney theme parks. In addition to automated lights and scenery, they also had access to the latest Synclavier audio technology and wireless

⁸² Eisner, Kindle Edition.

⁸³ Eisner, Kindle Edition.

⁸⁴ Roth interview.

⁸⁵ Roth interview.

⁸⁶ Roth interview.

microphones, which was used on Broadway.⁸⁷ The trio realized that there was a lot that they could learn, and Eisner welcomed them to learn and experiment on the Disney dime.

Eisner's next project for the trio was a rock version of *The Nutcracker* featuring Disney characters, to be staged at Videopolis. This gave them further opportunity to develop their style in conjunction with the mechanics of staging animated characters like Mickey, Minnie, and Disney's new character Roger Rabbit, who utilized sloppier and more fluid movements to convey the cartoonishness, that was integral to his character in the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*. The staging incorporated Bennett-style cinematic transitions, such as walls that slide apart as characters walk upstage, as if the "camera" is following them out the door. It also involved a transformation sequence, which would foreshadow their future work on *Beauty and the Beast*.

Mickey's Nutcracker (1991) opened about the same time that the film version of *Beauty and the Beast* premiered, and that *Beauty and the Beast Live Onstage* also premiered. The stage show loosely followed the plot of *The Nutcracker*, embellishing it by making the Rat King a central villain instead of a cameo character. In a possible comedic nod to *Beauty and the Beast*, the Rat King was once a handsome prince, turned into a rat (one might say, a Beast?) and can be transformed again (not with true love, but) with that which he truly hates: sugar.⁸⁸ This transformation effect was achieved by the Rat King/Prince actor standing on a mark, and turning his back to the audience with blinking lights and moving gobo shadows aimed at him. Meanwhile, as he does a quick costume change in front of the audience, removing his rat costume in one or two quick

⁸⁷ Roth interview.

⁸⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR54K-w85Yo>

movements as other cast members take these pieces and dance away. The cast of characters swirls around him like a cyclone and other dancers bring him his princely crown before he turns around at full lights. The scene is nothing compared to what would eventually be achieved on the Broadway stage for the Beast's transformation with a Broadway budget and professional illusionist Jim Steinmeyer's original designs, which would be patented as new inventions.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the trio was able to make the most of this moment on stage, using nothing but movement, dance, and lights on the low theme park budget.

Eisner was impressed, and the trio used this moment to ask, once again, if they could launch their theatre laboratory.⁹⁰ This time, he did not say "no." Instead he asked, "What would [the project] be?"⁹¹ The trio offered *Mary Poppins*, and Eisner granted them seed money to develop the idea for the stage. However, when the animated film version of *Beauty and the Beast* was released in 1991 to critical acclaim, including a review by New York theatre critic Frank Rich, which called it the "best musical score" of the year, Eisner approached Roth about staging *Beauty* instead. Roth recalls, "I wondered how you could show onstage the way the spell was shown in the movie, where the members of the Beast's staff were immediately changed into objects. So, when I asked how all these people could change in an instant, Michael said, 'Yeah, you're right. Keep going on *Mary Poppins*.'"⁹² However, Eisner was not alone in his instinct to push for

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Peter Filichia, *Broadway Musical MVPs: 1960-2010: The Most Valuable Players of the Past 50 Seasons*, (Hal Leonard Press, 2011), Kindle Edition.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Filichia, Kindle Edition.

Beauty and the Beast. There were other voices in the Company that believed that *Beauty* was the strongest choice to stage.

Ron Logan, president of Disney's Entertainment division was one of the first high ranking members to suggest bringing *Beauty and the Beast* to Broadway – independent of the trio's Touchstone Theatricals idea. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Eisner's philosophy on synergy meant that theme park designers, planners, and managers viewed the progress of animated films years before they premiered, in order to plan related theme park content. Upon seeing rough clips of *Beauty and the Beast* and hearing Alan Menken and Howard Ashman's score, Logan said, "one thing that really struck me, that could be extremely successful for all of us, is *Beauty and the Beast*... The music is perfect for theme parks, music is perfect, I think, for a Broadway show."⁹³ Katzenberg and Eisner maintained their stance, at the time, that there would be no Disney musicals on Broadway, and Logan wrote a letter to Eisner to express, in so many words, "you're wrong."⁹⁴ When the Rich review was published in the New York Times, Eisner and Katzenberg called Logan saying, "What was your idea about *Beauty and the Beast* again?"⁹⁵ Logan and his vice president, Bob McTyre approached the trio about giving *Beauty and the Beast* another chance.

The decision had been made: if the theatrical professionals working at Disney could come up with a viable way to stage *Beauty and the Beast*, this would be the musical

⁹³ In the previous chapter, I emphasized the importance of music to theme park stage shows in maintaining the energy and affectual response of a thirty minute piece. The musical theatre songs composed by Menken and Ashman offered an opportunity to condense plots into thirty minutes and retain the emotional journey. Ron Logan (Former president of Disney Entertainment) interview with author, May, 2020.

⁹⁴ Logan interview.

⁹⁵ Logan interview.

to go to Broadway. Logan and the trio were tasked with putting together a proposal for how the musical would be staged, and Eisner gave them one stipulation: they were not allowed to talk to Linda Woolverton, Alan Menken, Tim Rice, or anyone from the animation studio who made the film.⁹⁶ He wanted to make sure that the team could develop ideas for staging the musical on their own – suggesting that the intent had always been creating something that quoted the original, but could stand on its own. Roth was, however, allowed to hire and consult with a theatrical design team for this presentation.

He hired Broadway veterans including lighting designer Natasha Katz and costume designer Ann Hould Ward, who had previously worked on *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods*. *Beauty and the Beast* producer Donald Franz recalls that Ward “had done the two things that we had to do. Number one: recreate a fairy tale in a theatrical term, which she did with *Into the Woods*, and also pull off an existing artwork which she did in *Sunday in the Park with George*.”⁹⁷ He uses the word “recreate” to further emphasize that this would not be a literal reproduction of the film, and the purposefulness behind Ward’s hiring is further evidence of their original intent. Through Logan, Roth hired Jim Steinmeyer, an “illusion master” who had previously worked with David Copperfield, to showcase some possible solutions for staging *Beauty*.⁹⁸ The task ahead of them was monumental and risky both artistically and financially.

⁹⁶ Roth interview.

⁹⁷ American Theatre Wing. “Production: “Beauty and the Beast” (Working In The Theatre #215),” Youtube.com. November 19, 2013. Accessed November 10, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqjdpGYF5co&t=1308s>.

⁹⁸ Veness, Susan, *The Hidden Magic of Walt Disney World: Over 600 Secrets of the Magic Kingdom, Epcot, Disney's Hollywood Studios, and Disney's Animal Kingdom*. (Adams Media. 2009), Kindle Edition. 156.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of transferring films to the stage was not new to Broadway (or even Off-Broadway), as there had been many musicals based on films up until that point: not least of which were *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982), which was written by the same music/lyrics team as *Beauty and the Beast*, Alan Menken and Howard Ashman, who also did *Smile* (1986), which was also based on movies. However, the proposed Touchstone Theatricals would have been the first theatre company created with the primary objective of turning movies into stage musicals. In this way, it was new.

Diamond Double Cross was their first attempt to stage a full-length Disney film [*Dick Tracy* (1990)] in a dramatic form – i.e. presenting a plot with a beginning, middle, and end – and it was not an animated film. Even so, the production was not even a representation of the film’s plot, since the trio could not get an advance screening of the film before putting it together. Meanwhile, the concept of staging animated films was not necessarily part of the trio’s proposal for Touchstone Theatricals. The film version of *Beauty and the Beast* was still in production when they first proposed the company, and until then the only precedent for such a thing was a 1979 production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* at Radio City Music Hall (often called *Snow White Live*), directed and choreographed by Frank Wagner, and produced by none other than former Disney Entertainment director Robert “Bob” Jani, mentioned in the previous chapter. This run of this show was short but wildly successful, and is credited as one of the performances that ultimately saved Radio City Music Hall from demolition.⁹⁹ For all intents and purposes, *Snow White Live* was one of the first major experiments in transferring animated film to

⁹⁹ Tammy Tuckey, “TTTS: Interview with the Cast of “SNOW WHITE LIVE,” Youtube.com. August 24, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEquyK5W0Aw>. Rosemary Novellino-Mearns, *Saving Radio City Music Hall: A Dancer's True Story*, (Teaneck, NJ: TurningPointPress, 2015).

the stage, and is remembered for eliciting strong emotional and participatory responses from the audience, especially children, who would shout “Don’t eat the apple!” at Snow White’s critical moment.¹⁰⁰ However, the piece was designed, true to Jani’s dramaturgical style, as a “spectacular” to be high in spectacle, music, and energy – not so much character depth or plot expansion. Even though they added songs and a few new plot points, they were not interested in re-creating the piece for the stage, or pushing the boundaries of animation and theatre. All in all it is remembered as a family show, aimed at children and grandparents, who would have been children when the film first premiered.

Nevertheless, the theatrical potential of staging animation Off-Broadway was so intriguing that in 1983, Joe Papp of the Public Theatre was in negotiations with Disney to produce *Snow White Live* starring Linda Ronstadt at the Delacorte Theatre as part of his free Shakespeare in the Park program.¹⁰¹ These negotiations, which occurred before Eisner’s tenure, fell through because of Jani’s prior contracts with other theatres for the show’s national tour, and Disney lost an opportunity to further develop the piece beyond its usefulness as theatre for young audiences.

Roth and his team knew that the emotional impact of *Beauty and the Beast*, as an animated film, affected more than a childrens’ audience. As evidenced in Chapter 2, the

¹⁰⁰ Tuckey, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEquyK5W0Aw>.

¹⁰¹ It is believed that Papp was interested in *Snow White* after his production of *Pirates of Penzance* had a successful commercial run and Broadway transfer. The negotiations were announced in *the Los Angeles Daily News* in 1983 and then nothing was heard after that. Jim Hill, “The “Snow White” that wasn’t: Why Disney took a pass on a Joe Papp production that would have had Linda Ronstadt starring as the Fairest in the Land,” Jim Hill Media Entertainment News, February 4, 2018. https://jimhillmedia.com/editor_in_chief1/b/jim_hill/archive/2018/02/04/the-quot-snow-white-quot-that-wasn-t-why-disney-took-a-pass-on-a-joe-papp-production-that-would-have-had-linda-ronstadt-starring-as-the-fairest-in-the-land.aspx.

film had a profound emotional and intellectual effect on adults including famous newscaster Dan Rather, who wrote about it as an AIDS metaphor. Roth expressed that he, himself, had cried watching the end of the film. As Chapter 2 explores in detail, Ashman's authorship on the film as a producer and lyricist lends a distinctly queer voice to the libretto, and his own death of AIDS before the film premiered emphasized the urgency of the movie's intended performative outcome of generating empathy for the Other. This was a story that was in line with the trio's artistic goals, and because of Ashman's Off-Broadway roots, and his own connections to Christopher Street, this was a story that gave them an opportunity to express themselves while experimenting with the technology and mechanics of staging film. To go to New York was to go home.

"Hi Michael! I'm Chip! I want to go to Broadway!"

The *Beauty and the Beast* team had about six months to put together their presentation for the Disney executives. Meyer worked diligently to create 140 black-and-white sketches of scenic designs, and Roth put them on slides.¹⁰² Roth looked at Woolverton's screenplay and listened to Menken and Ashman's score (with additional lyrics by Tim Rice, who filled the lyricist position in the wake of Ashman's death), and because he was not allowed to consult the film's original creative team for this project, he made executive decisions about where new songs should go, in order to expand the ninety minute movie into a two hour Broadway musical.¹⁰³ The biggest challenge, however, was to figure out how to transform humans into enchanted objects and change them back – plus, the fact that human bodies are much bigger than household objects.

¹⁰² Felicia, Kindle Edition.

¹⁰³ Roth interview.

Transforming a human-sized actor into a human-sized Beast was not a problem, but the ensemble of household objects, who not only help propel the plot, but provide much of the story's emotional undertow, presented a theatrical problem.

In the theme park stage show version, *Beauty and the Beast Live On Stage*, which the Broadway team did not participate in, actors wear human-sized object costumes – so the teapot and teacups are about five feet tall, and the clock costume has been likened to having one's own apartment, due to its large size.¹⁰⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter, the costumes serve their purpose for the theme park stage show, which is more focused on music and energy in a thirty minute respite from the heat and walking. McTyre explains, “We had already done this stuff in the parks, but obviously for Broadway it's going to be much more sophisticated... You know, there's no emotion that comes out of the mask that the Beast character [in the parks] wears,” which obscures the actor's face.¹⁰⁵ “So now you're going to do *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway. The people have to see it, see their faces, and they have to feel the emotions.”¹⁰⁶ While theme park performances have been known to be able to elicit strong emotional responses from guests, in a Broadway production, the team was determined to engender intellectual engagement as well. This objective would be difficult to achieve in large object costumes that hide the humanity of the character and the body of the performer.

This was Roth's original protestation against doing this musical: “How do you do a little teapot and the candelabrum thing?” he challenged, when Eisner first proposed

¹⁰⁴ Tammy Tuckey, “TTTS: Cast Member Corner- Interview with the Original Cast of ‘Beauty and the Beast: Live on Stage’” Youtube.com. July 23, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81vSVnWUjqE>.

¹⁰⁵ McTyre interview.

¹⁰⁶ McTyre interview.

Beauty, “It seems like the scale of it is weird.”¹⁰⁷ In addition to the director’s job of blocking the action, the answer to this question of human/object transformation would impact costumes and choreography the most, so Roth integrated Ward and West into the conversation and decision-making process – retaining a practice of fostering collaboration and complex authorship that was not only characterized by Bennett’s work, but the practices of the animation studio that created the source material, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. To figure out these dramaturgical questions, the team gathered in their home base, New York City. Sitting on the floor of Ward’s costume studio in Hamilton Heights, Roth, West, and Ward were determined to figure this out.

In the film version, much of the emotional and intellectual arc of the piece relies on the spectators to recognize their own humanity in the non-human characters. As discussed at length, in Chapter 2, this is at the core of how Disney animation works – in a process of “make-belief,” to use Richard Schechner’s word, blurring the lines between imagination and reality – where the audience actively invests in the reality of the characters’ lives. For the musical to “work” onstage, the audience would have to invest in the humanity of the characters, but in the believability of the spell – without which, there are no stakes to the former.

For the team, the humanity of the characters was their way in to solving this problem. “Who are these people?” they asked themselves, “the people that were in the castle, that were turned into objects?”¹⁰⁸ This emphasis on the objects-as-people prompted a different approach to the problem. “Why don’t we change the spell?” they

¹⁰⁷ Roth interview.

¹⁰⁸ Roth interview.

asked themselves.¹⁰⁹ Why not? They were instructed that they were not allowed to talk to Woolverton and the original creators, and that they had to make it up on their own. So, they determined that the Beast's curse will remain the same as in the film: he gets turned into a beast and has to learn to love another and earn their love in return before the last petal of the enchanted rose falls. But the objects – instead of being immediately transformed into animate, living objects – would gradually be turning into inanimate objects as the petals on the rose fell. This way, they would be humans, who were gradually losing their humanity. This would allow for human actors onstage, and could add a new dimension of urgency to the characters' plight that could open the door to new levels of empathy from the audience.

Roth excitedly called his parents to test this new idea on a lay audience, before bringing it to Eisner. The first concern was whether the plot change was readable to people who were used to the film version. When Mr. and Mrs. Roth confirmed that the idea was clear and understandable, the team called Eisner. The second concern was whether the new idea worked dramaturgically. When they pitched the idea to Eisner, he exclaimed, "That's it. That's it! That's the key that unlocks this."¹¹⁰ They had found the missing piece, and put the finishing touches on their presentation for the Disney Board of Directors, who were on a summer retreat in Aspen. The team pitched their concept for a stage musical, including the scenic and costume sketches. Logan recalls that they set up nine cubbyholes like small stages to highlight different aspects of the show, including a levitating enchanted rose, designed by Steinmeyer.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Roth interview.

¹¹⁰ Roth interview.

¹¹¹ Logan interview.

Steinmeyer displayed his live version of the character Chip, who is a child-teacup with a face in the film, to Michael Eisner and other executives. To create this effect, Steinmeyer recruited a local child actor, put his face inside of a teacup hat, and had him sit inside of a tea cart where his feet were not visible. Logan recalls that when the curtain opened on this corporate presentation, the young actor playing Chip said, “Hi Michael! I’m Chip, and I want to go to Broadway!”¹¹² Roth recalls that he started his presentation, but he “could see that Michael wasn’t paying that much attention. He kept looking at Chip. He wanted to know how we did that illusion.”¹¹³ He knew that it is an illusion, but he can’t discern where the illusion begins and where the “real” ends; thus, making belief. In recognizing the reality of the live actor playing Chip – which was a far cry from the five-foot teacup in Disney World – Eisner knew that the “magic” of the film (in terms of the humanity of the characters and the empathy it engenders) could be transferred to the stage.

Furthering the Plot

After being impressed by the team’s presentation, Eisner, Katzenberg, and Company president Frank Wells turned around to the Board of Directors, in the room, to chat for a few minutes. Eisner then turned around and said to the team, “Ok, we’re going to do it!”¹¹⁴ The team was stunned, because they hadn’t expected the green light that day – their goal was to not get shut down. They knew that there was still a lot to figure out. They had been able to put together one preliminary concept for this presentation, but they

¹¹² Felicia, “MVP: Robert Jess Roth,” Kindle.

¹¹³ Felicia, “MVP: Robert Jess Roth,” Kindle.

¹¹⁴ Roth interview.

thought there was much more to do before it would be complete.¹¹⁵ “When will it open?” Eisner asked. Roth responded along the lines of, “Oh, gosh, I have no idea.” Wells came up to Roth, shook his hand, hugged him and announced, “This is going to be amazing. We're going to revolutionize Broadway!”¹¹⁶ In this moment there was a sense that they were embarking on something that had not been done before, and something that would have a lasting impact on Broadway – although it is unclear from Wells’ comment what he thought that impact would look like, and since Wells died shortly before *Beauty* opened on Broadway, there is little way of knowing.

McTyre re-emphasizes that this was a 180° turn for Disney executives: that in the past, when theatre professionals proposed a Disney-produced Broadway show, the executives would run in the opposite direction: “They all saw it as a disaster in the making and didn't want to be associated with it. They said it would be a financial disaster.”¹¹⁷ Wells especially remained critical right up until this proposal meeting in Aspen. While the creative team had been putting together their presentation, McTyre had been busy discussing a potential budget with Eisner and Wells. After telling Wells, (who was in charge of the Company purse-strings, while Eisner was in charge of the Company’s overall vision), that a Broadway musical version of *Beauty and the Beast* would cost \$12 million dollars, Wells immediately told him the project would get no more than \$8 million.¹¹⁸ To put that into perspective, the Company had spent over 100

¹¹⁵ Roth interview.

¹¹⁶ Roth interview.

¹¹⁷ McTyre interview.

¹¹⁸ At the time, it cost roughly \$8 million to mount the biggest Broadway musicals like *Phantom of the Opera*. It is likely that in Wells’ mind, this would be sufficient, but McTyre warned him that it would not because a good manager might be able to cut costs here and there, but, in the end, “thing cost what they cost.”

McTyre interview.

million on one new attraction at Disneyland called Tower of Terror.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, *Beauty and the Beast On Ice* (one of the many Disney On Ice shows that had been running since 1981, as condensed reviews of songs, and films performed by ice skaters) cost \$6 million – and that was without staging the full plot or scenery.¹²⁰ \$12 million would not have been considered a difficult amount of money for the Company, so Well’s caution signals hesitancy. After the team’s presentation, however, the production was granted a \$10 million budget.¹²¹ This suggests a turning point that can either be credited to McTyre’s efficacy, the strength of the presentation, or – most likely – both.

The next step was to convince the film’s original creators that a Broadway version would be true to their work, while recreating it. Katzenberg gathered the creative team from Disney Feature Animation and the creative team from the proposed Broadway iteration together at the Four Seasons in Los Angeles, so that the Broadway team could do their presentation again.¹²² This is not something that Katzenberg was technically obligated to do. There was no legal need to get the original team’s blessing, but the film had been a deeply personal project for him, and for those involved, especially after

¹¹⁹ The Company had spent \$5 billion on a new theme park Euro Disneyland which had opened earlier that year in April to a lukewarm to hostile reception from the French. Two months after the *Beauty* team got their proposal approved, the Company spent an additional \$100 million on Euro Disneyland to increase attendance, including new stage shows and entertainments that anticipated a higher capacity crowd. By the next year, however, the Company was \$3 billion in debt from Euro Disneyland, which had failed to make up the difference in profits. I am confident that if Roth and his team had made the proposal for Broadway just a year later, the answer would have been “no.”

Eisner, Kindle Edition.

¹²⁰ “The *Beauty and the Beast* ice show featured dialogue and songs that the film’s cast members Paige O’Hara, Robby Benson, Angela Lansbury, Jerry Orbach, and David Ogden Stiers recorded specifically for the tour. At a price of \$6 million, the ice show cost Feld Productions about half as much as the eventual Broadway production by Disney. Not only did it include 46 skaters (18 male, 28 female), but 14 separate scenes. Its tour was planned for eight years: three in the US, in which it would cover 83 cities, followed by five more abroad (largely in Europe and in the Pacific). The production included 178 costumes, 205 props, and 8,000 lights.”

Kunze, 212.

¹²¹ Roth interview.

¹²² Michael Goldstein, “Broadway’s New Beast,” *New York Magazine*, May 14, 1994, 42.

Ashman's passing – which happened just a year prior to this presentation. “I walked into the meeting with the biggest chip on my shoulder I ever had,” remembers Menken, due to the fact that *Beauty* was the last project he and Ashman had collaborated on.¹²³ He was also apprehensive about handing it over to Roth, who he had never heard of, and who was a theme park director: “I was afraid their concept of a Broadway show was something you'd see at Disney World. How often have we seen people misunderstand [someone else's artistic vision].”¹²⁴ Tim Rice, who had replaced Ashman, was worried that the film was already “perfect” and that “the danger is you'll make it worse.”¹²⁵ Meanwhile Woolverton, who was dragged away from a vacation in Hawaii (which was well-deserved after the artistic and personally intense experience she had as the screenwriter for *Beauty*) expressed her apprehension simply as “*Yikes*.”¹²⁶ But each of them found themselves not only pleasantly surprised by what the Broadway team had come up with, on their own, they were enthusiastic, and Menken, Rice, and Woolverton officially joined the Broadway team.

One of the things that they were most excited about was the possibility of expanding the musical from a ninety minute animated film to a full-length Broadway show. This included new songs, as well such as “No Matter What,” “Me,” “If I Can't Love Her,” and “Human Again,” encourage deeper understandings of the characters, plot, and themes of accepting those who are Othered. For example, the song “No Matter What” is about Belle's father, Maurice, accepting and celebrating his daughter's difference. He sings “They are the common herd/ And you can take my word/ You are

¹²³ Goldstein, 42.

¹²⁴ Goldstein, 42.

¹²⁵ Goldstein, 42.

¹²⁶ Goldstein, 42.

unique: crème de la crème.”¹²⁷ This song is reminiscent of a song “Proud of Your Boy,” which Ashman had written for Aladdin which was cut from the final version, in which Aladdin’s mother declares her love for her son no matter how he lives his life. In his book on the queer histories of Disney, Griffin reads this song through the lens of Ashman’s lived experience as a gay man, coming out to a parent.¹²⁸ Thus, while there is no evidence that Ashman directly influenced the creation of “No Matter What”, which was written for the Broadway version, after his death, there are direct parallels to his style.

While the film version makes Belle the vehicle for the audience’s eventual acceptance of the Beast, the stage version expands the Beast’s character to give him a journey of self-acceptance, or the kind of self-liberation that the post-Stonewall activists talked about in their writings. This challenge was a subtle theme in the film version where the Prologue features a picture of the Prince on a stained glass window with a Latin that translates to “He conquers who conquers himself.”¹²⁹ In the stage version, Menken and Rice gave the Beast, what is known in musical theatre writing as a “conditional love song” titled “If I Can’t Love Her.” As Stacy Wolf writes in her book *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, traditionally, conditional love songs such as “Make Believe” (*Show Boat*), “If I Loved You” (*Carousel*), “People Will Say We’re In Love” (*Oklahoma!*), and “I’ll Know” (*Guys and Dolls*) include principal lovers attempting to conceal their love in a series of qualifications: “To the characters the duet is meant to express their incompatibility... To the audience, though, the song conveys what [the characters] realize: that they are, of

¹²⁷ Franz, 22.

¹²⁸ Griffin, 149.

¹²⁹ Kirk Wise, dir. *Beauty and the Beast*. (Walt Disney Studios, 1991), Disney+.

course, already in love.”¹³⁰ Like “If I Can’t Love Her,” the conditional love song does not always have to be a duet. For example, the principles in South Pacific sing the “Twin Soliloquies” in which they express their hopes and fears of falling in love with someone who is so different from them. Likewise, “If I Can’t Love Her” as a romantic ballad, involves the Beast expressing, not concealing, his fears that he is not worthy of Belle. When he comes to the refrain, he sings, “No beauty could move me/ no goodness improve me/ no power on earth/ if I can’t love her/ No passion could reach me/ no lesson could teach me/ how I could have loved her.”¹³¹ His pattern includes two lines about himself, followed by the condition “If I can’t love her,” showing his budding self-knowledge paired with his consideration of loving Belle. This “me/me/her” pattern reinforces the idea that in learning to love Belle, he learns to love himself.

Another song that was added to the stage version was one that had been written by Ashman and Menken for the film version, but eventually cut at the last minute called “Human Again.” In this song, the objects sing about their excitement about the curse being broken and all of the things they will do when they are human again. The song, of course, emphasizes the humanity of the ensemble, and their own hopes and dreams, raising the stakes for the spell to be broken.

The team had an opportunity to develop the text and designs for six months, at the end of 1992, while the Walt Disney Company entered negotiations with New York City to produce a Broadway show. One of the biggest delays was the question of whether *Beauty and the Beast* would be a union or non-union production – with Disney originally

¹³⁰ Wolf, 197.

¹³¹ Franz, 64.

wanting it to be non-union.¹³² This was a problem because Roth was a union director, and he and the rest of the team, many of whom were also union members, would not be able to do the show if it were non-union.¹³³ Disney relented, and the production would be a union production. The team made their presentation in Aspen back in June 1992, and these negotiations pushed the production into 1993. On February 8 of that year, Walt Disney Theatrical Productions Ltd. was formed as a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company, and was run by Ron Logan and Bob McTyre, who had previously headed the Company's Entertainment division.¹³⁴ As mentioned earlier in this chapter, *Beauty and the Beast* – now with the new subtitle *Beauty and the Beast: A New Musical*, to distinguish it from the film – was announced in *Variety* twenty days later, and the casting search would begin.

Broadway veteran Terence Mann was cast as the Beast. The new cast included Beth Fowler as Mrs. Potts, Tom Bosley as Belle's father, Eleanor Glockner as Madame de la Grande Bouche, Heath Lambert as Cogsworth, Stacey Logan as Babette, Brian Press as Chip, and Kenny Raskin as Lefou.¹³⁵ One of the characters that was difficult to cast was the villain Gaston since he has to be large, muscular, handsome, and a strong baritone who can easily navigate the balance between being comical and menacing.

¹³² Aside from the information that I have on this from the interview with Roth, the negotiations between Disney and theatre unions would require deeper archival investigations that I was unable to achieve due to different circumstances of Covid-19. It is also possible that this information is unavailable to the public at all.

¹³³ Roth interview.

¹³⁴ This would become Disney Theatrical Productions in 1999 as one of many areas under the Buena Vista Theatrical Group.

Anonymous, "Buena Vista Theatrical Group," Opencorporates.com. Accessed July 22, 2021. https://opencorporates.com/companies/us_ny/1700823.

¹³⁵ Playbill Staff, "Look Back at the Original Broadway Cast of Beauty and the Beast," Playbill.com. April 18, 2020, <https://www.playbill.com/article/look-back-at-the-original-broadway-cast-of-beauty-and-the-beast>.

Logan recalls that the team had their eye on musical theatre actor Burke Moses, a former football quarterback, who was starring in the 1990s Broadway revival of *Guys and Dolls*.¹³⁶ Moses maintains that he always believed that *Beauty and the Beast* would make a perfect Broadway musical since he saw the film version in 1991 – he had been pressing his agent to get him an audition even before the show existed. He was devastated when he learned about *Beauty*'s announcement for Broadway right after he signed a contract with another show.¹³⁷ Logan explains that Disney paid \$100,000 to buy Moses out of his contract with *Guys and Dolls*, showing that they were willing to spare no expense to fulfil their vision.¹³⁸ The search for Belle was more intense.

Hundreds of young ingénues auditioned for the role of Belle, many of them imitating the vocal performance of Broadway veteran Paige O'Hara, who did the voice of Belle in the film.¹³⁹ Susan Egan had never done a Broadway show before and had never seen the film version of *Beauty and the Beast*.¹⁴⁰ She had no intention of auditioning for the Disney stage musical because she – a self-identified “Sondheim snob”, which suggests she favors more cerebral musicals – initially thought that the idea of a musical based on a cartoon was silly: “I was such a theater snob and there were a lot of things happening that season. There was *My Fair Lady*, *Carousel* and *Grease*,” which she had her eye on because it was being directed by none other than Broadway legend Tommy

¹³⁶ Logan interview.

¹³⁷ Tammy Tuckey, “TTTS: Interview with Burke Moses, Original Gaston in Broadway’s “BEAUTY AND THE BEAST”” Youtube.com. August 23, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tS5KBQ_1pws.

¹³⁸ Logan interview.

¹³⁹ Timothy Callaway, “Susan Egan: Belle, Meg, Glamour and Goop - Part 1,” The Mouse Castle, July 29, 2012, <http://www.themousecastle.com/2012/07/susan-egan-belle-meg-glamour-and-goop.html>.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Tune.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, she auditioned anyway, because "that's my job [as an actress]. I go to auditions," plus, she was a big fan of Alan Menken for his work on *Little Shop of Horrors*.¹⁴² Without any prior knowledge of how Belle is supposed to be played, she read one of the lines from the script, "Papa, do you think I'm odd?" and interpreted it to mean that Belle was odd and quirky. She was able to make the creative team, plus Eisner and Katzenberg laugh, and when it came down to the end of the casting process, Roth asked to see if she could play more of a conventional ingénue to strike a balance between the film version and her own unique interpretation.¹⁴³ She could, and she was cast as Belle, once again highlighting the balance between the film and the stage version as a re-creation. There was a full reading of the musical's new libretto, and rehearsals began in October 1993.¹⁴⁴ Previews were two months away.

Conclusion: Theatre under the Stars

In the rehearsal room, Roth maintained that the focus of the actors' performances should be the humanity of the characters, and what they want. For example, instead of going up to Beth Fowler and saying "Ok, you're a teapot," Roth insisted she should focus on the character as a mother, and how she wants to end the curse to save her son.¹⁴⁵ In acting, this is often called "playing your objective" instead of "playing your obstacle", which would have the actors focus on the characters' limitations as objects – rooted in the Stanislavski acting tradition, discussed in the first chapter. In order to make their

¹⁴¹ Craig Brockman, "A Conversation with Susan Egan," Broadwayworld.com. Oct. 16, 2003, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/A-Conversation-with-Susan-Egan-20031016>.

¹⁴² Brockman.

¹⁴³ Brockman.

¹⁴⁴ Tuckey, Moses interview.

¹⁴⁵ Roth interview.

performances as objects believable, there was emphasis on actor movement. The actors were encouraged to be active collaborators, much as animators and voice actors had been during the making of the film version. This led to a particularly poignant dramaturgical relationship between Egan and Woolverton on further development of Belle, as a character – including a new solo song written by Menken and Rice called “Home.”

West and Ward amassed a collection of household objects from kitchen supply stores and asked themselves questions like, “If I were a spatula, what would I look like and how would I move?” to figure out how to stage the widely recognizable and beloved animated characters from the film.¹⁴⁶ In many ways the burden of transferring the “make belief” of the film was in Ward’s hands, as the costume designer. She knew that “If you lined all the characters up, a four year old should be able to tell you who the people are.”¹⁴⁷ She tracked the “through line” of each character’s progressive transformation into an object so that “at the end when the servants are human again, there’s no doubt about who’s who, for their everyday clothes are in line with their object-like attire.”¹⁴⁸ When the show entered its previews stage in Houston’s Theatre Under the Stars, the balance between human and object in the costumes had not yet been figured out. McTyre recalls, “We were all concerned that it had to look like the film. The Beast’s head was all built up. Lumiere and Cogsworth had elaborate headgear. Then when we got it out in front of the audience we realized we had buried the actors.”¹⁴⁹ It wasn’t like the five-foot teapots in Disney theme parks, but the humanity of the characters, which the actors had been discovering in rehearsal was being hidden by prosthetics. This was one of the many trial-

¹⁴⁶ Michael Lassell, *Disney on Broadway*, (Disney Editions, 2002), 38.

¹⁴⁷ Lassell, 35.

¹⁴⁸ Lassell, 37.

¹⁴⁹ McClintock, John. “Disney Takes Manhattan,” *Disney News Magazine*, January 1, 1994, 18.

and-error aspects of this theatre laboratory that made *Beauty and the Beast* a true theatrical experiment.

In terms of the staging, there were visible connections between what was on stage in *Beauty and the Beast* and the experimentation that the trio did in Disney theme parks: including an elaborately choreographed chase/battle scene, that was reminiscent of the Jerome Robbins nod in *Motorcar Mania*, automated scenery and lights like in *Diamond Double Cross* to signify movement, especially for scenes where characters run or march through the forest, and a transformation scene like in *Mickey's Nutcracker*, albeit much more high tech. The challenge was that with *Beauty and the Beast*, and with a larger budget than they ever had in the theme parks, the technology and scenery started to become overpowering to the rest of the dramaturgical elements. This became especially apparent in Houston during previews, when it took multiple days to tech single numbers like “Be Our Guest.”¹⁵⁰ By the time the previews opened to audiences, the technology just wasn't working – artistically or computer-wise – and automated scenery would crash into other scenery pieces, actors would get stuck in the air, and Roth would have to call “hold please” and address the audience to explain what went wrong.¹⁵¹ Audiences still enjoyed the performances, but the team used previews as an opportunity to strip down the spectacle. West remembers, “One night, Rob [Roth] and I turned to each other and said, ‘they took it back!’ The actors took the show back that one night, and they knew it

¹⁵⁰ Burke Moses says it took ten days to tech “Be Our Guest” – to put that into perspective most shows take a weekend to tech the entire production.

See Tuckey, Moses interview.

¹⁵¹ Goldstein, 43.

too.”¹⁵² After they had stripped down some of the mediation so that the humanity of the characters could be revealed – much like the transformation scene at the end of the musical – the audience began to have strong emotional responses to the production.

Beth Fowler who played Mrs. Potts recalls that audience members would cry during the library scene, and that when Chip was onstage the children in the audience were silent. “You could hear a pin drop” she said, indicating strong audience engagement. One account of the first night of previews for *Beauty and the Beast* recounts how, “At the penultimate moment in the fight scene, with the rain pouring and the lighting flashing, as the Beast turned away from Gaston to reach toward Belle, and Gaston rose, knife in hand – suddenly from the middle of the mezzanine, a seven-year-old boy’s voice cried out, ‘No!’”¹⁵³ Such moments, where the lines between “make believe” and “make belief” are crossed are apparent throughout theatre history. For the team of *Beauty and the Beast*, such moments are indications that their intended outcome had been achieved. The action of the musical was real enough for the boy to feel the need to intervene, or at the very least, voice his dissent against Gaston attacking the Beast. Actress Susan Eagan who played Belle on Broadway recalls that when she enters onstage in her iconic yellow dress, little girls in the audience, wearing their own versions of the dress, whisper “she looks just like me;” thus, recognizing their own life in Egan’s performance of Belle. These audience members are active witnesses, participating in the reality of the staged animated musical. The team had achieved their intended goal. *Beauty* opened on Broadway in April 1994 as the culmination of a decade of rapid and intense

¹⁵² Chris Boneau stated, “I think one of the best things we’ve done is let the actors be actors. They’re not inside cardboard boxes or foam heads they are actors, and we’ve stripped away some of the things so you actually see the man underneath the [costume].” American Theatre Wing.

¹⁵³ Lassell, 28.

theatrical experimentation that began when Peter Schneider first entered Disney Feature Animation in 1984, bringing with him a “theatre discipline” and other theatre practitioners like Menken and Ashman, who created musicals that would be re-performed in theme parks, Broadway, and eventually world tours and local stages.

Afterward: Narratives of Process

"The Test Tube with Coffee"

In his foundational essay "The Laboratory Theatre" (1923), Richard Boleslavsky recalls watching a play where a scientist in a laboratory does experiments to improve humanity. He recalls the prop test tubes filled with coffee ("probably left from the luncheon with the property man") and how the actor playing the scientist dramatically held up the test tube, looked into it, and despairingly exclaimed, "everything is over! The world has perished!"¹ This moved Boleslavsky, who said, "This [staged] laboratory and the work going on within it reminded me of so many other laboratories established for the purpose of saving the theatre and of the results which they achieve." Of all of the new forms, devices, styles, stars, mechanical advances, and quick production processes, he notes that, "there are some actors, artist designers and even a few directors who look tearfully at a 'test tube with coffee' hoping for a solution. They attempt to accomplish something by experiment, but exhausted and unsuccessful, they drop into a chair sobbing: 'Everything is over, the Theatre has perished!'"² While the ultimate goal of experimentation in the theatre is the overall improvement of the craft (and, by extension, one would hope, the improvement of human lives on earth), he warns, with his "test tube with coffee" metaphor, to resist the temptation of narratives of progress – or, the idea that progress or evolution is linear, clean, quick, and universally beneficial. If one assumes and expects these things, they are bound to be disappointed. As I conclude my dissertation, maintaining that theatre professionals and theatrical knowledge contributed

¹ Richard Boleslavsky, "The Theatre Laboratory," *Theatre Arts Magazine*, Volume 7, Number 3, 1923, 244.

² Boleslavsky, 245.

unquestionable improvements and sophistications for the Walt Disney Company at this time, I re-emphasize a similar caution to the reading of the history of theatre laboratories of the “Disney Renaissance” in a reminder that these were not linear, clean, quick, or universal.

As Erika Fischer-Lichte reminds readers in her essay, “Some Critical Remarks on Theatre Historiography,” narratives of progress in theatre historiography emerged as trends in the 18th and 19th Century, presenting theatre history “as a continual progression upward from primitive and rough origins toward an ever more civilized and perfected state.”³ She argues that this before-and-after approach of “the historicist ideal of completion” limits or eliminates histories of problem solving, and makes theatre history less relevant to the problems of today. Rather, she contends, theatre history must take a problem-oriented approach – identifying a contemporary problem and investigating the past to find answers, in terms of process. In other words, for those interested in changing the state of the contemporary theatre practice, it is not enough to examine a period of history like the “Disney Renaissance” and determine that changes in culture, hierarchy, process, content, form, and function occurred without asking, “What happened so that such a change could take place?”⁴ Working towards a process-oriented historiography, and informed by my own theatrical training, I have approached this period in terms of objectives, obstacles, and strategies used to achieve goals. I have focused more on the questions, “What did they want, and how did they try to get it?” than the attainment itself.

³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Some Critical Remarks on Theatre Historiography,” in Wilmer, S.E. *Writing and Rewriting National Theatre Histories*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004. muse.jhu.edu/book/8880, 5.

⁴ Fischer-Lichte, 9.

In this way my historiography has privileged the philosophies of the Boleslavskian theatre laboratory, which he said should be modeled after the scenic draftsman “when he traces twenty lines on paper, one after another, and erases them one after another until he finds the right one.”⁵ The draftsman metaphor apt for Disney animation cels, the many drafts of storyboards and screenplays, the purpose built theatres of the theme parks, and the integrated staging of animated films as theatre, which require both the literal and figurative erasure and re-drawing of lines. These are the kinds of processes Boleslavsky was referring to as the “tedious labor,” when he identified what he saw as a big problem in his own contemporary theatre: “There are no laboratories of the theatre, there are no tense experiments and achievements, no tedious labor discovering new forms, no fling of imagination, no joy of attainment.” – as quoted in the Introductory chapter. Boleslavsky was writing against the problem of an American theatre industry that was captive to an individualist “star system”, where “gods of the theatre” were venerated and given the bulk of available resources and opportunities for development, while everyone else showed up to work, with less pay and less training, just to support them. I am, however, reluctant to identify just one, singular problem in contemporary theatre practice to justify this dissertation.

This is because in March 2020, I became the first person in my theatre department’s history to successfully defend a dissertation prospectus over Zoom, in the first two weeks of the Covid-19 shutdown. In the spirit of process-oriented histories, it is worth noting that the word “laboratory” did not exist in my original dissertation prospectus, and neither did the name “Boleslavsky.” I will begin my Conclusion, by

⁵ Boleslavsky, 245.

identifying the original contemporary problems that I sought to address with this dissertation, and the ways that these changed in the wake of the decimation of the theatre industry during the Covid-19 pandemic. I have written this dissertation while watching the bulk of theatre professionals go on unemployment, and/or frantically re-adjust their resumes to market themselves to non-theatrical avenues. The vulnerabilities and inequities of the contemporary theatre industry and practice have come into stark contrast and has raised the stakes and urgency of a dissertation dedicated to theatre professionals who brought their theatrical knowledge and skills to a non-theatrical Company. Resisting the temptation of a progress narrative and the naivete that the Disney-model can or should be cut-and-pasted verbatim into other contexts, I conclude that these stories do offer some workable alternatives to contemporary problems.

Purpose, Passion, Perception

“Artaud believed that the function of theatre was to teach us that “the sky can still fall on our heads.” We’ve known for some time that this vision of theatre is impossible, Utopian, possibly even hysterical (Artaud as Chicken Little)... At a time when every cultural practice is reassessing itself and its role, perhaps we will re-entertain Artaud’s mad vision of theatre as a place to encounter the unknown and the unimaginable, a place that teaches the necessary humility of not knowing.”

– Una Chaudhuri, “A Forum on Theatre and Tragedy in the Wake of September 11th, 2001”

Writing in late 2019 and early 2020, I sought out to write a history of *Beauty and the Beast*, which better reflected the material realities of the thousands of theatre artists who have experienced America’s most-produced musical in tactile ways. “The majority of scholarship that addresses this musical, focuses primarily on the role it played in larger institutional and cultural shifts that occurred on Broadway since the mid-1990s, with special emphasis on the transformation of Times Square,” I wrote, concluding that the

majority of people who encounter this musical have more in common with choreographer Matt West and costume designer Ann Hould Ward browsing the kitchen supply store, than they do with Michael Eisner or Rudolf Giuliani negotiating real-estate policy. I wanted to re-center the history of Disney and theatre to better reflect the creative laborers and address the problems and concerns that practitioners encounter while staging animated films, and *Beauty and the Beast*, in particular. Based on my own experiences working on this musical and dramaturging this musical, I wanted a dissertation (that would be an eventual book) that would be read (just as much, if not more) in rehearsal rooms and production tables than academic conferences – one that answered the questions and needs of directors, designers, actors, and theatres.

As Fischer-Lichte contends, the majority of inquires I've made or received while working on this musical have to do with past processes. "How did they do that?" "Why did they make that choice?" "What worked and didn't work?" To undertake research that would be designed to address the material circumstances of production for Disney musicals like *Beauty and the Beast*, I adopted a methodology from material culture studies, developed by Igor Kopytoff, called the "cultural biography" of a thing. "What sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its 'status' and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized?" he asks.⁶ "Where does the thing come from, and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life', and what are the cultural markers for them?" Establishing *Beauty's*

⁶ Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66.

status as the “most produced musical in the United States,” the first chapter on the structures and created processes of the animation studio under Peter Schneider’s leadership and the second chapter on the making of the film *Beauty and the Beast* were conceived to answer the Kopytoff questions of “Where does the thing come from, and who made it?” and identify its “ideal career” in terms of the creators’ intentions for it. Tracking its iterations in theme parks and Broadway, the third and fourth chapters were designed to answer the questions on what its career has been thus far, and what the many “lives” of the text reveal.

Effectively I wanted to create a comprehensive production history of *Beauty and the Beast* that could serve as a dramaturgical companion to those who produce it. “Towards this goal,” I wrote, “a comprehensive production history of *Beauty and the Beast* is one written in the tradition that Bruce McConachie champions in his essay ‘Historicizing the Relations of Theatrical Labor,’ where the word ‘production’ encompasses the ‘many processes leading up to stage presentation.’”⁷ Thus, it was always intended to be the kind of problem-oriented, process-centric study that Fischer-Lichte uplifts.

However, by the time I defended my prospectus, one sentence of the document had become hauntingly dated. After establishing that *Beauty and the Beast* is the most-produced musical in the United States, I declared, “This means that at this very moment, as this prospectus is being read, *Beauty and the Beast* is being rehearsed, in multiple locations, across the United States, from regional theatres, to schools, and community

⁷ Bruce McConachie, “Historicizing the Relations of Theatrical Labor,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 168.

theatres.” Suddenly, this justification for the dissertation project was irrelevant as productions of all live theatre had been shut down and cancelled across the country – some “postponed” with the hopes that we will be able to “flatten the curve” by Easter, May, July, August, or September, at the latest. Meanwhile, I no longer had access to libraries or archives, rendering much of my Methodology, Research Plan, and Timeline for Completion sections of the prospectus similarly obsolete.

I patiently attempted to do what research I could, completing my phone interviews with Rob Roth, Ron Logan, Bob McTyre, Linda Woolverton, and Peter Schneider, who were all happy to take the time to talk to me about *Beauty and the Beast* since they had no theatre projects to work on.⁸ On April 23, about a month into quarantine, I met with Peter Schneider who declared, “I’m going to blow up your [dissertation] concept.”⁹ My stomach sank, because at that point, I didn’t know if my dissertation concept could be destroyed any more than it already had by Covid realities.

“Oh, OK. This is... *this* is what I want,” I replied on our Zoom call, sardonically.

“[In Chapter 1] you want to focus on *Little Mermaid*... and you need to look at *Oliver and Company*,” he said, because that’s where I would find, “the genesis of this

⁸ In late April 2021, a year after my interview with Roth, the former *Beauty and the Beast* director found himself in the middle of a controversy. After Broadway producer Scott Rudin had been publicly accused of verbally and physically bullying subordinates, leaked emails between Roth and Rudin revealed Roth making light of the accusations and making jokes about the accusers. Roth subsequently apologized for his actions and resigned from the planned *Beauty and the Beast* revival in London (originally set for 2020 but delayed due to the pandemic). Matt West was appointed by Disney Theatrical Productions to replace Roth as director. As of the date of this dissertation’s submission, there is no evidence to suggest that Roth, himself, exhibited abusive behavior as a director. This acknowledgement and the scholarly exploration of Roth’s work in Chapter 4 are not designed to vindicate him, and I hold him to his own self-accountability on the matter. Likewise, because this is a recent controversy, which is outside the timeline of this dissertation, I will not be addressing it in the body of this dissertation, especially as the situation is still unfolding.

⁹ Peter Schneider interview, April 2020.

whole thing” so I could unlock the big picture.¹⁰ I absorbed this for a moment – a beat – and he could see the wheels turning in my head, as I considered the fact that I would have to completely de-center *Beauty and the Beast* as the primary focus of this study.

“Ahhhh,” he exclaimed excitedly, “gotcha!” In that moment, I experienced, firsthand, what it feels like to be guided by the manager-mentor, Peter Schneider, and the way that he wants to see artists think for themselves, connect the pieces, and push their concept to be the strongest it can be. “And you can figure out what is important to you later on,” he told me, empowering me to decide what to do with the information given just as he had once empowered artists at Disney Feature Animation to make their own choices, self-critique, pick their own teams, and let the strongest ideas manifest. He pushed me, in the best possible way, to think bigger.

In the absence of libraries and archives, I focused on what I *did* have: the stories of the theatre professionals I had interviewed, and years of theatrical training and experience, myself: script analysis, dramaturgy, directing, acting, production, and design. The first question that I have been trained to ask, when approaching a play, is “What are the character’s objectives?” “What is standing in their way?” “What tactics do they use to get what they want?” As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, this is a line of questioning that was developed by the Moscow Art Theatre to train actors to get into character without a director’s help. Schneider’s objective was to empower the artists to cultivate their own voices and create an artistically self-sustaining studio. Woolverton and Ashman’s objective was to create a story that would teach people the correct way to judge people and expand their powers of human recognition and empathy. Ron Logan

¹⁰ Schneider interview, April 2020.

and Bob McTyre’s objective was to create sophisticated theatre that pushed the limitations of Disney theme park possibilities. Rob Roth, Matt West, and Stan Meyer wanted to extend experimentation on cinematic staging techniques, and create a new laboratory dedicated primarily to staging films.¹¹ As I re-imagined the big picture of this project in terms of these objectives, the word “experiment” began to appear more frequently in my drafts. I discovered the ways that theatre experiments effectively transformed operations at the Walt Disney Company’s animation studio and theme parks, over the course of a decade.

In terms of obstacles, the most apparent one, across the board at the Walt Disney Company was the phrase, “What would Walt do?” and an overall cultural attachment to a very specific, myopic vision of the past and tradition. As highlighted by the Sean Griffin quote in the Introductory chapter, “[Walt’s] history as a risk taker and experimenter was definitely not what company executives took from the man’s memory.” Thus, not only was opposition to change based on a narrow view of Walt’s creativity, but it was also a selective and distorted view. Naturally, my inclination was to research the experiments of Walt Disney – specifically search for any theatrical experiments – to highlight the ways that theatre professionals rekindled the spirit of risk and experimentation that once

¹¹ In certain cases, I have been able to determine the success of these intended goals. For example, in Chapter 1, I was able to clearly identify Peter Schneider’s goal of empowering artists to cultivate their own voices, as opposed to being “grunts”, and I can determine, based on documented evidence of increased complexity of authorship in Disney animation that yes, indeed, this goal was achieved. In Chapter 3, I can identify that the goal of proliferating theatre in Disney theme parks was part of a larger overhaul to make the parks more culturally relevant and increase park attendance and profits. There is a documented increase of both during this period, specifically tied to opening of the Videopolis theatre and theatrical performances like *Fantasmic!* – especially among teenagers, who Eisner used as the gauge for cultural relevancy. Meanwhile proving the success of the listed goals in Chapters 2 and 4 is a bit more difficult, since these answers are tied to the reception of a cultural text (the film and stage version of *Beauty and the Beast*) and would require massive amounts of ethnographic evidence to make a definitive statement about the numbers of people who had the intended phenomenological response.

existed. One of the few clues I had was a brief mention of the fact that animator Vladimir “Bill” Tytla carried a copy of *The First Six Lessons* by Richard Boleslavsky in his back pocket and used it to greatly impact the acting for animated characters in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Upon deepening my understanding of these early theatre experiments in animation, I discovered Boleslavsky’s writings on theatre laboratories, and the profound relevancy of his words to the goals of the theatre professionals at Disney in the 1980s. As he lays out the core values of his ideal “laboratory of the theatre”, it was not difficult to see how each one corresponded to the issues raised in each chapter: calling for sustainable, collaborative creation over the limits of individualist geniuses, the power of the theatre as a “social force” for changing hearts and minds in the “main road travelled” [read: mainstream], the continual development of new forms, and the renewal and revival of old forms, passed down.

As an added touch of fate, I realized that he wrote these words and founded the American Lab Theatre in 1923, a few years after the devastating Spanish Flu global pandemic had shut down theatres across the world, and the same year that Walt Disney and his brother Roy founded the Disney Brothers Studio, which would eventually become the Walt Disney Company.¹² When Boleslavsky writes about theatre makers having shallow expectations for progress and suddenly declaring ‘Everything is over, the Theatre has perished!’” I could not help but think of those in the past year who, frustrated with the limitations of under-tested and under-tried virtual theatre in a pandemic declared that “Theatre over Zoom is not real theatre!” Based on the collective experiences of

¹² Charolotte M. Canning, “Theatre and the Last Pandemic: In 1918 an outbreak of influenza killed millions and shuttered U.S. theatres—and then one day it was gone,” American Theatre Magazine, March 24, 2020, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2020/03/24/theatre-and-the-last-pandemic/>.

contemporary theatre makers in the past year, I found it endearing and, dare I say, *hopeful*, to read of the ways that spectators, a hundred years ago, could experience such a revelatory moment watching the Moscow Art Theatre just a few years after they inevitably wondered if theatre would survive at all. Not only did theatre survive a global pandemic, but it could also still surprise them in the best-possible ways. Those spectators who founded the American Lab Theatre, including the future titans of American theatre like Stella Adler, Harold Clurman, Sanford Meisner, and Lee Strasberg had found theatre that was absolutely transformative, committed themselves to undertaking the processes that yielded these powerful results, and planted the seeds that bring about future theatre laboratories, including those of the “Disney Renaissance.”

Among these founders of the American Lab Theatre was a young man named Francis Fergusson, who, discovering that his acting talents were less-than stellar, opted to serve as Boleslavsky’s assistant director and dramaturg. Fundamentally interested in *how* theatre transforms spectators in the way that he and his peers had been transformed, he developed a theory of literary criticism, which he wrote in a book called *The Idea of a Theatre; A Study of Ten Plays; The Art of Drama in Changing Perspective*. Much like the writer, J. Weaver’s response to the same production of *The Cherry Orchard*, quoted in the Introduction, Fergusson dedicated his career to answering that same question, “Why did it get me?” In doing so, he identifies the “tragic rhythm” – a specific plot structure where the protagonist sets out to accomplish something [purpose], suffers some kind of tragedy or setback [passion], and in this crucible, fundamentally shifts their viewpoint, so that they will never be the same again [perception]. He contends that when Shakespeare had Hamlet say that “the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was

and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature,” this is what he meant: that dramatic action is a raising of consciousness for the characters that mirrors the real-life processes by which a person might undergo significant changes. This position is, of course, completely a-historical, but it does suggest an early understanding of the phenomenological relationship that a spectator has to a cultural text – the recognition of self so that when the characters suffer, the spectator suffers, and when the character reaches a new level of perception, the spectator is enabled to do so as well, he says, “in a thousand [different] ways.”¹³ While more literary than historical, Fergusson’s theory, developed in the Boleslavskian laboratory, offers a theatrical answer to the historiographical problem of resisting progress narratives: that it is in the process of navigating obstacles [passion] that one gains new perspectives that enable progress.

In detailing my own process for this dissertation, I have presented a series of events that mirror this structure: my own purpose, passion, and perception. I set out with an initial goal [purpose] of writing a comprehensive history of *Beauty and the Beast* that would be relevant to contemporary theatre practitioners. After undergoing the “passion” of writing a dissertation in a global pandemic, as my industry and communities crumble before my eyes, I saw my world reflected in the words that Richard Boleslavsky wrote a century ago. Like the New York audience of the Moscow Art Theatre’s production of *The Cherry Orchard*, in 1923, I ask, “Why did it get me?” and I theorize as Fergusson did that it is because of this fundamental structure of events that are the very basic building blocks of drama.¹⁴ Finally, I gained perspective on the practical application of

¹³ Fergusson, 13-34.

¹⁴ Performance theorist Victor Turner has a similar theory that dramatic structure mirrors real-life drama, and he separates it into four steps, “Breach—Crisis—Redressive Action—Reintegration

Boleslavsky's values of the theatre laboratory to the laboratories of the "Disney Renaissance", and the way that they speak to problems in the contemporary theatre. In the following sections of this chapter, I will conclude my study by highlighting each of the aforementioned Boleslavskian value to its corresponding event at Disney from 1984-1994, as well as its relevancy today.

"Doing Better Than Walt"

There is no *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway without the contentious process of Peter Schneider using theatre management approaches to divorce Disney animation from its creative reliance on the commodified memory of "genius" Walt Disney. As Chapter 1 explained, there are effectively two kinds of theatre laboratories: the ones that center around the development and realizing of one person's individual vision and the ones that seek to elevate the whole ensemble. Schneider had experience in both settings but maintains that his time in the emerging ensemble-based Chicago theatre scene, in the 1970s, had a significant impact on his approach to theatre, which he would bring to Disney.¹⁵ In turn, he fashioned his leadership style on the idea that his duty was to empower the artists to cultivate their own voices, and push them to become master-artists in their own right. In doing so, he gave the animation studio the gift of self-sustainability, trained them to self-critique, gave them permission to (and encouraged them to) question and dissent, and emphasized that everyone in the room had something valuable to contribute.

or Schism," qtd. In Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 75.

¹⁵ Schneider interview, August 2020.

While the self-identified “theatre discipline” he brought to Disney animation still relied on hierarchy – specifically a corporate hierarchy – it decentered and democratized the concept of a “genius” from its traditional meaning as an individual, exceptional, and inherent ontological ability, to something that is attainable through ongoing training, development, tense collaboration, and engaging with challenging viewpoints. Not only could they reach Walt’s level, but they could surpass it. “They had to believe they could do better than Walt,” he maintains.¹⁶ This aligns most with the first, second, and fourth values, which Boleslavsky assigns to a theatre laboratory. While all of the chapters, in this dissertation, have been interested in dramaturgy, in terms of objectives and tactics, this section contends that if the goal of the theatre laboratories of the “Disney Renaissance” was to simply “do better than Walt”, their experiments were largely successful towards that end – emphasizing a triumphant example of the ensemble-based laboratory model over the individual-centric one.

As Chapter 1 noted, Walt Disney, for all his contributions, carried implicit biases against women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and his notorious anti-Semitism, which have been verified by multiple historians and sources. Due to the complexity of authorship in the Company’s studio production, theme parks, and management, I caution against broad or oversimplified statements about how these biases manifested themselves in these things – particularly in terms of intended outcomes. Nevertheless, for Schneider, who is, himself, Jewish, and the new generation of artists at Disney in the 1980s and 90s, which now included people from historically excluded groups, doing “better than Walt,” came with the acknowledgement that individual

¹⁶ Schneider interview, April 2020.

“geniuses” have individual limitations – in Walt’s case, limitations on perspective and inclusion of the marginalized. Schneider came to a Disney animation studio which was more diverse than the one that Walt left behind, but in trying to emulate Walt-the-genius (or at the very least not stray too far from his path), still fell into the trap-mindset that there is only one way of doing things or looking at the world. They could not grow without being exposed to different people and different perspectives.

Schneider combated this insularity in several ways. Firstly, by bringing in more outside people, especially theatre people like stage manager Kathleen Gavin, who served as a producer and his second-in-command, in these early, transitional years. He would bring in multiple like-minded theatre professionals on projects and make them “producers;” thus giving them access and authority over the many areas of animation. In this way, they could serve as connectors between the many groups that it takes to make an animated film, making sure that the films were dramaturgically cohesive, and rejecting “What would Walt do?” as an acceptable response to a problem.

As described in Chapter 1, he brought in outside speakers and lecturers from Pat Riley, coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, who gave a workshop on teamwork, to the communist San Francisco Mime Troup, to do a workshop with animators on the sequence of *The Little Mermaid*, where Ariel cannot speak. In contradiction to the traditional Disney animation practice of doing everything in-house, he and Katzenberg hired a casting director for *Oliver and Company* (1988) who brought in high-profile talent from Hollywood, the music industry, regional theatre, and Broadway – all of whom had different backgrounds, different ways of doing things, ways of seeing the world, politics, perspectives, and sensibilities. Under the new collaborative policies in the studio, these

actors were encouraged to do hours of ad-libbing, which gave them an opportunity, not just to perform the characters, but have a hand in authoring them, as well. It is worth noting that while Disney Feature Animation remained a majority white, male, and heterosexual institution, the majority of those from historically excluded groups, who worked there, at this time, were elevated to decision-making positions at this time. There was more work to do in combating the hegemony of the studio, but the actions ensured that the overall studio was positioned to do “better than Walt,” in terms of complexity of authorship and inclusion.

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, he brought in outside screenwriters, composers, and lyricists, including Linda Woolverton and Howard Ashman, who would bring with them storytelling techniques informed by theatrical dramaturgies. Together they would make bold experiments on using the mainstream Disney animated musicals to bring stories of outsiders to the public, especially children. As Chapter 1 maintains, this was happening at the height of the Reagan years, when the majority of Americans identified as conservative, and institutions reinforced narratives that equated Americanism and belonging with white, Christian, heterosexual, gender-normativity, and Reagan’s own re-brand of capitalism as a “bootstrap” ideology. With this cultural backdrop, the Disney animation studio, which had notoriously reinforced these narratives of normativity up until this point, became a front-line cultural battlefield. As this dissertation has mentioned, there has been a plethora of critical readings of these films have highlighted the ways that dominant ideology was both upheld and subverted by these animated films in different ways. These mixed results call to mind Jürgen Habermas’ assertion that in a public sphere – or in this case, a sphere that is open to multiple points of view – there is

no equal playing field.¹⁷ While historically excluded perspectives were finally being included, that does not mean that they were given equitable weight – as evidenced, especially, by the tensions that Woolverton encountered in the story meetings for *Beauty and the Beast*, with lingering bad feelings that are still palpable to this day. Looking back, Schneider concedes that while the monopoly of one, dominant ideology had been effectively displaced under his tenure, there was little to no consciousness regarding the inequalities that persisted at that time.¹⁸ Today, while working on new theatre projects, he has committed himself to “doing better” than he did in the past, and has hired an equity consultant to further interrogate his own biases, maintaining that individual limitations must be challenged.¹⁹ When one examines this period of Disney animation one can see how ideologies clashed, gained ground, and lost ground, as the insularity of the studio had been effectively disrupted.

The theme of “doing better” echoes throughout the chapters of this dissertation. Using theatrical dramaturgies of empathy, Woolverton and Ashman worked to improve Disney animation’s treatment of scary non-human characters. In the 1980s, the theatre performances in Disney theme parks not only improved in terms of technology and scale, but in terms of inclusiveness and outside perspectives – specifically in terms of open LGBTQ acceptance and representation, which had been prohibited under Bob Jani’s tenure, as Entertainment director. This included the Broadway/Off-Broadway methods of staging that Rob Roth, Matt West, and Stan Meyer brought with them. Under the more open leadership of Ron Logan and Bob McTyre, Disney Entertainment took more

¹⁷ Qtd in Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge, (Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991). Kindle Edition, 10.

¹⁸ Schneider interview, August 2020.

¹⁹ Schneider interview, August 2020.

creative risks and brought in more outside theatre artists as independent contractors. Not only were the artists and their ideas viewed as an infusion of new life into multiple Company divisions, but Eisner also invested in these newcomers, most notably by producing *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway.

In the 21st Century, the theatre industry is still coming to terms with the insularity of institutional creative organizations. As mentioned in Chapter 1, many institutions in the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) were founded in the mid-20th century (many of them founded before the Civil Rights Act was passed) on the ideal of reviving the resident theatre model from the 19th Century. The idea of a resident company is one which Boleslavsky championed saying, “In such a theatre a young actor, knowing that he will be part of the group the entire year and need not worry about his bread and butter, can consecrate his time to education and the perfection of his art.”²⁰ It was not just about creative sustenance but material, economic, and physical sustenance as well. However, he ends his manifesto by declaring that the leadership, personnel, and the ways of doing things must continually change. He says, “In a laboratory theatre everyone can and must say: “I take off my hat to the beautiful yesterday, but I pray to the amazing today and I am ready to give myself and to cede my place to the all-triumphant and mysterious tomorrow.”²¹ At Disney Feature Animation in the 1980s, the problem was replacing the memory of a leader, who had passed. In the theatre industry today, one of the problems is leaders who fail to cede their place.

²⁰ Boleslavsky, 249.

²¹ Boleslavsky, 249.

In summer 2020, the We See You Movement, made up of a coalition of high-profile theatre artists who are black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), published their “Principles for Building Anti-Racist Theatre.” Their list of demands highlighted the ways that the LORT in representation, funding, and engagement for BIPOC artists, even though they are a “global majority.”²² They write, “While the arts are biased by definition, access to making art should not be, and this requires a regular changing of the guard. Succession plans should include the sustained development of BIPOC leaders through gap training and non-paternalistic mentorship opportunities, with clear and non-transactional paths of advancement.”²³ This demand is consistent with the original intent of theatre laboratories in the United States, as stated by Boleslavsky, ultimately illuminating the ways that the system has failed to bring these values to fruition. As the We See You letter exclaims, “Theatre is struggling through the challenges of this time, but we must be better when we return.”²⁴ Just at Disney in 1984, the contemporary theatre cannot move forward until there is a commitment of the “old guard” to cede their place – which includes not only changes of leadership, but the overall de-centering of individual perspectives towards more inclusive and collaborative spaces.

Triumph of Collective Collaboration

Thus, the theatre laboratory of the Disney animation studio can be read, not just as an example of the ensemble-based laboratory, but a successful one. In this section, I define my criteria for “success” in terms of mass appeal of the art, in question, indicated

²² We See You Movement, “Principles for Building Anti-Racist Theatre,” <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ede42fd6cb927448d9d0525/t/60262df611ccc800db7defb9/1613114870376/PRINCIPLES+FOR+BUILDDING+ANTI-RACIST+THEATRE+SYSTEMS.pdf>.

²³ We See You Movement, 3.

²⁴ We See You Movement, 3.

by its mass consumption. This includes animated films, theme park entertainments, and *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway. This analysis rests on the premise that people make choices of consumption as expressions of self. In Celia Lury's book *Consumer Culture*, she contends that "Consumption is to do with meaning, value, and communication as much as it is to do with exchange and economic relations."²⁵ This means that consumers purchase tickets to a Disney film, theme park, or Broadway musical because these things hold cultural and personal value to them. The high box office numbers, therefore, indicate that there are millions of consumers who are in collective (although not universal) agreement that films like *Oliver and Company*, *Little Mermaid*, and *Beauty and the Beast* can be classified as art that has meaning and value.²⁶ An uptick in theme park attendance can signify an upswing in the creation of stage attractions that are more culturally meaningful than before. Finally, a fifteen-year Broadway run, tours, and extended afterlife of *Beauty and the Beast* on stage can not only be read as an endorsement of the quality of the film-version, but of the stage musical's ability to offer consumers an experience that adds to the value of the film.

As noted, one of the intended values of the Boleslavskian theatre laboratory is the creation of art that enjoys mainstream success – in terms of wide mainstream consumption. Boleslavsky argued that high-quality, mainstream art can effectively change hearts and minds in mass audiences. In other words, good art can change the world. As described in Chapter 2, this is what Woolverton and Ashman believed when

²⁵ Lury, 14.

²⁶ Even accounting for the effect of the Disney marketing machine on consumer trends, it is worth noting that other films which received the same level of Disney marketing attention during this period, such as *Rescuers Down Under* (released in between *Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*) did not perform as well at the box office.

they collaborated on *Beauty and the Beast*, and as mentioned in Chapter 4, it is what the trio of Roth, West, and Meyer believed when they, with Woolverton's help, brought the story to the stage. While it is difficult to impossible to measure or prove the effect of *Beauty and the Beast* on the hearts and minds of those who bought tickets to the film or stage version, the high volume of consumers suggests, at the very least, that the story is meaningful to millions of people.

This is the kind of intended outcome that spawned the birth of the Regional Theatre Movement in the United States in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Cold War era nationalism inspired institutions like the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Jerome Foundation, to pour millions of dollars of funding into finding the next American playwrighting genius, who could create theatre that spoke to the world, on behalf of the nation. Of the two kinds of laboratories – the individual-centric and the ensemble-based – these backers chose to invest in the former, often giving money up to five figures into the pockets of individual playwrights and artistic directors. This is the funding model which spawned the proliferation of hundreds of LORT theatres, creating an ecosystem in the American theatre industry that Douglas Anderson called the “new play industry” in his 1988 article “The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America.”²⁷ As Anderson writes, the “Dream” for the corporate and public financiers was for individual playwrights to create works in regional theatres that would make commercial transfers and become mainstream successes – signifying the creation of

²⁷ Douglas Anderson, "The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America." *TDR* (1988-) 32, no. 3 (1988): 55-84. Accessed August 30, 2021. doi:10.2307/1145906.

meaningful, national art that could compete internationally. The problem, however, which made these organizations question their investments, is that for the thousands of new plays that had been produced across the country from the 1950s to the 1980s, only about fifty playwrights from this thirty-year period became commercial successes – signaling a lack of national interest in exchange for the millions of public and private dollars that had been put towards hundreds of individual artists over the years.²⁸ Just as the Walt Disney Company spent twenty years after Walt’s death searching for the next “Walt”, the mid-century notion of the “genius” – mythologized and commodified – placed pressure on individual playwrights to live up to the expectations of corporations, the U.S. government, producers, artistic directors, audiences, and to hold the entire funding future of the theatre industry on their singular shoulders. As Chapter 1 notes, arts funding foundations began diverting their funds, in the late 1980s, to laboratories dedicated to experiments of form and function instead of experiments of content – with special emphasis on interdisciplinary collaborations as collaborations between individuals in different fields and not interdisciplinary collaboration between groups of artists in one location.

Thus, a natural byproduct of the individual-centric laboratory model is a false choice between laboratories dedicated to content and laboratories dedicated form and function. Disney Feature Animation took on experiments in content, form, *and* function, blending hand-drawn animation and new computer animation, along with theatrical storytelling modes. In doing so, the studio created musicals with the kind of wide-spread mainstream success that the financial founders of the Regional Theatre Movement

²⁸ Anderson, 74.

dreamed of. Instead of attributing Disney's success to their access to corporate funds, it is important to remember that LORT theatres have been awash in corporate money since the 1950s. This money, however, was most-often invested in individuals, as opposed to ensembles or groups, whereas Disney invested its resources into an ensemble-based studio space, with hundreds of workers from all over the country and international community.

Due to the limitations of individuals artists, it is almost unfair to expect one singular playwright to craft a play that can speak to a region, let alone a nation, or the world. The open-forum style of the collaborative model not only created art that was stronger, it created art that had a more collective appeal. Watching the "new play industry" falter in the late 1980s, Anderson echoed Boleslavsky reminding his readers that the most successful playwrights of history did not work alone: "Historically, playwrights have emerged from a company of like-minded individuals. Shakespeare, Moliere, O'Neill, Shepard, Mamet all made art in concert with companies they helped create companies which were in the process of evolving an aesthetic. The plays produced were organic expressions of a hard-won collective consciousness."²⁹ The success of the Disney model can be seen as an extension of this tradition and an endorsement for it.

Today, we are still in an industry where artistic directors make six-figures at major regional theatres, which don't pay or barely pay their interns. Because the laboratories of the regional theatre movement had been largely initiated on the premise of individual-centric content creation, this meant that a majority of American theatre

²⁹ Poignantly, as Chapter 1 notes, part of Peter Schneider's experience in theatre before Disney was working at the St. Nicholas Theatre in Chicago, which Mamet helped found. Anderson, 71.

laboratories were defunded – their new play development wings decimated by the mid-1990s.³⁰ In his 2008 article “Where Do New Plays Come From?” Rick DesRochers, literary director for the Public Theatre, at the time, describes how this mindset, has negatively impacted theatre in the 21st Century. Because new play development in regional theatres had been downsized in the 1990s, many new plays are developed in separate companies.³¹ These laboratories, however, are solely dedicated to development and not production of new works, meaning that most new plays in the United States never see a first production, because they are not picked up by regional or commercial theatres. There is much speculation as to why these plays don’t get picked up, and an advocate for an ensemble-based laboratory model can point out that the striking fact that these playwrights are not part of the artistic communities or processes in the regional theatres, where they are hoping to have their work produced. Thus, while individuals are offered short-term support in independent laboratories, the playwright, laboratory, and the theatres are disconnected.

The problem of disconnect was something that Schneider recognized immediately upon his arrival at Disney, which he terms “Wing-ism.” His first actions were designed to reduce this and promote more open communication between departments. Additionally, one of Eisner’s most notable interventions as C.E.O. was not just hiring Peter Schneider to help run animation but instituting a policy of “synergy” which forced Disney’s

³⁰ Schechner, Richard. "Do You Care If the Not-for-Profit Regional Theatre Goes Under?" *TDR* (1988-) 37, no. 3 (1993): 7-11. Accessed August 12, 2021. doi:10.2307/1146306.

³¹ These laboratories include Jaw/West, Lark Play Development Center, New Dramatists, The New Harmony Project, New York Stage & Film, Ojai Playwrights Conference, O'Neill National Playwrights Conference, Orchard Project, PlayGround Festival, PlayPenn, The Playwrights' Center, Playwrights Showcase, Sundance Institute Theatre Lab, WordBRIDGE Playwrights Lab, and Young Playwrights' Inc. DesRochers, Rick. "TDR Comment: Where Do New Plays Come From?" *TDR* (1988-) 52, no. 4 (2008): 7-12. Accessed August 12, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25145551>.

corporate divisions to talk to each other and collaborate. Often, synergy is defined in terms of being a marketing and advertising strategy, where departments are able to “cross-promote” each other’s work. When *Beauty and the Beast* came to Broadway, it was negatively viewed by some in the theatre as just another marketing synergy strategy. For example, in her article “The Economic Development of the ‘New’ Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical,” Elizabeth Wollman wrote:

“The tactic that many corporations are currently using to advertise and market new theatrical productions is commonly referred to as "business synergy," through which media companies work to generate stockholder value. With synergy, a company makes money both by selling a particular product and by integrating it into a cyclical web of related products. Thus, a company like Disney can use one of its properties, for example the animated film *Beauty and the Beast*, to sell any number of others: *Beauty and the Beast* on video, *Beauty and the Beast*-related rides at Disneyland, *Beauty and the Beast* merchandise at Disney stores, and now, the musical version of *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway and on international tour.”³²

While it is correct to talk about synergy as a marketing strategy for cross-promotion, the collaborative aspect should not be downplayed. Eisner was determined to break down barriers of communication between divisions so that divisions feel invested in the work of other divisions – in a way that avoids the kinds of disconnect that exist in the theatre industry today.

This is the policy that allowed for much of the theatrical experiments in Disney theme park in the 1980s and 1990s – specifically *Beauty and the Beast Live on Stage*, which started a new tradition where animated films would be staged in theme parks as drama. This is also the policy that brought about *Dick Tracy’s Diamond Double Cross*

³² Elizabeth L Wollman, "The Economic Development of the ‘New’ Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical." *American Music* 20, no. 4 (2002): 445-65. Accessed August 25, 2021. doi:10.2307/1350153.

and the experiments that the trio of Roth, West, and Meyer were able to do with moving lights and automated scenery. Ultimately, synergy allowed for *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway, but did so in a way that cannot be reduced to cross-promotion.

Finding Parameters of the “New”

“Deep in the shadows of Mount Olympus, our alphabet takes route ... flowering with new expression. Hail the proud Greeks: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides. The theater is born.”

- Original Narration for Spaceship Earth, EPCOT, 1982³³

These words were written by playwright and author Ray Bradbury, who developed the storyline, script, and theme for Spaceship Earth, and other EPCOT attractions in the early 1980s.³⁴ The scene is a tableau of audio-animatronics, which the guests pass in a non-stopping car, on a dark ride highlighting the history of human communication. The stage directions in the transcript read thus: “Up next on the right, is the Greek Theatre. Two men wearing masks are performing *Oedipus Rex* written by Sophocles circa 428 B.C. Another man holding his mask is standing towards the back of the scene probably waiting for his part to come up,” demonstrating a knowledgeable homage to Sophocles’ innovation of including a third actor. For Bradbury, theatre is a vital part of the history of human invention and innovation. As a playwright, he is one of the many theatre professionals who imprinted on the Walt Disney Company before the era of experimentation covered by the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, I will use his

³³ I would also like to thank my friend and former Disney theme park employee John McGraw for pointing out that the original tableau for ancient Greece in Spaceship Earth featured *Oedipus Rex*. Without this conversation we had in the car, driving back to Philly from our off-off Broadway collaboration, the week before the Covid shutdown, in late February 2020, I would not have gone down this rabbit hole.

³⁴ Jennifer Fickley-Baker, “Honoring Ray Bradbury’s Contribution to Epcot,” Disney Parks Blog, June 8, 2012, Accessed February 21, 2020. <https://disney parks.disney.go.com/blog/2012/06/honoring-ray-bradburys-contribution-to-epcot/>.

theatrical homage in Spaceship Earth to open the conversation to the final lesson of this dissertation.

Commissioned to tell the story of the evolution of human communication for this dark ride, inside the iconic large white globe, which is the centerpiece of the EPCOT park, he begins moves from cave paintings, to Egyptian written language, to the Phoenician alphabet, to Greek theatre, to Roman roads, to the fall of Rome, leading to the “Dark Ages,” to the preservation of knowledge by Islamic cultures and Catholic monasteries, to the invention of the printing press, to the European Renaissance, to the Industrial Age mass communications of newspapers, radio, film and television (including, of course, Disney), and finally to the invention of the computer and satellite communications. “With these machines comes a wondrous new network of communications, a vibrant maze of billions of electronic pathways stretching to the very edge of space,” says the narrator, actor Vic Perrin.³⁵ While a general oversimplification of the origins of theatre, which excludes some of its earlier forms, the inclusion of theatre in this grand history of communications networks (in a ride sponsored by the Bell System, later absorbed by AT&T), is notable because unlike the invention of alphabet codes, written communications, road networks, etc. there is no immediate line of succession between the birth of theatre and the invention of computers or satellites.³⁶ Bradbury, instead, creates a pattern, where he periodically interrupts the narrative of technological progression to insert advancements in the arts: he uses this pattern three times – first for the birth of theatre, second for the visual art of the European

³⁵ Anonymous, “Original Version (’82-86),” Epcot Discovery Center, December 19, 2001, <http://www.intercot.com/edc/SpaceshipEarth/spscript82.html>.

³⁶ Anonymous, “Original Version (’82-86).”

Renaissance, and third for the proliferation of movies, tv, and especially Disney. The linear narrative of progress that Bradbury is telling is simple for the fifteen-minute ride: new technologies like the written word, the printing press, and telecommunications bring about new forms or innovations on old forms of art, which, in turn, benefit humanity.

Ending with the invention of computers and satellites, with no new forms of art to complete the pattern that Bradbury established, the question in 1982, when the ride first opened, is only implied: “What new forms of art – in particular, visual and performing arts – will be realized thanks to these new technologies of computers and satellites?” Over the next few years, part of the answer would be discovered in Disney theme parks, under the literal shadow of the iconic Spaceship Earth geosphere. As Chapters 3 and 4 detail, some of these technological advances include automated, intelligent lighting, sound, and scenery, which would impact the way that theatre is staged – particularly for those like Roth, West, and Meyer, who were looking to do cinematic staging – in the future. Nevertheless, by the time Spaceship Earth was updated in 1986, and now narrated by Walter Cronkite, this new technology was brand new in the parks. The high-tech Videopolis theatre/nightclub had only been open for about a year, and the theatre artists had not yet had the opportunity to test it for storytelling purposes.³⁷ Even with the 1994 update, now narrated by Jeremy Irons, who provided the voice of Scar in the film version of *The Lion King*, released that year, ended with the dawn of the internet and fiber optics

³⁷ The updated 1986 script revises the portion on Greek theatre to read, “In classic Greece, the alphabet grows and flowers with new expression and a new stage of storytelling emerges. A stage on which we examine our world and ourselves. The theater is born.”

Anonymous, “SE Script - Cronkite Version,” Epcot Discovery Center, January 7, 2002. <https://www.intercot.com/edc/SpaceshipEarth/spscriptwc.html>.

– leaving the possibility for advancements in art open.³⁸ At the end of Disney’s decade of theatrical experimentation, in the same year that *Beauty and the Beast* opened on Broadway, there were missed opportunities to celebrate the triumphs of technology and art that had occurred under Disney’s own roof.

Instead, the ride in 1994, now sponsored fully by AT&T, ended with imagined scenarios of future science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM. The audio-animatronic tableau at the end of the ride showed an American boy and a Japanese girl on a video chat, watching a baseball game together on opposite sides of the world through large computer screens. Even though AT&T introduced a tiny and expensive video phone in 1992, the futuristic one on the ride was still a Disney fantasy in 1994.³⁹ However, in 2020, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, these images of the future came to fruition as many now transitioned to Zoom for work, socializing, and my own dissertation prospectus and research interviews. Even though the visionaries of the Spaceship Earth updates did not include possible theatrical or artistic applications for video conferencing technology, the University of Maryland’s school of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies (TDPS) gained notoriety in Spring 2020 when their virtual production of Qui Nguyen’s play *She Kills Monsters* premiered live (not prerecorded) on May 7.

³⁸ The updated 1994 script reads, “In ancient Greece, the spoken word was elevated to a fine art. Philosophers debated with one another in plazas and storytellers found a new forum for personal expression. The theater was born.”

Anonymous, “SE Script - Irons Version,” Epcot Discovery Center, January 7, 2002.

<https://www.intercot.com/edc/SpaceshipEarth/spscript.html>

³⁹ Benj Edwards, “132 Years of the Videophone: From Futuristic Fantasy to Flops to FaceTime,” Technogizer, June 14, 2010, <https://www.technogizer.com/2010/06/14/videophones/8/>.

Associate Professor Jared Mezzocchi, who teaches Production Media and Technology, suggested using digital technologies to enhance a Zoom production.

American Theatre Magazine reported,

“The design team has created digital effects that will take place in each individual Zoom box, and specific features have been loaded into SnapCamera, an app that augments webcam lenses, a bit like an Instagram filter. Strategic lighting in each room is crucial, and the performers rely heavily on angles, distance, and looking in the right direction at the right time. Blocking now consists largely of where the actors look and position themselves within their box.”⁴⁰

With the Snap Camera app, images of students were enhanced in real-time, mapping computer animated filters on their faces to make them look like dragons, slime monsters, and other mythical creatures. Animations of fire and other special effects were also added in the moment, showing the ways that the kind of experiments that were done with early computer animation at the Disney Feature Animation under Schneider’s tenure, mentioned in Chapter 1, eventually paved the way for accessible animation technology that would prove useful to theatre, in this grave moment, over thirty years later.

As Tom Sito writes in *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*, “CGI had developed over a half century in myriad unrelated places” from avant-garde art, to NASA, to the Department of Defense, to early video games, and to university research labs.⁴¹ In 1984, Eisner, Katzenberg, and Roy E. Disney brought the new technology to Disney Feature Animation, where the studio painstakingly learned how to use it seamlessly in two-dimensional animation. Sito explains,

⁴⁰ Sharee Turpin, “She Kills (Virtual) Monsters,” *American Theatre Magazine*, May 7, 2020, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2020/05/07/she-kills-virtual-monsters/>.

⁴¹ Tom Sito, *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson* (University Press of Kentucky, 2006), Kindle Edition, Chapter 12.

“It wasn't always easy. I recall Katzenberg driving the 3D department crazy about making the CG integrate more seamlessly with the 2D art. Once, on the ballroom sequence for *Beauty and the Beast*, someone thought to bring the producers in early to see the wire-frame structure turning to the music. In place of the character animation to be done of Belle and Beast were two large polygons. When they watched it, Katzenberg reacted to the placeholder polygons. ‘What the fuck is that? It looks like two big avocado pits!’ He left everyone rattled and one designer in tears. The solution was to bring in traditional animator James Baxter to draw a few key poses of Belle and Beast to cover the offending polygons. Otherwise, the camera move and structure was exactly the same. This time when they brought Jeffrey to see it and he beamed, ‘There! Now that's much better!’”⁴²

Eventually, the veterans of these tense experiments would go off into other studios and other avenues, bringing this hard-won knowledge with them. By 2015, computer animation would become so commonplace that smartphone apps like Snapchat would introduce the kind of augmented reality filters that can impose animation on people's faces from their own phone devices. In December 2019, right before the pandemic, *Forbes Magazine* reported that theatres all over the world were experimenting with virtual reality and augmented reality technologies to enhance live and immersive performance.⁴³ The University of Maryland was no different.

Mezzocchi explains to the *Washington Post*, “We're a Research I school. This is what we have been doing calisthenics for — asking a deep research question about how performance in theater can be a part of the scientific method. Can we achieve the essence

⁴² This incident occurred five years into the experiments with computer animation, showing the ways that it was still misunderstood well into the laboratory process. Eventually, according to Sito, despite his harsh personality, when Katzenberg left Disney in 1994 to create its rival company Dream Works, many computer animators would follow him to this new studio and create the massively successful film *Shrek*. Other veterans of Disney's experimentation with computer animation would join other companies, and bring the technology into other venues such as advertising – to a point where computer animation threatened to replace two-dimensional animation entirely, as mentioned in the Introductory chapter. Sito, Kindle Edition, Chapter 12.

⁴³ Sol Rogers, “How Technology Is Augmenting Traditional Theater,” *Forbes Magazine*, December 6, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/solrogers/2019/12/06/how-technology-is-augmenting-traditional-theatre/?sh=4bab99d50c07>.

of theater under these constraints?”⁴⁴ Part of the “calisthenics” he is talking about is the University of Maryland’s existing tradition of digital theatre experimentation, culminating in *The Triumph of Isabella: An Immersive Experience* collaborative project, developed from 2017-2019. In a collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, The Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels, the university was given high-resolution scans of the surviving panels of the Triumph of Isabella painting by Denis Van Alsloot, commemorating the 1615 Ommegang theatre and performance festival. At TDPS, a group of PhD researchers collaborated with media and projections MFAs to animate the paintings and bring the festival back to life in an immersive experience, using animation, sounds, and augmented reality. Serving as the sound designer for this project, it was my job to help recreate not just the sounds of a mass parade, but the “Renaissance” crowd’s response to it.

Imagining that a “Renaissance” crowd would respond to the recognizable mythological creatures, saints, and known figures, represented by massive pageant wagons and puppets, in the same way that a modern crowd might respond to a parade in a Disney theme park, I drew from my research on Disney and my own lived experience as a Disney theme park guest to create an immersive soundscape. Specifically, I was inspired by the work of Don Dorsey, mentioned in Chapter 3, who was an executive in the Entertainment division. In the 1970s Dorsey created a coordinated sound system for the park parades so that when a float was approaching, the sound would fade in and vice-

⁴⁴ Thomas Floyd, “How do you do live theater in a pandemic? U-Md. experiments with Zoom-staged version of ‘She Kills Monsters’” Washington Post, April 30, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/theater-dance/how-do-you-do-live-theater-in-a-pandemic-u-md-experiments-with-zoom-staged-version-of-she-kills-monsters/2020/04/30/e5898f72-8572-11ea-ae26-989cfce1c7c7_story.html.

versa for when the float drove away. This would ensure that guests would get the same quality experience no matter where they were standing. Don recalls spending months on rooftops with a stopwatch, studying float movement and giving cues via headset to an audio technician, who would adjust the volume knobs on a soundboard.⁴⁵ In 1991, during the “Disney Renaissance,” the Company invested in the development of the Disney Entertainment Control System (DECS), which automated the process over 200 speakers, and also triggered lighting and animation projection cues.⁴⁶ This would be my guiding principle for *Triumph of Isabella*: editing the sound and music cues so that the audience hears them before they see them approach from the right of the screen, and hearing them after the sound fades to the left of the screen – building anticipation and excitement and highlighting the ways that knowledge of Disney theatre laboratories can inform contemporary theatrical experimentation.

Mezzocchi maintains that universities have the potential to become centers of theatrical experimentation, because they do not have much of the funding constraints that regional theatres need to contend with: “When [universities] have artist-in-residency funds and you have experimental funds, then you're not putting the sole burden of all of that onto the regional theaters. You're putting it into the university, the university, stripping away the term ‘academia’ is a regional space.”⁴⁷ The same can be said for a Disney studio or theme park, even though these do not constitute traditional conceptions of what theatre is. Mezzocchi’s experiments, along with other TDPS experiments, occupy what he calls the “spaceless world of the digital,” meaning that it frees theatrical

⁴⁵ Don Dorsey, “Everyone Loves a Parade,” Dondorseyconsulting.com. Accessed August 29, 2021.

<https://www.dondorseyconsulting.com/dscoop.htm>

⁴⁶ Dorsey, <https://www.dondorseyconsulting.com/dscoop.htm>

⁴⁷ Jared Mezzocchi interview, August 2021.

experimentation from traditional theatre spaces and parameters, while still holding the “essence” of theatre that he talks about.⁴⁸ This ensures that the theatre is sustainable against challenges like a global pandemic or that we will be included in the histories of human technological advancement, as those who harnessed and benefited from these inventions instead of being replaced by them.

In 2008, Spaceship Earth underwent its most recent update. Now narrated by Judith Dench, the ancient Greek segment was completely revamped. The actors in masks performing *Oedipus* were replaced with new animatronic figures, and the updated script reads, “The ancient Greeks were great inventors of the future. First, they established public schools, and then begin teaching an intriguing new subject called mathematics. And with math comes mechanical technology and the birth of a high-tech life we enjoy today.”⁴⁹ The “birth of theatre” had been replaced in the narrative with the birth of STEM, signifying one of the final shifts: that theatre was no longer a primary value or priority in Disney theme parks. Furthermore, one of the more insidious messages of this change is that the parameters of theatre do not extend to STEM and vice-versa. This is, of course, yet another false choice – proven by the very history of theatrical experimentation in Disney theme parks. Just as the “Renaissance” segment of Spaceship Earth (still) includes both the technology of the printing press, Leonardo DaVinci’s machines, and Michelangelo’s paintings, the history of theatre in the “Disney Renaissance” includes both technology *and* theatre.

⁴⁸ Mezzocchi interview, August 2021.

⁴⁹ Admin, “Spaceship Earth (Epcot) – Dame Judi Dench Version (2008-Present),” Disney Park Scripts, August 13, 2015, <https://www.disneyparkscripts.com/spaceship-earth-epcot-2008-version-dame-judi-dench/>.

In 2021, there is an acknowledgement of the dangers of automation, as it threatens to endanger the jobs of millions of people around the world. The stories of how theatre professionals engaged with new technologies at Disney from 1984-1994, however, suggests that theatrical knowledge offers those who possess it, an opportunity to shape the ways that these new technologies will be used – and, in doing so, develop or impact future forms of theatre. As this dissertation comes to a close, I offer Bradbury’s original parting words from the first iteration of Spaceship Earth for when the ride comes to an end, “Tomorrow’s world approaches, so let us listen and learn, let us explore and question and understand, let us go forth and discover the wisdom to guide great Spaceship Earth through the uncharted seas of the future. Let us dare to fulfill our destiny.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

When *Beauty and the Beast* opened on Broadway in April of 1994, many in the theatre establishment looked at it like it was something akin to a “test tube of coffee:” a superficial experiment, all fake. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the narrative of “Disneyfication” emerged, which painted *Beauty* on Broadway as an invasion or colonization of a non-theatrical entity into a theatrical space, signaling the end of theatre. “The essence of theatre is dissent, contention, criticism, and controversy, the very qualities Disney abominates and surgically removes from all its products,” railed Charles Marowitz in his article “Do We Want a Disney World?” in *Theatre Week Magazine*, after

⁵⁰ Anonymous, “Original Version (82-86).”

Beauty had been playing on Broadway for a few months.⁵¹ Once these qualities disappear from theatre, he argues, theatre, by its essence, perishes.

However, what he and many others of like mind, at the time, failed to consider was not only the theatre professional involved in the decision to bring Disney to Broadway, but the processes of dissent, contention, criticism, and controversy which formed *Beauty and the Beast*, and its different iterations. In my introductory chapter, I identified some of the reasons why the theatre experiments at Disney, that occurred from 1984-1994, have been obscured in the historiography and metanarrative of the “Disney Renaissance.” This dissertation, in turn, has brought several of the symbolic “draftsmen” (and women!) of the “Disney Renaissance” out from behind the curtain, to show a decades’ worth of processes experimentation and their roots in the traditions and contexts of theatrical practice. These not only included experiments on management, leadership, content, form, and function, but also an enactment of the values of a theatre laboratory, as articulated by Boleslavsky. These values include, 1) improving craft through training and development, 2) collective creation and development over an individualist “star system” 3) theatre as a “social force” through the “main road travelled” [read: mainstream] 4) updating and trying new things 5) and developing new forms that will influence the world. Through these values, Boleslavsky argued that the overall quality of art will improve within the laboratory. Bringing it to the mainstream will not only raise the culture of the country at large but make theatre an “essential” and “indispensable” part of people’s lives.⁵² Thus, I encourage readers to look at the Disney “test tube” in a different

⁵¹ Charles Marowitz, “Do We Want a Disney World,” *Theatre Week Magazine*, Volume 8, Number 1, 1994, 23.

⁵² Boleslavsky, 246.

way to see the “essence” of theatre and the values of the Boleslavskian theatre laboratory realized, especially from 1984-1994.

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