

To the Heart of Drama Translation

Estonian Week: Roundtable Discussion on the Promotion of Contemporary Plays Abroad

We may all feel that translation is not only about matching equivalent words to one another in different languages. But then exactly what it is all about? And how does the theatrical context modify it as we start to talk about drama translation? In her play *Beatrice*, the Estonian playwright Siret Campbell delves into the question that what it is that makes us humans by examining the borders between reality and virtuality. The readers' virtual guide is Mootchi who is quasi speaking from the head of the characters with the help of their digital devices. Looking it up, I assume that the author named her character after an early virtual character of the computer entertainment industry. But the way it sounds as the actors of the József Attila Theatre pronounce it, the name becomes like that of a well-known Hungarian actor, Zoltán Mucsi's last name. And I just can't help but think about a video that became a meme of the Hungarian internet a couple of years ago. The creators dubbed the video of a skilled, but, compared to human capacity, still awkward robot with the famous swearing improvisations of Zoltán Mucsi. The association is even not that far from the main question of the original play: probably nothing would made the robot as humanlike as this amazingly creative swearing.

It shortly becomes clear that this nuance is not at all marginal for me concerning the effect of the performance. The story that is already played on the edge between dramatic and absurd in the direction of Sándor Guelmino gets a hint of irony that makes all the dramatic elements slightly melodramatic from that point on. This happens even easier in the case of a stage reading, where the fact of reading, the distance of the actors from their roles and the minimalist stage design are in a way stylized and abstract by their nature, therefore being more apt for absurd than for tragic. And this leads us directly to the question: what is drama translation? Is it the *text* published or given to the director (where in this case Mootchi was probably spelled the same way as in the original play), or is it the *totality of the word and phrases said on the stage*? Or more sharply: does a play even exist in translation before being staged? The question of who the target audience of it also depends on the answer: is it the potential audience of the performance, or rather the dramaturge and the director, who „re-translate” the opus by their interpretation.

Therefore the stage reading and the roundtable discussion, organized by the president of the International Theatre Institute's Hungarian Centre, Anna Lakos, completed one another. The two plays staged in Hungarian in the József Attila Theatre raised several questions regarding not as much of their related topic, reality and virtuality, but most of all the philosophy and practice of translation. The Hungarian viewer, being curious about the Estonian contemporary drama, may have been just as much surprised to see a play about the virtuality-reality dimension, as the universality of this topic may have reassured the selectors. As Siret Campbell puts it in the discussion on the day after: *Why would, for instance, a Polish theatre stage a play about how it is today to be Estonian?*

Listening to the double monologue of the other Estonian play, Martin Algu's *Something real* I was wondering on the same question that popped into my mind during *Beatrice*: what is it in the adventurous story that I can relate to as something characteristically Estonian or local. Ironically, the concept to relate to something as being „typically” contemporary Estonian, Hungarian, Polish or French may already be too vast and general to find something real – but for the famous „here and now” of the theatre we do need some kind of here, and some kind of now. Attila Szabó theatre historian, deputy director of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute of Petőfi Literary

Museum, moderator of the discussion asks how much „localness” can we tolerate. This is more and more interesting, he says, and seems to be escapable not only regarding the import and export of dramas, but also concerning the theatre as it is: should the selector look for the universal or for the specific?

Opinions are divided among the participants of the discussion in this matter. According to Laurent Muhleisen French translator, artistic director of the Maison Antoine Vitez International Centre of Theatrical Translation, in a sense, the more local you are, the more universal you can be. To bring out the general, you need to be aware of not only what can be imported and what remains strange, foreign, but sometimes it is worth to check a specific word in the original text to know the context, exact meaning, and to get closer to the style of the author. For this, it is very helpful to invite the translator to the reading rehearsal, but what is natural in France, where performances have no dramaturge, may be problematic elsewhere as it may lead to a confusion of the roles. These are pragmatical questions, while the translation in itself is already not only linguistic, but also cultural question. As Patrícia Pászti, bilingual Polish-Hungarian translator, director of the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Kraków also emphasizes it: for a good translation you need to know both of the cultures, and both of the theatre cultures within, with their characteristic mentality. The ten best contemporary Polish play is not necessarily the ten best contemporary plays translated from Polish to Hungarian – these are different categories. Not to mention that – as Laurent Muhleisen adds – a drama fully plays its role in the performance after all: the translation is completed by the actors as their playing methods meet the language of the play. But by looking at our subject from the point of view of the „realization”, the staged performance, promotion becomes crucial. As Patrícia Pászti puts it: for making a translation successful, you have to manage everything around it from the search for partners to the addressing of editors and dramaturges and the organizing of literary events. Without these it is unlikely that a new drama translation would interest anybody, especially if someone starts to translate only authors from after 1989 being completely unknown in the target country, as she did. Underground is essentially not shiny but fresh, young – and unknown, says Laurent Muhleisen about this.

There is something everybody agrees on: the import of foreign plays works better than the export of the local – it seems that there is no difference in this between the represented countries. Another similarity is that playwrights and drama translators are not formed at universities. But while Siret Campbell playwright, and Eszter Orbán dramaturge, presidential member of the Hungarian Theatre Dramaturges’ Guild shares the view that for the development of the field the institutional, academic framework would be important, Laurent Muhleisen prefers the workshops, informal courses and guided scholarship programs as formation. As he puts it, the task that seems to be the most important currently in France concerning this matter is to persuade the students to go to theatre and to show them how interesting it is. And for this, the most effective way proves to be making them meet the artists, for example through the invitation of the playwrights to the courses. Theatre is a special genre, the texts have musicality, rhythm, and orality demands a certain simplicity as the viewer can not turn a page back if he or she does not understand something at first.

Regarding the practice, Eszter Orbán also underlines the relationships within the professionals: theatres and creators usually know who to look for concerning one language or one country’s drama literature, or another. Apropos the question of import-export, Tamara Török translator, dramaturge of the Katona József Theatre also sees the personal acquaintance between the European dramaturges as primary channel: the colleagues regularly suggest contemporary plays to each other. Laurent Muhleisen brings up their database as a possible way of the institutionalization with thousands of plays translated from different languages and searchable according to title, author,

number of roles and themes. There is a synopsis and a short extract to introduce the dramas. And for Tamara Török's question that why would a French creator choose a Hungarian, Estonian or Polish play from the thousands of translated ones, he answers with catchy French ease: well, because of love, for example! And though he further develops his answer by emphasizing the importance of professional and personal networks and international festival attendance of successful performances, this report ends here as – after all – hardly other than something like this operates this profession.