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THEATRE IN TRANSLATION IN MONTREAL: RESPECTING THE PLAYWRIGHT, CHALLENGING THE AUDIENCE

BEFORE 1968, FOREIGN PLAYS brought to Montreal's audiences were always produced in their European French translation. Actors and directors of that time had mainly been trained, whether in France or in Québec, by French actors. The artistic models advocated followed Copeau's, Dullin's, Jouvet's and Pitoeff's views of the theatre. Montreal theatre artists felt they had succeeded only when audiences believed that the show they had witnessed was as good as a Parisian one. The local theatre milieu of that time took the posture of a colonized subject, fearful of the master's disapproval.

Following the push for independence in the political arena, accompanied by the development of a strong Québécois literature rooted in the realities of everyday life, a shift in translation practices occurred. Theatre companies became aware that it was increasingly difficult to present in some truthful way texts whose language did not seem connected with the evolution and development of a strong nationalistic drama. A malaise set in. With the 1968 presentation of Michel Tremblay's play Les Belles-soeurs, the Montreal theatregoing audience underwent a transformation and wished to find a life on the stage that they could recognize as their own. At this point, plays presented in a Parisian argot or in a geographically neutral literary French became unacceptable: such translations created an alienating effect. This impression was much more strongly felt with American plays than with other foreign works; the territorial proximity of the us and the Québécois audience's familiarity with American culture brought to light every mistake, flaw and counter-meaning generated by French translators. French translations often generated "gross misinterpretations resulting from a lack of knowledge of American idioms" (Delisle 3).1 While not everyone agreed that translation into Québécois should be the rule, and while French translations continued to be used, after 1968 translating foreign plays into Québécois slowly became the norm.

Although we can assume that French translators were producing good translations for their French audiences, their work was, in the 1970s, not seen as pertinent for the Québécois public. This suggests that theatregoing had ceased to be understood by Montreal audiences as merely an expedition into high culture – a quest for beauty removed from life – and had started to become a vehicle for collective identification; that is, one stopped going to the theatre to see others and began to look for one's self in theatrical representations. In this context, the translation

conventions (imported from France) prominent in the fifties and sixties became obsolete. The audience as well as theatre practitioners began to expect that "not only the meaning of a word or sentence must be translated, but also the connotations, rhythm, tone and rhetorical level, imagery and symbols of association" (Zuber 92). It was then felt that the viability of these elements could only be guaranteed through indigenous translative practice. Although driven by a political context, the rationale for such an attitude was highly practical, informed by the pragmatics of theatre-making.

A Parisien or geographically neutral French was alienating and unacceptable, especially in translations of American plays. Élise Guilbault, Louis-Philippe Davignon-Daigneault and Marc Labrèche are shown in Maryse Warda's contemporary translation of David Mamet's Le Cryptogramme, directed by Denise Guilbault at Théâtre de Quat'Sous.
Photo: Josée Lambert

Given that "a play is dependent on the immediacy of the impact on the audience" (Zuber 92), European French translations seemed remote to Québécois audiences. Understanding that the "reality" was not coming through, Québécois theatre artists took upon themselves the task of translating foreign plays. In reality, Québécois artists had for some time "corrected" what they saw as the most obvious mistranslations in French adaptations. Putting the French translations aside thus seemed natural and legitimate when they began translating from the original source text. In fact, what the Québécois translators undertook was what the French translators had done for quite some time, that is,

to transpose the play in such a manner, that the message of the original and the dramatist's intention be adhered to as closely as possible and be rendered, linguistically and artistically, into a form which takes into account the different traditional, cultural and socio-political background of the recipient country. (Zuber 95)

While Québécois audiences had long been exposed to translations designed for a European French audience, more texts now appeared on Montreal stages translated for a North American French audience. This shift made the relationship between the characters and audiences of the plays more intimate. This practice increased the significance of the plays, clarifying the subtexts while at the same time eliminating the linguistic irritants always present in French translations. Staging a play in Montreal was no longer a matter of putting forward the French version of a story; it became "the process of transposing the translated text into a speakable and actable performance, including the translation of nonverbal signs" (Zuber-Skerritt 490) suitable for a Québécois audience.

During this period, excesses were committed, and translations often became adaptations. Having used the local language, translators were tempted to change the locations of plays to make them fit the Québécois dialect. Translators adapting Neil Simon plays, for instance, often moved the setting from New York to Montreal. One of the most extreme examples of adaptation occurred with Robert Lalonde's version of Chekhov's Three Sisters, in which the play was set in northern Québec and the sisters dreamed of moving to Montreal.

It is also important to note that Québécois translation practices were not standardized. Contemporary analysts found it difficult to define how foreign works were being transposed. Various terms were used to explain the practices of the period: "translation, adaptation, version, paraphrase, transtranslation, and (we are tempted to add) treason" (Lefebvre 32). Certain concerns were raised at the time regarding the translator's faithfulness to the original text; but liberal translative approaches still prevailed. Behind such efforts was the desire to regenerate the contact between Québécois audiences and theatre artists through foreign plays. In essence, translation became a means for the community (Québec) to express and recognize itself through another community.

That attitude allowed the translators of the 1970s a great deal of freedom. Arguing truthfulness to the spirit of the source text, they often changed the location, the period and sometimes even the situation of the play. Although the intention was to transmit the play as precisely as possible, translators gave priority to the target audience's comprehension of the work. The work of the foreign playwright was to be respected, but it had to be made suitable for its new audience. As Jean Delisle explains, "any adaptation is made on behalf of authenticity, respect for the spirit of

the work, the preservation of its original flavour, but also, and perhaps especially, on behalf of the public to which the adaptation is directed" (6). Therefore, the key to a translation's success was its effectiveness with the audience. In other words, the effectively translated play was one with which the Québécois audience could identify.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the adaptation practices by which foreign plays were transformed to fit the Québécois context were deemed dangerous. This sort of criticism reflects how Québécois language, because of its dialectal status, was perceived as geographically rooted. Therefore, it was assumed that a person speaking Québécois could not portray a character from any geographic origin but Québec. This limitation made it necessary to transfer the location of the translated play to Québec, which was obviously restrictive. Paul Lefebvre relates that

a certain kind of spectators and translators/adaptors seem stunned by hearing a dialogue in Québécois in a play in which the action is situated in another country. It is because they consider their tongue incapable of translating a foreign language on an equivalent level. We have here a surprising relic of cultural colonialism. (46–7)

The will to translate, and to translate only into Québécois, eventually became a tool of social affirmation, but also of theatrical development. Québécois became a language capable of transmitting complex realities, a language as versatile and as rich as the French used in the European translations; it too could express levels of social status and modes of reality drawn from any foreign culture. The goal of the translation/adaptation practice of the seventies was thus to elevate Québécois language and culture and the audience's sense of pride; it also, on the most fundamental level, aimed to render the theatrical event more effective, capable of bringing foreign realities to accurate life on the stage.

There is a danger in translating foreign plays with the intention of bringing them close to the target audience: the text can be adapted so closely to the new culture that it loses its original qualities. Although true of any translation, this situation was sharply felt in the theatre community of the early 1980s. In translating foreign plays for a Québécois audience, if the translator is not careful to retain what is foreign in the fabric of the play, many particularities may be lost. This is the very practice the French were accused of following in their translations.

Translation, in essence, represents a dialogue between two cultures. When an indigenous language is used in translation, the audience gains contact with a foreign culture. In that process, the translator must nevertheless be cautious: if familiarity erases too much of the source culture's distinctiveness, the theatrical experience may be impoverished. Gershon Shaked writes:

Cultural awareness therefore implies a dialogue in which one acknowledges what is different and struggles over what is similar. This is the principal process of grappling with any foreign text, and in this lies the enormous power of the theatre, which possesses extra-textual resources permitting it to emphasize the similarity of what is different without foregoing the differentness.

Anyone pretending to have completely deciphered the alien simply does not acknowledge its strangeness and differentness. On another hand, anyone closing himself off from the possibility of approaching what is alien remains shut up within his own four walls. He is unable to compare his world with others, enriching it by a constant process of analogy and metaphorization between himself and his fellow man outside himself. The function of every theatre, and of the director as an intermediary, is to preserve that balance between bringing foreign cultures closer and preserving their identity. (14)

This going back and forth between source and host cultures gives a translated text its strength and fascination. It creates a significant communicative network between the playwright (through the translator) and the audience. In this light, "the encoded message is seen as existing in a never-ending dynamic relationship with the audience" (Fotheringham 33). In Québécois theatre, this dynamic could not exist, at least not as forcefully as it does now, when the translated texts came from France. The differences in culture, not to mention in language, between Europe and North America were so great that French translations diminished any real communication between foreign playwrights and Québécois audiences. These audiences thus felt alienated from the core of the foreign work. Since "we decode messages not according to individual but culturally based codes and conventions" (Fotheringham 35), the French encoding and inflections blurred the reception of foreign plays, rendering the experience of the play's foreignness neutral. That, of course, was before Québécois translators and adaptors took the matter in their own hands. And, following the phase in which translation was perceived chiefly as a tool for affirming Québécois identity, theatre translation has become a means of moving Québec toward other cultures, a tool to open Québécois culture to the world.

During the 1980s and 1990s, adaptation fell out of favour with Québécois artists. Distancing itself from the joual, Québécois language found a wider expressive potential. Limiting language too restrictively by geographical location was seen to be futile. It consequently became possible to use the Québécois language "without in any way transplanting German or English characters into Mauricie" (Denis 9). But it took almost twenty years of translation maturity before Québec could arrive at this point. Recently, something of a coherent and consistent practice has emerged. Translators have realized that between the street language (joual), regarded as the base for the Québécois dialect, and the elevated form of literary

French, considered as the standard translative language in France, there may be several levels of language available to translators, all forms of expression respectful of North American Francophone practice.

It is now believed that faithfulness to the original work cannot be assured in the adaptation process. Some observers have become suspicious of a "too familiar" language, and we thus note how the excesses of the 1970s have generated a new conservative position in the politics of translative practice. A move back to a more traditional approach to translation (although still using Québec language) has become the norm. Such a move represents

a new approach, more respectful of the other. It is no longer a question solely of appropriating [the essence of the other], the stranger's discourse, of usurping its identity, but rather of recognizing its radical inalienable difference, to approach as close as possible, to seek to transmit its own essence. (P. Lavoie 8)

This approach cannot be likened to that which prevailed in the 1960s. Even if the language is less popular than in the 1970s, it is still rooted in the Americanness of Québécois culture. It is far from the foreignness created by the French translations of the distant past.

The evolution of translation practice has led to an optimistic stance whereby the translator has become "rather open to the juxtaposition of two worlds" (P. Lavoie 8). This signals quite a switch from what sometimes happened in the 1970s, when Québécois translation, "instead of revealing the foreign work, charged the former to proclaim the Québécois existence" (Brisset, "Ceci" 13). In the new context, Québécois culture has become mature and self-assured. Foreign works can now exist for themselves, outside of a nationalistic identification process. As Annie Brisset has explained in a debate, "the translation loses its specular and reterritorializing function" (Sixièmes 47).

Cultural awareness implies a dialogue in which one acknowledges what is different and struggles over what is similar. Here, Nathalie Malette and Germain Houde engage in a different sort of struggle in Pierre Legris's translation of David Mamet's Oleanna, produced in winter 1994 at Théâtre de Quat'Sous, directed by Micheline Lanctôt.
Photo: Yves Renaud

In examining the changes that have occurred in the translative practice since 1965, one cannot help but recognize the fluid nature of translation. Before 1968, the French version of a work was the only version considered stage-worthy; this has changed. Translation is now highlighted in its dynamic aspects, linked to the place and time of its presentation. Consequently, former translations can become outdated and outmoded. The translator is now given permission to reread the foreign play with each new production. He or she can define the play's relevance at the moment of its staging, with the director's vision and the actors' perceptions in mind. The translator is now part of an artistic team, and can thus adjust his or her work to the situation of each new creative collaboration.

In the 1980s and 1990s it became possible to use the Québécois language "without transplanting German or English characters into Mauricie." Shown here are Pascale Montpetit and Gabriel Gascon in Marie-Élisabeth Morf's translation of Botho Strauss's Le Temps et la Chambre, directed by Serge Denoncourt in January 1995.
Photo: Yves Renaud

During this evolution, importantly, the Québécois language has achieved a new status, a new versatility, capable of transmitting all the nuances of any source language, respectful enough always to "render as precisely as possible the tongue of the source text" (Denis 17). The Québécois language now enjoys a trusting relationship with the source text; it can carry the text's meaning, form and style. Québécois translators have thus found a confidence both in language and in themselves, one that permits them to respect the internal structure of the source text. The audience, therefore, experiences not so much a Québécois version of the foreign text as a foreign text acted in Québécois (B. Lavoie).

The recent interviews I conducted with the artistic directors of the major theatre companies in Montreal – Pierre Bernard of the Théâtre de Quat'Sous, Guillermo de Andrea of the Théâtre du Rideau Vert, Lorraine Pintal of the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde and Pierre Rousseau of the Théâtre Denise-Pelletier – indicate that they are the beneficiaries of this history of translative approaches. They all take for granted that a theatrical translation "must be linked to its own time" (Pintal). Having read various translations of a given play before making a decision

on its interest for a Montreal audience, they all come to the conclusion that "obviously, translations grow old" (Rousseau). A texture that may have been perfectly effective and perceived as accurate twenty years ago may seem dated to a contemporary audience. They all clearly state that "a translation can only be a vision, an interpretation at a given time of a given play, by a given group of individuals" (Bernard). These artistic directors are willingly negotiating with an essential element of the theatrical translative problematic: the impossibility of translating a work perfectly and definitively. They all agree that "a definite translation seems like an utopia" (de Andrea); "a definite translation does not exist" (Pintal); "there is no such thing as a definite translation" (Rousseau); "the interpretation of a work cannot be definitive, it would kill the work" (Bernard). This is a very relativistic approach. To get as close to the original material as possible, one is obliged to question any translation currently in circulation. Translation has become an ever-repeated process of questioning foreign plays in an everlasting quest to transfer the original into the most appropriate and accurate version for its new target audience. Obviously, in Montreal this quest cannot be envisioned independently from the geography of North American French culture.

Geography is still of the utmost importance to the translative process in Montreal. If today's artistic directors are less dogmatic and more pragmatic than their predecessors, they still feel strongly that "if a play needs translation it has to be translated locally" (Bernard). But all of the artistic directors I interviewed admit that if they were to come into contact with a good (European) French translation of a play, they would use it. The circumstances in which a French translation could be used are very rare, mainly for reasons of plausibility. For Pierre Rousseau and Guillermo de Andrea, the territoriality of a play can justify the use of a French translation: "The more a play is set in foreign surroundings, the more a French translation can be appropriate" (Rousseau). It is an old argument, one that assumes that the Québécois language is too geographically tainted and may create confusion in the spectator's mind when used in a European context. "A French translation can be used when the plot is set in Europe. The level of language will give the references" (de Andrea).

For Lorraine Pintal, this approach is questionable. She is aware that the translation-in-Québec-at-all-costs attitude is often questioned, but for her it is essential to translate in North America: "What has been translated elsewhere by people from another culture, even though in the same language, will not generate the same resonance or be anchored in the society for which we are doing theatre." She is not an apologist of the Québécois dialect, but, for her, even a standardized French generated in Montreal is different from its counterpart from Europe; hence the necessity always to translate locally. This attitude is rooted in an old perception of the highly appropriative attitude of French translators toward the work. Like their predecessors, the artistic directors I interviewed all agree, to

various degrees, that, as Pintal says, "French translators are appropriating and transforming the text to suit their audience" (Pintal). So, in order to stay as close as possible to the original work, she prefers a local translation on every occasion.

The necessity to translate locally is felt more strongly with American drama. Unanimously, the artistic directors I interviewed believed that

if we put in parallel the original American work with its French version, there are elements that are misunderstood. The meaning may be the same but the nature of the words is very different. And the rhythm, there is a rhythm in North American French that is very different from European French. In our way of speaking, in our instinctive understanding of the American language, we are touched by something because we are part of the same continent. We have the same flow, the same way of contracting our thoughts, all of which very different from the French. (Bernard)

The appropriation of American work is completely integrated today. No one will ever, it seems, be tempted to work on an American play translated elsewhere than in North America. As for European plays, the debate is still open.

Another essential element for the various artistic directors is the linking of translation and mise en scène. Translation is part of theatrical teamwork; the translated play is not meant to live independently from the stage. In the creative process, the translation is always questioned in a collaborative effort to clarify the work. "Theatre is a living art that must change when confronted with the stage. We must reinvent the work even if it is notorious" (Pintal). Like an original script or a play originally written in French, the translation is questioned and transformed when confronted with the work of the actors, the designers and the director. Like any theatrical event, "the translation must evolve during the rehearsal period" (Rousseau). There is a very thin line between questioning the text within its potential mise en scène and adapting the text. Although this line has been crossed time and time again in the past, contemporary artistic directors are reluctant to let foreign plays be adapted. But they are also very protective of the creative prerogative of the production team. "The mise en scène, as well as the acting, can question the translation and, by extension, the original work. The orientation of the show can give a new colour to the words" (Bernard).

“If a play needs translation it has to be translated locally.” Shown here, in the foreground, are Jean-François Canac and Benoît Girard in Calderon de la Barca’s La vie est un songe, translated by Montreal’s Jean-Pierre Ronfard and presented at Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in May 1997.
Photo: Yves Renaud

In 1999, as before in Montreal, the principle behind the translative process is one of clarity to the audience. “The goal of the translation is to make readily available the foreign text in a version which is respectful of the dramatic action” (Rousseau). The story must be told as clearly as possible. The need to retranslate systematically comes from an acute conscience that audience taste is evolving. A translation accurate ten years ago may not suit a contemporary audience. Hence the need to retranslate again and again, so that “the translation will never lose its contact with the public” (Rousseau) – the ultimate ambition being that “the local spectator must understand the work as the original public did, but in a different language” (Bernard). This is a strong endeavour, from which originated forty years of theatrical translation in Montreal and which still pushes theatrical artists to question and generate translations that are always different, always respectful of the playwright, always challenging their contemporary audience.

Notes

1 Quotations have been translated into English for easier reading. Unless otherwise noted, all translations mine.

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“Theatre is a living art.... We must reinvent the work,” argues Lorraine Pintal, artistic director of Théâtre du Nouveau Monde, where Marco Micone’s translation of Goldoni’s La Locandiera was produced in 1993 with (shown here) Sylvie Drapeau and Robert Lalonde, directed by Martine Beaulne.
Photo: Yves Renaud

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