# ADAPTING NOVELS FOR THE STAGE: NEW CLOTHES OR NEW EMPERORS?

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## *Abstract*

Adaptation has played a role in the evolution of artistic civilisation from ancient times—be it prose to stage, or poem to play, or translation from one language into another language. It has brought with it both practical and aesthetic dilemmas. Should novelistic adaptation adhere to the principle of "make it new"? Can the stage accord a finer, "truer" meaning to the work from which it was adapted? Or should the play strive to remain loyal to its source, replicating character, story and nuance as proximately as possible, albeit in a different medium?

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The adaptation of novels into theatre has a long history, and not all of it illustrious. Emile Zola's willingness to entrust *L'Assommoir* and *Nana* to the hands of William Busnach, a witty socialite whose previous theatrical works had included *Ali-Baba* and *Fleur de Thé*, is perhaps foremost among the cautionary tales. We may just as readily recite stories of conspicuous success. The recent staging of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* has been met with wide critical approval, and successful stage adaptations of works as diverse as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Thirty Nine Steps*, *The Mousetrap* and *The Woman in Black* all testify to an artistic penchant for staging fiction that remains as buoyant as ever.

That said, the matter of adaptation has raised some interesting controversies and curious caveats. Because of their length or complexity some novels have been deemed unsuitable for stage adaptation. One critic avers that Nicholas Sparks novels "should not be [adapted]**,** ever" ("In Defence of Hatred" 2); another believes that Günter Grass's novel *Tin Drum* should never be the subject of adaptation. John Patterson, with more than a little tongue in his cheek, has demanded a "ten year, worldwide moratorium on adapting novels"—though he does have a rather engaging reason for this. Too many novels nowadays, he argues, are being written and marketed with a stage or cinematic eye in mind and that works to the detriment of great novelistic writing. J. D. Salinger is sometimes mistakenly cited as an example of a novelist who committed himself to the purity of genre, having experienced the 1949 box office flop *My Foolish Heart* which was based on his short story "Uncle Wiggily in Connecticut." He rejected out of hand Elia Kazan's suggestion that *The Catcher in the Rye* could be staged on Broadway (McAllister 1). But Salinger did not have an objection to adaptation, *per se*. He told Sam Goldwyn, for example, that he would allow the adaptation of the novel providing he himself could play the role of Holden--an offer that Goldwyn felt unable to accept (see Maynard 93).

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Few have argued that the principle of transforming a novel into some other art form is an automatic aesthetic travesty and should be avoided altogether. This is hardly surprising. In one form or another, adaptation has played a role in the evolution of artistic civilisation from ancient times—be it prose to stage, or poem to play, or translation from one language into another language. Even so, it has brought with it both practical and aesthetic arguments. To what extent, if at all, should novelistic adaptation adhere to the principle of "make it new," to borrow the title of Ezra Pound's 1934 volume of critical essays on the subject of originality? Can the stage accord a finer, "truer" meaning (as Sartre suggests it does (64-76)) to the work from which it was adapted? Or should the play strive to remain loyal to its source, replicating character, story and nuance as proximately as possible, albeit in a different medium?

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Many of these issues come to the fore when we consider the stage debut of Michael Morpurgo's children's novel *War Horse*, which was adapted by Nick Stafford and opened on 17 October 2007 at the Olivier Theatre in the National Theatre, London. The play captured that holy grail of stage adaptation—near universal artistic acclaim combined with astonishing financial success. The production made use of life-size horse puppets purpose-made by the Handspring Puppet Company of Cape Town, South Africa. The achievements of the play have been recognised by a string of design awards, including the Olivier Award, the Evening Standard Theatre Award and London Critics' Circle Theatre Award. The adaptation will transfer to Broadway in New York in 2011 and a film will be released in 2011 or 2012 under the directorship of Stephen Spielberg.

Nick Stafford's adaptation of *War Horse* can in some sense be viewed as an endeavour to "make it new." The most obvious "newness" is the revision of audience level—the novel is essentially a children's work, aimed at the 10-14 age range. The play, though still appealing to children as a visual event, is clearly targeted at an adult audience. This transition has been wrought in two ways. Firstly, in the novel the central character and narrator is the horse Joey. For children an animal narrator is entirely plausible, but less so for adults—though there are a number of obvious exceptions, among them George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Anthony Schmitz's *Darkest Desire: the Wolf's Own Tale*. Nick Stafford opted to decentralise the narratorship, shifting it between different characters on the stage and thus avoiding the potential sentimentality and technical difficulty of animal narration. Sentimentality is an accusation that has several times been levelled at the novel though this feels to me a harsh judgement given that the piece was intended as children's fiction.

Secondly, the adaptation has redefined the idea of "a horse." Though Morpurgo's narrating horse is not without its own inventiveness, Nick Stafford's representation of horses through elaborate on-stage puppetry extends the story beyond sentimentality and



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into a curious state of suspended disbelief in which the puppeteers, clearly visible to the audience, deftly capture the animal's quirks of movement and sound, and bring forward a sense of nobility and integrity. It is a remarkable achievement and, in its power, transcends the novel, perhaps because the breathtaking artistry required to replicate the nuance of a horse somehow melds with the splendour of the animal itself. While a reader finishes Morpurgo's novel aware of its anti-war sentiments and touched by a sense of equine pathos, an audience leaves a performance of Stafford's *War Horse* awed by the dextrous artistic skills of the puppeteers and riveted by the notion of having witnessed an extraordinary theatrical spectacle. The focus is on the noble splendour of the horse, and the mechanical ingenuity demanded to enliven that splendour, rather than on the pathos and tragedy of the horse.

The sense of spectacle is important, and can be pressed a little further. While for most of us reading a novel is a process of quiet internalisation, theatre promotes a more obvious sense of visualisation and externalisation. It could be argued that the very processes of theatrical production make it inevitable that a play will "write new" the novel upon which it is based and, with this very point in mind, Nick Stafford identifies the fundamental difference between the novel and the play as creative pieces of art. In a 2010 interview he points to a contrast between the very intimate process of writing a novel (his own novel, *Armistice*, having gone to print in the same year) and the collaborative construction of a play like *War Horse*:

> In theatre … there are other artists who mediate between the writer and the audience. Actors, designers, lighting designers, costume designers, sound designers, composers and the directors who oversee it all are responsible for how your story looks, sounds and to some extent feels.

The difference between this process and the novelistic art is stark. In *The Art of Hunger* Paul Auster expresses his admiration for storytelling in fiction, suggesting that the unembellished narrative leaves space for the reader's imagination to shape the story to his or her own predilections. By inhabiting this space, the text functions as "springboard of imagination" (298), inviting the reader to finish it and make it his or her own. The creation of the play, as Nick Stafford avers, is a much more composite process. Many hands and minds and eyes lend themselves to a production and the outcome is a communal artistic creation, distantly indebted to the original creation but assuming a life and dynamic of its own. When people discuss the stage version of the *War Horse* their first discursive port of call is inevitably the genius of the mechanical horse puppets and of the men and women who manipulate them. This feature of the play is entirely extraneous to the novel and represents an absolute departure from the limits of the original—to the point where the adapted stage play *becomes* an "original" in its own right.

Because the adaptive process, in this respect, demands a much broader, wider eclectic artistic input than the original novel, what role, if any, can or should the novelist



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have in the adaptive process? Michael Gerard Bauer's *The Running Man*, one of Australia's most respected and influential novels of the last twenty years, was written in the wake of the Vietnam war and describes the failed re-assimilation of an veteran into Australian society. In 2010, the novel was adapted into a play by Moira Arthurs and performed by redfoot theatre [sic—no capitalisations) at the Stowe Theatre in Perth, Western Australia. The novelist, Michael Gerard Bauer, accepted an invitation to attend a performance of the play but, aside from granting permission for Arthurs to adapt the play, had no input into the script—in fact, he had not even seen the script or discussed its contents with the playwright/director. How would he react?

Arthurs has spoken about the challenges and inevitabilities of turning a fairly lengthy novel into a ninety minute theatrical piece:

> The truth is that any dramatist has to condense. There is no time to follow a linear narrative on stage; the theatrical space has to double up on meaning—images have to work concurrently, simultaneously. In a sense, for the drama to capture the essence of the novel—and "essence" is really what I was looking for—stage episodes have to capture a greater density of meaning. (Interview, 28 November 2010.)

Arthurs' *modus operandi* could be seen in the production's extensive use of cyclorama images which commonly offered visual stills and video clips as foils to the action on the stage. So, for example, while the performers enacted a 1960s party scene, the cyclorama interposed their merriment with images of war and suffering—a statement of the ambivalent tenor of the 1960s which positions it as both the best of times and the worst of times. This temporal coincidence of viewpoints is a ready possibility for the stage but a relatively difficult achievement for all but the most accomplished of novelists—those, for example, who are able deftly to underlay the surface topography of their narrative with deeper currents of irony.

While Arthurs was able to develop simultaneous and complex layers of meaning in the production, there were some aspects of the novel that she had to omit. Bauer's extended image of a lizard, which provided the novel with one of its seminal metaphorical arteries, was entirely removed from the play. Arthurs explains that "[N]ot everything can be included. The lizard is a beautiful metaphor for the novel but I judged that if I tried to pursue it on stage, it might come across rather crudely, bereft of the subtleties that the measured narrative of the novel, drawn out of hundreds of pages, had so beautifully achieved." Whatever the case, Arthurs' stage adaptation worked its magic and Bauer stood up at the end of the performance to deliver a generous and emotional vote of appreciation to the adaptor/director and the performers. In his praise of the production, Bauer spoke of the newness and surprise that the performance had brought to him—an acknowledgement that the play and the novel were different but related works of art.



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Whether Michael Gerard Bauer would have wanted a role in the adaptive process, had it been offered, is unclear. Intriguingly, the novelist Dennis Lehane has suggested that while he has no objection to the adaptation of his novels, he would not wish to play any part in that process:

> I'll adapt other stuff, but adapting my own work, I would have no perspective whatsoever. To me it's like a doctor operating on his own child. I just don't know how anybody could do it. Some people do it, and they do it wonderfully, but I'm not that guy.

But what does Lehane mean by "perspective"? The paternal comparison he uses of a doctor operating on his own child perhaps gives us a clue. In what sense would a doctor lack perspective in that particular situation? Presumably in an emotional sense—in a level of involvement with a subject that questions whether particular judgements could be made without the intrusion of extraneous feelings and considerations. In a different context, Paul Levinson has called this the "first love syndrome." By this, Levinson refers to the emotional attachments a reader feels with a novel, an attachment that can serve to negate unduly the achievements of a later adaptation. But the phrase can equally serve to summate the emotional attachment any novelist must feel towards his initial creation, and the inevitable trepidity with which he or she regards the challenge of translating success in one medium to success in another.

The question must arise: with so many dramatists producing new works, and striving for a "hearing" for their primary source scripts, why is it that anything has to be adapted at all? Naturally enough, the financial inducements for adapting successful novels into successful plays is clear enough. In the two runs of *War Horse*, London's National Theatre gleaned a profit in excess of £12 million—a figure eclipsing any other production in the last decade. There can also be political reasons. During Estonia's period of nation liberation (1918-1920), the authorities encouraged the adaptation of stalwart novels—by nationalistic writers like Anton Tammsaare, August Gailit, Albert Kivikas, and Oskar Luts—in order to tap into a wave of populist sentiment (Gassner and Quinn, eds. 251-252). The intention here was not to change the content or implications of the original novels but, rather, to give the messages of those novels broader currency through the popular stage. This was not a matter of "writing new" the old novels but, rather, of giving the emperor new and more populist clothes.

A similar theatrical impulse was discernible in the run-up to Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule in 1997, with a string western novels finding themselves dressed up in eastern apparel. I recall, for example, Kit Mang Drama group's stage adaptation of *Death in Venice* and the Hong Kong Students' Federation stage rendering of *Tale of Two Cities* which dramatised the flight of students from Beijing to Hong Kong after the Tiananmen incident. Benny Chia's play *Living Up To Expectations* was another memorable example, reworking Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*, a work beloved of many a Hong



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Kong Chinese student. Set in 1900 Hong Kong, Pip becomes a rather naïve New Territories boy—the New Territories being that part of Hong Kong that border's mainland China. Miss Haversham is transformed by Chia into the daughter of a wealthy taipan (Hong Kong parlance for a tycoon); and Estella becomes a Eurasian brought up as English, with numerous and often absurd English mannerisms. In one of the play's memorable scenes, Estella rebukes Pip, suggesting "I don't think you have ever eaten with a knife and fork, have you?"

Chia's attempt to demonstrate that east-west theatre had a socially useful place in Hong Kong society succeeded to a degree—but, as I have suggested already, it was an indigenous reworking of a western classic rather than a recasting or recreation of that classic. The parallels between the western original and the indigenous rewriting are fairly meticulously preserved, as is, I would suggest, the social commentary of the original story. This kind of theatre, rather like the Estonian nationalistic theatre, has a temporal resonance but not a great deal more. The adaptation of western novels was relevant in the run-up to 1997 because it tapped into the intense sense of east-west fusion that permeated almost every aspect of the colony's life in the run up to the 1997 handover to China. As Hong Kong, and its theatre, have found greater confidence after 1997, the tendency for stage adaptations of western novels has waned and a new wave of dramatists, offering original plays and original ideas, has crashed excitingly on Hong Kong's theatrical shoreline.

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The fashion of adapting novels for the stage has spawned a generation of "How To" books and shows no sign of falling into abeyance. This need not necessarily be a cause for alarm and may even be a healthy sign that creative processes are alive and well. The convenient compartmentalisation of genres, albeit useful to university students and their tutors, always risks erecting unhelpful barriers between this work and that. The translation of a novel into a stage play, or *vice versa*, provides in itself an intriguing study on the nature of the artistic process. There is an undeniable and complex artistry in the adaptation of novels, an artistry that is most evident when it is lacking in those impoverished adaptations that, from time to time, find their on to the boards. Nick Stafford's *War Horse* reveals the adaptive art at its zenith, offering a work clearly inspired by its original but one that is in itself original, reaching for new meanings and crossing new artistic boundaries. Not every adaptation can or needs to be as groundbreaking as Stafford's production but it seems to me that for an adaptation to find an enduring place in the artistic canon, it needs to offer difference and newness—and difference and newness not simply of "clothing" but of substance. Only by journeying a sufficient space from its original, and by capturing the intimate nuances of its genre, can the adaptive piece establish its own lasting integrity as a singular piece of art.



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