

Julianne O'Brien - Writer/dramaturg

1) FAMILY AUDIENCE AND THEMES

- I have co-written 3 successful Family Musicals for Windmill/South Australia Theatre. Writing for families, I don't split my focus but write for child and adult at the same time. The FAIRY/FOLK tale is based on universal themes like love and belonging which are meaningful for human beings whatever age.
- If I were to come up with a CONTROLLING IDEA (*Theme expressed in a statement*) that is encapsulated in most Fairy/folk tales it could be this -

'Life is very difficult but you can get through it by taking actions in alignment with your deeper values. When you do this, however, you will attract the forces of antagonism which will test you. But ultimately, you will be rewarded'

This is true of adults and children. In fact, many adults find this harder to do than many children although they have more life experience.

2) IS the 'darkness' of Pinocchio the musical suitable for children?

- 'Pinocchio' had a successful run in Australian capitals and NY (and was awarded the 2014 Helpman award for 'Best New Australian Work). It almost got a season in LA but deemed by producers at last minute as 'too dark' for children. (It is created for audiences from the age of 8 upwards)
We (Rose Myers and myself) make no apology for the darkness. Our understanding of importance of fairytales is based on the insights of child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim who wrote "*The Uses of Enchantment*" which looks at psychological function of fairytales and the archetypes they contain.
When told a tale, the child is invited into experience the shadow side (the repressed side) of herself and her life within the psychological safety and symbolism of the tale.

For eg. A young child may feel it dangerous to express anger directly at her mother (who may even be her sole caregiver) but is invited to despise the witch and champion Gretel's attempts to destroy her. The witch as a symbol of the Bad Mother.

3) UNIVERSAL THEMES AND CONTEMPORARY OBSESSIONS

- One way we keep the work relevant to contemporary children and adults is to meld universal themes and contemporary obsessions like the desire for fame. Folktales are usually able the desire for wealth rather than the current obsession with fame. We set our tale in the fashion world.

4) WRITING 'Rumpelstiltskin'

The process took 18 months during which Rose and I disagreed on who would be the protagonist

Story – a girl claims publicly to be a magical genius but, in fact, is ordinary and untalented. She enters into a contract with a Goblin, Rumpelstiltskin. He will create magical creations for her but he demands three things in exchange. The last is 'her most precious future possession'. She agrees to this not realising it will be her first born child.

I wanted the GIRL to be PROTAGONIST because she is the innocent, the usual folktale hero that gets into trouble through the human failings of desire and pride. She is identifiable for an audience.

Rose wanted Rumpelstiltskin to be PROTAGONIST which that is more unusual. A feared, unloved outsider of a community that could also be seemed identifiable.

We solved this writing problem through the CREATIVE JOURNEY which involved many drafts and 2 creative developments. Another element was the input of Paul Capsis (the play was written for him to play Rumpelstiltskin) and the pathos, emotional and vocal range he brought to the table.

Our solution to the Protagonist Problem

1st ACT PROTAG is the girl– a naive country girl gets in too deep with the darkside and loses her baby.

2nd ACT PROTAG is the goblin– an unlikely love story between the self-loathing Rumpelstiltskin and the wide-eyed, trusting baby.

5) CLIMAX

Climaxes of plays are the most important action points and yet many scripts by inexperienced writers (and first drafts from more experienced writers) often contain no climax or a weak climax. The climax of our musical is a custody battle that involves a genuine legally binding contract, two adoring custodians and one very confused baby.

When we came to this idea we decided not to shrink back from it as many members of audience (adults and children) will have been touched by a scenario like this. We pushed the drama of these scenes, allowing it to get as nasty, confusing and heart-breaking as in real-life.

Love wins out at the end. A new hybrid family (not nuclear, not biological) is created based on unconditional love. This family is reflected back to the audience – the adults and children – as something they can recognise.

6) SHARED SOCIAL AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCE OF FAMILY SHOW.

The “family show’ as compared to a ‘children’s show’ can be a shared cultural experience for adults and children together.

There are some ways in which the FairyFolkTale is different to a play written for adults.

However, FFT is not a debate. It deals with incontrovertible truths. It’s not debating those truths.

FFT is not political in this way. They can’t present paradox, or moral compromise,

ambivalent feelings, they can't have unresolved conflicts or open endings . They can't present unbearable levels of grief or pain and they can't show good characters suffering for no reason. I wouldn't write a play for adults like this either as I believe the writer is responsible for the ideas she is putting out into the public domain and I think those ideas ultimately should be life-affirming when writing either for children or adults.