



From the shelf to the stage:

Turning a BOOK into a PLAY



The Eve Alvord Theatre

Every season Seattle Children's Theatre turns much-loved children's books into new plays. For the 2001-2002 season, several writers have undertaken the complex and exciting process of adapting a book for the stage.

In many regards, writing an adaptation resembles writing a new work. At SCT the process often begins with Artistic Director Linda Hartzell finding source material she thinks would make a good play. Then she contacts a playwright with whom she can discuss ideas and create a framework for the play. How many characters will there be? How will the story flow? What sorts of technical support will it need? From there the playwright develops a draft and Linda hires a director. The play then goes through a workshop process that involves hiring actors to come in and read the script aloud. During this process the playwright reworks the script. Next, Linda hires designers, the director casts

actors and, finally, after weeks of rehearsal, the play makes its premiere.

Of course, writing an adaptation does differ from creating a new work in several ways. In a new work, the content may be completely fleshed out or it may be no more than a flicker of an idea. But in an adaptation, the playwright always works from another source: a book, a poem, a nursery rhyme, etc. Also, the elemental differences between the stage and the printed page pose challenges for the adaptor: physical limitations on stage, cast size, and time.

For example, Louis Sachar's *Holes* presents a fundamental dilemma for the physical staging. Stanley Yelnats must dig a hole five feet wide by five feet deep every day; thousands of holes have been dug at Camp Green Lake. How do we show this on stage?

And *Charlotte's Web* could have an enormous cast if it included all of the family members, animals at the Zuckermans' farm, and multitudes of beasts and humans at the fair. Plays with very large casts are generally prohibitively expensive to produce, so the play must be written with actors playing more than one role during the show, and time and space must be allotted for scene and costume changes.

Also, in a book, the author has time to add exposition to develop characters, describe setting, and portray action. The reader then elaborates on that text with his or her own imagination. In our theatre, however, time is limited to less than two hours. This restraint allows the playwright to concentrate on a few key elements of the plot in greater depth. For example, in our adaptation of Esther Forbes' *Johnny Tremain* several storylines, like those involving Cilla's sister Issanah and Johnny's horse Goblin, had to be cut to keep the primary focus on Johnny and his personal quest.

Another aspect of adaptation that poses an interesting challenge is the development of character. In a book, an author develops a character through many means: narrative prose, describing a character's thoughts or mood, or dialogue between characters. On stage, a character expresses him/herself through a monologue, a gesture, or through interactions with other characters. Sid Fleischman, author of the book *The Whipping Boy* and last season's play *Prince Brat and the Whipping Boy*, explains: "I approach the play quite differently than I do the novel. There is physicality to the stage. I need to narrow my view to the stage itself and envision my characters [physically in three

Activity/Discussion

- Using a book that your class is reading, select a chapter of the book and divide the students into groups of three. Each group then selects a moment in that chapter that they believe sums up the author's intent for that section of the book. Using only themselves, the groups of three should create a frozen picture of that moment. As each group presents their frozen picture to the rest of the class, discuss the relationship of the characters presented. What, where, and how is the story being told? Did each group choose different aspects of the chapter? Did they use different characters? Why?

dimensions]... While in a novel the author can write what a character is thinking, the playwright has to find other ways to bring out the information." Of course, when the author adapts his own work, he is already inside the head of his characters. When another writer approaches a book, he/she must work hard to find an authentic voice for the characters while trying to make the play his/her own, a challenging and exciting process for many playwrights.

Audience expectations also play a significant role in how an adaptation is received. Every member of the audience, young and old alike, has a preconceived notion about the world of *Winnie-the-Pooh* or *Charlotte's Web*. Each person brings his or her own ideas about the staging of a beloved book. It is perhaps the greatest challenge for the adaptor to create a play that satisfies the audience's desires while bringing something new and vibrant to the stage. And that is also one of the greatest rewards in staging an adaptation: being able to breathe new life into a beloved work, helping people experience it in a whole new way.



EALRS

READING—analyze
 COMMUNICATION—observe, communicate clearly,
 work in a group, evaluate
 ARTS—reason and solve problems, communicate