

INTRODUCTION

The story of King George III and the Regency Crisis starts in 1788. The story of *The Madness of King George*, however starts in the early 1990's when writer Alan Bennett rediscovered his fascination with George III, the monarch famous for losing the American colonies and his 'marbles', returning to a subject he had first researched at school, when George III was often cited as a 'bad king'. Bennett's interest had been rekindled by reading some of the medical history written by Richard Hunter and Ada McAlpine published in the 1980's. Their work suggests that the King's illness was physical rather than mental and that he was suffering from Porphyria. From Alan Bennett's point of view this was an interesting dramatic situation as "the King's malady was a toxic condition ...thus afflicted, he becomes the victim of the doctors and a tragic hero

The Madness of George III by Alan Bennett opened at the Royal National Theatre in London in November 1991. The play, directed by Nicholas Hytner, starred Nigel Hawthorne.

"Alan Bennett's new play ... is a history play, a political satire, a medical lampoon, and a portrait of a sad, difficult, lonely man

The Sunday Times

Task

Extract from the above review the different genres that are relevant to the play. How does the story benefit by combining genres? What are your expectations of each of these genres? How do you react to the combination? Write a paragraph on elements within the story that relate to the conventions of each genre.

Theatre-inspired film, past and present

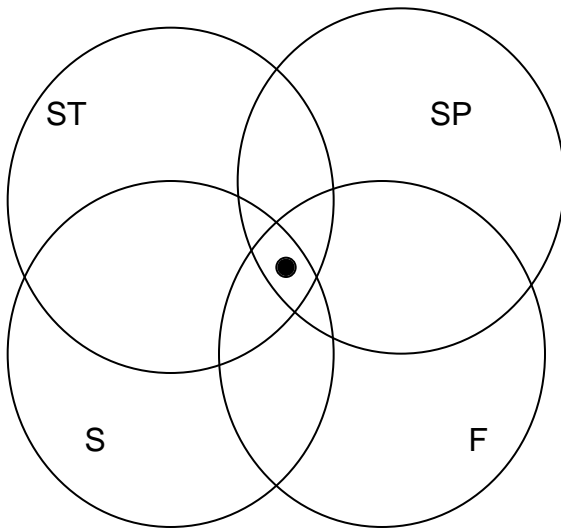
Back in the 1930's when 'talkies' first came in, Hollywood repeatedly imported whole plays from Broadway, along with theatre-trained writers and actors. It became increasingly clear, however, that the two art forms spoke different languages. While Hollywood studios bought up scripts of shows which were artistic successes, this did not guarantee similar success on film.

1995 seems to be seeing a return to theatre-inspired film: 'Death and the Maiden', 'Vanya on 42nd Street,' 'Oleanna' and 'Nell' are all films based on stage plays. *The Madness of King George* continues this trend and the film version sees the same team come together to transfer what was a successful stage play into a screenplay and film.

From text to performance on stage and film

Merely reading a play or a script misses the most important element of either medium - that of performance. Even in the case of Alan Bennett, a writer given to detailed visual descriptions and vivid stage directions in the play text, much of the substance of the play or film as experienced is missing.

The key difference revolves around the fact that drama to the reader is textual, while performance and film are audio-visual. A visual performance entails a very different system of codes and signs. The director has selected what to emphasise, the actors are cast, the locations and lighting arranged and so on. As spectators in the theatre, we are still able to choose how to view the action - what to look at on stage. With film, the spectator is given no choices since the camera directs and even focuses our gaze.



The diagram to the left indicates the relationship between the stage text, the stage performance, the screenplay and the film.

Considering that Alan Bennett's *The Madness of King George* exists in four forms - the stage text, screenplay, stage performance and film - do you think that there is something that each form holds in common (e.g. themes, characters etc.)?

ST= Stage text

SP=Stage performance

S = Screenplay

F=Film

● = Intersection

The moment a written text is performed or adapted for a different medium, themes, ideas, characters and situations are given life and discourse. No text is sacrosanct. Every production in any medium will bring about something new. Yet whenever we complain that a play has been misrepresented in a performance - or a film has not done justice to a particular play - we do imply that the 'play' is there, almost on a pedestal.

Transpositions and adaptations tend to reflect the very essence of the ideas in the original script, but before long the play and screenplay are rendered archival documents of the various performance texts; they become one more system of presenting a set of ideas. So, which ideas and characters, which elements of the plot, which emotions survive the shift from one medium to another? Who decides what will stay and what will go, or what emphasis to give a particular scene? And in terms of an adaptation such as this from stage to screen, to what extent do the commercial pressures of the film industry affect what we see on the big screen?

To consolidate your understanding of the differences between the theatre and film draw up a chart with four headings (*see below*). Under each heading list the techniques! conventions specific to each medium . basically how each tells a story. We have started the list with one example, which you can continue.

Screenplay	Stage text	Stage performance	Film
<i>working drafts</i>	<i>one text</i>	<i>many performances</i>	<i>finished print</i>

You have now thought about the differences between script, theatre and film from the point of view of the audience. This film production of *The Madness of King George* had the same director, writer and lead actor as the theatre production. To find out about their experience of the adaptation process, Film Education spoke to Alan Bennett (writer of screen and stage play) and Nigel Hawthorne (*King George*) and sections of their interviews are used throughout this guide.

The Opening

The purpose of the opening of a story in any medium is to establish character, time and place. It is vital that from the beginning, the audience are drawn into the story. The theatre and film versions of *The Madness of King George* have very different opening scenes.

The following two passages are comments by Nigel Hawthorne and Alan Bennett on the opening scene. How does Nigel Hawthorne describe the differences between the film and stage performance? In what way were these differences shaped by the different nature of the two media? How much does Alan Bennett feel that he shaped the opening of the film? How might this compare with the stage performance? Can the writer of a film be an 'auteur' in the same way as the writer of a stage play? Why?

"In the opening of the film you see the King about to open Parliament and racing down the corridor, yelling at the Prince of Wales. On the stage that was just an ordinary scene on the forestage and it wasn't done with any movement at all. It was just a spat going on between members of the royal family. But when we got to Eton College, where the scene was shot, we went down the cloister corridors at a great speed in all this paraphernalia, in all these coronation robes and I think that sets up the film and my character as being not only to do with ceremonial, to do with madness, but also to do with absurdity."

Nigel Hawthorne

“I think the opening of the film is very exciting but that is as much to do with the shooting and the editing as with the writing. You get all this jumble of activity and the King being dressed and at the same time you realise there is antagonism between him and the Prince of Wales and that the politicians have their place. So a lot of necessary information is got over in the first ten minutes or so of the film.”

Alan Bennett

Task

Comparing Openings:

You will need to look at copies of the play text and the screenplay in order to complete this exercise (see bibliography on last page for details).

In the play text you should look at pages 1 to 6. In the screenplay you should look at pages 5 to 8.

- *What is the opening image of the play? List the characters introduced in the opening sequence. What does the audience learn of the King, Queen, Prince of Wales, Pitt and any of their relationships?*
- *Explain the importance of the business with the King’s waistcoat. How, if at all, could this idea have worked on film? Try acting out this scene. How long is it? In what ways can you establish the different status of the characters involved and their relationships? What are the apparent problems of staging this scene?*
- *What are the opening images of the film? List the characters introduced in this opening sequence? How long do you think this sequence plays in the film?*
- *In groups, discuss the main differences between these openings.*

Consider:

- *layout and substance of written text*
- *introduction of characters*
- *introduction to relationships/themes*
- *introduction to setting/period*
- *humour*
- *speed of action*

Adaptation-Gains and Losses

So far you have looked at the process of adaptation and the importance of strong opening scenes. We will now look more closely at the gains and losses to the story-line and characters that occur in the transition from play to film. Alan Bennett was asked about the effect of re-writing for film and says the following about the demands of writing for each medium:

“New elements came in like the sharper antagonism between the King and the Prince of Wales. On the stage it was closer to historical fact; the Prince was less of a villain, more easy going. But you do need strong lines and strong antagonisms in a film. So the Prince of Wales became more wicked and more a focus of opposition to the King, whereas on the stage, that had been more political rather than royal. The thing which never really worked on stage was the political side of the crisis because we couldn’t show the House of Commons in any convincing way. As soon as you can show 200 people shouting their heads off, it becomes much more dramatic, then all that side . the integration between the King going mad and it being a political crisis . works much better.”

Alan Bennett

For the actor, playing a character for theatre and screen involves two very different processes. In a film scenes are divided into shots with some lasting only one line, and often shot not in the order of the story. Nigel Hawthorne had played the part of the King on stage 380 times before transferring this role to screen. Below he describes his experience.

“This knowledge of the character had grown on me and I think through the months I’d come to think of it as second nature to me almost. So this was an enormous asset when I did it on film. The process was different, certainly, because we were not working on a stage set but on locations. But the scenes were reasonably similar, though truncated as things are in the movies because everything has to be made shorter. All the scenes have to be shorter and link into the next. But I did find that the journey that I was going to take as the King was so firmly in my mind, that when we came to break it up and shoot it out of sequence, as you do in filming, I wasn’t ever stumped to know what was the thinking or feeling at a particular moment.”

Nigel Hawthorne

The two images shown (*right and below*) represent a similar moment from the stage play and the film production. Consider the following:

- which comes from which medium,
- the difference in costume and how this affects our understanding of the characters,
- the differences in body language and what each pose suggests about the King!/Lady Pembroke,

- the casting of the two Lady Pembrokes.

What can the pictures tell us about the two mediums?

Dialogue and speed of narrative

Writing for film requires an economy of dialogue. Image and sound can add to the story, so writers need to pare down their words to the minimum. Alan Bennett comments:

"I believe film has to be brisk . as opposed to television, where I tend to spread myself and not bother about what's going to happen next. On television I always feel that if you get the dialogue right or if people are saying interesting things you can take a lot more time and to a lesser extent that's true with the theatre. But in films, the question in the audience's mind is always 'what happens next?' so you have to get on."

Look at how the dialogue is transferred from theatre to film. Think of the moment in the story when the King realises that the American Colonies are going to become independent. On film, this was shown with a close-up of a world globe with a voice-over. On stage, it is discussed among characters. This means that some dialogue is lost. Alan Bennett says the following:

"I'm not particularly wedded to my own prose, but there were some speeches that I liked. There is one speech that George III makes about America, which came under threat but then was saved; because it was about America and since the film needed to do well in America anything to do with America tended to be safe-guarded."

Compare the speeches below from the stage play and the screenplay. Describe the changes made and explain why you think they were made.

KING: Peace of mind! I have no peace of mind. I have had no peace of mind since we lost America. Forests, old as the world itself, meadows, plains, strange delicate flowers, immense solitudes. And all nature new to art. All ours. Mine. Gone. A paradise lost. The trumpet of sedition has sounded. We have lost America. Soon we shall loose India, the Indies, Ireland even, our feathers plucked one by one, this island reduced to itself alone, a great state mouldered into rottenness and decay. And they will lay it at my door. What is this I'm reading? It is America. The words fly ahead of me. I cannot catch them in the mist. Stage play p.25

KING: Peace of mind! I have no peace of mind. I have had no peace of mind. I have had lost America. Forests, old as the world itself, meadows, plains, strange delicate flowers, immense solitudes. And all nature new to art. All ours. Mine. Gone. A paradise lost. Screenplay p.29-30

Task

Write the dialogue for a scene between King George and one other character who comes to visit him while he is recovering from his illness. The scene should represent some kind of turning point in the story.

Now present this dialogue in the following ways:

- Write the scene with stage directions for the theatre.
- Storyboard the scene for film production.

Bibliography / Filmography:

Play text: The Madness of George III, Alan Bennett, Faber and Faber Limited, 1992.

Screenplay: The Madness of King George, Alan Bennett, Faber and Faber Limited, 1995.

Film: The Madness of King George, dir. Nicholas Hytner, The Samuel Goldwyn Company & Channel Four Films. Cert. PG. Running time 110 mins.

Written by Ian Kelly. Produced by Film Education for Channel Four Films & The Samuel Goldwyn Company. Special thanks to Alan Bennett and Nigel Hawthorne for their contribution to this study guide.