

The Chicago Tribune

Theater Loop

January 4, 2009

Why 'Doubt' and 'Frost/Nixon' work better as plays

As movie adaptations of stage plays go, the recently released "Frost/Nixon" and "Doubt" are among the best of recent vintage, not least because the writers of the sourcing play also penned the screen versions. Both contain distinguished performances that deserve to figure in the Academy Awards nominations. Both have brought powerful contemporary dramas to a much wider audience.

But "Frost/Nixon" and "Doubt" are also, in very different ways, revelatory examples of how certain themes, emotions and truths simply cannot be fully and effectively transferred from stage to screen.

Theater just does some things better (and, admittedly, many things worse). These plays worked much better as plays, bravura acting and emotionally arresting cinematography notwithstanding. In fact, I'd argue that their central themes work only as plays.

Here's why. And if you've yet to see either work, watch out for spoilers below.

In "Frost/Nixon," which appeared on Broadway in 2007, the writer Peter Morgan has both a story to tell and an argument to make.

His story is, of course, the backstory of the interviews given by Richard Nixon to the British talk-show host David Frost, wherein the former president came as close to the public confrontation of his own guilt as at any moment before or after. The tale of the chase—life-changing for all parties involved—is engrossing on either stage or screen.

But Morgan's argument is a different matter. In essence, Morgan is saying that Frost's set of 1977 interviews were at once the beginning and the ultimate manifestation of a new confluence of politics and media-powered celebrity. Frost, a showbiz creature, used his arsenal of weapons to vanquish Nixon, anything but a show-biz creature. Frost won not because he was smarter than Nixon (he was not), but because Nixon was woefully ill-prepared for the new world order of which Frost was a charter member.

Morgan boils all this down to a close-up. On Broadway, the actor Frank Langhella's face suddenly appeared, sweating and guilty, on a massive video screen above the actual actors. It was a surprisingly revelatory moment. Oh my gosh!, one thought to oneself, none of the actual discourse of Watergate, none of the inquiries or proceedings, had the requisite visceral appeal for a public increasingly entranced with TV.

In that final moment, you saw a metaphor for every time you've seen a small screen simplify, bastardize, remove complexity, shaft nuance and outright lie. Nixon was felled by a close-up. And in the theater it hits you like a tornado. It was as if you saw both the actual story, played by real humans, and the way it played to the masses, who cared only about a single shot of a camera. And you could bob your head up and down

from one to the other.

None of that is possible in a movie theater because you've been looking at close-ups all night.

Morgan's story survives intact—indeed, it is told with more flourish and zest—but his argument falls apart. The switch from one screen to another doesn't pack any punch. There is no revelation of the power of television. There is no contrast between live truth and mediated fantasy. It just doesn't work.

Now you could argue that a more visually sophisticated director than Ron Howard would have better finessed that moment. No doubt. But it would have been no substitute for what happened in the theater.

John Patrick Shanley's "Doubt" is a very different issue. Here, the story is of a nun and school principal who suspects that the priest in her parish is sexually abusing at least one young man in her school. She has no hard evidence for this belief and the play, which appeared on Broadway in 2005, is a meditation on the line between a feeling of certainty and certainty itself; the need to protect the victim and respecting the rights of the accused; and the failings of a patriarchal racist society that put these people in these positions.

Neither the play nor the film reveal whether or not the priest actually did what the nun suspects him of doing. That is the whole point of the drama. But once again, it works only in the theater.

The stage version of "Doubt" has only four characters. Doug Hughes' Broadway production was lean in every way—language, setting, metaphor and staging. In that spare, sparse theatrical world (a style that the late Harold Pinter exploited so adroitly), the lack of the central information didn't come off so much as an omission as an exquisitely effective way of entrusting the audience with an ambiguity that was the very heart of the play. We never saw the kid at the center of the accusations. And that made a complicated kind of sense—it heightened his importance and ensured no young boy was being put through such a trial eight times a week.

Theater thrives on mystery and incomplete information and the performances of the primal Cherry Jones and the shrewd Brian F. O' Byrne were suffused with both simplicity and endless complexity. Of course we didn't know what really happened. We couldn't know. Theater hides as well as reveals. It's inherent to the form.

But in the movie, the story is expanded. Shanley, who directed his own play, can't be faulted for that. It makes sense that we see the church, the school, the garden, the streets, of the Bronx and, indeed, the kid himself. The movie version of "Doubt," which stars Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman, surely provides a much fuller and more evocative sense of the parish and the social milieu in which Shanley sets his drama.

Once again, the story is enhanced. But not the argument.

In the movie theater, the omission of a crucial piece of information doesn't so much

play as the film's raison d'etre but as something weirdly out of sync.

If we're seeing the kid at the end of a potential encounter with the priest, why aren't we seeing what went on before? If we now know so much more about this child, why don't the characters just go up and talk to him? It doesn't make any sense to us in the movie, but in the play these same questions somehow don't come up.

The film takes the tiny universe of "Doubt" and makes it bigger, more realistic, more literal. And in doing so, it begs the question as to why it shouldn't just have gone all the way.

You could argue with foundation that the two central performances in "Doubt" are the best of the year and superior to the work of the role's originators. Certainly, the redoubtable Streep adds layer after layer of doubt, decision and thought to a character that Jones merely inhabited, eight times a week live, in person and on point.