

From Page to Stage: Theatrical Adaptations of King and the Politics of Presentation

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Abstract

Stephen King's horror stories, full of deep psychological and social understanding, have been artfully adapted for the screen. This paper examines the stage adaptations of both *Misery* and *Carrie* and the ways in which performance changes the meaning of the narrative. Centring on gender, trauma, and spectacle, this study utilises adaptation theory (Hutcheon), performance studies (Schechner), and feminist theory (Butler) to challenge the notion that these adaptations are replicates rather than reinventions. Theatre is asserted as a political arena where repression and identity are displayed onstage before an audience, giving way to new perspectives on evoking King's perennial concerns of fear, control, and cultural trauma.

Keywords: Adaptation theory, gender, trauma, Stephen King, performance studies, theatre and identity

Introduction

The best-selling American author Stephen King, who is best known for writing horror fiction that combines supernatural elements with psychological realism, has achieved both critical and popular success. Though the cinematic adaptations of his work are extensively analysed and critiqued, adaptations for theatre are relatively unexamined. The visceral nature of theatre, its live and embodied performance, allows King to be transformed through recontextualisation, using group dynamics, sound and set, rather than relying on the cutting-room effects of the cinema to evoke his recurring themes of fear, trauma, repression, identity, and the grotesque.

This paper examines two major theatrical adaptations, based on King's novels: *Misery* (1987) and *Carrie* (1974). Very different in plot and tone, both deal with subjects of imprisonment, mental anguish and suppressed fury. This study inquires how the shift from page to stage reshapes the narrative meanings in thematics and visual performances between these two genres and is also specific in terms of how stage adaptations translate trauma and gendered experience: Annie Wilkes's possessiveness turns to madness in *Misery*; Carrie White erupts from bullied adolescent to vengeful icon in *Carrie*, but through primarily performative choices that magnify or sublimate their emotional and symbolic resonances. The main argument of this paper is that the stage versions of *Misery* and *Carrie* don't just rehash King—they re-politicise him. Through embodiment, spectacle, and gendered performance, these adaptations reshape the story's meaning and emotional force. Through the performance of trauma and identity in the live space of theatre, these works provoke audiences to consider issues of power and control and resistance in ways that are only possible in a live performance.

Theoretical Framework

To critically explore how King's novels *Misery* and *Carrie* transform into theatrical events, this study is underpinned by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, composed of adaptation theory, performance studies theory, feminist theory and trauma theory. They provide us with important tools for reflecting on how and where meaning is reinvented in performance, specifically concerning the play of gender, trauma, and spectacle.

Earlier models of adaptation invested in the fidelity of the source text, while modern theorists claim that adaptation is a form of creative transformation. As Hutcheon (2006) puts it, "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (p. 7), so everything that is adapted speaks in its own voice and has its own targeted audience. Adaptations are products and processes—texts that both replicate and transform the source material. In *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema*, Cartmell (2012) claims:

Adaptations redistribute energies and intensities, provoke flows and displacements; the linguistic energy of literary writing turns into the audio visual kinetic performative energy of the adaptation, in an amorous exchange of textual fluids. (p. 13)

He adds that all adaptations are necessarily a critique of the source text and arise from the cultural and aesthetic politics of the adapter. In a live performance, the limitations of the art form, the absence of special effects, and the elements of spatial intimacy necessitate an alternative approach to King's dread-focused stories. The result is not just translation, but reimagination. Theatre's transience and immediacy make it a powerful medium to examine King's undercurrents of repression, violence, and psychological disintegration. Unlike cinema or literature, the theatre makes trauma visible through the body and presence, and this brings a different set of emotional and political considerations with it.

Performance theorists such as Schechner and Carlson help analyse how theatre works as representation and ritual. Performance, for Schechner (2006), is "Ritualised behaviour conditioned and/or permeated by play" (p. 52), liminal practices which test the borders between self and other, actual and imaginary. To him, theatrical performance is neither passive nor representational, but rather transformative; it reconstitutes meaning through bodily repetition and spatial configuration. Carlson (2001) introduces the idea of 'ghosting', referring to the way current performances are haunted by past impressions, cultural recollections or media images. This is particularly true of the stage versions of *Carrie* and *Misery*, which cannot help but stir up associations with prior film adaptations and viewer expectations. For example, any staging of *Carrie* is 'ghosted' by the 1976 film's iconic imagery, such as the blood-drenched prom dress, which haunts the audience's reception and expectation.

Judith Butler and her notion of gender performativity are useful when thinking through the theatrical representation of characters such as Carrie White and Annie Wilkes.

Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (1990, p. 33)

Butler claims that gender is not an essential identity but a repetitive performance, formed by social conventions and norms. Viewed in this light, Carrie's shift from obedient to avenging figure can be understood as a transgressive re-enactment of femininity—that is, the eruption of a stifled identity through spectacle.

Annie Wilkes in *Misery* exemplifies Creed's (1993) 'monstrous-feminine', twisting maternal care into coercion. Her identity is staged through

contradiction, where nurture becomes violence. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth's theory of trauma supports this analysis when she asserts that trauma is not wholly lived through in the scene of its inception, but reappears as a belated, involuntary repetition. The re-enactment or reiteration of a story or scene functions, in theatre, as a form of expression of traumatic memory. In 'Carrie', the prom scene serves as a ritual re-enactment of humiliation and vengeance and in 'Misery', whenever the play is staged, the protagonist's impotence and violation are re-enacted.

Case Study I: *Carrie*

King's first novel, *Carrie* (1974), revolves around Carrie White, a reclusive, ostracised teenager who is raised under the abusive and overbearing hand of her fanatically religious mother, Margaret White. An outcast at school, where she is the object of intense bullying, Carrie is tortured at home by her fundamentalist mother, who believes Carrie's telekinetic powers are a sign of the devil. The story ends in a terrible disaster on the night of the prom with the dehumanised and humiliated Carrie using the power of telekinesis to take revenge on everyone who had gone against her.

At heart, *Carrie* is a bildungsroman ransacked by trauma, in which the conventional coming-of-age issues like puberty, sexual awakening, and peer approval are spun through prisms of guilt, suppression and violence. Carrie's first menstruation, poised as it is between the reality of the female body and the fantastical horror of the supernatural, is one of body horror rendered in social commentary. The novel, then, is an indictment of institutionalised misogyny, religious primitivism, and the casual brutality of the herd, even as it suggests that Carrie's monstrosity is not inherent but a product of systemic oppression and alienation

The musical that received the most attention was 'Carrie: The Musical', which was first staged on Broadway in 1988 and was later revived Off Broadway in 2012. Considered a commercial failure earlier, it found its way back to success, providing ample material to look at how King's horrific story has managed to cross mediums and become a live musical. Sound and spectacle were key to creating the sense of the supernatural which marked the climax of *Carrie* on stage. The prom scene, the book's most famous sequence, is accomplished using lighting, fog machines,

and sudden sound effects that combine to create a stunning visual effect. Blood, the recurring symbol of both feminine shame and revenge in the novel, is largely faked with red lights or stylised fabric, rather than actual gore. "But the act of showing the ruined body is only half the story; the other half is the act of concealing, of producing a partial vision" (Pinedo, 1997, p. 51). The presentation is in part practical, but also aesthetic: an abstraction of trauma, rather than its reproduction.

Music, the emotional subtext of the story, gives form to Carrie's innermost feelings as well as her struggle with her mother. Other songs, like 'And Eve Was Weak', highlight Margaret White's mental and spiritual domination over her daughter, turning dialogue from the novel into dark, incantatory ritual. Without words, the songs also help in expressing grief, as well as advancing character. Carrie's solo songs, such as 'I Remember How Those Boys Could Dance', show her longing for a regular life as well as foreshadow how she will eventually lose control. Thus, music is an embodied passage for trauma.

Beyond music, movement itself dramatises Carrie's isolation and emotional turbulence, extending trauma into physical space. The choreography and blocking of the show also highlight the themes of her being a social outcast and her bursting emotions. Ensemble scenes tend to posit Carrie at the edges—separated in terms of physical space onstage or by lighting to emphasise her isolation. In the climactic prom sequence, choreography gives way to chaos, an analogy of the shattering of Carrie's psyche and heart. Movement is a language in which rage and alienation can be shown, permitting trauma to exist outside of words and in space and time.

A feminist interpretation of *Carrie* positions the story as an exploration of the linkages between women's puberty, shame, and rage. Carrie's menstruation-related horror—at the heart of the plot and echoed in constant references to blood—embodies the terror and repression of the female body. Her powers grow with her sexual maturity; thus, puberty is depicted as both empowering and a curse. Her mother, Margaret White, is an embodiment of internalised misogyny, viewing female sexuality as a sin and punishing her daughter for an act of biological inevitability.

Margaret's very identity is constructed around a patriarchal structure, using religious dogma rather than logic, and too much shame as discipline. Her infamous declaration in the musical—"Eve was weak"—

is turned into a literal song and sermon on stage, Margaret becoming a figure for ritualised oppression (Cohen, Pitchford, & Gore, 1988). The music underscores this through visual and vocal means; Margaret's declaration is delivered with preacherly inflection and with blazing, scorching lighting and static blocking that suggest cruelty and fanaticism. This culminates in the stylised blood scene—already discussed in staging terms—which functions as symbolic violence and expressionistic climax.

Crucially, Carrie's revenge is depicted as righteous, not merely horrific. Where King's original words tend to leave that moral failing a bit more ambiguous, the stage version frequently seems to want the audience to experience what she does, through musical soliloquies that tie the brutality to her own trauma. The spectacle is therefore ambivalent, giving you the horror movie tropes, yet criticising the culture that facilitates such violence.

The conventional roles of good spectator and judge, that the audience normally assumes, is subverted in these plays. Theatre, according to Carlson (2001), turns a passive reader into a live witness, creating a 'haunted stage' where meaning is produced through presence. The audience is made to bear uncomfortable witness to the bullying, with prior knowledge of how her humiliation will play out. Dancing close to pain, using sound, gesture, and spectacle to mediate it, viewers are given no option but to reflect on their own complicity with such systems of cruelty. By rendering Carrie's trauma visible and audible, the adaptation forces viewers to scrutinise the politics of presentation, not just the content. It is not just a horror tale staged for the sake of entertainment—it is a ritual of reckoning in which power, shame and rebellion are acted out live and in person.

Case Study II: *Misery*

Misery (1987) by Stephen King is a novel about imprisonment, obsession and the frightening power of the creative muse. The story is focused on Paul Sheldon, a novelist famous for his Victorian romance series, which follows the character of Misery Chastain. Paul is rescued from a car wreck but then held captive by Annie Wilkes, his "number one fan," a former nurse, in rural Colorado. It starts as a tender act of caring that soon morphs into a double nightmare of mind games and physical torture as Annie drags Paul into writing, resurrecting Misery back to

life in a new book and punishing him whenever he isn't compliant or doesn't meet her expectations.

At its heart, 'Misery' is a psychological horror story that lampoons fandom, authorship, and the power imbalances inherent in creator/audience dynamics. The themes of control, insanity, and authorship come to the fore as Annie tyrannises Paul's body and artistry. His physical impotence is a mirror of his symbolic impotence as a writer under siege. Annie's maniacal adoration and increasing violence are figures for diseased forms of readerly entitlement and distorted feminine caretaking.

The play 'Misery', particularly the 2015 adaptation reworked for Broadway by William Goldman, directed by Will Frears, and starring Bruce Willis and Laurie Metcalf, captures the claustrophobic horror that King creates in his novel as a live, intimate spectacle. The confines of the dramatic medium could hardly be better suited to this story, which is almost entirely set in a single, enclosed space.

Production design vividly evokes the suffocating monotony and tensions at the heart of the story. The rickety one-room cabin, with the old brass bed and writing desk, with the medical instruments ominously placed and with which the physical and psychological imprisonment of Paul Sheldon is enforced, is quite apt. The spare setting coerces the audience to stare, and keep staring, emulating Paul's own inescapability.

The corporeal performance brings an affective intensity to the representation of suffering and violence. Unlike the novel, in which relatively little of the cruelty happens off page or is described in internal monologue, the stage insists on the literal embodiment of the violence, which is shot through with a real-time pace that engages the audience in the urgency of Paul's anguish, whether in the scene of Annie snapping his ankles or the one where she shoves food down his throat. These are sequences that depend on a careful choreography of movements and props to keep the actors safe, while adding to the scene's verisimilitude. This immediacy of the corporeal dislocates the viewer somewhere on the side of the in-process trauma.

Sound design and purposeful deployment of silence also serve to ramp up the anxiety. Silence is employed to underline the unpredictability of Annie's mood—her jarring shifts from sunny chirpiness to shrieking hysteria, which echo the madness that animates her. These abrupt

bursts of sound—the creak of a floorboard, the slam of a door—act as auditory jump scares that mirror the violence erupting in Annie’s mood swings. As Carlson (2001) says, repetition and interruption are some of theatre’s most haunting possibilities; the sound design in *Misery* creates an atmosphere of terror by what is heard and what cannot be heard.

These staging strategies prepare the ground for the play’s gendered power dynamics, where sound and silence echo the instability of Annie’s identity. Annie’s gestures of ‘love’ and ‘care’ morph into manipulative forms of coercion and control, her exaggerated nurturing masking violence. On stage, Annie embodies Butler’s gender performativity and Creed’s monstrous-feminine, as her nurturing turns coercive. Annie’s oscillation between nurturer and captor thus makes her body the very stage upon which gendered power and horror are played out.

The power reversal between Paul and Annie—the man being rendered passive, the woman overtly violent—also further scrambles traditional gender norms. Paul, being both physically frail and a creative slave, can be read as feminised in weakness, a complicit subject or a victim of a bullying carer. The staging underscores this in physical placement and blocking: Paul spends much of the time sitting or lying down, everything in him as low as possible, while Annie stands over him, her dominance clearly established.

The tension on stage depends on the audience’s reaction. The proximity of the actor and audience in the theatre creates a voyeuristic awkwardness. Paul’s suffering is not some mediated fiction that viewers witness, but an embodied performance. This proximity makes the audience not only a silent spectator but a participant in Annie’s mounting violence. As Schechner claims, performance is not something that happens but something that is made to happen, even as it incriminates, implicates itself, and the audience, in the production and reproduction of meaning. In ‘*Misery*’, that sense is one of collective dread and helplessness.

Finally, trauma emerges in the adaptation as performance. Annie performs a psychotic fantasy of care and literary deliverance, Paul’s submission is a strategy for survival. Their transactions become their own kind of theatre—theatre of compliance, of anger, of seduction, of punishment. Annie’s performance is most obvious. The performing layers of her identity are most apparent: nurse, friend, critic, mother, judge—sometimes all in a single scene. Her tonal changes and scattered movements recall the overly demonstrative nature of melodrama, where

emotions are heightened and displayed.

At the same time, Paul's trauma is also enacted in non-verbal signals—his shudders, pauses, and physical degradation trace the psychological strain of imprisonment. His character arc is more of a journey via the aesthetics of pain, which forces the audience to face not just their fear, but also powerlessness. According to Caruth (1996), trauma does not reside in the original event itself but emerges through the repetition of its sensation. Onstage, every performance of 'Misery' reenacts the trauma for the character but for the audience it reanimates the terror of the trap, the brittleness of control.

Comparative Analysis: 'Misery' vs 'Carrie'

Modelling some of these issues through trauma, gender, and power, the plays differ in both tone and genre, yet each is thematically concerned with staging such trauma and gender for new audiences. These adaptations convey how theatre does not just represent horror but reconfigure it through spatial immediacy, embodiment and audience participation. This section will compare the ways both plays negotiate trauma, gender subversion, theatrical form, and audience reception.

Both plays align with Caruth's idea of trauma as repetition. On stage, Paul's endurance and Carrie's explosive vengeance demonstrate trauma not only as pain but also as transformation. Both plays challenge and undermine traditional gender roles. In 'Misery', Paul's powerlessness and Annie's domination of him reverse the usual representation of male power and are suggestive of Butler's (1990) gender as performance. Annie's "nurturing" image is itself a form of coercion, which reveals the instability of gender roles. In 'Carrie', female fury boils over in a context of religious shame and maternal oppression. The internalised misogyny of Margaret White is an instrument of abuse as opposed to the derived sense of empowerment of Carrie's fury. In the 1976 film, however, the mother speaks for the symbolic, identifying with an order which has defined women's sexuality as the source of all evil and menstruation as a sign of sin (Creed, 1993). The result is that female characters in both adaptations are powerful nodes that are complicated.

'Carrie: The Musical' employs stylised lighting, dance and projection to externalise horror to provide expressionistic spectacle, not realism. 'Misery', on the other hand, employs minimalism, such as a one-room

set that emphasises psychological tension and physical performance. These tones represent genre: 'Carrie' projects internal chaos; 'Misery' appropriates dread. The stage takes away the protection that comes from the distance of storytelling. Performance, as Schechner (2006) explains, is a joint creation with the audience. In both plays, audiences are transformed into witnesses—mute within Paul's victimisation, expectant within Carrie's debasement—to underscore the ethics of the spectator. In both, Carlson's 'haunted stage' draws the audience into cycles of complicity. In the end, both adaptations deploy live performance to critique systems of repression and to expose trauma's overtly performative elements—not escape but reckoning.

Conclusion

The stage productions of 'Misery' and 'Carrie' revitalise horror through live performance, transforming private terror into public encounter. At the heart of this metamorphosis is the politics of presentation, where choices in set, lighting, and casting reshape how gender, trauma, and power are understood. These productions show how staging transforms horror into political confrontation. In 'Misery', proximity and confinement emphasise male helplessness and female power. In 'Carrie', stylisation and music are what externalise repressed rage and reimagine the monstrous-feminine as an act of resistance.

Both plays provoke the audience, making theatregoers attend to their complicity in society's violence, exclusion, and shame. As Schechner (2006) argues, theatre reshapes culture by implicating its audience. In staging King's stories, horror becomes a collective experience—not just fictional fear, but a mirror of cultural trauma. These adaptations elevate King's themes beyond genre, offering embodied critiques of power, identity, and repression—felt not only by characters, but by the audience as well.

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