

Researching Theatrical Adaptations Outcome Statement
by Kristen Barrett

RESEARCH OUTCOME

Over winter break, my independent study successfully exposed me to a variety of enthralling theatrical adaptations. As noted in my proposal, I read the source material for and viewed Nashville productions of *A Christmas Story*, *Cinderella*, *Nashville's Nutcracker*, and *Jersey Boys*. I replaced *Snowy Day* with *Nashville's Nutcracker* due to the fact that *Snowy Day* opened after the end of winter break. My successive viewings of these productions engrossed me in the art of adapting stories. As I pondered these adaptations, I made a number of revelations that bettered my understanding of theatrical adaptations.

For instance, Philip Grecian's adaptation of *A Christmas Story* taught me how adapters use narration and monologues in theatrical adaptations to express a character's interiority. Just like in the original text, an adult Ralphie narrates the events of *A Christmas Story* to the audience. Instead of being a disembodied voice however, Ralphie narrates while re-enacting these stories from his childhood. While seeing this production, I marveled at Philip Grecian's decision to keep the character's interiority intact in this way, adding more comedy to an already hilarious story.

The Nashville Children's Theatre's *Cinderella* demonstrated to me how successful adaptations can deviate from the tone of the source material and even other adaptations. The modern, Western conception of *Cinderella* comes from Charles Perrault's *Cendrillon*, which reads more like a pious parable than a fairytale. The Grimm brothers' *Aschenputtel*, another popular source text, takes on a dark, dismal tone, ending with doves plucking out the stepsisters' eyes. NCT's version of *Cinderella* abandoned both of these structures, presenting a playful, humorous fairytale suitable for children and appreciated by adults. All in all, its adherence to the basic *Cinderella* plot and masterful manipulation of tone exemplified the importance of adapting a piece to suit a desired audience.

Without a doubt, *Nashville's Nutcracker* was the most creative adaptation I viewed over winter break. Paul Vasterling, the adapter and the Artistic Director/CEO of the Nashville Ballet, transforms Tchaikovsky's ballet into a whimsical tale set in Nashville during the Tennessee Centennial Exposition of 1897. Each scene takes place at a different Nashville historical landmark, and performers at the Kingdom of the Sugar Plum Fairy represent various attractions from the Exposition. Furthermore, Vasterling's *Nutcracker* takes a *Hamilton*-esque approach to casting, resulting in blended families during the party scene. Overall, Vasterling's adaptation provided me with a stunning example of an adapter bringing new vigor to their source texts.

My last excursion took me to *Jersey Boys* by Marshall Brickman and Rick Elice, the jukebox musical about the Four Seasons. Jukebox musicals typically fall short due to a lacking storyline, but *Jersey Boys* avoids this pitfall and kept me enthralled the entire performance. More than any other adaptation I studied, *Jersey Boys* brings an overlooked story to the public eye. In *Jersey Boys: The Story of Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons* by David Cote, Rick Elice describes the Four Seasons as those "disenfranchised by the cultural elite," and he celebrates *Jersey Boys* for giving them and their fans the attention they deserve (20-1). *Jersey Boys* shows how an adaptation can give a voice to an underappreciated narrative, which happens to be my exact reason for adapting Nella Larsen's *Passing*.

FINAL PROJECT OUTCOME

Nella Larsen's *Passing* is a prime example of an exceptional piece of literature overlooked in the American literary canon. Set in New York during the Harlem Renaissance, the narrative follows two African-American women who grew up together in Chicago: Irene, who lives in Harlem, and Clare, who chooses to pass as white and marries a vehemently racist white man. The novella depicts a complex portrait of race and gender issues in the black community during this time period. I reread *Passing* twice over break and studied two educational texts about the work and Nella Larsen's life. With newly acquired knowledge of adaptations fresh on my mind, I confidently embarked on my first adaptation with promising results. I included an excerpt from my sixty-page working draft below with a list of my expenditures detailed subsequently.

All in all, this project proved to be a fruitful educational experience. I am so thankful for the financial support of the Miller Arts Scholar Minigrant and look forward to embarking on more creative endeavors in the future.

EXCERPT

Clare explains to Irene how the behavior of her white aunts, who were her guardians, led to her deciding to pass.

CLARE

They made me what I am today. For, of course, I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem, or even a daughter of the indiscreet Ham. Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could "pass." You can't know, 'Rene, how, when I used to go over to the south side, I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had. It made me all the more determined to get them and others. Do you, can you understand what I felt?

(looks pointedly at IRENE).

The aunts were queer. For all their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced — ruined, they called it — a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn't forgive the tar-brush. They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbours, or even to mention the south side. You may be sure that I didn't. I'll bet they were good and sorry afterwards.

(laughs)

When the chance to get away came *that* omission was of great value to me. When Jack, a schoolboy acquaintance of some people in the neighbourhood, turned up from South America with untold gold, there was no one to tell him that I was colored, and many to tell him about the severity and the religiousness of Aunt Grace and Aunt Edna. You can guess the rest. After he came, I stopped slipping off to the south side and slipped off to meet him instead. I couldn't manage both. In the end, I had no great difficulty in convincing him that it was useless to talk marriage to the aunts. So on the day that I was eighteen, we went off and were married. So that's that. Nothing could have been easier.

EXPENDITURES

Original Texts/Historical Texts for Shows	
<i>A Christmas Story: The Book That Inspired the Hilarious Classic Film</i> by Jean Shepherd	\$4.99
<i>Jersey Boys: The Story of Frankie Valli & the Four Seasons</i>	\$9.99
<i>Cinderella</i>	public domain/no cost
<i>The Nutcracker and the Mouse King</i>	public domain/no cost
Subtotal	\$14.98
Show Tickets	
<i>A Christmas Story</i> Ticket (Dec 13 at 6:30)	\$56.75
<i>Cinderella</i> Ticket (Dec 14 at 6:30)	\$23
<i>Jersey Boys</i> Ticket (Jan 11 at 7:30)	\$98.5
<i>Nashville's Nutcracker</i> (Dec 16 at 2 pm)	\$110
Subtotal	\$288.25
Original Text/Educational Materials for Passing	
<i>Passing</i> by Nella Larsen	\$12.26
<i>In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line</i> by George Hutchinson	\$29.95
<i>Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies</i> by Mar Gallego	\$89.99
Subtotal	\$132.20
TOTAL	\$435.43