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Courting Johanna: Adapting Alice Munro for the Stage

In this paper I will consider Alice Munro's story "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage," which was published in 2001 in a collection of the same name, in the form of its adaption as a play by Marcia Johnson. The play, *Courting Johanna*, premiered at the Blyth Theatre Festival in 2008 and was published the next year. In considering one of Munro's stories as a play, I will be joining many other critics in asking how Alice Munro achieves her particular affect, but I will be approaching the question from a transmedia perspective. By asking how this adaptation works on the stage, I will be asking questions about the nature of theatrical representation, the feminism fundamental to Munro's world view, and whether we can, perhaps paradoxically, understand Munro's story-writing genius by looking at it in the mirror of the theatre. In my case, I am able to draw on the experience of directing a student production of *Courting Johanna* at the University of Lethbridge in February 2014 - the perspective of personally bringing the play from page to stage.

Alice Munro's stories have inspired a select number of Canadian film and television adaptations, most famously the 2006 film *Away From Her*, which won director Sarah Polley a Genie Award and an Oscar nomination for her adapted screenplay. The short story cycle *Lives of Girls and Women* was adapted for CBC television in 1994, and "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" premiered at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival as *Hateship Loveship*, but has not yet had theatrical release. For theatre, Toronto's Alumnae Theatre produced "The Progress of Love" in February of 1999; adaptor and director Guillaume Bernardi won that theatre's Professional Director's Award.ⁱ Also for Alumnae, academics Frances Halpenny and Helen Dunlop adapted *Lives of Girls and Women* for a reading in March 1983.ⁱⁱ

Courting Johanna

While “fidelity criticism” is largely dismissed in contemporary adaptation studies (Atkinson et al 2011: xv), Marcia Johnson has been, for the most part, highly faithful to the story in her stage version. *Courting Johanna* is one of three pieces of literature Johnson has adapted for theatre, although she has also adapted her own work from radio to stage plays and back.ⁱⁱⁱ She was working at Blyth as a playwright in residence when she met Munro at a public event. In the course of a conversation about what Johnson liked about each of Munro’s stories in her most recent collection and how they could work as plays, Munro offered “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” for adaptation. The generous offer was both unprecedented and unexpected; according to Johnson, Blyth’s artistic directors had been asking for permission to adapt an Alice Munro story “for thirty years” (2014: Public Talk). In her first draft, Johnson added extra characters, including Judith and Rosie, the two women mentioned in the story as being in love with Ken (Munro 2001: 45), and also a drinking buddy for Ken. Eventually, Johnson realized that “a short story should be a short play,” (2014: Public Talk) and she chose to follow the chronology and make no additions (2009: 5). Theorist John Bryant uses the term “fluid text” to talk about any work that exists in multiple versions, meaning the story and the play would both constitute the work in its totality (2013:48). The premiere production at the Blyth Festival, the second production in Lethbridge, and any subsequent productions, are part of the total text, as will be the film version when it is released.

It is not surprising that other writers have wanted to use Munro’s words. When Munro won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013, many of her greatest fans were other writers. Irish fiction writer Anne Enright remarked :

Short stories do not make any grandiose claims about truth and society. Munro’s work has always posed a larger question about reputation itself; about how we break and remake the literary canon. That question was triumphantly answered by the Nobel Prize. If her life’s work proves anything, it is that the whole idea of ‘importance’ means very little. Her stories do not ask for our praise, but for our attention (qtd. in Berkowitz 2013:3).

Enright echoes a claim often made about Munro's stories, that they are deceptively quiet and quietly deceptive. As Cathleen Schine writes in her review of Munro's collection *Dear Life*, "There are dramatic events [. . .] but the stories do not often revolve around them. This is one of the many, many delights of an Alice Munro story – the way she makes the ordinary jump out, like a lithe, muscular, startled cat, and the way she lets the extraordinary quietly take its place in line, hands folded, head down" (2013: 24).

Schine attempts to itemize some of Munro's common techniques and qualities, trying to unlock the secret of how she writes. Schine observes, for example, that the stories "tend to be geographically concentrated, often based in a small town in Huron County, Ontario" but that they can also cover a vast expanse of time, sometimes in a single sentence (2013:24). "Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage" adheres to these conventions of time and place, and Marcia Johnson's play version retains the shifting time frame. The play begins with a Prologue which, in our University production, we set in the fall of 1955. The Prologue introduces us to our protagonist, Johanna Parry, and to the small Ontario town where she works as a housekeeper, but it also reveals that Johanna is about to embark on a train journey across the country to an even smaller town in Saskatchewan. Act One then transports us back one year and introduces us to Johanna's antagonists, two teenage girls who decide to play a trick on her. Sabitha is the granddaughter of Mr. McCauley, the man Johanna works for. Sabitha's mother is dead and her father, Ken Boudreau, is out west, looking for work. Sabitha writes a letter to her father and gives it to Johanna to address before it is mailed. Sabitha's best friend Edith notices the envelope is unusually thick, steams it open, and reveals that Johanna has also written to Ken Boudreau, thanking him for the "nice things" (Johnson 2009: 29) he had written about her in his letter to Sabitha, and for bringing her along when he took Sabitha and Edith to the Western Fair the previous summer. From this seed, Edith hatches a plan to invent a correspondence, writing fake letters to Johanna supposedly from Ken, and making Johanna believe that Ken is in love with her. Act One includes a series of scenes between the two teenage girls, interspersed with scenes of Johanna writing her letters and reading the ones she believes to be from Ken. Act One concludes at the point where the Prologue left off, with Johanna getting on the train to go west to Ken. As Schine points out, "Many of Munro's stories [. . .] involve trains, befitting a writer who writes so often of escape, of unforeseen encounters, and of alienation." Characters on trains are compartmentalized from their real life and "on the way to the future" (2013: 25). We emphasized

this train motif in the production by using alley staging, with the audience on both sides of a runway – or train track – configuration. The entire black box theatre was surrounded by a wide ring of paper that served as both prairie horizon line and projection screen, and at the point where Johanna is leaving for Saskatchewan, a moving train was projected running around the circumference of the theatre. Schine observes that Munro’s stories have “great internal locomotion” and a sense that “the story rolls forward”(2013: 25), explicitly captured in production by the relentless movement of the train into Johanna’s future. Vincent Murphy advises that adapting from page to stage relies on “finding a stageable image – a visual representation that grounds the theme in the space and manifests a key metaphor in a playable way onstage” (2013: 9). For our production, the train journey was a key image.

Of course, it is the uncertainty of what Johanna will find in Saskatchewan at the end of her journey that gives the story its tension. Schine writes of Munro that, “she makes us aware of the variable, the infinite variations life can throw at themes and landscapes and towns and girls and women and men and boys, the chance that propels every story” (2013: 24). She concludes that, “it is the inevitability of chance that propels so many of Munro’s stories” (Schine 2013:25). Act Two takes this tension, uncertainty, and chance even further. When Johanna finds him in an abandoned hotel in Gdynia, Saskatchewan, Ken is delirious with fever and Johanna must nurse him back to health and lucidity over a period of several days. When he comes to his senses, Ken barely remembers meeting his father-in-law’s housekeeper, but he recognizes in Johanna a hard-working and financially solvent woman – in fact, his best and only prospect for a way out of debt and dissoluteness. The Epilogue offers a surprising ending. A couple of years have passed and Edith and Sabitha are reunited at Mr. McCauley’s funeral. Their conversation reveals that Ken and Johanna are married and have a baby, named Omar, and that they now live in Salmon Arm, British Columbia. So Johanna’s journey has continued and she is now even farther, geographically and personally, from the lonely life of servitude she knew in Ontario.

Schine writes of Munro that, “She does not suggest that everything will turn out well, just that it will turn, and in ways we can’t predict. But there is also an appreciation, an affection almost, for the random twists of life’s narrative” (2013: 26). In “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage,” Munro surprises and delights her reader by allowing the story to turn out well, giving it, as Schine observes, almost a quality of fable, myth, or fairy tale, “of a story told

out loud” (2013: 26). This is an interesting observation, given that the story was made into a play – that in theatrical form it became a story “told out loud.” Keeping this adaptation in mind, it is even more interesting that Schine remarks on how certain elements are repeated and therefore recognizable between Munro stories: “She seems to be embarked on a journey of constant adaptation, as if she were her own species. It’s one of the qualities that give her work an almost epic quality” (2013: 26). Janice Kulyk Keefer describes the story as “the daring refraction of a fairy tale,” and remarks that “It is the province of serendipity – ‘the whole twist of consequence’” (2008: xv). In an interview, Munro suggests, “I think you still hear lots of stories that people tell which are maybe supposed to illustrate some strangeness about life” (qtd. in Awano 2013: 182). Sabitha plays an elaborate variation on “He loves me, he loves me not” based on the fatalistic belief that the number of letters in one’s name has something to do with who one will marry. Edith translates a poem from the Latin which warns us: “You must not ask, it is forbidden for us to know, what fate has in store for me or for you” (Johnson 2009: 63). The story, and the play, hinge on this concept of fate being unknown and uncontrollable: perhaps Edith’s joke, which put her in the position of playing Fate, seals her own future as surely as it delivers Johanna to hers.

Lives of girls and women

Schine points out that Munro’s stories are often set in a time before feminism, and describes what she calls “the dismay at a woman’s ambition” (2013: 26). In this story, all of the female characters embody this ambivalence towards their gender in intriguing ways. Even the titles are ironic: “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” is the name of the silly game that Sabitha plays to determine if a boy likes her. Much like “Courting Johanna,” it suggests a kind of traditional and innocent romance entirely at odds with the actual plot. The weary waitress that appears in one quick, early scene suggests the typical job prospects for women, as does Milady, the divorced owner of her own dress shop who finds herself unappreciated and shunned in this parochial, “cliquey” town. Sabitha is pretty, vain, not very bright, and by the end of the story she is well on her way to a fate worryingly similar to her mother’s, the promiscuous drug addict, Marcelle, who died when Sabitha was eleven. As a working class immigrant of about thirty, with little education, no family, and a plain and sturdy appearance, Johanna has literally no prospects of romantic love in her life. A trick, meant to be cruel, spurs her to take a chance and actually

delivers her a handsome husband and a baby. Johnson comments on this explicitly in the final scene between Edith and Sabitha:

Edith: You know, Sabitha, on the list of all the things I plan to achieve in my life, there's no mention of being responsible for someone named Omar.

Sabitha: Be cool. It's a happy ending! . . . (Johnson 2008: 63).

Edith's line also points to her pivotal, and potentially disappointing, position in the story. From the earliest scenes we understand that Edith is smart, academically gifted, and creative, if devious and somewhat amoral. When she types a letter in the voice of Ken Boudreau, Sabitha is astonished: "It's just like if he wrote it. How did you do that?" (Johnson 2009: 37). We might easily suppose that Edith is a version of the teenage Alice Munro, who grew up in the same time and place as her fictional creation. When Sabitha suggests to Edith she could be a secretary she retorts "Bite your tongue" (Johnson 2009: 35) and imagines instead a life as a "Nobel Prize winner" or "Artist" (Johnson 2009: 33). But at the end of the play, Edith has still not heard if she has been accepted to the University of Toronto, she is still stuck in small town Ontario. Alistair MacLeod has "praised [Munro's] empathy, especially for 'super-smart' women who grow up in small towns, in ordinary circumstances, with few choices for a future, and yet vibrate with life" (qtd in Feniak 2014: 14). We are reminded that this is the 1950s and that, regardless of how special she may believe herself to be (Munro 2001: 25), Edith's prospects will be circumscribed by her gender, just as Munro's early work was dismissed and overlooked as "too female."^{iv} In her introduction to the story collection, Janice Kulyk Keefer sums it up:

Johanna, that austere, astoundingly capable, direly lonely fool for love, is given her heart's desire through the agency of one of Cupid's unlikeliest agents, the adolescent Edith. Precocious, possessed of a discriminating imagination, and, we feel, doomed to discover that her desired 'real' self will never eclipse her present, compromised identity (2008: xv).

W.R. Martin has written that "Alice Munro's insights, at once penetrating and sympathetic, are typically conveyed in paradoxes and parallels [. . .] a complex counterpointing of opposed truths in a memorable model of life and reality" (1987: 1). He also observes that often, in Munro's stories, "there is an imaginative young girl as a first-person narrator. Not only is she likely to

find herself in the middle, having to choose between opposed interest, forces, demands and loyalties, but it is the young who are most absorbed by discoveries, epiphanies, and who try hardest to catch new and often disturbing experiences in some sort of net of words” (Martin 1987: 199). Martin suggests that this is the same effort that Munro is making with her writing.

As Ajay Heble points out, the quality of chance and other possibilities is signaled by textual devices in many of Munro’s stories, where characters comment on their own or others’ stories *as* stories, or allude to the act of writing (1994: 13). In *Courting Johanna*, we see the creation of a correspondence as we watch Edith type letters “from” Ken to Johanna and we see Johanna writing in response. We also hear Edith and Johanna, and at one point Sabitha, briefly, read these letters out loud. Whether reading the short story or, I would argue, even more explicitly when we see the action performed on stage, we are aware of the construction of a fictional narrative. We are heartbreakingly aware that Johanna believes the narrative to be true, and as spectators we are tense with apprehension that she will soon find out she has been deceived and her false reality will be shattered. But then, Johanna somehow makes the false narrative into the truth. Heble argues that, “By foregrounding writing and making us aware of a writer’s ‘tricks’ and ‘effects’ – the words appear strikingly often in her stories – Munro seems to be insisting on the autonomy of the text” (1994: 13). But he goes on to point out that there is also an outward movement, a desire to make the material reality of “the real world” conform to her vision of it: “This move, unstated but always implicit in her fiction, bespeaks a desire, on Munro’s part, to reclaim the realm of reality precisely by demonstrating the extent to which it is textual – something to be interpreted and deciphered” (Heble 1994: 14). We tell stories about our lives to make them bearable, to make sense of them (Heble 1994: 185). Johanna tells her life story in a letter to Ken, and then proceeds to write herself a new life. At the end of the play, Edith struggles to make sense of this new narrative. She cannot understand why the story did not have a more, to her mind, logical ending:

EDITH: I kept waiting to. . . well . . . get caught. And then, nothing. Nothing happened and I couldn’t understand why.

SABITHA: Because nothing ever happens here.

EDITH: It all seems sort of. . . fantastical. Don’t you think?

SABITHA: I guess.

EDITH: Fantastical and dull, all at the same time (Johnson 2009: 62).

She also describes it as “a joke of some kind. Some. . . inept joke” (Johnson 2009: 62) and even as “a warning” (Johnson 2009: 63). For Edith, reality has broken the rules of fiction: a crime must be punished, a sad story should not turn out happily, a denigrated minor character like Johanna should not win – at least partly because it suggests that Edith, brilliant star of her own life narrative, might not win. Things might not turn out the way they are supposed to. Heble suggests that it is these two qualities – the awareness of other potential meanings and possibilities, and the awareness of the textual quality of reality – that gives Munro’s stories their particular sense of distance and affect (1994: 15).

Edith and Johanna form a strange and unacknowledged pair in the story. Edith’s conservative sexuality is closer to that of the older Johanna than to her peer, Sabitha, and Edith is easily able to take Sabitha’s sexually explicit suggestions for a love letter and translate them into tender expressions of romantic longing that appeal to Johanna. In the final scene of Act One, Sabitha has returned home after three weeks of vacation at a cottage with her older cousins. She imagines herself to be more worldly and experienced and tries to shock Edith with stories she has heard. Failing to interest Edith with these exploits, Sabitha starts to rub herself with a cushion, which does finally elicit Edith’s response: she demands Sabitha stop and then grabs the pillow away from her, saying “You could get into trouble doing that. My mother told me!” (Johnson 2009: 45). Clearly, Edith naively believes that masturbation can lead to dire consequences (Munro 2001: 33). In an attempt to both appease and tease Edith, Sabitha suggests lines for their next letter from Ken to Johanna. Her suggestion of “Your last letter filled me with rap-ture. . .” is countered by Edith’s, “Your last letter made me so happy to think I did have a true friend in the world, which is you” (Johnson 2009: 45). Edith goes on to suggest another sentence that includes the word “gregarious.” Sabitha does not know what the word means and believes that neither will Johanna, but Edith insists, “*She* will” (Johnson 2009: 46), implying that Edith thinks Johanna is smarter and more literate than Sabitha and even demonstrating a hint of respect for the older woman. Finally, Sabitha’s crass suggestion, “Reading it in bed with your nightgown on and thinking how I would crush you in my arms and I would suck your titties” (Johnson 2009: 46) becomes in Edith’s interpretation, “It would be wonderful if you were reading it in bed with your nightgown on and thinking how I would like to crush you in my arms” (Johnson 2009: 47).

Sabitha's adolescent pornographic imaginings become - for Edith and for Johanna – gently erotic and sweet. In a story where Edith is Johanna's tormentor, paradoxically it is Edith's skillfully written love letters that spur Johanna to love. In the guise of Ken, Edith has courted Johanna.

Realism

Heble has suggested that Munro's work is generally described as realism largely because of her attention to detail: "By listing trivial details, Munro grounds the reader in a surface reality, in a safe, recognizable and knowable world which presents itself as real and true" (1994: 4). In contrast, Heble describes Munro's technique as "paradigmatic discourse" (1994:5), meaning the potential for one thing to have been something else, "the way things *might have been* as distinct from the way things necessarily are" (1994: 5). The specific and mundane detail of surface realism suggests its opposite, the things that might have been there instead, suggesting "the unresolvable gap between all writing and the reality which that writing attempts to re-present" (1994: 5). Interestingly, Heble compares writing to acting: "Any attempt at representation, whether it be by fictionalizing or through acting, is inevitably part of a larger endeavour to master the world, to reduce life to a rational set of codes or systems" (1994: 6). In a way then, what Heble is getting at is something like subtext - what one sees or reads about, whether an object or a person's behavior, suggests some other potentiality (1994: 7). For example, Edith might not have discovered the letter Johanna slipped in with Sabitha's. The mundane object – a thick envelope, sealed and addressed but not yet mailed – is a potent surface detail because it turns the plot. On stage, the envelope, produced from the pocket of Sabitha's skirt and tossed carelessly on the kitchen table, is at once a period-specific detail (almost foreign to us in our era of email and texting) and an object of symbolic weight.

In our set design, the furniture that Ken believes belongs to him, and which Johanna brings on the train, takes on this kind of significance as well. Piled up to form a wall at one end of the set, the antique furniture took on extra thematic power. Mr. McCauley is more incensed by the fact that Johanna has "stolen" his furniture than by her departure; Ken has borrowed money from Mr. McCauley using the furniture as collateral to a level of debt far greater than it is worth; in the story (Munro 2001: 16), Johanna has lovingly polished and cared for this furniture, stored in a barn, during the year she has been carrying on the false correspondence with Ken, and she brings it to him as a way for them to begin a life together and furnish a new home. In the theatre,

the furniture was ever-present, almost threatening to collapse under the weight of its own importance and tumble onto the actors below. As Heble asserts, the furniture suggests the possibility that so many other things might have happened, but did not.

Christine Geraghty says that “an adaptation necessarily relies on and cites a widespread web of influences” (qtd in Bruhn et al 2013: 8). For example, in our production of *Courting Johanna* we quoted a wide variety of historical “references that supported the main representation” such as the music, costumes, and set dressing. The designer, David Barrus, drew on donations by community members and was able to costume the cast in authentic period clothing. Barrus remarked that Canadians in the 1950s would still have clothing from the previous decade because they tended to take better care of and keep their clothing longer than we do in our age of disposable, fast fashion. This is even referenced in the play when Mr. McCauley talks to the shoe repairman about resoling a pair of boots he bought in London on his honeymoon (Johnson 2009: 23). Therefore, Mr. McCauley was costumed in a handsome suit, hat, and overcoat from the 1940s. Johanna has likely made all of her own clothing, and this experience is reflected when she expresses shock at the cost of a store-bought dress she purchases to get married in (Johnson 2009: 16). The entire scene in the dress shop is a good example of how the play is able to convey information to an audience visually. The shop keeper, Milady, at first puts Johanna into a green suit with a velvet collar and little buttons. Johanna looks awkward and embarrassed and, interestingly, this prompts Milady to become kinder, to tell Johanna more about her own loneliness, and to find a much more suitable and flattering dress. Onstage, of course, the clothing tells its own story, visually – we can see without being told that one dress is better than the other. On the other hand, the script presents media specific, material challenges, for the costume shop that must find or build a dress to match the description in the lines, and for the actor who must put on and take off costumes onstage in a short amount of time. The scene in the dress shop is also significant because Johanna reveals – to Milady’s surprise and to her own - that she is buying a wedding dress. Murphy tells us that, “One of the clearest examples of spoken language as a character’s action is a vow. When someone commits with certainty to a significant course of action that he or she has been considering, it is the utterance of that fact that makes it real and communicates it both to any other characters onstage and to the audience. Sometime it is news to the character as well” (2013: 106). Johanna’s line is: “It’ll likely be what I get married

in” and the stage direction tells us: “Johanna is surprised at that information coming out of her mouth” (Johnson 2009: 17).

Adapting to theatre

The adaptation of a work from the page to the stage is an act of remediation, of taking the content from one media and translating it to another. As David Bolter and Richard Grusin remind us, all media are at one level a play of signs, and while “each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience,” ultimately each medium reminds us of its own specificity and “hypermediacy” (1999: 19). Atkinson points out that the process is one of both adapting from and adapting to (2011: xvii). Yet another way of thinking about it is to consider that, to adapt is to “make suitable” (Hutcheon 2013:7). Theatre is particularly interesting in this regard, in its unique mix of spatial and temporal immediacy and immersion with a high degree of hypermediacy, or awareness of the medium itself. We are in the same space as the actors/characters, who are showing us the story in real, uninterrupted time that we cannot pause or re-read as we could with a story or a film. On the other hand, theatre (especially theatre that does not aim at conventional realism) is undeniably artificial and we are reminded continually that what we are watching is not real, that we are being told a story that has been constructed to fulfill the medium specificity of theatre, and that we are participating in an art form. Theorists argue that, in order for the audience to really experience the adaptation as such, it needs in some overt way to acknowledge its source material in its very structure. An adaptation can also be thought of as “an announced retelling” (Bryant 2013: 48). Copyright stipulations for *Courting Johanna*, for example, ensure that any use of that title on a poster, program, or any other form of advertisement, will be accompanied by the statement: “Based on the short story ‘Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage’ by Alice Munro” (Johnson 2009: 7). It is unlikely any viewer of the play will be unaware that it is an adaptation.

But real interplay between the two happens, if at all, only for the reader or viewer who knows both versions and can compare them. Linda Hutcheon writes that “If we know the adapted work, there will be a constant oscillation between it and the new adaptation we are experiencing; if we do not, we will not experience the work *as an adaptation*” (2013: xvii). Taking into account the reception experience of an audience member means considering not only their horizon of expectation based on prior knowledge of the source material (Hutcheon 2013: 121),

but possibly knowledge of other work by either the source or adapting authors, and further, knowledge about the venue and the company producing the play. In the case of *Courting Johanna*, audience members may not be aware of the specific story it is based on, but they may know other stories by Munro, or they may only be aware of her reputation and remember things they have heard or read about her. They may have a preconception of what a Munro story will be like without ever having actually read one. John Bryant also reminds us that writing is “creativity as both an individual and social process involving moments of solitary inspiration but also collaboration with readers” (2013:48). For example, we might imagine Munro writing in response to her readers’ and critics’ reactions to her previous work, to what has become expected of a “Munro story,” and also to her own social preoccupations about, for example, prospects for women in small town Ontario in the 1950s.

In fact, we may read or see the original after the adaptation, “thereby challenging the authority of any notion of priority. Multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically” (Hutcheon 2013: xv). Viewers that enjoyed the play might well seek out the story. Similarly, Hutcheon supposes actors might “seek background and inspiration from the adapted text” (2013: 81), and in our production that was made explicit to their preparation. As director, I asked each actor to write a profile of their character based on reading the script, and then to read the story and write another profile, this time making use of the additional information the story could provide. In most cases, the story provided more background and more clues about motivation and values. For example, in the play, Ken has several lines that indicate he values his friends but that they sometimes take advantage of him. In a monologue in which he explains how he came to be in possession of the broken-down hotel he reveals: “I tell people that I won this place in a poker game. Women like the sound of that. The thing is, I took it in payment of a debt. I just can’t seem to say no to a friend. Gets me into trouble sometimes” (Johnson 2009: 56). As we have seen, Johnson initially tried to convey this aspect of Ken’s life by creating a drinking buddy and girlfriends for him, but eventually chose to create a monologue in order to give some sense of his social burdens. In the story, Munro writes about Ken losing jobs more than once because of standing up for friends or doing them favours (2001: 43). This information allows the actor to play Ken more sympathetically, understanding that loyalty is very important to him even when it is not in his own best interest.

Hutcheon points out that “characters are crucial to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of both narrative and performance texts because they engage the receivers’ imaginations through [. . .] recognition, alignment, and allegiance” (2013: 11). Having the actor playing Johanna speak directly to the audience as she reads and writes her letters creates a sense of identification with her point of view, as we hear the confessional and autobiographical content of the letters she has composed. We literally hear Johanna’s inner voice and witness her experience of reading a love letter for the first time in her life. As Hutcheon acknowledges, “no one mode is inherently good at doing one thing and not another; but each has at its disposal different means of expression – media and genres – and so can aim at and achieve certain things better than others” (2013: 24). The challenge is to determine “how different media can deal with elements like point of view, interiority/exteriority, time, irony, ambiguity, metaphors and symbols, and silences and absences” (Hutcheon 2013: xvii).

Conclusion

Anne Gjelsvik argues that “we tend to react differently towards different art forms due to a combination of medium characteristics and conventions” (2013: 247). The differences in how we feel when we read and when we watch something need to be taken into account (Gjelsvik 2013: 259). A good example from *Courting Johanna* is the eventual interaction between Johanna and Ken when she finds him, sick, delirious, and alone, in his abandoned hotel in Gdynia. As the actor playing Johanna tenderly undresses and bathes the actor playing Ken onstage, the potential for romance and eroticism is evident; far more than when reading the words on the page, the spectator can experience Johanna’s reaction to touching the body of an attractive young man, quite possibly for the first time. The casting, blocking, music, and lighting choices, all combine for a much different phenomenological experience for the spectator in close proximity in an intimate setting. All of the directing and designing choices come from the foundation of Johanna’s experience of the world – each object is the object as she sees and experiences it.

Finally, the play allows Edith and Johanna to confront one another in a way the story does not, and our production allowed them to exist in the same moment in time and space. Edith, standing in the funeral parlour in Ontario, and Johanna, in a rocking chair in her home in Salmon Arm, are able to gaze at one another across the theatrical space. Johanna smiles broadly for the first time in the performance; the moment is enhanced emotionally by a Scottish fiddle tune that

has been a recurring motif for Johanna, and by another projection, an animated pen writing the words of Johanna's letters across the ring encircling the theatre. The play allows us as an audience to witness Edith acknowledging that Johanna has won. Furthermore, *Courting Johanna* allows the viewer to consider Johanna's past, present, and future as a whole because they all take place before us in the same space. The ending allows Edith and Johanna to look at each other across the miles and exist in different places, yet the same place, simultaneously. The very spatial limitation of the theatre provides an emotional effect and a satisfying climax that the story does not provide. Munro's story

deals with oppositions, contraries, tensions, inconsistencies, and then sometimes failures, but more often resolutions, implied or achieved; in literary terms the oppositions produce ironies and paradoxes, but also sometimes moments of vision in which the oppositions are reconciled or are seen as parallel [. . .] the sort of consummation in which the oppositions are transcended and all life becomes at once both familiar and mysterious... (Martin 1987: 13).

I conclude that, by its media specificity – its very nature – theatre can assist a story like this one by Alice Munro to reveal its own nature.

ⁱ Bernardi explains: "It was not quite an adaptation, it was a performance of the short-story. At that point, I believe Munro was not willing to have a work adapted in any way and I could do it only because I assured her that her text would be performed as it was. I was lucky because a literary agent was a member of the Alumnae Theatre at that time: she handled the negotiations with Munro's agent. The piece was 80minutes long. There were four performers (three women, one man) who acted the whole text at times as narrators, at times as characters. It really was a dance theatre piece. The movement was very abstract and they were all of them wearing 'abstract' costumes, with no reference to the rural community mentioned in the short-story" (email 19 May 2013).

ⁱⁱ My thanks to Robin Whittaker for this information.

ⁱⁱⁱ The other two are *The Heaven Shop* by Deborah Ellis which became *Binti's Journey*, and Ursula K. LeGuin's *Paradises Lost*, which became an opera of the same name. Johnson's original plays *Say Gingerale* and *Perfect on Paper* have been both radio and stage plays.

^{iv} Even Munro's choice to work in the genre of the short story can be attributed to her gendered workday. In an interview with Lisa Dickler Awano in 2013, Munro explained: "I could take off housekeeping and childrearing for a certain amount of time but never for the amount you need to write a novel" (181).

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