



Changing stages: Theatre industry and theatre art

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1

As a tragic epicentre to the play, Act 4 Scene 5 of *Hamlet* affords Shakespearian directors the opportunity to explore the psychological impact of Elsinore's corrupted state. On occasion, this scene portrays Ophelia's grief towards the death of her father and facilitates an autonomous vocalisation of her views of the court, thus freeing her from the patriarchal expectations of passivity. Simultaneously, the scene also consolidates the concept of Ophelia as an objectified subject, as grief is placed firmly within the lens of rarefied mental illness. Gulsen Sayin Teker notes that in spite of some adaptations to Ophelia's representation in the 1960's, portrayals 'still revealed in Ophelia only the lyricism of her beauty, madness, and death'.¹ In light of Teker's argument, I will analyse the representation of Ophelia in Act 4 Scene 5, of Simon Godwin's production of *Hamlet*, exploring its relation to popularised depictions of the character and the central interplay between 'madness' and autonomy.

Godwin's production takes a prototypical approach to the depiction of Ophelia during this scene. When evaluating Act 4 Scene 5, academics frequently note the symbolic resonance of the flowers which Ophelia hands out; speaking to her views of the court. Alison A. Chapman notes that this action 'participates in this clinging to physical, material traces of larger, intangible concepts'.² Chapman's argument links to a broader thesis which Cherrell Guilfoyle outlines, stating that 'characters who go mad in renaissance drama frequently speak more truth, and deeper truth than when sane'.³ Godwin's production draws particular attention to what Chapman describes as 'material traces of larger intangible concepts', since the flowers are replaced by strands of hair which Ophelia has pulled out.⁴ This theatrical effect generates a violent eschewing of personal identity and draws attention to the scene's symbolism, by constructing a dichotomy between the lyrical presence of the flowers as compared to their material absence. It is also salient that Ophelia throws the 'columbines' at Claudius, signalling a conscious awareness of their allegorical meaning, which as Guilfoyle's argument suggests, provides a 'deeper truth than when sane'.⁵ However, the hallucinatory implications of using hair as opposed to flowers also illustrates a preoccupation with representing Ophelia as 'mad' rather than grief-stricken. Neil Taylor's research on various

¹ Gulsen Sayin Teker, 'Empowered by Madness: Ophelia in the Films of Kozintsev, Zeffirelli, and Branagh', *Literature film quarterly*, 34:2 (2006) 113-19 (p.114).

² Alison A. Chapman, 'Ophelia's "Old Lauds": Madness and Hagiography in "Hamlet"', *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, 20 (2007) 111-35 (p.115).

³ Cherrell Guilfoyle, "Ower Swete Sokor": The Role of Ophelia in "Hamlet", *Comparative drama*, 14:1 (1980) 3-17 (p.6).

⁴ Chapman, 'Ophelia's "Old Lauds"' (p.115).

⁵ Guilfoyle, 'The Role of Ophelia', (p.6).

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performances of Ophelia reveals that ‘the most popular form of preparation was trying to understand the psychology of Ophelia’s mad scenes, [...] by researching mental disorders in the modern world’.⁶ Taylor’s primary data applies to Godwin’s production, since Kimura Sae notes that ‘Trichotillomania or hair-pulling disorder, is a chronic illness that especially afflicts women, and Ophelia’s self-harm was based on the actual symptoms of distress’.⁷ Thus, in Godwin’s production, Ophelia vocalises her views of the court, though this is mediated through the prevailing notion that her grief is ‘madness’ and therefore not entirely autonomous. Whilst providing aesthetic creativity, Godwin’s depiction of Ophelia remains subtextually consistent with popularised depictions of the character within the roles performance history.



Figure 1 Ophelia (Zeffirelli)



Figure 2 Ophelia (Doran)

Furthermore, the representation of Trichotillomania operates in conjunction with various iconographies associated with the character of Ophelia. For example, Franco Zeffirelli’s film adaptation includes Ophelia first appearing with her hair up, and later in Act four Scene Five is shown with her hair down in a dishevelled manner (see **Figure 1**).⁸ Gregory Doran’s filmed stage production uses similar styling for Ophelia’s hair during the scene, (see **Figure 2**).⁹ Godwin’s production also utilises comparable imagery by having Ophelia first appear with her hair styled, and then un-styled (see **Figure 3** and **Figure 4**). This theatrical mise-en-scène implies a sense of un-fixing; that Ophelia’s appearance acts as a metaphor for her fragile state of mind and subsequent ‘madness’. At the same time, the costuming and hair within Godwin’s production further reflects a rejection of social expectation, as is evidenced when Ophelia takes off her trousers to create a tableau of Polonius. This can be readily compared with Doran’s depiction of Ophelia, who also undresses during the scene (see **Figure 2**). In both cases, Ophelia’s actions act in diametric opposition to her council from Laertes to remain chaste, during Act 1 Scene 3.



Figure 3 Natalie Simpson Ophelia (Godwin)



Figure 4 Natalie Simpson Ophelia (Godwin)

This subtext of sexuality is emphasised in Godwin’s production when Ophelia grabs Claudius’ hand and clasps it to her breast. It is evident from these actions, that Ophelia has neglected Leontes’ advice, and perhaps has taken steps to expose the sexual appetites of the king, which is a central concern for Hamlet throughout the play. This critical perspective operates in conjunction with Jillian Luke’s argument; that within this scene Ophelia ‘rejects this narrative of courtly femininity both in her actions, and in the stories she tells. She exchanges Claudius’ elite view

⁶ Neil Taylor, ‘An Actress Prepares: Seven Ophelia’s’ in *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, ed. by Kara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.43-58 (p.43).

⁷ Kitamura Sae, ‘Hamlet dir, by Simon Godwin (review)’, *Shakespeare Bulletin* 37:4 (2019), 58791 (p.589).

⁸ *Hamlet* dir. by Franco Zeffirelli (Canal +, 1990) [accessed via BoB].

⁹ *Hamlet* dir. by Gregory Doran (2009) [accessed via BoB].

of feminine behaviour and experience'.¹⁰ Whilst Luke's view is certainly applicable to Godwin's production, there remains the central question of autonomy, and whether such staging may instead perform a version of sexuality that constructs Ophelia as an object. Overt displays of Ophelia's sexuality as in Doran's case (see **Figure 2**), complicate the boundary between a liberated reclamation of social acceptability, with a fetishization and glamorisation of mental illness. The prototypical approach to depicting Ophelia that Godwin illustrates, suggests that this production falls somewhere in between these two concepts, whereby there is a conscious effort to display Ophelia's autonomy, without a rejection of the stereotypical precursors of 'madness' that often permeate performances of the scene.

To conclude, it is evident that Godwin's production presents Ophelia with a prototypical approach that intertextually links to previous versions of the play. The popularised depiction of her grief as 'madness' has become so resonant within the cultural milieu, that there is an inherent tension between her vocalisation of the court and autonomous actions, as compared to a desire to present mental illness to the benefit of theatrical frisson. Whilst Godwin's production does not provide an answer to this debate, it does serve as an intriguing case study into examining this central interplay. As this critical analysis has aimed to highlight, such portrayals of Ophelia may warrant further scrutiny. More work can be done to evaluate her attitudes and behaviours towards both herself and the court during the section of the play that is so frequently (and reductively) labelled as the 'madness scene'.

2

Since its West End debut in 1985, *Les Misérables* has continued to exemplify the capitalist mindset of the megamusical. From its inception, London's theatre district has always been associated with commerce, which as Rohan McWilliam states 'offers a way of understanding popular and material culture, in the lives of both sexes, social class, and the identities created by buildings and spaces'.¹¹ McWilliam's analysis emphasises the commercial aspects of the West End theatre district, that was already well established by the time *Les Misérables* was staged. However, the work of Cameron Mackintosh created a conscious financial model for the megamusical, which he based on the success of productions such as *Cats* (1981) and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971). In this essay, I will analyse the commercial dimensions of *Les Misérables* to provide evidence of the intentionality of this financial model. In doing so, I will argue that Mackintosh is a highly prominent figure, having had significant impact on the theatre on both a localised and global scale.

As Jessica Sternfield details, Mackintosh was the key contributor in initiating collaborative work with Trevor Nunn and the RSC, having heard the concept album created by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boubil.¹² In doing so, Mackintosh was arguably the central figure in envisioning the theatrical potential of *Les Misérables*, during a period to which Thatcherite subsidy had exacerbated the commodification of the arts. Jenny Hughes supports this argument, stating that 'Les Misérables showed

¹⁰ Jillian Luke, 'What If the Play Were Called Ophelia? Gender and Genre in Hamlet', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 49:1 (2020) 1-18 (p.11).

¹¹ Rohan McWilliam, 'Introduction', in *London's West End: Creating the Pleasure District, 1800-1914*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.1-10 (p.1).

¹² Jessica Sternfield, "'To Love Another Person Is to See the Face of God' Les Misérables", in *The Megamusical*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 175-224.

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how Mackintosh's investment model, which responded to the changing financial cultures of the 1980s, nurtured a theatre product of high artistic, as well as economic value'.¹³

Hughes' analysis is particularly salient, since it highlights the production as a 'product', whilst also contextualising the financial model that was conceived by Mackintosh. The changing financial culture of the 1980s which Hughes details, placed emphasis on the economic viability of musical theatre. This generated a higher level of risk aversion than may be seen in other modes of less commercialised drama; such as avant-garde and fringe theatre. Subsequently, the model adopted by Mackintosh has had significant influence on the economic principles which still govern the industry. Today, West End productions frequently utilise this blueprint, often to great financial success; inevitably solidifying the replication of its formula. For example: the adaptation of novels, the investment into spectacular effects and the inspiration of popular music genres are not only present in *Les Misérables*, but also in a myriad of other contemporary musicals. Evidentially, Mackintosh's model has had significant influence on the landscape of the West End district and its theatrical output.

Millie Taylor examines the term 'megamusical' as 'coined by American journalists in response to what they perceived in the 1980s as a 'British invasion' of Broadway', thus highlighting the models' transatlantic permutations.¹⁴ It is in this sense that Mackintosh's influence can be understood on a global scale, as the impact of the megamusical transcends the West End district. In a non-

international context, *Les Misérables* has manufactured dedicated iterations of the production for touring which has had inevitable influence outside of London, in UK receiving houses. For example, as of this writing, a touring production is currently being staged in the Millennium theatre in Cardiff, running until January 2023 (see **Figure 5**). Thus, this reproducible model for the megamusical has not only impacted the West End industry, but also invariably affects theatre outside of London, by proving the economic viability of touring musicals for receiving houses. However, this notion has become a point of contention, since the model as predicated on capitalist mindsets, is described by critics such as Dan Rebellato as 'McTheatre'; which transforms the art of theatrical writing into a global product.¹⁵ Rebellato thus views the influence as troubling, as it could potentially operate as a homogenising force, especially in relation to its replicability within a global context. Given this globalised scale, it is evident that within the landscape of Thatcherite subsidy, Mackintosh has shaped the nature of musical theatre, in ways that are still identifiable within the contemporary moment.



Figure 5: Wales Millennium Theatre official website

Figure 6: Merchandising from website

¹³ Jenny Hughes, 'The Theatre and Its Poor: Neoliberal Economies of Waste and Gold in "Les Misérables" (1985) and "Road" (1986)', *Theatre Journal*, 67:1 (2015) 1-19 (p.2).

¹⁴ Millie Taylor, 'British Popular Culture and Musical theatre', in *British Musical Theatre since 1950*, ed. by Patrick Lonergan and Kevin J. Wetmore, (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), p.83-140 (p.141).

¹⁵ Dan Rebellato, 'Playwriting and globalisation: Towards a site-unspecific theatre', *Contemporary theatre review*, 16:1 (2006), 97-113.

The marketing and promotional materials for *Les Misérables* emphasise the commercial mindset that Mackintosh clearly relied upon in his conception of the megamusical. For example, since its opening, the production has continued to generate profit through merchandising (see Figure 6). Similarly, the iconography of Cosette has become a ubiquitous landmark of mainstream theatre, as evidenced by the extensive promotional materials surrounding the production (see Figure 7 and 8). Though these strategies are not exclusive to *Les Misérables*, Sternfield notes that ‘Mackintosh’s advertising and marketing machine proved remarkably effective’, thus indicating his association with bringing these theatrical practices to the fore.¹⁶ The financial outlook of Mackintosh has had evidential impact on the landscape of subsequent productions. This is analysed by Vangelis Siropoulos who states that Disney’s integration into Broadway was influenced by the economic success of *Les Misérables* and other megamusicals, noting that this ‘redefined the economic potential of the musical as a Broadway fixture, a touring production, and an international export’.¹⁷ As is the case with Hughes’ argument, this form of theatre is defined in terms of ‘product’ and ‘export’, a notion that is especially salient when considering the capitalist associations of the Disney corporation. The model that Mackintosh conceived continues to resonate, notably through Disney’s ongoing presence in the global theatre market. Like the financial modelling of *Les Misérables*, Disney’s productions seize the economic viability of intellectual property within the theatre industry and construct their ‘products’ as an export.



Figure 7: Poster on Bus



Figure 8: Poster on underground

To conclude, it is evident that the financial model which Mackintosh constructed for *Les Misérables* has had an ongoing impact on the theatre industry. This has been the case not only through the megamusicals positionality as an international export, but also through the promotion and marketing materials which have emphasised *Les Misérables* as a theatrical ‘product’. Mackintosh’s prominence as a figure in the theatre industry is evidenced by his ability to transform the musical in an age of Thatcherite subsidy. Whilst some critics find the global replicability of such productions troubling, it seems clear that Mackintosh’s influence will continue to resonate as long as West End musicals continue to turn a profit.

3

Walt Disney’s 1953 adaptation of J.M Barrie’s *Peter Pan* remains one of the most culturally resonant iterations of the play. The depiction of Peter within this version takes strong inspiration from Maude Adams’ portrayal, which as Patrick B. Tuite notes ‘did not attempt to question patriarchal norms, and instead created a character that exemplified the best



Figure 9: Disney’s Peter Pan

¹⁶ Sternfield, “To Love Another Person Is to See the Face of God”, p.222.

¹⁷ Vangelis Siropoulos, ‘The Bohemian Iconoclast and the Corporate Giant: Julie Taymor’s Staging of Disney’s *The Lion King*, or The Portrait of the Avant-Garde Artist as Corporate Employee’, *Gamma*, 2010, 137-49 (p.138).

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American virtues'.¹⁸ Indeed, on an aesthetic level, Adams' all-American Peter bares strong resemblance to Disney's version (see **Figure 9** and **10**). However, in spite of Adams' influence, the inherent androgyny of a female portraying a pre-adolescent boy provided issues for the studio. As Susan Ohmer notes, this theatrical context created a character that 'occupies an unstable position in a binary system of gender' thus 'Peter becomes a "problem" in narrative construction and character development'.¹⁹ The focus of this study, therefore, will be to investigate the adaptations' endeavours in redressing this gendered ambiguity, through its handling of female characters and their relationships to Peter.



Figure 10: Maude Adams' Peter Pan

The adaptation opens with a shot of Mrs Darling pinning her hair. Clearly, the character operates in conjunction with the theatrical version, which, as Alison B. Kavey notes, is 'a master of performing domestic femininity'.²⁰ Here however, Disney amplifies nuclear ideologies, as evidenced by Wendy's first interaction with Mrs Darling where she comments upon her appearance. Within this scene, there is a clear binary opposition between Wendy's enthusiasm towards her mother's gown, in comparison to Michael and John's boyish games. This preoccupation with beauty and appearance comes to characterise the depiction of femininity throughout the adaptation, for example, upon Tinkerbell's arrival she is almost immediately seen gazing into a mirror. Elizabeth Bell's analysis of Tinkerbell's portrayal reinforces the concept of hyper-femininity, as she intertextually links the character to Marilyn Monroe, arguing that the fairy is 'linked narratively to an American icon of sexuality'.²¹ By linking Tinkerbell with Monroe, there appears to be a concerted effort by the studio to reinforce the idealisation of gender binaries that had characterised Hollywood in the decades preceding the film's release. Furthermore, as is the case with the depiction of Mrs Darling and Wendy, this adaptation implies to the audience that aesthetics are centralised concerns for the female characters. Consequently, the ambiguity of Peter's gender is redressed, by the overemphasis of gender stereotypes in the female roles.



Figure 11: Mrs Darling fixes her hair



Figure 12: Tinkerbell looking into a mirror



Figure 13: Mermaid looking into a mirror

Such stereotypical gender significations persist, epitomised clearly in the scene at mermaid lagoon. Within the establishing shots of the mermaids, they are seen to be gazing into their reflections, looking into mirrors and fixing their hair. Here, they are strongly codified as feminine via their preoccupations with appearance, and indeed, these introductory shots draw

¹⁸ Patrick B. Tuite, "Shadow of [a] girl" An Examination of *Peter Pan* in Performance' in *Second Star to the Right: Peter Pan in the Popular Imagination*, ed. by Allison B. Kavey and Lester D. Friedman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), pp.105-131 (p.127).

¹⁹ Susan Ohmer, 'Disney's Peter Pan Gender, Fantasy and Industrial Production' in *Second Star to the Right*, p.151-188 (p.173).

²⁰ Alison B. Kavey, 'Introduction From Peanut Butter Jars to the Silver Screen' in *Second Star to the Right*, p.1-12 (p.9).

²¹ Elizabeth Bell, "Do You Believe in Fairies?" Peter Pan, Walt Disney, and Me', in *It's the Disney Version!: Popular Cinema and Literary Classics*, ed. by Douglas Brode and Shea T. Brode (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p.79-92 (p.86).

clear parallels with Mrs Darling and Tinkerbell, (see **Figure 11**, **Figure 12**, **Figure 13** and **Figure 14**). During the mermaid scene, Disney reinforces the implicit sexuality of the female characters, by having them flirt with Peter. Bell highlights this, stating that Peter is depicted as 'a preadolescent boy and concomitantly oblivious to the constant flirting of the girls [...] It was as if Disney, so thoroughly immersed in the fantasy of asexual boyhood, ignored any questions of Peter's sexuality'.²² Whilst I would agree with Bell's identification of flirtation, I would instead suggest that such female sexuality operates not as an exploration of 'asexual boyhood', but rather aims to redress the gendered ambiguity that the character of Peter emblematises.²³ This argument is reinforced by the foundations of Barrie's play, which Heather E. Shipley outlines, arguing that the female roles 'maintain their status in relation to Peter Pan, as they are [...] in conflict with each other over their desirous wishes of him'.²⁴ In using Shipley's perspective, it becomes apparent that the codification of femininity, as predicated on beauty, not only redresses the sexual ambiguity of Peter by enforcing gender binaries, but also provides an implicit sexuality to Peter himself, since the female characters constantly desire him.



Figure 14:
Mermaid fixing her
hair

The exploration of implicit sexuality within the female roles is counterbalanced by themes of motherhood that pervade the second half of the film. Whilst the depiction of first-nations characters is extremely offensive from a racial perspective, the scene provides critical insight into gender representation, as Wendy is asked to collect firewood rather than dancing, because of her femininity. Poignantly, Wendy's frustration in this scene is harnessed as she subsequently urges her brothers to return home and visit their mother, suggesting that her agency of persuasion is rooted within the ideal of the nuclear family. This theme is evident in the theatrical version, as Kavey notes that 'all of the female characters in Peter Pan, [...] share the desire to become wives and mothers'.²⁵ Thus, Disney capitalizes on the celebration of traditional gender roles. As Mia Adessa Towbin *et al* analyses, this is typical of the company who, through their fairy-tale adaptations, typically depict woman as 'engaged in domestic responsibilities'.²⁶ This concept is evident not only in *Peter Pan* but also within other releases of the decade such as *Sleeping Beauty*, which similarly deposits a strong codification of gender within a prince-saves-princess formula. Thus, the depiction of women in Disney's *Peter Pan* redresses the gender ambiguity of Peter, whilst also serving the company's existing ideologies.

To conclude, the representation of gender within Disney's *Peter Pan* provides a vehicle in redressing the sexual ambiguity of the title character. Disney reinforces gender binaries and creates implicit sexuality within female characters. Since the release of this film, the pre-adolescent all-American boy has become the dominant theatrical mode of representing Peter. As this essay has aimed to illuminate, such a portrayal can be critically observed beyond mere functionality, since it has a clear impact on gender, sexuality and idealisations of the domestic.

²² Bell, "Do You Believe in Fairies?" (p.85).

²³ Bell, "Do You Believe in Fairies?" (p.85).

²⁴ Heather E. Shipley, 'Fairies, Mermaids, Mothers, and Princesses: Sexual Difference and Gender Roles in Peter Pan', *Studies in gender and sexuality*, 13:2 (2012), 145-159 (p.156)

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25 Alison B. Kavey, “I do believe in fairies, I do, I do” The History of Peter Pan and Epistemology’ in *Second Star to the Right*, p.75-104 (p.101).

26 Mia Adessa Towbin, Shelly A. Haddock, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, Lori K. Lund and Lista Renée Tanner, ‘Images of Gender, Race, Age, and Sexual Orientation in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films’, *Journal of feminist family therapy*, 15:4 (2004), 19-44 (p.35).

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