

Dr. Seuss' playing fields

by Jane Clifford

The risk to children who see "Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who!" is not that they won't enjoy the new film. It's that the book, a classic first published in 1954, may never again be quite as entertaining.

HORTON HEARS IT - Does the magic of the master of kids' books lose anything when the creations leave the printed page? CNS Photo courtesy of Blue Sky Studios. That possibility is what fuels often-heated debates over whether the creations that popped out of Theodor Geisel's imagination should just stay put on the printed page.

"Certainly the adaptations of Dr. Seuss' books to film and television have been inconsistent at best," says Robert J. Thompson, founding director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University.

"With 'How the Grinch Stole Christmas,' you have a beautiful adaptation - a great television classic. With the same exact book, we have the Jim Carrey version," Thompson pauses, thinking about the Carrey film that opened in November 2000. He admits to being a huge fan of Carrey, who, he says, "looks like he was drawn by Dr. Seuss."

"It is, arguably, one of the worst films made in the history of the American cinema," Thompson says.

Adaptations of Seuss' work began more than 60 years ago. "Horton Hatches the Egg," which introduced the sweet elephant to the world in 1940, became a 10-minute animated short in 1942. Then, in 1944, his first book - "And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street," published in 1937, also became a 10-minute short. The first full-length, live-action feature was "The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T," in 1953.

The breakthrough adaptation, in Thompson's view, was "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," a 1966 half-hour

TV special shepherded by famed animation director Chuck Jones, who met Seuss when the two worked together during World War II on "Private Snafu," an animated series of military training films.

All with the stamp of approval from Audrey Geisel, keeper of the flame since her husband's death in 1991. She heads Dr. Seuss Enterprises. She's as faithful to her late husband's vision as Horton is to the Whos, with the attitude that "a property's a property, no matter how small." And when it comes to the big ones, she's even more of a watchdog.

"Changes have been made," she said.

As executive producer of the Horton film, she asked that Horton's teeth look less like a bunny's and wanted adjustments to the Sour Kangaroo's pouch.

Said to have been deeply disappointed in the 2003 live-action version of "The Cat in the Hat," starring Mike Myers, Geisel has told more than one interviewer that there will be no more live-action Seuss.

"The best way to do Dr. Seuss is to do it the way Disney did when they did the first 'Winnie the Pooh.' They took several stories, short and sweet, and put them all together," Thompson says.

Which is exactly the treatment producers gave to "Seussical: the Musical," the Broadway show that opened in November 2000 and closed six months later. But its afterlife, on tour and in thousands of school and youth theater productions, is going strong.

"I think 'Seussical' is an ambitious and charming attempt to meld stories together," says Thompson, whose 12-year-old daughter was in a recent production of the show. "Its legacy will not be its Broadway run. Its

legacy is children's theater productions. There are lots of kids every year having a lot of fun with Dr. Seuss."

Thompson says "Seussical" is a natural for a movie.

"I think, in the end, with the exception of that (Grinch) TV special, in every other case, none has ever really lived up to the minimalist elegance of the books themselves," he says. "But that doesn't, on the other hand, say this shouldn't be done."

The films and TV specials and cartoon versions are, Thompson says, "a way of continuing to keep that Dr. Seuss universe in front of the culture."

To that end, Audrey Geisel said fans probably can expect Seuss' environmental tale of "The Lorax" to be the next film. Eventually, she says, all his characters will come out from under the covers.

"My motivation is solely for the perpetuity of the books and the characters that he developed," she told the Los Angeles Business Journal in 2003. "I want to keep the books alive and well and on the best-sellers list."

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