

# Arts of Adaptation

The County's new film festival hosts a series of conversations on conversion, the art of transforming one work of art into another

KAREN VALIHORA

The official program includes film screenings, exhibits, music, parties, drinks in the festival lounge at Karlo Estates — and, threaded through all of it, conversation.

This festival explores dialogue — whether formal, staged conversation about the films, or those around a bottle of wine or at dinner — or the kind that goes on within, that interior dialogue with the conversation an adaptation necessarily pursues.

Film adaption is pursued as a multi-layered conversation. That conversation might start with a screenwriter and the author whose work they adapt, or transform, moving it from one medium to another. That work is a meditation, and it continues to spark a series of conversions, by directors, actors, and cinematographers, into, eventually, a film and its audiences.

What is usually invisible, the thought and feeling behind filmmaking, comes into the foreground here — into the conversation. That puts the 2002 film written by Charlie Kaufman, *Adaptation*, at the center of the programming.

Charlie Kaufman also wrote the script for *Being John Malkovich*, a brilliant film about being on the inside, in the interior of actor John Malkovich's mind. The film managed both to make its viewers feel they were inside John Malkovich's mind — and that John Malkovich's mind was a singularly unique place. By stressing interiority and uniqueness, paradoxically, the film opened common ground, forged a path into those qualities of deeply interior experience that we share with others.

That's what film can accomplish at its best — the sense of an interior experience shared with others — which is why seeing films in concert with others is such an important way to appreciate them, to take them in. In the dark interior of a cinema, we are all dreaming the same dream.

## BASED ON A BOOK

That dream, for this festival at least, comes from books. Another deeply interior art form, authors spin sentences that unfurl inside the mind of the reader, creating a shared experience on the page. One of the marvels of a faithful adaptation is that it can reproduce exactly the experience of reading a book; the early Harry Potter movies, for example, seemed to recreate exactly what I had imagined and experienced as a reader, right down to Hagrid and Dumbledore and Diagon Alley.

Not all adaptation strives for this kind of fidelity. Far from it. The film *Adaptation* shows Kaufman's struggle to create his own work of art by completely re-thinking (if not overthinking) its source, a book by Susan Orlean called *The Orchid Thief*. Watching

*Adaptation*, I found myself for the first half, while screenwriter Charlie (a version of Kaufman, naturally) suffers writer's block, just wanting to read the book — I still want to do that — but when Charlie finally gets inside his subject, the film just takes off, a brilliant work of art in its own right, one that goes further than the book — quite literally: the film's second half takes place three years after the publication of *The Orchid Thief*.

On opening night, the festival screens a UK and France co-production, *Widow Clicquot*, which comes to CAFF right after its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival. The film takes us to the invention of champagne during the Napoleonic wars of the early nineteenth century; whole scenes take place in sun-soaked French vineyards. It's a must for anyone interested in wine culture, and it made me long to read the book, a New York Times bestseller. As author Tilar J. Mazzeo will be on stage after the film, in conversation with Eleanor Wachtel of the CBC's Books and Company, I did just that.

The book features gems like passages from the letters of the dashing salesman, Louis Bohne, to Barbe-Nicole Clicquot, the veuve, or widow, of Veuve Clicquot, as he travels across Russia in deep winter, selling the dream of champagne to thirsty, war-ravaged nobles. It's a fantastic history. The film whets the appetite for more, appropriately enough, and raises questions about what is kept and what must go in vivid, visual adaptations of written and historical materials.

Also screening is the Canadian film *Ru*. Set in Quebec in the 1970s, the film remembers the "boat people," the Vietnamese who fled the end of the Vietnam War after the defeat of the American-supported South Vietnam by the communist North. The film, based on a coming-of-age novel of the same title by Canadian writer Kim Thúy, juxtaposes memories of the young heroine, Tinh's, well educated and wealthy family's forced flight from her beautiful childhood home, by truck, ship, wooden boat, and, finally, airplane, to rural Quebec. Her father, formerly a high-ranking member of the Vietnamese government, takes a position delivering Chinese food, happy to be safe and alive and with his family. The film renders the Quebec of the 1970s in beautiful detail, as from a child's eye, opening a conversation between Tinh's past and that of a Canadian viewer. Afterwards, director and screenwriter Charles-Oliver Michaud will be in conversation with the award-winning writer and screenwriter of *Scarborough*, Catherine Hernandez.

On Saturday, Pathways to ReconciliACTION takes place around a screening of *The Secret Path*, an animated adaptation of both Gord Downie's album and Jeff Lemire's graphic novel that remembers the experience of Chanie Wenjack, an Anishinaabe boy who died trying to get home from school. The screening is preceded by a Mohawk language short film, *Six Strings*. Before the screenings, a traditional Mohawk welcome and an opening concert by Tyendinaga-based singer-songwriter Jennifer Brant presents songs inspired by Mohawk/Kanien'kéha language, culture and traditions. At the same time, a residential school survivors exhibit curated by the Tsi Tyónnheht Onkwawén:na Language and Cultural Centre unfolds in the Regent Theatre Lobby. Later that day, a virtual reality experience that mediates on land and time, *Biidaaban: First Light*, takes place in the sensory garden at Base 31. That's a pretty engaging day, for all the senses.

Both after and between the festival's multiple film screenings, conversations, between writers, screenwriters, directors, and producers, pursue the themes of adaptation, first-person experience, and what survives. This festival is centered on the first-person: the memoirs and historical fictions at its heart approach the experiences of individuals both from within and without, felt on the inside, looked at from the outside. The conversations it promotes suggest ways of bringing disparate realities together, not to dissolve, but to inform one another.

Festival Passes are \$150, and available on the CAFF website. Single event tickets are \$25.

