

The possibilities of  
turning the animated  
cartoon musical,  
pocahontas, into a  
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Assertive and free spirited, Pocahontas follows her dreams and obeys no one. Brave and athletic, she scales mountains, climbs trees, and steers a canoe better than a man, like Women Who Run With Wolves. She does what she wants to do and does it well. Lively and vigorous, the place that later will be called, Jamestown, is full of energies of native American and forms a great universe before Englishmen settled in the place to bring destruction. The American racoon and bird, both facetious and cute, are fictionalised in the form of animated cartoon characters.

This is what The Walt Disney Company presents in the animated cartoon musical, Pocahontas (1995), which was a challenging attempt to present the beautiful spirits of the native American woman, Pocahontas, and her people – that of the Jamestown in the early days, and the peaceful life of the American wild animals.

The musical score and especially ‘The Colour of the Wind’, both winning Academy awards, add entertainment value to the film, and also contribute to implanting efficaciously the high ideals of global brotherhood and multi-cultural equality in children while involving them in the fantasy of a fictionalised animated cartoon.

As some of Disney’s animated cartoon musicals, such as The Lion King, The Hunchback of Notre Dame and The Little Mermaid have been adopted for stage musical productions with memorable hit songs, and followed by world wide tours, there is, of course, a possibility to adopt Disney’s Pocahontas into a successful stage musical. I will support this idea by going through the storyline of Pocahontas and its relation to the reputation of The Disney, the

reaction of the audience, and the value of musicals. I will also look at the integration of musical numbers that are used in the film, and the possibility to reassemble the order of musical numbers for the stage version of Pocahontas. However, there remain some difficult problems, such as how to represent the spirits of the river and the wind, both significant motifs in the film on stage. I will analyse these problems by looking at the visual styles of the animated cartoon and the stage performance.

### Storyline

Disney's Pocahontas offers an opportunity to educate children to appreciate global brotherhood. In Pocahontas, the villains are the greedy white men who want to exploit the new land by excavating the earth for its gold which is supposed to lie there. Even the best of them, handsome John Smith, looks foolish compared to the wise Native American woman, Pocahontas. Their exchange of wisdom therefore is destined in one way only: from Pocahontas to Smith. So when Smith unwittingly tells her of his dream of building a civilized country like Britain on the land of America, Pocahontas shows her disgust, and tells him a story of the spirit of a great universe. Her message will find an echo in the hearts of children everywhere through the hit song 'The Colours of the Wind' which keeps reminding children that everything in this world – mountains, trees, animals has its spiritual life, and that those spirits combine to produce a harmony.

Pocahontas is a typical Disney's animated cartoon with cheerful music, carrying a message of hope, and appealing to all generation with a universal theme that life has much to offer. Janet Wasko in the book of Dazzled by

Disney claims, ' magic, love and romance, good and evil, optimism and happiness, fun and family, fantasy and imagination, and bravery constitute the top-ten values that unambiguously define the “ wonderful world of Disney”'. (Janet Wasko, 2001, p129). Those values indeed fit in the context of Disney's Pocahontas, which is about the difference between good (John Smith) and evil (Governor Ratcliffe), nature and civilization, using the imagination, making people laugh, and even sharing the basic family value.

It is possible to bring Pocahontas on to the stage by using decorative props and set props as trees and mountains, and using puppets as wild animals. The props and puppets will make it possible to celebrate the greatness of nature with the help of talented stage designers and puppet designers, such as Julie Taymor, the costume designer, and mask/puppet co-designer of The Lion King. It is also possible to reduce the physical barriers that separate children from the screen, such as the two dimensional television, in the following way. The set of Pocahontas, the stylised representation of a lively natural land of America, can be placed not only on the stage and apron, but also in the orchestra pit, on the wall, around the balcony rail, and even up into the ceiling. The performers who play animals can entry through the theatre, dance at the balconies on the sides of the theatre, and touch some of the audience. This exciting style of theatre that also features in Cats, The Lion King, Witches of Eastwick, and Slava's Snowshow does not just enable children to sit in the seats, but also directly involve them in the lifelike production.

Pocahontas also deals with the idea of global brotherhood. The scene in which Pocahontas asks the wise old spirit of Grandmother Willow, a magical

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tree in the forest, ' what is my path? How am I ever going to find it?', Grandmother Willow answering, ' Listen, all around you are spirits' ' they live in the earth, the water, the sky, if you listen, they will guide you'. Through Disney's Pocahontas, children are encouraged to be open-minded and to see the world through a pantheistic perspective as embodied by Native Americans and universal spirits. The representation of Native Americans and universal spirits can be more visually real and appealing to most of the audience if it is presented on the three-dimensional stage in a theatre. For instance, the spiritual magic that Ketaka, the tribal shaman, summons can be shown more lively on stage through such devices as smoke, dry ice, spotlights, gobos, computer animation and projectors.

However, that sort of presentation might be seen as just another theatrical gimmick,

It is very clear that the aim of Disney's Pocahontas is to promote global utopia by spreading the idea of global brotherhood. In Hollywood Musical, The Film Reader, Richard Dyer claims, ' Two of the taken-for-granted descriptions of an entertaining musical, as " escape" and as " wish-fulfilment", point to its central thrust, namely, utopianism' (Steven Cohan, 2002, p20). This applies to Pocahontas. How can the crude English settlers, so ignorant of the spiritual things, call native Indians heathens? These intruders are the real savages who destroy the earth and their potential. In contrast, the Indians seem impeccable.

They care for the land, commune with its spirits, and love each other. The only exception is John Smith who learns to see natural life from Pocahontas's

perspective, and in the end, he risks his life to stop the war between American Indians and Englishmen. It does not matter whether the source of wisdom comes from human beings, ancestral spirits, or natural spirits. If people are willing to see things from the perspectives of the others, there will happiness, hope and peace. Thus, Disney's Pocahontas offers the image of something better (natural spirit, peace) to 'escape' to, which our daily lives don't provide, and delivers the elements of utopia, such as peace and hope, which are essential to the musicals of entertainment.

The possibility of turning a cartoon film into a stage production also depends on the fame of the movie and its audience. The fame of the film affects and guarantees the sales of tickets. The Lion King is one typical example of a adoption of a reputable cartoon film for a successful stage musical. Julie Taymor claims, 'If The Lion King hadn't been a movie, there would be nothing like this [proven box office]' (John Bell, 2001, p40). It is necessary to confirm that the cartoon film is so attractive that children can memorise the plot or the speciality of the movie, such as the culture of Hakuna Matata in The Lion King which most children love it so much that their parents are willing to take them to the theatre to show them the lifelike stage version. Probably Disney's Pocahontas is possible to be adopted for a successful musical performance owning the fame of the Disney, and the popularity of Pocahontas which is proved by face that it has been translated into several different languages and released in numerous countries.

Another motive that makes stage version of Pocahontas possible is its original message, a message that is concerned with the virtues of family and society. It is well known that Disney's cartoon films are suitable for children, <https://assignbuster.com/the-possibilities-of-turning-the-animated-cartoon-musical-pocahontas-into-a-stage-musical-essay-sample/>

and are the one of the most popular indoor recreations for families. It is no doubt that Pocahontas certainly serves the purpose of Disney's animated cartoon which appeals the virtues of love, family and society, therefore, it is possible to present it as family stage musical, and encourage the audience to think about his or her family in the theatre.

### Musical numbers

The score of Pocahontas probably is the one of largest, which contains seven songs Disney has ever made. The lyricist is Steven Schwartz, and the composer is Alan Menken who is also the composer of Disney's Aladdin, Beauty and Beast and The Little Mermaid. The style of music seems closer to 'French epic Les Miserable' (William A. Everett, 2002, p226), the songs of 'They're savages' and 'Dig Up Virginia' are among this example. However, some of the songs, such as 'If I Never Knew You' and 'Colour Of The Wind' are closer to the pop music.

Disney's Pocahontas can be qualified as a film musical, and can be adopted for a stage musical, because Pocahontas is marked by music, and 'its primary entertainment value and investment lie in the musical numbers themselves' (Gerald Mast, 1987, p2). For instance, the musical number of 'Colour Of The Wind' helps greatly to make audience understand what the story of Pocahontas is about through the pop music. Moreover, each musical number is associated with a particular character, and through the songs, the personalities of the characters are revealed dramatically to the audience. For example, the differences between American Indians and English gold diggers are clearly distinguished by 'Steady As a Beating Drum' and 'Virginia

Company'. The free and adventurous spirit of Pocahontas is presented in the musical numbers of 'River Bend' and 'Colour Of The Wind'. In contrast, 'Did Up Virginia' shows greedy and selfish personality of the Governor Ratcliffe.

In order to adopt Disney's Pocahontas for a stage musical, it is necessary that every character have its own musical number that expresses its particular idea, personality and emotion. It is possible to create two romantic scenes with song and dance between Pocahontas and John Smith by putting the originally abandoned song, 'In The Middle Of The River' in the scene in which they meet up again at the place of Grandmother Willow, and putting 'If I Never Knew You' in the scene in which John Smith is taken in a tent as a prisoner by the Indians. In addition, it is also necessary to create additional musical numbers for Meeko and Flit, the raccoon and the bird, who are the main animal characters, and the comedians of the story.

However, if I inset the intermission after the scene in which Kocoum is shot by Thomas, there will be only two songs in act two, which are 'They're Savages' and 'If I Never Knew You'. It is possible to place 'Colour Of The Wind' in the ending to emphasise the main idea of the story, and to bring out the ensemble of the characters on stage. Or it may be more amusing to create a musical number for Meeko, Percy, a dog of the Governor and Flit in the ending when they become friends with each other.

### Visual style

The Disney's animated cartoons are widely well known for their fantastic stories and vigorous imaginations. In Pocahontas, Disney's animation team takes full advantage of the stunningly beautiful scene of natural land of <https://assignbuster.com/the-possibilities-of-turning-the-animated-cartoon-musical-pocahontas-into-a-stage-musical-essay-sample/>



America, and allows Pocahontas to leap from one glorious location to another, and to steer canoe from top of the waterfall to rapids. Thus, we can say that through the computer animations and creative editing, Disney's animated cartoon offers a world that is far larger than a theatrical stage. From this point of view, there seems to be the limits to the project of turning imaginary cartoon scene into real stage settings.

First, the cliff from which Pocahontas dives in the beginning of the film and on which she sees John Smith off in the ending is the key scene of the story, and requires a mechanical stage lift high enough to provide a scenery setting situated high above the stage. And there must be traps cut into the stage floor to enable the performers who play Pocahontas, Meeko, Flit and John Smith move to the space beneath the stage while the scenery props on stage are changing. In this way, they can pop out from the basement to take audience by surprise. This technique may be very useful in the musical number of 'Colour Of The Wind' in which Pocahontas and John Smith explore natural world from mountains to the world under the river.

The shifting scene in the musical numbers of 'Colour Of The Wind' and 'River Bend' can be made visually interesting by the revolve and slipstage built into the stage floor. However, it is impossible to represent waterfall and rapids by bringing real water on stage (stage version of *Singing In The Rain* is the exception, which uses real water as the representation of the rain). The spirits of waterfall and rapids can be presented by swinging blue silky fabric and using dry ice, but this visual effect is much less realistic than the animated cartoon.

Second, the wind that plays one of the most important and significant parts of the story is difficult to represent on stage in a realistic way. It is true that the wind is not a visible object but a tangible movement of the air, so in the animated cartoon, the spirit of the wind is shown through the movements of the swinging leaves and shinning sparks. It may be possible to create the feeling of the wind in a theatre by fans installed in the stage floor and on the ceiling. On the other hand, the movement of the wind is difficult to control in reality (on stage). It is difficult to represent the movement of the wind as naturally and smoothly as in the imaginary animated cartoon.

Third, the changing scene in which Pocahontas and John smith explore natural world in the musical number of ‘ Colour Of The Wind’ can be presented by a series of shadow images. The flat puppets of Pocahontas and John Smith, and the flat scenery props, together with the uses of a transparent drop and a plan angle back light can produce shadow puppetry in oriental style, and create an alternation of the scenes.

Furthermore, puppet works may bring cartoon characters, such as Meeko and Flit, to life on stage, and shorten the visual distance between audience and animated characters. However, since there are no spoken dialogues and musical numbers for these animal characters in the movie, it may be dull and less realistic to try to appropriate the images and behaviours of the animals into the puppets for a musical stage. In contrast, Disney’s animated cartoon seems to successfully present the spirits of the real animals.

Disney’s animated cartoons are accepted as one of the method educating children through the fantastic images, memorable hit songs, and the stories

with the virtues of love, courage and happiness. Pocahontas, a typical Disney's animated cartoon, worthy of transforming into a stage musical because of the fame of the Disney, its educational value, and its entertaining value, which is an essential element of the musical performance. The theatrical technology, stage equipments, and the puppet works will make it possible not only to adopt an animated cartoon of Pocahontas for a stage musical, while faithful to the original idea of the movie, but also to create a new visual enjoyment in a theatre. However, the number of the musical scores in the original film is not sufficient for a musical production. And we cannot deny that an animated cartoon film provides a more realistic world than a stage performance. Perhaps this will be the weak point of a stage production that is transformed from a successful film.

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