

From Page to Stage

On the adaptation of a novel for the theatre

A novel lives only when it is read. If no one reads it, it dies and joins the multitude of literary corpses that lie buried in the graveyard named Out of Print. But unlike the human dead, it doesn't have to wait till the Day of Judgement for its resurrection. It can be brought back to life at any time by someone stumbling serendipitously across a copy, per-haps stored in the bowels of a library or on the dusty shelves of a second-hand shop or, increasingly, via the internet, and discovering in that forgotten book a reviving pleasure.

But what then?

One reader isn't enough to keep a novel going. It needs a sustaining community. And how is that brought about? By talk. Books are read because people talk and write about them. Gossip between friends, reviews, literary criticism, school and academic study, television, radio, newspaper and internet attention – blogs, tweets, Face-book, and whatever other social networks the future brings us. These are the connections, one person to another, that generate interest in a novel.

Talk creates readers and readers keep novels alive. If the talk and the reading continue long after the author's death the book becomes a classic. I know of no other satisfactory definition of a classic than this.

But there is another aspect, which is also important (perhaps even vital) to a novel's continued life and to its status with readers. Adaptation. Its conversion, its reworking into other narrative forms – theatre, film, TV and radio dramas, graphic art, opera, ballet. Adaptation gives a novel a second, parallel life, and adds different possible interpretations of its story to those that readers have already constructed from the original text. Adaptation adds value and richness to the life of a novel. What's more, it's after enjoying an adaptation that many people feel impelled to read the novel for the first time. Adaptation creates readers.

One form of adaptation I haven't mentioned is trans-lation into another language. We don't think of translating as adapting, but it is. The translator has to make many decisions about meaning of such importance that a trans-lation is an act of interpretation. Because of this, it is another version, a linguistic and therefore a cultural adapt-ation. A translation is a companion of the original, not a clone.

I want to concentrate on the adaptation of a novel to a play, from page to stage, as an example of some of the differences, problems, gains and losses involved.

The book is my novel *The Toll Bridge (De Tolbrug)*. The adaptation was made for performance in Dutch.

To begin with, then, there is my original: the text I wrote and published by The Bodley Head, UK, in 1992.

Then there is the Dutch edition, translated by Rob Scholten and published by Querido in 1993.

Though a translation is an adaptation, it retains the same form as the original. It is a printed book, a novel that attempts to remain as true as possible to the spirit and intention of the story,

if not the literal meaning, and to be as close as possible to the page-by-page procedure of the original.

In other words the two books are the same kind of artefact.

The Dutch edition was read by Dirk Terryn, a teacher at Xaverius College in Antwerp. He liked it so much he passed it on to an ex-pupil, Robby Cleiren, who had recently graduated from theatre school and was starting out on a career as an actor. He liked it so much he dis-cussed with Dirk the possibility of turning the story into a play. They shared the book with two other young actors, Sofie Sente and Pieter Embrecht, who said they'd be interested in taking part in a stage version. Dirk set up a production company, Ibycus, in order to put the project on a professional footing.

Their next step was to invite me to write the script. I took this on with some, as it turned out, justified trepidation. To begin with, there is a considerable differ-ence between writing a novel and writing a play adapted from the same story. I'd written plays, but never adapted a novel of my own. The challenge was seductive.

A second problem was that I cannot read or write Dutch. Therefore my script would be in English and would have to be translated to produce a version (another adaptation!) over which I'd have no control or influence.

I met Dirk and the actors and put the problems to them. They persuaded me to go on. They had read the book in both English and Dutch, and each had marked the scenes they thought should be considered for the play.

Their choice of scenes was partly determined by another decision. The story involved nine characters. But for reasons of cost as well as preference, they wanted to restrict the cast to the three central late-teenagers, Jan, Tess and Adam. This meant that

the play would concentrate on only one strand of the story, the relationship between those three characters. This is usual with dramatisations of a complex long novel (as against, for example, a more simply constructed and mono-thematic novella or a short story involving few characters). Already, before a word was written, the play was moving away from a close identification with the novel and becoming something else.

The play was becoming an object in its own right, which happened to use as its raw material, so to speak, the same story as the novel. A play imposes all sorts of limits, which are different from the limits on a novel. Most obviously, it imposes a time limit – ‘the two hours’ traffic of our stage’, as Shakespeare phrased it – whereas the novel can go on for as long as it likes. A play makes key features visible that a novel need not. For example, the appearance of a character in a play is fixed by the appearance of the actor, whereas in a novel this can be left to the reader’s imagination, given a few clues. The same goes for the setting. A play is limited to the physical practicalities of the actors and the technical restrictions of the stage. In a novel a character can age within a sentence but not on a stage, can perform actions which an actor cannot because of his own or the physical limitations of the stage. And so on: the differences are legion.

Adapting a novel for the stage is about selection. Selection of the characters who will appear in the play, selection of scenes that will compose the play’s plot, selection of what to show and what not to show, what to tell and what not to tell. These choices construct an interpretation. When a reader reads a novel she is on her own in the theatre of her imagination as director, actors, set and costume designer. Based of course on the information given in the novel. But even then, a reader selects what she will

attend to – which is why a novel is more or less different during a second and third reading from what it was the first time. But when we watch a play we are witnessing – and enjoying or disliking – other people’s interpretation of the story – their selective ‘reading’ of the novel set before our eyes on the stage.

Which brings me to another difference between a novel and a stage adaptation. The text of a novel is – if you will allow the expression – a sacred text, though secular, not holy, in nature. I mean it is fixed. It is not meant to be altered, rewritten, or changed in any way by the reader. A play is not like that. It is always a working document. Of course, the work of some playwrights deserves to be more closely followed than others because of the precision of the writing. Shakespeare’s plays are an example, so too are Sam Beckett’s and Harold Pinter’s. Actors alter the texts of those scripts at risk of mangling the work of their betters, however good the actors are.

But then, these are established plays by dead play-wrights who cannot be questioned and referred to about possible changes. And it is well understood that a new play by a living author is always a working document that is altered and honed during rehearsals with or without the co-operation of the writer. Another company will take the same text and adjust it again to suit their understanding of the play, perhaps cutting scenes and rephrasing lines. In recent days, for example, the so-called ‘well made’ plays of Noel Coward and Terrence Rattigan have been revived to great acclaim because of the refreshing interpretations discovered by young directors after many years of disdainful neglect.

Creating a novel is a singular, solitary act, the author working on his own. Creating a play is always a collaboration, a team of people working together.

With *De Tolbrug* this was especially the case. I wrote a script in English. The actors weren't happy with it. It was more like a novel than a play. So three of us set about writing another script, Dirk Terryn, Robby Cleiren and myself. We spent eight intense days, first deciding on the scenes to be included, then writing them with the novel text as a base from which to develop the stage version, and also – another frequent necessity of adaptation to the stage – writing new scenes needed in the play to tell the story in stage terms.

A simple example. In the novel a plot-significant moment between two characters can be stated in a sentence. But in a play this might need a passage of dialogue between the two characters for the same essential information to be given to the audience. Similarly, in a novel a description of an action can take a long paragraph, whereas on stage the same event can be acted in a quick movement that takes a couple of seconds.

A great difference between a novel and a play is that a novel can tell us about the interior life of characters – their thoughts, feelings, and even their semi- and unconscious experience. A play is weak in that regard, but strong on exploring the social relations between characters, their lives revealed through what they do and what they say.

As a novel, *De Tolbrug* is mainly concerned with the characters' inner lives. And it includes many stories told as memories or observations. These are the heart of the story. Remove them and you're left with a pedestrian, banal, rather lifeless plot. To be true to the spirit, the intention, and the nature

of the novel, the adaptation had to find a way of dramatising these literary elements. The solution the actors agreed on was of such importance it determined the nature of the whole play. Influenced, I think, by their training in what I believe is called Flemish Wave theatre, as well as by their personal preferences, they went back to the aboriginal roots of theatre, the tradition of oral storytelling. Rather than ignoring the audience they talked directly to it, told the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters when that was necessary, commented on each other, and acted out those parts of the story that could be best shown as action and dialogue. By doing this they drew the audience in, made it part of the play, allowed audience reaction to shape the performance. And in this way they remained true to the novel.

By the time it was finished, the play was recognisably set beside a bridge, recognisably employed characters and scenes to be found in the novel, and was recognisable as an aspect, a particell of the novel. But what it was not was an attempt to represent the whole novel acted out on a stage. It was a work with its own integrity and separate existence, as a play always should be.

This became even more the case when the English script was translated by the actors into Dutch. At this point my writer's authority was sidelined. I couldn't even take part in the rehearsals because it would have been a tedious and inhibiting irritation for the actors to explain to me what was going on as they dug into the text, revised and refined it again and again over two months of rehearsals and gradually shaped it into the play they finally performed. And perhaps this is always true to some extent, even when working in your own language. There is an old joke in

English theatre. If you attend a rehearsal and see someone sitting at the back looking as if he is being slowly murdered, that's the author.

In other words, I became a spectator, a member of the audience only. But let's not underestimate the influence of an audience. This is another difference between a novel and a play. Of course there are some novelists who have in mind a particular readership while they are writing, and tailor their work to suit it. But I don't think literary authors do that. Putting this contentious topic aside for the moment, my point is that *at the time of reading* a published novel, readers have no influence whatever on the story. They cannot change anything about it. The printed text is authorised, and fixed. This is central to a novel's integrity.

On the other hand a play is subject to considerations of the audience. Even when the script is finalised during rehearsals, the reactions of the audience during a performance have an influence. Every actor will tell you that audience reactions cause changes to be made to the script. In that sense a play, and especially a new play, is always a work in progress.

Our first intention with *De Tolbrug* was to make a play for young people. Our assumptions about such an audience influenced the scenes we chose from the book, supposing them to be the ones that would most interest teenagers, many of whom might never have been to the theatre before. And we decided on a playing time of no more than sixty minutes, because we supposed they might not sustain concentration for longer.

But very soon we questioned these decisions. Though I write novels about young people, I have never compromised on language, length, form or content. I do want young people to read

my novels, but I don't write *for* them, in the sense of adjusting what I write to suit assumptions about them or because of sociological research which records what they say they like. I don't think about a readership as I write. So I was uneasy from the start about *De Tolbrug* being moulded to some preconception of the audience.

It quickly became clear that the actors were just as uneasy. So we decided that what we were doing was adapting one thread of the stories in the novel to make a play about three seventeen-year-old characters; that we would approach this task with the same standards and uncompromised aims that we applied to all our work, regardless of who eventually read or viewed it; but that we would advertise the play in such a way as to attract young people as the primary audience, because we felt the story would appeal to them and it might bring in many who had never experienced theatre before.

After that, I don't remember any moment when we limited ourselves or changed anything because it might be too much, too difficult, too unfamiliar, or make too many demands, whether linguistic, emotional or intellectual, for a young audience to understand or endure.

By the time of the premiere, the play ran for one hour fifty minutes. By the last of forty performances it ran for two hours and ten minutes. The extension occurred mainly because of very physical comic business inserted by Pieter Embrecht led on by audience reactions to his inventive humour. An example of the influence of an audience. None of this business was in the script, but it added a humorous flavour that the script lacked. And it did something else. It created a contrast with the more serious and wordy scenes that helped retain and refresh the audience's attention. Shakespeare is of course the greatest exponent of the

use of a comic moment set between, and counterpointing, the serious moments on either side of it. The example usually quoted is the porcine comedy of the drunken Porter placed between the horrific murder of the king and the crisis of its discovery in *Macbeth*.

One more difference between a novel and its adaptation and then I'm done for now.

I haven't mentioned props. In a novel, all kinds of things are mentioned. Sometimes they are simply there to help set a scene. Sometimes they are necessary to the plot – a murder weapon, for example. Sometimes they have symbolic significance. And sometimes they merely assist the illusion of realism. Readers are used to identifying those artefacts that in one way or another contribute to the deeper meanings of a story.

In a play you can't be quite so protean. Whenever an actor uses a prop the instinct in the audience is to assume it has a plot or character significance. Chekhov put it best when he said that if you produce a gun in the first act you'd better make sure you use it by the end of the play. In one of my first plays the father of the main character wore his left forearm in a plaster cast. After the performance quite a few members of the audience told me how appropriate this was, because it perfectly symbolised the fractured relationship the father had with his son. They assumed that the plaster cast was intended as part of the play. In fact, the actor wore the cast only because he'd broken his wrist the day before. Some props do help to create the illusion of reality. But only incompetent writers, directors and actors employ them only for that purpose. Everything that is done and used in a play suggests more significance to an audience than mere verisimilitude.

Redundancy has a place in a novel – asides, digressions down narrative byways, description for the sake of it, passages of meditation or commentary, authorial intrusions. The pleasures of the inconsequential. But there's no place for redundancy in a play. Everything must be consequential, pertinent, and relevant to the plot.

In the adaptation of *De Tolbrug* the use of props was kept to the essentials and only those that contributed to the meaning of the play were used. This quality was inherent also in the set. Stef Stessel's design was beautiful – I use the word strictly – in its minimal perfection. A work of art in its own right. A square, honey-coloured wooden platform surrounded by a moat of water contained in a zinc channel high above which was a zinc gutter from which dripped in gentle and irregular rhythm widely spaced drops of water like a suggestion of rain. In the middle of the wooden platform was what appeared to be a square table made out of hundreds of old books. During one scene, in a delightful coup de theatre, this was turned into a bathtub full of steaming water into which one of the characters was dunked and given a thorough wash.

All of the set was deliciously proportioned. My first thought when I saw it was how closely it resembled the stage of a Japanese Noh theatre. And this influenced the resulting play, because it set the tone, the style of pared-down, carefully shaped, precise and orchestrated use of language and movement. When an audience enters a theatre and sees before it a stage set of such appealing pertinence, and when similarly appropriate music is playing as they take their seats, their state of mind, their attitude to the occasion, their mood, is being prepared for the play they are to see.

Theatre is above all to do with the power of language expertly spoken and the physical presence of the actor. Theatre is a visceral art. Not to put too fine a point on it, it is in the right best sense erotic. No other art so combines body, mind and soul, the down to earth and the spiritually elevated.

A novel is an object made of language presented in book form. It is constant and is there for anyone to read across time and distance. It has self-contained permanence. A play is quite the opposite. It is not the script the writer wrote, nor the play the actors set out to create. Only the play performed on each separate occasion is the object the actors make. It is ephemeral, lasting only the time of performance. This is why the moment at the end of a play when the actors take their bows is so poignant. What we have witnessed, what we have been part of, has already vanished into thin air. It lives only in our memory.

And yet, theatre is the greatest of the arts. Because it incorporates all the other arts. Because it brings together the primary art of language – poetry, prose, conversation, storytelling, facts and fictions – combined with movement, music, and the visual arts of painting, costume, physical objects (which the actors call props), all shaped into a ritual performed on a sacred secular space, the temenos we call a stage. And because a play enacts for us the most profound truths and the slippiest falsehoods of human nature, helping us to make sense of ourselves and other people and what it means to be alive.

Perhaps that was why working with Dirk Terryn and the three wonderful actors, Sofie, Pieter and Robby, was one of the happiest experiences of my professional life. I expect their accounts of what we did together would vary from mine and from each other's, as accounts of shared experience always do. But I think they would agree with most of what I say about the

difference between a novel and its adaptation for the stage. And I am grateful to them for helping keep my novel alive with an afterlife their play created for it.

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