
Book Section:
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Hybrid forms: *Nights at the Circus* and adaptation

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Nights at the Circus opens with a scene of storytelling occupying one long night and a full third of the novel. Carter's miraculous winged aerialiste recounts her history to sceptical newspaper man Jack Walser, aided by Lizzie, her foster mother and constant companion. That he distrusts their tale is understandable: from Fevvers' claim that she was '[h]atched out of a bloody great egg' (Carter 1985: 7), raised in a brothel, taught herself to fly, was later exhibited in a museum of female 'monsters' wondrous as herself, then narrowly escaped sacrifice on the makeshift altar of a well-known politician, the American balks at being asked to believe more than six impossible things before breakfast.[1] Instinctively, the journalist rejects the category-defying proposition on which Fevvers' narrative rests and which she seemingly embodies. Nonetheless, her seductive performance on and off the trapeze insists that he 'briefly contemplate the unimaginable', leaving him 'trembling as if he […] stood on an unknown threshold' (Carter 1985: 17, 30). Significantly, Walser is troubled not only by the irreconcilability of a bird-woman with 'all the laws of evolution and human reason' but also the unsettlingly polyphonic discourse she adopts (Carter 1985: 15). Listening to Fevvers, he feels hypnotised:

> Her voice. It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife. Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice for singing with; it comprised discords, her scale contained twelve tones. Her voice, with its warped, homely, Cockney vowels and random aspirates. Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren's. (Carter 1985: 43)

Struggling to clear his head, Walser ponders if this disturbing sonority 'could almost have had its source, not within her throat but in some ingenious mechanism or other behind the canvas screen' (Carter 1985: 43). Yet his 'almost' reveals the doubt that rationalism cannot dispel. Like the story itself, the mode of telling is clashingly multivocal: melodious and jangling, sublime and coarse. Carter's description of her heroine's vocality signals the 'dipping, swooping' rollercoaster ride of the ensuing narrative as well as its internal discordance.

Walser's journey through the novel takes him from disbelief to conviction. In the process, he is rendered ludicrously unrecognisable, humiliated, attacked, drugged and kidnapped: consequently, his initially unblemished and, to Lizzie, '*banal*' surface is radically transformed as he undergoes reconstruction on a deeper level (Carter 1985: 172). Concurrently, his quest to unmask Fevvers as fraud, or prove her as freak, is abandoned once love lets him accept her on her own terms, in all her contradictions. Cynical and cocksure, Walser is not an especially sympathetic figure until the arrogance is knocked out of him. Nevertheless, his position as newcomer to the circus and audience for the women's stories implies his alignment with the reader. With him, like him, we are invited to assess the narrative that unfolds. Unlike him, the reader does not seek literal truth in fiction and especially not in a work significantly inspired by the eighteenth-century picaresque, a genre where, according to Carter, 'people have adventures in order to find themselves in places where they can discuss philosophical concepts without distractions' (Haffenden 1985: 87). Nonetheless, *Nights at the Circus* is a book that makes difficult demands: as the *Guardian*'s Sam Jordison notes, recalling its reception in the mid-1980s, reviewers found Carter's novel variously 'overwhelming', 'disconcerting', overstrained by 'impossibilities', tipping from 'delicious' into 'queasy' (Jordison 2017). Such terms suggest that Fevvers' impact on Walser

found its equivalent in readerly reception; further, that for both, this is down to shifting and dissonant registers as much as fantastical content. In this way, the novel's preoccupation with hybridity and transition is echoed in its formally uneasy constitution. And while categorical disturbance assumes distinctive shape in *Nights at the Circus*, it is also a characteristic quality of Carter's oeuvre. Dualities and liminalities proliferate in her writing, crystallized in an array of metamorphosing, hybrid or otherwise ambiguous bodies. As author, Carter likewise seemed to resist classification, deemed mythologizing and demythologizing, feminist and 'pseudo-feminist' (Dworkin 1981: 84), fantastical and materialist, or all these at once.[2] While occasionally frustrated by what she regarded as misreadings of her work, Carter courted the tensions as well as liberatory opportunities of border-crossing.[3]

This essay addresses the theme of hybridity in *Nights at the Circus*, exploring its 'unnatural' forms and clash of voice. Rather than offer a reading of the novel, I pursue its retelling and reinvention in theatrical adaptation. As I have discussed elsewhere (Babbage 2018), the prevalence of themes and scenes of performance in Carter's works has contributed to their appeal for dramatic translation, with the author herself correspondingly open to interventions of this kind.[4] *Nights at the Circus* has been less frequently adapted than some of her other texts, however. It is not hard to see why: length aside, the novel poses numerous staging problems, with a narrative that crosses continents and moves back and forth in time, and a huge cast of characters, one of whom flies, many of them animals. Yet, I make the argument that it is precisely where conventional models of dramatization falter that unconventional alternatives come into their own, since the unsettling and unsettled source demands a staging approach that is equally experimental; this does not mean such mediations will be any more comfortably received than the original. In what follows, I examine two adaptations of *Nights at the Circus*, each of which employs an unconventional mix of artistic languages to mobilise and re-voice the hybridities of the source. The higher profile of these

productions, *Nights at the Circus* by Tom Morris and Emma Rice for Kneehigh (2006), combined aerial performance with storytelling, music and physical theatre in a show that was mounted in major theatres in six British cities; smaller-scale and staged at the Edinburgh Fringe, the adaptation by Sarah-Jane Moloney and Steve Green for ensemble group Fourth Monkey (2012) overlaid live action with stop-motion animation. My analysis of these productions builds on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the linguistic/artistic hybrid, defined by him as an instance where 'within the boundaries of a single utterance, two potential utterances are fused, two responses are […] harnessed in a potential dialogue' (Bakhtin 1981: 361). Hybridity, as I show, offers a productive framework for understanding the tropes of Carter's fiction, the artistic experimentation it has inspired, and finally, the 'double-voiced' project of adaptation itself (Bakhtin 1981: 361).

Hybrid constructions: Bakhtin and adaptation

Carter's fiction has often been examined through the lens of Bakhtin, predominantly with reference to the carnivalesque. Certainly, Bakhtin's model of carnival as a transgressive, unsettled space marked by parody, profanity and the grotesque, and in which orthodoxies are overturned and ordinary rules suspended, lends itself temptingly to her writing. In particular, *Nights at the Circus* and her final novel, *Wise Children* (1991), both of which deal overtly with performance and masquerade, have attracted Bakhtinian readings. Paulina Palmer was an early critic to read the former in this light, finding echoes of Bakhtin's concept of carnival in the novel's explicit vocabularies of revelry and misrule, its category-defying bodies, and the anarchic energy that drives the text throughout. In Palmer's reading, Carter's version of the carnival is implicitly a feminist rejoinder to Bakhtin's model that harnesses the latter's radical energies while challenging its patriarchal origins (Palmer 1987). Subsequent analyses

have been more equivocal, with several scholars highlighting the time-limited character of carnivalesque subversion as well as the festival's ambivalent status as licensed misrule.[5] Such scepticism would seem to align with Carter's own views, as expressed in her short essay 'In Pantoland':

> The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment… after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened. (Carter 1993: 109)

A similar note of caution is sounded in *Wise Children*, which has also been interpreted, via Bakhtin, as a 'celebration of the vitality of otherness' (Webb 1984: 282). Towards the end of that novel, Dora Chance cuts through her uncle's complacency, supplanting realism for fantasy: '"The carnival's got to stop, sometime, Perry", I said. "You listen to the news, that'll take the smile off your face"' (Carter 1991: 222). In tenor and rhythm, her line echoes Lizzie's 'dampe[ning]' response to Fevvers' triumphant vision of herself and Walser, New Woman and New Man, marching into the New Century: 'Perhaps so, perhaps not […]. Perhaps safer not to plan ahead' (Carter 1985: 281). Such exchanges lead me to concur with Clare Hanson, who argues that Carter's writing consistently reveals a 'tension […] between radical will and sceptical pessimism' that more straightforwardly utopian readings have tended to overlook (Hanson 1997: 59).

The push and pull of attitudes proffered in *Nights at the Circus* – at one moment ambitiously soaring and at the next earth-bound – suggests, like Fevvers' paradoxical body, an internally unsettled and competing discourse. Such tensions are reflected in Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, arguably a more pliant interpretive tool than carnival but less thoroughly

applied against Carter's work to date. Overlapping in key respects with the work of semiotician Valentin Vološinov, who theorised that language was 'dialogic' in the sense of being dynamic and interactive, Bakhtin's model argues that meaning is necessarily produced in and through communication.[6] That principle is encapsulated by his claim that '[t]he word in language is half someone else's': far from a 'neutral medium' that freely bends to a speaker's intentions, for Bakhtin language is 'populated – overpopulated – with the intentions of others' (Bakhtin 1981: 293-4). Dialogism is identified as a property intrinsic to all language, evident in its evolution over time, but Bakhtin also uses the term to describe more specific phenomena, including where two voices coexist within one utterance. Applying this principle to literary analysis, Bakhtin cites Dostoevsky as an especially sophisticated exemplar: '[i]n every voice he could hear two contending voices, in every expression a crack […]; in every gesture he detected confidence and lack of confidence simultaneously' (Bakhtin 1984: 30). This case can equally be made for Carter's writing, I suggest, whether manifest in Lizzie and Fevvers' competing discourses or more broadly in the author's semi-parodic reframing of literary forms and ideas.

Bakhtin's analyses of dialogism and carnival are crucially connected in their emphasis on discourse as polyphonic, mutable, and internally contested. His concept of 'hybridity' continues this theme, regarded both as a property of language in general and a writerly strategy that takes distinctive form. Hybridity in the first sense he describes as 'unconscious', referring to the organic, unintentional process by which language transforms over time: its susceptibility to hybridization means that any supposedly 'single' language or dialect will actually be a composite of 'various "languages" co-existing within [its] boundaries' (Bakhtin 1981: 358-9). Bakhtin's second, more specialised definition relates to hybridity's usage as a novelistic strategy whereby the utterance of a single speaker 'actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two "languages", two semantic and

axiological belief systems' (Bakhtin 1981: 304). Bakhtin exemplifies this with Dickens, showing where the voice of a character or 'society' is hybridized with that of the narrator, the latter interjecting barbed commentary that undermines the authority of the first (Bakhtin 1981: 302-7). To count as hybrid in Bakhtin's terms, there can be no boundary separating these internal voices or languages; they co-habit, conspicuously and jarringly, 'within the limits of a single, syntactic whole' (Bakhtin 198: 305). In *Nights at the Circus*, therefore, whereas the contrasted outlooks of characters are positioned dialogically, the narrower concept of hybridity is also materialized, not least in Fevvers' 'unnatural' body and multiphonic voice. A further, more capacious application of Bakhtin's model could term the novel itself a hybrid, combining as it does postmodern playfulness with traditional formal solidity, the result, as Carter put it in a letter to her agent and friend Deborah Rogers, 'a bit like psychedelic Dickens' (Gordon 2016: 326).

The idea of hybridity resonates powerfully with practices of adaptation. Here, hybridity as a term surfaces most commonly in biological adaptation, where genetic material from two different organisms combines through interbreeding to produce a hybrid offspring: the forms which result may be regarded anxiously as a species threat, or valued as a vigorous and timely advance.[7] While the hybrid forms generated through cultural and literary adaptation are beasts of a different order, the attitudes they meet in critical and popular reception can be surprisingly similar. Whether disparaging, appreciative, or a mix of both, judgments frequently hinge precisely on this inherent hybridity: in other words, on the perceived success or failure of the interplay of 'utterances' – source on the one hand, interposing 'voice' that appropriates and mediates it on the other – within the adaptation as a 'single, syntactic whole' (Bakhtin 198: 305).

Rather than be drawn into overworked and ultimately irresolvable debates about the competing imperatives of textual authority versus interpretive freedom, I turn to consider two

adaptations of *Nights of the Circus*, which, as I show, welcome the excitements and discomforts of a formally unsettled position. These reimaginings reach to expressive languages beyond theatre's familiar boundaries – to aerial performance, puppetry, and stop-motion animation – interweaving these into dramatic action in a curiously amalgamate aesthetics. That such strategies are adopted in production highlights the risk-taking ambitions of the makers, but further suggests that the ideas the novel proffers, not least its conceptual hybridities, correspondingly call for interdisciplinary inventiveness in translation. It is also notable that a turn towards these representational idioms echoes on the one hand Carter's fascination with popular entertainment modes – circus, pantomime, puppet shows – whose overt theatricality matched her interests in spectacle and self-conscious play-acting, and on the other her distaste for the era's mainstream British theatre, least satisfactory she believed when slavishly pursuing 'the fictive reality of naturalism, which necessitates the creation of an illusion as an end in itself' (Carter 1998: 407). By rejecting the self-enclosed framework of illusionist representation and pursuing theatricalist alternatives, these adaptations find innovative routes to articulate Carter's themes, simultaneously changing the rules governing audience expectation. In this way, these stagings of *Nights at the Circus* are readable as hybrid in more ways than one: as a fusion of authorships within adaptation's frame; and in their expansion of theatrical potential, as unlike discourses conjoin.

Kneehigh's *Nights at the Circus*

In a history of performance-making spanning over forty years, Cornwall-based Kneehigh Theatre (1980–2021) built an international reputation for inventive, ensemble-based and story-led productions, with energetic physicality, puppetry, and live music as trademark features. The company's frequent appropriation of fairy tales and legends – for example, with

The Red Shoes (2001), *Tristan and Yseult* (2006), and *The Wild Bride* (2011) – combined with humour, a stripped-back aesthetic and political edge, hints at the territory they shared with Carter. That synergy was emphatically flagged with director Emma Rice's adaptation of *Wise Children*, mounted in 2018 to launch her theatre company of the same name. Carter's *Nights at the Circus* spoke powerfully to Rice, who directed Kneehigh's 2006 production, precisely for that mix of the fantastical with the earthily grounded which made the company's work popular and distinctive. Rice's perception that this was a book 'about theatre and showbusiness and women in that world. It's literally about women bursting out of their corsets and flying' highlights the importance of the Victorian fin-de-siècle context with its radical unsettling of gender norms as well as the imaginative leap this required. Characteristic of Kneehigh's process, their adaptation of *Nights at the Circus* was created in rough shape by the ensemble cast through improvisation and devising before being scripted, here by writer-director Tom Morris.[8] Kneehigh's reworking is overtly metatheatrical, an attitude and aesthetic that reflects Rice's broader directorial perspective: 'I don't want the "fourth wall" constantly and fearfully placed between the actors and the audience. I want the actors to speak to their accomplices, to look at them, to respond to them' (Rice 2015). Self-conscious theatricality is apparent from the outset, as Jack Walser, seated in the auditorium and muttering observations about the play's opening and its compere – 'End of the century. Obviously a woman but dressed as a man. Seems to be talking in the voice of a man. Doesn't quite make sense. Seen better in Reykjavik' – is lured across the footlights by a finger that beckons him from between plush curtains, before becoming a fist that punches him on the nose (Morris & Rice 2006: 10). As well as heralding the circus theme through clownish routine, this beginning explicitly rejects a model of performance as imitation of 'fictive reality', insisting that spectators – or 'accomplices' – are in the *same* world as actors and characters, not invisibly removed from this behind a notional fourth wall. Jack's notebook

and pencil are peremptorily seized by the Chorus – 'Creatures of the Theatre', whose motley garb of underwear, with faces made up beneath stocking caps, signals, like their generic descriptor, the constructedness of the performance act – who berate him for the detachment his critic's tools imply. Jack must become part of the circus, remade by it, before he is worthy of Fevvers, instead of seeking to 'solve' her; by extension, the audience are asked to meet the production as sensational experience, to accede to the thrill of the ride rather than rationalise each step of the journey.

The distinction between contemplation and immersion, and the tension between these states, is highlighted in the production's use of aerial. There are four such sequences in the show. Fevvers is first revealed when the curtains open to find her high on the trapeze, nipple tassels twirling, singing as she swings:

> I am only a bird in a gilded cage
> With a lock that is copper and steel
> Like a secret to last till the death of the age
> With no one to touch and to feel. (Morris & Rice 2006: 12)

Later, when the action moves to Russia, Fevvers, half-heartedly rehearsing on the rope, calls down tauntingly to Jack, 'Since you've followed me all the way to St Petersburg, why don't you follow me up here?', to be met by the cautious rejoinder: 'I'll stay on the ground thank you' (Morris & Rice 2006: 34). The third sequence depicts the Cockney Venus's act in full flow – self-referentially situated as performance inside performance – when the trapeze breaks, and Fevvers perilously '*hangs there*' (Morris & Rice 2006: 54): in the novel, the suspicion is that the Charivaris, rival high-wire artists, are the 'murderous fuckers' who 'have been tinkering with the rope' (Carter 1985: 160). Aerial is also worked into the final scene,

following the explosion and train crash. Kneehigh's adaptation omits the long section in Siberia, instead reuniting Fevvers with Jack as the latter emerges from a heap of snow. He appeals to her with poetry that becomes a song, in terms unrecognisable from his cool appraisal at the beginning:

> I want to feel the dark warmth of your body
> Rising like hands to hold me as I write. […]
> I want to feel each beat of life in you,
> Each taste, each song, each joke, each fear, each dream. (Morris & Rice 2006: 61)

A trapeze tumbles from above, and, to the music of Nina Simone, issuing from a radio Lizzie finds in the rubble, first Fevvers and then Jack flies, she pulling him up to meet her. The production closes with them swinging exultantly in each other's arms as their rhythm turns unmistakably bouncy, to become, in the words of one reviewer, 'a transcendent vision of sexual delight' (Bassett 2006).

It will be clear that where the first three aerial sequences serve an immediate narrative purpose the last is more symbolic than story-led. The materializing of a trapeze in the snowy waste is an anti-illusionist gesture which supports the idea that the two find equilibrium, further implying a wider 'happy ending' in which neither sex controls or submits to the other (Carter 1985: 281). However, aerial functions throughout not only dramatically but corporeally and emotionally. Indeed, the use of trapeze within the show is narratively ambiguous: most obviously, while these sequences realistically enact Fevvers' profession as aerialist, they do not – cannot – foster doubt in spectators over whether she is 'fact or fiction' (Carter 1985: 7). This representational constraint suggests that the practice of aerial in the show opens up two different ways of looking: for Walser, it perpetuates the frustrating

enigma of Fevvers' supposed hybridity; for the audience, it offers more straightforwardly spectacular entertainment. The gap between novel and production is further embodied by 'sylph-like' actress Natalie Tena, '21 and radiant' (Atkinson 2006), who in no way resembles the colossal Fevvers, described as 'six feet two in her stockings' and 'more like a dray mare than an angel' (Carter 1985: 12). For a few critics this casting proved something of a stumbling block, a literal diminution and implicit sweetening of Carter's formidable original; more often, reviewers highlight the impact the performance brings over what it is judged to lack. References to 'gloriously acrobatic' action, 'high-octane, heart-stopping' glamour and 'breathless' energy convey the language through which aerial speaks: in other words, terms that evidence how aerial registers on the body in the tangible responses of spectators (Atkinson 2006, Warner 2006, Fisher 2006). For while aerial can surely be assessed on a technical level – and from this perspective the production might fare poorly, since its trapeze work is modest at best – even the simplest routine can spark the rapt attention these adjectives imply. Peta Tait argues that rope and trapeze acts compel this kind of visceral reaction, witnessed in the spectator's 'jolts, gasps, contractions and sighs', and further, in the sensation of '"catch[ing]" the aerial body with his or her senses in mimicry of flying' (Tait 2005: 143, 141). Tait reflects on the 'oscillating identification and disidentification' that occurs as the watcher experiences in themselves the forceful imprint they observe. A similar fluctuation of perspective occurs when Tena 'falls' from the trapeze, since the knowledge that the drop is staged cannot repress the stomach-dropping shock it generates. Aerial performance disallows a detached interpretive position; its incorporation here reinforces narrative insistence on the importance of experiential knowing and further inserts its own meanings and effects, never fully disappeared into the drama but 'co-existing' within the boundaries of the whole (Bakhtin 1981: 359).

Carter's characterisation of Fevvers as aerialist and claimed avian-human hybrid does not only symbolise the period's liberated New Woman, but also addresses its ideologically loaded cultural, social and technological discourses. Forced to pose as the Winged Victory in Ma Nelson's brothel, Fevvers enacts a 'static performance of her femininity' which ambiguously combines patriarchal appropriation of the female form as icon of 'Liberty' with the Victorian idealisation of woman as the angel in the house (Russo 1994: 166). At the same time, that Lizzie and Fevvers turn 'freakish' corporeality to advantage in the circus aptly reflects the era's preoccupation with gender difference, and likewise its cherished dream of the human potential for flight.[9] Awed by Fevvers' strength and size, Walser wonders briefly: 'Is she really a man?' (Carter 1985: 35) His speculation, as Mary Russo discusses, echoes troubled perceptions of the female aerialist in nineteenth-century accounts 'as masculinized or ambiguous in relation to gender' (Russo 1994: 170-1). Tait likewise argues that early trapezists 'exploded assumptions about innate physical gender difference', its male performers notably light and graceful, the women steely and muscular (Tait 2005: 2). In Kneehigh's exuberant finale, a similar blurring of bodies and genders occurs as the small but sinewy Tena easily lifts up Gísli Örn Gardarsson, playing Walser, to join her. Again, aerial practice exudes meanings which, interwoven with the drama, shape a polyphonic discourse that speaks of fluid identities, risk, and opportunity.

Fourth Monkey's *Nights at the Circus*

Fourth Monkey is a London-based actor training and repertory theatre company, led by artistic director Steve Green. Green founded the company in 2010 as an inclusive alternative to traditional conservatoire training or drama school, in its relative affordability – with fees regularly waived for auditions, and intensive short courses as well as longer programmes –

and a hands-on pedagogy emphasising student discovery above expert instruction. Green's directorial approach is not unlike Rice's, with both highlighting ensemble creation and physical engagement with the material from the outset. That ethos is exemplified in a 2014 interview where Green remarked that he hated 'table work', a method common in mainstream British theatre that privileges verbally teasing out the script's complexities: 'I'm not going to waste a week sitting around a table […]. We'll do that stuff, but we do it on our feet' (Green 2014). Fourth Monkey's performance style necessarily varies with the subject, but productions are typically high energy and ensemble-focused, sometimes clown-inspired, relatively low budget but with ambitious conceptual reach. The company have achieved sell-out success at and beyond the Edinburgh Fringe with several adaptations, such as *A Clockwork Orange* (2010) and *The Elephant Man* (2012), as well as original works like *The Peculiar Tale of Pablo Picasso and the Mona Lisa* (2013), this last in some way echoing their own aesthetic in its theme of artists who reject the naturalism of their predecessors.

Nights at the Circus (2012) was co-directed by Green and Sarah-Jane Moloney, a then-emerging artist who initiated and co-wrote the adaptation. This was Moloney's first foray into playwriting; she went on to forge a career as playwright, dramaturg, and translator, with recent works including *Sappho* (2020), staged at Geneva's experimental Poche/Gve theatre. *Sappho* is built from an interweaving of time-lines and perspectives converging on the island of Lesbos that work to unpack the meanings of place and poetry – cultural, political, sexual – at different points in history. Its structural complexity reflects Moloney's stated preference in theatre for 'a collision between two things that could seem incongruous', adding: 'I find it difficult to write something that stays on one level: I need it to play out on several at the same time' (Moloney 2019). Collisions proliferate in Carter's novel, as already shown; the adaptation reiterates that clash, adding further hybridities of its own. In line with the company's aim to maximise actor opportunities, it had a twenty-plus cast with no role-

doubling, around twice the number in Kneehigh's version; at the same time, Fourth Monkey's was approximately half its length, at 75 minutes compared with two hours and twenty. Arguably, the shorter play also covered more of the original's plot, omitting Fevvers' kidnap but extending into Siberia and Walser's encounter with the shaman. Moloney and Green's version thus channelled the 'breathless' quality of Kneehigh's aerial into the wider production in an enormously rousing staging, compered by clowns Grik and Grok, who also shaped the atmospheric soundscape with live music on ukelele, mouth organ and kazoo. Animals featured prominently, with actors in role as the disturbingly humanoid apes who renegotiate the terms of their contract, and a ventriloquized toy pig as Sibyl. The tigers, memorably brought to life by Kneehigh with flaming metal buckets and saws, are correspondingly animated here by performers tearing across a momentarily frozen stage, vivid paw on one hand and mask in the other. In both productions, such portrayals embrace a rough puppetry which bypasses illusionist representation for more abstract expression of Carter's 'questing sluice of brown and yellow, a hot molten death' (Carter 1985: 111).

The production's most striking stylistic decision is its inclusion of a different order of puppetry in the form of original animations by Chloe Rodham. Rodham is an artist and animator based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne whose diverse projects frequently address the territory of folk and fairy tale, with a macabre, deeply textured aesthetic which recalls the films of Czech surrealist Jan Švankmajer and American-born Brothers Quay. Rodham's short stop-motion film *Smile* (2010) presents a love affair between an acrobat and clown who struggle to distinguish their true feelings from their performance personae. *Smile*'s themes of forced jollity, make-up as mask, and the underlying tawdriness and cruelty of the circus are reiterated in the animation created for *Nights at the Circus*. Rodham's film for Fourth Monkey is in three wordless segments, each less than a minute, played at intervals in Walser's interview with Fevvers and used to tell her backstory. The first opens with the

trembling cracking of an egg, the next frame showing a beribboned basket on a doorstep; in the second, a little Fevvers, winged and naked, is nurtured by Lizzie in Ma Nelson's brothel then posed playfully as Cupid, before a temporal blurring sees the child become woman plummeting from the roof, then kicking up to fly through the night sky; the third shows Fevvers as part of Madame Schreck's freakshow, coveted by a cold-eyed client who evidently means her harm. Rodham's work combines physical models mobilized through stop-motion photography with paintings animated on the computer. Dolls with a pearlescent gleam represent Fevvers and the freakshow's 'prodigies of nature', these solid characters interacting with painted counterparts – Lizzie, Ma Nelson, and Madame Schreck – who appear flattened and unnervingly insubstantial. Rosanna Hall describes the techniques behind figures and frames, and their impact:

> Some had costumes made of papier mache while others were dressed in fabric. All were shot against black, with backgrounds composed afterwards with a mixture of painting and photography through which a plausible yet visually intriguing picture of Carter's vision emerges. Drawing the world around the characters offers a dreamlike quality to the work, where the backgrounds shift and merge in colour as the characters themselves remain composed. The result is a world as dense and rich as a painting which has been blown into life […]. (Hall 2012)

Hall conveys the fascination and peculiarity of the animated scene. Richly intricate as they are, these environments still hold a makeshift quality with the unnatural proportions of a doll's house, inhabited by figures who are partial or rudimentary versions of a human being. Yet those imperfections render them more rather than less compelling; reviewing the

production in Edinburgh, Veronica Aloess found the animations 'childish and yet strangely disquieting in the awkward way the doll-like characters move' (Aloess 2012).

The image of the puppet recurs in Carter's writing, foregrounded in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and story 'The Loves of Lady Purple' (1974). These miniaturized figures are shown as sources of great potency, while seemingly defenceless against the fetishistic impulses of the manipulative puppeteer. The tension between child-like imagination and perversion of that vivifying power is captured in Kenneth Gross's observation that '[t]o shrink down human form can have some violence in it, yet it allows the artist […] to bring out hidden lines of connection between human and inhuman, animate and inanimate, things both inside and outside the self' (Gross 2011: 42). Such 'lines of connection' here manifest strongly, especially in the way that the bodies of dolls speakingly express women's oppressive objectification. Fevvers herself is as a curious amalgam, fluttering feathers sprouting from porcelain limbs: this figuring not only reiterates her claim to corporeal hybridity, but stirs the viewer's desire to see the motility it promises. In aesthetic qualities and especially through its flickering insertion in the scene, the film thus works suggestively to show how, for Walser, Fevvers bewitchingly 'keeps moving in and out of focus' (Warner 1994: 247).

While praising the production's energy and ambition, reviewer Michael Coveney expressed some disappointment that Shala Isis's 'raucous, chav-like Fevvers, a riot of pink satin and blonde tresses, doesn't actually fly': not just budgetary constraints but a particularly low-ceilinged venue ruled out the possibility of literal aerial action (Coveney 2012). Yet, Fevvers *does* fly, by virtue of Rodham's animation. Moreover, the film is actually projected onto outspread wings worn by the performer: constructed in multilayered off-white cambric, tipped with ragged feathers in cerise, their span unfolded as a screen on which the heroine could communicate her story. This device implicitly invites audience imagination to take

flight, simultaneously operating in mise-en-abyme to blur identities not just of onstage Fevvers and doll-like double, but narrative authorship: texts of novel and adaptation meld with Rodham's own, the latter, as animator, likewise a performer 'telling big stories on a small scale' (Purves 2007: xvii). Attending to these stories unfolding on outstretched wings requires particularly suspenseful attention: stop-motion's paradoxical ability to suggest that '[t]ime carries on in a moment where time stops' mirrors Walser's sensation of temporal freezing as cynicism becomes rapt absorption (Purves 2007: 9). Where aerial performance injects ebullient energy, animation unsettles and offsets visceral immediacy with a different kind of life.

Conclusion

This essay argues that adaptation is already hybrid, with double-voicing central to its pleasure yet equally likely to bring frustration when its utterances turn too starkly from the presumed authority of the source. This friction surfaces in Kneehigh's and Fourth Monkey's novel reimaginings, particularly where stage representation 'fails' fictively to honour certain emphases of Carter's text. However, the same adaptations have been acclaimed precisely for the way they supplement that text with new dynamic languages which in performance rearticulate or playfully subvert Carter's narrative. My analysis shows that these interpretations are hybrid not only in their status as adaptation, but in self-conscious interweaving of expressive modes which seek to meet on stage the challenges the source poses. Carter's novel, suspicious of realism even as it grounds itself historically and politically in the turn-of-the-century moment, resists illusionistic dramaturgy; it rather demands creativity which diverges from fictive literalism to open up meanings on the conceptual level. Perhaps the central difficulty it poses, among myriad provocations, is how,

or whether, Fevvers can fly. As spectators, we surely long to see this; yet we should remember that the novel leaves her avian capacities uncertain, asking that readers, like Walser, accept Fevvers as the category-defying being she is. It follows that enacting the metaphor at the novel's heart means finding forms able to embody the layered meanings flight encompasses, as well as activating its imaginative buoyancy.

I established that hybridity for Bakhtin manifests in two forms: unconsciously and broadly, in the evolutionary process of languages; intentionally and precisely, in strategic collision of utterances within a syntactic whole. Carter's novel self-consciously embeds a variety of hybrid forms and my analysis of its rebirth in adaptation highlights that interdisciplinary hybridity in performance can reenact collision on an experiential level. Kneehigh's incorporation of aerial may hint at a literalized embodiment, but I have argued that in practice aerial predominantly operates as a non-representational discourse that is sensational and spectacular more than it is realistic or dramatic. The animated film in Fourth Monkey's production functions differently, more obviously serving storytelling: however, in its curious refashioning of Carter's narrative, and movements of shrinkage and unfolding, it forces lingering attention on the uncanny visualities that play across outspread wings. Both adaptations are thus double-voiced, revealed as theatrical hybrids in Bakhtin's specific sense of the term. But in addition, the innovative intermedialities these productions promote point to hybridity on the wider level, as the experimentation adaptation necessitates contributes to the evolution of theatre and expansion of its vocabularies.

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[1] Accepting multiple impossibilities is normal for Lewis Carroll's White Queen. The spirit of Carroll haunts Carter's novel, explicit in Walser's head-scratching '[c]uriouser and curiouser' as he struggles to understand how time has been brought to a standstill, and implicit in the way that admitting one 'inconceivable' idea precipitates a torrent of others (Carter 1985: 90; Carroll 1996: 23, 184).

[2] Sarah Gamble summarises the resistance of Carter's work to classification, noting: 'Categorising Carter's chosen mode of writing is made additionally difficult because of the fact that throughout her career, her narratives constantly negotiate and adjust their position on the margins of a variety of literary genres and forms' (1997: 5).

[3] The abrupt shifts of register in Carter's fiction occasionally sparked reviews that left her baffled. Edmund Gordon cites her puzzlement (with reference to *The Passion of New Eve*) on

'how easily people miss the irony and do not know when I am joking, often with embarrassing results' (2016: 276).

[4] To date, the major screen adaptations are Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984) and David Wheatley's *The Magic Toyshop* (1987), for both of which Carter wrote the screenplay. The author also adapted her fiction for the radio and her radio drama into fiction; two plays first broadcast in the 1970s, *Vampirella* and *Come Unto These Yellow Sands*, received new productions on BBC Radio 3 in 2018. Susannah Clapp states that, as literary executor of Carter's estate, she had been granted free rein if approaches were made: 'There was to be no holding back on grounds of good taste; she had no objection to her prose being turned into an extravaganza on ice: on the contrary' (2012: 4-5).

[5] Christina Britzolakis unpacks the difficulties of claiming that Carter endorses the carnivalesque in 'Angela Carter's fetishism' (1997: 54-56).

[6] Vološinov's model of dialogism, first introduced in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929/1973), predates Bakhtin's analysis of the term set out in four essays between 1934 and 1941, later collated in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). Andrés Haye and Ramiro González perceive Bakhtin's conception of dialogism as an extension and development of Vološinov's (2021: 751). Any effort to position these analyses relationally is complicated by arguments that works attributed to Vološinov – likewise to Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev – were actually written by Bakhtin. Sue Vice notes that the accepted practice used to circumvent this 'authorship problem' is to view such overlapping publications collectively as 'a product of the "Bakhtin circle" or "school"' (1997: 7-8).

[7] These issues as well as other concerns about biological hybridization are considered by Julia Gabryś, Barbara Kij, Joanna Kochan and Monika Bugno-Poniewierska (2021).

[8] Morris, artistic director of the Battersea Arts Centre from 1995-2004, previously collaborated with Rice for Kneehigh's *The Wooden Frock* (2004), a variation of Cinderella intertwined with the Italian folk tale 'Wooden Maria'.

[9] Nathan Bossoh (2021) charts the Victorians' pursuit of aerial navigation, foregrounding the work of George Douglas Campbell, 8th Duke of Argyll, who believed that the principles of bird flight should be mimicked in the flying machine.