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## Adaptations: Blood and All You Zombies

Nolan Atterbury

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Final Draft

Nolan Atterbury

Prof. Thomas Keith

Honors Thesis

11/25/19

Adaptations: *Blood* and *All You Zombies*

During my senior year of high school, I came across a story, Robert Heinlein's *All You Zombies*, that I instantly fell in love with. This story stayed in my mind since then and has become one that I knew I needed to work to put up on stage. How to approach a story that deals with the life of a character whose existence is a temporal anomaly, who, through the wonders of time travel, is their own mother, daughter, father, and son, was incredibly daunting. I knew that it would be fascinating if told in the right way, but how to get it there was a challenge. In my final years of college, I wasn't sure if the story would be better served approaching it through the same technique I had been learning in the IPE program or on my own, through playwriting. This led me to ask myself the question: which projects should one undertake with the help of an ensemble of peers and which projects are better served by focusing one's attention on writing them as traditional plays? How do you find the best mode of translating a given idea or given story from that medium into a performance? It was those questions that had me conflicted and what eventually led me to the comparison detailed here.

Over the course of 2019, I undertook the task of adapting two short stories using these two different methods. For my ensemble-based creation, I was paired with two

classmates, and eventually, we decided to adapt the story *Blood* by Roddy Doyle. Independently, I decided to challenge myself with developing a script for *All You Zombies* by Robert Heinlein. That script, a component of my thesis project and now in its fourth draft, has begun to take on a life of its own. I have retitled my play adaptation of the story *Mother/ Daughter/ Father/ Son (M/D/F/S)*. While both adaptations, *Blood* from Roddy Doyle's story and *M/D/F/S* from Heinlein's short stories, had common steps that led me to the finished products, the difference between the two modes of adaptation required my process and commitment to be distinctly different.

My role as a playwright in *M/D/F/S* was similar to that of the author of the short story, as I had the final say in what would be in the play and was able to describe it. However, I only contributed one element of the production, as the ultimate ending for the script must be shaped by actors, designers, and a director. Melissa Ingle and Thomas Keith as my director and advisor, respectively, both gave me ideas, feedback, and advice on what they thought; however, the script is my creation.

On the other hand, with *Blood's* ensemble-based creation, there was much less individual control for that project. Instead of a director and advisor, we got the advice of our classmates in Performance Workshop, our senior-level class devoted to this project. Meanwhile, instead of focusing on sitting alone to concentrate on writing, many of our rehearsals involved the creation of work on our feet, working and creating it through improvisation or exercises, based on exercises stemming from the work of Viola Spolin, as seen in her book *Improvisation for the Theater*. This was the method taught to us by Adrienne Kapstein as one of many methods for creating a performance. This method of

producing a show focuses usually not on one aspect of the performance but means we must “create meaning through manipulation of the stage picture. Relationships are established and being actively conveyed to the audience” (Munoz).

Regardless of the process used to create an adaptation, switching from a text-based narrative of a story to the visual and auditory nature of theater requires plenty of changes in how you attempt to give the audience information. The narrative of a short story comes usually from a first person (from the perspective of a character), second person (as if you were the main actor of the story), or third person viewpoint (an outside perspective). However, “a theatrical adaptation opens a story up to other ways of telling, other sensations, other ways of layering emotions and ideas” (Hughley). Theater does not use the same opportunities, instead relying commonly on movement, spoken text, costumes, actors, movement, space, lighting, and even music to accomplish the task of telling a story. This can include the use of narration in theater, however, the story of a play is most commonly told through dialogue among multiple characters, in addition to non-textual elements as listed above. The common issues I found when working on these adaptations were as follows: determining the point of focus the performance should use to portray the information, changing the details of the plot, setting, and narrative of the story to be told theatrically, and bringing in other artists to help you fully realize your creative vision.

Narration: Choosing a Perspective

When adapting for the stage, one must determine what is the actor/audience relationship: is the audience an outside observer, or are they engaged and referenced by a character within the piece. One option available in theater is narration, where a character speaks directly to the audience. When narrating in theater, the second person singular perspective, I found to be particularly challenging. When speaking in the second person, using “you” as the main method of telling the story, it becomes hard for the audience to connect with the story as it is being presented. This makes it interesting for perhaps a monologue or short play, but in traditional theater makes a barrier between the audience and the narration. This still leaves us with at least three options for narration, which Mike Alfreds, author of *Then What Happens: Storytelling and Adapting for the Theatre*, describes as “Third person narration from outside the action/ Third person narration from inside the action/ First person narration” (Alfreds 81). In theater, there are many plays in which characters acknowledge the audience, such as with the use of the narrator, often known as direct address. Neil Simon’s plays *Brighton Beach Memoirs* (1983) and *Biloxi Blues* (1984) both use Eugene as both a character who would often break from the context of a scene and speak with the audience to give them information or his thoughts on a scene. This relationship is an example of first person narration and direct address, since “the narration is inevitably—and this is its strength and uniqueness—at the mercy of the teller’s subjectivity. This makes it frequently unreliable” (Alfreds 92). This sort of relationship is often encouraged in theater, as there is frequently a strong connection felt between artists and audience, since “theatre is created with the expectation of an audience” (Alfreds 27). That feeling

of being in the same room as the action taking place, being able to see the events happening with your own eyes cannot be replicated in prose or on film.

However, in a play, you can feel that within first person narration there is another subdivision, “whether they are remembering events... with the benefits of hindsight; or whether they’re experiencing them exactly as they first experienced them” (Alfreds 92). This can significantly change the outcome, as a narrator looking back can allow the audience more knowledge than the characters themselves may know at the time, which is known as dramatic irony.

There are also two options for third person narrators: from within the action and from outside. This can provide not only a change in perspective within the story but can allow for a change of pace of the action and dialogue. One example of this is in the musical adaptation of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* by Alan Menken, et al. This musical incorporates a group of storytellers that seamlessly flow within the action of the story and remain part of the story, explaining the setting to the audience and action that expanded beyond the reaches of the stage. This also gives them a way to increase tension and intensity throughout the production, by varying the pace in the narration. This is one aspect artists are able to play with in theater that is much more difficult, if not impossible, to do through fiction. Since theater provides some information through spoken, not written, text, as well as intention, action, and interpretation, the feeling behind lines can be changed through an actor’s performance, which can add significant meaning to the text.

For example, in *M/D/F/S (Mother/ Daughter/ Father/ Son*, my adaptation of Robert Heinlein's story), I have created a narrator who not only serves to give the audience crucial information about the action and location but is representative of a major element of the story structure. The narrator was built to echo the fact that the story of the play has happened time and time again. In this way, the narrator is meant to help show the cyclical nature of the story incarnate. Since the story is a time travel paradox that is in the form of a time loop, the events of this story have happened before, shown by the fact the narrator of the story knows what events will and must happen. This idea, given to me by Melissa, my director, during our first read through, is also meant to symbolize the fact that this is something that has happened before and will happen again. Since this play deals with an intense paradox, I wanted to decide on an internal logic for this story. There are some events that are set in stone and must happen at a certain time or place, such as the meeting on the park bench or the abduction of baby Jane. With this being the way "my" time travel was going to work, and wanting to add a touch of noir atmosphere, I added this narrator to incorporate these into the play more clearly.

Similarly, we began with a narrator in my ensemble creation, *Blood*. Our first project, a theoretical trailer to our full performance to come, began with a narrator saying, "Meet Dan. He's just a normal, average heterosexual male in his 40s" (Well Done). This narrator also influenced the theme of the play, as our original idea was to make our play similar to *The Twilight Zone* and have the narrator function like Rod Serling on that show. However, we found ourselves drawn away from that style, and

thus, the narrator didn't make sense anymore. We experimented bringing it back throughout the process, but have decided we would prefer to use more traditional methods to tell our story.

Content: Keeping What Works, Fixing What Doesn't.

Narration and the relationship with the audience are not the only considerations that come with the territory of adaptation, as some changes are necessary when switching medium from text to stage that deal with the story. With these theatrically based alterations to the story, I have come up with two major categories: Changes for clarity and core changes. Changes for clarity are those that I sought to take out or add as they simply made my work clearer and remove confusion for the audience. Core changes are those that deal more fundamentally with the story as it was originally presented. The primary difference between the two is the intention behind the alteration and the amount of effect it has on the rest of the play. Core changes are made, in my experience, due to outside circumstances, or desires of the playwright/ensemble. Changes for clarity are those the artist finds themselves coming up against and are made with the intent of easing the transition to the stage as a medium.

For example, in *Blood*, one of our first changes was for clarity of translation, removing Ireland as the setting of the piece. As American actors who are not strong enough with Irish accents to develop a show in that dialect, we didn't want to confuse our audience by focusing on accents as a means of storytelling. However, this distinction does not mean that changes in easing shifts do not affect the rest of the

piece, perhaps changing elements outside of the change itself. While changing the setting to America still tells the same basic story, it removed some elements that we appreciated, the fact that “[h]e grew up in Dracula’s city. He’d walked past Bram Stoker’s house every day” in Doyle’s original story, or Vera’s (the main character’s wife) constant teasing of saying “You’re such a messer” (Doyle 1). However, we believed these elements that we lost were worth the ease and removal of confusion that came with having our adaptation rooted in an American location and in our accents.

In addition to the changes for clarity, there are those changes that my ensemble mates and/or I made consciously to alter the fundamental material as presented by the author. Some of these changes are purely practical, when adapting for theater, “to put text into action, we have to discover performance equivalents for the literary devices of the fiction we’re adapting” (Alfreds 57). Since theater, though often text based, is a visual and auditory medium, the story must be adapted and realized in a different way. For example, in Robert Heinlein’s story, the majority of the tale is told in a conversation between the bartender and the character of the Unmarried Mother. While this is captivating, having the entirety of the story told through a summation would not be interesting onstage. As a playwright, I took the opportunity to take the life events of the Unmarried Mother character and show them to the audience directly as they happened (or at least how the Unmarried Mother was telling them).

Another reason for clarity changes is due to the amount of time available to tell the story. Because the stage is something that is meant to happen live and in person, it is challenging if not impossible to give the audience the same experience reading the

story. Authors in a novel or story are able to give a precise amount of time to tell precisely what the author wants to tell. A sentence in a work of fiction can describe the span of a minute, a month, or an eternity. Meanwhile, in most theater productions, audiences feel a minute as a minute. This requires you use “an economy of expression. Like poetry, it forces one to compress ideas. In a few, well- written lines of dialogue, the playwright must relate what could be expanded to several pages or even a full chapter in prose” (Perry 1313). Such compression applies doubly so for the action of a play.

For example, in *Blood*, the author Roddy Doyle gives the action of the protagonist eating a raw steak as “He took a fillet steak into the gents’ toilet at work, demolished it, and tried to flush the plastic bag down the toilet. But it stayed there like a parachute, on top of the water” (Doyle 4). In our production of this, simply eating one of our faux meatballs (Rice Krispy Treats dyed to look like ground beef) takes around 30 seconds, plus the time to grab it, sit down, and finally eat it takes well over a minute. This is seemingly an eternity for our audience, and by design. In prose, the reader is free to move at their own pace, where “passages can be read and reread for clarity. The mind can pause and retrace incidents” (Perry 1313). An author of fiction is easier able to offer the reader a glimpse inside the characters’ minds, leaving their actions to be a second element to advance the plot. However, when adapting this play for the stage, one rarely has the time or luxury to speak from inside a character’s brain directly. Instead, the theater uses the languages of action and dialogue to convey information. This allows us to add overt feeling into the play, while reading about a character does

not necessarily have the same impact as seeing a man bite into a dripping meatball with your own eyes.

Collaboration: You Can't Do It Alone.

Either method you choose to adapt, collaboration is still necessary. The culmination of any project is also thanks to the help and involvement of several other people who are able to influence the work, either passively or actively, including directors, actors, designers. These factors show the amount of difference in control in short story writing, playwriting, and devised ensemble creation. In a short story, the author gets to add in anything they want, perhaps with the advice and eye of a trusted editor, but ultimately the decision on what makes it into the story is up to one person. Meanwhile, in the theater plays are “a synthesis of many art forms which range from painting to dance. It is not the cumulative result of one man's labor like the novel. Playwright, director, actor, designer, and technicians all impart their ideas in its interpretative process” (Perry 1313). Even within this, there is a large interplay between how much control is available by each of those members.

One upside to creation via playwriting, as opposed to the ensemble method of creation, is practicality. With *M/D/F/S*, as the playwright, I am primarily responsible for shaping the story. This allows for more artistic freedom when coming up with ideas about how to translate for the stage elements such as Heinlein's time machine, described as “a U. S. F. F. Coordinates Transformer Field Kit, series 1992, Mod. II... shaped to pass as a suitcase. ... all I had to do was to shake out the metal net which

limits the transformation field.” (Heinlein 8). Conveying his amount of information would be unduly challenging to give to an audience, thus in my adaptations, this becomes the stage directions describing the bartender character’s physical behavior as they “pull out a large sheet with golden wiring embedded along it. They lay it down, fix it, check their watch, then the Unmarried Mother walks in” (Atterbury 38). In literature, one is able to convey and utilize different details than you would in theater. So, instead of reading the text “His fingers tightened on the glass and he seemed about to throw it at me; I felt for the sap under the bar” (Heinlein 1), they are able to see it enacted onstage, as I translated into stage directions, as follows: “The unmarried mother slams the shot glass down with such force, it shatters. The bartender grabs for a bat under the table, but doesn't pull it past their chest” (Atterbury 3). However, there are also considerations one must make since you will be working with others to fully produce a play. For example, literature is able to dwell in many similes and alliteration, among other literary devices, with which they can to make a point or add variety to the way they make their point. This cannot always be done on stage due to the limitations of that medium.

Another important factor in deciding how to approach an adaptation is the time frame for production and rehearsal; as the ensemble method of creating work requires a large time investment. My ensemble for *Blood* would meet once weekly for a minimum of 3 hours (usually adding another 2-4 hours depending on our schedules), to help create our show together over the course of two semesters of classes (28 weeks), bringing sections of the performance to show to our Performance Workshop class. Meanwhile, the process of writing of *M/D/F/S* took two months to bring from start to first

draft, and edited over the course of this last semester. I then was faced with the additional tasks involved in mounting the play. They included meeting with Melissa and the actors who I had asked to be involved in the initial reading of the play. Developing it further would take longer still, both in consideration for editing, as well as adding in the other elements of performance.

Methodologies on how to take a piece of short fiction and translate it into staged performances may differ, but there are common elements and concerns that one must undertake and consider. These include, but are not limited to, the length of the original material and the constraints of performance time, the actor's specific relationship with the audience, and performative storytelling versus verbal storytelling. Beginning with a piece of fiction gives you an existing core material, as "literature and theater are in tune with each other in a way that makes for successful themes and character-driven stories... They get the experience of connecting with the story in an intimate, bursting setting — it's coming to life right in front of them" (Munoz). It is my love of these complicated and goofy stories that originally set me on the track to work on adaptations of Roddy Doyle's *Blood* and Robert Heinlein's *All You Zombies (M/D/F/S)* into theatrical performances, through the different practices of ensemble based creation and traditional playwriting:

"adaptation is nothing new in the theater. Nearly all of Shakespeare's plots were borrowed from earlier sources. Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Strange Interlude* (which won a Pulitzer Prize) were based on Greek myths"

(Perry 1312)

However, in the adaptation process, there is a stripping away of certain elements and the addition of other elements, which change the meaning and impact of the story while honoring the core narrative of the original material. In my work, I've hoped to take the best elements of the stories I enjoyed and imbue them with extra creative energy that can be harnessed through theater.

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