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Angela Tiziana Tarantini, *Theatre Translation: A Practice as Research Model* (Clayton: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 251 pp., ISBN: 978-3-030-70201-4

Reviewed by Carmela Esposito

The two texts – written and performed – are coexistent and inseparable, and it is in this relationship that the paradox for the translator lies. The translator is effectively being asked to accomplish the impossible – to treat a written text that is part of a larger complex of sign systems, involving paralinguistic and kinesics features, as if it were a literary text, created solely for the page, to be read off that page.

Susan Bassnett, *Ways Through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Text*

Neapolitan dramatist Eduardo De Filippo allegedly once defined drama as “what happens when we actually live what people experience in real life without the hindrance of being bad actors”. One can find truth in such words, metaphorically and linguistically: the verb itself, ‘to act’, bears several meanings. ‘To act’ is ‘to take action’, ‘to behave’, ‘to operate’, but it also means ‘to perform’, ‘to play’ and/or ‘to pretend’. Drama embodies such inflections in their entirety, except for the latter. Although it is common knowledge that there will always be some degree of fiction to be found in drama, make-believe is certainly what drama is not: drama is life’s own reflection, hence the urge of empirical research on the matter is highly welcome and unquestionably necessary. The statement “theatre is ‘parasitic’ on the cultural codes which operate in the real world” is by Elaine Aston and George Savona; quoted in Tarantini’s book (189), it is rather compelling, as it not only proves De Filippo’s fair point, but also, by employing a biology metaphor, it denotes the application of scientific attention and terminology to the practice of Theatre Translation. Tarantini’s monograph contributes to do just that and more.

If Theatre is life’s parasite, understood as “an organism that lives in or on an organism of another species, (its host), and benefits by deriving nutrients at the other’s expense” (Oxford Dictionary), so is Translation, as translating is indeed a process “at the Other’s expense”. Assuming that the origin of the term (“from the Greek *parasitos* which is a compound word made up of *para-* ‘alongside’ and *-sitos* ‘food’” [*ibid*]) contributes to describe Translation as “someone who is eating at another’s table” granting it the power of an active cultural graft, its derogatory connotation of “someone who habitually exploits others and gives nothing in return” (*ibid*) is however faulty and doesn’t fully comply. Contrarily, though Theatre and Translation can be in some ways considered to supplement themselves with the nectar of life, they surely do not negate an exchange, since they do give back to each other. This sort of synergy is lucidly confirmed and ascertained in *Theatre Translation: A Practice as Research Model*.

Angela Tiziana Tarantini is a Teaching Associate in Translation and Interpreting Studies at Monash University, Australia, where she carries out research in the area of Theatre Translation with focus on the interaction between the translation and performance interface. The book is sectioned in three parts, namely: Part I and Part II, which respectively encompass the theoretical exegesis and offer a practical component, and Part III consisting of the translation excerpts’ appendix. Her main contention is to establish whether the translator can predict the gestures and physicality of stage

concretisation, and most importantly, whether “translation of a text meant for theatrical performance has an impact on the actual stage performance” (5). In her shrewd investigation, without failing to address controversial discussions such as the concept of ‘gestic subtext’, Tarantini adapts and applies Kershaw et al.’s Practice as Research (PaR) model, with the aim of analysing the effects of translation on theatrical performance. Drawing from up-to-date critical frameworks, Tarantini promptly highlights a gap in the scholarship and allows “for the development of a suitable methodology to address it” (7). Her findings offer acute reflections and qualify as the result of a workshop which “took place from the 16th to the 18th of February 2016 at the Performing Art Centre at Monash University” (88) and featured two different groups of actors: “Group A consists of professional Australian actors and drama students; Group B consists of second- and third-generation Italian-Australian migrants who speak fluent Italian and are professional actors” (89). Both casts, unaware of what was the nature of the translator’s research, were required to perform selected scenes from two plays written by the Australian playwright David Mence: *The Gully* and *Convincing Ground*. “Both are set in Australia and boast Australian themes, landscapes, geographical sites, and characters” (13) and both plays deal with the topic of colonisation. *Convincing Ground*, translated by Tarantini as *Il Baleniere*, is inspired by the historical controversy of the ‘Convincing Ground massacre’ and tells the story of a whaler and his indigenous wife. Conversely, *The Gully*, translated as *La Gola*, is “a dystopian comedy in three acts set in 2109 in a post-apocalyptic Australia” (14). In choosing to work on these playtexts, Tarantini shows a sensibility towards culture-specific matters such as that of Aboriginal Australia and demonstrates to be conscious of the complexities of current “issues of representation and of speaking for the Other in a postcolonial society” (17). Thus, Tarantini’s keen assertions clarify the matter of power dynamics and the topical themes of cultural appropriation, which are carefully addressed by admittedly adopting both a domesticating and foreignising attitude in her translations, “well aware that domestication and foreignisation are two extremes of a continuum rather than a dichotomised opposition” (62).

As Mence actively cooperated with the translation process, Tarantini’s study overall epitomises the importance of collaborative effort between author and translator, which correspondingly revealed itself to be extremely beneficial to both translation and playtext: “the discussion sometimes resulted in the author going back to the source text in English and making some changes, claiming ‘the Italian version works better’” (75). The outcome of the copious experiments on predicting Gesture, Tempo and Rhythm constitutes a solid proof of how much the performance itself could omit if the translator is left behind closed doors (which ends up to be usually the case nowadays). It follows that the translator could contribute to the shaping of the source text just as well as the author of the English text could turn into “the co-author of the Italian version” (77) and vice-versa. Recent studies have focused on the advantages of collaborative practice (for example, Margherita Laera, *Theatre and Translation*, 2019) and Tarantini brings forth rigorous and systematic evidence to such statements, while also providing illuminating and accessible multimedia support.

Fittingly, what really makes Tarantini’s stance utterly deserving of critical favour, besides offering an instructive report based on structured empirical data, is arguably the eloquent intention of exploiting Translation not only as a tool to explore in depth linguistics and culture-related matters, but also as a means to research its own process – even as it is a performative act. Furthermore, Tarantini does not shy away from taking part in the so-called ‘performative turn’ debate and her scrupulous inspection is “the development of a replicable PaR model rather than its findings” (199). Her writing

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style establishes itself as precise and educational, which dignifies the subject of Theatre Translation by successfully reassessing its undeniable scientific cognisance.

Even though somewhat of an itch of ambition is positively evident throughout the text, Tarantini is well aware that she is “not trying to reinvent the wheel” (199), yet her findings set aside a precious contribution to current discussions around “what the text ‘does’ in performance” (201). Moreover, credit is due for the emphasis placed on wanting to empower the ‘doing’ of the translator and the shift from the metaphor “TRANSLATION IS TRANSFER” to “TRANSLATION IS PERFORMANCE” metaphor. The methodological analysis displays high scholarly competence, ergo paving the way for further multi-disciplinary investigations, never without an attentive thirst for even more accurate estimations regarding the effects of ‘staging translation’.

Given the above, Tarantini’s *Theatre Translation: A Practice As Research Model*, whose translations “can be considered an instance of performative rewriting” (207), indeed represents a valuable step forward in contemporary debate concerning the fields of both Performance Studies and Translation Studies. The replicability and flexibility of the well-tried research model turns out to be one of the strongest accomplishments of the present study, being capable to – with an unprecedented sense of foresight – leave room for further attempts, while at the same time indicating a “feasible path for research in Theatre Translation within the performative paradigm” (208). If Drama deals with the hinterland of our conscience, making up for a mirror of humanity, then Translation is undoubtedly the mirror within the mirror, the magnifier in the magnifying glass, or simply the ‘play within the play’. Therefore, it can be concluded that the perquisites of Theatre Translation go far beyond the mere circulation of foreign plays among different cultures, as it also allows the enrichment and exploration of one’s own, serving as nothing but our inexorable “other-biography” (to borrow a definition by Enrico Terrinoni, in *Oltre Abita il Silenzio. Tradurre la Letteratura*, 2019), where the lines between Australianness/Otherness and Italianness/Identity are blurred among gesture, beats, emblems, impressions and movements on the stage.