

**TRANSACTING DRAMA**  
**by Philip Boehm**

En primer lugar quisiera agradecer a los organizadores de este simposio, a los intérpretes, así como a los anfitriones aquí en la Habana. Y ya de entrada topamos con un problema muy difícil: ¿Cómo traducir la famosa hospitalidad cubana a cualquier otro idioma?

Bueno. Como tengo miedo de comprometerme más en español, voy a retirarme hacia el inglés.

Damas y caballeros, compañeros y compañeras, mesdames et messieurs, ladies and gentlemen. I've come here to ask for asylum. I suspect most of you have as well, although it's not so much political refuge we are seeking as a kind of linguistic haven, a place where our tribe of linguistic nomads might be safe from being hounded, harried and harassed by monolingual critics who assume that Cervantes wrote in English or Jehovah spoke to Moses in some European language.

Nevertheless, no matter how fast we run or how far we go I'm afraid our bad name will always catch up with us. After all it's encoded in everyday speech, such as in the banal but sadly ubiquitous concept of "lost in translation." So perhaps we should take Margaret Mitchell to heart who said "Until you've lost your reputation, you never realize what a burden it was" – embrace our guilt and make our confession while repeating the mantra "traduttore traditore."

It's true: translators and traitors are one and the same. And as uncomfortable as this particular shoe might be, it fits no one so well as

translators of dramatic works, who often feel driven to commit petty or high treason against the original text. In reality, however, these are not so much acts of sedition as crimes of passion, since translating plays is unquestionably a labor of love.

Like much true love, it is also frequently unrequited or taken for granted, and its devotions usually escape notice by everyone except the occasional malcontent who saw a production of *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* last season in Paris and, well, *that was le vrai Molière* but what the same man saw last night in Dallas or Dublin—well obviously a lot was lost in the translation!

Of course another person might just as easily complain about a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* done in Boston that doesn't quite hold up to British standards, but in that case she will blame the director, the actors, the designers, or the general waywardness of US theater.

Obviously both productions involve acts of interpretation, but whereas Shakespeare's words had "merely" to travel from page to stage, Molière's had to move from tongue to tongue as well. Such long voyages require a very tight ship, which is why more of the original is typically jettisoned as translators resort to increasingly drastic measures to keep afloat between the Scylla of fidelity and the Charybdis of stageworthy English. The lines need to speak as well as be spoken; they should ring true both within the context of the play and in the ears of the receivers. This problem is exacerbated by the intrinsically ephemeral nature of performance. Sitting in the house, the audience has just one chance to register what's going on: no pages to flip, no rewind, no instant replay. And that beautiful

phrase you so toiled to translate can vanish in a cough or be cut by one missed cue.

In case the translator proves shy about deciding what should stay and what should go, the director or even the actors will likely show no such hesitation and modify as they deem fit. This is not simply callous or cavalier disdain toward intellectual property; it is the presenters' duty to convey their concept as clearly as possible and to keep the audience on the edge of their seats while so doing. Edits and amendments that would be unthinkable with poetry or prose are frequently necessary with drama. No matter what the original language, whole lines, scenes, and characters are often cut and dialogues reshaped to fit the production, unless the author or the author's agent intervenes, as has famously happened with works by Samuel Beckett.

Here we encounter telling cultural attitudes towards intellectual property. Playwrights and especially their agents in the Anglo-Saxon world are more inclined to view their work as commodities. This results in contracts that are longer, more controlling, and stingier—at least when it comes to rights and royalties accorded to the translator. My experience with Eastern European writers is another matter: a good case in point involves the last play I directed—*Marija's Pictures* by the Croatian playwright Lydia Scheuermann Hodak. Both she and her translator were more focused on the message than the market. They were concerned to see that the play reach the widest possible audience, and because the play treats the suffering of women known personally to the author,

she refuses to accept any royalties for its performance. Incidentally she also gave me a very free hand when it came to changing the text.

I recall another occasion when I was studying directing in Poland, and would sit in on rehearsals conducted by leading stage directors. One of them was preparing a production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. But he kept cutting and cutting the piece until only about one third of the text remained. One day he leaned over and said: "I was wondering whether we have the right to still call this Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*... but then I looked again and decided that it is definitely the spirit of *Uncle Vanya* and there's enough Chekhov there to keep calling it that."

Furthermore, translating plays tend to require more reshaping than translating other genres because the discrepancies between original text and final recipient are generally greater. Translators and presenters alike must cope with a shifting cultural context, which applies to the style of the performance as well as the substance of the play. What passes for passion in Krakow may seem like schmaltz in San Francisco, and a play that runs an hour in Cincinnati will likely last 90 minutes in Berlin and twice that in Moscow. Plays by Tennessee Williams seem very concrete in St. Louis but somewhat more abstract in Kyoto. And audiences here in Havana might be ready for a daringly nude production of *la Celestina*, but probably not in Kansas City. Local traditions of acting and directing, the social status of the theater, the presence of state or market censorship, the length of rehearsals, and the clout of various agents all affect what gets said on stage and how it is received.

How it gets said, however, is the translator's special art.

All translation requires first hearing a voice in one language and then impersonating it in another. Of course, most stage works have several voices, each revealing aspects of character, social background, and class. Years ago I was working with my wife Elżbieta Skłodowska trying to translate into Polish a play by the US playwright Sam Shepard. That play posed a lot of problems because the author used a lot of very colloquial language such as “that sucker could sure haul ass.” It was hard coming up with a language that wouldn't be read as Warsaw working class or too much from a Polish village. Other problems involved slang terms for car parts or products that didn't exist in Poland—but we were happy to have a chance to coin a few new phrases.

It's always a good idea to resist the temptation of reading playscripts as final texts rather than as scores for performance. And some of the most effective translations are specific to the individual production. A few years ago a theater in Atlanta commissioned me to translate Bertolt Brecht's early play *In the Jungle of the City*. They were bringing in a German director, and wanted a new version that sounded more contemporary, more American, and would be more “actable.”

My own goal was to present a clearly understandable text that would capture the energy of the fight that is the play's central metaphor, as well as the poetry that is its hallmark. It was clear that for our audience in Atlanta, certain themes—particularly allusions to race and instances of racism—would resonate differently than they would in Germany, either in Brecht's time or today.

One of the first puzzles to be solved involved the protagonist Garga's penchant for quoting Rimbaud, a task that led me to check the original source. Comparing the German with the French, I discovered that Garga's version of Rimbaud bore an uncanny resemblance to early poems by Brecht, who was obviously more interested in capturing the soul of the passages than in reproducing them word-for-word, a guideline I determined to follow with absolute fidelity.

Performing the play in the United States made the Chicago setting more tangibly realistic, just as it made the idea of sailing straight from Lake Michigan to Tahiti more comically surreal. References to the flatlands or prairie evoke more and different associations from American audiences than they would from German theatergoers: the uncrowded countryside is marked in the play by its very absence and serves as a utopian counterpart to the city in the title—an idea I was able to strengthen by referring to the Gargas' former "house in the flat land" as their "little house on the prairie," after the famous books by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

A similar opportunity for playfulness came in the first scene, set in a Lending Library, where the character Worm picks out a book at random and begins reading. The literal citation would be "The skies were black, clouds were flying east" – but that wouldn't mean anything to our audience. Instead I chose to have the same character "read" a recognizable passage from Dickens—a very logical choice given the time and place of the play—that also served to

foreshadow the last line of the play, “*Es war die beste Zeit*” – here rendered as “It was the best of times.”

A tougher moment came when a different character stages a bungled attempt at shooting himself so that he may deliver some Famous Last Words—in this case borrowed from the Prussian King Frederick the Great. While German audiences in the 1920s might have recognized them, our Atlanta public certainly wouldn't. So here I added a calculated anachronism designed to further underscore some of the connections explored in this production, and instead of Frederick the character quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This prolepsis notwithstanding, I was generally concerned to convey the flavor of the 1920s, and consulted with some older relatives to make sure certain words and slang expressions rang true for that period.

That's a rather longish example but it does underscore the benefits of working with the presenters early on so that the translator can tailor the translation to the concept of the production.

Before I finish I'd like to also touch on a practice I am using more and more both in my own writing and in staging plays in translation. This is the inclusion of original text in a language that is foreign for most of the audience. I'll give three brief examples.

The most recent comes from the play I mentioned earlier, *Marija's Pictures* by Lydia Scheuermann Hodak, which we staged in St. Louis in a translation by Nina H. Antoljak. Because St. Louis is home to a large population of Bosnian refugees, I chose to add some text from the original Croatian, as well as some

songs sung in Bosnian, which is essentially the same language. The actors were not native speakers, and had to work to manage what was for them a difficult pronunciation. But the effect did more than provide what is known as local color: it also kept the audience dimly aware that they were inhabiting two worlds—the world of the characters, in the former Yugoslavia during the fighting of the 1990s, and the theater itself, in St. Louis.

Another use of this bilingualism happened in a play called *Alma en venta/Soul on Sale*, about a Mexican-American painter, who is occasionally visited by his mother. They switch back and forth between Spanish and English. But once staged, the scenes were so clear that they required no additional translation—at most some audience members wished they had paid more attention during high school Spanish class, but that kind of nudging discomfort might be a very good thing.

Finally, in another play I wrote entitled *Mixtitlan* a certain grandmother who is a powerful *curandera* has speeches in Nahuatl, and the text only contains vague hints at translation. But these invariably involve rituals that she is performing, so that the impenetrability of the language lends to its power, much as the Latin texts in *Divinas palabras* by Ramón Valle Inclán.

So much for examples. And speaking of Latin: *Confiteor Deo omnipotenti, et vobis, fratres et sorores, quia peccavi nimis cogitatione, verbo et opera*--perhaps as a translator I ought to stress the verbo part once more—*VERBO et opera, mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. Now I have confessed at least some of my sins, and with contrite heart I will allow myself to hope for reconciliation even as I thank you for your indulgence.

Gracias, merci, and thank you.

*Havana 2006.*