

POPULAR NOVELS, POPULAR PLAYS, AND THE VOX POPULAIRE

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Introduction

The subjects of plays are often drawn from the most popular topics of the day, as this makes good sense for people trying to capitalize on what will sell and what will make the most money for their respective businesses. What these can also tell us, however, is the overall feelings that are voiced by the current culture around them. In trying to sell to society, one must echo the voice of that society, and that is what can make these plays so interesting in a historical sense as well as a modern one.

A proven way to capture people's interest has been to take a famous novel and turn it into a theatrical production, either a musical or a play, thus making it more accessible to the general public. Over time, films usurped much of this retelling, but theater still found its niche by achieving a more personal retelling of the tale. No matter how familiar these tales become, there are some stories that still captivate the imagination, and good playwrights are always on the lookout for ways to do just that.

In recent years, the popular theater has included dazzling displays such as *The Lion King*, *Spiderman: Turn Off the Dark*, and *Footloose*, all plays originally derived from recent films and comic books. These are more modern plays created to entice the current generations familiar with the films to go see the live theater in the hopes of seeing more of what they love. It has become a proven formula that will most likely continue to be used in the future.

More historically, however, the novels that have been turned into plays are those that send a clear message to the audience, and while the aforementioned plays do carry some form of message, earlier choices were even more in tune with the current topics. A number of these stand out from earlier times that have passed the test of time and carry clear messages that still resonate to this day. Of these novels, two have made the transition into modern repertoire and yet still reflect the views of those who wrote them into our modern times – *The Phantom of the Opera* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

Arising from the Mists – *Phantom of the Opera*

It was the play that might never have happened. Gaston Leroux, the author of *La Fantom de l'Opera*, was a more popularly known for his detective novels, and *Phantom of the Opera* was something of a departure from that genre, though still possessing elements from it. It was not until 1925 that the story became well-known, not as a play but as a silent film starring Lon Chaney. This transition turned the main character, Erik, from a somewhat sympathetic character into more of a monster than Leroux had ever intended him to be (Ribi re). Further characterizations were to follow, again on film, including the 1943 version starring Claude Rains, and several adaptations well into the 1990s (Hart and Webber). These held true to the earlier cinematic vision of the work, distorting Leroux's Phantom even further, and turning him into a gruesome creature who had either been distorted by accident or by demonic dealings.

The first theatrical release, however, was in 1976, and forever altered the meaning back to Leroux's original vision. Playwright Kenneth Hill was wandering in an old bookstore when he happened upon a dusty copy of Leroux's novel. What he found was that the true story behind *Phantom of the Opera*, the one that had been occluded by years of Hollywood horror movies, was far more complicated than first met the eye. The Hill production, which is still in theaters today, was instrumental in the creation of Andrew Lloyd Webber's well-known extravaganza that has captured the public eye for the last twenty-six years. Webber's attendance of a performance of Hill's version led to an almost collaboration of the two playwrights, but Webber broke off communications and wrote his own story. Undaunted, Hill also continued to produce his play until 2008 (Hill, *History*).

A third variant came into being in 1991, written by Maury Yeston and Arthur Kopit, and comprised of some of the wit of Hill's version and the romance of Webber's (Yeston). For several years, the theater community was afire with a surfeit of *Phantom*s of varying degrees of madness and vengeful longings. All of them had some resonances of the original story to a greater or lesser extent, and they had a strong following of devoted fans.

The history behind *Phantom* and its proximity to the familiar tale of *Beauty and the Beast* are what grab the hearts of the so-called 'vox populaire' or popular voice¹, and it is due to their diligence that the story has survived for so long. Gaston Leroux made full use of the history surrounding the Paris Opera house to sell his novel, and the backstory of the novel capitalizes on the bloody history of the time period. In Leroux's imagination, the cessation of work on the opera house for periods all-throughout its fifteen year construction gave ample time for secret passages to be created, especially during the time of the Franco-Prussian War and the French Commune from 1870 to 1871. While the opera house was being used as a military outpost, armaments and explosives were stored and cached in the cellars, some of which were found several years later, adding to the plot devices that Leroux had available for his use (Hart and Webber).

This background, along with everything else, captured the flavor of the times and gives Leroux the ability to make the story so vivid. Inspired by authors such as Poe, Conan Doyle, Kipling, and especially Dickens, Leroux claimed that "he had learnt from Dickens that a good plot is no more than an abstract construct unless you can make the story come alive; mystery is dependent upon it: the more fantastic the story, the more accurate it needs be in its evocation of the quaint reality of everyday life ... in *The Phantom of the Opera*, mystery is born of the workings of the real; it is born of the gaps and discrepancies in our grasp of the places and characters" (Ribi re).

Notably, the other thing that makes the plot so compelling is the complexity of human life and drama that is seen woven through the story. The use of the Paris Opera House as the setting of the action almost never moves from the actual building. The *Opera Garnier* becomes a microcosm of everything human and the action spans from the very roof of the building to the depths of the underwater lake far below ground. In between lies the human realm, and in a place such as the opulent opera house, the entire strata of human society could be witnessed (Ribi re). It also captivates our senses, much as the story of the *Titanic* does, by being a cross-section of life encapsulated in a finite space, and the interactions of the people in that space become the drama and a story to which we can relate.

One of the other selling points to *The Phantom of the Opera* is its main character, Christine Daae. Although Christine seems to be a mostly passive figure, there is a strength of soul that emerges within her during the course of the story. Ribi re points out that "she is not the stereotypical heroine that her blond hair, blue-eyed physique and childish naivety might lead us to believe. And ironically it is the forbidding figure of the Phantom who ultimately empowers her both as a singer and as a woman: crossing emotional and social boundaries, she becomes the agent of Erik's redemption and can choose

her own fate (Ribi re). Instead of being the stereotypical female character who has to be saved from a horrific fate, in the end she makes her own choices and is able to allow Erik to pass on with dignity for them both. Her growth and the emergence of her individuality over the course of the story is one of its most enduring points and something that has allowed it to appeal to audiences over the decades.

In the end, *The Phantom of the Opera* enchants audiences as much for its rich and complex background as it does for its poignant love story. The theatrical versions of the story capture the poignancy of the story, and inspire compassion and pity rather than the fear and terror capitalized on by the cinematic versions. The story becomes more human and relatable, and although the theatrical versions were late in their arrival, they have more than made up for their absence.

An Unfamiliar Road – *The Wizard of OZ*

When L Frank Baum wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of OZ* in 1900, he had no idea how popular the story would become, but he was not one to let an opportunity pass him by. In 1902, the first theatrical release of *The Wizard of OZ* was produced, but the story had altered considerably from the original novel. Gone were the characters of the Wicked Witch of the West and even Toto; Dorothy’s new companion was a cow named Imogene, and her new rival was the displaced King of OZ named Pastoria (Raymond). In the course of displacing the Wizard, who apparently was the cause for Pastoria’s disappearance in the first place, the reinstated king targets Dorothy’s group for destruction, and it takes the divine intervention of one of the witches to allow Dorothy to leave in peace (Swartz).

This was no longer a familiar story where Dorothy met and walked with her friends to get home again. It had become instead a political gambit. In one of the scenes in the middle of the play, when the companions meet the wizard, Dorothy asks him if he is a magician. He replies:

Wizard

Am I? Watch! All done by the passes of the hand.

Dor

Then you can send me back to Kansas with a pass.

Wizard

I am not a Congressman. (Baum)

The script is liberally sprinkled with tiny puns and references such as this that give the play a tone that the book never had, at least overtly. The play was a rousing success and it stayed in production almost constantly for the next twenty years (Swartz).

Thus did the story of *The Wizard of OZ* remain until 1939 when the cinematic version was released, allowing the world to view Judy Garland in all her Technicolor splendor. It was at this time that the story suddenly reset itself to the original plot and characters, and became etched for all times within American culture.

Other versions followed. In 1974, an African American version was released under the title *The Wiz* (Brown). Although this version stayed true to the original plot of the novel, it also incorporated the humor of the original play and added a number of African American references that gave it a very different flavor. All new music was written for the play, and the African American influence in the play resonated throughout the script. Tying even into the folklore of the deep South, the Wicked Witch of the West, Evillene, calls upon some of the traditions when she summons the head of the winged monkeys to come to her. He comes, insolently enough, and appears in her court stating:

Winged Monkey

Ok, baby! I'm here. Bt it's not because of you. It's because of that dumb chant.

Evillene

Don't you come signifying to me, you little ape, or I'll put a spell on your...coconuts. (Brown 60)

The addition of the signifying monkey was something that the targeted audience could understand and relate to as this is a key element to many of the African American stories of trickery and deceit. When the movie version of *The Wiz* came out in 1978, it was set completely within the environs of New York City, and many of the unique aspects of the script had been removed or remodeled to make the film more appealing to a diverse audience. Although beautifully made and starring such famous singer-actors as Diana Ross, Michael Jackson, Nipsey Russell, and Richard Pryor, the film did not succeed as its stage incarnation had (Swartz).

More recently, the play *Wicked* has made its name on Broadway as the play adaptation of a book by the same name. This version of the plot is from the Wicked Witch of the West's point of view, and gives a different outlook on the play. There is also a new Andrew Lloyd Webber production based on the 1939 film that will be arriving in the United States sometime in 2013. Obviously, the appeal of *The Wizard of OZ* lives on still.

There have been a number of controversial topics that have surrounded *The Wizard of OZ* since its release, and whether or not the original story had subliminal messages about the Populist part is still a matter for hot debate. Although originally a simple essay hypothesizing the overall themes in *The Wizard of OZ*, Henry M Littlefield started a revolution of thought about the book that is still discussed today. His ideas that the silver slippers, gold bricks, Emerald City, and even the Munchkin's were all Populist political references have been touted, refuted, and finally denounced by literary critics since the mid 1960s (Taylor 414). There still seem to be arguable points, however, as to whether Baum truly meant for his novel to represent something political and the use of the book as an allegory remains, at least in teaching circles, as a useful parable of symbolism and metaphor (Taylor).

What endears Dorothy and her companions most to us are not the fantastical elements of the piece, though they certainly can be seen as miraculous in some cases, but instead, it is the amazing resilience that the main character portrays. A nine-year-old child and a girl child at that, is swept away to a world of fantastic beauty and danger, and yet she is able to overcome all of the obstacles that she is presented with. Even though she has help, most of the main actions and decisions are left up to her, and she leads her friends unfailingly through the difficulties that face them in reaching their ultimate goals. This sort of scenario was uncommon for the time, because no one looked at Dorothy and told her that she could not do something due to her gender. In 1900, when most women did not even have the vote, having a successful, strong female lead character was very unusual indeed. Baum manages to succeed where many others might not, and that perhaps is what has given the story its length and staying power for all of the intervening years.

Conclusion

As trivial as both of these stories may seem at first glance, there is much to be said for both of them. There is a lot of political speculation that can be made about both of them, and a great deal of it is relatable to our lives today. Politicians have changed very little over the last eleven decades, and what could be said for the atmosphere in both OZ and the Paris Opera house could still be seen today. The country is as stratified as the people in either story, and the powerful gain more power daily, just as the

less fortunate have to struggle to get by. People still have problems that they need to solve, and it takes strong men and women to get through many of the daily trials that they are faced with. And underneath everything, there is an undercurrent that we can't always see, something that we are missing, that we can almost just put our fingers on...the pulse of the mystery still beats within us, and we both long and dread for its solution.

The Wizard of Oz and *The Phantom of the Opera* have survived the test of time, not because they are the best, deepest stories and plays, not because they address, overtly anyway, the deeper meanings of life, but because they are as relatable now to the audiences as they were when they were first written. The stories, both of which are the journey of the hero towards a resolution for better or worse, appeal to us because they are our own stories, our own hero's journeys that we make throughout our own lives. The women are strong, the men supportive but not in a smothering way, and the outcome is at least peripherally positive. The stories have something that resonates within us, and it is something that reaches out and is embraced by the vox populaire for that very reason.

One must remember that the triumph of human achievement is often seen only through the lens of time, and for both L. Frank Baum and Gaston Leroux, that lens is very clear indeed. While neither author could have seen the vast popularity that their work would enjoy on the stage, the foresight in their writing is obvious and their ability to appeal to a wide audience is quite apparent. Seeing that the works continue to perpetuate new theater productions and new versions as time goes by, there is no question that the writers' names will be remembered for a very long time to come, as will the stories and the characters that they have created.

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ⁱ not to be confused with the vox populi – an impromptu interview with the man on the street.

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