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## THEATRE TRANSLATION AS COLLABORATION: A CASE IN POINT IN BRITISH CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

**Abstract:** Theatre translation is usually seen as a more elaborate dimension of literary translation because the text being translated is considered to be just one of the elements of theatre discourse. When translating a play, the translator should always adapt for performance the text he or she is recreating and be aware that a performer will deliver the lines. The translator, then, must take into account both the pragmatic and the semantic expressiveness of the word and remember that they are always at work simultaneously. I will take examples both from my personal experience and from remarkable cases in point of how a good translation may affect an audience reception of a foreign play and I will show that it is primarily through a pragmatic approach that it is possible to obtain an awareness of what is the most appropriate way of rendering the original text.

**Key words:** theatre translation, contemporary English drama, pragmatic approach, holistic context

One possible way of looking at translation activity could be to regard it as a mirror which is held up to accurately represent a source text. The reflected image will never look exactly the same as the original; nevertheless, it is to be trusted as being a true copy of it. The best achievement, then, we can aim at when translating is to “say *almost* the same thing,” as Umberto Eco stated with the title in his extensive study on translation.<sup>1</sup> Although this process of rendering a text from a language into another may lead to the conclusion that it is a task not to be fully fulfilled, in a paradox, I would like to state that this is far from being an absolute failure. We should read it in the light of the aesthetics of failure Samuel Beckett coalesced in *Worstward Ho*: if language by definition fails to translate thought still it is complicit in representing it<sup>2</sup>; therefore, if we are aware that it is not possible to render “faithfully” an original text into another language, all the same the translation reifies this impossibility. Although we know we are doomed to failure, this awareness must generate an expansion in creative activity. After all, as Beckett wrote, all an artist can do is to reiterate his/her attempts: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”<sup>3</sup> Since I first read this, it has become my motto as a translator.

Theatre translation is usually seen as a more complex dimension of literary translation since the text being translated is thought to be just one of the elements of theatre discourse that one has to render in a different language. Besides, theatre is a mirror of the world, a mirror that not only reflects the verbal utterances but also actions, gestures, silences and the whole apparatus that goes together with them. That is why in translating for theatre the intrinsic impossibility of translation becomes an even more complicated process. However, as Anne Ubersfeld wrote in *Reading Theatre*, “In theatre the impossible reigns, theatre works with the impossible, and is made to express the impossible.”<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the rhetorical figure prevailing in theatre is the oxymoron which, for instance, shows the contradictions rooted in the characters – and in the situation they have to cope with – that make theatrical actions move forward on the stage.<sup>5</sup>

“Drama, as an art form, is a constant process of translation,” as Reba Gonstand observed, and “from original concept to script (when there is one), to producer’s/director’s interpretation, to contribution by designer and actor/actress, to visual and/or aural images to audience response [...] there may be a series of subsidiary processes of translation at work.”<sup>6</sup> In the dynamic recreation of a source text, then, with the awareness of the peculiarity of a language stylistics, cultural differences, and different theatrical conventions we should also keep in mind that in the consequential act of staging a play there are always different kind of translations involved. We can then assert the written text is incomplete

since it is indissolubly linked to performance – as Uberfeld stated it is “troué,” it has gaps<sup>7</sup> – so we must fill in the blanks by finding answers in the performance itself, and only this combination gives us a complete play-text, a text mediated by the two elements. The distinction between written text and performance is an artificial one since, she argues, the two cannot be separated. Their relationship is not just that of a semantic equivalence because the performance cannot be perceived as a mere “translation” of the text. It would be dangerous to assume that the expression of a context results from a conversion from the linguistic sign system to a system of performance/stage signs; as a matter of fact, this attitude may lead to the conclusion that there is only a single correct way to interpret it.

We know that different performances give us different readings of a text, and it is not only a matter of a director’s choice because it is even impossible to reproduce the same text night after night in performance: we will notice different gestures, slight changes in intonation, different answers to and from the different audience present in the auditorium. As a consequence, we can infer that there isn’t a definitive written text. However, incomplete though it may be, it is only through its structure that the performative aspect can be expressed and it is the raw material on which the translator has to work. As Susan Bassnet remarked, “it is with the written text, rather than with a hypothetical performance, that the translator must begin.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the translator also knows that the translation cannot maintain the text in its original state because it is intended for a future situation of enunciation staged for an actual target audience. Therefore, as Patrice Pavis commented, the translation takes place at the intersection of the situations of enunciation in a given target language and culture, and even though we possibly have only a vague notion of a given culture inevitably it is within the aspects which determine its identity that a translation takes place:

Translation is this undiscoverable mythic text attempting to take account of the source text – all the while with the awareness that such a text exists only with reference to a source-text-to-be-translated. Added to this disturbing circularity is the fact that theatre translation is never where one expects it to be: not in words, but in gesture, not in the letter, but in the spirit of a culture, ineffable but omnipresent.<sup>9</sup>

When translating a play, the translator should always adapt the text he or she is recreating for performance and be aware that a performer will deliver the lines. Clearly enough then, his/her task is not simply to decode a text into a different language creating a linguistic equivalence. Actually, I believe there’s no such thing as a literal translation because it will always be the product of someone who re-creates a text for

performance to grant an audience access to a specific text. After all, a translation consists in changing a text to suit different needs. The translator's craft will only produce a transitory text whereas the work of art is timeless. The socio-cultural context so unconditionally clear for its contemporary audience and fellow citizens is yet empty or just ornamental for historical latecomers or outsiders: we need to regain the lost meaning by substituting source text details with elements that are communicative for us in the same way as the ones in the original play were for the source audience.<sup>10</sup> The translator, then, must sense both the pragmatic and the semantic expressiveness of the word observing the distinct dramatic traditions of the languages from and into which s/he is translating. A theatre translation above all has to function within the immediate context of performance – without annotations or editorial commentary.

Often the translator is also requested to meet the expectations of a particular audience and to provide familiar details for it in the new version; this strategy may lead to adaptations that have a great distance from the original and possibly suffer the heavy influence of the director or of the producer imposing their own choices.

So, which are the strategies that must be developed for dealing with what seems to be untranslatable or unspeakable? What we need is probably a combination of processes of adaptation, interpretation, paraphrasing, contemporization, and most importantly understanding and collaboration. It is this holistic context, as Andras Nagy suggests, rather than a distinct text that poses the real challenge to the translator for performance.<sup>11</sup> And its observance probably grants a “true respect” for the text being translated.<sup>12</sup>

If we look again at the simile of the mirror, the peculiar translation adapted to function in one country could be just a fragment of the shattered mirror in which the original image was reflected. It follows that a translated theatre text emerges as a variety of reflections and images generated by the historical context and by the cultural environments, as if we were looking back at the original through a kaleidoscope.

Not only should the ideal recreation of the original play convey its linguistic characteristics and its cultural references, but it should also aim to reproduce or to “wisely” interpret the aspects arisen from the collaborative process that produced it. This is particularly true for those plays which playwrights have workshopped in close collaboration with directors and actors. In translation there seems to be a relation of asymmetry with the original text because it is not distorted but deliberately re-crafted to address the ultimately ephemeral moment in which it is to be performed.<sup>13</sup> The translator, as re-creator of the text, should be acknowledged as a key figure within the collaborative process

of production comparable to the role of the playwright, of the *dramaturg* and of the director. Each new translation, like each new production, involves a distinctive set of artistic and pragmatic choices; the result cannot claim to be definitive, it works only until the voice through which it speaks has resonance to its target audience.

The translator has rarely been acknowledged as a creative figure integral to the process of production, a creative figure in the shaping of the performance text through rehearsals and production meetings. As a matter of fact, the current practice in Italy, for instance, when translating contemporary texts is to commission a translation to academics or experts in a given foreign language to obtain a raw text which can then be reworked in a new version by a known playwright or *dramaturg* but, more often, by the director him/herself even though they do not always have an appropriate competence in the source language (this practice often arises more than a suspicion on a contemptible habit to plagiarize previous translations of the text in question). With classics, a previously published translation is usually readapted by the director him/herself. This is true only when the translator is not a prominent figure in the cultural scene or when s/he is not the official translator of a particular playwright. Probably this happens because new versions or adaptations seem to have a higher status than translations.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the implication has been that an adaptation requires a level of dramaturgical skill and creative vision, which, in a mere translation, are solely attributable to the original playwright? This provocative suggestion conveys some truth: often translators are not trained to translate for theatre. In most of the cases, they only have a literary academic education.

### **A case in point**

My first personal experience of collaboration in the creative process of translation is a good case in point to go further in this exploration. The text I'll take into consideration is Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney*. I first came across it while translating Aleks Sierz's *In-Yer-Face Theatre* into Italian. This was a really fruitful experience since it allowed me to literally plunge into contemporary British drama and gain a deep knowledge of the theatrical innovation that took place at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, Aleks' prompt answers to my queries were crucial in giving me confidence to complete the translation with the knowledge I was serving his purpose. An author's tips are always useful for a translator – it doesn't matter which genre of text you are working on.

I was fascinated with Ridley's play, one of the first to introduce a new sensibility on London theatre scene.<sup>15</sup> When in 2005, together with the company I formed with fellow former students of the acting school I attended, we were asked to stage a play in a theatre festival in Spoleto I

didn't hesitate to propose *The Pitchfork Disney*. We could have worked with an existing translation of the play, published as *The Killer Disney*, but I didn't like it because of its literariness, its lack of theatrical rhythm, elaborate syntax and its slavishness; therefore, I decided to translate it again. My professional education as a translator is mainly academic but I've been taught by professors who often worked in theatre as translators or directors. Moreover, being myself an actor as well, I could approach the written text with an ear for performance.

When a very first draft of the translation was ready I asked a playwright (who studied acting together with me) to read it and make the adjustments she thought necessary. She was probably too creative. As a result she re-imagined the text through the eye of the female protagonist and heavily changed it: I had to struggle to restore what I thought was necessary. Notwithstanding, she also introduced some very interesting solutions from a semantic point of view and the text acquired a colloquial dimension that improved the directness of the telling of the story. Eventually, she played the female protagonist having become perfectly tuned with that role. I was playing the male leading part, so working together helped us a lot in pitching the translation at the "right" register. In spite of the play being set in London's East End, it lacked any true concern with dialect and class inflected language. We just differentiated the childish language of Haley and Presley, the two brothers we were playing, from a kind of jargon used by Cosmo, the entertainer, a character which is their exact opposite. The process of adaptation was revealing of many aspects of theatrical interpretation, so action became more talkative than originally planned. Besides, instead of a naturalistic setting, the director chose to stage it with just a few elements of furniture: the skeleton of a door and of a window, an old fridge and a couple of chairs which were all constantly moved on scene to stress changes in the developments of characters' perspective.

I was aware of the audience we would have played for. Usually at festivals you have a theatre-wise public, who has extensive knowledge of the theatre scene. So, I decided not to translate some elements (i.e., the title and the names of the protagonists) and references to the Britishness of the British play (i.e., tea cups). Furthermore, after the recent wave of new writing coming from the UK, a trend had been set for British plays which we hoped to exploit commercially. Nonetheless, I didn't believe that totally relocating the alien source material within the cultural experience of the target audience would have helped in the comprehension of the play. Whether a process of domestication represents an undue betrayal of the source, or due recognition of the target is still a matter of opinion. The decision to relocate a play is arguably more consequential with a text for performance but still it is a decision to be taken with a scrupulous

attention. And the translator must be well aware of the constant process of redefinition of the contemporary target culture.

After playing open air in Spoleto, in a charming 14<sup>th</sup>-century cloister and in front of an audience of about three-hundred, we presented *The Pitchfork Disney* in Rome in a small fringe theatre, the classical black-box, for a three-week run for an average audience of about thirty. As a consequence, we had to re-work the translation. It's really different when you pronounce a line and you have to walk for seven or eight metres or if you just have to take two or three steps. The text changes as the space changes as the acting changes. I tried to modulate the words into a tone more suitable for that space, to condensate lines in order to get a more essential language. Also, together with the director, we cut from the text. We thought some of the extensive monologues would have not been "tolerated" by the different audience in that claustrophobic auditorium. We then moved in a bigger theatre in Rome and we also went on a short tour but we didn't significantly change the text after that.

The above mentioned experience strengthened in me the belief that an ideal translator for theatre not only must be trained at university to gain linguistic and cultural competence but also at theatres or academies of dramatic arts. After all, a translator should write for actors like playwrights do. According to this view - which in some way is similar to what Robert Corringan stated as far as in the Sixties about translators being trained in the practice of theatre: "Without such training, the tendency will be to translate words and their meanings. This practice will never produce performable translations"<sup>16</sup> - I recently promoted an agreement between Italy's National Academy of Dramatic Arts "Silvio d'Amico" and "Sapienza" University of Rome where I teach courses of Translation from English into Italian and of English Drama (the agreement was compiled and signed during the 2009/2010 academic year by Professor Isabella Imperiali, on behalf of "Sapienza" University of Rome, and by Maestro Lorenzo Salvetti, Director of Accademia D'Arte Drammatica "Silvio d'Amico"). Students who follow my and Professor Imperiali's courses of Translation for Theatre will be allowed to put into practice what they study, and shape their translations through a collaboration with students of acting and directing courses from the Academy. Students from the University are supposed to enter the rehearsal room of the studio theatre of the Academy with a first draft of their translation (done under my supervision) and after a couple of weeks of rehearsals with actors, directors and teachers, they should be able to come out with a translation that would answer the requirements of the abovementioned holistic context. Working in workshops and interacting face to face will enable students to acquire an awareness of a

comprehensive method which wishfully they will later apply in their professions.

At the beginning of November 2010 we had the chance to put into practice what we had envisaged with the agreement when the boards of the academy and of the university agreed to fund a workshop on Martin Crimp's plays. I chose to work on *The Treatment*, a challenging text Crimp wrote for the Royal Court Theatre in 1993 whose translation hadn't been published yet in Italy. *The Treatment* is a play set in New York and uses the metropolis as a convention in the same way some Jacobean playwrights used Venice to distance their own society from its decadence; this city drama, as Sierz remarked, is a "cry of dismay at how art is judged by commercial rather than aesthetic criteria."<sup>17</sup> I selected five students from my MA course on translation and asked them to translate it. I assigned to each of them a few scenes, and when they had a first draft of their translation we met and read it aloud: in this way they were able to confront their solutions and to conform recurrent terms, names, and to convey metaphors and images in the same way. The need to conform the five different sections of the translated text (one for each translator) was indeed a good way to reflect on the playwright's style. I obviously corrected mistakes and proposed suggestions for difficult passages so as to find together a valid solution. What was more difficult was to make them aware of the necessity to find a definite way to characterize characters' idiolect and to maintain it throughout. We managed to overcome this difficulty through a deep analysis of the text and a detailed study of characters.

An important aspect of the project was the meeting we organized for the participants to the workshop with Martin Crimp and theatre critic Aleks Sierz. As a matter of fact I believe it is extremely useful, when translating a text of a contemporary living author, to have the possibility to ask questions to him/her. And both Crimp and Sierz were very generous with students. Moreover, Crimp translated several plays into English so his suggestions were really helpful and specific. He thinks there are different ways to approach a translation for theatre. It is possible to have a straight translation from a language the translator understands, whose aim is to provide a window on the original text. In this case, the only concern for the translator is that the translation will be actable; s/he doesn't want to appear but just wants to serve the writer, the play and also the production. We can infer two different possibilities to proceed in this instance from two translations Crimp was commissioned to do. When in 1997 he translated Eugène Ionesco's *Les chaises* for the Royal Court Theatre, director Simon McBurney didn't want the play to appear as a French artefact, so he suppressed all the references to that cultural environment; whereas, Crimp kept them when translating Ionesco's

*Rhinocéros* (Royal Court Theatre, 2007) since director Dominic Cook wanted to recreate a world of France in the Fifties, so he did want this artefact.

It is also possible to fashion a transparent straight translation based on an intermediate text from a language the translator doesn't understand. Crimp doesn't like this option because he believes it doesn't allow you to get the thrill of the original language. He compares it to shaving in front of a steamed mirror: you risk to cut yourself really badly.

Finally, a translator can adapt, rewrite, renovate and reshape a text so as to tailor it for an audience who speaks a different language and lives in a different country and in a different time. Crimp followed this course of action when he translated Molière's *Le misanthrope* (Young Vic, 1996; Comedy Theatre, 2009), because he believes that, for instance, the contingent satire in *The Misanthrope* would otherwise get lost. He also produced a pared-down version of Anton Chekov's *The Seagull* (National Theatre, 2006). In the final text 19<sup>th</sup>-century references were either replaced with equivalent or altogether removed and it was also stripped from 19<sup>th</sup>-century theatrical conventions – such as monologues and asides. Crimp's version was obviously shorter but also more vibrant, fresher than the original, renovated as an old painting could be after a process of restoration.

Translating for performance within a given context requires a sensitivity to the various agendas in operation in both the source and target cultures – whether in terms of state censorship or, at a more pragmatic level, institutional production policies. As cultural advocate, the translator may refuse to relocate the source text for fear of neutralising its cultural identity. For instance, when in 2009 the Belarusian company Belarus Free Theatre came to play in Italy (at *Vie Scena Contemporanea* theatre festival in Modena), I was asked to revise and adapt the translations of a couple of their plays because I had been to Minsk to work with them, knew their plays and particularly their peculiar condition of dissidents to the totalitarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko. In that case there was no use in domesticating their plays: what had to emerge was an awareness of what is life in Belarus under the abuses of a dictatorship which was to be conveyed with absolute consistency.

## Conclusion

Intercultural communication always depends on varied and complex processes, which influence not only the production of a theatre translation but also its distribution and reception by a diverse target public. It is mainly with practice and with a pragmatic approach that is possible to get an awareness of what is the most suitable solution according to the place and to the persons involved. However interesting and stimulating are the

two polarized theoretical constructs of performability and readability that have animated the theoretical debate about translation for theatre, when applied to actual translations and theatrical performances they seem to share a weakness in their prescriptive approaches.

In particular, I believe it is rather singular to speak about readability for a text conceived and written to be spoken and performed. Usually, in the process of creation, the words that constitute the language of the play are first heard by the playwright as his or her characters start to come to life, he or she then writes them down to be spoken by actors and/or actresses who in turn deliver them for a given audience who listens to them. This is roughly the process of what we call theatre which is mainly made of a combination of utterances and listenings even though it makes use of written words. To be defined stageworthy, a translation should flow like the original text flows. And this is what a theatre translation should aim to do and what, in my opinion, defines the good sense and sound judgement a wise translator should have.

Having no wish, then, to impose any particular rule or method on translation studies, I just wish translators to fail in the best possible way.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See, Umberto Eco, *Dire quasi la stessa cosa, esperienze di traduzione* (Milano: Bompiani, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> C. J. Ackerley, S. E. Gontarski, eds., *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 652-53.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1983), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading theatre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 190.

<sup>5</sup> See Ubersfeld, *Reading theatre*, 190 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Reba Gonstand, "Verbal and non verbal communication: drama as translation," in O. Zuber ed., *The Language of Theatre. Problems in Translation and Transposition of Drama*. (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1980), 1.

<sup>7</sup> See Ubersfeld, *Reading theatre*, xvi; 10.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Bassnet, "Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts," in Theo Hermans, ed., *The Manipulation of Literature* (London: Croom Helm; New York: St Martin's, 1985), 102.

<sup>9</sup> Patrice Pavis, "Problems of Translation for the Stage: Intercultural and Post-Modern Theatre," in Peter Holland, Hanna Scolnicov, eds., *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 42.

<sup>10</sup> See Andras Nagy, "A samovar is a samovar: Hopes and failures of the author as the object and subject of translation," in *Moving Target, Theatre translation and*

*Cultural Relocation*, ed. by Carole-Anne Upton (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Andras Nagy, "A samovar is a samovar," 152.

<sup>12</sup> The importance of an "holistic" approach was advocated by Pavis since at least 1989, when for instance he wrote: "The translator is a dramaturg who must first of all effect a macrotextual translation, that is, a dramaturgical analysis of the fiction conveyed by the text. S/he must reconstitute the plot according to the logic that appears to suit the action, and so reconstitute the artistic totality," in Patrice Pavis, "Problems of Translation for the Stage: Intercultural and Post-Modern Theatre," 27.

<sup>13</sup> See Hale and Upton, "Introduction," in *Moving Target* (Manchester, UK & Northampton MA: St. Jerome Publishing, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> See for instance what Maria Delgado states in Phyllis Zatlin, *Theatrical translation and film adaptation: a practitioner's view* (Clevendon: Multilingual Matters, 2005), 26.

<sup>15</sup> Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 40-47.

<sup>16</sup> Robert W. Corrigan, "Translating for Actors," in W. Arrowsmith and R. Shattuck eds., *The Craft & Context of Translation*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961), 100.

<sup>17</sup> Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*. (London: Methuen Drama, 2006), 40.

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