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FROM VALLECAS TO HIALEAH: TRANSLATING ALONSO DE SANTOS'S SPANIARDS INTO CUBANS

BY PHYLLIS ZATLIN

How does one translate the title of José Luis Alonso de Santos's 1981 play, *La estanquera de Vallecas*? Of the four words, only two pose problems; one can handle "la" and "de" without much difficulty. But what does one do with "estanquera" and with "Vallecas"? We have tobacco shops in the U.S., but we don't have *estancos* per se; even if the word "tobacconist" were not awkward sounding, perhaps we ought to downplay the setting. And what is Vallecas? Will we find it in the tourist guides? Not likely. In order to attract the attention of potential directors and audiences, a play title has to sparkle. The explicit and improbable rendering, "The female owner of a small, government-licensed tobacco shop in Vallecas, a working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of Madrid"—or even the more direct, and hence more probable, "The tobacconist of Vallecas"—won't play in Peoria, or almost anywhere else.

The scene of the action in *La estanquera de Vallecas* is clearly indicated by the title, but the allusion only works for those who are familiar with Vallecas. The 1986 movie version retained the original name, but when the play has been staged in Latin America, and even in other parts of Spain, often an appropriate, local neighborhood has been substituted for Vallecas. Indeed, the author encourages such shifts in locale. In any translation of tragicomedy for American audiences, obviously Vallecas has to be changed. Alonso de Santos's story deals with two hapless would-be thieves who take over a tobacco shop and sequester its inhabitants. They then make common cause with the elderly woman and her young granddaughter, but ultimately are defeated by the police. The play is sometimes farcical, sometimes sad, but always universal. The place could be any similar neighborhood in any large city. The solution I found for my translation, *Hostages in the Barrio*, eliminated the problematic geographical reference as well as the immediate reference to the tobacconist. My American title deliberately shifted the emphasis from the

local setting to the human situation.

At various moments in the text, I made other minor changes—always with the consent of the author—to somewhat neutralize the location. The action might take place in Madrid, or in New York, or in Los Angeles. The characters, in my transformation, could be Hispanics who had emigrated to the city from any warmer, friendlier place. They might have come to the Bronx from Puerto Rico rather than coming to Madrid from Andalusia. They could be proud of being Spanish speakers rather than of being Spanish. Beyond occasional snatches of dialogue, the most significant changes I made involved the choices of songs.

Among the most difficult puzzles one faces when translating plays is the question of song lyrics. Do you keep the original song or substitute another one? If you keep the original, do you translate the lyrics or retain the original language? If you keep it, will the music be accessible to your potential directors? Will the potential actors be able to sing it? If the song has already been translated, do these lyrics in the target language serve the same function as the original lyrics? Is the song still under copyright? How about the translated version? (Quoting a few lines in a published text may not violate the law, but singing those same lines in the theater, without permission, might.) And after you go through agonizing hours resolving all these matters, if you are lucky enough to have the play staged, will the director simply ignore all your hard work and toss in whatever song moves his or her spirit?

In the case of *La estanquera de Vallecas*, songs are carefully integrated into the performance text. The lyrics refer intertextually to the action and, at times, are woven into the dialogue. But the original songs will not work for American audiences. In the "birthday party" scene of *La estanquera de Vallecas*, the author specifies records with the "His Master's Voice" label and the song "Suspiros de España." Because this particular song would be unknown to most Americans, I substituted another Spanish *paso doble* that was in fact popular-

ized decades ago in the United States on the Victor label: “Valencia.” The song could be understood as a nostalgic reference to the warmer climate left behind by workers seeking employment in the city, rather than an ironic comment on Spanish historical and political reality. The second song, near the end of the play in the original, was the popular flamenco-style “Los campanilleros”; popular, that is, in Spain, but unknown here. I substituted the more familiar “Granada”; while maintaining the reference to Andalusian culture, the substitute song alludes historically to the surrender of the Moors and hence to the situation of our would-be thieves who are about to admit defeat. Moreover, the song, in Dorothy Dodd’s English lyrics set to Agustín Lara’s music, even emphasizes the early morning hour when this action takes place: “The dawn in the sky greets the day with a sigh for Granada.”

The already translated lyrics of “Valencia” and “Granada” could readily be worked into the text; these familiar songs are old enough that they could have been favorites of the elderly grandmother—and are, or soon should be, in the public domain, thus removing a potential obstacle in performance.

Shortly after completing *Hostages in the Barrio*, the more or less geography-neutral translation of *La estanquera de Vallecas*, I sent the manuscript to the Bridge Theater in Miami. The producer and the artistic director of this theater reacted enthusiastically and asked me to prepare a somewhat modified script, to be called *Hostages in Hialeah*. In other words, could I turn Alonso de Santos’s Spaniards into displaced Cubans?

The mind boggles at what would be involved in shifting the locale this way for the original text in Spanish. Virtually every line might require revision; certainly every line would have to be scanned carefully by somebody with an intuitive grasp of Cuban-American colloquial language at various registers. Alonso de Santos delights in using slang; equivalent slang would have to be identified in Hialeah street language. The project would be a full-scale intralingual translation, no less difficult than the task of translating the original text from Spanish to English.

The shifting process in English is far less complicated, and for the success of the project may have less to do with the translator’s knowledge and ear than with those of the actors. I was present in Miami in October

1997 when the Bridge Theater gave the third of its rehearsed readings of Alonso de Santos’s play *Hostages in the Barrio*, not the alternative text, *Hostages in Hialeah*. Even so, the actor reading Tocho convincingly played his character as a local Cuban; he was so effective that a member of the audience later asked me how long Alonso de Santos had lived in Miami to be able to create someone who sounded just like the people of Hialeah. Tocho was that real for her because of a skilled actor who brought his character to life by capturing the inflections of local speech. One should never discount the contribution of the actors.

The move from Madrid to Miami may also be facilitated by the creativity of the set designer. The original text calls for the Spanish flag on the back of the door. My neutral text suggests using a poster of a vaguely subtropical scene. The Bridge Theater plans to use Miami and/or Cuban-specific motifs: visual signs that will establish the setting for the local audience before the first word is spoken. A poster of old Havana and familiar bumper stickers, such as “Hermanos al rescate” and “Yo no voy!” also were proposed as elements, for the setting.

Relatively few words in the actual text need to be changed, in part because I had already eliminated overt references to “las dos Españas” and to Andalusia. In the open discussion that followed the rehearsed reading of *Hostages in the Barrio*, a theater professor from Florida International asked me if it had required a lot of transformation to make Alonso de Santos’s jokes work for the English-speaking audience. Obviously I had made changes, not only to compensate for puns and other word play but wherever I found what I considered to be cultural gaps. For example, when the frightened grandmother calls on the saints for assistance, I thought that most spectators, including many American Catholics, would not anticipate the accompanying prayers that she is about to recite. I therefore substituted an alphabetical list of saints, chosen from the list of churches in my local phone book: Saint Anthony, Saint Bartholomew, Saint Cecilia. An impatient Tocho cuts her off, and the audience laughs because they share his belief that the list of saints will continue through to Z. When the two would-be thieves joke about stealing Franco’s supply of condoms—which he, of course, intended to give out to children

as balloons—I changed Franco to “the cardinal” because I suspected that most Americans would not know of Franco’s virtuous reputation. But when Leo asks Tocho if he’s stupid enough to think that Fidel Castro will send them a back-up, the line is Alonso de Santos’s, not mine. The Castro joke transcends national boundaries.

One significant change in the dialogue came at the suggestion of my contacts at the Bridge Theater. In the original play, and in my primary translation, the Governor himself—“el excelentísimo gobernador”—comes to urge the thieves to release their hostages. We hear his off-stage voice in a parody of pompous political speech, followed by Tocho’s and Leo’s satirical comments about him. Because of controversies surrounding a recent Miami mayor, they asked me to substitute the Mayor for the Governor and assured me that the word “mayor” is an automatic laugh line for their audiences. The transformation was far less radical than the altered political allusions in the Spanish movie, and Alonso de Santos graciously accepted this and other suggested changes.

The imbedded lyrics of the songs created greater difficulties. For a Hialeah version, I initially believed that both “Valencia” and “Granada” would have to be replaced. The new songs would have to be of Cuban origin, or familiar to Cubans, and old enough to have been favorites of the grandmother years before. One of them would have to evoke nostalgia in some way and the other had to refer to impending loss.

I generally have three ways of seeking substitute songs: my own collection of songbooks, the songbooks in the local library, and, indirectly, the fakebooks belonging to my older sister, who has long been a professional singer and piano player. On this occasion, I also asked for assistance from Cuban-American graduate students. One of them, a well-known composer, proved an especially knowledgeable resource. So, with more than a little help from my friends, I ultimately chose “Perfidia,” and, at least initially, “La comparsa.” Both of these Cuban classics had been translated and were already known in English.

The time-honored Cuban bolero, Alberto Dominguez’s “Perfidia,” with English lyrics by Milton Leeds, worked well in *Hostages in Hialeah*. It pro-

vides appropriate music for dancing during the impromptu party, and the lyrics blended easily into the situation and accompanying, slightly revised dialogue:

(LEANDRO, *begins to sing along with the music.*)

“To you, my heart cries out ‘Perfidia’. For I found you, the love of my life in somebody else’s arms....”

GRANDMOTHER

It’s a beautiful song, isn’t it? Very sentimental.

LEANDRO

Yes, Grandma. It really is beautiful. When I had to leave the island, I’d hear it playin’ and it’d make me wanna cry up a storm. “With a sad lament, my dreams have faded like a broken melody...”

GRANDMOTHER

My late husband, the poor man, cried whenever we played it. He was very serious, but he was all heart.

ANGELA

Being Cuban is beautiful, isn’t it?

The second song proved much more problematic. I tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade myself that Albert Gamse’s translated lyrics for Ernesto Lecuona’s “La comparsa” would serve our purpose. It is early morning, and the grandmother sings to herself while Tocho and Leo get more and more nervous about their fate. It is clear now that they cannot escape and that they will have to go out and face the waiting police. What lies ahead for them is painful to consider, and the grandmother’s singing begins to get to Tocho. “La comparsa” speaks of lost love, but my character refused to sing lines such as these: “I dream of a night, enchanted by La Comparsa, Havana seemed all afire, I met the one I desire!” Grandmother was so much happier singing “Granada” that she persuaded me to keep it in both versions of *Hostages*. In translating theater, one should never discount the contribution of

the characters themselves.

Happily, Dodd's lyrics for "Granada" allude to *habaneras*, if not to Havana. The Grandmother finishes her singing with the lines "Then moonlit Granada will live again the glory of yesterday, romantic and gay," and "When day is done and the sun starts to set in Granada." But, following the pattern of the dialogue in the original text, where the granddaughter sings a brief reprise, I chose to have her repeat the *habanera* line:

ANGELA

(*On the verge of crying, she picks up the song's ending.*)

"For soon it will welcome the stars while a thousand guitars play a soft *habanera*." Shall I start peeling the potatoes, Grandma?

LEANDRO

Just make lunch for you two. We'll be eating out. Some friends of ours have invited us...to the Slammer Bar and Grill.

I think it works, but we'll have to await a performance in Miami to find out for sure. In evaluating a theatrical translation, never discount the contribution of the audience.

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