CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

| | |
|---|---|
| Title | The not-so-singular life of Albert Nobbs |
| Authors | Noonan, Mary |
| Publication date | 2020-05-09 |
| Original Citation | Noonan, M. (2020) 'The not-so-singular life of Albert Nobbs', in Cronin, B., MagShamhráin, R. and Preuschoff, N. (eds) Adaptation Considered as a Collaborative Art. Adaptation in Theatre and Performance, pp. 67-82. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham. doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-25161-1_4 |
| Type of publication | Book chapter |
| Link to publisher's version | 10.1007/978-3-030-25161-1_4 |
| Rights | © 2020, the Editors and the Author. This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned. |
| Download date | 2026-11-07 03:51:58 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14328 |

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

# The Not-So-Singular Life of Albert Nobbs

Mary Noonan

The short story "Albert Nobbs" by the Irish novelist George Moore first appeared in *A Story-Tellers Holiday*, in 1918. It was later re-published by Moore in his *Celibate Lives* (1927). In 1977, a play, *La Vie Singulière d'Albert Nobbs*, adapted from the Moore story, was written and directed by the French theatre director Simone Benmussa, and performed at the Théâtre d'Orsay, Paris. The French play was then translated by Barbara Wright, and performed in Manhattan at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1982, under the title *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs.* The New York production starred Glenn Close in the leading role. Having played in many other venues over the years, *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* came full circle in May 1996, when it returned to George Moore's home-place of Galway. Benmussa was invited by Garry Hynes to stage the play for the Druid Theatre Company. In addition to her authorship and direction, Benmussa also designed the set and lighting for the production. Jane Brennan starred as Albert Nobbs. And finally, thirty years after it was first performed in New York, in 2011, Glenn Close produced and took the titular role in the film entitled *Albert Nobbs.* From novella to play in French, to play in translation, to film – the narrative of Albert Nobbs has been through many permutations.

The story of Albert Nobbs, therefore, is one of multiple adaptations and translations. In this chapter, I will first consider Benmussa's theory of the stage, as the backdrop for an exploration of her theatrical adaptation of Moore's short story. I will show that for her, theatre must be both oneiric – drawing its impetus and its structuring from dreams – and

also political. I will then consider the techniques she uses in order to make a play that is critical of – that exposes – the coercive nature of the narrative from within patriarchy, the role of narrative in the historical silencing of women and the relationship between performance and gender. I will show that Benmussa – to use her own word – "ransacks" the original text (Benmussa 1979, 24) to serve her own ends. Seen from this perspective, her version of Albert Nobbs is an appropriation of Moore's text, rather than an adaptation. Julie Sanders suggests that what often distinguishes a literary appropriation from an adaptation is its political intention:

> Appropriation carries out the same sustained engagement [with the source text] as adaptation, but frequently adopts a posture of critique, overt commentary and even sometimes assault or attack. (Sanders, 2006, 6)

Sanders draws on the work of Adrienne Rich, among others, to show that "for women writers it was essential to take on the writing of the past in order to move beyond it into a creative space of their own" (12). She quotes Rich's 1971 essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in which she states that "We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us"(Rich, 1971, in Sanders 2006, 12). Rich's position is particularly apposite to our study of Benmussa's work, as both were working to a feminist agenda throughout the 1970s. Benmussa's work will be framed in this essay, therefore, in the context of works of literary appropriation – works that seek both to foster historical understanding and insist on a radical break with tradition, "a dissonant and dissident rupturing of its value-systems and hierarchies" (Sanders, 12). However, this is not to suggest that there is no playful dialogue and exchange between the appropriation and its

source: in the case of Benmussa's *Albert Nobbs*, appropriation of George Moore's original narrative enables an intense form of creative play, where multiple versions of Albert become manifest on the stage, creating a space of fluidity between source text and appropriation, past and present, fiction and theatre. This chapter will examine, therefore, the range of theatrical techniques employed by Benmussa with the intention of mining – and exposing – the layers of exclusion underpinning the original story.

By the time she came to adapt and direct the story of *Albert Nobbs* in 1977, Simone Benmussa had already developed her own theory of the stage, and a range of innovative staging strategies. In an essay she published in 1974, she elaborated her understanding of the nature of theatre. For her, the stage was a space of 'de-realisation', where the elements of time, space, and silence interact to draw the spectator into a state that is akin to a dream-state: the oneiric. The true function of theatre, for Benmussa, was to provoke or stimulate the unconscious fantasies or buried desires of all those involved in the enterprise: writer, actor, spectator:

> In contrast to the theatre of imitation, which is in reality a theatre of illusion, of lies, of "as if" […] there is the theatre of fantasy, which seeks to establish a surreality that could denounce the real, a theatre where representation – which in this theatre becomes a direct transcription of the imagination into space – attempts, not without difficulty, to deny that it is representation at all. (Benmussa 1974, 28)

Oneiric theatre, as she called it, would stimulate the hidden desires of the participants through a process of displacement. The transposition of bodies and objects into unfamiliar spaces causes the viewer to attribute new meaning to them. According to

Benmussa in this essay, theatre operates through exaggeration, displacement and disorientation – just as dreams do. In this dreamscape, words too are changed:

> In effect, theatre denies the proportions of the real: the spoken word is offered, not spoken, on the stage. It stands up, vertical, in opposition to the word that circulates horizontally, the word that's convertible to cash, in society. (Benmussa 1974, 30)

Therefore, Benmussa was interested in creating a form of theatre that would draw actors and spectators into a dream-space, where silences and emptiness would speak as loudly as words or conventional settings. Theatre of the strange, the oneiric, places special demands on the spectator, who must be willing to allow herself to be disconcerted, and at the same time, naïve, because as with Alice in Wonderland, "where everything is strange, there is no more room for surprise." The effect desired most of all by a director of oneiric theatre is to create a sense of 'ailleurs', elsewhere – the opposite of the effect of traditonal theatrical 'opacity', which leaves no room for mystery or strangeness. This does not mean, however, that oneiric theatre cannot also be political theatre. The hidden structures of a mise-en-scène are the most important, and the most dangerous, with the potential for disruption of an audience's received ideas: "Political theatre should not be built on a conservative theatrical structure' (Benmussa 1974, 34). Theatre that seeks to change minds or sow the seeds of change in society cannot restrict itself to the traditional theatrical conventions, it must be disruptive at the level of mise-en-scène. Ultimately, theatre, for Benmussa, is a privileged space for the unleashing of buried fantasies. The fundamental reality of theatre arises from the collision of the real space and the imagined space, of theatrical time and real time. In this privileged space, life and death move into and out of each other: "and it is with caution that one should proceed through this making

and unmaking" (Benmussa 1974, 37). It is in the pull between the real and the unreal that theatre is made.

Commenting on another of her plays which arose from the adaptation of a fictional text – in this case, the play *Portrait de Dora*, adapted from Hélène Cixous's novel *Portrait du Soleil*, and produced in Paris in 1976 – Benmussa stated that she "thought it would be interesting to start with a text that was not theatrical, as it would enable us to avoid the habitual theatrical yoke, the yoke that constricts the actors' freedom and forces them to keep on the rails of theatrical 'language'. The text came from elsewhere" (Benmussa 1979, 10-11). The adapted text must in some way 'not fit' in the new medium or genre – the text's discomfiture opens the opportunity for exploration of marginality, exclusion, authority and legitimation.

When it came to adapting the story of Albert Nobbs from George Moore's novella, Benmussa was most interested in making a political play:

> When I was working on the adaptation of this short story, what I appreciated was the force, the simplicity, the obviousness, the incredibility of this true story which, starting from a simple, naïve news item, became the expression of an extremely transgressive political situation, and this without being in any way didactic. (Benmussa 1979, 23)

Moore's narrative enabled Benmussa to make an oneiric play about the coercive force of narrative in a patriarchal culture, the role of narrative and narrativity in the historical silencing of women and the relationship between performance and gender. Moving between the genres of narrative fiction and non-narrative theatre, breaching the generic boundaries, gave her the freedom to "ransack" the original text:

> In the course of adaptation, everything changes: one ransacks the text, one creates one's own reverie, one follows the subterranean layers of one's own imagination and of one's own fantasies. (Benmussa 1979, 24)

Indeed, Benmussa uses the metaphor of archaeology when talking about the work of adaptation. The different layers, representing different historical periods, that an archaeologist may uncover in the course of a dig, are emblematic of the layers of potential meaning buried in a text. An adaptation may unearth previously unsuspected treasures. The hidden structures of the text are capable of stimulating the buried material of the unconscious, in both writer and spectator, through the work of imagination. And of course, the trope of burial and unearthing is central to the story of Albert Nobbs, which is one of disguise, of doubling, of plurality. Benmussa, a twentieth-century feminist intellectual, was bound to find something different in the story of Albert to what George Moore, the Victorian patriarch, would have found (Moore came from a wealthy land-owning Anglo-Irish family whose estate was near Galway on the west coast of Ireland):

> […] I realised that he saw things from the point of view of a man telling a woman's story (his humour was tinged with irony), and that, on the other hand, he saw things from a writer's point of view, that is to say with the writer's inevitable distance from the characters who are the subject of the narrative […]. (Benmussa 1979, 24)

Moore's story provided Benmussa with the perfect vehicle for an exploration of the historical economic and sexual exclusion and silencing of women. The work of adaptation allowed her to dig deeper into the labyrinth of meanings held within the structure of the narrative, and to unleash hidden fantasies of dreams – those of Albert, as well as her own and those of the actors, and ultimately those of the spectators. For the

character Albert Nobbs is a dreamer. Set in a Dublin hotel in the 1860s, Moore's original tale presents the story of a dependable hotel waiter, who goes quietly about his business "no running around to public houses, no pipe in his pocket and above all, no playing the fool with the maid servants" (Moore 2011, 4) until his death reveals that he is, in fact, a woman.

Benmussa says that she "ransacked" Moore's text, and indeed, almost every line of text in her play is taken directly from Moore. So, at the level of the narrative, Benmussa invents nothing. She simply edits the text to suit her purposes. Moore's story is set in a Dublin hotel, Morrissons, where Albert works as a waiter, a drudge from morning till night. One night she is asked to share her bed with a visiting house painter, Hubert Page. As a woman disguised as a man, Albert is afraid that her secret will be disclosed. Reluctantly, she tells her story to the painter, evoking a lonely life, but the painter reveals that she is also a woman, who has assumed her role as a reaction against an oppressive husband. Hubert Page has ''married'' a woman and is living a rewarding life. Albert is astounded, and the story arouses her to her own latent potential for experience. She begins to dream of the possible woman's life she could have. In her daydreams, this takes the form of the creation of a home, with soft furnishings and beautiful objects such as mirrors and clocks. Her fantasy requires a partner though, a 'wife' who would help her in the setting up of a small shop. She decides to court Helen Dawes, a maid in the hotel, a girlish flirt who is actually engaged to Joe Mackins, an odd-job man working at the hotel. Helen mercilessly exploits Albert for all that she can get from him by way of gifts, leading him on and mocking his apparent asexuality behind his back with Joe and the other members of the hotel staff.

Albert lives in an indeterminate zone, as Hubert Page says "neither man nor woman, just a perhapser" (Moore 2011, 29). Having adopted the costume of a man as a younger woman, in order to earn a living as a waiter, and also, to avoid sexual aggression, which she appears to have feared greatly, she gradually becomes one with her costume, so that she loses touch entirely with her body, or any sense of sexuality. While Moore, according to Benmussa, treats Albert's story with "a great deal of respect, tenderness and humour" (Benmussa 1979, 24), his is a linear tale of the life of a hotel in Victorian Dublin, ending with Albert's death and the 'big reveal' of her true sex, appealing to the potential prurience of readers. Moore's story concludes with two Victorian patriarchs – Moore and his interlocutor Alec – speculating on the relationship between women and fairies:

> A woman that marries another woman, and lives happily with her, isn't a natural woman; there must be something of the fairy in her. (Moore 2011, 97)

Benmussa wanted to take this "text from elsewhere" and "create a new kind of writing" (Benmussa 1979, 24). The new writing emerges from the placing of Moore's words within the displaced spatial and temporal dimensions of the stage. Benmussa had developed her staging technique to enable her to subvert the conventions of traditional theatre and mine the layers of dream and fantasy in the auditorium, by creating an anti-realist *mise en scène* that calls attention to the dialectic of absence and presence in the space of the stage. What is important for her is that the inner life of the characters be suggested through manipulation of the multiple languages of the stage. Costumes and physical objects have the power of metaphor on the stage, and are used to evoke the inner life of the characters. Her setting for the play is not realistic, but everything in it 'speaks' or even 'writes':

> The tea tray Nobbs carries has the importance of a word; the way the actress carries it is the equivalent of a phrase. The doors that move of their own accord carry on a dialogue with the actors, as do the lights, the movement of a dress, or the folds of a coat. The images take form in this way and create a new form of writing. (Benmussa 1979, 24)

On Benmussa's stage, each object, gesture or movement has the force of metaphor. Her set for the play features *a trompe-l'oeil* backdrop of the interior of a hotel. The only 'real' objects on the stage are two doors, a spiral staircase and a chair – crucially, Albert's chair on the landing between first and second floors. The doors and staircase stand alone in the stage space, not connected to an 'architecture' – they appear to 'float' in space:

> In the half-light it is just possible to make out: on one side, in the void, a swing door leading to the kitchen; its upper part is glass, its lower part wood. On the other side, equally isolated, a revolving wood and glass door such as are to be found in old hotels […]. The two doors will later revolve or swing of their own accord […] as if ghostly visitors or maids, fairies or voices, were passing through them. (Benmussa 1979, 77)

This spectral space is the setting for the representation of movement between spaces: Benmussa's objective for her work on Moore's text is to create a space of fluidity between identities, between time-frames, between narrative fiction and theatre. Ultimately, she creates the non-realist setting in order to enable multiple versions of Albert to become manifest on the stage, drawing attention to the fact that the 'true' Albert must remain inaccessible, above all to the character herself. Costume is of supreme importance in this theatre. Albert's suit is the ultimate metaphor – it is 'at the same time

armour, yoke and defence' (Benmussa 1979, 22). One of Benmussa's aims for the play was to explore the politics of work in the patriarchal society represented in Moore's story, and women's lack of power in the hierarchy:

> I had to expose the scandal that this woman's body hidden under this man's body represents for society. (Benmussa 1979, 22)

Albert's costume became her means of subsistence and survival, but it also "exiled her for life from her own body" (Benmussa, 1979, 23). Through disjunction of sound and image (many of the characters only 'appear' as 'voices off' or recorded voices – and fragmentation of the narrative, Benmussa opens up the gaps and silences in Moore's narrative. The emphasis on silence and absence, combined with her work on the temporal dimension of the piece, allows her to bring the significance of objects such as costume to the fore: costume becomes "the pivot between life and death" in the play, according to Benmussa. Her stage adaptation shows very forcefully how the man's suit worn by Albert alienates her from her woman's body for life. And the play also highlights the enormity of the price Albert pays for her economic survival: the loss of her sexual body, which seems to have withered beneath the suit. Her body has been transubstantiated into the coins she saves beneath the floorboards of her room, wrapped – like babies – in blue and pink tissue paper. "Her costume has become her body. This was the starting-point from which I directed the actresses" (Benmussa 1979, 22). Ultimately, the costume is manipulated by Benmussa to symbolise the disempowerment and exclusion of the woman at the heart of the story: she is alienated from her own body in a very graphic way. Combined with Benmussa's handling of Moore's narrative, and her use of voice, costume works to represent the silencing of Albert, whose power to tell her own story is

largely usurped by the voice of George Moore.

In Benmussa's adaptation, Moore and his interlocutor Alec are voices-off throughout the playing time. The play opens with these two voices, which are heard before anything is seen on stage. The voice of George Moore continues to recount Albert's narrative throughout. What is more, Moore speaks for Albert in scenes when the silent body of the main character is present on stage. In fact, Benmussa's great innovation in the play adaptation is to make Albert a largely silent character, and to have a chorus of voices off, or recorded voices, circling round the character in the stage space. At the opening of the play, two chambermaids pull back the stage curtains as they would the curtains in a guest's bedroom in the morning. Benmussa underlines the theatricality of the venture from the outset – we are entering into theatrical space, and this is 'dream space' according to Benmussa: 'In stage work, just as in dream work, a situation or a desire is projected into space by a word or gesture: stage work produces images. The stage is the reflecting surface of a dream […] it is the meeting-place of desires that can only make signals to us […].' (Benmussa 1979, 9). One of the key effects of Benmussa's theatre is that of mobility of all the structures within the piece, and above all, the temporal and spatial structures. In this play, as in her other work for the stage, she fractures the temporal dimension of the staging, so that several dimensions are in play at any one time. Thus, the voices of Moore and Alec come from 'elsewhere' – in one sense, they are already in the past, although they speak in the present. The past of the narrative is in conflict with the present of the playing:

> The continual play between the distance implied by the narration, and on the other hand, the identification with the characters demanded by the theatre, obliges this

ubiquity to be both *there*, and *elsewhere*. (Benmussa 1979, 24)

This multiplication of levels of playing is further enhanced by the disjunction of voice and body presented by her adaptation of Moore's text. At various points in her production, a plethora of recorded voices circle around Albert, who is alone on-stage. It is never clear whether these are the real voices of the hotel's inhabitants, or voices in Albert's head – her imaginings or dreams. The voice of George Moore frequently intervenes in Albert's reveries, interpreting them for Alec, and its never quite clear what the status of this voice is – is it also a voice in Albert's head, or coming from 'elsewhere'? In addition, Benmussa uses the flashback to complicate matters further. So, both actors and spectators are forced to move between several layers of reality and unreality, fantasy and dream, and this fluctuation creates the ideal conditions for meditation on the nature of 'presence' and 'absence', for which the story of Albert is the ideal catalyst.

The stage, for Benmussa in her writings on theatre, is the place where we can apprehend – in the sense of 'have an apprehension of' – that which resists representation. Thus, with Albert Nobbs, she designed a set that would allow for the suggestion of ghostly presences, signaling that the play is a reawakening of a story from the past, but also suggestive of the unlived life of Albert Nobbs. Albert is present on stage, but only just. Effectively, she is absent from her own life. At one point in the play, the chambermaids who appeared at the opening reappear, and one of them stands behind Albert – she is her "feminine double", according to the text. This spectral presence – visible to the audience, but not to Albert – "imitates every movement she makes. It is as if they are superimposed on each other" (Benmussa 1979, 93). Benmussa's set is spare,

with two doors – an upstage swing door, leading to the hotel's kitchen, and a downstage revolving door, leading from the hotel's lobby to the street. The stage is dimly lit. A backcloth suggests the upper floors of the hotel, and characters – guests, maids – painted in *trompe l'oeil*. In the middle of this cloth, is a landing with a real chair, and on this chair sits a real character – Albert – sitting very still and only just distinguishable from the *trompe l'oeil* scene. Only a small group of characters ever appears on stage, effectively the staff of the hotel. The guests do not appear, though Mrs Baker, the hotel's manageress, frequently addresses guests, and the revolving door frequently moves as if people are coming and going in the hotel, though no-one is seen. Similarly, the swing doors at the back of the stage regularly swing back and forth, though no-one is entering or leaving the kitchen.

What Benmussa gives us is an interplay of voices in a space where presences are suggested, but not seen. In fact, the only characters seen on stage are Albert, Hubert Page, Mrs Baker and Helen Dawes. Scenes not visible on stage are evoked imaginatively through the conversations heard – for example, between members of the kitchen staff. Sometimes, we hear Albert's inner voice, while she sits or stands mute on stage. Sometimes, a character on stage speaks in dialogue with an invisible interlocutor, whose recorded voice we hear. And throughout, the voice of George Moore intervenes at regular intervals to comment on Albert's story, and even to speak on Albert's behalf, commenting on her actions and interpreting her intentions. Elin Diamond notes that "Moore, aggressively omniscient, is everywhere […] just as though the Albert we see were absent from her own story, a mere diegetic description" (Diamond 1990, 100). Benmussa's narrator, unlike Moore's, claims the story is a true one, and Benmussa

highlights the authority of the male voice telling the woman's story. This effect is further enhanced by the plethora of other disembodied voices heard by the audience in the course of the play. Most of these are indulging in gossip about Albert, especially when the apparently asexual waiter begins to take what seems to be an amorous interest in the chambermaid Helen Dawes. Benmussa's technique of fragmentation of episodes and disjunction of body and voice is particularly effective in generating the impression that Albert is an absent presence at the heart of her own story, and also in highlighting the aggressive and calculating nature of the commerce at the heart of heterosexual relations. Albert is particularly unsuited to the cut-and-thrust of the sexual marketplace, and the young waiters and chambermaids of the hotel exploit her innocence and mock her apparent lack of sexual drive in a merciless fashion. The unnerving, not to say uncanny nature of the disembodied voice, is particularly effective in representing the insidious nature of gossip and the coercive nature of gender relations.

To take this one step further, we could say that Benmussa exploits Moore's narrative in order to make a play about the coercive nature of narrative art, and by extension, narrativity. Teresa de Lauretis has argued that the subordination and exclusion of women is endemic to narrative, inherent in its very morphology (de Lauretis 1981, 103-57). A playwright like Benmussa is actively interrupting the processes of narrativity – the process by which a spectator of any representative medium will construct a causal chain of events, on the basis of the evidence provided, leading to a telos or conclusion. By playing with notions of presence and absence through the medium of the disembodied voice, by moving between past, present and future in an apparently random way, thereby presenting an impossibly episodic and fragmented telling of Albert's story, Benmussa

makes it impossible for us to consume the character as a coherent whole, and makes us feel our own complicity in the construction of gender roles through the telling of stories. "With its relentless teleology, its ordering of meaning, narrative accrues to itself the power to define and legislate. It is, as Maria Minich Brewer puts it, 'the discourse of authority and legitimation'" (Diamond 1990, 96). In the late 1970s and in the 1980s, a number of women playwrights made plays that exposed the coercive nature of narrative – Diamond points to Marguerite Duras, Caryl Churchill and Benmussa as three salient examples of this. By flooding their stages with fragments of narrative, at the centre of which stands a largely silent women, these playwrights interrupt the dramatic present with intimations of the past, forcing the audience to understand female identity as a historical and cultural construction. This is what Simone Benmussa achieves with *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs.*

Susan Melrose has noted that in the 'classical' Europe-centred theatrical tradition, "the idea of woman has not only figured, but served as a prime focus for dramas (such as *Antigone*) which are concerned with threats to authority in the family structure – a microcosm of the state" (Melrose 1998, 132). Melrose concludes that while in theatre tradition the *idea* of woman has always been powerful, "theatre as institution staged [the] political erasure [of women]" (134). Judith Thompson also comments on how classical theatre, particularly the Greek theatre, sought to formulate and enforce notions of gender roles: "Female sexuality is [seen] as dangerous, not only to family honour, but to state security and to cooperative survival: it must be made to seem part of a 'natural' male order by the action of the plays" (Thompson 1992, 30). She points out that "plays don't in fact *mean* things, they *do* them" (28) – that theatre 'means' what happens in the

auditorium – and that therefore, the playwright, and ultimately the performance, can shape meanings and have a transformative impact on the bodymind[1] of those present in the auditorium, not through 'character' or even text, but through the picture of a world that is created between author, actor and spectator. Clearly, it is the combination of all the languages of the stage that accomplishes this shaping work: voice, gesture, facial expression, light, spatial relations, movement. Philip Auslander has pointed out that in performance, "the self is gender amorphous, holding within itself the potential for many changing gender and sexual identities" (Auslander, 1997, 136).

For Benmussa, Albert's dream is the dream of a world in which one would be free to operate unhindered by the shackles of heterosexual politics. Unlike the Hollywood film, which in a sense relishes the potential for titillation and sexual speculation in a story of female transvestism, and which capitalizes on the sub-plot of romance between Helen, the young chambermaid, and Joe, the handyman, Benmussa's play is built around Albert's dream, and is constructed in such a way that it makes space for many moments of reverie on the part of the main character. The section entitled 'Albert's Dream' marks the beginning of the character's building of a fantasy of a new life in a feminine space, where she could indulge her sensual longings, in the company of another woman:

> ALBERT NOBBS'S VOICE: […] I would return home, my heart anticipating a welcome – a real welcome, for though I would continue to be a man to the world, I would be a woman to the dear one at home. […] Our home would be as pretty and happy as any in the city of Dublin. […] a clock to stand on a marble chimney-piece or a mahogany chiffonier. (Benmussa 1979, 94)

In other moments of reverie, Albert, dreams of having access to the beauty of nature, longing to visit Lisddoonvarna on the west coast of Ireland with the housemaid Helen Dawes:

> ALBERT NOBBS: I've looked forward to […] walking with you in the strand, the waves crashing up into the cliffs, with green fields among them […]. We shall see the ships passing and wonder whither they are going. (Benmussa 1979, 105)

Actors on Benmussa's stage must play on at least two levels, as they interact with the recorded voices of absent characters or perform in the presence of characters who are invisible to them. In this oneiric form of theatre, actors are required to "go into the secret recesses of the characters and the space that surrounds and penetrates them, which they in their turn must haunt" (Benmussa 1979, 25). A theatre of indeterminacy then, where identities are fluid. Benmussa exploits the potential of theatre, therefore, to explore the processual nature of the self. Her project is radically political:

> If this kind of theatre is to succeed in upsetting the everyday, restrictive ordering of space and time imposed on us by the powers that be, then it must exist and exert itself as political theatre. It is radically opposed to the great edifying and reproducing machines that we see all around us at the moment. (Benmussa 1979, p.11)

This tells us all we need to know about Benmussa and adaptation. Adaptation allows the artist to set herself free from generic traditions and conventions. The adapted text must in some way 'not fit' in the new medium or genre – the text's discomfiture opens the opportunity for exploration of marginality, exclusion, authority and legitimation. In real terms, what this means is that the artist – dramatist – is called upon to use all of the languages of the stage (sound, silence, lighting, gesture, expression) to communicate

something of what has been lost – repressed – in the original telling of the story. Twenty-nine years after playing Benmussa's Albert on stage, Glenn Close financed and starred in the film version. The film is much closer to Moore's novella than it is to Benmussa's stage adaptation of it. Mainstream film is bound by the conventions of narrative, that is, linear plot, strong character development and pace. Director Rodrigo Garcia delivers a strong evocation of Victorian Dublin, and in particular of the life a hotel such as Morrisons, where the relationship between the wealthy upper middle classes and the poor working classes can be considered in microcosm. Not much is left to the imagination. The film is clearly a vehicle for Glenn Close's performance as Albert. In her foreword to a new edition of the Moore text, Close comments that Albert's face is like a mirror, causing people to react to her direct, unknowing gaze in ways that reveal, to themselves and to others, who they really are. Her innocence is also clownlike – the funny-tragic face of the human comedy in which we are all players.' The camera does indeed seem to have been seduced by Close's highly effective sustaining of an impassive, mask-like face and stiff, stilted body. Cinema audiences used to seeing Close in femme fatale roles are inevitably fascinated to find her portrayal of a man – especially the masculine voice – convincing. And her expressionless face and eyes and robotic movements exert an additional fascination. Janet McTeer as Hubert Page is also effective in the transvestite role. Inevitably, Hollywood will need to suggest that when a woman lives with a woman there is sex involved, and when these moments are represented in the film, the screenplay alters the details of the Moore story considerably. So, for example, when Hubert reveals to Albert that she too is a woman, she does it by ripping open her shirt and exposing two dramatically large breasts. This is funny, but it also marks Hubert as a sexual being, so

that when we see her living with the woman she has married, we assume that it is a sexual relationship.

This is far from Benmussa's desire for her play: to bring out "the adventure of marriage as a community of interests and not as a sexual adventure – which I found extremely modern for those days – and celibacy" (Benmussa 1979, 24). In Benmussa's hands, adaptation became a powerful exploration of the subordination and exclusion of women that is endemic to narrative. Both Moore's original novella and Glenn Close's filmic adaptation are anchored in the linear narrative. Benmussa subverts and dislocates the narrative to her own ends. However, although she is faithful to the letter of Moore's text throughout, she makes one small but significant change: she has George Moore say at the outset that unlike the other tales he and Alec exchange, this one is "une histoire vraie" (Benmussa 1977, 1) – a true story. Her play will therefore represent a history of Albert Nobbs, where the truth emerges in the dislocation and fragmentation of the original. Benmussa's stage version of Moore's story shows very clearly that narrative, and by extension, narrativity, reinforces the power relations created by sexual difference, implicating audience members in the coercive desire to consume the silent woman at the heart of the story. In adapting George Moore's work of fiction for the stage, she created a play that is, to a large extent, a meditation on the nature of generic boundaries, and the possibilities afforded by movement and transfer between two genres. Moving between narrative fiction and theatre, she uses the 'perhapser' Albert Nobbs to explore the processual nature of the self, and the fluid nature of identity. By taking a "text from elsewhere" and transposing it to the stage, Benmussa enabled the gaps and silences created by the shift from one medium to another to come to the fore. Within these gaps,

she staged a dance or choreography of the narrative text and the bodies of the actors on the stage, bringing narrative and theatre into a fruitful collaboration. Ultimately, Benmussa's reworking of the story of Albert's attempts to make herself 'fit in' reveals the process of adaptation to be aesthetically transformative, a process which has the capacity to "upset the restrictive ordering of space and time imposed on us by the powers that be."

Works Cited


Auslander, Philip (1997). *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism.* London: Routledge.

Benmussa, Simone (1974). 'La Déréalisation par la mise en scène', in Paul Vernois, ed., *L'Onirisme et l'insolite dans le théâtre fraçcais contemporain*, pp. 27-37. Paris: Editions Klincksieck. My translation.

--- (1977). *La Vie Singulière d'Albert Nobbs.* Paris : des femmes.

--- (1979). *Benmussa Directs: Portrait of Dora and The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs.* London: John Calder. *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs* is translated by Barbara Wright.

Diamond, Elin (1990). 'Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmussa, Duras', in Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, pp.92-105. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

De Lauretis, Theresa (1981). 'Desire in Narrative' in Theresa de Lauretis*, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, pp.103-57. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Melrose, Susan (1998). 'What do women want (in theatre)?' in Lizbeth Goodman (ed.), *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, pp.131-135. London: Routledge.

Moore, George (2011). *Albert Nobbs: A Novella.* London: Penguin Books. "Albert Nobbs" first appeared in Moore's *A Story-Tellers Holiday* by George Moore, in 1918. It was later re-published by him in his *Celibate Lives* (1927).

Sanders, Julie (2006, 2016), *Adaptation and Appropriation.* London: Routledge.

Thompson, Judith (1992). 'The World Made Flesh: Women in Theatre' in *The Death of the Playwright?* pp. 24-42. London: Macmillan.

Zarrilli, Phillip (2002), *Acting (Re) Considered.* London: Routledge.

[1] Phillip Zarrilli uses the term 'bodymind' to refer to the psychophysical work of the actor. See in particular his book *Acting (Re)Considered,* London, New York: Routledge, 2002.