

Movie critics have contended that Disney makes the best musicals in America in animated form. In 1991, when the movie *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* opened, Frank Rich, then chief theatre critic of *The New York Times*, proclaimed it to be the best musical score of the year, on stage or off. Considering comments like this, it is difficult to see the transition from film to stage as anything other than a natural progression.

Expanding the 90-minute visual magic of Disney's animated classic into a traditional-length Broadway musical was not simple. Peter Schneider, president of Walt Disney Feature Animation, has commented that "many factors had to be addressed." These included expanding the original score and rethinking the overall storyline, not to mention developing techniques to turn a prince into a Beast and his castle's servants into household objects. The main problem in this transition was how the objects could come alive on stage. With a talented group of Broadway veterans gathered for *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*, this concern was answered with the decision to create a silhouette of the movie, rather than a replica of it.

From this point forward as the musical came to life, concerns of its living up to the movie that inspired it were slowly - and excitingly - evaporating. In April of 1994, the stage version finally opened on Broadway.

The Songs

Along with the original Academy Award winning score by Alan Menken and the late Howard Ashman, seven new songs - one with lyrics by Ashman (which was cut from the film) - and six others by Tony and Academy Award winner Tim Rice, *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST* took on a brand new life on stage.

The stage Beauty allows the Beast to sing (which he does not do in the film). The song "Human Again" which was cut from the film, brings the story into deeper focus. In it, the Beast's servants, who are gradually evolving into inanimate household objects, dream what it would be like to be "Human Again." This number and the seven other new songs have helped turn the children's animated classic into a distinctly rich and profound tale for all ages. The new songs include "No Matter What" (Maurice and Belle), "Me" (Gaston and Belle), "Home" (Belle), "How Long Must This Go On?" (Beast), "If I Can't Love Her" (Beast), "Change in Me" (Belle) and "Maison Des Lunes" (Gaston, Lefou, Monsieur D'Arque).

The Story

Linda Woolverton expanded her screenplay for the stage, reshaping scenes so they could play effectively in the theatre where close-ups don't exist. Characters have been fleshed out, and several of the servants roles have been enhanced. The film opens with the servants' transformation already complete. On-stage however, the process happens gradually. The decision to show this evolutionary process on-stage underscores the point that once the transformation is complete, there is no going back and, more importantly, it allows the audience to participate in the illusion and the concept of the actor as an inanimate object.

Linda has also allowed the relationship between Belle and the Beast to evolve more subtly and gradually. She is particularly proud of a new scene in the castle's library in which Belle reads the Beast the story of another classic myth "King Arthur and the Sword in the Stone."

The Costumes

The job of transforming the animated characters into living and breathing human beings and household objects fell to veteran Broadway costume designer Ann Hould-Ward. Her job was to capture the look and spirit of the film, translating its simple shapes in clear line and color into theatrical costumes with depth

and texture. From start to finish the process took two years. Her hard work and ingenious designs resulted in a 1994 Tony Award.

Hould-Ward, whose Broadway credits include *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods*, understood that the success of the stage version would depend largely on a convincing presentation of these inanimate objects. They would have to recall their film counterparts while accommodating the bodies of full-size human beings who sing and dance. In order to do this, Hould-Ward developed a series of presentation boards and conceptual sketches to spark discussion between designers, animators and Disney executives. They were the first in a series of drawings that eventually numbered 350.

The animated feature was both a jumping off point and a constant reference not only for the costumes, but for the entire production. It was assumed that the audiences would bring certain expectations to the show - the job of the entire creative team was to invite viewers to go beyond their expectations and discover new aspects of the already familiar characters.

The Staging

Robert Jess Roth's staging and Matt West's choreography proved the sheer theatrical excitement that a stage *Beauty* requires. Set designer Stan Meyer has created a richly colored storybook world, while experts on magic and pyrotechnics have been brought in to provide the literal and figurative fireworks. The show-stopping "Be Our Guest" is even more spectacular on-stage than it was in the film. The stage version starts off as *Follies Bergere*, descends into *Busby Berkely* and ends with fireworks and explosions. Director Roth has managed to find a visual style for the stage version that is more dazzling than the film but that does not let the spectacle overwhelm the story. Roth has commented that "we have found the perfect balance between storytelling and razzle dazzle where the love story remains key to making the show work emotionally."

Now in its seventh smash year on Broadway, Disney's BEAUTY AND THE BEAST continues to delight audiences of all ages.