

A Beauty But a Funny Girl:  
A Queer Investigation of the Broadwayfication of Disney

The term “Disneyfication” often implies that substance, edge, and thematic depth have been removed and replaced with childish, censored, and heteronormative story lines, in the form of mindless spectacle. Politically, the term implies values which range from “simplistically rightist- moderately conservative to those who barely tolerate Disney, [to] cryptofascist for those who perceive his work as insidious, even dangerous.” (Douglas, xi) Therefore, to refer to the period in the mid-1990's, when Disney acquired real estate in Times Square and opened musicals on Broadway, as the “Disneyfication of Broadway” is to imply an invasion of a corporate, heteronormative culture into a Broadway culture which is historiographically represented as a sophisticated, leftist refuge for the outsiders of American culture, particularly the LGBTQ community. However, in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Alexander Doty asserts that “unless the text is *about* queers ...the queerness of most mass culture texts is less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception.” (xi) Thus, this paper traces the production *and* reception of the Disney property *Beauty and the Beast* from animated film to the Broadway stage in order to uncover the ways in which its creators utilized a traditional musical theatre form to present an anti-essentialist treatment of gender and sexuality in American culture to the mainstream public. I refer to the influence of musical theatre culture on Walt Disney Company films as its “Broadwayfication.” Since one of the major deterrents of a queer reading of Disney musicals is the “Disney” brand name, my goal in justifying my own queer reading of *Beauty and the Beast* is to bring this musical out of the “closeted” categories of code, camp, and connotation and to provide another voice for the queer community.

### **The AIDS Metaphor**

Before I proceed in reading Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* as a queer text, I must clarify the word 'queer' as adhering to the idea that gender and sexuality are fluid constructions which can be dismantled and rebuilt in unlimited variations. In exploring the queer spectatorship and authorship of the film and stage texts, this term expresses what Doty calls “cultural common ground between lesbians and gays as well as other nonstraights” while allowing the idea that straight-identifying audience members can also experience queer interpretations of seemingly heterocentric texts. (2-3)

Two film reviews of *Beauty and the Beast* from 1991 prove the possibility of queer, in this case gay male centered, readings of a Disney text from heterosexual individuals. Dan Rather, in writing a review for the *Los Angeles Times*, first opened the door to alternative readings of Disney musicals when he challenged his readers to:

“Think of the [witch's] spell as AIDS...you feel the Beast's loneliness and desperation a little more deeply...That means that millions of Americans, most of them children, are looking at a Person With AIDS with a new kind of compassion. We're crying when he's sad, cheering for him when he wins... can you possibly imagine that we'd *identify* with him?” (“The AIDS Metaphor”)

For a white, heterosexual, and powerful man like Rather to articulate the “AIDS Metaphor,” which would otherwise remain a queer subtext of the film, the heteronormativity of the Disney product had been officially challenged. The second earth-shattering review came from

Frank Rich of the *New York Times* who argued,

“The best Broadway musical score of 1991 was that written by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman for the Disney animated movie 'Beauty and the Beast.' Mr. Ashman, who died of AIDS this year, and Mr. Menken were frequent collaborators Off Broadway but had never worked as a team on a Broadway musical.” (“The Year in the Arts”)

These two reviews, connecting lyricist and producer Howard Ashman's AIDS related death to the Broadway musical style of the film, exemplify the ways in which the musical theatre culture influenced a “Broadwayfication” of Disney and brought queer themes and volatile political metaphors into a genre which was considered to be a status-quo-enforcing children's spectacle.

Ashman, is often posthumously credited with the clever combining of the musical theatre and Disney animation. Studio head Jeffery Katzenberg called Ashman the company's “guardian angel,” and at the end of the credits for *Beauty and the Beast* is a dedication, “To our friend Howard Ashman who gave a Mermaid her voice and a Beast his soul.” (Griffin, 144) Ashman has been regarded as the *auteur* of the Disney films he worked on because of his strong influence on the creative team and the finished product. The fact that his authorship on *Beauty and the Beast* resulted in specific commentaries on gender and sexuality, through the use of musical theatre conventions in the film, which resulted in justifiable queer responses from mainstream heterosexual individuals, means that a deeper investigation of queer meanings within these conventions can give ground to expanded queer responses to the film and stage versions today.

### **The Broadwayfication of Disney**

Ultimately, the prime obstacle in a queer reading of *Beauty and the Beast*, is the fact that in this story, “Happily Ever After” for Belle involves a heterosexual marriage to the prince. However, a queer reading of Howard Ashman's work is possible in the same way that the musicals of Stephen Sondheim are open to gay interpretations despite the fact that they do not feature gay characters or relationships. As John Clum asserts in his book, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture*,

“*Sweeney Todd* is about a heterosexual serial killer and has no gay characters. Is it gay theatre? For many gay men the answer is yes...There is something of the monster mother in Mrs. Lovett, taken here to macabre dimensions well beyond Mama Rose. There is a sense of revenge on the hateful “straight” world... Sondheim seems to respond to Sweeney's dark, bitter version of human experience.” (235)

Not only is this analysis relevant to *Beauty and the Beast* because of the casting of Angela Lansbury, who had originated the role of Mrs. Lovett and who had played Mama Rose in London, as the voice of Mrs. Potts, but in this case, both queer authorship and reception contribute to the claiming of *Sweeney Todd* as a queer text. Clum connects the darkness of the musical to its contemporary culture when he states, “It's no surprise that he would write musicals about serial killers and presidential assassins. Such anger resonated with key moments in gay history... as much as the cleverness, camp, and irony.” (216) There is a similar darkness in *Beauty and the Beast*, personified by the Beast's anger. Because Howard Ashman was dying of AIDS during the film's production, Alan Menken recalls the ways in which Ashman would lash out: “With the burden of dealing with losing control of his body to AIDS, not to be able to control his creative process as well was too much.” (Gillespie,

Interview) If *Beauty and the Beast* was a product of a specific cultural moment, it would be the AIDS crisis which Menken describes as a “war with unthinkable casualties and no end in sight. All I can say is that the emotions that were bottled up and dealt with on a personal level by Howard and me and probably most everyone else working with us is reflected in our score to *Beauty and the Beast*.” (Gillespie) Therefore, just as one can understand the depth of Sondheim's anger and fear as a gay man while exploring *Sweeney Todd*, the AIDS Metaphor for *Beauty and the Beast* becomes valid if one knows this element of the production history.

In addition to tone, the text of *Beauty and the Beast* allows for both Belle and the Beast to be read as individually queer characters, because of the way in which their romance subverts more traditional musical theatre arcs. Part of the genius of the subversive nature of *Beauty and the Beast*, is the fact that, despite its darker tone, its musical form evokes a nostalgic association to the musicals from the Golden Age of Broadway and the heteronormative values which their romantic plots reinforced. In her book *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical*, Stacy Wolf explains the structure of such a romantic plot:

“Two principals, one male and one female, are introduced early in the show by solos that convey through music how they are opposites who will eventually unite. Their divergent personalities, overdetermined by their differences in gender, symbolize larger cultural and social diversions.” (31)

If *Beauty and the Beast* had followed the romantic plot structure of a Golden Age musical, Belle would have married Gaston, sacrificing her autonomy to conform to her society's prescribed gender roles. Belle and Gaston, dressed in contrasting colors, are quickly established as opposites who represent larger societal differences; most notably, Belle's defiance of gender roles and Gaston's embrace of masculine performance. In “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, Foucault,” Judith Butler talks about the way in which gender performance can affect one's societal status. “In so far as social existence requires an unambiguous gender affinity, it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms” (26) Likewise, Gaston informs Belle, “The whole town's talking about it. It's not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas and *thinking*.” (Wise, *Beauty and the Beast*) While citizens of her village had just proclaimed in the opening number that they don't understand Belle because she has “her nose stuck in a book,” (Wise) Gaston's comment confirms for the audience that Belle is ostracized for her failure to successfully perform femininity.

Belle's role in her society as “puzzle” is not unheard of in a traditional musical. Belle's status as a woman who must be tamed calls to mind Maria from *The Sound of Music*. In her article, “The Queer Pleasures of Mary Martin and Broadway: the Sound of Music as a Lesbian Musical,” Wolf notes, “Refusing the terms of femininity defined by the abbey, Maria is uncontrollable, undefinable, virtually unnameable - a 'problem.’” (54) Likewise, the villagers in the opening sequence cannot quite define Belle's otherness, using words like “odd,” “different,” and “peculiar;” all synonymous with “queer.” While *The Sound of Music* traces Maria's “transformation into heterosexuality,” (54) Gaston suggests that the cure for Belle's Otherness is a heterosexual marriage to him, as if he, himself, had been influenced by the musicals of old.

Belle is quickly established as a desirable sexual object within her village. Meanwhile the fact that Belle does not return this desire to any male in town queers her character; a theme which is prevalent in Belle's early solo number “Belle Reprise.” She sings about her distaste for the idea of marriage and her yearning for a gender-ambiguous “someone” who can

“understand” her. (Wise) This musical theatre convention known as the “I want” song had been used by Walt Disney in his princess films like *Snow White* (“Someday My Prince Will Come”), and *Cinderella* (“A Dream Is a Wish”). However, the “I want” songs that Ashman's leading ladies sing in *The Little Mermaid* (“Part of Your World”) and *Beauty and the Beast* (“Belle Reprise”) reflect the ingénues' status as outsider or Other, particularly with regard to the fact that they go against their world's prescribed gender and sexuality rules. As Ashman, himself, said during production for *The Little Mermaid*:

“In almost every musical ever written, there's a place, it's usually the third song of the evening...the leading lady usually sits down on something. Sometimes it's a tree stump in *Brigadoon*, sometimes it's under the pillars of Covent Garden in *My Fair Lady*, or it's a trash can in *Little Shop of Horrors*, but the leading lady sits down on something and sings about what she wants in life. And the audience falls in love with her and roots for her to get it for the rest of the evening.” (qtd. in “Waking Sleeping Beauty”)

Thus, Ashman was very purposeful in the creation and placement of this song. Belle's society cannot name her “oddness,” she cannot successfully perform femininity, cannot name her desire, and she seems to have a sexual aversion to men placing her outside the world of heteronormativity, on a multilayered, queer spectrum. The Broadway-like structure of the film establishes Belle as the protagonist immediately *because* she is “different,” and the audience is supposed to sympathize with her because of her undefinable Otherness.

The eventual romance of Belle and the Beast does not detract from Belle's queerness because of the Beast's own Otherness and queerness. For example, Belle propositions the Beast in the dungeon with the provocative bargain, “Please, I'll do anything” in the hope of him releasing her father, and the Beast responds, “There's nothing you can do.” This rejection of Belle's sexuality queers the Beast in the same way that Belle's rejection of Gaston queers her. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, sexuality cannot be defined simply by the gender of one's intended object. A queer reading of *Beauty and the Beast* requires the precondition that “Some people, homo-, hetero-, and bisexual, experience their sexuality as deeply embedded in a matrix of gender meaning and gender differentials. Others of each sexuality do not.” (Sedgwick, 26) Belle and the Beast fall into the latter category as each one begins this play with no trace of opposite sex attraction whatsoever, but eventually find themselves in a male/female relationship based on their respective attractions to their partners' Otherness.

*Beauty and the Beast* is a film which encourages its audience to look beneath the surface of the world in which we live. Therefore, I do not see such a reading of the film as an “alternative reading.” Rather, I think of it as a deeper reading. As Wolf says, “More conventional (read: straight) readings simply rely on different, if naturalized, assumptions about representational practices, and, by extension, social relations.” (“Queer Pleasures,” 52) Knowing the history of the film's production and authorship, plus the response of critics such as Rich and Rafter, as well as a queer character analysis through musical theatre conventions enables spectators to assign deeper meaning to a “Disneyfied” mythology.

## **Human Again: Humanizing Otherness on the Broadway Stage**

Unlike the film *Beauty and the Beast*, there are few accounts of the stage version's production other than the “official” story in the form of carefully constructed press releases from the Walt Disney Company, statements from Michael Eisner and other executives, and souvenir books. There is even less attention from Disney scholars, Broadway historians, or

queer theorists. Most scholarly articles which mention *Beauty and the Beast* onstage usually pertain to the implications of Disney's corporate business ventures in Time's Square, their acquisition of the New Amsterdam theatre, or focus on the more critically acclaimed Broadway version of *The Lion King*.

Tracing the "queer authorship" and "queer reception" of this musical is also difficult because, unlike the film which, aside from expanded re-releases, has virtually remained the same throughout the years with its more obvious *auteur*, Howard Ashman, there is no clear *auteur* for this theatrical production. Since Ashman was credited with giving the Beast his "soul," Ashman's absence to the stage production was reflected in negative responses from critics such as Brad Smith and Ty Burr who claimed, "Beauty's production values are skin deep"; essentially it is 'all show with little soul'" whereas, "above all, the movie had soul." (qtd. in King, 67) Perhaps the closest thing to an *auteur* that the theatrical production experienced, and the strongest case for queer authorship, was its openly gay director, Robert Jess Roth. However, as Doty says,

"A 'strong' *auteur* will develop a recognizable style and thematics that are carried from text to text, creating an oeuvre that expresses a consistent personal aesthetic and ideology. A 'weaker' director—traditionally called a 'stylist,' a 'metteur-en-scene,' or a 'hack' — exerts limited or erratic influence over her or his projects." (18)

Roth belongs in the latter category, as his aesthetic is mostly devoid of ideology; the "all show" that Smith references in his review. However, one can still read into his artistic choices as queer, not simply because of his sexual orientation but because of the queer influences on those choices.

For example, the Beast of the stage version is different in appearance and manner than the film. Roth explains the way in which his concept for the Beast was inspired by rock performers, saying, "In the movie, the Beast has a cuddly, teddy-bear-like quality underneath his rough exterior. But for live performance... I wanted the Beast to show his chest and have long hair, to create an animalistic magnetism on stage." (Franz, 92) This sexualization of the Beast is reminiscent of the way in which openly gay Disney animator Andreas Deja was the first to draw sexually appealing male characters such as Triton, Gaston, and Hercules whereas traditional Disney males such as Mickey, Pinocchio, and Peter Pan were more sexually ambiguous. (Griffin, 142) While Deja has admitted that his sexual orientation has influenced his work, Roth was influenced by Classic Rock idols such as The Who, The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Elton John, and Alice Cooper. (Burnett, "Profile:Rob Roth") Even though Roth has never said that his sexuality has influenced his personal aesthetic, there is still a case for queer authorship on *Beauty and the Beast* in the way that the director was profoundly influenced by the queer aesthetics of Bowie, Elton, and Alice. In terms of reception, "Alice Influence" was noticeable to Alice Cooper himself, a heterosexual white male like Dan Rather, who after seeing the musical exclaimed to Roth, "Well, people are wearing makeup, there's special effects, there's a story, there's lots of lighting. All Alice." (Lisa Wolf, Interview) Thus, the same principles of queer reading can be applied to the original Broadway production of *Beauty and the Beast*; however, the strongest and most enduring testament to the existence queer themes in the stage version lies in the libretto, itself.

The lyrics "Bittersweet and strange/ finding you can change/ learning you were wrong." (Franz, 82) from the title song from the film not only articulate the lesson of Belle and Beast's relationship but explains an ongoing theme in the musical's journey from film to stage: embracing the unfamiliar, change, and growth. The addition of new songs such as "No Matter What," "Me," "If I Can't Love Her," and "Human Again," encourage further queer readings of

the text. Firstly, the creation of these new songs proves that even something that is seen as canonical such as a Disney myth can be changed while they add new themes of parents accepting queer children, rejecting normativity, queer self-acceptance, and the eventual triumph of the queer community. Of these four songs, Ashman only wrote “Human Again” for the film but it was later cut. Nevertheless, his legacy and authorship live on in the way that the creators continued to incorporate songs inspired by his musical theatre-based methodology for subverting heteronormativity.

For example, the song “No Matter What” is about Belle’s father, Maurice, accepting and celebrating his daughter’s difference. He sings “They are the common herd/ And you can take my word/ You are unique: crème de la crème” (Franz, 22) Maurice’s acceptance of Belle is reminiscent of a song “Proud of Your Boy,” which Ashman had written for *Aladdin* which was cut from the final version, in which Aladdin’s mother declares “her love for her son no matter how he lives his life... The song’s message to homosexuals obviously lies close to the surface.” (Griffin, 149) Thus, while there is no evidence that Ashman directly influenced the creation of “No Matter What”, there are direct parallels to his style.

Another Ashman strategy incorporated by Menken and his new writing partner, Tim Rice, was to reference Golden Age musicals such as *Carousel* to re-emphasize the ways in which *Beauty and the Beast* subverts the romantic trajectory of older musicals which would have paired Belle with Gaston in the name of binary reconciliation. When Gaston proposes to Belle, he sings the new song “Me” which is reminiscent of the song “When the Children Are Asleep” from *Carousel* that the character Enoch Snow sings to his love interest Carrie Pepperidge so that she can envision their future life together as man and wife. “Me,” however, presents marriage as a form of oppression while using similar, though more obvious, rhetoric to the Rogers and Hammerstein classic. Enoch sings to Carrie, “The first year we’re married/ We’ll have one little kid/ The second year we’re goin’/ Have another little kid/ You’ll soon be donnin’ socks/ For eight little feet-“ while Carrie protests, “I am not enough to another fleet!” (Rogers and Hammerstein, 1945) His lyrics showcase the way in which marriage and heterosexual procreation are linked inevitably, and though Carrie protests, she will eventually give in. Meanwhile Gaston sings to Belle, “We’ll be raising sons galore/ each built six foot four/ Each one stuffed with every Gaston gene!” while Belle intermittently protests, “Inconceivable/ Unbelievable/ I’m not hearing this!” (Franz, 25) In each song, a less-than-worthy male attempts to woo his intended with promises of marriage and children. The main difference, aside from the fact that in *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle refuses her suitor, is that in *Carousel*, the song, though sometimes comical, is meant to be taken seriously by both Carrie and the audience, while “Me” is meant as pure comedy. “Me” strips the hypothetical love song of any subtleties, specifying the sexual nature of a union to Gaston and emphasizes Belle’s sexual difference in her rejection of him. Perhaps the creators hoped that the audience would be attuned to this parallel as *Carousel* was being revived on Broadway the same year that *Beauty and the Beast* opened.

Another key to a queer reading of the stage version is understanding the ways in which the Beast is challenged further to accept his own Otherness. This challenge was a subtle theme in the film version where the Prologue features a picture of the Prince on a stained glass window with a Latin that translates to “He conquers who conquers himself.” (Wise) While there is no such stained glass window or Latin phrase present in the script or set design of the Broadway musical, the idea is carried over into the extended dialogue and new songs added for the Beast’s further character development. The song, “If I Can’t Love Her,” is yet another example of an appropriation of a traditional musical theatre convention, in this case, use of a “conditional love song,” for the purpose of subversive themes. Traditionally, conditional love songs such as “Make Believe” (*Show Boat*), “If I Loved You” (*Carousel*),

“People Will Say We're In Love” (*Oklahoma!*), and “I'll Know” (*Guys and Dolls*) include principal lovers attempting to conceal their love in a “series of qualifications.” (Magee, 248) Wolf explains with regard to “People Will Say We're In Love,” “To the characters the duet is meant to express their incompatibility... To the audience, though, the song conveys what Curley and Laurey don't realize: that they are, of course, already in love.” (Wolf, 197) Like “If I Can't Love Her,” the conditional love song does not always have to be a duet. For example, the principals in *South Pacific* sing the “Twin Soliloquies” in which they express their hopes and fears of falling in love with someone who is so different from them. Likewise, “If I Can't Love Her,” as a romantic ballad, involves the Beast expressing, not concealing, his fears that he is not worthy of Belle. When he comes to the refrain, he sings, “No beauty could move me/ no goodness improve me/ no power on earth/ if I can't love her/ No passion could reach me/ no lesson could teach me/ how I could have loved her. (64) His pattern includes two lines about himself, followed by the condition “If I can't love her,” showing his budding self-knowledge paired with his consideration of loving Belle. This “me/me/her” pattern reinforces the idea that he must accept himself before he is capable to love her as he expresses his wishes for what he “could have been:” beautiful, good, passionate (sexual), and self-aware. By acknowledging everything that he is *not*, he is able to acknowledge and accept what he *is*: Other.

Thus, though songs like “No Matter What,” “Me,” and “If I Can't Love Her,” the additions made to *Beauty and the Beast* prove that even something as canonical as a Disney text can be changed and nuanced. The new songs and additions to dialogue disrupt and challenge the meditation-like flow of the film text which most audience members would have known by heart. The way in which this musical favors the “strange” and the “changeable” highlights the stage musical's carnivalesque qualities. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque thus: “As a form it is very complex and varied, giving rise...to diverse variants and nuances depending on the epoch, the people.” (Bakhtin, 250) In this way, both the carnivalesque and queer theory celebrate the complexities and diversity of human existence while *Beauty and the Beast* showcases the queer community of characters in the carnivalesque castle and traces their humanization in relation to the budding relationship of Belle and the Beast, particularly in Ashman's most direct contribution to the stage version, the song “Human Again.”

In the Disney tradition, inanimate objects, when brought to life through the art of animation, have specifically represented sexual freedom at a time when the main characters of Disney cartoons, such as Mickey Mouse, were not allowed to express themselves in such a way. Griffin has written extensively on the relationship between Disney cartoons in the 1920's and the carnivalesque, quoting Russell Merritt's theory that, “Disney's sympathies are generally with those who goof off... Authority figures are invariably absurd.” (7) Thus Disney's “rebellion against authority was often manifested in the shorts through behavior that emphasized the bawdy or sexually licentious.” (7) However, when Griffin traces the way in which Mickey's “low' humor” was toned down during the Great Depression due to a rise in conservatism, he also mentions that during this time, “as inanimate objects began to move like human beings, they also seemed to have erogenous zones... the animation of household props reintroduces the sexual energy that had been quelled within Mickey.” (12) Therefore the juxtaposition of Belle and the Beast's queer relationship to the human transformation of the Enchanted Objects embodies a very political message which is articulated in the lyrics of “Human Again” as all of the Objects sing, “if it all goes as planned, our time may be at hand any day now... Sweep up the years of sadness and tears and throw them away.” (Woolverton, 75) Therefore, the liberation of the queer principal characters liberates all queer individuals as a reflection of the hope that the necessity for “coding” and “subtext” will soon be in the past as

queer individuals will be humanized by a larger society. For the characters in *Beauty and the Beast*, the carnivalesque celebration of change applies to social change as well.

For example, in 1998, the changeability of *Beauty and the Beast* onstage was tested in the casting of African American R&B star Toni Braxton as Belle on Broadway. This marked the first casting of an African American woman as a Disney princess on Broadway, proving, once again, the ways in which the text allows for and demands change. Jason King's article "Toni Braxton, Disney, and Thermodynamics," while critical of the corporate "Disneyfication of Broadway," still notes that, "Changes in *Beauty and the Beast*'s musical score were made to accommodate (rather than to stifle) Braxton's "queer" voice." (75) King's article also points to the way in which the casting effects the queering of the text. He says, "If Braxton is essentially playing herself, then all the questions of difference that inform her star discourse—from her desire for soul music in an Apostolic household to the rumors of her lesbianism to the details of her bankruptcy—are operating in her onstage performance." (75) Of the few scholarly articles pertaining to *Beauty and the Beast* onstage, the fact that this response references the way in which the musical accommodates queerness, is another example of how response to mass culture texts effects the queering of the text.

### **History Repeats Itself**

With the new live action film version of *Beauty and the Beast*, including the new songs from the stage version, the question is: if *Beauty and the Beast* can be claimed as a queer musical, what does this mean for the future of the text? With every production of this musical, whether it be on Broadway, on national tour, in a high school, middle school, or summer camp, the text has been produced, viewed, and interpreted in unlimited variations; as unlimited as human sexuality itself. In this way, Howard Ashman not only gave his characters life, but gave many Mermaids and Beasts of the world their own voices and souls, and will continue to do so. *Beauty and the Beast*, has proven itself a living work of art, which constantly adapts to an ever-changing world teaching generations of Americans that if we look beyond the surface of a text, we may find:

"Something there that wasn't there before." –Ashman

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