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Benjamin Hooper
College of DuPage

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Will You Adapt the Play? Adapt the Play. Will You Adapt the Play?

by Benjamin Hooper

(English 1102)

The Assignment: Students were asked to select a play, read it, and then watch the movie version of the work. After doing so, they were required to write an essay which identified and illustrated the strategies used by the screenwriter and director to open up the play and make it more cinematic.

David Mamet's play *Glengarry Glen Ross*, first staged and published in 1983, won the author a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1984 (Sauer 143). It was hailed by one critic as "a play with real muscle," "carving characters and conflicts out of language" (Cushman). In addition to the Pulitzer, the play earned accolades from the New York Drama Critics Circle, the Dramatists Guild, and a nomination for a Tony Award (Sauer 143). Given the play's success, the process of translating it into a feature film would be a daunting task for even the most expert of filmmakers. Indeed, Charles Eidsvik once wrote that "not only are our expectations higher for adaptations; what we are willing to put up with is radically less" (669). Nonetheless, nearly a decade after the play was first published, the task of adapting, or "opening up," the play was taken on by director James Foley, who toiled in collaboration with Mamet himself.

An adapted work generally follows one of three basic models: literal, faithful, or loose. A literal adaptation is nearly identical to the source material, changing only what is necessary for the shift in medium. In contrast, faithful adaptations often feature several changes in terms of characters, plotlines, and settings, but remain true to the "spirit" of the original work and usually retain the same main storyline and characters as the source. A loose adaptation is usually characterized as having little in common with the work it is derived from, sharing only scattered elements of the original and sometimes borrowing the work's title (Georgalas). Although Mamet took numerous steps to open up *Glengarry Glen Ross* for the screen -- including the creation of additional characters, expanding the set, and dramatizing additional scenes -- the film remained true to the themes, characters, and main storyline of the play, qualifying it as a faithful adaptation.

The stage version of *Glengarry Glen Ross* follows an evening and a day in the lives of real-estate salesmen Shelly "The Machine" Levene, Richard Roma, Dave Moss, and George Aaronow as they struggle to cheat and manipulate their customers, employers, the police, and each other. The play opens in a Chinese restaurant with Levene, Moss, and Roma engaged in three separate games of manipulation. First, Levene attempts to bribe office manager John Williamson into giving him premium leads, which he believes will allow him to break his bad streak and get back to the top of the board. Elsewhere in the restaurant, Moss tries to convince fellow discontent Aaronow that the key to halting their own bad luck is to steal the leads and sell them to a competitor in exchange for cash and jobs, while Roma shares a drink with a fellow restaurant patron whom he hopes to manipulate into buying some land. The next day, the salesmen arrive to find that the office has been ransacked, and the leads stolen. Police question all of the office's occupants. As this is occurring, Levene arrives triumphant to announce he has made a major sale, and Roma's drinking partner from the previous night backs out of the deal. In the end, Williamson discovers it was Levene, not Aaronow, whom Moss eventually convinced to steal the leads, and the play ends with the police taking Levene into the office for questioning after Williamson apparently told them of his findings.

In order to expand on the world the characters live in, Mamet and Foley added additional scenes, locations, and characters to the film. Mark Caro wrote in his article "Reading Between the

Lines” that “to make material work on cinematic terms, film-makers often add as well as subtract, creating new characters and situations to communicate more clearly what they think the [play’s] ideas are” (2). By far the most radical of the added scenes takes place in the real estate office early on in the film, concurrent to Roma’s discussion with James Lingk in the restaurant. The scene marks the sole appearance of the character Blake (Alec Baldwin). This character, and the scene in which he appears early in the film, are never even mentioned in the play. Blake, a successful and wealthy salesman, was sent by the office’s owners, Mitch and Murray, to assist Williamson (Kevin Spacey) in motivating Levene (Jack Lemmon), Moss (Ed Harris), and Aaronow (Alan Arkin) to improve their sales rankings. Blake goes about the process of motivation via a series of insults and threats. Jack Lemmon said of the scene: “I think Alec’s part -- which he played brilliantly -- I think really explained the situation early on in the film and really let people know the pressure these guys were under, which was enormous” (*The Charlie Rose Show*). The scene serves to raise the stakes for the salesmen, as Blake informs them that only the two top sellers will be retained by the company once the current sales contest ends. For the rest of the film, the salesmen work with the knowledge that their jobs are on the line, and with the possible exception of Roma, who was not present at the meeting, they know they will most likely not be one of the top two sellers. As Lemmon said, the scene shows the audience the pressure the men are under, as well as allows viewers to more fully sympathize with the desperation that drives the men and their actions.

Another example of a scene in the film that was not taken from the play occurs at the very beginning of the movie. To be precise, the Chinese restaurant conversations are preceded by a scene featuring Levene and Moss using payphones outside in the street. These phones are located part way between the restaurant and the real estate office. This scene is a prime example of expanding the story’s setting, showing the audience a part of the characters’ world that wasn’t visible in the play. This adds to the realism of the setting, and helps the audience to better visualize the scope of that world. What’s more, it helps to illustrate the relationship between the restaurant and the office in terms of location and interaction.

The scene also serves to expand upon a subplot only mentioned briefly in the play, that of Levene’s comatose daughter. In this scene, Levene speaks on the phone to hospital officials and learns that his daughter’s care is in danger of being cancelled due to his failure to pay owed money to the hospital. The subplot is revisited later in the movie, as Levene makes three more calls to the hospital to enquire about his daughter’s condition and insists that he’ll have the money for her care soon. The story is alluded to in a more subtle fashion every time the movie shows Levene sitting at his desk and the photo of his daughter is prominently displayed. This subplot creates sympathy for Levene’s character that was not present in the play. In the original text, Levene was portrayed as selfish, always attempting to con someone. But the expansion of the daughter subplot shows a more human aspect of Levene -- that of a man who loves his family. The audience can then infer that it is not pure greed that drives Levene’s actions, but also a desire to support his family and pay for his ailing daughter’s medical needs.

Further sympathy for Levene is created by another additional scene not dramatized in the play. After being heavily berated by Blake and told of the jeopardy his job is in, Levine shows up at the door of a prospective customer he spoke with on the phone. However, Levene finds that the woman he spoke with is not home, and speaks instead with her husband, Mr. Spannel (Bruce Altman). Spannel, while polite, reveals himself not to be as easily gulled as his wife, and sees through Levene’s attempts to con him into a sale. The scene serves as an example of Levene’s day to day life, continuing his bad streak of being rejected by uninterested customers and finding no sympathy from his superiors at the office.

In addition to dramatizing new scenes, the filmmakers changed the locations for some pre-existing scenes and altered the content of some of those scenes. Most of these changes take place in the first half of the movie, and deal with the three conversations that open the play. While the setting

of Roma's conversation with Lingk remains unchanged, the scenes dealing with Moss and Aaronow and Levine and Williamson involve several locations. The conversations are also split into smaller sections to reflect the needs of the medium. Joseph Boggs wrote in "The Problems of Adaptation" that "each medium has its strengths and limitations, and any adaptation from one medium to another must take those factors into account and adapt the subject matter to take advantage of the strengths of the new medium" (674). A major strength of theater is a play's ability to carry on a long scene or a lengthy speech without becoming awkward or losing the audience's interest. Film, on the other hand, is a medium characterized by quick dialogue and short scenes. This presented the filmmakers with an obstacle, as *Glengarry* the play is full of long speeches and dialogues. Yet, as Charles Eidsvik reminds us, "the attempt to adapt a work that is not 'cinematically conceived' into 'cinematic terms' forces filmmakers into attempting original solutions" (670), and this was the case with Mamet and Foley. Their solution was to take nearly the exact same dialogue as the play and break it into smaller chunks and to allow the conversations to take place in numerous locations. Thus, Moss and Aaronow's conversation, which, in the play, occurs totally in the Chinese restaurant, now takes place outside the house of a potential buyer they were unable to close, and while they are driving in Moss' car. In similar fashion, Levene and Williamson's conversation about the leads takes place on screen partially in the bathroom of the Chinese restaurant before the Blake scene, and picks up later as Levene confronts Williamson while the latter man locks the office for the night. That section expands further as the two men walk outside to the street and end up inside Williamson's car. The different locations serve to keep the visuals of the scene interesting to a viewer's eye. Additionally, the actions given to Williamson allow actor Kevin Spacey to more physically illustrate his aloof attitude and non-responsiveness to Levene's pleas and attempts at bargaining.

To take on the Herculean task of adapting a Pulitzer Prize winning play into a film, and to then to have said film become a critical and commercial success in its own right takes more than -- as Blake might say -- "balls of brass." It takes knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of both mediums, as well as dedication and skill to craft the film into a work that plays on those strengths while remaining faithful to the source. With the creation of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet and Foley have shown themselves to possess those qualities, and have shaped a work that rivals its namesake artistically and in terms of cultural impact.

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