

# Created Relation: The Translated Play in Performance

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## Abstract

The process of translation restores the materiality of time and space to a play. Performance, of course, takes place only within the here and now of an audience, but a play that comes from a different time or different place prompts an encounter with the conceptual and perceptual real from sometime or somewhere else. If we are to consider translation as an ethical practice, one concerned not only to present the dislocated other to the located self, but also to protect the displaced other from wholesale appropriation by the self, then the translated play must in some ways prove resistant to such assimilation. But of course the retention of foreignness—or what Steiner called restitution—is problematic, not least because of the attendant danger of merely exoticising. The theatre of García Lorca in English presents an interesting case study in this regard.

**Keywords:** translation practice; performance; otherness; translation ethics; cultural assimilation.

## Resum

El procés de la traducció retorna a una obra la materialitat del temps i de l'espai. La representació, per descomptat, només té lloc en una ubicació i un moment concrets per al públic, però una obra que ve d'un temps i d'un espai diferents provoca un encontre amb una determinada realitat conceptual i perceptiva, d'un altre moment i d'una altra ubicació. Si considerem que la traducció és una pràctica ètica, encarregada no sols de presentar *l'altre* descontextualitzat al *jo* contextualitzat en el propi terreny, sinó també de protegir *l'altre* desplaçat de l'apropiació absoluta pel *jo*, aleshores cal que l'obra traduïda resisteixi d'alguna manera l'assimilació. Certament, però, la conservació de l'estrangeria—el que Steiner va anomenar *restitució*—és una qüestió delicada, especialment pel perill intrínsec que comporta fer una simple exotització. El teatre de García Lorca en anglès és un camp interessant en aquest aspecte.

**Paraules clau:** pràctica de la traducció; representació teatral; alteritat; ètica de la traducció; assimilació cultural.

## Summary

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Look, you're not alone in your feeling... the cultural moment is discovered in a fragment of created relation... it's the poet's and translator's perception, not the cultural or literary historian's.

Charles Tomlinson

## 1. Translation and the contingent

To talk about translating for the theatre is to talk about theatre practice. Translation as an ethical practice and theatre as an enduring form both potentially invite to the sort of exogamy that is implicit in the notion of journey, to the gazing outwards from the homelands of the cultural matrix. Both animate towards the establishment of complex relationships between self and other, and there are all sorts of reasons arising from the politics of the last seventy-five years in particular why this should be important. And all sorts of reasons, of course, why such relationships should not be open to being categorized or seen in terms of any given model or be subject to any simple essentialism. Translation, of course, as a writing practice and theatre as a collaborative making-practice are about how we place contexts around actions; they embody the effects of contingency. By highlighting the constantly changing nature of forces in play at moments that are in themselves various and ever-shifting, theatre and translation ensure that these contexts—the context of the play, the context of the translator and the context of performance—encourage us to relativise not just the apparent truths of any given situation, but also the frameworks in which those truths are dramatised.

That of course is what Charles Tomlinson, eminent poet and translator, means when he notes that the cultural moment may be made manifest in a fragment of creative relation. The translated play is paradigmatic of such a relation. To understand this we need to conceptualise the relationship between the source product and the process of translation as an act of completion. But not completion in teleological terms. Translation, in its ability both to safeguard the past and to project that past into the present moment of performance, brings a completion, an afterlife, that is wholly contingent. This is one of the reasons, of course, why translations seemingly age so quickly. And because that moment of performance is always in the here and now, the act of completion that a translation brings to a translated play-text is constantly superseded by the next translation. And by the next performance. Translation posits an infinity of possible extensions, of possible completions. So that if there is any fear that the translated afterlife of the text may supplant the existence of the text itself, it is true only temporarily. Translation is an action and an ongoing cultural process, a continuum of transformation that renews itself as circumstances around it change. If performance can only be conjugated in the present tense, then translation takes us invariably to that part of the subjunctive mood that is governed by contingency. When we translate from

the elsewhere or the elsewhen our shifting gaze allows that object to be simultaneously of then and there, encased in cultural difference, but also belonging to the shifting here and now of our spectator. In other words, translation is not a filter between past and present, between the cultural other and the located self; it is a prism that releases, that fires off in different directions a series of intercultural and intertemporal moments that challenge and enrich spectator reception and experience.

The past and past texts are unstable because they are constantly projecting themselves into the future in a process of endless extensions and completions. Geographies, of course, are no less stable, and the most fruitful connections can be established across the fictions of cartography. Jorge Luis Borges, in particular, was clear in his view that maps tell us nothing about humanity. His 1985 poem «Juan López y John Ward» not only captures the cultural moment through a cross-cultural friendship that is never realized, but also stands as a powerful indictment of the worst consequences of a particular moment's failure of translation on a global stage (BORGES 1998: 699):

Les tocó en suerte una época extraña.

El planeta había sido parcelado en distintos países, cada uno provisto de lealtades, de queridas memorias, de un pasado sin duda heroico, de derechos, de agravios, de una mitología peculiar, de próceres de bronce, de aniversarios, de demagogos y de símbolos. Esa division, cara a los cartógrafos, auspiciaba las guerras.

López había nacido en la ciudad junto al río inmóvil; Ward en las afueras de la ciudad por la que caminó Father Brown. Había estudiado castellano para leer el *Quijote*.

El otro profesaba el amor de Conrad, que le había sido revelado en una aula de la calle Viamonte.

Hubieran sido amigos, pero se vieron una sola vez cara a cara en unas islas demasiado famosas, y cada uno de los dos fue Caín, y cada uno Abel.

Los enterraron juntos. La nieve y la corrupción los conocen.

El hecho que refiero pasó en un tiempo que no podemos entender.

## 2. Translation and the continuum

Translation as a writing practice (rather than simply conceived as a mimetic transcription) requires the translator effectively to function as a continuum, a passageway of thought and feeling, sometimes on the surface, sometimes profound, between the here and the elsewhere, the now and the elsewhen. Translation, and especially translation for the theatre, is a process that engineers movement—movement between the narratives, concepts and structures of life that are embodied in foreign-language texts and the perceptual and conceptual space of the spectator.

Just as the notion of the continuum develops out of the thought of Walter Benjamin (BENJAMIN 1996: 70), so the metaphor of passageways echoes the thought of Gilles Deleuze. In his great cinema book *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Deleuze observes that «cinematic movement is a translation in space».

He expands this: «Movement in space expresses a whole which changes, rather as the migration of birds expresses a seasonal variation» (DELEUZE 1986: 111). Deleuze sense of the processes at play between screen and viewer is one of translation, taken in its fullest sense. It is the translation that happens when the spectator organically reconfigures screen events, when his or her condition of presence provides an expanded consciousness of the space occupied by the film, is at once a useful concept for the analysis of spectatorship, *and* for understanding the processes at work in any act of translation —that is an act of translation which is concerned to communicate qualities of thought, knowledge and perception to an audience that at that moment may not perhaps have a correspondingly developed vocabulary to receive, understand and make sense of what translation is offering them. In other words, we are talking about a translation process that both communicates and reconstructs the perceptual and the conceptual real. What theatre does at its best is make something from somewhere else, or sometime else, the elsewhere and the elsewhen, tangible in the experience of a spectator who exists in the here and now of performance.

For when we translate theatre, is this not what we do? —we engineer an interactive transaction that is the equivalent of Deleuze's movement in space, the movement between stage and spectator in which not only texts and readers are brought together, but whole contexts are re-created and related through changing patterns of language, reference and allusion. In this way translation too may affect the seasonal variation, the movements through time and space that bring about the migration of birds, the flight of imagination, in an auditorium. Movement in translation, like Deleuze's concept of movement in the cinema, involves the interactive communication of complex cognitive and affective processes to a spectator whose embodiment of perception, memories, of a sense of aesthetics, and of ideological and ethical preferences is embedded in the present moment in the theatre. On the quality of that communication depends the translation's ability to work as a play in front of a live audience. But it is on the quality of the interactive transaction that the play prompts from its audience that the success of the translation as a translation ultimately depends.

### 3. Translation and the materiality of time

Translation happens when the translator is engaged within all of the constituent contexts of the process. It is this aliveness to its various contexts, and the requirement that the translator should act as a conduit between them, that highlight the most crucial difference between a translated play and an original one. We can accept that all writing has the potential to accrue new meanings and therefore new potentials for performance as it travels through time and space. It is this sense of the journeying play, the play as cultural momentum, that the director both contributes to and exploits. But when a play has been translated, its language is also in transition: it is a found stage language, a version among versions, one that can be found and found again in order to establish connections between pastness and the ever-changing present.

Should the translator adopt a position of aloofness from or subjection to any one of these contexts, then the translation that he or she produces will be characterised by radically different qualities. Translation variation, of course, can respond to many different writing choices, but in this case it is the position adopted by the translator vis-à-vis the text that has profound implications for the strategies that shape the writing of translations. Let us consider this review of Red Tape Theatre's 2008 production in Chicago of Lope de Vega's *The Dog in the Manger*.

Anyway, that's what happens in the 17th-century comedy by de Vega, playwright and poet of the Spanish Golden Age. Palmer doesn't so much translate the play as adapt it to his own purposes. Setting his version outside of time (fear of the Inquisition mingles with talk of iPods) and adopting a decidedly apocalyptic tone, Palmer follows Lope's basic outline but repeatedly goes off on noncomic tangents relating to such varied subjects as illusion, consumerism and the nature of history.

Compare it with Victor Dixon's 1989 translation of the opening scene of the same play (DIXON 1990: 41):

TEODORO: Tristán! Quick, run this way!  
 TRISTÁN: What a disaster!  
 TEODORO: She recognize us?  
 TRISTÁN: Probably. Don't know.  
 DIANA: Wait, sir! Sir, stay! Remain! Hear what I say!  
 This is an outrage, sir. Come back! Look, listen!  
 Hello! Where are those servants? Hello! No one?  
 It was no ghost. I know; I wasn't dreaming.  
 Hello! Are you all asleep?  
 FABIO: Your ladyship.  
 DIANA: I like your coolness when you see I'm blazing!  
 Hurry, you idiot, what else can I call you,  
 and find out who it was just left this room.  
 FABIO: This room?  
 DIANA: Move man, and answer with your feet!  
 FABIO: I'll go.

On the surface, James Palmer's adaptation «outside time and place» and Victor Dixon's clearly faithful translation, closely anchored to its historical moment, can be seen as the writing tactics suggested by the extremes of domesticating and foreignising. But in practice they have as much to do with how the translator situates him or herself, culturally and/or professionally, in relation to the cultural work of the text in question. The consequence of Palmer's approach is that his play is eviscerated of any sense of temporality, de-historicised, so that it no longer speaks of contexts that are other to us. But more seriously, perhaps Dixon's translation excludes contemporary complicity, the urgent life-giving sense in theatre that «this concerns me after all». It is a form of museological practice, the translational wing of forensic criticism. In both cases, the cultural continuum, the

moment of created relation, are gone; the dialectic of distance and engagement that vivifies theatre is evaporated.

#### 4. Translation and the materiality of space

One of the central problems with what we might term the philological method of translation is that it eschews the dynamics of cultural encounter. This is frequently evident in the discussions of philologically-oriented translators who write in the main about their lexical battles, victories and losses rather than reflecting on the potential impact that their strategic purpose may have on audience experience and perception —such a discussion occurs, for example, around the issue of whether Golden Age theatre should be translated into equivalent polymetric forms in English (see JOHNSTON 2009: 300-314). More worryingly, perhaps, philology leads us to suppose that the secrets of any text may be wholly disinterred by close-reading, so that the translator's gaze is textually inward-looking, and the translator's endeavour restricted to rummaging around continuously within the framework of the text, rather than also searching out those crossing points where the alterity of a foreign-language text finds its two-way connections to a new audience. We need to be careful, of course, that we do not make too many claims for what theatre can do, but if intercultural awareness rests upon an aversion to essentialising the other and a willingness to surrender something of one's own position, one's ownership of place, in order to travel towards (in what Steiner famously termed the «hermeneutic motion») the lived experience of the other, then the translated play in performance provides a vehicle for such awareness, potentially at least, to develop. Translated theatre, in its immediacy and its ability to render the other material, has the power to recreate a sense of «diaspora identity», so that translation itself becomes a paradigm for the «new possibilities of relationships between cultures that seem to transcend the specificities of history, race, language and time» (BHARUCHA 1993: 1).

And yet, so much of our theatre product is either culturally normalized in aggressively assimilative translations —Chekhov and Ibsen are prime examples— or exoticised so as to produce the illusion of contact with the cultural other, who is reduced to a series of easily graspable essentialised characteristics. These orientalist (rather than foreignising) versions may pay lip-service to multi-ethnicity, but in the final analysis they are weighed down by little more than cultural pastiche. The theatre of Federico García Lorca in English has suffered particularly in this latter regard, perhaps because the figure of the tragically passionate foreigner, which Lorca of course embodies, provides such an easily constructed other on the English-speaking stage. Since 1986, when international copyright was momentarily relaxed, Lorca's plays have been performed in English with increasing regularity. But while Lorca's work, or some of it at least, has effectively entered the British and American theatrical canon, there is still a sense that Lorca on stage can be problematic, that underlying all that human passion and stage energy there linger, respectively, the parallel difficulties of a residual cultural opacity and an embarrassing level of melodrama in performance.

A number of theatre practitioners have spoken of such difficulties —indeed, Lorca himself had already referred to what he viewed as the untranslatable essence of his theatre. Central to the author's perception of his own untranslatability was undoubtedly his awareness that the dramatic actions and stage language of his plays are vivified —that is, made real in terms of audience experience— through what Chomsky would describe as an encyclopaedia of extralinguistic reference, in the case of Lorca one of unusual intensity and coherence —«a grammar of images», in Stephen Spender's phrase. Routinely, of course, this grammar, this encyclopaedia, is reduced on stage to the simple adjectival appeal of an Andalusian tourist guide, as directors maraud into the idiom and style of flamenco in order to plunder there something of the exotic otherness that they perceive at the heart of Lorca's work. In many ways, this constitutes in itself an act of translation, this time into an English-language theatre culture, of a perception, still widespread even in Spain, that there is a folksy element to Lorca, that his work is rooted in and reflects a popular tradition that is somehow timelessly and quintessentially Spanish.

Any resistance to translation that characterises Lorca's theatre, however, derives more from the way in which he attempts to negotiate his plays into, and then beyond, the horizon of expectations of his audience, than from any simple rootedness in a specific tradition or unchanging culture. The complicity upon which Lorca's plays depend for their impact is carefully crafted by a writer who was also acknowledged as a great director. His plays invite their audiences to imagine alternatives to the social and moral codes of the day, an act of imaginative collaboration that may only be enabled through the construction of a stage world that shifts across the terrain of the known, the recognisable, into the challenging realm of the unfamiliar or the taboo. His frequently quoted view of theatre as «a school for laughter and tears, an open forum where we can put old or misguided moralities to the test and embody in living examples the eternal truths of the human heart» is based on three central but interconnected notions of dramaturgy: firstly, the idea that the theatre can, and should, re-orientate the spectator towards what he considered to be the most precious fulfilment of our being, the instinctual life; secondly, that theatre has a central role in the debate between traditionalism and the modern then raging in Spain. Lorca was writing at a time when Spain was slowly emerging from the cocoon that was self-imposed in the wake of the disastrous war against the USA in 1898, a time when the paramount axis of national division —the internal colonisation frequently represented in abbreviated form as the «Two Spains»— was coalescing increasingly around the characteristics of Marxist ideological conflict. Old historical certainties and dominant cultural modes were being increasingly challenged as new ideas swept in from abroad, and throughout his work Lorca implicitly interrogates the meaning of Spanishness, examining how ingrained codes of behaviour and sets of assumptions shape the contours of an imprisoning identity.

The third element of his dramaturgy —the idea of «putting to the test»— is the one that connects most completely with performance. For Lorca, performance is a crucible —people often refer to the «pressure-cooker» or «hothouse» feel of



his theatre, both in terms of the characteristic entrapment of its protagonists and of the emotional complicity that this entrapment is designed to excite in its spectators. In this sense, performance is the key to an impact that derives from emotional response, an impact whose goal is to extend and deepen the spectator's experience of sources of personal and societal repression. Lorca's view of theatre as «es la poesía que se levanta del libro y se hace humana. Y al hacerse, habla y grita, llora y se desespera» (GARCÍA LORCA 1980: 1070) works within this concept, because it is through such emotionally-charged language that theatre may make what is invisible or repressed in society visible on stage. It is the marked contrast between this poetry and the flintier, hard-edged speeches that speak of self-control and conformism that forms the central axis of the language universe of Lorca's theatre. Only if the translator is able to re-create meaningfully and coherently the system of culture-specific references *within* the framework of the linguistic tensions that inhabit this universe will he or she be able to re-create in turn the complicity that Lorca sought for his plays in performance. Much attention has been paid to the need to get these culture-specific references «right», but in the final analysis, if Lorca's plays are to retain their full impact on stage in English, then translators for performance must translate the plays' potential for performance. For, in the case of García Lorca, that potential is the lynchpin of his thinking as an artist who believed that theatre —and most particularly tragedy— had its own particular contribution to make to social dynamics.

In a review of a recent production of my translation of *The House of Bernarda Alba* Lyn Gardner ends a series of complaints (several of them well-founded) with the criticism «and it's not very Spanish either», an observation whose peevish tone indicates that this had cast a pall of dissatisfaction over the entire performance. Directed by a disaffected Israeli, in a version by an Irish translator written for a provincial English audience in 2008, the stunning visuals of the production emphasized the interior of the house as a high-security prison in which the daughters prowl in restless and understated rage against their confinement. The metaphorical sweep of the play is such that it speaks of and to contexts of which its original author could have had no knowledge, in the way that the *Bacchae* is a play about terrorism centuries before Robespierre was born. So that this is a perfectly valid translation of the play's central situation, in which the physical and metaphorical walls of Bernarda's house insinuate themselves subtly into the physical and metaphorical divisions of Jerusalem and Belfast. In other words, the spectator's imagination is dislocated beyond his or her horizon of expectations, uprooted from an easy identification between Spanish passion and tragedy, and blended into a more complex sense of sexual repression as expressive of institutionalised oppression. In terms of stage language, from which of course the most characteristic driving energy of Lorca's plays derives, the translated text was conceived as a middle language, very close to the original Spanish in terms of punctuation and breathing patterns, so that in performance it comes across as deliberately staccato, the speech of those to whom freedom of expression is denied (JOHNSTON 2008: *ibid*). More importantly, it deliberately eschews any idiomatic English so that while it is of course immediately comprehensible to an



English-speaking audience, it does not easily allow the spectator to re-imagine the otherness of the play through the comfortable and familiar verbal constructions and stock images of the merely exotic.

This gives the play in performance something of a Brechtian feel. Lorca's status as a «dramatist of poetry and passion» is not entirely helpful to any of the practitioners—including translators—who have attempted to make his plays work in English, on page or stage. Lorca is a writer of dissonances, creating a style that is not only rich with individual and social colour, but that is also expressive of the instinctual vitality and performative energy that will, in his theory of performance, highlight the nature of identity as a site of conflict. For Lorca, writing provided him with his own liminal space in which he explored both the central tensions between social and personal being, and the darker recesses of the personal. If the stage-language does not render precisely these locations and dislocations of identity, the productions may well lurch into self-conscious projections of a highly exotic other, poetic, passionate and dark. In order to ensure the interanimation of words and cultural identity within the crucible of the performance space, the translator must undertake a very precise mapping—or through-routing—of the relationship between situation, character interaction and individual verbal strategies. Otherwise, as the language of Lorca's plays becomes reified as «Lorquian», the plays lose their capacity genuinely to move, to provoke and to shock, and the spectator is delivered into a world of remorseless cultural pastiche and ventriloquised passions.

## 5. The t-effect

It is commonplace to discuss and assess the translated play as somehow deviant from the norm (supposedly established by the original), a piece of theatre manqué. Even to talk about «doing» rather than «writing» or «making» a translation speaks somehow of translation as a subsidiary activity, one that cannot deliver the entire linguistic and cultural complexity of an original piece of writing. But the translated play, in its ability to create a sort of turbulence on stage, in the way it renders other time or other place simultaneously present, can animate—potentially—towards a different sort of night out in the theatre, a different quality of dramatic experience. By analogy with Brecht's *verfremdung*, might it not be possible to begin to think of the special qualities that a translation can bring to the stage as a «t-effect». In that way the translator for performance, like every other professional who contributes to the collaborative making process of theatre, can and should be thinking about writing something that doesn't seek merely to replicate an original, but rather to extend it, enrich it, enlarge upon it.

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