

Philip Ridley (1964–)

DOUGLAS KEESEY

As a painter, photographer, playwright, filmmaker, and author of children's books, Philip Ridley is an artist whose work has sometimes been overlooked as confusing in its variety and confounding in its refusal to meet critics' expectations that it fit neatly within an individual art-form. Yet Ridley himself has said that, regardless of the medium in which he happens to be working at the time, all his art is about "the power of storytelling, how the stories we tell make sense of our lives." And most of these stories have elements of dark fairytale or gothic horror. In *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s*, Aleks Sierz calls Ridley "the poet of the uncanny, whose work spawns new images of the strange, the weird, and the wonderful." Indeed, these images have proven to be too strange and disturbing for some. In the *UK Telegraph*, drama critic Charles Spencer accused Ridley of being "turned on by his own sick fantasies" and argued that his work "positively revels in imaginative nastiness." Such critics, Ridley has claimed, are "blinder than a bagful of moles in a coal cellar." Comparing his works to the dark rides at amusement parks, Ridley has said, "I like putting people on a ghost train, but I guide them safely through the other end."

The light at the end of the tunnel is certainly clearer in Ridley's works for children and young adults. In *Moonfleece* (2004)—the fourth play in his youth-oriented Storyteller Sequence—Ridley alludes to the times when, as a child, he would "mix fantasy up with real life" and invent "fairy stories" about "dragons" to calm his younger brother's fears and help him fall asleep. One such story seems to have been the source for the children's novel *Krindlekrax* (1991), in which nine-year-old Ruskin, a nerd in glasses, has to contend with a wild boy named Elvis, whose window smashing terrorizes the entire neighborhood. By imagining that Elvis is a giant crocodile named Krindlekrax

who can be tamed if confronted and befriended, Ruskin is able to get a mental grip on the problem, conquering his fear of the other boy and, by understanding what has caused his delinquency, soothing Elvis and bringing him back into the community. Similarly, in the first Storyteller play *Sparkleshark* (1997), Jake, a fourteen-year-old geek in glasses, is faced with a macho bully named Russell and an angry, oversized misfit called Finn. Jake binds and redirects the other boys' negative energies by telling a spellbinding fairytale in which "hard" and "horny-as-hell" Russell plays a prince who finds the courage to express his tender feelings for the girl he loves, and in which Finn, cast as a dragon named Sparkleshark, can express his fury through roaring and then have his meanness tamed by others' compassion.

Although they started out as stories for children, Ridley's first two films take a darker turn toward more adult material. In *The Reflecting Skin* (1990), a prairie gothic which Ridley has called "my *Blue Velvet* with children," eight-year-old Seth decides that his neighbor, Dolphin, is a female vampire sucking the life out of his older brother. Under the influence of his father's horror fiction, Seth misidentifies Dolphin as the cause of his brother's mysterious illness and misunderstands her sexual relationship with him as predatory. In one scene, Seth blows air into a frog, which then bursts in Dolphin's face. Here again, just as he followed his father's horror fiction, Seth is acting out scripts he learned from his parents. As a form of punishment, Seth's mother would pour water down his throat until he felt like bursting. In addition, Seth sees his father, who has been falsely accused of murdering some local boys, swallow gasoline and then light himself on fire. Seth is entranced by the flames, having learned from his parents how to take pleasure in violent punishment, how to scapegoat individuals as the sole cause of all the pain. Originally described as "somewhere between innocence and heartlessness," Seth finally tips toward the latter, becoming complicit in the murder of Dolphin. But this attempt to lay all the blame on her does not save his brother, who is now grief-stricken as well as mortally ill. A guilt-ridden Seth is left screaming in the fiery rays of the setting sun, as if going up in flames like his father.

In Ridley's second film, *The Passion of Darkly Noon* (1995), the title character is a young man lost in a dark forest. Unfortunately, the stories that influence him only take him deeper into that darkness rather than offering him a way out. When Darkly meets a sensual woman named Callie, he follows his parents' fanatical religious teachings and blames her for exciting the desire in him that he considers a sin. Seeing Callie with Clay, the man she loves, Darkly scapegoats her for his own jealousy, which is exacerbated when Clay's mother Roxy, blaming Callie for taking her son away, labels her "the monster of the forest" and a "witch." Callie attempts to tell a different story, casting Darkly as the "prince" who can save her as the "princess" from the "witch" Roxy, but Darkly is still under the sway of the old narrative. In a fit of self-

righteous fervor, he tries to set fire to Callie in order to watch the "witch" burn. She momentarily halts him by stating "I love you," but whether or not her compassion for his suffering could serve as an effective counter-narrative, we will never know, for at that point he is shot to prevent him from doing any further damage. The lyrics to the song written by Ridley to end the film suggest that Callie's words have brought Darkly to a belated realization of the role he has actually played in this dark fairytale. Too late to benefit from his new self-understanding, Darkly dies in the flames he had set to kill Callie, a conclusion which Ridley has described as "*Beauty and the Beast meets Apocalypse Now*: the language of the fairy tale and of the horror film come together for this explosive ending."

Ridley's third and most recent film, *Heartless* (2009), though set on the streets of East London rather than in the woods of America, is still another fairytale "labyrinth" in which "Jamie, the lead character, is lost." The film was inspired by Ridley's collaborative work with bi-polar young people on the Storyteller plays, "kids and teenagers" whose world "makes no sense" because "they can't get a grip on their story in it." When his mother is burned alive, Jamie cannot understand how the gang members who did it could be so heartless, so he imagines that they are literal monsters rather than teens wearing reptile masks. Jamie, who has a heart-shaped birthmark over half of his face, also fears that others see him as monstrous. He believes that he must get rid of this birthmark or he will never be loved. Following the bad advice of gang leader Papa B., Jamie acts out the terms of a dark fairytale. As Ridley has explained, like Cinderella, Jamie "has something to do by midnight": he must "cut someone's heart out (the proposed fate of Snow White)," or the birthmark, which has magically vanished, will come back. But after he commits this terrible act, Jamie realizes it was entirely pointless. In fact, his birthmark had never disappeared, and his girlfriend had loved him anyway. Undeterred by how he looks, she fell in love with his "beautiful heart." But by cutting out the heart of that other young man, Jamie has turned himself into a heartless monster. According to Ridley, Jamie "has found the center of the labyrinth," which is "his own dark heart"; "he's taken himself on a journey to show ... that he's got as much evil in him as the people that he failed to understand." The dark fairytale that Jamie mistakenly believed in and acted out led him to commit a terrible crime, but it also enabled him to understand that the gang members are humans like him, kids fooled into believing that by taking from others they could strengthen themselves, that by killing others they could make themselves less afraid.

The recognition of one's own potential for evil could help stop the scapegoating of others as "monsters." But Jamie's self-realization comes too late for him to make a difference in the world, as it occurs while he is being burned alive by members of the gang. As is often the case with Ridley's more adult

works as opposed to his plays for children, there may be a light at the end of the tunnel, but the main character is not brought safely through to the way out. On some of Ridley's dark rides, it is only we as the audience who make it out enlightened and alive in the end.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

- Izod, John. "The Polycentred Self: *The Passion of Darkly Noon*." *Myth, Mind and the Screen*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. 143-159.
- Ridley, Philip. "Author's Note." *The American Dreams: The Reflecting Skin & The Passion of Darkly Noon*. London: Methuen, 1997. vii-xxix.
- Ridley, Philip, and Aleks Sierz. "'Putting a New Lens on the World': The Art of Theatrical Alchemy." *New Theatre Quarterly* 25.02 (2009): 109-117.
- Urban, Ken. "Ghosts from an Imperfect Place: Philip Ridley's Nostalgia." *Modern Drama* 50.3 (2007): 325-345.