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“Let Our Freak Flags Fly”: *Shrek the Musical* and the Branding of Diversity

Jessica Brater, Jessica Del Vecchio, Andrew Friedman,
Bethany Holmstrom, Eero Laine, Donald Levit, Hillary Miller,
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and Peter Zazzali

“The paradigm of multiculturalism actually excludes the concept of dominant and subordinate cultures . . . and fails to recognize that the existence of racism relates to the possession and exercise of politico-economic control and authority.”
—Hazel Carby, “Multiculture”¹

At first glance, *Shrek the Musical*, DreamWorks Theatricals’ first offering, and Barack Obama, the forty-fourth president of the United States, appear to have little in common.

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This essay developed out of an exercise in David Savran’s Sociology of Theatre seminar at the CUNY Graduate Center in the spring of 2009, in which doctoral students attempted to construct a comprehensive socioeconomic analysis of a single Broadway production by exchanging and developing individual research assignments. The authors elected to expand the project to compose a collaboratively written essay.

¹ Hazel V. Carby, “Multiculture,” in *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999), 222.

It may be purely coincidental that *Shrek* opened on Broadway in December 2008, between Obama's election in November 2008 and his inauguration in January 2009, events that at least one self-styled progressive said "would mean the end of racism in America."² We believe, however, that the musical's advocacy of tolerance and celebration of cultural diversity made its arrival timely. Its climactic number, "Freak Flag," represents nothing less than an anthem of multiculturalism: "All the things that make us special / are the things that make us strong!"³ Yet many argue that multiculturalism is far less radical than it might seem. Walter Benn Michaels, for example, contends that it backs away from militating for structural change by redefining "the opposition to discrimination as the *appreciation* (rather than the elimination) of difference."⁴ Because it is predicated on the aesthetic contemplation of diversity rather than the struggle against racialized subordination, multiculturalism represents what Hazel Carby calls a "supermarket" theory that imagines the individual consumption of "difference" to be a cure for social ills.⁵ Examining *Shrek's* message, and the divergence between that message and the blatant racial stereotyping of Donkey, *Shrek's* "jive-spouting sidekick,"⁶ we could almost believe it was designed to epitomize the contradictions that disrupt the paradigm of racial diversity in the early twenty-first-century marketplace. Crucially, these contradictions are also exemplified at the highest levels of political discourse in the United States, in the debates and controversies about racial identity that have shadowed Obama since he entered the national political arena at the 2004 Democratic national convention.

In this essay, we aim to study how DreamWorks has branded *Shrek the Musical* as a celebration of diversity and to link it to the branding of Barack Obama. We argue not that "brand Shrek" is an analogy for "brand Obama," but that both serve as contemporaneous examples of the same problematic claims. We believe, moreover, that both cases are important and instructive examples, because of the power of branding—a kind of mythmaking that the explosive growth of advertising since the 1960s has turned into a science. Thanks to the wizards of Madison Avenue, Nike, Disney, Apple, and dozens of other multinational corporations have engineered the transformation of their trademarks into the emotional and spiritual insignias that Douglas Holt calls "iconic brands." According to Holt, iconic brands spin narratives, complete with "plots and characters," that address "the collective anxieties and desires of a nation" and provide a kind of magical resolution of "cultural contradictions." Iconic brands, moreover, like myths, become "vessels of self-expression" that provide consumers with "little epiphanies," encouraging them "to think differently about themselves."⁷ A refurbishment of the commodity with its lost aura, branding has been especially successful on

²"A twenty-one-year-old white 'antiwar' college student in Iowa City who called himself a 'progressive' told me in early March 2008 that 'electing Obama to the White House would mean the end of racism in America.' 'Do you really believe that?' I asked. 'Absolutely.'" See Paul Street, *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 81.

³David Lindsay-Abair and Jeanine Tesori, "Freak Flag," in *Shrek the Musical* CD booklet, Decca B0012627-02 (2009), n.p. The popularization of the phrase "freak flag" dates back to Jimi Hendrix's 1967 song, "If 6 Was 9."

⁴Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007), 5 (emphasis added).

⁵Hazel V. Carby, "The Canon: Civil War and Reconstruction," in *Cultures in Babylon*, 239.

⁶Misha Berson, "'Shrek' Tickles Young Hearts without Forced Dazzle," *Seattle Times*, 16 December 2008, 4.

⁷Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 3–11.

the Internet, whose very “placelessness,” Naomi Klein argues, allows iconic brands “to soar, less as the disseminators of goods or services than as collective hallucinations.”⁸ But even when posted on billboards, iconic brands are utopian fantasies that promise consumers the fulfillment of both personal and communal dreams. In the twenty-first-century neo-liberal marketplace, countless products and persons have endeavored to become iconic brands, “engines of culture” that leave palpable imprints on society and, most important, generate vast quantities of capital.⁹

DreamWorks’s invasion of Broadway, an arena in which Disney had already claimed a strong corporate presence, was carefully designed and packaged to extend the reach and lifespan of the *Shrek* franchise—its most lucrative product—by appealing to the historically liberal Broadway demographic. We aim to demonstrate that DreamWorks used its marketing strategy—diversification—to provide the theme—diversity—for the product it was employing to implement that strategy. We do not mean to assert that corporate diversification and the politics of cultural diversity are the same, but we do see a synergy between them in the early twenty-first century, as more and more multinational corporations invest in the upper-middlebrow sector of the cultural economy known as Broadway. DreamWorks’s skillful manipulation of the politics of both diversity and diversification suggests that *Shrek the Musical* provides precious insight into the workings of culture in the age of Obama.

Those who question whether Obama has become a brand should note that his 2008 campaign was named *Advertising Age’s* Marketer of the Year and awarded the Titanium and Integrated Grand Prix at the International Advertising Festival in Cannes.¹⁰ Bowing to the exigencies of electoral politics, the campaign produced a classic, iconic brand that spoke to the dreams of the American electorate: the image of a progressive, innovative, thoughtful, determined, benignly paternalistic leader. Perhaps its most remarkable feature was its construction of brand Obama as a screen onto which voters could project their wishes and fantasies, both reverential and phobic. For many liberals, he seemed the social activist who would end racism by providing a reconciliation of the many contradictions that are linked to race. Yet as critics like Adolph Reed and Paul Street contend, he repeatedly staked out relatively conservative positions.¹¹ Street claims that Obama’s simultaneous minimalization and emphasis of his own racial difference has exploited “both the willingness of many white voters to proclaim their rejection of old-fashioned race prejudice and the simultaneous unwillingness of most whites to acknowledge the continuing powerful and pervasive role of racism in American life.”¹² Reed, even more pointedly, argues that Obama has effectively severed “the last threads of any connection between notions of racial disparity and structur-

⁸Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador USA, 1999), 22.

⁹Andy Hobsbawm, “Brand 2.0: Brands in a Digital World,” in *Brands and Branding*, 2nd ed., ed. Rita Clifton (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009), 224.

¹⁰See Matthew Creamer, “Obama Wins! . . . Ad Age’s Marketer of the Year,” *Advertising Age*, 17 October 2008, available at http://adage.com/print?article_id=131810 (accessed 15 July 2009), and Eleftheria Parpis, “Cannes: Obama Wins Titanium, Integrated Prizes; Tribal DDB Scores for Film,” *Adweek*, 27 June 2009, available at http://www.adweek.com/aw/content_display/creative/news/e312c0d30928617f5ec62b626e1f69dd07f (accessed 15 July 2009).

¹¹See Adolph Reed Jr., “Where Obamaism Seems to Be Going,” *Black Agenda Report*, 15 July 2008, available at <http://www.blackagendareport.com/?q=content/where-obamaism-seems-be-going> (accessed 14 March 2009), and Street, *Barack Obama*.

¹²Street, *Barack Obama*, 80.

ally reproduced inequality rooted in political economy."¹³ For the "punditocracy," this attempt "to transcend race" goes by the name "post-racialism."¹⁴ Commentators on the Right—and, increasingly, the Left—have used it to claim that racial discrimination is a thing of the past and, as a result, that affirmative action and other race-based programs are obsolete.

Post-racialism is hardly the invention of twenty-first-century pundits. On the contrary, its origins lie in the backlash against the civil rights movement as legitimized in 1978 by *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* and later institutionalized by Ronald Reagan and other neo-conservatives. Although Obama has never denied the force of racism, he has consistently attempted to distance himself from affirmative-action policies endorsed by the preceding generation of black leaders (like Jesse Jackson) by adopting a universalizing discourse that insists, in his own words, that the nation's "monumental problems . . . are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all." For Obama, the United States, with its gorgeous multicultural mosaic, represents the promised land: "I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible."¹⁵

Shrek the Musical

DreamWorks Theatricals constructed *Shrek the Musical* as a celebration of multiculturalism to stake out a politically liberal position on Broadway—the Great White Way—and so distinguish itself from its arch-rival, Disney.¹⁶ The piece is based on well-known commodities: William Steig's children's book, *Shrek!* (1990), and the 2001 DreamWorks movie *Shrek*, which won the first-ever Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. Although DreamWorks's versions are very different from Steig's, all are quest narratives that center on the search for a princess by the title character, a bright green ogre abandoned by his parents. In all versions, Shrek finds his ogre princess, although in DreamWorks's versions, Fiona is human by day and transforms into an ogre by night. DreamWorks also introduced the villainous Lord Farquaad of Duloc, who tricks Shrek into rescuing Fiona, because Farquaad wants to marry her. Shrek's motor-mouthed co-star, Donkey, appears only briefly in Steig's story, but is elevated to a major character in both film and musical, playing a funky Sancho Panza to Shrek's straight-talking Don Quixote. DreamWorks's most striking addition is a ragtag collection of well-known fairytale characters who are persecuted and exiled by Farquaad for being "freakishly different from everyone else."¹⁷ This crew of freaks settles on Shrek's parcel of land, supplying the context and motive for his initial petition to Farquaad. Most important, the freaks' heroic resistance to Farquaad's oppression provides the impetus for the musical's celebration of difference.

Shrek the Musical's salute to multiculturalism is not without precedent. In fact, there is a long tradition of liberal musicals with antiracist messages, including *Show Boat*

¹³ Reed, "Where Obamaism Seems to Be Going."

¹⁴ Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Obama Gives Fiery Address at N.A.A.C.P. 100th Anniversary Celebration," *New York Times*, 17 July 2009, A16.

¹⁵ Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union," 18 March 2008, available at <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords> (accessed 11 July 2009); see also Street, *Barack Obama*.

¹⁶ For an account of *Shrek's* environmentalist ethos, see Jane Caputi, "Green Consciousness: Earth-Based Myth and Meaning in *Shrek*," *Ethics & the Environment* 12, no. 2 (2007): 23–44.

¹⁷ Plot synopsis, in *Shrek the Musical* CD booklet, n.p.

(1927), *South Pacific* (1949), and *West Side Story* (1957), even if most of them, like *Shrek*, end up exoticizing and commodifying the subjugated cultures for which they so eagerly advocate.¹⁸ But politically progressive musicals are relatively scarce, because the genre historically has catered to upper-middle-class audiences that would prefer for politics to be left at the stage door. Even the vast majority of so-called black musicals, from *A Trip to Coontown* (1898) to *The Color Purple* (2005), employ the same conventions as white musicals, while drawing more explicitly and knowledgably on African American musical forms. However, Disney Theatrical Productions' arrival on Broadway, beginning in 1994 with *Beauty and the Beast*, has subtly changed the calculus of race in musical theatre. *The Lion King* (1997) used elaborate puppetry and African percussion—along with its African and African American cast—both to camouflage and enrich its Western-style pop score and to brand itself as an exotic entertainment. Although *Tarzan* (2006) adopted a similarly orientaling approach and *The Little Mermaid* (2008) cast African Americans in two supporting roles, the Disney musicals refuse to engage racial politics directly or take political stands.

In order to demonstrate how DreamWorks has challenged the Disney model, we are performing a political economic analysis of DreamWorks's infiltration of Broadway. Taking its cue from Marxism, this methodology differentiates production, distribution, and consumption,¹⁹ yet even Karl Marx acknowledged that the three phases are difficult to separate, noting that because every act of production represents the consumption of raw material, "[p]roduction is also immediately consumption" and vice versa. Distribution, meanwhile, "is itself a product of production," because "only the results of production can be distributed" and "the specific kind of participation in production determines the specific forms of distribution." Whereas the Marxian hierarchy envisions relations of production as "predominant,"²⁰ late capitalism has so significantly modified the dynamics of the marketplace that the character and importance of the categories of production, distribution, and consumption have shifted. In this age of hyper-marketing, branding and other forms of promotion have become a juggernaut that crushes everything in its path. Indeed, these modes of distribution have become so powerful that they often determine the character of the commodity they promote, as well as the labor process that produces it. We therefore begin our analysis by examining modes of *distribution*: how the branding of *Shrek the Musical* was engineered and how it relates to DreamWorks's long- and short-term corporate strategies. From there, we study the geography of *consumption*: the Disneyfication of Times Square and the response of critics in New York and elsewhere. Next, we explore relations of *production*: how the piece was put together and its message crafted. We conclude by zeroing in on the musical's staging of cultural diversity to demonstrate that the contradictions associated with Obama and post-racialism are replicated in DreamWorks's use of the childlike, bumbling Donkey to recycle antiquated African American stereotypes that quite precisely undermine its liberal ideals.

Distribution: Branding DreamWorks and Building the *Shrek* Franchise

With the runaway success of the first *Shrek* movie, DreamWorks realized it had tapped into a goldmine. Relying on a complex integration of strategies, it has attempted an

¹⁸ See Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 179–227.

¹⁹ See Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication* (London: Sage Publications, 2009).

²⁰ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 90–95.

ever-wider distribution of the franchise, all the while trying to become everything to everyone: major studio, independent production company, and significant presence in the diversified world of franchised entertainment. Its efforts to sell *Shrek the Musical* to various consumer groups resulted in a glut of marketing campaigns that often seemed inconsistent and flatly unprofitable. Yet this lack of specificity, criticized as “fuzzy” by producers, was in fact a deliberate strategy on the part of a corporation that has carefully tailored the *Shrek* brand for different marketplaces to maximize profits.²¹

Two months after *Shrek the Musical* opened, the *New York Times* reported that box-office revenues were suffering a “downward spiral as ugly as the ogre of the title.” *Shrek*, whose weekly operating cost was about \$600,000, grossed just under \$850,000 during the first week of January and suffered continuous subsequent decline.²² Indeed, in its first six months of operation, *Shrek* played to only 73 percent capacity and accrued a net loss of approximately \$1.8 million.²³ DreamWorks blamed “poor word of mouth among people who have seen the show; a fuzzy advertising campaign; and the high price of tickets for a production that is perceived, fairly or not, as a family show.”²⁴ Despite the poor sales, the appearance of the bright green ogre on Broadway was part of DreamWorks’s efforts to sell *out*—to expand its mass-media market to reach new consumers in the economically minor Broadway market—a seemingly counterintuitive strategy. Through strategic corporate and artistic partnerships and a wide network of promotional campaigns, DreamWorks used *Shrek*’s appearance on Broadway to position itself competitively in an upper-middlebrow cultural field, thereby attempting to distribute the franchise in new markets and upgrade its brand status.

DreamWorks Theatricals is a recent subdivision of the global entertainment giant, whose 1994 founding by director Steven Spielberg, former Disney executive Jeffrey Katzenberg, and music-industry leader David Geffen has become an industry legend. The three principal partners’ personal investment of \$33 million each was augmented by Microsoft executive Paul Allen, who contributed \$500 million to the company’s original capitalization—an enormous sum even by Hollywood standards. Chemical Bank provided a revolving line of credit worth \$1 billion, sending the message that an investment in DreamWorks was a sound financial decision.²⁵

From the beginning, DreamWorks branded itself as a different breed in the entertainment industry, constructing a mythology of its founders as renegades and artistic visionaries. Katzenberg was originally a Disney employee, but a public feud over earnings with then-Disney CEO Michael Eisner culminated in Katzenberg’s resignation. This tumultuous, well-publicized break with Disney fed the image of DreamWorks as the “independent challenger” to the titan of the animated film industry. There was also, of course, the sterling reputation of Spielberg, who had created DreamWorks as “an informal creative environment that fostered talent—especially directors and writers—

²¹ Patrick Healy, “An Ogre’s Magic Is Flagging in Producing Ticket Sales,” *New York Times*, 3 February 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/04/theater/04shre.html?scp=15&sq=shrek&st=cse> (accessed 20 April 2009).

²² Ibid.

²³ “Legit Grosses,” *Variety*, 6-12 April 2009, 34; DreamWorks Animation SKG, Inc., “Q1 Earnings Report Transcript,” available at <http://seekingalpha.com/article/133785-dreamworks-animation-skg-inc-q1-2009-earnings-call-transcript?page=3> (accessed 14 May 2009).

²⁴ Healy, “An Ogre’s Magic Is Flagging.”

²⁵ Daniel M. Kimmel, *The Dream Team: The Rise and Fall of DreamWorks: Lessons from the New Hollywood* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 30.

who have their own vision and imagination."²⁶ The promise of creative freedom and greater financial reward attracted many leading directors, among them Ridley Scott, Woody Allen, and Sam Mendes.

DreamWorks's image as progressive and artist-friendly was challenged early and often, as it depended on a series of co-financing arrangements and distribution deals to stabilize its profitability at the expense of its brand identity. An attempt to build a studio in a California wetland outraged local environmentalists and ultimately failed.²⁷ The company's reputation also suffered a serious blow just before the 1996 release of Spielberg's *Amistad*, when the author of a slave narrative sued over alleged copyright infringement.²⁸ Suffering financial as well as image problems, DreamWorks sought to merge with Paramount in 2006, a deal that brought in \$1.3 billion in capital, but was terminated in October 2008, just when *Shrek the Musical* opened in Seattle.²⁹ In order to maintain fiscal solvency, CEO Katzenberg was paid only \$1 in salary during the years 2006–08, by which time the company's profits were rebounding.³⁰

To bring *Shrek* to the stage, DreamWorks initiated an auspicious partnership with Neal Street Productions, a British company with serious artistic aspirations that was incorporated in 2003 by Sam Mendes and two partners. Although *Shrek the Musical* was a patently commercial enterprise, the partnership revealed a potent bid for theatrical legitimacy that offered each partner unique benefits. For Neal Street, the association provided increased accessibility to the New York commercial theatre and the US film market. The arrangement initially guaranteed Neal Street's Mendes a yearly stipend of \$160,000 to fund his theatre and film directing.³¹ Mendes, who won an Academy Award for directing *American Beauty* (1999), cut his teeth in the early 1990s directing for the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. He secured his reputation, however, between 1992 and 2002 as artistic director of the Donmar Warehouse, one of London's most notable mid-size companies, frequently casting major film actors in a diverse mixture of new plays, musicals, and revivals. This blend catered to an educated, upper-middlebrow audience with a low threshold for experimentation, neither threatening liberal, upper-middle-class sensibilities nor straining the bounds of traditional linear, realistic storytelling. Although most Broadway consumers would not have associated the Neal Street brand with Mendes or his three Olivier Awards for Best Director, the partnership raised DreamWorks's brand identity and legitimized its entry into the Broadway market. In fact, it was reportedly Mendes who gave Katzenberg the idea of turning *Shrek* into a Broadway musical.³²

The economics of Broadway required DreamWorks to change the market-saturation techniques it used to promote the three *Shrek* films. A key component of the campaigns

²⁶ Warren Buckland, *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster* (New York: Continuum International, 2006), 26.

²⁷ Kimmel, *Dream Team*, 40–44.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55–61.

²⁹ Anne Thompson, "DreamWorks Considers Indie Future," *Variety*, 25 June 2008, available at <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117988086.html?categoryid=13&cs=1> (accessed 3 August 2009).

³⁰ "DreamWorks CEO Katzenberg Received \$1 Compensation in 2007," *iStockAnalyst*, 10 March 2008, available at <http://www.istockanalyst.com/article/view/iStockNews/articleid/2347620> (accessed 9 July 2009).

³¹ See Kimmel, *Dream Team*, 118. The subvention was in addition to a \$500,000 payment to Mendes in 2000 for directing *American Beauty*, which DreamWorks distributed.

³² Tom Teodorczuk, "Shrek Is Set to Be a Monster Hit in the West End," *London Evening Standard*, 15 December 2008, available at <http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23601656-details/Shrek+is+set+to+be+a+monster+hit+in+the+West+End/article.do> (accessed 3 August 2009).

for each was the release of a plethora of *Shrek*-themed products. At one time, fans of the loveable green ogre could, for example, chomp Cheetos that turned their tongues “Shrek green,” dig into a breakfast of Eggo waffles imprinted with Donkey’s face,³³ and chase it with a Shrek-a-Licious Sierra Mist Slurpee.³⁴ The deluge of specialty products usually lasted only a few months, long enough to generate buzz and ensure a big opening weekend for each film. DreamWorks and its partners often advertised these products as “limited edition,” a moniker that gave the goods immediate, if artificial, value and, in some cases, cachet as collectors’ items. But even after the onslaught, consumers could still purchase plenty of *Shrek* memorabilia online and at retail stores worldwide: toys, games, dolls, and apparel—big income generators for DreamWorks and its licensees.

DreamWorks’s saturation of the market with Shrek’s likeness facilitated his transformation from a cartoon character into a full-time franchise. The studio banked on the expectation that their ogre would be recognizable and vendible—whether or not he was featured in a current box-office hit—and research demonstrates the success of its strategies. According to Marketing Evaluations, 94 percent of children ages 6 to 11 recognize Shrek—the same percentage that recognize Mickey Mouse. Shrek’s “likeability” with both children and adults is also high: the former rank Shrek just below Santa, while among mothers of children ages 2 to 11, he ranks as likable as the Easter Bunny.³⁵

Producing on Broadway, however, presents radically different challenges from producing in Hollywood. According to an influential study on the economics of the performing arts by William Baumol and William Bowen, theatre is beset with a structural dilemma that makes it nearly impossible to earn a profit.³⁶ Unlike other modern industries that use technology to manufacture products more efficiently, theatre can profit but little from technological advances. The production process in the 2000s remains much the same as it was in the 1960s, insofar as actors and musicians require the same amount of time to rehearse and learn their parts. There are few shortcuts, and because a show does not start to recoup its initial investment until it has opened, the producers begin their venture at a net loss, with little hope of turning a profit. During the first half of the twentieth century producing was less risky, because labor costs were lower; but ticket prices, expensive as they are, have not kept up with rising costs, and although the Broadway success rate since 1945 has consistently hovered at around a meager 20 percent, a show must now run at about 75 percent capacity to break even, as opposed to the 50 percent that sufficed during the 1950s and 1960s.³⁷ Baumol and

³³ For an informal survey of Shrek food products, see *X-Entertainment Blog*, “Shrek 2 Crap: Volume I,” 5 May 2004, available at <http://x-entertainment.com/updates/2004/05/05/shrek-2-crap-volume-i/>, and “Shrek Crap: Volume II,” 6 May 2004, available at <http://x-entertainment.com/updates/2004/05/06/shrek-crap-volume-ii/> (accessed 23 April 2009).

³⁴ Theresa Howard, “Shrek and Donkey’s Waxy—Uh, Wacky—Ad Dials Up Winner,” *USA Today*, 2 August 2004, available at http://www.usatoday.com/money/advertising/adtrack/2004-08-01-track-dial_x.htm (accessed 20 April 2009).

³⁵ Quoted in Bruce Horowitz, “Shrek, Promoter of Sugary Treats, Thumped as Exercise Advocate,” *USA Today*, 26 April 2007.

³⁶ William Baumol and William Bowen, *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1966), 164.

³⁷ Richard Caves, *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 256; Steven Adler, *On Broadway: Art and Commerce on the Great White Way* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 18.

Bowen refer to this dynamic as a “cost disease” from which theatre unavoidably suffers.³⁸ Mary McColl of the Broadway League of Producers echoes their point: “Labor is the highest expense in operating a show. . . . There are other production costs to be sure, especially marketing during the front end, but it’s predominantly labor once the show is opened.”³⁹ Indeed, *Shrek* employed over 200 people represented by no fewer than fifteen labor unions trying to ensure the most lucrative salaries and benefits for their members. McColl explains that the average cost for a Broadway musical is \$11 million in capitalization and \$600,000 to \$700,000 to cover its weekly operation.⁴⁰ *Shrek*’s weekly expenditures matched this figure, but the fixed cost of mounting the show was reportedly a daunting \$24 million.⁴¹

DreamWorks’s financial reports emphasize that despite the losses incurred by *Shrek the Musical*, maintaining a Broadway musical was good business.⁴² Katzenberg’s letter to shareholders in the company’s 2008 annual report stated that the company realized the “solidification of [its] franchise strategy, which will provide the underpinning of future performance.”⁴³ He explained that DreamWorks’s strategy involved “extending our franchises beyond our core business in meaningful ways. In December 2008, *Shrek the Musical* debuted on Broadway, where it continues to delight audiences of all ages.”⁴⁴ Financial reporter Steven Birenberg, writing for *RealMoney* on the day after *Shrek* opened on Broadway, suggested that DreamWorks stock was worth adding to a portfolio, because the company was “trying to morph into a more Disney-like company with creative animation driving multiple revenue streams.”⁴⁵ Indeed, DreamWorks acknowledged the potential risks of *not* emulating Disney’s diversification, while warning that Disney was moving in on DreamWorks’s primary revenue source, computer-generated animated film.⁴⁶ DreamWorks recognized the inherent risks of diversifying and seemed quite willing to trade economic capital for the symbolic and cultural capital that could later be leveraged through what it called “the exploitation of [its] film properties through the development” of nonfilmic “special content,” such as a Broadway musical.⁴⁷

Unlike the three *Shrek* films, *Shrek the Musical* was not hailed by a multitude of product tie-ins; instead, DreamWorks seemed to consider it an extension of its already-thriving *Shrek* empire, and “cost disease” just another business expense or tax deduction.

³⁸ Baumol and Bowen, *Performing Arts*, 164.

³⁹ Mary McColl (Broadway League of Producers, director of labor relations), interview with Peter Zazzali, 13 May 2009.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Healy, “An Ogre’s Magic Is Flagging”; Patrick Healy, “‘Shrek the Musical’ to Close Jan. 3,” ArtsBeat Blog, *New York Times*, 21 October 2009, available at <http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/10/21/shrek-the-musical-to-close-jan-3/> (accessed 29 October 2009).

⁴² *DreamWorks 2008 Annual Report*, 24 February 2009, available at http://ir.dreamworksanimation.com/dwa/opencms/company/investor_relations/annualreports.html (accessed 3 August 2009).

⁴³ Jeffrey Katzenberg, “Dear Fellow Shareholders,” in *ibid*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Steven Birenberg, “How More Media Companies Brave the Headwinds,” *Yahoo! Finance*, 15 December 2008, available at <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/How-More-Media-Companies-tsmmp-13831797.html?v=1> (accessed 3 August 2009).

⁴⁶ “Risk Factors,” *DreamWorks 2008 Annual Report*.

⁴⁷ Form 10-Q for DreamWorks Animation SKG, Inc. Quarterly Report, “Our Business and Distribution and Servicing Arrangements,” *Yahoo! Finance*, 29 October 2008, available at <http://biz.yahoo.com/e/081029/dwa10-q.html> (accessed 3 August 2009).

Even so, in April 2009, DreamWorks seized the opportunity to link the musical to a progressive cause, this time using Earth Day to promote environmental awareness on the leftwing website, the *Huffington Post*. In an article attributed to the ogre himself, Shrek asked people to “make a commitment to do their part and incorporate a little green awareness into everything they do every day”—but not before plugging his show. “As it happens,” he wrote, “I’m not in the swamp at the moment. I’m in New York City, ‘treading the boards’ . . . in my new Broadway musical.”⁴⁸ The article vaguely refers to several environmental issues—car exhaust, the destruction of wildlife, and the fur industry—but it prescribes a remedy based on individual commitment, rather than systemic change.

DreamWorks’s effort to brand *Shrek* as “green” began with a controversy that arose over product tie-ins for the film, which echoed the company’s struggles to establish a progressive identity. The fierce criticism of its use of a cartoon character to shill junk food to children caused DreamWorks to shift tactics and use *Shrek* to promote healthier lifestyle choices.⁴⁹ To celebrate Shrek’s third cinematic incarnation, McDonald’s offered *Shrek*-themed “Happy Meals” that encouraged healthier eating by offering children Chicken McNuggets, apple slices with low-fat caramel dipping sauce, and low-fat milk, rather than the usual burger-and-fries fare.⁵⁰ Sold under the tagline “Go for Green,” the promotion tied Shrek’s signature color to the call to be more environmentally responsible, implying that eating a slightly healthier Happy Meal meant living a more “green-conscious” lifestyle. In addition, McDonald’s launched a *Shrek*-themed website that encouraged children to exercise, asking them to log their physical activity online to earn points redeemable for various prizes. Although it was billed as the “single biggest promotion of fruit, vegetables and milk” in McDonald’s history, many questioned the nutritional value of the “balanced” fast-food meal and the efficacy of asking children to become more physically active by visiting a website.⁵¹

Marketing *Shrek the Musical*, however, required more than the usual deluge of tie-in products and a nod to progressive causes. To design a marketing campaign, DreamWorks hired one of New York City’s trendiest entertainment advertising agencies, SpotCo—the same agency whose “No Day But Today” ads had helped transform *Rent* (1996) into a cultural icon. The first major component of the campaign involved print advertising, a traditional approach made untraditional, because the ads parodied the Broadway canon. One poster, for example, depicted Princess Fiona under the headline: “If My Friends Could FREE Me Now.” These posters were part of a complete takeover of the advertising space in the Times Square subway station, a location targeting tourists as well as theatre aficionados. Bill Damaschke, president of DreamWorks Theatricals, admitted that the “iconic” musicals being parodied “may go over people’s heads,” and it is unlikely that a significant number of parents and first-time or casual consumers of

⁴⁸ “On Earth Day: A Green, I Mean Really Very Green, Perspective,” *Huffington Post*, 22 April 2009, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shrek/on-earth-day-a-green-i-me_b_190173.html (accessed 22 July 2009).

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the *Shrek* junk-food controversy and its aftermath, see Melanie Warner, “Guidelines Are Urged in Food Ads for Children,” *New York Times*, 17 March 2005, C7.

⁵⁰ “McDonald’s Brings the Joy of Shrek to Customers Around the World,” Press Release, *PR Newswire*, 8 May 2007, available at <http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=109&STORY=/www/story/05-08-2007/0004583765&EDATE=> (accessed 23 April 2009).

⁵¹ See, for example, “Iowa Senator Takes on Shrek’s Promotion of Snack Food,” *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, 18 May 2007.

Broadway musicals would have caught an obscure reference to *Sweet Charity*, *Gypsy*, or *A Chorus Line*.⁵² It is more likely that DreamWorks wanted aficionados and industry professionals to believe that it—unlike Disney—was in the know, capable of lovingly lampooning classic musicals, because it understood their cultural importance.

SpotCo also planned an Internet offensive through e-mail and the official *Shrek* website, which became a gateway to countless photos and videos of performances, television commercials, and a series of “webisodes.” Viewing performance footage online is a mode of previewing the live theatrical event, which reassures consumers that they are making a sound financial investment, while instilling what Richard Caves calls “rational addiction”: the consumption of cultural goods to increase one’s “expertise and training” so that one experiences more “thrills per hour” when consuming similar goods in the future.⁵³ This strategy was especially important, because *Shrek*’s mass-market appeal needed to transfer to the more-limited Broadway market, with its high fixed costs and more specialized, upper-middlebrow consumer base.⁵⁴

SpotCo also designed the television commercials to use *Shrek* to represent the central characteristic of DreamWorks’s corporate identity: lively irreverence. The mission statement of DreamWorks Animation states that it seeks “to tell great stories that are fun and comedic, told with a level of sophistication and irreverence that appeal to the broadest audience possible.”⁵⁵ One ad described *Shrek the Musical* as “part romance, part twisted fairy tale, and all irreverent fun.”⁵⁶ Another concluded with the alarming promise that “Broadway’s getting a Makeogre!”⁵⁷ This “irreverence” has become a trademark for DreamWorks, because it works in part by skewering the competition, turning, for example, cute Disney-style songbirds into objects that provide eggs for Shrek’s breakfast. DreamWorks thus offers cultural products that are self-consciously clever and hip yet unthreatening to a mass audience.

Expanding markets across cultural fields is especially challenging with a theatrical product, because the value of a creative good that cannot be mass-produced depends in part upon the circulation of social capital and “how easily persons with shared interests make contact with one another.”⁵⁸ To that end, SpotCo created Shrekster, “the theatre world’s first major attempt at creating a social community.”⁵⁹ Both a parody and pastiche of social-networking sites like Facebook, Shrekster featured satirical fairytale news stories, message boards, and profile pages for *Shrek* characters. Individual users created their own profiles in which they divulged their social, cultural, and economic

⁵² Stuart Elliot, “A Wink to Theatregoers, and Nods to Broadway,” *New York Times*, 4 December 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/05/business/media/05adco.html?ref=theater> (accessed 19 April 2009).

⁵³ Caves, *Creative Industries*, 175.

⁵⁴ For a complete analysis of the “cost disease” affecting the Broadway market, see *ibid.*, 253–64.

⁵⁵ DreamWorks Animation Website, “Company Overview,” available at <http://www.dreamworksanimation.com> (accessed 12 May 2009).

⁵⁶ “Overview,” *Shrek the Musical* television advertisement, available at <http://www.shrekthemusical.com/videos.html> (accessed 12 May 2009).

⁵⁷ “Reviews,” *Shrek the Musical* television advertisement, in *ibid.*

⁵⁸ Caves, *Creative Industries*, 180.

⁵⁹ *Broadway World*, “Special Broadway World Offer: Join Shrekster and Enter to Win Free Tickets to Shrek the Musical,” 7 November 2008, available at http://broadwayworld.com/article/Special_Broadway_World_Offer_Join_SHREKSTER_and_Enter_to_Win_FREE_Tickets_to_SHREK_THE_MUSICAL_20010101 (accessed 19 April 2009).

positions, interests, and attitudes. Shrekster promoted itself as a place to share information with other “theatreogres” and win prizes like free cast recordings and tickets.

At first glance, Shrekster was a flop. The activity on the site appeared minimal; message boards and other areas for public communications among fans contained few posts. The focus of Shrekster seemed too narrow to generate any significant word-of-mouth buzz. However, the site won SpotCo an award for Best Integrated Ad Campaign at the 2009 Internet Advertising Competition.⁶⁰ Unlike most social-networking sites, which are powered by ads, but operate as platforms for almost any kind of communication, Shrekster was built entirely around cultural products related to *Shrek the Musical*. Every time users posted to Shrekster, they acted as meaning-brokers and promoters of the musical. In facilitating a kind of *faux* grassroots branding of *Shrek*, Shrekster functioned as what Holt calls a “populist world”: an “autonomous” place where “people’s actions are perceived to be guided by intrinsic values, not by money or power.”⁶¹ SpotCo intends to revive Shrekster to advertise the musical’s national tour with city-specific messages and promotions; it also plans to launch banner ads that Shrekster users can copy and paste into their Facebook and MySpace pages. These do-it-yourself identity-markers can track the web activity of users who click on them, transmitting valuable market-research data to DreamWorks. Sara Fitzpatrick, director of interactive media for SpotCo, promises that “[w]e’re going to keep expanding Shrekster as the show continues to grow. . . . It’s the most effective way to reach as many fans as possible.”⁶²

Consumption: On Broadway and Beyond

In seeking to tap into the largest market and diversify the *Shrek* brand, DreamWorks is following in Disney’s footsteps. In the 1990s, Michael Eisner famously invested in the cleanup and redevelopment of Times Square by spending approximately \$6 million to renovate Florenz Ziegfeld’s New Amsterdam Theatre on 42nd Street, hoping to change the Disney brand “from a company solely interested in making money into a company respected for fueling the performing arts.”⁶³ Classy (à la Ziegfeld) but accessible (à la Disney) was the formula as Disney Theatricals anchored its corporate entity in Times Square.⁶⁴ However, the renewal and rebranding of the area from a den of iniquity to a family-friendly entertainment zone sparked considerable controversy for then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani. While one would be hard-pressed to argue for a Times Square that includes rampant violent crime, the targets of legal measures (loiterers,

⁶⁰ *Broadway World*, “SpotCo Wins Three Internet Advertising Awards for Inspired Work on ‘Shrek,’ ‘Heights’ and ‘[tos],” 2 April 2009, available at http://www.broadwayworld.com/article/SpotCo_Wins_Three_Internet_Advertising_Awards_for_Inspired_Work_on_SHREK_HEIGTHS_and_tos_20090402 (accessed 23 March 2010).

⁶¹ Holt, *How Brands Become Icons*, 11.

⁶² David Ng, “Theaters Are Taking Social Networking to a New Level,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 2009, available at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2009/06/la-jolla-playhouse-doug-wright-social-media-shrek-next-to-normal-twitter.html> (accessed 8 July 2009).

⁶³ Elizabeth L. Wollman, “The Economic Development of the ‘New’ Times Square and Its Impact on the Broadway Musical,” *American Music* 20, no. 4 (2002): 447. As Wollman points out, this \$6 million (or even \$15 million to mount the musical version of *The Lion King*) is dwarfed by the amount Disney would usually spend on a television or film property.

⁶⁴ The company secured a forty-nine-year lease, low-interest loans, and ample encouragement to expand Disney’s presence elsewhere in Times Square, including a Disney store, the ESPN Zone, a studio for ABC television, and new musicals.

hustlers, panhandlers, and prostitutes) earned considerable sympathy from activists, who saw their expulsion as a form of moral policing that endangered “the survival of a wide variety of sexual subcultures and practices to which Times Square, for more than three quarters of a century, owed at least part of its fame.”⁶⁵ Yet ironically, the same social issues that came up in the early 1990s were echoed some fifteen years later when *Shrek’s* “freaks” invaded the new Times Square. Legislated conformity, the use of eminent domain, the tension between public and private space: these themes are central to the plot of *Shrek the Musical*, in which a neighborhood rife with self-proclaimed freaks is brutally cleansed by Lord Farquaad, who boasts, in what could be a parody of Giuliani: “Once upon a time / this place was infested / Freaks on every corner— / I had them all arrested.”⁶⁶

From an urban-planning and -design perspective, notions of diversity and difference were emphasized by the aesthetic plan for the area. The 42nd Street Development Project insisted on new buildings with “bright signage” to fit a “vision of positive chaos and populism.”⁶⁷ This design created a new Times Square that became a corporate playground within which a calculated diversity of pedestrians would be consumers first and tourists or residents second. In her study of US “brandsapes,” Maurya Wickstrom argues that corporations “deemphasized the consumption of specific commodities and instead create[d] experiential environments through which the consumer comes to embody the resonances of the brand as feelings, sensations, and even memories.”⁶⁸ The focus on environment rather than product in the new Times Square assisted DreamWorks in engineering a theatrical experience that did not require the endorsement of theatre critics.

Financial analysts speculated before *Shrek the Musical* opened that “given the mammoth popularity of *Shrek*, it may be somewhat critic-proof.”⁶⁹ Even after the musical closed in January 2010, it is difficult to determine how much the divided assessment of its message impacted the play’s run. John Simon in *Bloomberg News* found its “apothecosis of ugliness distasteful,” while Terry Teachout in the *Wall Street Journal* was distressed that he was not “spared the starchy pro-tolerance agitprop” and had to suffer songs that “[ram] home [the play’s] politically correct point with monomaniacal relentlessness.”⁷⁰ The only other New York critic to complain explicitly about the show’s message was the *New York Times’s* Ben Brantley. His line of attack, however, was more aesthetic than political, because instead of rejecting the message, he attacked

⁶⁵ See Bart Eeckhout, “The ‘Disneyfication’ of Times Square: Back to the Future?” in *Critical Perspectives on Urban Redevelopment*, ed. Kevin Fox Gotham (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing, 2001), 381. See also Lynne B. Sagalyn, *Times Square Roulette: Remaking the City Icon* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), and Mark Sussman, “New York’s Facelift,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 42, no. 1 (1998): 34–42.

⁶⁶ Lindsay-Abair and Tesori, “What’s Up, Duloc?” in *Shrek the Musical* CD booklet, n.p.

⁶⁷ Pranay Gupte, “Her ‘To Die For’ Projects Include Times Square and the Seventh Regiment Army,” *New York Sun*, 9 March 2006, available at <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/her-to-die-for-projects-include-times-square/28837/> (accessed 5 May 2009).

⁶⁸ Maurya Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

⁶⁹ Birenberg, “How More Media Companies Brave the Headwinds.”

⁷⁰ John Simon, “Loveable Shrek, Fiona Animate Broadway’s New Cartoon,” *Bloomberg News*, 15 December 2008, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601088&sid=aLtBDoKkkzTQ&refer=muse> (accessed 20 March 2009); Terry Teachout, “We’re Stuck with Shrek,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 2008, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122963466772219437.html> (accessed 4 April 2009).

the play for its preachiness. He was annoyed, he wrote, at having to endure morals wrapped in “power ballads with lyrics explaining that ‘What makes us special makes us strong.’”⁷¹

The critics writing for publications outside New York were somewhat more generous, perhaps aware that they were introducing the play to a national audience. Howard Shapiro of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* approved the idea of letting one’s “freak flag fly,” and Robert Feldberg, writing for New Jersey’s *The Record* saw echoes of World War II internment camps in the banishment of the Fairytale Creatures.⁷² *Variety*’s David Rooney identified the message of “Freak Flag” with “the teen-friendly agenda of outsider acceptance,” while Elysa Gardner of *USA Today* called the play very funny and “family-friendly.”⁷³ Simon Houpt of Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* and Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* both suggested that the issue of diversity was well-worn on Broadway, with Marks declaring: “*Hairspray* called; they want their theme back!”⁷⁴ Both Marks and Houpt employed a critique similar to Brantley’s: rather than seeing the musical as actively engaging issues of racial identity, they projected a yawning, post-identity critique that seems to imply that these issues are old hat in a commercial theatre that had long since pledged itself to liberal causes.

DreamWorks ignored the mixed response to *Shrek the Musical* and continued its propagation of the product. The original cast recording debuted at the number-one spot on the *Billboard* cast album chart in March 2009.⁷⁵ When the show received eight Tony, ten Outer Critics Circle, and eleven Drama Desk award nominations, it handed its promotional team a surfeit of professional endorsements to lure a national audience.⁷⁶ Even before the nominations, however, DreamWorks announced plans for a national tour.⁷⁷ *Shrek the Musical* is to open in Chicago in the summer of 2010, to be followed

⁷¹ Ben Brantley, “‘Shrek the Musical’: The Belching Green Ogre has a Song in His Heart,” *New York Times*, 15 December 2008, available at <http://theater2.nytimes.com/2008/12/15/theater/reviews/15shrek.html?ref=theater> (accessed 2 April 2009).

⁷² Howard Shapiro, “A Big Green Ogre Goes to Broadway,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 15 December 2008, available at http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/arts/20081215_A_big_green_ogre_goes_to_Broadway.html (accessed 19 April 2009); and Robert Feldberg, “Zingers Come a Line a Minute in Fairy Tale Parody,” *The Record*, 15 December 2008, available at <http://www.northjersey.com/entertainment/stage/36152259.html> (accessed 15 March 2009).

⁷³ David Rooney, “Shrek the Musical,” *Variety*, 14 December 2008, available at <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117939208.html?categoryid=33&cs=1> (accessed 4 March 2009); and Elysa Gardner, “On Broadway, ‘Shrek: The Musical’ is a Gas, Gas, Gas,” *USA Today*, 15 December 2009, available at http://www.usatoday.com/life/theater/reviews/2008-12-14-shrek-the-musical_N.htm (accessed 4 March 2009).

⁷⁴ Simon Houpt, “It’s a Little Too Easy Being Green,” *Globe and Mail*, 15 December 2008, available at <http://license.icopyright.net/user/viewFreeUse.act?fuid=NDYxOTU4NA%3D%3D> (accessed 5 March 2009); and Peter Marks, “Here Comes ‘Shrek.’ Hold Your Nose,” *Washington Post*, 15 December 2008, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/14/AR2008121402465.html> (accessed 5 March 2009).

⁷⁵ *Broadway World*, “Shrek The Musical CD Debuts at #1 on Billboard’s ‘Top Cast Album’ Chart,” 1 April 2009, available at http://broadwayworld.com/article/SHREK_THE_MUSICAL_CD_Debuts_at_1_on_Billboards_Top_Cast_Album_Chart_20090401 (accessed 15 July 2009). As of July 2009, it outranked every Disney musical on both Amazon and *Billboard* ratings.

⁷⁶ Tim Hatley’s costume and set design and Brian d’Arcy James’s performance won Drama Desk Awards. *IBDB*, The Broadway League Database, “Shrek the Musical,” available at <http://www.ibdb.com/awardproduction.asp?id=477427> (accessed 12 July 2009).

⁷⁷ Andrew Gans, “Shrek The Musical to Launch National Tour in 2010,” 23 April 2009, available at http://www.playbill.com/news/article/128564Shrek_the_Musical_to_Launch_National_Tour_in_2010 (accessed 26 June 2009).

by Dallas, Denver, and other cities.⁷⁸ DreamWorks, in other words, is banking on a long-term strategy of keeping *Shrek the Musical* alive to secure a continuous return on its investment. Late in the run, it even added the Monkees' song "I'm a Believer" to the show, because so many fans of the movie were disappointed by its absence from the musical. Although DreamWorks lost most of its Broadway capitalization, national tours and amateur rights ensure long-term profitability. Knowing that there are 100,000 high schools and 9,000 community theatres in the United States that perform musicals, DreamWorks worked out an unusual agreement with the show's writers. The latter "were allowed to copyright their material" in exchange for DreamWorks's retention of a large part of the show's royalties past the standard eighteen-year mark. And royalties represent pure profit—\$1 million to \$3 million a year, in perpetuity.⁷⁹ While this amount may not seem like very much for a large corporation, high school performances of *Shrek the Musical* also help promote other parts of the *Shrek* empire, keeping the franchise alive and profitable.

Production: Putting It Together

DreamWorks's *Shrek* represents a radical revision of the wry children's book *Shrek!*, which repackages the title character and his cronies to make them more appealing and entertaining for a mass audience. *Shrek!*'s creator, William Steig (1907–2003)—dubbed the "The King of Cartoons" by *Newsweek*—began contributing to the *New Yorker* in 1930 and published more than 1,600 cartoons in the magazine over the next seventy years, including 117 covers.⁸⁰ Because of Steig's distaste for penning advertisements, "which he loathed," he turned to writing children's books in the 1960s.⁸¹ For roughly thirty years, he wrote children's stories like *Shrek!*, which "graphically repeated themes of stark separation and warm reunion" of parents and children. Susan Scheftel suggests that Steig's work characteristically positions the protagonist as "suddenly lost, alone, and disoriented in a vast and empty space."⁸² Steig's books written for young audiences maintain the wit evident in his *New Yorker* cartoons and a sensibility that owes as much to Samuel Beckett as James Thurber.

In DreamWorks's versions, the relatively intellectualized, highbrow humor of Steig's *Shrek!* is overwhelmed by popular-culture references and in-jokes, but its most obvious alteration was to make Steig's ogre much more attractive and lovable. Steig's is rough-hewn, complete with pockmarks on his face, a few misshapen teeth, spiked hairs jutting out of his nose, and ghoulish, red eyes. Two characters, Lightning and Thunder, ask: "Did you ever see somebody so disgusting?"⁸³ (Steig's title is a pun on the German *Schreck* and the Yiddish *shrek* or *schreck*, meaning "terror" or "fear.") In DreamWorks's version, Shrek's visage is softened and smoothed and his eyes flash

⁷⁸ *Shrek the Musical* official site, available at <http://www.shrekthemusical.com/tickets.html> (accessed 6 January 2010).

⁷⁹ Robert Hofler, "Life After Death on B'way: Fast 'Flops' Earn Big Bucks in the Sticks," *Variety*, 23 November 2009, 1, 42.

⁸⁰ Yahlin Chang, "The King of Cartoons," *Newsweek*, 15 May 1995, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/103867/page/1> (accessed 31 August 2009).

⁸¹ Sarah Boxer, "Wry Child of the Unconscious: William Steig, 90, on Art, Life, and the Mysterious Orgone," *New York Times*, 29 November 1997.

⁸² Susan Scheftel, "The Children's Books of William Steig: A Creative Representation of Early Separation and Resiliency," in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, ed. Robert A. King et al. The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child Series, vol. 63 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 169.

⁸³ William Steig, *Shrek!* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1993), n.p.

tender and sheepish looks, while Donkey is conspicuously anthropomorphized. Steig's final image is of Shrek and Princess Fiona being married by an alligator who presides over the Christian, heteronormative ritual, replete with a white wedding veil for the princess, but even at the end, the pair remains in a world apart, living "horribly ever after," Steig writes, "scaring the socks off all who fell afoul of them."⁸⁴ DreamWorks's Shrek, in contrast, is a heroic, ugly-on-the-outside, beautiful-on-the-inside type of character, long familiar from fairytales and Hollywood films.

When DreamWorks and Neal Street decided it was time for Shrek to make his stage debut, they engineered it cautiously. They did not search for an innovator like Julie Taymor, whose work on *The Lion King* netted six Tony Awards and gave Disney Theatricals, for the first time, a measure of high cultural capital; instead, hoping he could repeat his magic, they turned to Jason Moore, the director who had secured *Avenue Q* (2003) the Tony Award for Best Musical.

Like *Avenue Q*, *Shrek* is characterized by a kind of quiriness—an interplay, for example, between fart jokes and middlebrow, witty repartee. Because he trained as a film director at UCLA, Moore seemed a carefully calculated choice for the stage adaptation of a film, yet he also has an impressive directing resume of work on small-scale productions, such as Peter Morris's *Guardians* (2005), a play about Abu Ghraib that began as an award-winning production at the Edinburgh Fringe. As director of *Avenue Q*, Moore was featured in a documentary in the well-respected company of George C. Wolfe and Joe Mantello.⁸⁵

In addition to Moore, the producers hired two high-profile writers, David Lindsay-Abaire (book and lyrics), who received the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for *Rabbit Hole*, and Jeanine Tesori, whose music for *Caroline, or Change*, in collaboration with Tony Kushner, was nominated for a Tony Award in 2004. DreamWorks and Neal Street then worked to ensure that the collaborative process, spearheaded by Moore, would be perceived as a cooperative channeling of creative energy. In one of the webisodes posted on the *Shrek* website, Moore's comment that "you have to continue to repeat, 'this is the story we are telling,'" was spliced together with footage of Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori recounting a series of their rejected choices, which were edited out, they report, because "they" thought these ideas "too dark." The editing makes it clear that although Moore was part of the "they," no feelings were hurt.⁸⁶ "Theatre is all about creating a community," says Moore. "[W]e have an incredible community backstage and I just hope that that joy and warmth and laughter translates onstage."⁸⁷ The producers were eager that their creative staff be perceived as a diverse yet conflict-free collective transmitting its warm feelings to the audience.

Taking its cue from the collaborative process, *Shrek the Musical* places a low value on conflict and a high value on celebrating individual difference. Conflict is shown to be the product of misunderstandings about who the characters really are, rather than of

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ *Show Business: The Road to Broadway*, DVD, directed by Dori Berinstein (New York: Dramatic Forces, 2007).

⁸⁶ *Shrek The Musical* Official Website, "Webisode 3: Direction" in "This Is Our Story: From the Swamp to the Stage," available at <http://www.shrekthemusical.com/webisodes.html> (accessed 17 May 2009).

⁸⁷ *Shrek the Musical* Official Website, "Webisode 2, part 2: Sets & Lighting" in "This Is Our Story: From the Swamp to the Stage," available at <http://www.shrekthemusical.com/webisodes.html> (accessed 17 May 2009).

divergences in values: everyone turns out to be a freak, so everyone is the same after all. The freak-in-chief is Shrek, who may appear unusual, but underneath the green makeup and prosthetic layers he is a well-respected Broadway leading man. As played by Brian d'Arcy James, Shrek "is a hero," says Moore, "but he is a hero who looks different than people expect him to. That's when it became clear—let's cast a heroic guy underneath that layer of make-up."⁸⁸ The ontology of Shrek—ugly-on-the-outside, beautiful-on-the-inside—is replicated exactly in the process that turned James from handsome actor to ogre. Difference is cosmetic—unless, that is, the different character happens to be a jackass.

Why Is Donkey Black?

Among the hundreds of interviews, profiles, and webisodes devoted to *Shrek the Musical*, no journalist has ever asked this question, yet racially coded insinuations are everywhere in the production and its reviews. The short answer to the question is that Donkey is black because the musical, despite its message, is appealing to comic yet retrogressive racial stereotypes. For a more nuanced answer, we need to examine both the film and Tesori's score, since music is especially adept at telegraphing ideologies and attitudes—mediating, in Theodor Adorno's words, "the trends and contradictions of bourgeois society as a totality."⁸⁹

Unlike every other musical based on an animated film, *Shrek* gains theatrical legitimacy by having an entirely original score. Yet its characterization of Donkey is anything but original. In *Caroline, or Change*, Tesori had proven her ability to adapt African American musical traditions, but with *Shrek*, she used an even greater diversity of styles and song forms. Many songs use the pop-rock hybrid (well-seasoned with power ballads) that has become the new vernacular of the Broadway musical. But Tesori also makes notable use of African American styles, including gospel, funk, hip-hop, soul, and Motown, in addition to bubble-gum pop, Kander and Ebb razzle-dazzle, and Sondheim-style pastiche. Given DreamWorks's attempt to beat Disney at its own game by winning over Broadway habitués, she and Lindsay-Abaire also comment on and satirize the practices of musical comedy. The score, in fact, is so self-conscious that it turns the piece into a kind of metatheatre that deliberately plays fast and loose with theatrical conventions and fairytale characters and plots. These metatheatrics give the musical a certain upper-middlebrow cachet and are clearly designed to appeal less to children than to the musically literate audiences that frequent Broadway musicals, especially gay men and other aficionados of campy satires (like *The Drowsy Chaperone* [2006]).

Audiences of all stripes, however, will recognize that Donkey is distinguished from his friends by his persistent association with black music. In "Don't Let Me Go," for example, he plays the clinging, faithful servant and croons Stevie Wonder-style sweet soul to win Shrek's affection, before, in a frenzied crescendo of "I-need-you"s, begging Shrek not to leave him.⁹⁰ In "Make a Move," he gives romantic advice and facilitates

⁸⁸ *Shrek the Musical* Official Website, "Webisode 4: The Hero" in "This Is Our Story: From the Swamp to the Stage," available at <http://www.shrekthemusical.com/webisodes.html> (accessed 17 May 2009).

⁸⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, "Some Ideas on the Sociology of Music," in *Sound Figures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 9.

⁹⁰ Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori, "Don't Let Me Go," in *Shrek the Musical* CD booklet, n.p.

Shrek and Fiona's match by rapping two stanzas and doing an Isaac Hayes impersonation above a *Shaft*-like ostinato, all the while backed up by Three Blind Mice posing as the Supremes. "Donkey Pot Pie" runs funk against gospel, as the "scared to death" beast of burden defends himself against three ravenous Dragonettes.⁹¹ Shrek, Fiona, and Farquaad get a song each to explain their histories (abandonment for Shrek and Fiona, a short father for Farquaad), but Donkey's hysterical effort to be Shrek's friend is never explained. He has no history; he is simply inherently desperate, pathetic, and amusing—like Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, he "jis' grew."

Although Donkey grabs the spotlight in his three songs, he remains the comic sidekick, as in every other DreamWorks version. The movie *Shrek* is a classic buddy film, and most of the story takes place during the journey that forges a binding friendship between Shrek and Donkey. Tellingly, reviews of the movie always racialize the dynamic: "Talking his way into becoming Shrek's sidekick on his quest is the motormouth Donkey (Eddie Murphy), a loyal but jive jackass who refuses to leave his savior, Shrek, alone."⁹² One cannot help but read the film's casting of Murphy as Donkey as a reference to the cross-racial buddy-film formula that turned Murphy into a major movie star in the early 1980s: *48 Hours* (1982), *Trading Places* (1983), and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) all use the formula of two men who are initially in conflict, but then overcome their differences through the force of the masculine bond.⁹³ Daren Brabham argues that Murphy's Donkey fits Stuart Hall's theorization of the three categories of blackness allowed in white narratives in order to keep "black experience trivial": the primitivized native; the slave figure, through his childlike behavior and eagerness to please Shrek; and the clown, through his endless antics, singing, and mugging.⁹⁴ One might note as well that as beasts of burden, donkeys' close kin, mules, have historically been associated with African Americans, because of the need for mules in sharecropping and the false promise of "40 acres and a mule" for every former slave. Casting Donkey as black, then, has layers of racial significance even before the performance starts.⁹⁵

After years of development and an out-of-town tryout in Seattle, *Shrek the Musical* debuted on Broadway, with Donkey played by African American actor Daniel Breaker—cast no doubt because of his Tony-nominated performance in *Passing Strange* (2008), a short-lived but critically lauded musical that deconstructed the limits of African American middle-class identity. The poster of Donkey on the outside of the Broadway Theatre featured a headshot of Breaker with his eyes opened extremely wide in a comic look that seemed to say, "Who, me?!?" but that also recalled a standard trope of minstrelsy: bugging the eyes for comic effect to accentuate the blackness of the burnt-cork makeup. The poster thus suggested that Donkey belonged somewhat belatedly to the minstrel tradition.

⁹¹ Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori, "Donkey Pot Pie," in *ibid.*

⁹² David Ansen, with John Horn, "A Shrek of a Summer," *Newsweek*, 7 May 2001.

⁹³ If, as one critic speculated, DreamWorks cast Murphy because of his turn as Mushu the dragon (another needy comic sidekick) in Disney's *Mulan* (1998), Murphy became just one more pawn in the Disney versus DreamWorks corporate competition; see Elvis Mitchell, "So Happily Ever After, Beauty and the Beasts," *New York Times*, 16 May 2001.

⁹⁴ Daren C. Brabham, "Animated Blackness in *Shrek*," *Rocky Mountain Communication Review* 3, no. 1 (2006): 64–71.

⁹⁵ There is also the issue of animal characters standing in for minstrel stereotypes in animated film. Perhaps most famous is Brer Fox in Disney's *Song of the South* (1946). It is ironic that although the film version of *Shrek* ridicules Disney, Donkey winds up sounding quite a bit like Brer Fox.

Crucially, costume designer Tim Hatley chose not to try to recreate the film version of Donkey by using a full mask; instead, his headdress followed the actor's hairline so that the audience could see Breaker's face and, most important for our analysis, the color of his skin. Donkey had been changed from an animal with a black voice to an animal-human hybrid whose racial difference was now visible. The *Seattle Times* review remarked: "Daniel Breaker now is shaking those hoofs as Donkey, Shrek's jive-spouting sidekick, making the part funnier, campier, more endearing."⁹⁶ Breaker maintained that he had avoided seeing the *Shrek* movie, because he did not want to be influenced by Murphy's portrayal: "When I got the part I thought 'Maybe I should go check these out.' But I didn't want to get lost in the pressure of trying to imitate Eddie Murphy."⁹⁷ The metanarrative of the white-black buddy film that links *Shrek* to Murphy's career obviously did not escape Breaker, however, nor did the specter of Murphy's comedic delivery. As he admitted in another interview, even without having seen the film, he was referencing Murphy: "I'm not doing Eddie Murphy from 'Shrek,'" Breaker cracked. "I'm doing Eddie Murphy from 'Trading Places!'"⁹⁸ The performances were similar enough to make *Variety's* critic remark: "Echoing enough of Eddie Murphy's original take on the character with his own fresh spin, Breaker . . . establishes a touching buddy bond with . . . Shrek."

The *Variety* critic was not the only one, however, who noticed a different set of innuendoes that further complicated Donkey's characterization: "If he plays Donkey as a little limp in the hooves, that fits with the wink-wink campiness of Lindsay-Abaire's script"⁹⁹ (Fig. 1). This perspective was echoed by Brantley in the *New York Times*, who noted Donkey's similarity to another African American icon: "As Shrek's sidekick, the sassy Donkey, Daniel Breaker at least appears to be having a good time in his furry coverall, letting his fetlocks go limp in dismay and cutting up like a hirsute Little Richard at the Mardi Gras."¹⁰⁰ The critics remained silent on the subject of blackface, but many loudly (and, in some cases, homophobically) censured the musical for Breaker's alleged gay-face. *New York* magazine's Jesse Oxfeld, for example, described Donkey as a "prancing, squealing gay caricature" and "a flamboyant queen."¹⁰¹

But Donkey is not the only character whose sexual difference marks him as the embodiment of the lavender arch in *Shrek's* rainbow of diversity. The cross-dressed Wolf (Chris Hoch) and Pinocchio (John Tartaglia), both played with calculated campiness, represent unmistakable gay stereotypes: the former is called "a hot 'n' tranny mess," while the latter, played by an openly gay actor, ends "Freak Flag" with a variation on the queer cheer: "I'm wood! I'm good! Get used to it!"¹⁰² These flamboyant characters, including Donkey, seem to be another example of DreamWorks thumbing its nose at

⁹⁶ Berson, "'Shrek' Tickles Young Hearts," 4.

⁹⁷ Eloise Parker, "Suited to Play Donkey," *New York Daily News*, 14 December 2008.

⁹⁸ Gordon Cox, "'Shrek's' B'way trek," *Variety*, 16 December 2008, 16.

⁹⁹ Rooney, "Shrek the Musical."

¹⁰⁰ Brantley "Shrek the Musical."

¹⁰¹ Jesse Oxfeld, "The Theatre Review: 'Shrek the Musical,'" *New York*, 15 December 2008, available at <http://nymag.com/arts/theater/reviews/53120/> (accessed 17 June 2009).

¹⁰² Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori, "Story of My Life" and "Freak Flag," in *Shrek the Musical* CD booklet, n.p.; see Brandon Voss, "Fairy Tales: The Director and Stars of the New Broadway Production of Shrek Talk about Playing Gay, Fighting Off Fans, and the Best Coming-Out Gift for Clay Aiken," *The Advocate*, 16 December 2008, available at http://www.thefreelibrary.com/_print/PrintArticle.aspx?id=191953828 (accessed 19 January 2010).



Figure 1. Shrek (Brian d'Arcy James) and Donkey (Daniel Breaker), his "limp in the hooves" sidekick. (Credit: Sara Krulwich/Redux Pictures.)

Disney and trying to have it both ways, playing up to the sizeable gay audience of Broadway musicals, while entertaining tourist families with Shrek's friends' campy antics.

In the case of Donkey, the layering of gay-face onto blackface is congruent with his role as a clownish cupid, since there are long histories of both African American and queer comic characters (from Queenie in *Show Boat* to Jack in *Will & Grace*) who facilitate heterosexual unions, but these stereotypes should not be equated. The black male sidekick is almost always subordinated in social (and, in this case, species) status to his master, while the gay sidekick is usually of the same social class as his buddy. Yet, like all sidekicks, Donkey exists to please and help his master; he is acceptable as long as he is hilarious, which is how a black and/or gay sidekick is supposed to be. If the sidekick is black *and* gay, so much the better.

Donkey, the Wolf, and Pinocchio are not the only characters in *Shrek* who are constructed as members of a persecuted minority. Tesori and Lindsay-Abaire have populated their world with dozens of fairytale creatures of all shapes and sizes—most of them famously animated by Disney—including a wizened gnome, a frothy sugarplum fairy, and three rotund pigs. Whether magical, blessed, or cursed, they are stigmatized for being "freakishly different" and hence representatives of the multicultural world the musical celebrates, a world in which even the hero is marked as different by virtue of his green skin and funny ears. They sing two songs, at the beginning and end of the piece. The first is the minor key "Story of My Life," which tells the tale of their

legendary suffering and expulsion from Duloc under threat of execution. The second is the gospel-tinged "Freak Flag," an anthem of self-assertion that inspires them to resist Farquaad's oppression and provides the musical with its uplifting moral: "What makes us special . . . / makes us strong!"¹⁰³ Despite the song's unmistakable nod to gospel, the lyric employs the discourse not of the civil rights movement, but of gay liberation.¹⁰⁴ Pinocchio laments that he has been "[o]uted by [his] nose,"¹⁰⁵ while Gingy declares a politics of visibility, announcing that "it's time to stop the hiding. / It's time to stand up tall. / Say 'Hey world, I'm different.'" Humpty Dumpty even borrows the essentializing argument about the origin of sexual orientation: "It's not a choice you made. / It's just how you were hatched."¹⁰⁶

By taking up a politics of visibility, the makers of *Shrek* seem yet again to be winking at gay audiences. To that end, the producers sponsored the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center float in the June 2009 New York Pride March. With an estimated 1 million people in attendance and considerable media attention, the march was a significant opportunity for DreamWorks to disseminate its product, while plying the liberal demographic.¹⁰⁷ In the piece itself, the politics of visibility turns the fairytale creatures into a victimized minority whose difference is an open secret: on the one hand, their peculiarities are visible at first glance; and on the other, the characters cannot be credited as heroic resisters until they proclaim their difference. In contrast, Donkey cannot come out as black, because his blackness is at once obvious and impossible. A walking, talking anachronism, he serves to reanimate archaic racial stereotypes that give the lie to *Shrek the Musical's* celebration of diversity.

Conclusion

The contradictions inherent in the politics of visibility are symptomatic of a moment in US history in which all forms of identity are seen as being increasingly problematic—both stable and unstable, essential and volitional. To some extent, this instability, in the heyday of the metrosexual, is modeled on the difficulty of reading sexual orientation, but it goes far beyond sexuality. After all, in 2008, an African American presidential candidate was obliged to *come out* as black in his famous "speech on race."¹⁰⁸ These contradictions are also the result of a political settlement that celebrates multiculturalism, while pursuing policies that exacerbate inequality and penalize those whose opportunities have vanished. Both brand Obama and brand Shrek epitomize a historical moment in which so many pundits and arbiters of culture would like us to believe that race no longer matters. But we would be short-sighted to blame either Obama or *Shrek*, because the culture of which they are part has made it far more profitable

¹⁰³ Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori, "Freak Flag," in *Shrek the Musical* CD booklet, n.p.

¹⁰⁴ The use of an up-tempo, crowd-pleasing, gospel-style eleven o'clock number has become virtually *de rigueur* in the Broadway musical. This strategy is cleverly satirized in "A Big Black Lady Stops the Show" from Martin Short's *Fame Becomes Me* (2006).

¹⁰⁵ Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori, "Story of My Life," in *Shrek the Musical* CD booklet, n.p.

¹⁰⁶ Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori, "Freak Flag," in *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ "Gay Pride Parade Marks 40th Anniversary of Stonewall Riots," *Huffington Post*, 28 June 2009, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/06/28/gay-pride-parade-marks-40_n_222010.html (accessed 19 July 2009). Sponsoring a float for a not-for-profit organization costs a corporation \$4,000–\$6,500, whereas a corporate float alone costs upward of \$11,000; see "NYC Pride: The March," NYC Pride website, available at <http://www.nycpride.org/march.html> (accessed 19 July 2009).

¹⁰⁸ See Obama, "A More Perfect Union."

to sell a gorgeous rainbow of diversity than an analysis, in Hazel Carby's words, of "the possession and exercise of politico-economic control."¹⁰⁹ Floating free from the entanglements of policy, these brands have become iconic because the multicultural politics they express seems to effect a magical cure for social inequities. In this context, is it not ironic that the character in *Shrek the Musical* who most emblemizes the contradictions inherent in multiculturalism happens to be the symbol of the Democratic Party—the party that has, since 1964, carried the mantle of civil rights and garnered 90 percent of the African American vote?

Shrek's finale, "This Is Our Story," is a paean to diversity that represents the United States as a fairytale kingdom and "giant Whitman's Sampler."¹¹⁰ That this celebratory, triumphant song culminates in an unplanned echo of Barack Obama's Democratic national convention tribute to the "American spirit . . . that binds us together in spite of our differences" is the result not of a conspiracy of post-racialists, but of the recognition, on the stump or Broadway stage, that an anthem to the many-in-the-one is sure to bring the crowd to its feet:¹¹¹ "We are different and united. / You are us and we are you."¹¹² Could DreamWorks have a theme song lined up for Obama's re-election campaign?

¹⁰⁹ Carby, "Multiculture," in *Cultures in Babylon*, 222.

¹¹⁰ It is ironic that one of the most popular Whitman's candies of the first half of the twentieth century was named Pickaninny Peppermints.

¹¹¹ Remarks of Senator Barack Obama, "The American Promise" at the Democratic national convention in Denver, 28 August 2008, available at http://www.barackobama.com/2008/08/28/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_108.php (accessed 8 August 2009).

¹¹² Lindsay-Abaire and Tesori, "This Is Our Story," in *Shrek the Musical* CD booklet, n.p.