

An Absence of Ghosts: Cultural and Theatrical Translation in the British Reception of *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso*

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Abstract

Mark Dornford-May's widely-acclaimed adaptation of the medieval English Chester «mystery» plays, *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso*, reveal the extent to which theatrical translation, if it is to be intelligible to audiences, risks trading in cultural stereotypes belonging to both source and target cultures. As a South African production of a medieval English theatrical tradition which subsequently plays to an English audience, *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* enacts a number of disorientating forms of cultural translation. Rather than facilitating the transmission of challenging literary and dramatic traditions, *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* reveals the extent to which translation, as a politically correct —and thus politically anaemic— act, can become an end in itself in a globalised Anglophone theatrical culture.

Keywords: cultural translation; theatre translation; cultural appropriation; globalisation; medievalism.

Resum

L'elogiada adaptació de Mark Dornford-May de les obres «de misteri» de Chester (en anglès medieval), *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso*, revela fins a quin punt la traducció teatral, si és concebuda per ser comprensible per al públic, té el risc d'acabar comerciant amb estereotips culturals tant de la cultura de partida com de la d'arribada. En tant que producció sud-africana d'una tradició teatral medieval en anglès que ha de ser representada per a un públic anglès, *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* permet diverses formes desconcertants de traducció cultural. Més que facilitar la transmissió de les tradicions literària i dramàtica, *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* revela fins a quin punt la traducció, com a acte políticament correcte —i políticament dèbil—, pot esdevenir un fi per ella mateixa en una cultura teatral anglòfona globalitzada.

Paraules clau: traducció cultural; traducció teatral; apropiació cultural; globalització; medievalisme.

If translation is a form of hospitality, as the late French philosopher Paul Ricoeur argued, then it is dependent upon its host's confidence in her possession of her own home (RICOEUR 2006: 3-11). Without that confidence, translations arrive as disorientations —their addressees unknown, their languages incoherent. In this article, I will assess the «double translation» at work in a recent global theatrical hit called *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso*, adapted from a British medieval source by a South African theatre company under British direction. In this vertiginous adaptation, an original theatrical tradition belonging to the source (British) culture is mediated and re-translated by the target (South African) culture. In turn, the target (South African) culture is forced to translate itself according to a series of assumptions on the part of the source (British) culture to which it returns, now as source. Disorientation —political, cultural, and particularly historical— is, I shall suggest, inevitable.

The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso is a modern adaptation of late medieval «mystery» or «cycle» plays originally performed every other year in the English city of Chester until the closing decades of the sixteenth century. *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* illustrates the extent to which translation, rather than facilitating the transmission of challenging literary and dramatic traditions, can become an end in itself in a popular, multicultural, globalised theatre. In its production decisions and treatment of its source texts, *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* functions as a cautionary tale for the theatre translator in an age when culture itself has been commodified as one product among others made available for easy consumption. Rather than facilitating cultural encounter, and forcing producers and audiences into complex, reflective stances regarding the ethical implications of difference and otherness and their representation in performance, theatrical translation has come to *stand for* cultural encounter: it has taken its place and, in the worst examples, such as *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso*, it functions as an obstacle to authentic cultural and historical encounter and re-encounter.

Let it first be said that *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* is a rousing, raucous and entertaining theatrical experience which successfully captures some of the performative spontaneity of its medieval source texts. It may be protested that, in submitting it to the following assessment, the production is being forced to assume a weight of significance it was not intended to carry. But the production's extraordinary global success —lead actress Pauline Malefane is now an international opera star— suggests that it has tapped a series of cultural assumptions which pertain directly to many of the dilemmas of translating for the stage.

The original adaptation of the Chester plays was undertaken by British director Mark Dornford-May and musical director Charles Hazlewood as a community project for a company which would comprise white and black South African actors and musicians. *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* debuted in Cape Town in 2001, where Dornford-May had created the Lyric Theatre Company Dimpho di Kopane (this company preceded his current company Isango Portobello, which toured *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* internationally again in 2009). The University of Virginia theatre critic Betsy Rudelich Tucker characterises the original production as follows:

Yiimimangaliso is the product of an extraordinary collaboration between London's Broomhill Opera Company and the Spier Festival near Cape Town, South Africa. Over a thousand South Africans, of various heritages, were auditioned for the thirty-four acting and singing roles in this collaborative production... Drawing on the rich musical heritage of South Africa, the production is sung and performed with a commitment and richness that soar through Broomhill's 150-year-old Wilton's Musical Hall, the acoustically vibrant space where *Yiimimangaliso* enjoyed an extended run in London in the summer of 2001. The production, originally staged for the Spier Festival in South Africa under the artistic direction of Broomhill Opera, was brought to London in repertory with the company's *Car-men*. (RUDELICH TUCKER 2002: 303)

The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso is an adaptation of a number of the plays which originated as part of Corpus Christi festivities in fifteenth century Chester. These plays, called «mysteries» after the civic guilds charged with their organisation and production, were prevalent across Catholic Europe, and re-told a cycle of Biblical narratives from Creation until the Last Judgement. At their thematic and dramatic centre was the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Performed by amateur actors on pageant wagons, the play-texts are minimal, with a focus on conveying or exploring through action key theological ideas and pastoral ideals for lay Christian consumption. The mystery plays were initially tightly mapped onto the liturgical calendar of medieval Christian culture but quickly transcended their liturgical function to become the centre of an extraordinary festive culture in its own right.

A reading of the existing texts of the medieval drama, which are generally minimal in terms of stage direction, with a heavy emphasis on dialogue, has licensed a false assumption that they are naive theatrically and psychologically; such a reading is, of course, simply insensitive to the dynamics of performance, when the sparse play-texts would have been supplemented by considerable improvisation and site-specific action. In fact, the logistical complexity of the production of mystery plays would gall the most ambitious modern director. In the city of York, where the largest English productions were undertaken, the pageants could last for between ten and fifteen hours. The first of the plays, the Creation, would be played at dawn at Micklegate in the city, and would be repeated successively at specific points throughout the city, meaning that a single play might be performed between ten and twenty times. And, of course, each play was dependent upon the punctual execution of whatever play preceded it (there are records of fines, in York and Chester, levied against guilds whose productions over-ran, thus delaying the completion of the entire sequence). Hundreds of actors and technicians were employed, with thirty two actors playing Jesus at any one time during the York pageants. And if the plays themselves were mobile, so too were the audiences, meaning that the execution of the Cycle drama, which brought visitors from all over the island of Britain to the cities in which they were performed, provided an extraordinary opportunity for carnivalesque misrule and more serious criminality. It is perhaps as a result both of an effort to maximise the commercial opportunities afforded by the pageants and to minimise its logis-

tical difficulties that in Chester the plays came to be performed at Whitsun (Pentecost, the seventh Sunday after Easter), and over a three-day period, with twelve plays being performed each day.¹

Debuting to a European audience in 2001 at the Wilton Music Hall in London, *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* is undertaken in seven languages, English, Middle English, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Tswana, Zulu, and Latin, with no sur-titling or other translation. Modern English is used, occasionally, to paraphrase some of the dialogue in African languages, but it is never allowed to function either as a discourse of translation or meta-language. Staging is minimal, involving only a raised dais on a thrust stage with a balcony and two wings in which musicians, singers and the actors come and go throughout the production. Props are similarly minimal: a bail of hay signifies Bethlehem, a trellis fence, Noah's Ark. Actors play multiple roles (the actor who plays God in the Old Testament reappears as Jesus in the second act) and costume change, dance and song indicate transition from one play to the next.

In a documentary accompanying a BBC video recording of the plays, Dornford-May says that the impetus for the production of *Yiimimangaliso* was the invitation to help native theatre practitioners «take the culture of South Africa to the rest of the world» (DORNFORD-MAY 2002). For musical director Charles Hazlewood, South Africa represented «an extraordinary cultural goldmine». In his reflections upon the audition process, Hazlewood came to recognise, he says, that «singing [for South Africans] is as natural as breathing or eating; it's a primary function» (DORNFORD-MAY 2002). Most of the company were amateurs, recruited from the complex network of township choirs and *Yiimimangaliso* was the first professional theatrical experience for many if not all the actors.

In describing his choice of the Chester Mysteries as a source text for a South African company, Dornford-May felt that it was necessary to find a text which traversed the ethnic diversity of his actors; the company needed «something which would be common to all the different cultures of South Africa, which is a Christian country» (DORNFORD-MAY 2002). Drawing on a theatrical tradition at whose heart was the Bible «gave us common ground within a company which has ten or twelve cultural groups within it».

«It isn't that we were teaching or patronising the company», says Dornford-May (2002). But the experience of seeing *Yiimimangaliso* suggests otherwise. The production is exuberant, but its exuberance is childishly festive: with no sense of rootedness in real social worlds, the celebratory milieu of *Yiimimangaliso* is wastefully self-reflexive. At no point does the play engage, as its medieval counterparts often did, with thorny matters of contemporary politics. *Yiimimangaliso*'s political imagination is naive to the point of caricature: for example, a white, Afrikaans-speaking Cain slays his black, Zulu-speaking brother Abel in its version of the Chester *Cain and Abel*; Roman centurions are played as South African riot police (although not in the 2009 revival). Ironically, in such a self-consciously multiracial theatre company, race is all but erased in the fic-

1. The best survey of recent scholarship on medieval English theatre remains Beadle (1994).

tional world of the play; black and white characters play brothers and sisters, fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, all the while explicitly negating race as a key characteristic of identity. Such a decision should not surprise, as the play foregrounds its Western audience's perception of South Africa —a perception also turned into political and economic policy by its own government— as the «rainbow nation». The play's elision of political complexity in favour of festive cliché clearly worked for many reviewers. According to respected London theatre critic, Michael Billington «we are witnessing not just a well-drilled company but an expression of communal joy» (BILLINGTON 2009). In her review for *Theatre Journal*, Betsy Tucker can hardly contain her enthusiasm:

The tested formula of bringing different people together in a theatre project, employing the strongest of theatre's tools —poetic language, good singing, music, drums and dancing, and a mythic tale— worked here, and very beautifully. As we all struggle with the place of theatre in our saturated world, it cannot be foolish to remind ourselves that simple and ancient formulas retain the power to bring communities together and to provide their audiences with moving celebrations. (RUDELICH TUCKER 2002: 305)

But celebrations of what? For both Billington and Tucker, their assessment of the plays is adumbrated by an implicit sense of their own liberal political relief and self-satisfaction with recent historical events in South Africa. *Yiimimangaliso* is no longer primarily an adaptation and translation of an English theatrical tradition but a cipher for the fulfilment of an easy Western cosmopolitan fantasy of a deracinated South Africa. If invoked at all, the medieval prototypes gift a purportedly naive and rootless South African theatrical culture with a powerful way «to bring communities together»; theatre is forced into the service of a liberal hegemony. But an essentialist colonial pedagogy remains, this time in finding equivalence in a «primitive» European theatrical past which enables South African players to achieve self-articulation in a similarly primitive (theatrical) present. The observations of the Dutch anthropologist and cultural theorist Johannes Fabian (2002) apply powerfully here: in his classic study *Time and the Other*, Fabian delineates the extent to which Western rationalist sciences in general, and anthropology in particular, have objectified non-Western cultures by locating them in a temporal scheme which figures them as a «stage» or «phase» of cultural development of which Western societies stand as fulfilment or apotheosis. Despite being «present» —in Fabian's term, *coeval*— with us, non-Western cultures are thereby figured as primitively *of-the-past* (FABIAN 2002: 37-71). The decision of Dornford-May and Hazlewood to form a new South African theatre company by introducing them to the ontogenetic «roots» of British theatre practice enacts a double translation. It achieves the effect of primitivising South African culture by equating it with a supposedly naive medieval theatrical tradition and its culture; and it reasserts the «primitivism» of medieval theatre, reinforcing the assumption that late medieval English culture was dominated by the Bible, its narratives, and ecclesiastical institutions. In turn, in negating political and cultur-

al difference by fetishising the Bible as a «common ground» for its performers, *Yiimimangaliso* works powerfully to erase the recent past for its South African audiences. Where the Bible provided the Apartheid regime with a rhetorical resource with which to justify its racism, it functioned alternatively as boon and means of consolidating political opposition and solidarity for the black majority opposition. In other words, the Bible could only function as a «common ground» if it itself was subject to translation: «are these Chester Mysteries an opera I haven't heard of?» asks Pauline Malefane when recalling the early rehearsals of *Yiimimangaliso* (DORNFORD-MAY 2002). Dornford-May recalls that these early rehearsals were undertaken using the original Middle English text of the Chester plays. Such «foreignisation» worked to disorientate the interpretative reflexes of the South African cast, assuring them that the Chester plays are mere *play*. This is the Bible reduced to typological myth: its role in local cultural memory is all but negated.

But what of, in particular, the British audiences who helped turn *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* into an international theatrical phenomenon? *Yiimimangaliso* offers to a British audience a translation of the origins of its own theatrical tradition. But that tradition is poorly understood by contemporary theatre-goers. The production of religious street theatre was banned after the Protestant Reformation in England and, for the most part, the cycle drama was not performed again until the mid-twentieth century, when the York and Chester Mystery Cycles was re-performed as part of the Festival of Britain in 1952. This festival, designed to invigorate an exhausted society after the traumas of World War Two, prioritised artistic events which foregrounded British, and particularly English, communal identity. The plays were recruited to the cause of a simplistic medievalism which, as Sarah Beckwith suggests, «enact the past as nostalgia, as utopia, as trauma, as ruin» (BECKWITH 2003: 18). In their modern reproductions in Britain, the medieval religious drama panders to an aesthetics of revival: they stand as mournful reminders of an Edenic «green and pleasant land» which, of course, never actually existed.

A production such as *Yiimimangaliso* can thus only enhance its British audience's sense of cultural and particularly historical disorientation. «Vibrant, inventive, musical, convincing, multilingual», says British theatre historian Meg Twycross of *Yiimimangaliso*, «and leaving us with the regretful sense that the baton has been handed on, and we no longer know how to do this» (TWYXCROSS 2006: 359). *Yiimimangaliso* does not translate a British theatrical tradition back to its British audience as a resource which they might use to challenge or re-think the constitution of present cultural mores or renew —rather than revive— their conceptions of the political and cultural dynamics of performance. In foreignising an originally British, medieval dramatic culture, *Yiimimangaliso* rather invites its British, and indeed developed world audiences, to re-exoticise African culture. African languages function in the play as exotic complements to the percussive African music and harmonic choral songs all too familiar from the vogue for «world music» which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s —a vogue in which the «rainbow nation» of South Africa played a crucial role (groups such as Lady-

smith Black Mambazo and collaborators such as Paul Simon were at the forefront of such popularisation). Costume and dance reinforce the assumption that one is privy to an «authentic» African cultural experience —with the added bonus that one can rest easy in the knowledge that *Yiimimangaliso* poses no threat, that nothing, other than an easy joy, is at stake. And nowhere in the production do we get any treatment of the ethnic tribal tensions among South Africa's black communities. In contrast to the cosy exoticisation of *Yiimimangaliso*, the fifteenth and sixteenth century, post-Reformation, productions of religious cycle drama in England were always already controversial, nervous performative events. As a result of authorising a production of the plays, the Mayor of Chester was brought before the Star Chamber (a secular inquisition) of Queen Elizabeth I and threatened with imprisonment. In response to a request from the aldermen of York in 1567 to produce the plays, the Dean of York, Matthew Hutton, reported of the drama that, although «I find many things that I like because of their antiquity... in this happy time of the Gospel, I know the learned will dislike it, and how the body of the State will bear it, I know not» (WALKER 2000: 206).² Hutton's subtle remarks capture the extent to which the religious drama of the English Middle Ages was not in the business, as is often assumed, of «bringing communities together» but was, like all genuine theatre, concerned with challenging and galvanising its audiences into thinking differently about their communities, histories and institutions.

I have been arguing that *The Mysteries-Yiimimangaliso* is an example of the worst predilections of cultural translation. It essentialises the cultures of both its source and target audiences and panders to a clichéd conception of globalised multiculturalism. It elides the complex recent history of South Africa and proffers to a British audience, in particular, a version of a theatrical tradition which is allowed to function only as a form of nostalgia. The relationship of British audiences to their medieval theatrical past is implicated with the suppression of religious street performance and the establishment of professionalised theatre and secular drama more usually associated with Shakespeare. British theatre begins, in other words, by rejecting medieval cultures of performance.

At least since Schleiermacher, translation has been predicated upon a dynamic of transmission —and of the translator's mobility— between the foreign and the domestic, between two poles of language and culture. At risk in such a conception of translation is the presumption of stability and self-knowledge on the part of both domestic and foreign cultures, not to mention the translator's self-confident ability to mediate between them. But do cultures ever enjoy such prepossession?

Furthermore, can such a model of translating ever be satisfactory to the complexities of translation for performance? Whereas textual translation is in service of a communitarian ethic where equivalence is a supposed goal, translation for performance is rather at the service of the *event* of theatrical or musical play. What are the implications for the ethics of translation of this subservience to per-

2. I have modernised the English here for the reader's convenience.

formance? Is suitability for performance more important than the effort to carry across what is distinctive about the Other? Is cultural encounter in theatre translation thus submissive to the *performativity* of the theatrical text? If the answer to this question is yes, then translation for performance faces complex ethical questions about its capacity to represent and re-present the Other. When theatre refuses its own imperative to explode the complacencies of its makers and audiences, translation, and the cultural encounter it facilitates, can never hope to take place. We have in such a theatre not the fusion, but the *confusion* of horizons of expectation. Cultural, temporal and ultimately ethical disorientation reigns.

As with successful theatrical productions, all successful translations are haunted texts, to echo Marvin Carlson (2003). In an interview for the *Official London Theatre Guide* in which he reflects on the goals of his production, director Mark Dornford-May comments: «When God walks onstage to open this latest version I hope that in the wings some of the ghosts of past performers, medieval apprentices, Tudor merchants, mid-twentieth century carpenters and teachers are there to watch us continue the tradition» (DORNFORD-MAY 2009). In the view of this spectator, Dornford-May's theatre is, on the contrary, bereft of ghosts.

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