“PRETTY, ISN’T IT?": ADAPTING FILM NOIR TO THE STAGE

TONY PERUCCI

Many of the concerns introduced about the practice of adaptation centre around the staging or filming of a literary work. As is addressed by many of the essays in this volume, the signal point of contention has long been the question of the newer medium’s ability to maintain “fidelity” to the language, form, or spirit of the “original” work. Indeed, all works of art are adaptations in some sense, and the resultant work is by necessity a dialogic response to source texts, be they pre-existing literary works or the texts of culture more generally. While literary sources remain a basis for many stage and screen productions, recent years have seen the emergence of film as the basis for theatrical adaptation. Here, I address some of the particular challenges in adapting film to the stage; what I see as the inadequacies of the dominant approach to this mode of adaptation; and what an alternative approach to adapting film to the stage might look like through my recent stage adaptation of the film noir classic, Double Indemnity—itself a product of a series of adaptive reworkings.

Two of the most successful Broadway musicals in recent years exemplify the trend of adaptation of film to stage. The unprecedented success of Spam-a-lot! (based on the 1975 Monty Python film, Monty Python and the Holy Grail) and The Producers (based on the 1968 Mel Brooks film) stand alongside a range of big-budget Broadway productions based on movies that run the gamut of artistic and fiscal achievement. These include: The Graduate, Hairspray, Dirty Dancing, The Lion King, Billy Elliot, Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, Saturday Night Fever, and The Sweet Smell of Success. As David Savran suggests, one way to account for this trend is that “film has become the dominant narrative form” (qtd. in Campbell). This dominance exists not only in terms of form, but also in film’s overtaking of the novel as the dominant medium (along with television) for establishing a common cultural mythology. In the financially-driven Broadway production (as all of the above represent), the stage adaptation of a film can borrow the cultural capital of its source film, just as film and stage adaptations once did (and continue to do) of the...
literary works from which they were adapted. Moreover, what is sometimes thought to be a drawback of adaptations from canonical literary works—that they vulgarize high art by “middle-browning” it into the digestible film or play—is actually a box office advantage. Tourist audiences, for example, can be comforted by the familiar in the form of a recreation of a popular text that they watched on home video. This process does not so much “high-brow” the movie as it transforms it into a higher value commodity. With Broadway ticket prices often at seventy-five dollars or more, the guarantee of appeal is clear: “If you liked the movie, you’ll love the play!”

Screen to stage adaptations operate based on an appeal to familiarity of form and content. And it is this replication of the familiar that drives the development and marketing of such productions. In the productions that I have seen of this genre, it is this play to familiarity that ultimately undermines the artistic possibilities of the work. That is to say, a problem opposite to the criticism leveled against literary to stage adaptations emerges: the adaptations are too committed to fidelity to the original text. This practice leaves the theatrical production redundant, and almost asserts theatre’s subservience to the now dominant form of film. Productions often work to recreate the experience of the original film, with the only major change being the addition of musical numbers. The 2002 theatrical adaptation of The Graduate included the film’s Simon and Garfunkel score, replication of the set from the film, and actors known predominantly for their film work (Jason Biggs, Alicia Silverstone, and Kathleen Turner), all to alleviate any fear in the audience that they might actually be watching a play. Similarly, the record-breaking The Producers recreates most of the scenes from the film, comic beat by comic beat, oftentimes down to replication of timing and actor emphasis of words. What are added to The Producers are the musical numbers and an increase in anti-gay humour. Such attempts at replication encourage comparison to the film source, with the play as an inadequate imitation of the original. How could Jason Alexander or Nathan Lane be better than Zero Mostel at playing Zero Mostel playing Max Bialystock, or Matthew Broderick or Martin Short be better than Gene Wilder at playing Gene Wilder playing Leo Bloom?

Moreover, film does some things better than theatre—namely the production of verisimilitude and naturalism. When contemporary theatre attempts to replicate the success of these conventions, it simply highlights the ways in which the intimacy of film acting and the realism of a filmed setting can capture the “reality” of a distant time and place through the historicizing effect of photography. Film seems to document a past in its
previousness, while allowing for a more secure maintenance of the audience’s suspension of disbelief. Film is simply better than theatre in producing the effects that Brecht derided in his writings: “the engendering of illusion” where theatre “cast[s] a spell” over the audience (122). Theatre’s inferiority in these areas is actually its advantage—for both the political reasons that Brecht sketches out, as well as for aesthetic ones.

One distinctive aesthetic of theatre is its “liveness.” Performance is characterized by its presence; as Peggy Phelan suggests, performance’s “life only is in the present” (146) in that it erupts in a “manically charged present” of liveness only to disappear upon the moment of its enactment (148). What theatre produces is the persistent immanence of action, what Walter Benjamin calls *Jetzeit*, or “the presence of the now” (261). Or we could also reverse this and suggest that performance calls forth *the now of presence*. As Artaud shows us (as well as Brecht), theatre is always a dialogue between the story and characters represented with the material and dynamic presence of the actor in this time and this space.

So, it is with these concerns that I entered into the process of adapting and directing *Double Indemnity* in Los Angeles at California State University, Northridge. The 1944, Billy Wilder-directed film is often heralded as a classic and remarked as exemplary of the film noir genre. It was often identified as such when French film critics first coined the phrase to mark the movement of nihilistic crime films that shared stylistic features like low lighting, harsh shadows, extreme camera angles, hard-boiled dialogue, *femmes fatales* and bleak endings. The film is an adaptation of James M. Cain’s 1936 novella, which is itself a compilation of a serial, first published in the magazine, *Liberté*, which was an adaptation of an actual famous murder trial covered obsessively by tabloids in the 1920s. As Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy West argue, tabloid stories functioned as “adaptation-ready” sites because tabloid newspapers themselves consciously adapted crime stories to fit the genre of crime fiction, “adapting raw facts into amusement” (212, 215). Edmund Wilson dubbed Cain one of “the poets of tabloid murder,” in part because his crime fiction was distinguished by presenting the Everyman criminal, rather than the Everyman private detective, as the first-person narrator (qtd in Schickel 19). Without the moral barometers of Raymond Chandler’s detective-heroes, Cain’s protagonists invite the audience to empathize with the committing of criminal acts. As W.M. Frohock suggests, in Cain’s work the reader is “tricked into taking the position of a potential accomplice” with the narrator/criminal (qtd in Pelizzon and West 228). Chandler, who wrote the adapted screenplay with director Billy Wilder, was not a fan of Cain’s writing, declaring:
“Pretty, Isn’t It?”: Adapting Film Noir to the Stage

Everything he touches smells like a billygoat. He is every kind of writer I detest [...] Such people are the offal of literature, not because they write about dirty things, but because they do it in a dirty way. (qtd in Schickel 34)

However, the dirtiness of Cain’s writing, the moral ambiguity and empathy for criminal acts was what attracted me to the project. I wanted to create a piece that was about film noir, about Double Indemnity, and about the process of implicating the audience in their empathy for criminality—as well as to explore the poetics of tabloid murder.3

In creating the adaptation, I worked from the novella, screenplay, and film as primary source texts. Though the plot remains basically the same, Chandler and Wilder made some significant changes to Cain’s text. In fact, Cain contended that most of the alterations in plot improved upon his original, and he would have included them if he had thought of them (Schickel 65-66). The film, like the novella, is presented as a confessional. Within the first minutes, the film’s protagonist, Walter Neff, insurance salesman, confesses a murder into a dictaphone. He committed the murder, he explains, for money and a woman—a plot which had failed dismally: “I didn’t get the money and I didn’t get the woman. Pretty. Isn’t it?” (Wilder 11). The woman in question here is Phyllis Dietrichson, a classic noir femme fatale. To free her from a loveless marriage, Phyllis and Neff plot to commit the murder of her husband, so that they might both share in a romance and a hefty life insurance policy. Moreover, the policy contains a double indemnity clause: the policy will pay double if Mr. Dietrichson is to suffer an accidental death while riding on a train.

While the murder is carried off successfully, the paranoia that is evinced by the attempts to evade the police and especially the insurance investigation, headed by claims manager Keyes, ultimately destroys the relationship, as mutual suspicion leads to each shooting the other. The film, like the novella, is a study in an attempt to "crook" the wheel of the system, in this case the bureaucratic capitalist system of insurance, where "beating the boss" is conflated with erotic desire.

To this end, I worked from two key traditions—Chamber Theatre and the Viewpoints—both of which (and in conjunction with each other) allowed for a critical engagement with the imminent theatrical moment, and challenged the primacy of fidelity to the cinematic text. The stodgily named Chamber Theatre, developed in the 1940s at Northwestern University, approaches the staging of the novel (and short story) as one that refuses the elimination of the narrative, or "novelistic" qualities of the novel. Such qualities include the narrative point-of-view and what Robert Breen calls "motivation at the moment of action," a key element in the
story of a murder plot (4). Narration need not be dispensed with, nor need it be relegated to the detached narrator. Rather, Chamber Theatre splits the narrative voice amongst multiple actors, as the dialogism of the inner conflict of the narrator is materialized in separate characters who are personifications of the divergent elements of the narrator’s self. Moreover, the narrator occupies the place of Brecht’s epic actor, commenting on and intervening with the dramatic scene rather than leaving it as a hermetically sealed artifice.

However, the tradition of Chamber Theatre relies on a “fidelity” to its novelistic source. It is, as Breen suggests, “in the service of literature” (Breen 6). Moreover, while the split narrator in my adaptation of *Double Indemnity* helped to produce a dramatic way to make present the “intrapersonal” conflict within Walter Neff (namely between the self who wishes to commit the murder, and the one who wishes to control these criminal urges), Chamber Theatre encourages an inclination towards the pastness of fiction and film that I wish to disrupt. Breen contends that, as in film, the experience of presentness is only an illusion, a virtuality that masks the pastness of scripting, rehearsal and theatrical production:

The drama in the present is virtual, for the drama of the past is actual since the actors have rehearsed the play and what they say has already been spoken and memorized, and indeed, the spontaneous sense of repartee is but virtual, since both parties know how it will end, having already played through many times. (62)

As the novel and film operate with an emphasis on the pastness of the narrative (both are framed as Neff’s confession, where he recounts his story), such a technique would tend to serve to replicate this pastness rather than to destabilize it, and to heighten an encounter with the presence of the now.

To disrupt the multiple levels of pastness of the adapted texts, and to highlight the performance’s elements of presence and presentness, we utilized the Viewpoints and Contact Improvisation in the development of the piece. The Viewpoints, first conceived by choreographer and theorist, Mary Overlie (and revised by theatre director Anne Bogart), works to challenge what Overlie calls the “Vertical” theatrical system that privileges plot and character over other theatrical elements. Overlie has developed a full conceptualization of theatrical practice, as well as specific rehearsal, training exercises, and performance strategies to encourage performers and directors to engage on the “Horizontal.” All elements, or Viewpoints, of the stage are in equal value and particularity: Space, Shape, Time, Emotion, Movement, and Story.
Bogart has broken these down further: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition (elements of time), spatial relation, shape, topography, gesture, and architecture (elements of space).6 Viewpoints-composed pieces treat these elements as Horizontal to plot and character (more akin to instrumental music or postmodern dance). Rather than remaining in the “virtual” realm of the represented, as in Breen’s Chamber Theatre, the “drama” involves an equal and “actual” engagement with the imminence of live actors. The traditionally subordinate signifiers—the actors’ bodies and their actual engagement with time and space on stage—operate with the signified character and plot (Breen’s “virtual”) on the Horizontal plane.

To further enhance the “liveness” of performance, we used contact improvisation within the performance itself. Contact improvisation is a contemporary dance form that involves not just the spontaneous invention of a dancer, but also the reactive dynamic constructed by the shifting weight between dancers who continuously give and receive each others’ weight.7 The improvisation is derived as much from without—the points and modes of continual “contact”—as from within. We used contact improvisation not only as a mode of developing choreography, but also as staged improvisation, as the choreography of these duet scenes was improvised during the actual performance even as the dialogue was scripted.

Below, I describe three key scenes that challenge the primacy of both source texts: the novella and the film. In each case, the adaptation and staging serve to privilege the performed moment over the pastness emphasized in film and Chamber Theatre adaptations. This presence served to create identification for the audience with the criminal impulse to “crook the system,” the distinctive thematic strain of Cain’s work. The opening dialogue of the piece utilized this dynamic of presence to work the possibilities of a live audience. In the film, following a brief exchange with an elevator operator, the first dialogue is the confession into the dictaphone to claims manager, Keyes. Thus, the film establishes the framing story as less past than the story of the murder which is recounted. We also set-up a narrative framing; however, it was used to directly implicate the audience in the narrative. As the lights rise on the classic noir figure (grey suit, hat), he stands shaking his head at the audience. He begins with a confessional of sorts—not the one delivered to the boss/confessor Keyes, but the one delivered to his lover/conspirator Phyllis at the end of the film: “We’re both rotten, only you’re a little more rotten. You’re rotten clear through.” Suddenly, he pulls a gun from his trouser pocket, aiming it at the audience in the classic noir gesture (arm
close to the side, elbow at ninety-degree angle, gun at hip-level). "What's the matter? It's what you came down here for tonight." Finally raising it, he shoots the audience. This action, which simultaneously positions the audience within the narrative, occasions the experience of the live by having a gun fired in the same time and space as the audience, and marks the dynamic aesthetic relationship between actor and audience (as with Phyllis, we, like the femme fatale, precipitate the murder; we are Neff's conspirators and are ultimately victim of his violence).

Fig. 6-1. Walter Neff (Jason Baumwirt) shoots the audience in Double Indemnity. Photo by Tony Perucci, 2005.

In a later scene, taken exclusively from the Cain novella, two actors portray different aspects of Walter Neff. In the novel, Walter directly addresses the reader, challenging us to identify with him, detailing the
ways in which capitalism (in the form of the insurance company) produces a criminal mentality. Utilizing the Chamber Theatre approach of a split narrator, we staged Neff's internal conflict and simultaneously challenged the audience to empathize with his desire to "crook the system" of the "roulette wheel" of capitalism. (I have emphasized the text that designates the second speaker):

You think I'm nuts? All right, maybe I am. But you spend fifteen years in the business I'm in, and maybe you'll go nuts yourself. You think it's a business, don't you, just like your business, and maybe even a little better than that, because it's friend of the widow, the orphan, and the needy in time of trouble? It's not. It's the biggest gambling wheel in the world. It don't look like it, but it is, from the way they figure the percentage to the look on your face when they cash your chips. You bet that your house will burn down. They bet it won't, that's all. What fools you is that you didn't want your house to burn down when you made the bet, and so you forget it's a bet. That don't fool them. To them, a bet is a bet, and a hedge bet don't look any different than any other bet. But there comes a time, maybe, when you do want your house to burn down, when the money is worth more than the house. And right there is where the trouble starts. (Cain 23)

We attempted to engage the pastness of the represented conflict with the presentness of the performative moment through contact improvisation. As Neff literally wrestled with his conscience, the actors worked with the Viewpoints of tempo, duration, shape, and gesture. But this representative strategy is no more important than the actuality of the presence of the actors (not just the characters) physically competing with one another. Here, the actual competition for physical dominance is as critical as the virtual narrative being represented by the scene. Distinct from film, live theatre can engage with not only the virtually indeterminate (the characters and audience do not know what will happen next), but also the actually indeterminate (the actors do not know what will happen next). Thus, as an audience, we experience not only the representation of conflict, but actual conflict.
Fig. 6-2. Walter Neff (Taylor Zagnoli and Reza Mir) wrestles with his conscience in *Double Indemnity*. Photo by Tony Perucci, 2005.

The technique that perhaps most directly engaged with the divergent aesthetic technologies of film and theatre was the juxtaposing of live actors with an overlaid, rear-projected film image. We began this interplay of the filmed and the live in the pre-show, as a montage of sequences from the film, and newly shot black and white footage of the Hollywood Hills provided the *mise-en-scène* for an improvised sequence of images by actors onstage from *Double Indemnity* and of the film noir style generally. As the projected images and the live performers were able to be seen simultaneously (as they were both in the same visual schema), the film served to highlight the ways in which the actors played with the shape of noir postures, the tempo of noir gestures, and the spatial relationship of noir cinematography. Thus, the interplay of the live and the filmed both commented on the film (and, generally, on film as a medium) and enacted what film cannot do—the shared experience of time and space.
The penultimate scene of the performance most directly challenged the notion of fidelity to the cinematic text. In the film, Walter seeks out Phyllis when he realizes she may be setting him up. Confronted in her shadowy living room, she pulls a gun on him, declaring, “I never loved you, Walter. Not you, or anybody else. I’m rotten to the heart. I used you, just as you said. That’s all you ever meant to me” (Wilder 113). But, then, in a moment representative of 1940s gender norms, she finishes, “until a minute ago [...] Just hold me close” (Wilder 113). This collapse of will (dependent as it is on retrograde constructions of femininity) has always infuriated me, as it has cultural historian Ann Douglas, who comments that every time she watches the film she yells at Phyllis, “Shoot him! Shoot him!” (Douglas). In staging the scene, rather than simply accepting the terms put forth by the film, I used three sets of actors playing Walter and Phyllis. As two of these near-simultaneous scenes conclude, Phyllis does not wilt, but rather successfully shoots Walter and exits the stage. Only in the third and final version does Phyllis give in to the gender norms conscripted by the screenplay. The stage, now strewn with dead bodies, estranges the classic scene, allows for the shared pleasure in
subverting gender conventions, and highlights the ways in which theatre singularly encounters the contingent and transformative.

Theatrical performance provides an opportunity to engage with film as a cultural text without ceding to cinema's aesthetic primacy. Theatre can attend to the ways in which cinema operates as the central cultural practice that it is, even adopting cinematic techniques. But it is when theatre adopts and adapts those technologies to the stage, with approaches that highlight the singular ways that the theatrical encounter erupts in time and space, that new aesthetic and critical worlds emerge.

**Works Cited**


"Pretty, Isn’t It?: Adapting Film Noir to the Stage"


Notes

1 The commercial success of The Graduate can further be attributed to the much ballyhooed nude scene of one of the film stars, Kathleen Turner, appearing in it (BBC News). The result, Ben Brantley in The New York Times argued, was not enough to lift the play. Rather, “Nearly everything seems as flat and two-dimensional as construction paper, as if this were The Graduate: The Board Game” (Brantley). However, the play ran for two years on London’s West End, nearly a year on Broadway, and in productions around the world, including Australia, Poland and South Africa (BBC News, 18 Jan 2002).

2 And yet, despite the absurdity of such a simulacrum (or because of it), The Producers was an unmatched success. In its over six-year run on Broadway, it grossed nearly three-hundred million as well as one-billion globally, setting records for single day ticket sales ($3.5 million), single ticket price ($480 per seat), Tony Awards (12) and nominations (15). However, the 2005 movie based on the movie-based-play flopped (Robertson).

3 The desire to have the audience confront their own complicity with criminal, and even murderous enterprises, was in part a response to the dispiriting re-election of U.S. President George W. Bush, which had just occurred when I began writing the adaptation.
4 This was a change from Cain's novella, where Walter's last name is "Huff" and Phyllis' last name is "Nirdlinger."

5 Mine is a highly simplistic rendering of Overlie's philosophical approach. I should note here though, that Overlie proposes a drastic re-envisioning of what theatre is. Indeed, her expressed mission is not to construct theatre pieces, but rather to deconstruct theatre itself. For more on Mary Overlie and the Six Viewpoints, see her website, www.sixviewpoints.com.

6 Bogart's reimagining of the Viewpoints is detailed in her book, with Tina Landau, The Viewpoints Book.

7 See Novack, Cynthia J. Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture.

8 For a critique of such an understanding of "liveness," see Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture.