

CHARACTER ADAPTATION OF THE PLAY “TOWARDS ZERO” (PHAENSANGHARN)

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INTRODUCTION

‘Towards Zero,’ a novel by Agatha Christie, an English writer praised as the ‘Queen of Crime,’ was first published in the United States in June 1944, and later adapted to the play by Gerald Verner in 1956, first performed in September 1956 at the St. James Theatre. It was then developed into a film called ‘Innocent Lies,’ which wasn’t a great success, unfortunately. Apart from being remade into the French version called ‘L’Heure Zéro’ in 2007, the novel was also adapted to the ITV’s series in the same year. In 2010, the novel’s first version of a radio drama was made. Each episode of 30 minutes was broadcasted on BBC4 radio channel (Agathachristie, 2010). The novel ‘Towards Zero’ becomes popular thanks to its great plot twist, interesting theme and sophisticated relationships among characters. Readers, after reading, will be left with sympathy, pity or even disgust for these round characters, clearly and truly reflecting ordinary people who are both noble and wicked. The reason the researcher as the director of the play has chosen the novel is the proper numbers of characters for students’ Art Thesis Exhibition 2019. However, because there are more female than male students, gender adaptation for characters from men to women in the play is then required. The change is made without key themes or messages being exploited. Another reason for the novel selection and adaptation to a Thai play is the researcher’s personal favor in crime novels and plays.



Figure 1. Act 1 Scene 1 of Phaensangharn (Thai version of Towards Zero)
Photo: Courtesy of Apisara Yuttharot

Research Objectives

To make a Thai adaptation of the play 'Towards Zero' for the Art Thesis Exhibition at Department of Theatre Arts, Saun Sunandha Rajabhat University.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was analyzed using the method of content analysis, which has 3 steps as follows: 1. consult previous literature regarding the play Towards Zero including the original novel, the play adapted from the English novel, with the aim to compare and contrast between the two versions, leading to the proper adaptation as a play in Thai, 2. interview the play writer who made the Thai adaptation of Towards Zero, and 3. make a summary.

FINDINGS

It was found that character adaptation was made mainly based on characters' actions and objectives. It was important to deliberately study characters' thoughts and behaviors so that the adaptation could well portray the story's original messages. Studying characters' actions and objectives could be done by analyzing their actions which lead to problems, conflicts, tragic endings and their decision to solve all these problems in the end (Maneewattana 2007, Padungsestakit 2015.) From the study of the play 'Towards Zero,' Gerald Verner's adaption was clear in every element of the play. He included only scenes important for the audiences and possible to make on stage. However, although the number of characters was reduced, the main themes and key messages were still kept. As for the Thai version adaptation, Panuwat Inthawat, the director, decided to change characters' gender from male to female to 2 characters due to limited numbers of male students participating in the play. Therefore, from the main characters of 7 males and 4 females, it was changed to 5 males and 6 females. Factors relating to character reduction may be financial matters or performers' gender. With some sub-plots being eliminated, certain character reduction was therefore a natural alternative. (Rattanachaiwong 2018, p 76-77)

From studying Gerald Verner's adaptation techniques, it was revealed that the opening scene was still the same, compared to the original novel version. The focus was on each character introducing and revealing the story and signaling problems that may occur out of these so-called normal situations. Gerald Verner still kept the main characters including Lady Tressilian, the landlord of Gull's Point, guests present during the crime, personal servants and policemen. Nonetheless, other characters such as Angus Mac Whirter, a man attempting suicide from the cliff who knew about the mystery of the crime, Thomas's brother and friend, lawyers and friends of Mr. Matthew Treves and Jane Barrett were all cut off. Gerald Verner didn't choose to add any new characters. He instead obviously added more roles to the remaining characters. For example, the role of Angus Mac Whirter was added to Mr. Matthew Treves, the lawyer and friend of the lady. Instead of being murdered in the original version, Treves in this version was present in the play all along during the crime and investigation. He also played an important role in crime solution and murderer reveal, which were set due to his reputable occupation as a lawyer.

As for Panuwat Inthawat's Thai version adaptation, the play by Gerald Verner was translated and used mainly with all of the main characters remaining, including Lady Tressilian, the landlord of Gull's Point castle, Nevile Strage, the man inviting both of his wives to the castle, Audrey Strange, the former delicate and sensitive wife of Nevile, Kay Strange, the new headstrong and quick-tempered wife of Nevile, Ted Latimer, a charming lad and friend of Kay, Mary Aldin, the lady's servant who lacks self-confidence, Superintendent

Battle, a Metropolitan Crime Investigation Division official, Inspector James Leach, Battle's nephew, Constable Benson a police officer, Thomas Royde, a quiet man who likes reading crime novels and Mr. Matthew Treves, an old man and friend of the lady, a former lawyer. Panuwat made some changes to the gender of some characters from males to females without interfering the main plot. From the analysis of romantic relationships of the main characters who had relations with Lady Tressilian, there were only 3 characters left which are Mary Aldin, Thomas Royde and Matthew Treves. Mary Aldin was a female character so there was no need for an adaptation. It was eventually concluded that the gender change would be applied to other two characters, Thomas Royde, changing to Tamera Royde, and Mr. Matthew Treves, changing to Martha Treves (Inthawat, Personal Communication, 2018).



Figure 2. Act 2 Scene 1: Tamera Royde (left). Audrey Strange (Middle) and Martha Treves (Right)

Photo: Courtesy of Apisara Yuttharot

Tamera Royde, who was Thomas Royde in the original story, was a friend of Audrey's, Neville's former wife. He was a quiet man who likes reading crime novels. After 7 years of absence, he was back to visit the lady, and when the murder occurred, he was the one knowing who the real murderer was and helping the innocent wrongly claimed as the culprit. At the end of the play, he confessed his love for Audrey and both of them fell in love. Despite the couple's happy ending, the author didn't clearly portray their romantic relationship until the end. Therefore, Panuwat, the translator and director of the play, chose the change this character's gender from male to female. The character of Tamera Royde, now as Audrey's close female friend, thus didn't interfere with the main plot. Another adaptation is the character of Martha Treves, who was Matthew Treves, the lawyer friend of the lady, in the original play. He visited the castle, stayed all along during the incident, and had an important part in investigating the crime. He was a great support for the police in revealing the murderer. Due to his occupation as a lawyer, he was considered as a respectable character. There was no evidence of his romantic relationships shown in the play, and due to Panuwat's research, there had been female lawyers working in England in 1956. Changing from a male to female character was consequently possible. Regarding changing characters' names to match their newly assigned genders, names aren't necessary having abstract or symbolic

meanings. However, as the author had already used names with hidden meanings, Panuwat as the translator had to make an adaptation with those meanings maintained. For instance, the name “Thomas” meaning “twin” was a name of one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus, and the name “Matthew” from Matthew Treves means “a gift from God” and was also a name of another Apostle of Jesus. From the analysis of the relation between these characters’ names and their roles in the play, there were “no symbolic meanings relating to the play’s plot and main themes.” The director then made changes in steps as follows.

1. Characters’ names were to change from male to female names, and the names were required to be commonly used in 1950.

2. With no need of maintaining the meaning, characters’ names could be changed to anything using as similar alphabets as possible from the old names.

The newly changed names were Tamera from Thomas (maintaining T and M sounds) and Martha from Matthew (maintaining M and T sounds). From the study, the name Tamera were popularly used in 1950-1960, and the name Tamera was also used in the later period despite being less popular. Moreover, the name Tamera was the closest to the name Matthew. It was therefore chosen. (Inthawat, Personal Communication, 2018)

DISCUSSION

It was concluded that with Panuwat Inthawat’s gender adaptation in the Thai version of the play, characters that had direct influence on the story, which are Tamera Royde and Martha Treves, affected the characters whose genders were not adapted. To illustrate, the character of Thomas Royde was first introduced as Audrey’s friend who has a secret affection for her. After the murderer was arrested, he confessed his love to Audrey and both of them fell in love in the end. With the gender adaptation to Tamera Royde, the character was then introduced as Audrey’s close friend who seemed to deeply care for her. The relationship between these two characters who have the same gender and the ending scene after the murderer was arrested with the two laughing and hugging each other may have the audience questionably interpreted them as a gay couple. The director didn’t directly answer this question and left the audience with opportunity of open interpretation. As for Matthew Treves, who was a lawyer friend of Lady Tressilian’s husband. They knew each other through the Lady’s husband who was a judge. With a gender adaptation to Martha Treves, the character was introduced as the Lady’s best friend instead, leading to the closer relationship between the two compared to the original version of the story. Moreover, this affected the character’s mental and physical change such as body’s shape, hair and eye colours and complexion after gender adaptation was applied.

The character’s adaptation of Gerald Verner and Panuwat Inthawat could be concluded as follows. The total number of characters in Gerald Verner’s adaptation was 11, including Lady Tressilian, Kay Strange, Mary Aldin, Nevile Strange, Audrey Strange, Ted Latimer, Superintendent Battle, Inspector James Leach, Constable Benson, Thomas Royde and Mr. Matthew Treves. Panuwat Inthawat’s adaptation based on Gerald Verner’s version included 9 characters without gender change and 2 characters with gender change from males to females. The changed characters, Tamera Royde from Thomas Royde and Martha Treves from Mr. Matthew Treves, were noticeable both in the mental and physical levels, affecting the relationships with the original characters who weren’t adapted. The play’s ending thus left audience with various alternatives to think of the play based on their own understanding. This indicates that to make characters’ adaptation, it is essential to think of the main plot and themes, and the changes shouldn’t interfere those. However, the changes should be treated carefully since it could still affect other elements of the play (Rattanachaiwong, 2018, p. 81).

In conclusion, the adaptation of the play “Towards Zero” was 2 characters’ gender change from males to females, corresponding with the objective of the Art Thesis Exhibition where there are more actresses than actors. The result from the adaptation was the practical play, suitable for performer selection based on the students’ gender. It is suggested that if there are enough actors and actresses for the original version of the story, gender adaptation shouldn’t be made. It is important to keep the play original and true to the author’s will as the audiences could experience desired artistic appreciation and logical storyline. However, the novel by Agatha Christie is still considered very interesting and has been adapted to various plays. This study aims to inspire people interested in crime plays. The play based on Agatha Christie novel was selected due to its messages in reflecting people’s neglected parts of life. The work by Agatha Christie clearly reflects life values through words and characters. It is a classic work which has always been popular.

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