

Marilyn Arsem

THE AUDIENCE'S EXPERIENCE
IN "RED IN WOODS"

So,
why the color red
why red on white
why in the snow at dusk
why red riding hood

BACKGROUND ON THE STORY

RED IN WOODS was the continuation of work with the Red Riding Hood story, that I had begun in a workshop at Mobius, and in the performance, "Throw it in the Fire," which was presented in 1987. This work was based on a very particular version of Red Riding Hood, which is the earliest extant version of the story, according to Jack Zipes, in his book, The Trials and Tribulations of Red Riding Hood. While it resembles the Grimm's Brothers version with which we are more familiar, it differs in some rather profound ways.

I have always found the Grimm version very confusing. While I have always been attracted to the story - probably because the main character is a girl - it never made sense to me. No matter what the girl did, she was helpless in protecting herself from the wolf. In that version, only the woodsman can save her. In some versions, even the grandmother is miraculously reborn, as a result of the woodsman cutting open the wolf. What is the message to a young girl reading this story? You are always in danger from sexual predators, and only a man can protect you. But then does he becomes the next predator? How can you distinguish between them?

This older version makes much better sense to me. It is a story of a girl coming of age, experimenting with sex, and then leaving when she has decided that she has had enough. She is responsible, and knows how to take care of herself.

In this version, the line between seducer and seduced is much less clear. The girl and the wolf are equals, and the roles keep shifting between them. As she undresses in preparation for getting into the bed with the wolf, she removes each garment with the question, "What shall I do with this?" Isn't this a kind of strip tease? "Throw it the fire, you won't need it any more." The repetition of the exchange is a kind of foreplay, building the tension and anticipation.

But perhaps the most disturbing part is the meal that the girl eats before entering the bedroom. The wolf has killed the grandmother, and has placed her flesh in the cupboard, and her blood in a bottle. He serves this as a meal to the young girl. Even though a bird warns her of what she is eating, she proceeds to consume the meal, knowingly eating the flesh and blood of her grandmother.

How does that change her? She is no longer innocent. She has blood on her hands. Has she, then, become a woman? A woman with a sexual appetite? As the granddaughter comes of age (and sexual activity) and begins bleeding, the grandmother enters menopause (and death) and stops bleeding.

THE AUDIENCE'S EXPERIENCE

So what is it, in this performance, that the audience has agreed to do? They have agreed to take a walk alone in the woods, and then to meet me several days later to be videotaped describing their experience. They have also agreed to not talk about the experience with anyone else. They have driven out into the countryside of Concord, which is about 30-45 minutes from Boston, and have left the car at the side of the road to get into my car. I am a complete stranger to most of them. And then each is let out at the edge of the woods, a spiral of red yarn stretching from their feet along the ground into the trees. I drive away, and the person is alone, with darkness approaching. The only choice is to follow the path.

Just like the girl in the story, the audience is asked to complete a task, which must be done by following the path through the woods. The sun is setting, and it is getting colder. The distance to go is unknown. And, as the mother warned the girl, the audience is told to be careful. What is the risk?

If you are 'good' - obedient, and stays on the path, you will reach the end in no time. It is possible to get through before it is completely dark. But what is the experience, in that case? Probably rather dull. If you follow the path without looking around, you will miss seeing most of the objects and images. Only a few are set directly in the path - the seeds in the fallen trunk of the tree is one of them. If you manage to look around, even while staying on the path, you will see more. But you must rely on your imagination to engage with the images, except for the few boxes that are within reach to open.

If you open the boxes, you will discover that each contains some kind of food. So then there is the question of whether to ingest it, or not. A foil-covered candy seems innocuous and safe. But what about the raspberries? And is the raw liver really to be eaten? And finally there is a box of teeth - fangs, really. Are they to be put into your mouth?

It is the images that are off the path that are much more interesting. But what will happen if you step off the path? How much time do you really have before it gets dark? For instance, is the meal really for you? If you go down the embankment to sit at the table and eat the meal, what will happen to you? Will someone else appear from above? Will you be trapped in the pit?

Three other people appear in the piece, and you are the fourth. Child. Mother. Grandmother. Wolf. But who is who? Entering the woods, you are the child. But almost immediately you meet a child, and so, are you her mother, or the wolf? Do you help her across the stream, or do you leave her behind, or do you try to take her?

During this encounter a woman's voice is heard, calling from the woods, "Where are you?" Do you know?

Later you see a bed in the distance. It appears as if someone is asleep in it, but later a woman in a nightgown is standing and watching you, and then she begins to move towards you. But who is she really? Is she your grandmother, or the wolf? And what will you do when you reach her? Suddenly she is gone, and the empty bed is waiting. Will you lie in it? And if you do, who will join you? Are you the grandmother, waiting for the child; or the wolf, waiting for the child; or are you the child, waiting for the wolf? When you pull back the covers to get in, you will discover tufts of gray fur and a large red stain on the sheet. Is it trace of what has just occurred, or a sign of what is to come?

Still later, when it is getting dark, a figure beckons to you from across the field. Is that person the child, the grandmother, or the wolf? And you? What is being offered to you? A small round red box is left in the path, and it is full of teeth. Are they your own? Are they meant to be eaten, like the items found in other boxes? After all, they did come out of some creature's mouth. What would happen to you if you added all those sharp teeth to your own mouth? Will you become a wolf?

Finally, as the dark encroaches, you hear your name being called from the trees. It is the voice of a woman, coming from different directions. Or is it several women? How can you reach her, which direction should you go? And if you leave the path, and go off into the woods, what will happen? Isn't it getting too dark?

And how much longer is it before the end?

Ultimately, it is safer to stay on the path. But then you must live with the knowledge that you had a less than full experience, and you carry with you a sense of being not fully satisfied, a feeling of incompleteness. Only in your imagination do you play out the possibilities.

Whereas in the story, she took the risk, lived fully, and survived.