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What Happens in Adaptation? The Fate of Literary Texts

Key Stage 4 English Literature
Resource 5

2019



Resource Five

Overview



Topic	Authors and Adaptation
GCSE Modules	Modern Texts – Alan Bennett, The History Boys
Objectives	<p>By the end of this resource, you will have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Engaged with the figure of the author in relation to his work and the differences between forms of adaptation.✓ Developed an understanding of the mechanics of adaptation in theatre and film more widely and encourage not only thinking beyond the text✓ Considered the role of the author in adaptation.✓ Developed interpretative analysis and applying problem solving skills to wider contexts. It encourages critical and evaluative thinking and writing.
Instructions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Read the data source2. Complete the activities3. Explore the further reading
Context	<p>The play <i>The History Boys</i> by Alan Bennett was first performed at the Royal National Theatre in 2004, winning both the Laurence Olivier and Tony Award for Best New Play, among others.</p> <p>In 2006 the film adaptation was released, which was directed by Nicholas Hytner, who had also directed the play. The film also featured the original cast of the play along with new additions.</p> <p>The data source is taken from <i>The Faber Educational Edition</i> of the play, which provides further study material and information on the play itself and the context around it. The extract here specifically discusses the differences between the play and the film.</p>

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Alan Bennett

'The Film of The History Boys'

Many film versions vary dramatically from the original novel or play, but The History Boys remains largely true to the original play. The screenplay was written by Alan Bennett himself, and the cast in the film were the same as for the stage production. Because of this closeness, it is important to analyse what differences there are between stage and screen productions.

Figure 1

Original History Boys Cast at the National Theatre (2004)



Differences Between the Play and the Film

1. In the film the complex timeline of the play is simplified, with events taking place in chronological order. Gone are the opening scenes of each act, which focus on Irwin as government adviser and historian. Gone too is Scripps's role as narrator. The combined result is to help the film audience to indulge in escapism much more easily. Just as the fractured timeline and regular address of the audience in the play was used to make the audience stop and think about what was taking place, the film version achieves the opposite, with a greater focus on escapism and entertainment.

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2. Perhaps the most noticeable change is the addition of the PE teacher. There is much comedy in Adrian Scarborough's performance as Mr Wilkes, but also a more sinister thread of religious bigotry. The theme of religion in the play is examined through the character of Scripps. It's a minor theme, and we get the impression that Scripps's faith is genuine yet held with a sceptical eye. The film version adds a much more critical approach to Christianity. Wilkes is proven an idiot when he mistakenly questions Timms, 'Did Jesus say, "Can I be excused the crucifixion?" No.' It is up to Scripps to correct him: 'Actually, sir I think he did.'
3. The Art History lessons with Mrs. Bibby are a new addition. These scenes allow more time to focus on the theme of homosexuality, with Timm's line about 'men with tits ... put on with an ice-cream scoop' actually being taken from Bennett's 1988 play *A Question of Attribution*.
4. The film contains a number of location changes. The film was shot at locations which include Fountains Abbey and colleges in both Oxford and Cambridge. The trip to Fountains Abbey is reminiscent of the opening moments of Act 2 where Irwin is a TV historian.
5. A lollipop lady is used to replace the role of the Headmaster's wife. She discovers Hector groping a student.
6. The ending. There are a number of differences in the 'flash-forward' to the boys' future lives. Significantly, Posner becomes a teacher in the film, and there is an accompanying air of optimism about his future, which differs from the play. This is in keeping with the genre of the film which, as a comedy, should end optimistically.

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7. Some minor moments from the play left out of the film, notably including Posner's parents' complaint, along with the subsequent meetings between Headmaster and Irwin, and between Irwin and Posner.'

Figure 2
The History Boys Film
Cast (2006)



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Activities



Activities



1. Summarise the main changes between the play and film of *The History Boys* and explore the effect this might have for the audience.
 - ✓ Consider the reasons behind the changes and how a film audience is different to a theatre audience.
2. Explore more widely, how does a film adaptation of a play differ from that of a novel?
 - ✓ Consider different aspects of form and content within a play and a novel.
 - ✓ Also think about the differences between theatre and filmmaking, such as technical aspects.
3. Considering the writer: Do you think it is a good idea that the original author is involved in the adaptation of his/her work?
 - ✓ Consider how this influences the film itself and the filmmakers, but also the reader of the novel and the film audience.

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Further Reading



Explore



1. Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (2004)
2. Joseph H. O'Mealy, 'Rewriting history: Alan Bennett's collaboration with Nicholas Hytner on the adaptations of *The Madness of George III* and *The History Boys*' in *Modern British Drama on Screen* (2013)
3. Bert Cardullo, *Stage and Screen: Adaptation Theory from 1916 to 2000* (2011)
4. Michael Ingham, *Stage-Play and Screen-Play: The Intermediality of Theatre and Cinema* (2016)

Adaptations to watch:

1. *The History Boys* (2006), dir. Nicholas Hytner, starring Richard Griffiths, Dominic Cooper and James Cordon.
2. *The Madness of King George III*. (1994), dir. Nicholas Hytner, starring Nigel Hawthorne, Rupert Everett and Helen Mirren
3. *The Lady in the Van* (2015), dir. Nicholas Hytner, starring Maggie Smith and Alex Jennings.



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100 Black Prince Road
London, SE1 7SJ



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