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Traducció sense fronteres: Theatre Projects and Translation in Multicultural Contexts, Originating in Barcelona

ABSTRACT

This paper is centred on different theatre initiatives linked to the city of Barcelona that emphasise performing arts as a means of promoting intercultural communication, as well as overcoming the barriers that prevent its production. The analysis is focused on observing the role that translation, understood in a broad and often performative sense, plays in all these projects calling for a review of its canonical definition in academia in order to adjust it to the reality of the 21st century. At the same time, the article claims the recognition of these theatrical creations, not so much as indisputable initiatives of social nature, but as artistic products of the first order.

KEYWORDS

community theatre; translation; multiculturality; multilingualism

1. “Enlarging translation”, enlarging theatre: rethinking concepts

Theatre (just like other performing arts) projects in multicultural contexts can adopt extremely different formats, as the present paper demonstrates, depending mostly on their primary objective, the functions in their respective environments, their intrinsic philosophy – i.e. the theoretical principles and framework – and those who actively partake. Nonetheless, to a varying degree, they all share social and artistic commitment, and they also represent various challenges to the dominant, and deeply rooted, paradigms of today’s scenic arts. The projects I will discuss in this paper, moreover, all share their bond to the city of Barcelona, the multicultural and multilingual contexts in which they are/ were carried out, and the central role they give to translation – in a very broad sense – as a means of overcoming language and cultural barriers while also fostering dialogue between groups. To exemplify two very distinct and long-running projects, the following analysis will look at the organisation *Pallassos sense fronteres* [Clowns without borders] and at the intergenerational scenic creation project *Pi(è)ce*. The former was born in 1993 in Barcelona and is still based there, but works internationally in conflict zones (war, natural disasters, refugee camps, etc.). The latter started in

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2011 in a multicultural neighbourhood in Barcelona and was developing projects until 2022.

Although I will necessarily contemplate different aspects of these projects in my analysis – having therefore to consider different theoretical frameworks, those that examine community and social theatre, collective creation, performative arts and multiculturalism among others –, the way each of them deals with translation is at the core of my approach. The main languages during the performances have usually been Catalan or Spanish, but a considerable number of other languages were also involved in the different phases of the creative process: Tagalog, Urdu, Hindi, Chinese, Ukrainian, Arabic, Berber, Wolof, among others. In this sense, several questions arose very early in my inquiries: To what extent has translation been part of the considerations that guided these projects from the very beginning? What translational notions lie behind their theatrical practice? Which translational perspective has been adopted? How has translation been used?

The first steps in my research already made it clear that I had to rethink the relatively stable concept of (theatrical) literary translation that I implicitly had in mind. To give an initial insight into the corpus, in the projects I am about to analyse, translation plays any role but a canonical one. I am not going to compare any text originally written in a certain language (the source text and language) with their transposition into a second language (the target text and language) or, as it more commonly happens in theatrical translations/ adaptations, with a version adjusted to the reality of the new audience. Whereas in the examples researched here, translation has been used often, on the one hand, as a performative tool throughout the creative processes to ensure communication between participants, as well as between performers and audience at the very moment of staging. On the other hand, it has been the means used to create one single final text (in Catalan or Spanish) from multilingual contributions produced by the multilingual participants in the projects. Therefore, while professional translators may have had a role in some cases, occasional translators were the most common and bore the greatest load in the translational processes. Furthermore, besides language, theatre and scenic arts make use of other semiotic codes: clothes, colours, music, images, objects, etc. How must they be treated and analysed from a translational perspective?

My translational concerns initially found some answers in Maria Tymoczko's volume *Enlarging translation, empowering translators*, that focuses on translation practice in the 21st century – inspiring the title of this section. To expand the very concept of translation, Tymoczko (2007) downplays the universal value of current translational notions upon which hegemonic translational theories are grounded as well as their univocality in describing translation practice:

In general Western European words for 'translation' and the history of translation practices in Western Europe indicate that dominant Eurocentric conceptions of translation are deeply rooted

in literacy practices (as opposed to oral translation practices still predominant in most of the world). They also suggest that Eurocentric ideas about translation are shaped by the practices of Bible translation. (p. 57)

Edwin Gentzler (2017) from an explicitly *post-translation studies* perspective, considers for his part:

In this new global age, conditions have never been so fertile for growth in translation, but I suggest that so too has the *nature* of translation changed with the age, as has the media through which translations travel. [...] I am taking the idea of post-translation to the extreme, but in this book I ask, what if we erase the border completely and rethink translation as an always-ongoing process of *every* communication? What if translation becomes viewed less as a temporal act carried out between languages and cultures and instead as a *precondition* underlying the languages and cultures upon which communication is based? (p. 5)

And he later adds:

Instead of thinking in terms of the self and other, in which the “other” is translated into the “same”, instead of thinking in terms of the source and the receiver, instead of thinking in terms of the native and the immigrant being labeled “different” or “foreign”, I suggest that we rethink translation by getting rid of the many dichotomies and reimagining the cultural foundation in terms of all peoples being rewriters. (p. 8)

Another voice that helped me lay the foundations for my research was Eugene van Erven (2001) in his reflections about the emerging importance of community theatre in contemporary society:

Community theatre is a worldwide phenomenon that manifests itself in many different guises, yielding a broad range of performance styles. It is united, I think, by its emphasis on local and/or personal stories (rather than pre-written scripts) that are first processed through improvisation and then collectively shaped into theatre under the guidance either of outside professional artists – who may or may not be active in other kinds of professional theatre – or of local amateur artists residing among groups of people that, for lack of a better term, could perhaps best be called ‘peripheral’. Community theatre yields grass roots performances in which the participating community residents themselves perform and during the creative process of which they have substantial input. Not only the participants are considered ‘peripheral’, community theatre as an art form is as well. (p. 3)

Before starting with the depiction of the projects discussed here, firstly I would like to thank the generous collaboration of some of the protagonists: artistic directors, ideologists, promoters, sponsors, programmers, playwrights, dramaturgs, choreographers, etc. Very often one single person has played several of these roles. The following people have made these ambitious and wonderful initiatives possible:

- Eva García as a collaborator in several multicultural projects.

- Heidy Ramírez from the City of Barcelona.
- Andrea Corachán from *Transductores*.
- David Martínez from *La nave va*.
- Albert Tola and Constanza Brnčić from *Pi(è)ce*.
- Tortell Poltrona from *Pallassos sense fronteres*.

2. Framework for projects: the role of the institutions. Eva García and Heidi Ramírez

The first person whom I met to start my inquiries was Eva García¹ who defines herself professionally as a curator in cultural organisations. She is not currently involved in any specific theatrical project but has extensive experience in creative collaborative projects, and she is now working with several administrations and event organisations, like Barcelona's GREC – a summer scenic arts festival. Throughout her career in the theatrical scene in Barcelona and other places around Catalonia and Spain, she has fostered theatre as a social tool for integration and is the author of several publications dealing with topics such as community theatre, inclusive scenic arts and arts and education.

García dates the first examples in Catalonia and Spain of this type of theatre back to the years 2009 and 2010. It is consequently quite a new phenomenon that coincides with the big international migratory waves from the first decade of the 21st century. Community theatre in Catalonia and Spain, although not exclusively, is therefore closely linked to matters of migration, integration, multiculturalism and multilingualism. A milestone for her in this sense was *Quijotadas*² – by Miguel Oyarzun and Juan Alaya –, a play that transposes the figure of Don Quixote to a group of immigrants who dream of a better life in Europe. It had resounding success at its premiere in 2013 in Lavapiés (Madrid) and had a long run on Spanish and international stages. The actors – at that time recent migrants coming from Sub-Saharan Africa – were at the beginning completely unaware of Quixote's figure, central to Western literary canon; the play was inspired by the narration of their experiences throughout a journey full of hope but also of dangers and obstacles. In our conversation, García (2022) stressed the value of culture and language not only as a means of social integration, but also as a basic right of citizens. She defines the function of community theatre as follows:

Community culture and inclusive arts place the fulfilment of citizens' cultural rights at the core of their ideology, recognized in several international and state legislative frameworks, but repeatedly postponed. In these contexts, coexistence with vulnerability, as well as emotion and circumstance, is daily. Not just through accompanying the people, but also reviewing the

¹ Date of the interview: 12th April 2024 on Microsoft Teams.

² <https://mirageteatro.wixsite.com/mirage/quijotadas-eng> (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

organisations' own internal dynamics and the values that support the projects to avoid repeating the conditions of the processes that generate exclusion. (p. 19)³

Focussing on our topic – translation in theatre projects –, she affirms that these kinds of community projects are not normally based on already existing texts (translated or not), as the *Quijotadas* was, but on texts written ad hoc – often as a co-participative work. One stage production which she is especially proud of is the collective opera *La gata perduda*⁴, performed with the participation of the neighbours of El Raval, a multicultural neighbourhood in the very heart of Barcelona. The opera production is presented as follows on its website⁵:

“La gata perduda” is the first community opera to be premiered within Opera Prima, a set of community operatic productions from the Gran Teatre del Liceu. [...] The project began in 2018, with a period of meetings and relationship building between the Liceu and the organisations, collectives, facilities and neighbours of the Raval. This period was centred on listening and mutual discovery, defining the areas in which each person could collaborate in the project. Finally, the organisations and neighbours became involved in the creation of the project's image; its diffusion; the adaptation of the summary of the opera's storyline so it could be read easily; the sung interpretation; the musical interpretation; building the elements of the scenography; and costume making. Victoria Szpunberg's libretto after individual and group interviews with neighbours, experts and relevant people from the Raval. The music is composed by Arnau Tordera I, through absorbing the musical realities of the neighbourhood.

García describes the difficulties that she had to face in trying to involve all communities from the “prohibited neighbourhood”, as El Raval is referred to in the opera: some of them were extremely reluctant to partake in a communitarian project that mixed very heterogeneous cultures, and she had to persuade representatives of some specific collectives what the benefits of the project were. Victoria Szpunberg, the dramaturgist, based her libretto on contributions from members of the communities, expressed originally in their languages and translated later into Catalan: some of the participants had to work with non-professional translators from the community to orally narrate their stories about living in El Raval.

To conclude the interview, García stresses the embryonic state of these kinds of projects in Catalonia and Spain. In her opinion, they should ideally start as an initiative of neighbourhoods and communities, without the leadership of any external promoters, becoming therefore aware of the fact that culture is everyone's business. We are still, she affirms, very far from this reality.

³ Original text in Catalan. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own.

⁴ It was performed on 5th and 7th October 2022.

⁵ <https://lagataperduda.com/> (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

Heidi Ramírez⁶ is the person in charge of the *Programa BCN Interculturalitat (PROGIB)* at the City Council's Office *Barcelona Acció Intercultural*⁷. Her work mainly consists of organising a quarterly cultural program in the city's neighbourhoods based on activities that promote dialogue between communities. Theatre and other scenic art performances are only a small part, but an important one because they are an excellent tool to encourage debate: shows are usually followed by a talk between the audience and artists – actors, musicians, directors, dramatists, etc. Ramírez always looks forward to Barcelona's theatre schedule, especially productions by small independent theatres, because she can include some of them into her calendar for further staging. *Contrato indefinido*, for instance, by the Gambian-Senegalese playwright Aïssatou Djob, is a theatrical production of Sala Periferia Cimarronas⁸ staged later in other theatres: the play deals with the unfair contractual conditions for migrants and is narrated from the perspective of a black woman; *Voy donde no hay*⁹, by the Filipino playwright Berjer B. Capati – written in Catalan, Spanish and Tagalog –, shows the experiences of different generations of the Filipino community in Barcelona¹⁰.

Although Catalan or Spanish are usually the vehicular languages of these activities, almost all other languages spoken in the city have a place in the staging schedule organised by the institutions: they are protagonists, for instance, on the International Day of Poetry (21st March)¹¹ or on the Day of the Mother Tongue (21st February)¹². On both dates, translation plays a central role: in 2023 a poem by the Catalan writer Vicent Andrés Estellés was translated and performed into twenty-two languages¹³. Translation and translators are also present in other activities: Ramírez described a sewing course in which a big group of Pakistani women participate and where members of the community translated all instructions into Urdu. The main aspect I want to stress from my conversation with Heidi Ramírez is the central role that administrations play in intercultural dialogue; financial and

⁶ The interview took place on 22nd April 2024 at the Espai Avinyó (Barcelona).

⁷ <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/bcnacciointercultural/ca/espai-avinyo> (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

⁸ *Contrato indefinido* was performed in Sala Periferia Cimarronas between 10th and 26th November 2023. Since then, it has been scheduled in several *Centres Cívics* [civic centres].

⁹ *Voy donde no hay* premiered at the Casa Orlandai on 1st December 2023 and has been represented around the city since then.

¹⁰ Both plays are a good example of another recent global phenomenon: migrant playwrights who have recently settled in Barcelona adopt Catalan or Spanish for their stage productions.

¹¹ <https://www.barcelona.cat/barcelonacultura/ca/recomanem/dia-mundial-poesia-vicent-andres-estelles-protagonista> (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

¹² https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/bombers/ca/noticia/en-el-marc-del-dia-internacional-de-la-llengua-materna-lespai-avinyo-presenta-polifonies-linguistiques_1045224 (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

¹³ <https://cultura.gencat.cat/ca/ilc/que-fem/programes/dia-mundial-de-la-poesia/dmp-2024/index.html> (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

infrastructural support are essential requirements for the success of these types of initiatives. As important as these factors are, the strategies used in the design of the activities with the objective of actively involving as many citizens as possible are equally significant.

3. Andrea Corachán and David Martínez: scenic arts and social mediation

Andrea Corachán¹⁴ is a member of the organisation *Transductores*¹⁵. They define themselves on their website as: “*Transductores* is an interdisciplinary platform that carries out research projects and mediation based on three main axes of interest: collective pedagogies, collaborative artistic practices and methods of intervention in the public sphere”. Corachán describes her role in the group as an artistic mediator for socially vulnerable groups: young migrants, for instance. She claims that in recent years Barcelona’s City Council and the Catalan Government have improved their financial support for social artistic projects like theirs after realising how important they are in promoting integration. Nonetheless, she regrets how institutions demand quick visible evidence of their investment.

As an example of their social work through performative arts, Corachán describes the project called *La trama* – regularly integrated into the program of the *Centre d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona: Fabra i Coats* – that promotes dialogue between arts (exhibitions, performances, etc.) and different audience groups. She focuses on the activity *Take back the night. Make the centre ours* based on the exhibition *Periphery of the night* by the Thai artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul¹⁶. The target group was in this case a collective from the *Centre d’Acolida de Sant Andreu*, an institution that provides accommodation and support to underage migrants, arriving in Europe without any relatives accompanying them after a traumatic journey. The most important goal of the activity was to create a safe environment in which the participants could express themselves without any fears. After visiting Weerasethakul’s exhibition about the night, they were expected to contribute individually with two different interventions performed in front of the rest of the group: they first had to sing a lullaby and later to tell a dream. Both proposals – personal experiences related to the act of going to sleep, and not related to any conflict situations – should encourage them to participate in the performance. They were free to act, dance, write, talk about anything they wished. For the lullaby they obviously used their mother tongue, and they were also free

¹⁴ We met on 2nd May 2024 at the centre cívic Ca n’Andalet (Barcelona).

¹⁵ <https://transductores.info/> (retrieved on 1.09./2024).

¹⁶ <https://www.barcelona.cat/fabraicoats/centredart/en/content/process-take-back-night-make-centre-ours> (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

to use it to narrate their dreams¹⁷. However, all of them preferred to express themselves in Spanish, including at times some words in Catalan: the oldest members of the centre helped the newcomers in their narration and performance; language subgroups were built, but all participants sought communication with the other members of the group, sometimes using body language and gestures. Corachán remembers this performance as one of the most stunning of her program and highlights the implication of all participants and the beauty of the results.

David Martínez¹⁸, from the theatre group *La nave va*¹⁹, describes his artistic development as one determined by several encounters. In 2001, he met the dramaturgist Augusto Boal in Barcelona and learned his theory of the “Theatre of the Oppressed” together with Paulo Freire’s “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”. Due to these experiences, he adopted a social perspective in his theatrical activity and implemented methods such as “Image Theatre”, which questions the very nature of human communication and explores the capacities to reach the very essence of the human soul without using language. Two further important figures for him were Peter Brook and his idea of the indispensable connection between stage and audience, and Allan Owens’ works on the intercultural dimension of drama. The theatre company *La nave va* works in prisons, in schools, with migrants and with groups with special needs. Although some of their most successful productions have to do with migrants, interculturality and translation, I would like to mention his participation in two European research projects that explored the possibilities of drama as a social tool for communication between heterogeneous social and cultural groups: “Drama, a way to social inclusion” (1999–2004) and “Beyond text” (2016–2019). Speaking about the exchange of experiences that take place in these kinds of projects, Martínez stresses the importance of realising how important the cultural and linguistic perspective is in the construction of narratives – including scientific discourse – and the possibilities that theatre offers to improve research by offering a more holistic and universal view of reality and communication. Translation plays a central role in these projects because English is the *lingua franca* – in encounters and publications²⁰ – although most of the participants come from non-English speaking countries.

4. Pi(è)ce: intercultural, intergenerational theatre.

Emerging from an idea of Julio Álvarez – the manager of the small independent theatre Tantarantana, on the border between the multicultural neighbourhoods of El Raval and Poble Sec –, *Pi(è)ce* was a theatre project between 2012 and 2022

¹⁷ There are some pictures of this activity on the web.

¹⁸ We met on 14th May 2024, on Microsoft Teams.

¹⁹ <https://www.lanaveva.org/> (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

²⁰ Benmergui et al. (2019); Piekkari (2005).

that involved students from two secondary schools – IES Milà i Fontanals and IES Consell de Cent – and a group of senior citizens from the district. After being linked to the school subjects of Catalan, first, and Spanish, later, the project began to be carried out within the so-called *aula d'acollida*, i.e. the classroom where migrants start their schooling immediately after their arrival in Catalonia without any knowledge of Catalan or Spanish. Every school year, a group of students and senior citizens developed a play and performed it at the theatre Tantarantana²¹. Albert Tola²² – dramaturgist, translator, and playwright – and Constanza Brnčić²³ – dancer, dance teacher and researcher – led the process, guided artistic investigation on a topic determined before by the students and were responsible for the final text and choreographies, always based on the individual contributions of the group. Exercises on linguistic expression and movement in space – and their relationship and interconnection – were always the starting point for further inquiry – learning to listen to and to observe oneself and others. The projects always implied interpretation of verbal and non-verbal cues within the culturally extreme heterogeneous groups in order to promote communication and living together.

By framing the project around a fictional plot, the participants were able to keep some distance from their personal circumstances during the creative process. After having proposed some exercises, Tola rewrote all the contributions in a unique text; Brnčić did the same with the choreography. The final products were always staged in Catalan or Spanish – with all the imperfections of non-native speakers; some contributions had to be translated before, especially those of students who had recently arrived, with the help of other students from the same linguistic background. Brnčić and Tola define the central role they confer to translation as less of a tool that searches for perfect equivalence between texts and languages but rather as a way to reflect the very process of expressing concepts and feelings. In their own words:

Because translation always specifies what is incomplete, the imprecision of the expression, whether it is linguistic or gestural. Yet this imprecision, what we could call distance, has many degrees and this scale awakes our interest especially during the creation of scenic materials. (Brnčić & Tola, 2017, p. 5)

Tola is fascinated by the imperfections of language due to the use of other languages, by the contamination resulting from contact between languages and cultures. *Pi(è)ce* was an absolute success and started a path as an independent

²¹ <https://tantarantana.com/projecte-comunitari-social-piece> (retrieved on 1.09.2024).

²² I met Albert Tola on 24th May 2024, at Café Nabucco (Barcelona).

²³ I met Constanza on 31st May 2024, at the Teatre Antic (Barcelona).

project linked to the City of Barcelona and to its summer festival, GREC. Their performances took place at the CCCB, a very prestigious cultural centre in the city.

5. Clowns without borders: communication without words

The organisation *Pallassos sense fronteres* was born in Barcelona in 1993 during the Yugoslav Wars with the aim of providing support to the children in the conflict zone. In February 2024, after thirty years of existence, they published the book *Riures i emocions – Els viatges de pallassos sense fronteres (1993–2022)* including a chronology of all their actions and collecting experiences from their members and occasional collaborators. After Yugoslavia, they have been performing in conflict zones all around the world, always pursuing the same goal: to bring a smile to children in times when they are living traumatic experiences. Because of the complexity of their presence in these areas, the clowns always work with local organisations that take care of the logistics and advise them about local particularities – of ideological, religious or cultural nature – to avoid dangerous misunderstandings. Although the clowns learn some words or small texts in local languages – *Good morning, how are you? Are you enjoying the performance?* –, using some words as well in English – as the *lingua franca* –, they base their shows on non-verbal circus language and universal comicality. Tortell Poltrona²⁴ – the artistic name of Jaume Mateu, founder and heart and soul of the troupe – highlights that there is a universal language of circus as well as a universal language of humour. On the one hand, they are based on physics – juggling and acrobatic acts, for instance – and on the other hand, on universal comicality – normally based on actions that lack harmony in the cause-effect relationship. Their performances are based on universal common sense, respect and the so-called white humour. Poltrona (2024) tells us the following anecdote about communication:

In Livingston (Guatemala) the Garifuna people didn't understand the acrobatic act with the inverted pyramid of chairs by Tortell because that game with such an unusual object caused strangeness. Although Guatemala is a Spanish speaking country, the gestural language had always had much more impact, because the meanings in the Spanish from one place and another very often don't coincide. (p. 84)

Ana Mota (2024), who was in Kosovo in 2004, describes the following situation:

Although the war finished some years ago, tensions are still evident and aggressions between the different sides of the conflict still exist. We, the clowns, arrive and start performing: on one side sit the Kosovar Albanian children, on the other the Serbian. And I thought of the idea to

²⁴ Personal communication by telephone on 23rd April 2024.

bring a Kosovar Albanian kid and a Serbian one on stage together. And while we are doing the act, both kids start laughing, they look at each other laughing... And I realise here that when two people laugh together, they connect, and it is impossible that they look at each other with hatred and distrust, they stop being enemies. (pp. 47–48)

6. Conclusions

It was impossible to analyse all these projects in depth. My aim was rather to make visible the role that translation plays in the contemporary scene, especially in projects that foster intercultural communication. This paper, rather than offering answers, raises questions that should serve to explore the limits of translation studies in the 21st century.

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