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Tremendous Success and Terrible Failure: The Broadway Shows of Edward Gorey

*This article discusses the art and literature of Edward Gorey, focusing on his two Broadway shows that played concurrently in the late 1970s. The first, *Dracula*, was a tremendous success, running for over two years and 925 performances. The second, *Gorey Stories*, opened and closed on the same night for only one performance. This article submits that the reason for *Dracula*'s success and the failure of *Gorey Stories* is that Gorey's visual aesthetic, while morbid and dark, is easily consumable by a mass audience especially when paired with show that provides a recognizable plot structure. Gorey's narrative style, featured in *Gorey Stories*, is complex and can be unsettling, making the show a difficult sell for Broadway. Tony Gunn is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Theatre.*

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On October 20, 1977 in the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway, a revival of the Hamilton Deane and John L. Balderston play *Dracula* opened after five preview performances. The original production premièred in New York on October 5, 1927 in the Fulton Theatre starring Bella Lugosi in the title role. This new production was notable for two reasons. First, it starred a young and very attractive Frank Langella (Figure 1) as *Dracula*, a sexy rather than a terrifying vampire. Second, the production featured set and costume designs by Edward Gorey, mostly known at the time for his illustrations. The production was a rousing success, playing for over two years and for 925 performances.



Figure 1. Frank Langella as Dracula. Courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

The next autumn featured another Gorey production on Broadway. On October 17, 1978 *Gorey Stories* began previews. Coined as “An Entertainment with Music” the 90-minute play featured enactments of seventeen of Gorey’s short books with musical accompaniment and a cast of 5 men and 4 women. The production officially opened, and closed, on October 30, lasting only one performance and sixteen previews.

The vast difference in the performance run and profitability of the two shows is significant. Why was *Dracula* so successful and *Gorey Stories* not, and how was it that someone as talented but adverse to the mainstream and famously reclusive as Gorey could have two shows on Broadway at the same time? This article will endeavour to answer these questions. I argue that Gorey’s work defies easy classification, and resists traditional moralizing, instead presenting a world that is full of both chaos and the mundane. His dark esthetic, when there is a focus on his visuals, can have a broad appeal when paired with a recognizable narrative structure. Whereas Gorey’s narratives, when unfiltered and presented with limited visual support, are highly polarizing and have a more limited appeal. Gorey’s own feelings about the shows, not surprisingly, further complicate matters, as he enjoyed *Gorey Stories* and only tepidly accepted *Dracula*. To provide a complete picture of Gorey and the two shows that banked on his celebrity I will first give background

about his personality and work as an artist. I will then give details concerning how *Dracula* and *Gorey Stories* came to be, their journeys to Broadway, and their critical reception once there. I will then provide analysis for the design components and narrative structures for both shows. Finally the article will contextualize the shows back to Gorey to demonstrate that what he is most well-known for is not a full representation of who he is as an artist.

Edward Gorey – A Brief Introduction

To understand how extraordinary and odd it was for Gorey to have two Broadway shows in production at once, it is important to understand a bit about him and his art. Edward Gorey (1925–2000) is primarily known as an author and illustrator having penned over one hundred short books during his lifetime including *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, *The Doubtful Guest* and *The Willowdale Handcar*. There are four collected volumes of his work which successfully brought his stories to a wider audience.¹ He has an enormous cult following that buy up his numerous books and prints and make pilgrimages to his home, now a museum, to learn and lurk where he lived and worked in the later stages of his life. He has been called “an American original,”² “a man of enormous erudition [...] An artist and writer of genius,”³ and “one of the most original artistic and literary minds in late 20th century America.”⁴ Perhaps Gorey is best known for the animated opening to the PBS series *Mystery* that began the program in the 1980’s and 90’s. Some of the stylized figures still appear in parts of the show’s credits.

While scholarship on Gorey is scarce, there is some analysis of his work. Alexander Theroux gives this lengthy but helpful explanation about his style and trademarks:

His is an unclassifiable genre: not really children’s books, not comic books, not art stills. Gorey’s works – sort of small and humorously sadistic parodies of the obsolete Victorian “triple decker” – are in fact midget novels, each the size of a hornbook, withered into a kind of Giacomettian reduction of twenty to thirty doomful pages of scrupulously articulated and curiously antiquarian Gothic illustrations and a spare but sequential just-about-conclusive narrative: often merely wistful and understated captions of distracting economy.⁵

Theroux points to the typical arrangement and structure of a Gorey book, but he also singles out a key characteristic, the “small and humorously sadistic” element of parody that is present—and even prevalent—in many titles. Karen Wilken describes Gorey’s parodies of “tragic innocents of nineteenth-century literature” and explains that these stories “simultaneously obey the conventions of the genre and mercilessly parody them, underscoring both the inherent pathos of these tales and their inadvertent over-the-top absurdity.”⁶ Allusions and parodies are key to Gorey’s work. As Wilken points out, following “a lifetime of voracious reading,”⁷ Gorey will reference a universe of signifiers with which a reader will most likely not

be familiar. Recognizing the references, according to Wilken, “is not essential to enjoying Gorey’s work, but it can enhance the pleasure his books offer and in no way diminishes appreciation of his originality.” She states that his allusions are mostly “flirtations” with conventions, and that recognition from a reader can bring about an admiration that he is able to “transform the known into the remarkable, to make something personal and fresh out of the familiar.”⁸ Gorey is clearly a master of pastiche, stringing together stories from his vast knowledge of narratives from both high and popular culture to create new and exciting works that simultaneously seem familiar and new.

Another vital characteristic of Gorey’s work—and one that tends to seem old-fashioned—are the people who inhabit his books. Wilken describes Gorey’s usual suspects as:

Mustachioed men in ankle-length overcoats; elegant matrons with high-piled hair; athletic hearties in thick turtlenecks; imposing patriarchs in sumptuous dressing gowns; kohl-eyed wantons with alarming décolletages and nodding plumes; solemn children in sailor suits and pinafores; frivolous housemaids.⁹

While this list does not cover all characters in Gorey’s canon, it certainly is a good starting point as some of these individuals typically appear in almost every one of his books.

Wilken also points out that the books are typically set in an “Edwardian era,” although some seem to be out of “someone’s vision of the 1920’s” and the setting appears to be “England,” although “small town America is suggested.”¹⁰ Many article writers and interviewers are surprised when it turns out that Gorey is an American from the 20th century, assuming he was a British writer from the 19th. Stephen Schiff supports this notion when he posits that Gorey’s work looks as if it is from “long ago and far away.”¹¹ This characteristic is one defining feature; it appears to come from a distant past, yet it also contains a wry humour that appeals to current sentiment. Gorey’s work is simultaneously nostalgic, dark, troubling, and humorous, and because of this unique combination it is particularly memorable.

Scott Baldauf highlights another trademark, “Gorey creates tension by suggesting violence, rather than showing it. Inanimate legs jut out from underneath shrubs or out of doorways, and the only hint that something awful has happened is from a wry footnote.”¹² These inanimate legs are notable reoccurring images that embody one aspect of Gorey’s work—the allusion to something dreadful. Gorey is a master of giving little hints, sometimes to be delicate, other times to be funny, but an observant reader will notice that everything is in place for the ghastly to happen. In other cases, the ghastly has just occurred and the image captures the aftermath. This defining element adds a fun bit of anticipation and the potential for shock to Gorey’s images and is another reason that his art is so exceptional.

Many articles link Gorey to the likes of Lewis Carroll, stating that he works in the realm of nonsense. Schiff and Gorey dance around what the term nonsense means as they focus more on the how unknowable the world is. Gorey admits to Schiff, "I think there should be a little bit of uneasiness in everything, because I do think we're all really in a sense living on the edge. So much of life is inexplicable."¹³ Schiff's definition is much more refined than simply labeling Gorey's work as "nonsense." Many stories, especially those for children, reify a sense of order and meaning in the world. Gorey's books work expressly against this notion. Rather than being nonsense, his works reconfigure everyday life in a way that mirrors, more truthfully, the dangers and mundanity of lived experience. Sometimes terrible or boring or unimaginable events occur and there is no real reason for them. As Gorey frequently states, "I write about everyday life."¹⁴

While it is easy to think that he is joking when he makes such statements, this perspective is key to understanding his work. He can focus on moments and experiences that are upsetting, unpleasant, or dull, and bring those often-overlooked incidents into view. The narratives bob and weave in such a way as to continue to be surprising, resisting easy classification or reader digestion. Listing Gorey's work as "nonsense" or "strange" or "macabre" makes the work easily dismissible and categorizes it as something that does not require any attention—the workings of a weird eccentric that are trifles or things of naught. Instead, Gorey's work points to the moments of daily life that are glossed over or willfully ignored and does so in a way that is truthful, but somehow also humorous. As Schiff explains, "For Gorey, existential dread isn't the subtext, it's the punch line. The books are as appallingly funny as if they were parody, but they're not parody, exactly, because in some way they also seem absolutely true; their chill is authentic."¹⁵ These tendencies and characteristics are part of the Edward Gorey universe. Chilling yet funny tales where the characters seem doomed—if not to a violent end than at least an exceedingly monotonous afternoon. Rather than purge fear and pity the stories incite amusement, discomfort, bewilderment, and sometimes all three. It is easy to see Gorey's influence on such artists such as Tim Burton, and Daniel Handler, better known as Lemony Snicket, has jokingly admitted that his books just rip off Gorey.¹⁶

The last aspect of Gorey's life that is noteworthy for this article is his famous reclusiveness. While he had many friends, and was willing to do interviews when necessary, Gorey lived a solitary lifestyle and mostly demurred and shunned praise and attention. His devotion to unconventional stories paired with his introverted demeanour makes Gorey's work on Broadway even more mystifying, yet, while both shows touted Gorey's participation, neither were instigated by him.

Dracula: A Sumptuous, "Bloodless"¹⁷ Hit

The idea to produce *Dracula* came from John Wulp, an artist and theatrical jack-of-all-trades who ventured into production as an avenue to showcase his own work. He formed the Nantucket Stage Company and in 1973 went about producing their first summer season in the auditorium of the Cyrus Pierce School on the island.

The plays included one of his own, *The Saintliness of Margery Kempe*, as well as *Marco Polo Sings a Solo* which was a new play by John Guare. Wulp felt he needed a crowd pleaser for the season, and along with collaborators, decided to produce the old Deane and Balderston script for *Dracula*. A drunk, Bobby Bushong, recommended they hire Edward Gorey to do the sets and costumes.¹⁸ Wulp reports in his autobiography that when he called Gorey, explained the project, and asked him to design Gorey replied, "Sure, why not?"¹⁹

While the other productions fizzled, *Dracula* became an enormous hit. Reviews were overwhelmingly positive both locally and nationally. Newsweek called the show "delicious," "extraordinary," and stated that Gorey's designs provided "the right atmosphere of sophisticated scariness."²⁰ *Cape Cod Illustrated* gushed that the play was "one of the most unique dramatic offerings to be presented so far this season. It is a stunning production."²¹ Things fell apart for the Nantucket Stage Company the following year, but *Dracula* had been such a stellar success that Wulp endeavoured to move the production to Broadway. While he obtained the amateur and summer rights for the script, Harry Rigby, a longtime Broadway producer and friend of Gorey's, grabbed the first-class rights as soon as the favourable reviews for the Nantucket production came out.²² What followed for Wulp was years of waiting to get back the rights so he could raise the needed funds for a Broadway production.

The Hamilton Deane and John L. Balderston script for *Dracula* follows a very recognizable melodramatic plot structure.²³ In the English countryside on the estate of Dr. Seward, his daughter, Lucy, has taken ill and no one can tell the cause. The only apparent symptom that accompanies her weak state is two dots on her neck. The show begins as her fiancé Jonathan Harker and Dr. Seward's former professor and mentor, Abraham Van Helsing, have travelled to the manor to be with Lucy and assist in her treatment. There is also a new neighbor, Count Dracula, who drops by in the first act to see how Lucy is doing. The only other important character is R.M. Renfield, one of Dr. Seward's patients who is mentally unsound, and who occasionally interrupts with his rantings and ravings. The play begins as Van Helsing identifies a vampire as the cause of Lucy's troubles, the group uses Lucy as bait to identify the vampire, recognize Dracula as the villain and attempt to hunt him down. While they are gone, Dracula visits – and seduces – Lucy at the end of Act two. Lucy's condition worsens in Act three, but Van Helsing realizes that Reinfeld is under the Count's spell and tricks him into leading the group to the vault where Dracula rests during the day. Once there Jonathan jams a stake into Dracula's heart, killing him and restoring Reinfeld and Lucy to their full health.

Harry Rigby's plans for *Dracula*, which centred around Ricardo Montalban playing the lead character, never came to fruition. He signed the rights, not to Wulp, but to a different producer, Bruce Mailman. Only after Edward Gorey wrote a letter stating that he would only design the show for Wulp did Mailman eventually release the rights to him.²⁴ Wulp secured the \$300,000 funding for the show from several sources, including theatre owners Jujamcyn Theatres, an art collector, and his

next-door neighbours.²⁵ He retained Nantucket director Dennis Rosa, hired Frank Langella as Dracula, and scheduled previews in Boston with a Broadway opening in October 1977.²⁶

Even before its opening the press was very favourable. On October 17, 1977, three days before the official premiere, Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* gave a rousing intro to the production and to Gorey, making clear that his designs were the reason that this *Dracula* was noteworthy. Gussow explained aspects of Gorey's work in the lengthy article which framed the show as a massive hit. He pointed out that the sumptuous scenery and special effects, which accounted for about an eighth of the production's \$300,000 budget, were "more lavish and detailed than is usual on Broadway."²⁷ Gussow, after praising Gorey for the entire article, finishes with "I can testify it is a thoroughly Gorey evening with Dracula."²⁸ This last remark, although the article is not a review, encourages readers to attend.

Immediately after its opening a wave of positive reviews followed. Along with Gussow's introduction two other *New York Times* stories appeared. Richard Eder's review gave the show mostly praise, but quibbled a bit about the "bloodless" production. He enjoyed the direction, lighting, and Gorey's designs, even if they were "too clever" at times. He found most of the acting "polished," but "not very interesting." While there were "stylish," and "tense moments," along with a "bone-shaking ending, [...] generally...the effect of this Dracula is a beguilement that appears and submerges, separated by stretches of mere patience." He does however gush that Frank Langella is "stunning," "beautiful and sensual," but "notably lacks terror." Clearly, while there are aspects he liked about the production, Eder gave a decidedly mixed review.²⁹ Walter Kerr, in an article about parody on Broadway, also had mixed feelings about both *Dracula* productions playing at the time.³⁰ He commends the opulence of Gorey's designs, as well as Langella's performance, "a superb Dracula as Dracula's go," but dislikes the campy aspects that permeate the production, indicating that, while the show is fun at times, it lacks the sustenance and substance he is after in his theatrical fare.³¹ While these reviews indicate mixed feelings about the production, the fact that the *Times* ran three different stories, all prominently featuring pictures of Langella, greatly boosted the profile of the production. *Dracula* was also mentioned in other *Times* articles, including a "critics favorites" piece, that ran in December 1977, in which Gussow places the play as one of the best running at the moment.³² This blanketing of coverage from the *Times* certainly helped the show become a hit.

Dracula also received positive reviews from other newspapers and media outlets. Martin Gottfried for the *New York Post* lauded the "spectacular" production, pointing out, that while designers do not typically receive the most credit for a play, that Gorey "dominates this one, sets the tone and propels it." Only a "spoil sport", Gottfried concluded, would not enjoy the production.³³ Edwin Wilson for *The Wall Street Journal* also called the visual aspects of the production "spectacular" and

commended the “style” of the play.³⁴ The producers took no time to run a *Times* full-page advertisement five days after the opening, which displayed snippets of fourteen seemingly rave reviews.³⁵ The overall positive critical response to the show undoubtedly contributed to its success.

Another key to the success of *Dracula* was the deft way the production presented macabre, and slightly silly, darkness that was contained by the end of the show. This push and pull was achieved through Gorey’s designs paired with a recognizable melodramatic story. With archival pictures of the set and costumes, as well as a “Edward Gorey’s *Dracula* Toy Theatre,” a small model of the set with paper doll cutouts, I will analyze how Gorey’s designs functioned within the play. While the designs suited the dark and Gothic tone of the production, they also provided support for the story. Rather than using Gorey’s drawings to render a scenic design that looks like an estate, the producers took Gorey’s drawings and blew them up to enormous size. The proscenium arch featured drawn shrouded female statues in bat-framed plinths on the right and left while an enormous skull with bat wings adorned the top of the arch. While the three set locations were in disparate locations, a library, a bedroom and Dracula’s vault, all felt as if they took place in luxurious crypts as cobblestone walls and five high archways, adorned with bat capstones, were present in each act.

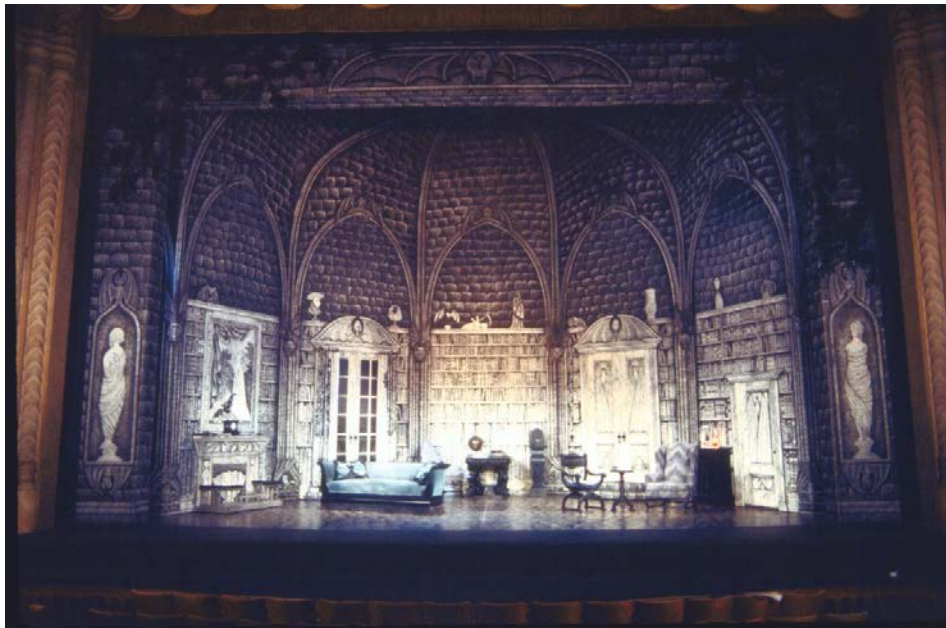


Figure 2. Set design by Edward Gorey for *Dracula*. Courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Bats and skulls, both large and small, continued within the set design in each act. Act one, the library (Figure 2), featured bat winged skulls above both a door and window that led to outside the manor. Act two, Lucy’s boudoir, featured skeleton cherubs that parted the curtains both to Lucy’s canopied bed and to the drapes to her balcony door. Bat wallpaper also lined the partition while a winged skull, with a

rose underneath, adorned Lucy's bedspread. Act three, Dracula's vault, featured the enormous bat archway outlined by cobblestone and piled skulls. Astute audience members could see a plethora of bats, skulls, and other creepy crawlies drawn into the nooks and crannies of each act.

The bats were also present in the costume design. The sleeves on Lucy's dress in Act one resembled wings and bats adorned her night gown in Act two. The character Reinfeld, who is also under Dracula's control, wore pajamas that had large bat buttons, furthering the metaphor. This costume and set design is certainly campy, as many critics pointed out, but is also effective in communicating the story. The bats and crypt-like appearance in the drawing room and Lucy's bedroom symbolize how Dracula has infiltrated all aspects of life at the manor as they now mirror his vault. The costumes further emphasized the ways in which Dracula affects other characters. Lucy's subtle wing-sleeves and bat imprints on her clothing show how she is being influenced by the Count. Dracula's cape, which he wears in Acts one and two, provide him with bat wings that connect his costume to Lucy's and Reinfeld's.

The costume and set design provided creepy as well as campy fun for the audience to enjoy but, as I detailed before, *Dracula* follows a very tried and true melodramatic plot structure. The play presents a problem that needs solving, clever heroes overcoming an evil – while at the same time intriguing and sexy – villain, and good triumphs in the end. The story, through predictable, is reassuring as problems faced in the world can be fixed and evil put in check. While Gorey's visual aesthetic is key to the production, his fondness for narrative complexity is noticeably absent.

***Gorey Stories: "Too Smart for Broadway"*³⁶**

Just as *Dracula* began as a project that recruited Gorey as a designer, *Gorey Stories* began without any input from the artist at all. In 1974 Stephen Currens, then a student in the Theatre department at the University of Kentucky, collaborated with music student David Aldrich in creating a one-act play based on a few of Gorey's short stories for the University's All-Night Theatre Festival and in 1975, the theatre department produced a full-length *Gorey Stories* for their main stage season.³⁷

Currens then went to New York to attempt to find a producer for the play and, after many rejections, found a fan in Howard Ashman. Ashman would later help write *Little Shop of Horrors* as well as several very popular Disney musicals, but at the time was the artistic director for the WPA Theatre, an off-off Broadway venue at 138 5th Ave. Ashman produced *Gorey Stories* as a part of WPA's 1977 season where it ran for twelve performances and proved to be a great success. In a glowing review *New York Times* critic Mel Gussow stated that the play was, "exquisite...a merrily sinister musical collage," and that that it had "wit, economy, and malice."³⁸ Encouraged by this review and, perhaps, the success of *Dracula*, Harry Rigby—the same friend of Gorey who had initially grabbed the rights to *Dracula*—partnered

with John Wulp, Terry Allen Kramer and Hale Matthews, and moved *Gorey Stories* to the Booth theatre on Broadway for a Halloween opening in 1978. The producers also hired Gorey, who had not been involved with the show up to that point, to design sets and costumes for the Broadway production.

Gorey Stories presents a series of short vignettes, along with a few poems, based on Gorey's clever and campy tales. The first act, set in a Victorian drawing room, begins with the actors frozen in a tableau. One by one they unfreeze to recite a limerick from *The Listing Attic* and then freeze again as the next poem begins. Following the poems, the actors proceed to act out other Gorey books one at a time. The second Act affords a bit more of a structure as a narrator explains that one Mr. Earbrass, an author, is trying to write his next novel. The text is directly from *The Unstrung Harp* and the play now takes the narrative trajectory of Earbrass attempting to string together a good story. Vignettes from six different Gorey books then play out, all with Earbrass's narration. The plot occasionally shifts to Earbrass's process of writing, but then shifts back to the stories themselves. At the end, we are told, that Earbrass has indeed published his work, and now he stands on his property at twilight while words—such as anguish, turnips, and conjunctions—flood through his mind, mirroring the ending of *The Unstrung Harp*. The actors then exit the stage, but return to sing one final song, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* set to music, in a form of curtain call.

The press for the Broadway production of *Gorey Stories* was very different than was present at the reception for *Dracula*. A few prominent accounts state that a newspaper strike and lack of reviews led to the production having difficulty finding an audience.³⁹ This is true to a point, but deserves teasing out. The newspaper strike only affected *The New York Times*, and while a Mel Gussow favourable review could have certainly been beneficial, it doesn't mean that the production would have been any more successful. The *Times* did publish a short piece on the show a full four months before previews began, although it reads more like gossip than a preview as Gorey and director Tony Tannor seem to grumble about the show more than effectively promote it.⁴⁰

Although limited coverage from the *Times* may have hindered the production, Tanner later gave this insight as to how other publications reacted, "*The Post* and *The Daily News* were ambiguous. We got raves from John Simon. Basically, it was killed by two television critics: Dennis Cunningham and Pia Lindstrom."⁴¹ The transcript for Cunningham's review is available through the *Journal of New York Theatre Reviews*. He positions himself as someone who knows about and enjoys Gorey's books, which "read well, but sure don't play well." He goes on, "I hated virtually everything I cast my bored eyes on this evening, and I am trying, at this very moment, to restrain myself from saying some very nasty things." Cunningham also stated that the play "shouldn't be playing much longer."⁴² The *Post* review, by Clive Barnes, is as ambiguous as Tanner expressed, as well as being decidedly mixed. Barnes, like Cunningham, positions himself as a fan of Gorey's work, but seems to think the stories work better in book form. He states that the production is

“unique, odd, perverse, and engaging [...] It has the style of Gorey’s unique sensibility. It also has the impact of a mildly dampened rag.”⁴³ Another mixed review comes from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* where William B Collins writes, “as acquired tastes, this one takes a more perverse sensibility than some of us are able to bring to the theatre.” He states that the first act, made up of vignettes of Gorey books is, “terribly precious, an entertainment devised by effete for true believers.” He lightens a bit about the second act, which “nearly makes up for the archness of the rest of the production.”⁴⁴

Although some reviewers were puzzled or bored by the show, others gave tremendously positive reviews. The sometimes-acerbic John Simon wrote in *Cue Magazine*, “It is sophisticated entertainment for anyone bored with virtue and children and normalcy. Here is tasteful perversion, in short, *camp*, but at its smartest, as close as we can get today to Noel Coward, and beautifully made.”⁴⁵ Months after the show had closed Martin Gottfried lamented that “*Gorey Stories* was smart, too smart for its own good. Too smart for Broadway.” The show, “abandoned to the television reviewers [...] was condemned soundly and roundly by the lovers of *Grease* and *The Wiz*.”⁴⁶ Both Simon and Gottfried argue that *Gorey Stories* was sophisticated and intelligent entertainment, and imply that the critics who did not like it were not smart enough to enjoy it. Both published after the one evening run, these positive reviews could not have helped an audience see the show.

Visual Aesthetic vs Narrative Structure

A key difference between the shows are the aspects of Gorey’s work which each emphasized. While *Dracula* focused on the artist’s visual aesthetic, *Gorey Stories* concentrated on the author’s narrative style, and did not have the same sumptuous and luxurious visual aesthetic, using instead a style that relied mostly on the audience’s imagination. While archival materials for the set design of *Dracula* are many and varied, there is no apparent archival photos for the set design for *Gorey Stories*, but the utility of the set can be inferred by comments made by critics and the show’s printed script.

Reviewer John Beaufort noted about the set design in *Gorey Stories*, “whether to save money or for other reasons, Mr. Gorey’s designs have been limited to Lady Celia’s drawing room and the summerhouse – neither of which has inspired Mr. Gorey to heights of antic creativity.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the set description in the printed play reads, “The lights come up on a Victorian drawing room sparsely furnished except for chairs and a lightweight settee or sofa. In addition, there is a light weight dressing screen and perhaps a cloak-tree up stage left.”⁴⁸ The beginning of Act two reads, “The setting is the same as before.”⁴⁹ It is clear that the set did not attempt to capture visual spectacle in the same way that *Dracula* had, a point Tanner lamented about long after the show closed. “I was kicking and screaming all the way,’ Tanner said, referring to the move to Broadway. ‘The Booth is too big a theater. People paying \$27.50, or whatever the price was then, don’t want to be told to use their imagination. They want to see it.’”⁵⁰



Figure 3. Edward Gorey and the cast of *Gorey Stories*. Courtesy of Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

The costumes for *Dracula* and *Gorey Stories* are similar in that they both indicate style and period, but where *Dracula*'s costumes for Lucy and Reinfeld communicated what was happening to the characters in the story, the costumes for *Gorey Stories* (Figure 3) provided versatility as all the actors play various characters throughout the evening, and their costume corresponds with the types of roles they will be portraying. The script lists the character names along with the kind of stock characters they will be playing. Those types include a maid, a butler, the hostess, a spinster, a singer, a child, an opera fan, an author, and a young man.⁵¹ The costumes provide utility for the actors and actresses to play all the types in the Gorey canon, as well as present a Goreyesque aura as they performed the various stories and poems throughout the evening.

The narrative structure of *Gorey Stories* is as unconventional as *Dracula* is predictable. The show creators had difficulty wrapping the show in a recognizable narrative package, trying to present the short stories in a way that brings them together in some sort of whole. There is no discernable narrative through line other than Mr. Earbrass attempting to write his novel in the second act.

While the narrative structure of *Gorey Stories* doesn't follow the typical Aristotelian plot construction, so common in movies and plays, its structure does have some precedent as plays such as *Spoon River Anthology* (1963) and *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976), which had just finished a two-year run at the Booth theatre in 1978,⁵² also follow patch-work quilt approaches to storylines. The issue with *Gorey Stories* can be seen not only in its unconventional narrative form, but also in its content, which some might find bizarre and off-putting in the way that dark themes are presented as fun. The tantalizing naughtiness of *Dracula* is contained by the end of the show, but *Gorey*

Stories offers no such comfort. There are no virtuous endings or poetic justice to make all right with the world. Sometimes stories are deliberately terrible for comedic purposes, such as *The Hapless Child* where a little girl, Charlotte Sophia, is unintentionally run over by her own father. Others end with no closure, such as *The Willowdale Handcar* where the protagonists go into a tunnel and never come out. To end the evening with *The Gashlycrumb Tinies*, undoubtedly Gorey's most famous work, can further alienate as the story is an abecedarium of how various children have died presented in rhymed couplets. Audience members not in on the joke, rather than being titillated and soothed as they were in *Dracula*, might have found this experience repugnant.

Producers wagered that Gorey's narratives could appeal to and satisfy a Broadway audience, but the bet did not pay off. Had the show been a success it could indicate that a production as unconventional and challenging as *Gorey Stories* could eschew spectacle and still be successful, but the conventional wisdom of what makes a Broadway hit, a familiar plot structure backed with lots of spectacle, ensured financial success for *Dracula* and failure for *Gorey Stories*.

Gorey's Involvement, or Lack Thereof

Gorey's take on the two shows indicates that his sentiment was exactly the opposite of Broadway audiences. It is easy to assume that *Dracula* would be a project that would have been exciting for him, and which he might even have initiated, but that is far from the truth. Instead, he admitted, "I would never have taken that project to my bosom if they hadn't offered lots of money. Not that I have anything against it; it just doesn't interest me very much."⁵³ In the same interview, which occurred before the show opened, he stated, "I'm just designing this. They're calling it my production, which I think must make the director feel a trifle idiotic."⁵⁴ Gorey makes it clear that this project was not his idea, and he is mystified by it bearing his name. In a further display of artistic unease Gorey told John Corry that he "did not like the execution" of the sets.⁵⁵ He repeated as much to Dick Cavett, stating that he "practically had a cardiac arrest" when he saw the set for the first time. He explains "I felt the scale was wrong, that I should have done them on a larger scale. I don't like blown-up drawing very much." He later clarified, "everything was much too open."⁵⁶ Obviously, Gorey, while not being opposed to it, was not particularly enthusiastic about the production and not happy with how the set was realized. It is an odd occurrence for the namesake of a hit production to balk at taking credit or showing enthusiasm for it.

Conversely, Gorey's reaction to *Gorey Stories* was just the opposite: "I went down and saw it, and the minute I heard things I'd written coming out of other people's mouths, I absolutely adored it, and I went to every performance. In the later previews for Broadway, I thought it was the best ensemble acting I had ever seen in my life."⁵⁷ He also admits in the interview "It was the only time I appreciated my own work, because it had nothing to do with me – somebody else did it."⁵⁸ This suggestion is strengthened by Gorey's own seeming exhaustion with the project

once he was involved telling John Corry of the Broadway production “I guess I’ll go see *Gorey Stories* when it opens. But then again, maybe I won’t. I’ll probably be in such a snit I won’t want to see it.”⁵⁹ These comments followed his admitting that he didn’t like the realized set design for *Dracula*, and suggests that he would not be happy with the set for *Gorey Stories* either, further complicating his position and feelings about the productions.

Conclusion

For an artist as subversive and polarizing as Gorey the process of seeing his work realized and paraded about on Broadway must have been both thrilling and nauseating. It is widely known that *Dracula*’s commercial success gave Gorey the financial flexibility to purchase his home on Cape Cod, yet it forever paired him with a production he did not seem to like very much. *Gorey Stories*, while not nearly as financially successful, moved him so much that he saw every WPA performance and, while that enthusiasm might have cooled as his involvement increased, inspired him to produce his own plays on Cape Cod in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.⁶⁰

The robust yet delicate nature of Gorey’s appeal is made fully visible when comparing these productions. *Dracula* showed his artistic prowess as well as his humour in its ability to provide self-aware spookiness whereas *Gorey Stories* showed that the refined wit of Gorey’s narratives was mostly misunderstood. Yet, rather than focus further on the production’s short run, I want to suggest that the producer’s willingness to gamble on such a unique little show indicates Gorey’s impact as an artist. The unique combination of humour and gloom make him truly one of a kind, and these two productions, which came to be as a result of other people harnessing his talent, should solidify his place, not just as an author and illustrator, but as a theatre practitioner of note.

¹ Fittingly, the collected work volumes are titled: *Amphigorey*, *Amphigorey Too*, *Amphigorey Also*, and *Amphigorey Again*.

² Carol Stevens, “An American Original,” in *Ascending Peculiarity*, ed. Karen Wilken (New York: Harcourt: 2001), 126.

³ Stephen Schiff, “Edward Gorey and the Tao of Nonsense,” *The New Yorker*, November 9, 1992, in Karen Wilken, 139, 140.

⁴ Thomas Curwen, “Light from a Dark Star,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2004. <http://articles.latimes.com/2004/jul/18/entertainment/ca-curwen18>

⁵ Alexander Theroux, “The Incredible Revenge of Edward Gorey,” *Esquire*, June 1974: 110.

⁶ Karen Wilken “Mr. Earbrass Jots Down a Few Visual Notes: The World of Edward Gorey.” Found in *The World of Edward Gorey*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams: 1996), 63.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ Schiff, “Edward Gorey and the Tao of Nonsense,” in Karen Wilken, 136.

- ¹² Scott Baldauf, "Portrait of the Artist in Chilling Color," *The Christian Science Monitor*, October 31, 1996. Found in Karen Wilken, 174.
- ¹³ Stephen Schiff, "Edward Gorey and the Tao of Nonsense," in Karen Wilken, 156.
- ¹⁴ Ibid 145, also Theroux, "The Incredible Revenge of Edward Gorey," 148. Theroux builds his article to make this assertion the climax of the piece. Like a twist ending.
- ¹⁵ Schiff, "Edward Gorey and the Tao of Nonsense," in Karen Wilken, 145.
- ¹⁶ Mark Dery, "Nightshade is Growing Like Weeds," *New York Times*, March 2, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/06/arts/design/06gorey.html>
- ¹⁷ Richard Eder, "Theatre: An Elegant and Bloodless Dracula." *New York Times*, October 21, 1977.
- ¹⁸ John Wulp, *The Bing-Bango Orchestra*, (self-published, 2016), chapter 12, 4. <https://www.johnwulp.com/about-me>. Bobby Bushong (1922-1995) was a painter who settled in Nantucket after a successful career as a commercial artist in New York.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., chapter 12, 4.
- ²⁰ Charles Michender, "Nantucket Gothic," *Newsweek*, July 16, 1973, available at <http://goreyana.blogspot.com/2014/07/1973-dracula-review.html>.
- ²¹ Evelyn Lawson, "Dracula, undead on Nantucket," *Cape Cod Times*, July 5, 1973.
- ²² John Wulp, *The Bing-Bango Orchestra*, (self-published, 2016), chapter 13, 2. <https://www.johnwulp.com/about-me>.
- ²³ The Irish actor and playwright Hamilton Deane wrote his version of Bram Stoker's novel in 1924. It was the first authorised version. The play was revised by Balderston for its United States performances in 1927.
- ²⁴ John Wulp, *The Bing-Bango Orchestra*, Chapter 13, 2. <https://www.johnwulp.com/about-me>.
- ²⁵ Ibid., Chapter 13, 3.
- ²⁶ Ibid., Chapter 13, 3 – 4.
- ²⁷ Mel Gussow, "Gorey Goes Batty," *New York Times*, October 17, 1977.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Richard Eder, "Theatre: An Elegant and Bloodless Dracula," *New York Times*, October 21, 1977.
- ³⁰ The productions were Gorey's on Broadway and *The Passion of Dracula* which was playing downtown at the Cherry Lane Theatre.
- ³¹ Walter Kerr, "Parody in and Out of Focus," *New York Times*, October 30, 1977.
- ³² Mel Gussow, "The Critics Choose Their Personal Favorites," *New York Times*, December 9 1977.
- ³³ Martin Gottfried, "Dracula is Pure Escape, Great Fun," *The New York Post*, October 21, 1977.
- ³⁴ Edwin Wilson, "The Bloody Count Rises," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 1977.
- ³⁵ *New York Times*, October 25, 1977, 43.
- ³⁶ Martin Gottfried, "Theatre: Grown-Up Theatre," *Saturday Review*, January 6, 1979, 48.
- ³⁷ Rich Copley, "Gorey Stories Come Full Circle," *Lexington Herald Leader*, October 8, 2010. <http://www.kentucky.com/entertainment/performing-arts/article44053254.html#0>.
- ³⁸ Mel Gussow, "Gorey Stories' are Exquisite Playlets," *New York Times*, December 15, 1977.
- ³⁹ Karen Wilken, 264. In Wilken's endnotes for Richard Dyer's "The Poisoned Penman," she states that the newspaper strike is a main cause for the shows short run. Wilken also has the incorrect dates for the WPA performance. Stephen Currens also blames the newspaper strike in Rich Copley's "Gorey Stories Come Full Circle," *Lexington Herald Leader*, October 8, 2010. <http://www.kentucky.com/entertainment/performing-arts/article44053254.html#0>.
- ⁴⁰ John Corry, "Broadway: Gorey Stories could drive an author and director Batty," *New York Times*, June 23, 1978.
- ⁴¹ Janice Arkantov, "A Sick Slant on Life From a Gothic Artist: Tony Tanner, director who stage the Broadway debut of *Gorey Stories* presents the work in Hollywood 13 years later." *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1992. http://articles.latimes.com/1992-02-02/entertainment/ca-1826_1_tony-tanner.
- ⁴² Dennis Cunningham, "Gorey Stories" *WCBS-TV 2*, October 30, 1978. Found in *Journal of New York Theatre Reviews 1978*.
- ⁴³ Clive Barnes, "Staged Gorey Looks Pale," *The New York Post*, October 31, 1978.
- ⁴⁴ William B. Collins, "Gorey Stories: It's Halloween on Broadway," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 2, 1978.
- ⁴⁵ John Simon, "Gorey Stories," *Cue Magazine*, November 3, 1978.

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- ⁴⁶ Martin Gottfried, "Theatre: Grown-Up Theatre," *Saturday Review*, January 6, 1979, 48.
- ⁴⁷ John Beaufort, "Gorey 'comics' brought to stage: Scary Tales Miss Mark on Broadway." *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 1, 1978.
- ⁴⁸ Stephen Currens, *Gorey Stories*, (New York: Samuel French, 1983), 7.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ⁵⁰ Janice Arkantov, "A Sick Slant on Life From a Gothic Artist: Tony Tanner, director who stage the Broadway debut of *Gorey Stories* presents the work in Hollywood 13 years later," *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1992. http://articles.latimes.com/1992-02-02/entertainment/ca-1826_1_tony-tanner.
- ⁵¹ Stephen Currens, *Gorey Stories*, (New York: Samuel French, 1983), 3.
- ⁵² Production information of the Booth theatre can be found at <https://www.ibdb.com/theatre/booth-theatre-1071>
- ⁵³ Robert Dahlin, "Conversations with Writers: Edward Gorey," *Conversations with Writers*, Volume I, 1977, found in *Ascending Peculiarity*, 34.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ⁵⁵ John Corry, "Broadway: *Gorey Stories* could drive an author and director Batty," *New York Times*, June 23, 1978.
- ⁵⁶ Edward Gorey, interview by Dick Cavett, *The Dick Cavett Show*, WNET, New York, November 30, 1977. Found in Karen Wilken, 63.
- ⁵⁷ Richard Dyer, "The Poison Penman," *The Boston Globe Magazine*, April 1, 1984, in Karen Wilken, 122.
- ⁵⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ John Corry, "Broadway: *Gorey Stories* could drive an author and director Batty," *New York Times*, June 23, 1978.
- ⁶⁰ The Cape Cod years of Gorey's theatre work are documented in Carol Verberg's *Edward Gorey On Stage*, (Boom-books, 2012), and part of my dissertation, now in process.