

Bridget Kelley

Mrs. Partridge

Senior Capstone

7 January 2024

What In The World?

The year is 1889, and the typical Saturday begins with the morning coffee run. Journalists from the same background scurry past with their novel articles for the Sunday paper, hoping that theirs makes the morning headline. Clocks tick slowly at *The New York World*, and finally comes the end of the editor-in-chief's shift, that is, until a radiant, confident, young woman, no older than twenty-three, marches into the office and demands a place outside of the garden columns and in history. After a long and vigorous journey, through Cochrane Mills, to Pittsburgh, to New York City, and all the way around the world and back again, Elizabeth Jane Cochrane, publicly known as Nellie Bly, used her endless ambition, strength, intelligence, and determination to pull off one of the biggest 'bait and switch' in American history. Nellie Bly is the central focus and main character, as well as the inspiration for my Capstone project, *The CooCoo's Creed*, a play based on her venture behind the walls of Blackwell's Island's Women's Lunatic Asylum, to uncover and write an expose on the inhumane treatment of female patients, a venture only a woman could make. Against all odds, Bly, a young woman far ahead of her time, pulled herself out of the "Daily Recipes for Housewives", and into the headlines of one of the most influential newspapers of its time. As I researched Bly's story, from her upbringing to her success, I could not get enough of her. I found myself falling down a Nellie Bly rabbit hole. I wanted to know everything about her.

You see, at the time, I was well aware of who Elvis Presley was, having recently gotten his biopic, alongside other famous musicians such as Elton John and his biopic *Rocket Man*, Freddie Mercury, and his biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*, or even movies focusing on historical events such as *Oppenheimer*, which was a movie adaptation of a book about The Manhattan Project. These examples exist alongside each other, as well as plenty of other biopics, written about celebrities whose names have only strengthened throughout time, and the release of these biopics had people foaming at the mouth. So, whilst biopics are being produced everywhere and anywhere, it left me with two questions. Where was Nellie Bly's biopic? And, what is it about these biopics that has audiences coming back for more? These two mysteries led to the central question of my project: How can adaptations of important historical events or figures, help in educating the general public?

Although many sources proved helpful, a written review titled "Film Industry Tends to Reveal a Rise in Biopics", by Liliana Griffis, opens a doorway into the modern-day popularity of historical figures, celebrities, and their lives, some going into their childhoods leading up to fame, others, focusing on their biggest projects. The source goes into extensive detail on the upcoming demand for biopics. In recent years, Hollywood's profits on biopics have Skyrocketed. Biopics based on famous jazz musician, Elvis Presley in his biopic, *Elvis*, and *The Wolf of Wall Street*, based on Jordan Belfort, biopics have given audiences an insight into the background, before the story, and the life story of some of their favorite and/or least favorite names that are tied to every niche. Informative and inspiring, the article led to me researching and writing a biographical playwright about late seventeenth-century stunt journalist, Nellie Bly. The review supports my purpose as to why I wrote about Nellie Bly's ten-day investigation of Blackwell's Island's Lunatic Asylum. In Nellie Bly's case, plenty of people question whether she was real,

and her research and heroic journey into an asylum, and to be able to write a biographical playwright on Bly's heroism and her uncommonly narrated story (Griffis).

However, my previous proved extremely helpful for the foundation of my research. An animated video on Nellie Bly's childhood and career, as well as everything she accomplished up until her death, proved to be my biggest crutch to lean on in the writing process, as well as the most inspirational. It starts from her birth, her childhood nickname, Pink, up until her first job in Journalism at the Pittsburgh Dispatch, to The New York World and Blackwell's Island, to the New York Sun, and a shortened trip around the world. It talks about her late marriage, and every detail about her life, right up until she died of pneumonia. More importantly, the video has a heightened focus on her time at Blackwell's Island, allowing it to serve as the basis of all the information I had on Nellie Bly other than her writing that had been uploaded online, bad movie adaptations, and the very few biographies that I could find on her. During my research, I grew very fond of Nellie Bly and I was and am enticed by her work, discoveries, writing, and her courage to do everything she did. The video is simply facts from Nellie Bly's life, and it goes into detail about all she did, I truly love this video. It is the best and most helpful source I have found and it has a special place in my heart due to the way in which it allows the audience watching it to get invested in Nellie Bly's story, the same way I hope the audience feels towards my play (The Atlantic).

Although the source I mentioned before was the most helpful, an outside view of what it looks like for somewhat more modern-day female writers, provides a wonderful perspective. Iris Smith's article, "Who speaks and who is spoken for: Playwright, director, and producer Joan Lipkin", focuses on Joan Lipkin, founder of The Uppity Theatre Company. Lipkin's work contains numerous successful playwrights on topics of gender and queer discrimination, working

through her plays, performing every single one with a purpose, a drive, and a motivation. She spreads awareness on social issues, specifically discrimination. Her musicals plays and performances are created to shed light on the important, but almost touchy and taboo topics many others are afraid to touch. Lipkin's ambition, drive, purpose, and motivation behind the writing and performance of plays and musicals, and all that those adaptations can do for real-life issues are reminiscent of Nellie Bly. Although Joan Lipkin, focuses on more social issues relating to gender identity, sexuality, and racial discrimination, it is her overall purpose that aligns with mine and her goal I can take from this article. It provides experience and perspective within the acting, writing, behind-the-scenes, and audience point of view, as well as opens a gate for so many ways that I could use it. Whether it is to represent the impact that plays and musicals and theater as a whole have on the world around us (Smith).

Furthermore, another source titled, "Her Place Was in the News", written by Patsy Sims and published in *The New York Times*, goes into depth on Nellie Bly's background, providing a glimpse into her childhood, revealing her christened name, Elizabeth Jane Cochran, and how she got into Blackwell's Island's Asylum, commonly referred to as "the madhouse". Sims mentions Bly's time working for the old Pittsburgh Dispatch after reaching out to the editor about the patriarchal views on women, she was reached out to and hired by the same editor. Although moved to write for the New York World, after trying to escape the garden section, which is how she ended up on Blackwell's Island, her writings titled, "Inside the Madhouse", were published, sparking her career. Although extremely admirable and successful, most people go unnoticed by Bly's work. The article speaks more on author Brooke Kroeger's biography of Nellie, and how informative it is for those trying to learn further about Bly. This article provides me with facts,

history, and evidence of Nellie Bly's work and success, to adapt her discoveries into a play (Sims).

Alongside Sim's article, another article, parallel to a modern day and empowering female writer, "Drawing fire: fueled by outrage and armed with an artist's pen, journalist and activist Molly Crabapple fights for justice in the Middle East, and closer to home", authored by Ron Rosenbaum provides a glimpse of artist Molly Crabapple, comparing her artistic activism to be equivalent to a modern-day Nellie Bly. Referring to her as a "fiery young woman-former fire eater", and going into detail on her activism and the different forms of art in which she has used to portray such. She has been involved in riots and has stood up for abused and poor immigrants who have been treated poorly. Crabapple's work has been featured by *The New York Times*, as well as by *Vanity Fair*. Molly Crabapple is a symbol of people, women, immigrants, all minorities, who are still fighting for equality hundreds of years later, and people are still mistreated, even after Bly's hard work and her groundbreaking discoveries, there is still so much work to be done. Through this source, I have learned more about feminists and activists who are still currently fighting for equality for everyone, while also filling monstrous-sized shoes (Rosenbaum).

Thereupon the previous sources, another striking female artist is making headlines in Marcia Eppich-Harris's article, "The Liminal Space Between Feminism and Misogyny: Introducing Playwright Nina Raine's *Rabbit*", Eppich-Harris goes into incredible detail on female playwrights in the United Kingdom, and how even though they may not band together, and not all of their plays are written alongside the Feminist Manifesto is, there is still feminism in their themes as, their impacts, and in the foundation of their works. The author uses English playwright, Nina Raine, and her play *Rabbit*, as a prime example that just because it is not

apparent and in your face, feminism is all over the works of female playwrights, authors, and writers. It explains the plot of *Rabbit*, and how it falls into a vital piece of literary and performance feminism, proving that activism is in everything everywhere, as long as you are on your feet with something to stand for. This article brings light to the feminism aspect and backs my argument on behalf of the underappreciation and credit, as well as career opportunities for female writers, playwrights, and authors, and opens up a wide array of doors for arguments and perspectives of activism and feminism in my play as well as in the general idea for the theme of *The CooCoo's Creed*. I can use it to argue feminism and the importance and impact that female writers have, as well as how often they are underestimated by male writers, as well as audiences (Eppich-Harris).

It would be ludicrous to assume that everyone, everywhere adores biopics, and is begging for more. However, it is those feeding into the biopic craze, those paying the salaries of every director and producer in Hollywood that gets the rights to the next big celebrity's story, that create the central question. *The CooCoo's Creed* is for everyone, from people interested in biopics, to historians, even any unsuspecting person who craves the experience of a live performance. Writing and working toward performing *The CooCoo's Creed*, made me wonder if people care more about the celebrity, or the romanticized dramatic aspects of the one-of-a-kind lives depicted in each motion picture, if the same names that have grasped the media's attention through generation after generation, as societal standards shift and further groundbreaking questions are presented, if those such as Nellie Bly, who are not as commonly known of by the general public, truly matter, or it is all about the story. Either way, the time, effort, passion, and dedication I put into *The CooCoo's Creed*, tied me to Nellie Bly, who to me feels more like a

friend, than a historical figure who changed the way society viewed mental health over one hundred years prior to myself.

Works Cited

- Eppich-Harris, Marcia. "The liminal space between feminism and misogyny: introducing playwright Nina Raine's *Rabbit*." *Studies in the Humanities*, vol. 41, no. 1-2, Mar. 2015, pp. 192+. *Gale OneFile: Fine Arts*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A416300965/PPFA?u=mlin_s_veyhs&sid=bookmark-PPFA&xid=067e058c. Accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- Griffis, Liliana, et al. Review of *Film industry tends to reveal a rise in biopics*, Review of *Eagle Eye News*.
- Rosenbaum, Ron. "Drawing fire: fueled by outrage and armed with an artist's pen, journalist and activist Molly Crabapple fights for justice in the Middle East, and closer to home." *Smithsonian*, vol. 46, no. 11, Apr. 2016, pp. 35+. *Gale OneFile: Fine Arts*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A450505180/PPFA?u=mlin_s_veyhs&sid=bookmark-PPFA&xid=260f4275. Accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- Sims, Patsy. "Her Place Was in the News." *The New York Times Book Review*, 6 Mar. 1994. *Gale OneFile: Fine Arts*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A174388908/PPFA?u=mlin_s_veyhs&sid=bookmark-PPFA&xid=a8ac045b. Accessed 18 Oct. 2023.
- Smith, Iris. "'Who speaks and who is spoken for:' playwright, director, and producer Joan Lipkin." *TDR* [Cambridge, Mass.], vol. 38, no. 3, fall 1994, pp. 96+. *Gale OneFile: Fine Arts*,

link.gale.com/apps/doc/A15845032/PPFA?u=mlin_s_weyhs&sid=bookmark-PPFA&xid=7752e504. Accessed 12 Oct. 2023.

The Atlantic, *YouTube*, 30 May 2019, <https://youtu.be/ACz2bwF1gEs?si=KQihComOFJyxwI6g>. Accessed 9 Nov. 2023.