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EDITORIAL

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‘Telling the tale’: Adaptation as interpretation

ABSTRACT

The introduction considers the adaptations of stage musicals from previously existing source material as acts of cultural translation, operating through intricately interwoven intertexts of narrative meaning in myths, folk tales, fairy tales, prose fiction, poetry and films across a wide spectrum of cultures and languages. One of the key questions problematized is the common sense idea of fidelity to the original source material; it is however logically impossible for an adaptation to be faithful to its source as all adaptation involves interpretative decisions so that even the simplest translation from one medium to another is a hermeneutic act. Rather than focusing exclusively on the technical differences between media, the articles in this volume address adaptations of sources for the musical stage as interpretations.

KEYWORDS

adaptation
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genre
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The majority of musicals currently running on Broadway and in the West End have been adapted from already existing material: of the nineteen playing in New York in January 2015, eleven are adaptations from various sources;¹ this trend is even more pronounced in London where fourteen out of 23 musical theatre productions are based on novels, plays or movies.² Among the remaining original shows, three and four, respectively, are jukebox musicals that are based on the life story and/or back catalogue of famous pop composers, singers or bands.³

1. In alphabetical order, these are: *Aladdin*, *Cabaret*, *Chicago*, *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, *Honeymoon in Vegas*, *Kinky Boots*, *Les Misérables*, *The Lion King*, *Matilda*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Wicked*.

2. *Billy Elliot, Cats, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, The Commitments, Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, Les Misérables, The Lion King, Made in Dagenham, Matilda, Miss Saigon, Once, The Phantom of the Opera, Wicked and Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown.*
3. In New York: *Beautiful, The Jersey Boys and Mamma Mia!*; in London: *The Jersey Boys, Mamma Mia!, Sunny Afternoon and Thriller Live.*

A number of those shows that have been adapted constitute only one of multiple adaptations of their source material: four (*Cabaret, Chicago, Les Misérables* and *Matilda*) followed one or more film versions of the novels and plays they are based on; another three productions (*Aladdin, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *The Phantom of the Opera*) are one of several musical theatre adaptations.

One obvious reason why so many classic novels have been musicalized more than once is that many of them are in the public domain, so no licensing fees are required; another, that they have title recognition. Another outstanding feature of those literary works are their well-delineated, memorable characters and the often dramatic way they interact, which may be even more attractive to adaptors in the area of theatre and film 'than the overarching themes of the novel in question' (Whelehan 1999: 8). The recent boom in screen-to-stage adaptations is even easier to explain as most of these musicals have been produced by media corporations that own the rights to the films these shows are based on, like Disney or Dreamworks, which both have now their own firmly established business branches to develop their back catalogue into theatrical properties (Disney Theatre Productions and Dreamworks Theatricals, respectively).

Business considerations aside, it is nonetheless striking how many composers, lyricists and librettists have chosen to transform the same artistic source with greatly varying outcomes, proving James M. Welsh's point that '[t]he whole process of adaptation is like a round or circular dance. The best stories and legends, the most popular histories and mysteries, will constantly be told and retold ...' (2007: xxv).

What follows is an incomplete list of novels, plays and movies that have been adapted more than once in the field of music(al) theatre. This chronological list is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, but is included here only to indicate the pervasiveness of adapted material throughout the international musical:

- There are numerous 'straight' musical versions of the fairy tale *Cinderella*; on film these include for instance Disney's *Cinderella* (Geronimi/Jackson/Luske 1950) and *The Slipper and the Rose* (Forbes 1976, score by Richard M. and Robert B. Sherman). Among the made-for-television adaptations one should muster Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella* (Nelson 1957, Dubin 1965 and Iscove 1997, which in turn was revised as a stage musical in 2013) and *Cindy* (Graham 1978; score by Stan Daniels), while the stage adaptations range from *Mr Cinders* (1929; Vivian Ellis) and *Cindy-Ella, or, I Gotta Shoe* (1962; Caryl Brahms and Ned Sherrin) to *Soho Cinders* (2012; George Stiles and Anthony Drewe).
- *Aladdin* has received at least two major musical treatments: the TV adaptation with a Cole Porter score (Nelson 1958) and the animated cartoon with its Alan Menken and Howard Ashman/Tim Rice songs (Clements/Musker 1992), with the latter recently (in March 2014) also having been transposed into a stage musical.
- Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838) has not only been brought to the screen to great acclaim by directors David Lean (1948) and Roman Polanski (2005), but has also inspired Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* as well as the freely adapted Walt Disney animated cartoon musical, *Oliver & Company* (Scribner 1988).
- Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) in turn has been musicalized by both Leslie Bricusse (*Scrooge*, Neame 1970) and Alan Menken/Lynn Ahrens (*A Christmas Carol*, 1995).

- *The Three Musketeers* (1844) by Alexandre Dumas was adapted with a Rudolf Friml/P.G. Wodehouse/Clifford Grey score (1928); in addition, there is the 2001 version by George Stiles and Paul Leigh and the Dutch retelling by Ferdi and Bob Bolland (2003).
- Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883) may be most widely known as a Disney cartoon (Sharpsteen/Luske 1940), yet it has also been turned into a 1976 TV musical with Danny Kaye and Sandy Duncan (directed by Ron Field and Sid Smith, with songs by Billy Barnes) and a second TV musical with a score by Stephen Schwartz focusing on *Geppetto* (Moore 2000). The latest incarnation is an Italian musical (2003) with songs by pop group I Pooh.
- Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is the foundation of the last (unfinished) collaboration of Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson (1950) as well as several film adaptations including one with three songs by Burton Lane and Alan Jay Lerner (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Curtiz 1960), a full-blown screen musical (*Huckleberry Finn*, Thompson 1974) with a score by the Sherman brothers, and Roger Miller’s multiple Tony-Award winning *Big River* (1985).
- J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan, the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow up* (1904) is the source for a film musical (the Disney version, Geronimi/Jackson/Luske 1953), a TV musical (Hemion 1976, score by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley, with Danny Kaye and Mia Farrow), and several stage musical incarnations by Leonard Bernstein (1950), Jule Styne/Betty Comden/Adolph Green/Moose Charlap/Carolyn Leigh (1954), George Stiles and Anthony Drewe (1996) and Piers Chater-Robinson (2003). It is also extensively referenced in the screen-to-stage adaptation of *Finding Neverland* (2014; Gary Barlow).
- Gaston Leroux’s *The Phantom of the Opera* (1909) led to musical treatments by Ken Hill (*Phantom of the Opera*, 1976/1984), Andrew Lloyd Webber/Charles Hart/Richard Stilgoe (1986) and Maury Yeston/Arthur Kopit (*Phantom*, 1991).
- Joseph Moncure March’s 1928 poem *The Wild Party* was musicalized in the same year (2000) by both Andrew Lippa and Michael John LaChuisa.
- Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* (1936) has been brought to the stage as *Scarlett* (1970) with a score by Harold Rome, as *Autant En Emporte le Vent* (2003; Gérard Prescurvic), and in a 2008 adaptation (*Gone with the Wind*) with songs by Margaret Martin.
- Ernst Lubitsch’s 1940 *The Shop around the Corner* – itself based on a play by Nikolaus Laszlo – is the source material for the MGM film musical *In the Good Old Summertime* (Leonard 1949) and the Sheldon Harnick/Jerry Bock Broadway show *She Loves Me* (1963).

Considering the vast array of styles and sensibilities on display in these and other adaptations it becomes evident that there is clearly more than just one way and certainly no single ‘correct’ approach to adapt a previously existing work. In ‘The Death of the Author’, Roland Barthes proposed over 50 years ago that ‘a text is not a line of words releasing a single “theological” meaning of the Author-God but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash’ (1977: 146). Transposition from one medium to another therefore always involves a complex set of negotiations with the variety of intertexts activated by the source text.

The most widespread misconception about the process of adaptation of a work from one medium to another is the myth that the adaptation should

be faithful to its source. While this is not only impossible (a two-hour screen adaptation of a 1000-page novel cannot by definition be 'faithful' to the tome), it also ignores the factor of interpretation that determines any reading of an artistic work.

In Linda Hutcheon's words:

All [...] adapters relate stories in their different ways. They use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualise or concretise ideas; they make simplifying selections, but also amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect, and so on.

(2006: 3)

Adaptation is always an act of interpretation, and judgements on the success of the adaptation will always involve a comparative interpretation of the source text in the light of an interpretation of the adaptation. The notion of fidelity does however retain a certain purchase on the act of transposition from one medium to another: as Aragay suggests, 'while fidelity cannot be considered a valid yardstick with which to judge any adaptation, adaptation studies cannot afford to ignore the institutional and performative nature of the discourse of fidelity as found above all in reviews' (2005: 20).

If the act of translating a text from one language to another involves a great deal of interpretation and artistic judgement, how much more so does the activity of re-reading and transforming texts from one context (medium or culture) to another. J. Dudley Andrew has pointed out that:

Adaptation [...] is a cultural practice; specific adaptations need to be approached as acts of discourse partaking of a particular era's cultural and aesthetic needs and pressures, and such an approach requires both 'historical labor and critical acumen'.

(1980: 16–17)

Each act of adaptation involves a new cultural appropriation of the original text, and old texts are kept alive in the contemporary cultural imaginary through these very acts of appropriation.

Too often, however, success or failure of any adaptation is defined narrowly either in terms of box-office receipts or critical acclaim (Bluestone 1957: 62). As indicators of artistic achievement both criteria are problematic. Far more illuminating is the exploration of the shifts in emphasis that come about as the result of sociocultural factors that affect the process of adapting any material in different countries, for any theatre system, and in any era – or simply as an expression of different artistic temperaments, attitudes and ideologies. Orr has pointed out that

the 'successful adaptation' [...] is] the adaptation that fits in with the generally-held perception of the source text at a given time. In this light, fidelity remains of interest only insofar as "lapses of fidelity" – the changes that occur in the passage from literary to filmic text [...] provide clues to the ideology embedded in the [filmic] text.

(1984: 73)

It wasn't until the 1950s and 1960s that what today is called adaptation studies became established in academic debate and discourse (Aragay 2005: 11). Then as now adaptation studies often focuses more or less exclusively on

page-to-screen adaptations or – in the area of music(al) theatre studies – on page-to-stage or stage-to-screen transfers. There have been many illuminating accounts of how a specific drama or film has been transformed into a Broadway or West End show, usually expounding on the differences between the source and its musical version resulting from the particular demands of each genre or medium.⁴ In considering transpositions from novel into film, Imelda Whelehan warns of the complicated web of cultural and industrial factors that are invoked:

[A]ny critical consideration of an adaptation’s reception might benefit from recognising some of the practical realities involved in producing a commercially successful film – such as pruning culturally anachronistic features, trimming sophisticated narrative strategies into a recognisable popular film genre which is, in turn, an adaptation of older films, with intertextual links with its contemporary counterparts.

(Whelehan 1999: 4)

Yet the subject has certainly far more dimensions than the ones already mentioned, as even a cursory look at the history of the stage and movie musical reveals. For example, attention may also be paid to the way an adaptation constitutes an *interpretation* of the material, as becomes evident whenever one compares different retellings of the same story.

This special issue of *Studies in Musical Theatre* offers four examples of a comparative approach to *several* adaptations of the same source material in order to identify variations in reading the original. By setting three or more versions side by side, parallels, disparities and changes emerge that reflect social mores, cultural codes and individual aesthetic values. As Linda Hutcheon points out: ‘Neither the product nor the process of adaptation exist in a vacuum: they all have a context – a time and a place, a society and a culture’ (Hutcheon 2006: xiv).

Two of the essays in this volume explore how fairy tale tropes have resurfaced repeatedly in musical theatre: In ‘Clothes Make an Awful Difference in a Girl’ Maya Cantu compares three works that transpose Charles Perrault classic *Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper* (1697) into the world of fashion, a setting popular mainly because it allows for spectacular production values with regard to costumes. The world of haute couture is exemplified by two of the most famous cities to define women’s chic, Paris (*Mlle. Modiste*, 1905) and New York (*Irene*, 1919); the film musical *Funny Face* (Donen 1957) – produced by Paramount, but looking and sounding like a prime example of 1950s MGM – covers both cities by beginning in the American metropolis and then moving to the French capital.

Confirming John M. Desmond’s and Peter Hawkes’ claim that ‘the technical, narrative, stylistic, historical, and spectatorial contexts [are] important in understanding the differences between text and adaption’ (Desmond and Hawkes 2006: 4), Cantu demonstrates through close readings of the three subjects the ways in which the 1905 operetta, the 1919 Broadway musical and the 1957 movie musical ‘vary in their adaptive strategies, contexts, and interpretations’, even if all of them maintain the theme of upward mobility and self-improvement via self-invention in the main character of the shop girl.⁵ The three retellings are also similar in carefully avoiding the reduction of their respective ‘Cinderellas’ to the traditional passive female of patriarchy, patiently waiting to be rescued by a Prince Charming. Instead each of the

4. Some examples can be found in previous issues of this very journal, such as Harvill (2009), Raab (2011) and McGill (2014).
5. As Cantu underlines, the three adaptations also share the structural trait of being rather integrated works.

three protagonists Fifi, Irene and Jo is not only ‘an active member of the work force’, but they are also ‘all represented as spirited, assertive, and resourceful characters, with sharply articulated goals and ambitions’.

According to semiotician Roland Barthes, the ‘infinity of narratives’ and ‘the multiplicity of standpoints’ can be studied from a vast variety of angles – ‘historical, psychological, sociological, ethnological, aesthetic, etc.’ (Barthes 1977: 80) – and consequently Rebecca Warner takes a completely different approach to a similar topic, the various incarnations of the ‘Beauty and the Beast’ trope in modern musical theatre by employing simultaneous synchronic and diachronic analysis as suggested by Barthes’ contemporary and fellow structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his seminal publication ‘The structural study of myth’ (Lévi-Strauss 1955: 428–44).

The fairy tale story of the beautiful young French girl who falls in love with an ugly creature and thus lifts the curse that has transformed a prince into a beast, has in the last three decades not only served as the storyline of Disney’s smash hit animated cartoon musical *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale/Wise 1991) and its subsequent highly successful stage adaption (1994), but also is easily recognizable as an important plot element of several other major theatrical works such as *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), *Passion* (1994), *Wicked* (2003) and *Shrek* (2008, itself a Broadway version of a global movie blockbuster, directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson and released in cinemas in 2001).

Warner’s detailed structuralist analysis highlights how the binary opposition between ‘beauty’ and ‘ugliness’ that characterizes the fairy tale in its retellings gets compounded to include various other motifs such as ‘Rejection/Acceptance; Truth/Falsehood; Good/Evil; Private/Public’ and how the original simple and straightforward presentation of the signifiers ‘beauty’ and ‘ugliness’ becomes progressively more layered and complex and in certain cases is even reversed.

Frank L. Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, first published in 1900, has often been called an ‘American fairy tale’ and has inspired a whole series of musical-theatrical adaptations: a Broadway extravaganza (1903), the iconic MGM film (Fleming 1939) with its score by Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg, the 1975 stage musical *The Wiz* with songs by Charlie Smalls and Stephen Schwartz’s *Wicked* (2003), the global smash hit that so far has earned more than \$880 million in New York alone (Anon. 2014). Because ‘as a *process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation’ (Hutcheon 2006: 8; original emphasis), Ryan Bunch takes a close look at all four versions in order to find out in what ways ‘the conventions of musical theatre facilitate their transformations of the story according to divergent expressions of American identity’.

What Bunch observes is a continuous process of re-inscribing ‘an embodied performance of identity and community’ in each successive retelling of Dorothy’s journey to the land over the rainbow; this ‘presumptively *American performance*’ not only allows for double-coding of characters and incidents, but also offers opportunities for individual members of mass audiences to create new levels of meaning in the stories they encounter.

The fourth essay is by theatre scholar Annette Thornton who foregrounds two collaborations between composer-lyricist Paul Gordon and director-writer John Caird. Contrasting the Gordon/Caird musical theatre reworkings of Charlotte Brontë’s classic *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Webster’s enormously popular *Daddy Long Legs* (1912), which premiered in 2000 and 2009, respectively, with the various film and television versions previously made,

Thornton shows not only 'how stories evolve and mutate to fit new times and different places' (Hutcheon 2006: 176), but also how a fresh approach to an aspect of the adaptation process that has often been discussed contentiously in adaptation studies – the concept of 'faithfulness' – can result in an insightful and arresting re-appraisal of two shows that are far more intelligently conceived than their rather short runs on New York (*Jane Eyre*) and in London (*Daddy Long Legs*) suggest.

Thornton points out where the diverse movie and TV renderings have failed to capture what makes the female protagonists Jane and Jerusha so singular and intriguing, but eschews the still rather customary approach of regarding (narrative) fidelity to the source material as the only criterion for gauging the 'success' or 'failure' of any adaptation, an approach that in recent years has been disparaged as both too limited and limiting by many academics such as Mireia Aragay, quoted above.

Instead, Thornton goes beyond that narrow definition and argues persuasively that in addition to sticking closely to important plot elements of the two novels, the two musicals also mirror their use of language and find theatrical equivalents to the novels' conceit of describing events from the heroine's point of view. Thus, the stage versions (re-)create female protagonists with 'a strong individual voice' which in turn allows today's audiences to fully connect with the stories they tell – in the hands of Gordon and Craig the love affairs between Jane Eyre and Rochester as well as between Jerusha and Jervis 'show mutual respect, gender equality, and honest communication' and are thus imbued with qualities that speak to modern theatregoers.

As a result, the musicals *Jane Eyre* and *Daddy Long Legs* can be seen as a perfect example of Aragay's claim that a 'successful' adaptation can be defined as an 'adaptation that fits in with the generally held perception at a given time' (Aragay 2005: 20).

Finally, in line with this special issue's theme of adaptation as interpretation, we are delighted to be including in the Re:Act section a transcript from an event held at UCLA in February 2014, 'Deaf West Theatre and the Broadway Musical: *Big River* and Beyond'. Organized by Raymond Knapp, who provides a short commentary on the proceedings, this event reunited members of the cast and production crew of Deaf West's Tony-award winning Broadway production of *Big River*, from 2004. In adapting the musical for performance by a mixed cast of deaf and hearing actors through the use of carefully developed signing, the production created an extraordinary musical theatre piece in which signing sang and singing signed. Ten years on, this panel performance by Deaf West explored some of the challenges and rewards of creating the show; we are sure you will likewise be challenged and rewarded by this encounter with a very unique musical theatre adaptation.

This special issue of *Studies in Musical Theatre* with its multi-perspectival and illuminating discussions will undoubtedly arouse the interest of readers in the area of comparative adaptation studies and stimulate further research in this rich, but sadly still rather underexplored field of music/musical theatre history.

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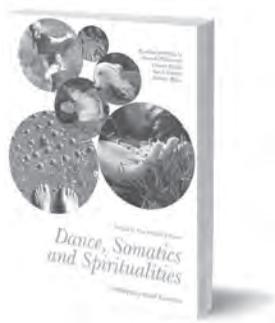
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