

Lawrence's 'Fox' Sets Trap for Adapter

By ROBERT KOEHLER

The playwright is one of the last links between private art and a mass public. On one hand, he shares with the novelist the boast of sole authorship. On the other hand, he shares with the screenwriter the pleasure of hearing a live audience react to the dialogue. It's the playwright's words we're hearing, one voice speaking to many.

Things get complicated, though, when the playwright is adapting another author's work. Where does the author end and the playwright begin? How can the playwright know when intent is violated? Whose voice is this anyway?

If the author is alive and feels violated, a mere phone call of protest might do. For Allan Miller, adapting D. H. Lawrence's novella "The Fox" (now in a revival of Miller's original 1981 production at the Back Alley Theatre), there were only gut instincts to go on—an emotional compass shared by Lawrence's characters.

"This story depicts instincts at odds, rather than motivations," explained Miller, sitting in his living-room rocking chair.

A dead author, though, has a few defenses. Miller found this out in 1956 when he wrote "The Fox" as a one-act exercise piece for himself, Geraldine Page and others in New York's Actors' Studio.

One of these defenses is the author's estate. When Page and producer Richard Adler encouraged Miller to send "The Fox" to Broadway, he innocently paid the estate's office a visit.

"I was literally thrown out the door," he said, smiling at his youthful *chutzpah*. "You can't just take an author's story and adapt it without getting the estate's permission," they told me. Of course, they were right. But that wasn't going to stop me."

So Miller went, as they say, to a higher source: Frida Lawrence, the novelist's wife.

"I sent a copy off to her, expecting the worst. In a couple of weeks, she replied, saying that it was the best adaptation of any of her husband's work she had seen." The measure of her enthusiasm was that no option was charged.



LACY ATKINS / Los Angeles Times

Director Allan Miller, who adapted "The Fox" to the stage.

As it transpired, "The Fox" never reached the Great White Way. Written with Page in mind and delivered to Adler on time, Miller waited months for a reply. "As time ran on," said Miller, sounding like any rejected playwright, adapter or not, "my hope began to run out." Adler finally acknowledged to Miller, who had expanded the play into three acts and (at Adler's request) added more than three characters, that "he didn't think he was the right producer for it."

It was Miller's play now ("not even Lawrence's ghost could stop me"), and the surest sign of that was what Miller did next.

"I tore up every copy of the script I could lay my hands on." For the next 20 years, Miller's last image of "The Fox" was as trash can filler. Only he didn't get his hands on every copy.

"Flash forward two decades. I was rummaging through old papers, and to my shock, I found a copy of the script. I gave it to my wife [and co-artistic director at the Back Alley] Laura [Zucker] to read. After a couple of hours, she came back to me and asked me when I had last read it. She thought I had a real play."

A close read of the novella reveals the germ of a drama between Henry, a World War I soldier on leave, and Jill and Nellie, female partners eking out a farm existence. The farmhouse Henry intrudes upon was his childhood home, and he determines from the start to have Nellie as his wife.

We can imagine the living-room fights between Jill and Henry. (Less imaginable is a lesbian affair, cooked up for the 1968 Lewis John Carlin/Howard Koch film version.) But things become tricky when Lawrence dives into interior monologues about human will.

"An obvious problem," Miller noted. "So I latched onto a visual symbol for Henry's will: his rifle. I reweaved the rifle into the play's action, and it gave me my ending."

The reason why Miller couldn't follow Lawrence's ending is a classic example of adapter's nightmare. First, Lawrence has Henry fell a tree and literally *will* it to crash on Jill and kill her. Then, he has Nellie and Henry run off to farthest Cornwall, with Nellie resisting Henry's demands for subservience.

"That's impossible to stage," he said, adding that the film adaptation fell into the trap of literalness during these passages. "It's like the dialogue. I'd say at least 70% of it is mine, but created after surrounding and brewing myself in Lawrence's own dialogue. You search for what sounds right—like someone saying 'You're buttered up'—not the literal words."

Miller's ending uses the rifle symbol climactically, and actors' expressions as an emotional coda. The process made him conclude that "a truly artistic adaptation is a piece of original writing. It's being true to the original theme—the dilemma of two people being equals and lovers at the same time—while inventing plot and structure."

Miller, a busy actor when he isn't busy at the Back Alley, hasn't returned to a serious binge of writing since "The Fox." But, looking out the window, he found a connection between acting and his creative dalliance with Lawrence. "You don't lose your own identity by becoming the voice of another author—or another character. You gain something by adopting that voice to your own mind."