

PRODUCTION HISTORY

The path of the stage adaptation of The Hunchback of Notre Dame can be traced back many centuries to 1163 – the year in which construction began on Notre Dame Cathedral. To this day, the cathedral stands situated in the center of Paris as one of the largest church buildings in the world and an architectural marvel.

VICTOR HUGO'S NOTRE-DAME DE PARIS

In 1829, a young author named Victor Hugo began writing an ode to Notre Dame, constructed centuries earlier. Hugo had a deep appreciation for Gothic architecture, the style that flourished in France between the 12th and 16th centuries and has characteristics such as flying buttresses, vaulted ceilings, gargoyles, and a grand scale. By the early 19th century, a number of Gothic buildings throughout Paris were neglected or torn down and replaced with new buildings. For Hugo, this mistreatment combined with a fascination with forgotten architecture culminated in the writing of Notre-Dame de Paris.

Hugo's project can be seen as a success in many ways. Published in 1831, the main character of the novel is neither Quasimodo nor Esmeralda nor Frollo, but rather Notre Dame itself. The novel thus reinvigorated an interest in Gothic architecture, and a massive restoration project of the cathedral began a few years later. The novel went on to be regarded as one of the great works of Western literature; in 1833, it was published in English under the title The Hunchback of Notre Dame – a title that Hugo himself disliked because it put the focus too much on Quasimodo and his physical differences as opposed to the cathedral.

DISNEY'S ANIMATED THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME

Hugo's novel has inspired numerous adaptations. Perhaps the most well-known of these adaptations is Disney's 1996 animated film, which began production in 1993, when Walt Disney Feature Animation development executive David Stainton was looking for material to

adapt into an animated musical. The team at Disney Animation felt that it was always important to tackle a new challenge with each film; inspired by the opportunity to adapt a literary masterpiece that is sophisticated and serious in tone, Disney quickly put the film into production with directors Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, who had previously directed *Beauty and the Beast* together. Joining them would be composer Alan Menken, writing music for his sixth Disney animated film, and lyricist Stephen Schwartz who had previously collaborated with Disney and Menken on *Pocahontas*. After *Pocahontas*, Schwartz and Menken were offered a choice of a few ideas for their next project and were immediately attracted to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Schwartz explains, “I liked the underlying themes (the idea of social outcasts and the worth of people being different than what society sees on the surface) and the struggle of Quasimodo to break free of the psychological dominance of Frollo.”

ADAPTING AN EPIC NOVEL INTO AN ANIMATED FILM

Like most adaptations, the animated film made a number of departures from the original story. While Esmeralda is the human protagonist of the novel, the film’s focus is realigned onto Quasimodo, whose isolation and treatment were topics of fascination for the filmmakers. Additionally, all of the characters were altered for the film: Quasimodo, who is mute and deaf in the novel, speaks; a 16-year-old Esmeralda, becomes a twentysomething with a significantly stronger, more mature characterization; the philandering Phoebus becomes more akin to a traditional Disney prince; and Frollo is most changed, transitioning from a priest with a complicated backstory and conflicted morality to a judge whose villainy is ever-present. Absent from the film adaptation is a poet and playwright named Pierre Gringoire who marries Esmeralda and later runs away with her pet goat, Djali (who did make it into the film).

While the film is one of Disney’s darkest animated pictures, it is still significantly lighter than Hugo’s novel. There are a number of divergent plot points between the two works; most notable is the ending. In the film, all of the heroes – Quasimodo, Phoebus, and Esmeralda – fight against Frollo, who dies by losing his balance and falling into a fiery abyss. In the novel, Esmeralda is hung, already having been left by Phoebus for another woman. After learning of Esmeralda’s execution, Quasimodo pushes Frollo to his death. Quasimodo disappears, and a few years later, his skeleton is discovered tightly embracing Esmeralda’s.