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Accidental Acrobatics Surtitling Strategies for the Theater - An AVT Case

The technical expedient of surtitling for the live performing arts, a descendant of the now one-century old practice of cinema subtitling, has made a significant contribution over the last 30 years to the international knowledge of theatrical productions, whether of drama or opera, through its role in facilitating the scaling of linguistic barriers.

Are specific strategies needed for the linguistic and cultural mediation that is being furthered by the recently emerged professional discipline of surtitling? How are these different from the more familiar strategies used by subtitles? What kind of competences are required to fulfil the objectives of surtitles? *Accidental Acrobatics* will attempt to propose some answers to these questions.

But why «accidental acrobatics»? Because the use of written texts, accompanying theatrical events in order to make them linguistically comprehensible to an audience that does not know the language (or the languages) of a production, results in a balancing act that is not only an end in itself, having been imposed by rules that are implicit to the theatrical experience.

The keywords with which we'll find ourselves face to face are: 1. Time, 2. Rhythm, 3. Editing, 4. Service, 5. Rehearse, 6. Optimize, 7. Team – all categories that are usually foreign to the traditional field of translation (except Editing). This is an evidence of the

uniqueness of surtitles, in which the art of compromise, well known to translators, finds yet further incentives.

1. **TIME.** Writing surtitles means telling a story in a time frame, which is stated by the stage through singing or acting. The story is told through a written text (to be read), which summarizes the vocal text (to be heard). The time standard combines those two parallel storytellings, keeping the written path dependent on the vocal path.

2. **RHYTHM.** To make the time standard work together with the surtitling, it is necessary to consider its rhythmic aspect. Through that rhythm the score of a spoken or a sung text becomes a production. Identifying a rhythm which respects the staging (timing) leads to properly set up the storytelling of surtitling.

3. **EDITING.** Editing is the most familiar phase to a translator; it recalls the editorial work of a publishing house. The editing suitable for surtitling, however, differs largely from the usual editorial review. «Editing», in surtitling, means «adaptation»: adaptation to timing, layout, reading times. And the editorial standards used in a production change for every single caption.

4. **SERVICE.** Surtitling is a service provided to the audience. This service works if it integrates with listening and viewing. The main working tools, for this aim, are timing (dramaturgical tool), editing (adaptation), graphic layout (text layout) and the analysis of reading times (right fruition for the audience).

5. **REHEARSE.** In theater, rehearsing is a practice shared by everyone, including the authors of surtitles. That means that every linguistic choice needs to be tested together with acting, singing, stage action. Moreover, surtitles have a both visual and semantic impact, which needs to be judged carefully, evaluating its graphic project, rhythm and narration.

6. **OPTIMIZE.** The various standards that make the surtitling working properly need to be well balanced. This balance is crucial to determine the functionality of a correct linguistic mediation for the live performing arts. However, this goal is to be achieved gradually, step by step. This process goes through phases which are separate yet closely linked.

7. **TEAM.** Making surtitles is teamwork. Teams are made up of individuals with different skills and competences. Such working team needs to be coordinated and supervised, we could even say led by a director. What certainly should never be missing, in

a team, is the spirit of compromise and the constant search for better solutions.

Keywords: Time, Rhythm, Editing, Service, Rehearse, Optimize, Team.

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Bionote

Mauro Conti (Florence, Italy, 1957), a graduate in History of Music and German Studies, began his professional activity as editor in 1977. In 1987, he achieved the position of author of surtitles for the Florence Opera House and in 1996 he founded Prescott Studio, a Company focused on the linguistic mediation services for the live performing arts (surtitling, multilingual titling). Prescott Studio, which collaborates with the principal theatrical festivals and institutions in Italy for both opera and drama, since 2002 has edited productions also in Berlin, Moscow, Prague, Santiago de Chile, Muscat (Oman), Al-Manamah (Bahrain), Chicago, New York. For Expo Milano 2015 and Piccolo Teatro di Milano, 2015 Season, Mauro Conti launched Translating Voices Across Continent (TVAC), a project for theater and linguistic mediation in collaboration with Montclair State University (NJ, USA).