

A Victorian Play with a MODERN HEART

Alexa Junge's challenge in adapting *Fingersmith* was to trim down the huge book while still staying true to the characters' needs and wants.

By Judith Rosen

Writer Alexa Junge picked up *Fingersmith* when a friend recommended it and then—propelled into its startling, vivid world of Victorian con artists and thieves—barely put it down until its 500 pages were done.

She knew right away that she had to turn Sarah Waters' Man Booker Prize-nominated novel into a play. The stage version of *Fingersmith* will have its world premiere at OSF in 2015.

"The characters were so alive, I could see them and hear them all speak," Junge said during a recent interview at OSF. "Their needs were urgent, life or death. And the many different points of view, so mesmerizing in the book, felt innately theatrical. Every scene felt like a seduction."

Adapting a book that betrays as well as seduces, and contains several dramatic plot twists was a challenge that she delighted in. Not only are we being told a story, we're being directly spoken to by the characters, so that we think we're part of that story. We have to shift our thinking and shift our hearts, but we can't disengage; the characters are standing there in front of us, working to win us to their perspective. They need us. They live and breathe because we're there. And as we give to them and the story, we take from them in turn."

Junge delighted in making the story's romance part of this active engagement. Seeing a forbidden love grow opens our eyes to lives we don't know we've been blind to, she says. "Waters reclaimed the Victorian novel by creating a narrative within it that could never exist in its day. Now I get to make theatrically present something that was forbidden, unnamed, while still being true to the time and the roles people had to play. You may think you know what this story is, but you don't. It's much more interesting than you think. It's much more complicated as well."

First, you cut. But what?

After pitching her project to OSF and getting stage rights to the book, Junge faced her first creative hurdle in deciding what to cut. "That's any adapter's dilemma," she notes: "How do I want to spend my time on the stage? What scenes do I want to see? Can I serve the plot as it is, or do I have to simplify?" *Fingersmith*, with its intricate, twisting story and its large cast of characters, posed a particular challenge.



Alexa Junge

She wondered briefly if she could do what the Royal Shakespeare Company did with *Nicholas Nickleby* in 1980: capture the work's richness in a massive, six-hour, two-day production. She gave up that idea quickly; "Everyone I proposed it to blanched."

Instead she set priorities by focusing first on the emotional needs of the characters. "When I write, I have to connect emotionally with each character's story, to feel its every beat," she says. "Then I focus on the

significant beats in the action."

She was aware that staying true to the novel—its spirit and aims—might mean changing it. "You can't sit with characters for ages, the way you can do in the book," says Junge. "So to articulate their stories, you sometimes have to reframe them in a way that an audience can more immediately understand and feel." But as she built in or fleshed out motivations for selected characters, she aimed to make them an outgrowth of what was in the book, not a wholesale change. She saw signs that she was on the right track when, watching auditions, she couldn't remember whether the scene being read was in the book or not.

"It's that thing an adaptation does," she says. "It's different, but it feels of a piece with the original work and its world. It keeps essential what's essential, but it also makes the work new."