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ADAPTING A PICTURE BOOK INTO A PLAY

(FROM PAGE TO STAGE)

Description: I'm a children's book author and playwright. Until recently, I only wrote plays for adults. My picture book, *Annushka's Voyage* was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1998. After the book came out, I gave presentations at schools and libraries throughout the country. Teachers and librarians often said to me, "You're a playwright. Why don't you turn *Annushka's Voyage* into a play for young people? I agreed it was a good idea, but I didn't start the adaptation until January 2005. I enjoyed writing the play version, and I'm happy to say that the audience who saw the play performed in February 2006, at The Little Theatre, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, also enjoyed the experience. But I didn't move the book from page to stage. I had to do a lot of reinvention.

Edith Tarbescu is the author of four children's books, as well as a produced playwright. Her picture book *Annushka's Voyage* was chosen as a Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies for 1999. It was also on the list picked by the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee, as one of the "Jewish Books Too Good to Miss—the Best of the Bunch from 1998." Her other picture book, *The Boy Who Stuck Out His Tongue: A Yiddish Folktale*, published by Barefoot Books, was translated into Danish and Korean. A recently-completed middle-grade novel, *The Summer of My Salami*, is currently under consideration.

Good morning! My name is Edith Tarbescu. I'm the author of four children's books, as well as a playwright. I was bitten by the theater bug when I was 13. I grew up in Brooklyn, and yes, a tree does grow there, more than one, actually. While watching my first Broadway show, I fell in

love. I've been in love with the theater ever since. I've had plays performed in regional theatres, as well as Off-Broadway, N.Y. I studied playwriting at the Yale School of Drama.

Before I adapted my picture book "Annushka's Voyage," published in 1998, by Houghton Mifflin, into a play for young people, I had several written plays for adults.

After “Annushka” was published, I gave presentations at schools and libraries all over the country--both secular and religious. Several librarians told me, “Why don’t you turn your book into a play?”

I was busy with adult plays, but I finally took their advice. I’m glad I did. It was a wonderful experience.

The only rule about writing books, or plays, is never bore your audience and don’t preach.

But there are certain things to keep in mind, for example, the antagonist must want something and want it badly. Think of Lady Macbeth!

There also must be conflict and tension. I added more conflict to the play than there was in the book. I added conflict between the two girls, and between the girls and the guards on the ship, and at Ellis Island.

A book is usually written in first person or third person. There is narrative and dialogue. A play is only written in dialogue. The dialogue should move the plot along and should never be chit-chat, e.g., How are you? I’m fine. How’s the weather? Think it’s going to rain? Weak dialogue doesn’t advance the story. Strong dialogue reveals character, for example, in Tennessee Williams’s play “The Glass Menagerie,” Tom, the protagonist, wants the audience to know that his father abandoned the family. But Williams isn’t mundane. Instead of saying the facts in a straight-forward way, the main character says, “My father fell in love with long distance.” In the same play, when the

mother is waking Tom, she calls in a strident voice, “Rise and shine, rise and shine. Each character speaks in a distinctive way.

Getting back to “Annushka’s Voyage,” my book starts with Grandma telling Anya & Tanya that a letter from Papa has just arrived from New York.

I decided that was not a good starting point for my play. A picture book tells a story in words and pictures and is usually 32 pages. I had the advantage of opening up the book: i.e., expanding and embellishing the text. Instead of starting when Papa has already left for America, I started the play before Papa leaves. The play opens on the last night of Hanukkah. The four characters are celebrating and singing “Tumbalalaika.” After that brief opening, Papa tells the girls he’s leaving for America. We hear their reactions and their fears.

I also open up the scenes on the farm while the girls wait for Papa to send them their steamship tickets. (Read from book and play.)

The heart of the story is the journey and traveling in third-class (steerage). The ship is a perfect place for tension, conflict, and drama by showing, not telling about the storm they encounter, and the officials who keep them in their place. I also show Tanya, the rebellious, younger sister, sneaking up to the first class deck and getting caught by a guard. (Read from play.)

The ending of the play was also changed to suit the medium. In the book, Anya & Tanya are worried about meeting Papa. Will he be at Ellis Island? Will they find each other? By waving the candlesticks that had been a gift from Grandma, they find their

father. In my play, Papa is not there to meet them. That creates tension for the audience. Where is he? Will he show up? What will become of Anya & Tanya? We see the girls on stage waiting, but instead of hearing what happened to Papa, we see him picked up by a policeman for purportedly stealing a loaf of bread.

(Read that scene in play) This is another example of showing, not telling.

The play ends with the policeman apologizing to Papa for arrested the wrong man. After that scene, the policeman drives Papa to the Battery in Lower New York so he can catch the ferry to Ellis Island to pick up his daughters.

While the girls are waiting, a doctor looks after them, making sure they are safe. The play ends with the scene of Papa finally arriving at Ellis Island. He sings “Tumbalalaika” as he runs onstage to meet them. The song brings the play full circle.

In the picture book, the story ends w/Papa taking the girls back to his apartment on the Lower East Side, in NY, where Anya says the Shabbos prayer before dinner. But I didn't want that scene in my play. It would have been anti-climactic. The drama in the play comes from Papa's late arrival, with the two girls sitting on a bench onstage, not knowing what will happen to them.

I had the play read aloud by students at Solomon Schechter, in Albuquerque, and the kids immediately noticed the different ending and were disappointed.

But, I later had the play performed at The Little Theatre, in ABQ, and the audience loved the new ending. Not everybody in the audience at the theater knew the

book as intimately as the students in at Solomon Schechter, in Albuquerque. I had visited the school twice to speak about my books.

Keep in mind, too, that you have to be economical on stage: the fewer actors the better. That's why I used doubling. I have 5 characters: Anya, Tanya, Grandma, Grandpa, and Papa in the play. Except for Anya and Tanya, the other three actors double as guards, doctors, policeman, bakery clerk, etc. The doubling would be for perfect for professional, or community theatres. Schools, however, are different. Students can participate in the crowd scenes on board the ship and at Ellis Island.

From page to stage: Wearing two hats can be fun and challenging.

I plan to adapt my book "The Boy Who Stuck out His Tongue: A Yiddish Folktale" into a play. That should be exciting, too.

Thank you! I hope you all love the theater as much as we all love books!

Contact me for further information:

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