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SOME PITFALLS OF TRANSLATING DRAMA

By Philip Boehm

The adage “traduttore traditore” addressed generally to translation applies *in extremis* to plays, because translators of drama frequently feel driven to commit instances of petty or high treason against the original text. In reality, these are not so much acts of sedition as crimes of passion: after all, 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 *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* last season in Paris and, now *that* was Molière, *sans doute*, whereas what we saw last night, well, obviously, a lot was lost in the translation!

Of course any Shakespeare-in-the-Park is equally likely to provoke the same disgruntlement: two seasons ago upon-the-Avon, the same curmudgeon undoubtedly saw a splendid *Midsummer* and now *that* was Shakespeare! In this case, however, since the usual suspects aren't around, the blame devolves onto the director, actors, designers, or the overall waywardness of American theater.

Obviously both productions involve acts of interpretation, a point not lost on Robert Wechsler, whose recent book on translation is entitled *Performing Without a Stage*, 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.

In case the translator proves less than resolute in 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.

Plays in translation require still more reshaping, because the potential discrepancies between original text and final recipient are generally greater than in other writing. 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 read as 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. *An Afternoon in Creve Coeur* sounds very concrete in St. Louis but somewhat more abstract in Kyoto. 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, though, 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. There may be genuine regional speech, as in plays by de Filippo or Kroetz, or else invented dialects as in Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Rojas' *La Celestina* is rife with forms now considered archaic, and works by Mayakovsky or Witkacy sparkle with futuristic neologisms.

The problem of translating social class and the related issue of conveying formal versus informal speech are extremely difficult to solve using American English, although this is a tribute to our

democracy. The British have an easier time producing Chekhov, in large part because their English remains so heavily class-coded. Meanwhile, on this side of the Atlantic, theater companies frequently attempt to convey class by using faux aristocratic accents based on a generic stage British, a ploy more likely to backfire than hit the mark. Regionalisms, too, work better in England because Britain has so many true dialects, whereas having Woyzeck speak Gullah will likely raise more issues than it solves.

A further difficulty stems from 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 achieve can vanish in a cough or be cut by one missed cue.

Finally, the translator should resist the temptation (which has proven the bane even of some dramaturgs and literary managers who should know better) of reading playscripts as final texts rather than scores for performance. In so doing, he or she may avoid the literariness that impairs so many translations.

Such are the pitfalls lying in wait for the unwary. As if these weren't deterrents enough to dissuade all but the most intrepid, the pay's not great either, with royalties usually derived from the original author's share of the take. And the take, generally speaking, is pretty meager, at least in the United States, where most theater is produced by nonprofit organizations struggling to make ends meet. Commissions are few and far between, and seldom qualify as munificent. The theaters' inability to offer more incentive viciously reinforces the cycle that bars so much international drama from our stages. So translators have little choice but to work under the assumption that true love is blind—especially to money.

Even if they can't pay more, what theaters can do is involve the translator in the process as early as possible, from the moment the play is selected (too often, producers or directors don't even consider the issue of translation until a few weeks before beginning rehearsals). Better still would be to consult with translators about plays that haven't been translated at

all: this would help lead the theaters to commission new translations of unknown works as opposed to retranslations of known plays. By treating the translator as a coauthor or designer, the director or dramaturg can help ensure that the translation will reflect the concept of the production, and vice versa. Early, clear, and frequent communication even in matters as seemingly trivial as script formatting will save substantial time and peoplepower.

As a case in point, I would like to refer to a translation I did of Brecht's play *In the Jungle of the City*. This came about as a commission: in 1998, Bertolt Brecht would have turned 100, and theaters around the world celebrated by producing many of his plays: 7 Stages of Atlanta received support from the local Goethe Institute to mount a production of *Jungle* with a German director and scenographer. After consulting the extant published translations, the producers hired me to create a new English version that would sound more contemporary, more American, and would be more "actable." (The availability or unavailability of playscripts in translation calls for a separate article.)

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 I needed to solve 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 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, an idea I was able to strengthen by referring to the Gargas' former "Haus im flachen land" as their "little house on the prairie."

A similar opportunity for playfulness came in the first scene, set in a Lending Library, where the character called Worm picks out a book at random and begins reading: the literal citation would be "The skies were black, clouds were flying east." This I changed to a readily recognizable passage from Dickens—perfectly logical given the time and place—that also served to foreshadow the last line of the play, "Es war die beste Zeit," felicitously rendered as "It was the best of times." Later on, in Scene Nine, the original Salvation Army minister borrows his "last words" from Frederick the Great: I risked adding anachronism to Brecht's numerous anachronisms by quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., to further underscore the issues of racism explored in the piece and help move the text into the conceptual context of our production in Atlanta. This prolepsis notwithstanding, I was generally concerned to con-

vey the flavor of the 1920s, especially where capturing the sights and sounds of the city itself. The *Fleischkarren* of the original became "Butcher boys," after consultation with people who remembered them and who also vetted various slang expressions.

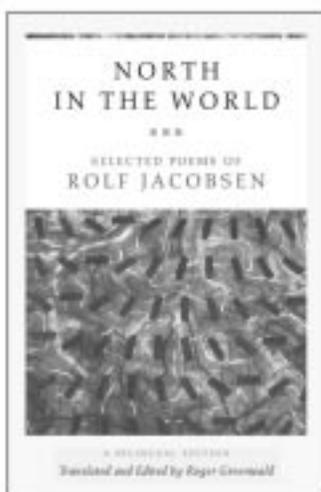
Any financial reward was minimal, to say the least. As expected, the Brecht estate offered ironclad terms of contract in matters of rights and royalties (reserving for the estate all of the former and much of the latter), all of which were scrupulously adhered to. The theater couldn't afford much in the way of commission, but they did arrange for me to meet with the director early on, and we remained in touch throughout the rehearsal process. They also flew me out for the opening.

Did I like what I saw? I'm sure I would have staged it differently (some years ago I directed a play...now *that* was Brecht!); but the performance did help me keep my eyes open to the number of interpretations a dramatic text may inspire. Which is one reason we should translate warily, lest we become blinded by our passion: after all, it was love that once translated Bottom...into an ass.

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TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY ROGER GREENWALD



For we have forgotten this: that the Earth is a star of grass,
a seed-planet, swirling with spores as with clouds, from sea to sea,
a whirl of them. Seeds take hold under the cobblestones
and between the letters in my poem, here they are.

from "Green Light"

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