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Frances Babbage, Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre: Performing Literature

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Recommended Citation
Foster, Verna. Frances Babbage, Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre: Performing Literature. Text and Presentation, 2018, , : 179-183, 2019. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, English: Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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Review of Literature: Selected Books

Frances Babbage, *Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre: Performing Literature.* London: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. 270+x. Hardcover $91.80.

In *Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre: Performing Literature* Frances Babbage advances the theoretical discussion of adaptation in unexpected ways by addressing a topic—the theatrical transformation of prose—that proves to be a far cry from the adaptation of novels for the stage to which it might at first seem to be akin. While Babbage does briefly discuss the Royal Shakespeare Company's legendary production of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1980) and Simon Stephens's adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2012), highly acclaimed for its "fidelity" (41) in representing in inventive theatrical terms Mark Haddon's detective story told from the perspective of its teenage protagonist with Asperger's, productions such as these are not where her interest lies. Babbage defines "adaptation" generously to embrace "any performance project predicated upon, profoundly engaged with and concerned to represent prose literature" (3). She uses the word "prose" advisedly so that she can include in her discussion not only theatrical adaptations of novels but also of such an unlikely prose work as Robert Burton's encyclopedic *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). In fact, many of the theatrical adaptations that Babbage explores are of prose works that would at first glance seem to be resistant to theatrical adaptation, or the adaptations themselves test the limits of what theatre can do—and audiences can accept (and in some instances endure).

And that is the point. In discussing such adaptations, Babbage is able to push the boundaries of adaptation theory by asking questions about what experiences readers of texts and audiences attending (and often participating in) performances may share in common, focusing on how "the fact or activity of adaptation is exposed in performance" (4), and highlighting how the adaptation of difficult texts or the parts of texts that seem least conducive to theatrical adaptation can push the creative boundaries of theatrical performance. Further,

most of the adaptations Babbage discusses are performances of various kinds in a range of venues but are not actually "plays." Babbage's concern with "live performance" (215), previously underrepresented in adaptation studies, as she notes, also distinguishes her book from previous studies of dramatic adaptation.

In five chapters Babbage covers the history of prose adaptations in film and drama; the reciprocal relations between book and performance; similarities between storytelling and theatre; the use of space with examples drawn from site-specific, promenade, and immersive theatre; and finally an exploration of how seemingly unadaptable texts such as Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* or David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* may yet be adapted in postdramatic theatre. In her first chapter Babbage offers new answers to the perennial, and by now somewhat worn, critical objections that adaptations of prose into drama (and film) are partial, superficial, emphasize "exteriority" at the expense of "interiority" (35), and "misrepresent" (39) the adapted work. For example, she points out that rather than limiting the "conceptual 'depth'" (33) of the source text, theatre can provide audiences with conceptual—and not simply perceptual—experiences by conveying them through multiple sense channels simultaneously. And to the objection that adaptations are somehow "reductive" (28), Babbage notes that a reader's experience of a prose work is itself no less partial than any given theatrical adaptation.

One of the most fascinating features of Babbage's discussion and of particular interest for the theory of adaptation is her emphasis on how the performances she selects retain the sense of the "*bookness*," both physical and textual, of the adapted work, explore the experiences shared by reader and audience member, and highlight the "distinctive qualities" of "literary work" and "theatrical performance" (45). This discussion is especially the focus of chapter two, "Performing Books," but it is a motif throughout *Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre*. The five performances Babbage considers in chapter two are *The Quiet Volume* (2010) by Tim Etchells and Ant Hampton and *Time Has Fallen Asleep in the Afternoon Sunshine* (2010) by Mette Evardsen, both performed in libraries; Complicite's *The Street of Crocodiles* (1992), an interpretation of the work and life of Bruno Schulz; *Gatz* (2006) by the American theatre group Elevator Repair Service; and *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (2013), adapted by Stan's Cafe.

The Quiet Volume acutely emphasizes the physicality of reading. The audience participants in pairs entered a library and received audio instructions on what to observe and what to do to make them conscious of themselves and each other reading texts; further, the texts on offer used disconcertingly varying fonts and were sometimes difficult to decipher. Complicite's *The Street of Croc-*

odiles included the performance of being immersed in the experience of reading as one character stroked and breathed in a book, while another, emerging out of a packing case, knocked over piles of books, and yet others rolled across the stage with their heads buried in books. *Gatz* originated from Elevator Repair Company's decision to adapt F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Instead of producing a conventional adaptation of novel into play, however, the company chose in the end to make theatre out of the book itself. The set is a "drab, cluttered office" (62). Finding a copy of *the Great Gatsby*, a bored office worker starts to read the novel aloud. While he is the only speaker (a Nick Carraway figure), gradually other office workers seem to take on the roles of Tom, Daisy, and Gatsby. Babbage suggests that the performance stages a common experience of reading: "A book in which we are truly absorbed can seem temporarily to construct a world more real, more substantial and often more desirable than the one seen when we look up from the page" (63). In this chapter on the "bookness" of theatrical adaptations Babbage also argues for the view that adaptation is a form of edition and notes director James Yarker stated explicitly that Stan's Cafe viewed their adaptation of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* as an edition akin to the early published editions of the work. The company highlighted their "cuts, citations and translations from Latin" (74) as well as their staged disagreements about what to include and what to omit as a form of editorial activity.

Chapter three focuses on storytelling as one of the most common, though by no means the only, commonality between adapted work and adaptation. Noting that theatre "regularly incorporates characteristic features of storytelling" (90), Babbage observes that a focus on storytelling helps to make an adaptation accessible and enables creative retelling for a new cultural context. She focuses on the theatrical adaptation of fairy tales. Because fairy tales have no single author and have been continually transformed in each retelling, they allow for greater freedom of adaptation and, Babbage argues, their transformations over time make them similar in nature to adaptations. She discusses Kneehigh Theatre's adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Red Shoes* (2000) and Teresa Ludovico's adaptation, with Birmingham Repertory Theatre, of Philip Pullman's *I Was a Rat!* (2013), his retelling of the Grimm Brothers' "Cinderella" story. As a cultural act, Kneehigh's adaptation of *The Red Shoes*, without changing the narrative, resisted the "problematic assumptions" and "moral stance" (95) of its source, questioning the condemnation of Karen's supposed vanity in wearing the red shoes to church and concluding with her refusal to accept the divine forgiveness that precedes her death in Andersen's tale. Stylistically, Kneehigh presented *The Red Shoes* as "an act of storytelling" rather than a play, with different actors, or "Storytellers," sharing the roles of the main characters (94). By contrast, Ludovico's production of *I Was a Rat!* used dialogue

almost exclusively, rather than narration, but incorporated "a heterogeneous mix of discourses including dramatic characterization and dialogue, carnivalesque comedy, mask, puppetry, acrobatics" and an equally diverse musical score (107).

Drawing on Complicite's adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (2012), Punchdrunk's adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (2007–08), and Retz's adaptation of Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (2013), in chapter four Babbage explores how readers and audience members, respectively, are situated in written and performed space. She notes, for example, that while the novel does not draw attention to the stylistic devices by which Bulgakov conveys the "sensation" of Margarita's flight, Complicite's audience "instantly understand, and can actively delight in, the means employed to present the same sequence" of flying (129). *The Masque of the Red Death* was a site-specific and immersive show performed at Battersea Arts Centre. Audience members wandered into different rooms, some of them furnished but uninhabited, encountering scenes from Poe's short stories in somewhat random order and occasionally experiencing one-on-one encounters with the actors. Babbage argues that Punchdrunk's adaptation enabled audience members to share in a reader's experience of the "liminal space" between their physical location and their position as observer "drift[ing] in and out of the fictional world unobserved" (140). *The Trial* used buildings and streets of London to position the participant spectator "as himself or herself in K's shoes" (153), as "Retz's Kafka is laid thinly over urban London with no attempt to staunch the bleed between the two," producing a "confusion of layering" (157). In all of these productions, Babbage insists, space is used not simply as the "illustrative representation" of "literary landscapes" but rather allows audience members, like readers, to experience those spaces (161).

If Retz's *The Trial*, in particular, makes large emotional and physical demands on the spectator, the productions that Babbage explores in her final chapter—adaptations of works that would seem to "*resist* adaptation" (165)—stress their audiences to the point of exhaustion. Hebbel am Ufer's *Infinite Jest—24 Hours through the Utopian West* (2012) took spectators on a 24-hour marathon across various locations in Berlin as twelve different artists or companies staged sections of Wallace's 1,000-page, multiply plotted, virtually unsummarizable, futuristic novel. Hof van Eede adapted Denis Diderot's experimental novel *Jacques the Fatalist* (1796), in which the author himself continually interrupts his own seemingly meaningless narration of a journey between a servant and his master, as *Where the World is Going, That's Where We are Going* (2012). This adaptation actually consists of "a rambling and often internally disputed account of why adaptation proved to be impossible" (193), creating

for the audience, not a staging of Diderot's novel, but a parallel experience. The oddest adaptation is Peter Jaeger's *A Field Guide to Lost Things*, in which the author lists in alphabetical order significant images from Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and includes under each heading ("Acacias; Afternoon Sky; Agate Marble; Air" [204], and so on) the references to that image in the order in which they appear in Proust's work. In 2015 Jaeger gave two non-stop readings of the new work that lasted three or four hours. Audiences were free to come and go, and few remained for the whole duration of the reading. Jaeger's work devalues the importance of originality in adaptation, while drawing attention to the "the fidelity of things" (203) in Proust; for audiences the theatrical experience of listening to Jaeger's reading "mirrors the notorious difficulties of reading Proust" (208). Each of these adaptations, Babbage comments, created "a new, live, embodied 'text' that could speak back meaningfully to the source, reframing it freshly in a theatrical context" (165).

Babbage succeeds in her aim in demonstrating that "theatre's practices of adaptation are artistically innovative, critically complex, conceptually ambitious, formally various and fully vital" (213). However, most of her examples offer rather rarified experiences that cannot have involved more than a small percentage of the theatre-going public in various countries (but mostly England), and that public is itself a small percentage of the audience for literary adaptations of any kind. Most theatre audiences will continue to experience the adaptation of fiction into drama in productions that stress story, characters, and "fidelity" to the source, with a bit of innovative staging thrown in. Further, the high cost of *Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre* means that most interested students and scholars will have to rely on library copies to learn about the creative and often meta-adaptive innovations the author so skillfully examines. Babbage's work deserves to be more widely accessible both for its contribution to our understanding of theatrical adaptation in particular and for the ways in which it pushes forward the discourse of adaptation studies.

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Sozita Goudouna. *Beckett's* Breath: *Anti-Theatricality and the Visual Arts*. Edinburgh Critical Studies in Modernism, Drama and Performance. Edinburgh University Press, 2018. Pp. 218 + xiv. $110.00.

Floccinaucinihilipilification—the longest non-technical/non–medical word in the original edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*—is the act of deeming something as worthless, usually because it is small, slight, short in duration, or seems insignificant. Though coined in 1741, its most specific application