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Abstract: Adapting novels and literature for live performance is a regular practice. Several professional theatre artists were interviewed in order to discover the main reasons and essential criteria for choosing novels for performance material.

Introduction

“*Gatsby* seemed like a cautionary tale and American classic, about the violence of our money culture and dreams that I could share...” (E. Thoron, personal communication, June 17, 2005). Adapting fiction has given playwrights and other theatre artists ready-made subject matter for their productions. Even though, like original work, the adaptations can result in many varied styles of performance, very similar reasons were given by theatre artists to explain the use of already published materials as the basis for their new work. Theatre artists adapt novels for the stage, or live performance, in many styles. They also have a variety of reasons for undertaking a process to adapt for the stage. These reasons propel them to engage in the retranslation of form that is required when resolving to adapt from literature – reasons they believe make the process more worthwhile than creating a new play from a new idea.

The Study

One major reason for asking theatre artists why they wanted to adapt literature for live performance is that very little had been written about adaptation and many works of fiction were turning up in theatres. There existed a little literature regarding the process of adapting novels for films but this had only a limited value for this study due to the very different characteristics of film and live performance.

The American Place Theatre in New York City produces the work of Artistic Director, Wynn Handman – it seemed pertinent to ask a theatre artist like Wynn Handman why he devoted his artistic expression to the adaptation of American novels. The adapted work the company was working on during the research period was *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Additional interviews were undertaken in the United States and Australia with professional theatre artists who purposefully chose to adapt novels as their performance material.

Findings

A major finding from the research was that even though many types of literature were chosen and different styles of theatre were the outcomes, the theatre artists had very similar reasons for preferring existing material over beginning from ‘scratch’:

Popular Culture

One very logical reason for choosing to recreate a novel, story or social event into another form was the appeal that the topic or characters would have for an audience. Chris Drummond, director of Brink Productions, said he was looking for a project when he looked on his own bookshelf where his wife had collected novels she’d read and enjoyed. He later discovered that *Night Letters*, by Robert Dessaix had been read by the author in a serialized form on National Radio. The New York Times book reviewer, Patrick Farrell, attested to the popularity of the book as it drove the “Hollywood-bound *Horse Whisperer* from atop the Australian bestseller list.” (Farrell, 1998).

The theme of *Night Letters*, “that life may be lived best as a voyage, not to get somewhere or to accumulate experiences but to savour each moment” was also important to Tom Wright, Artistic Associate and Literary Manager of the Sydney Theatre Company, in his choice to adapt *The Odyssey*.

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...so the *Odyssey* has a continuous tradition all the way through our collective memories, as it were, going back all through the entire western tradition, right back to its composition. It's not just the original text, in so far as it existed in all the subsequent performances, readings and understandings of it, that make it such a rich, complex and historical event. (Wright, 2006)

By looking back into the past with this classic work audiences were able to understand modern experience. Wright said he believed that rich, older works were 'greater than you'. This is also evident in the recent example of Margaret Atwood choosing an aspect of *The Odyssey* in her novel *The Penelopiad* (2006). This novel too, has been adapted for a history making collaboration between the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Arts Centre, Canada. (Munday, 2007) Laurence Strangio, Australian theatre director, said that he had wanted to adapt a work by Margaret Atwood because he admired her writing and realised her books were very popular. The novel he ended up adapting was not his first choice, but *Alias Grace* worked very well and he said he loved the language. So here we have an example of the popularity of the novelist as well as the novel itself being a driving force behind the decision to adapt for the stage.

Elise Thoron, Artistic Associate with American Place Theatre, chose to adapt *The House on Mango Street* because it was a popular choice for teachers of literature in schools. This book, by Sandra Cisneros, is her most popular and critically-acclaimed novel - it was told from the point of view of a young girl coming of age in a Mexican American neighbourhood in Chicago. Thoron said she felt that teachers had a responsibility to encourage students to read and were not always engaging students with texts in a way that influenced their feelings.

David Saar, Artistic Director of Childsplay in Phoenix, Arizona, emphasised that the popular titles of adapted theatre performances were 'bread and butter' for their company. They needed a 'title' for the public to trust which ensured full houses for the life of the production.

Elevator Repair Service is a contemporary New York theatre ensemble who take inspiration for their works from a multitude of sources. One of their works is an adaptation of the well-known novel *The Great Gatsby*. The director, John Collins, said that one of the company actors was a great fan of the book, and that 'everybody' had heard about it. As a Company, they knew it would have appeal, particularly for a New York audience where the novel is set:

...because it's famous, because it's a household word – that's kind of inviting in a way, challenging in a way. I'm sure it was an unconscious or conscious underlying part of the reason for doing it... (J. Collins, personal communication, January 11, 2005)

There have been some critics of this reason for adaptation. For instance, Andrew Bovell, Australian playwright and screenwriter, condemned the practice:

...there is still a feeling that it is safer to choose an adaptation because the emotional end point is established, you can show where the audience will be taken and it is easier to market. (Zion, 2004)

Social Comment

Doniger (1998) suggests some stories that are turned into literature and adapted and re-adapted often have some aspects of social or psychological fear attached to them. This was not only a common reason for choosing a novel for adaptation but also a number of theatre artists talked about the way they wove comments into their work. For example, Greg Lissaman, Artistic Director of Jigsaw Theatre Company, in the adaptation of *The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan (2004), made several comments about Australian society;

The book is a story of a boy who lives in this industrial world. It is very much like the world of Jeffrey Smart in artistic terms, that it's an alienating world in which people are small in comparison to the built environment around them... Houses that look all the same in suburbs, and people who just sort of sit there and go 'right let's look straight ahead and see that our interest rates are OK'. It is very much created in response to a Howardian world... (G. Lissaman, personal communication, October 15, 2005)

Lissaman agreed that the play had some very bleak elements but also had 'hope', and that the message was that playfulness was still possible to be found, and our thinking would become more liberal and progressive if our minds could be lifted from the mundane.

What inspired Chris Drummond's creation of theatre would often be an element of form, or an idea for content within a performance;

And in this age of reason where we seem to have eradicated any need for Gods or a belief in the invisible, and really feeling that we're told by the 'powers that be' that economic rationalism and capitalism is as natural as trees and rocks, and so there's no point in trying to think of the more compassionate way of being. (C.Drummond, personal communication, May 27, 2005)

Elise Thoron also made an adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, but for a Russian audience;

...I was allowed to choose anything I wanted to stage in 1995 Russia, when the country was transforming at a fast pace from a place where money had no value, to a place where money got you anything, and everything, and was beginning to be on display. *Gatsby* seemed like a cautionary tale and American classic, about the violence of our money culture and dreams that I could share... (E. Thoron, personal communication, June 17, 2005)

American Place Theatre perform stories that are...

strong on ideas and language and usually cut deep into American life... that illuminate our society, which provoke thought..." (W. Handman, personal communication, March 17, 2005).

Among the repertoire of the company were *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *China Boy* by Gus Lee, *Dreaming in Cuban* by Christine Garcia, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *Manchild in the Promised Land* by Claude Brown, *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd – all of which voiced

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various and different types of Americans and the views of America the company wanted to represent on stage.

Sympathy and Understanding for Other People's Lives

Martha Nussbaum (1997) discussed the novel *Invisible Man* (1995) by Ralph Ellison and said that narrative art 'has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist's interest – with involvements and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society's refusals of visibility.' This reminds us that telling stories together as a community engenders wonder and a sense of mystery, and that narrative imagination can lead us to moral interaction, which Nussbaum says is 'necessary preparation for citizenship and community.' She expressed the belief that it was important to members of a society to see themselves connected to each other by similar weaknesses and needs. Indeed, she argued it was impossible to relate to drama or literature unless you had some 'interests' awakened within yourself.

Chris Drummond said that the book *Night Letters* was talking about living in the moment, and that was something theatre could communicate very well and say in a way he thought the book did not – "it's got something to do with what the novel doesn't say that the theatre might reveal." Drummond said that he wanted to understand it at a gut level – the internal journey towards one's own death:

Night Letters talks about a very special quality of experience in which a dying man has burrowed down into the essence of his situation and found meaning for himself in an age where meaning has lost its, well, meaning! I believe it also communicates something very profound about humanity's relationship to nature and something new about Australia's identity to the rest of the world. (C.Drummond, personal communication, May 27, 2005)

John Romeril's adapted work *Miss Tanaka* (2001) started its life with a personal connection with Japan, and the interest grew. *Miss Tanaka* was one of several short stories by Xavier Herbert that were based on Herbert's own working life in Darwin, and as Romeril read through them *Miss Tanaka* seemed particularly appealing:

It took my fancy because it's a bit of a cross-dressing story. It's already got a built-in theatrical premise. People putting on costume, and playing at someone other than who they are... in the kabuki form of female impersonation role... that featured the Japanese diving community. (J. Romeril, personal communication, January 6, 2005)

Shedding Light on an Aspect of the Novel

The theatre artists who talked about some part of their adaptation being illumined by it being moved from one form to another also dwelt on the ability of theatre to add different elements of the performing arts, elements that are not automatically in a reader's mind for the novel. Chris Drummond talked about some of those elements during the process undertaken for *Night Letters*:

We had done five week creative development on the project... in which there were actors and acrobats and dancers and musicians, and Susan with this huge sprawling poetic text... we'd created a lot of images... (C.Drummond, personal communication, May 27, 2005)

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John Romeril wanted to work with his Japanese colleague, a puppeteer, when he looked for the material that turned into *Miss Tanaka*. Themes that were emerging in the text appealed to both of them for exploration on the stage: men and women against the weather; the weather against humanity; the incidence of cyclones and monsoonal rain; the pearling industry being a ‘life and death’ industry:

The physical damage that people often sustained was pretty horrendous. So people who limp, people who are missing the odd limb, people whose breathing was shockingly affected... I happen to think that’s the stuff the theatre can do well. . (J. Romeril, personal communication, January 6, 2005)

Pamela Sterling said she challenged herself and found ways to make stories and scripts really theatrical as a contrast to what she termed the ‘Disneyfication’ of many well-known stories. She wrote scripts with strong directorial concepts in mind:

For instance, *The Secret Garden* uses the nineteenth century convention of a live chamber orchestra to provide underscoring and a flute ‘voice’ for the robin character. *The Ugly Duckling* is set in Japan and calls for Kabuki techniques and origami influenced puppets. *Little House on the Prairie* also calls for a live band and lots of songs mentioned by Laura Ingalls in the book. In *Nate the Great* the neighbourhood kids play kind of a chorus who also transform themselves into trees and playgrounds, and also makes use of puppets. (P. Sterling, personal communication, March 8, 2005).

Desiring to Bring Stories to a New, Wider Audience

Chris Drummond said that one of the reasons he wanted to do *Night Letters* was that for him the book wasn’t complete and that he wasn’t able to access, through feeling, what some of the characters went through – he understood it intellectually, and acknowledged Dessaix’s ability as a writer to bring interest to profound subjects without cliché:

...we wanted to take the book’s starting point to go in a new direction because there were questions, at least there were for me, that weren’t answered by the book and I was inspired by that... There has to be a much deeper reason for taking a novel onto the stage and it’s got something to do with what the novel doesn’t say that the theatre might reveal. (C. Drummond, personal communication, May 27, 2005).

Greg Lissaman felt the book *The Lost Thing* couldn’t be pinned on one particular age group and had something for everyone. He thought it was like *Animal Farm* in the sense it was a children’s fable – on the surface it was a children’s book but it had meaning beyond the experiences of children:

So we put things all through that show that would require them to ask the parents or adults ‘what was that? Why was that there?’ Those things that we didn’t want to explain fully... we just wanted to spark their curiosity so they had to ask someone. So theatre becomes the spark of discussion as opposed to the end point. (G. Lissaman, personal communication, October 15, 2005).

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Lack of Gutsy Material in Original Playwriting

Gutsy writing could be considered writing that ‘says it like it is’. In a recent New York Times book review, S. Kirk Walsh (2007) described an author as “a bold writer who goes straight for the aorta. He is in the business of making his readers laugh and cry.” It was this feeling or attitude in writing that the theatre artists lamented was missing from much contemporary playwriting.

Chris Drummond commented that as a director of theatre he was ‘hungry’ for writers to have dynamic vision, but, he lamented, there are very few plays that demonstrate this. For him, this meant he wanted to work more with writers, whether of fiction or other forms, in order to create his works.

Tom Wright said that he had grown tired of seeing the ‘crisis of funding’ on the Australian stage where the size of casts were reduced, which resulted in ‘endless unconvincing plays... doing what other art forms could do better.’ This led to his decision to adapt *The Odyssey*. Wright said he felt that in order to adapt or translate classics for the stage a new, more robust way of writing was necessary.

Commissions for Specific Companies

John Romeril created adaptations of novels as commissioned works for specific companies. His adaptation of *Jonah* by Louis Stone was created for the Sydney Theatre Company and particularly for a Sydney audience. Romeril also talked about an adaptation of a John Marsden short story that looked, minute by minute, at a labour dispute, for the Melbourne Workers Theatre – who, he said, took their work very seriously representing the Unions.

In 2005 Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne, produced a season of adaptations that included *Alias Grace* and *The Black Swan of Trespass*. Two Australian Broadcasting Corporation programs, one radio and another television, also discussed the rise in the number of adapted works for live performance. The radio program was an episode of *The Deep End* (April 5, 2006) where the presenter claimed that adapting novels for the stage was “a popular pastime.”

Attraction to Language or Images

Laurence Strangio said that he was immediately attracted to *Alias Grace*, and on the very first page he felt the language was ‘great’. The book used a first person narrative and he felt it was strongly dramatic, and this gave him an avenue to explore.

John Collins felt that it wasn’t only because *The Great Gatsby* was a popular novel that it was chosen for adaptation for the stage, but that it was a ‘great story, great writing.’

...the language has a beautiful economy to it. It seems to me like one of the great accomplishments of the novel is the economy of the language. That’s what struck me when I first read it, how individual sentences, they can be very beautifully and simply constructed and the way the story is told, in this beautiful way. Some of the ways more dramatic things that happen, happen entirely in-between the sentences. (J. Collins, personal communication, January 11, 2005).

Collins explained that this was a special novel for other reasons as well: it was in first person narrative, which gave them the opportunity to have an actor be someone who is both the reader of the book as well as a character in it; also, it is a short novel, but not too short, and because they were reading it in its entirety the audience would make the commitment and feel that they also had accomplished something at the end of the performance.

An Example

Perhaps the best way to illustrate all the reasons given by the theatre artists is through the example of *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini. Wynn Handman, Artistic Director of American Place Theatre, was working on this adaptation when the interview for this research was taking place.

- Popular culture, or themes that are in fashion: Wynn Handman's theatre company in New York was so well known for adaptations that publishers send them novels to review in the hope they would be taken up for a production and be the type of novel that fulfilled the company's mission. *The Kite Runner* was a highly popular choice for the company to adapt – the novel was on the New York Times bestseller list for over two years.
- Social comment: The novel is about contemporary Afghanistan and portrays the relationship of two boys – one a privileged Pashtun, the other a Hazara servant – with the backdrop of 1970s Afghanistan in turmoil. USA Today reviewer, Craig Wilson, called it a 'haunting morality tale set in Afghanistan and California, covering nearly 40 years.' (Wilson, 2005)
- Sympathy or understanding about how people live: Khaled Hosseini, the author of *The Kite Runner*, thanked The American Place Theatre for their adaptation – "stage has always been a powerful medium for story telling... the story of Amir and Hassan, two boys who lived in my mind and are dear to my heart" gives the audience a clear comment on how life would have been for young boys living through Afghanistan's turmoil.
- Shedding light on an aspect of the novel: The American Place Theatre production of *The Kite Runner* takes place on a stage that is bare except for a stool draped with a piece of Afghani cloth. Authentic Afghan rubab music is played before and after the show. These added elements cannot be experienced in the same way through the novel.
- Bringing stories to a new, wider audience: American Place Theatre package their productions into educational products available for schools and other educational institutions in order to give students a new form of access to literature by 'bringing to life the world of the book with performances that create an atmosphere of discovery and spark the imagination.'
- Lack of gutsy material in playwrighting: The Washington Post Book World says parts of *The Kite Runner* are raw and excruciating to read, yet the book in its entirety is lovingly written. American Place Theatre did not shy away from the 'gutsy' parts when Wynn Handman adapted it for performance, including a pivotal point in the novel where the protagonist of the novel, Amir, watches his best friend get raped by the antagonist, Assef.

- Commissions for specific companies: Even though *The Kite Runner* was not specifically commissioned, American Place Theatre did create a gala event with the performance as the central focus. The company awarded the writer with a Literature to Life award and call the event ‘Finding Afghanistan in our American Place Theatre’. The evening included Afghan music and was sponsored by the New York Society for Ethical Culture.
- Attraction to language and images: When Wynn Handman talked about what text he would include in his adapted script for *The Kite Runner* he didn’t cut out descriptive passages:

The work is written by a fine writer, and you can just sail with it because the language is so rich and filled with images. Its really good, and it puts you right there. (W. Handman, personal communication, March 17, 2005).

Conclusion

Adapting novels for live performance is a regular practice by theatre artists, and they recounted similar reasons for using literature as the basis for their theatre-making. It was very interesting to find these common responses to the question of ‘why’ adapt – all the theatre artists had different processes in the way they worked with the material, and the productions resulted in varied styles and types of theatre, however, this article has presented the commonality of purpose in turning to literature as a fertile source for performance creation.

“We strive to respond to the needs of our time with work that is relevant and cuts deeply into the fabric of American society.” (W. Handman, personal communication, March 17, 2005).

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