'Everyone in the Room has a Connection to the Story': Fairytale Adaptations in Devised Theatre

Kneehigh Theatre and Cartoon de Salvo can be identified as two of Britain's devised theatre companies whose popularity has grown from the appreciation of predominantly rural, family audiences in village halls to success at regional and London theatres, and in Kneehigh's case to large scale National Theatre Productions, West End runs and international, critical acclaim. Members of the two companies have collaborated on productions and their performance styles share many distinctive elements, such as a strong sense of ensemble and a playful, comedic, improvisatory approach to making accessible theatre fuelled by music, visual spectacle and a sense of celebration. Both companies create work that enhances the sociality of the theatre event through direct address and audience participation within the work, to moments of what might be termed 'extra-performance', such as interaction between performers and spectators in the foyer or the sharing of food, drink and sometimes a dance floor to close a production. A further similarity in Cartoon de Salvo and Kneehigh Theatre's devising process is their preference for adaptation, creating new plays from existing sources, such as fairytales, classic texts and films. In this article I anaylse two of the companies' early fairytale adaptations and argue that adapting well-known stories has contributed to each company's success in forming a strong sense of connection with their audiences. In particular, I suggest that the fairytale genre, with its myriad of shared cultural symbols and vivid personal resonances lends itself particularly well to devised performance intended to be popular, accessible and celebratory, whilst also facilitating exploration of thought provoking social themes and cultural memories.

A theatre company's preference for adaptation might of course be viewed rather cynically as simply a means of securing audience numbers by 'playing it safe' with the presentation of known works. However, I'd like to counter this argument in two ways, firstly by suggesting that it rests on the assumption that to be popular is somehow a bad thing; and secondly by showing that by adapting fairytales these companies consciously and productively tap into what Kneehigh Co-Artistic Director Emma Rice calls a shared sense of 'cultural memory' that makes their work accessible and that also increases the audience's experience of theatre as a social collaboration between performers and spectators (Radosavljevic 2010: 93). What Rice refers to as 'cultural memory' is something that in reception theory, following Hans Robert Jauss, we might recognise as part of our 'horizon of experience' or 'horizon of expectations': the set of expectations and references that readers bring to a text in the act of interpretation (Jauss 1982: 19). In Jauss' theorisation readers assess a new work in relation to all of those already encountered. As Jauss explains it

> A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read. (Jauss 1982: 23)

From this theoretical perspective it is easy to see the fairytale genre as rife with sets of cultural references and interpretive strategies that are commonly known and shared, providing common roots from which Jauss suggests processes of individual interpretation grow.

Theatre audiences, as a social group, can be said to share such a horizon, providing the complexity of audience make-up is acknowledged as a complicating factor; a single audience might contain any number of individuals with their own different combinations of experiences and expectations shaping their interpretation of the work. This plurality of response is particularly relevant in relation to fairytales, which have a rich and dynamic history of production and reception owing to a lack of fixed textual origins and appearances in myriad forms across genres, cultures and generations. Fairytales – and certainly those devised by an ensemble of theatre makers – suggest multivocality and any adaptation of them might draw on a whole range of source texts. When we attempt to characterise the audience's 'horizon of experience' in response to a devised adaptation of a fairytale we must therefore acknowledge that such a horizon is likely to be nuanced and personalised for each deviser/performer and each spectator, and yet also perceived as something shared and based on many elements of common knowledge because of the proliferation of versions and cultural resonances. I would suggest it is this feeling of shared audience-performer knowledge, and spectator's confidence in interpreting the fairytale genre, which has drawn companies such as Kneehigh Theatre and Cartoon de Salvo to this material and that has contributed to their adaptations' positive reception over and above the initial draw of a known title to 'get bums on seats'.

Kneehigh Theatre and Cartoon de Salvo have been recognised by critics for their belief in the value of stories as a means of navigating the social world and exploring identities. Lyn Gardner for *The Guardian* has recognised that Cartoon de Salvo 'belong very much in the oral storytelling tradition of the fairytale where simplicity, ribaldry, the ordinary and the

extraordinary, the best and worst of human nature all collide' (Gardner 2007). Cartoon de Salvo prioritise 'exceptional storytelling' and Artistic Director Alex Murdoch describes the company as 'obsessed with what makes a good story' (Murdoch 2011). Similarly, Kneehigh Theatre, in theatre programmes and press interviews, repeat that their process 'always starts with the story'; and they are widely recognised as adept storytellers (Rice: 11). David Farr, then Artistic Director of Bristol Old Vic and subsequently at the Lyric Hammersmith and the Royal Shakespeare Company, has co-produced several shows with Kneehigh Theatre and argues that

> They are just very, very good at telling stories. And when you get innovative visual theatre allied with classical storytelling, you get something that audiences respond to immediately. (Farr in Gardner 2004)

I argue in this article that this immediacy of audience response actually relates not only to the companies' talent for storytelling and vibrant performance styles, but also to the way in which the subject matter that these companies have frequently chosen to adapt draws the audience into the event through the sense of a shared horizon of experience and expectations and acknowledgement of the audience as active participants in the creation of a new version of a story 'already read'. Both companies actively enhance the shared cultural memories surrounding their material; the intertextual richness of fairytales allows them to affect the aesthetics of reception through their poetics of performance in order to increase the audience's sense of collective ownership of the subject matter and emphasise their role in passing on a story through what Jauss describes as a 'chain of receptions from generation to generation' (Jauss 1982: 19).[i] Through analysis of Kneehigh Theatre's *Cry Wolf* (2003) and Cartoon de Salvo's *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* (2005), I set out the means by which the audience's sense of involvement can be enhanced in performance. Analysis

of these productions also reveals how these companies use adaptations of popular stories to question aspects of contemporary society – specifically issues surrounding the tensions between individuality and social cohesion and the communal good versus capitalist gains – by bringing the audience's expectations of the story into play for comparison.

Rice has frequently asserted that 'theatre is nothing without the engagement of the audience's creativity' and the company's adaptations foster this interpretive participation by referencing original source material and other adaptations within their own retellings (Rice 2005: 12). Similarly, Murdoch asserts that 'what is significant and exciting about [theatre] is its "live-ness", and we place our relationship with the audience at the heart of our philosophy and our work. [...]We want to make theatre that feels like an event (like a birthday party or school reunion) that brings people and communities together' (Murdoch 2011). Within Kneehigh Theatre's and Cartoon de Salvo's adaptations the audience are actively and openly directed towards remembering and reflecting on their shared consciousness of particular tales, themes, plot developments and motifs; spectators are made aware of the shared cultural symbols at play in a piece of work through the ways in which the companies evoke them, adding to that sense of a shared horizon of expectations. In *Contemporary British Drama* Lane discusses Kneehigh Theatre's *Brief Encounter* and refers to the style of adaptation as driven by 'playfulness' and 'self-conscious referencing' (Lane 2010: 168) . Lane concludes that this style alerts the audience not only to the subtext within the piece, but also to the 'subtext of the act of adaptation', although he does not then consider how this might effect audience's experiences of the event or interpretation of the performance (Lane 2010: 171). My suggestion is that this self-conscious referencing within

an adaptation creates a sense of shared endeavour and common understanding within the moment of the live event and helps to create ' a collective experience… a celebration, a collective gasp of amazement' that Rice strives for (Rice 205: 12). In interview with Duska Radosavljevic Rice reveals that the company's devising process begins with a sharing of memories and viewpoints on the story to be told, as everyone has a reason why they would tell that story.

> It might be an epic reason. It might be tiny. It does not matter. But it means that everyone in the room has a connection to the story. (Radosavljevic 2010: 92)

Just as the devising process begins from the premise that everyone in the room has a connection to the story – thus engaging from the start with the multivocality of the source material – the companies clearly work on a second premise that everyone in the audience can also connect to the material. This connection might be made through direct knowledge of the story in a textual form, from memories of childhood stories, or simply through awareness of the genre of fairytales more broadly, perhaps through other tales or various mediatised versions. This article suggests that this sharing of cultural memories to kick start the devising process can be extended to the audience through performance style and self-conscious referencing, and this shared act of adaptation gives us some insight into the success of these two productions and particularly in Kneehigh Theatre's case to the successful creation of a large audience following.

The Accessibility of Fairytales

It is easy to see why myth, fairytales and folklore are such popular sources of inspiration for these companies, as they have the potential to evoke deeply felt cultural resonances

amongst even the most diverse of contemporary British audiences. As Julie Sanders explains in her study *Adaptation and Appropriation*, fairytales offer the adaptor a widely inclusive frame of reference, due to their international and cross-generational popularity, as they are repeated in myriad forms.

> These are forms and genres that have cross-cultural, often cross-historical, readerships; they are stories and tales which appear across the boundaries of cultural difference and which are handed on, albeit in transmuted and translated forms, through the generations. In this sense they participate in a very active way in a shared community of knowledge, and have therefore proved particularly rich sources for adaptation and appropriation. (Sanders 2006: 45)

We might also add that fairytales and myths cross the boundaries of genre and high and low culture with ease, allowing for multiple interpretations, levels of understanding and intertextual referents, and strengthening the sense of inclusion and of course accessibility that is associated with such material.[ii] Furthermore, the development of these stories from an oral tradition has lead to stylistic conventions – such as formulaic narratives, a conversational tone, character types and dynamic action – that lend themselves well to performance based representations that seek to draw the audience into a performance-audience relationship characterised by direct address and a playful celebration of theatricality.[iii] In his writings on creating theatre for popular audiences, John McGrath recognises the accessibility of fairytales too, and their suitability for conveying complex social messages to theatre audiences. McGrath has evoked fairytale conventions in his work with 7:84 as a means of communicating with rural and working class audiences. For instance 7:84's seminal work, *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* was staged in the style of a pop-up-book to encourage the audience to actively interpret the play in the same way as they would when reading the bold messages conveyed in fairytales and the

stories from their childhood. In discussing the particular traits of the 1970s working-class audiences that 7:84 played to, McGrath defends the audience's preference for storytelling, bold experimental forms and Brechtian characterisation, over 'slice of life' theatre, stating that

> This is not, as some critics have thought, because the club/panto audience is unused to theatre, and therefore naively accepting – on the contrary, it is the sophistication of the audience of folk tales, able to shift ground with ease if given secure guidance. (McGrath 1996: 29)

Cry Wolf and *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* provide clear examples of how fairytale adaptation can make sophisticated explorations of social issues and experiments with theatrical form widely accessible. Kneehigh Theatre's 2002 production *Wild Jam* was performed outdoors at the Minack Theatre in Cornwall and was then re-worked in 2003 for a regional tour and re-titled *Cry Wolf*. Both productions had two distinct halves, the first being *Fish Boy*, a staging of Charles Causley's poem 'Francesco de la Vega', and the second half being a re-working of the 'Little Red Riding Hood' tale called *Cry Wolf*; it is this second piece that I wish to focus on here and to compare to Cartoon de Salvo's *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* produced with Battersea Arts Centre as a family show for Christmas and New Year in place of a more traditional pantomime. Both versions were performed by a company of actors and musicians who doubled as many characters, interacting directly with the audience and creating visual spectacle through innovative use of simple, but versatile sets, expressive puppets and imaginatively animated stage properties. In terms of accessibility and vivid cultural symbols, both of these productions made explicit reference to their source materials, emphasising the international, cross-generational, and inclusive aspects of the material in performance and accompanying print. In the case of both

productions the programmes evidence a very clear attempt to set the adaptations not only within a clear context relating to the source material, but within a broader, and thus more likely shared, horizon of experience and expectations.

In the programme notes for *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* Director Alex Murdoch sets out her main source as Robert Browning's poem 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin'. Murdoch goes on to list some of the historical evidence that informs the tale of the Pied Piper, to which Browning himself makes detailed reference in the poem. She refers, for instance to various explanations for the actual disappearance of 130 children from the German town of Hamelin in 1376. However, Murdoch also refers to less widely known versions of the Pied Piper myth that exist elsewhere in the UK, Belfast and the Isle of Wight, placing the tale within a slightly more international, and arguably therefore more inclusive, framework of cultural knowledge. In addition, the notion of fairytales being related to high and low culture, and to both adults and children, is carefully emphasised by Murdoch. A conceit of the performance that relates directly to Browning's version, and thus it could be argued to high literary culture, was the inclusion of William Macready as a child character who is told the tale, which comes to life in his dreams on stage. While it is explained in the programme notes that Browning dedicated his poem to William, the son of famous actor Charles Macready, we can only speculate as to the number of audience members who might have read this and furthermore felt any strong sense of connection to it as a cultural reference. However, Murdoch also includes references that perhaps more effectively localised the performance in its contemporary context, ranging from a quote and drawing of rats from a young pupil at Ravenstone School in Balham, South London, to an interview

between the company and Paul Cooper, a pest control expert for the council, introduced as 'the Ratcatcher of Lambeth'.

In performance it was the influence of Browning's poem that was brought out most strongly with very similar rhyme schemes and verses employed in the song lyrics, written by Brian Logan, and an emphasis on the town of Hamelin's repressed guilt for losing their children. As in the poem, Cartoon de Salvo conveyed the townspeople's guilt and repressed emotion through their banning of music in the town. In Browning's poem the banning of music is expressed as a means of remembering the lost children.

> And the better in memory to fix
> The place of the children's last retreat,
> They called it, the Pied Piper's Street --
> Where any one playing on pipe or tabor,
> Was sure for the future to lose his labour.
> Nor suffered they hostelry or tavern
> To shock with mirth a street so solemn. (Browning 1945: 276-282)

In Cartoon de Salvo's version this banning of music was used to express the Hamelin townspeople's repression of their emotions and inability to admit their sense of guilt, with music standing as a metaphor both for the expression of human feeling and for a healthy community that can share in the pleasure of communal creativity.

For *Cry Wolf*, director Mike Shepherd – Co-Artistic Director of Kneehigh Theatre with Emma Rice – acknowledges an unknown source text for the adaptation, simply explaining that their production is 'based on an ancient oral telling of "Red Riding Hood", and, like many folk stories which have latterly been "made safe" for telling to children, this version is ruder, funnier and more extreme' (Shepherd 2003). Shepherd's attempt to establish a

shared horizon of expectations here is based upon his acknowledgement that within contemporary culture fairytales have lost something of their earlier vibrancy and more adult content. This might be seen as what Jauss describes as a 'covert' signal or 'implicit allusion', reminding people that whilst they have most probably encountered fairytales through Disney's lens of sugary, happy endings there is also a folk history to be remembered. As well as aligning their adaptation with this oral tradition the programme also evidences a number of textual references, with folkloric poems and songs by Lorca, Causley and Anna Maria Murphy. Murphy in particular sets the tale within the fairytale genre in her poem 'The Wolves are at the Door' where she draws on the story of 'The Three Little Pigs' to remind us that 'They huff/They puff/They blow our houses down' (Murphy in Shepherd 2003). The tone of the performance is also indicated by the inclusion of a quote from Angela Carter's rewriting of the tale 'The Company of Wolves', where Carter plays with the well-known, formulaic ending of the tale in versions by the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault.

> What big teeth you have!
> All the better to eat you with.
> The girl burst out laughing;
> She knew she was nobody's meat. (Carter in Shepherd 2003)

This reference to Carter has multiple cultural resonances. By subverting the outcome of this questioning of the wolf, Carter's quote alerts the reader of the programme to the gender relations within the tale that Kneehigh Theatre went on to explore in performance; and of course Carter's tale was adapted in a famous film version with the same title, which might direct the audience's attention to the cinematic genre of the fairytale. Additionally, by selecting a quote that plays on these particular lines, Kneehigh Theatre are alluding to other

more accessible and arguably more widely-known versions than Carter's, making it more than an intertextual reference only for readers of contemporary fiction or fans of the literary fairytale.

Such intertextual references surrounding both *Cry Wolf* and *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* are primarily alluded to in the performances' accompanying programme material; the affect such material has on audience reception remains an unknown, and may be fairly limited, but I would argue that reading the array of cultural references provided in the productions' programmes could well have strengthened the shared horizon of experience and expectations amongst some audience members. What can be said with certainty is that such ephemera are useful here for evidencing the companies' intent to position their new versions of the tales within a history of rewriting and remembering. However, in the performances this history of rewriting is not emphasised so much through intertextual references, but by drawing attention to the familiar conventions of the fairytale genre to unite the audience in that active participation described by Rice as ' the engagement of the audience's creativity' and theorised by Jauss as a test of the new work's 'aesthetic value in comparison with works already read' (Rice 2005: 12 and Jauss 1982: 20). It is thus the alignment of these performances with oral tales re-told and re-encountered in Western culture that offered the greatest scope for creating a sense of common knowledge amongst the audience, and this was communicated not so much in the printed material as in the performance itself through what Lane identifies as a playful and self-conscious style of adaptation (Lane 2010: 168). Focussing on form and drawing the audience's attention to the well-known conventions of fairytales, rather than to the specifics of particular versions,

again creates a very broad frame of reference that is inclusive and accessible without depending on a homogeneity of experience or expectations. Jauss's concept of a shared horizon, as employed here, allows for a plurality of response that is highly nuanced for each individual, thus the cultural references and adaptation of fairytale conventions need not all have the same resonance or even be recognised alike by every member of the audience, for them to contribute to an overall feeling of shared cultural knowledge.

In performance these two adaptations also clearly evidenced the extent to which the style of the written fairytale, as developed from an oral tradition, lends itself well to theatrical representation, and more specifically to a presentational style that enhances direct contact between performance and audience. The strong narrator's voice in literary fairytales provides the appropriate tone for the companies' own styles of direct address and for the use of choruses who interact with the audience. *Cry Wolf* opened with a startling procession of actors and musicians, carrying, juggling, dragging and even riding on the scenery and properties for the play. They set, upturned and re-set the stage in choreographed, clown-like chaos whilst welcoming the audience with smiles, laughter, chatter, music and eager displays of showmanship before beginning to tell their tale. [Figure 1] Cartoon de Salvo opened their Christmas production of *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* in similarly jovial spirits with pre-performance carol singing in the foyer of Battersea Arts Centre, London, and through into the auditorium, with which audience members were encouraged to join in. [Figure 2]

The character types of fairytales also suit the casting preferences of these companies, as both productions included doubling and cross-gender casting, which required bold and immediate transformations of characters based on type rather than subtle, naturalistic characterisation. For *Cry Wolf* four actors, five musicians and two technicians formed the cast, with each actor playing at least two roles and one, Craig Johnson, simply credited as 'Everyone else'. For *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* the cast of eight performers played over twenty characters. The most demanding doubling moment in the show was when the parents switched between playing themselves and their own lost children, inhabiting their memories of the children as in a flashback. In Figure 3 we can see the parents remembering and re-enacting their own children at play; these transformations between the actors playing the parents and then their own children were achieved purely through character work rather than costume changes or overt signally. [Figure 3] Such devices demand that the audience work hard to keep abreast of the complex role playing and at least one reviewer of *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* felt that this aspect of the staging made the piece a little unclear (Clapp 2007). However, the fact that the fairytale world is one of transformation and unreality made these staging devices all the more appropriate and I would suggest that clarity was not the aim here, but rather the employment of the audience's creative interpretation. All of the techniques set out above were intended to increase the audience's active interpretation of the performance, helping to create a strong sense of shared endeavour at the event. Indeed, fairytales' unabashed implausibility and magical plot lines mark them out as a genre that demands reader or audience complicity and imaginative contribution to create the fantastical world that the tales inhabit. The strength of the cultural resonances surrounding this material is in part due to the fact that

such stories require this high degree of imaginative contribution from their readers and or audiences. As Sanders points out

> The spectator or reader [of adaptations and appropriations] must be able to participate in the play of similarity and difference perceived between the original, source, or inspiration to appreciate fully the reshaping or rewriting undertaken by the adaptive text. There are particular bodies of texts and source-material, such as myths, fairy tale, and folklore which by their very nature depend on a community of understanding. (Sanders 2006: 45)

The discourse of fairytale and folklore criticism suggests that this 'community of understanding' theorised by Sanders is complexly social and personal at the same time, shedding light on the reasons why these stories provide such a perfect opportunity for theatre companies wishing to create a sense of identity with their audiences and to enhance their feelings of participation in the theatre event.

Fairytales and the 'Inner Landscape'

Bruno Bettelheim's comprehensive analysis of literary fairytales focuses on their use as psychological aids to growing up and stresses the importance of fairytales in the lives of all children. In *The Uses of Enchantment* he asserts the importance of the thematic content of fairytales as relating to the personal experiences we are faced with in negotiating our social existence and argues that this is a major reason for their constant re-adaptation and their strong cultural currency (Bettelheim 1991). The fact that these stories are usually first encountered in childhood provides the theatre-maker with the opportunity to conjure up memories that relate to formative stages of our lives, and also to re-awaken childlike responses that are likely to have been highly imaginative, playful and more readily creative.

I would suggest that the unreality of fairytales is also a significant factor in seeming to break down the stage-audience divide and increase the audience's role in the success of the theatre event; staged fairytales place the audience's experience firmly within an imagined realm, which helps to reduce audience inhibitions and encourages active participation in the event. As McGrath suggests, audiences find themselves in well-known, and thus 'secure' territory within the realms of the fairytale genre.

Rice often acknowledges *The Uses of Enchantment*, as a source of inspiration and guidance for her work (Rice 2003 and 2005). Kneehigh's approach, not only to fairytales – including *Cry Wolf*, *The Red Shoes*, *The Wooden Frock, Hansel and Gretel* – but also to their adaptations of myths, literary works and more recently a number of films – has obviously been influenced by Bettelheim's positive appraisal of folktales and the power of myths. Rice stresses the personally felt 'necessity' of folktales which, following Bettelheim, she suggests can 'guide, calm and comfort us as we tip-toe through the minefield of human experience' (Rice 2003). The company also adhere to his insistence that fairytales should not be watered down for children so that only the more pleasant and often banal components remain, as Bettelheim is deeply concerned that censorship devalues the tales and reduces their impact on the reader.

> Most children now meet fairy tales only in petrified and simplified versions which subdue their meaning and rob them of all deeper significance.
> (Bettelheim 1991: 24)

It is very likely indeed that Bettelheim would have approved of Kneehigh's fairytale world where dark moments, violent acts, and controversial issues are revealed and explored, rather than hidden or shied away from. In *The Red Shoes* Girl's inability to stop dancing is

presented as a gruelling physical torment that leads to the bloody and painful amputation of her feet; in *The Wooden Frock* the female protagonist faces the traumatic prospect of having to marry her own widowed father, who appears to be perversely pleased that it is his daughter whom the ring fits. Reviewers of *Cry Wolf* shared a tendency to stress the darker side of this adaptation of 'Little Red Riding Hood', with a proliferation of comments referring to the production as 'darkly hysterical and unique', and to Emma Rice's playing of the Wolf as 'despicably evil and nasty' (Fisher 2004). Figures 4 and 5 for instance show Rice as the wolf loosely disguised as Granny, and Giles King as red riding hood eating flesh from a jar. [Figure 4 and 5] This reviewer had a warning to give potential audience members:

> While children will probably love this show, there is no guarantee that they won't have nightmares for weeks. Some adults may have similar problems after seeing this very visually striking show. The man in the front row who caught Emma Rice after a stage dive will also long remember his visit. He will not be the only one. (Fisher 2004)

Aside from referring to the dark fairytale atmosphere that Kneehigh Theatre created, this reviewer was obviously also affected by the level of contact that the performers had with the audience and hints at the feeling of shared experience that the company seeks to create.

With Cartoon de Salvo's adaptation of *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* the production was targeted more directly at children and family audiences, as an alternative to the traditional or more common celebrity pantomimes playing over the Christmas period, yet the darker elements of the story were not glossed over. As Murdoch states in her programme notes, 'it's a dark tale', and with regards to the 'Scratch' work in progress performance in the preceding February she even admits to wondering whether the show was 'a bit depressing

for Christmas' (Murdoch 2005). The Ratcatcher was played with a sinister edge, at first conjuring a dark blanket of wriggling rats which covered the stage with alarmingly lifelike speed and later luring the children out of their bedrooms and off into the night. [Figure 6] However, the real darkness of the adaptation lay in the fact that the townspeople's guilt and greed portrayed a Hamelin overrun not only with rats but also with selfishness: in that community blind consumerism ruled in the place of a more charitable Christmas spirit.

Fairytales and Social Order

The most interesting element of this darker side to Cartoon de Salvo's adaptation was not simply the way it introduced children to quite an adult theme, but the fact that it was placed within a contemporary framework of shopping and over-spending at Christmas in order to prompt the audience towards critical consideration of modern Christmas celebrations in the West and indeed their own behaviour over the seasonal period. This political aspect of *The Ratcatcher of Hamelin* was emphasised by Cartoon de Salvo in songs and visual images of the town's people weighed down by their excessive purchasing, in a similar way to Brecht's use of songs and striking visual images to highlight the political impetus of a scene in his own plays. [Figure 7] We might, for instance, compare Cartoon de Salvo's laden shoppers in Hamelin to Mother Courage, in Brecht's play of the same name, struggling with her overloaded cart – the symbol of her excessive drive to capitalise on the war. Lyn Gardner picked up on this aspect of the production for the *Guardian* as its most interesting element, praising 'the way that the town's outward espousal of Christian values is totally at odds with the townsfolk's elevation of shopping into a religion' (Gardner 2005).

Likewise, Kneehigh Theatre's adaptation of 'Little Red Riding Hood' was politicised through the depiction of red riding hood's family as dysfunctional in an entirely contemporary sense; through the cross gender casting of red riding hood and the wolf; and through the overtly sexual nature of the wolf's hunger. Giles King as red riding hood played on the euphemistic metaphors rife in other versions of 'Little Red Riding Hood', portraying the girl as innocent, coquettish and on the verge of sexual awakening, which was expressed with tongue in cheek visual images, such as red riding hood eating Bakewell tarts, suggestive of breasts, and putting on red lipstick given to her by the predatory wolf. [Figure 8 and 9] Rice played the wolf with a raw, animal sexuality not usually associated with women in fairytales, but explored directly by Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber* (Carter 1979). The fact that these parts were openly cast against gender brought issues of sexuality and socially accepted gender roles to the fore. Kneehigh Theatre's version of 'Little Red Riding Hood' invited critical consideration of these issues in contemporary society by encouraging the audience to acknowledge the sexual undertones latent in other versions and to reconsider well known versions of fairytales, by the Grimms, Perrault or even Disney, as 'socialising' tales intended to warn young girls against the dangers of men, sex and perhaps most importantly against disobeying the laws of 'decent' society even where they are at odds with the individual's desires or sense of self.

These aspects of the adaptations thus aligned them with another branch of fairytale criticism that impinges on notions of community by acknowledging that fairytales not only resonate on a very personal level, as evidenced in thematic and psychoanalytic readings

such as Bettelheim's, but also relate directly to societal issues and ideological questions. It is widely acknowledged in contemporary fairytale criticism that in addition to relating to an 'inner landscape', each adaptation or re-working of a fairytale enters an ideological debate that ranges, as Sanders suggests above, across temporal, cultural and geographical boundaries. Scholars such as Zipes, Tartar, Harries and Warner attempt to read beyond the psychological interpretation of fairytales, which they feel have been miscategorised as primarily children's literature, and strive to reassert their political purport.[iv]

Zipes in particular emphasises the ways in which folktales function as 'socialising' agents, used to instruct children and adults in the social norms that they are expected to adhere to and uphold. Zipes' work roots folk and fairytales within the domain of ideology, rather than exclusively psychological debates. In *Breaking the Magic Spell* Zipes criticises Bettelheim's 'moralistic', neo-Freudian approach and argues for an understanding of fairytales based upon scholarly research into 'the relationship of a specific audience to the tale at a given moment in history'. (Zipes 2002: p.192)

> Bettelheim has a one-dimensional way of examining the relation of literature to the psyche. To suggest that the external life is isolated from the inner life and that there is a literature which primarily addresses itself to the inner problems of a reader completely eliminates the dialectical relationship between essence and appearance. (Zipes 2002: 183)

By studying classical tales, as they appeared under the authorship and adaptation of the Grimms, Perrault and Hans Christian Andersen, Zipes places them in the specific context from which they emerged, refusing to accept them as merely floating entities devoid of context or external significance. Zipes therefore reframes the genre of fairytales within the community for which they were written.

Folk tales and fairy tales have always been dependent on customs, rituals, and values in the particular socialization process of a social system. They have always symbolically depicted the nature of power relationships within a given society. (Zipes 1991: 67)

Zipes labels the tales 'historical prescriptions', arguing that their structure, aesthetics and outcomes were derived from the ways that narrators 'perceived the possibility for resolution of social conflicts and contradictions' (Zipes 1991: 7).

Whilst Zipes situates himself in opposition to Bettelheim, and indeed argues rigorously and systematically against Bettelheim's somewhat controversial applications of fairytales in psychoanalytic practice, I see no reason to believe that these two critical perspectives – relating to inner landscapes or to a social order – are mutually exclusive; in fact I would suggest that this dualism is what makes myths, folklore and fairytale material so inspiring for theatre-makers and so well suited to the devising processes and artistic aims of Kneehigh Theatre and Cartoon De Salvo. The cultural memories of such material may be highly nuanced for each individual by their own personal responses and experiences, but they are of course tied to the social context of each new adaptation and the political undertones of every new engagement. In effect, just the fact that Cartoon de Salvo and Kneehigh Theatre have entered into a dialogue with the previous versions and myriad cultural appearances of their source texts creates an implicitly political framework for their performances, but does so without distancing the audience from the material on an individuated, personal or emotional level.

In stressing the political aspects of the companies' adaptations I am not suggesting that Cartoon de Salvo or Kneehigh Theatre use their source materials as a means of 'socialising'

their audiences, in the way that Zipes would characterise the Grimms as doing for instance; rather, I would argue that they recognise the significance of these myths and tales within cultural tradition and seek to make their audiences aware of them as vehicles for the exploration of contemporary fears, moral dilemmas and social concerns. Interaction with these source texts reveals a desire to re-contextualise and re-examine the significance of these stories for contemporary society; thus encouraging a sense of community and reflections on community experience in general by using the past, negotiated through an old story, as a model for understanding the present. As Zipes says,

> The fairy tale becomes a broad arena for presenting and representing our wishes and desires. It frequently takes the form of a mammoth discourse in which we carry on struggles over family, sexuality, gender roles, rituals, values and sociological power. Writers stake out their ideological positions through fairy tales. (Zipes 1997: 90)

Zipes' foregrounding of the ideological significance of folktales relates to Kneehigh Theatre and Cartoon de Salvo's engagement with such material and offers an insight into its value as a rich source for theatrical adaptation in addition to its popularity and accessibility.

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[i] In 'Vital Contact: Creating Interpretive Communities in the Moment of Theatrical Reception' I have theorised this process and created a set of terminologies to help define dramaturgical approaches intended to increase the audience's sense of connection to the performance. I suggest that through 'contact-localism', 'psychic-localism' and 'spatial-localism' devising companies – such as Kneehigh Theatre and Cartoon De Salvo – can significantly enhance the sociality of the theatre event through their performance style, adaptation of known stories and manipulation of performance space. See Lilley (2010).

[ii] Italo Calvino presents a logical argument accounting for this 'universal' aspect of fairytales, as his claims that 'The urge to collect and publish was stimulated by the "comparatist" passion peculiar to the literary culture of the period, in which similarity rather than diversity was stressed, and when evidence of the

universal diffusion of a motif rather than the distinction of a particular place, time, and narrative personality was emphasized.' See Calvino 1980, p.xxi.

iii Contrary to this accepted historical development of the fairytale genre, Elizabeth Harries challenges the accepted direction of tale transference from oral accounts to literary works. Harries claims that in fact cross-reference between mediums has influenced the fairy tales' appearance in both literature and folklore. She suggests that literary authors consciously constructed the idea of traceable origins in oral tradition in an attempt to link their work to an idyllic era of seemingly primitive and therefore more 'natural' cultural practice. Whether the development has been straightforwardly linear or more interconnected the fact remains that fairytales depicted in any medium tend to convey a sense of orality. For more discussion see Elizabeth Wanning Harries (2001).

iv See Jack Zipes, (1997) *Happily Ever After Fairy Tales: Children and the Culture Industry*, Zipes, (1991) *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for children and the process of civilization*, Maria Tatar, (1987) *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Harries, (2001) *Twice Upon a Time* and Marina Warner, (1994) *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*.