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# Translating the Theatre Act

Pavel Drábek

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Massimiliano Morini. *Theatre Translation: Theory and Practice*. London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2022. 176 pp. ISBN 9781350195639.

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[ reviews ]

Translating theatre is not to be mistaken with translating dramatic texts – be it as literature or even as texts *per se*. This is, in a nutshell and with significant simplification, Massimiliano Morini’s argument in this remarkable book, published in the series Bloomsbury Advances in Translation. With translation studies and pragmatics as a point of departure, Morini takes a long historic view – both of theory and of theatre practice. He is well equipped for the task, having dedicated his previous studies to the early modern English reception of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, to a range of studies on poetry and novel in translation, and to the pragmatics of translation (see MORINI 2012). He is also a well-known musician and performer, and I cannot help but see the inchoate experience of musicking and of performance as an experience trumping any arguments about textual approaches. The ‘authority of performance’ (to use Worthen’s term (WORTHEN 1997)) overpowers any textual politics in the translation of theatre. Morini gives such literary approaches a short shrift and calls them our ‘textual bias’ (95ff.), radically disputing them, sometimes even with a drop of zealous scorn.

Notwithstanding, Morini is a careful reader and rigorous scholar of translation theory. The opening four chapters of his *Theatre Translation: Theory and Practice*,

grouped in Part I ‘Theory’, are impressive in their concision, purpose, and range. Morini ventures into relevant disciplines too – literary history, book history, theatre studies, semiotics, and classical studies – and writes a potted history of translation theory: an almost obsessively text-centric tradition that has, for millennia, tried (and mostly failed) to handle the challenge of capturing in written words the performative medium.

Exactly in the middle of the book, in the single chapter of Part II ‘Terms and Methodology’, Morini

advances a neutral, descriptive and pragmatic view of the process whereby a source theatre act is transformed into a target theatre act. As anticipated in the introduction to the book, [this monograph] proposes to call this process **theatre translation**. (67–68; emphasis in the original)

In the remaining three chapters of the book, grouped in Part III ‘Practice’, Morini offers three different historic types of theatre translation – ranging from the seventeenth-century English versions of Guarini’s tragicomedy *Il pastor fido* (c. 1588), through Italian stage adaptations of late twentieth-century popular shows (Douglas-Home’s *The Secretary Bird* (1968) and Warren Adler’s novel *The War of the Roses*

(1981), adapted into a Hollywood movie), to postdramatic and hybrid performance works such as Heiner Müller's *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977) or Señor Serrano's multimedia show *Birdie* (2014). These are helpful illustrations of what Morini proposes but – without trying to be dismissive of his important argument – he is providing examples of a special kind of stage adaptation, explicitly arguing that any translation in the theatre must by necessity be an adaptation if it is to create a lively, effective piece of performance. Morini goes a step further and uses Roman Jakobson's translation triad, of *interlingual*, *intra-lingual*, and *intersemiotic* translation, which he complements with the theatre makers' necessary processes that he calls 'intrasemiotic/intersemiotic (dependence of performance on previous performances, on stage or in other media)' (71). This is only partially helpful. Like Jakobson's revolutionary proposition to study non-textual phenomena (images, behaviours, institutions, or cultures) as if they were *a text*, his translation triad proposes a system of *metaphorical* terms. This taxonomy allows for broader perspectives and hermeneutical insights, but also blunts the accuracy of our expression. If everything is a text (no, it is not), then we have only gained a powerful but blunt tool for mastering a great range of disparate material. Similarly, if everything is a translation (again, it is not), then even my current attempt at formulating thoughts – be they Morini's, or my own – could be translation. And so would be semantic redundancy, as each iteration is a retranslation of my thoughts and my previous propositions. The bounds of our language would vanish, and we would be doomed to communicate on a very inchoate, inarticulate level only.

Theatre texts – scripts, stage directions, AV recordings – are imperfect and frustratingly incomplete forms of media when it comes to capturing the wholeness of performance. Yet, they are almost all we have got. Just like language, we can only use old words and old thoughts to give form to the formlessness of our experiences.

Morini's case studies allow us to glimpse the processes of theatre 'translation' (the scare quotation marks are intentional) and consider the varieties of the *processes* of *transforming theatre acts into theatre acts* (Morini's words). A few clarifications are necessary if we are to be *literally*, not just metaphorically, on the same page:

*What are we translating when we are translating theatre? What is a theatre act? Do we mean a concrete show (a concrete run), i.e., a performance of a production? (Morini calls a staging or production a *mise-en-scène*. Unhelpfully somewhat: there are many more ways of making theatre than the French term warrants.) Or do we take the theatre act to be the *production* – that is, the *ideal*, coordinated artefact that the theatre company has rehearsed and attempts at performing for an audience? These are central questions that Morini does not address, so his case studies go only some way towards clarifying exactly what *theatre translation* – in its radical and inspiring boundlessness – means as a process. What is the artefact? What is worth translating? And, perhaps most crucially, what is *theatre* in this case?*

Morini's earliest example is the canonical tragicomedy *Il pastor fido* by Giambattista Guarini (printed in late 1589). Within a few years of unease over the play's novel genre, *Il pastor fido* spread throughout Europe like a wildfire:

Very few years elapsed before the appearance of versions in all the major European languages, including Latin; the first French translation was published as early as 1593; English and Spanish faithful shepherds followed in 1602; a neo-Latin *Pastor Fidus* in 1604 or 1605; a German *Schäfer* in 1619. [...] the existence of one version in a certain language would not hinder other people from creating their own and publishing them – as shown by two more printed translations in English, four more in French and three more in German. (78)

But this is just the setting for Morini's prime interest: Tailboys Dymock's 1602 translation into English shows signs of theatricality and was published by the London's leading publisher of plays. Three quarters of a century later, Elkanah Settle created his *Pastor fido: Or, the Faithful Shepherd* (1677), which was done from Richard Fanshawe's 1647 version, not from Italian. Where is the theatre in all this? Dymock's translation is implicitly theatrical in that it shows signs of what Brecht (and the late Alessandro Serpieri after him) would call *gestic language* – one governed by the live, physical, and social momentum of speech. These are not words of literature to be read in silence but utterances in dramatic moments. Morini points to this remarkable text but does not fully unpack what is hidden by his adopted catch-all term of *theatre*. Here *theatre* stands for dramatic, performative potential. The Italian playwright Eduardo De Filippo distinguished between words of the voice and those of the ink – *parole di voce e non d'inchiostro* (and I am grateful to Daniele Niedda and Alba Graziano for telling me of this distinction) – and it is this quality of *theatrical language* that Morini speaks

of when it comes to Dymock. Please note, we are talking non-metaphorically about spoken language, not about performance: words are only a part (and often a dispensable one) of stage action.

When it comes to Settle's 1677 version, that inducts yet another level of complexity. Settle does not translate from the Italian (he admits as much in his foreword), but he is conscious and even emphatic about the play's foreignness. Settle was a remarkable figure. He focused on the transnational dramaturgy of European theatre, arguably countering the nationalist tendencies of narrow, English Restoration views that edited out admissions of international influence. Settle's grand *The Empress of Morocco* (1673), his *Ibrahim, the Illustrious Bassa* (1676), or *The World in the Moon* (1697), probably inspired by Cyrano de Bergerac's fantastical *L'histoire comique contenant les états et empires de la lune* (1649) and its reception in the theatre, such as Aphra Behn's popular harlequinade *The Emperor of the Moon* (1687), opened the London theatre to a wider, pre-colonial global worldview. Yet again, it is only through the extant texts that we can *infer* (and no more than *infer*) the theatrical act that Settle's dramatic text enabled. To what extent then are we talking about translating the 'theatre act'?

Towards the end of his chapter on *Il pastor fido*, Morini briefly mentions John Fletcher's play *The Faithful Shepherdess* (c. 1607, printed 1609), which clearly is a riposte to Guarini's play (see also my somewhat dated discussion of the Fletcherian riposte in DRÁBEK 2010: 143, 165). Surprisingly, Morini does not consider the option that Fletcher's tragicomedy *The Faithful Shepherdess* could in fact be considered as a case of theatre translation on his own

terms. Fletcher read Guarini's play – either in the original (he read in Romance languages), or in Dymock's anonymously published translation of 1602 – and transformed it into an English play staged in 1608 by a professional children's company in London. The fact that Fletcher's play flopped does not mean much: so did Webster's *The White Devil*, so did Bizet's *Carmen*, and so did many other classics of theatre history. Fletcher, Shakespeare, and Massinger – and their followers and imitators – learned a lesson from the flop and forged an immensely successful culture of the English (or Fletcherian) pastoral tragicomedy, which continued well into the Restoration period (for instance in Aphra Behn's *The Young King, or The Mistake*, 1679). One flop does not make theatre history. (On this point please see also Adam Railton's work in progress.)

There are other available early modern examples of what Morini would call theatre translation. Jorge Braga Riera has studied seventeenth-century English translations of Spanish plays (BRAGA RIERA 2009, 2021). Shakespeare combined Plautus' *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo* in a fascinating creative act of *contaminatio* and wrote *The Comedy of Errors*. He also took older English plays – *The True Chronicle History of King Leir*, *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, the (ur-)*Hamlet* and others – and 'translated' them into new plays. (I loath to say *his* plays because they were published anonymously, or Shakespeare's name could have been added for reasons of publicity.) Another example of *theatre translation* is Fletcher's *contaminatio* of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1592) and the anonymous *The Taming of a Shrew* (c. 1592), resulting in *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed* (c.

1611). His friend and collaborator Philip Massinger 'translated' (intralingually) Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (c. 1605) into his successful comedy *A New Way to Pay Old Debts* (c. 1625). Are we still in the realm of *theatre translation*, or are we simply talking about playwriting and dramaturgical practice?

A remarkable instance of theatrical translation that would deserve further study is Joseph Rutter's 1637 English translation of Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*, acted in Paris in the previous year. (Corneille's play itself is based on Guillén de Castro's *Las Mocedades del Cid*, acted in Valencia in 1618.) In his address 'To the Reader', Joseph Rutter makes very interesting comments about the process of translating from the French theatrical culture for an English audience. Rutter's version was performed in London by a professional theatre company. A couple of decades later, in 1663, one of the illustrious writers of the seventeenth century, Katherine Philips – also known as 'the matchless Orinda' – made a translation of Pierre Corneille's *Pompée*. In the same year, it was performed at the Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin and printed both there and in London. An oblique comment in the printer's preface to the printed translation states: 'the hand that did it is responsible for nothing but the English, and the Songs between the Acts, which were added only to lengthen the Play, and make it fitter for the Stage' (PHILLIPS 1663: A2r). Here, we are talking about the translations of professional theatre productions for professional theatre productions. This is probably the closest that we could get to 17<sup>th</sup>-century practices of *theatre translation*. The next step would be to look at English comedians' versions/translations of English plays for their German stage – for

instance, Johann Georg Gettner's *Romio und Julietta* (c. 1685; see ERNE and SEIDLER 2020's edition in the Arden series) or *Die Heylige Martyrin Dorothea* (c. 1691), his version of Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr* (c. 1620) (see HAVLÍČKOVÁ and NEUHUBER 2014; MIKYŠKOVÁ 2018). The surviving texts are theatre manuscripts, not published plays, and serve as invaluable documents for the study of early modern theatre practice and theatre translation too.

When it comes to more recent examples, it may be our illusion that the situation gets simpler. Morini's case studies suggest that this is not so. We enter a realm floating on formless practices and conceptual quicksands. We only fool ourselves – by what Sloman and Fernbach (2017) call *the knowledge illusion* – that we are close to an understanding, without it being the case. In his final chapter – just before the 'Conclusion: What This Book is not About' – Morini considers an interesting example of Señor Serrano's multimedia production *Birdie* (2014), which engages in simultaneous and artistically incorporated translations into international languages. This is fascinating material but, again, only representing one special kind of performance and of theatre. *Birdie* is complex in a number of ways: not only in its heterogeneous intertextuality but also in its aim at performing for international audiences at festivals, etc. It is ethically desirable to open up worlds to the Other (and in this way, *Birdie* incorporates also an implicit presence of Morini's deontic aspect of translation). At the same time, this international thrust occurs at the expense of a focused, refined

attention to detail – and it is the cognitive joy of attending to detail, shared with others in real time, that gives theatre its unique quality. We all have experienced metaphorical, fuzzy, and visually stimulating shows that are perfectly inclusive of linguistic diversity, yet are profoundly frustrating because they thrive on our shared *assumptions*, not on shared attention to our haptic presence. Many such 'glocal' multimedia shows rest on shared functional misunderstanding, and we as audience watch while respecting that we can never be on the same literal page with our co-spectators, because there is no refined language that we share as part of the performance: only fuzzy images.

*Birdie* is also a kind of participatory show – what Nicolas Bourriaud calls *relational aesthetics*. The theatre act is co-created by the audience's participation and presence. Without the audience there is only a germ of the event. (Morini acknowledges as much.) But what are we to translate here? The *hic et nunc* audience presence? Is that the artefact? Surely not. Translating or imitating that would rob theatre of its unique feature: that it is always created *hic et nunc*, in the shared physical (or haptic) presence of others. A translation would turn us into Platonic shadows that replicate a higher command. And that would be worse than the textual bias that we, theatre translators, are all struggling against.

Massimiliano Morini's book is an inspiring, provocative, and stirring intervention into the comfortable waters of theatre translation. I am very grateful for this book and am looking forward to the debate it will engender.

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