

Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation: A Practitioner's View

Phyllis Zatlin. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters. 2005. Pp. xii + 205.

Translated novels and poems often arrive footnoted with “cultural notes” on words and allusions obscure to the reader’s cultural heritage. But translations of performances – whether of theatrical or cinematic dramas – have no recourse to such devices. The language experienced in performance has all the transience of an eavesdropped conversation, with no opportunity for review or back channeling: the immediacy of the audience’s engagement restricts the range of options available to the translator.

Zatlin’s text *Theatrical Translation & Film Adaptation: A Practitioner’s View* focuses on the distinctive challenges for translators of these forms, and offers a wealth of practical experience for those willing to take on the task of dramatic translation. An experienced and adept theatrical translator herself, Zatlin focuses the first half of her text on theatrical translation (chapters 1 through 5), followed by a brief bridge chapter on subtitling and dubbing for theatre and film (chapter 6), and finally, a discussion of the film adaptation of theatrical pieces (chapters 7 and 8).

The first section enlivens the oft-overlooked work of the theatrical translator with “war stories” from a group of experienced practitioners, including Zatlin herself. Though her informants work mostly in the American and European theatrical worlds, the stories answer most questions a novice in the field might have, presenting thoughtful solutions within complex contexts, thereby providing support, rather than prescriptive answers, for handling problems in their work. This approach dramatizes the work of translation as an exciting adventure for the translator seen as a cross-cultural worker: the stories are invariably entertaining, from her descriptions of amendments to relatively reserved Latin American plays for audiences in Madrid, who relish shocking profanities peppered throughout the spectacle, to the translation of one of those Spanish plays for American audiences, received well in New York, but furrowing brows in the Midwest with the coarseness of its language.

For the most part, Zatlin steers clear of theorizing in her work. Occasional guest appearances by academic superstars like linguist Noam Chomsky and literary theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are quickly given the hook, as she continually draws the reader back to the practitioner’s mindset. In the end, Zatlin’s only prescriptions to translators are that they maintain fidelity to the original while providing the audience with as similar an experience as available in the target language, and that they preserve the distinctiveness of the piece without exoticizing it for the non-native audience. As the case of the translation for the American audiences shows, the network of balances driven by audience definition is not always an easy one to achieve.

This balance inevitably requires a great deal of creativity, and Zatlin sensibly advises only those experienced in the field of theatre to take on such work, for the most successful translations incorporate the insights of the original writers, as well as the directors and performers who interpret the works. She also rightly compares the genre of translation to that of poetry, for the truly effective poetic translation conveys not only the meaning of the piece, but simultaneously transfigures the sounds and sound-meaning convergences to the reader/audience.

Still, there is a tragedy lurking within this drama: for all the exciting stories of challenging contexts, none of her informants advises the field as a plausible career. Despite the variety of resources available – chapter 3 offers an abundance of organizations and website URLs, particularly in France and Germany – the practitioners suggest it as sideline work for academics or a favor for friends in the arts, rather than a career in itself, mainly due to money, but also to the lack of job security in an uncertain market.

However, more opportunities seem to be available in subtitling and dubbing, as Zatlin discusses in chapter 5. Here, she answers a vexing question for foreign film buffs: why do subtitles in films never perfectly align with the speech on the screen? Again, the answer lies in the constraint of translating for a transient experience: with consideration to reading capacity, the translator often provides only a gist-level interpretation of an actor's words. Noting studies in language processing, Zatlin also discusses where to place line breaks in subtitles – at phrase boundaries, of course – and how long to maintain a subtitle on-screen.

All of this proves interesting on a trivia level, but chapter 5 also marks a shift in the style of presentation in the text. Having less experience with film than with theatre, Zatlin drops the practitioner's perspective here for a more distantly analytical one. Her chapters on the adaptation of stage drama to the screen, rather than offering stories from the trenches, shift to theorizing and post-hoc analyses of the decisions directors likely made in transposing a play to the cinematic medium. Resonances sound subtly between the halves, yet no clear links are established between the acts of translation and adaptation. And a subtle bias against film also emerges: not only do the films she cites fail, in her opinion, to maintain the dramatic and political incisiveness of the stage originals, but she also notes a difference in the balance this sort of translator works with. Here, she speaks of “a balance between fidelity to the source and *conformity* [italics added] to cinematic language” (p. 184): it's hard not to read the word *conformity* as anything but a theatre-lover's subtle jab at a medium she considers less personal and authentic than the stage.

Certainly, the wider audience for film, and that audience's expectations, constrain the possibilities for presentation in the medium. And Zatlin offers a broad review of this topic from a number of film theorists. For example, cultural critical André Bazin characterizes theatre as primarily about text and film as about space; Spanish scholar María Asunción Gomez defines a distinction between dramatic (theatrical) and narrative (filmic) forms; and the contemporary Spanish playwright José Luis Alonso de Santos similarly depicts the audience's reactions to the media in terms of questions asked at the end of the show: the theatrical audience wonders why characters acted as they did, while the film audience considers what happened in the movie. Such dichotomies are provocative, but are these differences truly essential? Zatlin acknowledges that the two media cross-pollinate their techniques, but she disappointingly still marks her examples of film adaptation as instances of loss, rather than focusing on hybrid cases and presenting the same type of success stories that characterize the first half of the text.

Zatlin's ease with presenting this case may lie in her nearly exclusive focus on 20th century Spanish film adaptations. The theatre of Spain, reacting to and recovering from the Franco era, appears to have more explicit politics than most American drama or film; the later film versions of those scripts, benefiting from distance and relative political stability, can easily tone down the political messaging. However, this selective and unacknowledged scoping of

Zatlin's evidence obscures other possible narratives in the adaptation of scripts to the screen. Contemporary American film adaptations of Shakespeare, for example, can reveal a narrative of ongoing dialogue with and modernization of classic texts. Though moviegoers are still occasionally treated to lush, limp and "loyal" adaptations, such as Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), the past decade has also offered some surprising and effective adaptations. Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) successfully conveys Shakespeare's musicality in a contemporary setting of mass media infiltration; Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999), with its startling filmic images, struggles to soar above Shakespeare's infamously rickety script of political decadence; and even the relatively light *10 Things I Hate about You* (Gil Junger, 1999) manages to maintain the charm of the Bard's story of gender warfare (*The Taming of the Shrew*) with crackling adolescent sexuality and humor. Counter-evidence like these cases – which enliven the theatrical in the more recent medium – are left out of Zatlin's analysis.

Texts on translation often begin with the old adage *traduttore, traditore* (roughly, "to translate is to betray"). Like the proverbial double agent, the translator juggles two languages and two cultures (at minimum), striving to serve two masters – the original and the target-language audience. While Zatlin successfully presents the translator more heroically than this in the first half of her text – more as a wily Puck enabling all the proper couplings – she winds up betraying the practice of film adaptation in the second, leaving her audience with the question of why the practitioner acted as she did.

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