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PREVIEW

**CORPORATE BROADWAY:
DISNEY AND THE THEATRE OF REASSURANCE**

by

Katherine L. Dudley

A DISSERTATION

**Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
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CORPORATE BROADWAY:
DISNEY AND THE THEATRE OF REASSURANCE

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University of Nebraska, 1999

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In 1994, Walt Disney Theatrical Productions ventured onto Broadway with *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*. New York City proclaimed a renaissance of 42nd Street; critics predicted a theme park takeover. By 1999, Disney Theatricals was firmly established as a financially successful Broadway producer and theater owner. Their activities include producing *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*, *King David*, *The Lion King*, *Elaborate Lives/Aida*, and renovating the New Amsterdam Theatre. Due to the extensive press currently and tepid academic interest in Disney historically, their presence on Broadway provides a unique opportunity to examine both the corporatization of the American commercial theatre and the shared American cultural values the popular theatre reflects. Towards that end, this study analyzes four areas of critical concern: (1) critical reception of the new producer, raising the age-old high art/popular art controversy and exposing insider prejudices; (2) aesthetic choices/changes from the

production's source material, examining the myth of the corporate sensibility and the ongoing power of the fairy tale; (3) inclusion and portrayal of cultural myths, defining a modernist mainstream that values community and solution-oriented thinking; and (4) corporate influences on producing practices, revealing middle-of-the-road tactics, marketing past the critics and tapping the family entertainment audience. Far from signaling the demise of Broadway predicted by critics, Disney's presence coincides with the contemporary recreation of the financially successful Broadway from 1900 to 1935.

PREVIEW

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Introduction

1994: Disney corporation ventures onto Broadway with their production of *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*. New York City and the state of New York holds their collective breath in hopeful anticipation of increased tourism with its resulting economic boost. Meanwhile, the Broadway critics snarl, planning a feeding frenzy for the opening of the production.

1999: Disney is firmly established as a financially successful Broadway producer and theatre owner. Two productions are in long runs, and two others are in development. New York City's Times Square is booming, and critical bias against Disney is waning. Disney's marketing savvy has extended itself to Broadway.

Disney is the corporate embodiment of what *Harvard Business Review* identifies as the current competitive strategy for businesses: experience marketing. Rather than providing a specific good or service, the company "intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event" (Gilmore). The company derives these "experiences" through a "process of exploration, scripting, and staging" (Gilmore). The end result is a conscious effort to enact an event, desirable to the customer or audience, within the control of a constructed environment with a scripted outcome. These constructed experiences will be interpreted differently by each individual patron, whose

perception is a personal response to this ephemeral event. The company markets the ephemeral event like a theatrical production. Experience marketing appeals to our "quest for experience" that Susan Willis identifies in her essay on family vacations (45). Rather than simply buying a product or service, as a culture, we prefer to wrap that act in a memorable event.

Disney has always used experience marketing; it began in the 1930s with their animated films and tie-in merchandise. Their film efforts grew into the ultimate embodiment of experience marketing with the opening of their first theme park: Disneyland. The most recent, and most logical, expansion of their experience marketing is their live theatrical productions on Broadway. Experience marketing mirrors the processes of creating a theatrical production with the addition of merchandise to commemorate the event. Disney entered the professional theatre as producer when they deduced ways to apply experience marketing, with its interconnected web of cross-marketing, to Broadway. Experience marketing techniques reduce the traditional risk of a quick-closing show that had kept Disney, with Michael Eisner at its helm, away from Broadway. (Eisner discusses his concerns about this issue in his autobiography [253]).

Understanding experience marketing is essential to understanding Disney and the practices of their theatrical division, Walt Disney Theatrical Productions. Their belief in the value of creating experiences binds their

divisions together. As evidenced in each year's annual report, corporate Disney is a conglomeration of divisions that function as separate units. In recognition of this separateness, one vice-presidential position is now devoted to exploring ideas with potential for cross-promotion or inter-divisional extension (Eisner 238). The strength of the corporation comes from their shared larger purpose: selling entertaining experiences. As recognized in a recent article in *Organizational Dynamics*, shared values are a "salient ingredient" in Disney's success and in the success of other large corporations (Powell). Movie studios, in particular, are uniquely positioned to "use entertainment as the adhesive that binds their brand to a disparate group of businesses," represented in Disney's case by their diverse divisions (Dogar). At Disney, communicating the company's primary values is a significant part of each employee's training: their job is to "create happiness," and their specific duties are approached as a tool toward that end (Taylor and Wheatley-Lovoy).

Disney's mastery of experience marketing foreshadowed their advent on Broadway. The basis of experience marketing is a strong story that shapes the event and the memorabilia associated with it. Successful stories evoke a high degree of "emotional involvement and personal identification" from the paying participants (Dogar). Defying some post-modern trends that eliminate story or diminish its significance, experience marketing appeals to

a modern aesthetic that uses narrative to structure life and still finds "magic" in the unfolding of a story. Jed Bernstein, executive director of the League of American Theatres and Producers, attributes the 1990s upturn in attendance on Broadway to an inverse reaction to the isolation of technology-based entertainment: people hunger for "the live experience" of a story (Sheward).

The five design principles for experience marketing are all principles of theatrical production using a collaborative approach: First, the producer must use a consistent theme that is concise and compelling and unifies all the elements of the experience. Positive cues for that theme are layered through the different elements of the experience and specifically designed to create memorable impressions. Any cues that contradict, confuse, or fail to support the theme are eliminated. The total experience should engage all five senses for the greatest impact. Finally, memorabilia is offered to commemorate the experience.

The final principle causes the most uproar among critics, who label the practice as the commodification of culture, implying that popular culture has been co-opted from the mainstream by corporations who shape the culture to support sales of their merchandise. One of those critics, Stephen Fjellman, addressing Disney specifically, concludes that a mixture of actual culture and corporate-created culture exists but finds danger in the "fake" world Disney presents (315-17). Without identifying it, Fjellman is railing against the very

foundation of experience marketing. Although the variety of merchandise in the theatre has increased, memorabilia is traditionally associated with the performance event: special programs, t-shirts, albums. Even in the previous century, Sarah Bernhardt's fans could purchase copies of the scripts for the production they attended.

The arguments engendered by Disney's memorabilia echoes the ongoing argument in the United States about the relationship between art and commerce. Borrowing ideologies from the old aristocracies that depended on patronage for the creation of art, the United States retains a myth about the separateness of creativity and financial necessities. Experience marketing is threatening to that myth because it blurs the "lines between intellectual property and merchandising" (Dogar). In the recent past, Broadway aesthetes looked to Livent as a possible answer to the incursion of corporations on Broadway: Garth Drabinsky, Livent's Chief Executive Officer, was a theatre insider and his corporation was unsullied by non-theatrical ventures. In fact, Livent is the only "publicly held company whose main business is live theater production" (Weber, B.). In retrospect, his attempts to create lavish events without subsidiary interests contributed to his downfall. Meanwhile, Disney and experience marketing are alive and well on Broadway.

Part of the critical resistance to Disney is attributable to an ongoing

perception of corporate "sameness" frequently referred to as the Disney sensibility. Products marketed as "Disney" usually are aimed at families and don't contain a high-degree of violence, sex, or profanity, in comparison with other comparable products. However, far from being the same, Disney products vary widely by division. Some divisions were created specifically to offer non-family oriented fare. Miramax was acquired to provide a venue for more experimental, adult-oriented film work. *Pulp Fiction* was created while Disney owned Miramax, proving the continuance of Miramax's non-Disneyesque mission. When Disney acquired ABC, critics and television insiders warned about the decreasing numbers of decision-makers programming television that would lead to "sameness" in the offerings (Moore). A more factual account of the merger chronicled the lack of changes at ABC with the exception of Disney's animated series added to ABC's "sagging Saturday morning kiddie lineup" (Holloway).

The charge of "sameness" also dissipates upon examination of the make-up of the Disney Board of Directors and top executives. Eisner's autobiography chronicles the diversity, confirming his awareness of the importance of ethnic, gender, and professional diversity. Robert Stern, a highly successful New York architect, has designed several "Disney" buildings, as well as serving on the board. Reveta Bowers is cited by Eisner as "the only elementary school principal on a major corporate board" (222).

Richard Nanula became Disney's Chief Financial Officer in 1991, making him the youngest CFO in a Fortune 500 company and "one of the highest-ranking African American corporate executives" (Eisner 231-2).

Any "sameness" in products marketed as "Disney" is a conscious choice in reaction to the culture surrounding the work. American audiences are currently fascinated with extremes. Consider the simultaneous popularity of the brawling style of *The Jerry Springer Show* in contrast to America's fascination with the royal rituals surrounding the death of Princess Diana. Both phenomena draw clear-cut moral lines within highly emotional stories. Into this culture, Disney inserts fairy tales that traditionally require simplicity, a clear definition of good and evil, and melodramatic stories. The means for producing these fairy tales frequently includes the use of new technology. Just as Walt Disney pursued the addition of color and sound to his work, corporate Disney has a reputation for investigating upcoming technology as a means to communicate their product (Maney 172). For example, Disney had forayed into the Internet long before the actual launching of their "Go!" network (Maloney). The content of Disney-branded stories is not avant garde, but instead offers a mainstream narrative of order, security, and happy endings. Disney's approach is modernist: technology is employed for the betterment of a world with solvable problems. Disney's critics seem unable to accept the value of the modern in what they define as a

post-modern world. The essays of Susan Willis and Karen Klugman, two contributors to a work assembled by the Project on Disney, provide a clear example: While discussing the fun of staying in motels on family vacations, Willis acknowledges the source of the pleasure as "an unconscious social yearning for security and community" (8). She goes on to denigrate the same phenomenon inside Disney World as a destructive form of "global homogenization" (32). Klugman attacks the Disney sensibility for its simplification of things that have "the potential for more complex and thought-provoking expression" (103). On a sociological level, scholars can acknowledge a human need for security and community; however, when Disney is involved, universal themes are automatically interpreted as inaccurate simplifications or homogenizations.

Using experience marketing, Disney brought fairy tales to Broadway. This "Disney phenomenon" is a unique opportunity to examine the state of the American commercial theatre and the shared American cultural values the popular theatre reflects. Disney is not the only corporate producer on Broadway, nor are they the only producers of mass-appeal shows. However, as "Disney," they draw more press coverage than any other single producer. Examining Disney's practices on Broadway illuminates current trends throughout the profession. Toward that end, this study analyzes four areas of critical concern: (1) critical reception of the new producer, raising the age-

old high art versus popular art controversy and exposing insider prejudices; (2) aesthetic choices and changes from the production's source material, examining the notion of the corporate sensibility and the ongoing power of the fairy tale; (3) inclusion and portrayal of cultural myths, defining a modernist mainstream that values community and solution-oriented thinking; and (4) corporate influences on producing practices, revealing middle-of-the-road tactics, marketing past the critics, and tapping the family entertainment audience.

Critical reaction occurred in two different venues: the popular press and the academic press. The popular press publishes criticism that, by its very nature, does not cite detailed support for its judgments; academic publishers require analysis and support for the author's conclusions. My study includes both types of criticism, using an analytical approach to determine critical trends and uncover biases in both venues. In much the same way, I use press reports, analytical articles, and interviews to examine Disney's producing activities for current trends on Broadway. The following study examines contemporary Broadway through the activities of Walt Disney Theatrical Productions.

Disney's Beauty and the Beast

I.

Naming the Beast

Critical reaction surrounding the April 18, 1994, opening of *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*¹ on Broadway was elitist, with critics positioning themselves as patrons of high art and shunning *Disney's Beauty* as low art of the worst sort. Railing against its animated film source, critics ignore *Beauty's* place in fairy tale tradition and claim the musical is simply the film onstage (despite easily documentable changes). Disney's corporate identity overshadows its actions as a theatrical producer, obscuring the range of approaches made possible by corporate funding.² Critics' biases divert them from examining the mythical framework that makes the production so profitably popular with the ticket-buying public. Examining *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* reveals a consistent set of criteria used to denigrate the production.

Alluding to the ongoing high art/popular art controversy, *Beauty's* critics, like previous Disney film critics, use the production's popularity to

¹ *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* and *Beauty* both refer to the Broadway musical produced by Walt Disney Theatrical Productions.

² "Disney" refers to the entire corporate entity. "Walt Disney Theatrical Productions" or "Disney Theatricals" refers to the specific division of the Disney corporation formed to produce live theatre.

attack its validity as a work of art. However, an examination of the criticisms surrounding the opening reveals the unique paradoxes created by the criteria used. David Richards in *The New York Times* attacks the art/pop art issue directly, declaring that *Beauty* was "hardly a triumph of art, but it'll probably be a whale of a tourist attraction" ("Disney"). A music critic for *The Hartford Courant* discusses the same phenomenon in songwriting, using the career of *Beauty's* composer, Alan Menken, as an example. The critic discusses the difficulty of writing songs that actually sell and the "posse of critics ready to declare you a sellout and a hack" if a composer succeeds (Metcalf). In literary venues, J.R.R. Tolkien's 1937 condemnation of Disney's work is frequently resurrected to label the whole of Disney's work as mass appeal schlock rather than art. Critical respect for Tolkien's work gives his opinion validity, but Tolkien issued the statement based only on Disney's early cartoon shorts. *Snow White*, the first of the full-length features in the Disney canon, was released several months later (Yates). It is commonly accepted that Tolkien condemned the main body of Disney's work, while in fact his criticism applies only to the largely forgotten early portion of Disney's work.

Ironically, popular art can become high art by "aging." Betsy Hearne, who has written extensively about folklore, and *Beauty and the Beast* in particular, places Disney centrally in the "high culture versus popular

culture" wars. She details the critically respected fairy tale revisions of Perrault, Grimm, and Lang and concludes that "the folklore we so venerate today was once viewed as common and vulgar by the educated elite of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" ("Disney"). With this historical precedent, *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* may be venerated in the future, despite its current "popular" status. Current critics are paralleling the reaction of the previous centuries' "educated elite." In fact, critic Vincent Canby uses Hearne's descriptive term "vulgar" in his contemporary assessment of *Beauty*, warning discriminating patrons not to "underestimate the appeal of such vulgarity . . ." ("Is"). Contemporary critical attacks on the "art" status of *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* reveal the central paradox of the high art/popular art controversy. The high art label cannot apply to any work that is tremendously popular. High art, by the critics' definition, is meant to exclude most of the possible audience.

Reverence for the "original version" is a persistent aspect of the high art bias against Disney. On closer examination, that reverence is actually reserved for the version most familiar to the particular individual. The first version of any artwork takes on a sort of spiritual purity that alterations can only seem to sully. To change the work is to ignore the reverence and respect due to the original work. A letter written in 1965 to *The Los Angeles Times* by Frances Clarke Sayers, a librarian, is the most cited example of this

particular attack waged on Disney products. She rages against the "scant respect for the integrity of the original creations of authors" (Sayers qtd. in Hearne "Disney"). Folklorist Hearne, although taking a fundamentally anti-Disney position, presents the historical refutation of Sayers' accusation: fairy tales have always been revised to match contemporary mores; no one original exists for any of these tales. As a librarian, Sayers should have known that multiple versions of each tale exist. Even if she didn't, the recent rise in academic interest in folklore certainly excludes the basis for this bias in more current authors. In his book, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Jack Zipes suggests that when it comes to stories, children resist change: "If they have been reared with the old tales, they do not want them altered" (190). Accepting his conclusion, the veneration of the original is actually a disguise for humanity's resistance to change. We like things to be the way we remember them.

Specific, contemporary charges about changes in the basic story used jointly by Disney's animated film and the live stage version of *Beauty and the Beast* support my contention that change is the stimulus for critical rejection. James Bowman, a movie critic for the *American Spectator*, looks at *Beauty and the Beast*, the animated film ("Disney's"). He cites the "irrelevance of parents" in the story and Belle's selfish choice of males based on respect for her "feminine autonomy." He claims that Disney ignores the

theme of the original story, "which stresses the risk and sacrifice involved in loving someone." That "irrelevant parent" is the one Belle sacrifices her freedom for, and Gaston, the suitor her feminine autonomy rejected, is physically abusive to his friends. She takes a huge risk as she pledges her love to a Beast with no hope of changing him. I cannot find support for Bowman's assertions in the events of the story, but his opening paragraph offers a possible explanation for his point of view. He begins by siding with the Southern Baptist Boycott of the corporation, and agrees with the Southern Baptist Convention spokeswoman's assertion that the company was "not the same Disney that it was years ago when we were growing up."³ Change is the problem. Linda Winer of *Newsday* uses the same faulty reasoning ("The Disney"). Taking partial credit for the praise of the animated film as "the best Broadway musical Broadway wasn't doing," Winer maintains that the stage version's added songs "seem like padding." She

³ On June 18, 1997, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to "refrain from patronizing the Disney Co. and any of its related entities" ("Disney Baptist"). Citing activities that are "increasingly promoting immoral ideologies such as homosexuality, infidelity and adultery," the members of the convention are particularly upset about insurance benefits for homosexual partners, Gay Days at the theme parks, adult themes in movies from Disney subsidiaries, and ABC's *Ellen* show (Pratt and Kay; Ross). Disney has encountered boycotts previously from American Family Association, the Assemblies of God, and the National Association of Free Will Baptists "with no appreciable effect" ("Disney Baptist"). A survey conducted by *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the University of North Carolina found 30% of the Southern Baptists polled would participate in the boycott (White, G.).

accepts "Human Again" without rancor; the original lyricist who had an Off-Broadway success (*Little Shop of Horrors*, which Winer mentions) wrote it.⁴ Of all the songs replacement-lyricist Tim Rice contributed to, she gives credit only to "If I Can't Love Her." But this approval is conditional and includes a suggestion that the song contains a "sly little musical quote" from *The Phantom of the Opera's* "Music of the Night." The song may be a "wrenching ballad," but the writers stole part of it. As long as it was created with the film, Winer praises the music, implying that changes inevitably produce an inferior product.

The veneration of the "original" also encompasses the fear that Disney's mass media dominance empowers them to dictate public taste. This argument examines changes in fairy tales as a result of community desires versus desires being dictated by the mass media corporation ("Disney"). Linking the criticism of Disney's fairy tale changes to the "same chicken-and-egg syndrome" that haunts the Barbie doll, folklorist Hearne places herself on the critical fence, claiming "that private commerce manipulates public will" and "public will also shapes private commerce." Then she contradicts herself, concluding that Disney's global marketing will make their version "THE authorized version for millions and millions of young viewers all over

⁴ Ashman died in 1991 from complications resulting from AIDS. The home video of *Beauty* begins with a dedication to him.

the world."⁵ She seems to forget her own argument that part of Disney's success is based on their response to the public will: children like Disney products because the products have what the children like in them.

Hearne erroneously concludes that, if offered, no other version of a fairy tale produced by Disney is going to be appealing. Despite influence from the animated film and the Broadway production of *Disney's Beauty and the Beast*, in 1998 at least two separate productions were successfully offering a different version of the fairy tale. *The Times-Picayune* reports the arrival in New Orleans of the BalletMet tour from Columbus, Ohio. David Nixon, the troupe's artistic director, admits their concern with audience expectations created by the Disney version. In response, BalletMet's advertisements carefully market their very different aesthetic. Nixon claims that once at the production, audiences "forget about the Disney version." As proof of their success, Nixon confirms that this production was bringing the troupe their "largest box offices ever" (Mahne). In direct competition with the Disney musical, the Theatre of Youth in Buffalo produced a musical *Beauty and the Beast* adapted by Michale Brill. The reviewer acknowledges the

⁵ This position is also a drastic shift from her published statement in 1989. In reaction to purists' anger at *Beauty* revisions, including Disney's version, Hearne offered the following: "We have developed a fairy tale about fairy tales, that in print or film they become culturally, textually, and graphically fixed" (*Beauty* 4). Perhaps the success of the video coupled with the large audiences attending the Broadway production changed her mind.