From Idea to Stage: A Ten Year Journey

In October of 2006 I saw Evanescence live in San Jose. I was already a big fan. The concert was one of the best I have ever seen. The musicianship and staging and the quality of the sound and the strength of Amy Lee’s voice were all just amazing. As is often the case when I immerse in art, I came away with a windstorm of inspiration, all whirling enthusiasm looking for direction.

I had been toying with how being undead would affect your world view. I had recently finished a short story called The Gift about a dutiful wife who trades her life for her dying undeserving husband. In that story, Death is impressed enough by her sacrifice that he gives her life back. Seeing what she had done for him transforms the husband. You can find the story in Drink Tank #300 (at item 244).

Evanescence had a big hit out called, “Bring Me to Life” where the female singer begs her boyfriend to breathe life back into her, to save her from the nothing she has become. Having two small girls, I had recently seen Disney’s 1937 masterpiece Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. The motivations in a lot of fairy tales are left to the imagination, but none so much as Snow White. I had always been bothered by the Queen’s obsession with killing her stepdaughter. Why would an unchallenged ruler be anything but pleased to have a ready-made heir just waiting to be crafted. Vanity just never struck me as a big enough motive to miss what an asset Snow was to the Queen’s power.

Moreover, what did Snow think and feel when she was in the Sleeping Death? The old hag told her the apple was a Wishing Apple, that one bite would bring her dreams true. And it did. She died, was buried for six months, then was awoken by the prince, which was what Snow had wished for. But she wasn’t dead, she was enchanted. What if she were in a zombie state where she was aware of what was happening? What kind of personal strength would she need to survive such an ordeal and still come out happy when the prince revives her? What kind of side effects or psychological damage would linger after an ordeal like that?

The Need for a Sequel Emerges

I became obsessed with these two notions, the Queen’s real motive, and Snow’s death experience. I decided I needed to write a sequel that picked up where the first story ends, and in doing so, explain the rest of the story that wasn’t apparent in the first part.

As bad as the first three Star Wars movies are, I think the strength of the last three comes from bringing a galaxy-spanning conflict down to a personal family saga. The Greek myths do this really well. Myths in general are about personal journeys that affect the world at large.

So I knew I wanted to find a family back story to explain the Queen’s actions. I also wanted to show Snow to be strong and capable. She is so subservient and so easily tossed around in the first story, I really wanted to show there was more to this girl than a pretty face and a nice voice. Surviving the death spell was proof of this. I needed to show how she survived it.

A Critical Turn

While I was working on these concepts, my wife made a critical connection. Denisen was at the time a newspaper reporter and has a natural gift for getting people to talk to her. In February of 2007, she had heard that our local bookstore was holding a signing for children’s books. There she met Robert San Souci, who has written literally scores of award winning children’s books. In chatting him up, she discovered that he had written the original treatment that was made into the Disney movie Mulan. She got his number and put me in touch with him.

What followed was a lovely correspondence where Robert gave me his agent’s name and I made multiple queries about pitching a Snow White sequel script. (Robert recently passed away. he will be sorely missed.) While the weeks rolled by and no one returned my calls, I continued writing the script. When the agent and all of Robert’s other contacts ran dry (he had pitched Mulan several years earlier and had not had contact with the movie business since) I began querying Disney directly. This was right at the end of the writers’ strike, when studios should have been hungry for new content.

Oh, the grand ideas I had. I envisioned Mick Jagger playing the Mirror and Christopher Lloyd playing the mad monk Brother Daniel. I hired my friend and artist Arlin Robins to craft a lobby card / DVD cover image to help promote it.

Reality Check

Eventually I got a letter back from Disney Legal telling me to stop sending anything to their personnel. To avoid plagiarism lawsuits, they had adopted an exceptionless policy of never looking at anything they had not first hired for. Then I heard that Disney, after 71 years was not going to do a sequel to Snow White. They have had great commercial success doing sequels to all their other Princess properties. Maybe Snow White was too dark. Their Princess movies have generally been lighter fare. Being duped out of your voice by a witch just doesn’t compare with having your mother try to kill you in cold blood. But now came word that instead of a straight sequel, Disney was going to reimagine the sequel as a martial arts action film set in China and called Snow and the Seven.

So I contacted Dreamworks. I got the same answer. If we didn’t think of it, we won’t listen to it.

Contests

So I entered the script in a couple of screenwriting contests. I figured a big win would add credibility and maybe get me an interview. In March 2008 the script, still as a Disney sequel, won Semifinalist in the [ScreenplayFestival.com](http://screenplayfestival.com/) 2007 contest, which meant it placed in the top third of several hundred entries. So I felt pretty stoked about continuing with the project. The contest also included coverage, or summary criticism. My reviewer told me to take the Disney out, that I didn’t need the Disney aspects to tell this story, and the Disney attachment was a deal killer.

I showed the script to my old friend and veteran film actor Jeffrey Weissman, and he said exactly the same thing. But just as importantly, Jeffrey pointed out that this was a play, not a movie. He said that since I had written it as a personal, focused family saga, where the story moves on character interactions, it really belonged on a stage.

Taking the Disney Out

So I took the Disney out and I rewrote it as a stage play. And lo and behold, the story got stronger as I filled in all the details I had developed having been thinking about the story for over a year. The dwarves became displaced Siamese Buddhist monks. I no longer had to shy away from the religion, the drinking, the cultural mores, the sex and the swearing that was a natural part of Bavaria in 1600 where the story is set. It was never a kiddie fairy tale. Now it was a worthy sequel to the original Grimm Brothers story. Then I discovered my original catchy title, Snow White and the Magic Mirror, had already been taken in a 1994 animated film. So I changed the name too.

From the very beginning I had seen this as a musical, probably because I had envisioned it as the end-to-end sequel to the Disney musical. But even as the Disney came out, the music was still a big piece of how the story was being told. So it is still a musical. Another of Jeffrey’s insights was that if Disney had owned The Wizard of Oz, then Wicked would never have been launched on Broadway. That made me feel better about saying goodbye to the Disney dream.

By the way, I have since met Michael Chabon, the Pulitzer Prize winning novelist who was hired to write the first draft for Snow and the Seven. He says he was fired from the job after handing in the script, and has not heard anything of the project since. It will probably never be made since 2012 saw both Mirror Mirror and Snow White and the Huntsman.

The Music

Back in 2007 I approached my friends Kristoph Klover and Margaret Davis about writing the music. Their band Avalon Rising was once in the running for a Grammy, but I knew them as approachable, friendly folk. To this day, after multiple albums, their huge fan following knows them as humble and accessible. They were thrilled from the start to be part of the project. God bless them.

I had originally thought to use Some Day My Prince Will Come as the central melody of this sequel. But with the Disney removed, we were free to take the music, like the script itself, wherever it needed to go. In the spring of 2008 I approached my friend Alexandra Montani who is an opera singer who now lives in Rome with her husband and small daughter. Alexa often comes to the Bay Area in the summer to visit friends and family. I knew she had a particular fondness for Snow White. She looks and sounds remarkably like the character in the Disney movie. She jumped at the chance to record a song for the play. In July 2008 we recorded a key song, “Summer Ended Early” at Kristoph’s studio in Oakland.

Table Reading

By February of 2009 I had recrafted the project into something completely original that I was really happy with. Jeffrey had put me in touch with Ann Thomas who runs a table reading group called the Pacifica Table Readers, which meets each month at her home to read and critique plays and screenplays. I got onto Ann’s calendar, and in May 2009 I got a table reading. It was wonderful. Seeing trained actors tackle the script as a cold read really showed me what worked and what did not. I gathered a ton of feedback, and went back to work.

Creative projects in the real world rarely take linear paths. An alumni of the Pacific Table Readers named David Guilmette used to run the Barefoot Theater company in Washington State. He heard from the members about my table reading, and he asked to see the script. David’s life has taken some interesting turns and he is now running an improv theater in Baja California. This is just one of several detours this project has taken over the years.

Getting the Details Right

From 2009 to 2014, Kristoph and Margaret finished writing the music for my lyrics and I fine tuned the script. We worked on it in our spare time and we ran through many drafts and versions. This has been a good period creatively for us. I wrote three novels and Margaret and Kristoph released three albums of music. Even though The Mirror's Revenge has been a "back burner" project, it has always been a favorite of ours that we wanted to get right. We have come up with a cohesive sound that tells a tight story.

During that time I also met Jeslyn Cantrell who has designed the album cover art. This image will be used for the play in all channels, the poster, the t-shirt, the album cover, and theater lobby cards.

In January 2015 I ran a Kickstarter to raise money to produce the album. This funded over our target, and we began recording in March 2015. When we started out, we had all the melodies and lyrics ready. Separating the parts for both voices and instruments, hiring musicians, scheduling studio time to record them, adjusting the lyrics accordingly, and then mastering the recordings, all took 14 months. I often describe this process as so long and intense, that had I known what was involved at the start, I may not have tackled it.

Since the songs are key to the story, listening to the songs in sequence tells the story. This is a tradition for musical theater scoring, and I have tried my best to live up to it. An album will get the story into the world and create an audience for the production while we do the workshopping. Once the staging is worked out, the script can be published with dialogue, songs, and staging notes together. We will produce a karaoke version of the album for theatrical companies to use in lieu of an orchestra.

Yes, It is a Play

Making the change from screenplay to stage play brought with it a world of logistical complication. You write a screenplay, go to Hollywood and beg, and if it happens, you sell it. The producer (or studio) hires other writers to work with the director to rewrite it into a shooting script, which gets changed a hundred times on the set by young writers working their way up through the movie business. You are done as of the sale.

Writing a play is just the beginning. So far I have worked with actors, musicians, and artists. Before I am done I will have worked with a producer, a director, set builders, more actors, more musicians, money people, and a whole host of folks I can only guess at from here. It’s a good thing everyone who has read the script has lit up with enthusiasm, and then said yes, it is a play.