
How a Streetcar Named Desire Has Transitioned from a Book to a Film

Any time a play or a novel is adapted into a film portrayal of the text, critics will evaluate the film either in a positive or a negative manner. It is necessary to understand the freedoms a director has, and understand that an adaptation allows for someone else to depict a play or novel in a new inventive way. Creativity and uniqueness are sometimes necessary in the adaptation of a play to film. Critics are still chasing after the idea of fidelity, but the truth is adaptations have as much to offer as the actual piece does. Elia Kazan's 1951 adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not loyal to the play, but its authenticity and many similarities allows the adaptation to become its own personality. It is necessary for the directorial changes, created by Elia Kazan, to exist in order to refute the idea that fidelity is always correct in a film adaptation.

When a story intended for the stage is translated into film, there are some points of difference and contention that naturally arise. Elia Kazan adapted Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and for the most part kept true to the original play, but he was able to add more to the story within a film format. Kazan was able to explore places mentioned in the play such as the bowling alley by incorporating them onto the big screen. The reader now could picture the bowling alley Stanley and his friends spend so much time at and they could get an understanding of the atmosphere because it was now in front of the reader rather than just in their mind. Kazan stuck to Williams's script for the most part, but his portrayal of characters seemed to falter from those in the written play.

Blanche DuBois, in the play, was an insecure, arrogant women who had just recently lost her reputation and her place in society. However, in the film, Blanche is less reserved than she was in the play. In the play there is a scene where a young man comes to collect money for the paper and Blanche is home alone to answer the door. When she answers the door he lets the young man in and he asks for money for the local paper. After Blanche reveals she has no money to give the young man she continues to make the polite young man stay against his will and the reader can feel the discomfort the young man is feeling up until when Blanche kisses him and he leaves. However, in the film adaptation the young man is extremely comfortable with Blanche and seems to be seduced by her charm. In the film, when Blanche kisses the young man he leans in to kiss her too, completely changing the atmosphere of the entire scene.

For someone who just watches the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* this scene gives the person a different image of Blanche DuBois than the reader who imagines Blanche as a

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completely different woman. Williams does not create Blanche as a likable character, and in the film version, Vivien Leigh was liked by her costars about as much as she was in the play. Being from England and an outcast to begin with “Leigh's presence on the set was clearly unwanted and it repeatedly disrupted the status quo harmony of a group of actors who had all worked together before in the same play” (Cahir). Blanche was unwanted in the play, and in the movie Vivien was unwanted on the set, but the choice made by the director to cast Vivien as Blanche created a dynamic on the big screen that gave the movie great success and helped the character in its own authentic way.

Directors have complete control in what they are directing, which depending on the critic is either a good thing or a bad thing: “Adaptation is always an act of interpretation, and judgments on the success of the adaptation will always involve a comparative interpretation of the source text in the light of an interpretation of the adaptation” (Gordon, Robert and Olaf). There will always be critiques of each director when a play leaves the stage and is directed on the big screen because people do not like to see variations of the same thing. Different portrayals of the same work allow for people to expand their minds and experience the creativity and the minds of others, such as that of a director, and build new ideas off of old ideas. Authenticity and interpretation are extremely important because no two people think alike. Tennessee Williams and Elia Kazan are similar in many ways, but each has their own way of creating a new idea.

Kazan made minor changes to *A Streetcar Named Desire* and was extremely successful, allowing the viewers to see the characters differently and visualize the scene more so than a couple stage directions. Kazan was able to incorporate his own vision of the scene on the set and he cast people to play each character from his idea of what each character was like. Marlon Brando played Stanley, and to a reader, maybe Stanley was not as seductive as he was in the film. In the play Stanley was a dominant, controlling man, but the film version took that dominance and combined it with sexuality creating a character that was likable, but also somewhat fearful. Kazan's decision to cast Brando as Stanley allows the audience to depict Kazan's idea of Stanley in his mind showing that authenticity allows for numerous interpretations of a work, down to the looks of characters and how strongly looks play a role in a character's personality and demeanor. Even though Kazan's ideas of scene and characters might differ from those of the reader who might not cast Marlon Brando as Stanley, Kazan made a decision to keep the majority of the script the same throughout the entire film, which was a benefit of complying with the fidelity that everyone questions in the adaptation of a play in to film.

Allowing for the director to make these changes in a film adaptation benefits the work because “Each act of adaptation involves a new cultural appropriation of the original text, and old texts are kept alive in the contemporary cultural imaginary through these very acts of appropriation” (Gordon, Robert and Olaf). *A Streetcar Named Desire* gained more popularity from the film

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adaptation and allowed for Tennessee Williams to gain fame in different spheres. “While the role of the reader/viewer is acknowledged in the literature on screen adaptation, it has not been studied in detail” (Raitt). The real critic is not evaluated when fidelity is the issue at hand. The audience is the determining factor when deliberating if an adaptation was successful or not. If there is no evidence to back up the idea that fidelity gains a better response from the audience than an adaptation does then there is no argument to support the idea that each adaptation should be identical to the piece it is depicting.

The audience should mainly be the focus, but “Too often, however, success or failure of any adaptation is defined narrowly” (Gordon, Robert and Olaf). The success is never defined by the audience, rather it is defined by ticket sales and the responses of the critics which is not an accurate measurement in the success of an adaptation (Gordon, Robert and Olaf). The director’s main goal is to create something that will appeal to the audience. When the director’s authenticity creates major success when adapting a play into a film there are always people who believe it could have been better if the director did not stray from the original script, but should a play and a film be identical? If a play and a film were identical the work would gain less success because there was no variation between either. Adaptations call for creativity and new ideas in order to lure in a new audience that has not been captivated by the original version.

The flaw to the argument of fidelity is that “The most widespread misconception about the process of adaptation of a work from one medium to another is the myth that the adaptation should be faithful to its source” (Gordon, Robert and Olaf). Adaptation is about change and in most cases change will benefit the adaptation. Change is necessary in order to keep the attention and the interest of an audience. *A Streetcar Named Desire* captures the idea that film adaptation can mildly change the play and it can still be a success. The director’s choices and decisions make the adaptation everything it is. The minor changes in characters, their personalities and scenes made for a different take on the original version, and also helped allow for reader to now visualize what they had already read. The film industry allows for more scenery, leaving less to the imagination of the reader.

Elia Kazan slightly altered the characters and the scenes in his adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and it was just enough change to challenge the world of fidelity, and proved the importance of some originality. Once the director has made his decisions on characters and scenery the rest of the adaptation is seen through the cast and how they chose to portray their characters. In the case of Vivien Leigh, not being liked by the rest of her costars gave her and her costars ammunition during each scene and helped convey the personalities of each character flawlessly, but with their own slight variation, such as the more dominant, sexual Stanley and the less reserved Blanche. All in all, authenticity is necessary for a brilliant adaptation to come to life. Authenticity and a director’s intuition combined can create a powerful adaptation such as that of *A Streetcar Named Desire* directed by Elia Kazan. This adaptation

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was extremely successful and also helped launch the career of Marlon Brando, creating success for many different people. Through the film adaptation of one play and a director's authenticity, a career was launched and the many themes and ideas Tennessee Williams conveyed in his play was successfully put on the big screen for the world to see.

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