
Margherita Laera, *Theatre and Translation* (Red Globe Press, 2019),
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Reviewed by Carmela Esposito

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.
William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Life and Theatre do not just co-exist. The former is simply not possible without the latter. In a constant exercise of mirroring, nurturing and harbouring each other, all that is 'represented' is always true, and although all that is 'staged' may be fictional, it is by no means false. As James Joyce once put it, "drama arises spontaneously out of life and is coeval with it" ("Drama and Life", 1900), implying how the underlying whimsicalities of humanity's circumstances and vicissitudes necessarily blur the lines between life and *mise-en-scène*. What often fails to be acknowledged is how those mechanisms of intersection allow us, in the words of Jerzy Marian Grotowski, "to cross the frontiers between you and me" ("Holiday", 1972-73). To transcend the notion of the single 'self', to fully embrace 'otherness' and to trade 'individuality' with 'plurality' are indeed the sort of negotiations that are at the basis of the translation process. Thus, theatre and translation as arts of widespread domain share a language that is somewhat 'habitable', and continuously evolving, moving with the times, exhibiting and emphasising cultural diversities and similarities.

Margherita Laera is a multiple award winning, Senior Lecturer in Drama and Theatre at the University of Kent in Canterbury, where she is co-director of the European Theatre Research Network. "Theatre And" is a Macmillan International series edited by Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato, which presents an innovative yet readily accessible multi-disciplinary approach to theatre scholarship. Laera covers the subject splendidly, crafting a well-structured, sharp study that not once shies away from discussing the complexities of the latest critical thought and debate, hence making *Theatre and Translation* one of the many flagships in the collection at present.

The book, which epitomizes a study on theatrical translation as well as a more theoretical reflection on the similarities between theatre and translation, is conceptually sectioned into three parts, namely: "What? Defining Translation", "How? The Practice and Politics of Translation" and "Why? The Case for more Translations". Featuring a brief but enlightening foreword by Caridad Svich, Laera's keen assertions are made in almost a storytelling style, without compromising academic rigour. In the preface, while recognising her position as "a white, middle-class European and a full-time member of staff at a British university" (7) the author also openly describes her sensibility as that of "a feminist scholar, a practising theatre translator, and an Italian migrant who writes and lives her daily life in a language/culture other than her native one and has consequently developed a mixed identity" (8). The recurring metaphors of the actor/translator who is faced with the challenges of speaking/performing *for/on behalf* of others, establish the foundations and the thought-provoking leitmotif of the book,

which leaves us with a compelling sense of urgency to act and defeat the domesticating tendencies in modern theatre translation.

Drawing from accurately up-to-date theoretical frameworks, Laera addresses and reassesses the cognisance of literal equivalence by analysing the paradoxes and conundrums of translating even the simplest of expressions. For instance, offering a “cup of tea”, as comforting as it may sound to British people, “does not map on to other language/culture combinations” (13) as tea could easily be associated with symbols of colonialism and exploitation in a different context, such as India, where it was “introduced as a crop by British colonialists” (14). Thereupon, Laera references her own personal experience, giving a further example of a different point of view: “my Southern Italian granny would never have dreamt of offering me tea (an entirely alien drink to her)” (15).

The first section is impregnated with the notion that “all theatre is a process of translation” (19) and Laera promptly provides evidence to this argument by investigating Jacques Lecoq’s actor training exercises through ‘mimodynamic processes’ so that actors could “learn how to instinctively ‘be’ a concept, colour, poem or painting rather than to describe them” (22) and “to be like translators so transparent and exact that they would be able to embody the so called ‘spirit of the original’” (*ibid*). Translation-inspired exercises are at the core of theatre practitioner Augusto Boal’s philosophy as well, who conversely believes that stripping meaning down to its ‘essence’ is not necessarily the only way to convey accessibility to everyone. As “the word spoken is never the word heard” (24), multilingualism and translation can admittedly empower audiences by turning spectators into ‘spect-actors’. By lucidly examining the power differentials ‘at play’ in the 2016 exchange programme of the Royal Shakespeare Company with China, Laera addresses Edward Said’s postcolonial theories and proceeds to denounce the conservative dynamics of inward-looking taste that locks up cultural borders and endorses the appetite for Anglo-American cultural products. To expand audience horizons means “giving up a portion of one’s soft power [...] provincializing the west” (41). The illuminating analysis continues by questioning the concept of ‘performability’ which Susan Bassnett affirmed to be “undefinable and therefore to be dropped in order to avoid marginalizing translators any further” (48). Ergo, the main contention of the second section is to illustrate how ‘performability’ is merely an excuse to prevent innovation by “fuelling a wholesale eradication of otherness from the target text” (49). With a lucid presentation of Lawrence Venuti’s critique of ethnocentrism in translation, Laera makes the fair point that foreignization techniques may represent a valid alternative to domesticating techniques in order to make the other visible, and abolish cultural favouritism, which conceals the fact that “fluency and readability boost sales while busting difference” (50).

Citing Marvin Carlson’s classification of the relationships between the culturally familiar and the culturally foreign, Laera fittingly traces a comparison between plays and people via the representation of reciprocal hospitality: “through theatre translation we receive the stories of others in our home, welcoming them as their hosts, and on the other hand we inhabit them, becoming guests” (55). Since identity is not to be perceived as fixed, but rather in a constant flux, “heterogeneous, porous and open”, theatre demands to be reconfigured as a “permanent border zone” (59). For this reason, Laera brings forward two paradigms: the model of cosmopolitanism, which upholds the irrelevance of nationalism that prevents us from “embracing a universal global culture” (61), and the model of creolization, a decolonising method which “refers to a specific phenomenon of cultural hybridization” (64). If theatre translation is concerned with the integration of identity and alterity, Laera argues that translators

should explore its ethics and contest stagnant conventions, if the aim is a change of mind-sets. Incidentally, the author's research project "Translating Theatre" (www.translatingtheatre.com) is an attempt to do just that; while encouraging intercultural dialogue and shaking monolingual imperatives, it functioned as a theatrical counter-narrative to "highlight other than silence linguistic and cultural difference without falling into the traps of assimilation or exoticization" (69). The project took place in the summer of 2016, when a team of scholar-translators, directors and performers came together to translate and perform in English three continental plays by writers with a migrant background and written in Polish, Spanish and French. The approach was undoubtedly vibrant with political nuances, as Laera first started planning it when the idea of a Brexit referendum was still a floating rumour. The third and last section of the book encompasses three major cases for more theatre translations: to expose audiences to the stories of others, to offer visibility/audibility to those who are rarely seen/heard, and to extend access to the theatre. Granting that "culturally distant others are here to stay" (74), the western theatre needs more translations to defeat the "insular and autarchic understanding of identity" (*Ibid*). Turning a blind eye to "so much variety already at home" (77) might lead to the dangers of ending up 'performing race' other than 'humanity'. Yet, widening access and inclusivity practices do not exclusively concern multicultural endeavours, as they pertain to different marginalised communities alike. In 2017 at the London National Theatre a set of pioneering captioning glasses "pledged to improve the experience of D/deaf spectators and hard of hearing spectators" (79).

It can be concluded that Laera's acute reflections offer a powerful take on an area full of academic potential. The last pages of *Theatre and Translation* culminate in a plethora of direct questions left unanswered, emblematically so. Scrutinising our own morals, inquiries such as "How will you be a good host, and a good guest? And how will you *speak with*, not only *for them*?" (80) linger in our minds and evoke possible answers. The theatrical encounter should not obliterate diversity, but celebrate it, and translation should act as a tool to avoid the 'luxury of neutrality' and claim its utter right to be and manifest itself for what it is: fluid, disjointed, fragmented, impure, and proud nonetheless.