



“Peter Pan on Crack” or How to Sound on Stage:

An Exploration of Speakability and Performability in Theatre

Translation

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Summary

This thesis aims to provide an insight into the terms ‘speakability’ and ‘performability’. The terms seem to be keywords in the literature on the translation of theatre. However, they are hardly ever clearly defined. It can therefore be confusing for the (future) theatre translator to understand why these terms are important and how they can be used as workable concepts during the process of theatre translation. It is demonstrated that there is a clear divide within the academic world on translation strategies within the field. The term ‘performability’ is central to this debate, and seems to be used as a way to denote that strategies of domestication are more acceptable in the translation of theatre than they generally are in the translation of other literature.

Some preliminary conclusions show that ‘performability’ can be seen as all strategies used by the translator that make a play work on stage, a process in which the literature on general literary translation can be useful. The difference with other literary forms is that the main strategy is generally aimed at domestication. The term ‘speakability’ is that one thing that is specific about theatre translation, namely the spoken language and how this can be recaptured in the translation. The best way to test speakability is to have the pre-final text tested in some kind of (simulated) performative environment.

All of these results are then tested on a case study, which consists of translating scenes from Polly Stenham’s play *No Quarter*.

Key words

No Quarter, Performability, Speakability, Stenham, Theatre, Theatre Translation, Translation



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Chapter 1. Introduction

Do you ever wonder why he talks like Peter Pan on crack? All that yikes, crikey, rats vernacular. That's because his only friends as a kid were his mother and a battered Enid Blyton. He actually thought that's how people talked.

(Esme about Robin in *No Quarter*, Polly Stenham, 75)

When reading a line like this, it is hard not to wonder what that could possibly sound like: 'Peter Pan on crack'. And what about 'a battered Enid Blyton'? Let alone 'Agatha Christie on speed' (n.a. 2013), as one reviewer referred to the manner of speech in Polly Stenham's emotionally intense play *No Quarter* (2013). Where a translation is concerned, this question gains a special relevance. Even if one is able to imagine what a Peter Pan on crack would sound like in English, this effect will still have to be reproduced in Dutch. Even more, it will have to be reproduced into a speakable and performable type of Dutch, at least when the translator in question is working to create a text with the purpose of a stage adaptation in the target language.

A beginning translator of theatre texts will first have to find his or her bearings amid the wealth of academic literature written on the topic of drama translation. A number of recurring points of discussion fuel the academic debate. Two specific terms that consistently return in almost all literature on the topic are 'speakability' and 'performability' (cf. Aaltonen 2000, Bassnett 1980, 1985, 1991, 1998, Espasa 2000, 2013,



Pavis 1989, 1991, Serpieri 2013, Snell-Hornby 2007). It is, however, not easy to determine what the terms actually refer to. The more literature one reads, the more mystifying these terms become, as they often lack a working definition that would make them applicable to empirical research or every day practice. Examples of their application to case studies are mostly confined to the poetic language of Shakespeare – who does not, as it happens, sound like Peter Pan on crack, nor like Agatha Christie on speed. So not only are case studies of the ‘performability’ of contemporary dramatic texts sorely lacking, but most academics do not seem to be able to provide a working definition of the abovementioned terms, nor do they fully explain why and how ‘performability’ and/or ‘speakability’ could pose a problem to the translator. The terms appear to be interrelated and are often mentioned in one breath.

Kevin Windle, for instance, explains speakability as ‘a neologism which has come to form part of the accepted terminology of the field. Other ‘-abilities’ have become widespread: ‘playability’, ‘actability’, ‘stageability’, and ‘performability’ are favourites, and express closely related ideas, which have much in common with ‘acceptability’ (156). He then continues to summarise a list of quotes from different authors on this subject, which does not do much to clarify the term.

Despite that, the terms are generally considered to be the most important tool in the box of the translator who is translating for the stage, as opposed to a print publication. This is not only evident from the literature written on the subject, but also underlined in essays by Joseph Marco (2002) and Barbara Blackwell-Gülen (2007), who

both set out to create pedagogical programmes meant to enhance university students' skills in the translation of theatre. Both of them refer to speakability and performability as essential elements of a good stage translation, and recommend having students' translations read out loud or even performed in front of an audience to test such 'abilities'. For those studying to become theatre translators, these terms are apparently a vital part of their studies and future work environment. I believe, though, that a clearer insight into what is meant by these terms and what a translator is supposed to 'do' with them is needed in order for any translator, student or professional, to be able to help them improve their translation skills.

There is a second reason why further investigation into these terms might be useful. Academics like Jan Willem Mathijssen (2007) have shown that the practice of theatre translation often differs radically from the way in which it is conceptualised theoretically. He is not the only one to draw this conclusion. Phillippe Le Moine, head of the National Theatre Studio's translation department Channels, states that:

[Translators] are not in contact with what they need to do: to translate for particular types of performance and staging. These are specific skills. There's a big divide and the two sides don't understand each other very well. It's something we're trying to remedy.

(qtd. in Logan 2003)



For anyone interested in working as a translator for the theatre, it could be of particular interest to investigate the ways in which theory and practice diverge and interlink, in order to be better prepared for the field. Especially in the context of translating a play which stands out for its unique, fast-paced dialogue, I think the terms I mean to investigate, ‘speakability’ and ‘performability’, are key to a better understanding of the practice of theatre translation. However, further investigation is necessary to shape these terms into workable concepts that can actually be adapted to the translation of a contemporary play.

In this thesis, the definition and acceptability of these terms to the study and practice of theatre translation will be investigated. This will be done by means of an in-depth study into what exactly is written about them in academic literature, how they are, if at all, defined, and most importantly, how they pose translation problems. It will also be investigated to what extent there are different ideas in the literature concerning these concepts. This is why a wide variety of literature is used, selecting sources from people who are involved in the field of theatre translation in different ways: e.g., academics in the field of theatre, academics in the field of translation studies and people who are not necessarily academics, but work as theatre maker or translator. The type of translations that will be discussed are translations of original dramatic texts, not stage adaptations of other types of literary texts, such as novels.

Lastly, the findings will be tested by adapting ‘speakability’ and ‘performability’ into workable concepts that will help me improve my own translation of Polly Stenham’s



No Quarter. I have picked this specific case study because both the language that is used in the play and the issues that are discussed in the play are contemporary, written by a young promising dramatist. In a limited sense, this case study hopes to address the lack in research into the translation of contemporary theatre.

I propose to answer the following research question:

How are the terms ‘speakability’ and ‘performability’ discussed and defined in theory on the subject of theatre translation, and how can these terms be adapted into workable concepts that can be applied during the process of theatre translation for the stage?

The first half of this thesis will explore this question by means of an in-depth look into the relevant literature, reviewing literature both from the field of translation studies and the field of theatre studies. In the second half of the thesis, the extent to which these terms can be adapted into workable concepts that can be used in translation practice will be discussed. This will be carried out side by side with an analysis of Polly Stenham’s *No Quarter*. In the appendices I present my own annotated translation.



Chapter 2. Method

This research starts out with a theoretical investigation in the third chapter into the terms 'performability' and 'speakability'. To further the understanding of these terms, the framework also provides a look into the wider debate around theatre translation.

The theoretical framework, which provides an overview of the theoretical research and presents its results, starts out with a short history of the study of the translation of theatre as a subfield of translation studies. This history will provide some insight into the way the term 'performability' evolved into its current usage, followed by a close look at the debate that stems from this early history of theatre translation, and still lives on today.

In the fourth chapter, the literature will be further analysed and an attempt will be made to formulate a way in which performability and speakability can be applied in the practice of theatre translation. Included is a brief discussion of the situation around theatre translations in the Netherlands in the year 2015-2016, in order to investigate whether there is a distinguishable divide between translations made by playwrights and those made by professional translators on the Dutch stage as well.

The results of this conceptual analysis will be put into practice in chapter five, the analysis of the case study, by discussing examples of steps I have taken during my own translation process to secure the performability and speakability of the source text in the target text. These steps include an experimental run-through of the translated play with



the help of a number of volunteers and the results yielded by this run-through, which are shown in more detail in appendix B. The case study includes a brief summary of the play and its main concerns in order for the reader to have a better understanding of the analysis and the translation that follows.

The conclusion will hopefully not only provide a satisfactory answer to the question asked in the introduction, but also discuss some possibilities for future research. The source and target texts can be found in appendices A and C respectively.



Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 History of the Study of Theatre Translation

If it was a long time before translation became a serious object of study at universities, then the study of theatre translation had an even more belated entrance into the academic world. Eva Espasa (2000) and Terry Hale and Carol-Ann Upton (2000) show that it was not until the late 1980s and early 1990s that serious discussion on the translation of theatre took place. Hale and Upton provide two reasons for this. Firstly, the 60s and 70s saw a number of changes in the practice of theatre translation. In one respect, there was an increasing demand for translated plays from other countries, as shown in an extensive research by famous theatre semiotic Erika Fischer-Lichter (1990). Also, whereas before it had always been trained translators and linguists that would provide translations for plays, it was now becoming more and more common for translations to be made by theatre professionals rather than professional translators.

A second reason for the rise in academic attention given to theatre translation is that, according to Hale and Upton, there had always been a taboo on the serious discussion of theatre translation as part of translation studies, because the resulting translations often took a lot of liberty with the source text and were therefore considered as adaptations rather than actual translations. But this same taboo, which stopped the study of theatre translation from gaining ground in the academic world, ended up being the one which fuelled the debate on the subject in the nineties, as interest mounted in the



growing divide between practitioners of theatre translation. In his 2003 *Guardian* article “Whose Play is it Anyway?” Brian Logan delves into the controversy that sparked this increase in academic attention. He refers to the change in theatre translation as the “controversial eclipse of the academic-translator by the playwright-translator.” He continues in the same vein as Hale and Upton by explaining that whereas up to the early 80s, it was mostly trained translators who would translate plays, “now people think it’s better to get someone who can write dialogue [referring to playwrights] rather than someone who speaks the language” (Hampton qtd. in Logan 2003). Logan concludes that many translators feel side-tracked, and within the theatrical field, opinions on the subject remain divided.

Within academic literature, the works of translation semiotician Susan Bassnett¹ and theatre semiotician Patrice Pavis in particular stand out in the early stages of the debate, as is shown by authors such as Espasa (2000) and Ekaterini Nikolarea (2002). In her earliest works on theatre translation, such as the 1980 monograph *Translation Studies*, Bassnett carefully introduced the concept of performability, which she considered central to the translation of theatre. For Bassnett, the term refers to a gestic text hidden in the play script, which had to be dug up by the translator in order to create a performable work. ‘Gestic text’ is used by Bassnett to refer to “the underlying deep structures and coded subtexts transparent in the play” (Serpieri 2013, 50), such as “deictic units, the speech rhythms, the pauses and silences” (ibidem). ‘Deictic units’ are identifiable units of

¹ Bassnett is sometimes also referred to as Bassnett-McGuire, the first name under which she published.

language referring to the action taking place on stage. A translator would have to focus on the performance that would follow his gestic text.

However, in the mid-80s, Bassnett changed her views, and her subsequent works on the subject reject this same notion of performability (Bassnett 1985, 1991, 1998). She stopped supporting the term, which she now refers to as merely “used to describe the indescribable” (1991, 102). In her view, ‘performability’ is quickly becoming just another word for ‘adaptation’, referring only to the acceptability of the text as a performance text. Later, she even went so far as to state that

whereas Stanislavski or Brecht would have assumed that the responsibility for decoding the gestic text lay with the performers, the assumption in the translation process is that this responsibility can be assumed by the translator sitting at a desk and imagining the performance dimension. Common sense should tell us that this cannot be taken seriously.

(idem: 100)

This is, however, not an attempt to get theatre translators out of their chairs and into the rehearsal room, like – as we shall later see – many other authors have aimed at, but it is much more Bassnett’s way to show that a theatre translator cannot think like a director and has to translate a written text into another written text without specific attention to the performance goal.



Academic literature (cf. Espasa 2013, Nikolarea 2002) usually places Pavis on the opposing side of the debate from Bassnett. In his essay 'Problems of Translations of the Stage' (1989) and the larger monography *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (1992) he argues for the theatre translator as the creator of a translation that will guide the final mise-en-scène the text will be part of (28). 'Mise-en-scène' refers to a term within the field of theatre studies first coined by French director André Antoine at the start of the twentieth century. It is used to refer to the entire final design of the theatre performance, including actors, the text and elements like technique. According to Pavis, every phrase should fit the form and intent of the play, up to the point that the translator is given the role of dramaturge. In further contrast to Bassnett, he is not much concerned with performability. Rather, his attention is focused on speakability, which he considers as the rhythm and duration of speech acts. He does believe that one has to be careful with such terms, as they should not be taken as an excuse for an overly simplified translation, in which phrasing is chosen only because it can be easily pronounced by an actor.

3.2 Analysis of the 'Page to Stage' Discussion

During the past few decades, those involved in the translation of theatre slowly divided into two main camps. These two camps can be defined along the lines of two separate textual systems that are involved in the translation of theatre: the written text and the stage text (cf. Aaltonen 2000, 2010, Anderman 2006, Besson 2013, Marco 2002, Perteghella 2004). It is not so much that these are considered to be two entirely separate



constructs. Rather, they have come to signify the specific purpose which guides the translation process: in the first case, what Bassnett (1980) refers to as ‘reader oriented’, which would be the case in, for instance, Molière’s works were to be translated as a written text for academic purposes, and in the second case as ‘performance oriented’, which is the case when a text is translated for the stage.

The debate is mainly driven by confusion between a reader-oriented tradition and a relatively new performance-oriented tradition. Most academics arguing for a stage-oriented approach do not consider it possible to translate a theatrical text in the same way as other types of written text. They find fault with the work of the translators of theatre plays who create more ‘scholarly’ or ‘literary’ translations, on the basis of stage-oriented criteria according to which these translations are judged to be too faithful and therefore unsuitable for the stage (cf. Pavis 1989, 1992, Logan 2013). Those on the other side of the debate believe that it is any translator’s duty to be faithful to the author they are translating. This leads them to the conclusion that what playwright-turned-translators call ‘translations’ are actually adaptations, and that it is necessary to have a much better knowledge of the source language in order to be able to successfully and faithfully translate any literary text, including theatre texts (cf. Bassnett 1985, 1991, 1998, Logan 2013).

Over the years, the debate has seen the introduction of a varied terminology. But although the concepts involved may find different expressions, there is quite a lot of



overlap between analogous terms. Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (1984)² and Espasa (2000) refer to 'page' versus 'stage', Mary Snell-Hornby (2007) and Sirkku Aaltonen (2000) discuss 'faithful' versus 'free' or 'actable' versus 'performable' translations, others mention 'scholarly' versus 'performable' (Perteghella 2004), or even, depending which of the two terms is linked to the side of the debate favoured by the academic in question, 'good' versus 'bad' translations (Zatlin 2005). One interesting reference made by both Espasa (2000) and Hale and Upton (2000) links this debate to the 'foreignization' versus 'domestication' debate. These concepts are not new: they are expressed in translation theory through terms such as 'naturalising' and 'exoticising' (Holmes 2010). However, within the translation of theatre, it is often assumed that a performance-oriented translation implies a domesticating strategy, whereas written text translations are linked to foreignization.

It needs to be remarked upon that where the lines in the debate appear to have been drawn very sharply, they are in fact more blurrier than they seem at first. Although Pavis' viewpoint, that of a theatre semiotic, is clearly antithetical to Bassnett's, a translation semiotic, most of the other authors' stances in this debate are influenced by their mixed academic backgrounds. More often than not they have studied translation and theatre in equal measure, and many of the authors have practical experience in the translation of theatre for the stage. It is true that those with more practical rather than academic experience lean more towards performance-oriented text translations, and that

² Zuber-Skerritt is sometimes also referred to in academic literature as Zuber, the first name she used for publications.



those whose work is generally more embedded in translation studies take a more nuanced approach and offer less practical examples of stage translation. However, Tom Kleijn, for instance, himself an experienced theatre translator, stated in a 2016 lecture that he himself always sides with the author:

Whatever [the theatre makers] do with the translated text is their business, but I do not want to make a head start towards the final performance. I am the one who understands the author, and therefore I feel like I have to defend his or her best interests. (...) I am not going to mess about with a text to make the director happy, to make the play more 'universal'.

(my translation)

This comes to show that not all practitioners necessarily believe in 'free' translations.

On the other hand, Phyllis Zatlin (2005) interviewed many theatre translators from different countries, and explains that she believes that academic translators do not necessarily produce unperformable texts. One of her interviewees was Marion Peter Holt, a theatre translator with an academic background, who stated that: "performability has always been the prime aim of every play I've translated. Then, I assume that if it's performed (or performable) it's publishable" (23).

Some voices indeed argue for a cooperative approach between the creators of the written translation and the performance-oriented text, the result of which would combine the best of both worlds. One of them is Pam Gems for instance, an English playwright,



who was interviewed by Logan (2013). She states: “You get, as I do, a translator to give you as literal a translation as possible. You as the dramatist then put your mark on it, and that means that the audience gets the best that you and the translator, together, can give them”. American playwright Philip Boehm (2001) made a similar ‘retranslation’ based on an existing translation of a Beckett play, because he was asked to make it “sound more contemporary, more American, and [...] more ‘actable’” (28), and in a 2010 interview with Roger Baines and Manuela Perteghella, Christopher Hampton explains that his translations of works by Chekhov and Ibsen came into being in a similar way.

3.3 Performability

The words ‘performable’ and ‘performability’ have so far only cropped up a few times in the discussion in this summary of the debate, but they are nonetheless central to the understanding of it. The terms can be considered both as central to the debate or as the focus of a splinter debate of its own. There are almost no authors, academic or other, who present a clear definition of ‘performability’; many, however, do believe that the notion is central to the translation of theatre, especially those on the performance-oriented side of the debate. Others believe that the notion is “resistant to any form of definition” (Bassnett 1998: 95) and “allows the translator to take greater liberties with the text than many might deem acceptable” (idem 96).

Unsurprisingly, Bassnett is most vehemently opposed to the term. Nikolarea (2002) summarises Bassnett’s main objections against the concept as:



- It is mainly used as a justification for various linguistic strategies used by translators, directors, and others;
- It makes claims to an old-fashioned notion of the idea that culture is universal, which, according to Bassnett, it is not;
- It is mainly a way to escape the domineering presence of both playwright and the play script.

(Nikolarea 2002, n. pag.)

It is easy to see how these objections are intertwined in the larger debate, as they all refer to strategies of domestication and adaptation of the foreign text.

Windle (2011) explains that the term, and other related concepts generally pertain to the acceptability of the play, a word also well known in translation theory (cf. Toury 1995). But what does acceptability mean in the context of theatre translation? It seems to refer to all those elements that make a text 'performable'. Obviously, this is still a very broad definition which is not necessarily helpful to the translator eager for instructions on how to start working on a 'performable' translation. Going over the literature, a number of factors are most often mentioned in connection with the 'performability' of a translation:

- Every translation needs to be made "for a particular mise en scène" (Hale and Upton 9), meaning that every translation is made for one specific performance and should therefore be created to fit the needs of that performance. Pulvers (1984) believes that in this way, the script can become a "starting point for the re-



creation” (28) of the play on stage. Pavis (1992) also considers the translation to be an integral part of the final performance.

- Espasa (2000) discusses the theatrical viewpoint, with which she means that the text should appeal to an audience. This audience-oriented viewpoint, which has both an ideological and an economical motivation, can also be found in Le Moine’s comments in the introduction. Unsurprisingly, ‘appealing to an audience’ often entails cultural adaptation. Fischer-Lichte has provided an in-depth research into intercultural exchanges in theatre. She concludes that although there is more and more foreign work on the stage in Western theatre, this mainly stems from a demand within the target culture, and the bulk of imported works undergo a high degree of adaptation. Examples of such adaptations are provided by Boehm (2001), who has ‘Americanised’ certain plays, and Pulvers (1984), a translator from the Japanese, discovered it took a lot of imagination on his part to make sure that the audience understood the specifically Japanese aspects of the play. Several other authors also strongly encourage cultural adaption in translations (cf. Marco 2002, Pavis 1989, 1991).
- The last element that often returns in the discussion of performability can be summarised in what Marco (2002) refers to as “matching the text to action” (59). This has to be done largely through speech acts and the mimetic language of the stage, which is considered by Alessandro Serpieri (2013) to consist mainly of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The first would refer to speech acts that ‘do



something' for instance by informing, warning, asking etc., the second refers to the actual "bringing about of something through speech" (55). However, in my view, this last element is different from the other two criteria. It is also more vague, possibly because one can wonder to what extent such speech acts are in the translator's hands, and to what extent they have already been developed within the play by the playwright.

Before defining performability more clearly, it is necessarily to address the notion of speakability first.

3.4 Speakability

Serpieri (2013) considers speakability to be "closely aligned to performability", considering it as the way in which language performs the actions that supposedly make the play performable. Although he is one of the few that considers the two terms to be so close, other authors also note that the two notions are "often equated" (Espasa 2000).

The definitions for speakability are, if provided at all, quite diverse, but all have to do with the manner of speech in theatre. Common denominators are:

- Rhythm (cf. Espasa 2000, Pavis 1989, 1991, Snell-Hornby 2007). Many authors discuss rhythm as something that is closely equated to a natural, easily flowing manner of speech.
- Duration. This is mentioned, amongst others, by Pavis (1989, 1991). He believes that the duration of a theatre play is also culturally decided, and that not all



audiences are used to listening for a very long time. This is also partly a time bound element, as today's audiences are more used to quick action than long dialogue.

This means that some plays might have to be cut, although this is more often than not up to the director. In the Netherlands, too, long plays get cut often: *Angels in America*, the celebrated but also notoriously long play by Tony Kushner, was played in over seven hours by acting group Noord Nederlands Toneel, performed by Toneelgroep Amsterdam in five and a half hours, and then cut back to four hours in its latest Dutch edition by Toneelgroep Oostpool. Many Shakespeare plays, such as *Hamlet*, are also often subjected to smaller or larger cuts.

But duration also means "economy" in text (Perteghella 2004: 2). Language has to be kept as short and concrete as possible. This is something to keep in mind when translating from English to Dutch, where sentences tend to be slightly longer. If this happens to too many sentences, it might seriously lengthen the play. Also, to come back to the first point on this list, duration can have influence on the rhythm of a larger piece of text.

- Clear speech, or "the ease with which the words of the translated text can be enunciated" (Wellwarth 1981: 140). Closely aligned to the commentary above is the need for clarity of utterances. As Espasa (2013) reminds us, the performance is a unique, unrepeatable event before an audience that usually visits the show only once and is likely not quite as acquainted with the text as its performers. They cannot skip back to passages they did not understand very well and have no time



to reflect on events during the show. Therefore, it is important that speech act are not unnecessarily difficult. It also means "that sequences of sounds which are difficult to articulate and which the audience may mishear are unsuitable" (Levy 1963: 129).

- Distinct voices. According to Pulvers (1984), actors "need to be able to move their audiences" (23), and one way to secure that is by making sure that all characters have clearly distinct voices.
- Speech and gesture. Nikolarea (2002) mentions that speech has to support the action on stage. Other authors agree that speech and gesture have to be congruent, making their arguments look very similar to Serpieri's argument mentioned before.

One further element of speakability is mentioned by nearly all authors: that it needs to be tested in practice. The job of the translator is not considered done unless he has had his text read, or even practiced in the rehearsal room, preferably by actors. Hampton (2013), himself a translator, states that his texts continue to change throughout the weeks of rehearsal for the play, and Zatlin even goes as far as to state that a theatre translator needs to have experience in the theatre himself, either on amateur or professional level, in order to truly understand speakability. Pavis (1991) creates a larger system, in which the translation of the text is only the second step, and the text continues to change even during the reception by the audience, which is considered its real test. Marco (2002) and Blackwell-Gülen (2007), both specifically interested in the teaching of theatre translation,



have added elements of such practice to the teaching systems they propose, amongst which the reading out loud and performing of texts. Zuber-Skerritt (1984) mentions the role of the translator as mediator, in which the translator is not only present in the rehearsal room to insure the speakability of his translation, but also to explain why certain lines are written the way they are, in order for the actors to be able to pronounce them correctly.



Chapter 4. Discussion

The findings in the theoretical discussion show first of all that the terms ‘performability’, and to some extent the term ‘speakability’ as well, have been used over the years to signify different elements of theatre translations. The meaning of the terms is sometimes more or less defined within one specific academic work, but these definitions are not used in the same way by different authors. One cannot help but sympathise with Bassnett’s frustration with the concept, who stated: “this very vexed term is frequently used by translators of theatre texts who claim to have taken into account the performance dimension by reproducing linguistically the ‘performability’ of the text” (1985: 90).

One further element that proves particularly frustrating is the “matching of text to action” (Marco 59). This because it is never explained how this is something the translator, rather than the playwright himself, has to secure. If the play is well-written, the matching of text to action should follow from the directions in the source text. The translator might have to make sure that he brings across certain stage directions in the correct way, but this does not necessarily call for any particular actions on the translator’s side that are different from those considerations made by the translator of other forms of literature, who is trying to bring the nuances and the characteristic elements of a source text across.



4.1 Theatre Translation in the Netherlands

Another problematic aspect of the literature on the subject is that the focus is usually on translating into English, and/or on the translation or adaptation of classical plays such as Shakespeare, Molière or Chekhov. The latter is problematic because the languages of classic authors require much more adaptation than the language of a contemporary author such as Stenham.

The former is problematic because the translation of plays into English is very different from translation into a language like Dutch. When an English theatre translator gets an assignment for a translation, it is often a play written in a source culture that is significantly different from the target culture, such as plays by Japanese writers. However, in the Netherlands, most translation assignments focus on languages belonging to source cultures much closer to ours, notably English, as much of the Western canon has been provided by English playwrights. Furthermore, Clem Robyns (2010) shows that different cultures can have different ways to integrate the foreign element of translated works in their own culture. It can be expected that English, a rather dominant language, might have a more imperialistic or defensive attitude towards different cultures than countries with a less dominant language.

In order to provide some evidence for the claim that in the Netherlands, much of the translated works concern Western canon, predominantly English canon, a short and very limited study was undertaken into the productions of the eight largest theatre groups of the Netherlands of the past theatre season, as shown in appendix C. However limited

the study might be, some preliminary results show that almost 50 percent of the plays that were based on translations were translated by professional translators (possibly more, as one theatre group, Toneelgroep Oostpool, did not credit their translators), and nearly 30 percent were translated by theatre professionals. However, of the translations made by translators, 12,5 percent were then further adapted by theatre professionals, against only 2,5 percent (namely, one) of those translations made by theatre professionals, as can be seen in figure 1 below. This shows that in the Netherlands professional translators have made some way for theatre professionals in the area of theatre translation.

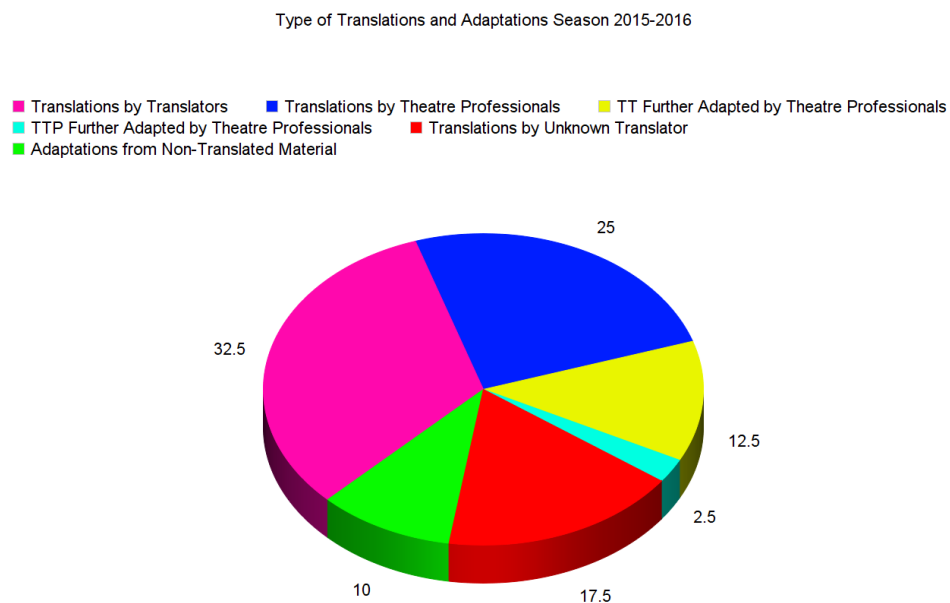


Figure 1. Type of Translations and Adaptations Season 2015-2016. Note: TT = Translations by Translators, TTP = Translations by Theatre Professionals.

The study also shows that over 40% percent of the plays translated for the stage in the season 2015-2016 by the eight largest Dutch theatre groups were English language plays, as can be seen in figure 2.

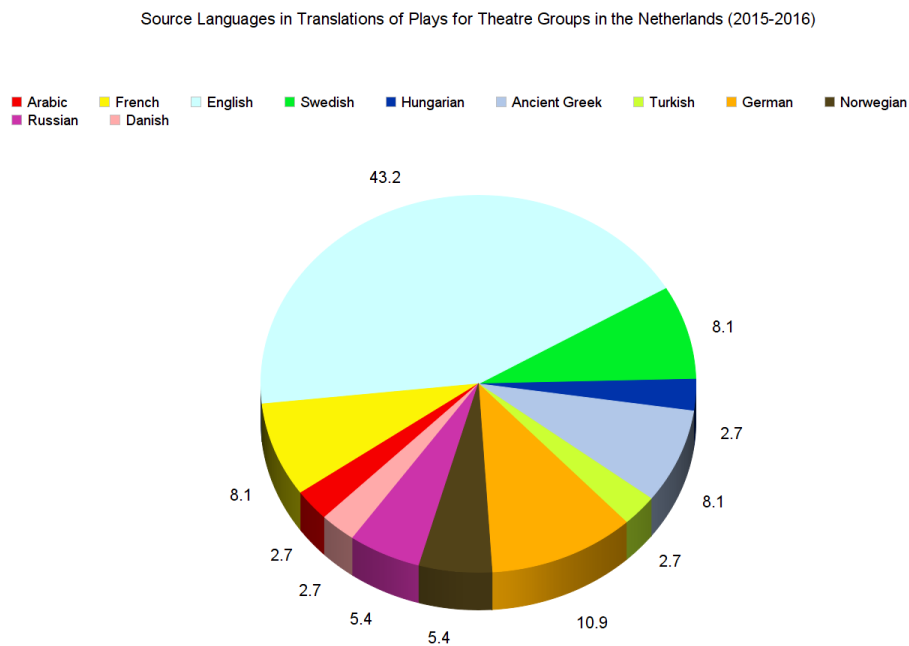


Figure 2. Source Languages in Translations of Plays for Theatre Groups in the Netherlands (2015-2016)

The result is that with case studies such as *No Quarter*, the cultural and linguistic gap might be smaller, which could make the question, especially of ‘performability’, less urgent, as a play such as *No Quarter* requires less extensive reworking to be performable



on the Dutch stage. A domesticating strategy might not always be necessary or even preferable, as my case study will show. Another reason why the focus on classical theatrical texts is problematic is because it does not take into account plays such as the *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Müller, a postmodern play which might be said to challenge ideas of 'performability' in its source culture, and which might not have been meant to be too easy on the audience's ear.

However, none of these objections amount to a compelling argument to give up on the terms 'performability' and 'speakability'. They should not be taken as an excuse to account for large cuts and adaptations that sometimes seem part and parcel of the transfer of plays from one culture to another, but rather as a way to account for certain choices which relate to the performability of a play in the target culture. It should be kept in mind that in the field of audio-visual entertainment, adaptation or 'free' translation is often less a matter of disrespect towards the author or source culture as it is a necessity in the struggle to get a foreign play on stage, and even more, to attract a large and varied audience to come and see it.

But these conclusions are far from sufficient to provide a guideline or basis for a theatre translator in creating a 'performable' translation. For that, it is necessary to try and combine the aforementioned aspects of 'performability' and 'speakability' that the literature provides into a set of criteria that turns them into workable concepts.



4.2 Performability

In the case of performability, we have seen that the term refers to the fact that the translation should meet the requirements of a specific performance, that cultural adaptation might be asked for, and that the text has to match the action on stage. Leaving aside that last aspect, which, as noted in the previous chapter, can be considered questionable, it becomes possible to consider performability as the translation of culture on stage, and all those considerations a theatre translator has to keep in mind when bringing source culture and language to the stage in a target culture. It consists of all those aspects that make a translation useful for the concept a director has in mind and understandable for the audience who will perceive it.

A literary translator will not be unacquainted with such considerations: what to do with culture specific elements,³ different accents, specific vocabularies etcetera, and the underlying question of whether to opt for a foreignising or domesticising translation strategy. These questions are often addressed in the more general literature on translation (cf. Grit 2010, Holmes 2010, Nord 2010). For the theatre translator, the questions and considerations are largely the same. It should therefore be quite possible to use general literature on, for instance, culture specific elements, and adapt such literature, taking into account the specific constraints of stage translations in order to deal with performability.

³ Whenever 'culture specific elements' are mentioned, they are used in the definition of Grit (2010, 189).

However, the translator has to keep two things in mind. Firstly, in a situation where the translator has been commissioned by a director or theatre group to translate a play, it means that what the future makers intend to show and do with the play will add further constraints and call for deliberations between the parties. Secondly, the performance situation might ask for a more rigorous strategy of domestication than literary translators would opt for literary texts that are not meant for the stage, not only because the text might be hard to understand or perform for today's audience, but sometimes also simply because the theatre makers ask for such a text. A translator with an academic background might not always agree with such strategies, but when working in a collective with a great performance in mind, mutual cooperation might be more productive.

Lastly, as mentioned before, I would like to challenge the idea that theatre translation always asks for rigorous strategies of domestication, as my case study below will show.

4.3 Speakability

In the case of 'speakability' there is clearly more consensus amongst authors. All definitions pertain exclusively to stage language and have to do with rhythm, duration, clear speech, distinct voices and the matching of text and action. I propose to view all considerations made on how to translate speech can be considered a subcategory of the larger considerations made in the framework on performability. These considerations also



help both director and audience to bring the play to life. However, whereas the discussion on culture specific elements is widely discussed in other literary works, the vocal element is one thing that is specific for the stage: how speech sounds when it is spoken rather than read. Falling back on other academic literature might not be sufficient. I therefore propose that in translating theatre, the practical adaptation of the text should always be an integral part of the translation process. In the work of professionals, this might mean working close with the theatre makers during the rehearsal process, in order to change the text when necessary, such as Hampton does (2013). Theatre students should get the chance to see their texts spoken or even performed in a performance setting, preferably by people with some experience in acting.



Chapter 5. Analysis of the Case Study

In 2007, *That Face*, the first play by then nineteen-year-old Stenham, premiered at the Royal Court in London. It was awarded the Critic's Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright 2008, the Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright 2007, and the TMA Best New Play 2007. It was soon followed by two other plays, *Tusk Tusk* in 2009 and *No Quarter* in 2013. All three plays were directed by Jeremy Herinn. Since then, several screenplays and another play, *Hotel*, have followed. *That Face* was performed also in the Netherlands, by the Dutch National Theatre in 2010.

Like most of Stenham's plays, *No Quarter* deals with topics of dysfunctional families and growing up. The background of the play is formed around the life of 24-year-old Robin, who has been raised by his artistic, free-spirited mother Lily in their huge, but crumbling country home. His upbringing has been peculiarly sheltered: Robin was home-schooled and there was no contact with the outside world or modern media. After this remarkable youth he goes out into the real world to study music at a London university. However, he soon finds he cannot cope with the modern world, and when his mother becomes terminally ill with Alzheimer's, he abandons his studies to return and live back home with her, ready to retreat permanently from the outside world he has rejected.

In the first act of the play, Robin helps his mother commit suicide, as both cannot cope with her facing a slow and painful decline into dementia. Immediately after her death, Robin discovers that his mother has sold their beloved country house, and



believing his successful politician brother Oliver forced their mother into selling, he starts a rebellion against his brother and the world.

In between the lines of this not exactly average story runs the underlying theme referred to in the play as 'mythology'. As Oliver tells Robin:

You were brought up on mythology. Hollow mythology. That's why you're all stuck, all angry, a prince in the wrong story. A prince with a black eye.

(90-1)

This is indeed the crux of the play: by cutting himself off from the realities of life, Robin is choosing to live in a magical imaginary world created by his mother that seems to exist only in their country home. And when both he loses his mother and his family home is threatened to be taken away, his world starts to crumble around him as much as the house does. Underlying that is an investigation into the larger question that Oliver tries to explain to his younger brother: what do we do when the world crumbles? Is it enough to make art or do we stand up and 'get a real job' (16)? The beauty of the play is that it never picks sides, but rather shows the value and evils of both courses of action.

I have chosen three scenes from the second act to translate. In the first fragment, Robin has just found out that their home is sold, and has decided to occupy it, military style. He has chosen a drug dealing, nineteen-year-old veteran, Tommy, who he has picked up on the street, to be his ally in their game. They are discussing their plans. The



second part is a monologue by Robin on the downside of modern society, and the last fragment is a longer, quick and quirky dialogue between Robin and his friends Arlo, Scout, Esme and Coby. Arlo and Scout are sent by Oliver to bring Robin back to London, Esme and Coby are neighbourhood friends from his early life and decide to check up on him. Realising that Arlo and Scout have betrayed him, Robin has spiked their drinks and takes advantage of their drug-induced confusion to set fire to the house.

The intended target audience for this translation consists of two parties: on the one hand, a theatre director and actors, on the other, a theatre audience. The theatre audience would be relatively young. This means that I intend to create a text meant for the stage, that uses the modern language of today's youth, like Stenham does in the source text as well.

5.1 Performability in *No Quarter*

The translation of this play will entail dealing with a number of translation problems that relate to performability. Stenham's source of inspiration is her direct environment.

Therefore, the setting of the play is thoroughly rooted in the British class system. This might not always be clear to a Dutch audience. Of course that is not necessarily a problem – some of the context might for instance be explained in an introduction, or the flyers usually accompanying productions – but here and there it produces some language and cultural problems.



Some of the culture specific elements within the text will have to be tackled individually. Despite discussions above, I do not think a very rigid strategy of domestication for the entire play is called for, as I am not looking to move the setting of the play to the Netherlands. However, it will be necessary for the audience to quickly grasp what is said. Tom Kleijn stated that in the case of culture specific elements, he works as follows:

I always consider neutralising to be the best option when it comes to culture specific elements. I try not to localise a scene very explicitly, but to make it a bit more universal. A setting in London will of course remain in London, but, one might wonder, is it necessary to mention specific street names?

I have tried to keep this advice in mind while working on my translation. Culture-specific elements in the play include 'pounds' and 'moolah', 'squaddie', 'Mother's ruin' and 'Friday'. For some, solutions are more obvious than others: the pounds, which are mentioned in a summary of different types of money, will have only a linguistic translation (Aixelá 2010), thus becoming 'ponden', but 'moolah' is English street language for money, and a rather old-fashioned type of street language, too, which supports Robin's character. I have therefore chosen 'doekoe', a nineties, but still well-known Dutch slang word for money.

Other elements are less obvious. 'Mother's ruin', for instance, is a nickname for gin (Castelow, n.d.) which refers to the fact that it was also literally part of the ruin of Robin's



mother. I have chosen a linguistic strategy in which I translate it to 'Moedersverdriet', as there is no similar Dutch expression. In this case, the context of the play, where Robin explains what it refers to, is sufficient for the audience to grasp what this nickname means. 'Friday' refers to Robinson Crusoe's right hand man, Friday, who would later be the title character in the 1973 play *Man Friday* by Adrian Mitchell and the 1975 film of the same name. The name 'Vrijdag' will be used here, which is the Dutch translation of Robinson Crusoe's sidekick. This character might be less known to the Dutch audience, so if the play is to be performed, it is essential for the translator to explain to the director the contempt with which Arlo would call Tommy 'Friday', in order for at least that feeling to come across clearly. In this sense, the translator might take on a role similar to that of the dramaturge, or support the dramaturge working on the production.

There is some recurring vernacular in the text. One type concerns military terms and slang, which is used to show the fake military siege that Robin believes is being undertaken against the house, the other is street language for drugs. In both cases, research has been done into similar Dutch terms that will not be too obscure, so that the majority of the audience can understand them, especially in combination with the actions on stage.

A final translation problem follows from what reviewers refer to as the wild, crazy structure of the play, which jumps from one intense, overwhelming scene to another. Some have found fault with this unrelenting pace, but one reviewer notices that



Stenham is that rare thing, a truly exciting writer. Her plays could do with some editing, but her work is scintillatingly alive. There will, no doubt, be new writing this year that is neater or better structured, but it is hard to envisage anything providing this kind of mainlining thrill.

(No Quarter – Royal Court Review 2013)

Despite that this rapid pace and intensity might interfere with the audience's understanding of the play, I believe it cannot be changed. The beauty of Stenham's work is that it is honest, outspoken, it is written the way young people actually speak and sound like. This is one of the reasons why I have chosen to keep in most of the swearwords, something Tom Kleijn in his lecture warns against as he believes they are much more common in England than on the Dutch stage. However, in order to make my translation performable on the Dutch stage, I have tried to use some swear words like 'fucking' less often, accounting for the slightly different meaning they have in their source language, by changing them in some places to the more mild 'verdomme' ('damned'), or the more commonly used Dutch expletive 'kut'.

5.2 Speakability in *No Quarter*

There is one remarkable element in Stenham's writing concerning rhythm. She tends to use full-stops in mid-sentence in order to show where the stress should be. In Dutch, these stresses had to be changed regularly as sentences are structured differently. I have tried to place the stress in the same way I expect Stenham would have used them in



Dutch, using the same punctuation as Stenham, so this peculiarity of the author is kept in the target text.

The most notable language specific problem concerns Robin's manner of speaking. Having been cut off from the outside world for most of his life, he still uses his mother's upper class, artsy sixties vernacular. We have indeed heard Esme, Robin's cousin who grew up in the same area and therefore knows more about his sheltered youth, explain this in the quote used in the introduction, where she refers to Robin as "a Peter Pan on crack" (75).

Although some of this manner of speaking will be up to the playwrights, examples of this are evident throughout the play in some register choices. Robin's favourite word is 'brillo', rather than telling his friend Arlo to 'fuck off', he tells him 'Oh do fuck off, Arlo' (60), and to an 'incident' he refers as a 'fracas' (44).

I have tried to avoid giving Robin a complete vernacular. Tom Kleijn stated in the abovementioned lecture that 'I do not speak a dialect. I therefore cannot translate into a dialect either. I don't see the use of it,' (my translation) and continued to explain that usually, the choice of dialect will be made by the director. To give the performers an idea of Robin's language use and personality I did look for a similar old-fashioned idiom when translating noticeably outdated words. I have used words such as 'jemig', 'jeminee', 'potjandorie' and 'verdorie', Dutch slang words with a similar old-fashioned sense.



To be able to render the rhythm and duration of the text, I have made sure to use expressions with ‘worden’, the Dutch passive, as little as possible. I have also worked on keeping my sentences short.

But most importantly, as many authors have stated, there is only one way to know if the language is actually speakable, and that is to test the language by having it spoken in a performative setting. Some might disagree with that, saying that reading your own translation aloud should be sufficient, but if speakability is considered as that what makes theatre translation different from other forms of translation, then I think that a live run-through of the play by – preferably experienced – performers is the best way to obtain crucial feedback on the ‘speakability’ of the translated text. As argued before, this is of vital importance to see how differently a text can work out when it is taken up by others, when it is performed or even semi-performed.

This is why I have held a small theatrical reading of my target text. I had my text, including the stage directions, read in a theatrical setting by a group of people with experience in acting. In the first part of this workshop, the play, its characters and the context of the fragments I had translated were shortly discussed. Then a first reading of the target text was held. The second part of the workshop was more active: there was a short warming up and some theatre exercises to get into character, and then the text was read in a performance setting, with the actors moving on stage and using props. They were encouraged to stop this performance at any point they wanted to notice that the text did not work for them or that something did not sound quite right.



The results of this little experience were very satisfying. There were some elements in the translation that were changed after the reading for reasons other than that the textual elements involved did not work when performed, but most elements were changed because they did not sound or work well on stage. To show how big the effect of this test on my final translation was, I have added the pre-test version next to the final version, with the changes marked in orange, in appendix B. Some recurring changes that were made concerned:

1. Word order. Especially those sentences where two the same words were repeated directly after each other were considered by the actors to be difficult to articulate. For instance, 'Als een uitzicht zo mooi is, is het alsof God met je flirt', became 'Bij zo'n mooi uitzicht is het alsof God met je flirt' (page 9 of appendix B).
2. Textual elements that the actors considered to sound 'too English'. For instance, 'de halve reden waarom hij zo goed is met de piano (...)', became 'de voornaamste reden waarom hij zo goed piano kan spelen (...)' (page 21 of appendix B). Some elements were changed because they had worked well in the source text, but did not come across as clearly in the target text. An example is that the actor who read Tommy did not understand why he asked Esme 'Wat doe je?', which was then changed into 'Hoezo dan?' (page 23 of appendix B).



3. Long sentences. Some of the sentences did not work for the actors because they were so long that they lost the sense of where to put stress. They often collided with sentences in which the word order did not work. For instance, 'ik beloof het op mijn woord van eer' became simply 'Erewoord' (page 7 of appendix B).
4. Minor changes that were a result of listening to what the actors actually said rather than read. This happened especially in small particles and demonstrative pronouns, such as 'Hij is een grote jongen', which became 'Het is een grote jongen' (page 20 of appendix B).
5. Expletives. All the actors agreed that the use of 'fuck' and other expletives itself was not disturbing, but they did mention at many points that they would use different expletives, such as 'kut', or even 'super', if the expletive was mainly used as an adjective. The expletives have therefore been changed in some places.

What should also be mentioned are those instances in which I had made translations that still didn't feel exactly right. However, when hearing them on stage, some of those turned out to work just fine the way the actor pronounced them. This was for instance the case with 'Breincellen... smelten' (page 11 of appendix B).

This experiment shows the true meaning of 'speakability' on stage. Of course, the professional theatre translators who have had a commission might not have the luxury to be able to test the translation beforehand. However, as much of the literature in the



theoretical framework has shown, it is not uncommon for translators to keep on changing their text during rehearsals, which is more or less a comparable situation.



Chapter 6. Conclusion

This thesis begun with the following questions:

How are the terms ‘speakability’ and ‘performability’ discussed and defined in theory on the subject of theatre translation, and how can these terms be adapted into workable concepts that can be applied during the process of theatre translation for the stage?

It can be concluded that the terms are central to the debate on the translation of theatre.

This debate is splintered into those who consider theatre translation as literary translation, which is generally a more faithful form of translation, and those who consider theatre translation as a specific translation for the stage, which is often more free than literary translation in general is considered to be and includes forms of translation which, from the point of view of other forms of literary translation, would be considered adaptations.

‘Performability’ is a key concept in this debate. Those on the text-oriented side of the debate regard it as a catch-phrase used to excuse the liberty taken with source texts on the target culture stage, and those on the other side considers it as a necessary means to explain the way in which theatre translation differs from more purely text-oriented forms of translation.



I propose to define performability as the translation of a source culture to the target culture stage. All the considerations on the part of the translator that concern adapting a play from one cultural context to the other are therefore a part of performability. As mentioned, I do not believe that these considerations always involve domestication; however, I do believe that they would and should entail close cooperation with theatre makers. To apply this concepts, it is best if a translator for the stage uses the same terminology other literary translators use. However, a translate should realise that the strategies chosen will often be quite different from those made by literary translators and depend on the specific parameters of the target performance – for example the wishes of a director – and on other constraints specific to stage translation, such as those related to speakability.

Speakability can be considered a subcategory of performability. It is also the one element specific to the translation of theatre, and has to do with the effect of spoken language on stage. To insure 'speakability', it is best that the translator in training tests his translation in a performance setting, or that the professional translator continues his work in the rehearsal room.

This research, however, has been quite limited, and there remains much to clarify and investigate. First of all, it would be interesting to describe the actual process of change that a professional translation undergoes through the cooperation between a translator and theatre makers, for instance by documenting a translation process in a more detailed manner, or by in-depth interviews with makers that focus on one specific



play. There have been interviews like that, but, even do they generally note that the text changes and provide some examples, they do not specifically analyse how it changes and what stages it goes through. Also, it would be interesting to research translations of contemporary theatre, in order to add to the current research and put previous conclusions to the test.

Another unexplored area of research concerns generally accepted translation strategies and conventions specific to Dutch theatre. This would especially be of interest for those theatre translators working to translate plays for the Dutch stage. It still remains to compare the practices, norms and conventions currently governing theatre translation into Dutch with their counterparts in the English-speaking world. A modest and very provisional start of such as research has been made in appendix D. Also interesting is research into the role of the theatre translator, and how and if it becomes mixed with the role of the dramaturge in Dutch theatre groups.

Lastly, turning our gaze back on the beginning (theatre) translator, it would be of great value to the education of future translators to continue the work of authors such as Blackwell-Gülen and Marco, and attempt to create a more systematic overview of the translation problems specific to theatre translation and their possible solutions. One element of focus would be performability, and the steps by which general translation theory on the subject of stage translations can be made applicable to an educational setting. The other focus would be on 'speakability' and attempts to test translations on stage. One might even introduce simulated situations where fictional theatre groups



‘commission’ students to translate a specific play, creating an experience which corresponds as closely as possible to the daily experience and constraints of professional theatre translators.

Finally, I would like to stress again that I believe that experience of the working environment of stage translators is essential for students of theatre translation and professional translators. Unlike many other forms of translation, stage translation is a cooperative effort between the translator and the many other parties involved in the process of bringing a dramatic production to the stage, such as directors, actors, designers and technicians. For me, stage translation is less about generally accepted notions on literary translation, derived largely from the translation of literary (non-)fiction and poetry, and more about the encompassing and immediate audio-visual experience that makes for good theatre, of which the text is only one component. A love for theatre translation includes attending live performances and gaining at least a basic knowledge of what it is like to work in (amateur) theatre. The translation of theatre is less about the triumphant moment of seeing your translated work in print, and more about the final experience of the play on stage, the liveness and aliveness of theatre. Seeing, smelling, feeling, touching, wanting, longing, hearing: it isn’t just the words that make for a good play.



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