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Peter Logan's "Peter and Alice"; or: The dangers of biopic realism

Franziska E. Kohlt

A few weeks ago, I went to see "Peter and Alice", a play by John Logan presented by the Michael Grandage Company, at the Noel Coward Theatre in London, and when people asked me, whether I liked it, I didn't quite know how to respond.

The play is developed from the historical meeting of Alice Liddell Hargreaves and Peter Llywelyn Davies in 1932, the real-life models for Lewis Carroll's Alice and J.M. Barrie's Peter Pan, and has them musing about their struggles to reconcile their own lives with that of their literary shadows.

Did I like the idea? A play that combined the history of two of my favourite novels, with what may have been said or thought between the lines of written biography, as one review put it, the "Proustian fantasies" of the two protagonists exploring themselves, their personalities and their past through the genesis of those fictional creations - yes, I do like the idea a lot.

Did I like the acting, the *mis-en-scène*? The stage - Davies' bookshop first, then Alice Liddell's Oxford, then Neverland, turning into the house of the Davie's, the villa of Reginald Hargreaves, the Great War, Wonderland, and then again the bookshop - represented the layers of the story - the present, history, memory, literary fiction - and leaving the stage, the protagonists exit in correct chronological order the stage of life itself – what a splendid idea! The changing sets and narrative modes materialised not only in the different, beautifully painted backdrops, but also in the actor's expressions: in between Judi Dench's typically dry, condescending sarcasm when first meeting the scruffy bookseller, then her radiant face and glittering eyes remembering those "golden afternoons" of the past, Ben Wishaw's hopeful smile as the little Peter Davies on the Adelphi Theatre's stage of *his* Peter Pan play, and his tears upon remembering family tragedy and how he killed a man in the war, then again his insecure, hesitating present self, the traumatised, suicidal alcoholic - good acting, and, all in all, good concept.

But did I like the play itself? Actually, I don't think I did. And what I do think, is, that the script is here more at fault than anything else that was materially present that day in the theatre, because what bugged me about it was the play's "biopic-realism". Based on the definition of a **biopic** as a

"A film or television biography, **often with fictionalized episodes**"
(Merriam-Webster)

it is however not only the *fictionalisation*, that bugs me, but the *falsification* of historical events by subtracting *historical* facts adding *fictional* ones – in order to generate a sensational stimulus, and a generic emotional response in the audience, which can often make

a story shallow and predictable. And this is, I found, what happens in "Peter and Alice".

Beside the two glowing protagonists, and their two fictional representations, who were the liveliest and most genuine characters of the play, there are the two pale and rather disagreeable characters of Lewis Carroll and J.M. Barrie. And, to be honest, if I would have encountered Carroll the first time in this play, I would have disliked him sincerely, as he is portrayed as mainly three things: creepy, pitiable and paedophile. When mentioning my interest in Carroll's work, I often find myself confronted with Carroll's alleged paedophilia. Quickly supported with "evidence" of *burned* letters and *missing* diary pages (which, to me, rather emphasises the *absence* of evidence, but later more) this is for many enough to make the case "obvious". Same scenario in "Peter and Alice": Logan raises the (apparently constant) threat of paedophilia to the central, defining aspect of the Lewis Carroll-Alice Liddell relationship (and a major one in the Davis-Barrie constellation) and lets it take over the play, which reduces a potentially rich and deep story that there was to tell, to a simplistic, sensationalist episode.

Interesting, if not astonishing, is, that John Logan explicitly cites a biographical source as his inspiration for the play: the Lewis Carroll Society's late president Anne Clark's *The Real Alice*:

"On June 26 1932 Alice opened the Lewis Carroll exhibition at Bumpus, the London bookshop. Beside her was Peter Davies, the original Peter Pan." (Logan 3)

And he adds as the stimulus for writing the play:

"I wondered what they said to each other"

From this, I assume, that Logan must have at some point read at least parts of Alice's biography, and that he must have been aware of the historic circumstances. Of course, the host of factual inaccuracies in his play (dates, ages, names etc.) does not matter too much to the content of the story, and distracts only the well-read.

But the inaccuracy of the events recalled (which is beyond natural capacity of mere memory gaps), suggests either, that Logan thinks the characters actually lied about their own past, or, that Logan read Alice's biography, and (quite literally) "sexed it up".

In Logan's play, Alice states, that she has been left alone with Carroll "only twice" (Logan 25) - both times she runs away in terror, because she fears Dodgson coming too close to her, physically as well as emotionally.

The first instance is the often-cited expedition to the festive illuminations on the occasion of Edward Albert, Prince of Wales and Princess Alexandra of Denmark's wedding on 10 March 1963. Clark's biography reports the event as follows:

"That evening Dodgson and his brother Edwin, then nineteen years old, toured the principal streets with Alice to show her the illuminations. [...] 'It was delightful to see the thorough abandonment with which Alice enjoyed the whole thing' wrote Dodgson. 'I clung tightly to the hand of the strong man on either side of me', recalled Alice many years later." (79)

Alice's family had returned home early, after the horrendous sight of a grilled Ox had somewhat spoiled the mood, and Alice's thoughts on being left alone with Dodgson and his brother, are recounted by Björk and Eriksson as follows:

“How exciting that Alice was allowed to go out alone with Mr Dodgson and Edwin! She held each one tight by the hand [...] They stayed out for hours [...] It was one of the most enjoyable days she had ever known.” (56)

Logan, however, has it like this:

CARROLL: Shall we stroll?

She's disturbed by this bit of her past.

ALICE: That long summer. God would it never end? ... We were walking in town. There were illuminations that evening, and the streets were radiant. My sisters and our governess wandered ahead [sic.], so it was just Reverend Dodgson and me... [sic.]It was so rarely that just the two of us alone. Only twice I can recall [sic.]...

Carroll and Alice stroll. It is 1862.[sic.]

[They chat about "growing-up", and how Alice's sister Lorina has got her first corset, a clear indication of her becoming a woman]

CARROLL: It's only a matter of the clock now. She'll be up and married and raising a litter of her own soon.

ALICE: Lorina?! She's still a baby.

CARROLL: She's 13. That's a whole year past the age of consent [...] Why in two years, you could get married. [sic.]

ALICE: What was he trying to say?

PETER: You know exactly. [...]

ALICE: I was a child!

PETER: Not after that night. [...]

CARROLL: Alice, will you not look at me?

Alice, obviously uncomfortable, rushes off to find her sisters, leaving Carroll standing there on his own.

Logan twice brings up twice that Carroll may have proposed marriage to Alice Liddell. However, he does not even do it *well*. The second time he raises the issue in the dramatic climax of the play, a crucial scene portraying what apparently led to the break between Dodgson and the Liddell family, Alice's alleged childhood trauma of an (near-)abuse in Carroll's darkroom (for which there is no biographical evidence whatsoever) – Logan again stops short of actually articulating it, but instead insinuates. A torturous conversation ensues, from which Alice concludes, that Carroll, 'tormenting himself about a sin', takes photographs of his child-friends - he did in fact “transform his desires into paper and silver nitrate”- and thus “explores some unknown and dangerous landscape” (Logan 43). Escaping the locked darkroom in tears, she reports the conversation to her mother, who subsequently has her burn all of Carroll's letters – those “anguished letters [...] dangerous impenetrable things” (46) – and forbids all further contact with Carroll.

Logan describes Carroll as needy and creepy, against a majority of overwhelmingly positive biographical recollections of his contemporaries. Likewise, Barrie is put forward as the candidate to blame for the (much-disputed) suicide of Peter's brother Michael, to whom he was “like a lover”. He is portrayed as possessive, blackmailing, and again, paedophile. But to what purpose? Why waste so many letters on something, that is, in essence, a contrived, false memory, that seems to serve the sole function of giving the two authors a bad image – and the play a sensationalist appeal. In the case of the latter, Logan could have just spelled out the

word paedophilia, instead of clumsily beating about the bush by making up half-baked biographical fragments.

Of course, some people will think: "Oh, come on you geeky, knit-picking literature student, it's only a play! Let the playwright have his freedom" - or, as a friend of mine, immediately after the play said "Go check Shakespeare's plays for their historical accuracy and see what you find" - indicating that even the Great Bard occasionally got things utterly wrong (I still haven't found out how to "sail to the coasts of Bohemia", cf. *A Winter's Tale*), or left out/twisted some facts for increasing dramatic tension. But then a few hours later, the exact same friend mentions, how Shakespeare's Richard III has basically ruined the real Richard III's reputation, and modern findings indicate, that he wasn't quite that horrible, and lots of terrible things he allegedly did (or rather, the villainous acts Shakespeare & Co ascribed to him) weren't actually historically accurate. And now there's the rub, as Hamlet (the Shakespeare one) may have put it: the dangers of biopic-realism.

I would argue, drawing on the dramatic biographies of Alice Liddell Hargreaves and Peter Llywellyn Davies, instead of eastenderifying the plot, would have served the purpose of creating a *genuinely* dramatic play, truthful to the shattering life of Peter and the rich and interesting one of Alice just as well, if not, even better. Much can be justified with the deceptiveness of memory, but to me, it seems mostly like the play doesn't really know where it's going.

[1] Logan, Peter. "Peter and Alice". London: Oberon Books, 2013.

[2] Clark, Anne. *The Real Alice*. London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1981.

[3] Bkörk, Christina and Inga-Karin Eriksson. *The Other Alice*. Stockholm: Rabén and Sjörger, 1993.

Franziska has recently completed her MA in Nineteenth Century Studies at the University of Sheffield, and works as a freelance translator. She is currently an independent researcher, working on dream-narratives and alternative states of consciousness as portrayed in Victorian

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