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0521344336 - The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture

Edited by Hanna Scolnicov and Peter Holland

Excerpt

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Introduction

HANNA SCOLNICOV

Chekhov did not believe that non-Russian audiences could possibly understand the full meaning of the selling of the estate in *The Cherry Orchard*. So worried was he about his plays being misunderstood in foreign tongues, that he regretted not being able to prevent their translation and production abroad. Chekhov's repudiation of translation represents an extreme position: a total denial of the possibility of transferring a play from one culture to another.

This volume is a collection of essays which examine the relationship between the play and its historical and cultural contexts. The problem of the transference of plays from culture to culture is seen not just as a question of translating the text, but of conveying its meaning and adapting it to its new cultural environment so as to create new meanings. The approaches presented by the different contributors vary from the theoretical to the practical, from the literary to the theatrical. Plays and productions are examined both historically and synchronically. The papers tackle the same problems from different national and theoretical perspectives.

The articles interact with each other, presenting a diversity of views of the central theme, and establishing a dialogue between scholars of different cultures. One discussion surveys the general problem, tracing its complexities. Another provides a theoretical scaffolding, an abstract, *a priori* structure into which yet another builds his pragmatics. Other papers analyse particular issues as instances of the theoretical and methodological questions involved.

The various articles show how critical the question of cultural difference is to the theatre, but also point to the theatre itself as a unique machinery for overcoming these differences and reaching out towards other cultures, other peoples and even other people. With the exception of some contemporary and local stagings, each production can be seen as a

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dialogue between the non-shared values, emotions, conceptions and beliefs of two, or more, cultures.

The volume opens with an essay by Gershon Shaked, which maps the ground, indicating the many cultural and linguistic gaps that must be crossed or translated if an audience is to be able to comprehend an essentially alien performance. His central example is that of the gap between Christian and Jewish perceptions and feelings, and the difficulty of overcoming them in the theatre. He speaks of cultural worlds that are 'light-years away' from each other. Shaked sees the theatre as a means of translating, of changing an alien, incomprehensible, and therefore frightening experience into an understandable one.

Patrice Pavis redefines the theme as translation in the widest possible sense: not just the finding of linguistic equivalence, but also of appropriate cultural and gestural parallels. Every translation is an appropriation of one text by another, by way of the concrete reception of a particular audience. Instead of speaking about the translation of a 'dramatic text', Pavis chooses to discuss 'translation for the stage'. He tries to formulate new standards for translation based on the present day perception of the indissolubility of theatrical word and gesture. The task of the translator concerned with performance is to preserve and transfer the 'language body' of one language to another. Pavis concedes that in the case of classical texts such a technique often involves a simplification and modernization which 'may shock philologists', but it alone can recover the 'language body' of the original and restore to the text its lost playability and vitality.

Peter Holland focuses on the transformations of the theatrical space by different playwrights. He sees stage-space and movement as constituting their own system of theatre language. Three representative plays, *Oedipus Rex*, *Bérénice* and *Waiting for Godot*, are analysed as culturally determined transpositions of the same basic perception of movement in the given space of the theatre. The fluidity and flexibility of the English Renaissance stage is contrasted with the intensity of meaning generated by the constricted and unified space defined by the Greek, French neo-classic, and Beckettian theatres. This analysis offers a novel way of approaching the multiplicity of adaptations and variations of classical plays, through their articulation of space rather than their handling of language or theme.

The eclecticism of today's stage repertoire points to the theatre having become, among other things, a museum of plays. Revivals necessarily mean that plays are staged out of their original contexts. James Redmond shows how, paradoxically, it is the irrelevant plays that do not lose their

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savour with the years. Plays which are immediately relevant are, using Shaw's terminology, 'useful plays' and therefore date quickly when the social and cultural environment changes, but they may become relevant once again through adaptation. Among other examples, Redmond follows the fortunes of Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias*. Its theme of illicit love threatening bourgeois morality is completely dependent on the nineteenth-century social context. Modern productions have either sentimentalized the love story or emphasized purely aesthetic qualities. But the play has been made 'useful' again in a recent feminist adaptation. The relevancy issue has been superseded only in Verdi's *La Traviata*, a work 'not of an age but for all time'.

Periodical reinterpretations of the classics have always inspired new artistic movements. Having shown how *mimesis* came to mean the imitation of a classic, Hanna Scolnicov goes on to discuss Shakespeare's formulation of the Renaissance concept of art as a mirror of life. This is a three-way mirror reflecting its source, Elizabethan society and the actual audience. Shakespeare is seen to have almost anticipated being performed 'out of context' and to have accommodated for it through his complex mirror image. The primacy of reality over its stage image was challenged by Antonin Artaud who saw reality as the theatre's double. But the very persistence of avant-garde theatre is a living proof that it in no way comes close to replacing the classical tradition.

Dwora Gilula addresses herself to what is commonly accepted as the first historical instance of transferring plays from culture to culture: the Roman adaptations of Greek drama. All the extant Roman comedies are of Greek origin, with Greek settings, names, clothing, currency, etc. The playwrights adhered to the Greek milieu self-consciously, as witnessed by Plautus's words: 'Now writers of comedy have this habit: they always allege that the scene of action is Athens, their object being to give the play a more Grecian air.' The paper comments on the difference in the cultural and social contexts of the theatre in Greece and in Rome, and on the impact of the performances on the respective audiences.

The political implications of cultural transference are investigated by Werner Habicht, who writes on Shakespearean productions and scholarship under the Nazi regime. Surprisingly, these activities continued during the Third Reich despite the ideological requirements imposed on the theatre. Ideologically acceptable principles of interpretation had to be devised. Shakespeare's plays were seen as political drama in which private values and experiences are subordinated to public ones – to the State in the

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histories and tragedies, and to social structures in the comedies. These public values were then identified with the Nazi concept of the *Volk*. Shakespeare was appropriated as a 'Germanic' writer, but also purged of those elements which were ideologically unacceptable. The production of Shakespeare's plays was encouraged by Goebbels because they were seen as embodying Germanic ideas of leadership and allegiance. Habicht provides wide-ranging examples that show how plays were manipulated and distorted to suit the perverse political propaganda.

Eli Rozik approaches the question of transferring plays from culture to culture from quite a different angle, assuming an a-historical, structuralist point of view. He is interested not in a proven instance of adaptation, but in the transformational rules of adaptation. Rozik compares Calderón's *Life Is a Dream* with Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, showing how the different poetic conventions, religious beliefs and moral sensitivities generate the different articulations of the same basic myth.

The question of how to produce a classic is tackled by Yehouda Moraly in his comparison of two modern approaches to the production of Molière. Both Claudel and Vitez wished to free Molière's texts from the stultifying influence of their traditional interpretations and productions. One way of doing this is by dissociating the theatrical sign from what it signifies. Thus Moraly shows how both Claudel and Vitez employed the same stratagem of mismatching roles and actors in order to estrange the text and liberate it from its conventional staging.

A wider gulf has to be breached when translating Molière into a totally alien target-system. Carol Bardenstein discusses the Egyptian poet Jalāl's adaptation of *Tartuffe* into colloquial Arabic. Her investigation focuses on the new version, *al-Shaykh Matlūf*, and its relation to nineteenth-century Egyptian culture and literary norms. Jalāl's work is analysed in the context of the growing interest in Western culture and the wish to appropriate sections of it and 'Egyptianize' them.

Vera Gottlieb analyses the British productions of Chekhov's plays. These seem to suffer more than most when transplanted from one culture to another. Although performed as period pieces, British productions have tended to ignore the social and historical context of the works, assuming an 'apolitical' stance. The plays were seen as mournful evocations of a valuable life gone for ever, and it is only in the last few years that Chekhov's ideas and his use of irony have been explored in productions.

An instance of even greater cultural incompatibility is presented by Erika Fischer-Lichte. She considers a contemporary Japanese pro-

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duction of Chekhov which self-consciously manipulates the discrepancy between the theatrical traditions of East and West. Fischer-Lichte describes how, after an initial rejection of traditional Japanese theatre in favour of Westernized theatre, a new theatrical movement arose, which searched for some kind of synthesis between the traditional and the Western. Suzuki's production of *Three Sisters* is seen as an example of such a synthesis.

Shoshana Weitz deals with the pragmatics of performances. Assuming a statistical approach to spectator response, she analyses the different responses among Hebrew speaking and Arab speaking audiences in Israel to a bilingual production of *Waiting for Godot*. The different responses clearly show the extent of the influence of political and ideological positions on the spectators' perceptions of a given production.

Edward Bond's *Saved* would seem to be a play too dependent on local milieu and language to be translated into another language and another culture. Ruth von Ledebur discusses the different productions of *Gerettet* in Germany and shows that despite the formidable obstacles confronting both translator and director, the play proved to be a great success in Germany, arousing reactions not very different from those in England. This is attributed to the regular cultural interchange between the two countries, particularly to the Brechtian influence evident in Bond's work, facilitating his acceptance in Germany.

Albert-Reiner Glaap presents an interesting test case: a play rewritten by its English author for the American production. Here the cultural transfer is effected by the playwright himself, and within the space of a few years. This is almost a laboratory case, which is analysed meticulously to show which of the changes introduced is 'merely' linguistic (underlining the difference between American and English), and which is a question of the different cultural context. What complicates the issue is the change in the sex of the main role undergone in this transference.

Most of the essays are based on papers presented at the Jerusalem Theatre Conference 1986, which was devoted to the same topic as the present volume, 'The play out of context: transferring plays from culture to culture'. The Conference was organized by the Department of Theatre Studies in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in association with the Israel Festival. I am indebted to the many friends and colleagues, both in Israel and abroad, who have helped in various ways to bring about this book, and to Sarah Stanton of Cambridge University Press for her

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unfailing good judgement and advice. Special thanks are due to Peter Holland, with whom it has been a pleasure to work on this volume, and to James Redmond, without whose encouragement and support there would have been no book.

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The play: gateway to cultural dialogue

GERSHON SHAKED

Translated by Jeffrey Green

I

A far-reaching assumption could be made, that we are generally unable to understand plays foreign to our own culture. One might go even further and posit that the understanding of any play or other literary work is necessarily limited. That is because reading or viewing is the constant process of translating an alien experience, with its own memories and associations, to our own realm of experience, with its memories and associations. That process of translation leaves gaps and interstices between our own world and the image of the world created within us by what is read or viewed.

We have already learned from Ingarden and others that authors attempt to restrict our possibilities for understanding by building various limitations into the text, but we break through them, translating unfamiliar relations to ones familiar to us. When we attempt to fill the gaps deriving from our misunderstanding of a text or spectacle, we try to translate an alien subjective experience (which, on the theatrical level, takes on a quasi-objective dimension, appearing as reality in its own right) to a close subjective experience. That process creates a gap between the original and the translation, and moreover, within the process of translation, various intermediaries stand between us and absolute misunderstanding or partial understanding, seeking to bring the distant closer and put the near at a distance.

The more our reading or viewing is public, the more it is imposed upon us. When seeing a play, an entire group is programmed in advance to respond to a phenomenon according to collective, extra-theatrical experiences which it brings to the ceremonial setting known as the theatre. There it must react to a new and unknown world in accordance with laws legislated from the stage.

The theatrical effects used by the director, from the sets and costumes,

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through the music and the lighting, to the establishment of a semiotics and stage behaviour for the actors, are all intermediaries between the different worlds which meet during the play. The director seeks to formulate that dialogue between reception and translation which takes place between the stage and the audience, so as to convey the message adequately.

Paradoxically, we are arguing that the process of reading a text or viewing a play is, to some degree, one of misunderstanding, *misunderstanding which is the only way one can understand*, because it implies transmission from someone else's realm of experience to our own. In any attempt at reconstruction, the reconstructor is always present, and he cannot, at least emotionally, reconstruct except within the realm of his own understanding.

When staging a classical play, the director stands as an intermediary between the spectator and the play, as a kind of translator, trying to bring an experience from the tradition closer to that of the audience, even though that tradition might be extinct. The Rabbis did something quite similar in the Midrash: they interpreted the Biblical text to give it universal appeal in the generation of their readers, who were unable to fathom the inner life of the original writers. After the Temple was destroyed, the Jews no longer witnessed daily sacrifices, and therefore the Rabbis substituted prayer for sacrifice: rather than atone for sinful speech by sacrificing bullocks, speech took the place of the bullocks. That is what is done by most directors who try to bring traditional texts back to life. They attempt to translate the tradition and the language of the past into the language of culture close to that of the audience attending a play here and now.

II

As we distance ourselves further in time and mentality, the process of translation becomes more complex. Take, for example, two common words in Hebrew: *yeshiva* and *heder*. They have entirely different meanings in different contexts. A *yeshiva* can be either a meeting or an institution of higher Jewish religious learning, and a *heder* can be simply a room, or a Jewish religious primary school. For an addressee unfamiliar with traditional eastern European Jewish education, no brief explanation can convey the world of experience embodied by those words, and if that is true of Jews from various Jewish cultures, it is doubly true of non-Jews. Or, to take another example, how is one to translate traditional Jewish dress such as the caftan, the fur hat (*shtraimel*), and the rest, to people in the hot Middle East unfamiliar with such garb or to Europeans dressed in jeans or black tie?

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Obviously we refer to the difficulty of presenting a work such as *The Dybbuk*, with the semiotics of the *shtetl* and the norms and values of Hassidic society, ruled over by a strange charismatic leadership in the persons of the *tsaddik* and his secular assistants, the wardens. In that world marvellous events take place, possession by a spirit and its exorcism. How do we transfer it to the secular, modern Jewish world? Or, further, how can the strange semiotics of that play be grasped, depending, as it does, upon folkloric elements expressed in costume, symbols, customs, and a complex structure of cultural signs, in a non-Jewish world which does not even have symbolic memories of that sort.

Productions of *The Dybbuk*, particularly the classic production by Vakhtangov, are probably among the most successful examples of trans-cultural transmission, and we shall discuss them below at greater length. Similar problems are posed in translating the ceremony of the Mass into Hebrew for an audience unfamiliar with it, one for whom the notion that bread and wine are transubstantiated into the flesh and blood of the Son of God is rather strange. How can they understand who priests and nuns are? Permit me to cite a personal example. When my daughter was seven, we took her to the Vatican museum in Rome. As we passed from painting to painting, she kept asking, 'Why did they draw so many pictures of that poor man nailed to two pieces of wood?'

An adult might perhaps be able to understand such things intellectually, but does such understanding penetrate to the place which literature and plays wish to reach, the audience's feelings? I have in mind a long series of Christian plays, from the medieval morality and mystery plays through those of Lope da Vega to T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), and even some of Beckett's recent plays, which the reader unfamiliar with the symbolic world and customs of Christianity must translate from one cultural system to another one, closer and more understandable to him. What significance can one find in the experiences latent in Christian morality plays or, for that matter, in Japanese No theatre? How can that significance be conveyed to an audience whose universe of discourse is light-years away from those cultural worlds?

The task of the theatre can be illustrated by contrast to raw, documentary spectacle. What, for example, does it mean to non-Moslems when they see a man remove his shoes and turn to face Mecca when he prays, or how can we interpret self-flagellation, which seems sadomasochistic to us, meant to imitate the tortures inflicted upon Ali, the central figure in Shiite Islam? We view these ceremonies on television as a sort of documentary theatre before they are made into artistic theatre or cinema. We are all exposed to the ceremonies of foreign cultures and societies, although those

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ceremonies have little meaning for us. They merely arouse the fear and dread one feels before what is strange and alien. That televised world remains foreign and threatening because the viewers are unable to translate it into their own concepts, terms, and symbols. Art takes over where documentary can no longer assist us, for only the art of the theatre, through its experience in translation on the stage, can bring the distant near and reduce the dread.

The foregoing remarks do not apply only to purely religious or social problems, but also have a deep effect on what might seem to be private matters: how does a matriarchal society relate to the father? How can people unfamiliar with the concept of human sacrifice understand the full depth of meaning of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (407 BC)? We have many theatrical versions of that myth: Racine's French play of 1674 and Gerhard Hauptmann's German version of 1943. There is also *Iphigenia in Delphi* (Goethe wrote an outline for such a play, and Hauptmann wrote one as part of his trilogy about the House of Atreus in 1940–3, a tragic, sombre interpretation of the Nazi period in Germany) and Goethe's version of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1786). Each one brings out another aspect of that dreadful structure of relations in which a father sacrifices his daughter, a son and daughter murder their mother and her lover, and a brother and sister meet again after many years in order to renew the dynasty, which, as it were, had been doomed to extinction. Each play attempts in its own way to convey the theme to the psychologies and mentalities of different cultures in different ages. They are all apparently close to the subject of Jephthah's daughter and the Binding of Isaac, but also distant from it. They are not easily grasped and must be reinterpreted to bring them closer to their audience.

From these efforts and from various productions of these plays we see the path to be taken by a playwright who wishes to establish a bond with a motif tradition containing, according to his understanding, eternal truth, but which must be explained and interpreted in different ways on different stages. A fresh confrontation with a subject may take various forms. At times it can be quite primitive, as with an attempt to adapt and remodel a subject to make it fit new artistic and social norms in a new context. For example, the Yiddish playwright, Yakov Gordin, wrote *Mirele Ephros* (1898) as a kind of adaptation of *King Lear*, placing it in the context of the Jewish bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century. The royal father's place was taken by the Yiddish *mamme*, Mirele Ephros and, instead of Lear's three daughters she has, of course, three sons. As in Shakespeare's play, two of them wish to usurp their mother's fortune while she is still living, and the third is loyal and decent. Of course, that modification of the basic