

teaching **STAGE**

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ONCE, IN THE TIME OF TROLLS

BY SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

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THE STORY OF KATRINA'S JOURNEY

Playwright Sandra Fenichel (FENN-eh-shell) Asher also writes books as “Sandy Asher.” Some time ago, she was asked to teach a writing workshop in North Dakota at the last minute when another children’s book author was unable to do so. During a meal at the workshop, she heard Lisa Lunge-Larsen’s brilliant retelling of a Norwegian folktale about three women who had grown ugly by working too hard. When Sandy returned home, she went to the library and checked out books of Norwegian folktales. “Sure enough,” she recalls, “there were many such tales—wise, funny, and populated by wise and funny women.”

Sandy had already written a stage adaptation of “East of the Sun, West of the Moon,” one of her favorite stories from her childhood. This script became the frame story for her play *Once, In the Time of Trolls*. Three other Norwegian tales, including the one heard in North Dakota, became part of the journey of the heroine, Katrina, who seeks to rescue her prince from the Troll Princess. In the play, three women tell Katrina their stories, which help the heroine discover the key to her own lasting happiness.

Katrina longs for adventure and is not content to remain at home. Through her journey, Katrina overcomes great challenges and must rely on her own wits to find and free the

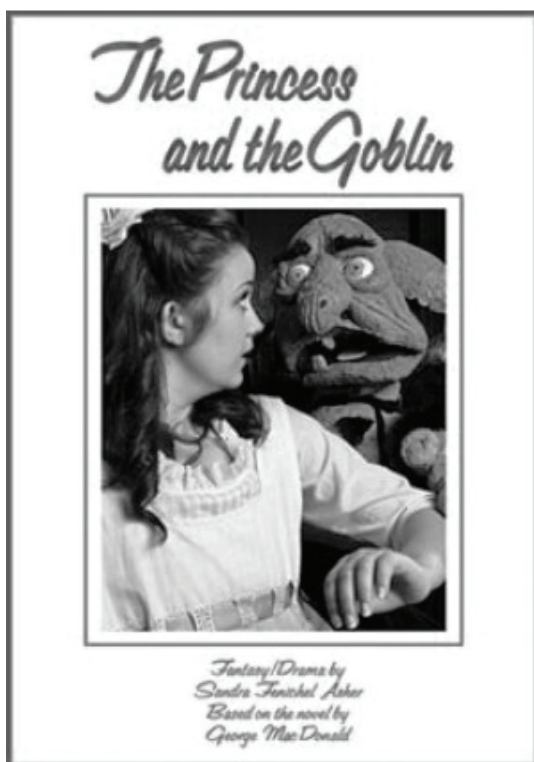


Writer Sandra Fenichel Asher and her dog Gracie. Photo: Harvey Asher

prince. Sandy Asher’s play does have a happy ending: Katrina commits to staying with the prince while preserving her right to be independent. However, it is a somewhat unusual ending for a folktale, since a female character rescues a male character rather than the other way around.

Sandy says that her primary goal in creating Katrina’s journey was to build a strong story, not to make a statement about female independence or happiness. She says, “I think most audiences simply accept what happens to the characters and don’t analyze Katrina’s choices in respect to her gender. But the strong female role models are there.”

Sandy dedicated *Once, In the Time of Trolls* to her husband, “Harvey Asher, the Bear/Prince.” Like Katrina, Sandy enjoys traveling and having adventures, and her career has provided opportunities to do so around the country, while Harvey’s teaching responsibilities kept him at home. However, the playwright says that she didn’t consciously try to tell her own story with the play. During the first professional production of the script, Harvey said of Katrina and the Bear/Prince, “It’s us. It’s our story.” Only then did Sandy see the parallels between the play and her personal life. Sandy reflects, “When the subconscious is at work, it’s best not to be overly analytical. The work is about character and story. The significance finds its own way in.” ♦



The cover of the published script of *The Princess and the Goblin* features UVU student actor Morgan Fenner.



Premiere Production of *ARK 5* at Highland High School. Photo: Beth Bruner

before they are published. It is helpful if the playwright can attend rehearsals and performances and talk to the director, actors, designers, and audience members about the script.

Sandy Asher, who lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, has come to Utah many times to see her plays in rehearsal and performance. She developed four different plays at Highland High School in Salt Lake City, including *ARK 5*, *We Will Remember: A Tribute to Veterans*, *In the Garden of the Selfish Giant*, and her adaptation of her own novel, *Everything is Not Enough*. She saw the second production of her adaptation of Avi's novel, *Romeo and Juliet: Together (and Alive!) at Last*, presented by the Youth Theatre at the U. She also conducted a writing workshop with teenagers at the University of Utah which generated the stories for her play, *Family Matters*, first performed by the Youth Theatre at the U. Sandy came to Utah Valley University to see the second production of her adaptation of George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and she will be visiting again in May to see the first full production of one of her newest plays, *Stuff: A Curious Collection*. Sandy will participate in post-show discussions with the audience after the March 3 and 4 performances of *Once, In the Time of Trolls*.

WORKING AS A WRITER: SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

Sandra Fenichel Asher has written in many different genres. She has written picture books, including *Too Many Frogs!*, *Here Comes Gosling!*, *What a Party!*, *Princess Bee and the Royal Goodnight Story*, and, most recently, *Chicken Story Time*. She has adapted all five of these picture books into plays for younger children. Sandy has also written novels for young people, ranging from the *Ballet One* book series for early readers; *Teddy Teabury's Fabulous Fact* for upper elementary readers and *Everything Is Not Enough* for young adult readers. She writes short stories for magazines including *Highlights*, *Humpty Dumpty*, and *Weekly Reader*. Sandy has written books about writing, including *Writing It Right: How Successful Children's Authors Revise and Sell Their Stories*, and she recently edited a collection of scenes and monologues from plays about people and events in American History called *American Heartbeat*.

As a play is written, the writer receives feedback from many different people. First, a play is usually presented in "staged readings," in which actors read the play with scripts in hand. Then come full productions during which the playwright can hear the dialogue and see how the writer puts the action onstage. Most plays are presented onstage two or three times



Second Production of *We Will Remember: A Tribute to Veterans* at Highland High School. Photo: Beth Bruner

For more about the writing and career of Sandra Fenichel Asher, see her website, <http://sandyasher.com>. Six of her plays, including *Once, in the Time of Trolls*, can be found in the anthology, *Tell Your Story: The Plays and Playwriting of Sandra Fenichel Asher*, published by Dramatic Publishing. ♦

WORKING AS A COSTUME DESIGNER: CAROLYN URBAN

Carolyn Urban is a theatre student at Utah Valley University. She designed all of the costumes for UVU's production of *Once, in the Time of Trolls*.

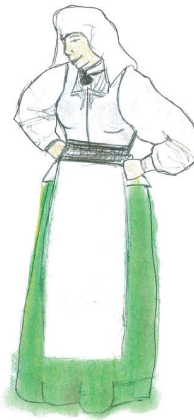
In meetings with the designers, director John Newman suggested that the designers use illustrations from Jan Brett's picture books, such as *The Mitten* and *Christmas Trolls*, as inspiration for the set, prop, and costume designs. Carolyn drew ideas from these books and also incorporated traditional Norwegian clothing into her design.

Carolyn suggested that the characters should reflect specific seasons. The Bear/Prince's costume uses colors associated with winter. The first woman who tells her story is tied to Spring, the second woman to Summer, and the third to Autumn. The four winds and the arches, designed by student set designer Madeline Ashton, are also associated with the seasons: rain in the West, flowers in the South, sand in the East, and snow in the North. Student lighting designer Landon Krazcek also used the seasons as the basis of the colors of the lights that are used in the show.

Carolyn also introduced another concept to the production design. She noted that northern Norway is above the Arctic Circle. At mid-summer, the land is illuminated by the "midnight sun." when the sun never sets. At mid-winter, the land is covered by "polar night", when the sun never rises. Carolyn suggested representing the midnight sun in Katrina's costume and the polar night in the Bear/Prince's costume. Dark and light are not associated with good and evil in the design; instead the dark and light colors reflect the solitude of winter and freedom of summer. Just like day and night, Katrina and the Bear/Prince are opposites who contrast and complete one another. ♦



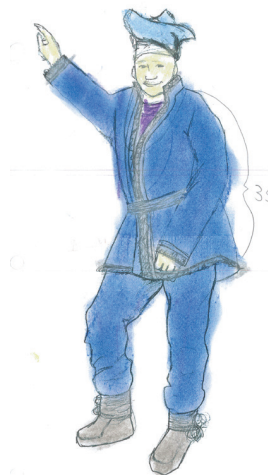
The first woman,
associated with Spring



The second woman,
associated with Summer



The third woman,
associated with Autumn



The father,
associated with Winter

CREDITS

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