

drama and fairy tales A fairy-tale drama is a theatrical work that uses the motifs, characters, and genre markers of the fairy tale. These plays have variously served as entertainment, socializing tools, pedagogical and didactic instruments, and critiques of the social, literary, and political order. Written for both adult and juvenile audiences, fairy-tale drama shares a great affinity with the other theatrical genres of ballet, opera, and musical theatre.

Before the advent of the *contes de fées* craze in France, works like ***Shakespeare's** *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1600), **Ben *Jonson's** *Oberon: The Fairy Prince* (1611), and **Henry *Purcell's** *The Fairy Queen* (1692) featured fairies and magical events; they preceded the rise of the fairy-tale play in

France with the publication of the earliest collections of fairy tales in the 1690s.

The theatre of the 17th century had been replete with magicians and sorcerers in pastoral plays, machine plays, court ballets, and operas. Plays that featured fairies—without exception comedies—were a conglomeration of music, dance, and special effects. They enjoyed great resonance among theatregoers, and their popularity often drove both what was written and what was performed. The use of fairies and demons allowed the troupe to use exotic costumes, and the exciting plots and the silly transformations the characters underwent all contributed to the audience's affection for this genre. In all probability the original audiences saw the fairies' capricious and tyrannical behaviour as

a commentary on the mores of the French aristocracy.

Although the craze lasted only two decades in France, the ensuing years were formative and defining for the genre throughout Europe. In the 18th century more fairy plays and fairy-tale plays began to appear, as the genre became more established and playwrights took inspiration from their own cultural and theatre traditions and indigenous tale collections. In England John Hawkesworth's *Edgar and Emmeline: A Fairy Tale in Dramatic Entertainment for Two Acts* (1761); Michael Arne's *A Fairy Tale*, adapted from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1763); J. Chr. Smith's *The Fairies* (1755); and Chr. Dibdin's *Queen Mab* (1769) all worked from Celtic mythology. In Italy, [Carlo *Gozzi's](#)

fairy-tale plays valorized the *commedia dell'arte* and presented stories based on puppet plays, oriental stories, popular fables, fairy stories, and the works of Calderón. Two that have withstood the test of time and have been revisited over the centuries are *L'amore delle tre melarance* (*Love of the Three Oranges*, 1761) and *Turandot* (1762). The ten tales Gozzi wrote for the stage in many ways were the beginning of the fairy-tale play as a satire of literary conventions of the times; his tales criticized and lampooned the 18th-century *Zeitgeist* and the Enlightenment's cultural reformist aims. German stages initially relied heavily on translations of popular French comedies and dramatized *contes de fées*, although an indigenous tradition began with such plays as *Mägera*,

die fürchterliche Hexe (*Megera, the Terrible Witch*, 1763); *Das Donauweibchen* (*The Maid of the Danube*, 1798); and *Hulda, das schöne Wasserfräulein* (*Hulda, the Beautiful Water Maiden*, 1799). Literary histories consider the real breakthrough work for the genre in Germany to be Christoph *Wieland's *Oberon* (1789).

By the 19th century, more theatres were in existence and accessible to more people, more fairy-tale books were in print, audience familiarity with the motifs and themes had increased dramatically, and new artistic tastes were developing. The fairy-tale play began to adapt to political, social, and literary sensibilities as playwrights exploited the malleability of the tales. Over the course of the century, fairy-tale dramas reflected the

pervading trends within literary movements and shifted from comedy to often more serious works and even tragedies. The genre also began to differentiate more clearly into musical (opera and ballet) and non-musical versions (see [BALLET AND FAIRY TALES](#); [OPERA AND FAIRY TALES](#); [OPERETTA AND FAIRY TALES](#)).

There had already been a century and a half of works based on [*Perrault](#), the [*oriental fairy-tale](#) collections, and the Italian medieval collections that had been received and that playwrights were adapting, but there were also new impulses spawned by the romantic interest in the genre, the rise of the literary *Kunstmärchen*, and the advent of the [*Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen](#). As the romantic wave swept Europe, playwrights from England to Hungary produced numerous

fairy-tale plays, many engendered by the romantic interest in Shakespeare. In Scandinavia, Adam Oehlenschläger wrote the outstanding *Sanct hafsaften-spil* (*Play for Midsummer Eve*, 1802) and [*Aladdin](#) (1805); P. D. A. Atterbom, a leader in the Swedish romantic movement, created his greatest poetic work, the fairy-tale play *Lycksalighetens ö* (*The Isle of the Blessed*, 1824–7) that explores the beguiling power of imagination in the history of poetry. In Hungary, Mihály Vörösmarty produced the great work *Csongor és Tünde*, a symbolic fairy-tale play reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. In England Thomas Cooke further explored Celtic sources in his *Oberon, or, The Charmed Horn* (1826, based on Wieland) and his 'grand

melodramatic fairy tale' *Thierna-na-oge, or, The Prince of the Lakes* (1829). In Germany, **Ludwig *Tieck** took up Gozzi's gauntlet and produced numerous works that were social, political, and literary critiques of his times, as *Der gestiefelte Kater* (**Puss-in-Boots*, 1804). Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué introduced the dilemma of the ill-fated love between humans and other-worldly **Undines* and **Mélusine*, a theme that was to re-emerge in later, neo-romantic plays; his 'Undine' was put to music by **E. T. A. *Hoffmann** and produced as a fairy-tale play (1816); Franz Grillparzer (among many others) took up the Melusine theme (1833). As the century progressed, other writers like Georg Büchner responded to Germany's aesthetic and political nationalism by creating a deliberately senseless, chaotic

and amoral universe in his anti-fairy-tale play *Leonce and Lena* (1843).

By mid-century, the tragic fairy tale coexisted with the socially satiric and light entertainment, and the commercial popularity of the fairy tale reached new heights. **J. R. *Planché** achieved great success in England with his extravaganzas like *The Good Woman in the Wood: A New and Original Fairy Tale* (based on **Mlle de *La Force's** 'La Bonne Femme' ('The Good Woman'), 1852) and Tom Taylor's *Wittikind and his Brothers, or, The Seven Swan Princes and the Fairy Melusine* (1852). In 1857, in Germany, fairy-tale plays as popular family entertainment made their debut in Hamburg with Carl August Görner's introduction of the opulently staged Christmas fairy tale, a tradition that has

continued to this day. Theatres around Europe were quick to pick up the trend because Christmas plays tided more than one theatre budget over to the next season.

By the end of the century, the genre's happy-end solutions dissolved into tragedy. The fantastic, utopian world of the original tales was shown to be inadequate, unable to resolve real-life conflicts. Romantic themes were back in vogue, as playwrights like [Maurice *Maeterlinck](#), [August *Strindberg](#), [Gerhart *Hauptmann](#), Fyodor Sologub, Henrik Ibsen, [Hugo von *Hofmannsthal](#), and [William Butler *Yeats](#) all turned to fairy tales and other anti-realistic forms to bring poetry and spiritual meaning back into the theatre. They employed elements from tales of Perrault and the Grimms and from [Hans](#)

[Christian *Andersen](#). Their plays often used the pattern of enchantment and disenchantment à la *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or took up the idea of contact with other-worldly females as an allegorical conflict between art and life, as Hauptmann's *Die versunkene Glocke* (*The Sunken Bell*, 1896), Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1876), and Hofmannsthal's *Das Bergwerk zu Falun* (*The Mines of Falun*, 1906). The mood of these plays was decidedly gloomy. The Belgian Nobel laureate Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892), considered the unquestioned masterpiece of symbolist drama and basis for the opera by [Claude *Debussy](#), conveys a mood of hopeless melancholy and doom, an obsession with love and death. Following Maeterlinck, other playwrights

dissolved the fairy-tale happy end into disillusionment and despair. Perhaps one of the most interesting paradigm shifts within the genre at the *fin de siècle* is apparent in [Robert *Walser's](#) 1901 dramolette *Schneewittchen* (**Snow White*). His work questions the very transmissibility of an ordered, traditional system of values as his characters possess literary self-consciousness: the queen and Snow White come to understand that their every move and thought is directed by their role as fictitious characters of two versions of a fairy tale, the Grimms' and Walser's. Walser saw his use of an unpoliticized, 'purely' poetic language as the only vehicle to imaginative transcendence.

While the symbolists and surrealists explored fairy-tale themes as meditations on

the human condition and the role of literature and art, others, like their predecessors in earlier centuries, were attracted to fairy-tale themes as a reflection on the social and political climate of the historical moment. The Russian [Yevgeni *Schwartz's](#) *Drakon* (*The Dragon*, 1943), for example, presents images of the way dictatorships and revolutionary politics work, a theme the East German poet [Wolf *Biermann](#) revisited in *Der Dra-Dra. Die grosse Drachentöterschau* (*The Great Dragon Slayer's Show*, 1970). As society and culture shifted around changing sexual, gender, and family attitudes, artists also used the adaptability of the fairy tale as a vehicle for their messages. In the mid-1980s in the United States James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim's **Into the Woods* (1987) was a

social parable that valorized traditional family values, monogamy, and hearth and home. By 1994, the fairy tale was used in the cause against Aids in Doug Holsclaw's *Myron: A Fairy Tale in Black and White*.

Fairy tale plays and children's theatre

In works for children some of the most essential liberating and transformational potential of the fairy tale is exploited as well as the genre's ability to reinforce gender roles and the socio-political status quo. Pedagogical and philosophical debates about childrearing, appropriate literature for juvenile audiences, and the needs of the child as audience have often informed these deliberations.

Privileged juvenile audiences enjoyed fairy-

tale plays as early as Françoise de Graffigny's *Zimane et Zénise* (1748, performed privately for the children of the Emperor of Austria). But the advent of fairy-tale plays for children can be traced back more clearly to the reception and dramatization of the French *contes de fées*, Perrault, and the Grimms. Two trends of production exist: home theatre (the earliest form of participatory theatre) and commercial theatre. By the middle of the 19th century, with growing literacy and great numbers of fairy-tale books on the market, fairy-tale plays for home productions abounded throughout Europe and North America, a tradition that has continued up to the present day. Female playwrights and adapters were and are in the majority. Mostly excluded from 'serious' theatre, women

turned to home productions as a vehicle to gain a kind of public voice before a limited, surely receptive audience of parents and friends. These plays and their production offered a kind of complicity between writers and performers—the disenfranchised groups of women and children gained a voice and declaimed. Most of these plays were adaptations of well-known tales, based on the standard corpus by Perrault, the Grimms, and Hans Christian Andersen found in popular anthologies: ‘Snow White’, *‘Sleeping Beauty’, *‘Hansel and Gretel’, *‘Little Red Riding Hood’, ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’, and a smattering of stories from *The *Arabian Nights*, like *‘Aladdin’. The French tradition of the *conteuses* was also adapted for home use, as Eliza H. Keating’s *The White Cat: An*

Old Fairy Tale Made into a Modern Extravaganza (1860). Anglo-American adapters also paid attention to their own children’s books that gave rise to *Dickens’s *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1846) or Frank L. *Baum’s *The *Wizard of Oz* (performed in Chicago as a musical in 1901). As reforms in schooling and pedagogy swept Europe and America, fairy-tale plays became part of these reformist and kindergarten movements and works like Lady Florence E. E. O. Bell’s *Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them* (1896) provided guidance. Henriette Kühne-Harkort’s Grimm adaptation *Schneewittchen* (1877) is a typical example of these kinds of works: played by children, the seven dwarfs bear names of minerals and elements and explain the natural world to the performers

and audience. Because these plays were not staged in theatre houses, critical reception of this tradition barely exists.

With the exception of Christmas fairy-tale plays, commercial theatres rarely performed pieces deemed appropriate for child audiences before the advent of children's theatres in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fairy-tale plays suitable for children were certainly written and performed before then, such as Sarah A. Frost's *Aladdin, or, The Wonderful Lamp: A Fairy Tale for Little Folks* (1890s), but most of these works originated in the musical theatre tradition. 'Cinderella' and 'Sleeping Beauty' had appeared as children's opera in Vienna as early as 1853; later in the century, Adelheid Wette's *Hänsel und Gretel* (1893, with music by her brother [Engelbert](#)

[*Humperdinck](#)) became an enduring classic still performed today. Like the Christmas fairy-tale play that assured the survival of theatres throughout the otherwise dry holiday seasons, the popularity of fairy-tale plays and their sure box-office success promoted stagings for social welfare benefits like the 1864 version of 'Cinderella' on behalf of the Sanitary Commission in New York or the Benefit of the Newark Orphan Asylum in 1876.

In the 20th century, the history of the fairy-tale play is inextricably linked with the history of children's theatre. Fairy-tale plays have been the backbone of many children's theatres, but their stage realizations have taken two directions: bourgeois theatres have typically presented traditional tales that

reinforce the social and political status quo, while proletarian and progressive theatres have sought to upend the traditional tale and have rewritten them or produced original ones with radically revised messages. But whether bourgeois or progressive, children's theatres have used fairy tales to didactic purposes, for the performers and/or the audiences.

One of many such examples of children's theatre's mission as a pedagogical institution was the Federal Theater Project in the United States during the Great Depression. The founders' stated goals were to reach children not otherwise in theatres, to provide entertainment, and to help child audiences learn about problem-solving. They employed children in the rewriting and performance of fairy-tale plays as a way to encourage freedom

of expression, to provide an emotional outlet, and to foster group cooperation. Of the plays the Project produced and staged around the country over a five-year period, *Aladdin*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *Hansel and Gretel*, **Jack and the Beanstalk*, and **Pinocchio* were the mainstays. The Federal Theater Project's objectives, goals, and productions are representative of much of children's theatre in the United States since that time.

Another part of the spectrum of didacticism in fairy-tale plays are the rewritings and adaptations to teach the audience. Perhaps the most interesting examples of this group were written and performed in the Soviet Union and later East Germany. In the 1920s in the Soviet Union, the traditional fairy tales were branded

inappropriate for children's theatre because party officials considered them 'monarchist in orientation, mystic and religious in influence, and likely to encourage the child to rely on a supernatural power to solve all problems'. By the 1930s attitudes shifted and writers like Yevgeni Schwartz began writing adaptations like *Krasnaya Shapochka* (*Little Red Riding Hood*, 1937); *Snezhnaya Koroleva* (*The *Snow Queen*, 1939); and *Zolushka* (*Cinderella*, 1937) as true 'socialist fairy tales'; these works, and others like I. Karnaukova and L. Brausevick's adaptation of S. T. Aksakov's tale 'Alenikii tsvetochek' ('The Little Scarlet Flower', based on **Beauty and the Beast*) became part of the standard repertory of children's theatre. As the theatre tradition developed, there was a move towards

intermingling of the real and the fantastic and reducing the use of the magical; *S. *Prokofiev's Pyot's polovinoy volshebnykh prevrashchenii* (*Five and a Half Magical Changes*) is a good example of this type: the one fantastic figure, the Kind Sorcerer, admonishes the child he aids to try to manage without magic, because every magical transformation is a kind of lie. By the 1950s Schwartz had turned from Western European classics to Russian folklore; in *Dvu klyona* (*The Two Maples*, 1954) Vassilissa, a proletarian worker, saves her sons from the Russian fairy-tale witch **Bába-Yagá*. The main message of the play is defeating evil and not to run away from home. That message made *Dvu klyona* the most popular (or at least the most staged) play in children's

theatre in East Germany.

In the West, fairy tales are embraced or eschewed for children's theatre depending on prevailing societal attitudes about children and their viewing needs, and the general role of theatre in society. Socio-political shifts in the 1980s and the connection to new psychoanalytical interpretations à la Bruno Bettelheim heralded a new 'poetic theatre' that distanced itself from the politically and socially engaged plays of the 1970s. It became possible to show the plot developments in fairy tales as psychic processes of universalized human, conflict-laden situations. Poetic theatre allowed a work of art to be independent of reality in favour of its own internal logic and it removed the work of art from social responsibility. Carlo

Formigoni's 'Cinderella' adaptation and Paul Maar and Mauro Guindani's *Die Reise durch das Schweigen* (*The Trip through Silence*) on German stages were important pieces in this period. But by the 1990s fairy tales once again were enlisted into the service of social and political causes, as political correctness and cultural diversity became driving forces. The series by the Players' Press in California, for example, rehabilitates the bad guys and gals of traditional tales like **Rumpelstiltskin* and the wolf of 'Peter and the Wolf', while Useni Perkins's *Black Fairy and Other Plays for African American Children* (1993) provides alternatives from under-represented traditions. Fairy-tale plays have once again become family theatre as many of the plays seem written more for the parents than for the

children; fairy-tale plays allow a flight to childhood as an escape from the unpleasant political and social realities of adulthood.

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