**Adapting an Ambivalent Text into an Opera: David Sebba's Adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as a Case Study**

**MA Thesis**

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# Abatract

This thesis explores David Sebba's Hebrew operatic adaptation of the novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which was written by Louis Carroll (the literary name of Charles LutwidgeDodgson) in English in 1865. This novel has gained a high status in children's literature, although it is not likely that children would be able to understand the sophisticated humor and the philosophical and scientific discussions, which are integral part of it. Some people claim that certain sections of the book can only be fully understood by mathematicians, physicists, and philosophers. Based on the Polysystem theory, Zohar Shavit argued that *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* can easily fall into two categories: either adult literature or children's literature. She therefore considered it an ambivalent text, which can be accepted and appreciated by both groups of readers. The term *ambivalence* was first introduced by Jurij Lotman (1977). Shavit highlighted four phenomena in the text, positioning it as ambivalent text. These phenomena were unique to the 1865 version and did not appear in the text which Carroll adapted for children in 1890. First, the 1865 version was comprised of three models which were considered staples of children's literature: adventure story, fantasy and nonsense. It also, however, contained the parody, which was aimed at the adult reader. Second, the novel creates an imaginary but coherent physical world, with no apparent educational pretenses. It therefore deviates from one of the sacred rules in children's literature, at least during Carroll's time. Third, this version completely blurred the line between reality and fantasy, bucking against the accepted conventions in children's of literature the time. Fourth, time and space are defined by the novel's unique logic which is meaningless in our world. Rachel Weissbrod (1996) added that another element of ambivalence in Carroll's book was its use of wordplays.

This thesis contends that the Hebrew operatic adaptation of the novel falls strictly within the world of children's texts, and that is how it is perceived by both the audience and the critics. Although the adapter of the opera strove to preserve the major elements of the source text, such as dealing with scientific and philosophical questions and wordplays, he and the directors who directed both opera productions aimed to make it more acceptable to children living in 21st Century Israel.

The following questions were examined in this thesis: how did the opera's production team deal with issue of ambivalence, which appears in the source text? Which of the elements of ambivalence were integrated in the operatic adaptation and which were left out of it? How does this impact upon the opera's classification as suitable for children or adults? How did the audience's and the critics' reception reflect the adapter's choices with regards to the elements of ambivalence?

The underlined hypothesis of the research is that both the opera's production team viewed it as aimed for children and therefore reduced the elements of ambivalence that we encounter in the source text. They are likely compensated for this by additional musical and visual elements. One would expect that, as in Carroll's adaptation and in more modern adaptations, this opera will also feature simplification of the plot, omissions of characters, adjustment of humor to the Israeli children's view of the world and the addition of didactic morale. The first hypothesis regarding the reception of the opera was that the main issue that would engage the audience and the critics was to what extent this opera was appropriate for children. The Israeli Opera's decision to perform an adaptation of a canonized book led to the hypothesis that the adaptation had a likelihood of exposure to a wide audience and a risk to be judged severely based on high expectations.

The theoretical foundation for this thesis incorporates theories of translation, adaptation and literature. Translation Studies contributed to this work the concept of *skopos*, which expresses the translator's purpose and ways of realizing it. The researchers who developed it, led by Hans Vermeer, claimed that a fundamental condition for the success of translation was the precise characterization of its purpose set in the negotiation between the translator and the translator (Vermeer, 2000). Using this theory, the thesis explores the goals that were attempted to obtain the various parties involved in the writing and production of the opera: the opera management, the librettist-composer and the directors in both productions. Based on Gideon Toury's research, this adaptation is examined as a product in which shifts from the source are dictated by a process of checks and balances between two contradictory considerations: adequacy which aims at adjusting the adaptation to its source and acceptability, which seeks to adapt it to the target culture (Toury, 2012). Toury defined these concepts in relation to translations, but here they are used for textual analysis of the libretto, taking into account the contribution of visual and musical elements.

The assumption, originated in the Polysystem theory, that the position of each phenomenon in culture is determined by its affinity for other phenomena led to comparison of the opera with three kinds of relevant works in terms of skopos: 1) other operas performed by the Israeli Opera; 2) the text source, its Hebrew translations, and adaptations that inspired the librettist-composer; 3) Other operas composed in Israel during the first two decades of the 21st century, with children as their main target audience. The comparisons showed the unique skopos of this opera. It is shorter than adult operas and incorporates non-sung dialogues. It is influenced by the models of fantasy, adventure story, and the nonsense merged in the literary source, but the opera's production team said it had tried to bring it closer to the children's content world. Unlike the other Hebrew children operas, which were adapted from Hebrew texts associated with Israeli children's culture, *Alice in Wonderland* was written based on an English source which was an ambivalent text. According to the opera's team production, the negotiations that set the purpose of the adaptation emphasized that it was primarily aimed at expanding the target audience of the opera and exposing this medium to children. During the research it turned out that Carroll's works were adapted to English Operas as well. The adapters' use of the source's language may justify a comparison between the English adaptation to Sebba's opera. One of these adaptations is Unsuk Chin's *Alice in Wondeland,* with a libretto by David Henry Hwang, was uploaded to Youtube. However, Since the composer is Korean and the librettist is American. This adaptation cannot be taken as a representative of English culture. Moreover, it was performed by the Bavarian Opera. Selecting one reference point from one culture limits the discussion of cultural differences, but focuses it on the status of the opera within the system to which it was intended.

Adaptation Studies contributed two guiding ideas to the work. The first idea, suggested by Timothy Corrigan (2017), is that a comprehensive study of adaptation should take into account three dimensions: process, product and reception. Since the opera was composed in 2010, I could not trace its production process in real time. The opera's skopos fills this gap by linking the adaptation characteristics to its purpose. This purpose is revealed by the circumstances surrounding the opera's creation and the input of its production team. *Alice in Wonderland* is the first opera written by the adapter, who was awarded M.Mus in composition and singing from the Tel Aviv Academy of Music. However, according to the Israeli Opera website, he translated "more than ten operas in Hebrew, translation for surtitles as well as translations for singing in performances"[[1]](#footnote-1).

The second idea, drawn from Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, is that the properties of the medium define the means that adaptations use, but the very possibility or impossibility of adaptation into a particular medium should not be derived from them (Hutcheon, 2012). Therefore, in addition to the libretto analysis, this thesis examines the contribution of other channels on which the opera operates, such as: music, decor, costume and stage play, in order to reconstruct the world created in Carroll's novel through illustrated text.

The main part of the thesis examined the opera as a product of the source text and relevant adaptations, and in particular *The Nursery Alice*. The shifts traced in the opera were divided into three divisions: 1) the linguistic-literary characteristics; 2) the literary source components as a work of prose; 3) Humor as a purpose for itself and as a means of parody and satire. The first-division shifts indicated the opera's fit with the children's image as limited recipients, with three assumptions: At the thought level, they are unable to understand complex texts; at the linguistic level, their vocabulary is limited; and at the topic level, there are topics that are taboo in writing for children. Thus, the vocabulary in the opera is limited and repetitive; the expressions are simple and have many features of spoken language. The rhyme is also intended to make it easier for young children to understand the opera and adjusts it to the type of literary texts they are familiar with. In the second division which dealt with elements of the source text as a piece of prose, the shifts examined in the story level included changes in the events told, didactic additions and omission of parodies, which were the focus of some of the meetings between and Alice and several characters in the book. The number of characters was reduced relative to the book, and the Alice was portrayed as mature and kind-hearted, a complete contrast to the wicked and infantile Queen of Hearts. The ironic tone added to the narrator's character disappeared upon cancellation of the narrator in the opera.

The humoristic elements in the opera allude to the nonsensical feature of the source text, although they are far less sophisticated. Moreover, the humor in the opera is stripped of all elements of parody and most of the science and logics elements. Most opera puns are based on Israeli children's songs, striving for accessibility. The opera includes the types of humor common in children's literature and are based on surprise and violation of expectations, which also indicate a striving for acceptability. The findings corroborate the hypothesis that the omissions, didactic morale and changes in humor contribute to the opera's affiliation of the children's culture system.

The opera's reception was tested according the extent of its exposure to different audiences in relation to other children's operas, as well as on critical reviews and talkbacks. The opera received widespread media coverage. The fact that most of the reviews and talkbacks discussed the issue of how the children in the audience reacted to the opera confirmed the assumption that this issue would be at the center of the critical discussion. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Itamar Meets a Rabbit* are the only children’s operas exposed to thousands of viewers in Israel at least (and are still running in 2019). One of the most prominent explanations for their success is that after they descended from the stages in their expensive production, accompanied by ensemble in the case of *Alice in Wonderland* and the Philharmonic Orchestra in the case of *Itamar meets a Rabbit*, a more limited and economical version of these two operas was produced. Expensive and multi-part operatic productions do not appear to be suitable for long-term performance.

Public support for the two operas, which allowed their performance in front of school students, was another explanation for their relatively broad exposure. It is evident from the reviews and talkbacks that the opinions were divided on the librettist's success in preserving the ambivalence of the source. Even critics who believed that the elements of ambivalence were preserved were doubtful about the ability of young children to understand them. As I mentioned before, the discussion in skopos suggested that the main purpose of the opera's production team was to expand the Opera House's audience and not necessarily to preserve the ambivalence of the source text. The large number of viewers and indications about the enjoyment of the children watching it show that this goal has been achieved in principle.

An article written by an elementary school teacher about her students' learning experience during preparation sessions before watching the opera may indicate a possible way to mediate the opera's medium while overcoming children's difficulties in understanding the ambivalence of Carroll's book and their remaining cues in the opera.

The issue of ambivalence impacts upon every aspect of the opera - the process, the product and the reception. All of these reflect the delicate process of checks and balances (between adequacy and acceptability) which is involved in the challenge of adapting an ambivalent text. This process entails a chance that the adaptation will be accepted into two different systems but also the risk of not being accepted by either.

1. www.israel-opera.co.il/eng/?CategoryID=263&ArticleID=354 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)