Courting Johanna
by Marcia Johnson
based on the short story “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” by Alice Munro

Reviewed by Daniel Thau-Eleff

Alice Munro’s short story “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage,” set in the 1950s in a small town in Ontario, reads like an outlandish, stranger-than-fiction piece of gossip, brought to life through rich character description and development.

Two teenage girls, Edith and Sabitha, intercept a personal letter from Johanna, Sabitha’s nanny, to Ken, Sabitha’s father. Sabitha’s mother died years earlier; her father lives in Gdynia, Saskatchewan, while she lives in Ontario in the care of her grandfather, Mr. McCauley, though being raised mostly by Johanna. When Ken doesn’t respond to Johanna’s letter, the two girls forge a response and, posing as Ken, begin to correspond with Johanna. The letters, which the otherwise bored girls see as an exciting prank, get increasingly romantic until Johanna quits her job with Mr. McCauley, packs up and takes the train to Gdynia to be with Ken.

Neither Munro’s short story nor Marcia Johnson’s stage adaptation, however, begin with this central plot. Both start with Johanna at the train station shipping furniture. Both versions then follow her to the dress shop, where she purchases the dress that she says will “likely be what [she gets] married in” (17). Then we meet Mr. McCauley, who feels betrayed and helpless after the sudden departure of his housekeeper. In Courting Johanna, Johnson designates this first set of scenes the “Prologue,” with “Act One” introducing and following the girls and their exploits, the letters and the courtship. “Act Two” begins with Johanna’s arrival at Ken’s place in Gdynia.

Johnson follows Alice Munro’s plot structure throughout, adding the occasional scene and fleshing out some details through dialogue. Most notable is the added dialogue and details in the relationship between Edith and Sabitha. There are also added scenes that flesh out Mr. McCauley’s dependence on Johanna and which gradually reveal to the audience the clandestine nature of her departure.

In reading Courting Johanna, it is difficult not to feel the loss of the details that make “Hateship, Friendship” such an effective short story. The most interesting things about the story do not emerge through dialogue; they are relayed to us by the unnamed narrator who knows each character’s thoughts
and feelings. For example, *Courting Johanna* omits the details of Mr. McCauley’s former prestige, now faded into anonymity; the story of his rebellious daughter (Sabitha’s mother), her death and the family’s reaction to it (which provides wonderful insight into the time period), replacing all of this with the line, “That furniture . . . belonged to my daughter; my daughter who died” (20), and a few other terse, sometimes darkly comic references. Even Edith’s back-story from her pre-teenage years, when her mother instilled a deep fear in her of masturbation, telling her it would cause her organs to “get congested and she might die” (Munro 113), provides insight into this otherwise pretty nasty character that we just don’t get from Edith’s line, “You could get into trouble doing that. My mother told me!” (45).

Does *Courting Johanna* work as well as a play as “Hateship, Friendship” does as a short story? Does an original artwork adapted from one medium to another ever really survive the transition? It’s certainly an interesting post-modern experience to read the original piece as literature, then read the script of a live-theatre adaptation published as literature. Also, in the premiere production, five actors played the nine roles, which creates interesting linkages between some characters. But the effectiveness of the adaptation is ultimately up to each reader to decide. In any case, “Hateship, Friendship…” and *Courting Johanna* are two versions of an engaging story, and this review is not going to tell you how it ends.

Munro, Alice, “Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage” in *Away from Her*. Penguin 2007. All quotes are from the play unless otherwise indicated.

Daniel Thau-Eleff is a playwright, actor, activist, and independent theatre producer in Winnipeg.

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