

“IN THE MIDDLE”

by Kristin Johnsen-Neshati

[Kristin Johnsen-Neshati is Associate Professor of Theater at George Mason University, where she has taught theatre history, dramatic literature, dramaturgy and dramatic criticism for 19 years. She is also a freelance dramaturge and director and has translated four of Chekhov’s plays. She is currently working on a book of interviews with leading Egyptian independent theatre artists.]



(Kristin Johnsen-Neshati)

(“Consider a Chekhov play with the translator’s three key questions in mind. . . .”)

Baathist snipers used an effective strategy to disrupt U.S. communications during the Iraq War: when they saw an Iraqi, an interpreter and an American soldier together, they aimed their scopes at the one in the middle. By eliminating the interpreter, they killed several birds with one shot, so to speak, not only leaving the Americans unable to understand or communicate but also intimidating potential collaborators. This broadcast their belief that the fearsome U.S. soldier, unaided by the linguist who bridges languages and cultures, was rendered powerless. A violent example, to be sure, but it teaches us a lesson that extends beyond the Baathists to human nature: once we know what people find threaten- ing, we learn what they value.

“When you learn a new language, you gain a new soul.” —Traditional Georgian saying

You’ve heard the arguments for learning a foreign language—it will make you more cultured, come in handy at home or abroad, look great on a résumé, keep the brain active, and enrich you personally in a hundred other ways. None of these practical benefits even comes close to the value Georgians assign to the mastery of a different tongue. For them, the stakes are more than intellectual or professional; they’re spiritual. Learning a new language doesn’t merely expand your mind; it doubles your essential capacities as a human being.

What makes language mastery such a profound achievement? We know it involves more than drilling vocabulary, memorizing conjugations and declensions, and adapting to new grammatical rules. It requires more than writing in a strange script or thinking in a new syntax. One has to plumb the depths of a foreign soul and identity, immersing oneself in all aspects of the culture, literature, folklore, geography, and competing worldviews of another people. It entails studying their history, philosophy, religion, fine and performing arts, as well as popular culture, jokes, entertainment and cuisine. It means understanding the structures of a country’s industry, economy, politics and military, and it demands some knowledge of how the history of the language evolved over time. In short, learning a new language calls for tremendously hard work and curiosity, and a generous measure of empathy. Most important, the mastery of a new language requires a rare willingness to struggle along in someone else’s medium, sounding so long like a babbling infant or a downright fool. It is a labor of love, a heroic campaign for understanding, an often- quixotic effort to catch amidst the chatter of our earthly Tower of Babel the excitement of a new message taking shape. It takes communication to cut through human arrogance and confusion so we can rediscover, if not our common mother tongue, some common ground for peaceful coexistence. Anyone who can, or even tries, to meet this challenge deserves what the Georgians promise.

Three questions face every translator:

1. Why should this text be translated?
2. If it’s been translated before, why do it again?
3. And, why should I be the one to translate it?

The first two are the easiest to answer. If the work to be translated—the source text—offers

ideas worth sharing or a fresh perspective or style, people will want to read it in their own language. If it’s influential, each generation of readers will seek out a new translation to help them access the original through clear and immediate language that resonates with their times. This is as true of Homer as it is of the Bible.

Language shifts constantly in all aspects—connotative, denotative, idiomatic, and rhythmic. Nowhere is this clearer than in slang, the special code of the “in” crowd always on the run. By the time “outsiders” have begun to grasp it, the lingo has changed. The lingo of one generation, so natural to its speakers in their youth, sounds out of place or affected a few decades later. How often do you hear such Americanisms from the middle of the 20th century as “Get me?” or “Hey, kid” or “Gee whiz!” used today? It is vital for a theatre translator to be especially mindful of how language ages. Like the playwright, he or she must recognize how unforgiving a live performance can be. In drama, more than fiction, dialogue is king; if it fails, there’s no narrative description to save the show. We needn’t venture beyond texts in our own language to see how some of America’s most celebrated playwrights—O’Neill, Williams and Miller—challenge today’s actors and directors to interpret “old-fashioned” dialogue that, if it doesn’t land right, is jarring to the ear. Similarly, a contemporary phrase sticks out in a new work if it doesn’t belong to the right period. You won’t hear “No worries” instead of “You’re welcome” on *Downton Abbey*, or “I’m good” for “No, thank you.”

The development of language is unpredictable. Over time, words can come to mean the exact opposite of what they once did, as the following example from Shakespeare demonstrates. Hamlet tells Marcellus and Horatio that he will follow the beckoning ghost of his father (Act I, Scene IV, ll. 79-86). To their attempts to hold him back the prince responds with an angry threat:

Hamlet: My fate cries out
And makes each petty artere in this body
As hardy as the Nemean lion’s nerve.
Still am I call’d. Unhand me, gentlemen.
By heaven, I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me.

Hamlet threatens to make a ghost of—kill—whoever “lets” him. The editors tell us that in Shakespeare’s time to “let” meant to “hinder”—not to “allow.” An echo of this linguistic relic survives in tennis or ping-pong, where a serve that glances the net before landing on the opponent’s court is called a “let.”

Language is always on the move, and translations have a limited shelf life. A good translator acknowledges this and strives to find the most immediate and accessible way to bring the original to today’s audiences. It’s the question of how best to do this that fuels continual debate. The translator should be attuned to today’s zeitgeist as expressed in the target as well as source languages. He or she must consider the tones and rhythms of contemporary speech and succeed at finding variations, such as verbal tics, regionalisms, and verbal patterns not identical—but equivalent—to those of the source text. Learning a new language makes you hear your mother tongue with the ears of a stranger. Only when I had to translate the Russian word *chudnaya*—an adjective that, in this context, means both miraculous and beautiful—did I realize how many English words I had taken for granted that combine exactly these meanings: wonderful and marvelous are just two examples. A translator must be able to think at times as a psychologist, an anthropologist, or sociologist to discover what a character is hiding or

revealing by using one word and not another, why a character uses passive and not active voice, or speaks in muscular Germanic phrases instead of bloated Latinate drivel.

Consider a Chekhov play with the translator's three key questions in mind: the text should be translated for many reasons, such as the author's superb craftsmanship, brilliant storytelling and inimitable style; Chekhov's plays have been translated many times, and for every generation they should be translated again. But now the third, and most daunting, question arises: Why should I be translating it?

Translation is art, not science—something we should not forget when we consider who can or should translate Chekhov. Advances in machine translation notwithstanding, a soulless processor will never render literary works in anything but a soulless fashion. Poetry and drama will always require the ear of the poet and the sensibility of the artist. A translator uses a distinct voice when rendering great works, much as a playwright does when creating them. Comparing several good translations of a single text can turn up surprising variations in vocabulary, syntax, rhythm, and style. Depending on what the reader is looking for, all of the translations might be equally valid.

Take, for example, the opening exchange in Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Masha, the unhappy child of an unhappy marriage, loves a man who's in love with someone else. She numbs her feelings with snuff and booze and can't seem to shake the attentions of Medvedenko, the school teacher. His name recalls the Russian word for "bear," suggesting a lumbering physicality that Masha would find awkward and unattractive. Still, Medvedenko's persistence will result in their eventual dreary marriage, and he will continue to dote on her despite her wish that he just disappear. One more thing: it's a comedy.

Medvedenko: How come you always wear black? Masha: I'm in mourning for my life. I'm unhappy.

Most translations of *The Seagull* open differently with Medvedenko asking, "Why do you always wear black?" For my translation, I chose the phrase "How come?" Both options are correct and viable, but let's examine them closely.

The source text starts with the Russian *dlya chego*, which means "why" in the sense of "for what reason?" But there's another word that's used more frequently for this purpose: *pochemu*. In translating this exchange, I asked myself why Medvedenko—and Chekhov—might have chosen the less common form of the question. Perhaps it was to give the actor playing Medvedenko more texture for his character. What if, for instance, *dlya chego* made the school teacher sound more awkward, more persistent, and more juvenile as he followed Masha around, pelting her with questions? What if *dlya chego* were just the kind of phrase that appealed to Medvedenko but drove Masha up the wall? I considered equivalents in English, especially for the kinds of questions that children ask. "How come the sky is blue? How come the grass is green?" Because "how come" has an extra syllable, it gives the listener more time to anticipate what's coming. From the actors' perspective, "how come" offered more material for both Medvedenko and Masha to work with, so I chose it for their opening exchange.

As this example shows, translation for the stage requires that one imagine the whole production from the actors', director's and even designers' perspectives. The very choice of "how come" instead of "why" reveals my reading of Medvedenko as comedic, lumbering, awkward and juvenile. He uses more words than necessary, unlike Masha, whose speech is blunt and curt. I imagine Medvedenko as oversized and dull, and Masha as petite, intense and quick. Clearly, these characters can be interpreted differently, and directors who use my translation will probably never know how I cast them in my head. Still, my images of the how the characters speak and behave and move through their environment grounded my choices for their language.

Through the exercise of translation itself—in the course of making a thousand tiny decisions—each translator discovers an emerging "voice" for a new and distinct contribution to the field. I set out to create fresh and playable American translations that would make the rhythms and habits of 19th-century provincial Russia accessible to our audiences. I wanted my translations to mirror Chekhov's economy, wit and music. I strove to make the imagery resonate and the language sing. But I didn't know all that until I was nearly finished translating four of Chekhov's plays.

A great challenge is to balance the familiar and unfamiliar for the audience, avoiding the twin pitfalls of confusion and over-simplification. I've chosen, for instance, to keep Russian versts to measure distances instead of converting them to miles. The meaning is clear in context, and by preserving a few linguistic artifacts, I hope to remind the audience of the play's provenance and show that I trust my viewers to respond with intelligence and a desire to learn something new. When you leave a little work for the audience to do, they tend to expand their outlook and leave better prepared for their next challenge in the theatre.

Can you call yourself a translator if the source language doesn't "speak" to you? You're not ready to translate from a foreign language into your own if the following apply:

1. When you hear it spoken, it doesn't stir you. Your only access to its meaning is intellectual.
2. You can't tell a joke in that language, dream in it, or don't "feel" its meaning before you understand it.

You may work with a native speaker to adapt the work, but what you produce is one step removed from an actual translation. The translator translates, but what you do with that translation is adapt.

For reasons I don't understand, many playwrights who adapt dramatic texts in their signature style prefer to call their works "translations" instead of "adaptations." Both processes are artistic and can result in works of brilliance. Still, they're no more alike than weaving and quilting, or painting and collage.

When we go to see a playwright's adaptation of Chekhov, the real draw is that playwright's take on a classic—not the classic itself. The adapter's trademark voice and dramaturgical sense become paramount. If the playwright cuts, rearranges, or elaborates on scenes, we accept this because we're watching a play "adapted from," "inspired by," or simply "after" Chekhov.

If we go to hear a translation of Chekhov, however, we want immediate access to Chekhov's voice and vision. We might not care who the translator is, as long as we leave with

the feeling of having encountered the work of the playwright himself. To this audience, the artistry of the translator is unimportant—and often indistinguishable from the author's—as long as it doesn't impede the artistry of the source text. The Chekhov translator doesn't cut, edit, rearrange or elaborate, but serves as a hollow reed, a vehicle that transmits the music of the original.

As the snipers remind us, the linguist is the guy in the middle—the one who, according to the Latin origins of translate, "carries across." Practically speaking, it would be impossible to compensate a translator for the time he or she spends developing professionally or working through a text. This is why, for so many translators for the stage, it's especially important they receive proper credit for their work and fair treatment throughout the production process.

In spite of existing copyright laws, and over the objections of many a conscientious dramaturg, translators report finding their texts "improved" by directors without their permission, dropped in favor of someone else's translation after an adapter's work has begun, or picked through along with other translations as raw material for a "synoptic" version that bypasses the need to pay royalties to anyone and gives the assembler full credit for the hodge-podge "translation" that results. Selecting a translation is like choosing a spouse. You might spend years dating and in that time find many great qualities to love in many great people. But once you commit to a translation, you have to stick to it. You might ask the translator to consider a few choice ideas for your production, but the days of "mix-and-match" are over.

Of course, translators lose out in these unprofessional games, but so do our audiences. When a director decides to "translate" by picking and choosing among several texts, even the best dramaturg would be hard-pressed to spot oversights or missed opportunities. Under these circumstances, who's equipped to evaluate the trouble spots—the rough edges that may even seem rough in the original? Who has the ability to track a certain word or image throughout the original text to understand the author's intent? Where's the truth in advertising? How can an audience know if it's getting a real translation or—like fish chunks dressed up as crab meat—a questionable imitation?

The problem for the translator isn't being in the middle, but finding oneself cut out like the dreaded "middle man." Whenever a professional's work is devalued this way, both the industry and the public lose. Money will always be scarce in the professional theatre, but acknowledgement is free. Instead of being made redundant, translators should be invited back to reclaim their position of value—in the middle.