

FROM NOVEL TO FILM

AUTHOR MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM ON THE HOURS

I may be the only living American novelist who is entirely happy with what Hollywood has done to his novel. I naturally feel slightly embarrassed about that. I worry that if I were a more substantial person, I'd be outraged. And yet, they did a remarkable job.



I felt good about the movie from the beginning, when Scott Rudin told me that David Hare was interested in writing the screenplay. I find that, unlike many novelists, I don't feel much allegiance to the "sacred text". A novel, any novel, I write is neither more nor less than the best I could do right then with those characters and situations.

Five or more years later, I'd surely write the book differently. If I'm fortunate enough to find that someone gifted and intelligent, "someone I respect", wants to turn my story into a movie or an opera or a situation comedy, the only sensible response is to turn it over and see where he or she will take the story, and to hope that I'll be surprised. I wouldn't want an entirely faithful adaptation. What would be the fun of that?

Before David started writing, I spent a day with him and Stephen Daldry, the director, in London. We talked for hours about the characters' lives outside the scope of the book: How did Clarissa and Sally meet? Had Richard been an AIDS activist? If Laura were to truly consider taking her own life, what means would she use? Then, armed with that information, David went to work, very much on his own.

As it turns out, the movie version of "The Hours" is pretty close to the book. David has told me that he tried it all sorts of ways, and found that the book's existing structure seemed to work best. The brilliance of his screenplay resides, in large part, in the transitions "we move effortlessly among the three different stories" and in the translation into scenes of that which was interior in the book. Without in any way simplifying the characters or their situations, he found things for them to do and say, ways for them to interact that telegraph the states of their souls.

It's revelatory, too, to see the actors at work. On the one hand, in translating a book into film, you lose the capacity to go inside the character's minds, and that of course is a serious handicap. But on the other hand you get Meryl Streep cracking an egg with barely suppressed violence, Nicole Kidman looking at a child as if from the depths of hell itself, Julianne Moore weeping in a bathroom



while speaking cheerfully to her husband in the next room. These wonders are available only from actors, and they make up for many pages worth of interiority.

As I try to write concisely about the experience of seeing THE HOURS, the novel, turned into "The Hours", the movie, I better understand those flustered Oscar winners who have to acknowledge more people, all of them essential, than they can possibly get to before the band starts playing them offstage. Any movie is hard to make; a good movie is almost impossible, and when a good movie gets made, almost everyone involved has brought some necessary spark of brilliance.

Philip Glass's music functions in the movie very much the way language does in a novel, as a rhythmic and lyrical accompaniment, and occasionally a counterpoint, to the raw business of the story. The music in THE HOURS is a stronger presence than music ordinarily is in movies. It's meant as more than background. It's as integral to the action as sentences are in a novel. Some people are put off by the prominence of the music. I think it's revolutionary, and exactly right.

When you see the movie, look for little unifying gestures that are common to all three stories, not just flowers and cooking but more subtle bits of business. Everyone cracks an egg. Everyone loses a shoe. It is just this sort of invisible stitching on which narrative stands.

In short, they did the nearly impossible. They produced a work of art. I can still hardly believe my luck.

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QUESTIONS ON MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM'S ARTICLE

1. What are the challenges that Cunningham sees for the person who wants to adapt his novel "The Hours"?
2. How does he think that the filmmakers overcame these challenges?
3. Do you agree with Cunningham's comments on the use of music in the film?
4. What are the usual criticisms made of film and TV adaptations of novels? How does Cunningham counter these accusations?
5. Cunningham says that the filmmakers "produced a work of art". How would you define a film as a piece of art? What qualities would it have in order to make it "art"?

