LITERATURE AND MEDIA

EMBEDDED TEXTS AND INTERPLAY

The stage and film musical has already been cited as an inherently adaptational form, often reworking canonical plays, novels and even poems into a mode that uses song and dance to deliver its narrative. West Side Story and Kiss Me Kate, two previously mentioned Shakespeare-informed musicals, are intriguing examples of this practice since they go one stage further by also operating as proximations: modern reworkings of the Shakespearean play- source. West Side Story would certainly not exist without Romeo and Juliet: Tony and Maria are clearly modern reimaginings of Shakespeare's 'star-crossed' lovers in a 1950s New York context. Their story of a love denied by feuding urban communities, and in particular the musical's two presiding gangs, the Jets and the Sharks, finds its origins in the Montague–Capulet rivalry, the 'ancient grudge' that drives the prejudice and violence of Shake- speare's stage Verona. The film's carefully realized mise-en-scène highlighted what was a topical issue of race conflict in New York at the time when the musical was first written and performed, and which manifested itself in violence against the immigrant Puerto Rican community.

There is much pleasure to be had in tracing the interrelationships and overlaps between the two texts, musical and early modern drama. The iconic fire escapes of the West Side provide a striking counterpart to the balcony scene of Shakespeare's play. Romeo's quasi-patriarch and confidante, the Friar, first seen in the play collecting herbs, is transformed into the gentle 'Doc', owner of the local drugstore where many of the Jets meet but also someone keen to act as a bridge between the rival communities. In a produc- tion working in a 'teenage' idiom – the late 1950s being the moment when teenage culture was formalized in both cultural and com- mercial terms at least in a US–UK context – 'Doc' is the sole parental figure we see on stage or on the screen (the musical was made into a film in 1961). Maria's parents are heard, but only as voices off; authority is effectively sidelined, removed from the centre. There are other supposed figures of authority who have a physical presence, in particular Officer Krupke and his colleagues from the NYPD, and the dance hall compere, but they are either laughably corrupt or

inept in their handling of the tense situation. In Shake- speare's play Juliet has a counterpart confidante to Romeo's in the comic figure of the Nurse. In West Side Story the comic aspects of that relationship are downplayed in favour of the sisterly attentions of Anita, fiancée to Maria's gang-leader brother Bernardo. One unforgettable sequence depicts a choreographed sexual assault performed on Anita by Jets members when she tries, and fails, to deliver a message from Maria to Tony, with tragic results. This moment is another suggestive reworking of Romeo and Juliet, collapsing into one scene both Mercutio's bawdy misogynistic banter with the Nurse and the plotline of the mis-delivered letter, something Jacques Derrida and others have identified as the crucial turning point of the play. This is still adaptation then but it is adaptation in another mode or key.

West Side Story does stand alone as a successful musical without particular need of Romeo and Juliet, but I would main- tain that audiences of the musical who possessed an intertextual awareness of Shakespeare in play had their experience deepened and enriched by a wider range of possible responses. Lyrics such as 'There's a place for us' undoubtedly return us to issues of spatial confinement in the tragedy, and the Jets' much reiterated gang tag 'Womb to Tomb' is a witty allusion to the tragic confinement of the play's young protagonists by the final scene of the play. This is a good example of the more sustained imaginative (and some-times politically left-leaning) reworking of the source text which I am identifying here as intrinsic to appropriation: rather than the movements of proximation or cross-generic interpretation that we identified as central to adaptation, here we have a more wholesale redrafting, or indeed recrafting, of the intertext. Kiss Me Kate has Shakespeare's misogynist comedy The Taming of the Shrew literally at its core: in a classic meta-theatrical move, the musical (filmed in 1953) is about a group of performers staging a musical version of The Taming of the Shrew. Audiences register two levels of adaptation and appropriation taking place here.

- ♥ The embedded musical of 'The Shrew' is on the surface a more straightforward adaptation, reworking the characters and events of

Shakespeare’s play into a song and dance format with Katherina’s societal resistance translated into songs such as ‘I Hate Men’ (though it must be said that rethinking Biancha’s flirtatious playing off her suitors into the song ‘Tom, Dick and Harry’ represents a considerable leap of imagination).

- The format of a musical ‘play within a play’ is itself Shakespearean in resonance, recalling the meta-theatrical framework of The Taming of the Shrew itself but also Hamlet, Love’s Labour’s Lost and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, among others. Shrew opens with the ‘Induction’, which establishes that the whole play of Katherina and Petruchio’s embattled relationship is a performance by a troupe of travelling actors who have tricked the inebriated Christopher Sly into thinking he is a lord watching household theatricals on his aristocratic estate.

- Kiss Me Kate frames its Shrew musical with a plotline of embattled theatre stars, once married but now divorced. There are obvious, hilarious ways in which their offstage tempera- ments mirror their onstage performances; Lilli Vanessi, for example, is outspoken and hot-headed in a manner appropriate to her character Katherine.

- While the musical’s untroubled manifes- tations of early twentieth-century US sexual politics, including the beatings and confinements visited upon the forceful Lilli, may no longer be acceptable as comic fodder in an era alert to domestic violence, the point remains that Kiss Me Kate is both an adaptation and an appropriation at the same time.

If the pure adaptation rests in the embedded musical, then the appropriative aspect is found in the wider framework story of the US theatre performers and in the related subplot of the Mafia henchmen seeking debt repayments from the production’s Hortensio, Bill Calhoun. The gangsters deliver one of the show’s most famous songs, whose title has itself almost reached the status of comic by-line for the act of Shakespearean adaptation: ‘Brush Up Your Shakespeare’. When Angela Carter chose this as one of the three epigraphs to her late novel on theatre,

Shakespeare and the musical, Wise Children (1992), she was surely anticipating a readership with a vivid cultural memory of Kiss Me Kate. Kiss Me Kate can obviously be viewed and understood in the context of Shakespearean appropriation more generally, which, as we will see in Chapter 3, is a veritable cultural field in its own right, but it also relates to a tradition that can best be described as 'backstage dramas'.

- ♥ These are texts interested in going behind the scenes of performances of particular plays or shows. This can be achieved in self-reflexive ways on the stage, as in Kiss Me Kate or Michael Frayn's play about English repertory theatre, Noises Off (1982).

- ♥ Shakespeare in Love (dir. John Madden, 1998) also exploits this motif, exploring an offstage relationship between Will Shakespeare and his star performer Thomas Kent (a disguised Viola de Lesseps) via suggestive cinematic cross-cutting between their 'real' life and their onstage performance in an embryonic Romeo and Juliet. Backstage drama of this kind has also been developed in a prose fiction context.

- ♥ Australian author Thomas Keneally's 1987 novel The Playmaker recounts the rehearsals and performance of a production of George Farquhar's 1706 play The Recruiting Officer.

- ♥ The play is performed by a group of convict actors who have been assembled for the purpose by Lieutenant Ralph Clark, a British military officer who is overseeing the penal colony established in Sydney, Australia, in the late eighteenth century.

- ♥ In a funny and touching account of the rehearsal period, Keneally draws on resonant echoes between the events of Farquhar's play, which depicts the sexual shenanigans of a group of recruiting officers I the provincial shire town of Shrewsbury, and daily life in the penal colony, where site-specific hierarchies prevail and where many of the women convicts are the sexual property of the military officers and overseers.

- ♥ Lieutenant Clark falls in love with his lead actor, Mary Brenham, a convicted clothes thief who performs the part of the cross- dressing Silvia in The Recruiting Officer, but we are always aware of the geographical and temporal parameters of this love story.

Keneally structures his narrative in the form of five chapters and an epilogue, self-consciously recalling dramatic structure, and in the epilogue we learn of Ralph's return to his English fiancée. Mary Brenham, along with the majority of convicts whose lives we have followed, slips from the historical record. Keneally's purpose in writing this novel stretches in resonance far beyond the 1789 setting of the events it purports to recall; shadowing the world of the penal community represented in the novel stand the lives of the displaced aboriginal and First Nation communities of Australia. For all the play-within-the-novel's claims to be the 'first' theatre production in this 'new' land, the reader is made all too aware that the Sydney penal colony is far from being the 'original' existence in this space and place. Behind the deployment of the surface appropriation of Farquhar's play to explore the world of the penal colony (Keneally worked extensively with historical archives), the author is concerned to make visible another more hostile act of cultural appropriation, the seizure of the land rights and cultural claims of the indigenous societies.

The novel is tellingly dedicated to 'Arabanoo and his brethren, still dispossessed', and Keneally has continued to be a prominent campaigner against Australia's restrictive immigration laws for related reasons. Appropriation, then, as with adaptation, shades in important ways into the discursive domains of other disciplines, here the legal discourse of land property and human rights. Intriguingly, Keneally's novel underwent a further process of adaptation when playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker re-created The Playmaker as a stage drama, Our Country's Good, in 1988. Following the practice of adaptation outlined in the previous chapters, Wertenbaker altered, condensed and redirected the focus of Keneally's novel for the purposes of her play. She chose to commence the play

with a scene on board the convict ship that transports the prisoners to Australia, whereas in the novel this experience is only ever recalled in flashback and by means of collective memory. Adding in the specific character, and in some sense narrative mouthpiece, of the Governor-in-Chief of New South Wales, Arthur Philip, Wertenbaker embeds in her play several extended justifications for the rehabilitative and socially constructive power of theatre and the arts. She had her own political motives for this in the late 1980s.

The debates conducted in the play about the sociocultural importance of the arts had a highly topical resonance in an era of UK Arts Council funding cuts. In an interesting twist, Our Country's Good has in turn proved an extremely popular play for staging and performance by prison drama groups, continuing the active case for drama as socially therapeutic. Reading the accounts of prison actors of the inspira- tional effect of the experience of staging Our Country's Good, there exists a sense in which the events described in Keneally's novel have come full circle (Wertenbaker 1991 vi–xvi).

Wertenbaker's play was first staged by the Royal Court Theatre in London, playing in repertory alongside The Recruiting Officer, which invited audiences to experience the texts in a comparative way. To further emphasize their connections, both productions shared the same company of actors so that for audiences attending both performances there was an interesting read-across from one to the other. On one night spectators might see a particular actor playing Justice Balance in The Recruiting Officer and then the next day that same actor playing Keith Freeman in Our Country's Good, the public hangman who assumes the role of Balance in the Australian convict production. Another double-handed play frequently staged by theatre companies for similar reasons and with similar read-across effects is Alan Ayckbourn's A Chorus of Disapproval (1984).

- ♥ This play is also about a company rehearsing a production, this time a provincial amateur British theatre group staging a production of John Gay's

eighteenth-century operatic musical The Beggar's Opera. Gay's text has been subject to numerous adaptations and acts of cultural filtration, famously providing the template for Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil's Three-penny Opera.

- Ayckbourn ensures that his audiences are alert to the particular connection between his play and Gay's by com- mencing A Chorus of Disapproval at the end, as it were, as the curtain falls on the successful performance and the actors take their bows.

- As a consequence of this, when the play lurches back in time to the start of the audition and rehearsal process the audience already knows that it is tracing Guy Jones's ascent from theatre hopeful to leading man. Of course, the humour also resides in the fact that Guy becomes far too easily identified with his part as Gay's womanizing criminal protagonist Macheath, upsetting various female members of the company in the process.

- Much of the comedy of A Chorus derives from the audience's active engagement with the embedded text and resonance of The Beggar's Opera, playing as it does on similarity and difference in ways that we have already seen are central to the adaptive process.

- Ayckbourn highlights the continuity of actor and part but also the discontinuities between Guy's privileged provincial existence and the eighteenth-century underworld of Gay's comic opera. When Beggar's Opera plays in repertory with Ayckbourn's play these connections and contrasts are drawn out for audiences in a highly explicit fashion.

- The methodology of immersive theatre company Punchdrunk, whose work has found particular purchase with audiences in the UK and the US during the past decade, again appears to rely on the prior knowledges that audiences bring to the experience of their experimental stagings of canonical plays and operas. In their 2010 collaboration with ENO (English

National Opera), they staged John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi (1612–13) in such a way that audiences could choose the sequence in which to experience the scenes staged in different rooms; in this way the idea of personalized experience was heightened but the randomness of the experience suggested that those with a prior understanding of the play and its linear or incremental sequence of events would experience the enforced fragmentation in very particular ways, reconnecting in their own heads the relationships between discrete events.

In another remarkable collaboration in 2013, the company staged The Borough, which was an audio-directed personal navigation of the Suffolk town of Aldeburgh in which the listener-walker confronted elements of George Crabbe's Aldeburgh-based collection of poems, first published in 1810, and Peter Grimes, the Benjamin Britten opera created out of Crabbe's poem (specifically from Letter XXII) in the early twentieth century. Since on the midsummer weekend when I experienced The Borough there had also been a site-specific beach performance of the opera, the same beach on whose crunchy pebbles the audio experience hauntingly began, provided a clear indication of the overlap and cross-referentiality of the immersive experience.

That the experience itself invited the hearer-walker to consider the feeling of rejection that Grimes undergoes, and how a community can act as threat as well as a space of welcome, placed the participant at the centre of the adaptive process, at one point quite literally hiding in a wardrobe in the bedroom of a terraced house near the seafront. Immersion, but also the role of the personalized response to adaptations, is brought strikingly into view by this particular participatory experience. Encouraged interplay between appropriations and their sources begins to figure here as a fundamental aspect of the reading or spectating experience, one productive of new meanings and appli- cations. But, as already stressed, appropriations do not always make their founding relationships and interrelationships explicit. The gesture towards the source text can be wholly more shadowy than in the above examples, and this brings into play, sometimes in

controversial ways, questions of intellectual property, proper acknowledgement and, at its worst, the charge of plagiarism.