

Review of: George Rodosthenous (Ed.):
The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen.
Critical Approaches from 'Snow White' to Frozen
Edited by George Rodosthenous
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Alba Montoya (Barcelona)

The book is a collection of papers organized on three main themes: Disney Musicals on film, the adaptation of film musicals to stage versions and the treatment of gender and race in both films and stage versions. The volume starts with Elizabeth Randell Upton's examination of SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS (1937). The author reflects the problem Disney's animators were confronted with when they had to animate humans »realistically« and link it with what Mori called the ›Uncanny Valley‹: sometimes animation that seems to be too realistic becomes scary. To solve this problem, Upton asserts that the use of music »paradoxically enhances the aura of reality for (Snow White), for her story and for her world« (106).

The second chapter, by Raymond Knapp, centres on SLEEPING BEAUTY (1959) and focuses on the use of Tchaikovsky's, together with new lyrics. Knapp is one of the very few authors on this book that actually talk about music in musicals and is very thoroughly presented. He analyses the adaptation of Tchaikovsky's music and how George Bruns (the composer of the film) is not always faithful to the ballet's narration.

Tim Stephenson's study of *MARY POPPINS* questions if this film is actually a precursor of the feminist musical. He asserts that Mary Poppins has challenged the male gaze as well as moved away from the stereotyped women in musicals: plain and passive, only preoccupied about finding love.

The fourth chapter, written by Paul R. Laird, considers *ENCHANTED* »as an unusual continuation of Disney princess films because it is both a tribute and a postmodern comment upon the genre« (214). Through a commentary about the songs included in the film and the representation of characters, Laird shows how contemporary Disney has begun to go further away from its own conventions by mocking them.

Part two opens with a chapter titled ›Disney Versions of Broadway Musical for Television in the Late 1990 and Early 2000s‹. Geoffrey Block focuses on four television adaptations relatively unknown: *CINDERELLA*, *ANNIE*, *THE MUSIC MAN* and *ONCE UPON A MATTRESS*, highlighting the role of the creative director and making connections to the original stage productions. In examining non-traditional casting, this chapter explores casting stereotypes and ways to approach colour-blind casting.

Olaf Jubin presents an overview of the staged versions of the film *THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME* (1996) and by doing that raises questions of the ›Disneyfication of characters‹. He also compares the German version (released in 1999) and the American version (from 2014/2015) and explores how the artistic team operated within the constraints of the Disney brand. According to the author, »it is more or less impossible to reconcile Disney«

with themes such as »violence, sexuality and political or with a critical stance against traditional authorities, such as organized religion« (p. 362).

In Chapter 7 Barbara Wallace Grossman focuses on a case of success both in film and its staged version: *THE LION KING* (1994). She celebrates the innovations of the stage adaptations directed by Julie Taymor and scrutinizes the use of music. Grossman makes a general outlook about how the translation of film language to the stage and points out the many risks that Disney took by giving this project to Julie Taymor, who believed that by making »stage mechanics« visible, audiences would be engaged.

Disney's projects on education are condensed in Stacy E. Wolf's chapter. She shows how Disney Theatrical Group's converted Broadway fiascos such as *THE LITTLE MERMAID* and *ALADDIN* in new products for education purposes with great success. To prove her point, she examines the productions of *ALADDIN KIDS* and *THE LITTLE MERMAID JR.* to demonstrate the impact of amateur productions on child development, engagement and participation.

The last five chapters compose the third part of the book, which questions how »race« and gender is represented in Disney musicals. Issues of masculinity, male dancing and maleness are interrogated in Aaron C. Thomas's study. *NEWSIES* juxtapose feminine power with masculinity and touches upon the third sex. He engages with questions of presenting new masculinities on stage and points out the importance of the dancing body in male representation.

In the tenth chapter, Dominic Symonds evaluates the impact of *HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL*, to focus on the gender politics in Disney films. Symonds explains

the relevance of *HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL* and links it to two other teen-centred musicals, the film *GREASE* and the TV show *GLEE*. He postulates that »girls can achieve, can have a voice and can gain independence (we are told); but the only way they will achieve access to those rewards is if they conform to the ›inhibitions‹ of their gender«.

Emily Clark, Donatella Galella, Stefanie A. Jones and Catherine Young, author the chapter on race, racism and orientalism in *THE JUNGLE BOOK*. Their aim is to argument that »white supremacy« is still evident in racial hierarchies and that the film's diversity, tolerance and cultural mix allow new critical reading. Also they reveal that the new staged version is not free of racism: according to them, »*THE JUNGLE BOOK* stage musical continues a long history of Orientalist, minstrel and Disney production whose racial politics cannot be easily dismissed« (632).

In chapter twelve, Sam Balrimore proposes that *ALADDIN* can be perceived as an analogy that goes beyond musical comedy and extends to a queer orientalist tradition. The author recognizes the importance of its first lyricist, Howard Ashman, who put already many gay signifiers in his other collaborations with Disney (*THE LITTLE MERMAID* and *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*), with *ALADDIN* he made not an exception. However, his premature death by AIDS, left unfinished the film and many changes were made (including leaving behind its queer foundations). Then, Balrimore explores the stage version directed by James Monroe Iglehart, who restored some of the original characters and songs made by Ashman, and with that, its queer signifiers.

Sarah Whitfield's chapter concludes the volume by questioning if FROZEN is a feminist musical. The author sums up the debate of whether FROZEN is ›feminist enough‹ and establishes links to constructions and re-enactments of gender on stage. Whitfield believes that FROZEN »is more than feminist wishful thinking and to argue that it reflects a certain progress in attempting to balance a similar double duty«.

To sum up, *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen* is quite an interesting book that unveils some details about Disney films that are relatively unknown. Nevertheless, the assumption of the editor that »the present book is the first to explore the Disney musical in such an extensive manner« is not quite correct. The book allows the reader to learn here and there some curiosities about certain musicals, but it fails to give a global vision of Disney musicals. This does not come as a surprise, as it is a compilation made by many authors, each of them with different areas of interest and coming from diverse academic background. The book delivers some interesting essays but fails to form a unified whole. It is nevertheless useful for those who work in this field.

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