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The translator on stage, by Geraldine Brodie, London and New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018

The Translator

Translation in the theatre industry is subject to a curious paradox. On the one hand, audiences are well used to seeing translated works on stage. Ibsen and Lorca, for example, have been revisited so often by English-speaking theatre companies that they now form part of the established theatrical canon, arousing a certain sense of familiarity in theatre spectators, even before their translations are actually staged (Anderman 2005, 290). On the other hand, the role of translators in bringing such performances to fruition often goes unacknowledged, as noted by #NameTheTranslator-style Twitter campaigns used to draw the attention of producers, publishers, and broadcasters to instances where the translator's name has not been publicised.

Pavis describes theatre translators as 'a group of enunciators intervening at all levels and at every stage of the production' (1996, 16). The 'meanings' they inscribe within the words they produce are subject to further intervention by other agents involved in crafting the performance, from the artistic director and producer, to the actors, stage team, and, potentially, the original playwright. In this sense, what the theatre translator produces is not a finished 'product' but the starting point for a multi-agency process of interrogation. Part of this process, Johnston observes, is to explore the ways in which the 'elsewhere and the elsewhere' qualities of an original play can be made to connect with the 'here and now' of the receiving audience in the target language (Johnston 2012, 46). Shaped within a space of constraint 'tied specifically to the target culture that produces it' (Pavis 1996, 16), the challenge for theatre translation is that the audience, too, will intervene in the process of meaning-making, interrogating the play through their own frames of memory, knowledge, and experience. For these reasons, Carlson argues that any theatrical production 'weaves a ghostly tapestry' for its spectators (2008, 165). 'Haunted' (Carlson 2008, 8) by its predecessors, the play-in-translation becomes influenced by its prior contexts of production and reception. This is not something to be mourned but an opportunity to embrace the play's 'theatrical potential' (Totzeva 1999) for continual and organic change.

In her introduction to *The Translator on Stage* (2018), Geraldine Brodie locates her study within these sometimes competing contexts of visibility, intervention, and collaboration. 'The conspicuousness of the translating agent in the theatre', she writes, '[. . .] comes at the expense of the visibility of translation as a practice and a process: the proffered production is

often labelled a "version" or an "adaptation", terminology which disguises translational activity' (1). The 'adaptor' is often chosen for their reputation or for their 'celebrity' status, and may not necessarily be proficient in the original language. Against this backdrop, and with a focus on eight instances of theatre translation produced in major London theatres between April and June 2005, Brodie sets out to examine the agency of different categories of translator in the theatre through a 'systematic mapping' (13) exercise aimed at revealing 'the collaborative translation process from commission to performance' (13). Proceeding from a detailed analysis of the contextual background that influences the 'decision-making functions around translation' (13), including the physical theatre spaces and overarching financial and management conditions under which the translations were produced, the bulk of the book is focused on the translations themselves, from how they were commissioned to how they were staged. This analysis reveals how the construction of a translation (and even the translation strategies adopted) is not limited to decision-making on the part of the translator, but takes in the collaborative contributions of a range of practitioners involved in the wider production. The book closes with a discussion of Brodie's interviews with the 'translating agents' (13) themselves, from producers, directors, and playwrights, to translators and representatives of literary departments, and tracks their involvement in the eight translation projects from inception to public performance.

The translation samples are drawn from a survey of newspaper theatre listings sponsored by the *Society of London Theatre*, a trade association that represents the producers and theatre owners of the major commercial and subsidised theatres in central London. Of the eight plays Brodie's review produced, three are termed 'direct translations' (10), written interlingually without the need for an 'intermediary linguist': *Hecuba*, by Euripides and translated from the Ancient Greek by Tony Harrison; *Way to Heaven*, by Juan Mayorga and translated by David Johnston; and *The Woman Before*, by Roland Schimmelpfennig and translated by David Tushingham. Five of the plays were new productions based on intralingual translations of classic texts, created with the aid of a previously provided or so-called 'literal' [translation] in the target language: *The House of Bernarda Alba*, by Federico García Lorca, in a version by David Hare; *The UN Inspector*, by Nikolai Gogol, in a version by David Farr; *Hedda Gabler*, by Henrik Ibsen, in a version by Richard Eyre; and *Don Carlos*, by Friedrich Schiller, in a version by Mike Poulton. The fifth, *Festen*, by Thomas Vinterberg, Mogens Rukov, and Bo Hr. Hansen, was an amalgam of intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation, and adapted by David Eldridge from an English-language playscript based on the original Danish film.

Brodie explains that it is common practice in mainstream London theatres to commission a well-known writer, director or playwright with a track record in commercially and critically successful productions to write the translation of a play. Where they do not command sufficiently the language of the original, and where production budgets allow, a theatre's literary department will commission a new literal providing substantial notes in the target language on the linguistic, cultural, and performance features of the original (2). Brodie calls the agents credited as the authors of these translations 'in-direct translators' (10), and notes that distinctions between those who command a play's original language and those who do not are rarely made public. The intervening processes of direct and indirect translation that take place between commissioning a new production of an original foreign language play, and its eventual reception on stage in the target language are often mysterious, and there are, Brodie writes, 'issues of status and recognition attached to the different holders of these

occupations' (3). Here, Brodie suggests the ethical project underlying the book: to lift the lid on the behind-the-scenes machinations that influence the appointment of literal, direct, and indirect translators, and to bring to light the often hidden 'influencers' (45) that intervene in the translation process. It is with its sustained analysis of the role of the literal on the mainstream London stage and its bearing on overarching questions of visibility that this book makes its major contribution, and emerging literal translators, in particular, will find much encouragement and numerous transferable ideas for their own professional practice.

A comparison of David Hare's indirect translation of García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda alba* with the literal that supported it, for example, demonstrates how Hare was influenced by the translation choices and extensive research undertaken by the literal translator, Simon Scardifield. Scardifield is an actor and experienced theatre translator, and his annotated literal provides copious footnotes 'anticipating potential queries and furnishing Hare with a personalized translation resource' (48). In an interview with Brodie, Scardifield asserts that the literal is often the only opportunity to communicate with the indirect translator, and that prefaces, footnotes, and annotations show the literal translator's awareness of the end user. This challenges the received view that literal translations are devoid of translator subjectivity and that the creative work of intellectual engagement with the foreign play is reserved for its adaptor. Charlotte Pyke's literal of Gogol's *Revizor* [*The Government Inspector*] (which provided the basis for David Farr's adaptation, *The UN Inspector*), is similarly sensitive to the needs of its intended reader and provides additional information in the form of endnotes. Indeed, Brodie's thoughtful comparative analysis of the literal text and a video recording of the translated performance of Farr's adaptation yields insights into the ways in which the literal translator can influence the stage performance crafted from their text. During the last long speech of the Governor, for example, in which he shouts 'What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves!', Pyke signals in red type that these lines are the most famous in the play and are usually spoken to the audience. Brodie's video analysis reveals this is also what happens in Farr's adaptation. (59). However, unlike Scardifield, who is credited as the literal translator in the programme for the production of Hare's indirect translation, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Pyke's involvement was not made clear in the published version of Farr's indirect translation. In her interview with Brodie, we learn that it was only at Pyke's specific request that her name was added to the National Theatre webpage for the play (58).

Brodie's interviews also reveal the institution-level concerns that condition the choice of one literal translator over another. Michael Grandage, who directed and commissioned the translation of *Don Carlos*, prefers a new literal for each new project, as part of his overarching commitment to giving each production 'new life and new breath' (110). He will make enquiries as to who is most likely to produce a workable literal and will draw on the expertise and connections of the literary department of the National Theatre as a resource. Grandage's approach emphasises a preference for 'precision' literal translations that provide a 'context for the decisions to be made and [for] providing dramaturgical advice' (110). Almeida Theatre artistic associate Jenny Worton likewise adds that the literal translator must be familiar with the theatre industry, and aware of how the meaning of the play relates to performance (122). The overarching aim for literal translations, Brodie argues, is to provide the 'subsequent writer' with a current and reliable 'linguistic transposition' along with contextual information about its theatrical setting (142), capturing something of the original in such a way that what is given is free of bias or cultural interpretation (140–141). 'There must be an unwillingness',

she writes, 'to impose oneself on the literal translation if it is to be useful for the indirect translator' (142). With reference to Appiah (2012) and Hermans (2007), Brodie finds that literal translation bears some of the hallmarks of 'thick translation', locating the text in its cultural and linguistic context through annotations and contextual information while ensuring the literal translator's own 'self-exclusion' (142).

As a form of dramaturgical support, therefore, the literal translator, while less visible, nonetheless 'contributes to the "new" in the same way as the indirect translator, and is aware of that requirement – indeed motivated by it' (153). To outsiders, the role of the literal translator may be 'underplayed and undervalued', Brodie admits, but the theatre industry 'implicitly validates the importance of this role by commissioning new literal translations from experts, and increasingly credits the literal translator more prominently' (153). Where credits go unmade, this is largely due to oversight than design. In her interviews with representatives of literary departments, moreover, Brodie records a high degree of understanding of the tensions inherent in the 'two-step' process of literal and indirect translation, together with a degree of sympathy for the literal translator (119). Indeed, the care with which literal translators are selected is itself a validation of their individual approaches to the text, recognising their contribution to the multiple collaborations that influence the performance text (142).

Brodie's forensic attention to detail in tracking the influence of multiple agents in the production of theatre translations makes this a volume rich in insights, and of interest to researchers and practitioners alike. A stand-out investigation into a pencil alteration to a line spoken by Vanessa Redgrave in *Hecuba* and recorded in the archived prompt book reveals how the original line by translator Tony Harrison 'Does something force them into human sacrifice?' was changed on stage to 'Democracy demands a human sacrifice' (85). In a television interview broadcast around the time of the performance, Redgrave links the play to issues of justice, democracy, and the complex legal situation surrounding the 2003 war in Iraq, leading Brodie to argue it was the actor herself who rewrote the line (86). The focus of Brodie's analysis is on the role of directors, producers, literary departments, playwrights, and translators (indirect, direct, and literal) as 'agents of translation' (105–154), but as the Redgrave example demonstrates, actors bring to bear an important influence on the range of meanings that can be constructed in a play. Future research into the agents of theatre translation might therefore usefully be oriented towards the specific roles of actors in shaping translation strategy alongside directors, producers, and playwrights, as active participants in the collaborative theatremaking process.

Theatre translation crystallises in Brodie's investigation as a practice located in the tension-space between visibility and invisibility, individual intervention and collaborative participation, and, in the concluding chapter, Brodie observes both the influence exerted by literal translators on the choices made by direct translators, despite the less overt nature of their contribution to the production, and the ways in which even the powerful authorial voice of direct translators can be 'tempered' (156) by the collaborative settings in which they work. As Brodie asserts, theatre is a multi-agency medium; before the full range and inner workings of translation processes can be made fully visible to theatre audiences, we need to know more about not just what is being translated, but who is doing the translating. Brodie's study could be extended, therefore, to not only examine the role of actors in meaning-making on the

translated stage, but also to connect with the collaborative modes of translation in operation in the wider London theatre industry beyond the West End, where much more direct (rather than literal) translation activity is in evidence, and where different funding ecologies lead to production forms less common on the mainstream stage, such as international theatre festivals supported by interlingual surtitles and rehearsed, dramatised readings of foreign work in translation. Brodie's in-depth investigation into the function of translation in the production of staged translations in mainstream London theatres is the first step in an exciting new phase of research into the overt and covert roles of theatre translators in the production of foreign work on the local stage.

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