

Scripta Volant

Titling for the theatre, a case of volatile writing

by Mauro Conti (2013)

0. Limits

The relationship between the public and the stage is based on a reciprocal and proudly self-sufficient legitimization that goes far beyond comprehension of a verbal language and is intolerant of a didactic mediation.

Participation in the theatrical experience should be, so to speak, hands-on. And the range of difficulties that the authors and actors bring into play is part of a strategy of spectator seduction.

It is foreseen and hoped for that one either come to the theatre prepared or enhance the experience afterwards. But being helped during the performance by third parties extraneous to the interpreter-receiver pair is more *tolerated* than *welcomed*.

1. A compass

In general, for those who provide the titling for live productions (whether the traditional and popular sur-titles or the sub-titles of multi-language displays or of texts transmitted wirelessly) there is an extremely fragile and fleeting space for mediation between the stage and the public. In the first instance because this kind of mediation is not planned for or foreseeable by, any author or performer.

Awareness of the aesthetic and textual limits of theatrical titling is nevertheless the primary path towards transforming a potentially disorienting technical expedient into a necessary linguistic and cultural compass.

Not only. It must be underlined from the beginning that the very idea of *limits* (technical, editorial, of fruition) represents, for the author of linguistic mediation for live productions, an extraordinary detonator of creative stimulus.

2. A service

But what is theatrical titling, essentially? This simple question must be answered before one may decide on precise aims in terms of the realization. And the most synthetic answer that I know is that theatrical titling is a *service*. A service that, in order to be such, must *function*.

I am not thinking of the essential functioning of the multiple technical devices (in constant and natural evolution and updating) but of the functionality of the textual parameters which, although conditioned by the type of technology in use, impose entirely specific editorial strategies – strategies that come to life around a paradox of reception: *reading voices*.

In the theatre one *listens* to a singing or speaking voice. One does not *read*. But the by now century-old (it was born with the cinema) technique of using written texts to overcome linguistic or sensorial barriers seems to challenge the solid laws of fruition.

The unhealable contradiction expressed in the formula *reading voices* is thus emblematic of an unbalanced equilibrium that finds its strong points in *mediation* and *compromise*: words that trace perimeters and at the same time open perspectives.

3. Contradictions

But what perimeters? And what perspectives?

One goes to theatre not to *read*, but instead for an aesthetic experience based on *listening* and *seeing*.

Thus, associating the reading of textual adaptations to the words or singing of given characters whilst ones eyes are also busy watching constantly changing events, is certainly a challenge. The challenge can be won only if the *wedge* of reading is well enough integrated into the multiplicity of the theatrical event that it may be compared to the control of the dashboard while driving: I see it without losing sight of the road.

4. The pace

To speak of integrating the titling to what is happening on stage so as to not confuse the spectator (and indirectly also the performer) means establishing operating priorities. And, surprisingly for the uninitiated, in a dominant role we find the parameter of *pace*.

Pace, understood as the *breath* given to the theatrical event by the recitation or by the music, is in fact the real legislator of the job of mediation, that which dictates the rules and traces the organic, natural points of reference that precede any possible theorization.

Pace binds theatricality, editorial intervention, and fruition.

To understand *what* the public reads, one must first determine *when* it will be read.

This means tracing a kind of *timing map* (*découpage*, *Zeitabstimmung*, *mappa temporale*) that establishes a relationship between the *timing of the interpretation* (proper to the stage and objective) and the *timing of reading* (proper to the spectator and subjective). This operation

requires experience and sensitivity and implies the coordination of choices that are not easy to be harmonized: technical, editorial, theatrical and aesthetic choices.

From a functional point of view, the superimposition of the rhythm of the interpreter with that of the rhythm of reading guarantees the synchronization of the translation-adaptation and the recited or sung text. But under the following conditions, which are suggested by experience and (why not?) common sense:

- reading times must be comfortable, given that one reads more slowly than one listens (to a given text);
- the segments of original text defined by the timing map must include information that is, if possible, complete in itself;
- the rhythm followed should answer to a fairly regular musical logic without causing boredom, and be compatible with the conditions above (comfortable reading times, complete sense in the segment of original text);
- the proposed sequence must include choices that insure a theatrically meaningful story, that unveils the text in a way that is not banal and is in tune with the staging;
- one must also evaluate the degree to which the non-show of the titling graphically conditions the show itself.

5. The adaptation

Drawing up the timing map thus implies provision for both technical and theatrical options. And, at last, opens the way for the true editorial work of writing what the public will read during the show – beginning the trip from proto-text to meta-text, from recited or sung text to titling.

At this point one realizes that it doesn't make sense to speak of a generalized, *a priori* reduction of content, because in a regular (technically) and coherent time map (from a theatrical point of view) every portion of text into which the script or score is divided registers its own degree of mediation between the original language and that of the titling. From the greatest equivalence to the least equivalence, passing through all the possible intermediate grades as proposed for example by Henrik Gottlieb in the early 90's for the specialized area of audiovisual translation: expansion, paraphrasing, transposition, imitation, transcription, slippage, restriction, reduction, cancellation, renunciation.

Everything depends on the *functionality* of the text in relation to the *fruition* of the theatrical event.

This job of editing is always long, complex, riddled with second thoughts that can also mean re-thinking the time map and, above all, it never has a definitive result as it shares the theatre's own vital imperfection and working method.

There is only one way to perfect the functionality of a text which aims to be a compass for the public: *rehearse*, and *rehearse* again, with the performers and the technicians – confirming a very old method of working that brings together all of the participants in the production who share like a treasure the words *mediation*, *synthesis*, and *rigor*.

With the recommendation that the point of view be always the public's and that every effort in the re-writing lead to a maximum of transparency and fluidity.

6. Professionals

This is the moment to ask which professionals are needed to mediate language for the live performing arts.

Is it an engagement for literary translators? For audiovisual translators? For dramaturges? For musicians? For stage directors? For publisher? For interpreters in the broader sense? There is no one answer because it is necessary to bring all these abilities at stuck.

This engagement may be carried out by one or more persons who integrate multiple experiences. The important thing is to have a sort of *director of fruition* who is responsible for the final result and controls the interrelationship between the time map, content, linguistic adaptation, editorial work, layout and (no small detail) the search for the *potential sound* in texts like the re-writing in the titling which is never read out loud.

In any case, linguistic mediation for the stage is an engagement for those who love the theatre in all its aspects (drama, opera, musical, puppetry, non-European traditions) as well as its aesthetic habitat which is so full of fertile cultural contaminations.

In this labyrinth of conditionings, we have already spied a space for creativity. But only if the *creativity* is subordinated to *service*, and the *obstacle* transformed into *stimulus*.

It is certainly a job that doesn't produce definitive results because of the very nature of live performing arts which don't share the same technical reproducibility of cinema or television. It is an imperfect job, contaminated, a process, a gradual approach to functional compromises. It is a job as ephemeral as the theatre, not usable outside the context for which it has been conceived.

7. Answers

One last recommendation. One should not feel uncomfortable with the educational dimension of linguistic mediation for live performing arts, given the inevitability of simplification in the textual adaptations. *Simplification* does not necessarily mean *banalisation*.

Titling, however, will never be able to answer all the questions. This device, which like few others favours the meeting of diverse cultures in an extremely vital and non-museum-like context, is only the *beginning* of a journey that each of us, as spectator, must then continue on his own.

December 2013

Contribution to the seminary *Sur-titrage, l'esprit et la lettre*, Paris, Théâtre de l'Odéon, February 3, 2014, ed. by Laurent Muhleisen, of Maison Antoine Vitez (Centre International de la Traduction Théâtrale), scientific coordination by Michel Bataillon. French translation by Michel Bataillon and Silvia Paparella (*Scripta volant. L'usage de titres: un cas d'écriture volatile*), published in the booklet given to participants. English translation by Amanda George.