

# Innovation of Narrative Discourse in the Musical "Into the Woods"

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## ABSTRACT

**The Broadway musical "Into the Woods" is adapted from four classic European fairy tales, which has a strong defamiliarization aesthetic effect. By comparing the intertextuality of narrative discourse and methods in the musical and traditional fairy tales, it can be seen that the composer and director fully utilized the visual-auditory three-dimensional expression discourse, creatively used such artistic techniques as banter, absurd, dialogism, polyphonic and heteroglossia, and created new narrative discourse and form rules for Broadway fairy tale musicals.**

*Keywords: musical, fairy tales, "Into the Woods", narrative discourse*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The musical "Into the Woods" is a stage musical composed by the outstanding American musical artist Stephen Sondheim, and written and directed by the famous musical writer James Lapine. After its debut in 1987, the musical has been widely praised by audiences for decades and won many awards, making it a classic Broadway musical.

"Into the Woods" follows the classic fairy tale of "Cinderella", "Little Red Riding Hood", "Rapunzel" and "Jack and the Beanstalk", new characters such as the baker and his wife are added to weave together into a new narrative. Once upon a time, Rapunzel was baker's younger sister, their father stole the witch's heirloom magic beans, for which the witch was disfigured as a punishment. The witch retaliated by adopting Rapunzel and killing the baker's unborn children. Now the witch needed the white cow, the red cloak, the yellow hair, and the glass slipper to make a potion for the restoration of youthful beauty. She told the baker and his wife that if they found these four objects in the forest within three days, they would have a healthy child. At the same time, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Jack and other people with different expectations have entered the forest, after efforts to achieve their respective wishes. However, a great disaster came suddenly — the giant widow came down from the sky to seek revenge on Jack, many people were killed successively. In the end, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, the baker and Jack join forces to kill the giantess, and the survivors gain a wake-up call after the plunder.

Fairy tales and musicals are two different literary/artistic forms. Although a fairy tale can be

stated in both written language and dramatic language, there are fundamental differences between written text and visual & auditory text in terms of expression methods. Oral/written fairy tale is a kind of language symbol text, while "Into the Woods" contains music, songs, dialogues, actions, dances, etc., which is composed of multiple artistic symbols. The uniqueness of its narrative discourse is mainly reflected in the following aspects.

## II. COMPREHENSIVE VISUAL AUDITORY SPACE REPRESENTATION OF DISCOURSE

First of all, the reading of written works is generally led to the process of visualization. All linguistic signs are interpreted into various concepts to form meanings. Drama directly shows the music, pictures and activities of the characters, so that the audience in the visual and auditory comprehensive statement system can perceive the fate of the characters and plot progress. Although there is intertextual variation between the two kinds of discourse, the discourse between them cannot be integrated into some aspects. For example, the written narrative has a descriptive function. The Grimm fairy tale "Cinderella" describes the seasons: "Every day the little girl went to her mother's grave behind the house and cried, and remained faithful and kind. When winter came, and the snow put a white turban over the tombs, and when the spring sun took it off again, the rich man took another wife. [1] Such a beautiful description cannot be expressed in "Into the Woods", but the multi-layered and multi-means audio-visual narration of musical drama is also beyond the reach of written narration.

The narrative form of dramatic performance has liberated the limitation of narrative space and time. The

audio-visual narrative structure of the stage is formed through the space-time layout of characters, images and sounds. It has two basic elements: the placement of the presentation object and the presentation of the content. For example, in the first act of "Into the Woods", the stage set is divided into three structural units. On the left is Cinderella's home, where she does housework in the kitchen. In the middle is Jack's cabin, milking the poor white cow; On the right is the family workshop of the baker and his wife, who is baking bread; Behind these houses, a huge forest stands in the background. "Into the Woods" transforms the planar imaginary narration of classic fairy tale into a three-dimensional image narration through the above stage space arrangement — three scenes are juxtaposed and several groups of characters are displayed simultaneously.

Secondly, because of the linear nature of language, fairy tales are generally narrated in the third person, usually with only one narrator. Musicals are complex narratives that have many narrators. There is even a full-time narrator in "Into the Woods," who comes on stage at the beginning of the show, narrating in the third person:

*(A narrator steps forward.)*

*Narrator: Once upon a time—*

*Narrator (NA): —in a far-off kingdom—*

*NA: —lived a young maiden—*

*NA: —a sad young lad—*

*NA: —and a childless baker—*

*NA: —with his wife.*

*NA: The poor girl's mother had died—*

*NA: —and her father had taken for his new wife—*

*NA: —a woman with two daughters of her own.*

*NA: All three were beautiful of face, but vile and black of heart. Jack, on the other hand, had no father, and his mother—*

*NA: Well, she was not quite beautiful—[2]*

The narrator points out Cinderella, Jack and his mother, the baker and his wife that appearing on the stage at the same time, then introduces to the audience the characters' behavior, psychology, time and space of the story, the occurrence and change of events, etc. This kind of statement is very unique in the musical, and its form originates from the intertextual imitation of the written narrative technique. Robert Scoglers said, "The description of all things that are normally perceived visually tends to be literary because these descriptions attempt to 'transform' a visual connection into a word-word connection." [3] This sentence can be interpreted in reverse. The description of a written literary word

can also be transformed into an audio-visual connection, as the narrator in "Into the Woods" plays on the stage.

Moreover, compared with the single language narration method of classic fairy tales, the musical "Into the Woods" has a multi-level and multi-means narration method. For example, in oral/written narration of fairy tales, the narration speed can be either fast or slow. Musicals, on the other hand, are usually told at a fast pace, taking advantage of a well-known storyline from the original text. "Into the Woods" has cast an actor as a voiceover character to introduce the story. The story of Rapunzel's meeting with the prince in the wild is narrated by the narrator:

*(Rapunzel, with babies, enters. RP falls into her arms; his sight is restored.)*

*Narrator: And finally, as for Rapunzel, she bore twins and lived impoverished in the desert until the day her Prince, wandering aimlessly, heard a voice so familiar that he went towards it. And when he approached, Rapunzel, overjoyed at seeing him, fell into his arms, weeping. Two of her tears wetted his eyes and their touch restored his vision.*

### III. THE INTERWOVEN EXPRESSION TECHNIQUES OF BANTER, ABSURD, AND METAPHOR

Eeriness is an important aesthetic characteristic of traditional fairy tales, but there are little banter and metaphors inside. However, Stephen Sondheim used a lot of expression means in the musical, such as banter, absurd, puns, etc., to cross and integrate various binary aesthetic factors, such as beauty, ugliness, funniness, and nobility, so that the audience gradually realized profound significance in the incredible plot. Little Red Riding Hood, for example, is transformed into a naughty and gluttonous girl. When she goes to see her grandmother in the forest, her mother does not prepare food for her. Instead, she buys it by herself from the bakery:

*Little Red Riding Hood (LRRH): I wish..It's not for me, It's for my granny in the woods. A loaf of bread, please—To bring my poor old hungry Granny in the woods... (Insistent) Just a loaf of bread, pleas...*

*LRRH: And perhaps a sticky bun?..Or four?... (smiles sheepishly)*

*LRRH: ....and a few of those pies, Please...*

After buying the bread, Little Red Riding Hood would not go away. She helped herself to the sweets and snacks.

*(LRRH has been compulsively eating sweets at the Baker's house; she now swallows, wiping her hands and mouth.)*

*LRRH: Into the woods, It's time to go, I hate to leave, I have to, though.... (mouth full) Into the woods To Grandmother's house—*

*Wife: You're certain of your way?*

*LRRH: The way is clear, ...I sort of hate to ask it, But do you have a basket?*

*Baker: Don't stray and be late.*

*Wife: And save some of those sweets for Granny!*

*LRRH: ...Into the woods To bring some bread To Granny who Is sick in bed. Never can tell What lies ahead. For all that I know, She's already dead...*

When Little Red Riding Hood took the basket from the baker's wife, the audience laughed, for she filled the basket with bread, and the baker's wife took the bread out of the basket. The reader lashes out as she says, 'For all that I know, she's already dead.' Prophetic dialogues, lyrics and puns abound in "Into the Woods," drawing laughter and applause. Because the audience is familiar with the characters and plot of the fairy tale, the script setting quickly shorten the distance between the plot and the audience, and arouse the audience's emotion of participation.

*(The Baker steps into LRRH's path; the girl is eating a sweet.)*

*Baker: Hello there, little one.*

*LRRH: Hello.*

*Baker: Have you saved some of those sweets for Granny?*

*LRRH: (embarrassed): I ate all the sweets and half the loaf of bread.*

Little Red Riding Hood had eaten all the bread before she reached her grandmother's house. The implication of this plot includes: firstly, grandma no longer needs bread; secondly, the metaphor that Little Red Riding Hood and grandma are both eaten by the gluttonous wolf; thirdly, the application of the motif of "hunger" and "gluttonous" in traditional fairy tales. Folk tales abound about famine and the food search. "The search for food, and the act of eating, are very important themes in fairy tales, not only in traditional fairy tales but also in contemporary fairy tales," says Sheldon Kashdan, an American psychologist. [4]

Exaggeration, irony and strangeness are common expressions in traditional fairy tales. Also, "Into the Woods" presents a large number of bizarre plots, breaks up, splices together and reassembles familiar things, giving people a sense of defamiliarization, and making

them surprised. For example, Cinderella's prince is on a quest for love, and the baker's wife has an affair in the dangerous forest:

*CP: Anything can happen in the woods..May I kiss you? Any moment, we could be crushed...*

*Don't feel rushed.*

*(He kisses her. She is stunned, steps away and turns to us)*

*Wife: This is ridiculous What am I doing here? I'm in the wrong story!*

In addition, the new "Into the Woods" story draws on intertextual links to classic fairy tales, with heavy use of puns and prophecies. For example, Cinderella with the others discuss how to deal with the giantess:

*Baker: Smear the ground with pitch.*

*Cinderella: Yes!*

*Baker: We'll lure her to an area smeared with pitch.*

*Cinderella: Her shoes will stick, and she won't be able to move.*

*Jack: And I will climb a tree and strike her from behind.*

*Baker: I will climb the tree, too. It may take two mighty blows.*

*LRRH: I'm excited!*

*Jack: I'm going to kill another giant!*

People are very familiar with such contents. Cinderella's glass slipper is stuck on the asphalt, Jack climbs a tree to kill a giant and Little Red Riding Hood deals with a Wolf. When the audiences see these familiar plots, they will arouse knowing cheers or laughter. "In the epistemological realm of our time, it would be difficult to try to create a narrative discourse without irony," said Robert Scoglers, commenting on American writer Barthelme's grotesque Snow White. [5]

#### **IV. THE EXPRESSION METHODS OF POLYPHONY, DIALOGISM AND HETEROGLOSSIA**

Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin puts forward the theory of polyphony, dialogism, and carnivalization, he thinks the structure of novel is similar to the counterpoint, which makes many independent sounds reverberation in parallel, caused the literature text structure at a higher level of multiple compound unification. It is obviously that the narrative discourse of "Into the Woods" used expression methods such as polyphonic, dialogism and heteroglossia, the traditional fairy tale has rarely used this kind of narrative discourse. In the opening scenes of the first and second

acts of "Into the Woods", three groups of characters in three frames come on stage together and sing or speak at the same time. With the narrator explaining the plot beside them, the plot is interpreted in parallel in the synchro state, just like the counterpoint. This is a typical embodiment of polyphony on the stage. For example, "Into the Woods" is sung at the end of the first scene of the first act. The main characters sing different poems in the same musical melody:

*Baker, Wife: Into the woods to lift the spell—*

*Cinderella: Into the woods to visit Mother—*

*Wife: Into the woods to fetch the things—*

*Baker: To make the potion—*

*Jack's Mother: Into the woods to sell the cow—*

*Jack: Into the woods to get the money—*

*Cinderella: To go to the Festival—*

*LRRH (skipping by): Into the woods to Grandmother's house...Into the woods to Grandmother's house...*

*Stepmother, stepsisters: To see the King—*

*Jack, Jack's Mother: To sell the cow—*

*Baker, Wife: To make the potion—*

*All: ...Into the woods! Into the woods! Into the woods, Then out of the woods, And home before dark!*

"Into The Woods" often shows different voices among characters in the same space-time background, and various attitudes and views of the protagonists are intermingled in the noise, thus promoting the intuitive progress of plots. There are ten such similar multi-voice collective performances throughout the show, in which the first and second half of the opening and closing, most of the actors participated in the performance. In particular, at the end of the first and second acts, all actors gather on the stage to present the scene of multi-voice dialogue in various artistic forms. For example, in the Finale song "Children Will Listen", all characters sing their own lyrics at the same time:

*Company(in three groups: round): To be happy, and forever, You must see your wish come true. Don't be careful, don't be clever. When you see your wish, pursue. It's a dangerous endeavor, But the only thing to do—Though it's fearful, Though it's deep, though it's dark, And though you may lose the path, Though you may encounter wolves, You mustn't stop, You mustn't swerve, You mustn't ponder, You have to act! When you know your wish, If you want your wish, You can have your wish, But you can't just wish— No, to get your wish (unison) You go into the woods, Where nothing's clear, Where witches, ghosts And wolves appear. Into the woods and through the fear, You have to take the*

*journey. Into the woods and down the dell, In vain perhaps, But who can tell? Into the woods to lift the spell, Into the woods to lose the longing. Into the woods to have the child, to wed the Prince, to get the money, to save the house, to kill the wolf, to find the father, to conquer the kingdom, to have, to wed, to get, to save, to kill, to keep, to go to the Festival! Into the woods, Into the woods, Into the woods, Then out of the woods—*

Accompanied by lyric music, dance and character movements, the polyphonic, interactive and comprehensive narrative discourse brings new meaning to the musical.

## V. EXTENSIVE USE OF LYRIC DRAMA PERFORMANCE STATEMENT

Lyric is the central element of musical drama. It is the rhymes sung by the characters in the musical. Lyric is literary, musical and dramatic at the same time. If there is no drama poem or the effect of drama poem is weak, musical drama can not promote the development of the plot, it is difficult to erect the character image. The lyric is closely combined with the musical melody in the choir, and the abstract musical emotion can be visualized by combining the rhyming, metrical and rhythm of the drama poem using phrase length, elevation and tone variation. Broadway musicals pay special attention to narrative skills, so how to use lyrics to better tell the story has always been the direction of musical directors' efforts. Sondheim, a master of musical narrative, has made outstanding contributions in this respect. The plays and poems he created in "Into the Woods" are extremely beautiful, concise, powerful and rhythmic, full of metaphors and philosophy, with unique literary value and strong modern flavor. For example, the witch's three verses play an important role in deepening the plot, expressing thoughts and feelings, and revealing the meaning of the theme:

*Witch: What did I clearly say? Children must listen....What were you not to do? Children must see... And learn. Why could you not obey? Children should listen. What have I been to you? What would you have me be? Handsome like a Prince?*

*Rapunzel: I am no longer a child; I wish to see the world!*

*Witch (tender but intense): Don't you know what's out there in the world? Someone has to shield you from the world. Stay with me. Princes wait there in the world, it's true. Princes, yes, but wolves and humans, too. Stay at home. I am home. Who out there could love you more than I? What out there that I cannot supply? Stay with me. Stay with me, The world is dark and wild. Stay a child, while you can be a child. With me.*

"Stay With Me" is the lyric that the witch sang when she cut off Rapunzel's hair after she learned that

Rapunzel was in love with the Prince, which fully expressed the witch's protection and worry about her adopted daughter. As Rapunzel is disobedient and does not understand the hidden dangers in society, the witch advises that children must listen. After Rapunzel was killed by the giantess, the lament witch sang the song "Lament" again:

*Witch: This is the world I meant. Couldn't you listen? Couldn't you stay content, Safe behind walls. As I could not.. Now you know what's out there in the world. No one can prepare you for the world. Even I.. How could I, who loved you as you were, How could I have shielded you from her, Or them? No matter what you say, Children won't listen. No matter what you know, Children refuse to learn. Guide them along the way, Still, they won't listen. Children can only grow From something you love, To something you lose!*

As Rapunzel did not listen to dissuasion and eventually turned into a tragedy, the witch lost her dearest, in fact, also lost the need for her life. Because the whole logic of "Into the Woods" is based on the fact that the witch wants to exchange her youth for a happy reunion with her adopted daughter. For this reason, she needs four items to make aphrodisiac water. When all went up in smoke, the witch left the world.

But the witch will always live on in fairy tales, meaning that as Sheldon Cashdan says: "The witch will continue to exist in fairy tales, forcing us to become aware of the counterforces within us that challenge our self-image." [6] At the end of the show, the beautiful young witch appears on stage again. When the theme song "Children Will Listen" is played, the witch sings:

*Witch: (simultaneously with Baker) Careful the things you say, Children will listen. Careful the things you do, Children will see. and learn. Children may not obey, But children will listen. Children will look to you for which way to turn, To learn what to be. Careful before you say, "Listen to me." Children will listen.*

*Company: Careful the wish you make, Wishes are children. Careful the path they take, Wishes come true, Not free. Careful the spell you cast, Not just on children. Sometimes the spell may last Past what you can see And turn against you...*

*Witch: Careful the tale you tell. That is the spell. Children will listen.*

American folklorist Alan Dundee points to a law in fairy tales — "Any fairy tale with a heroine has a female rival. So I'm inclined to agree with Verdier's interpretation that this [fairy tale] story is essentially a generational conflict between the daughter and the mother." [7] The witch sang three verses of the play — children don't listen/the world/children listen, which expressed the real feeling and emotion to the society and life. "Be careful what you say, children will listen;

Be careful what you do, children will see and learn," these are Sondheim and Lapine's fairy-tale fables for contemporary parents and children.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Jack Kipps describes "Into the Woods" as a hodgepodge of fairy tales whose success in the late 1980s led to a revival of fairy tales. "The more positive theory is that it is a possible postmodern attempt to create a new world outside the traditional boundaries of fairy tales." [8] Through the analysis of the innovative features of narrative discourse in the musical "Into the Woods", it can be seen that the newly composed musical fairy tale is far away from the traditional fairy tales, breaking through the fixed pattern of development of events and characters' behaviors in the traditional fairy tales, and opened the door of postmodern creation concept and form. The result, on the one hand, well-realized the musical popularity, secularization, urbanization of the commercial requirements; on the other hand, it defamiliarizes the aesthetic object and multiplies the aesthetic meaning, which reflects more profound thoughts and deepens people's understanding of the real society.

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