

## *Red Riding Hood*

Not having seen children's theatre since I was a member of the target age-group, I was unprepared for the number of adult jokes written into the script of *Red Riding Hood*. The first "big axe" joke took me off-guard, and, judging by the deeper sound of the laughter evoked in response to this joke, most of the other adults in the audience had a similar reaction. Adult jokes continued through entire songs such as "Tiny Chopper," in which the audience is told that "Even though [Ben has] a tiny chopper [...] It doesn't matter what the size is. It's what [he does] with it that counts." This concern over small penis-size is likely to appear in adult comedies like *Sex and the City* or in online ads promising enlargement, but a children's show was the last place I was expecting to encounter this topic which is decidedly not for kids. Additionally, it's hard to see any merit in the song besides this one joke which, if it were to be looked at literally, only expresses a preference for using small axes to large ones.

Apart from the subversively crude sexual jokes, there were also outdated cultural references that children would not understand. The song "Wolfylicious" makes allusions to several different songs including Sir Mix-a-Lot's 1992 hit "Baby Got Back." "Baby Got Back" has personal significance for me as it was the first pop song I ever learned from beginning to end. So, although I could not recall precise dates for the song's release during the performance of *Red Riding Hood*, it was immediately apparent – at least to me – that the song predated the majority of the children in the audience by over a decade. That the pantomime adapts the song and includes it as a part of a pop medley was a great moment for me and, I imagine, for the parents in the audience, as well, since the song was available at just about the time they were in high school and college. Unlike other 90s songs, such as the "Macarena," however, "Baby

Got Back” has not quite managed to cross the popularity gap into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it is improbable that the child-audience of *Red Riding Hood* would have heard it played at all prior to this performance. This is not to mention the general lyrical profanity of the original song “Baby Got Back,” which is about the artist’s sexual preference for women with “big butts” and includes turns of phrase such as “My anaconda don't want none unless you've got buns, hun.” That the song was rising in popularity amongst children was, in fact, the catalyst of a huge controversy amongst parents and teachers in my elementary school, and I often heard the song cited as an argument against pop and rap as appropriate musical genres for children.

The key to this particular usage of the song, as with the song “Tiny Chopper,” is that the writers ingeniously make the adult-humor of the production child-friendly. The songwriter does not talk about sexual fetishes or phallic insecurities. Instead, “big guts” and diminutive axes are the order of the day, leaving the child-audience with the chubby wolf and the wimpy woodcutter to cover up the more adult themes. This, I learned, after reading the Wikipedia page on the history and development of pantomime, is all part of the convention of pantomime as a genre. Sexual humor and the re-writing of popular song lyrics in ways which go over the heads of the younger audience members are common conventions of pantomime. Other ways in which *Red Riding Hood* holds to pantomimic tradition are by including a cross-dressing mother-figure (here, the Granny) and audience participation as part of the production – such as when Big Blue teaches the audience her “Laughing Song” and the Three Little Pigs prompt the audience to “oink”). This last convention was something I had expected, but never having seen a child’s production that was specifically a pantomime, I was completely ignorant of these other traditions.

At the same time as it was strange for me to encounter these conventions while surrounded by kids, it has since occurred to me that these trends have made their way into other forms of children's entertainment. These adult jokes don't surprise me when they inevitably show up in a Disney movie or in a Saturday morning cartoon. Perhaps the fact that I reacted differently to this medium as a setting for jokes which span several age divisions is more indicative of the immediacy of a theater experience – and an interactive one at that – than any real difference between the age-appropriateness of the jokes which it contained.

### *Antony and Cleopatra*

Caesar, although a “boy,” is made to look cold and distant through costuming and lighting. His suit, contrasted with the costumes of Mark Antony and the men in both armies, disassociates him from any group. His soldiers have much more in common with Mark Antony and his army – as we see in the drinking scene – than they do with Caesar, their leader. By the look of him, he should be behind a desk in an office, not a leader of men, yet the CEO-style Caesar is a very effective commander of men. He uses his detached position as a point of command. He orders the execution of Lepidus from a distance, refuses hand-to-hand combat with Mark Antony, and sends ambassadors to carry out his edicts, and it is because of this removed style of leadership that Caesar is able to succeed in conquering.

This suits the utilitarianism of Imperial Rome whose style of thought, according to Cleopatra, is counter to a “dispos[ition] to mirth.” As much of the play has to do with group affiliation and loyalty to that group, it is worthwhile to think of how group costuming functions elsewhere in the play. Mark Antony and his men, for instance, all dress in similar costumes. The military garb serves to identify them as a single unit, a body undivided. To signify

desertion, they take up the blue uniforms of Rome – which bring to mind the cool lighting used during the parts of the play which are set in Rome – and abandon their desert-like Egyptian colors. It is notable that even though Mark Antony is deserted by the majority of his troops, people who take on the Roman colors never take upon a full affiliation; they simply consider it an opportune change given the likeliness of Mark Antony's failure. Perhaps this is because Caesar, as a self-identified member of an out-group through costuming, cannot command in-group loyalty.

The women's style of dress is the most interesting of the three groups as they have no set uniform ascribed to them. There is, however, a standard of dress between them. As queen, Cleopatra is given the most elaborate costumes, and Charmian and Iras mirror her in like-colored but slightly less extravagant copies. This coordination between the women's outfits represents a like-coordination between the women as a unified front. They are so similar that the soothsayer tells Charmian and Iras that their "fortunes are alike." The similarities between these women are emphasized in the scene in which Cleopatra and her women dancingly lead Mark Antony offstage. The synchronization of their dance, like their costuming, shows that they are synchronized as a group and that the men with their battle scenes are part of a group which is separate from theirs.

The costuming of these women also changes according to function. Cleopatra's role at the beginning of the first act is that of a seductress. The more her dress embodies the exoticism of the Orient, the more her influence over the Roman in Antony. The first dress has the most flowing material, but as intentions turn to war, Cleopatra and her maidservants' outfits become more and more utilitarian, culminating in their use of pantsuits. When the

women are in a somber mood, they dress themselves in more somber colors such as white and/or black. In this way, Cleopatra creates her army of women of which Enobarbus complains that "'tis said in Rome that Photinus an eunuch and [Cleopatra's] maids manage [the] war." Their purpose as a group is reflected in their outfits, and common outfits demonstrate their common goals.

Even though there may be alliances between Caesar and Antony, Antony and Cleopatra, etc. there cannot be perfect trust between the groups. Eventually, it makes no difference that Antony has married Caesar's sister, Octavia, or that Antony and Cleopatra are romantically involved. The first loyalty and love is always to their own groups if they are to maintain their honor. This is why the play is able to continue after Mark Antony's death. Cleopatra is no Juliet, and her first obligation is not to her Romeo; it is to her women, her children, and her country. Likewise, Mark Antony is enraged enough by his flight in betrayal of his own group to want to kill Cleopatra, the source of his cowardice. In these moments of crisis, membership to in-groups is ultimately displayed and out-group members betrayed.