"The Old Forest": Story into Film

Steven John Ross
University of Memphis, sjross@memphis.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview

Recommended Citation
Ross, Steven John (1985) ""The Old Forest": Story into Film," Sacred Heart University Review: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol5/iss1/1
On April 12, 1985, Sacred Heart University hosted the New England premiere of "The Old Forest," an hour-long film adaptation by Steven John Ross of Peter Taylor's short story. Like "Searching for Wordin Avenue," the award-winning film he made several years ago while teaching at Sacred Heart, "The Old Forest" is, in Ross's words, "an ethnographic film," in this case focusing on various aspects of pre-World War II Memphis: the conventional, upper-class world of Nat Ramsey and Caroline Braxley, his fiancée; the new working class world of Lee Ann Deehart, one of Nat's girlfriends; and the primeval world of the Old Forest, to which Lee Ann runs away in the crucial incident that forces Nat and Caroline to look closely at each other and themselves. "The Old Forest" is scheduled for nationwide television presentation on the Arts and Entertainment Network.

Ross, who is currently a member of the Communication Arts faculty at Memphis State University, introduced the film at Sacred Heart and led a discussion after the screening on various problems of adapting a literary work to the film medium. The following is an edited transcript of his comments and responses to questions raised by the audience.

Just so I don't forget these stories, because I think they're so good, I want to talk first about the problem of trying to find techniques to take a literary piece and make it dramatic with film. One problem, of course, is trying to find in the real world images that capture what the author has written and has been able to imagine and have total control over. So, adapting a story to a screenplay is one thing. You try to deal with certain problems, going from one medium to another. But then there is another adaptation problem: butting your head up against reality: what can you find in the real world that you can film that is actually going to express what you think the author expressed? In general, that aspect of the production of "The
Old Forest,” I think, was fairly successful in terms of the visual aspect of it. But there were three instances that were extraordinarily fortunate to the point of being downright bizarre that I thought you might want to hear about.

The first was when we were looking for the loading dock for the scene with Lee Ann’s friend Nancy and the police. Those of you who have read the story were probably struck by the fact that it may be the single most faithful thing you’ve ever seen in any adaptation, that we just picked it up out of the story and plunked it down in the film. Well, I had students who I exploited to every inch of their lives searching all over Memphis with Polaroid cameras and they’d bring back pictures of loading docks, but nothing was working. And, as happened with most of this film, two weeks were left and there were still about fourteen locations that had not been found. David Appleby, the co-creator of the film, and I got into the car one day and just drove around. We were down by Calhoun Street and came across the loading dock. I said, “David, look at this.” And he said, “This is it!” The texture of the bricks and everything about it had the right period flavor. The angle of the light was perfect. That night I called Peter Taylor up at his home in Charlottesville and said, “Peter, I’ve got to tell you about this loading dock we found. You’re going to love it!” As I was describing it to him, he started finishing my sentences. “Does it have the Argle Brothers Cotton Company sign on it?” I said “Yes.” He said, “You’re not going to believe this, but that’s the only loading dock I ever visited in Memphis. I didn’t hang around loading docks much. I had a friend there.” And that is the loading dock he had in mind when he wrote the story. What you are seeing is a literal visualization of that scene.

The second weird occurrence like that was finding Caroline Braxley’s house. I was very happy in finding the Ramsey house and I thought it was exactly the way I wanted it to look, but I wanted Caroline’s house not to be the spitting image of Nat’s house. Nat’s house has got very warm colors and lots of wood and it’s sort of masculine in a traditional sense. So we were looking for something with more beige and pastels for Caroline’s house. A friend of mine took me to a house and we said this is wonderful. I talked to the people who owned it and they were incredibly cooperative, even
though I gave them all the warnings that you can possibly give, which is never enough because no one ever really understands how inconvenient it's going to be. They let us shoot. I went home that night, called up Peter and said, “We have a great house for Caroline.” I again started describing it and he said “Now does this house have French windows in the front and is there a wonderful staircase? Well, you’re not going to believe this, but I lived in that house! My sister was married on that staircase.” That house would be perfect, he said. In fact, if anything it became a problem because he kept on telling me on the phone, “You’ve got to include this part of that house and that part.” So those kinds of bizarre, eerie circumstances gave us a fated feeling about the film.

The last bit of good fortune involved the cotton office. If you’ve read the story, you know there is a wonderful page-long description of that cotton office. We had an adviser who was an old friend of Peter’s. He was a doctor in town and is one of the people the story is based on. He was a cotton office heir who gave it all up and became a doctor in his mid-thirties. He did not have the accident described in the story, though. Peter had the accident with the girl in the car. He’d take me down to Cotton Row in Memphis, which is on Front Street, right at the river, and we’d look at all those great old cotton offices. The main problem, though, was that in the 1940s they blocked up the skylights and put in modern low-hanging fluorescent lights. This may not be romantic or picturesque, but it’s a very precise way for cotton people to grade cotton. The color temperature doesn’t change as it does when you work by sunlight. So we couldn’t use any of these modern cotton offices, and we didn’t know what we were going to do.

You may have noticed a strange credit at the end of the film: to Prince Mongo. Prince Mongo signs his checks from the Bank of the Planet of Zambodia. But his checks are good and he buys crazy things that nobody wants and they wind up making him a mint of money. Well, Prince Mongo had bought this old cotton office building, which he let us use. As we were starting to shoot in there, David Appleby asked Ed Corlee, an old cotton man in real life and in the film, about who used to own this cotton office. He said, “Back in the thirties, a guy named Jack Ramsey owned it,” which is Nat’s father’s name in the film. He didn’t know anything about that. So
that was the third very strange thing that happened as we shot the film.

Again, when you're trying to find settings that match what's in the story, you find things that don't match but are so evocative of what you think the story is about that you wind up adding scenes. There is much we had to cut from the story, but there are a few things added. One of them is the scene in the men's room where Nat confronts himself. I think it was very important to add a scene like that in the film. There is no need for one in the story, but, in the dramatic medium it was important to do that. We were looking for settings for the girls' offices and I happened into the bathroom for the obvious reason, went out, and called David in. He looked in and said "We've got to use this place." We took one look at that bathroom and both fell in love with it as a great place in which someone has to confront himself. So that's the way that scene evolved. It wasn't something that was written in the screenplay adaptation. It came about as a result of confronting reality and trying to get all the other scenes matched up with locations. So with that in mind as a kind of practical extension of adaptation problems, I'll tell you what I found to be the most difficult things about going from page to screenplay in adapting this particular story.

The first problem was that I think the story breaks the most basic rule: don't have a passive protagonist. Your protagonist should be active, and Nat is not. Everybody else grows and changes during the course of the story, but Nat has everything done for him. Lee Ann is the one who runs out into the woods. I always felt that implicit in the story is that the person who needs to run out of that car and get lost in the woods and just hang around and think is Nat, not Lee Ann. That's what Nat should be doing when she says, "Get off the road, Nat." But he's not going to run into any forest and stare at his navel for a few hours. Nat goes out with the police. He goes out with his father and the mayor. He goes out with Caroline. They're all leading him by the nose, which is the point of the story, of course. But a passive protagonist is a problem. I think the only way to deal with that problem to some extent involves the next adaptation problem: what do you do about the narrator?

I felt that we had to have a narrator in this film because from the
very beginning you must sense that there is an older person telling a
story; he must have changed eventually. And so you have some sense
of progress having happened and that probably, eventually, the
events pictured change Nat. So that was one of the many reasons why
I think it was essential in this adaptation to keep the first person
narration. There are other problems with it. In his stories, Peter
Taylor uses a very subtly unreliable narrator: you’re not supposed to
take everything he says as God’s word. As Peter told me while we
were working on the script, you know that the older Nat is liberated,
but not that liberated.

I tried to get more of a sense of that ironic distance in the
narration, but failed. It just didn’t work. I’m not saying somebody
couldn’t do it, but what we were doing just wasn’t working. We had
several versions of the narration and we’d look at it, show it to a
couple of trusted friends on the editing table, and the response was
always the same. I couldn’t make the unreliable narration work, as
much as I would have liked to. I think it helped having Peter read the
narration because he’s got that nice southern kind of ironic quality to
his voice, very self-deprecating. But that irony was nevertheless one
of the things I think was lost in the translation. Again, I’m not saying
somebody couldn’t do it, but at least I had the courage to admit it
wasn’t working and so we fell back, gave it less texture but at least
tried to make it play a little better. You can have lots of literary
concepts and high intellectual goals, but if it doesn’t work on screen
you’d better drop it because nobody’s going to care.

And finally we faced the problem of how to get the first person
narration cut down to a manageable size. If you had seen the three
versions of the script, each one has half the amount of narration as
the previous ones, and then from the third draft to what wound up on
the screen there was another reduction of over fifty percent. You just
can’t keep going on, and every time you cut you realize you’re losing
something from the story. The film can only suggest the incredibly
ambiguous nature of the paternalistic system that was going on,
described in wonderful detail by Peter Taylor. For example, in the
story when the mayor and the newspaper editor and all the people go
out to put pressure on Lee Ann’s girlfriends, you expect what you’ve
seen in a thousand Hollywood movies about the South: some 400
pound sheriff walking up to the girl, saying “Listen, either you tell us
where that girl is or you're in for a lot of trouble.” And instead you have a very polite and paternalistic — in both the pejorative and positive senses of the word — respectful approach to them. And the story gives a lot more detail about their feelings toward the girls. We tried to do some of that in dialogue and we had to cut it because it fell flat on its face. It just didn't work. So that was another major problem: how do you keep on paring down, paring down, paring down.

I was wondering about the accents. I detected no discernible southern accent in the film. I've never been to Memphis. Is there one?

There is no one Memphis accent. There are a lot of southern accents, some extreme (like that of one of the policemen in the film) and some very subtle. A lot of the debutante girls and boys would be sent back East to school for a few years. There's a broad range of accents: I would say that there are 45 southern accents within a 100 mile radius of Memphis. I made sure we cast people from the area because obviously I'm not going to be a good dialect coach about southern accents.

You transposed Taylor's description of the Old Forest from somewhere within the story to the beginning of the film. Why did you do that?

For a number of reasons. One, if you talk about the story structure, it's very convoluted, and brilliantly so because it doesn't seem to be that convoluted when you're reading it. When you sit down and try to break it into a chronological narrative, it's amazing how convoluted the story-telling is. I think it really serves the story well and I think the story deals with the theme of time better than the film does. I think film can do that, but to tell you the truth I was just too scared. I wasn't going to start trying to deal with that: that was a conscious decision on my part. Also remember that at the beginning
of the story, Peter Taylor tells everything in the first paragraph: he gives away the ending. That’s typical of him because he’s not concerned with plot. He’s concerned with revealing circumstances of people’s lives and how they react to these things. But even for a sophisticated film audience, I just don’t think you’d give away the plot like that right away. It’s just not a very good “Drama 101” idea.

Second, if you are going to use that forest, which is a key image, you’ve got to establish it right away because it’s such a fanciful metaphor. If it’s just plopped in the middle of the story — here’s this forest, and by the way, women used to run off and disappear into these woods — I think the audience would never buy it. One of the things I hated about “Greystoke” was that after 40 wonderful minutes in the jungle, showing a little boy being brought up by the apes, a narrator is suddenly introduced. Not only is the narration introduced for the first time, but the character who is narrating is introduced then. This simply doesn’t work. Structurally, it was important for me to put the forest first. Also, the opening of the film is very rambling and episodic: you don’t get any story going for quite a while. And I think the opening too, by having something a little spooky suggesting “oh well, something bad must happen sooner or later,” was a helpful crutch to have. So I felt it was necessary to transpose it like that.

Did you ever contemplate photographing a narrator in his den or his library as a college professor?

If you noticed, we dropped that line. We just had him change careers and that was because I decided any academic gathering that I showed the film at would break out into hoots and hollers of laughter at the explanation that this man changed his life for the better by becoming a college professor, as if that’s everybody’s answer to the secret of life. So we dropped that. We don’t have to know what happens to him. We were going to have him become a golf pro for a while but decided that was too specific too.
Did you ever think to give him "body," to show him?

I thought about it and I decided not to do it. It was just simply a matter of choice. I liked the idea of the "disembodied" narrator better. I could see someone doing it "right" that way; I just didn't want to do it that way.

In the story, the scene towards the end when Nat and Caroline go racing down the road in the car seems more climactic and drawn out, and it seems very much underplayed in the film. What kind of decisions did you have to make about that scene? Was it a technical decision to shoot it as you did?

It was both technical and aesthetic. In the story, Nat is waiting outside Aunt Martha's place; then Caroline comes out and tells him what happened inside with Lee Ann. That scene is not told by the narrator; you get it through Caroline's long monologue, interrupted by her tearful breakdown. Everything that happens out by the old plantation house in the film happens in the car in the story. Taylor gives lots of interesting description about the towns that Nat and Caroline drive by, which we try to give a sense of in the plantation house scene. But the description goes on and on in the story. There is no way you can put all that stuff in a film. I also felt it was crucial to see Caroline and Lee Ann together. I really felt I wanted to see those two women together at that point because what happens is part of what is supposed to happen to people watching the film: in the beginning, Caroline is set up as pretty much of a stereotypical debutante dud, and hopefully people have the rug pulled out from under their feet a little bit and say "this girl isn't so dumb after all." At least she knows what's happening here, much more than poor old Nat does. She may not be able to break away from it, but she knows what's going on. And Peter said, too, that one of his big goals in writing the story was that it would be easy to make Lee Ann the heroine: the trick was to make Caroline the heroine. I felt that it was very, very important that we break away from the story like that and that Caroline have a chance to gain our sympathy at the end.
Having all of that monologue in the car, first of all, is constraining for a film audience, and I'd have had no way really, because of the way those places look now, of coming up with those other images that Taylor describes that help set the scene in the past without sticking in a lot more narration. The other reason was pragmatic. When you're shooting a long scene in a car, that car couldn't be running because you can't have the noise of the engine. The car has to be on a trailer. You have to have police block off a gigantic stretch of road, and everything you pass has to be of the proper period. And every time the actress doesn't make the take, you have to have some place to turn around this big trailer, and it takes a long, long time. That's again butting your head against reality. So for all those reasons, I changed the scene.

Part of the reason why I was expecting more emphasis on the final car scene was because of those repeated shots of Lee Ann in the convertible. I was trying to look ahead, wondering if you were going to have a similar shot of Caroline's awakening in the car, indicating her real sympathy for Lee Ann's liberation.

The only way you could have an equivalent image to show her liberation too would be to have another convertible, so we would have painted ourselves into a corner. It's always like that. There's always a thousand reasons why you can't use certain ideas. For example, I wanted more footage of Nat and Caroline by that plantation house, and originally the way that scene was written, Caroline did all of her monologue next to that house, where we were going to have some broken windows and stuff to show that it was more tattered and that it was an image of the past that was dying. We just couldn't do a monologue: the road was too close and it's the only road there, even though it's just a one lane road. There were trucks going by all the time. The day I scouted it, it was really quiet, but not the day we got there to shoot. It makes a more metaphorical conclusion to take her into the woods, but to be honest with you, that's what Larry McConkey, the cinematographer, and I kept telling ourselves as we were moving the scene to the woods: it will be
good, a good metaphor, to shoot it in the woods. But we had no choice. There was no other place to shoot that scene but in the woods. So this is confession time. That's another problem of literary adaptation, I'm afraid.

*I think the plantation at the end worked very, very well because I don't think Caroline is liberated. She understands, but I think she herself realizes that she is bound into the society in which she's grown up in somewhat the same way that Lee Ann is bound to the Old Forest. One girl is tied to her biological needs and the other girl is tied to her social needs.*

Yes, I'm happy with the plantation scene and so is Peter. Recently, after showing the film at a place we were both at, he even paid us a compliment and said that he wished he had thought of it. We had more really nice footage of that scene using Larry McConkey's steady camera, really nice traveling shots of Nat and Caroline walking by the house with some music. We wanted to use more of this, but whatever small climax the film has has already taken place and you've got to get the unraveling done fast. We were also trying to get the film in at an hour's length and some things had to go. There's still a remnant of a really wonderful shot we did walking up the pathway to the house. That whole shot was just beautiful because the cameras were moving, gliding with the trees going past and it really gave a sense of going back into the past. It's a perfect visual image, but I just didn't have the time to use all of it.

*There's a horrendous paragraph in the story in which Nat talks about going into World War II, the loss of his children, and the death of his mother and father in a fire, which makes one wonder why this incident of the Old Forest that happened in 1937 is worth talking about at such length when all these intervening catastrophes are dealt with in one paragraph. It again brings up the problem of the narrator, it seems to me, as one who has sublimated all these terrible experiences into this one incident that he can deal with. I'm wondering if that paragraph was ever in your narration or if you*
decided that it brought up so many other problems that maybe it wasn't worth it. It's very jolting in the story.

It's one of the things Peter can do in the story that we can't do in the film: he constantly suggests "I know this all seems so trite. Who cares about rich people in 1937 Memphis? Even people in 1937 Memphis didn't care about rich people in Memphis at that time. And all their stories seem so trite. With all their money, why should we be worrying about them?" Peter is constantly putting out all those disclaimers, and we couldn't do that.

When I read Taylor, I worry about his "nostalgia trip" about the South, the good old South where the "Negroes" treated the white folks nice and we felt comfortable in their protection. I think sometimes you need that jarring sense of the narrator in 1970, who looks back over his life and doesn't see it all as comfortable and genteel. I think you do have that in the film, but I think it's one of the risks that Taylor runs all the time in his stories, at least the ones that I have studied and taught: that there is always this sense of a reader reading Taylor and saying "Gee, things were nice in Memphis." But also, there are those class distinctions that you brought out very nicely, especially I thought with the policeman interviewing the girl on the loading platform. The policeman has a sense of sympathy for her that the aristocrats in Memphis can't possibly feel.

Yes, I always looked at that scene with the policemen as though they were saying "Yea, these are the rich guys that take out our little sisters, these rich guys." There was that kind of tension going on there. But again, that scene is right from the story. I think it's interesting because if I showed the film at the Memphis Country Club, nobody would be offended by it. In fact, the Central High School Class of 1935 is showing the film at their class reunion, which I'm really happy about, and I don't think people will be offended by it. I think they'll look at it as nostalgia even though it obviously isn't meant to be nostalgic, and I think Taylor is very subtle because his
nostalgia is part of that unreliable narration we were talking about before. But it doesn’t hit you over the head.

Tied in with the issue of black-white relations, I think there is one scene that really stood out, a very minor scene: the shot from the point of view of the black maid walking into the room. Am I correct in looking at that as a little touch of irony? It seems as though the white folks in the background look particularly wooden and stuffy.

Yes, the composition is very stately, with Momma Ramsey saying “John will be right here, and if you don’t need him, pay him no mind.” That was our way of trying to get at those paragraphs that Taylor had in the story about the servants. When I read Taylor, what I like is that his people are real people, real people with foibles you can understand and concerns you can identify with. They are also, if not bigots, bigots in a rarefied kind of way, where you have to look twice to understand how deep that goes. It’s just the social system. They did have these servants and relied on them a great deal, and there was no doubt that they felt better about themselves because they had servants.

When you did the scene with Fern and Caroline, in the story does Caroline put her head down like that?

Yes. I think the line is something like “Caroline made herself look absolutely, utterly, abjectly miserable,” or something like that. That’s an interesting point there because in the story Taylor says that Caroline makes Fern feel so bad for Caroline that she gives her the information about where Lee Ann is hiding, although this is very unclear and poorly motivated. In the film, Fern feels it’s as much her feeling of sadness and caring about Nat as it is for Caroline. That was the only way we could make it play. That scene is a favorite of mine because it took the longest time in the editing room to make it work on any level at all. You always feel very close to those scenes.
When I saw that scene I thought it conveyed the sisterhood of women. The male has his proprietary rights and Fern suddenly recognizes in Caroline someone who is also used by Nat's callousness.

That was the original intent. I'm really glad that came across to you — although you've read the story, so you're kind of cheating. I don't know if it's really there in the film or not. The point is that she has to go to Fern to get the answer because Fern looks at it all as a kind of soap opera. That's why I felt, even though it's awkward in the beginning of the narration, we introduce Fern better than Peter did in print. At least we bothered to introduce Fern earlier on. She's not in there enough, but in the story she just suddenly appears out of nowhere. That's why I insisted on keeping the line saying that she wasn't like those other girls. She didn't work for a living and she took her relationship with Nat far too seriously. That she didn't work for a living really doesn't flow in that context, but it has to be there, because on maybe the second or third viewing it may come across that she doesn't get what she wants. She's trying to have these other girls recognize her as any kind of human being at all, obviously, and they treat her terribly. The one who gives Caroline the information is the girl who doesn't work for a living, who just hangs around at home and wanted Nat for a husband and doesn't get him, who probably thinks that Lee Ann has disappeared to get back at Nat. I think it's very important Caroline get her clues from Fern, not from the stronger women.

I was wondering if when you initially planned the project you thought you'd have to shoot in December because you had to have a snowfall.

No, it was shot in December because I had a student crew and a faculty crew and we had to work during semester break. I knew from the very start that we were going to have to use a rain storm in the film. You don't wait for snow in Memphis, not with a budget of under $100,000.
How did you go about getting all the period clothing?

That was our largest budget item. As I said, the film cost a little under $100,000 and the clothing budget was $12,000 or $13,000. There were a lot of characters in this film, and we figured it would be best to fly our costumer — whose name, I swear, is Candice Cain — out to Hollywood. She went to Western Costume and rented and adapted most of the clothes. She also did a lot of shopping. Very little was made. We just didn't have the time or the budget to make clothes. So that's the way it was done. If the devil came to me with a deal and said I'll give you a lousy art director for a good costume designer, I would have signed it, because a director can't fake bad costumes. A costume designer really has to know what she is doing, obviously.

The bill to get the costumes from Hollywood to Memphis was $890, so one of the things we did while we were shooting was to be very nice to Federal Express (whose corporate headquarters are in Memphis). The first day after shooting, David and I got all the costumes in a van and drove down to the airport and Federal Express sent it back for free. That's why they got their credit at the end of the film: “Transport Facilities Courtesy of Federal Express.” That was an $890 grant.

But you know it was really worth it. You actually copied the identical descriptions in the story: of the girl on the loading dock, for instance.

Yes, right down to the red cap Lee Ann is wearing. Peter describes individual clothing in very great detail and I didn't know what half of it was. I relied on Candice a lot. She did a really good job, and she's doing very well for herself now as a theatrical designer.

There's one moment that really stands out in my memory from early on in the film during the garden party at the large house. I think there may have been only one shot, although maybe there were a
couple that were like it, of a man who was just looking sort of absent-mindedly, and it was so vivid because he seemed to have been caught completely unaware when you filmed him.

Yes, I liked that shot too. We were just trying to get that lazy sense of a southern garden party. And actually, he's a very fine actor who's done a lot of stuff in Memphis and just played the lead in "On Golden Pond" in a big theater in Memphis. He was being real nice and said he would be at the garden party. We really didn't have a role for him. We shot a lot of footage where we just gave people general directions. Larry just shot it like a documentary, like we shot the dancing scene in "Wordin Avenue." I'd be next to Larry saying, "Oh Larry, right over there." And he'd say, "Yes, I see it." As a result of that technique we ended up with some of my favorite shots.

_Did you do it that way in the cellar? Because that, again, was a very lively scene._

Absolutely. We had short scripted scenes, but we just let the dancers go. In fact, Larry is a master at the steady cam, which is a device you put on your body. There are springs that come off and it allows you to walk with the camera very smoothly. That's how we did the shot at the loading dock, the opening shot where the camera seems to be craning down as the car is coming in. That was Larry walking down a plank. And the last shot of the film, when the camera is booming up over the trees as the car goes off into the distance, was shot with Larry walking backward up a ladder with the steady cam. He is just very, very good. The problem is that he always wants to use it. When we got to the cellar, I said no tripods for anything and no steady cam. He said, "What do you mean, no steady cam? What about when Aunt Martha has to walk across the room?" I said, "You're going to hand-hold it." It allowed him to work a lot faster. It also meant that when we were shooting the people dancing, we were able to let them go, and we shot it like a documentary. We had a lot of fun. That means when you're cutting it you have to be sure you don't
wind up with the same people in alternate shots, but it allowed for that kind of looseness. Again, stylistic things are often technical in nature and sometimes involve not allowing the camera-man to do what he wants.