ENGAGING THEME-BASED THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES; AN EXAMPLE OF THE PLAY ADAPTATION, *TRANSGRESSION*

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Abstract

Beyond the ambience created by good lighting, the flamboyance of costumes and the mood created by sound; the director of a play production and his crew must also grapple with the central idea or the quality of the message that members of the audience would take home with them when they leave the Theatre. The craving for Theatre/Cinema managers and show promoters to sacrifice content at the altar of aesthetics creates a vacuum that must be filled if the Theatre and indeed the entertainment industry must continue to play its role of mirroring society. The art of Adaptation, thus allows for the 'transportation' of content-laden themes into new mediums such that veritable experiences and lessons are not lost and altogether serve as motivations for new ways of thinking and practice. Linda Seger's theory of Condensation and Expansion is engaged as an approach in modifying original materials to induce new artistic perspectives while illuminating emerging societal concerns. The Unizik Theatre production, Transgression as put up by 2020/2021 300-level Adaptation students was evaluated as the primary source of data. Findings show that the creative exploration and delivery of theme-based art forms through the instrumentality of adaptation portends far-reaching positive outcomes in the entertainment industry, especially in addressing socio-economic challenges and the question of leadership in Nigeria.

Keywords: Play Adaptation; Theme-based performance; Condensation; Expansion; and Story development.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the adaptation process in the arts provides a very engaging mental and physical experience for the creators and intended audience especially as it pertains to addressing particular issues of topical relevance within society. Within the spectrum of performance studies, it would appear that the process of Adaptation allows for the creation of a new body of art from an existing medium. This ability to transpose, transliterate and modify an existing artistic entity or body of work comes with a high level of creative responsibility in identifying the weaknesses and strengths within genres and mediums as well as in rightfully appropriating and balancing given context such that the essence of an existing original body of ART is not entirely eroded.

Across the various genres of artistic creativity, Adaptation provides new perspectives to throbbing as well as age-old societal issues. Furthermore, the excitement attached to the buzz or new discussion generated by an adapted work from newer members of the audience provides in some cases added incentives to the level of dexterity in this area. For Hollywood and Nollywood production outfits, Cinemas and streaming platforms that have been making huge financial successes in the present entertainment industry and adapted works constitute a predominant stake in the appeal from audience members thereby influencing their choices of theatrical and cinematic experiences. A recent example among many is Mo Abudu's 2022 film, *Death and the King's Horseman* which was an adaptation of Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka's classic play of the same title.

At the heart of the conversation and even experimentation of adapted works is the question of theme.

Stage and screen directors have continued to express this concern through their craft to validate the intention behind the creation of the adaptation whilst attempting to satisfy the craving for artistic embellishments and maybe achieve box office success alongside. Further to the argument of the theme is the need to close the knowledge gap that may have been left open by the original material or source. Indeed, this concern has been known to test the creativity and dexterity levels of writers, directors and actors in identifying new perspectives without diminishing the authenticity of original stories thereby engendering new discussions and insight to issues of collective relevance.

The importance of theme therefore moves to answer questions as to the present need for the new idea being put forward by artistic experiments. To this point, many African scholars and filmmakers propose that the continuous existence of man will always present cyclic circumstances and situations faced by forebears and even strangers in foreign lands but still experienced and dealt with nonetheless in different ways today. Gbemisola Adeoti for instance strongly opines that, "apart from myths, legends, history and contemporary reality, adaptation is another long-standing source of African drama. It perceives a contextual complementarity of the two worlds (the original and the adapted form)" (4).

Impliedly, whether it be Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu* which was inspired by the historical account of the *Owu* war ignited by the allied forces of the *Ijebu* and *Ife* kingdoms, but which bears similar story development and is an adaptation of Euripedes' greek tragedy, *The Trojan Women* or Ola Rotimi's exploration and interpretation of the themes of Anger and Incest through his retelling of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex in *The gods Are*

not to Blame or even Kunle Afolayan's re-imagination of the 1960 Nigerian independence story through his 2014 film *October 1*; these situations of the past and present will always be replicated in the art of the future. Indeed, it could be stated that the superimposed or *palimpsest* use of thematic material in the process of Adaptation appears to give the art form its appeal, appreciation and to an extent, validation from a wide range of audiences. Linda Hutcheon affirms that;

> "For audiences such adaptations are multilaminated; they are directly and openly connected to recognizable other works and that connection is part of their formal identity but also of what we might call their hermeneutic identity. This is what keeps under control the background noise of all the other intertextual parallels to the work the audience might make that are due to similar artistic and social conventions rather than specific works. In all cases, the engagement with these other works in Adaptations are extended ones not passing allusions. Part of both the pleasure and the frustration of experiencing an adaptation is the familiarity bred through repetition and memory (21).

Adaptation approaches for successful performative Experiments.

Adaptation presents an opportunity to transform existing narratives into new forms and this offers rich avenues for developing fresh stories and themes. Adapters can draw inspiration from a wide range of sources including literature, historical events, myths, and even other media, to create innovative and compelling narratives for the stage or screen. Adaptation bridges the gaps between different artistic and

academic disciplines, such as literature, theatre, and even cinema. Therefore the need to modify an original text to suit the existential narrative of another medium may not only be critical to the adaptation process but imperative to the intended outcome; Priya Meena and Rajiv R. Dwivedi observe that "Adaptations necessitate the omission and addition of details to present characters or plots from a cinematic perspective" (207).

The process of Condensation and Expansion as put forward by Linda Seger, thus allows for adapters to unlock hidden potentials in the narration, character development and thematic disposition of an original material in another medium without the burden of being particularly slavish in context and form. This modification process may include the "cutting away" and "joining" on one part and the "elaboration" on the other part of certain aspects of a given material to enhance its presentation, appeal and overall effectiveness in a new medium. Meena and Dwivedi state that, "Adapting a hundred-page novel into a two-and-a-half hour film requires a screenwriter to modify and condense scenes, as not every part is pertinent to the cinematic narrative" (208).

Thus, the process of Condensation and Expansion can be engaged separately and distinctly by adapters to ultimately improve the strengths and reduce the weaknesses of a given material as it assumes a new medium. Quoting Seger's text on *The Art of Adaptation; Turning Act and Fiction into Film*, Enric Folch restates that;

> "Condensing often includes losing subplots, combining or cutting characters, leaving out several of the many themes that might be contained in a long novel and finding within the material the beginning, middle and end of a dramatic storyline. While expanding, look for

> the implied scene. Sometimes a book contains so many scenes that all you need to do is pick and choose the ones to carry the story cinematically; at other times, scenes need to be created" (n.pg).

Invariably, the approach of Expansion or Elaboration, prioritizes expanding on the original story, adding new characters, twists, subplots, or narrative elements to create a more comprehensive or detailed adaptation. This is done to provide more depth, back story, and alternative perspectives to the original work. On the other hand, the process of Condensation or compression involves streamlining the original story, removing or compressing certain elements to fit the constraints of a new medium. The goal of this approach is to capture the central essence of the story material so that the theme is not distorted thus making it concise and easily accessible to its new audience.

Play adaptations however present unique opportunities and indeed challenges. For one, the Theatre stage creates an awareness of immediacy; every member of the audience and indeed the actors are unconsciously in agreement that a resolution must be achieved by the end of the performance. Unlike a book that can be "dog-eared" and returned to later or a movie that can be paused and watched later, the theatre engages each member of the audience in a transient yet continuous process that only terminates at the end of the play performance. The need therefore for adequate research by scriptwriters and directors of play adaptations to skilfully decipher what elements of the original material would need to be enhanced as well as those to be compressed cannot be overemphasized.

By studying adaptations, researchers and artists alike explore the intersections and interactions between these various forms of storytelling and artistic expression, allowing for a

deeper understanding of the creative and interpretative processes involved in translating a work from one medium to another. Jamie Sherry opines that "the lack of attention to the teaching of processes of adapting can be seen as a more general tendency to overlook the many useful theoretical and creative functions of adaptation studies beyond comparative case study analysis" (1). The adapters of the new given medium can thus engage several concepts in the construction of new narratives.

The engagement of Characterization for instance, also plays a vital role in the thematic development of an adaptation, especially within the play production medium. However, Adapters in the engagement of this concept often re-imagine the original characters, exploring their motivations, relationships and inner lives in greater depth and detail. The shift in character development and the choice of narrative perspective can lead to the foregrounding of different themes, such as identity, power dynamics or social commentary and this is heavily dependent on the level of interpretation of new or evolving characters within the story and indeed the original text as a whole can put out. Indeed as Robert Gordon and Olaf Jubrin state, "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."(6) Similarly, Adaptations engage in a dialogic relationship with the source material, as well as with other cultural texts and traditions. This inter-textual dialogue can generate new thematic explorations, wherein the adapter draws upon and responds to broader cultural and artistic detail.

Similarly, Recontextualization places emphasis and could be critical in "introducing" the difference in locale from the original material's historical, cultural, or social setting. This shift

in context can lead to the emergence of new characters, further development of existing ones and even the introduction of new themes as the original story is filtered through the adapter's perspective, intended purpose and even the target audience's experiences. Narrative restructuring also, places emphasis on the alteration of the sequence of events leading to the introduction of new characters, and an expansion of certain plot points. These narrative changes can significantly impact the thematic development to allow the adapter to shape the story to highlight different aspects and ultimately introduce new interpretations. The choice therefore of a medium, such as a film, Ritual, musical, or a historical occurrence, is critical as it can also significantly influence the thematic development of an adaptation.

Adapters may consciously or unconsciously infuse their own ideological and political perspectives into the adaptation, which can lead to an entrenchment of new themes as may be related to current societal topics such as politics, social justice, economic hardships, public health, the environment etc. Adaptations can serve as platforms for challenging dominant narratives and amplifying marginalized voices. Furthermore, the target audience's cultural, social, and historical context can also impact the thematic development in an adaptation, as the adapter may tailor the story to resonate with the audience's experiences, expectations and in some cases, cravings. The audience's reception and interpretation of the adapted work can further shape the ongoing evolution of the themes.

These are the key factors that contribute to the development of stories and themes in the process of adaptation. Adapters navigate this through different approaches to create new interpretations, challenge existing narratives, and explore

complex socio-cultural issues through the new artistic effort. These approaches as have been categorised by a range of scholars include; Modernization or Re-interpretation which involves updating the story to a more contemporary setting or context while still maintaining the essence of the original work. This can also involve changing the period, location, or cultural references to make the story more relevant to a modern audience. Faithful Adaptation on the other hand aims to closely follow the original story, character, and plot, with minimal changes or deviations. The essence here is to bring the original work to a new medium making a deliberate effort at preserving the core elements.

For the engagement of Transposition or Genre Shift, the major thrust is the process of "transporting" the original material into a different genre or medium, such as transforming a novel into a historical drama or a science fiction film. The purpose for this includes exploring the story's themes and characters through in a new embodiment and this could ultimately make it attractive to a new group of audience. Adapters may also adopt the approach of Reimagining or Subversion which makes a more direct effort to significantly alter the original story, characters, or themes to create a new, often more radical or unconventional alternative. This can involve changing the narrative structure, introducing new perspectives, or challenging the original work's assumption or conventions. In general, these approaches are not mutually exclusive and many successful adaptations often combine elements of several of these approaches to create ideologically distinct and in some cases commercially appreciable body of works.

Story Development of the Adaptation experiment, *Transgression*

The 300-level students of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Nnamdi Azikiwe University embarked on a Play Adaptation project in partial fulfilment of the academic requirement of the course; Principles of Adaptation, TFS 332 under the guidance of the course lecturer. The group settled for a 'Prose to Play' adaptation with particular reference to the historical events recorded in the Bible. Through a random selection process, the story of David and Bathsheba as narrated in 2 Samuel 11: 1-26 and 2 Samuel 12: 1-25 was chosen. The story development, rehearsals and production preparation process ran for 2 months with the eventual production holding on the 25th of November, 2021.

The group analysed and had discussions on the original material as recorded in the Bible. The original story tells of King David of Israel who spots a woman taking her bath from the balcony of his palace. Having been taken by her beauty, he enquires about her and is told she is Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, the Hittite. Moved by lust, King David invites her to the palace where he sleeps with her and sends her on her way. After some time, Bethsheba discovers that she is pregnant and sends word to David. In a sinister move, King David invites her husband Uriah who was away fighting for Israel in a war against the Ammonites. He gets him drunk and sends him off to his wife to redeem his shame of sleeping with another man's wife. Uriah however does not go home to his wife and then in a further move of desperation, King David orders that Uriah be sent to the fiercest part of battle where he is eventually killed. The king then brings Bathsheba to his palace as his wife; after which she gives birth to a son. But this act greatly displeased God and He

sent his prophet Nathan who hands down an unbearable punishment to a mortalised and broken David. Eventually, the child from the illicit affair dies.

In translocating the original story into play-worthy material, the students considered several factors. Among them was; the relocation of the original setting to another location whether real or fictional. There was also the need to develop the characters of the intended play production further than was outlined with the original text-span that they were working with; and in some cases, create new characters that would further give context and depth within the new medium. There was also the challenge of creating new dialogue material for new as well as existing character representations thus, the students were able to come up with the following play script;

The play is set in a fictional "Ndembele" Kingdom in precolonial Zulu land, South Africa. The play opens with a meeting between a Zulu king *Nkhosi* and his chief warriors. They strategize on their ongoing battles with their adversaries after which he sends them out and reclines to his private chambers but not before consorting with his most trusted friend, *Maqoba*. Looking over his balcony afterwards, he spots a beautiful woman taking a bath in a thatched makeshift bathroom. Smitten by her beauty, he then sends for the woman who we now know as *Jemila* and leveraging on his sovereignty as her king, he compels her to sleep with him despite knowing that she is married to one of his warriors. As she shamefully 'tiptoes' after the act, she is seen by one of the King's other three wives *Zenzile* who calls the attention of the other two. All three of them gossip about the polygamous nature of men and the apparent possibility of their husband and king bringing another wife to the palace.

The next scene opens with a visibly worried *Nkhosi* pacing about his palace. He has just received word from *Jemila* about her pregnancy. He summons his friend Maqoba and relates the matter to him. Maqoba reminds the King that it is taboo to sleep with the wife of another man. He then advises him to recall the husband of *Jemila* from battle and set him up for the pregnancy. The plan fails however when *Khanya*, Jemila's husband refuses to go home to his wife even after a heavy drinking session with the king. King *Nkhosi* therefore, after further advice from Maqoba, orders the secret execution of *Khanya* and takes *Jemila* as his fourth wife. This angers the gods of the land who immediately inflict hardship and disease on the *Ndebele* people. Eventually, the king is visited by the chief priest of the gods on the very day Jemila gives birth. He declares that the suffering of the people was brought upon them by the king himself and that the child born from the sacrilegious affair must die if peace is to return. At this point, a cry rents the air from backstage as the eldest wife of the king rushes on stage to report the death of the newborn. The story ends.

***Transgression*; A thematic analysis**

The themes explored by the 300-level adaptation class could be broadly categorized into three namely; Infidelity, Greed and Abuse of power. At the discussion and story development phase of the production, the cast and crew agreed that the act of Infidelity perpetuated by King David in the bible and characterized by the Zulu King *Nkhosi* is primarily a result of his greed who despite having other wives, was willing to go to the extent of killing another man to claim his wife and this ultimately leads to the utter abuse of his power of Kingship. Thus, it would seem that the aim of retelling this story and

accentuating the above themes in the process somewhat threw a searchlight on the failings of human nature especially as they concern powerful individuals in society today.

The adaptation experiment however employed various approaches in bringing these themes to the front burner; one distinct feature was in the area of Characterization. Indeed, as evidenced throughout the rehearsal period, meetings and eventual production, there was need to develop the existing character prototypes from the original story material as well as create entirely new characters within the narrative to further strengthen the plot. On one part, the development of the existing character prototypes involved a proper evaluation of the new environment where the character would function and this naturally cascaded down to other attributes such as dialogue and even mannerisms.

For instance, in the narration of the original story, the reader though knowledgeable of the fact that King David has many wives and concubines, is not introduced to any within the context and span of the events of 2 Samuel Chapters 11 and 12. The adaptation therefore created three additional characters as wives of King *Nkhosi* who engage at different times in the debate and gossip of the polygamous nature of men. In the third scene, for instance, queen *Zenzile*, the youngest wife of King *Nkhosi* catches a glimpse of *Jemila* beating a hasty retreat from the King's bed chambers and laments to the older wives as follows;

Zenzile: "Am I not beautiful enough for our King? What does that woman have so much so that a King would leave his young queen's bed cold at night for the arms of another?"

(The older queens look at themselves knowingly and giggle in mischief)



Plate 1: Queen Zenzile complains to the older wives about the king's neglect

Similarly, in another attempt at character development and in a slight departure from the original material which presents the main character, King David as solely responsible for his actions and consequently woes, the adaptation evolved yet another character in the person of *Maqoba* as a close friend and ally of King *Nkhosi*, who advises him on some of his decisions. The introduction of this character in the new body of work sought to

emphasize the part played by advisers to persons in the seat of power who leverage their influence as well as acts of sycophancy in putting forth policies that eventually bring great harm to the people they are expected to serve. And so in the adaptation, *Maqoba* plays a significant role at the beginning of the play in the decision of King *Nkhosi* to go to war with another kingdom as well as in *Nkhosi'*s decision to covet *Jemila* for himself and kill her husband, *Khanya*.

Another approach engaged by the adaptation students which enhanced the projection of the proposed themes was the expansion and condensation of the original material. This allowed for the exploration of artistic and directorial licences in strengthening and emphasizing areas of creative value while deemphasizing weaker material that may pull away from the thematic thrust if allowed in the eventual adaptation experiment. One of these situations was the tightening of the plot towards the end of the story to strengthen the effect of retribution visited on *Nkhosi* for his "Transgression". This was achieved by shortening the timeline between the exposition by the chief priest of the gods who confronts *Nkhosi* on the terrible sacrilege he has committed and his eventual punishment.

The adapters achieved this by coinciding with the birth of the baby boy borne through the illicit affair between *Nkhosi* and *Jemila* with the entrance of the chief priest of the land replicating the character of the prophet Nathan in the original text. The essence was to create a sharp contrast between the mood of joy accompanying the birth of a newborn with the experience of anguish attributed to the death of the same baby within one scene. Thus, as soon as the chief priest storms out after handing down the judgement of the gods, one of the older

wives comes on stage to inform the king that his newly birthed heir has just died.



Plate 2: First frame shows the Chief Priest (on the left), pronouncing the curse of the gods as a result of King *Nkhosi's* transgression. The second frame shows a dejected King *Nkhosi* after one of his wives tells him of his son's death.

This condensation approach by the adaptation group proved effective in heightening the impact of retribution which in turn accentuated the thematic thrust of the production as against the original material which appeared to slow the process from exposition to retribution by about seven days. Thus, the immediacy that the medium of the stage provided was explored adequately in this regard.

Conclusion

It is quite instructive to state that the play adaptation, "Transgression" as a theatrical experiment exemplified the urgent need to protect the human failings in present society and therefore act retrospectively. The essence was communicated from the formative stages of story creation through casting and even during rehearsals. At the dress and technical rehearsal, the students were asked to come up with one word that sums up the experiment that could serve as title for the production. Several phrases were thrown up such as; "Abomination", "Sacrilege", "Throne of Pain" and so on. The group eventually settled for the working title, "Transgression" as it was generally agreed that the title encapsulates the travails and consequences of the themes of infidelity (lust), Greed and Abuse of power.

Conclusively, the continuous need for film directors, stage directors, choreographers, applied theatre practitioners, cinema managers, content creators, artists and others in the creative and entertainment industry to engage theme-based approaches in illuminating discourses of social relevance cannot be over-emphasized. The instrument of Adaptation thus allows creatives and other active players in the entertainment space to retell stories with new perspectives whilst resisting the temptation to sacrifice meaningful and enduring content at the altar of mere aesthetics.

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