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Transmediating the Tale: Gopala Davies's *Barbe Bleue: A Story of Madness*

By Catherine Makhumula

Abstract

In this article, I discuss Gopala Davies's *Barbe Bleue: A Story of Madness* as a theatrical performance that incorporates digital media to experiment with theatrical storytelling. I argue that the director of the performance thematises the tale of Bluebeard's transmediality: its capacity to be retold across a variety of media. The resulting performance is a retelling of the tale into a new context and with personal motivation. Furthermore, through the exploration of its themes, Davies in *Barbe Bleue* also rewrites and comments on the tale of Bluebeard, evoking complex visual and auditory storytelling experiences within the theatrical time and space. The article, therefore, discusses the dynamic ways in which contemporary African artists like Davies combine and integrate digital media in their theatrical productions to explore new modes of presentation and new ways of experiencing theatre.

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INTRODUCTION

Artists working in different media from across national borders, throughout various historical periods, have been intrigued by the tale of Bluebeard. The tale is believed to have originated from the European oral tradition. The first surviving, and most famous, written version of this tale, Charles Perrault's "La Barbe Bleue," made its literary debut in Perrault's 17th century *Tales of Mother Goose* (1697). The collection is said to have taken the lead in transforming the oral narratives of a peasant culture into bedtime reading for children (Tatar 15).

The heart of the story involves a rich but violent blue-bearded nobleman who has a secret pattern of murdering his wives. The tale is about the attempts of the most recent wife to avoid the fate of her predecessors. At the beginning of the action, Bluebeard prepares for an expedition and entrusts the keys of his castle to his wife. At his departure, he gives clear instructions that while the wife is free to host and entertain in the castle, she is strictly forbidden to unlock one particular room. The wife promises to do as told but as soon as Bluebeard departs, she is overcome with desire to see the forbidden room. Her curiosity leads her to open it. To her horror, she discovers the hanged bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives. In haste, the wife drops the key in a pool of blood, staining the key as she dashes out. Bluebeard discovers the bloodied key as soon as he returns from his trip and regards it as proof of the wife's disobedience. He thereby announces her punishment as death. Just as Bluebeard is about to kill her, the wife's brothers break into the castle and kill Bluebeard – saving their sister, who in turn inherits Bluebeard's great

wealth. Bluebeard's widow uses the fortune to help her siblings, and she eventually remarries, forgetting about her horrible experience with Bluebeard.

The tale of Bluebeard is an old tale that has been retold in different time periods, across various geographies, and in a variety of media. Maria Tatar explains that master narratives¹ like the tale of Bluebeard are timeless and universal in nature (11). Not only are they encountered in print and on screen; the narratives are also encountered in performance as poems, myths, operas, fairy-tales, and plays. The tales rarely repeat themselves; instead, they are constantly adapted, altered, transformed, and tailored to fit new cultural frameworks. Tatar argues that it is precisely this fact that ensures that the tales are never exactly the same and are always kept alive and active, "(...) always doing new cultural work, mapping out different developmental paths, assimilating new anxieties and desires, giving us high pathos, low comedy, and everything in between" (Tatar 11).

In the example in this article, the tale of Bluebeard crosses time periods and locales to 21st century South Africa. It is used to explore themes relevant to Gopala Davies, the director of *Barbe Bleue*, and his context at large. As a performance that experiments with digital technology on stage, *Barbe Bleue* can be classified as an example of what David Kerr identifies as a growing trend in African theatre: the mixing of electronic media in theatre performances (xviii). However, while African theatre creatives like Davies are increasingly incorporating digital technologies in their performances in ways that surpass medium specificity, African theatre scholarship has been rigidly reinforcing the notions of African theatre as essentialist, medium specific, and under the

¹ Tatar describes the tale of Bluebeard as a master narrative which has repeated itself but also reinvented itself over the course of the past centuries, taking unexpected twists and turns as it makes its way into different cultural environments (12).

threat of extinction from digital media². By not recognizing the role of digital media in creating innovative ways of making and experiencing theatre, African theatre scholarship overlooks an integral aspect of African theatre in this age of ubiquitous technologies.

In this article, I discuss *Barbe Bleue* as a theatrical performance that incorporates digital media to experiment with theatrical storytelling. I argue that the director, Davies, thematises the tale of Bluebeard's transmediality: its capacity to be retold across a variety of media to tell a personal story of mental illness and domestic violence. The resulting performance combines and integrates various storytelling modes to retell, comment on, and rewrite the age-old tale of Bluebeard. This is achieved through the interplay of complex layers of visuality and aurality consisting of corporeal bodies, auditory voices, images, film, and various projection techniques. This, in turn, evokes an intricate multisensory experience for the audience.

I began with an introduction for the tale of Bluebeard to foreground the transmedial qualities that enable it to maintain its relevance in its retelling in the 21st century South African context. Thereafter, I will introduce *Barbe Bleue*, the production, to contextualise it as part of a trend in South African theatre that incorporates digital media. In the third section, I outline theoretical perspectives that guide the analysis of the performance to contextualise the performance as an intermedial performance that utilises transmedial storytelling. In the fifth section I analyse the performance of *Barbe Bleue* in terms of the media it utilises and the various storytelling experiences it evokes. I end the article with some concluding remarks on *Barbe Bleue*.

² There has been a significant amount of literature which has raised concerns over the impact of digital technologies on theatre and how theatre can be "preserved" or "adapted" to suit the new dispensation (Inyang 2; Nwankwo 34; Odhiambo and Warnes 284; Rantimi 129; Udengwu 342).

BARBE BLEUE: A STORY OF MADNESS

I encountered the production of *Barbe Bleue* in 2014 at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, where it won several awards. *Barbe Bleue* was one of the cases discussed as part of my thesis project on intermediality in the South African and Malawian theatre context. This larger study found that theatre practice in Southern Africa is far more experimental in transcending the boundaries between theatre and other media, in contrast with the scenario portrayed in African theatre scholarship (Makhumula 197). These experiments include both the incorporation of digital media and the presence of other media in theatre in general.

In *Barbe Bleue*, the tale of Bluebeard is used to explore themes relevant to the director and his context at large; such as contemporary, postmodern issues of women empowerment, mental illness, and domestic violence. As with the age-old tale of Bluebeard, the performance retains its suspense, dark mystery, and horror.

The director of the play, Gopala Davies, is a South African-Indian actor and director in both film and theatre. In my interview with Davies, he disclosed that a recent first time meeting with his father inspired the performance (Davies). The reason he had not met his father was that his mother had run away from him because he was abusive. Davies had just found out that his father had a clinical mental illness (Davies). The tale of Bluebeard's conspicuous themes of mental illness and domestic abuse explains why Davies was drawn to this narrative.

In addition to this personal inspiration, Davies explained that his desire to experiment with the techniques and borders of media was also a major motivation:

I love theatre and film and I wondered why separate the strengths of the two when they could come together and work to tell a narrative? So you've got tools such as editing, montage, close up, and then on stage you've got live performers, you've got presence, live contact, things that would work together. I wanted to see how does it work? Would it work? I also did a module on digital media at University of Pretoria in my honours year and that initiated the project. (Davies)

Davies cites his desire to experiment with theatre and film as the main impetus towards the *Barbe Bleue* project. Particularly, Davies explains that the vast number of tools and techniques that were presented by both media intrigued him. Related to this reason, his educational training provided him with the technical capacity to work in both media. It therefore was the very process of interaction between media that Davies aimed to investigate in his project.

The resulting production does not adhere to simple characterization, plot, and linear progression of story that absorbs the spectator in the fiction. Neither does it adhere to the harmonization of time, space, and action. It chooses instead to present fragmented narratives, disjointed soundscapes, visual illusions and spectacles, and an emphasis on physical language as opposed to dialogue³. Davies's central preoccupation is the retelling, rewriting and commentary on the tale of Bluebeard through a variety of media. As the performance analysis section shall demonstrate, the choices Davies and his cast made with regards to the staging of the performance incites the spectator to engage with new, contemporary ways of looking and hearing in the theatre. This

³ I should note that a reviewer, Sara Robertson, criticised the performance for its fragmentary format. She argued that "while the parts of the whole were well executed, the elements did not hang together well enough as a whole to make the show effective or hard-hitting" (Robertson). However, the fragmentation critiqued by Robertson could be said to be the very aesthetic Davies was aiming for in his retelling of the tale of Bluebeard.

performance analysis section will follow a brief discussion on theoretical perspectives that frame the discussion of *Barbe Bleue*.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Barbe Bleue is an intermedial phenomenon because it is a theatrical performance that combines and integrates a wide range of media such as auditory, visual, and corporeal texts. Intermediality in the broadest sense is defined as relations between media, media interactions, and interferences (Rajewsky 15). According to Rajewsky, these media relations, interactions, and interferences may be characterised as transpositions and transformations, as references and as combinations and integrations.

The first two types of media interactions – transpositions or transformations and references – are not relevant for this discussion. The former implies the way in which a media product comes into being, with the transformation of another media product (Rajewsky 51). In the latter, the intermedial quality has to do with the way in which the media product “uses its own media-specific means, either to refer to a specific, individual work produced in another medium, or to refer to a specific medial subsystem or to another medium *qua* system” (Rajewsky 52).

The most relevant category for this article is media combination. In media combination, the intermedial quality is determined by the very process of combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation. “These two media or medial forms of articulation are each present in their own materiality and contribute to the constitution and signification of the entire product in their own specific way” (Rajewsky 52). According to Lars Elleström, theatre is by definition a phenomenon of media combination. This is because theatre normally combines and

integrates, to varying degrees, basic media⁴ such as auditory text, still image, and body performance. The aesthetic aspects of these combinations and integrations of basic media are part of how theatre is understood and defined as a qualified medium⁵. “Theatre may thus be said to be a qualified medium that is very much multimodal and also, in a way, very much intermedial since it combines and integrates a range of both basic and qualified media” (Elleström 28). Using this definition, *Barbe Bleue* is intermedial because of the ways in which it combines and integrates basic media such as auditory text, still image, and body performance, but also other qualified media such as film.

Barbe Blue is also considered intermedial because of the unique way it *re-mediate*s and *trans-mediate*s an old fairy-tale of French origin into the South African context. I use Lars Elleström’s understanding of transmediation as both *re-mediation*: “repeated mediation” and *trans-mediation*, “repeated mediation of equivalent sensory configurations by another technical medium” (Elleström 14), because it describes the creative team’s engagement with media in this case. I specifically refer to the *re-* and *trans-*mediation processes that take place within the performance itself when the tale of Bluebeard is retold, re-written, and commented on through the use of corporeal bodies, auditory voices, images, film, and various projection techniques within the theatrical performance. I also allude to travel trajectories the tale has taken across time periods and geographies from 17th century France to 21st century South Africa. I therefore also ground the theoretical frame for this understanding in Werner Wolf and Irina Rajewsky’s categorisation of

⁴ According to Ellestrom, “basic and qualified media are abstract categories that help us understand how media types are formed by very different sorts of qualities,” whereas technical media are “the very tangible devices needed to materialize instances of media types.” Elleström uses the term basic media for those media that are mainly identified by their modal appearances (27).

⁵ “Qualified media are aspects of a medium characterized by historical, cultural, social, aesthetic and communicative facets” (Elleström 33).

“transmedial” phenomena, as phenomena that manifests itself across a wide variety of media (Rajewsky 46), or as phenomena that are not specific to individual media (Wolf 28)⁶. There seems to be an agreement among scholars that narratives, fairy-tales in particular, are a transmedial phenomenon (Rajewsky; Thon, “Narratives across Media and the Outlines of a Media-Conscious Narratology”; Thon, *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*; Wolf).

Consequently, “transmedia storytelling” also becomes a constructive framework for this analysis because of *Barbe Bleue*’s focus on storytelling as an activity. However, while Marie-Laure Ryan and Henry Jenkins’s concept of transmedia storytelling is used in reference to the multimedial franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* (novel-based); *Star Wars* (movie-based); *Batman* and *Spiderman* (comics-based); *Tomb Raider* and *Warcraft* (video game-based), transmedia storytelling, in this article, refers to a narrative that unfolds across multiple media – with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole – within the theatre framework.

There are similarities between Ryan and Jenkins’s concept of transmedia storytelling and the way I use it in this context. For example, their definition of transmedia storytelling as a deliberate attempt to make media converge around a shared narrative content (Ryan 1) also applies in this case. Davies makes a deliberate attempt to converge various media to retell, comment on and revise the tale of Bluebeard. Similarly, their understanding that transmedia storytelling tells *different* stories about a given story-world (Ryan 1) as opposed to adaptation (which attempts to

⁶ It should be noted that while Werner Wolf categorises transmediality as an example of intermediality (Wolf 19), Rajewsky takes another approach. She attempts to differentiate transmedial phenomenon (an aesthetic that is not bound to any specific medium even though its concrete realisation is necessarily medium specific in each case) from intermedial phenomenon (due to the crossing of borders between media)(46). However an example such as *Barbe Bleue* demonstrates that transmedial phenomenon and intermedial phenomenon are not far off from each other. As a theatrical performance, *Barbe Blue* combines and integrates media that is transmedially realizable and available across a variety of media.

tell the same story in a different medium) is also applicable to my usage of the concept in this article. The treatment of the tale of Bluebeard in this performance goes beyond adaptation in that it not only involves the retelling of the tale of Bluebeard in a different medium, but it also rewrites and comments on the tale of Bluebeard itself.

PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

For the purposes of this discussion, I have categorised the performance event into seven episodic scenes. Of these scenes, three are encounters between a man and a woman on stage. These are theatrical enactments reminiscent of the encounters between husband and wife in the tale of Bluebeard. Two are mockumentary videos that comment on and re-interpret the tale. One scene is dedicated to storytelling: It combines an auditory narrative of the tale of Bluebeard with a visual illusion of a storybook, a wide-screen projection, and an embodied performance⁷. Lastly, the final scene is a video re-enactment in response to the tale. The stories in these seven episodic scenes are quite distinct and are loosely linked together by clips of an audio and video fuzz intermission placed in between any two scenes. This “fuzz” – a distorted soundscape accompanied by a grainy image on screen – is looped in a video playlist and is accompanied by random beard facts projected onto the screen in text. The two features – the fuzz and the beard facts – hold the episodic scenes of the performance together as a unit. The following section discusses the scene categories in detail.

The Encounter Scenes

The three encounter scenes between a man and a woman by actors on stage are presented in the form of a physicalized and movement-based

⁷ This scene will be discussed last because it is the most complex.

storytelling. They consist of theatrical enactments reminiscent of the encounters between husband and wife in the tale of Bluebeard. As with the tale of Bluebeard, the three encounters scenes end with a violent physical altercation: a pinning against the wall in scene 1, an asphyxiation in scene 2, a power struggle in scene 7. Each of the scenes presents a graphic visual image of violence or death, as it extends the theme of domestic violence against women. The scenes mirror the vulnerability of the woman in the tale of Bluebeard. In this regard, they serve as enactments of the tale of Bluebeard. These encounters also consist of unprovoked, extreme acts of physical violence against women, thereby suggesting the themes of mental illness and abuse.

Mockumentary Videos

Two scenes are mockumentary videos⁸ that offer direct commentary and interpretation on the tale of Bluebeard. While the first mockumentary (scene 4) offers a feminist reading of the tale of Bluebeard, the second mockumentary (scene 5) offers a somewhat sexist commentary. These two scenes are considered as mockumentary because they make an effort to resemble a documentary, even though they are clearly not. Here, I am using Gary Rhodes and John Springer's definition of mockumentary as the use of a documentary format while using fictional content (4). The performance in the two scenes is marked as an authentic documentary by the camera angle, which frames the character against a neutral background in an interview-like, direct address. The opening sequence of the mockumentary, for example, uses common documentary narrative techniques. The subject even introduces the mockumentary as a "video" about a particular topic. The subversion from documentary to

⁸ A mockumentary is defined as a genre that appropriates styles from both the codes and conventions of the documentary and from the full spectrum of non-fiction media (Hight 26).

mockumentary takes place with the movement of the camera, which reveals that the documentary is in fact a mockumentary.



1 - The First Mockumentary (Source: Production Team)

In the first mockumentary, for example, a woman appears on the screen. In a medium shot, she provides a feminist commentary on the tale of Bluebeard as she looks directly into the camera and addresses her audience in the first person. It is revealed – with the movement of the camera – at the end of her speech that the documentary-like footage is actually a playful and rehearsed performance that takes place in a toilet. On a wider camera frame, the woman unrolls the toilet paper, wipes herself, flushes, pulls her pants up and exits the camera frame. The contrast between the seriousness of her subject matter and the setting of the monologue not only provides comic relief, but also confronts the spectator with the constructed-ness of the performance, thus challenging the authenticity of the documentary.

The Filmed Enactment

The video re-enactment, which is the last scene in the performance

(scene 7), is a complete rewriting of the tale of Bluebeard: The tale has been uprooted from its story-world in order to depict a new theme of revenge. This final scene concludes the power struggle between men and women as portrayed in *Barbe Bleue*. The scene depicts courtship and punishment. However, it is the collection of female performers (who appear both in the film and on stage) who punish the male protagonist. The last action in the performance could be read as the female characters exerting their revenge on the male protagonist for the abuse that they endured during the course of the performance and in the tale of Bluebeard.

The Storytelling Scene

The story-telling scene is the most complex of all the scenes in the performance. The scene consists of a simultaneous storytelling of the tale of Bluebeard which combines auditory narrative, three visual narratives and an embodied narrative. While most of these narratives would have sufficed on their own in this scene, the director enhances the experience of storytelling by introducing simultaneous modes of narration at the same time. Davies subsequently experiments with a variety of technical media⁹ to create a divergent range of visual and auditory experiences of the tale of Bluebeard in this scene.

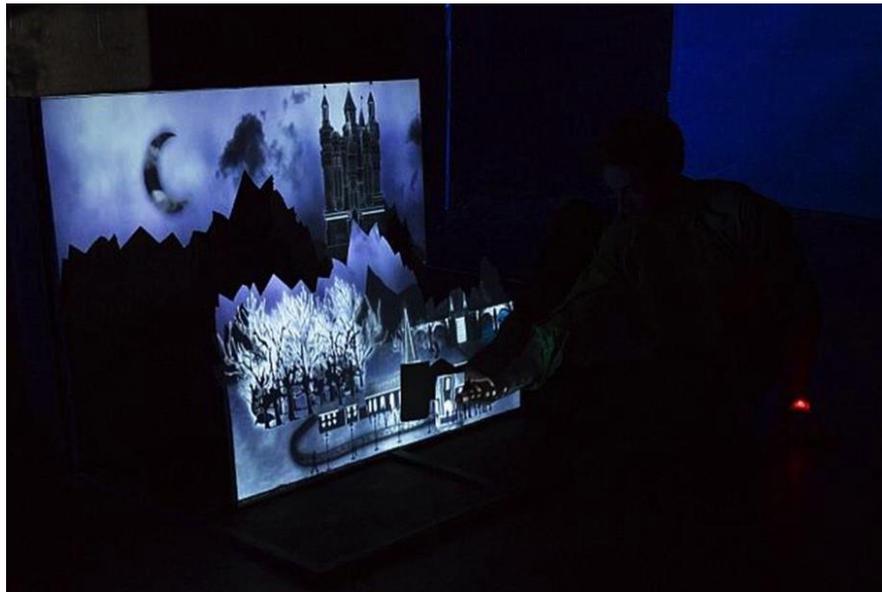
The Auditory Experience

The first storytelling experience is auditory and involves a narrator's voice and two other narrative voices that represent Bluebeard and his wife. This auditory narrative is the first to be encountered in this scene. The voice of a male narrator tells a version of the tale of Bluebeard from the beginning. This auditory narration is continued to the end of the scene

⁹ Lars Elleström defines a technical medium as "any object, physical phenomenon or body that mediates, in the sense that it 'realizes' and 'displays' basic and qualified media" (30).

even after other technical media are introduced to create other visual and corporeal experiences of the tale. The auditory narrative marks the tale as a narrative through the presence of the narrator whose pervasive voice surrounds the auditorium. The narrator's utterances, such as "once upon a time" and "the end," convincingly mark the narrative as fairy-tale.

The Storybook Experience



2 - The Storybook Experience (Source: Production Team)

The second storytelling experience encountered is the "pop-out storybook" experience. This experience involves a visual representation of a storybook on stage. Davies uses projection mapping to create the illusion of a pop-out storybook consisting of a visual set for the tale¹⁰. As the auditory storytelling experience commences, a replica of a "pop-out

¹⁰ Projection mapping is a group of techniques that is used for projecting imagery onto physical three-dimensional objects in order to augment the object or space with digital content (Rowe 155). With projection mapping, images are beamed, adjusted, and masked so that they seem to follow the shape of the target object instead of spilling out onto the walls. This has the effect of turning surfaces into dynamic video displays (Ekim 10).

storybook” supplements the auditory narrative. The male protagonist moves towards the front on the stage left and raises the “storybook” – a smaller white board on which images of Bluebeard’s castle and its surroundings are projected. Some of the images, like that of the castle, are static, while others are moving images (such as the images of the characters and the carriage). The male protagonist (on stage) appears to manipulate the “pictures” of the storybook with his hands and body.

As with the auditory experience, the “storybook” experience also capitalises on the fairy-tale’s traditional association with distinctive features such as the pictorial pop-out storybook to mark the narrative as fairy-tale. Using projection-mapping, Davies circumvents the problem associated with pictorial narratives (especially in single monophase¹¹ pictures) by incorporating movement into the static image of Bluebeard’s castle to capture the temporal unfolding of a story through moving images. The overall experience evokes a similar visual experience to that of reading a pop-out storybook in the minds of the spectator (albeit one with moving images).

To make the visual storytelling more effective, Davies creates post-dramatic visual illusions¹² in this scene. The main visual illusion is the pop-out storybook itself. However, there are other visual illusions introduced throughout the second scene. A noteworthy moment is in the climax of the auditory narration of the tale of Bluebeard. As Bluebeard is enraged by his wife’s betrayal in the auditory narrative, the narrator assumes the

¹¹ Monophase is a term used to describe a work that evokes one moment in a narrative through a single image (Wolf, “‘Cross the Border-Close That Gap’: Towards an Intermedial Narratology” 92).

¹² Jeroen Coppens observes a renewed interest in the trope of visual illusions in contemporary theatre, despite post-dramatic theatre traditionally being associated with an inclination to move away from coherent narrative and illusion (Coppens 14). Coppens notes that, rather than being a one-way communication process, the theatrical images from post-dramatic visual illusions are geared towards visualising how representation is an interactive process between the spectator and what is seen and, more importantly, how perception is a creative act that takes place in (and is also shaped by) certain practices of looking (Coppens 25).

voice of Bluebeard. Simultaneously, a shadow image of a man's head emerges on the right-hand corner of the pop-out storybook screen. This shadow image could easily be perceived as live, produced by the male protagonist who is standing behind the "storybook" screen, as opposed to being filmed and edited into the video footage as it had been (Davies). The image appears to lip-sync the words of Bluebeard in the auditory narrative. The ominous shadowy image of the head, when combined with a harsh reverberation of the voice, heightens the sense of Bluebeard's power over his wife, arguably delivering a stronger effect as it bridges the visual and auditory storytelling experiences. It becomes apparent that Davies aimed to create an illusionist effect. However, it is not an effect that absorbs the spectator into the story-world of the narrative, but one that makes them question if what they experience is live or mediated, and whether this question is relevant or not.

The Cinematic Experience

A few seconds into the verbal and storybook experiences of storytelling, the upstage "screen" (a projection on the wall) lights up and duplicates the images from the "storybook" to the entire wall. From the small storybook situated in front of the stage, the spectators' attention is re-directed to the larger projection of images that fill the back wall of the stage. This creates the third storytelling experience encountered in the scene. This experience is also visual in nature and it uses identical visual images to the storybook experience. However, this narrative invites the spectator to adopt a cinematic way of seeing as opposed to the referred "storybook" mode created by the smaller screen. Because of its wide-screen resolution, the visual images on the large projected screen display a lot more movement in the images than the "storybook." The feel of the large screen projection experience is reminiscent of the old black and

white movies by early filmmakers.

At this point, the spectator begins to take notice of the correlation between the auditory narrative and the visual narratives. It becomes apparent that the auditory narrative has been supplemented by the visual narrative/s, which enact the tale of Bluebeard. Inside Bluebeard's castle, a shadowy image of Bluebeard gives instructions and the keys to his wife and then, shortly after, a carriage is seen moving away from the castle, presumably taking Bluebeard away. Back inside the castle, the image of a woman going up the stairs emerges as the (auditory) narrator tells of the wife's decision to open the forbidden room. A flow of blood appears on the stairs as the narrator explains how Bluebeard's wife found the hanged bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives.

The technical aspects involved in curating the visual experiences of the spectator in this scene lie in the execution of cues by the cast. During the performance, two individuals are in charge of the beaming of identical video footage projected onto two screens. The actor on stage operates the footage displayed by the mini projector on the small "storybook" screen, while Davies himself controls the footage on the large screen. The two video operators harmonise their execution of cues to simultaneously stop and play the action on the two screens (Davies). This execution of cues is bound to be different in each performance event and in turn influence how the spectator experiences the performance.

The Framed Experience

An added aspect of the projected moving images on both screens is the square frame held by an omnipresent hand, which guided the visual narrative by weaving together the action in the auditory experience and visual experiences. This provides the forth storytelling experience. The mode of this storytelling experience is also visual, but unlike in the two

previous visual storytelling experiences discussed above, this narrative is focalised towards specific moments set apart from the overall story-world of the entire visual encounter. This storytelling experience uses a visible (shadow of a) picture-frame – an item that is largely associated with photography – to “capture” the moments of action in the projected moving images. The movement of the hand-holding-the-frame subsequently functions as a focaliser that magnifies certain critical moments of the tale. This has the effect of shifting the spectator’s gaze from one physical location of the story to another, for instance, between events happening inside and outside of Bluebeard’s castle. This technique is vital to the storytelling motif, allowing the director to select which parts of the tale he would like the audience to be drawn to, more or less in the same way a skilled storyteller crafts a story with his/her own personal touch, making additions and omissions.

The Corporeal Experience

The fifth storytelling experience consists of a dance sequence performed by an actor on stage, in conjunction with the projected images on the wall. This embodied storytelling is a movement-based depiction of the tale of Bluebeard. The dance sequence, performed in proximity with the projected wall upstage, also appears to be synchronised with the auditory and visual storytelling experiences. For example, the repetitive motions of scrubbing are symbolic of the washing of the key by Bluebeard’s wife. The motions of moving away, with hands held out to protect the face, suggests the wife’s reaction to Bluebeard’s physical assault¹³. There is a brief moment of doubling, as the performer overlays her body on the screen at the precise spot occupied by the shadow image of Bluebeard’s wife. In this instance, a shadow image of Bluebeard on

¹³ I arrived at this interpretation when the physicalized storytelling was seen in relation to the auditory and visual experiences that are synchronised in this scene.

screen appears to be giving instructions to his wife before his departure (these instructions are audible through the auditory narrative). At the very moment when the dancer's body overlays the image of Bluebeard's wife on the screen, the voice of a female character narrates the wife's response to Bluebeard's instructions. In this instance, all three technical media (the auditory, the corporeal, and the moving image) have been layered to create an overall synchronised experience of the tale of Bluebeard.



3 - The Corporeal Experience (Source: Production Team)

The Gestalt Experience

The sixth and final storytelling experience combines and integrates all storytelling experiences discussed above. It is essentially left to the spectator to experience these narratives on the basis of what they are able to see, hear, and feel. What is remarkable, however, is the way in which these narratives are woven together and entangled (using their own media-specific narrative techniques) into one master narrative – the sixth narrative experienced in its wholeness. Davies's use of media in his production – auditory texts, visual and physical languages – creates both a “heightened sensorium and sensory dissonance” at the same time and is a

catalyst that “activates a ‘synaesthetic’ theatre experience” (Coetzee) for the audience.

In addition, Davies experiments with the relationship between space, time, and action in theatre in his combination and integration of multiple storytelling techniques. Using the different types of techniques at play in this scene, the director effectively employs the technique of time delay, synchronising, and forwarding. This is achieved when the sequentiality and tempo of the tale/s is experimented with. The sequentiality of the narratives appears to be synchronised in some instances. However, there are other instances when the narrative from the focalised visual experience is delayed and is focused on a specific part of the story, while the narratives of the auditory and moving images progress. For example, in the middle of the storytelling, the focalising hand highlights Bluebeard’s departure in his carriage while the auditory narrative focuses on the events that happened at the castle after Bluebeard’s departure. The sequentiality of the narrative as encountered in the visual storytelling experience is thus different from that of the auditory storytelling experience. In this regard, Davies succeeds in creating new and multiple experiences of time and space for the tale of Bluebeard for the audience members.

CONCLUSION

Barbe Bleue combines and integrates various storytelling modes to retell, comment on, and rewrite the age-old tale of Bluebeard into a new context – through the interplay of complex layers of visuality and aurality consisting of corporeal bodies, auditory voices, images, film, and various projection techniques. The transmedial tale of Bluebeard is thus re-mediated and trans-mediated into a new context through the media convergence around a shared narrative of the tale of Bluebeard.

The performance of *Barbe Bleue* employed techniques that experimented with how the audience experiences theatre and theatrical presence. This experimentation was intended to critically engage the spectator with new, contemporary ways of looking and hearing. Davies takes an experimental approach that opens up theatre to new modes of experiencing theatre. *Barbe Bleue* is an example of how digital media extend theatre into a “modular non-hierarchical inter-active non-linear process where there is a layering of meaning present at the same time and space” (Chapple and Kattenbelt 23): a world of multiple meanings where meaning is not prescribed and audiences are encouraged to interpret their own experience of the performance.

Davies’s production and other similar productions highlight a disconnection between the current trends in African theatre practice and scholarship. While creatives like Davies are increasingly incorporating digital technologies in their performances, African theatre scholarship continually reinforces the notions of African theatre as under the threat of extinction from digital media. This viewpoint ignores the role of digital media in creating innovative ways of making and experiencing theatre. African theatre scholarship stands to benefit from exploring experimental forms of performance in order to account for African theatre in this age of ubiquitous technologies.

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