


Introduction

Aleks Sierz¹ 

¹ (PhD) FRSA, Boston University Study Abroad, London, England

At the start of 1955, the British critic Kenneth Tynan began an article, which was published in the Observer newspaper under the title “Convalescence”, about his country’s new drama, by saying: “Night-nurses at the bedside of good drama, we critics keep a holy vigil.” About 70 years later, this metaphor is still going strong, and critics, commentators and academics can still find themselves in the position of tending theatrical drama as if it was a patient whose recovery they have to supervise. We gather around the sick person’s bed, and try to console their relatives. We whisper to each other our views on how bad their condition is. We mutter about the reasons for their decline: lack of funding, poor audiences and competition from younger and healthier media. Behind us the life-saving machines bleep and blink; nurses appear and then leave. At the same time, we wish ardently for the patient’s recuperation, seeing hopeful signs from each movement, however small, of the theatre’s body.

Amid this rather gloomy picture of contemporary British theatre, some rays of sun do shine in through the patient’s window. As the online conference, *Adaptation, Appropriation, Translation* (held on 8-10 December 2023), made clear, this aspect of the subject exhibits a rude health. At what was a very memorable and intellectually stimulating event, the keynote speakers were Professor Benjamin Poore, Dr Catherine Rees, Professor Julie Sanders and Dr Aleks Sierz. Using examples drawn from the early work of Caryl Churchill, as well as more recent plays including James Graham’s *Best of Enemies* (2021), Poore analyzed the subject of appropriation, intermedi-ality, and the problem of history, by examining the question of identifying the difference between the intermedial practices of adaptation and those of the contemporary history play. History — the name that we give to our attempts to order and make sense of the overwhelming chaos of the past — is, he argued, on one level quite different from a novel or a film as a source text for stage adaptation. On another level, the same questions of fidelity and storytelling apply. On the other hand, Rees explored ways in which we can use textual adaptation as a metaphor to understand and approach other acts of appropriation and adaptation in the wider society, in this case the so-called Culture Wars. Looking at Patrick Marber’s *Don Juan in Soho* (2006), itself an adaptation of the famous masculinist myth, as means to explore how cultural heritage becomes part of our national cityscape, and how we as a society understand, process and celebrate so-called heroic achievement. In addition, Sanders looked at the ways in which Shakespeare is currently being adapted in debates about contemporary questions of social justice in a range of transnational contexts. Using the giant puppet *Little Amal* (2021), which engaged with impromptu audiences to tell a story of migration and displacement, this example looked specifically at her arrival on London’s Bankside — itself a Shakespearean geography — greeted by a Pericles-associated community theatre production. Lastly, Sierz examined two recent adaptations by playwright Martin Crimp, namely *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other* (2019) and *Cyrano de Bergerac* (2019). with the aim of showing that although the idea of being faithful to the original work remains a very strong aspect of public taste, it is productions which depart most radically from their source that



are the most aesthetically interesting, and the most successful in generating new meanings from the adapted material. Moreover, the freedom of creativity that this approach produces results in the most memorable theatrical experiences.

While these keynote contributions illustrate how adaptations are a central feature of contemporary British theatre, the following articles in this excellent volume – which Sierz co-edits along with Dr Işıl Şahin Gülter and Dr Özlem Karadağ – have a welcome international and historical aspect, looking at a much wider canvas than just insular new plays. To explore these ideas, the contributors to this volume engage deeply with the interconnected themes of adaptation and appropriation. Two foundational texts shape their approach. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as an “acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works”, emphasizing that adaptations captivate audiences by evoking both pleasure and critical reflection. Viewers and readers draw on their familiarity with the source material to appreciate the nuanced relationship between the original and its adaptation. Adaptations are often enjoyed because they breathe new life into familiar stories, presenting them through fresh formats, genres or media. They also offer the opportunity to recontextualize a work, highlighting its relevance in new cultural or historical settings. However, this inherited literary practice can be controversial. Adaptations are frequently overshadowed by their source texts, criticized for lacking originality or dismissed by audiences and critics as derivative. A further complication lies in the relationship between adaptation and appropriation. While adaptation typically maintains a closer connection to the source material, appropriation involves a more transformative process – borrowing ideas or elements to create something entirely new. In *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders argues that acts of appropriation are often motivated by political or ethical intentions. Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality further illuminates this process, describing texts as “a permutation of texts” in which multiple voices and references intersect and interact.

Despite their overlap, adaptation and appropriation are not interchangeable. Sanders offers key distinctions: appropriation often entails a more significant departure from the original, producing a work situated within a new cultural or critical framework. Through acts of interpolation, critique, and genre-shifting, appropriation frequently breaks or conceals the organic link with the source. As Sanders notes, appropriation “clearly extends far beyond the adaptation of other texts into new literary creations, assimilating both historical lives and events”. Still, both adaptation and appropriation are inherently interpretive and may reveal tensions within the texts they engage. Audiences often navigate these layered relationships, seeking to identify echoes, deviations and parallels between the old and the new. The act of translating a text also constitutes a form of adaptation. Translators must grapple with the challenge of conveying culture, history and character across linguistic and temporal boundaries. In many cases, translation necessitates process of adaptation, particularly when cultural or geographic shifts are involved. Thus, a successful translation often functions simultaneously as a compelling adaptation, reshaping the original to resonate within a different context.

In this context, the contributors to this thought-provoking volume have all engaged successfully with these themes. Dr Pelin Doğan-Özger explores power relationships and the way they construct the idea of “nature” in Athena Farrokhzad’s *Morals According to Medea*, a 2021 two-hander play which both adapts and interrogates Euripides’s *Medea*. Taking a feminist perspective, this chapter focuses on the dialogues between Medea and Morality to show how Medea challenges traditional discourses of motherhood, and at the same time is an example of resistance and of a refugee

outsider. If ancient Greek tragedy offers good examples for this kind of adaptation and appropriation, the same is true of Shakespeare. In “From Macbeth to Dunsinane”, Dilek İnan shows how David Greig, one of the least insular of British playwrights, uses the tragedy of Macbeth in his *Dunsinane* (2010), set after the action of Shakespeare’s play, to comment on clashes between Englishness and Scottishness while simultaneously criticizing the West’s intervention in the Middle East. Continuing this fruitful engagement with Britain’s national playwright, Neslihan Köroğlu looks at Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* (2012), in which the voices that are silenced in the original get a chance to speak out: Desdemona, her missing mother M Brabantio, her African nanny Barbary and Emilia. Morrison provocatively creates a postcolonial feminist space which enables her to talk back to Shakespeare.

As well as Shakespeare and Greek tragedy, European modernism is also a literary arena which theatre has mined extensively. In “Subverting Realism”, Enes Kavak examines how Anton Chekhov’s 1899 play, *Uncle Vanya*, has been adapted, with a postmodern twist, by both Howard Barker in 1993 and Simon Stephens in 2023. Like Chekhov, Franz Kafka is an emblematic figure in European modernism. Hakan Gultekin also looks at two interpretations, this time of Kafka’s short novel *Metamorphosis*, in versions by Steven Berkoff (1969) and Lemn Sissay (2023). In doing so the different historical contexts of the two plays illuminate their content. Next comes an analysis of the work of British playwright Lucy Kirkwood, by Elvan Karaman Mez, who shows how her plays *Tinderbox* (2008) and *NSFW* (2012) can be read as appropriations of the work of the modernist Caryl Churchill’s drama, whose politics are highly critical of the development of capitalism from the 1970s to the 2010s.

The final two chapters of this collection take journeys, both literally and metaphorically, to even more distant places. Raphaela Pavlakos takes us to the world of indigenous communities to demonstrate how the use of non-colonial language can create a sense of inclusion and help to build community. The example of Tomson Highway, whose first language was Cree, and who created *the Rez Cycle* plays, *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, written and produced in Toronto. This work raises questions not only about theater as a space of resistance, but also about how much we need translation to make sense of indigenous languages. Finally, Özlem Karadağ investigates the 2023 Turkish Netflix series *Yaratılan (Creature)* by Çağan Irmak, which is inspired by Mary Shelley’s 1818 classic *Frankenstein*. Seeing this version of the myth as an imaginative reappropriation rather than a literal adaptation, this chapter discusses pandemics, trauma, memory, bio-ethics in a work that was inspired by Shelley’s original, but also talks directly to our contemporary preoccupations, despite, or because, of the fact that it is set in the 19th century.

To finish this Introduction, I would like to thank the members of Theatre and Drama Network, first for their generosity in inviting me to participate in their conference, and then for the honour of co-editing and introducing this collection of excellent work. For the past 70 years, this network has done outstanding work in an international context. I would also like to especially thank Dr. Işıl Şahin Gülter, Dr. Özlem Karadağ, and Dr. Mesut Güneç, for their hard work and for guiding me through the process of this publication. If I have both appropriated as well as adapted some of their insights, I am sure that this is all in a good cause. As far as this volume is concerned, I can report that the patient is in extremely good health.

References

Hutcheon, L. (2013). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.

Sanders, J. (2016). *Adaptation and appropriation*. Routledge.

