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Phases in the Staging of Canadian Plays in Hungarian Translation

Katalin Kürtösi

Abstract

After some general and theoretical remarks concerning 'translatability' and the main features of an anthology of plays from Canada in Hungarian translation, the article deals with productions of some of these plays by professional and amateur theatre companies. The recent staging by Róbert Alföldi of Wajdi Mouawad's *Incendies* at a small theatre in Budapest proves that Hungarian audiences are open for delicate issues like immigration. The reviews of the show were very positive, it is played to full houses at Radnóti Theatre, and Adél Kováts was awarded the prize of best female actress in the role of Nawal at the nation-wide theatre festival. Since its first production in January 2017, *Incendies* has helped thousands of Hungarian theatre-goers become more sensitive to the complexity of current problems.

Résumé

Après une introduction générale et quelques remarques théoriques sur la « traduisibilité » et sur les caractéristiques principales d'une anthologie de pièces de théâtre canadiennes en traduction hongroise, l'article présente les productions de quelques-unes de ces pièces par des compagnies de théâtre professionnelles et amateurs. La récente production par Róbert Alföldi des *Incendies* de Wajdi Mouawad dans un petit théâtre de Budapest, prouve que le public hongrois est ouvert à des sujets délicats comme l'immigration. Les critiques ont été très positives, la pièce est présentée chaque fois devant une salle remplie au Théâtre Radnóti, et Adél Kováts a reçu le prix de meilleure actrice pour son rôle de Nawal à un festival du théâtre national. Depuis sa première représentation en 2017, les *Incendies* a aidé à sensibiliser des milliers de spectateurs hongrois à la complexité des problèmes actuels.



“The language of others is like a sphinx.”

Antoine Vitez¹

Recent critical discourse highlights widely different views about translation, translatability and untranslatability,² yet one genre, namely drama, is generally omitted in the argumentation. This is all the more surprising if we take into consideration that in Europe translations of one particular playwright’s work – this playwright is naturally Shakespeare – served as foundation stones for a future national drama in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (not only in Hungary and other Central European places, but also in German culture). If theorists of translation usually neglect drama and theatre, theorists of drama and theatre do consider the aspects of translation: Marvin Carlson in *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* does refer to this problem area, although only in the context of onomastic codes (e.g. ‘speaking names,’ the name-giving conventions of classical comedies, 34–35). In the entry on ‘traduction théâtrale’ of his *Dictionnaire du Théâtre*, Patrice Pavis tackles the complexity of translations for the stage:

Pour rendre justice à la théorie de la traduction théâtrale ... il faut tenir compte de la *situation d'énonciation* propre au théâtre: celle d'un texte proféré par l'acteur, en un temps et en un lieu concrets, à l'adresse d'un public recevant sur-le-champ un texte et une mise en scène. Pour penser le processus de la traduction théâtrale, il faudrait interroger à la fois le théoricien de la traduction et le metteur en scène ou l'acteur, s'assurer de leur coopération et intégrer l'acte de la traduction à cette *translation* beaucoup plus large qu'est la mise en scène d'un texte dramatique. Au théâtre, en effet, le phénomène de la traduction pour la scène dépasse de beaucoup celui ... de la traduction interlinguale du texte dramatique. ... La traduction n'est pas une recherche d'équivalence sémantique de deux textes, mais une appropriation d'un texte-source par un texte-cible. ...

Il n'est pas exagéré de dire que la traduction est en même temps une analyse dramaturgique ... une mise en scène ... et une adresse au public ... qui s'ignorent. (Pavis 1996, 384–385, 386)

Chapter 6 of Pavis’s *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* is wholly devoted to the problematics of theatre translation, with a subchapter about the “conditions of theatre translation reception.” Here he points at the importance of the “rhythmic and prosodic equivalence or at least transposition of the source text ... and the text of the stage concretization ... the criterion of the playable or speakable (text)” (143). Theatre being an art form of many layers, translation for the theatre necessarily “involves the

1) Vitez, 123.

2) In *The Translation Zone* (2006), Emily Apter has one chapter saying “Nothing is Translatable” (Part Two, 85–93) and another one claiming that “Everything is Translatable” (Part Four, 226–240). Untranslatability is ‘promoted’ to the status of subtitle in her next monograph, *Against World Literature*.



transfer of a culture, which is inscribed as much in words as in gestures” (155). He concludes the chapter by stating that “theatre translation is never where one expects it to be: not in words, but in the gestures, and in the ‘social body,’ not in the letter, but in the spirit of a culture, ineffable but omnipresent” (156).

Pavis, the theatre theoretician, then rightly underlines the complexity of translating plays – in a way, we could even say that it involves multiple translations: first, the translation of the title, the characters (in some cases), the set and time, the dialogues and instructions from one language to another, secondly, the ‘translation’ by the director into ‘stage idiom,’ thirdly, the ‘translation’ (interpretation) of the text by the actor/actress into the vocal language (tones, voice pitch, etc.) and body gestures of the target culture. Antoine Vitez sums up this process when he maintains that “the production of a play is a translation” (Vitez, 127) – although this statement may also be valid when producing a play in its original language.

For stage and film actor, stage director, theatre professor and translator (from several languages: Russian, German, modern Greek into French³) Antoine Vitez (1930–1990), translation is a great challenge, a must and an impossibility: when he remembers his first attempt at translating Hölderlin, he says, “That is what excited me at the age of seventeen, the idea that it is impossible to translate, but at the same time that it is intolerable not to translate” (Vitez, 122). Vitez points out that “there is a very great difference between the translation of novels, poetry or plays. But I do not believe that it is theoretical. It is more a difference in usage” (123). In his view, translation, like the theatre, “cannot be considered in isolation” (124) – both involve political aspects. The stage, after all, “is the laboratory of the language and actions of the nation” (127). The general social and cultural contexts of staging translated plays may require up-to-date translations, and therefore retranslations (especially of the classics like ancient Greek authors or Shakespeare) are necessary. Based on his experience of several decades, Vitez claims that “one does not translate into (or from) a lesser language in the same manner as into (or from) a greater language. These are political factors. The problem of translation is not just technical; it is also linked to historical values” (129). This short summary of Vitez’s ideas about translating for the stage may prove useful when considering stagings of translations from two ‘greater languages,’ English and French, of a ‘lesser culture’ (that of Canada) into a ‘lesser language’ of a ‘lesser culture’ (Hungarian).

These theoretical considerations were apparently well handled when putting together the first anthology of Canadian plays in Hungarian translation. The ten years that passed since its publication in 2007 may invite drawing a balance. *Történet*

3) Authors translated by Vitez include Chekhov, Gorky, Mayakovsky, Bulgakov, Pasternak and Yannits Ritsos.



a *hetedikén*⁴ contains seven plays from Canada in Hungarian translation: three from French (*Incendies* by Wajdi Mouawad, first in the anthology, *Des fraises en janvier* by Evelyne de la Chenelière, *Le ventriloque* by Larry Tremblay) and four from English (*The Rez Sisters* by Tomson Highway, *The Drawer Boy* by Michael Healey, *Half Life* by John Mighton and *7 Stories* by Morris Panych). Of the seven, five have been staged by Hungarian language companies (traditional or alternative) within the mother country or in neighbouring countries by minority theatres: *Des fraises ...*, *7 Stories*, *Half Life*, *The Drawer Boy* and *Incendies* – modifying the generally accepted view that translations from English corner the market (Heilbron and Sapiro, 95).

The echo of the plays in the volume – including a few book reviews and numerous reviews of performances by companies in Hungary and the neighbouring countries – is considerable: over 314,000 characters (43,000 words) are available online.⁵ *Magyar Narancs*, a leading weekly, published a very favourable review about the anthology itself, stating that it filled a gap. The reviewer starts with the idea that “there are masterpieces in world literature that raise the question why they are not known by everybody. *Incendies*, by playwright-actor-director-translator Wajdi Mouawad, who was born in Lebanon, has lived in Paris and Montreal, is one such work” (Kovács 2008). Kovács sees the dramaturgy of the play as strongly film-like (the review came out two years before the film was made). Speaking of the anthology as a whole, Kovács is of the view that the plays are of an uneven level, ranking *The Drawer Boy* as ‘second strongest’ and *Des fraises en janvier* as a ‘lighter’ play, while *Half Life* for him is a moving story.

As far as the stagings are considered, *Des fraises en janvier* did not receive much critical acclaim, although it was played by an alternative company in downtown Budapest in 2009 (directed by the highly reputed Péter Valló) and by a community theatre in a suburb of the capital. In July 2010 de la Chenelière’s short play was performed by (most probably amateur) actors in the framework of a summer festival called “Szentjakabi Nyári Esték” in Somogy county for an audience of about 400. Mighton’s *Half Life* was first performed by “Szabad Színház” [Free Theatre] of Székesfehérvár, directed by Judit Nagy. The company entered several amateur theatre festivals with this show, gaining prizes for acting. Drawing on a review by László

4) Upor, László (ed.). *Történet a hetedikén. Mai kanadai drámák*. Afterwords by László Upor, Péter Szaffkó and Katalin Kürtösi, biographical notes by László Upor. Budapest: Európa Kiadó, 2007.

5) Although the stagings of two plays from Québec (*Les Belles-Soeurs* by Michel Tremblay and Carole Fréchette’s *Les sept jours de Simon Labrosse*) also received critical response both in Hungary and in Serbia (where *Les sept jours ...* was played by a minority alternative company; see Bózsó), we do not include them in the present research: the Hungarian-language performances of Tremblay’s play were dealt with in a previous project and the findings published (see Kürtösi). Some figures with regard to the performances of *Sógornők* (*Les Belles-Soeurs*) deserve mentioning: as of January 2018, in Pesti Színház, there were altogether 144 performances (88 in the first run and 56 in the second run, after a few years’ break); the play premiered in 1997, attracting over **75,000** people during these twenty years!



Sz. Deme, an online source underlines that “contemporary Canadian playwright and director John Mighton presents a credible, empathic story” (Kortárs Művészeti Fesztivál), while Judit Bokros praised the acting and reminded readers that the problems and situations in the play seem familiar to audiences in Hungary, too. In June 2017 the company was awarded silver prize at the amateur theatre meeting held in Komló, and Márta Törtsök was named best supporting actress in the role of Clara (*lokál*).

7 Stories was first staged more than ten years before the translation was published in the anthology. In May 1996 Canadian director Michael Devine worked with the actors of Csokonai Színház, Debrecen, together with translator Péter Szaffkó. Devine chose songs by Leonard Cohen to accompany Panych’s text. The performance did not receive much critical attention – in an overview of the theatrical season in the regional monthly the play is referred to as medium-rate, producing random life stories. The reviewer found the spatial possibilities of the chamber theatre inadequate to suggest the depth of seven stories – more precisely the window-sill of the seventh story (Cs. Nagy). After the publication of Péter Szaffkó’s translation in the anthology, student-actors played it in Debrecen in 2013 and the same year the Hungarian high-school student company of Kosice, Slovakia (Kassai Gimnazista Színjátszó Társulat) also chose *7 Stories* (the director was Andrea Bodony). The reviewer of this performance highlighted the multiple layers of Panych’s play, manifesting social criticism and existential questions alike, offering excellent dialogues and comic situations together with moments for reflection (Haraszti). The student company entered theatre festivals with the show in Szepsi and in ‘Jókai Days,’ Komarno, the national Hungarian-language amateur theatre festival of Slovakia, where they were awarded the Nivo Prize together with three other student companies in June 2013. Panych’s play was chosen by a local amateur company in Inárcs, too – they also participated in several festivals in Hungary (Ajka, May 2011; Balassagyarmat, January 2012; Budapest, April 2013). In the qualifying national amateur theatre contest at Ajka, Nóra Kiss received third prize in the role of Charlotte. Presenting the Canadian dramas at various festivals and theatre contests plays an important role in the dissemination process: thousands of people in audiences in various parts of the countries – the locations are very often small towns or villages without a permanent theatre – are thus exposed to representatives of Canadian culture.

Incendies has without any doubt seen the most numerous stagings and provoked the most reviews from among the plays published in the anthology. It has had at least three mise-en-scènes in Hungarian: first as a diploma-work at the University of Theatre and Film Art in Budapest, secondly at a popular small theatre targeting mainly intellectuals in downtown Budapest, and thirdly by a highly-reputed Hungarian-language company in Romania. Mouawad composed a multilayered play:



it is an Oedipus-type story transplanted to the civil war in Lebanon, written in 2003 by a male playwright born in Lebanon, studying in Paris and active in Montreal and France, translated in 2007 into Hungarian by a young female translator who has a PhD from a university in Paris, staged in 2017, two years after the ‘migration crisis,’ by an internationally celebrated gay director who in Hungarian media is often featured as an opponent of the present (right-conservative) regime at a small theatre directed by a female actress. Within one year it had over forty performances, always to full houses (and in most cases all the folding seats at the ends of the rows taken, too), so almost ten thousand people were captivated by Mouawad’s exciting plot.⁶ At the National Theatre Meeting in Pécs, “so many people wanted to see *Incendies* on Sunday afternoon that not only were all the extra seats taken but the audience occupied spaces not meant for viewers in the Chamber Theatre of the National Theatre of Pécs” (Verasztó).⁷ The online playbill offers a link to 23 reviews, including two blogs, and mentions one more without a link; in a Google search I could find a further eleven reviews about the performance in Radnóti Theatre and five more about the performance by the Timisoara company, so the total is around forty reviews in Hungarian. The titles of the reviews concerning the show in Budapest invite readers either by shocking phrases or by referring to the mysteries in the plot: “there are no words for the hell of war” (Bodnar); “executioners, victims, homeless” (Bóta); “mankind going downhill” (Csáki); “a road to hell” (Sághy); “life is in flames” (Dézsi); “the vicious circle did not close” (Mészáros); “you find out what your roots are and you cannot utter a word” (Kránicz) – and we could continue the list. Mouawad’s play premiered in Radnóti Theatre in mid-January 2017 followed by an explosion of very favourable reviews. At the end of the season, Adél Kováts received the award for best female acting in the role of Nawal from the jury of the National Theatre Meeting (POSZT) held in Pécs from 8–17 June (fourteen shows – including two performances by Hungarian-language theatre companies from Transylvania – participated in the competition, where altogether twenty awards could be gained).

A rapid survey of the reviews and comments manifests a general agreement about the qualities of the play and the strong relevance of the problems it raises.⁸ Reviews and blog entries always devote a paragraph to Mouawad, summing up his artistic career and his personal involvement in the refugee/migration topic. The performance was dealt with in practically all national newspapers, including conservative ones

6) <http://radnotiszinhaz.hu/repertoar/futotuz/> offers pictures from the performance and an interview with the director, Róbert Alföldi.

7) The number of ‘regular’ seats is 220; together with the extra chairs and other spaces (probably sitting on stairs), approximately 300 people could see the show in Pécs.

8) Adél Kováts, who played the role of Nawal, received a message from a lady in the audience who told the actress that the second act moved her so profoundly that she had to hang on to a stranger sitting next to her, otherwise she would have started sobbing loudly (Schäffer, 12).



(except for the right-wing *Magyar Hírlap*), and all cultural and theatre forums – for me personally, the most surprising entry was the blog of the Lutheran Church (Kézdi). Looking at about three dozen reviews, one can frequently see evaluations like “smash hit ... standing ovation ... stunned audience” (Kézdi); “*Incendies* ... shows both sides of the massacre (in the Middle-East) in the most perfect way ... the performance in Radnóti Theatre, directed by Róbert Alföldi, is among the most significant ones in recent years in Hungary” (Kovács 2017); “a strong performance, leading the audience to catharsis” (Turbuly); “a cathartic mis-en-scène, a faultless theatrical performance, one of the most shocking in recent years” (Makrai); “the performance digs thought-provokingly and movingly deep, and features some dark comic scenes, too” (Bóta); “the grandmother in the play leaves a testament to her granddaughter, the mother to her twins, and Mouawad to us” (Marik) – and, as with the titles, we could continue citing favourable summaries about the performance. Only one entry out of the many evoked the very first staging of Mouawad’s play as a Master’s degree final project in direction at the University of Theatre and Film Art in Budapest in 2012: in a blog note, MakkZs wrote that after having read the play (s)he was not satisfied with the show although several leading Hungarian actresses and actors were involved in it – but the recent production at Radnóti Theatre was a definitely high standard performance. All the critics of Alföldi’s mise-en-scène referred to the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, mainly with a positive ring, i.e. praising the director for drawing attention to the shocking human stories behind it, but avoiding direct political references.

Róbert Alföldi knew what to do with the story: he did not offer a solution ... but showed a stunningly exciting and shocking story without declarations, getting involved in party politics, or adding anything – he just left the story to work, which is why it touches the viewer. It has been a long while since we saw such a well-written story in such an intelligent staging. It is very much worth seeing – but only for those above age 16. (Kézdi)

Some reviewers used the occasion of the *Incendies* show to give an overview about theatre performances on similar topics, thus putting it in a wider context.

In recent months we have had a series of theatre pieces reacting to the “refugee-crisis” in some episodes or as a whole play, indirectly or very outspokenly. In Theatre K2’s *Cájtstück*,⁹ one of the stories is about housing a refugee boy and its consequences; in the basement studio of József Katona Theatre *Nem vagyunk mi barbárok*¹⁰ is based on a similar starting

9) The title is the Hungarian phonetical spelling of the German term *Zeitstück*, meaning a piece of timely problems.

10) József Katona Theatre is a leading ‘art theatre’ in Budapest – the title of the play means “we are not barbarians’.”



point, while *Egy fiú Boszniából* [A boy from Bosnia] in Bethlen Square Theatre also receives a new and saddening timeliness, although written twenty years ago. Just as the story showing the horror of the Balkan war through the eyes of an adolescent boy can be related to our days' traumas, *Incendies* at Radnóti Theatre will always touch a sore spot as long as there are wars in the world. (Turbuly)

More than one reviewer/blogger expanded the focus of war, civil war or forced refuge to the problematics of facing troubled historical periods, events and speaking about them – a very sensitive issue in the Hungary of our days.

It has been long since I saw theatre work of this intensity: without any doubt, for me, what Alföldi has been representing so far as individual and theatre artist, reaches its peak in this show. The director manifests an extremely strong wish for communication ... underlined by teaching us not only to think but also to speak up. This teaching is pulsing in the essence of the story and in every single minute of the show ... driving us to hold together ... embrace the others in the auditorium, encouraging each other to hold out ... in the strong belief that we also will be able to break the silence when the moment arrives. (Zsófia Pál)

The fact that in Mouawad's play silence, the refusal to talk, is as important as the verbal dialogues, inspired Bóta to reflect upon similar cases in Hungarian history:

Seeing this play, one cannot but think of the countless still hidden crimes of the interwar period, the details of the '56 revolution, the communist period of the early 1950s: our parents were quiet about these – no wonder that those born in the late 1950s and early 1960s were called a 'fatherless generation'. *Találkozás* [Meeting], a play by Péter Nádas focuses on this in a remarkably suggestive way. These problems are shockingly sharply highlighted in *Incendies*, pointing out how ignorant we are about who escape their countries and why, what sort of danger they can mean, what kind of sores they have, why they carry destructive hatred with them – lacking the necessary knowledge and as a result of our fear and refusal, why we are not able to handle these issues, why we are not empathic and hospitable towards them, why we cannot understand that they are forced to escape their homes. (Bóta)

The dichotomy of silence and speaking up are raised on a universal level in the play: "At first sight it may seem paradoxical that the most important message of *Incendies* is encouraging talking while the end is just silence, beyond the voiceless horror of the mother. But then we come to realize that the world just needs a bit of silence. Still, we can have it only after having told everything" (Dézsi).

The reviews unanimously praise the actors and actresses, not only Adél Kováts as Nawal and Zsolt László as Hermile Lebel, Dorina Martinovics and Renátó Olasz as



the twins, but also Mari Csomós, Eliza Sodró, Zoltán Schneider and György Gázsó in supporting roles. Most comments liked the translation (Zsófia Molnár's work), but some were puzzled by the changes from 'factual' into poetic style.¹¹ The simplicity of the set and costumes helped the audience fully concentrate on the action, the emotions and the power of the text – some observers pointed out that Mouawad's is a "theatre of words."

Although the Radnóti Theatre performance totally dominates the reviews available online, about half a dozen were found about the Timisoara company's interpretation of *Incendies*. Metteur-en-scène Radu-Alexandru Nica used Zsófia Molnár's translation in Csiky Gergely Hungarian State Theatre. The show toured in Transylvania (Tirgu Mures) and Budapest alike; it was also shown at regional theatre festivals. The review after the guest performance in Budapest missed what Alföldi did some years later, namely the strong focus and some cuts in the original text, claiming that without these the production moved toward sentimentality and self-repetition (Csatádi). Moving back in time, reviews in Hungarian-language papers and online forums in Transylvania pointed out that Csiky Gergely Theatre pioneered the staging of Mouawad's play in Romania, looking forward to further ones across Romania (Dénes). Nica cast the role of Nawal to three actresses (Rita Lőrincz, Etelka Magyari, Andrea Tokai) – this possibility was discussed in reviews of the Radnóti Theatre version, too. Judit Simon – like Dénes – has a very positive impression about the show, claiming that the play brings universal topics to the surface: the sources of hatred, searching responsibility through revealing the past, or why irrationality can rule in certain parts of the world.

Rare are the theatrical performances in which everything fits and is expressive: acting, sets, costumes, music, lights. This performance talks about the search for identity, self-knowledge, the need to face our past, the possibilities of the present, urging us to find an answer to these questions that are very topical in our region, too, so that we can create a better world. The performance of the Timisoara company makes sense of making and watching theatre. (Simon)

It is not easy to sum up the various reactions to the performances of Canadian plays in Hungarian. Still, some general features are obvious. Several plays were chosen by amateur or student companies and taken to regional or national theatre festivals, thus introducing them to audiences other than the company's base. Minority Hungarian-language companies in Slovakia, Serbia and Romania also found Canadian plays in translation a challenge to show their diverse audiences. After the publication

11) Director Róbert Alföldi mentioned that there were cuts and some changes with regard to the published version of the translation – personal e-mail to Katalin Kürtösi on 17 August 2017.



of the anthology of Canadian plays in Hungarian, more than half of the pieces in it were staged, one – *Incendies* by Wajdi Mouawad – reaching the status of a ‘cult-show,’ triggering dozens of reviews and blogs and, above all, highlighting the need to face uneasy events of the past and make efforts to handle them correctly. All in all, almost a hundred thousand people were exposed to English-Canadian and Québec plays in Hungarian in two decades.

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