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“Not the Same as His”: A Modern Musical of *At the Back of the North Wind* Interview with Jeffrey Haddow and Thomas Tierney

Rebecca Nesvet

Tori Amos’s *The Light Princess* is not the only MacDonald musical adaptation to reach the American stage. In 2006, lyricist Jeffrey Haddow and composer Thomas Tierney teamed up to adapt *At the Back of the North Wind* as a musical, which updates the novel to twentieth-century America, a choice that both disrupts the source material and creates a “modern fairytale” of notable faithfulness to MacDonald’s theories of storytelling and metaphysics. This is a promising development for MacDonald studies. Adaptation can jump-start recovery or canonization, so the musical, once completed, may bring the novel to new and appreciative audiences.[1]

In Haddow and Tierney, MacDonald has found masterful interpreters. This duo’s previous works, many of which are adaptations of British classic novels, have received considerable recognition. Haddow is the 2009 winner of the BMI Harrington Award for Creative Excellence in Musical Theatre. He has adapted *Sense and Sensibility* for the Berkshire Theatre Festival and his revue *Scrambled Feet* ran for two years at the Village Gate, the original home of the cult revue *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris*. Composer Tierney’s work has been performed at major American theatres, including Ford’s Theatre, the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, and Los Angeles’s Musical Theatre West. A song contributor to Tommy Tune’s “Legend of Sleepy Hollow” interpretation *Ichabod!*, Tierney also composed the music for *Narnia*, an adaptation of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, which has had over six hundred American productions, and a *Narnia* symphony suite that premiered at Lincoln Center.[2]

Haddow and Tierney’s *North Wind* is currently a work-in-progress, but it has been showcased in concert readings produced by the New Jersey Theatre Alliance, Pat Flicker Addiss, Theatre Resources Unlimited (New York), and the Village Theatre (Washington State). It was also honored as a Finalist for the 2008 Richard Rogers Award for new American musicals. In adapting MacDonald’s novel, Haddow and Tierney retain its basic premise.

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It is still the tale of a horse (Old Diamond) and his boy (Young Diamond), whose encounter with the beautiful, terrifying, maternal yet seductive North Wind takes him beyond the Hyperborean frontier. The musical's title song suggests that the Back of the North Wind is a space without time. There, "[t] he rain never falls / And the wind never blows / And the living stream / Just flows and flows." [3] This is captivating and yet threatening, suggestive of eternity and death, as it should. And of course, in the musical as in the novel, Diamond sings.

MacDonald began *North Wind* with a disclaimer, that seekers after the Hyperborean fantasy of Herodotus must seek it elsewhere, as MacDonald's "story is not the same as his." [4] Haddow and Tierney's work requires a similar preamble, for it is a radical overhaul. Here, Diamond is still a "holy fool" (Haddow), or, as MacDonald puts it, "God's baby," a prophetic "genius" whom "people think [is] silly," because he "understands things without any other body telling him what they mean." [5] Haddow and Tierney appreciate this kind of "genius" as enthusiastically as MacDonald's first person narrator does—in a song titled "Intuition." However, Haddow and Tierney also contrast the ethereal, visionary Diamond with a cynical, bored, and rather ordinary modern (1980s) American boy. In a 1980s frame story, this nameless child hears Diamond's tale from his own grandfather.[6] Seriously, perhaps terminally ill, the grandson is distracted, entertained, consoled, and empowered by his grandfather's rendition of the tale of the two Diamonds and the North Wind. "God makes a few" geniuses "now and then to teach the rest of us," MacDonald states.[7] Haddow and Tierney reinforce this idea by making the grandfather such a salutary visionary. Moreover, the grandfather-as-visionary arguably faithfully adapts the source because, it is ultimately revealed—the grandfather is Diamond—a Diamond who reaches old age. Although this Diamond, unlike the original, survives his childhood, he nevertheless vanishes permanently to the "back of the North Wind," for, in a resolution reminiscent of *Peter Pan*, he convinces North Wind to take him there instead of taking his convalescent grandson. His visionary powers enable him to see her and to save his grandson.

This ending casts away one of the most haunting aspects of MacDonald's novel: the question of theodicy. MacDonald confronts this question directly when Diamond, traveling with North Wind, sees her cause a deadly shipwreck. He asks her if she indeed sunk the ship, and she admits that she did. "Yes," she says, without apology. This is a declaration, not a confession. "And what good will come of that?" Diamond asks. "I don't

know,” she replies. “I obeyed orders. Goodbye.” Implicitly, the orders are divine. Why would God want a shipwreck? How could a just, omniscient, and omnipotent God create or allow such a disaster? The greeting “goodbye” shuts down any further attempts at catechism, so Diamond tries a different approach. He investigates the mysterious source of the orders. Not naming God, he demands to be taken to the locus of mystery and source of her power: the Back of the North Wind. Desiring an explanation not only for worldly events but of death (a cognate of the Back of the North Wind) itself, he aims to solve the problem of theodicy.

This problem emerges again and again throughout the novel. “There are reasons, Diamond,” MacDonald’s North Wind explains when he questions why the child crossing-sweeper Nanny’s life must be so different from his own. “Everybody can’t be done to all the same,” North Wind insists. “Everybody is not ready for the same thing.”[8] What makes Nanny “ready” for street-sweeping, or Diamond and the sailors ready to die? The critic Francis Spufford has read *North Wind* as a meditation on the psychic pull of Arctic “ice” and specifically a variation on Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen*, itself informed, Spufford claims, by the inexplicable 1845 disappearance of the crews of Sir John Franklin’s doomed Arctic expedition.[9] Why did any of these boys, from Franklin’s to Kay to Diamond, vanish at the back of the North Wind? Was it necessary for the achievement of some human or divine aim? Spufford surmises that MacDonald invents North Wind in order to “humanise his themes of hope and resurrection,” but the fantasy also seems a speakable examination of confusion and doubt. “What’s beautiful can’t be bad,” the wise child theorizes, unaware that this may be read outside its immediate context as a rationalization of death.[10] As MacDonald knew, a most frustrating aspect of theodicy is child mortality. While the narrator, viewing Diamond’s “alabaster” body after he has permanently “gone to the back of the North Wind,” immediately “saw how it was,” he did not yet see *why*.[11]

To land readers at this distinction, MacDonald sacrifices Diamond’s earthly existence—and ushers him into a new, invisible life, which answers the question. MacDonald’s biographer Rolland Hein points out that in MacDonald’s interpretation of Christianity, soteriology resolves theodicy. Just as Christ’s death restores humanity to life, human mortality has a place in the universe as a prelude to eternal life. “Is it not true?” a young MacDonald rhetorically asked his future wife Louisa Powell, “that our life here” on earth “is a growing into life, and our death a being born—our true birth.”[12] The

North Wind's "orders" make sense, because they prepare Diamond for his "true birth," at the novel's conclusion, when he proverbially and perhaps literally departs for the Back of the North Wind. His governess or his mother, she educates or births him into that new existence, a reality out of all the human characters, only he himself and the narrator recognize.

This context complicates Haddow and Tierney's adaptation—or, rather, their choices disrupt it. The entire novel prepares Diamond for his transition. So too, as I have said, does the adaptation—though Diamond's sojourn on earth in that work is rather longer. But in the novel, Diamond gives up earthly activity (existence is perhaps debatable) for a "true life" of his own. In the adaptation, elderly Diamond (to be distinguished, of course, from "Old Diamond" the horse) goes off to death without necessarily gaining this true life for either his grandson or himself. Instead, it's a different kind of blessing he seeks: more earthly life for the child.

This distinction is integral to my evaluation of the musical's potential as a vehicle for MacDonald's mythopoesis. In context—the context of the 1980s frame—Haddow and Tierney's update of the frame story strikingly fulfills MacDonald's idea of the moral honesty of the well-told "*mä[h]rchen*," or fairy tale. "[M]an may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws," MacDonald opined in "The Fantastic Imagination" (1893); if these forms "embod[y …] old truths, we call them productions of the Imagination," and as long as there are "harmony between" the invented world's "laws," the invention remains "credible."[13] In 1980s New York, infant mortality was largely conquered by modern medicine, but a new threat caused many of the survivors of the Great Depression to outlive their grandsons. The 1980s boy's mystery illness is never explicitly identified with AIDS or any other medical condition, and Haddow and Tierney do not identify the HIV-AIDS epidemic as a possible context. When I interviewed them, they did not mention the crisis at all. It is more than likely that I am interpolating it.

However, in the 1980s and 1990s, this epidemic ravaged America, creating conspicuous devastation within the arts communities of New York and other cultural centers. It also notoriously killed children, including Ryan White (1971-90), who in his brief life became an eloquent, deeply memorable advocate for change and compassion, one whom MacDonald surely would have found one of God's babies. So when the elderly American Diamond's grandson battles aliens on a video game machine in hospital, he doubtlessly shared the building with many other dying innocents, including

a quite a few who were publicly acknowledged geniuses. Some of these dead were mourned in terms with which MacDonald might have identified. "AIDS is here to test all of us," the actress Sigourney Weaver claimed, "our love, our character, our commitment."[14] As this decade wore on, how many grandparents wished they could make an arrangement with the North Wind so that their grandsons could live to be old? If Haddow and Tierney's *North Wind* merits this reading, whether or not it reflects their creative intention, the adaptation is very much "credible" in the terms of MacDonald's literary theory.

In fact, it may be more credible than a more faithful adaptation. There can be integrity in updating fairytales and myths. The folklorist Jack Zipes points out that although many modernized fairy tales are disasters at mythmaking, especially if they are created for no other reason than to prolong the obsolescence or piggyback upon the allure of the original, the "best […] modern fairytales reflect the complex problems brought about by highly industrialized or post-industrial societies and the difficulties that the genre itself has in maintaining its utopian purpose."[15] In G. K. Chesterton's estimation, MacDonald himself saw value in what Zipes calls "modern fairy tales": specifically, in the immediacy of their modern settings. The "fairy tale was inside of the ordinary story," Chesterton claimed.

Some of the most powerful episodes of MacDonald's *North Wind* indeed reveal the extraordinary "inside the ordinary story" and do so by acknowledging temporal change yet revealing a universal truth.[16] Diamond's visit to the Cathedral is one such moment. The North Wind's tour brings Diamond to a cathedral, which he accesses from above. The Cathedral belongs to Diamond's Victorian world as it is a prominent landmark in his city. However, it is also a relic of a culturally different past. As Diamond walks through the uppermost section of the Cathedral's "great empty nave," he overhears the complaints of effigies of the Apostles. Medieval anachronisms, they nevertheless exude High Anglican hypocrisy, decrying charity to the poor as out of keeping with the true church.[17] The unchristian cant of the "sham apostles," MacDonald suggests, is not a symptom of the Church's modern decline: it has always been a feature of the established religion, whatever that religion happens to be. The revelation of these fantastic creatures in the realistic, imaginable space of the Victorian Cathedral testifies to the power of the hidden extraordinary to reveal difficult universal truths. I believe the episode also suggests that the radical transformation of canonical art, as the effigies are, gives that art its own kind of "true life"—a

point also made by MacDonald's cited influence Percy Bysshe Shelley in "Ozymandias," in which the tyrant's hired sculptor faithfully yet radically "mocks" his cruelty in a form intelligible for the ages.

Haddow and Tierney likewise turn to the familiar, modern, and local to reveal the abstract ideas that animate MacDonald's tale. They rightfully recognized that for modern American theatre spectators, Victorian England is not an "ordinary" setting. It is exotic and faerie, like the "princesses and goblins" of the *märchen* that MacDonald so effectively revolutionized. On Broadway in particular, poverty and economic injustice are typically represented only at disappointing cultural and temporal removes. In the Dickensian dystopias of *Oliver!; Sweeney Todd, or the Demon Barber of Fleet Street; Les Misérables; West Side Story;* or *Spring Awakening,* poverty and hardship are the problems of nineteenth-century melodrama, inviting the audience to pity more than identify with the struggling characters. By creating this alienation, *Spring Awakening*, for example, gets away with showing the corporate party groups, tourists on package tours, and, eventually, high school drama club parental audiences scenes of exam-induced suicide, teenage rape and deadly amateur abortion, as well as the hypocrisy of the adults who oversee all these horrors, because the characters' modernity is neutralized by their *lederhosen*. More recent examples of this unspoken law's dominion, some of which use it knowingly, incisively, and even ironically, include *Amazing Grace, Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, and *Hamilton*, which address the cultural impact of slavery and the Indian Removal Act, but only in (at least some of the time) *culottes* and lace cuffs—despite their comingling with modern musical genres, visible microphones, and sneakers.

In this context, had Haddow and Tierney chosen to set *North Wind* in its original era, it might constitute an escapist fantasy, and not of the disruptive type that North Wind herself offers. When *North Wind* is fully produced, we will see if it justifies its creators' poetic liberties. In the meantime, if any readers of this journal would like to contribute to the piece's developmental process by concert-reading or experimentally producing it in their own theatre communities, they are welcome to contact Haddow and Tierney at *www.northwindmusical.com*.

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In September 2015, I interviewed Haddow and Tierney, via electronic

communication. I am grateful for their willingness to speak to *North Wind* about their work’s genesis, its future, and its relation to MacDonald’s novel.

Rebecca Nesvet: How did you each first encounter MacDonald’s novel *At the Back of the North Wind*? What were your respective first impressions of it?

Jeffrey Haddow: Tom [Tierney] brought the novel to my attention. I’d never heard of it before, but when I read it, I immediately saw its potential for a modern audience, i.e., the timeless aspects of it. I also saw in its lyricism and emotional and spiritual reach the potential for musicalization.

Thomas Tierney: A good friend (and fan of my other work) recommended the novel to me. She had read it as a child, and loved it. And she thought it might appeal to me as a potential story for a musical. I liked it, and agreed with my friend about its potential (although I did feel it needed some updating). It was on my back burner for a while until I ran the idea by Jeff, and with his enthusiasm for the story, we soon began work—at first as a film musical.

JH: Tom and I saw in the basic story an opportunity to adapt it as an animated film. We also immediately realized that to make it relevant to today’s audience, we would have to alter the setting, language, and sensibility of the characters. And so our first pass at the project was a Disneyesque Manichean screenplay, but with a more ambitious layer of meaning that explored life and death issues.

TT: For me the appeal was in the fantasy element, especially as it reminded me of another favorite project I’d recently completed: *Narnia*—a musical based on C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. As Jeff began to adapt the story, more and more I could see the potential for music in the story and the characters.

RN: One school of MacDonald criticism relates him teleologically to C. S. Lewis. In this school, MacDonald’s significance lies in his inspiration of Lewis, and tends to accept Lewis’s praise for MacDonald’s spiritual affect and ambivalence about his aesthetics. What do you think? How does your adaptation relate to Tom’s *Narnia* compositions? Should modern audiences watch MacDonald, then Lewis?

JH: I'll let Tom speak to the relationship between MacDonald and Lewis, but for me it was important to explore the spiritual elements in the story without any explicit reference to Christianity or any other specific religion. This made the character of the North Wind a challenge.

RN: What are the rules that she must obey? Who or what has made those rules?

JH: To accommodate these concerns, we created the concept of The Grand Design, a kind of cosmic plan that had some flexibility with mortals (via free will, persistence, and persuasiveness) but which had to be followed pretty much to the letter—with a very few exceptions—by immortal forces like the North Wind. It was and is a fine line to walk, and we are still fine-tuning this aspect of our world-building so that it will be believable, yet surprising when it needs to be. Nevertheless, after some developmental staged readings of *North Wind*, we have got, perhaps inevitably, some questions about whether the Grand Design should be equated with "Intelligent Design."

TT: I can see how C.S. Lewis was inspired by MacDonald, but found Lewis' style much more grounded in a storytelling style suitable for contemporary audiences (of course he is more contemporary). Lewis managed to create a literary work inspired by Christian themes, but avoided making those themes obvious by adding a host of fantastical characters and elements, but also including very real protagonists in the four children who get caught up in the good/evil struggle that is happening around them. Regarding the music itself, I let the story and characters dictate where it's going, and would consider the inspiration for *North Wind* music independent of my *Narnia* score. I think the two musicals are so different that it shouldn't matter which show is seen first—but I really like the idea of a festival that would include both shows!

RN: What is the target audience of your adaptation? Has the evolved over time?

JH: Our target audience is and always has been the family, adults and children alike. Older children, that is. We've also aimed at the widest possible audience demographic. Our goal is first and foremost entertainment. If the story makes people think, so much the better.

TT: Yes, our target has always been a secular family audience. The earlier film musical may have been more “Disneyesque” in style and therefore more suitable for younger audiences, but as we developed the musical for the stage, the tone became a bit more universal. It’s appropriate for “all ages.”

RN: You changed the time and place settings to New York City during the Great Depression, with a frame story set in the 1980s, during the old age of a character who was a child of the 1930s. Why America, the Depression, and the 1980s? What has the *North Wind* mythos gained or lost by these decisions?

JH: To us, it seemed there were enough similarities between the hardscrabble existence of Depression-era New York and Dickensian London that it seemed a natural fit. The frame story in the 1980s came about to contrast a relatively modern, cynical child with his more naive 1930s counterpart. We didn’t frame the story in our own twenty-first century present because that would stretch the credibility of our denouément. In my mind, we had everything to gain by making the story more relevant to a modern audience.

In our altered ending, we gain a payoff of the free will versus predestination question that hovers over the story, and the crucial factor that love plays in changing the game that the North Wind is playing with the mortals.

Yes. We didn’t find MacDonald’s ending a satisfying resolution for our musical.

RN: The musical includes a song titled “Intuition,” which becomes a major theme. Why?

JH: In the book, the boy seems to be a kind of holy fool (and I mean that in the best sense of the term), a genuinely good soul whose very goodness makes him receptive to forces larger than himself. We needed a modern equivalent of this, a means of allowing Diamond to make decisions based on the kind of inner wisdom that can come from meditation. Learning to listen to the voice behind the door: Intuition.

RN: What messages or questions do you want audiences to take away from

your version of *North Wind*?

JH: The questions that I see the story exploring are:

- How much free will do we have?
- How much of our "choices" are programmed by our background, character, and situation?
- What role does persistence, intuition, and love play in our ability to change our destiny?

RN: And what have you learned about MacDonald—and your adaptation—from the development process

JH: I've learned that being overly reverent to source material can become counter-productive, especially in a work of imagination like this one. The artist must go to the source material to inspire the imagination to soar into new realms while still retaining the power of the core elements that have made the original story a classic.

Endnotes

1. Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation, and Authorship*, 1660-1769 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 14, discusses the reciprocal processes of adaptation and canonization during the rise of Shakespeare's cultural star.
2. For both bios, see 'Creators' *At the Back of the North Wind: A Musical*, 2009, http://northwindmusical.com/html/creators.html, Web, accessed September 2015.
3. Jeffrey Haddow, *At the Back of the North Wind*, unpublished typescript of 2006, Act I, Scene I, p. 3. Kindly provided by Haddow.
4. George MacDonald, *At the Back of the North Wind*, edited by Roderick McGillis and John Pennington; Preface by Stephen Prickett (Peterloo: Broadview, 2011), p. 45. All quotes from the novel reflect this edition.
5. Ibid, pp. 296 and 189.
6. Ibid, p. 189.
7. Ibid, p. 190.
8. Haddow and Tierney, *North Wind*, p. 73.
9. Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), pp. 202-3.
10. MacDonald, *North Wind*, p. 53.
11. Ibid, p. 298.

12. George MacDonald to Louisa Powell, quoted in Rolland Hein, *George MacDonald: Victorian Mythmaker* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1993), p. 40.
13. George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination," in McGillis and Pennington, 363-8, p. 364.
14. Sigourney Weaver, quoted in Michael Shnayerson, "One By One." *Vanity Fair* (28 February 1987). Web. http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/1987/03/devastation-of-aids-1980s 8 December 2015.
15. Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 141-2.
16. G. K. Chesterton, quoted by Mark Young, 'Introduction: *Good Words for the Young*', in McGillis and Pennington, 299-303, p. 303.
17. MacDonald, *North Wind*, p. 98.

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