Creative Copying?: The Pedagogy of Adaptation

by James McKinnon

As a teacher of post-secondary theatre who works in both liberal arts (BA) and vocational (BFA) contexts, I consider it my job to help my students develop both creative and critical skills. Although these abilities are highly prized, few of us perform with confidence in both modes. In theory, a post-secondary drama department should be an ideal place to develop these skills, since both creative process and criticism are taught and practiced there. But in reality, they are often taught and practiced in isolation. By the time I meet them, many or most of my undergraduate drama students have either consciously chosen or unconsciously gravitated toward one specialization or the other. Some see themselves as artists and eschew critical theory and theatre history as useless—or even potentially harmful; others feel they are not blessed with creative genius, and choose to concentrate on becoming skilled researchers, writers, or technical artists. In the drama department where I have done most of my teaching, there are very few students who excel (and several who struggle) in both areas. Recently, inspired by my research on how Canadian playwrights use and abuse "the classics," I have turned to adaptation as a conceptual and practical model for developing critical and creative skills simultaneously. While it may seem counterintuitive to teach creativity through "copying," my experiments suggest that adaptation-based drama teaching is effective, engaging, and highly versatile. As the examples below show, adaptation works in a variety of teaching contexts and serves a number of objectives.

There are many reasons that few of us practice creative and critical thinking with equal confidence, but most are rooted in the very notion that they are distinct and separate. In fact, contemporary creativity research shows that creativity and criticality are not opposed but rather interrelated and interactive processes (Lubart 298; Runco). But we

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In the words of Canadian playwright and adaptor Jason Sherman, "Adapt or die!" University of Alberta Drama students Neil Kuefler and Vanessa LaPrairie rehearse a scene from Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* for a project directed by their classmate Mark Vetsch.
Photo by Mark Vetsch

often approach them separately, and the curricula and institutional practices of drama departments frequently reinforce the conceptual separation of critical and creative processes. Creative and critical skills are often taught and practiced in different courses, by different teachers, and in different buildings: theory and history courses take place in lecture halls and seminar rooms, and focus on reading and writing; while directing, acting, voice, and movement happen in studios and theatre spaces, and focus on kinesthetic, interactive methods. To move from drama history class into scene study class, therefore, is to adopt a different mode of thinking, working, and being, and I have often observed the resulting disconnect as the material learned in one classroom is seemingly checked at the door of the next classroom—even if the topics overlap (e.g., Elizabethan theatre history and Shakespeare scene study).

In addition, as creativity researcher Keith Sawyer has shown, many people still subscribe to the romantic/idealist conception of "creative genius" as a heavenly gift that is essentially impenetrable to rational inquiry. The enduring romantic myth of creativity as an inscrutable gift possessed by solitary geniuses—Caspar Friedrich's 1818 painting *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* captures this notion—is subtly consecrated in the curricula of most drama departments. Survey courses are typically oriented around canonical playwrights, defining their work as the "art" of a given era or nation while overlooking the creative contributions of scenographers, actors, and to a lesser extent, directors: the holy text is permanent, while designers (unless their names are Appia or Craig) come and go. The efforts of non-playwrights are treated as supporting creative genius rather than consisting of it. We glorify the creative genius and his (rarely her) masterpieces, treating them as if they suddenly appeared *ex nihilo,* but rarely talk about the lengthy, fundamentally collaborative process that produces such work. Ultimately, this gives the impression that creative genius consists of the ability to sit down at one's desk, pull a quill out of a hollowed-out skull, frown pensively for a moment, and then crank out *Hamlet* in one sitting. Artists are supposed to be blessed with a flair for originality and creativity, and most students feel they aren't blessed in this way. Many feel intimidated by the pressure to just "create" out of thin air. Insofar as creativity and critique are the purview of the artist, "doing theatre," for many students (only a tiny fraction of whom are or aspire to be playwrights), means learning how to support someone else's artistic vision. (Even acting students, though they tend to be confident of their creativity, spend much of their vocational training learning how to take direction.)

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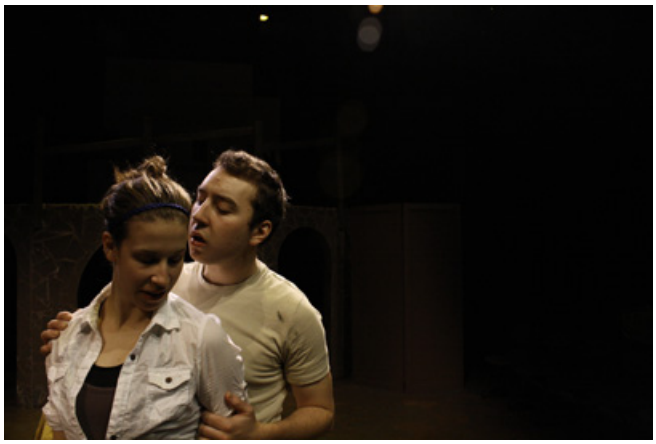
One productive way to dispel these myths is to define creativity as a function of adaptation, rather than of originality. While contemporary criticism often considers adaptation derivative, parasitic, uncreative, and uncritical, the modern contempt for adaptation is a product of the same romantic myths outlined above. From the classical era through the Renaissance, art was created not through spontaneous invention, but by emulating and adapting the established masters of the form. Shakespeare is a case in point: though often revered for his original genius, his plays, creative though they may be, are all adaptations. In fact, *everything* we do and



Adaptation requires a little finesse. Treating dramatic text as a starting point—rather than an objective or a revered artifact—forces adaptors to consider the importance of context. Instead of asking "How do we do this scene?" adaptors must ask, "What do we want to say about or through this scene?" or "How should we use this scene to suit this audience, in this time and place?"
Photo by Mark Vetsch

say, to the extent that it consists of putting familiar materials to new uses in a new context, is adaptation; adaptation is not the opposite of creativity, but the basis of it.

Adaptation-centred drama pedagogy offers many strategies for challenging false dichotomies and putting both creative and critical talent within the reach of any student. For one thing, studying adaptation reveals and demystifies the *process* of artistic creation. Simply discovering that *Hamlet* is "just" an adaptation helpfully puts the mighty Shakespeare in perspective, particularly for junior students who may have been browbeaten with him throughout their high school years. But the real payoff comes from examining *how* the Hamlet story has been adapted, by Shakespeare and others, tracing its trajectory from an ancient Viking saga to a Jacobean revenge tragedy to contemporary versions based on absurdism (Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*) and carnivalesque parody (Michael O'Brien's *Mad Boy Chronicle*).

Looking at variations on the familiar plot reveals important insights into creativity. For example, the fact that Shakespeare didn't invent the story of the heir who feigns madness to outwit his usurping uncle doesn't make him uncreative. Quite the opposite: his creative process is visible in the adaptations he makes to convert the pagan heroic epic into a revenge tragedy for the Christian era. In "creating" *Hamlet,* Shakespeare's inventive skill, formidable though it may have been, was perhaps less important than his technical expertise: to make a long, narrative romance into a (comparatively) short revenge tragedy, he selected some parts of the lengthy epic plot while omitting others; compressed the time frame; fleshed out the existing characters, invented new ones, and eliminated others; added a number of spectacular elements to hold the attention of the audience; and adjusted the major dramatic question in accordance with the new ethic, changing it from "how will the hero take honourable revenge?" to "how can Hamlet define and realize justice without submitting to the ghost's (un-Christian) demand for murderous vengeance?" Moving forward in history, we can study how Stoppard turns the revenge tragedy into an absurdist comedy by shifting the focus onto two marginal characters, or how Michael O'Brien uses tactics of carnivalesque parody to debase the mythical original and challenge its canonical authority. Investigating what adaptors do with their sources reveals evidence of their creative process, demonstrating how, contrary to popular conceptions, creativity is not manifested in sudden flashes of inspiration but in methodical, persistent labour.

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Learning adaptive techniques demystifies "originality" by showing students that masterpieces are not suddenly invented out of nothing, but through skills and methods that they too can master. Many students are intimidated by playwriting because it seems highly unlikely that they could simply sit down, suddenly invent a plot and characters, and churn out a play, much less a good play, but studying adaptation empowers students with a sense of their own critical and creative agency, while providing a set of practical tools to exert that agency in adaptations and retellings of their own—which they prove eager to do. This approach often brings out the creative genius in my most unabashedly uncreative students: the non-drama majors who choose "Play Analysis" as their fine arts elective, because it seems least likely of all the available options to require any demonstration of creative ingenuity or personal investment. After introducing them to drama with *Oedipus Tyrannos,* I have them watch an animated film adaptation that retells the Oedipus story in eight minutes (www.oedipusthemovie.com). The film's most notable adapta-

tions include casting vegetables in place of human actors, and showing certain scenes not directly represented by Sophocles, including the fatal duel between Oedipus and Laius (Oedipus, a potato, wields peelers, while Laius, a broccoli, fights with a cleaver), and a sex scene between Oedipus and Jocasta (who is "played by" a tomato).

Some students feel impelled to defend the "original" from this betrayal, and need to be reminded that the film does not replace the alleged "original" but is, like Sophocles', merely one of many co-existing versions of the story. Most find the film hilarious, and it is obvious to everyone that the divergences from the expected plot (whether or not one approves of them) are what create the "interpretive *frisson*" of the adaptation, as Daniel Fischlin has put it (317). So what are those divergences? And how can similar strategies be put to use in other contexts? Students in my last class identified several of the film's adaptive tactics and put them to use in their own adaptations of famous plots and current events, experimenting with the effect of changing the point of attack (What if *Oedipus* opens with the final episode, showing his exile in disgrace, and then gradually reveals his identity to the spectator in flashbacks?), debasing the characters (What if the plot of *Tartuffe* was played out on an elementary school playground?), and so on. Without realizing it, an entire class of students who chose the course specifically to avoid being evaluated on their creative skills became quite comfortable with practicing creative adaptations.

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Adaptation also entails critical insight: adaptors refashion old material because they have something to say about it. So in addition to demystifying creative genius, studying and practicing adaptation overcomes resistance to critical theory by showing how it is not opposed to, but a fundamental aspect of artistic creation. Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet,* for example, adapts *Othello* by multiplying the protagonist and dislocating him in time and space, so that we see him living in three different epochs of African-American history. Among other things, this shows us not that the "tragedy" of Othello is a unique disruption of the "normal" course of events, as Shakespeare's version suggests, but precisely that, from an African-American perspective, the traumatic experience of miscegenation *is* the normal course of events, repeated over and over again. In addition, Sears invents a new character, Billie, the black wife Othello abandons, to show how the tragedy is experienced by the black community that Othello leaves rather than by the white one that excludes him. Students who see how and why Djanet Sears decentres Shakespeare in history, geography, and action simultaneously learn techniques of plot construction and the utility of post-colonial theory in not only critiquing but also *creating* new art.

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As Sonia Massai observes in "Stage Over Study," adaptors often anticipate scholars in their critical revisions of classic texts. Massai looks at the works of Edward Bond and Charles Marowitz to show how they creatively critique Shakespeare using methods and perspectives that would only later be described by scholars as "cultural materialism." In the classroom, it often seems as though artists create art and critics criticize it, but adaptations show how "every rewriting is a critical reading and every critical reading is a rewriting" (Massai 255). This perspective is invaluable in a post-secondary creative arts context, where students often identify with either creativity or critical theory and are dismissive of or intimidated by the other. Working with, on, and through adaptations demands critical and creative sensitivity simultaneously. One student in a Dramaturgy course, inspired by the relationship between creative and critical practice, decided to extend Brecht's ideals about active spectatorship beyond the point imagined by Brecht himself, by literally forcing the spectators to influence the action: she proposed adapting *Mother Courage* into a semi-improvised, "choose-your-own-adventure" cabaret in which the actors would stop the action and make the audience vote on a number of possible choices for the characters. When I ran into her two years after the course, she was working on a script.

Adaptation is highly adaptable to a number of different contexts and circumstances: the examples above and below are taken from both lecture-based and practical courses, for both drama majors and non-majors. In a lecture-based environment, I might point out how playwright Michael O'Brien travesties *Hamlet* in *Mad Boy Chronicle* by setting the plot in medieval Denmark and changing the characters to grotesque Vikings (a choice he justifies by claiming to return to the *real*

original which Shakespeare adapted); then we might brainstorm a number of other revered stories in our culture, and split into small groups with the goal of debasing a famous masterpiece using similar tactics. In a creative-based course, or where resources allow, I might ask students to take such ideas and develop them further. For example, if we learn about plot structuring by looking at different versions of *Oedipus,* I'll ask the students to experiment with the same variables (point-of-attack, inciting incident, selection and arrangement of story events, etc.) in adaptations of their own.

Classroom work on adaptations reinforces what researchers and theatre artists already know: first, that creative breakthroughs are not sudden but gradual—much more perspiration than inspiration, as Edison put it—and second, that ''creativity is almost never a solitary activity but [rather] fundamentally social and collaborative'' (Sawyer 259).

Group projects work especially well, and in doing so they dispel the myth that creative work typically represents the output of a solitary artist, struck by inspiration. Classroom work on adaptations reinforces what researchers and theatre artists already know: first, that creative breakthroughs are not sudden but gradual—much more perspiration than inspiration, as Edison put it—and second, that "creativity is almost never a solitary activity but [rather] fundamentally social and collaborative" (Sawyer 259). These facts, though experienced daily by both theatre artists and scholars, are often obscured in coursework that asks students to admire the finished product of a masterpiece without supplying any insight into the highly collaborative and laborious processes that created it. Contrary to the image of Shakespeare, created by centuries of editorial commentary and tradition, as a unique genius who delivered one masterpiece after another to the comparatively unimportant, anonymous actors at the Globe, the real Shakespeare worked in collaboration with other writers, and probably with actors, and largely by gradually reworking stolen and borrowed plots from existing sources into plays.

Working on collaborative adaptations provides an important impetus to the group performance work that often distinguishes drama from other undergraduate programs. Sometimes, students take it for granted that they will be asked to perform simply because they are in drama (or alternatively, in spite of the fact that they are not actors). Memorizing, rehearsing, and performing a scene from a play just because it's on the course outline doesn't always provide or demand much critical reflection. But adapting a play to suit particular criteria is an exercise that demands and displays creative and critical skills simultaneously. In one course on modernism—which acting and design students typically approach with disdain because to them it is just a waste of time they could be using to learn *real* skills—I asked the students to adapt and perform scenes from the modernist canon, with the intention of investigating the extent to which these now-classic texts still can or should serve to shock, provoke, and break conventions. The more scholarly students in the class enjoyed being able to channel their critical insight into creative products. One such group, having discovered that Beckett forbade casting women in *Waiting for Godot,* did just that, drawing parallels between the play and the existential *ennui* represented in *Desperate Housewives.* Many of the actors, at first thrilled simply by the prospect of performing in a boring "history" class, discovered that they enjoyed the intellectual challenges involved in critical adaptation—one of them went on to write a very modernist manifesto railing against the conventions of realism, the style she had spent the previous several years training to master.

In contrast to the habitual association of adaptation with "copying" and plagiarism, my experience with adaptation suggests that learning to copy is actually an effective way to develop creative skills and foster critical engagement simultaneously—just as the ancients did. (It can also stimulate productive discussions of intellectual property that go beyond the standard "academic dishonesty" boilerplate in most course outlines.) Notwithstanding the allegiances and assumptions they may have chosen before we meet them, I believe we have a duty to equip students with both critical and creative skills, particularly if they are training for a career in which both are vital. Artists who eschew critical thinking as pedantry are simply robbing themselves of powerful means of creative insight and expression, while even "pure" scholars need creative skills in order to challenge critical orthodoxies and create new knowledge. By working from the premise that adaptation, not originality, is the basis of both creative and

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critical thinking, one can vanquish false dichotomies and render these intimidating mysteries into a set of practical tools that anyone can appropriate and adapt to suit his or her own ends.

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James McKinnon just finished his PhD in Drama at the University of Toronto. His research focuses on how Canadian playwrights use and abuse canonical authors to engage contemporary spectators. He teaches several courses at the University of Alberta Department of Drama and is also a dramaturge, performer, director, and adaptor.

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