

STAGING THE FANTASTIC

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School

of Theatre and Dance

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Robert W. Kimbro

May 2016

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the practice of adaptation and specifically the staging of literary works featuring elements of the fantastic. There is a long tradition of skepticism about depicting such fantastic elements on stage. Yet there is an equally long tradition of plays about gods, witches, fairies, talking animals, and magic. In this study, I examine successful recent productions of such works with a focus on the way that they utilize varying storytelling modes and systems of signification to overcome the challenges of staging the impossible. American Players Theatre's 2014 production of *An Iliad*, adapted by Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare, revisited Homer's epic of the Trojan War. *The Tempest*, staged by Teller and Aaron Posner, used techniques of stage magic in the service of Shakespeare's story of the exiled sorcerer, Prospero. Synapse Productions brought the talking barnyard creatures of George Orwell's allegorical fable *Animal Farm* to life through techniques of overt puppetry. And my own adaptation of *Odd and the Frost Giants* staged Neil Gaiman's new tale of Norse mythological figures Thor, Loki, and Odin.

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## **Introduction: Adaptation and the Fantastic**

Theatre is telling other people's stories. Directors pick up a playwright's script and craft it into a specific experience for their audience. Actors embody characters both like and unlike themselves, mixing their own experiences and personalities with their observations and insight and imagination about the nature of others. Designers craft environments that shape both the performance and reception of the production. Stage managers, craftsmen, and technicians bring skill, talent, and dedication to bear to ensure that the story gets across to the audience night after night. Even playwrights are working in a dialogue with the past, reworking universal themes to fit their culture and context.

This thesis is an examination of a particular subset of this storytelling practice: the adaptation of stories from literary sources for performance on the stage. More specifically, it is focused on the theatrical adaptation of stories of the fantastic, a combination that has often been regarded as particularly problematic. My own work as a theatre artist has often featured such stories and this study is informed by my two decades as a theatre practitioner as well as my two years of scholarship at the University of Houston.

My goals are largely practical. What can adaptation theory and the study of performance tell us about how to effectively transport stories across media from page to stage? To answer that question, I will be examining recent successful adaptations with an eye for the way the artists involved capitalized on the strengths and managed the limitations of the theatrical medium. My interest is not simply explanatory. I want to extract from this examination precepts that can guide my own future adaptation work and that of others.

In this introduction, I will briefly review my own experience with theatrical adaptation and lay out a theoretical framework for this examination. The first chapter of the thesis will use Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare's adaptation of Homer's *Iliad* to investigate the interaction of storytelling modes and storytelling media. The second chapter focuses on the presentation of the fantastic and the ways that theatre artists can take advantage of the dual nature of objects and persons onstage to overcome the challenge of representing the impossible. In the final chapter, I will turn my attention to my own 2011 adaptation of Neil Gaiman's novel *Odd and the Frost Giants* to see how these theories illuminate that work, and to consider how I might apply these ideas to a potential future adaptation of Catherynne M. Valente's *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*. The script of *Odd* is included as an appendix.

## **Adaptation and Me**

As an undergraduate at Rice University, studying political science and history, I was active as an actor, technician, and designer in the Rice Players, a student-run extracurricular theatre troupe. I also began working professionally as an occasional carpenter and electrician for the Alley Theatre. After graduation, with my intended career path in diplomacy blocked by the political climate of the late 1990s, I turned my attention fully to theatre, directing plays and continuing to work as a technician and designer. This led me eventually to a directing internship at the McCarter Theatre Center, where I branched out into theatre education as well, specifically working with young playwrights. A decade of work as a director, teacher, and playwright brought me back to school for graduate studies at the University of Houston and to this thesis.

Looking back, I can see that adaptation in many forms was a consistent theme in my work, though I wasn't really conscious of it at the time. As a directing intern at McCarter, I

became familiar with Artistic Director Emily Mann's work in Theatre of Testimony, which transforms interviews and news accounts into theatrical events. I worked with Emily on a new translation/adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*<sup>1</sup>. That season also saw me involved in the premiere of Regina Taylor's *Crowns*<sup>2</sup>, a stage adaptation of more unlikely source material – pictures of African-American women in their church hats – and on McCarter's annual production of *A Christmas Carol*. That particular adaptation of Dickens' classic was only one of three that I worked on in the space of a few years (the Alley's Michael Wilson script and Romulus Linney's version at Children's Theatre of Madison being the other two). Those *Carol* scripts transform the original work in markedly different ways. I directed *Into the Woods*, *A Year with Frog and Toad*, and *The Secret Sharer*– all transformations of stories into new media or new formats. I was the assistant director on a production of Don Nigro's *Quint and Miss Jessel at Bly* in New York (an exploration of the backstory of Henry James' *Turn of the Screw*). I created a 25-minute adaptation of *Henry V* for an ambitious presentation of both of Shakespeare's history tetralogies and explored a stage adaptation of Jan Potaki's *ms Found at Saragossa*. In short, I was already steeped in the practice of adaptation when I picked up Neil Gaiman's *Odd and the Frost Giants* and read it to my children in 2009. That encounter prompted a headfirst dive into adaptation and an eventual 2011 production at Stages Repertory Theatre.

The other clear pattern that emerges, looking back at my work, is an interest in stories of the fantastic. Of the ten adapted scripts I listed just, six (*Odd*, *Saragossa*, *Quint and Miss Jessel*, *Into the Woods*, *Frog and Toad*, and *Christmas Carol*) are fables, myths, stories of magic, or ghost tales. The non-adapted works I've directed have included *Macbeth*, Sarah Ruhl's *Dead*

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<sup>1</sup> McCarter Theatre Center, April 29 – May 18, 2003. Emily Mann, director/adaptor.

<sup>2</sup> McCarter Theatre Center, October 15 – November 3, 2002. Regina Taylor, director/adaptor.



*Man's Cell Phone*, and Don Nigro's *Ravenscroft* – all of them stories of the fantastic. So I am particularly interested in how these stories work on stage.

### **Adaptation and Fidelity**

Reading the scholarly work on adaptation can be frustrating for the practitioner of theatre. To begin with, the field focuses overwhelmingly on adaptations from novel to film. In the words of Jane Barnette, "Most of the scholarship in adaptation studies addresses cinematic adaptations, however; if the stage is considered at all, it is typically referenced as a step in the evolutionary path toward the film version."<sup>3</sup> At the same time, a considerable portion of the work done on adaptation is concerned primarily with translation and, more broadly, the adaptation of material across cultural boundaries (usually with a film as the end project). This work also tends to be less than satisfying for someone whose interest is on transmedial boundaries more than transcultural ones. In short, the discipline of adaptation studies is dominated by the neighboring fields of film studies and translation studies, leaving only a thin sliver somewhere in the middle dealing with the nuts and bolts of reshaping a literary story into a theatrical experience.

There is still, however, much that is useful to us to be found in adaptation studies. Most fundamentally, perhaps, examinations of the value of adaptation itself. In more recent work on adaptation, it seems almost reflexive for the scholar to begin by noting and decrying the discipline's historic obsession with ideas of "fidelity" to a source text. This line of thinking takes as its starting point an assumption that adaptations (and particularly film adaptations) are lesser copies of a worthier original. There is an echo here of Plato's ancient argument that all art is suspect because it is an inferior copy of reality, which is itself only an echo of the ideal world of

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<sup>3</sup> Barnette, "Literary adaptation for the stage," 294.

forms. The modern fidelity scholar might not place forms at the top, but there is certainly a hierarchy in this line of thought which automatically values the literary creation more highly than any stage or screen version. As a result, the primary yardstick for evaluating an adaptation is to what always-partial degree it succeeds in the ultimately impossible task of recreating the literary source.

The Reader's Theatre or Chamber Theatre tradition was the dominant approach to studying stage adaptations until the very late twentieth century, and it is strongly influenced by this idea of fidelity. The primary proponents of this tradition were Wallace Bacon and Robert Breen, teaching at Northwestern University in the decades following World War II, and Marion Kleinau at Southern Illinois University starting in the 1960s. They were building on an older tradition of "oral interpretation" of literature, in which the goal was always and explicitly a deeper understanding of the literary work. Performance was not an end in itself, but rather a tool for literary analysis. Chamber Theatre can be seen as a reaction to the restrictive nature of this practice – an expression of the natural human instinct for performance and the desire to place effective performances at the center of an adaptive practice. That's certainly what has happened at Northwestern in the work of the generation of scholars and practitioners who followed Breen and Bacon, a list that includes Frank Galati, Mary Zimmerman, and the members of Lookingglass Theatre. My own work as an adaptor<sup>4</sup> comes out of this tradition. The productions I saw of Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* and *Secret in the Wings* in New York and Princeton were very influential and Eric Lochtefeld and Laura Eason, collaborators of

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most vexing questions I faced in writing this thesis was how to spell the word "adaptor/adapter." My own preference was for "adaptor," but the -er version is more common in the literature (although both are used, without any clear pattern in region or discipline). The issue was settled when I noticed that Sir Peter Hall refers to himself as the "adaptor" in his notes to *Animal Farm*. If it's good enough for Sir Peter, it's good enough for me.

Zimmerman's at Lookingglass, participated in developmental readings of my unproduced adaptation of *ms Found at Saragossa*.

But the writings of the Readers/Chamber Theatre movement still make up most of the extant literature on the practical process of transforming a literary work into a stage play. And in spite of a growing interest in performance, the primary concern of the movement remained literary. Wallace Bacon is probably the most fidelity-oriented of the three, going so far in his 1966 *The Art of Interpretation* as to warn his readers (presumably high school and college teachers of literature) about the "dangers of an audience"<sup>5</sup> – the way the desire to entertain can distract from the interpreter's proper concern with understanding the source work. At the same time, he references Horace's idea that poetry should give pleasure or instruct and asserts that, of the two, giving pleasure is the more essential to literature.

This conflict between the study of literature and the creation of theatrical art is even more notable in the practice of Breen and Kleinau. Paul Edwards, in his study of the Chicago/Northwestern adaptation tradition "Staging Paradox", describes how Breen's productions at Northwestern were much freer in their treatment of the source text than his instructions to other adaptors in his book *Chamber Theatre*.<sup>6</sup> And Kleinau in her 1980 *Theatres for Literature* seems to deny that she's actually adapting at all—or at least not making "plays" but instead presenting the written work itself on stage.<sup>7</sup> But it is clear in both cases that these scholars were in fact producing adapted pieces of theatre and often quite effective ones. The instructional texts they produced contain extremely useful insights into the way point of view, traditionally a greater concern for student of the novel than of drama, actually works in staging

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<sup>5</sup> Bacon, *The Art of Interpretation*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Edwards, "Staging paradox" 237.

<sup>7</sup> Kleinau and McHughes, *Theatres for Literature*, 3.

and how directors can create an authorial voice through blocking and the use of devices like a narrator figure.

More recent writing on adaptation theory seeks to move beyond this issue of fidelity and argues strongly for the value of adaptations as artistic works in their own right. Dennis Cutchins finds support in Mikhail Bakhtin's argument that all literature is in conversation with other works past and present and that meaning is created in each act of reading. In this world of constant re-creation and adaptation, there's no reason to assume that any adapted text is inferior to an illusory original. Julie Sanders argues that even the assumption that the source work predates the adaptation in a meaningful way is questionable, because all works in a culture speak to one another in a web of interconnections and each individual reader will encounter those works in a unique order that will influence the meaning created at each reading. Kate Newell uses *The Wizard of Oz* as an example to illustrate this phenomenon. Here a later, cinematic version has displaced the earlier literary version of a story as the benchmark to which faithfulness is measured, calling into question both the privileged status of the written work and the importance of temporal precedence. In fact, the consensus in adaptation theory over the last decade seems to be that "fidelity criticism" as a whole has been discredited.

And yet there is still a sense among artists making adaptations, myself included, that we are trying to be faithful to something, that there is an "essence" to a story that is independent of form or medium. Dennis Cutchins has argued that the subjective nature of this concept of "essence" renders it useless. Perhaps, for scholarly purposes, he is correct, but subjectivity is less of a problem in artistic practice, and I will close this section on fidelity with a quote from Lookingglass company member Doug Hara that resonates with my own work as an adaptor.

“The idea is to tell the same story the way it *affected* you. I mean, the things about the novel or the story that resonate, that are still, like, banging off the walls of your ribcage. ... We want to be faithful to *that*.”

The fidelity that matters is not to the form of the source material, but to the experience of the reader who becomes the adaptor – to the meaning that was made in that reading.

### **Storytelling Modes**

Another idea commonly found in adaptation theory, and one with greater practical application than fidelity, is the concept of a set of storytelling modes. This is a taxonomy of approaches to storytelling, separate from questions of genre or medium. If medium is about how the story is transmitted to the audience (through text on the page, images on a screen, actors on a stage, and so on) and genre is about a set of expectations shared by storyteller and audience (romantic misadventures will end in happy alliance, the exalted will fall from grace, the dogged investigator will marshal the forces of reason in unravelling a mystery, and so on), then mode is about the approach taken by the authorial voice.

Since antiquity, it has been traditional to divide storytelling practice into three modes. Exactly what those three modes are has been in dispute just as long. Aristotle speaks of the lyric, epic, and dramatic modes. In the lyric, the storyteller relates personal experience. In the epic (or narrative), the storyteller relates events that happened to others. In the dramatic, the storyteller shows us the experiences of others through dialogue or other mimetic representation. Tzvetan Todorov refers to a slightly different, but related system shared by Diomedes and Plato: only a narrator speaks, only characters speak, both speak. Wallace Bacon refers to the way James Joyce presents the three modes in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: the author is mediated by characters in the dramatic mode, unmediated and direct in the lyric mode, and a mixture of the two in the epic mode.

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin advanced the idea that the novel represents a new mode of storytelling. He defines the novelistic mode in “The Epic and the Novel,” one of four essays in *The Dialogic Imagination*, largely by placing it into opposition with the epic mode. Bakhtin’s definition of the epic mode is somewhat more extensive and specific than Aristotle’s and chapter one of this thesis will examine that in more detail in the context of Peterson and O’Hare’s *An Iliad*. Aristotle and Bakhtin, however, share an understanding that it is possible for a single work of art to operate in more than one mode. Aristotle praises Homer as the greatest epic poet expressly because he is able to mix dramatic scenes of dialogue into his epic storytelling. And Bakhtin asserts that elements of the novelistic mode of discourse tend to spread to other art forms over time.

Adaptation theorists have drawn on these modal frameworks. Marion Klein and her co-author Janet Larsen McHughes use Aristotle’s system of modes extensively in *Theatres for Literature*. Bacon and Breen both describe techniques that mix narrative/epic and dramatic mode, even if they don’t use that terminology. Perhaps the biggest name in adaptation theory in the twenty-first century, Linda Hutcheon, matches Bakhtin by introducing a new storytelling mode. Her system of three modes consists of telling, showing, or interacting. Showing clearly maps to the mode traditionally called dramatic. Telling seems to combine the lyric and narrative modes into one category. This leaves room in the tripartite system for a new mode – interactive – to describe storytelling techniques that allow the audience to exercise some degree of agency over the story. Hutcheon is concerned primarily with video games as an interactive storytelling medium, but the mode could also be applied to experiences like theme parks, pencil and paper role playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons, and historical re-creations.

Hutcheon seems to assume, however, that these modes are largely determined by the medium of storytelling. This is a common and perfectly natural misstep. The medium of theatre

is well suited to showing story in the dramatic mode. Literature, on the other hand, is well equipped to tell a story in the narrative mode. But to assume that choosing a medium locks the storyteller into a single mode is to miss the possibility of the genius Aristotle saw in Homer – the skill of mixing modes in a single medium. Good adaptors have always understood this, instinctively if not through theory.

### **Semiotics and Dual Nature**

Equally useful to the practitioner of adaptation as the theory of storytelling modes is the concept of theatre semiotics. Semiotics is the study of the making of meaning through signs. Charles Peirce divides semiotic signs into three classes<sup>8</sup>: icons, which derive their meaning from their strong similarity to the thing indicated; indexes, which have a lesser connection to the meaning they carry; and symbols, whose meaning is entirely arbitrary. According to the strongest versions of semiotic theory, all systems of communication, theatre included, are collections of such signs. But students of theatre have long argued that the embodied nature of theatrical communication means that things on stage can “exceed their sign value”<sup>9</sup> and have an impact upon the audience as a sensory object, as well as a sign of some other meaning. This moves us into the realm of phenomenology, in which objects exist not simply to be interpreted, but to be experienced through our human senses.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, persons and objects on stage can carry multiple semiotic meanings at all three of Peirce’s levels simultaneously. And each element of a production – costuming, lighting, set, acting – is communicating simultaneously. This results in something that theorist Roland Barthes called a “density of signs”<sup>11</sup> that combine

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<sup>8</sup> Merrell, *Peirce, Signs and Meaning*, 134.

<sup>9</sup> Knowles, *How Theatre Means*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Knowles, *How Theatre Means*, 24.

to form the theatrical experience. The adaptor with an awareness of this complex system of interacting meanings and experiences can take advantage of it.

As with the idea of modes, it is tempting to oversimplify the way these sign systems operate on stage. Hutcheon suggests in her *Theory of Interpretation* that the dramatic and literary media utilize different kinds of signs: symbolic and conventional on the page and iconic and indexical on the stage or screen.<sup>12</sup> But it is possible for theatrical artists to use all of those sign types, just as it is possible for them to use both narrative and dramatic storytelling modes. In fact, it is difficult to avoid it. In an often-cited example, a chair on stage is never just a chair. It is a chair in our world, playing a chair in the world of the story, which in turn might signify the authority of a king and the power structure through which he rules. Ric Knowles, in *How Theatre Means*, addresses the theatrical use of multiple modes and various types of signs<sup>13</sup>. He uses the traditional taxonomies of lyric, narrative, and dramatic modes and iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs and argues that understanding their utilization is key to understanding the making of meaning on the stage. Knowles is more concerned with devised theatre than adaptation and he considers modes and signs largely separately. The two systems are, however, fundamentally connected. The use of the narrative mode creates expectations in the audience that are conducive to interpreting signs on an indexical or symbolic level. Conversely, the consistent use of iconic signs reinforces a dramatic mode of representation. These two interlocking systems of modes and signification are particularly important when a story moves from medium to medium. Each way of interfacing with the audience – text on the page or live performance in a shared space – interacts with those modes and sign systems differently. And

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<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Knowles, *How Theatre Means*, 137-144.



the dual nature of objects and persons in the theatre is particularly critical for the artist looking to tell a story of the fantastic on stage.

### **The Fantastic on Stage – a History of Skepticism**

There's a long tradition of critics arguing against depicting the fantastic or marvelous on stage, going all the way back to Horace and the *Ars Poetica*. "Medea should not slaughter her children in the presence of the people, nor abominable Atreus cook human organs publicly, nor Procne be turned into a bird, Cadmus into a snake. Whatever you show me like this, I detest and refuse to believe." Horace's injunction against fantasy was picked up by Renaissance scholars and the French Neoclassicists.

J.R.R. Tolkien is arguably the foremost fantasy author of the twentieth century. He shared Horace's skepticism about putting the fantastic on stage. In 1938, as he was in the early stages of writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien delivered a lecture at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland entitled "On Fairy Stories". It is collected, with what the author describes as "a little enlargement" and "a few minor alterations" in *The Tolkien Reader* as half of the chapter "Tree and Leaf". In this lecture he makes the following provocative statement: "Drama is naturally hostile to Fantasy. Fantasy, even of the simplest kind, hardly ever succeeds in Drama, when that is presented as it should be, visibly and audibly acted."

But human beings love stories of the fantastic and always have. So alongside this negative tradition exists a long series of counter-examples – plays that do attempt to stage the impossible: Euripides' *Medea* and *Bacchae* (which partly prompted Horace's objection), the miracle-filled religious cycle plays of the Middle Ages, Shakespeare's *Tempest* and *Macbeth*, *Skin of our Teeth*, *Seascape*, *Marisol*, *Angels in America*, *Prelude to a Kiss*, *Metamorphoses*.

## Defining the Fantastic

Tzvetan Todorov's 1970 book *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (translated into English in 1973 as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*) defines "the heart of the fantastic" in terms of an event. Something happens in a story that should not be possible according to the laws of the universe we know. Either this is an illusion or the world of the story is not governed by those familiar laws. This creates three categories. In the first, the uncanny, the seemingly impossible event is explainable. It is a deception, an illusion, a hallucination, or something similar. On the other hand, you have the marvelous, where the fantastic event has indeed happened and the story is taking place in a world where ghosts or monsters or djinn are real. For Todorov, the true fantastic is the narrow section that lies in between the uncanny and the marvelous, where both explanations are available to us and we (or the characters in the story) are uncertain of the truth of the matter and, thus, the nature of the world we are in<sup>14</sup>.

Todorov's strict definition of the fantastic as requiring that ambiguity is quite narrow, certainly much narrower than "Fantasy" in the sense that Tolkien was using in 1938. And it is worth noting that Todorov's text actually spends a great deal of time on all three categories, suggesting that the titular term "fantastic" might also be applied more broadly as a super-category encompassing all three subcategories. In this thesis I will be using that broader sense. In fact, the focus will be largely on what Todorov would call the marvelous – stories of worlds that are different from our own. But using fantastic instead of marvelous not only matches Tolkien's usage, it is also the common term for this sort of story among writers of speculative fiction today.

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<sup>14</sup> Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25.

We enter the realm of the fantastic when something impossible happens. And that is the challenge for the artist adapting a story for the stage. Unlike words on a page, the actors, set pieces, and props on the stage are subject to the physical laws that the fantastic event, by definition, seems to break. It is this difficulty that leads to the skepticism about successfully presenting the fantastic in the theatre. Both Horace and Tolkien talk about “belief”. We “detest”, says Horace, because we do not believe. The reason orcs or witches don’t work on stage is because we know we’re looking at fakes. Tolkien goes on to essentially dismiss the idea of “suspension of disbelief”, at least where it comes to the truly fantastic. Instead, he introduces the idea of “literary belief” in which the author creates what he calls a “Secondary World” that the reader can enter into and believe on its own terms. We know there aren’t witches and wizards in the real world. But we accept that the rules are different in the world of the story.

Importantly, Tolkien seems to believe that this state of literary belief can only work on the page. He goes on to argue essentially that, because of its visual nature, disbelief in the theatre can only go so far. It is like a rubber band that will only stretch so much. As we go farther from the center point of “reality” it gets thinner and thinner until, somewhere well before fairies and witches and orcs, it snaps and the performance fails. How, then, do successful performances of fantastic stories like *Macbeth* or *The Tempest* or Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses* work, when they do? The answer lies in considering not just medium but also storytelling mode and semiotic sign categories.

Tolkien is talking about the limitations of storytelling in the theatrical medium. But he is also basing his understanding of those limitations on unspoken assumptions: that these fantastic stories are being performed in the dramatic mode and using iconic signs. In short, he is picturing a basically realist theatrical practice, as would have been common at the time he was writing, at

least in more traditional theatres<sup>15</sup>. (It seems safe to assume that Tolkien's theatrical tastes did not run to surrealism, Dadaism, or other avant garde styles.) Horace, of course, far predates modern realist theatre, but the way he expresses his concern about presenting the impossible shows proto-realist thinking in the way that it privileges iconic representation in the dramatic mode. Horace assumes that theatre is about showing the audience a representation they can "believe" to be real, in some sense.

To use the vocabulary of semiotics, this kind of realism relies on iconic signs, which derive their meaning from their similarity to the objects they are portraying. It may be possible at times, through the use of technology coupled with skill and technique to create a convincing illusion of the impossible – to build iconic signs of the fantastic and use them to mimetically represent in the dramatic mode a world where the familiar physical laws are broken. Stage magicians make a living doing something very similar. But I argue that there is a different and ultimately more fruitful path for the artist adapting fantastic stories for the stage. Only by using techniques which activate the narrative storytelling mode in the theatrical medium and by building a system that includes indexical and symbolic signs instead of or alongside icons can a theatre artist unlock the full potential of her medium for this kind of storytelling. In doing so, a production can sidestep the problem of suspension of disbelief and engage the audience cooperatively in the creation of a fantastic world on stage in a process much more like Tolkien's "literary belief".

In the chapters ahead, I will look at specific examples of the way contemporary directors, playwrights, designers and actors use non-dramatic modes and non-iconic signs in

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<sup>15</sup> Warden, *British Avant-Garde Theatre*, 23-24. Warden's work argues that there was more innovative theatre in Britain between the wars than is commonly acknowledged, but it is quite clear that the dominant style was realist and even naturalist.

literary adaptations and stories of the fantastic. Most examples will fall into both categories, but these techniques can also be used to overcome other challenges in moving stories from a written to staged medium and to stage elements of the fantastic in works that were originally conceived for the theatre. And I will close with an examination of my own work in the light of this theory and with an eye toward future fantastic storytelling.

## Chapter One - Embodying The *Iliad*: The Epic and the Dramatic

### Introduction

Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare's *An Iliad*, adapted from Robert Fagin's translation of Homer's epic, is one of the most remarkable adapted works to appear on American stages in the last decade. The work has been performed to critical acclaim at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, McCarter Theatre Center, New York Theatre Workshop, the Guthrie in Minneapolis, the Court Theatre in Chicago, La Jolla Playhouse, and at regional theatres across the country. In the summer of 2015, it was produced by American Players Theatre in Spring Green, Wisconsin. On July 15, 2015, I saw that production and interviewed James DeVita, the actor playing the Poet. The adaptation has been both a critical and commercial success, which might be considered surprising for a one-man show based on a nearly three-thousand-year old poem.

This work is a particularly interesting case study in the use of different storytelling modes. The source work is the archetype of the medium of epic poetry. However, scholars have long noted that Homer's work is not written in a purely epic storytelling mode, but contains elements of the dramatic mode as well. In fact, according to Aristotle, that ability to move from the epic to the dramatic is essential to Homer's genius.<sup>16</sup> In this chapter, I will examine the ways that Peterson and O'Hare remix those storytelling modes in a new medium as they transport to the stage the song of Achilles' rage and see what lessons can be drawn for adaptors and students of adaptation.

*An Iliad* also provides an excellent framework for the consideration of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the novelistic mode of storytelling and how that idea can inform the practice of

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<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 24.

theatrical adaptation. The three storytelling modes – lyric, epic, and dramatic – are a fluid construct and have been reshaped by writers from Aristotle to James Joyce to scholars of oral interpretation like Marion Kleinau to fit their own particular needs and areas of interest. Bakhtin argues for a fourth, “novelistic” mode of storytelling and defines it in direct contrast to the epic mode. In doing so, he recasts the epic mode in the light of his concepts of heteroglossia and polyphony, which both involve the presence of multiple world-views in a single work. He is not directly concerned with issues of adaptation, but those concepts are certainly useful for the adaptor. And looking at how Bakhtin and others have adapted the idea of storytelling modes can help us reconstruct that framework as a tool for adaptation.

A side-note for clarity before we begin: Peterson and O’Hare’s adaptation is entitled “an” *Iliad*, suggesting that this is only one of many possible retellings of this story. (This is, in itself, an idea that flies in the face of epic tradition, as defined by Bakhtin). In order to minimize confusion, when discussing the adaptation I will retain that article. References to “the” *Iliad* will be to Homer’s poem, specifically the 1998 Robert Fagles translation that served as the basis of the adaptation *An Iliad*.

### **Context and Background**

The late twentieth and early twenty-first century has been a golden age of adaptation in Anglo-American Theatre. From *The Grapes of Wrath*<sup>17</sup> to *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*<sup>18</sup>, from Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*<sup>19</sup> to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*<sup>20</sup>, stage adaptations of literary works have achieved remarkable success. Much of this activity has been centered in the

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<sup>17</sup> Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, 1988.

<sup>18</sup> Royal National Theatre, London, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Lookingglass Theatre, Chicago, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Northwestern University, Chicago, 1996.

city of Chicago, where adaptors Frank Galati and Mary Zimmerman of Northwestern University have built on a tradition of literary adaptation begun by Robert Breen, whose 1978 text *Chamber Theatre* has become a touchstone of adaptation theory. Interestingly, when Breen wrote that book, he was teaching in the “Department of “Interpretation” (since renamed the Department of Performance Studies).<sup>21</sup> That older name placed the department in a tradition of oral interpretation of literature that explicitly traced its origin to the ancient Greek rhapsode, reciting the very Homeric work that Peterson and O’Hare have adapted today.

However, neither Peterson nor O’Hare are directly tied to this Northwestern tradition and, further, where Breen’s work is focused on taking the nominally unitary voice of a novel or other work of fiction and splitting it into a polyphonic presentation which pulls out the multiple voices latent in the story and embodies them in separate performers, Peterson and O’Hare seem to be moving in the opposite direction. In *An Iliad*, a single “Poet” voices ten of the many characters of Homer’s *Iliad* in a retelling of the ancient epic. Nonetheless, many of Breen’s concepts can be applied to this adaption.

The idea of multiple voices co-existing in a single text is central to the work of Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin and I will be exploring how his ideas illuminate the transposition of the *Iliad* onto the stage. In this I am anticipated by Michael Bowman’s 1995 article “Novelizing the Stage: Chamber Theatre after Breen and Bakhtin” and I will be drawing on that article in this chapter. In the context of this specific adaptation, tackling as it does perhaps the most iconic work of epic literature, the *Iliad*, Bakhtin’s thoughts on the nature of epic storytelling as expressed in his 1941 essay “Epic and Novel” will be most useful. One of his central arguments

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<sup>21</sup> “Major in Performance Studies,” Northwestern University, accessed February 14, 2016, [https://www.communication.northwestern.edu/programs/major\\_performance\\_studies](https://www.communication.northwestern.edu/programs/major_performance_studies)



in that piece is that, “In an era when the novel reigns supreme, almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent ‘novelized’”<sup>22</sup>. The late twentieth and early twenty-first century would seem to be such an era, particularly if one believes, along with Robert Breen, that film is an essentially novelistic mode of storytelling<sup>23</sup>. Unsurprisingly, upon examination, we find that the elements that Bakhtin identifies as most characteristic of the epic mode of storytelling are transformed in Peterson and O’Hare’s work.

It also becomes clear in examining Bakhtin’s writing on the epic mode that he is less concerned with the storytelling function of literature than he is with the content of that literature, what it tells us about the nature and values of the society that produces it, and what effect it might produce in turn on that society. The concern of this thesis is more practical. I believe that an understanding of the various possible modes of storytelling is critical to the artist who seeks to reinterpret a literary work in the theatre. What would a “novelistic” mode of storytelling look like on stage? What advantages might it provide over or in combination with the epic or dramatic modes?

The work of Bakhtin and Breen (and Bowman) can give us a picture of how this text is situated in a continuum of adapted works. But to fully understand how *An Iliad* functions will also require an examination of the way these playwrights appropriate, select among, and transpose specific qualities of Homer’s text to produce their desired effect on a modern audience. After exploring the theoretical context of *An Iliad*, I will describe how it makes use of or transforms for its own purposes characteristics like Homer’s repeated epithets for characters, his use of lists, and the role of the gods in the story.

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<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Robert S. Breen, *Chamber Theatre*, 55.

## An Anti-Epic Retelling

Early in “Epic and Novel”, Bakhtin lays out three “constitutive features” of the epic text:

The epic as a genre in its own right may, for our purposes, be characterized by three constitutive features: (1) a national epic past— in Goethe's and Schiller's terminology the "absolute past"—serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic ; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality, that is, from the time in which the singer (the author and his audience) lives.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to these three, elsewhere in the article he describes at least two other characteristics of the epic which will be useful to our examination of *An Iliad*. First, that epic storytelling does not need the structure of beginning, middle, and end that is crucial to novelistic storytelling. Second, that “the epic world knows only a single and unified world view”<sup>25</sup>. Every one of these characteristics is dramatically changed and undermined in the transposition from the poem to the stage.

Of these five characteristics, three could be seen as dealing with the process of storytelling: the epic distance of the storyteller, the lack of a beginning-middle-end structure, and the necessity of the unified world view. The other two—the absolute past and drawing on national tradition—are concerned with the content of the work. However, those characteristics have a major impact on the way that the story and, specifically, the performer of the story, connect with an audience in live performance. The way that Peterson and O’Hare deal with that epic, national past is critical to their adaptation.

Let’s begin by examining Bakhtin’s second “constitutive feature”, the denial of personal experience in favor of tradition. Peterson and O’Hare’s construction of “The Poet”, their

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<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, 70.

storyteller figure, completely rejects this concept and this may be their most transformative act of adaptation. Who is this Poet? We know that he has been telling this story for a long time. At the very beginning of the play, he talks about his experiences “singing” this story in ancient Mycenae, Babylon, Alexandria, and Gaul. He is a supernatural figure that reaches back and connects us to the time when this epic was composed. Even Homer doesn’t claim to be a contemporary of his subjects, Achilles and Hector. But the Poet does. When he realizes that his list of the Greek ships and their cities of origin is unintelligible to his modern audience, his frustration in being unable to make us understand is apparent: “these names mean something to me. And I knew these boys...”<sup>26</sup>. The source of this story is personal experience, not national tradition and this makes a huge difference in the ability of the audience to connect to the story the Poet is telling. In the words of Bakhtin:

It is precisely this new situation, that of the original formally present author in a zone of contact with the world he is depicting, that makes possible at all the appearance of the authorial image on the field of representation. This new positioning of the author must be considered one of the most important results of surmounting epic (hierarchical) distance.<sup>27</sup>

The question of the point of view from which a story is told is also of critical importance to Robert Breen, who refers to it (somewhat confusingly for our purposes) as the narrator’s “epic situation”<sup>28</sup>. Breen’s thesis is “that there is a technique for presenting narrative fiction on the stage in such a way as to take full advantage of all the theatrical devices of the stage without sacrificing the narrative elements of the literature.”<sup>29</sup> In the same way that Aristotle praised Homer for combining the epic and dramatic modes in *The Iliad*, Breen is seeking to combine

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<sup>26</sup> Peterson and O’Hare, *An Iliad*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, 63.

<sup>28</sup> Breen, *Chamber Theatre*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Breen, *Chamber Theatre*, 4.

these modes onstage. He sees the narrator figure as a key element in making this work and devotes an entire chapter to the various points of view such a narrator might express.

None of the four options that Breen lays out (first person main character, first minor character, third person omniscient, or third person objective observer) quite fit the Poet. His assertions that he knew the Greek soldiers and the way that he tells some of the anecdotes of Achilles' behavior suggest that he is a first person minor character. However, he often displays qualities of the third person omniscient, giving us peeks into the heads of his main characters as well as into the world of the gods. When I read the script, my paradigm for understanding of the Poet's point of view was actually a very modern one: the embedded war reporter. This figure, intimately knowledgeable about the warrior class but not quite of that class, constantly struggling to balance empathy and objectivity, is all too familiar in this era of media-savvy military leadership.

While this image worked in my imagination as I read the script, it is certainly not the only possible way to conceive the role in performance. This was brought home to me by the American Players Theatre production, in which the Poet, James DeVita, was costumed as though he were a slightly old-fashioned university professor. The production was set in a classroom and even went so far as to play the beginning of the show with the house lights up, as though the audience were a class of students at a lecture on the fall of Troy. In conversation with the actor before the performance, I heard him describe the very different production design used when he and director John Langs staged the show the year before in Milwaukee. There the set suggested a destroyed post-war landscape and the character was costumed to evoke (although not directly identify as) a Vietnam veteran.

Three very different approaches to the character, but each accomplishes the same things in terms of storytelling mode. For Bakhtin, these design and acting choices create a distinct “formally present author in a zone of contact with the world he is depicting” and also in contact with the world of the audience. That distance from the absolute past that Bakhtin posits as essential to the epic has been undermined, and the story is novelized.

On the other hand, for the adaptor, the key to the epic (or narrative) mode of storytelling is the fact that it tells us, rather than shows us, the story. That invites us to participate imaginatively in the creation of ancient Troy, as we would when encountering the story on the page. Fantastic story elements like the Olympian gods and other elements like the brutal violence described by Homer that would be challenging to represent purely mimetically can be successfully evoked through an imaginative collaboration between the artists and the audience. By activating the epic mode of storytelling through the mechanism of the narrator figure, the production has made its job of communicating Homer’s poem easier. Any of these possible points of view for the Poet help bridge the distance between us and ancient Troy and make possible a number of devices that close that distance even further.

One of those devices is found immediately after the Poet’s failure to connect his audience to that list of Greek home ports. If the Poet’s frustration lets us know that we’re hearing a story of personal experience, his solution is a direct attack on Bakhtin’s first and third features – the location of the story in an “national epic past” and the absolute distance between the epic past and our present. The Poet abandons the list of Greek place names (and his direct quote of Fagles’ translation) and replaces them with a list of American cities, regions, and towns. We have, in a gesture, picked up and moved this story from the world of ancient Greece to modern America. The denial of the Other is a key quality of epic storytelling, according to

Bakhtin.<sup>30</sup> The epic is always “our” story. The beauty of this transposition in *An Iliad* is that it manages to first powerfully evoke the Other with the litany of exotic and alien place names and then, by replacing them with “from Texas, from the flatland, from Dallas, from Plano, from Houston”, claiming the *Iliad* as “our” story, too. Throughout the story, the Poet connects us to his subject with very modern and very down-to-earth metaphors, such as stubbornly refusing to switch from a slow check-out lane or experiencing road rage and he jumps throughout time in his invocations of military history and culture, referring to “medics” in the Greek camp or referring to a picture of front line soldiers in what seems to be the First World War.

Again, who is this Poet? So far, we’ve seen that he is ancient, he is a witness to the events he’s relating to us, and he is capable of bridging the gap between us and the Other, between now and the Epic Then. He is also weary and uncertain – both of how to tell his story and of the wisdom of telling it at all. Almost immediately, we hear his concern that he has been abandoned by the Muse who inspires his storytelling, and there is the suggestion that that Muse’s reappearance is sparked by drinking alcohol. At several points in the story he struggles to find words and he loses control when describing Patroclus’ battle rage, finally having to apologize to his audience. If the Poet is the conduit for the worldview of the story, it is clearly not the “single and unified” unquestionable worldview described by Bakhtin as characteristic of the epic. Our narrator’s struggle inevitably invites us to critically examine the values of the poem - and the Poet. Even though Peterson and O’Hare have not, as Breen advocates in *Chamber Theatre*, used multiple performers to separate and clarify the multiple voices in the original text, they have managed to achieve the goal of “novelization”, which Bowman describes as to “welcome and accommodate other voices, other values, other points of view”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Bowman, “‘Novelizing’ the stage,” 15.

We have now covered four of the five characteristics of epic storytelling I identified in “Epic and Novel” and found that the adaptation and specifically the use of the Poet as a specific narrator-figure manages to resist and undermine each of them. The last is another structural issue – the epic’s disregard for beginning, middle, and end. When Bakhtin introduces this idea, he does it by directly referring to the *Iliad*:

The *Iliad* is a random excerpt from the Trojan cycle. Its ending (the burial of Hector) could not possibly be the ending from a novelistic point of view. But epic completeness suffers not the slightest as a result. The specific “impulse to end”—How does the war end? Who wins? What will happen to Achilles? and so forth— is absolutely excluded from the epic by both internal and external motifs (the plot-line of the tradition was already known to everyone).<sup>32</sup>

The idea that the epic audience already knows the story is a commonplace in discussion of these works. Bert States called this playing to an “audience of the initiated” when talking about how Brecht would invert this structure to “speak to his countrymen about matters that they should hear about but, for the most part, not emulate.”<sup>33</sup> It is very likely that Peterson and O’Hare share this sentiment in their examination of the appeal of violence and war. But it is also clear (from that first failed listing of home ports) that they cannot assume that their audience is “initiated” in this story. Logic dictates, then, that they cannot be arbitrary in their beginning and ending points. Furthermore, their audience, accustomed to “novelized” storytelling, will demand a structure with a beginning, middle, and end.

So how is *An Iliad* structured? The “MICE quotient”, a concept developed by novelist Orson Scott Card and frequently used in fiction workshops, suggests that stories can be “about” four different things: Milieu (or setting), Ideas, Characters, or Events (M, I, C, or E). It is tempting to assume that a story as packed with action as the *Iliad* would be built around event, and in a

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<sup>32</sup> Bakhtin *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> States, *Great Reckonings*, 176-7.

different adaptation it could well be. But it is clear upon examination that *An Iliad* is constructed around an idea – the idea of Rage. We open with the word “Rage!” (albeit in Greek) and it launches the first English passage of verse as well. Achilles’ rage against Agamemnon is the inciting incident that begins our story structure. We return to the idea of rage again in the middle of our story, when Patroclus, clad in Achilles’ borrowed armor and buoyed by his borrowed glory, is overcome with battle rage. This is also where the Poet is himself possessed by rage and loses control, bringing this theme as close as possible to the audience. The third rage of the story is Hector’s, as he strips the armor from fallen Patroclus.

The rule of three is a pretty good sign that a story is structured to satisfy a modern “novelized” audience. But *An Iliad* goes one step further, ending by returning to Achilles and his potential for rage. After killing Hector, Achilles refuses to give up the body, dragging it behind his chariot and using it to taunt the defenders of Troy. Finally, Priam, Hector’s elderly father is spirited by Hermes into the Greek camp to plead for his son’s return. Confronted with the king of Troy, Achilles reacts not with rage but with compassion. Specifically, he recognizes the rage within himself and lets it go. He returns Hector’s body and agrees to a truce that will allow the Trojans time to bury their hero. Far from a “random excerpt”, *An Iliad* is the story of rage given rein and then brought under control.

Where Homer simply ends his story with the funeral of Hector, the Poet of *An Iliad* is compelled to give us a reason why he doesn’t continue the story. He “doesn’t want to” tell about the fall of Troy. Here he does assume an “initiated audience”, one will know the story of the Trojan Horse. More importantly, he “can’t” tell the story of the sack of Troy, though he does briefly describe it in telling us that he’s “not singing that song”. He gives us enough to see that that song would be a song about the return of rage.



It is worth noting that many of these “anti-epic” qualities are not new to the adaptation but exist in the original poem as well. Bernard Knox, in his introduction to Fagles’ translation, asserts that “in those sections ... where personal relationships and motives are important ... Homer’s method is dramatic rather than epic.”<sup>34</sup> Here Knox is echoing Aristotle’s praise of Homer in the *Poetics*. In addition, the contrast between Achilles and Hector can be seen as at least a proto-example of polyphony, a concept that Bakhtin sees as essentially novelistic. Achilles is the archetypal man of war. His relationships, with one exception, are entirely with his comrades, rivals, and foes. The only traces of a family or domestic identity we get from Homer’s depiction of Achilles are his interactions with his mother, but even there it is clear that domestic life has been rejected in favor of the war camp. Thetis mothers her son by calling in a favor from the forge-god and providing Achilles with divinely-crafted arms to replace those taken from Patroclus by Hector. Hector, on the other hand, is frequently presented as a man of family. We see him not only with his mother, but most memorably with his wife and infant son. Tellingly, that baby, Astyanax, is unfamiliar with his father in his war gear, crying in fear at this sight of his helmeted head. Hovering over these scenes is the image of a different Hector – Hector before the war, Hector the father and husband and son, a man of peace. It is impossible to see Achilles anywhere but the battlefield. This contrast is played up in *An Iliad* but it definitely exists in Homer’s *Iliad* as well. And both men are powerfully valorized, suggesting that Homer’s worldview may not be so singular after all.

And, of course, the starting and ending points that help create *An Iliad*’s structure are Homer’s starting and ending points, too. In spite of Bakhtin’s assertion that it is a “random” excerpt from a longer story, it is very possible to make the argument that Homer is crafting a

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<sup>34</sup> Knox, Introduction to *The Iliad*, by Homer, Translated by Robert Fagles, 47.

story with a beginning, middle, and end, just like a novelist. But there is no doubt that going from a literary to a theatrical medium leads the adaptors to stress and reinforce those qualities and in the next section, I will examine ways in which Peterson and O'Hare transform specific aspects of Homer's storytelling to create a more compelling adaptation.

### **Translating Across Culture and Medium**

Homer's *Iliad* is written in ancient Greek and in the extremely exacting and very regular epic hexameter. Robert Fagles' extremely readable English translation does much of the work of bridging the gap between Homer and the modern audience. But not all of it. The art of adaptation lies in translating the idiosyncrasies of a work's home medium into the strengths of the destination medium. And the essence of activating the narrative mode on stage lies in reminding the audience of the act of storytelling that they are watching and imaginatively participating in. Peterson and O'Hare use Fagles' text to do both of these things—literally, at times, as in the moments when James DeVita in his role as professor-Poet would brandish a physical copy of the Fagles translation at his students/audience, reminding us that his efforts to make us see are also the process of adaptation itself.

One of the characteristics of hexameter is the use of a set of epithets to fit character names to the requirements of the meter. Similar to the Nordic *kennings*, which do something similar to meet the demands of alliterative verse, these nicknames are like adaptor cables that allow a name to fit into the metrical space available. The ancient Greek poet could call Achilles "brilliant", "swift-footed", "swift runner", or "godlike" depending on what was needed to complete the line.<sup>35</sup> The adaptor for the stage is free of those metrical constraints (since this script is not written in hexameter), but is still left with a menu of these epithets, and Peterson

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<sup>35</sup> Knox, Introduction to *The Iliad*, 14-15

and O'Hare make use of one to evoke a powerful cross-cultural image of one of the principal characters.

Hector is known as Héktoros híppodamóio – “Hector breaker of horses”. *An Iliad* never uses the word “cowboy” but the reference is inescapable and powerful, particularly in a recent American military context. The metaphor of the “cowboy American” on the world stage is ubiquitous. John Patrick Shanley created a memorable stage example in his Palestinian allegory play *Dirty Laundry* and that metaphor may well have been the most common one world-wide for the conduct of both Bush administrations before and during both Gulf Wars. On the surface, it is a simple image. The breaker of horses is tough as leather, not to be messed with, ready and willing to use force. All true of Hector, certainly.

But there is a deeper symbolism of the cowboy in popular culture, too. One that goes back to archetypal Westerns like *Shane* and *The Magnificent Seven* – the image of the cowboy as reluctant warrior, who uses violence to protect or create a world where men can spend their time on horseback, taking care of livestock, land, and family. It is an image that still shows up (alongside a lot of violence) in Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* and other modern Westerns. In the words of *An Iliad*, “deep down, [Hector]’d rather be taming horses”. Peterson and O'Hare had a number of epithets to choose from for Hector. “Shining”. “Man-killing”. But they choose to frame Hector's description with “breaker of horses”.

In addition to epithets, Homer's verse is filled with lists. Lists of ships, lists of treasures offered as ransom, lists of warriors killed in battle. Aside from the initial list of Greek hometowns that we have discussed already as setting up the challenge for the Poet in telling this story, *An Iliad* does not give us many of Homer's lists. But the adaptation, having established at the beginning that this is part of the poem's vocabulary and recognizing that the conceit, born

in the oral performance of the rhapsode, still has power in performance today (perhaps more than it does on the page), returns to the list format several times. When Patroclus is seized by battle rage, we get not a list of his fallen foes (as in Homer) but a list of the ways that he kills them (for a very different effect). When Hephaestus forges Achilles' new armor, we get a detailed list of the things that appear sculpted on the face of the mighty shield (a list that ironically depicts a picture of a world at peace). And, finally, near the end of the story, after Hector's fall, we get the longest list in the play. The Poet, grasping desperately for a comparison that will let us understand the battlefield, compares it to a fairly comprehensive, chronological list of wars throughout history. It is a huge list that goes on for pages and essentially brings storytelling to a stop. It is awkward and compelling and gives us the frustration of an artist and storyteller trying to communicate something bigger than a play. It caps the narration of battle in the play. When we resume storytelling, it is to tell the journey of Priam to Hector and the letting go of rage that results from that. The list of wars has taken the story of violence as far as it can go.

Alongside the narrator's "epic situation", another of Robert Breen's primary concerns in *Chamber Theatre* is the question of "aesthetic distance"- which is really a question of the degree of audience involvement or investment in the story. One of his theses is that the use of a narrator figure does not automatically lessen the aesthetic distance of the audience from the play, a view he ascribes to "critics", including Oscar Büdel.<sup>36</sup> In fact, Breen asserts, the use of a narrator increases the director's (or playwright's or actor's, as appropriate) control over that aesthetic distance. He goes on to assert that the use of the narrator creates a "double distance" – the distance between audience and narrator and between narrator and story (the sum of

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<sup>36</sup> Breen, *Chamber Theatre*, 50.

which is presumably the distance between audience and story – although it is also possible to think of that distance as existing independently, as well, a sort of “triangle distance”). These distances can be manipulated by shifts in dialect or creative blocking. In fact, much of Breen’s text is taken up with consideration of specific scenarios of such manipulation.

The circumstances of *An Iliad* introduce even more distances we could plot (if we are interested in continuing this geometric metaphor). For, in addition to the Poet as narrator, we also have between us and the story of Achilles and Hector the formal verse of Fagles’ translation and even the original Greek (presumably unintelligible as language to the audience). The Poet can tell us the story in modern vernacular (approximating the situation described by Breen) or he can shift into a more formal tone and remind us of the distance of time. He can even chant in a language that reminds us of the distance between our culture and the Otherness of the Greek original. There are too many variables to attempt any sort of analysis of a system for manipulating them, but shifts in the narrative mode are used throughout to create changes in tone or mood. For example, the battle rage of Patroclus is narrated using a significant amount of the formal verse, but chopped up into fragments as the Poet loses control of himself. The final confrontation between Achilles and Hector is told largely through the longest stretch of formal verse in the play, which builds to an abrupt shift into vernacular as the Poet gives us the thoughts going through the mind of one of the combatants – we are not told which one. After the heightened verse of the combat, the aftermath of Hector’s death is told in vernacular prose, which suddenly feels drained and simple. Peterson and O’Hare may not use Breen’s tool of multiple performers, but we can certainly see a shared interest in the use of the narrator device to control the audience’s relationship with the story being told.

The last aspect of adaptation I will consider in *An Iliad* returns to the question of the construction of the plot. We have already considered the way that the adaptation picks up on

Homer's theme of rage and giving up on battle rage. In addition to that kind of shaping, however, any adaptation has to consider the relative lengths of works in the original and destination media. Put more simply, plays are typically far shorter than novels or epics. Adaptation is often a question of cutting.<sup>37</sup> What does *An Iliad* cut and to what effect?

The first category of cuts is the ebb and flow of battle. In Homer, the fortunes of the two sides ebb and flow, even while Achilles is withdrawn. Even in that subplot there is an ebb and flow, as the Greek leaders send an embassy that seems to have a chance to change Achilles' mind. *An Iliad* has no space for this sort of back and forth. When Achilles withdraws, the Greeks are beaten back until Patroclus goes forth. Then the Greeks are winning until Hector kills Patroclus and so forth. It is a simpler story for a shorter medium.

But the second major category of cuts has a more nuanced effect on the story as it moves from the poem to the stage. *An Iliad* cuts most of the activity of the gods that fills a significant portion of Homer's poem. The back and forth in battle during Achilles' absence is largely attributable to how involved the gods are on one side or another at any given time. Gods enter battle directly and are even wounded. Again, much of this cutting can be attributed to the dictates of a reasonable evening onstage. But there's also a cultural shift here that plays out in the final battle between Hector and Achilles. In Homer's *Iliad*, Hector's initial escape from Achilles and his later downfall at that hero's hands are largely attributable to the very direct participation of Apollo and Athena respectively. These interventions are cut out in *An Iliad*. Where the earlier god-related cuts are excisions of large stretches of story, these cuts are much more surgical and clearly used to shape the story. Not having become accustomed to the direct agency of the gods earlier in the story, the audience is not likely to be receptive to their sudden

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<sup>37</sup> Bowman makes a similar point about the work of Robert Breen, whose stated devotion to textual fidelity did not keep him from making wholesale cuts in his adaptations.

activity at this point. We do have one clear (and somewhat shocking) intervention near the middle of the play, when Apollo brings Patroclus' rampage to a halt by magically stripping him of Achilles' armor. But that intervention is necessary to set up the ultimate confrontation of the two champions, which presumably will be fought (literally) man-to-man. While the gods have by no means disappeared from *An Iliad*, the cutting necessary to make the translation to the stage has clearly been used to shape their role in a way calculated to please the modern audience.

## **Conclusions**

Going from a 687-page, nearly three-millennia-old poem featuring dozens of characters to a single evening of contemporary theatre might qualify as an act of extreme adaptation. As always, pushing things to the extreme gives us valuable information about how they work. In this case, we see that elements of Robert Breen's Chamber Theatre practice, specifically concerns with the narrator's "epic situation" and with the manipulation of the audience's aesthetic distance through shifts in language, appear even though his characteristic division of authorial voice among multiple performers does not. We find many of Bakhtin's ideas about the essential nature of epic storytelling supported in the adaptation's push to "novelize" the story to make it work in a modern context. We see how the adaptors use the Poet-narrator to activate the narrative mode of storytelling, which engages the audience as imaginative collaborators. And, most importantly, we see the imaginative recreation and repurposing of distinctive elements from the original in new forms in the new medium as an old story is retold as a new work of art.

## Chapter Two – Signs of the Fantastic

There is an argument to be made that theatre, rather than being unsuited to the depiction of the impossible, is actually particularly well-suited to the task. Every person and object on the stage is already performing a magical transformation. The actor is not, after all, a Danish prince or an Egyptian queen. The elaborate raised chair is not truly a throne. Through an act of imagination in collaboration with the audience, things become what they are not. Why must the “thing they are not” be a thing that is possible? If a modern actress from Texas can play Antigone of ancient Thebes, why not Titania, Queen of Faeries? If a stage in Houston can represent the battlements of Elsinore Castle, why not the Hall of the Valkyries in Asgard? To put that question another way, are there limits to what can be signified by objects and persons on stage?

Chapter one examined how Lisa Peterson, Denis O’Hare, and the artists of American Players Theatre combined different storytelling modes to adapt a story of mythical gods and heroes for the stage. This chapter will look at how various artists use different types of theatrical signs to retell other stories of the fantastic. The focus will be on two productions – a staging of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* that used the techniques of stage magic to push the boundaries of what iconic signs can do and an *Animal Farm* that utilized the polysemic potential of puppetry to embody Orwell’s allegory – with examples drawn from other productions, as well.

### **Staging the Fantastic in *The Tempest***

Chicago Shakespeare’s production of *The Tempest* was led by directors Aaron Posner and Teller, who had originally produced the show in 2014 at the Smith Center in Las Vegas, in collaboration with American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge. The Chicago production, like an earlier 2015 production at South Coast Repertory in CA, shares several performers and most design elements with the original. Teller, one of the co-directors, is best-known for his work as a



performing magician. With his partner Penn Gillette, he is one of the best known illusionists in the world. This is his second collaboration with Aaron Posner; the first being a production of *Macbeth* in 2008. Both productions made heavy use of stage magic techniques to produce the impossible moments called for by Shakespeare's scripts. Teller and Posner are not engaged in adaptation in the sense of moving a story from one medium to another, but this production did adapt Shakespeare's story to a different time and context. And it serves as a case study in the presentation of magic on stage. This analysis is based on the October 24, 2015 performance, which I attended at Chicago Shakespeare Theatre on Navy Pier.

The set of the ART incarnation of this *Tempest* was described in the New York Times as combining "the grandeur of a seafaring galleon with the rumpled beauty of a traveling circus."<sup>38</sup> That description would suit the Chicago production equally well. The sailing-ship elements certainly help evoke the titular storm as it wrecks King Alonso's ship, but what dominates is the feel of a traveling extravaganza that has seen better days but retains the power to amaze. This is reinforced by the costumes for Prospero and Ariel, which are clearly designed to evoke early twentieth century showmen. The production design immediately activates the narrative mode. Posner and Teller aren't showing us a desolate island. What we're seeing is explicitly a show.

Teller has cited the influence of a 1940s travelling magician called "Willard the Wizard"<sup>39</sup> on his concept of Prospero and also suggested that this travelling-magic-show milieu led to the choice of Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan to create the live music performed throughout the show. The result, interestingly, is a world of stage magic rather than one where magic is a real

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<sup>38</sup> Charles Isherwood, "Brave, New, and Lifted by Magic," *New York Times*, June 2, 2014, accessed December 6, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/theater/the-tempest-a-la-steampunk-in-cambridge-mass.html>

<sup>39</sup> Carol Cling, "Teller's Magical *Tempest* Marks Its World Premiere at the Smith Center," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 4, 2014, accessed December 6, 2015, <http://www.reviewjournal.com/entertainment/teller-s-magical-tempest-marks-its-world-premiere-smith-center>

part of a fictional world. The historical setting itself carries a double meaning: this is a world other than our modern one, where magic and mystery might be possible, but it is also suggests the charlatan—the “humbug,” to use P.T. Barnum’s terminology—the showman who knows that trying to figure out the trick is part of the game. And it is a game that Posner and Teller are playing with us, whether we’re imaginatively invested in creating the “magic” or wondering at the marvels the performers pull off.

As the show opens, we see Prospero summoning the storm that wrecks the King’s ship. This effect involves fog, a basin of water, and a paper ship that moves at Prospero’s gestured command and finally bursts into flames. At the same time that this is going on in the center of the stage, we see the chaos on board the ship in the upper levels of the decks, a transformation of size that makes Prospero bigger than the set that contains him. The whole sequence is accompanied by live music. Semiotically speaking, we are seeing Alonso’s ship signified by two things at one time: a folded piece of paper floating and sinking in a basin of water and the larger stage set of platforms and rope rigging. Neither is actually a ship in a real sense and neither possesses the degree of iconicity associated with theatrical signs in a realist context. Instead, both are indexes of the vessel, a fact underscored by their simultaneity. The paper boat, in fact, is also acting polysemically as a symbol of the complete helplessness of the Milanese party in the face of Prospero’s sorcery. Additionally, each of these signs is an index of the other. The movement of the paper boat in its basin informs our understanding of the situation in the larger set and explains why the characters moving about on the platforms and rigging are acting and reacting as they are. At the same time, the distress of those characters lends emotional resonance to the sinking of the paper vessel. Finally, Prospero’s ability to move the paper ship without any visible means of manipulation (accomplished through Teller’s craft of stage magic) is an iconic sign of Prospero’s power: it has a high degree of resemblance to real magic.

This resemblance to real magic is the advantage that Teller's expertise brings to the production. The challenge of representing the impossible is precisely that: the impossibility of the thing represented. If the goal is to communicate through iconic signs where the communicative power and clarity of the sign is derived from its close resemblance to the thing signified, representing things like flight or telekinesis. Stage magicians like Teller, however, make their living by crafting situations that resemble the impossible so closely as to defy explanation. Stage technicians and theatrical craftsmen do this, too, and have done so for as long as there has been theatre. Stage blood and fight choreography might be the most common example of techniques for presenting on stage events or actions that, while not in violation of physical laws, are not possible, practical, or ethical to perform. While indexical signs of meaning are probably the most flexible way to present the fantastic on stage, such techniques make it possible to create iconic signs of the impossible, as well. One of the most fascinating and enjoyable things about this *Tempest* is how freely it combines indexical signs with a range of iconic signs, some of which are only possible because of the use of stage magic.

### **Fantastic Creatures**

There are, famously, two non-human inhabitants of the island where Prospero finds himself marooned with his daughter Miranda: Ariel, "an airy spirit," and Caliban "a savage and deformed slave."<sup>40</sup> In this production, both are clearly presented as fantastic creatures. However, in one case, this is accomplished through the use of iconic signification and, in the other through indexical signification. The result is an icon of a spirit and an index of a monster.

Ariel, played by Nate Dendy, is made up to appear inhumanly pale without the explicitly fake look of clownface. He also uses colored contact lenses and slightly stylized movement to strengthen the sense of a creature with human form, but otherworldly nature. His appearance is

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<sup>40</sup> All quotes from Shakespeare's text are from the Arden Shakespeare, 3<sup>rd</sup> series.

similar to, but more extreme than, the character Data on the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and Posner, in an interview in the program for the play, compares the two characters as well, suggesting that Ariel finds humanity alien—fascinating but slightly beyond comprehension. It is worth noting that, while these techniques of making Ariel inhuman and fantastic do take advantage of modern make-up and contact lens technology, they are not inherently beyond the capabilities of theatre artists contemporary to Tolkien, Shakespeare, or even Horace. This is also true of the primary signifier of Ariel’s magic in the show – card manipulation.

The production opens with Ariel entering and taking up a position atop a trunk at the downstage right corner of the thrust platform. From this position, he observes the still-lit audience, while constantly manipulating a deck of playing cards, riffling and shuffling them one-handed in an impressive display of dexterity. Eventually he brings someone out of the audience and performs a card trick, which turns out to be a pick-pocket trick as well. Ariel is silent throughout the interaction. Before the first word of Shakespeare’s text, we know that this production will be more interactive than an audience member would expect from “traditional” Shakespeare. The acknowledgement of the audience and the event of performance moves us further into the narrative mode already presaged by the set. An idea of collaboration with the audience has been introduced, but also with the magician’s traditional unspoken challenge – can you figure out how we did that? At the same time, we’ve internalized a lot about Ariel’s character. Ariel’s silence helps establish the character’s distant, otherworldly nature. We’ve seen this spirit masterfully manipulating one of our peers in the audience, anticipating the way Ariel maneuvers Ferdinand, the King and his companions, and the clowns around the island to suit the needs of Prospero’s plot. Perhaps more importantly, we’ve established a powerful visual

metaphor for Ariel's magical powers: the decks of cards that he can seemingly summon from thin air and dismiss again at will.

Even though the audience is acknowledged by Ariel, the audience is never made aware of the techniques that produce his alien qualities. The audience is not asked for any imaginative participation in making Nate Dendy the actor into Ariel the spirit. Ariel is as real a spirit, as similar to the creature in Shakespeare's written text, as stage makeup, movement training, and dexterous prestidigitation can make him. He is an icon of the spirit. That is his primary level of signification. At the same time, his resemblance to Data is an indexical and intertextual reference to the *Star Trek* franchise and his costume serves as an indexical reference to the time period of the early twentieth century. His subservience to Prospero makes him a symbol of the magician's power and his cold affect could be read in contrast to Caliban, whom we will consider next, to make him a symbol of reason in opposition to passion. Like many persons and objects on stage, Ariel is a densely polysemic sign, but his fantastic nature functions primarily on the iconic level.

Caliban is a creature of a different sort—not airy, but profoundly embodied. Doubly embodied, in fact, as the character is played by two performers from Pilobus Dance Theatre. Caliban is two-headed, with eight limbs that seem to function as either arms or legs as needed. Clothed mostly in mottled brown make-up, the two dancer/actors are not bound together in a single costume, but maintain physical contact at all times in various shifting configurations. The effect is impressive and fun to watch, but it seems unlikely that any audience member, even a child, would believe that Caliban is a single, two-headed creature. The suggestion of such a creature is clear and physical, but the resemblance is indexical, rather than iconic.

In contrast to the hidden techniques that make Ariel strange, Caliban's strangeness is achieved overtly. The audience is always aware of the athletic mastery and clever creativity

going on in this depiction of Caliban. In addition to our enjoyment of Shakespeare's story (made possible through the signification of the character of Caliban), we also enjoy the puzzle-solving of connecting the sign to the signified ("oh, I see what they're doing"), and we enjoy the physical performance of the dancers on a purely phenomenological level. The use of an indexical sign makes possible these three levels of delight. And, of course, a purely iconic representation of a two-headed, eight-limbed Caliban would present an impossible challenge to the casting director.

Tolkien argues that men dressed up as fantastic creatures can achieve only "buffoonery or mimicry." There's certainly a comic element to this presentation of Caliban, as there is a comic element in the character on the page. I found, however, that this performance was not confined by that comedy, but retained the ability to tap into the genuine pathos of that character. Of course, pulling off this effect required the talents of a pair of highly-trained dancer/athletes and a similar attempt made by less capable artists might well have fallen into the "buffoonery" Tolkien fears or even evoked the audience contempt that Horace promises to those who present things that cannot be credited. Nonetheless, the Caliban provides strong evidence for the possibility of a human-portrayed monster.

### **Appearances and Disappearances**

Besides these two non-human natives of the island, the third magical character in the play is Prospero himself. Unlike the other two, he is presented as completely human. He shares with Ariel, however, the ability to appear and disappear and move about invisibly. Prospero often invisibly observes Ferdinand and the King's party on his island. In these scenes, the actor playing Prospero, Larry Yando, remains visible to the audience throughout and the reactions of the other actors, along with Prospero's dialogue make it clear when he is invisible in the world of the play. This is not stage magic, but simple theatrical magic. This representation of Prospero's power is more indexical than iconic: the situation we watch play out on stage is

connected to invisibility in a sensory way but no attempt is made to make Prospero literally invisible.

Later appearances, such as the banquet that Ariel sets for the King and his companions in Act III, scene 3, draw on techniques of stage magic and include the audience in the illusion, creating a more iconic representation of the magic involved. The banquet itself is produced through a stage illusion. A curtain is drawn across the front of a seemingly empty table, and dishes of food appear. That is only a warm-up for the appearance of Ariel “like a harpy” several lines later. The actor bursts from the air above the table in a way that is startling to both the conspirators in the play and the audience in the house. In the moment of this jump-scare appearance, we shift closer to the dramatic mode of storytelling, as the production gives us a mimetic (and iconic) representation of magic. Ariel has appeared from thin air for us, just like he has for Antonio, Alonso, Sebastian, and Gonzala (the role of the kindly old advisor being gender-switched in this production). Interestingly, though, Ariel’s harpy disguise couldn’t be simpler, consisting only of a long piece of fabric stretched between two sticks that becomes both “wings” and a dramatically flourishable cape. It is effective and believably terrifying to the victims, but we in the audience are made privy to the mechanism of Ariel’s trick. We’re not allowed to get too comfortable there, though, as the cape is soon used to conceal another appearance, as a particularly dramatic flourish reveals Ariel replaced by Prospero. This illusion is purely for the audience, as Antonio and the others do not see the banished Duke yet. In the space of moments, through a combination of overt and concealed techniques, the audience has experienced an illusion along with characters in the play, watched from a distance as Ariel further tricks those characters, and finally been the target of a final illusion directed straight at them. Interestingly, a very similar appearance is used later in Act IV, scene 1, when Ariel interrupts the clowns Stephano and Trinculo as they ransack Prospero’s wardrobe. (In fact, I

suspect from the staging of both scenes that the same mechanism was used in Ariel's sudden appearance both times.) Judging from the audible reaction of the audience the night I attended (and my own reaction as well), the repetition did not dull the effectiveness of this trick.

### **Manipulating Characters**

In *The Tempest*, Prospero is in the position, unusual among protagonists, of being in complete control of the world of his play. He and his servant Ariel can control the sea, produce illusions both wonderful and terrifying, and manipulate the people on his island as if they were marionettes on strings. The last is a type of magic particularly well-suited to theatrical representation. Whatever control an actor can exercise over her own body, she can grant to another character on stage. The impossibility depicted here is simply a matter of coordination and physical execution, which can be achieved through training and rehearsal. With practice, one actor can seem to manipulate another like a marionette. Unsurprisingly, this is a fairly common way to achieve magic onstage and it is used a lot in this production.

We've already looked at the way the cast's reactions help communicate Prospero's invisibility and subsequent appearance in I.2. Similar work by the actors help to communicate Prospero and Ariel's ability to put people to sleep at will. We see Prospero exercise this power tenderly on Miranda very early in the play: "Thou art inclined to sleep; 'tis a good dullness,/and give it way. I know thou canst not choose." (I.2.185-6). Of course, that last half-line underscores Prospero's dominance even in this gentle magic (in contrast to the "rough magic" he uses on his brother and the king). The simple illusion created by Eva Louise Balistrieri as Miranda as she slips suddenly into slumber at her father's command follows a more elaborate illusion created by the rest of the cast, who have appeared in tableaux illustrating Prospero's narrative of his and his daughter's exile. These scenes are clearly staged as images that Prospero is summoning for his daughter and they serve the same purpose for us as they do for Miranda, to clarify and enliven a



fairly long stretch of exposition. It is worth noting that this play within a play makes Prospero a theatrical artist himself. He is using some of the same arts to tell his story to Miranda that Posner and Teller are using to tell Prospero and Miranda's story to us. At this point, the lines between dramatic and narrative mode and also between iconic and indexical signs have become thoroughly blurred, with the result that the audience is primed to experience either or both in a mixture and the actors and designers are correspondingly free.

Ariel also makes use of magical sleep when he encounters King Alonso and his companions, Prospero's treacherous brother Antonio among them, in the first scene of Act II. He performs the trick a little differently, however, dispensing sleep not with a verbal command, but with his signature playing cards, culminating in a gag where he has to produce a comically large playing card to get Gonzala to finally fall asleep. The conceit of Ariel's magic being expressed through the playing cards is well established at this point. Earlier, in describing the way he sowed confusion on the King's ship ("I boarded the King's ship: now on the beak/Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin/I flamed amazement" (I.2.196-8)), Ariel illustrated his mischief by producing and disappearing decks and throwing cards about the stage, a prodigious display of prestidigitation that was capped by the lonely Ferdinand ("The King's son I have left by himself . . . His arms in this sad knot" (I.2.221-4)) startled to discover one of Ariel's cards hidden upon his person.

The slumber that Ariel forces upon the King and Gonzala is interesting in that it serves no clear purpose in the world of the play. Why Ariel would place these two at the mercy of the villains Antonio and Sebastian, only to rescue them by rousing them again later, is a mystery. Ariel says nothing to explain it and there's nothing in Prospero's instructions to his spirit to help us understand. Possibly, he is testing to see if Antonio is as villainous as Prospero has described him. In a production that has thoroughly established both a narrative mode of storytelling and a

relationship not only between storyteller and story but also between audience and storytellers, there's a more satisfying answer. Ariel has already interacted with us in the audience before the play ever began. His purpose in this scene is the same as Shakespeare's: to demonstrate the villains' perfidy to us.

There are several other illusions in this production that we could consider, but I'll close by considering another example that works on multiple levels at once. It occurs early in the play, when Prospero demonstrates his dominance over Ariel, reminding the spirit (and informing the audience) of their history on the island. In the script, Prospero threatens to "rend an oak/And peg thee in his knotty entrails till/Thou hast howled away twelve winters." (1.2.294-6). In this staging, Ariel is actually trapped, either in the threatened oak or in a flashback to the cloven pine prison Sycorax had held him in (the effect is ambiguous enough to be either or both). Prospero torments him in this prison as he recounts the tale. But the prison is not represented in an iconic way as a tree of either sort. Instead it is a magician's box—the sort that Willard the Wizard might have placed an assistant in. Atop the box that contains Ariel's body is a smaller box for his head, which Prospero rotates, creating the illusion that he has twisted Ariel's neck several full rotations. This effect does a lot of storytelling work. It effectively presents the tale of Ariel trapped in the tree through a metaphor that we in the audience see and engage with creatively and imaginatively. At the same time that we are collaborating in this metaphorical storytelling, we are also being entertained by the illusion of the magic box, which we don't fully understand. The scene establishes Prospero's dominance over Ariel, whose power we have already been impressed by. And the mystery of the box also establishes Prospero's (and the production's) control over our perception. This sequence is a miniature of the show, operating on us and with us simultaneously. It utilizes indexical and symbolic signification and blurs the lines between dramatic and narrative storytelling by showing us Prospero telling the story of

Ariel and Sycorax. In short, it demonstrates an adept navigation of modes and sign types in service of a fantastic story.

### **Puppetry and the Fantastic**

The use of stage magic techniques in *The Tempest* allowed for an unusual degree of iconic signification of fantastic elements. Yet the greatest strengths of that production lay in the combination of iconic and indexical representations. In this section, I will examine the way another specialized practice, puppetry, creates advantages for adapting stories of the fantastic. The focus will be primarily on overt styles of puppetry, where the operator is not hidden from the audience. Most of my examples will be drawn from Synapse Productions' 2004 production of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, but I will also consider the work of Julie Taymor, best known for her staging of Disney's *The Lion King*, and of classicist Peter Arnett, who toured universities in the mid-twentieth century with marionette productions of classical Greek theatre.

Puppet scholar Robert Smythe has suggested that "the puppet is a conceptual stand-in for reality that releases the reader from the real world and its restrictive physical laws binding human actors."<sup>41</sup> It is precisely this escape from the physical laws of the real world that make puppets useful for presenting the fantastic. Steve Tillis emphasizes the semiotic nature of puppetry in his definition of the term: "If the signification of life can be created by people, then the site of that signification is to be considered a puppet."<sup>42</sup> This can be achieved using almost any material: the socks in a child's playroom, two-dimensional cutouts in an Indonesian shadow puppet theatre, foam and felt on *Sesame Street*. There is a remarkable moment in the American Players production of *An Iliad* discussed in chapter one where the Poet plays out Hector's fatal flight from Achilles as a puppet show, using only his fingers to represent the running legs of the

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<sup>41</sup> Smythe, "Peculiar Possibilities," 6.

<sup>42</sup> Tillis "The Art of Puppetry," 179.

warriors. In each case, the material of the signification is unlike the living thing being signified. This moves us away from the iconic end of the spectrum of sign types in a way that creates freedom for the storyteller. Tillis classifies puppets along a range from “naturalistic” through “stylized” to “conceptual” There is a clear parallel here to the spectrum of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs. The important thing is that puppets are well suited to navigate these categories to overcome the challenges of presenting the impossible.

Overt puppetry is the term puppeteers use for styles where the operator manipulates the puppet in plain view of the audience. This can be done in a number of ways. In traditional Japanese *bunraku* puppetry, the puppeteers are dressed in black, and the assistant puppeteers (an individual puppet is traditionally operated by a team of three) are hooded as well. More recent Western examples of overt puppetry have utilized costumed puppeteers, whose attire interacts with the appearance of the puppet in various ways, sometimes seeking to make the puppeteers disappear, other times extending the puppet through the body of the puppeteer. In some cases, the costuming of the puppeteer can play in opposition to the nature of the puppet to illustrate a deeper truth about the character presented. In any case, the visibility of the puppeteer establishes a relationship between the storyteller and the story and, in doing so, moves us into the narrative mode of storytelling.

### **Orwell’s “Fairy Story”**

Most readers will be at least somewhat familiar with the plot of *Animal Farm* – likely from a junior high or high school English reading list. Nonetheless, a quick overview will be useful. Inspired by the prophetic vision of Old Major, a venerable hog, the animals of Jones’ farm overthrow and drive out their human masters. Led by the pigs (the most intelligent of the animals) and specifically by two hogs named Napoleon and Snowball, the animals are initially successful in running their own affairs. They repel an attempt by Jones to retake the farm.

Napoleon and Snowball squabble over the leadership of the farm and Napoleon eventually drives Snowball out in a violent coup. Utilizing dogs to enforce his will, Napoleon exerts more and more control over the farm, abandoning the principles of “Animalism” and eliminating all threats to his rule. Over time, Napoleon and the remaining pigs become more and more human in their behavior until finally the new masters of the farm are indistinguishable from the old human masters.

George Orwell subtitled *Animal Farm* “A Fairy Story”. This sobriquet has been dropped from most translations and many English editions of *Animal Farm*. Editors have presumably feared that calling the book a “fairy story” would undermine its status as literature and consign it to the colorful shelves of kiddie lit. But that subtitle is a critical hint as to the nature of the fantasy that Orwell is creating and important to anyone wanting to adapt the story for another medium. C. M. Woodhouse, writing about *Animal Farm* in 1954, says that a fairy story is “a transcription of a view of life into terms of high simplified symbols”.<sup>43</sup> The author, he goes on to say, is not interested in characterization except as a tool for representing truth, and that economy of expression leads him to use “stereotypes, puppets, silhouettes – or animals”. On stage, we can have puppet and animal at the same time. And it is worth noting that Hall, unlike those editors and translators, retains the subtitle, opening his adaptation with the line “Animal Farm. A fairy story by George Orwell”.<sup>44</sup>

If generations of editors and English teachers have been hesitant to embrace the label of “fairy story”, they’ve been eager to apply another label to *Animal Farm*: allegory. There is no question that Orwell’s characters and incidents directly parallel the events of the Russian

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<sup>43</sup> Woodhouse, C. M., Introduction to *Animal Farm*, by George Orwell, reprinted from *The Times Literary Supplement*, London, August 6, 1954.

<sup>44</sup> Hall, et al, *George Orwell’s Animal Farm*, 5.

Revolution and its aftermath. What is remarkable, in fact, is how little ambiguity there is – Napoleon is clearly Stalin, Snowbell Trotsky, Boxer the proletariat class, Moses the Russian church, the neighboring farms Germany and England. Of course, the success of the story is predicated on the fact that it functions on both levels. A reader, perhaps a child, with no knowledge of the historical context can engage with Boxer and the rest as characters. But at the same time they are signs, in a very explicit way. When an adaptor moves these characters into a theatrical setting, he has to find a way to replace the symbolic sign system of language on the page with a physical representation on the stage. When Sir Peter Hall adapted the story in 1984, in his production, he chose to use masked human actors. But his “Note by the Adaptor” acknowledges other possibilities: “This was one solution to the production of the play. There are many others.” The 2004 production by Synapse Productions used puppets.

Julie Taymor, who has often resisted the label “puppet artist”<sup>45</sup>, uses the concept “ideograph” which Alan Wood defines as “a concrete emblem of character or thought”, though Taymor elsewhere described it as “an essence, an abstraction”<sup>46</sup>. Taymor is certainly using the concept for a range of theatrical expressions far broader than just her puppets, but it is tempting to think of puppets as “concrete abstractions”, animated representations of characters and ideas. This conceptualization emphasizes the way that puppets function on a symbolic level to represent concepts as well as on an indexical level to represent characters. Puppets (and particularly overt puppets like the ones used by both Taymor and Synapse) are particularly well-suited for this sort of polysemy and therefore for allegory, which relies on this sort of multiple meaning.

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<sup>45</sup> Wood, “Bringing Together Man and Nature”, 225.

<sup>46</sup> Schechner and Taymor, “Julie Taymor,” 28.

Heinrich von Kleist's 1810 essay *On the Marionette Theatre* suggests that puppets can possess a grace beyond the capabilities of any human dancer. This grace flows, at least in part, from their relative simplicity, as compared to a human. What Kleist calls "affectation"<sup>47</sup> in a human performer comes when the dancer's "soul" is dislocated from the center of gravity of the movement. This cannot happen, he says, in a puppet, whose soul is inseparable from its center of gravity. The same simplicity that ensures this grace makes a puppet an excellent vessel for an allegorical character. The puppet is created to tell a story. Its physicality is determined entirely by the needs of the story. In the words of Jiri Veltrusky, a puppet "has only those features of a real person which are needed for the given dramatic situation; all the components of a puppet are intentional signs".<sup>48</sup> Those signs can be crafted with both character and symbol in mind. Boxer can be built as both the image of a horse and an emblem of strength. If the goal of fairy stories and allegories is to create clear symbols or signs to communicate a truth about the real world, puppets would seem to be ideal tools.

### **Synapse's *Animal Farm***

The 2004 Synapse production of Hall's adaptation of Orwell's *Animal Farm* was directed by David Travis and used puppets created by designers Emily DeCola and Eric Wright of the Puppet Kitchen. In addition to the change from masks to puppets, this reimagination of the show also incorporated changes to the script itself, specifically in the framing device used to present the story. Hall's script opens with "a boy some eight or nine years old" selecting a book from a shelf, which he begins to read aloud. This book is Orwell's *Animal Farm*. With this device Hall "doubles down", in effect, on that troublesome subtitle "A Fairy Story". Going further, Hall also frames the story by placing it on a set constructed to echo a child's toys. The audience for

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<sup>47</sup> Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre", 22-26.

<sup>48</sup> Proshan, "The Semiotic Study of Puppets," 13.

Hall's production experiences Orwell's story through the lens of a child's encounter with it. The narrative mode is activated.

The 2004 Synapse production, which I attended, went in a different direction. No young boy opens this version of the story. Instead, a rat – wooden, rolling, and manipulated via a pair of rods by a puppeteer dressed in flannel and corduroy with a cap suggestive of an early twentieth century newsboy – takes the stage (and the Boy's narrator lines). With one simple design choice, the Synapse production retains the narrative mode, but reframes the story and recasts the narrative voice. Still distinct from Orwell as author, our guide is now not a child, but an animal from the world of the farm, if not a member of the farm itself. This choice picks up on a plot thread from the source novel, in which the animals of the farm debate what role the rats and wild animals of the area should play in their revolution. As puppet designer Emily DeCola related to me, the artistic team envisioned the Rat as an “embedded outsider”, part of the world but not necessarily in “idealistic alignment with the main characters”.<sup>49</sup> This endowed the narrative voice with a certain cynical distance from the profoundly hopeful but ultimately doomed idealism of Boxer and the other animals. This tone had already been foreshadowed by the dramaturgical materials in the lobby of the theatre, where Synapse was also running an adaptation of Orwell's *1984*. The emphasis was on surveillance and the dangers of the totalitarian state. This may be a “fairy story”, but not one exclusively for children.

At the same time, the wooden, wheeled Rat was undeniably reminiscent of a child's push-toy. And DeCola confirms that wooden children's toys and twentieth century American folk art were an inspiration for the entire design. All of the puppets were built from materials that suggested children's toys of the period in which the novel was written. The fairy story

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<sup>49</sup> Emily DeCola, interviewed by the author, May 6, 2015.



nature remained, but was not foregrounded in the way it had been in 1984. Instead, it was one part of the dual nature of the Rat and of almost all elements of the synapse production.

According to DeCola, the use of puppets allowed these characters to “depart from the human” and spurred more “imaginative work on the part of the audience”.

The costumes in Synapse’s *Animal Farm* embodied the allegorical parallels found in Orwell’s novel. The puppeteers were dressed as farmers and laborers, epitomizing the socio-economic classes represented by the animal characters they were operating. In addition to their performance function of animating the puppets, the puppeteers themselves became signs for elements of Orwell’s allegory. Interestingly the puppets and the puppeteers are signifying the same things, but through different axes of similarity. The puppet animals enact the proletariat, resembling the signified social class through behavior and action. The puppeteers physically resemble individual members of the proletariat, synecdochically signifying the entire class. The two sign systems reinforce one another in a powerful way. The costume of the puppeteer for the narrator Rat functions similarly, but not identically. This costume doesn’t suggest a laborer so much as a newsboy and, by extension, the literary class to which Orwell himself belonged. The costuming opens up two possibilities: the Rat could be seen as a symbol for the journalists of the time period Orwell is allegorizing or as a sign for the author himself. Of all the characters in the play, only the pigs of the farm and the humans who only appear at the end of the play don’t exhibit this dual sign system of puppet and puppeteer. We will consider their semiotics in the next section.

### **Puppetry and the Human Form as Sign**

Peter Arnott was a professor in the drama department at Tufts University in the middle decades of the twentieth century who staged marionette productions of classical Greek plays,

which toured in the U.S. and Great Britain<sup>50</sup>. Arnott's productions represented a novel and, according to contemporary accounts, largely successful approach to the various problems presented in staging these ancient scripts. The most interesting aspect of his productions for this analysis is the fact that Arnett, visible above his marionette stage, would utilize his own body and face in performance alongside the marionettes. For the ancient device of the *deus ex machina*, Arnett would use his own hand, made giant by the context of the marionette figures around it, to "fly" a character out. He also played Dionysius in *The Bacchae* by lighting his own face from below, creating the effect of an enormous divine apparition<sup>51</sup>. We can see in these examples the way that puppets, playing against human forms, can reshape our perception of those forms. The moment in *An Iliad* mentioned earlier, in which the Poet enacted the pursuit of Hector by Achilles using his fingers as puppets, had a similar effect. The scale of the Poet was temporarily changed to place him on a level with the gods who have been manipulating the events of the Trojan war throughout. This elevation of his stature pays off a few minutes later when the Poet is scathingly critical of Zeus's use of his divine power to protect Hector's dead body after refusing to intervene to save his life.

*Animal Farm* did not play with scale, but utilized the interplay of puppets and human form in another way that turned the human form itself into a symbolic signification for the evils of capitalism. While all of the other animals were portrayed by puppets, the pigs on the farm were masked humans. They began the play costumed as farmers, much like the puppeteers operating the other animals. As the story progressed, the costumes of the pigs changed as they became disconnected from their proletarian roots, going from flannel and work pants to suits and, in the case of Napoleon, military uniform. Farmer Jones and other humans were portrayed

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<sup>50</sup> Fern, "The Marionette Theatre of Peter Arnott," 177.

<sup>51</sup> Fern, "The Marionette Theatre of Peter Arnott," 184.

by unmasked actors. As a result, the pigs occupied a metaphorical space between animal and human that both presaged and allowed their eventual transformation into indistinguishable copies of the former oppressors by removing their masks in the play's final moment.

## **Conclusions**

Puppetry and stage magic are widely different practices, but each afford the theatrical storyteller ways to expand the sign systems available to them in order to tell stories of the fantastic. Each allows, in different ways, an escape from the limitations of the physical laws of our world. The puppet designer and operator can create in the puppet performer a particularly simple and clear signifier. For the storyteller concerned with metaphor and allegory – for the teller of a “fairy story” – this can be a considerable advantage. In the 2004 Synapse reimagining of Peter Hall's adaptation of *Animal Farm*, David Travis, Emily DeCola, Eric Wright and the other storytellers took further advantage of the dual nature of puppets to facilitate multiple levels of signification and then played those puppets in contrast to human performers in ways that recontextualize and open up the human form itself. The magician can create convincing illusions of marvelous events and creatures, allowing iconic signification of the impossible. In Teller and Posner's *The Tempest*, this led to a uniquely rich exploration of the Prospero's power over his world. Both productions stand as counter-examples to historical skepticism about theatrical representations of the impossible.

### Chapter Three – Adapting Odd

*Odd and the Frost Giants*, by Neil Gaiman, was published in 2009. I was already a fan of Gaiman's earlier novels, such as *American Gods* and *Coraline*. I was also the father of a six-year-old and a three-year-old, and this new novel was perfect for us to read together. A couple of weeks of bedtime reading later, all three of us were in love with the book. And, more significantly for this work, I had strong images of a stage production of the story. That began a year-long process of reaching out to Neil Gaiman's agent to secure adaptation rights, finding a theatre to produce the show, and negotiating a contract among myself and both parties for the production. Meanwhile, I worked on the script. Finally, *Odd and the Frost Giants*, the play, was produced by Stages Repertory Theatre in Houston and ran May 2<sup>nd</sup> through May 21<sup>st</sup> of 2011. I was the director as well as the adaptor of the work. The design team featured Mary Robinette Kowal (puppets), Christine Giannelli (lights), Chris Bakos (sound), Kathy Snider (costumes), Mike Mullins (set), and Jodi Bobrovsky (props). The show played to school matinee audiences on weekdays and general audiences on the weekends. I considered the show a success and I think that feeling was shared by the theatre staff and leadership as well as the cast and design team.

In this chapter, I will examine this adaptation much as I have the shows referenced in the two previous chapters, applying the frameworks of storytelling modes and non-iconic signification to the way this show dealt with staging a story of the fantastic. I have the advantage here of being both the scholar and the artist. But the scholar of 2016 is quite different from the adaptor/director of 2010-11. The vocabulary and understanding of modes and signs that I am applying to the script now were not part of my working framework then, though, looking back, I can see elements of both starting to appear in the way I presented the concept of "theatricality" in classes I was teaching at the time. This re-evaluation of my own work will, I hope, provide insights that I can apply in future productions, and I will close this

chapter and thesis with a brief consideration of how these concepts could shape a future adaptation of Catherynne M. Valente's young adult fantasy novel *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*.

### **Transporting Odd from Page to Stage – Navigating Media and Modes**

Gaiman's book is the story of Odd, a young Norseman whose father, a woodworker, has died while off on a sea raid. Trying to take his father's place, he badly injures his leg cutting down a tree. His mother marries the unpleasant Fat Elfred, and Odd finds himself isolated and unhappy. Meanwhile, winter seems to be lasting an unnaturally long time. Eventually, Odd leaves his village and goes to his father's isolated woodcutting hut, where he encounters three animals – a bear, a fox, and an eagle – who reveal that they are actually the gods Thor, Loki, and Odin, trapped by Frost Giant magic in animal form and cast out of their home realm of Asgard. As long as Asgard is controlled by the Frost Giants, winter cannot end. Odd helps the animals find a way to return to their realm. After a visit to Mimir's Well, the mythic source of wisdom, Odd journeys alone to the Wall of Asgard and convinces the Frost Giant to leave and return to his home. With the Frost Giant gone, the goddess Freya is able to restore the gods to their true forms and to partially restore Odd's shattered leg. Odd returns home, wiser and stronger, to rejoin his mother, who has left Elfred, and the two prepare to set out on a journey to her native Scotland.

In adapting this story for the stage, my goal was to reproduce in the new medium the experience I had as a reader. This is essentially the kind of faithfulness that Lookingglass company member Doug Hara was talking about in the quotation I used in the introduction: striving "to tell the same story the way it affected you". What most affected me was the way this story worked for all three of us: my three-year-old son, my six-year-old daughter, and me. I

wanted to expand that shared bedtime story experience to audiences full of families. This meant that the silly joy of the talking animals and the emotional resonance of Odd's journey were both vital to the success of the production.

Length and scope are always concerns when adapting novels for the stage. The novel is simply a longer format than the play and a written medium allows for large casts and multiple locations that can be problematic to represent in the theatre. *Odd*, however, is actually novella-length (roughly 14,500 words), and I found that I did not need to make significant cuts in order to create a play of manageable length. The eight chapters of the novel became the eight scenes of the play. I cut one significant event from the next-to-last chapter, not for reasons of length, but largely because of the challenge of representing the fantastic elements of the event depicted. I will go into more detail about that excision later in this chapter.

*Odd* also has a relatively small cast of characters. In addition to Odd and the three transformed gods, the only figures who speak in the book are the Frost Giant, the goddess Freya, Odd's mother, Elfred, the voice of Mimir's Well, and one of Elfred's children. All of those characters, with the exception of Elfred's child, made it into the adaptation. Because the figure has such importance in the story, I also had Odd's father appear, but not speak, in a flashback sequence at Mimir's Well. Again, there will be more on that later in the chapter.

While length was not an issue, the number of locations in the novel was a different matter. Using the broadest definition, events recounted in the novel take place in Odd's village, aboard a Viking longship, on the coast of Scotland, in various parts of a Norwegian forest, at Odd's father's hut, by a frozen waterfall, upon the magical rainbow bridge Bifrost, in the realm of Asgard, in the Giants' land of Jotunheim, by and atop the wall of the city of Asgard, and in Odin's hall. Some of those locations were more present in the novel than others. Like Homer in

the Iliad, Gaiman moves back and forth from epic to dramatic mode throughout the novel. He does this through use (or non-use) of dialogue, manipulation of tense, and degree of detail.

The first chapter of the book, entitled simply “Odd,” is entirely in the narrative mode. The voice of the author fills us in on Odd’s story, up to the point where he has left his village. Time passes rapidly, skipping months or years between relevant events, and events are not always related in chronological order. There is no dialogue and the story is told from a point in time when Odd is already orphaned:

“His father had been killed during a sea raid two years before, when Odd was ten. It was not unknown for people to get killed in sea raids, but his father wasn’t killed by a Scotsman, dying in glory in the heat of battle, as a Viking should. He had jumped overboard to rescue one of the stocky little ponies that they took with them on their raids as pack animals.”<sup>52</sup>

In Chapter Two, “The Fox, the Eagle, and the Bear,” Gaiman moves toward a dramatic mode of storytelling. Time becomes more linear, events are more detailed, characters begin to interact, and dialogue starts to appear.

“Odd looked at the bear. The bear looked at Odd with big brown eyes. Odd spoke aloud. “I can’t run,” he said to the bear. “So if you want to eat me, you’ll find me easy prey. But I should have worried about that before, shouldn’t I? Too late now.”<sup>53</sup>

Because of this shift in mode, some locations in the book (the woodcutter’s hut, Mimir’s Well, the Wall of Asgard) are more present than others (Scotland, the Viking longship). But even in just the dramatic scenes, the locations are numerous and different enough to present a challenge. To overcome this challenge and to retain as much of Gaiman’s distinctive voice as possible, I chose to stage the entire show as a story being told to the audience. This gave the production the same flexibility to move from dramatic to narrative mode as Gaiman’s prose.

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<sup>52</sup> Gaiman, *Odd*, 1-2.

<sup>53</sup> Gaiman, *Odd*, 18.

This staging was based on an exchange near the end of the book:

“Now, laddie,” boomed Thor. “Tell us just how you defeated the might of the Frost Giants.” He seemed much more cheerful than when he had been a bear.

“There was only one of them,” said Odd.

“When I tell the story,” said Thor, “there will be at least a dozen.”

This gave me the idea of placing the entire production in a Viking mead hall, where they would gather to tell stories through the long winters. The Stages Repertory production featured a rough stone wall covering the upstage side of the three-quarter-round acting space. Viking shields hung around the space on wooden shapes that suggested the prows of longships and in the center of the space was a low, round wall that could be a fire pit or a well. This created a space wherein the various locations required by the story could be signified in various ways. Mimir’s Well and the hall in Asgard where Freya restores the Gods to their true forms were reasonably iconic, the woodcutter’s hut less so as it was suggested by a bedroll and the fire pit, and the trees where Odd frees the trapped bear even more indexical – represented by a storyteller’s staff and one of the theatre’s architectural columns.

This storytelling framework also determined the make-up of the cast of the show. The script calls for six actors. One plays Odd and the other five are identified as “Storytellers.” Three of the five also play specific characters within the story: the transformed gods Odin, Loki, and Thor. The final two storytellers play multiple roles. Storyteller Four, the only woman in the cast, takes on two roles within the story: Odd’s Mother and the goddess Freya. Storyteller Five takes on the roles of Odd’s unsavory stepfather Elfred and the Frost Giant antagonist. While conventional wisdom about literary and theatrical media assumes that the storyteller would be more present in the former than the latter, this approach actually foregrounds the storyteller from the beginning, making the narrative mode the default for the production.



One complication that arises when a theatrical work activates the narrative mode through the use of narrator figures is the need to identify those figures. In text, the narrator can be essentially invisible. Unless prompted, a reader won't likely think about who is telling the story. That option is less available on stage. It is possible to use an off-stage narrator, speaking through the theatre's sound system, so that the audience never sees the narrator and a certain degree of anonymity can be maintained. But that sacrifices all of the value of the actor's embodied presence in performance and still doesn't eliminate vocal markers of gender and accent which an audience will inevitably use to puzzle out the identity of this figure. Once the narrator figure or figures appear on stage, casting and costume design choices will inevitably define the narrator as a character.

Robert Breen devotes the third chapter of *Chamber Theatre* to the question of narrative point of view. He lays out four possible categories: first person (main character), first person (minor character), third person (omniscient), and third person (objective observer). Breen seems to see these categories as applying to the written story and then uses the author's practice to guide his staging. This reflects his belief in the primacy of the literary artifact. For the transformative adaptor seeking to create something new, this is a useful starting point. But the situation can quickly grow more complicated when the possibilities of the dense sign systems of the stage come into play.

In Gaiman's novel, the unidentified narrator tells the story in the third person and is largely omniscient, though our access to the inner thoughts of Odd and the other characters is limited. For the adaptation, even though the storytellers are identified with specific characters in the book, they retain Gaiman's third person language. The position from which they are telling the story, what Breen calls their "epic situation,"<sup>54</sup> is a hall in Asgard some time after the

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<sup>54</sup> Breen, *Chamber Theatre*, 21.

events depicted. This means that the two storytellers who present multiple characters, Four and Five, have as their primary identity their Asgardian roles. Four is Freya, who “plays” Odd’s Mother in the story. Five is more complicated, as neither of his major roles, Elfred or the Frost Giant, would be present in this storytelling setting. Instead, we conceived of Five as a minor Asgardian figure, a companion or helper to the gods. There are several such figures in Norse myth: Thialfi, Skirnir, Hermod. The only time Five appeared in this role in the show was in the sequence where Freya transforms the gods from animals back to humans, when he accompanied and assisted her. But his costume was based on this identity.

I arranged the Storytellers’ lines so that they were never narrating the actions of their own “true” selves. Four and Five do narrate their first appearances as the Mother and Elfred, introducing each in the third person in the narrative mode before starting to “play” them in the dramatic mode. Even though Storytellers One through Three don’t directly narrate their own actions in the story, their narration does reflect their specific characters through the choice of which lines of Gaiman’s narration is assigned to each. When the narrator is enthusiastic about Odd’s adventure, we hear it from the actor who also plays the thunder god Thor – called “Friend of Man” in the old Icelandic poems. When more skeptical, it comes from the cynical trickster god Loki. Odin, the arbiter and lawgiver god, mediates between the two and keeps the story moving forward.

So we have actors as storytellers in the narrative mode, speaking directly to us in the third person, who also slip into roles which they present in the dramatic mode. For the Storytellers presenting Thor, Loki, and Odin, whose dramatic mode characters are trapped in animal form, this also involved operating puppets representing those animal forms. This is an extraordinarily rich and complex way to tell a story. The complexity reaches a peak in the third scene, when Loki tells Odd how the three gods found themselves in this predicament. This is an

extended and elaborate flashback sequence in the book, but in terms of the action onstage, is simply Loki (as a fox) telling a story to Odd. To ameliorate the dangers of a long piece of exposition, we did something very involved.

Storyteller Three, operating the Loki-fox puppet, began telling the story to the actor playing Odd. After a sentence or two, the actor transferred control of the puppet to Storyteller Two (who was also controlling the Thor-bear puppet) and stepped away from that scene to address the audience and tell the rest of this story directly to them. Once that convention was established, the characters of the maiden and the Frost Giant within Loki's story were presented through silhouette projections upon the wall and their voices were played as recorded sound cues. Meanwhile, Storyteller Two, through the fox puppet continued to silently "tell" the story to Odd on another part of the stage. Here we had a dramatic mode representation of the fox-Loki telling the story to Odd, while simultaneously there was a narrative mode presentation by the actor playing Loki directly to the audience of the story of Loki's actions in the past. In the course of that story, Loki interacted in the dramatic mode with the recorded voice-over, while interspersing comments on the action directly to the audience in the narrative mode. At the end of the story, when the Frost Giant has taken control of Thor's hammer and of Asgard and transforms Loki and his companions into animals, Storyteller Three took the fox-Loki puppet back from Two, illustrating the forced transformation and merging the two threads of storytelling back into one. This was a dense, multi-layered form of storytelling not possible in a written medium. But theatre's unique ability to present multiple systems of meaning simultaneously meant that it could be understood even by audience members just entering school age (as evidenced by informal post-show conversations I had with friends of my children who came to see the play).

Taking my cue from the book's references to how this story would be told in Viking mead halls let me frame the story in a way that could move from dramatic to narrative mode and back and even to operate in both simultaneously at times. This let me retain much of Gaiman's charming language. It also a way to present multiple locations and characters without demanding elaborate set changes and a larger cast. It did not directly address the problem of staging the fantastic elements of this mythical story, although activating the narrative mode broadens our options for doing so. In order to successfully adapt *Odd* to the stage, the designers, actors, and I had to deal with presenting the gods in their natural and animal forms, the environments of the Fimbulwinter, Bifrost, and Asgard, Odd's visions at Mimir's Well, and the confrontation with the Frost Giant antagonist.

### **Staging the Transformations – Mythic Gods as Talking Animals**

The most prominent fantastic element in *Odd and the Frost Giant* is the presence of mythical gods trapped in the form of animals for much of the story. There is very little in the way of demonstrations of magical power by the gods in the book. Loki (a fire god, as well as a trickster) starts a campfire at one point and helps to melt an ice shard into a prism, but that's about it and those were easy enough to stage with a lighting effect and a bit of sleight of hand and some expository dialogue. The impossibility of talking animals, however, is squarely in the realm that Todorov would label as the marvelous subset of fantastic and that Tolkien would expect to fail on stage. I never saw this as a problem, however, but as an opportunity that was one of the main attractions of the project.

I met puppet designer Mary Robinette Kowal working on a touring production of *The Tempest* for the education department of McCarter Theatre in 2006. (Emily DeCola from the puppet production of *Animal Farm* discussed in chapter two was also involved in the show.) That production used overt puppetry – rod puppets manipulated by puppeteers who were

visible to the audience – to represent both Caliban and Ariel. I was struck at the time by how effective those puppet characters were at representing those fantastic element – the spirt and monster of Prospero’s island. And I wanted to do something similar with the animal-gods in *Odd*. There’s an interesting thing that happens when overt puppets interact with human actors. A puppet show staged with hidden puppeteers can and often does operate entirely in the dramatic mode. The puppets show the story – in a stylized form, but without necessarily engaging in narrative storytelling. But when the puppeteers are visible and manipulating the puppet in conversation with human actors, that physical act of storytelling is foregrounded in a way that activates the narrative mode to some degree. Interpreting the presence and movements of puppet and puppeteer requires more active imaginative participation on the part of the audience member, which in turn allows the creation of the fantastical character, event, or world. I contacted Mary as soon as I started work on *Odd and the Frost Giants* and she designed and constructed the three animal puppets and coached the actors on puppeteering.

Overt puppeteering has the advantage of providing multiple sites for signification. On the most basic level, the shape and color of the animals’ bodies, as well as the texture of the fur material that covered the fox and bear, combined with the style of movement endowed to the puppets by the puppeteers, communicated the idea of “fox,” “bear,” and “eagle.” The heads of each puppet, however, were made of thin wood veneer constructed through folded paper techniques to look like wood carvings of animals. This invoked the character of Odd’s lost father, the woodcarver. In the show’s opening scene, Odd was shown playing with wooden toys created for him by his father, including a wooden Viking warrior. This toy, a simple puppet itself, helped the college-age actor signify Odd’s youth. On a secondary level of signification, it represented the father himself and was left lying prone on the floor when Odd learned of his loss and went off to attempt to fill his role as woodcutter. At its heart, *Odd* is the story of a boy attempting to

deal with the death of his father. In both the book and the play, Odd's shattered leg is a physical symbol of this psychic wound. In the play, the father's continued importance is also signified in the physical construction of the animal puppets.

Overt puppeteers are often costumed to make them blend into the background or disappear. The Japanese *bunraku* tradition, where the puppeteers wear all-black, often with a hood covering their heads and faces, is an example. But the body of the puppeteer can also become a site of signification, as in Synapse's *Animal Farm*, where they were costumed as the laboring classes the animals represented. In *Odd*, the costuming served a more specific purpose. These animals are animated by the trapped spirits of the gods Thor, Loki, and Odin. The puppeteers were the Storytellers playing those gods and they remained costumed as those gods. What the audience saw was the figure of Loki manipulating the body of the fox, a concrete metaphorical expression of the magical transformation. Julie Taymor describes a similar effect in her production of *The Green Bird* where a puppet and puppeteer combine to represent a prince transformed into a bird as "the dialectic between the puppet and the human character" and a "double event".<sup>55</sup>

These puppets were an effective way to stage these fantastically transformed figures. Staging the event of the transformation was trickier. The last section discussed how the transformation into the fox was incorporated into Loki's retelling of the exile from Asgard. In the book, Freya is described as kneading and reshaping the flesh of the animals until they are back in their normal forms. This didn't seem to be a practical staging approach. Odin's transformation is accompanied, however, by an incantation of sorts:

She scratched the back of the bird's neck with her fingernail and it preened against her.

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<sup>55</sup> Schechner, "Julie Taymor", 33

“Odin All-father,” she said. “Wisest of the Aesir. One-eyed Battle God. You who drank the well of wisdom from Mimir’s Well . . . return to us.” And then, with her left hand, she began to reshape the bird, to push at it, to change it . . .

A tall, gray-bearded man, with a cruel, wise face stood before them.<sup>56</sup>

I took this as my cue for these transformations. Freya’s list of descriptors for Odin are related to the Norse poetic device of kennings, nicknames for characters that reference their nature or deeds and are almost always used in place of proper names. I researched traditional kennings for the other two gods and constructed incantations for the other two gods. Freya recited these against a musical background that recalled the song sung by Odd’s Mother in the opening of the show (played, remember, by the same actress) and associated with the stories of magic and adventure she would tell him when he was small. At the same time, Freya, assisted by Storyteller Five in his guise as helpmate to the gods, was removing the puppets and restoring certain costume pieces—Odin’s hat, Thor’s belt, Loki’s cloak—that had been set aside while they were in animal form. Not a literal staging of the scene from the book at all, but instead a complex mixture of indexical and symbolic signs of magic and identity and transformation made possible by the production’s ability to move fluidly between narrative and dramatic mode.

Incidentally, both Freya’s incantations and the costuming accessories are elements that operate intertextually, referencing and drawing upon the old mostly-Icelandic sources for the stories we have of the Viking gods. Gaiman is consciously drawing on these sources as well, alluding to myths like the construction of the wall of Asgard and the origin of Mimir’s Well, which he never fully explains in the text. In the educators’ packet that was distributed to school groups that attended the production, we included essays on the three gods with retellings of these stories and others as context or a starting point for future exploration by interested audience members. These essays were also available through the Stages website, providing a

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<sup>56</sup> Gaiman, *Odd*, 101.

further site of intertextual discourse. This was a bit of what Jane Barnette calls “the final step of adaptation dramaturgy – audience outreach”<sup>57</sup> where the goal is to connect audience members with the source material and its own connection to other literature. This scene is probably the best example in the show of a moment when the adaptation reached back to the mythological tradition for material that does not appear in Gaiman’s version but complements it.

### **Staging the Magical Environment – Fimbulwinter and Bifrost**

While the talking animal-gods are the most prominent fantastic element in *Odd*, they are not the first such element. The first part of the story—Odd’s childhood, his father’s death, the accident that crushes his leg, and his mother’s remarriage—involves nothing impossible. It is only after these events, when Odd has lost both father and mother that something impossible happens: winter refuses to end. In the old stories, Ragnarok, the end of the world, is heralded by an extraordinarily long and harsh winter, called the Fimbulwinter. Gaiman’s doesn’t use that term, but he’s clearly referencing the idea. The idea of a never-ending winter, or even a non-supernatural winter, is challenging to present realistically in the theatre, where audience comfort demands non-frigid temperatures, and snow, ice and wind are difficult to signify iconically. Instead, we moved completely into a narrative mode, relying on the symbolic system of Gaiman’s language to tell the story of the lingering winter. That method worked to get Odd out of the village and to his meeting with the fox, bear, and eagle. The next part of the story, however, where Odd takes the animals to a frozen waterfall and uses the ice there to access the magical rainbow bridge Bifrost and travel to Asgard, demanded some degree of dramatic representation.

We created the waterfall by dropping a cascade of fabric from the lighting grid. Meanwhile Storytellers Four and Five narrated the journey there. Sound cues helped evoke Odd

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<sup>57</sup> Barnette, “Literary Adaptation for the Stage,” 297



chipping off a large piece of ice with his axe. The rainbow and the magical travel along Bifrost were accomplished through light cues and sound together with stylized “flight” by the puppets and Odd. It worked, but it definitely felt like the part of the show where the traditional concerns about representing the impossible onstage were the most relevant. These moments seemed to demand a physical representation that was difficult to pull off successfully. In retrospect, I wonder if I could have made more extensive use of Storytellers Four and Five and utilized narrative and dramatic modes simultaneously to better realize this sequence.

### **Staging Visions of Wisdom – Mimir’s Well**

Mimir’s well presented a different sort of challenge. There Odd drinks from the magical waters that carry wisdom, hears the voice of the dead giant Mimir, and sees visions of his parents before he was born and of the Frost Giants in their home in Jotunheim. Presenting the visions was not problematic, in itself. The fire pit was designed to double as Mimir’s Well, so that we could anchor this scene in a concrete location. Lighting and sound cues are well-suited to create the impression of a dream-state and the visions themselves could be physically staged or projected. The trick of the adaptation here was in the content of the visions themselves. This passage in the book is obscure. We know that, after the visions, Odd is able to finish a wood carving his father left behind that turns out to be an image of his mother. Later giving this carving to the Frost Giant helps Odd convince the Giant that he can leave and go home without losing face. But it is not entirely clear what insight the visions have given Odd to allow him to accomplish these things. I think that ambiguity works and is even enjoyable on the page, where the reader can take her time and reread as necessary. But I felt that on stage, where the causal sequence of events is clearer, too much ambiguity would be a problem. Additionally, I knew that our presentation of the Frost Giant himself later in the show was going to be somewhat abstract

and any visual representation of the Giants in Jotunheim here might create audience expectations that would make that more difficult.

The solution we eventually used in the production was to focus on the idea of home and show only the images of Odd's parents as Odd's mother made Norway her new home. That left the question of Odd's father. Using any of the Storytellers to portray him would be problematic, as it would associate him either with one of the gods or with the character of Elfred. In addition, the fact that, up to this point, audience members could create their own mental image of the lost father seemed important. In the end, the costume and props designers combined to create a life-sized costume matching the carved wooden Viking warrior from the beginning of the show. Storyteller Five played the father in this costume while the recorded voice of Mimir provided just enough narration to frame the events of the vision and to emphasize the idea of home. Odd's next conversation with Thor, about where the Frost Giants come from and what their home is like, is thus set up as providing the understanding Odd needs later to convince the Frost Giant that he doesn't actually want to rule Asgard after all.

### **Staging the Confrontation – The Frost Giant**

The final moment of the fantastic to consider was actually the first one to occur to me as I was reading this story to my children. In the book, this is how Gaiman establishes the size of the Frost Giant (and the Wall of Asgard):

At first, Odd thought that the wall of Asgard was as high as a tall man and that there was a pale statue of a man sitting on a boulder beside it—at least he imagined it to be a statue. And then he moved slowly closer, and closer, and the wall grew and the pale statue grew also, until, as the boy got closer still, he had to throw back his head to look at them.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Gaiman, *Odd*, 76.

Later the Giant picks Odd up so that they can converse and there is an illustration of Odd standing in the Giant's palm looking into the Giant's face. My idea was to attempt a similar size reversal on stage.

A rough stone wall ran the length of the upstage side of the theatre. At first, when Odd approached the wall, he directed his attention upward and the audience heard the voice of the Giant (performed off-stage by Storyteller Five) amplified and distorted. When the time came for the Giant to pick Odd up, a group of stones in the center of the wall folded down like a drawbridge, revealing a giant stone hand into which Odd stepped. Then a sound cue and light shift signified the journey up into the air while more stones shifted in the wall until it had reconfigured into a craggy stone face, twice as tall as Odd. The wall functioned as a giant puppet, echoing the smaller animal puppets, but with a construction suggesting forbidding stone rather than father-associated wood. Paradoxically, this staging suggested both great size and close intimacy, almost like a close-up on a giant movie screen. This was an appropriate setting for the conversation between Odd and the Frost Giant, in which Odd frees Asgard not through an exercise of magic or power or even trickery, but by reminding the Frost Giant of his home and the things that are actually important to him.

The only major event from the book that I did not include in the stage adaptation comes right after this conversation. In the book, the Frost Giant places Odd atop the Wall of Asgard and walks off into a snowstorm. Odd is left on this precarious perch until the eagle-Odin arrives with Loki's magic shoes (which had been referenced earlier) allowing him to float down and rejoin his companions. On the page, this bit of magic is a whimsical follow up to the climatic confrontation and easily achieved through description. I could see no such quick and easy way to realize the effect on stage, however, and devoting the time and imaginative energy needed for Odd to "fly" in whatever sense slowed down the pace of a story that wanted at that point to move briskly to

a conclusion. Instead, in the stage adaptation, the Giant lowers Odd to the ground before leaving, where he was found by Freya, coming to investigate the Giant's departure. This leads to Freya's restoration of the gods and to one final piece of magic before Odd returns to his own world and life. Freya offers to heal his shattered leg. In the book, she "deftly unhooked it at the knee"<sup>59</sup> to examine it and discover that she cannot fully restore it. She makes it better, however, and offers to "replace it entirely? What about a cat's rear leg? Or a chicken's?"<sup>60</sup> Odd declines and Freya promises that it will continue to improve with time. All of this echoes the wound created by the loss of the father, which has been made better by Odd's adventure and will continue to get better, but can never be completely healed while Odd remains himself. Unhooking a leg at the knee is a challenging thing to stage, so the stage adaptation relied instead upon the symbol of the brace which Odd's Mother (played by Storyteller Four/Freya) placed on his leg after the accident and which Freya removed with the accompaniment of the magical music that is also associated with the Mother. The entire scene with Freya ends the fantastic portion of the story with a less spectacular and more personal form of magic.

### **Staging Fairyland – The Next Step**

With the completion of this thesis and my graduate work, I look forward to being more active as a theatre practitioner again, including adapting more works of the fantastic for the stage. One text that I have already started to explore is Catherynne M. Valente's *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making*. Like *Odd*, *Fairyland* was originally published in 2009. That iteration of the work was a crowd-funded online serial. It was picked up for conventional publication in 2011. It continues to have a sizeable online fan base and as of this writing, it has generated four sequels, all conventionally published, and an online-only

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<sup>59</sup> Gaiman, *Odd*, 105.

<sup>60</sup> Gaiman, *Odd*, 106

prequel novella. *Fairyland* also shares with *Odd* the quality of appealing to audiences of all ages rather than specifically targeting young readers only. At this stage I have begun the process of reaching out to the author to discuss adaptation rights and have starting to work on an outline of the adaptation, applying the lessons learned in *Odd* and in the research presented in this thesis.

*The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making* will present different challenges than *Odd*. To start with, *Odd* is a novella-length and turned into a show of manageable length with only one major scene cut. *Fairyland*, while not particularly long for a novel, is over four times the length of *Odd*. As in Peterson and O'Hare's *An Iliad*, significant textual cuts will be necessary simply to reach a workable length for staging, particularly for young audiences. The cast of characters is also correspondingly larger, raising questions of effective doubling or combining certain roles. In addition, the scope of the world presented in *Fairyland* is much larger than in *Odd*. While Bifrost is a visibly wondrous location, most of what we see of Asgard is like *Odd*'s home village and the surrounding forest, only grander. *Fairyland*, on the other hand, is partly an homage to books like Frank L. Baum's *Oz* series and Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books, both of which rely for much of their appeal not only on character and story but on a sense of wonder built on the exploration of a series of fantastic locales and encounters with impossible creatures. Valente's book is the story of a girl named September, who is carried off by the Green Wind from her home in Nebraska to Fairyland, which, like *Oz* and *Wonderland*, is packed with marvelous things like a young Marid who lives backwards in time, a dragon-like creature who is actually a cross between a wyvern and a library, and an island of Tsukumogami—household items that have gained a soul through long service. This is, however, also the appeal of presenting this story on stage—the chance to create puppets, costumes, stagings and scenery to embody these locations and creatures.

Realizing these wonders will require the engagement of audience imagination that comes with activating the narrative mode through various devices, including the use of a narrator figure. *Fairyland* is written in the third person omniscient point-of-view. Unlike *Odd*, though, the narrator voice in this novel is highly distinctive and even somewhat mysterious. She refers directly to her own existence and that of her audience in passages like this one, after September has encountered a signpost directing her to choose a path to lose either her life, her mind, her way, or her heart. With “lose your way” pointing back in the direction she came from and unwilling to lose her life or mind, September chooses her heart.

You and I, being grown up and having lost our hearts at least twice or thrice along the way, might shut our eyes and cry out, *Not that way, child!* But as we have said, September was Somewhat Heartless, and felt herself reasonably safe on that road. Children always do.<sup>61</sup>

This is clearly the voice of a specific character who would need to be embodied in a stage production. In fact, it would be an appealing role and a large one. What is unclear is who exactly this character is—whether she is a native of Fairyland or our world and what her relationship is to the story. One possibility is that she is a Wind, one of a group of very urbane personified nature spirits, including the Green Wind, who play various roles in September’s adventures throughout the series. Regardless, the narrator is a very active storyteller who could be used throughout the story to activate the narrative mode and engage the audience’s imagination in cooperative storytelling.

*Fairyland*, unlike *Odd*, is the first in a series of books and one might hope that a successful adaptation of this one might lead to further adaptations as well. This raises an interesting question, as the plot of the second book is foreshadowed in a storyline in *Fairyland* that might otherwise be an easy cut. Early in the book, the heroine September loses her

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<sup>61</sup> Valente, *Fairyland*, 26

shadow, sacrificing it to save a shapechanging *peri* child. This moment, a clear homage to the opening scene of *Peter Pan*, has the same resistance to staging as that predecessor scene: how does one remove a shadow onstage? At least Peter's shadow is quickly restored, while September's shadow remains severed all the way through the end of the text. It may be that the best solution is to leave the scene and trust the realization of the effect to designers and directors. Alternately, a more radical change may be in order.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined efforts to stage the fantastic—stories, characters, locations, and events that defy the physical laws of our world. Conventional wisdom says that a literary medium is better suited to this kind of storytelling, since the actors, scenery, costumes, and props that make meaning in the theatre are themselves subject to those physical laws in a way that words on a page are not. In this view, the great advantage of the theatrical medium—the power of live embodied performance—is balanced by the limitation of what can be realistically represented on stage. And this is true, so long as those performers operate in the dramatic mode, showing the story to the audience through the use of largely iconic signification. Yet the storytellers examined here (and countless others before them) succeeded by taking advantage of the extraordinary flexibility of the theatrical medium and its ability to utilize not only dramatic mode and iconic signs, but also narrative mode and indexical and symbolic sign systems.

Peterson and O'Hare's *An Iliad* moves fluidly back and forth from epic to dramatic mode and utilizes shifts in language and cultural context to retell Homer's epic in a way that makes it both classic and current. Aaron Posner and Teller created a dense and complex system of signs in *The Tempest* at Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, utilizing the technologies of stage illusion to push the boundaries of what can be depicted iconically on stage while also constructing rich indexical and symbolic presentations of Prospero's magic. Synapse Productions used overt puppetry to make concrete the allegorical subtext of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. And my own adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Odd and the Frost Giants* relied on layers of simultaneous systems of signification to embody Odd's parallel quests to restore the gods to Asgard and deal with the loss of his father.



In each case the twin taxonomies of lyric, narrative, and dramatic storytelling modes and symbolic, indexical, and iconic signification were useful. But all of these production defy easy classification. The strength of the theatrical medium is the way that it can move fluidly from mode to mode or even operate simultaneously in more than one mode. Similarly, theatrical storytelling can be dense with signification utilizing all three classes of signs at once. The artist who chooses to meet the significant challenge of taking a story of the impossible from page to stage would be well advised to take advantage of both.

# **Odd and the Frost Giants**

**From the Novel by**

**Neil Gaiman © 2009**

**Adapted by**

**Rob Kimbro**

**Adaptation © 2010**

**Draft Version – May 2011**

**Final Production version**

## **Dramatis Personae**

**Storyteller #1/Odin**

**Storyteller #2/Thor**

**Storyteller #3/Loki**

**Storyteller #4/Odd's Mother/Freya**

**Storyteller #5/Fat Elfred/Frost Giant**

**Odd**, a young Viking boy

## **Setting**

A Viking mead hall – a place for telling stories through the long winter months as we await the return of spring

Winter

A Thousand Years Ago, more or less.

## Scene 1

### Odd

*A Viking Mead Hall. A place for gathering and telling stories to pass the long winter months.*

*Five storytellers enter. As they tell the tale of Odd and the Frost Giants, they will take on the roles of the Gods, Odd's Mother, the Frost Giant. Everyone in the story, except Odd*

### STORYTELLER #1/ODIN

Once there was a boy called Odd

*Odd enters, excited, carrying a wooden toy his father has just carved for him. Perhaps a troll. He runs to the hearth, where his other toys are – a longship and a Viking warrior and begins to play. There is a carved wooden chair.*

### STORYTELLER #2/THOR

There was nothing strange about that in those days. In Norse, the tongue of the Vikings, it meant the tip of a blade. It was a good name. A lucky name.

### STORYTELLER #3/LOKI

The boy *was* odd, though. At least, the other villagers thought so. And if there's one thing he wasn't, it was lucky.

### ODIN

There were no full-time Vikings in those days. Everybody had another job.

### THOR

Odd's father was a wood-cutter. A master of the axe. In the winter when the snows were deep he would sit by the fire and carve wood into faces and drinking cups and toys.

*Odd enjoys the toys his father has made him. When his mother enters, he proudly shows off his father's latest creation.*

### STORYTELLER #4/MOTHER

Odd's mother would sew and cook . . .

### LOKI

and, always, sing.

*Storyteller #4 takes on the role of Mother. She sings. Something Celtic, perhaps. It is stirring, adventuresome, though we don't understand the words.*

### THOR

Sea-raiding, or "Viking", was something the men did for fun or to get things they couldn't find in their village – gold, metal for axes and tools, wives.

*Odd's Mother sits in the chair with a basket of handwork and Odd takes his toys and plays at her feet.*

**LOKI**

Odd's mother was from Scotland. The songs she sang to Odd were the ballads she had learned as a girl, back before Odd's father had taken her knife away and thrown her over his shoulder and carried her back to the longships.

**ODIN**

Odd didn't understand the words his mother sang.

**STORYTELLER #5/ELFRED**

But she would translate them after she sang, and Odd's head would roil with fine lords-

**THOR**

Riding out on great horses-

**ODIN**

Their noble falcons on their wrists-

**LOKI**

Brave hounds padding by their sides.

**ELFRED**

Off to get into all manner of trouble.

**THOR**

Fighting giants!

**LOKI**

Rescuing maidens!

**ODIN**

And freeing the oppressed from tyranny.

**LOKI**

When Odd was 10, his father was killed on a sea raid.

*Odd's Mother's song changes – mournful now and softer. She rises, absorbed in her grief.*

**ODIN**

It was three weeks after the longship had come back without his father.

**THOR**

The time of year when Odd's father would go deep into the woods to his tiny woodcutter's hut and return a week later with a cart full of logs – enough to work and carve all through the winter months.

**ODIN**

Certain that he knew all there was to know about cutting trees, Odd took down his father's axe and hauled it out into the woods.

*Odd goes and gets his father's axe, returning to center stage. He looks at his mother, who does not notice. This is the best plan he can come up with to make things right again. It does not go well.*

**LOKI**

He later admitted to his mother that, possibly, he should have used the smaller axe and practiced on a smaller tree.

*Odin comes to stand behind Odd with a branch that will become Odd's crutch. Odd swings the axe – out of control. We hear a crash and he drops the axe. He falls and Odin brings the branch down on top of him, leaving it lying across his body..*

*During the following dialogue, Odd makes his way home where his Mother helps him into the chair and fits him with a primitive leg brace. Odd will wear this through the rest of the show until his encounter with Freya in Asgard. Odd's Mother continues to sing, sadly, as she puts on the brace. When she is done she stands and moves away.*

**THOR**

Still, what he did was remarkable. After the tree fell on his leg, he used the axe to dig away the earth and free himself. He cut a branch to lean on, for the bones in his leg were shattered. And, somehow, he got himself home.

**ODIN**

Hauling his father's heavy axe with him, for metal was rare in those hills and he could not leave it there to rust.

**ELFRED**

Odd would have to wear a brace on that leg for the rest of his days.

**THOR**

After his father died, Odd's mother sang less and less.

**LOKI**

Two years passed and Odd's Mother married Fat Elfred.

*Storyteller #5 takes on the role of the stepfather. He claims the carved chair. And Odd's Mother's attention. Odd is left out.*

**ELFRED**

Who wasn't that bad!

**THOR**

When he hadn't been drinking. And he had sons and daughters of his own and no time for a crippled stepson. So Odd spent more and more time out in the great woods.

**ODIN**

He loved the spring, when the waterfalls began to course down the valleys and the woodland was covered with flowers.

**THOR**

He liked summer, when the first berries began to ripen, and autumn when there were nuts and small apples.

**LOKI**

Odd did not care for the winter, when the snows drove the villagers into the great hall.

**THOR**

In winter, the men would fight and fart and sing and sleep and wake and fight again.

**LOKI**

And the women would shake their heads and sew and knit and mend.

**THOR**

Until March, when the snow would thaw, the rivers begin to run, and the world would wake into itself again.

**ODIN**

But not that year.

*The Gods exchange a look – grim, as if Odin has reminded them of an unpleasant reality they'd just as soon have forgotten.*

**LOKI**

No. That year, winter hung in there. Day after day, the ice stayed hard; the world remained unfriendly and cold.

**THOR**

People started to get on each other's nerves.

*Elfred and Odd's Mother exit*

**ODIN**

Which is why - one morning at the end of March, before the sun was up, when the frost was hard and the ground still like iron, while Fat Elfred and his children and Odd's Mother were still asleep – Odd put on his warmest clothes, took his father's axe and a smoke-blackened salmon, and limped out into the woods.

*Odd journeys around the stage. As he does so, the storytellers create a new location - a simple hut with a cot and a fireplace.*

**LOKI**

The snow was deep and treacherous, with a thick, shiny crust of ice.

**THOR**

It would have been hard walking for a man with two good legs. For a boy with one very bad leg and wooden crutch, every hill was a mountain.

**LOKI**

Odd crossed a frozen lake - which should have melted weeks before - and went deep into the woods.

**ODIN**

The day seemed short, as if it were still midwinter instead of nearly April, and it was dark as night by the time he reached his father's old woodcutting hut.

*As Odd builds his fire, he finds a half-carved piece of wood. It is hard to tell what it was intended to be when finished. He nearly throws it on the fire before deciding to pocket it instead.*

**LOKI**

He started a fire and ate smoked salmon.

**THOR**

It was good. There were blankets in the corner still. Nobody hit him or called him a cripple or an idiot. And he could imagine that the little room still smelled of his father.

**ODIN**

He fell asleep quite happy.

*Lights go down on Odd, curled up asleep. The Gods watch him for a brief moment and then exit to take up their animal forms.*

*Storyteller #5 enters. He carries a tall, simple walking stick.*

**STORYTELLER #5**

Not far from Odd's father's cabin, there was a dead pine tree with a hole in one side, the kind that bees sometimes inhabit and fill with honeycomb.

*He creates or reveals a tree – possibly realistic, possibly abstract. It should, however, have a hole.*

When the people in Odd's village found a tree like that, they would make the honey into the mead they drank to celebrate the safe return of their Vikings or Midwinter or anything else that needed celebrating.

But the people in Odd's village weren't there to find this tree.

*Enter a bear, who is also Thor*

Instead there was a bear.



A hungry bear.

Next to that dead pine tree grew a silver birch. To get at the hole and the honey, the bear  
leaned against the birch to move it out of the way.

*The bear thrusts its snout deep into the tree. Elfred uses his staff to create the birch and  
trap the bear in place.*

But then the young birch tree snapped back and trapped the poor bear against that ancient  
pine.

And there he stayed.

*Enter a large eagle with only one eye, who is also Odin. He lands near the bear, surveys  
the situation. The bear is frustrated, chagrined, perhaps a little embarrassed. The eagle  
flies away.*

*From the direction toward which the eagle exited, there comes a fox, who is also Loki.  
The fox is red-orange, like a flame, with a narrow muzzle, sharp ears and a calculating  
and sly expression. He, too, comes to look at the poor bear. He finds the situation very  
funny. The bear does not. A growl. The fox composes himself and goes to search for a  
solution.*

## Scene 2

### The Fox, the Eagle and the Bear

*Morning. Odd is awakened by a scratching outside the cabin. Outside is Loki, in his fox form..*

**ODD**  
Hello.

*When it sees that Odd is watching, it moves a little bit away and turns back to look at the boy. It takes a dancing step or two towards him and then turns away, looking back as if inviting Odd to follow him.*

**ODD**  
I suppose it is not every day you get to follow a fox.

*To the fox:*

Just a moment.

*Odd gets his father's axe and his crutch and begins to follow the fox.*

*After a time, they come across Odin, in the form of a large eagle with only one eye. The eagle lands and watches Odd carefully.*

**ODD**  
Hello.

*The eagle takes off again.*

*As the fox and the boy continue, the eagle follows, circling overhead.*

*After a time, the fox comes to the hilltop where the bear is trapped. The bear looks miserable. It bellows grumpily.*

*The fox and the eagle look at Odd. Odd looks at the situation and at all three animals.*

**ODD**  
Gotten yourself stuck, have you? Well. . .

#### STORYTELLER #5

Odd cut a piece of wood about twelve inches long and used it to prop the two trees apart, for he didn't want to crush the bear's snout. Then, with clean, economical blows, he swung the blade of his axe against the birch.

*Odd starts to chop through the base of the birch.*

**STORYTELLER #5**

The wood was hard, but he kept swinging

*Odd swings again.*

**STORTELLER #5**

And he had soon come close to cutting it through.

*Odd pauses and looks at the bear. The bear makes a noise, wondering why Odd has stopped. The eagle and the fox continue to watch with great interest.*

**ODD**

I can't run. So if you want to eat me, you'll find me easy prey.

But I should have thought of that before, shouldn't I? Too late now.

*A final blow of the axe and the birch falls away. Storyteller #5 exits with the birch/staff  
The bear pulls free and looks at Odd. It is a big bear. All three animals watch Odd.*

*Odd reaches into the pine and tastes the honey. It is good. The bear lunges forward and  
licks Odd's hand. The bear returns to the hole and enjoys the honey, now free of any  
worry about being trapped.*

*The bear roars, not so grumpy now.*

**ODD**

Well, then.

*Not quite sure what to do next, Odd turns to go. He immediately realizes that he has no  
idea how to get back to his father's cabin.*

**ODD**

I don't suppose you remember which direction I came from? Ah, well. That looks familiar. Maybe.

*After a moment of consideration, he picks a direction and heads off. After a moment, his  
bad leg gives way on the ice and he falls hard, his crutch flying off. The bear  
approaches.*

**ODD**

Hello, bear. You had better eat me. I don't know the way back and I'll be more use as bear food than I will be frozen to death on the ice.

*The bear settles down in front of Odd. If the design allows, the bear indicates that Odd  
should climb onto his back. The fox takes the lead again and all four return to the cabin  
– Not exactly a brave lord on his horse with his hawk and his hound, but close enough.*

*If riding the bear is not feasible, then the bear can support Odd as he retrieves his crutch  
and then as he walks back to the cabin.*

*Night falls as they return.*

*Outside the cabin, Odd dismounts (or steps away) from the bear*

**ODD**

Thank you.

*The bear nods. The eagle lands and looks at Odd with its one good eye. The fox waits  
between Odd and the cabin.*

**ODD**

What?

*It is clear what the animals want.*

**ODD**

I suppose you had better come in.

*They do.*

*While Odd busies himself around the cabin – putting away the axe, lighting a lantern or a  
candle, etc., the animals arrange themselves comfortably on one side of the cabin. When  
Odd turns his attention back to them, they are asleep.*

**ODD**

Good night, then.

### Scene 3

#### The Night Conversation

*Odd lies down. Lights narrow down until only Odd can be seen. He sleeps, a little restless. He dreams of the songs his mother used to sing.*

*A voice from the darkness interrupts the song. Deep, booming, gloomy.*

**THOR**

It wasn't my fault.

*A second voice – higher. Bitterly amused.*

**LOKI**

Oh, right. I told you you'd get yourself stuck. You just didn't listen

**THOR**

I was hungry. You don't know what it was like, smelling that honey. It was better than mead. Better than roasted goose. And you of all people don't need to go blaming anyone else. It is because of you we're in this mess.

**LOKI**

I thought we had a deal. I thought we weren't going to keep harping on about a trivial little mistake . . .

**THOR**

You call this trivial?

*A third voice, high and raw*

**ODIN**

Silence.

*Odd has been feigning sleep through most of this, but now he sits up and uncovers the lantern or moves the candle to illuminate the other side of the room. Just the three animals.*

**ODD**

You were talking.

*The animals look at each other as if to say "who, us?"*

**ODD**

Somebody was talking and it wasn't me. There isn't anyone else in here. That means it was you lot. And there's no point in arguing.

**THOR**

We weren't arguing, because we can't talk.

Oops.

*The fox and the eagle look at the bear, who looks ashamed of himself.*

**ODD**

Which one of you wants to explain what's going on?

*The fox responds.*

**LOKI**

Nothing's going on. Just a few talking animals. Nothing to worry about. Happens every day. We'll be out of your hair first thing in the morning.

*The eagle examines Odd carefully with its one good eye. It turns back to the fox.*

**ODIN**

Tell!

**LOKI**

Why me?

**THOR**

Oh, I don't know. Possibly because it is *all your fault*?

**LOKI**

That's a bit much. Blaming the whole thing on a chap like that. It wasn't like I set out to do this. It could have happened to anyone.

**ODD**

*What could? And why can you talk?*

**THOR**

We can talk because, O mortal child – do not be afraid – beneath these animal disguises we wear . . . well not actual disguises. I mean we are actually a bear and a fox and an eagle, which is a rotten sort of thing to happen, but where was I . . . ?

**ODIN**

Gods!

**ODD**

Gods?

**THOR**

Aye. Gods. I was getting to that. I am great Thor, Lord of the Thunders. The eagle is Lord Odin, All-father, greatest of the Gods. And this runt-eared meddling fox is –

**LOKI**

Loki. Blood-brother to the gods. Smartest, sharpest, most brilliant of all the inhabitants of Asgard –

**THOR**

Brilliant?

**LOKI**

You would have fallen for it. Anyone would.

**ODD**

Fallen for *what*?

*The fox looks at him and sighs*

**LOKI**

I'll tell you. And you'll see. It could have happened to anyone.

So, Asgard. Home of the mighty. Surrounded by an impregnable wall built for us by a Frost Giant. And it was due to me, I should add, that that wall didn't cost us the Giant's fee, which was unreasonably high.

**THOR**

Freya. The giant wanted Freya. Most lovely of the Goddesses – except for my lovely wife Sif, of course. And it wanted the Sun and the Moon.

**LOKI**

If you interrupt me one more time. *One more time.* I will not only stop talking, but I shall go off on my own and leave the two of you to fend for yourselves.

**THOR**

Yes, but –

**LOKI**

NOT ONE WORD!

*Silence.*

**LOKI**

In the great hall of Odin sat all the Gods, drinking mead, eating and telling stories. They drank and bragged and fought and boasted and drank, well through the night and into the small hours. The Goddesses had gone to bed hours since and now the fires burnt low and most of the gods slept where they sat. Even great Odin slept in his high chair, his single eye closed in sleep.

But there was one among the Gods who had drunk and eaten more than any of the others and still was neither sleepy nor yet drunk, not even a little -

**THOR**  
Harrumph

**LOKI**  
I said *one word* –

**THOR**  
That wasn't a word. I just made a noise. So. You weren't drunk.

**LOKI**  
Right. I wasn't. And, not-drunkenly I wandered out from the hall and I walked out to the top of the wall around Asgard.

In the moonlight, standing beneath the wall, staring up at me, I saw the most beautiful woman anyone has ever seen.

*On the wall we see the shadow of the beautiful woman. We hear her voice – beautiful, magical, like the striking of a harp string*

**VOICE**  
Hail, brave warrior.

**LOKI**  
Hail yourself. Hail, most beautiful of creatures.

(I knew she liked me.) What would a young lady of such loveliness be doing a-wandering alone, and at night, with wolves and trolls and worse on the loose? Let me offer you hospitality – the hospitality of Loki, mightiest and wisest of all the lords of Asgard.

**VOICE**  
I cannot accept your offer, O brave and extremely good-looking one. For although you are tall and powerful and extremely attractive, I have promised my father, a great king, that I will not give my heart or my lips to any but he who possesses one thing.

**LOKI**  
And that one thing is?

**VOICE**  
Mjollnir. The mighty Hammer of Thor.

**LOKI**  
My feet flew and like the wind I rushed back to the great hall. There was Thor, sleeping in a drunken stupor, his face lying in a puddle of gravy, and hanging from his side, his hammer. Only the nimble and clever fingers of Loki could have teased it from the belt without waking Thor.

*The bear's voice rumbles, deep in the back of his throat. The fox glares at him.*



**LOKI**

Heavy it was, that hammer – mightiest of the weapons of the Gods. Yet not too heavy for my magic.

I hurried to the gates of Asgard, unbarred them and walked through – followed by the hammer. The maiden was there, weeping.

Why the tears, O loveliness itself?

**VOICE**

I weep because once I saw you, great and noble lord, I knew I could never love another. And yet I am doomed to give my heart and my caress only to he who lets me touch the Hammer of Thor.

**LOKI**

Dry your tears. And behold – the Hammer of Thor!

She stopped crying then and reached out her delicate hands and held the hammer tightly.

*The shadow of the beautiful maid begins to change and grow. We hear “her” laughing, but now her voice is changed – a deep, crashing noise.*

**LOKI**

The maiden held the hammer as if it was a feather. A wave of cold engulfed me and I found myself looking up at her. To make matters worse, she wasn’t even a *she* any longer.

She was a man. Well, not a *man*. Male, yes. Yet big as a high hill, icicles hanging from his beard.

**VOICE**

After so long, all it took was one drunken, lust-ridden oaf and Asgard is ours.

**LOKI**

The Frost Giant looked down at me and gestured with Mjollnir, the magical Hammer of Thor.

**VOICE**

And you, you need to be something else.

**LOKI**

I felt my back pushing up. I felt a tail forcing its way out from the base of my spine. My fingers shrank into paws and claws.

It wasn’t the first time I had turned into animal form – I was a horse once, you know – but it was the first time it was imposed on me from the outside. It wasn’t a nice feeling. Not a nice feeling at all.

**THOR**

It was worse for us. One moment you're fast asleep, dreaming about thunderstorms and the next you're being scrunched into a bear. He turned the All-father into an eagle.

**ODIN**

Rage!

**THOR**

The giant laughed at us, waving my hammer about. Then he forced Heimdall the Guardian to summon the Rainbow Bridge and exiled the three of us here to Midgard, the world of men. There's no more to tell

*Silence.*

**ODD**

Well, Gods or not, I don't know how I can feed you. If this winter keeps going, I don't think I can keep feeding me.

**THOR**

We won't die. Because we can't die here. But we'll get hungry. And we'll get more wild. More animal. It is something that happens when you have taken on animal form. Stay in it too long and you become what you pretend to be. When Loki was a horse –

**LOKI**

We don't talk about that.

**ODD**

So. Is that why the winter isn't ending?

**THOR**

The Frost Giants like the winter. They are the winter.

**ODD**

And if spring never comes? If summer doesn't happen? If this winter just goes on forever?

*Silence. The bear and fox, agitated, look to the eagle.*

**ODIN**

Death!

**LOKI**

Eventually. Not immediately. In a year or so. And some creatures will go south. But most of the people and animals will die. It is happened before, back when we had wars with the Frost Giants at the dawn of time. When they won, huge ice sheets would cover this part of the world. When we won – and if it took us a hundred thousand years, we always did – the ice sheets would retreat and the spring would return.

But we were Gods then, not animals.

**THOR**

And I had my hammer.

*A pause. The situation is extremely grave.*

**ODD**

Well then.

We'll set off in the morning. Once there's light enough to travel by.

**LOKI**

Set off? For where?

**ODD**

Asgard, of course.

*With that, Odd lies back down and goes back to sleep. The animals look at each other, bemused, as lights fade*

## Scene 4

### Making Rainbows

*The next morning. Odd is packing his few belongings for the journey to Asgard. He holds the half-finished wood carving in his hand*

**LOKI**

What's that you've got there?

**ODD**

It is a lump of wood. My father began to carve it into something years ago and he left it here. But he never came back to finish it.

**LOKI**

What was it going to be?

**ODD**

I don't know. My father used to say that the carving was in the wood already. You just had to find out what the wood wanted to be and then take your knife and remove everything that wasn't that.

**LOKI**

Mm.

*The fox turns away, seemingly unimpressed.*

**THOR**

It won't work. I mean, whatever you've got in mind, it won't.

**ODD**

Tell me again how you get to Asgard

**LOKI**

Easy. You get to the city of the Gods by crossing Bifrost, the Rainbow Bridge. Only, when you're a God, you don't have to wait for the sun to come out after a rainfall. You just wiggle your fingers and a rainbow appears. Easy.

**THOR**

It was easy. When we had fingers. Which now we don't.

**ODD**

We can still find a rainbow and use it.

**LOKI**

Rainbows turn up after it rains, don't they?

**THOR**

Not in midwinter. In the spring, yes. Except that there won't be a spring!

We're wasting our time. We don't have any way of getting to the Rainbow Bridge. And if by some miracle we crossed it, look at us – we're animals, and the boy can barely walk. We can't defeat Frost Giants. This whole thing is hopeless.

**LOKI**

He's right.

*Odd starts out of the cabin, pausing in the doorway.*

**ODD**

If it is hopeless, why are you coming with me?

*Silence for a moment, then the animals move past Odd out of the cabin – first the eagle, then the fox and finally the bear.*

**THOR**

Nothing better to do.

*As Odd and the Gods begin to journey around the stage, Storytellers #4&5 enter. The bring with them, or create, a frozen waterfall*

**STORYTELLER #4**

The place Odd took the Gods was one of his favorite places in the world

**STORYTELLER #5**

. From spring to midwinter the river ran high and fast before it crashed down almost a hundred feet into the valley beneath.

**STORYTELLER #4**

In the high summer, when the sun barely set, the villagers would come out to the waterfall and splash around in the basin pool, letting the water tumble onto their heads.

**STORYTELLER #5**

Now the waterfall was frozen and ice ran from the crags down to the basin in twisted ropes and great clear icicles.

**ODD**

It is a waterfall. We used to come out here. And when the water came down and the sun was shining brightly, you could see a rainbow, like a huge circle, all around the waterfall.

**LOKI**

No water. No water, no rainbow.

**ODD**

There's water. But it is ice.

*Positioning himself carefully, Odd swings his axe against the waterfall. The impact echoes, cracking off the hills around them and great chunks of ice fall at Odd's feet. The fox watches carefully. The bear is less impressed. Meanwhile the eagle circles overhead. It has not spoken in a long while.*

**THOR**

Clever. You broke it.

**ODD**

Yes.

*He examines the fallen pieces, selecting one.*

**LOKI**

It is a lump of ice, if you ask me.

**ODD**

Yes. I think the rainbows are imprisoned in the ice when the water freezes.

*Odd works, trying to shape the ice. Perhaps he uses the axe, or a belt knife. Either way, it is awkward and he's not making much progress.*

**THOR**

He's been up there a long time. Do you think he's looking for something?

**LOKI**

I worry about him. It must be hard to be an eagle. He could get lost in there. When I was a horse -

**THOR**

A mare, you mean.

*The bear is amused. This is clearly a sore subject for the fox, who turns his attention to Odd, who is still working at the ice, but making little progress.*

**ODD**

I've seen rainbows on the snow sometimes and on the side of buildings, when the sun shone through the icicles. And I thought, Ice is only water, so it must have rainbows in it, too. When the water freezes, the rainbows are trapped in it, like fish in a shallow pool. And the sunlight sets them free.

*The fox noses around on the ground for a moment. He finds a grey stone, half-buried.*

**LOKI**

Here. This is what you need.

*Odd picks up the grey stone. It is a flint, with a blunt end like a handle and a sharp end where the stone has been chipped away.*

**LOKI**

Don't touch the edges. It'll be sharp. Really sharp. They didn't mess around when they made those things and they don't blunt easily if you make them well.

**ODD**

What is it?

**LOKI**

A hand axe. Long ago, men used to do sacrifices here, on that big rock over there and they used tools like this.

**ODD**

How do you know?

**LOKI**

Who do you think they were making sacrifices to?

*Odd begins to use the axe to shape the ice. This works much better. He looks back at Loki in surprise.*

**ODD**

It is hot.

**LOKI**

Is it?

*Soon Odd is satisfied with the shape of the ice. He has made it into a crude prism. He stands and holds the ice in the sunlight, turning it this way and that. Suddenly, a puddle of light appears on the ground or on the waterfall, all the colors of the rainbow.*

**ODD**

How is that?

**THOR**

But it is down here. It should be in the air. I mean, how can that be a bridge?

*The eagle, who has returned to watch these developments, suddenly takes off with a clap of wings and begins to fly around the stage*

**LOKI**

I don't think he's very impressed. Nice try.

*But the eagle turns and gains speed. With a screech it dives toward the pool of colored light. It continues to gain speed. There's no way it can pull out in time.*

*Blackout. The colored lights reappear and expand, taking in all of the animals and Odd. Us, too.. The world is raspberry-colored and leaf-colored and golden-colored and fire-colored and blueberry-colored and wine-colored. We're inside the rainbow now and it is*

*taking us somewhere. The play of the colors builds to a peak and stops. We're somewhere else – still a forest, but wilder, bigger, greater. Perhaps the Northern lights are constant here, an echo of the Rainbow Bridge.*

**ODD**

Where is this place?

**ODIN**

Asgard!



## Scene 5

### Mimir's Well

#### STORYTELLER #4

Really, truly, with all his heart, Odd wanted to believe that he was still in the world he had known all his life – Midgard, the country of the Norsemen. But he wasn't and he knew it. The world smelled different. It smelled alive. Everything he looked at seemed sharper, more real, more *there*.

#### ODD

So, this is where the Gods live? This is Asgard?

#### THOR

Well, this whole place is Asgard. Yes. But the Gods live in a town, not in these woods.

#### ODD

What do you call the town?

#### THOR

Asgard. It is called Asgard, too.

#### LOKI

We named it after ourselves, the Aesir. The Gods.

#### ODD

How far is it?

*The fox sniffs the air.*

#### LOKI

Not too far. Once we get through this forest, we reach the plain, and the town is in the center of the plain.

#### ODD

I suppose we should get on with it, then.

#### THOR

There will be time. Asgard is not going anywhere. And right now, I am hungry. I am going fishing. Why don't you two build a fire?

*The bear lumbers off into the darkness of the forest. The eagle flaps its wings and takes off, following the bear. Odd and the fox are left alone. The fox watches him as he gathers branches and prepares to start a fire – either with flint and steel or by rotating a small stick in a hollow of a larger piece of wood. Either way, it looks like it is going to be hard.*

**LOKI**

Why bother?

This is easier.

*The fox pads up to the pile of sticks and breathes upon them. They catch fire with a crackle.*

**ODD**

How did you do that?

**LOKI**

This is Asgard. It is less . . . solid . . . than the place you come from. The Gods – even transformed Gods – well, there is power in this place. You understand?

**ODD**

Not really. But not to worry.

*With the fire started, Odd and the fox settle in to await the return of the other two. Odd pulls out his father's unfinished carving and examines it. He can't quite make out what it was going to be and it bothers him.*

#### **STORYTELLER #5**

It was twilight by the time the bear brought back the largest trout Odd had ever seen. He gutted it with his knife and roasted it over the fire. The eagle ate the head and the fox enthusiastically devoured the guts. And Odd and the bear divided the meat, the bear eating more than everyone else combined. As the moon rose, twice as large as the one Odd knew in Midgard, the companions settled in for the night.

*Sated, the fox and the eagle fall quickly asleep. Odd is still restless, still examining the carving. The bear looks at him.*

**THOR**

You must be thirsty. Come on. Let's look for some water.

*Odd leans on the bear for support and the two move off from the campsite. Once they are gone, Loki and Odin exit with the campsite.*

*The bear seems to know where he's going. He leads them to a clearing, with a small pool or well at the center. When they enter the clearing, there is music. Perhaps Mother/Freya singing softly offstage, barely audible. It is reminiscent of her songs at the beginning of the show. This is a magical place. Mimir's Well. Leaving the bear, Odd approaches the water.*

**THOR**

Careful. It goes down a long way.

**ODD**

There are shapes moving in the water.

**THOR**

Nothing in there that will hurt you. They're just reflections, really. It is safe to drink. I give you my word.

*Odd drinks from the well. Four times. The music grows louder.*

**ODD**

Feel so sleepy.

**THOR**

It is all the traveling. Lie down. Rest.

**ODD**

But the others. . .

**THOR**

I'll tell them you fell asleep in the woods. Just don't go wandering off. For now, just rest.

*Odd lies by the well and quickly falls asleep. The bear watches him for a moment and then pads away.*

*The music continues to grow louder. Perhaps the water in Mimir's Well begins to glow. Odd rises. He takes another drink from the well. A voice. Ancient. The voice of a giant from the beginning of the world. Mimir.*

**VOICE**

What do you need to see?

*Silence*

**VOICE**

You have drunk from my spring.

**ODD**

Did I do something wrong?

*Silence.*

**VOICE**

No. Look.

*The shapes in the water reform into visions. The sound of Mother/Freya singing is now clear and strong.*

**VOICE**

Your father. Years ago, in Scotland

*We see Odd's father meeting Odd's mother. He takes her knife.*

**VOICE**

He brought her back to his home.

*Later, perhaps on the ship or back in the village, the father returns the knife. Odd's mother starts to strike him, but he is kneeling in apology or submission. She stays her hand*

**VOICE**

And she made it her home as well.

*Mother reaches down and takes Father's hand, drawing him up. They exit, together.*

*Odd returns to his sleep as the vision fades. He awakens, suddenl.. He takes up the unfinished carving and works at it with his knife. He knows what it is now: his mother, as she was on the day his father fell in love. He finishes the carving, The music and lights fade back to normal. After a moment the bear emerges from the forest.*

**THOR**

Come along. The others are already on their way to the city.

**ODD**

Where do the Frost Giants come from?

**THOR**

Jotunheim. It mean's Giant's Home. It is across the great river. Mostly they stay on their own side. But they've crossed before. One time, one of them wanted the Sun, the Moon and Lady Freya. The time before that, they wanted my hammer, Mjolnir, and Lady Freya. There was one time they wanted all the treasures of Asgard and Lady Freya

...

**ODD**

They must like Lady Freya a lot.

**THOR**

They do. She is very pretty.

**ODD**

What is it like in Jotunheim?

**THOR**

Bleak. Treeless. Cold. Desolate. Nothing like it is here. You should ask Loki.

**ODD**

Why?

**THOR**

He wasn't always one of the Aesir. He was born a Frost Giant. He was the smallest Frost Giant ever. They used to laugh at him. So he left. Saved Odin's life, on his travels. And he. . .

*The bear pauses, thinking.*

**THOR**

...he keeps things interesting. Anything that you did last night, anything you saw . . .

**ODD**

Yes?

**THOR**

The wise man knows when to keep silent. Only the fool tells all he knows.

*Odd and the bear rejoin the fox and the eagle. They are at the edge of the forest now.*

**LOKI**

There you two are.

**THOR**

Well, what do we do now?

**ODD**

Wait for me. I'll walk alone from here to the walls of Asgard.

**LOKI**

Why?

**ODD**

Because I don't want the Frost Giants knowing you three are back. Not yet. Wish me good luck. The blessing of the Gods must count for something.

**LOKI**

What if you don't come back?

**ODD**

Then you're no worse off than you were before you met me. Anyway, why shouldn't I come back?

**THOR**

They could eat you.

**ODD**

Ah . . . do Frost Giants eat people?

*Pause.*

**LOKI**

Occasionally.

**THOR**

Almost never.

**LOKI**

I wouldn't worry. There's barely any meat on you. You'd scarcely be worth the trouble of eating.

*Odd looks at each animal in turn before turning and walking out into the plain. The animals exit. Odin, as Storyteller, remains. After a moment, Loki and Thor, as Storytellers, reenter.*

**ODIN**

The snow had blown clear of the path and, although the ground was slippery in places, Odd found the walk was not as hard as he expected.

**LOKI**

At first, Odd thought that the wall of Asgard was as high as a tall man and that there was a pale statue of a man sitting on a boulder beside it. At least, he imagined it to be a statue. And then he moved slowly closer and closer, and the wall grew, and the pale statue grew also, until, as the boy got closer still, he had to throw back his head to look at them. Every step he took toward the gates, toward the huge pale figure on the boulder, he felt the temperature drop.

**THOR**

And then the statue moved and Odd knew.

## **Scene 6**

### **The Wall of Asgard**

*Odd is now at the great giant-built wall surrounding Asgard. We see a section of the wall – huge stones fitted snugly together. It extends up out of our sight and to either side. We do not see the immense front giant, but we hear him. His voice booms, surrounding and overpowering Odd.*

#### **STORYTELLER #5/FROST GIANT**

Who are you?

#### **ODD**

I am called Odd.

#### **FROST GIANT**

What are you? A God? A Troll? Some kind of walking corpse?

#### **ODD**

I'm a boy.

#### **FROST GIANT**

What in Ymir's name are you doing *here*?

#### **ODD**

I'm here to drive the Frost Giants from Asgard.

#### **FROST GIANT**

No you won't. You can't.

#### **ODD**

'Fraid so.

#### **FROST GIANT**

I outwitted Loki. I bested Thor. I banished Odin. All of Asgard is under my rule. Even now my brothers march from Jotunheim. The Gods are my slaves. I am betrothed to the lovely Freya. And you honestly think you can go up against me?

*Odd simply smiles. No one has smiled at the giant like that before. It bothers him*

#### **FROST GIANT**

I rule Asgard!

#### **ODD**

Why?

**FROST GIANT**  
WHY!?

**ODD**  
I can hear you fine without you shouting.

*Quietly*

Why do you want to rule Asgard?

**FROST GIANT**  
See that wall?

*Beat*

My brother built that wall. He made a deal with the Gods – to build them a wall in less than six months or he would take no payment. And on the last day, as he was just about to complete it – on the *last* hour of the last day, they cheated him.

**ODD**  
How?

**FROST GIANT**  
My brother had a horse. A magnificent stallion that hauled great massive stones to the wall. Made the whole project possible, really.

Well, on the last hour of the last day, the most beautiful mare anyone had ever seen ran across the plain and lured away the stallion. The stallion broke its bonds and the horses ran off together and were gone. And then, Thor returned from his travels and killed him with his hammer.

That's how every tale of the Gods and the Frost Giants ends – with Thor killing Giants. Well, not this time.

**ODD**  
Obviously not.

So, what did your brother want for payment?

**FROST GIANT**  
Nothing really. Just stuff

*Pause*

He wanted the Sun. The Moon. And Freya.  
All things that I now control, for Asgard is mine!



**ODD**

Yes. You said that.

*Beat*

Why? Why did he want those things?

**FROST GIANT**

HOW DARE YOU QUESTION ME!

*The earth shakes. Odd has to lean hard on his crutch to keep his balance. He continues to smile. A pause.*

Would you mind if I picked you up? So we can talk face-to-face?

**ODD**

So long as you're careful.

*Odd steps onto the giant's hand. Spotlight on Odd. The wall transforms into the face of the Frost Giant – perhaps two stones open as eyes, another pushes out to become a craggy nose. The giant examines the small figure in his palm. Then, more softly . . .*

**FROST GIANT**

Beauty.

**ODD**

Beauty?

**FROST GIANT**

The three most beautiful things there are. The Sun, the Moon, and Freya the lovely. It is not beautiful, really, in Jotunheim. There's just rocks and crags and . . . Well, they can be beautiful too, if you take them the right way. And we can see the Sun there, and the Moon. No Freya – nothing that beautiful. She's beautiful. But she does have a tongue on her.

**ODD**

So you came here for beauty?

**FROST GIANT**

And revenge for my brother. I told the other Frost Giants I'd do it, and they all laughed at me. But they aren't laughing now are they?

**ODD**

What about spring?

**FROST GIANT**

Spring?

**ODD**

Spring. In Midgard, where I come from. It isn't happening this year. If the winter continues, then everyone will die. People. Animals. Plants.

**FROST GIANT**

Why should I care?

**ODD**

Beauty. There won't be any. There will just be dead things.

**FROST GIANT**

Dead things can be beautiful.

Anyway, I won it. I beat them. I fooled them and I tricked them. I banished Thor and Odin and that miniature turncoat Loki.

**ODD**

Do you really think your brothers are on the way?

**FROST GIANT**

Ah. Um. They may be. I mean, they all said they would . . . if I did . . . I don't think any of them actually expected me to conquer this place, and they all have things to do, farms and houses and children and wives. I don't think that they really *want* to come down to the hot lands and play soldiers guarding a bunch of grumpy Gods.

**ODD**

And I suppose they can't all be betrothed to lovely Freya.

**FROST GIANT**

Lucky them. She's beautiful. Oh, yes. I'll give you that. But she only comes up to the top of my foot. She shouts louder than a giantess when she's angry. And she's always angry.

**ODD**

But you can't go home when you've won.

**FROST GIANT**

Exactly. You wait here, in this hot, horrible place for reinforcements who don't want to come, while the locals hate you . . .

**ODD**

So go home.

*Beat*

Tell them that I beat you.

*Pause*

**FROST GIANT**

You're too small to fight. You would have to have out-witted me.

**ODD**

My mother used to tell me stories about boys who tricked giants. In one of them, they had a stone-throwing contest. But the boy threw a bird, not a stone and it went up into the air and just kept going.

**FROST GIANT**

I'd never fall for that one. Anyway, birds, they just head for the nearest tree.

**ODD**

I am trying to allow you to go home with your honor intact and a whole skin.

**FROST GIANT**

A whole skin?

**ODD**

You banished Thor to Midgard, yet he's back now. It is only a matter of time until he gets here.

**FROST GIANT**

But I have his hammer.

**ODD**

Go home.

**FROST GIANT**

But if I take Freya back to Jotunheim, she'll just shout at me and make everything worse. And if I take Thor's hammer, he'll just come after it, and one day he'll get it, and *then* he'll kill me.

*Pause.*

*Storytellers #1-3 enter, at the edges of the stage.*

**STORYTELLER #1**

Later, when the Gods told this tale, late at night, in their great hall, they always hesitated at this point, because in a moment Odd will reach into his jerkin and pull out something carved of wood and none of them, try how they might, was certain what it was.

**STORYTELLER #3**

Some of the Gods claimed that it was a wooden key and some said that it was a heart.

**STORYTELLER #2**

Some say Odd presented the giant with a really good carving of Thor's hammer and the giant fled in terror.

**STORYTELLER #1**

It was none of these things.

*The storytellers exit.*

**ODD**

My father met my mother on a raid somewhere in Scotland. That's far to the south of us. He found her trying to hide her father's sheep in a cave, and she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. So he brought her, and the sheep, home. He would not even touch her until he had taught her enough of the way we speak to tell her he wanted her for his wife. But he said that on the voyage home, she was so beautiful she lit up the world. And she did. She lit up his world, like the summer sun.

**FROST GIANT**

This was before you were born.

**ODD**

True. But I saw it.

**FROST GIANT**

How?

**ODD**

I saw it in my father's eyes. He loved her, and a few years ago he started to make something for her, but he left it unfinished, and then he didn't come back to finish it. So, last night, I finished it for him. It is my mother, when they had just met. Stolen from her people and her land, but brave and determined, and not ever going to give in to fear or grief or loneliness.

*Beat*

You came here for beauty, didn't you? And you can't go back empty-handed.

*Odd offers the carving to the Giant.*

**FROST GIANT**

It is . . . remarkable. And lovely. Yes. I will take it back with me to Jotunheim and it will brighten my hall.

Do you think I should say good-bye to lovely Freya?

**ODD**

If you do, she'll probably shout at you some more.

### **FROST GIANT**

Or beg me to take her with me.

*With a slight shudder, which, in a giant, is still a significant thing.*

I need good weather to leave in. Something to hide my tracks and to make me hard to follow.

*Odd is lowered back to the ground. He steps from the Giant's hand and watches as the Giant departs.*

### **STORYTELLER #3**

The giant returned Odd to the ground and reached up into the clouds. When he lowered his hands, snow began to fall in huge white flakes. Turning his back on Asgard and Odd, the giant lumbered away into the blizzard.

## Scene 7

### Freya's Transformations

#### STORYTELLER #2

When the Gods saw, from the forest, the giant departing, they went out to meet the boy. The eagle got there first.

*The eagle flies in and lands near Odd. It gazes at him with its one good eye.*

**ODIN**

Good?

**ODD**

I'm cold. But yes, I'm good.

The Frost Giant's gone. I made him go away.

**ODIN**

How?

**ODD**

Magic.

*There is a sound – singing, like at the Well, and cats.*

**ODIN**

She comes.

*Freya enters. The Goddess of Love and Fertility. Leader of the Valkyries. Perhaps unsurprisingly, at the moment, she looks a lot like Odd's Mother. She smiles at Odd, who is bemused.*

#### STORYTELLER #4/FREYA

I am the Goddess Freya. Who are you, mortal, to journey to the Walls of Asgard?

*The fox and the bear arrive*

. . .with such strange companions.

**ODD**

I am Odd. And these three are Odin, Loki and Thor. I have brought them back. The Frost Giant is gone.

**FREYA**

Well, well, well.

Welcome home, boys!

All-Father?

*Freya reaches out her right arm and the eagle lands upon it. Some or all of the the next section of dialogue could be sung by the Goddess as she works her magic to restore Odin to his true form. If it is not sung, there should be music, reminiscent of the Mother's songs at the beginning of the show.*

Odin All-father  
Wisest of the Gods  
One-Eyed Battle God.

You who drank the water of wisdom from Mimir's Well.

Return to us.

*The eagle is gone and in its place is a tall, grey-bearded man with a floppy-brimmed hat and only one eye.*

**ODIN**

I was far away. And getting farther away with every moment that passed. Well done.

*Freya moves now to the bear, singing Thor back to his own shape.*

**FREYA**

Thor Thunderer  
Hammer-wielder.  
Giant's bane and Serpent foe.  
Goat-driver. River-wader.

Return to us.

*The bear is gone, replaced by a large, muscular man with a great beard. He smiles at Odd before being struck with a troubling thought*

**THOR**

I need my hammer. I need Mjolnir.

**ODD**

I know where it is. It was hidden as a great boulder. I can show you, if you like.

**LOKI**

When we've finished the important business at hand, perhaps?

Me next.

*The fox approaches Freya*

**FREYA**

You know, many people will find you much easier to cope with in that shape. Are you sure you don't want me to leave you?

*The fox makes a choked growl.*

**LOKI**

Fair Freya, you joke with me. But do the bards not sing:

A woman both fair and just and compassionate  
Only she can be compared to glorious Freya?

**FREYA**

Loki, you caused all this. *All* of it.

**LOKI**

Yes. I admit it. But I found the boy as well. You can't just focus on the bad stuff.

**FREYA**

One day, I will regret this.

*But she smiles and reaches down a hand to touch the fox. And sings*

**FREYA**

Loki Trickster  
God of Fire  
Wolf Father  
Hair Thief  
Odin's Friend  
Return to us

*And the fox is replaced by a beardless god, handsome and pale. Freya turns to Odd*

**FREYA**

Your turn.

**ODD**

I look like this anyway.

**FREYA**

I know.

*She bends down to examine his leg.*

**FREYA**

May I?

**ODD**

Um. If you want to.

**FREYA**

It was crushed. So much so that not even I can repair it. But I can help.



*Freya sings over his leg as she removes the brace. It is definitely a song that Odd's Mother might have sung, but full now of magic and power. When she is done, the brace is gone and the leg is nearly whole again.*

**FREYA**

I'm sorry. I did the best I could do. It is better, but it is not right. Yet.

Why don't I replace it entirely? What about a cat's rear leg? Or a chicken's?

**ODD**

My own leg is fine.

*Odd stands, putting weight on his leg.*

**ODD**

It doesn't hurt. Not really. Not like it used to.

**FREYA**

It will get stronger in time.

*Thor walks over and claps his hand on Odd's shoulder. Hard.*

**THOR**

Now, laddie. Tell me just how you defeated the might of the Frost Giants.

**ODD**

There was only one of them.

**THOR**

When I tell the story, there will be at least a dozen.

**STORYTELLER #5**

There was a feast that night in the great mead hall of the Gods. Odin sat at the end of the table, in the magnificent carved chair, saying almost as little as he had when he was an eagle. Thor, sitting at his left side, boomed enthusiastically. Loki, all the way down at the far end of the table, was pleasant enough. Until he got drunk.

**LOKI**

In horses and rings/ you will never be rich  
Bragi, but both will you lack  
Of the Gods and Elves/ here together met  
The most cowardly in combat is you.

And shame on you, Odin/ Unjustly you settle  
The fate of the fights among men.  
Often you give him/ who deserves not the gift  
To the vilest/ the victory prize

**FREYA**

Peace, Loki . . .

**LOKI**

Be silent, Freya/ For fully I know you  
Sinless you are not yourself

*Thor grabs Loki and drags or carries him from the room.*

**ODD**

He doesn't learn.

**FREYA**

No. He doesn't learn. None of them do. And they don't change, either. They can't. It is  
all part of being a God.

*Odd nods, understanding a bit. After all, he has certainly changed.*

**FREYA**

Have you eaten enough? Have you drunk your fill?

**ODD**

Yes, thank you.

*Odin approaches. He carries a staff now, tall and covered in carving. Wisdom and magic  
and stories are all carved into this staff.*

**ODIN**

Do you know what spring it was you drank from, boy? Where the water came from? Do  
you know what it cost me to drink there, many years ago? You don't think you defeated the  
Frost Giants alone, do you?

**ODD**

Thank you.

**ODIN**

No. Thank you.

*Odin holds out the staff to Odd*

**ODIN**

This is for you.

**ODD**

But . . .

**ODIN**

It is never wise to refuse the gifts of the Gods, boy.

**ODD**

Well, thank you.

**ODIN**

Now, it is time for you to go home.

*Odin wiggles his fingers and there is a rainbow. Again it expands to fill the whole world.  
The Gods exit and Odd is transported by the rainbow back to Midgard.*

## Scene 8

### Home

*As the rainbow fades, Odd begins to walk. Loki, Odin and Thor reenter, as Storytellers. We hear the sound of water.*

#### STORTELLER #3

As Odd walked down the path to the village, he heard a rushing noise. It was the sound of snow melting, of new water trying to find its way to lower ground. Sometimes he heard a *clump* as snow fell from a tree or a harsh cracking noise as the ice that had covered the edge of the bay through this unending winter began to cleave and to break up. It was the sound of spring.

#### STORYTELLER #2

Odd was still limping, just a little. His right foot would never be as strong as his left. But it did not hurt. And he was grateful to Freya for that.

Odd made his way to Fat Elfred's door

*Odd knocks with the staff. We hear Elfred from off-stage*

#### STORYTELLER #5/ELFRED

Who is it?

#### ODD

It is me. Odd

*There is a grumbling off-stage that grows quickly nearer. Something about good-for-nothing runaways and teaching someone a lesson. But when Elfred appears, he's taken aback by the figure he sees.*

#### ELFRED

I'm sorry. I thought my runaway stepson was here.

#### ODD

It is him. I'm mean, it is me. I'm him. I'm Odd.

*Pause*

#### ELFRED

You grew.

#### ODD

Is my mother here?

*Another pause*

**ELFRED**

She didn't stick around much longer than you did. Went back to your father's old house. I imagine you'd find her there.

*Odd absorbs this news as Elfred retreats. Meanwhile, the cabin from Act I reappears.  
Odd's Mother enters and sits in the carved wooden chair.*

**STORYTELLER #1**

Odd turned around and, leaning on his carved staff, made his way through the village.  
Which seemed now too small for him.

**STORYTELLER #3**

Soon the ice would have melted enough for the longships to sail.

**STORYTELLER #2**

He did not imagine anyone would refuse him a berth on a ship, now. They always needed a good pair of hands at the oars.

**STORYTELLER #1**

Nor would they argue if he chose to bring a passenger.

*Odd crosses and pauses just outside the cabin. Again he knocks with the staff. She stands and freezes – recognizing him immediately. Before she can hug him. Before she can cry or laugh . . .*

**ODD**

Hello, Mother. How would you like to go back to Scotland? For a while, at least.

**MOTHER**

That would be a fine thing.

*Now she embraces Odd as he comes in to meet her.*

**END OF SHOW**

## **Notes to the Director**

This story presents a number of technical challenges. The stage directions in the script and the following notes reflect the solutions that we found for the first production. Those are certainly not the only possible solutions.

### **The Storytellers**

It is important, I think, to be very upfront about the fact that the actors are telling the audience a story. This conceit allowed us to be very abstract about setting the stage for the various scenes. In a way, our production never left the mead hall. The honey tree was created by a storyteller knocking a hole in a longship prow that decorated a vertical post at one corner of the theatre. The waterfall was a length of white fabric that dropped from the lighting grid and was arranged and later removed by the storytellers. The mead hall had a central fire-pit that served as all of the fires in the show, as well as Mimir's Well.

The five storytellers have distinct personalities that reflect their primary characters. It may be useful to think of #1-4 as Odin, Thor, Loki, and Freya throughout (and perhaps we are hearing this story in Odin's mead hall). #5 is trickier, as he's not really the Frost Giant or Elfred when he's in storyteller mode. I ended up thinking of him as a junior Aesir or a companion of the Gods who fills in where needed. There are several such figures in the old Norse stories – Thialfi, Skirnir, Hermod. This relationship was most explicit in the original production in scene 7, where he assisted Freya with the transformations of the Gods and Odd's healing.

### **The Transformed Gods**

For the bear, the fox, and the eagle, the original production used wonderful life-size puppets created by Mary Robinette Kowal. They were manipulated in full view of the audience by the actors, who remained in costume throughout. More or less - each of the three had 1-3 costume accessories that they removed before taking up the puppets and which were restored to them at the end with Freya's spell-singing (Thor's belt, Odin's hat, Loki's cloak, etc.)

### **The Hammer Theft**

Loki's story of the Giant's deception and the loss of the hammer is tricky, as it is a long piece of narrative nested within the larger story. To allow the actor more freedom and make things clearer to the audience, we allowed him to step away from the puppet and tell the story directly to us, as the fox (manipulated, along with the bear, by Storyteller #2) continued to "tell the story" to Odd in dimmer light.

### **Mimir's Well**

This was probably the trickiest section of the book to bring to the stage. A lot happens here in the original text. Odd sees visions of his parents throughout their marriage, the Giant at the Wall of Asgard, and the Frost Giants in their native home of Jotunheim. And he grows physically as a result of drinking the water. All in all, he emerges wiser and more mature, with an understanding of his own home and that of the Giant. It is that understanding that gives him the leverage to get the Giant out of Asgard.

I chose to concentrate on the parents by presenting a silent and very stylized version of their meeting, which Odd watched (presumably in a dream) from beside the Well. I felt it was important that the audience never really see the Father, so Storyteller #5 played that role in a mask and costume that made him into a life-sized version of the wooden Viking warrior from the beginning of the show. When Odd awakens, he has a deeper understanding of his family and his home. He now knows what the carving is supposed to be and he can step in for his dad and finish it. But he doesn't *need* it, as he now carries that knowledge within himself. That's what allows him to give the carving to the Giant in the next scene.

It is definitely a good idea to go back to the source material (both Gaiman's book and the legend of Mimir's Well itself) for inspiration in this section. The Mimir story can be easily found online. Odin refers to the origin of the Well at the end of the play and we made a version of the story available in the educators' guide for the production.

### **The Wall**

Our Wall was present throughout the entire show and filled the upstage side of our  $\frac{3}{4}$  round space. It was not, however, lit directly until Odd approaches the Wall between scenes 5 and 6. When Odd was lifted into the air, part of the wall pushed forward to become a brow and nose and a hand folded down, leaving a mouth-like opening.

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