

Tale of Snow White returns to its gory roots at Brisbane festival

The classic Brothers Grimm fairytale turns to the darker side of its source material in new stage productions at this year's Brisbane Festival

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Saturday 17 September 2016 13.00 AEST

Everyone knows that Snow White - paragon of purity, beauty, youth - is hunted down by her wicked stepmother. Or is she? In the first 1812 edition of the Brothers Grimm tale, it is not her stepmother who orders the huntsman to cut out the girl's lungs and liver to eat, but her own mother.

That small but crucial twist has now been resurrected. Forget Disney; a new rock-opera-cum-cabaret by La Boite Theatre Company, Opera Queensland, and Brisbane Festival dives into a far more grown-up, gory version of the fairytale. With the dwarves and the prince jettisoned in favour of competitive mother-daughter relations, this production hones in on the rabid jealousy that can arise between those bound by blood.

The Queen (Italian opera singer Silvia Colloca) is a raven-haired autocrat in love with her own reflection. She dances the tango with the slick, servile Mirror (Kanen Breen), whose camp, catty remarks are enhanced by his black suit, bleached hair, and sparkling ruby lipstick. The Queen rules by looks: female power, for her, is bound up with being a bombshell.

Then, one day, 15-year-old Snow White secretly tries on her mother's clothes. She kicks off her ugly black school loafers and gingerly slips one foot at a time into red stilettos. Over her white smock she wraps a regal gown. Encouraged by the crooning Mirror, Snow White preens and pouts. When it dawns on the Queen that her sexual prowess is about to be usurped, she orders her daughter killed. (In the Brothers Grimm version she literally desires to consume her daughter by eating her innards.)

La Boite's Snow White is just one of a number of revivals at this year's Brisbane Festival. Together they paint a complex picture of the fairytale popularised by the Brothers Grimm in the early 19th century.

This Sunday will see a rare screening of the 1916 silent film Snow White, enhanced with live music from concert pianist Mauro Colombis. Walt Disney watched this fantasy caper as a boy. It inspired him to make his animated masterpiece Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (also

showing on Sunday at Goma) in 1937, replete with singing little people, cute woodland animals, and a handsome, if utterly insipid, prince. Years later he proclaimed it to be the “perfect story”.

But if Disney delivered a sanitised, sugary take on a tale that has its roots in a brutal, violent Europe, the French Snow White by Ballet Preljocaj, which finished its run last week, is more faithful to the darker tones of the original (the festival states this production is not recommended for children). With costumes designed by Jean Paul Gaultier, the wicked queen is a bondage dominatrix surrounded by prowling cats. Her punishment, as in Brothers Grimm, is a dance to the death in hot iron shoes.

Liberties, however, are taken with Snow White. In the Grimm tale she is named “Little Snow White” to emphasise her childish innocence. Upon her collapse from the poison apple, she is encased in a glass coffin; it is there, when she is little more than a lifeless porcelain doll, where the prince first sees and claims her. “Let me have the coffin,” he says to the mourning dwarfs. “I will give you anything you want for it.”

Thankfully, Ballet Preljocaj provides Snow White with more agency. Danced by Emilie Lalande, she is not a comatose object to be possessed and traded by men, but a flirtatious tease, awake and aware (for the most part at least; after the queen shoves the apple down her throat, she becomes lifeless, her limbs animated by the devastated prince). While the rest of the dancers’ movements are staccato, hers are languid and fluid, brimming with eroticism.

In her 1971 book Transformations Pulitzer prize-winning poet Anne Sexton dubbed Snow White a “dumb bunny”: in the original tale, after all, she is tricked not once but three times by the wicked queen. La Boite’s Snow White (played by the perfectly pitched Stephanie Pickett) is also a bunny but more of the Playboy variety.

Like her mother - who convinces the horny, hunky Huntsman (Michael Tuahine) to kill her daughter by seducing him - Snow White quickly learns that sex is power. When the Huntsman is sent to execute her, she shows him what he’s missing. This Snow White is no wilting violet or chirpy domestic busybody as in Disney’s take. Nor is she like Kristen Stewart’s “warrior princess”, who took up arms to reclaim her kingdom in the 2012 film Snow White and the Huntsman. This Snow White is really only interested in saving herself.

In The New Yorker, folklore scholar Maria Tatar writes that early renditions of Snow White are “a reflection on children’s fears about the cruelty of stepmothers, at a time when mortality rates for child-bearing women were exceptionally high.” That may be true. The Brothers Grimm revised their earliest version, changing the murderous mother to a murderous stepmother in the 1819 edition, possibly to lessen the impact and implications of the former.

Playing with the taboo idea of an evil mother is more interesting today, when stepmothers have less control over children and it is more usual to have separated parents. So, too, is combating the overbearing prescription that motherhood should and must be sacrificial. Driving the Queen is fear: fear of ageing; fear of being rendered invisible; fear of competition, not to mention revolt against societal norms that dictate that the only legitimate feeling about offspring is unconditional love.

All good fairytales expose societal anxieties. Remove the attempted filicide and La Boite's Snow White could be a more familiar story: one of a precocious teenager who rebels against her mother's hold to test the limits of her own sexuality; and of a mother who, watching her daughter grow up, suddenly feels the loss of her own allure.

Snow White is on at La Boite - Roundhouse Theatre until 24 September

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