

Candidate 6 evidence

Advanced Higher Drama 2022-23
Project (Dissertation)

Title:

'A novel is a dictatorship, but a dramatisation is a democracy.'

Question:

Can the depth of a novel ever be fully realised on stage?

Candidate Name:

Candidate Number:

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Practitioners referenced:

Ivo Van Hove

Sally Cookson

Ramsey Nasr/ Hans Kesting

Eric Sleichim

Madeleine Worrell/ Felix Hayes/ Melanie Marshall

Michael Vale

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An D'Huys

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'A novel is a dictatorship, but a dramatisation is a democracy.'¹

Good books don't necessarily make great plays². Despite this, literary adaptations generate approximately three times more in ticket sales than an original script³. These adaptations are ideally considered to 'be free from the "trappings" of a text'⁴, yet providing a link between contemporary theatre and 'an older performance tradition of oral storytelling.'⁵

However, the variances in 'storytelling' forms occasionally result in 'shows as different as they are similar to the source material that inspired them.'⁶ Novels differ greatly from the theatrical experience - they are a private pleasure- characters are created in the imagination:

"The reader writes the novel" [...] you actively assist in imagining the world the author evoked through language.⁷

¹ Mark Lawson, Jan 16, 2014, *Page to Stage The Rise of The Acted Book*. The Guardian. <https://amp.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/16/page-stage-rise-acted-book> [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

² Sarah Hemming, November 22, 2013, *Adapting Novels For Theatre*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/30392f4c-5130-11e3-b499-00144feabdc0> [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

³ Publishers Association, July 10, 2018, *Film, TV and theatre adaptations of books attract more revenue, viewers and critical acclaim*. <https://www.publishers.org.uk/film-tv-and-theatre-adaptations-of-books-attract-more-revenue-viewers-and-critical-acclaim/> [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

⁴ Frances Babbage, 2015. *Adaption and Storytelling in Theatre*. <https://www.critical-stages.org/12/adaptation-and-storytelling-in-the-theatre/> [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

⁵ ^ [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

⁶ Lyn Gardner, Feb 25, 2014. *Page to Stage: Is it Always Second Best?* The Guardian. <https://amp.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/feb/25/jane-eyre-1984-matilda-let-right-one-in-stage-adaptations> [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

⁷ Michael Billington, Nov 17, 2005. *Why Turn Novels Into Drama?* The Guardian. <https://amp.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2006/nov/17/whyturnnovelsintodrama> [accessed 9th February, 2023]

Theatre, however, is communal. Time, space and characters are shared, 'The different narrative demands of the genres can chafe, leaving stage adaptations looking flat and linear.'⁸

Both art forms are consumed differently which makes adaptations difficult, as crucial elements of both can be lost in their merging: 'the major loss for a novelist in theatre is control - especially of characterisation. In a book, an incidental figure makes exactly the impact the author permits them, but in theatre, the casting of a brilliant young actor in a small role or an under-powered performer in a larger one can significantly change the balance of the narrative.'⁹

So can the value of a novel be retained through theatrical adaptation? How do the different methods of adapting novels affect the product? And, ultimately, should page-to-stage adaptations even be explored if the result is a lack of original theatre? With the theatre industry slowly emerging from the financial difficulties of the Covid pandemic, and adaptations increasing in popularity, these questions are even more pressing.¹⁰

Using Sally Cookson's 2016 devised version of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*¹¹ and Ivo Van Hove's 2022 production of Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*¹², one must consider the truth of

⁸ Sarah Hemming, Nov 22, 2013. *Adapting Novels For Theatre*. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/30392f4c-5130-11e3-b499-00144feabdc0> [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

⁹ Mark Lawson, Jan 16, 2014, *Page to Stage The Rise of The Acted Book*. The Guardian. <https://amp.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/16/page-stage-rise-acted-book> [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

¹⁰ Georgia Snow, Jul 16, 2016. *Shows based on books and films sell five times more than original work - report*. The Stage. <https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/shows-based-on-books-and-films-sell-five-times-more-than-original-work-report>

¹¹ The Readers Room. Jan 16, 2017 <https://thereadersroom.org/2017/01/16/love-it-or-hate-it-jane-eyre/> [accessed 11th February, 2023]

¹² Brigid Delaney, Jan 19, 2016. *A Little Life: why everyone should read this modern-day classic*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/20/a-little-life-why-everyone-should-read-this-modern-day-classic> [accessed 9th February, 2023]

the statement: 'the really great novels invariably lose more than they gain when subjected to the filleting process of adaption'¹³.

A Little Life was first staged as the 2018-19 season opener for the Amsterdam International Theatre, before its revival at the 2022 Edinburgh International Festival at the Festival Theatre, performed in Dutch. Yanagihara's novel on which Van Hove's production is based, became a bestseller despite mixed reviews on its sensitive subject matter: 'There are those who think it the best book ever written and those who find its obsessive detail, slow-burn revelation and melodramatic intrusions too much.'¹⁴

A Little Life follows a friendship group - Jude, Willem, JB and Malcolm, experiencing life, supported only by one another and their ambition. Living in New York, Jude's childhood abuse continues to haunt him, even after finding happiness with his adoption by former Law Professor, Harold, and his brief relationship with Willem. Jude's trauma proves unbeatable and, following the death of Malcolm and Willem in a car accident, he commits suicide.

Considering the graphic content prevalent throughout the story: rape, self-harm, abuse; it is hard to envision how it could be staged faithfully to the novel, or even enjoyed considering the brutality of the content. However, Van Hove's drive to push the limit of what is possible

¹³ Michael Billington, Nov 17, 2005. *Why Turn Novels Into Drama?* The Guardian. <https://amp.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2006/nov/17/whyturnnovelsintodrama> [accessed 9th February, 2023]

¹⁴ Mark Fisher, Aug 21, 2022. *A Little Life Review - Hanya Yanagihara drama is not for the faint-hearted.* The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/aug/21/a-little-life-review-festival-theatre-edinburgh-vo-van-hove-hanya-yanagihara> [accessed 24th February, 2023]

onstage¹⁵ and the currency of the themes of the play - mental health, identity and platonic love's importance, suggest its staging was a timely way in which to examine our world. It's recent transfer to the West End further suggests this relevancy to contemporary audiences. In tackling this challenge, Van Hove sought Yanagihara's approval and was advised: 'It has to be an interpretation, not a literal translation. The book requires total surrender from the reader. And it will be the same with the play. ¹⁶'

A major aspect of the adaptation was therefore the challenge of staging self-harm.

Acknowledging this, Van Hove said: 'The book is intense, and we wanted the people to have the same sensation'¹⁷. There are many moments in which Jude (Ramsey Nasr) cuts himself at the stage-left sink, it becomes a vessel for him to wash away his self-perceived impurities and sins. The first time he did it, he sat with hunched-posture against the side of the sink, his legs straight and head bowed as he sliced open the blood pack on his left arm, releasing streams of dark red blood as Nasr closed his eyes, omitting relieved-sounding breaths. The live, slow-burning strings of Eric Sleichim's contemporary music ensemble BLINDMAN a chilling accompaniment to the action.

The moment was all-encompassing of the senses and its visceral nature was vital to the narrative as the pain Jude self-inflicts symbolises his trauma and inability to overcome it. It is how he copes with internalised feelings of shame, worthlessness and self-hatred. He hid

¹⁵Susan Bennett and Sonia Massai, 2018. *Ivo van Hove: From Shakespeare to David Bowie- Ivo van Hove: An Introduction*. Drama Online. [accessed 9th December, 2022]

¹⁶ Hanya Yanagihara Quote. *A Little Life*. Toneelgroepamsterdam <https://tga.nl/en/productions/een-klein-leven> [accessed 22nd February, 2023]

¹⁷ Juan A. Ramirez, Oct 21, 2022. 'It's Intense': Ivo Van Hove and Jan Versweyveld on Bringing Their Visceral Adaptation of 'A Little Life' to BAM. Vogue. <https://www.vogue.com/article/ivo-van-hove-jan-versweyveld-a-little-life-bam> [accessed 23rd February, 2023]

these cuts with his long-sleeved, fitted, collared shirt that Harold gifts him earlier in the production, a symbolic item of costume that with each new cutting session becomes increasingly blood-stained, representing Yanagihara's core message on everlasting-trauma and how love cannot mend all. The clear symbolism in the design choices reflected Van Hove's desire to 'make it as visceral as possible so that you're not looking at something but *inside* a story.¹⁸

However, it does contrast with another violent moment later in the production: a flashback in which Jude relives when as a child he was run over by a car at the hands of Dr Traylor. In this moment Dr Traylor (Hans Kesting) holds a large, high-intensity, white lamp used to represent the headlights of the car, while Jude (Nasr) runs and stumbles in circles around the light that Dr Traylor rotates centre stage.

As the audience never actually sees Jude's accident, Van Hove, in this case, draws upon their imagination to know the brutality caused, without physically witnessing the crash, but in doing so the horror created was arguably weakened in comparison to the graphic nature of the self-harm. Considering how Jude's cutting stems from his horrific past, it is an odd juxtaposition that the pain Van Hove has chosen to show occurring in Jude's present seems more horrifying than the trauma he presents as precipitating it. It could be argued, however, that by leaving the collision to the audience's imagination Van Hove does resemble the essence of the novel, where Yanagihara also entrusted his reader with the autonomy to picture how awful the incident was for ourselves.

¹⁸ Juan A. Ramírez, Oct 21, 2022. 'It's Intense': Ivo Van Hove and Jan Versweyveld on Bringing Their Visceral Adaptation of 'A Little Life' to BAM. Vogue. <https://www.vogue.com/article/ivo-van-hove-jan-versweyveld-a-little-life-bam> [accessed 23rd February, 2023]

To further overcome limitations presented through transferring storytelling methods: especially losing the thought process and habits of characters; Van Hove frequently made use of monologue. In such moments, the other characters remain on stage but are not involved, active or listening, usually absorbed in their own lives and hobbies, for example JD paints, Jude cooks, Malcolm makes scale models, Willem reads. This tool employed by Van Hove was effective in reaching the depth of the novel as it added detail to each character's life that was too insignificant to put emphasis on in interactive performance, yet the background movement evidences the sense of time passing.

The walls on either side of the apartment space were also used to effect as they projected video footage of New York City traffic in motion which unrestrained the set from the apartment and mimicked the open world of the novel itself: 'a constant reminder that there is an outside world, despite the fact that so much of this play is focused on the internal life and relationships of this one character. The projections of the city representing the outside world are then shut away any time Jude's pain takes over his perception of the world'¹⁹.

Jude ultimately experiences his most scarring moments of trauma at the hands of three men: Brother Luke, Dr Traylor and Caleb. In Yanagihara's novel, these men are distinct evils, each as cruel as the other - yet Van Hove made the decision to cast the same actor (Hans Kesting) in all three roles. This was an especially impactful feature of the adaptation as it invited the audience to recognise that it didn't matter *who* was causing Jude pain, all that

¹⁹ Olivia Ek, Apr 20, 2020. 'A Little Life': *Adaption and Mixed Reality*. The Theatre Times. <https://thetheatretimes.com/a-little-life-adaptation-and-mixed-reality/> [accessed 9th September, 2022]

mattered is that they *were* inflicting it. In Van Hove's adaptation, it is the evil actions, not the people themselves, that are important in how they affect Jude profoundly in his self-worth. Although straying from traditional casting, and the distinct men of the source material, this is arguably a faithful way of conveying the traumatic scars and actions.

Another aspect of non-naturalistic casting came through the flashbacks of Jude's past - flashbacks played by Ramsey Nasr, who is clearly not a child. In contrast, it is significant to Yanagihara's novel that Jude is so young when the majority of his trauma is inflicted on him. By having Nasr perform these flashbacks, for example at the beginning of Act Two, following Caleb's abuse, he has a flashback to his past with Brother Luke. Nasr sat downstage centre, his eyes wide with hope as he talked to Luke, held his hand, rested his head on his shoulder, his facial expression pouty in his sadness. The pitch of his voice was also higher in this moment as we saw his memory of Luke promising Jude a better life; While Nasr mimics this childhood movement and voice wonderfully, it would have been more impactful to have a child actor play these moments, to emphasise Jude's vulnerability during Brother Luke's emotional manipulation. Considering Jude's reluctance to talk about his past or think about his past memories (throughout the novel he frequently discusses his method of blocking memories away), it would be more impactful in this aspect to have child and adult Jude as separate entities, due to the changes the trauma imposes on him.

Furthermore, the confines of the condensed story, even with Van Hove's production's 4-hour length, omitted key elements of Yanagihara's novel: Jude's dramatic decline in health before his death and how this impacted his relationships, his starvation of himself and his friends' interventions, and key moments with Willem and Andy. In addition, the fact that

we as an audience are always seeing Jude unclothed takes away from his self-consciousness in his scars, something Yanagihara indicates he never willingly shows, even to Willem when they start their romantic relationship – detracting from the intimacy and trust in these relationships as they grow. Indeed, considering the main theme of friendship in Yanagihara’s novel, it is unfortunate that Van Hove’s adaptation did not put more emphasis on the happier elements of Jude’s life, instead leaning into the on-stage trauma: ‘So whereas the novel highlights how incredibly, unbelievably successful everyone becomes ... Van Hove goes all in on the abuse.’²⁰

Like Van Hove, theatre director Sally Cookson is constantly striving to stretch her creative limitations: ‘I don’t think anything is impossible to put on stage.’²¹ and while *Jane Eyre* and *A Little Life*’s narratives are by no means related, the importance of setting, and the depth of insight into the central character’s thoughts and feelings in the source material is just as challenging to reimagine.

Jane Eyre was a devised piece created by the company she assembled for it: a cast of 7 actors, 3 musicians, and 10 in the creative team. It was originally staged at the Bristol Old Vic, before opening at the Lyttelton Theatre in September 2015. The piece was adapted from Charlotte Brontë’s novel, following protagonist Jane Eyre (Madeleine Worrell), an orphan sidelined suffering from abuse in her youth, as she battles life’s struggles and enters

²⁰ Dan Dinero, Oct 21, 2022. *A Little Life*. The Easy. <http://www.theeasy.com/Reviews/2022/L/alittlelife.php> [accessed 3rd March, 2023]

²¹ Andrzej Lukowski, Jul 6, 2018. ‘I don’t think anything is impossible to put on stage’: Sally Cookson on the enormous challenge of adapting *A Monster Calls*. The Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/a-monster-calls-old-vic-sally-cookson-interview-patrick-ness-stage-play-novel-adaptation-a8430421.html> [accessed 3rd March, 2023]

a tumultuous and often toxic love affair with Mr Rochester (Felix Hayes) wherein she must decide what her true values are.

As a devised piece of work, the novel was collaboratively adapted on a scene-by-scene basis through movement, voice, and dialogue. Worrell explained: 'We spent a lot of time...reading chapters from the book. Then you literally get on your feet, and start playing around with it. You start physicalising it yourself. It's about finding a physical and verbal language, yourself, as a company.'²² Considering the extensive participation in the creation of this theatrical adaptation, it is an interesting comparison to Van Hove's singular approach to Yanagihara's novel, and with so many opinions being incorporated, it is arguable that, as each member of the team's interpretation created a slightly different style, Cookson's production became more reflective of the changes and journey Jane experiences in Bronte's novel.

The Brontë sisters are known for using setting in their novels to indicate personality, and it was therefore crucial that the set was powerful in reflecting character states and feelings. To do this, Cookson created a playground for the actors with various levels, a simple combination of wooden planks, metal bars and ladders – its bare nature inviting the audience to project their own imagination as they followed Jane's story.

For example, when Jane first comes to Thornfield Hall, the set was illuminated by the actors holding handheld lamps, creating silhouettes and shadows on the wooden-framed set, creating an intimate and dark atmosphere that reflected the secrets Mr Rochester was

²² Madeleine Worrell, 2015. *Jane Eyre 03 Devising*. National Theatre Collection. Drama Online. https://www.dramaonlineibrary.com/video?docid=do-9781350997738&tocid=do-9781350997738_6120709535001&st=jane+eyre [accessed 21st September, 2022]

hiding from Jane in the house. Cookson's symbolic use of design, in collaboration with her set designer (Michael Vale), to represent the diverse setting meant that while the depth of Bronte's novel might not have been visually available, it allowed for the audience to see each location in their own way, providing a central link between the page and stage.

Furthermore, the collaborative use of movement and props was expertly used by Cookson to convey the novel's key themes and Jane's internal thoughts. Throughout the production, there is a motif of Jane opening windows, represented by the ensemble holding wooden window frames high in front of Worrell, before she would push them forward, the ensemble swinging the frames out to the side at a slow pace.

For example, when Jane is teaching the children at Lowood School, Worrell would occasionally look longingly through the wooden frame, before returning to her upright posture and teaching. Following this sequence, as the group ensemble recited answers to questions, they congregated around Worrell, and assembled frames in a 2-by-3 grid in front of her. Worrell closed her eyes and used the gesture of crossing her arms and throwing them out to her sides, exclaiming 'Enough!' at a loud volume. As she leant forward and pushed open the assembled panes, the ensemble members moved stage right and left, with the image of Jane, arms held in the air, seeking escape now clear.

Cookson's use of imagery to reflect Jane's longing for freedom from societal limitations placed on woman and an escape from her low self-worth was also developed by Worrell's holding of the ladders in subsequent scenes. For example, following Jane's encounter in the Red Room, she talks to the housekeeper, shrouded in a blanket, about how unjust it is to

live with Mrs Reed. As she does, Worrell clings to the ladder with both hands, with wide teary eyes and a glum facial expression, as she looks off into the audience. Her consistency in holding the ladders close to her in such scenes suggests her desire for freedom, and existing outside of control.

The theme of freedom is therefore cleverly emphasised through Cookson's staging in a way that breaks the mould of novel storytelling. It portrays Jane's desires visually, and hence, is an intelligent method of transferring the depth of Bronte's original words, with both author and director relying on the audience's interpretation. Cookson's staging of this internal desire makes the moment Worrell holds the ladder upon finding a burned down Thornfield House more poignant as she realises that the fire has taken away – in essence – parts of herself, as the set became part of Jane's identity. Thornfield represented Jane's perseverance in her search for love and acceptance beyond the secrets shrouded in it, and her loss of it drives her to find it within Rochester again.

Cookson also made specific use of multi-role casting, with Jane, Rochester and Bertha (Melanie Marshall) the only characters played by one actor, arguably emphasising their individual strength. Jane who overcomes her internal battles, finds freedom, and ambition, Rochester who despite his secrets and troubled past shows perseverance, and Bertha who is whole, yet disabled and haunting, and too important to be dismissed.

These casting choices by Cookson also emphasised another important aspect of Bronte's novel – highlighting those who impacted Jane most profoundly – by not allowing them to morph into other characters and people, they become irreplaceable. Cookson's use of her

ensemble cast in this way highlighted Jane's search for love, and the transience of everything in pursuit of identity and true companionship.

However, as effective as Cookson's staging and design choices were, characters from the source material were cut, along with storylines that showed significant growth in Jane's character in Bronte's novel: The most significant being the freedom in Jane's choices and her generosity that came from inheriting £20,000 from her Uncle, which is pivotal in her recognising her own growth. Jane's lack of reasoning behind such choices meant that she seemed quick in her decisions and illogical, rather than Bronte's intelligent – albeit spontaneous – woman. In a discussion on the process of cutting down the source material, Cookson said in collaboration with Mike Akers: 'We both agreed to focus on Jane's coming-of-age story, not just the Rochester romance [...] Without the distraction of spectacular sets or special effects, it becomes a psychological study of one woman's journey, in which every other character and event feels secondary to that purpose.'²³.

Overall, the depth accessible in the separate storytelling forms of theatre and novels may differ, but the heart and focus of the source material can still be found in a successful adaptation. In theatre, visual methods can convey themes in a way that's difficult to encapsulate in a book, however novels can reach levels of psychological depth in their character exploration that directors and actors may struggle to match.

²³ Marianka Swain, Sally Cookson Quote. Sep 24, 2017. *Interview: Director Sally Cookson Talks JANE EYRE*. Broadway World. <https://www.broadwayworld.com/westend/article/BWW-Interview-Director-Sally-Cookson-Talks-JANE-EYRE-20170924> [accessed 16th March, 2023]

Van Hove's exploration into self-harm and trauma in Yanagihara's *A Little Life* beautifully executed the ugliness of what the characters faced, and provided a primary focus on Jude's sufferings. While wonderfully conveyed in the design choices of Van Hove with his creative team - Jan Versweyveld, Eric Sleichim, An D'Huys and Bart Van den Eynde – and through the performances of Nasr and Kesting, his adaption did lack in exploring secondary character ' backgrounds – lessening the depth of Yanagihara's novel. Van Hove used this source material to focus on trauma and mental health, highlighting that the story he wanted to tell existed within the bigger one: "Theater is there to represent the actual reality outside. I think that's the function of art and theater — you look at things that you abhor, that you really are nauseated by, but that's important because it's a cleansing process."²⁴

Cookson's devised *Jane Eyre* expertly explored the psychology of the complex central character and her romance with Rochester to its bittersweet nature, inviting her audience to follow an imaginative journey with Jane, just as Bronte's novel does. Creatively using the input of multiple sources, Jane's complex personality, past, and difficult relationships were explored in an interpretive way, more reflective of the novel-reading experience.

I therefore consider the increase of page-to-stage adaptations as positive. These adaptations encourage engagement in other storytelling mediums and draw larger audiences to the theatre in a time where the industry is monetarily struggling. Artists will always be drawn to creative methods of storytelling, in whichever form they may take, and such collaborative and cross-form productions will therefore always find a home:

²⁴ Nina Siegal, Ivo Van Hove Quote. Sep 21, 2018. 'A Little Life Comes to the Stage. The Audience Can't Look Away. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/theater/a-little-life-play-amsterdam-ivo-van-hove.html> [accessed 23rd March, 2023]

'I believe strongly that theatre-makers are instinctively drawn towards pieces of art in other media that offer them new ways to examine the world today. They should look for inspiration wherever they can find it.'²⁵

²⁵ Lyn Gardner, Feb 25, 2014. *Page to Stage: Is it Always Second Best?* The Guardian. <https://amp.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014/feb/25/jane-eyre-1984-matilda-let-right-one-in-stage-adaptations> [accessed 9th Feb, 2023]

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