



BY
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From the Novel to the Screen

THREE DIRECTORS TALK ABOUT THE PERILS AND PLEASURES OF FILM ADAPTATION

In light of Spike Jonze's *Adaptation*, it would be absurd to actually quote from Robert McKee's treatise, "Story," on the process of adapting a screenplay from a book. So, let's get the temptation out of the way: "The conceit of adaptation is that the hard work of story can be avoided by optioning a literary work and simply shifting it into a screenplay. This is almost never the case."

Now that the devil McKee has been exorcised, the increasing trend of adapting screenplays from books in Canadian filmmaking follows closely on the heels of that other prevalent trend: blending the job of writer and director, although not necessarily in a cause-and-effect manner. Three filmmakers—first-time feature director, Jacob Tierney; veteran director, but first-time writing an adaptation, Kari Skogland; and the prolific award-winning Sturla Gunnarsson—are much more than a conceit.

Not all adaptations are created equal and the elements involved create unique intellectual challenges. Is the author alive for reference or dead with just his or her reputation looming over the screenwriter's shoulder? Is the intimidation factor higher if the subject of the adaptation material is fact or fiction? One factor does appear to apply in all cases, and that is the sense of responsibility to the original material. This concept—which vacillates back and forth between being an honour and a burden—never goes away for a minute. Once into it, adaptation is a process that forms like a construct in the screenwriter's head—the original picture, the roughed-out paradigm, the transfer, the glitches, the guilt, and the end result.

Jacob Tierney, coming into his directorial debut from a career as an actor, is the writer/director of the recently completed

Twist, which he adapted from Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist*. It's a stone-cold classic. Dickens is long gone, and the work has been performed in musical form in most high schools across the continent. So where's the edge? Tierney twisted the *Twist*, updating his pickpockets to male prostitutes, setting the story in this century and arranging for the character of Bill Sykes to keep the boys in line by using sweet Nancy to distribute the heroin to feed their addictions. Minor adjustments.

Tierney worked from a cultural *Zeitgeist* inspiration of the novel respecting the monumentality of it, but he still felt the freedom to flip the story upside down and make Dodge—in his version, Dodge—the lead. "I did it by using a very basic outline, and by that I mean the musical," explains Tierney. "Structurally it was much more concise, more to the point. What I wanted to do was take the things that everyone remembers about *Oliver Twist* because it's so entrenched in our common memory." Tierney treated this "common memory" like a pop-culture mythology and reformatted it to "a real, very dirty, very messy view of life. I went back to the text every once in a while, largely taking characters out of original context and thinking about the way they weren't talked about, what wasn't discussed in the book. I changed protagonists, and instead of telling it from Oliver's point of view, I tell it from Dodge's."

Admittedly, Tierney took Dickens where he might have gone had he lived in 2003. But *Oliver Twist* was written in 1837 and could only go as far as it did in dealing with the life of the lower classes, which was still outrageous and confrontational enough for its time. "I didn't stick very strictly to the text and the dialogue. It ain't Dickens. No 'Please Sir, may I have some more.' I wouldn't use that line in this version unless we were doing a very black comedy."

Director Kari Skogland has just completed writing her new screenplay for Alliance Atlantis, which is an adaptation of Margaret Laurence's Canadian classic *The Stone Angel*. This adaptation will be a first for Skogland, who recently directed *Liberty Stands Still*, starring Wesley Snipes, Linda Fiorentino and Oliver Platt, based on her own screenplay. *The Stone Angel* has been Skogland's long-time passion, which is the gracious way of saying she has been carrying the book with her since the age of 12. "Reading this was the first time I awakened to the idea of aging and what it meant. The idea that a life had been led and a brain had been cooking inside a person was a very defining experience for me."

The adaptation process took Skogland six months to complete. *The Stone Angel* is a compelling journey seen through the eyes of a woman nearing the end of her life. At 90, Hagar Shipley speaks of the perils of growing old and reflects with bitterness, humour and a painful awareness of her frailties on the life she has led. For Skogland, the challenge was two part. First, to take what is effectively a voice-over narrative and make it visually arresting for a film, and secondly to deal with a story written in the 1960s, which has flashbacks, and make it vital enough for an audience in 2003.

"The toughest thing is serving the author," she says, "as well as what you believe to be the intent of the book, and serving drama. This story is a dialogue in Hagar's head. I found my stride quickly because I tend to prefer characters to 'do' rather than 'say.' Via the characters and their interaction, we get what was going on in her head. The time element was something else. It's essential to keep the time shifts, because this is a woman coming to grips with her mortality. It's also a book that has been studied and interpreted by everybody. I have always wanted to adapt this book and funnily enough, I was not intimidated until Alliance said 'yes.' I'm taking on a literary genius, and she's not around to pick her brain."

A leading proponent of adapting original material to screen is director Sturla Gunnarsson. His filmography transverse the gamut of parameters: the 2002 feature *Rare Birds*, adapted by Ed Riche from his book of the same name; the television movie *Scorn* (2002), based on Lisa Hobbes Birnie's *Such a Good Boy*, adapted by Andrew Rai Berzins; the feature *Such a Long Journey* (1998) based on Rohinton Mistry's award-winning novel of the same name, adapted by Soonni Taraporevala; the television movie *The Diary of Evelyn Lau* (1993) adapted by Barry Stevens from Evelyn Lau's autobiographical book, *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid*; and his next project, *Beowulf*, based on the seventh-century epic poem.

"Some novels that have a big narrative or a multi-character sweep lend themselves to a miniseries instead of a broader

canvas, which you get with a feature film," Gunnarsson explains. "You have four or six hours to work with, and it lets you put a story on a much longer fuse and handle longer story lines. *Evelyn Lau* and *Scorn* are both non-fiction and the approach to those was very different for *Rare Birds* or *Such a Long Journey*. With non-fiction, the adaptation becomes the act of creating a narrative. In my mind, it's very much like the act of editing a documentary because in a doc you have all the facts, the characters and the events, but they are constructed through journalism. To turn that into a character-based narrative, you have to make a big choice to get inside the material and find the spine.

"In the case of a novel, like *Such a Long Journey* or *Rare Birds*, the author has already created the story and the universe. This calls for a distillation. In *Journey*, Mistry is an author who is a master of naturalism. All that he writes about is what the characters do and what they say, and you don't have to interpret that. What you have to do is say 'we have 400 pages of characters and a geopolitical context and too many elements.' It becomes a matter of choices about which storylines are peripheral. *Rare Birds* was a bred-in-the-bone Newfoundland piece. Newfoundland is not the subject of it; Dave, Phonse and Alice are, but Ed captures the dialect and the humour."

Gunnarsson's filmmaking background is in documentaries, which is where he learned to craft a narrative. "The documentary is a universe where characters are living, breathing people much more interesting than anything I could have cooked up out of my head," he explains. "In adaptation, it gives me a sense of security when swimming in waters I don't normally swim in."

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