

Two Books on Translation for the Stage

ADAPTING TRANSLATION FOR THE STAGE. EDITED BY GERALDINE BRODIE AND EMMA COLE (2017)

London and New York: Routledge. 298 pp.,

ISBN: 9781138218871, h/bk, £110.00;

ISBN: 9781315436814, e/bk £35.99

THE TRANSLATOR ON STAGE, GERALDINE BRODIE (2018)

New York: Bloomsbury. 208 pp.,

ISBN: 9781501322112, h/bk, £96.00;

ISBN: 9781501322105, p/bk, £23.99;

ISBN: 9781501322136, e/bk £25.99

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‘One of the problems of writing about practice, even collaborative practice, is that discussion hovers at the level of the anecdotal’ (236), writes David Johnston in his essay in Geraldine Brodie and Emma Cole’s *Adapting Translation for the Stage*. The ambition of both the volumes under review, one co-edited and one authored by Geraldine Brodie, is to move beyond the case study towards a long-overdue theory of theatre translation. The editors of *Adapting Translation* announce that their volume ‘advances the debate theoretically and methodologically by engaging in detailed discussion [...] Translation is understood here to refer not only to the idea of a translated text, but to the entire process surrounding the adaptation of the written word for performance’ (5). Over its twenty-two chapters, written by translators, academics and theatre practitioners, the volume succeeds in bringing ample evidence of the complexity of translation for the stage but its open and inclusive definition of what translation stands for (‘drawing adaptation, and its practitioners, into the translation embrace’, 4) effectively fails to construct a reliable theoretical approach. Brodie and Cole assert that ‘[a]ll translation must be a form of adaptation: an unrefined word-for-word translation is unintelligible’ (6). This simplification doesn’t do much justice to either concepts, but it is in line with the editors’ pronounced agenda: ‘The present volume consequently attempts not only to destabilize the literal/performable binary but also the translation/adaptation binary to provide critical guidance upon terminology distinctions’ (7). Unsurprisingly, the destabilization results in exactly the opposite: rather than providing critical guidance, it blurs terminological contours even further. In her essay (‘Paralinguistic translation in Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love*’, 90–103), Emma Cole proposes the new concept of *paralinguistic translation* ‘to refer to the translation of language, themes, images, and even issues to do with the performance context and reception history’ (90); there is a sense of *déjà entendu* in that what Cole is describing is standard editorial practice that is (or should be) comprised in the translation process. An adaptation by any other name... Again, this only contributes further to the dilution of terms.

Several of the volume’s essays – such as those by Lucy Jackson (‘Forces at work: Euripides’ *Medea* at the National Theatre 2014’, 104–117); Adam Versényi (‘Theatrical translation/theatrical production: Ramón Griffero’s pre-texts for performance’, 186–200); Gráinne Byrne and Kate Eaton (‘Pinning down Piñera’, 210–222); or Gareth Wood (‘How to solve a problem like Lorca: Anthony Weigh’s *Yerma*’, 250–262) – present fascinating and well-nuanced material; at the same time, their interest in translation as a text or as a process is tangential. Their approach would fit in more neatly in a volume on performance dramaturgy. Similarly, the eponymous concept of *adapting* is deployed in a varied and loose way, and again: while the individual essays bring interesting material, the volume fragments into anecdotal discussions of practice. Eva Espasa’s afterword ‘Adapting – and accessing – translation for the stage’ (279–287) attempts to bridge the diversity and draw out

common themes and practices. However, not even her essay succeeds in progressing beyond a discursive catalogue of individual case studies covered in the book (and even one, by Christopher Haydon, that probably was probably expected to be there but is not). It is only David Johnston's essay 'Narratives of translation in performance: Collaborative acts' (236–249) that proposes a theoretical discussion, drawing on Benjamin, Deleuze and Guattari as well as a longer *durée* of translation and theatre practice, transcending the transitory anecdotal occurrence towards a 'narrative' or perspective – one that attempts to 'carry the [translated] play beyond what remains of it, of its aura and of its name' (245).

Adapting Translation for the Stage brings essays that are about more and other things than adapting translation for the stage. The terminological destabilization is an editorial strategy to incorporate a greater variety of examples than their title proposes at face value. The individual essays derive from 'the 2013–2014 Theatre Translation Forum seminar and workshop series, run in partnership through University College London and the Gate Theatre Nottingham' (8). Not strictly proceedings, but the book reads as collected papers rather than a curated collection of commissioned essays. Another editorial strategy is the ex post justification of the scope: 'focusing on translation into one language gives us the scope to theorize the actuality of translation on stage today, as practiced [*sic*] on a number of continents' (9). This claim is a flawed syllogism of course; there is no evidence that present-day translations into English (predominantly British English), or more specifically translations and adaptations for the British stage, can be representative of the practices globally and historically. I would rather argue that the British practices are idiosyncratic and would probably fail to find equivalents in other, culturally and linguistically less dominant contexts. The claim begins to crumble in Chapter 21 – not an essay but a transcribed conversation with Princeton-based theatre-maker Emily Mann: 'For us in the United States, unless you are a fluent speaker of the language we call our translations written by playwrights "adaptations". [...] I would never call my adaptation of *The House of Bernarda Alba* a "translation" because my Spanish is not good enough' (267). Mann may well be mistaken on the general US usage of the terms, and yet, this signals a terminological rift not only *within* English but also (significantly for the ambition of the present volume) between critical writing and practice. This rift doesn't give much hope for a smooth extension of 'the actuality of translation on stage today' to 'a number of continents'. So, Tanya Ronder, in her essay 'The roaming art' (203–209), opening the last section of the volume, offers a useful and cogent introduction into the two-tier adaptation process (literal translation adapted for the stage by a playwright). While I will probably use this essay as course reading, what it articulates is UK-specific practice, including some of its frequent simplistic suggestions such the practitioners' *argumentum ad baculum*: it works on stage, *ergo* job done. In trying to stay in close touch with live theatre practice, the volume as a whole effectively falls for this presentist, utilitarian fallacy; in keeping with much current writing about theatre practice, there is an ethnographic and anti-intellectualist aspect to the project in its design as well as in its particulars (here is Ronder's opening):

Translation, version, new version, free version, inspired by, taken from, after, adapted, co-adapted, loosely adapted... I once presumed there was a set of criteria one could hold up against any English rendition of a foreign-language play and know how it should be credited. The truth is more capricious. The label is simply an agreement reached between writers, theatres, agents and estates. Much like the spectrum of diagnoses within the world of mental health – when does melancholia slip in to [*sic*] depression, where are the firm edges of psychoses – it is a sliding scale of categories with no real absolutes. (204)

Some essays bring in a historical perspective, but coincidentally such instances are only as historical contexts rather than aspects of historiography. So Enza De Francisci discusses the changes Pirandello made in translating his *Liola* from Sicilian to Italian (228); however, the suggestions she is making about the reasons behind the changes sound impressionistic or

speculative rather than critically argued. It was on several occasions in the course of reading that I asked myself after the purpose of history and, more specifically, the historiography of translation and adaptation. With the exception of David Johnston, there is little this volume offers beyond a critical reflection of the present moment. In his fascinating discussion of Anthony Weigh's adaptation of Lorca's *Yerma* (2011), Gareth Wood merely 'offer[s] an evaluative assessment of the adaptation' (254). This is a feature that runs through the entire volume and leaves a sense of frustration and certain misgivings about the longevity of such critical effort. All theoretical and methodological objections aside, *Adapting Translation for the Stage* is a valuable collection of essays that collect a rich variety of evidence from contemporary theatrical adaptations and translations.

Geraldine Brodie's *The Translator on Stage* opens a much-needed problem of translation practice: the financial and production aspects that crucially define the shape of the translation. Brodie is well positioned to undertake this project thanks to her professional background as translator, academic, and chartered accountant. Her book announces that it 'examines the role of the translator on stage by investigating the collaborative translation process from commission to performance' (13; discussed in detail in Chapter 3 'Eight Productions and Their Translation Teams'). This needs to be nuanced: strictly speaking the translator is not studied 'on stage' (that's the book's central metaphor) but rather Brodie analyses the forces and collaborative efforts that contribute to the shape of the staged play in translation, very importantly 'the financial and administrative structures and organizational cultures of the organizations producing these eight translations, investigating the motivations and contexts that influence decision-making in the theatrical translation commissioning process' (21). This discussion concentrates in the Chapter 2 'London Theatre: Contexts of Performance'. The selection of her eight case studies is important:

Rather than pick out what I considered to be a representative collection of translations, thus imposing ready-formed assumptions on my data, I adopted an approach learned in my practice as a financial auditor: I identified a time-based corpus that would yield a random sample. I looked back to 2005 as a year that was recent enough to be current and fresh in the memory but far enough away for publications and archival material to be available, and identified the months of April, May and June as appropriate for study, on the basis that they were least likely to be distorted by Christmas or summer special programming. I then analysed theatre listings advertised as *The Official Guide of the Society of London Theatre* [i.e. SOLT, ...] and extracted any translated plays, discounting opera and musicals because the translation processes in these two genres are subject to additional translational and operative constraints [...]. My review produced a list of eight translated plays performed in major London theatres (and therefore available to and likely to be attended by large and varied audiences). (8–9)

It is beyond the scope of this review to unpick individual problems of this approach but the tenor of the justification, uncannily reminiscent of E. A. Poe's delirious 'The Philosophy of Composition', is alibistic – as if the invisible hand of the market can give an answer to the theoretical problems of theatre translation practice. Additionally, we learn that another production, '*Blood Wedding*, however, was not picked up by my sample because the Almeida's productions did not feature in the SOLT-sponsored newspaper listings' (34). As a result, 'all eight plays come from theatres which received substantial amounts of funding from Arts Council England, ranging from £893,814 (the Almeida) to £16,390,026 (the National Theatre) in the same period' (43). If anything, these financial and institutional facts make Brodie's sample highly exceptional, to say the least.

The eight case studies from 2005 London are diverse and complex but – similarly to the selection of essays in the edited volume – don't capture the variety of theatre translation as such. The somewhat claustrophobic world of marketing-driven theatre in London is idiosyncratic and narrow, however varied, logical and coherent it may seem. Even if we stay within the UK, I lack a reflection of the

overwhelming and different practice of translation/adaptation undertaken by such towering phenomena as Barry Rutter's Northern Broadsides, which have been cultivating the art of stage translation/adaptation systematically for over three decades. Also, I lack a discussion of the practice of theatre translation that must fulfil the (frequently draconic) briefs of the playwright's agent. (Not surprisingly, that agent very often sits in London or in New York.)

The book's title (without any subtitle provided) is quite misleading. This may be a result of Bloomsbury's marketing department (self-similarity at play) but a more accurate name would be more honest. Brodie's title was probably the one she uses for her introduction, 'The Role of the Translator on the London Stage'; to that should be added the words 'in subsidised theatres in spring 2005' because the sample doesn't represent the London stage as such, let alone acknowledge translation/adaptation practice in the long history of London theatre.

Not unlike *Adapting Translation for the Stage*, Brodie's book brings fascinating and detailed cases of theatrical translations. It also ails similarly: the practitioners' word trumps all (a director is chosen because he was 'very good at knowing how to nurture things', 69) and a number of the conclusions state the obvious:

two important features of the theatre translation process: first, that the final translator consciously creates their own reading of the original work, which is overtly presented as such to the audience by means of naming that translator; second, that this reading is mediated and refracted by other theatre practitioners during the process of staging the performance, which, although less overtly stated, is nevertheless implicit in the extensive list of cast and creative participants in the programme, and selected individuals from this list in promotional material. (71)

Chapter 4, dedicated to 'Agents of Translation', passes methodically from department to department: practitioners and process, producers, literary departments, directors, indirect translators, direct translators, literal translators, and playwrights. Given Brodie's stated interest in the financial aspects of a production, I was surprised not to find the marketing department and the play's literary agent. For her argument to stay watertight, these should probably be covered. However, this chapter focuses more narrowly on the resulting textual and dramatic shape, less so on the production side. The three-page section on 'Producers' (113–116) comes down to professional networks and the contexts of existing professional links.

Brodie's discussions occasionally get repetitive. Almost all of the crucial points and arguments are made twice – such as the discussion of Henrik Ibsen's letter about the necessary changes to make his play work in German (61, 148) or when bemusedly observing that Mike Poulton, who established himself as the named translator of Schiller's *Don Carlos*, asserting that 'in his experience literal translators preferred not to be mentioned' (80). I suspect that these recurrent moments indicate that there is more to be mined from them but Brodie is generously kind to her subjects. Her purpose is to describe the momentary state of the art (presentism again?), rather than aspire to a more perennial theory of the production aspects of theatre translation. This is not necessarily an objection to Brodie's interesting book, only an identification of further research opportunities. The fact is that Brodie's *The Translator on Stage* is making the first necessary step to such a theory.

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