

Translation Plays: La Malinche y otros intérpretes

Amalia Gladhart

From the well-spoken Malinche, who translates Hernán Cortés' semi-intelligible gibberish for a Spanish-speaking audience in Sabina Berman's *Águila o sol* (1984), to the multilingual adolescents mediating between parents and host country in plays about immigration and exile, as in Roberto Cossa's *Gris de ausencia* (1981), the translator is a frequent figure on the Latin American stage. The captive translator, forced to take on the role of interpreter, reappears in Griselda Gambaro's *Es necesario entender un poco* (1995), while a lack of translation is central to Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda's *La mujer que cayó del cielo* (1999), shaping both the plot and the play's engagement with its audience.¹ As intermediary, or re-writer, the translator may be more or less willing to participate in the exchange, more or less transparent or interventionist in their contributions. Likewise, assumptions about audience comprehension may be more or less accurate, and may be overly restrictive in terms of language use, demanding a monolingual text, for example, when the audience in fact is multilingual. Translation may enter a play in the form of the spoken words of a character who translates or it may be hidden in the disembodied or unattributed translation of a gloss or supertitle. In *Speaking in Tongues*, Marvin Carlson observes that the onstage translator traditionally "is embedded within the dramatic world of the play, a character among characters, a voice among voices, and the fact that he may provide a necessary communication aid to the audience is hidden within the convention of dramatic illusion, like a drama's necessary exposition" (186). At other times, however, that role may be less hidden. There are, for example, instances of translation *for* the audience and those of translation *in front of* the audience. In the first, the audience is provided with a translation—which can be rough, mannered, witty, or pointed—of the words of particular characters. In the latter, the audience witnesses a scene in which translation occurs—just as it

might witness a love scene, a murder, or a family argument over a meal. Put another way, we might distinguish between plays that contain translation at the level of plot and plays about translation, in the sense of theme.

Why stage translation? Why include a translator-character in a play or place a character—perhaps unwillingly, or without sufficient preparation—in the role of translator? Historical circumstance is one reason, as in the case of a play about La Malinche, who is known to have acted as interpreter. In general, scenes of translation highlight moments of cultural and linguistic contact or change. These plays are “about” translation. They are also translation plays in the sporting sense of a series of passes, an executed maneuver. Translation is represented or practiced in order to do something, to make a point. To play may also mean to be included and chosen. Translation (or sometimes a lack of translation) works to circumscribe or extend the field of listeners with access to the words spoken on stage. Translation may be represented within an otherwise monolingual play. It may also arise in multilingual plays in which the mix of languages and pronunciation is the result of historical circumstances (such as colonization, migration, exile, or education) that, on stage, complicate or interrupt communication between characters. Communication between stage and spectator may also be complicated, for example if spectators’ access to the dominant language of the play is uneven, or if characters speak a language foreign to the community in which the play is being performed. As a result, both individual characters, and often the audience, may be excluded from the central action because of their inability to understand the words being spoken.

I want to be careful about stretching the concept of “translation” too broadly; if anything and everything is translation, the concept loses all meaning. But it is also important to divest translation of its apologetic sheen, evident in the sad and self-dismissive way a person might say, “I read that only in translation.” While a translation is always an interpretation, *un interprète* may also be understood as a performer. These plays include both instances of simultaneous interpretation and representations of literary or textual translation. Performance metaphors that attempt to account for translation abound. As Eliot Weinberger notes in his essay “Anonymous Sources,”

Translation is an utterly unique genre, but for some reason there is a perennial tendency to explain it by analogy. A translator is like an actor playing a role, a musician performing a score, a messenger who somehow garbles the message. But translation is such a familiar and intrinsic part of almost any culture that one wonders why there

is this need to resort to analogies: we do not say that baking is like playing the violin. (25)

The translator on stage, however,—the character-translator—is unambiguously a performer, even if the action of translation or interpretation is also real in the sense of being materially necessary to the audience’s understanding of the dialogue.

Finally, any consideration of translation must include a consideration of context. How much of a text’s originating context can, or should, be brought over into the translating culture? How does the necessarily new context come into being through the creation of a new text and connect to the source even as it diverges from it? These questions are especially relevant within the particular, and peculiar, context of a staged translation. Staging translation draws attention to and calls into question many of the constitutive elements of theatre: audience, repetition, and some degree of communication or community, however fleeting or contingent. While interpretation is always part of theatre, putting a translator on stage makes that inescapably evident.

La Malinche: Translator and Token

The paradigmatic translator on the Mexican stage is La Malinche, the subject of plays by Rosario Castellanos, Sabina Berman, and Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, among others. In the case of La Malinche, translation, while “embedded” within the play, to use Carlson’s term (186), is not incidental; the nature and extent of La Malinche’s intervention as mediator is at the core of her historical importance. Granted, a character-translator might not be caught in the act. In Castellanos’ *El eterno femenino* (1974), a reanimated La Malinche steps out of her waxworks stasis to correct the historical record. She alludes to her work as translator but is not portrayed in the moment of translation. Thus, she says to Cortés, “Soy tu instrumento,” (89) and responds to Cortés’ fatuous “¡Ah, mujeres, mujeres! ¿Por qué la Divina Providencia las habrá dotado del don superfluo de la palabra?” with a pointed, “En mi caso particular, para que yo te sirviera de intérprete y te transmitiera el mensaje de los emisarios de Tlaxcala” (90-91). Nothing is actually translated: We simply see the translator on stage. The translator as instrument, moreover, despite the pointedness of La Malinche’s remarks, suggests a passive role, one characterized by transmission rather than creation.

In Berman’s *Águila o sol* (1984), on the other hand, La Malinche is busy at work. Sandra Cypess observes that Berman creates for Cortés a pidgin Spanish in which “the inclusion of signifiers from many time periods

and from countries whose imperialist policies affect Mexico—France, Italy, Germany, and the United States—reflects the realities of foreign political, economic, and cultural influences that still operate” (134). As Cypess writes, “Because Cortés never utters a complete and logical sentence, the only way his ideas are made known is through the interpretive skills and imagination of La Malinche” (135). The translation, then, is essential. Without La Malinche to speak for him, Cortés would be effectively mute—or simply ridiculous. Extending the idea of translation for the audience, Cypess continues: “It is ironic that La Malinche as translator is also required by the Spanish-speaking audience, whose mastery of Spanish in Mexico is the legacy of the colonial heritage” (135).² In a way, La Malinche’s translation here is, if possible, doubly bilingual, as she translates for the indigenous Mexicans on stage and for the Spanish-speaking, present-day Mexicans in the audience.

Cypess’ note on the irony in the need for a translator brings to mind Eliot Weinberger’s description of his bilingual reading with Octavio Paz, an event that was included in a Bill Moyers PBS series. In the *New York Times* review of the show, the critic wrote: “‘Octavio Paz was accompanied by his translator,’—no name given, of course—‘always a problematic necessity’” (17). Weinberger continues: “‘Problematic necessity,’ while not yet a cliché about translation, rather neatly embodies the prevailing view” (Weinberger 17). Instead of a “problematic necessity” or an “ironic need,” might the theatrical foregrounding of the translator make it a fortunate necessity or a generous opportunity, weaving the translator’s interpretations into the fabric of the play? Might it say more, perhaps, about the pitfalls of communication and interpretation than about translation, per se? Because the stage is by nature a space of interpretation and mediation between the source of whatever is being represented (be that playwright, text, or actor) and the audience, translation is a necessity, but not a necessary evil. A kind of translation—mediation, gloss, interpretation—is constitutive of theatre.

As reimaged by both Castellanos and Berman, La Malinche is notable for her agency, good sense, and intellectual superiority; her complex status as captive or object of exchange recedes into the background. Yet the interpreter’s role may be severely circumscribed. Such, of course, is very much the case outside the theatre, where interpreters employed during times of war or occupation regularly face reprisal or exile. One such circumscribed role appears in Griselda Gambaro’s *Es necesario entender un poco* (1995). Divided into ten scenes, the play synthesizes many of the concerns evident in Gambaro’s earlier work in a poetic and powerful way. Continuing the preoccupation

with information, miscommunication, and unreliable appearances evident in plays such as *El campo* (1967) and *Información para extranjeros* (1973), *Es necesario* presents both greater narrative clarity and greater abstraction, as if the essence of misunderstanding has been distilled. Gambaro's play portrays an absolute lack of comprehension, as characters appear incapable of—and often indifferent to—any direct connection.

Translation Impossible: From China to Paris and Back

The depiction of translation in Gambaro's piece presents language as a false token of understanding, one that allows at best partial communication. The play is based on the experience of John Hu, a Cantonese man of letters who was taken to France by the Jesuit Father Jean-François Foucquet in 1722. The account of Hu's life in Gambaro's play follows quite closely the narrative presented by Jonathan Spence in *The Question of Hu*. While Gambaro's play is fairly comprehensible, it is also confusing, as the narrative leaves many transitions unexplained. The setting, geographically and temporally distant from a contemporary audience, places the spectator in a position analogous to that of the characters, who confront a series of unintelligible others. Translation becomes indentured servitude, a contractual obligation that leaves little space for intellectual analysis or witty rejoinders. As the priest informs Hue in the third scene, "Aunque seas un letrado, me debes obediencia. Hay una frase en el 'I Ching' que no entiendo" (72). The limitations of even a shared language are evident in the character of the priest, who speaks Chinese but neither understands Hue nor cares to. Hue's knowledge affords him no privilege. On board ship, the priest wants to get immediately to work on the translations. Hue, desperately seasick, complains that his belly is full of waves and that in five months, no one has spoken to him. The priest replies that, in fact, "Le hablan todos, señor Hue. Es usted quien no entiende" (67). For Hue, unintelligible speech is no better than silence, and it is just as isolating. Even back on land, far from the movement of the waves, Hue declares, "Los signos están vivos como las personas," (72) unfixed and, hence, unreadable. Hue's task as translator is exaggerated, with the priest telling him, "Me ayudará a traducir todos los libros. El 'I Ching' y los cuatro mil restantes que compré en China" (66). Later, after six years in a French asylum, Hue tells the priest, newly returned from Rome with the promise to send Hue back to China, "Traduje cuatro mil libros al lenguaje de la nada" (112). Hue's journey, undertaken in order to serve as translator and copyist,

has been futile from the outset, for he has neither translated nor copied and has nothing to show for his suffering.

In his discussion of the ways in which stage speech may be rendered foreign without becoming unintelligible, Carlson writes:

The force of verisimilitude encourages the use of actual foreign languages on stage, while the necessity of adopting the raw material of life to the theatrical and social conventions of a particular public, here including the language they speak, has resulted in a variety of substitutions for or supplements to actual foreign speech. The major substitution has been various forms of stage dialects, an artificial 'stage speech' that one may consider to be a kind of artificial dialect; the major supplement, in modern times, has been the supertitled translation. (13)

Yet, leaving aside concerns with verisimilitude, the audience may simply be told—directly or indirectly—that one or more characters are speaking another language. Thus, the dialogue in Gambaro's play has been implicitly translated for the spectator, but not for the other characters. All of the characters speak recognizably Argentine Spanish, but it is evident that Hue continues to speak Chinese in France, which can be seen in the reactions of his interlocutors, such as the Sacristan who demands, "¿Qué jerigonza habla?" (91).

Es necesario entender un poco encompasses Hue's journey to France, opening just before his departure with the priest and ending after his return to Canton. In between, various episodes of Hue's life are portrayed—many based upon incidents noted in the historical record—such as his encounters with a beggar and then with a dying woman at an inn and his eventual confinement to the asylum at Charenton. The play also includes an encounter between Hue and the Marquis de Sade at the asylum, where the latter prepares the inmates' performance of the death of Marat, an implicit reference to Peter Weiss' 1964 play *Marat/Sade*. The main departure from the historical record of Hu's life in Gambaro's play occurs in the scenes involving Sade. While the two men were indeed inmates at Charenton, Hu returned to Canton in 1725, fifteen years before Sade was born. Hue's encounter with the Marquis de Sade is ambivalent. Sade initially treats Hue with some consideration, ordering the inmate playing Marat to bring him food and lifting him onto a bench. Hue seems like another spectator, dumbly huddled in the corner of the room in which Sade is preparing to rehearse his play. Anticipating Hue's fear—though not speaking directly to Hue, who, in any event, could not understand him—Sade affirms that "nada es tan malo como perder las

palabras. No comprender” (103). The meeting with Sade, however, does not substantially alter Hue’s circumstances.

Hue experiences beatings, hunger, and imprisonment, but his greatest suffering is caused by a lack of understanding: “El mundo de los hombres tiene que ser comprensible, porque no hay pavor más grande que vivir en él y no entenderlo” (118). Hue is shaken by terror, by dread, by fear of the unknown, of the dangerously unexplained, of the unintelligible words that may be spoken in kindness or in anger. Translation in Gambaro’s play is an absence more than an activity, standing in for a kind of mechanical going through the motions of communication that leaves no room for patience, for trial and error, for listening. Translation is both out of reach (4,000 books) and beneath the notice of characters who cannot be bothered.

Gambaro’s title carries a warning: It is necessary to understand at least a little of this history—of John Hu, of the Jesuits in China, of Peter Weiss’ recreation of the Marquis de Sade—in order to understand the play. Yet even without glossing the allusions, the play can be read as a parable of noncommunication, a sign of the ultimate opacity of language, the inevitably limited extent of any exchange. The effort to pin down every reference, every clue, may lead down a blind alley. The play tells us something about the relationship of theatre and knowledge as well, for we see the staging of misunderstanding and, by extension, are invited to speculate on what might constitute or foster comprehension. Like so many of Gambaro’s plays, *Es necesario* demands that the audience examine its own participation. Because the characters are unable to understand each other, the audience must play the role of interpreter and make the relevant connections. Yet the representation of translation within the play reveals the interpreter’s role as ambivalent, with no guarantee of understanding or compassion. While it may be necessary to attempt to understand—and possible to do so—the results of that understanding cannot be predicted in advance. Hue’s internment is due to the greed, laziness, and indifference of those around him as much as to his inability to communicate directly. Still, like the character of Rita in *La mujer que cayó del cielo*, without the necessary words, Hue can offer no evidence to counter the assumption that he is mad, or close enough.

Speech and Sanity: Interpretation or Diagnosis?

Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda’s *La mujer que cayó del cielo*, premiered in Mexico in 1999, is based on the experience of a Tarahumara woman, Rita Patiño Quintero, who spoke only Rarámuri (Tarahumara) and who was found,

lost, in the U.S. in 1983. She was interned in a Kansas state mental hospital, with diagnoses of schizophrenia and mental retardation. As represented in Rascón Banda's play, a lack of translation—or capacity for translation—is one cause of her long institutionalization.³ The play is composed of thirty-eight individually titled scenes. In Scene 3, “Cuando las palabras son ruido nada más,” Giner, the narrator, addresses the spectators to ask whether they understood the police officers' conversation in English. Rather than wait for a reply, he concludes that they likely attended bilingual schools as children, an assumption about the theatrical audience that may or may not be accurate—not everyone in Mexico can afford to send their children to bilingual schools. Recognizing this, Giner paraphrases the dialogue, just in case. However, “[I]os sentimientos no necesitan traducción,” he says (94), an assertion the play as a whole tends to negate.

Clutching the bars of her cell, Rita shouts at her jailors in Rarámuri. Again, Giner interprets the exchange for the audience:

Ellos tampoco saben lo que ella grita. Imaginan que está enjoadada porque la han encerrado a la fuerza, que quiere irse, que los está insultando. Pero no saben exactamente lo que ella está diciendo. Como ustedes tampoco. Para ellos, sus palabras son ruido, como el sonido del teléfono, como el maullido de un gato. (95)

At one level, words may be superfluous: Body language and setting make the gist of what Rita says fairly obvious. At another level, Rita becomes part of the natural world, part of the background, rather than a human speaker. Similarly, Rita listens to the officers as if hearing “el sonido de la lluvia y del viento, el claxon de los autos, el ruido de la ciudad” (94). Yet nuance and specificity remain important, beyond the general outline of what a person wants to say. The police officers are correct, but only up to a point, about the content of Rita's diatribe: “[N]o saben que les está reclamando por qué la encerraron. [. . .] No saben que les está gritando malditos, malditos, malditos” (95).

Unmarked (or minimized) translation enters into *La mujer que cayó del cielo* when certain characters begin speaking in English, then switch to Spanish, their earlier use of English having “marked” their subsequent speech as being a translation from the original English. Here there is no unacknowledged translator who needs to be recognized; the translation is enclosed within the play as a whole, part of the work of the playwright. Significantly, these glosses flow into one another, as though the process of moving between languages were transparent, unmediated, or automatic. Yet the inability to move seamlessly (or at all) between languages is part of what permits the

doctors to diagnose Rita as mentally ill. In Scene 27, “No te entiendo, Rita,” Rita speaks Rarámuri. In the text, a Spanish gloss immediately follows in parentheses. There is no explicit indication as to whether the translation is meant to be staged or is for the reader’s use exclusively, but the fact that elsewhere in the play (for instance, Scene 23, “Larga distancia”) lines in Rarámuri are not followed by parenthetical translations suggests that the glosses in Scene 27 are meant to be available to the audience. In production, this gloss may be staged through a voiceover, but the stage directions do not specify how translations should be handled, raising the possibility of some intriguing options, including the choice of whether to translate for or in front of the audience, or not at all. One option might be to place a translator at a lectern, reading. Alternately, a silent figure holding papers might represent a translated text, while the translated words are read by an unidentified, unseen speaker. In the following scene, the first doctor describes Rita’s condition in English. Immediately afterward, “voces”—presumably offstage—repeat the same information in Spanish. For the rest of the scene, the two doctors converse in Spanish. Here, two characters initially presented as English speakers have in a sense been invisibly “translated” for the audience. Continually present but relatively unmarked, translation serves an informative function, as the playwright attempts to keep multiple languages in play without wholly alienating the spectator. An author’s note prefacing the text of the 2000 edition details Rascón Banda’s sources and concludes, “La obra debe representarse con los textos en las tres lenguas: inglés, tarahumara y español. El autor agradecerá al director que no se traduzcan. Sólo así se puede hacer sentir al público el conflicto y la tortura por la incomunicación” (9). This author’s note underscores the importance of the lack of communication, but also a particular attitude toward the audience. Placing a (largely) incomprehensible character on stage poses some risk, if only a theatrical one of wasting stage time on words the audience will not understand. Yet the stated goal is not necessarily—or not only—to make the audience understand, but to make the spectator experience a lack or impossibility of understanding.

A Family with No Common Language

The translator’s role may resolve a situation of mutual incomprehension, or the translator may be framed as scapegoat. Or she may simply fail, as in the case of Frida in an extended scene of translation that occurs in front of the audience in Roberto Cossa’s *Gris de ausencia*. Premiered as part of Teatro Abierto in 1981, the play presents a family of Italian immigrants who

have returned from Buenos Aires to Rome, where they run the Trattoria La Argentina, serving up an exaggeratedly folkloric *argentinidad* that includes gaucho costumes and an 85-year-old grandfather clumsily playing tangos on the accordion. Yet while the menu is “authentic,” the mask of Argentine-ness is far from stable. When Dante hollers into the kitchen for “locro a la camatarqueña,” an irritated Chilo corrects him: “Ca-ta-mar-que-ña” (75). In his analysis of the play, Miguel Ángel Giella stresses the characters’ loss of language in the experience of exile. While the exact reasons behind the family’s return to Italy are not explained, these characters—out of place, all of them—share no common communicative ground. Far from achieving a unified return to the Old Country, the family has further dispersed, with one child living in Madrid, another in London. Lucía speaks mostly Italian, spiced with enough Spanish to be intelligible to a Spanish-speaking spectator. Her daughter, Frida, speaks with a Spanish (Madrid) accent and thinks her Uncle Chilo’s Argentine Spanish is cute. Chilo, meanwhile, has not learned Italian, despite living in Italy for many years. Unable to understand their speech, Chilo is sure the locals are insulting him and loses no opportunity to describe the “tanos” in negative terms. When Frida’s brother, Martín, calls from London, the call is a humorous example of utter miscommunication. Lucía struggles but finally understands that “mader” must mean “madre.” She asks, “¿Fa molto freddo a Londra?” but evidently does not understand her son’s reply. “¿Cosa é ‘andertan’?” she asks, and then says to Frida, “Diche que ‘no andertan’”(74)—a misapprehension that is funnier for the spectator who understands a little English.

Taking the phone, Frida resorts to a mix of Italian and English. Lucía must repeat her question—“Domándagli quando verrà a vedermi”—more than once before Frida admits, “No te entiendo madre” (74). Lucía then repeats the question a third time, louder. When Frida turns to Chilo for help, he answers, “No sé. . . dice que lo mandes a algún lado” (75). To her brother, Frida says, “Dice madre. . . Mader diche. . . No, mader sei. . . Que te mande. . . ¡Que te mande a ver!” (75). Becoming hysterical, Lucía asks a different question: “¡Domándali si fa freddo a Londra!” Speaking into the phone, Frida improvises: “Dice que vayas a ver a Fredy en Londres” (75). This is a scene of failed translation, and its failure seems inevitable, making the terms of exchange more than a little unfair. There is no explanation of why Martín evidently speaks neither Spanish nor Italian. Unheard on stage, his words must be inferred from the responses of his mother and sister. As interpreter, Frida is a hinge between two languages she does not understand

or speak. Her attempts at translation rely heavily on sound similarity, so that *freddo* (cold) becomes *Fredy*. Yet *Gris de ausencia* is not a strictly realistic play. It is not the play's logic that should be at issue—how is it possible that no two members of this family share a language?—but the results, comic yet painful, of that linguistic separation.

Technologies of Translation

Linking translation failure and translation in front of the audience, Jean Graham-Jones discusses the role of both machine translation and translation in general in Rafael Spregelburd's play *Spam* (2013) in an essay titled "Anticipated Failure, or Translating Rafael Spregelburd's Plays into English." Because "three scenes purport to involve 'Google Translator' (or Google Translate)," Graham-Jones writes, "I thought it crucial not only to find a way to highlight the key role Google plays in what we today call Global English, but also to use these three scenes in translation to signal the process whereby languages are converted into Googlish" (141). In the Buenos Aires production, she notes, "the actor entered a structure more reminiscent of a Bond-era telephone booth than a translation box at the United Nations. In the first GT scene (day 2), the audience listened to an English recording of an e-mail Monti had received . . . Monti-Spregelburd acted as interpreter, 'Google-translating' the text into comically flawed Spanish" (141). The scene Graham-Jones describes suggests a way of making partially visible the hidden, quasi-magical operations of machine translation. Indeed, here the machine translation is humanized, with the human interpreter performing in place of the machine. The scene draws on audience implication in translation in another way as well, as many spectators will likely have employed Google Translate themselves.

Elsewhere, we might see a kind of fictional machine translation, or imaginary machines that transmit human-generated messages. In her analysis of Berman's *eXtras*, Jacqueline Bixler describes the actions of two assistant cinematographers, whose constant use of invisible walkie-talkies "underscores the process of transnational communication as they attempt to translate and relay messages between the mostly invisible, English-speaking Hollywood directors and the Spanish-speaking extras" (435). In the process, Bixler notes, "Linguistically and culturally caught between the two groups, Fabiola and Simón perform as human walkie-talkies in this comic process of transcultural (mis)communication" (435). Frida performs a similar function in Cossa's play, transmitting her brother's off-stage messages. In both Berman's and Cossa's

plays, human beings become (invisible) mechanical devices. Translation occurs within that black box of immaterial machinery—before the audience, but unseen, mysterious, and unsuccessful. The words translated, moreover, are unheard, unavailable. The audience *witnesses* acts of translation, but because the foreign-language words are never spoken on stage, the spectator neither benefits (or needs to benefit) from the translator’s interpretation as such.

In Conclusion

Plays that combine multiple languages, dialects, or accents also foreground the limits of any interpretation, which must be dependent on the knowledge and ability of the interpreter. Linguistic incomprehension or unintelligibility serves to represent the isolated “other,” or alien, on stage by reproducing the experience of isolation for the audience. Plays may present moments of failed translation, as well as moments when translation is foregrounded in such a way as to emphasize the difficulty or impossibility of understanding—that is, when the seemingly easy translation process points to the incapacity of the characters, due to linguistic lack, or lack of will, to interpret one another’s words. Another kind of translation, absent translation, is the translation that does not happen when the character speaks a language that other characters and/or the audience is not expected to understand, and no translation is forthcoming.⁴

A last sort of translating for the audience would be theatrical translation: translation *of* plays, not *in* plays. In an essay that explores the epistemological possibilities of theatrical translation through the lens of three case studies, Adam Versényi argues that

[t]he translator’s examination of artistic creativity in one cultural context allows that artistic product to regain its original force from the force of its audience’s attention in another cultural context. As the translator sorts through a multitude of possibilities for each performative moment, registering each nuance, not fixing meaning but allowing it to float, the mechanics of translation create a space between cultures, a conduit for conversation and comprehension as opposed to the concrete complacency that comes from defining the object of study. (433)

Versényi suggests that to think about translating “is to think about communicating the contours of knowledge production in both cultural locations” (438). The translated text carries traces of the source context that are sometimes explicit indications, sometimes subtle hints that the text comes from

somewhere else. These traces might include the name of the source author, the words “translated by” or “from” on the program or title page, the original geographical setting, or more subtly, a indefinable “flavor” of otherness. Local color—foods, curses, landscapes, costumes, historical figures—may appear, and while the original context is lost, the reader understands that something is being said about that original context. For example, Suzanne Jill Levine explains that in her translation of Manuel Puig’s *Heartbreak Tango* (*Boquitas pintadas*) she replaced the tango lyrics that appear as chapter epigraphs with Hollywood movie references. She argues that “the translator-as-critic must expand the context and take into consideration how a work will be received in other cultures” (130-31) and concludes that “the translation responds not only to the author’s world . . . but, most urgently, to its potential reader(s)” (134). The same might be said of the translation’s potential spectators.

A translation takes a text that is distant, unfamiliar, unreadable for those who do not know its language and brings it close enough for the reader of the translation to grasp its meaning. How close that understanding might be, or should be, is another question for discussion. Wherever a given translation falls on the spectrum of more or less domesticating, every translated text demands a reading that draws on both familiar and unfamiliar contexts, or one that extends a familiar context into unfamiliar territory. These questions can be particularly complex in the theatre, in part due to the multiple codes that must be transmitted, as conventions of performance style or gesture will vary across cultures, and in part because, as with any text or reading, the context (source or translating) is created anew with each performance. The dialogic character of theatre immediately engages the spectator with any performed translation. Because a translation of a script must be “playable” in order to be successfully staged, theatrical translation may tend toward a more domesticating approach that makes the actors’ words sound natural to an audience in the receiving culture.⁵ Versényi writes of “the inherent liminality involved in theatrical translation, where the borders that both define the work and exist within it are constantly shifting in multiple ways as different voices and diverse relationships are experienced and exposed” (439). Rafael Spregelburd, in a short piece also translated by Jean Graham-Jones, argues that “[t]ranslating theatre is always, for better or worse, rewriting theatre—rewriting it for a new community of meaning” (374). While this might be said of any literary translation, the community of meaning is key in any theatrical performance. Edith Grossman has argued that translators “translate context” (71). Lawrence Venuti, by contrast, contends that translation “dismantles the

context that is constitutive” of the source text (35). The two arguments are not incommensurable. If the translator translates context, as Grossman suggests, that means she must consider the text, while translating, not as an isolated object but in its relation to other texts, other signs. As Spregelburd concludes, “the challenge for theatre is not just the play’s translation, but rather the deep, unnameable, unexplainable understanding of the community that will come to see it, taking its place in a darkened theatre in order to give life back to the submerged nuances beating in the depths of every text” (377).

Looking at translation as staged within plays provides yet another context of translation to consider. Staged representations of translation often center on relationships of power and authority. The power of the individual translator may be asserted, as in Rosario Castellanos’ and Sabina Berman’s portrayals of La Malinche. Conversely, the need for translation may signal the lesser authority of the person for whom the message is translated or the person who is not offered a translation. Never wholly transparent, the translator’s intervention is always an interpretation. Staging translation makes that interpretive act present, impossible to ignore. Intriguing, too, is the frequency of nonsense that appears as part of a staged translation. This may be an attempt to maintain a monolingual play by introducing an imaginary language rather than a real one, a variant on the practice of using stage dialects. In *Águila o sol*, La Malinche massages Cortés’ gibberish into useable form, while in *Spam*, Monti renders flawed English into Spanish that is yet more flawed.

The translator on stage presents a model of the interpretive process: what it is, how it works, how it breaks down. Interpretive acts are ongoing, contingent, inescapable, individual, abusive, humane. Recalling Sandra Cypess’ idea of ironic necessity underlined earlier, the awareness that the contexts within which translation occurs are not naturally occurring or neutral is also significant. The translator on stage becomes the go-between who makes possible audience comprehension, and may also, by withholding or distorting a translation, stymie or manipulate that comprehension. The dynamics of staged translation are continuously shifting, and the translator’s speech is necessarily multi-vocal. The circumstances that make translation necessary, that put cultures and languages in contact, may be violent or exploitative—or, sometimes, joyful.

University of Oregon

Notes

¹ I discuss *Gris de ausencia* and *La mujer que cayó del cielo*, with an emphasis on migration in both plays, in “Teaching Latin American Migrations Through Theater.”

² I discuss Berman’s portrayal of La Malinche as translator in more detail in the first chapter of my book, *The Leper in Blue*.

³ See Mary Sánchez for an account of Patiño Quintero’s experience in Kansas and the circumstances of her release.

⁴ The translation of multilingual plays implies a kind of multilingual translating of the play as a whole and of the instances of translation (or, again, its lack) that occur in the play. By way of example, an English translation of Roberto Cossa’s *La Nona* by Raúl Moncada opens with the following translator’s note: “The language of *La Nona* is that of many Italian immigrants who live in Argentina and speak in a mixture of their original language with Spanish. In this translation, Spanish and ‘Lunfardo’ (Argentine slang) have found their English equivalent, but most of the Italian has been left intact. Many of Nona’s expressions are clarified by other characters’ responses, and some are generally recognizable to an English-speaking audience. However, some terms might remain elusive as well as some typically Argentine customs.” A mix of languages is thus retained, though the combination is altered. (Unpublished manuscript, graciously provided by Roberta Wells-Famula, director of education, The Old Globe, San Diego, CA.)

⁵ Graham-Jones addresses this issue at greater length in her discussion of translations of Spregelburd’s work.

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