

ADAPTING A PLAY

by Lindsay Price

What steps do you take to turn a work of fiction into a stage play?

Copyright

If what you want to adapt is in the public domain, then you can adapt the work without obtaining permission. Make sure though! Just because an author is deceased doesn't mean their work is free reign. If it's literature written in the 20th century onward, assume you need to make inquiries.

What Do You Want To Do?

That's the first question to ask: What do you want to explore with the original work? What do you want to present? What's the audience experience? What's the most important part? It's impossible to put a Dickens novel word for word in a play. So, what's your approach? What style of play do you want to stage? Are you going to change the time period? Do a modern version? Do an abstract version? The more you can envision the final product, the easier the process will be along the way. If you know what you want, it's easier to make changes and cut.

Become an Expert

Know the original work inside and out. Become an expert. Read it once, twice, keep reading. Read *about* the work. Highlight anything in the work that leaps out at you as a theatrical image. Also highlight the character and story elements. Be able to talk about the characters and the story at



the drop of a hat. Character and story will become the backbone of your play.

Exercise

Assuming you're adapting a novel as a class, divide the class into groups and assign each group a character. The groups must find everything there is to know about the character. Then they must present a scene or a performance piece (it's important that the presentation be theatrical) that showcases their character.

When to be Faithful

If you're dealing with something familiar to your audience, give them the parts of the work they know. Can you imagine a version of *HAMLET* without "To be or not to be?" Or *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* without the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future? You never want to take your audience out of the world of the play by missing something.

Go through the work with two different coloured highlighters. Mark what's essential for the story and then what's essential for the audience. Finally with a pencil (so you can change your mind) mark what can be cut without hurting either.

Continued Over...



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The Fine Print

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When to Change

There will be changes. There must be changes. It's one thing to be faithful but a play is not a book. What works in one medium will not work in another. For example, descriptive passages do not work on the stage. Neither do narrators.

What you change depends heavily on what you've decided your final product is going to look like. If you're doing a modern version of **ROMEO AND JULIET** then you're not going to be using Shakespeare's original language. If you want to do an all-female version of **MOBY DICK** the text has to reflect this choice.

No Narrators!

When going from prose to play form it's tempting to throw in a narrator to fill in plot points and descriptions. Resist the urge! Narrators are one-dimensional talking heads, not fleshed-out characters.

If you *must* include one, it can't be because you're unable to figure out how to tell the story. Make the narrator three-dimensional. Give them a name, give them a purpose in the play beyond sharing information. Give them a want, an obsession, a flaw. Take narration to a new theatrical level.

Write the Play

Finally, once you've highlighted, become an expert, cut, changed, and stricken the narrator, it's time to write the play! Remember above all else that this is a play. Plays depend on the actions and reactions of

the characters. Don't have your characters standing around spouting pages of text!

Adaptations can be fun to write and illuminate the original work. It's always interesting to look at a piece of literature from a different point of view. 🍷