FROM PAGE TO STAGE

Adapting Young Adult Literature to the Stage

Daniel Volaric

From Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse* to Mark Haddon's international best-seller *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, fiction for children and young adults is a popular source for the stage. Adapting a classic and contemporary novel is nothing new to the film, TV and theater industries. Over the years, an increasing number of children's novels has formed the basis for plays and movies.

This paper will explore the work of Mechthild Hesse and Susanne Franz at the University of Education in Freiburg, Germany, where, over the last ten years, they have turned several young adult novels into drama with the help of students training to become teachers. Everyone involved in the project strongly believes that watching and experiencing literature is vital to its enjoyment and teaching. In the last segment of this article, the benefits of attending a theater performance will be looked at, as well as the learning possibilities of acting out a play.

From Novel to Drama: The Work at the University of Education in Freiburg

The process of transforming a novel into a live theatrical experience is a unique and challenging process. One of the main challenges of adapting a novel to the stage arises from the fact that a novel is meant to be read, whereas a play is intended to be seen and heard on stage. And yet, adapting novels is a common phenomenon. To adapt simply means to transpose from one genre to another, to change or adjust an existing work, to create something new.

Since 2004, Professor Mechthild Hesse, Susanne Franz (director) and future teachers studying at the University of Education in Freiburg (Pädagogische Hochschule = PH) have adapted several novels for young adults, such as *The Giver* by Lois Lowry in 2005, *(Un)arranged Marriage* by Bali Rai in 2008, *La Linea* by Ann Jaramillo in 2012 and *Stone Cold* by Robert Swindells in 2013. Once a year,

PH-students perform on stage, their aim being to bring enjoyment of literature to local high school students. To date, an audience of more than 20,000 people has been reached. The project emerged from the general assumption that drama has the potential to enrich and transform its participants, as well as the people in the audience. The project participants are no professional actors, but clearly such an experience is highly beneficial for them. Furthermore, this project offers high school students a unique possibility in terms of learning English as a second language. Based on Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, which was staged in 2013, the whole project will be outlined in more depth to illustrate its benefits.
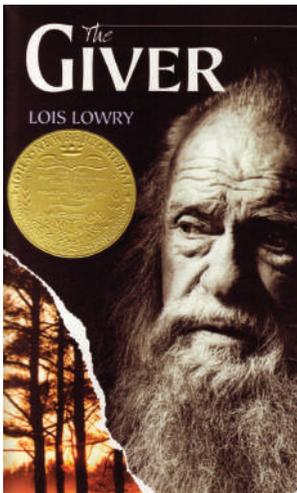
The Giver in its original version as a novel (Lois Lowry, HMH)

Staging Frankenstein

Ghost or horror fiction is one of the oldest literary genres. Mostly, these tales are explicitly intended to scare, unsettle or horrify the reader or listener. Children, teenagers and even adults like the feeling of being "pleasurably frightened and terrified" (Hesse 60). Horror fiction makes us realize what we are afraid of and forces us to confront our fear. Although most people associate ghosts, zombies, werewolves and other supernatural forces with horror, not all stories of the supernatural are actually horror and neither does all horror fiction have supernatural components.

The horror novel has a long tradition with advocates such as H. P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allan Poe. Two of the classic examples of what could be considered horror fiction are Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The classical tale of Frankenstein and especially the well-known character of Frankenstein's monster have influenced popular culture for more than onehundred years. The story has been staged numerous times and has been used for many movies. However, especially those who have not read the novel tend to reduce *Frankenstein* to a simple horror story about a deformed killing

monster. *Frankenstein* is more than that, though. It is also about being different, trying to fit in, bullying, dealing with death and the responsibilities and moral limitations that come with scientific knowledge. All of that makes *Frankenstein* highly up-to-date and relevant for today's generation, which was one of many reasons for staging it at the PH Freiburg in 2013.

Staging *Frankenstein* was a collaboration of Mechthild Hesse, professor of English at the University of Education in Freiburg, Susanne Franz, a professional director, and the entire cast (12 future teachers studying at the University of Education). Based on Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* and several other existing scripts, the process started with creating a first draft. The scriptwriting took place during a five-day workshop in June, lead by Mechthild Hesse, in which the original tale was shortened. Further, we had to decide which passages, aspects and characters were crucial for the storyline and which were not. Throughout this process, we tried to stay faithful to the original piece, especially since *Frankenstein* is such a well-known and beloved novel. However, we had to cut, de-emphasize and re-adjust a lot of details, while we also added certain aspects that were not

part of the original text. For instance, we included the role of Mary Shelley as narrator and removed Captain Robert Walton and his letters to his sister entirely.

At the start of November 2012, Susanne Franz, the director, joined us for rehearsals, the main aim being for the actors to fully immerse themselves in the script and the story. Every character, every scene, every little detail had to fight for its place. Certain scenes were too long, dialogues did not flow naturally on stage. We had to move away from decisions we had made in the beginning. This was an ongoing process that continued until opening night.

We started to go through individual scenes first, linked some of them together and in the end had entire runthroughs with make-up, costumes, music and light. We had a clear plan, so each cast member knew exactly which scene was rehearsed when.

After about seven weeks of rehearsals (Friday and Saturday, later also Thursday and Sunday), we preformed six times in January 2013 at the University of Education. Three performances took place in the morning, exclusively open to high school students, whereas the three evening performances were open to the public. To enrich the experience for the high school students, we offered follow-up

sessions after every matinée. The students had the chance to ask questions or clarify aspects they did not understand. In April 2013, we also performed at a local high school in Hesse and two scenes were shown in August 2013 in the context of the English Drama Network Meeting at the English Theater in Frankfurt.

Learning through Watching and Listening

Adapting young adult literature to the stage is not only done for the university students' sake. It is also done for EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. Students attending the performances are exposed to spoken English, which can help them improve their listening skills. Most course books tend to use formal English which can sound rather unnatural, leaving students sounding like robots. In drama, on the other hand, students listen to different accents and more natural language.

Reading a play or novel can be quite challenging for many students. Unknown vocabulary, complicated sentence structures and the length of the text often leave students unmotivated and frustrated. Watching a play on stage gives students visual and aural support to enhance their comprehension of the written text. In the long run, this might spark their interest to read other novels or plays and affect their way of reading young adult literature.

Mechthild Hesse and Susanne Franz's adaptation of *Frankenstein* for the stage (Klett, 2014)

However, to enhance the experience, students should not come unprepared. Simply sitting in the audience is passive. Being passive is generally not an effective way of learning. Being engaged, on the other hand, by researching into the play, discussing certain aspects, acting it out, taking notes and doing follow-up-sessions, makes it more likely that the experience of watching and listening a theater piece is beneficial and enjoyable. Therefore, teachers need to prepare their

students beforehand and include a follow-up-session.

A Step Further

Students who experience English theater first-hand might be interested in performing English plays at their own school. Drama is, as Kempston states, "a potentially powerful pedagogy for second language teaching and learning"(93). In fact, performing on stage makes learners use the target language in a meaningful and safe context, which allows them to gain self-confidence, motivation and enthusiasm for the English language. As a result, drama can be an effective tool for improving students' language skills as a whole. Furthermore, it gives them the chance to understand and interpret literature holistically. They are not only reading and analyzing a piece of literature, they fully immerse themselves in it. Acting requires its participants to use their whole body, imagination and knowledge about the time, place and people to portray a character convincingly. Drama has the potential to provide a "sustained, intensive and profoundly satisfying encounter" with the literary text (O'Neill 152). Drama offers unique opportunities for supporting second language learning.

Drama and Oral Communication

The most important competence related to performing is speaking. Talking allows learners to organize their thoughts and helps them understand their feelings. However, students are generally reluctant to communicate in the EFL classroom. A reason could be that students do not relate with the given tasks or do not find them meaningful enough to actually contribute something. If this is true, it is not enough for language teachers to hand out tasks that build up language skills. There is clearly a difference between "real demands of language use" and practicing language skills (Byron 126).

To foster meaningful communication, teachers have to emotionally involve students. Therefore, the effectiveness of drama for language learning relies on whether learners "care enough about the problem in the drama to try and meet the challenges (including the language challenge) it offers" (ibid. 127). Role-taking as well as role-creating give students the opportunity to identify with characters in the fictional world. This identification results in the urge to use the target language. Drama forces students to produce language. As Somers points out:

> In a well-designed dramatic situation, the learners' need for

communication tends to overcome their fear of linguistic inadequacy so that they are able to make the best use of the language skills they already possess. (139)

Drama offers many opportunities for students to use the target language in a meaningful way. Furthermore, it supports the development of literacy in a positive way.

Drama and Reading

Learning to read is a complex and versatile process. The reader has to uncover and create the context which is hidden in the written text. This context is "featureless and does nothing visually to capture the attention or involve emotions" (Reid 73). For EFL learners, according to Reid,

there is loss and change in the transfer to print — loss of immediacy of relevance, loss of vividness, loss of support in the search for meaning. (73)

Being exposed to print on their own, readers have to fully rely on their prior knowledge and decoding abilities to be able to discover meaning in a written text.

EFL learners clearly require more visual and aural support to be able to comprehend a written text. Byron stresses the fact that especially young learners are "stronger at reading action, or words-embedded-in-action, than they are at reading words alone" (79). Pictures have a great impact on students' understanding of meaning. This applies to still as well as moving pictures. Therefore, students should be allowed and encouraged to

actively experiment with the representational resources of word and image, and with the ways in which they can be combined. (Kress/Van Leeuwen 113)

Drama plays an influential part in providing the opportunity for students to take part in the literary world. As Chang points out,

it permits them to turn abstract written words into concrete images and to construct meaning from the text though collective as well as individual experience. (10)

Through drama, students are encouraged to be part of the dramatic world and to take on roles. This active involvement fosters students' reading development because they are often eager to continue reading. The challenge for teachers is to provide stories that encourage and challenge students to read in the foreign language.

Drama and Writing

Writing should not only be concerned with the imparting of knowledge of skills and rules concerning writing, since this "will produce competent, though disengaged, writers" (Packwood/Messenheimer 145). To prevent this, writing should include a "clear audience, purpose and topic" (Cameron 156). Drama gives students the opportunity to portray certain characters, work together with team members and act out scenarios. This allows them "to experience their dilemmas, feel the tension and share in their happiness or sadness" (Chang 11). Grainger claims that this interaction and role taking enhances "authenticity and often a real sense of audience" (82). Steele believes that drama provides a unique chance for students "to think, talk, respond and interact for a change of perspective to occur". Furthermore, she stresses the fact that the use of drama supports students to "delve deeper and more reflectively" into their own writing (184). They can use the experience gained through drama to establish true understanding, which "can bring vividness and an authentic voice to their writing" (ibid. 185).

The situations within the play naturally generate writing in different registers and genres. Writing in role is multimodal, since students have to select relevant vocabulary and an appropriate register, based on the character's status in the given scenario. Research has shown that writing within this dramatic setting involves "thinking, listening, creating", and more significantly, gives them the chance to "use their whole being in meaning-making" (Crumpler/ Schneider 62).

Teaching literacy and becoming literate are dynamic processes. Through drama, these processes can be effectively enhanced, since students use their bodies and their brains both at the same time. Literacy skills should not be equated with simply knowing a set of linguistic features. The ultimate focus should be on the context of a given situation. A great body of studies, such as those by Cremin et al. (2006), Podlozny (2000) and Wagner (1998), have argued that using drama in the EFL classroom incorporates all necessary aspects of literacy development. What drama does to support literacy is summarized by Chang. She states:

> Drama can help bring written texts off the page into the here and now and can activate children into listening to one another, having their own say, and trying out a

range of registers in order to communicate in context. (11)

Learning about One's Self through Drama

Drama certainly establishes a purposeful foundation on which students' language skills can be developed, but drama can also make a significant contribution to students' sense of identity. Learning a second language can be overwhelming for many EFL learners, which can have a negative impact on their self-esteem and self-confidence. A low self-esteem and a lack of confidence not only effect language learning but have an impact on education as a whole.

But how can drama address the issue of enhancing self-esteem? One way in which drama is dealing with this is through the notion of role-taking or role-creating. Through the active participation in the process, students are able to "experiment safely with alternative identities", which gives them the chance to see themselves in a different light (Winston 3). According to Moreno, taking on roles can change students' sense of self, since "roles do not emerge from the self but the self may emerge from roles"(157). This emergence bears the potential to "heighten their perceived status in the classroom and thus

encourage them to find a voice" (Winston 3).

Another important aspect that supports the development of self-esteem is the safe and inclusive environment in which drama takes place. A positive environment in which students are not afraid of failure ultimately results in enhancing their self-esteem and their learning achievements in general. Within the drama process, everyone is valued and encouraged to contribute to the development of the play. Such an atmosphere is founded on a sense of belonging and security, which can make students lose their inhibitions to use the target language and further enhance their self-esteem.

Drama thus supports students' level of language proficiency, helps them build confidence and a sense of language awareness and furthermore prepares them for real-life communication. If the purpose is clear, students use the target language, regardless of their possible lack of language competence. Drama involves students on an intellectual, emotional and physical level and supports the development of various competences. Furthermore, drama addresses the "language learner as a whole person in an authentic relational context" (Lutzker 233). As Dufeu phrases it:

Language is not mediated in an abstract way; rather it is directly experienced through active usage. It develops out of the communication between the participants. It arises in action and through interaction […]. The participants are addressed as entire persons through the actions of real or imagined persons. Body, feelings, intellect are simultaneously addressed in the web of social activity. The body supports the vocal and verbal qualities of expression, or contributes to the stimulation of expression. The actions make the language dynamic and vice versa. (65)

Drama is a holistic approach which involves, engages and develops the whole child. It provides the possibility to increase students' self-esteem and self-confidence and furthermore enhances learning.

Conclusion

The value of drama as a means of language learning and teaching in the German EFL context has not yet been fully explored. Without a doubt, facilitating and implementing drama is challenging since it requires effort, active participation, compassion, empathy, and discipline. However, drama (adapted or not) can make a positive contribution to students' lives.

Throughout this article, the impact of drama on students' communication skills, reading and writing ability, as well as their personal development has been illustrated. Furthermore, it is a powerful tool in and even beyond the EFL classroom. Drama

can facilitate personal and social development, learning in other curricular areas and the development of a range of skills and understanding that can be applied […] in other life situations. (Livermore v)

Staging plays for students in English in such a manner is unique to the Freiburg area. Its true effectiveness for language learning has yet to be fully proven. We need more evidence-based research in the field of drama, since many people, on an international and national level, start to notice the powerful potential drama has for the lives of students.

This article, however, does not offer drama as a universal solution, as a secret recipe, as something to spoon-feed students with, nor does it claim that drama should be the only teaching method used in the modern language classroom. What this article wishes to promote is for teachers to be even more willing to break their classroom routine and include drama as a means to learning the target language or a

piece of literature in a different way. This requires a shift towards a new way of thinking, teaching and learning in school, but it is worth the risk and effort.

Daniel Volaric (*1989) studied secondary education at the University of Education in Freiburg. During that time he was part of two theater productions (Frankenstein *and* Stone Cold*) with M. Hesse and S. Franz. He is not only interested in acting, but also enjoys working in the field of drama pedagogics. Currently, he is in the initial phase of his PhD, which is concerned with drama and language learning in an EFL context.*

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