



**What Does Tolkien Know about Fantasy, Anyway?
Representations of the Fantastic on the Contemporary Stage**

By Rob Kimbro

J. R. R. Tolkien is arguably the foremost fantasy author of the twentieth century. In 1938, as he was in the early stages of writing *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien delivered a lecture at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland entitled “On Fairy Stories.” It is collected, with what the author describes as “a little enlargement” and “a few minor alterations,”¹ in *The Tolkien Reader* as half of the chapter “Tree and Leaf.” In this lecture, he makes the following provocative statement: “Drama is naturally hostile to Fantasy. Fantasy, even of the simplest kind, hardly ever succeeds in Drama, when that is presented as it should be, visibly and audibly acted.”²

There’s a long tradition of critics arguing against depicting the fantastic or marvelous on stage, going all the way back to Horace and the *Ars Poetica*, where he writes: “Medea should not slaughter her children in the presence of the people, nor abominable Atreus cook human organs publicly, nor Procne be turned into a bird, Cadmus into a snake. Whatever you show me

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *The Tolkien Reader*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 31.

² Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” 70.

like this, I detest and refuse to believe.”³ Later, Horace’s injunction against fantasy was picked up by Renaissance scholars and the French Neoclassicists.

However, human beings love stories of the fantastic and always have. Alongside this negative tradition exists a long series of counterexamples. These are plays that do attempt to stage the impossible: Euripides’ *Medea* and *The Bacchae* (which partly prompted Horace’s objection), the miracle-filled religious cycle plays of the Middle Ages, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and *Macbeth*, Pulitzer Prize-winners like *The Skin of our Teeth* by Thornton Wilder and *Seascape* by Edward Albee, and more recent successes like Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses* and Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig’s *410[GONE]*. Like many of the strictures of the Neoclassicists, the rule against the fantastic has often been defied in practice by very successful dramatists.

Tolkien’s objection, however, is not based in theory or an adherence to traditional strictures, but on theatre-going experience. Later in his essay he refers specifically to witnessing failures of the fantastic in a children’s pantomime of *Puss-in-Boots* and in multiple productions of *Macbeth*.⁴ Tolkien presents his declaration on the hostility of Drama to Fantasy as an extrapolation from experience. Many modern theatregoers have undoubtedly shared this experience. Fantastic events and creatures can be difficult to embody on stage. The most recent and best-funded attempt to stage Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, for example, had mixed results at best. The musical, directed by Michael Warchus, failed to recoup costs in its Toronto run, and a subsequent West End run in 2007 was met with mostly negative critical reactions.⁵

³ O. B. Hardison and Leon Golden, *Horace for Students of Literature: The “Ars Poetica” and Its Tradition* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 13.

⁴ Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” 71.

⁵ Kelly Nestruck, “Critics are Dazzled and Confused by Lord of the Rings Musical,” *Guardian*, June 19, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/jun/20/thelordoftheringsmusical>.

This limited success stands in stark contrast to the critically lauded and commercially successful movie adaptations directed by Peter Jackson.

Is Tolkien right, then? Is Fantasy anathema to Drama? What is the source of the danger that he and Horace saw, and how can it be avoided in practice? To answer that question, this paper will consider what we mean by the fantastic and then go back even further than Horace—to the Greeks and Aristotle’s *Poetics*—for a possible explanation of when and how such stories can work on stage.

Defining the Fantastic

Tzvetan Todorov’s 1970 book *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (translated into English in 1973 as *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*) defines “the heart of the fantastic” in terms of an event. Something happens in a story that should not be possible according to the laws of the universe we know. Either this is an illusion or the world of the story is not governed by such familiar laws. This definition creates three categories. In the first, the *uncanny*, the seemingly impossible event is explainable. It is a deception, an illusion, a hallucination, or something similar. On the other end of the spectrum is the *marvelous*, where the fantastic event has indeed happened, the story is taking place in a world that is not governed by the physical laws of our real world, and ghosts or monsters or djinn or whatever impossibilities called for by the story are real. For Todorov, the true *fantastic* is the third category: a narrow section that lies in between the uncanny and the marvelous where both

explanations are available and the audience or the characters in the story are uncertain of the truth of the matter and, thus, the nature of the world they are in.⁶

Todorov's strict definition of the fantastic as requiring such ambiguity is quite narrow, certainly much narrower than "Fantasy" in the sense that Tolkien was using in 1938. It is worth noting that Todorov's text spends a great deal of time on all three categories, suggesting that the titular term "fantastic" might also be applied more broadly as a super-category encompassing all three subcategories. This paper makes use of that broader sense. In fact, the focus will be largely on what Todorov would call the marvelous—stories of worlds that are different from our own. Using fantastic instead of marvelous not only matches Tolkien's usage, it is also the common term for this sort of story among writers of speculative fiction today.

This definition gets to the very heart of what our skeptics are talking about. We enter the realm of the fantastic when something impossible happens. That is the challenge for the artist adapting a story for the stage. Unlike words on a page, the actors, set pieces, and props on the stage are subject to the physical laws that the fantastic event, by definition, seems to break. This is an area where a movie has a distinct advantage over live theatre; there are an array of techniques that can make the impossible happen on screen. In the case of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* films, a truly incredible amount of craft and technical expertise was devoted to capturing the impossible on film in ways that simply aren't available to the theatre artist. It is this difficulty that leads to the skepticism about successfully presenting the fantastic in the theatre. However, this way of understanding the challenge of staging the fantastic rests

⁶ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), 25.

on problematic assumptions about the modes of storytelling and types of signification available to the theatre artist.

Modes of Storytelling

Aristotle talked about storytelling in terms of three “modes.” In the *lyric* mode, the storyteller relates personal experience and feeling directly to the audience. In the *epic* or *narrative* mode, the storyteller relates events that happened to others. In the *dramatic* mode, the storyteller largely disappears and the audience experiences the story through a representation of events. These categories or similar systems have been used ever since—James Joyce references them in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example.⁷ The concept of mode gives us a way to classify storytelling independent of and in combination with taxonomies of medium and of genre. Where medium refers to the interface between storyteller and audience—the printed word on the page, moving images on a screen, actors on a stage—and genre refers to the expectations on the part of an audience that a story will follow certain rules and conventions, mode describes the relationship of storyteller to story.

Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, revisits and updates this idea of storytelling modes for modern practice. Her system consists of showing, telling, or interacting. She refers to these as “modes of engagement” or “modes of involvement.”⁸ Like Aristotle’s system, it describes the relationships among storyteller, story, and audience. Aristotle’s lyric and narrative modes would both be “telling” in this system, which makes no distinction between a story of

⁷ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Project Gutenberg, 2014), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4217/4217-h/4217-h.htm>.

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22-26.

personal experience and one related in the third person. “Showing” would map to Aristotle’s dramatic mode. This is the realm of mimesis, where the storyteller creates a visual and aural representation of the world of the story for the consumption of the audience. This leaves room in a tripartite system for a new mode—interactive—to describe storytelling techniques that allow the audience to participate physically and kinesthetically in the story. Hutcheon sees this mode as encompassing a wide range of modern storytelling experiences: video games, tabletop and computer roleplaying, theme parks, and historical recreations.

The many possible combinations of media and mode allow for a highly flexible system of storytelling classification. But Hutcheon, like Tolkien, often seems to assume that specific modes are inextricably connected to specific media.

To tell a story, as in novels, short stories, and even historical accounts, is to describe, explain, summarize, expand; the narrator has a point of view and great power to leap through time and space and sometimes to venture inside the minds of characters. To show a story, as in movies, ballets, radio and stage plays, musicals and operas, involves a direct aural and usually visual performance experienced in real time.⁹

This is a perfectly natural assumption. The medium of theatre is well suited to showing story in the dramatic/showing mode. Literature, on the other hand, is well equipped to tell a story in the narrative/telling mode. But it is the same misstep that Tolkien and Horace make when they dismiss the possibility of staging the fantastic. To assume that choosing a medium locks the storyteller into a single corresponding mode is to miss the possibility of the genius Aristotle saw in Homer—the skill of mixing different modes in a single medium. Hybrid forms are possible, and theatrical practitioners since the time of Shakespeare have been using narrative techniques

⁹ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 12-13.

like the Chorus in *Henry V* to “leap through time and space.”¹⁰ Those techniques can also enable actors and directors to stage the sort of fantastic stories that a straightforward dramatic mode presentation might fail to realize.

One theorist who embraces the distinction between medium and mode is Bert States. In *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, States lays out his own system of modes, asserting that the actor can communicate with the audience in self-expressive, collaborative, and representational modes of discourse. He refers to these as “I,” “you,” and “he” modes.¹¹ These map directly to Aristotle’s original framework. Essentially, a storyteller can share how they feel (lyric or self-expressive), tell us what happens so that we can imagine it (narrative or collaborative), or show us what happens (dramatic or representational). But States is very clear that an actor can and must “shift keys” among these modes to be fully effective. Likewise, Aristotle, in chapter 24 of *Poetics*, praises Homer as the greatest of the epic poets precisely because he is able to mix the dramatic mode into his epic narratives.¹² Homer is not locked into the epic mode just because he’s using the medium of the epic poem.

Similarly, Drama doesn’t always have to operate in the dramatic mode. This is the possibility that Horace and Tolkien don’t see. They’re conflating the *medium* of Drama with the dramatic *mode* of storytelling. The danger isn’t presenting the fantastic on stage. It’s trying to tell stories of the fantastic in the dramatic mode—attempting to show the impossible through mimetic representation.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 160.

¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. and ed. Malcolm (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1996).

Semiotics and Dual Nature

Semiotics is the study of the making of meaning through signs. Tapping into the narrative mode in a theatrical production broadens the artist's range of semiotic options and allows the use of sign categories that are not available when the artist is simply showing a story in dramatic mode. Philosopher Charles Peirce divides semiotic signs into three classes: icons, which derive their meaning from their strong similarity to the thing indicated; indexes, which have a lesser connection to the meaning they carry; and symbols, whose meaning is entirely arbitrary.¹³ The most stringent versions of semiotic theory hold that all systems of communication, theatre included, are simply collections of such signs. But students of theatre have long argued that the embodied nature of theatrical communication means that things on stage can "exceed their sign value" and have an impact upon the audience as a sensory object as well as a sign of some other meaning.¹⁴ This moves us into the realm of phenomenology, in which objects exist not simply to be interpreted, but to be experienced through our human senses.¹⁵ Furthermore, persons and objects on stage can carry multiple semiotic meanings at all three of Peirce's levels simultaneously. And each element of a production—costuming, lighting, set, acting—is communicating simultaneously. This results in something that theorist Roland Barthes calls a "density of signs" that combine to form the theatrical experience.¹⁶ The theatrical artist with an awareness of this complex system of interacting meanings and

¹³ Floyd Merrell, *Peirce, Signs, and Meaning* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 134.

¹⁴ Ric Knowles, *How Theatre Means* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 9.

¹⁵ Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1997), 38.

¹⁶ Knowles, *How Theatre Means*, 24.

experiences can take advantage of it to realize stories on stage that a simpler sign system might not be able to capture.

As with the idea of modes, it is tempting to oversimplify the way these sign systems operate on stage. Hutcheon suggests that the dramatic and literary media utilize different kinds of signs: symbolic and conventional on the page, and iconic and indexical on the stage or screen.¹⁷ Even so, it is possible for theatrical artists to use all those sign types, just as it is possible for them to use narrative, dramatic, or lyrical storytelling modes. In fact, it is difficult to avoid it. In an often-cited example, a chair on stage is never just a chair. It is a chair in our world playing a chair in the world of the story, which in turn might signify the authority of a king and the power structure through which he rules. Ric Knowles, in *How Theatre Means*, addresses the theatrical use of multiple modes and various types of signs.¹⁸ He uses the traditional taxonomies of lyric, narrative, and dramatic modes and iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs and argues that understanding their utilization is key to understanding the making of meaning on the stage. Knowles largely considers modes and signs separately. The two systems are, however, fundamentally connected. The use of the narrative mode creates expectations in the audience that are conducive to interpreting signs on an indexical or symbolic level. Conversely, the consistent use of iconic signs reinforces a dramatic mode of representation. These two interlocking systems of modes and signification are particularly important when we consider how a story—or type of story, such as fantasy—works in different media. Each way of interfacing with the audience—text on the page or live performance in a shared space—

¹⁷ Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 43.

¹⁸ Knowles, *How Theatre Means*, 137-144.

interacts with those modes and sign systems differently. The dual nature of objects and persons in the theatre is particularly critical for the artist looking to tell a story of the fantastic on stage.

Belief in the Dramatic and Narrative Modes

Both Horace and Tolkien see the conflict between theatre and fantasy as arising from the problem of “belief.” We “detest,” says Horace, because we do not believe. The reason orcs or witches don’t work on stage is because we know we’re looking at fakes. Tolkien goes on to essentially dismiss the idea of “suspension of disbelief,” at least where it comes to the truly fantastic.¹⁹ Instead, he introduces the idea of “literary belief” in which the author creates what he calls a “Secondary World” that the reader can enter into and believe on its own terms. We know there aren’t witches and wizards in the real world, but we accept that the rules are different in the world of the story.

Importantly, Tolkien seems to believe that this state of literary belief can only work on the page. Because of its visual nature, belief in the theatre can only go so far; it is like a rubber band that will only stretch so much. As we go further from the center point of “reality,” belief gets thinner and thinner until, somewhere well before fairies and witches and orcs, it snaps and the performance fails. How, then, do successful performances of fantastic stories like Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* or Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses* work? The answer lies in considering not just medium but also storytelling mode and semiotic sign categories.

Tolkien is talking about the limitations of storytelling in the theatrical medium, but he is also basing his understanding of those limitations on unspoken assumptions that these fantastic

¹⁹ Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader*, 72.

stories are being performed in the dramatic mode and using iconic signs. In short, he is picturing an essentially realist theatrical practice where the goal is to create an onstage world that resembles the one we live in. Realism was the dominant practice in English theatre at the time that Tolkien was writing, and it seems likely that realist productions made up the bulk of his theatre-going experience.²⁰ Horace, of course, far predates modern realist theatre, but the way he expresses his concern about presenting the impossible shows proto-realist thinking in the way that it privileges iconic representation in the dramatic mode. Horace assumes that theatre is about showing the audience a representation they can “believe” to be real, in some sense.

To use the vocabulary of semiotics, this kind of realism relies on iconic signs, which derive their meaning from their similarity to the objects they are portraying. It may be possible at times, using technology coupled with skill and technique, to create a convincing illusion of the impossible—to build iconic signs of the fantastic and use them to mimetically represent in the dramatic mode a world where familiar physical laws are broken. Stage magicians make a living doing something very similar. But there is a different and ultimately more fruitful path for the artist adapting fantastic stories for the stage. By using techniques which activate multiple storytelling modes in the theatrical medium and by building a system that includes indexical and symbolic signs—instead of or alongside icons—a theatre artist can unlock the full potential of her medium for this kind of storytelling. In doing so, a production can sidestep the problem of suspension of disbelief and engage the audience cooperatively in the creation of a Secondary

²⁰ Claire Warden, *British Avant-Garde Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 23-24.

World on stage where the laws of nature do allow for the fantastic—a process much more like Tolkien’s “literary belief.”

How does this work in practice? The remainder of this paper will examine recent productions that have tackled the challenge of staging the fantastic by tapping into non-iconic signs and the narrative mode. These shows invited their audiences to participate imaginatively in the creation of the Secondary Worlds of the plays. The first was a staged adaptation of a Neil Gaiman novella; the other two were very contemporary presentations of stories by Shakespeare and Homer, attended by this author in 2015 at American Players Theatre and Chicago Shakespeare Theatre.

Odd and the Frost Giants



Stages Repertory Theatre's world premiere production of *Odd and the Frost Giants*, 2011 (Photo: Bruce Bennett)

These images are from Stages Repertory Theatre's 2011 production of *Odd and the Frost Giants*, adapted for the stage by the author of this paper from the novella by Neil Gaiman. The story is a new Norse myth—a tale of Thor, Odin, and Loki, who are tricked by the Frost Giants and trapped in animal form until they are freed by a young Viking boy named Odd. The transformed gods are at the heart of the story, and it's exactly the sort of Fantasy that Tolkien predicts would fail utterly on stage: talking animals, mythic gods, and giants. To avoid the difficulty Tolkien worries about, we presented the transformed gods using *overt* puppetry with no attempt to conceal the puppeteer. This technique removes any dramatic mode pretense that the production is representing the world as it is. We did not ask the audience to believe that a construction of wood, foam, and cloth was a living bear or even that this was exactly what Thor as a bear might look like. Instead, we asked the audience to watch and imagine with us a story about a bear.

To cite a specific example of the way this technique operates, puppet designer Mary Robinette Kowal intentionally created fox and bear puppets without legs. The mechanics of leg construction and movement are particularly difficult, but that movement is also something an audience can readily fill in with their imaginations. By taking a step away from an iconic or literal representation of an animal, the design activated a collaborative, imaginative participation by the audience member in the creation of that Secondary World Tolkien spoke about. Further, costuming the puppeteers/actors as the gods whose spirits are trapped in these animals made concrete the dual nature of these characters in the book.



Stages Repertory Theatre's world premiere production of *Odd and the Frost Giants*, 2011 (Photo: Bruce Bennett)

This approach, where both the puppet and puppeteer signify a single character, isn't unique to this production of *Odd and the Frost Giants*. Julie Taymor used it in *The Green Bird* and *The Lion King*. She calls it a "double effect."²¹ In fact, the Japanese tradition of *bunraku* has made use of this effect for hundreds of years. *Bunraku* puppets are controlled by three operators, who wear black outfits with hoods to minimize their visual presence. The lead puppeteer, however, generally does not wear a hood, allowing the audience to appreciate both his artistry and his facial expressions. The result is what puppeteer Nancy Lohman Staub calls "a creative collaboration between [the puppeteers] and their audiences."²² In all of these cases, the audience watches both puppet and puppeteer and does the creative work of stitching both together, letting them reinforce instead of contradict one another. This participatory process

²¹ Richard Schechner and Julie Taymor, "Julie Taymor: From Jacques Lecoq to 'The Lion King': An Interview," in *Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects*, ed. John Bell (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 33.

²² Nancy Lohman Staub, "Bunraku: A Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity," *Puppetry International* 15 (Spring and Summer 2004): 22-24.

activates the power of the narrative mode in the same way literary fantasy on the page activates the reader's imagination and power to believe. Overt puppetry is, of course, not the only way to activate the narrative mode.

An Iliad and a Tempest



James DeVita in *An Iliad* at American Players Theatre, 2015 (Photo: Zane Williams)

In Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare's adaptation of *An Iliad* at American Players Theatre (Spring Green, WI) in 2015, virtually nothing in the extremely effective production was represented mimetically. Instead of showing us ancient Troy, actor James DeVita told the story in vaguely academic context, as though we were students at a lecture. His chalk holder in the photo above became the spear of Achilles; a vest stood in for the armor that Apollo causes to fall from doomed Patroclus; Homer's divine Muse was a cellist. The designs for the show did include special effects—projections, flames, and a model of the destroyed city of Troy—but none of it asked for a suspension of disbelief.

Peterson and O'Hare's script, in fact, revolves around the simultaneous challenge and potential of presenting the fantastic story of Hector and Achilles to a modern audience using only the narrative tools of the ancient rhapsodes. Again and again, the Poet asks the audience "do you see?" and succeeds in evoking that understanding by *telling* the story, not showing it, drawing on analogies to contemporary experience and ancient techniques of epic narrative.²³ In doing so, it evokes in the audiences an imaginative participation in creating something Tolkien might well have recognized as a Secondary World.

Similarly, Chicago Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, directed by Aaron Posner and Raymond Joseph Teller, presented the fantastic in the dramatic mode. Half of the performing duo Penn and Teller and one of the foremost magicians in the world, stage illusionist Teller puts the impossible on stage. Posner and Teller's production of *The Tempest* often took advantage of that skillset by presenting magic in a purely dramatic mode. Objects and people literally levitated; Ariel and Prospero appeared from thin air. Using only traditionally theatrical techniques of make-up and movement, actor Nate Dendy was convincingly transformed into a very inhuman spirit. None of these moments of fantasy involved overtly narrative storytelling; the audience was not privy to the mechanisms involved and was not invited to co-create. This suggests that, despite the warnings of skeptics, dramatic presentation of the fantastic is possible with sufficient skill and resources.

But even in this production, the most effective moments were ones that brought the techniques of stage illusion into the service of narrative storytelling. The storm at the beginning of the play involved a paper boat in a basin of water, which Prospero could miraculously

²³ Lisa Peterson and Denis O'Hare, *An Iliad* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2013), 34-54.

manipulate without touching. With a gesture, Prospero was able to cause the paper craft to catch fire and sink. The effect was impressive but not directly representational. Instead, the sequence demanded the audience's imaginative participation.

So, too, did the representation of Caliban, who was performed by two dancers moving and speaking together. Even the youngest audience members were unlikely to "suspend their disbelief" and think those performers to really be one creature, yet this was an extremely effective and enjoyable way for performers and audience members to collectively imagine monstrous Caliban. *New York Times* critic Charles Isherwood, writing about an earlier iteration of this production at the American Repertory Theatre in Massachusetts, found the two-headed Caliban a "lively divertissement" with "symbolic resonance." Even in this setting, the most hospitable setting possible for the dramatic staging of the fantastic, the narrative components met with the greatest success.

Conclusion

J. R. R. Tolkien's provocative advice on the fantastic can best be taken with a slight modification. The dramatic mode may be hostile (or at least inhospitable) to Fantasy, but that doesn't mean that the stage must be free of the fantastic. Shakespeare was well aware of the dangers of staging the impossible—not just the fantastic. One of his most famous passages, the opening of *Henry V*, addresses that very issue:

...But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that have dar'd
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object. Can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques

That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million;
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.²⁴

Shakespeare was a master of storytelling modes. By moving from dramatic to narrative to lyric throughout his plays and tapping into his audience's "imaginary forces," he was able to realize any number of fantastic and otherwise impossible scenarios. By tapping into the narrative mode of storytelling and engaging our audiences as imaginative co-creators of incredible worlds, contemporary theatre artists, too, can fill our stages with fairies, wizards, gods, and monsters and put the impossible onstage.

²⁴ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 979.

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