

# STAGES OF TRANSLATION

EDITED BY DAVID JOHNSTON

ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS ON  
TRANSLATING FOR THE STAGE

David Hare, Ranjit Bolt, Jeremy Sams,  
Neil Bartlett, John Clifford, Adrian  
Mitchell, Nick Dear, David Rudkin,  
Declan Donnellan and other  
notable contributors

*absolute classics*

# STAGES OF TRANSLATION

INTRODUCED AND EDITED BY DAVID JOHNSTON



*a b s o l u t e   c l a s s i c s*

First published by Absolute Classics in March 1996, an imprint of Absolute Press, Scarborough House, 29 James Street West, Bath, BA1 2BT, England.

© David Johnston 1996

© Steve Gooch, Noel Clark, Anthony Vivis, Joseph Farrell, David Rudkin, Colin Teevan, Eivor Martinus, Stephen Mulrine, Peter Meyer, Kenneth McLeish, Keith Dewhurst, Gunilla Anderman, Jacek Laskowski, Bill Findlay, David Edney, John Clifford

Assistant Editor: María José Sánchez Blanco

Cover and text design: 6/26 Graphic Design, 26 Noel Street, London.

Printed by The Longdunn Press Ltd, Bristol.

ISBN 0 748230 75 4

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of Absolute Press.

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
GENERAL VIEWS	
Steeve Gooch: <i>Fatal Attraction</i>	13
Noel Clark: <i>Translating For The Love Of It</i>	23
Anthony Vivis: <i>The Stages Of A Translation</i>	35
TRANSLATION: FREEDOM AND CONSTRAINT	
Joseph Farrell: <i>Servant Of Many Masters</i>	45
David Johnston: <i>Theatre Pragmatics</i>	57
Neil Bartlett: <i>Interview. A Different Night Out In The Theatre</i>	67
Declan Donnellan: <i>Interview. The Translatable And The Untranslatable</i>	75
TRANSLATING THE CLASSICS	
David Rudkin: <i>First Thoughts Towards A Translation. Euripides's 'Problem Play': The Herakles</i>	81
Colin Teevan: <i>A Barbarian Activity: The Process Of Translation Of Euripides's The Iphigeneia In Aulis</i>	95
TRANSLATING EUROPEAN THEATRE	
Eivor Martinus: <i>Translating Scandinavian Drama</i>	109
Stephen Mulrine: <i>'A Man With Connections'. Adapting Gelman's Naedine so vsemi For Radio</i>	123
Peter Meyer: <i>Thoughts On Translating French Plays</i>	131
David Hare: <i>Interview. Pirandello And Brecht</i>	137
Laurence Boswell: <i>Interview. The Director As Translator</i>	145
PARTICULAR GENRES	
Kenneth McLeish: <i>Translating Comedy</i>	153
Keith Dewhurst: <i>'But the Squires Are Crammed Full With Sorrows'</i>	161
Jeremy Sams: <i>Interview. Words And Music</i>	171
CHOICES OF AUTHOR	
Gunilla Anderman: <i>Classical You Win, Modern You Lose</i>	179
Jacek Laskowski: <i>Translating The Famous Dead, The Dead Obscure And The Living</i>	187

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

Bill Findlay: <i>Translating Into Dialect</i>	199
Edwin Morgan: <i>Interview. Language At Play</i>	219
David Edney: <i>Translating (And Not Translating) In A Canadian Context</i>	229

TRANSLATING POETIC THEATRE

Adrian Mitchell: <i>Interview. Poetry On Stage</i>	239
Ranjit Bolt: <i>Interview. Translating Verse Plays</i>	249

TRANSLATION AND CREATIVITY

John Clifford: <i>Translating The Spirit Of The Play</i>	263
Nick Dear: <i>Interview. Translation As Conservative Writing</i>	271
Various Contributors: <i>Round Table On Translation</i>	281

## INTRODUCTION

*Some hold translations not unlike to be  
the wrong side of a Turkish tapestry*

JAMES HOWELL

This book was conceived out of absolute madness.

It was the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset who talked pityingly of the ‘misery and grandeur’ of translating, and this particular translator was constantly renewing his promise to himself not to take on any more translations. As an academic, I told myself I would no longer jeopardise my reputation as a serious scholar by undertaking what even many linguists consider to be mere jobbing, provoking the derision of those most traditional sectors of academe which still persist in viewing translating as a sort of collaboration with linguistic cads and cultural bounders (it still surprises me that many colleagues working in literary disciplines remain blind to the omnipresence of translation in their field); and I would never again oblige myself to wrestle with impossible verbal and dramatic equivalences for long hours on end – terrifyingly long hours when set against the short time available for getting the translation done (why is it that even when plays have been around for three hundred years, theatre companies invariably commission a new translation just a couple of months before rehearsals are due to start?) I would be absolutely mad to consider doing even one more translation, I told myself. . . and yet here I was agreeing to edit a collection of essays and interviews dealing with precisely that, the writing of translations for the stage.

Absolute madness, however, lay behind the genesis of this volume in a more literal sense, in that this was the name given to the event held to celebrate the collaborative links between Absolute Press and London’s Gate Theatre, which at that moment was staging my adaptation of Lope de Vega’s *Madness In Valencia*. While other publishers (I make this observation from the standpoint of an independent academic) were flooding the market with translated playscripts that were barely readable never mind speakable, Absolute had always sought to publish translations that had been proved on stage. The staged work of people like Adrian Mitchell, John Clifford, Nick Dear and Laurence Boswell had already done much to kindle public and critical interest in the fascinating riches of the Spanish Golden Age, and the timely publication in Absolute Classics of versions of the great triumvirate of Lope, Tirso and Calderón confirmed the status of these writers as

acknowledged giants of the European stage. As a professional Hispanist, I felt more than a passing debt of gratitude to Absolute Press, and so it seemed to me entirely appropriate that it should be Absolute who published a book of essays in which translators for the stage were given the opportunity to discuss their work both in terms of the process of translating itself and as part of the collective enterprise of making theatre. This resultant collection of voices from the field is the first of its kind to be published, and the questions it raises and the issues it explores will, I am sure, prove invaluable in furthering the growing debate as to the status of translation in contemporary English-speaking theatre, as well as giving illuminating insights into the ways in which translators work. For the purposes of ease of consultation, all of the essays and interviews in the book have been classified in subgroups in the index. These classifications can only be broadly accurate, however; what characterises all of the contributions in this book is the restless questioning of the art of translation, and as such many of them range over a number of related issues.

When the idea for the book was first discussed on that evening in December 1993 I had been translating (and subsequently adapting) for the stage for seven years. As a translator I had developed, as translators for the stage invariably do, a growing awareness of the difficulty of avoiding an interaction between my own voice as translator and the voice of the original author, of the impossibility of producing a seamless second garment through some process of invisible stitching. And as an academic I had begun to reflect increasingly on the meaning of what I was doing, on my sense that I was translating to a pattern, one that perhaps could be developed into a viable theory of translation practice. This process of reflection was further stimulated – to put it mildly – by a radio programme I had heard in which the Gate’s production of *Madness In Valencia* was being discussed. In particular, a pair of critics were mulling over the role of the Doctor, a character who in Lope’s original serves primarily as a mouthpiece for the (then) advanced world of Valencian mental health-care. It was clearly not possible to recreate this functional role (even if it had been, the character would have been deadly dull), so I decided to highlight the Doctor’s more comic elements, enlivening his interaction with other characters in the asylum by turning his long disquisitions on the nature and tell-tale signs of sanity and madness into hopelessly inadequate, essentially comic, personality-tests based on the association of ideas. My consternation grew as I listened to the two critics discussing Lope, in all seriousness, as a hitherto unsuspected precursor of Freud. Not that I felt guilty about this (at least not in the way Freud understood guilt), because I remained convinced that those scenes of the play involving the Doctor could not have worked without such a change. And the change itself was hardly radical after all, because what I had done was to hook this character onto one of the main thematic axes of the work – the relativity of madness and sanity. But the incident did prompt several very basic questions. Why,

for example, had the producers of the programme not thought it important, or simply worthwhile, to consult the translator as to the exact status of the piece they were talking about? Were they not aware of the dangers implicit in such a discussion? The play was clearly labelled a 'version' (although to my mind it was no less faithful to the original for that). Did they assume that the translator was an invisible presence, like a pane of glass, to use the conventional metaphor, through which the original work could be scrutinised with every detail accurately in place?

The incident gave me no pleasure. In a British theatre which, for a whole variety of reasons, is turning increasingly to translations of new plays and new versions of old plays, it seemed to me that it was high time that the very specific business of writing translations for the stage was considered in terms of the multiplicity of approaches that practitioners themselves bring to it. That is not to say that this book entirely eschews issues of theory, but the theory of translation, like literary theory, must by definition derive from an analysis which is *a posteriori*. A conviction common to all those who reflect upon their work in the pages that follow is that there can be no hard and fast rules concerning translation for the stage, that there can no more be a prescriptive theory for translation than there can be for the writing of a play or a poem. Rather than centred upon the theory of translation, therefore, or on translation seen from the perspective of the science of language and linguistics, the essays and interviews contained within this book tend to consider translation as an extension of stage-craft, another activity to be understood as an integral strand of that multilayered process of making a play work on stage.

That is not to say that there is a common view held of translating by translators themselves. As the following pages make clear, translators do not share a common methodology or even hold to a similar viewpoint on the perceived status of translation in the theatre. In particular, there is some considerable divergence among practitioners not only on the principal issues of the scope for personal creativity, or voice, in translation, whether translators should play feudal servant to their master, or if they are a second author in their own right, a Cervantes to Cide Hamete Benengeli, but also on the question of the translator's linguistic competence in the target language. This latter point provides one of the major bones of contention between academic, or literary, approaches to playmaking, and a more purely theatrical view; the first one is legitimately concerned with the play at the level of its constituent semantic units, the level of detail, while the other, although not abandoning word-based analysis, is much more concerned with the play in terms of dramatic impact. It is, of course, a basic difference, and like all differences at base it contains within itself the possibility of a whole variety of eclectic approaches; but in the universe of play translating that does not make it any less the *prima mobile* that sets the spheres spinning, either in defence of the original

author's words as fixed on a page, or of the reconstruction of his or her desire to create a memorable night in the theatre.

The metaphor of the *prima mobile*, which, in a neo-platonic scheme of things, causes the spheres to spin out of love of God, strikes me as being particularly appropriate in this discussion of the forces which are prime movers in translators' approaches to their work. Even the most casual of glances at the essays contained within this book will reveal that translators of drama are impelled by a passion that is partly unconditional love for a work distant through time or place, but – crucially – whose vision connects most intimately with their own experience of the world, and partly a sense of the grandeur (to use Ortega's word) of their role as mediators, if not between God and Man, at least between Racine or Pirandello and their public today. Small wonder then that translators, whilst recognising the need for caution and relativity of judgment when it comes to discussing the practical outcomes of their work, are often also ready to couch their working codes of practice in the morally absolutist terms of principle, fidelity, love and integrity. For me, one of the most fascinating aspects of this book is the way in which translators negotiate between the moral absolutism of their love for the original author or work, and the pragmatism that comes driving out of the knowledge that the creature created from that love is not just a private thing; it has to function under public scrutiny.

Under the scrutiny of public *and* critics. This raises another question which sparks off a variety of opinions. Do translators wish to be given public recognition as progenitor of their love-child, or do they think it only right and proper that they should remain behind the scenes, invisible if invaluable handservants? The question, as I have already indicated in the case of Lope's Valencian doctor, is also of relevance to critics who have to discuss, for example, Marivaux or Euripides in terms not just of a particular performance but also of a particular linguistic re-clothing, and to an audience which may or may not choose to go to see a Brecht simply on the basis of whether it is an apparently straightforward translation by A N Other or a 'new version/adaptation' by David Hare. 'Straightforward' translation and adaptation/new version come to represent opposite poles of fidelity; rightful inheritor, upright and true, and bastard child, wickedly lively and devil-may-care.

Of course, this is another basic difference equally subject to constant and careful negotiation. Translators *are* extremely conscious of the label given to their finished product, designed to serve both as an indicator to audience and critics of the nature of the beast, and, naturally enough, to give due recognition to their own level of contribution. But in practice there are numerous examples, both lovingly and frustatedly detailed in the contributions below, where translators swing between both positions in the same play, even in the same scene. Decisions have to be taken at every individual stage of the process, and the translator's sense of the dialectical

relationship between the formal expressive qualities of the original and the impact of the putative version leads to a pragmatism which combines the rigour of literary criticism with the flair of dramatic re-creation. All translations, in whatever field or for whatever purpose, are ultimately judged by purely functional results. A Hispanist, let's say, spends several years translating *La Regenta*, the greatest Spanish novel of the nineteenth century, a reader somewhere pronounces it 'a good read', and the functional success of the translation has been achieved; conversely, we have all been victims of the electrodomeestic confusion that arises in the wake of instruction manuals poorly translated from the original Japanese or Korean.

It is surely a basic truth that all language acts are essentially acts of communication, even if what they are choosing to communicate is that there are whole areas of human experience which are ultimately incommunicable. We don't need to delve too deeply into reception aesthetics or information theory before realising that, if that is the case, the receiver is as central to the act of communication as the sender. In the case of literature, which is clearly an extended, more highly self-conscious, language act, the receiver is no less central because, as proponents of reception aesthetics would argue, the word-based work of art exists not on the page but in its active re-creation or, as Roman Ingarden has termed it, in its 'concretisation'. These issues are central not just to our practical study of literature in general, but also to our particular understanding of the dynamics of stage/audience complicity. On one hand, therefore, the immediacy of reception in theatre gives translating plays virtually a paradigmatic status within the study of translation while, on the other hand, a consideration of the theoretical issues thrown up by translating for the stage gives us a series of illuminating perspectives on the constituent elements which come together in the making of a play in performance – 'concretisation' in its most vividly elaborated form.

All of the contributors to this volume have considerable experience in writing for the stage, often in terms of writing their own plays, and in the case of translation, of working always with a *mise en scène* in view. Emerging clearly from their reflections on their work is the inseparability of play and performance, of text and representation. Scholarly translation, meaning by that a translation that is linguistically and formally faithful to the maximum degree, is not discussed here because it is fundamentally page-oriented. That is not to say that such translations serve no purpose; indeed, as Eric Bentley has noted, any major foreign play should be published in both strict and freer form (as he himself has done with Brecht's *The Good Person Of Setzuan*). The problem arises when scholarly translations seek to pass themselves off as 'acting versions'; at that point they can obscure the real dramatic qualities of the playwright they profess to be serving. An overly 'faithful' translation, in this sense, like a loving dog gambolling round our feet at the most inopportune moments, can often make a foreign play awkward, torpid, colourless,

like a Turkish tapestry viewed back to front, as James Howell observed in the eighteenth century. The mind may be capable of reconstructing the original tapestry from its reverse side, just as one can perhaps tease out the dramatic qualities of a play from a scholarly translation; but translation and adaptation for the stage (or screen) are activities concerned crucially with the impact of immediate reception.

As a result of this, many of the essays and interviews contained in this book reflect upon the sort of choices the translator is involved in as being similar to those confronting a genuinely creative writer. There is a clear consensus that there are myriad solutions in the target language for every single form in the source text. Otherwise translation would be more a branch of philology than a creative process. Where contributors tend to disagree most acutely is in how they delimit that creativity. Clearly, once one recognises the inevitability of making choices, which will either ensure or preclude the character, expressiveness and voice of the target-language text, one is also recognising that the translator will inevitably impose his or her own reading on that text. It is at this point that translating for the stage connects with drama criticism, and several of the pieces in this book are extended literary analyses of plays, upon which the decisions inherent in the translation process are based.

However, in the imposing of a reading upon a play, translators move into a more radical area of re-creation. Aristotle wrote, or at least his translator claims that he wrote, that ‘a good metaphor implies the intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars’, and in many ways this is what translators do when they write a version of a foreign play. In other words, they recast its external form so as to protect its range of meanings. There are some who see this procedure as positing the possibility of an infinite enrichment of our repertory, because, after all, setting, for example, Calderón’s *The Surgeon Of His Honour* in Samurai Japan in order to enhance the impact of the honour code, leaves the original *El médico de su honra* wholly unscathed, still open to the most lavishly faithless or slavishly faithful productions imaginable. Other commentators, however, are much less happy about this type of procedure, seeing it as poetic licence in its most facile form. In that respect, this book has no editorial axe to grind. Every single translator in this book is more than capable of justifying the linguistic, cultural and – especially in the case of Scottish, Irish and Canadian contributors – the political implications of his or her readings, as well as the working decisions taken as a logical consequence of those readings.

Another issue which is given a variety of treatments in this book is that of the impact of performance specifics on translating plays. Different degrees and levels of translation, transformation, version-writing, transpositional metaphors etc. are ensured not just by linguistic and literary differences. Translators are often also acutely aware of the particular space for which they are preparing their work, and accordingly incorporate into their new version specific complicities with specifically

envisaged audiences as well as actors. In that sense, the oft-asserted *vita brevis* of theatre, in contrast with the *ars longa* of dramatic literature, is not simply a way of distinguishing between production and publication values; it can frequently be the very epitome of the translator's consciousness, just as it frequently is of the director's. The ephemerality of a stage production, the result of an ongoing process of interpretation and angling/redirecting of the codes for specific performance written into a playtext, becomes virtually a *sine qua non* of the art of theatre translation. Because even in those cases where a translator is not working towards a particular space or group of actors, he or she will still, in all likelihood, be angling the new version so that it penetrates into a particular consciousness, culturally and linguistically defined by the English (or any other) language in current usage. No wonder then that so many translators themselves insist on the essentially short-lived nature of the work they produce.

Of course, in practice, specifically-angled translations are very often successful in places remote from the informing culture and linguistic fabric for which they were prepared (I had such an experience, which I still fail to fully understand, when the *Blood Wedding* which I had done for Scotland's Communicado was performed with equal success in Tennessee). In the same way that those plays whose first line of engagement is with local issues expressed through local language can subsequently speak to audiences of all sorts of provenance, so translations and adaptations geared towards the specific can also transcend what is only an apparent limitation.

There are a range of other specifics which translation, if it is to be functionally successful, must sometimes take into account. Translation can involve moving from one medium to another (theatre play to radio script, stage to screen) or between genres (novel to play). In many ways, such transfers throw a sharper light onto the process of adaptation as a dialectical process; a constant movement in the translator's mind between two competing consciousnesses, the awareness of how one set of conventions works in the target area, and the agonising sense of the very different functioning of the source text. In that way, the essays in this book which deal with transfers between media and genres can be read, in their turn, almost as heightened accounts of the process of stage translation itself, paradigms for theatre adaptation in their own right.

As editor I owe debts to many people who worked on this project at various stages and who helped define its contours. First and foremost, to the talented writers and translators, the leading practitioners of the art of stage-translation at work today, who contributed essays and interviews, and whose pausing to reflect on their craft has opened up this range of illuminating perspectives on the making of theatre; secondly, to those who word-processed and transcribed the fruit of those reflections – especially Bronagh, Heather and Jennifer; thirdly, I gladly acknowledge the invaluable friends with whom I have tended to mull over these

things, under a whole variety of circumstances, especially Joe Farrell, Gerry Mulgrew, John Clifford, Laurence Boswell, and, recently, David Farr; fourthly, to another friend, John Macklin, with whom I organised a pioneering one-day conference on the translation of Spanish plays a short five years ago; fifthly, to Gaynor MacFarlane, for organising and recording the Gate Theatre translation session; sixthly, to my own university, Queen's in Belfast, for the generous financial support which made the publication of this book possible. Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to the poet Carlos Alvarez, whose poetry I have had the privilege both of translating and reading in public with him, and who once put translation and adaptation into this illuminating (if extreme) perspective:

'Perfect translations do exist. I know of one, for example, of the *Poem Of*

*The Cid*'.

'What is it?'

'*The Song of Roland*'.

# FATAL ATTRACTION

Steve Gooch

Steve Gooch studied French and German at Trinity College, Cambridge and Birmingham. His early plays and translations helped establish the pioneering Half Moon Theatre in the early seventies, when his first Brecht translation – *Man Is Man* – was produced by the Royal Court and subsequently by the RSC. Since then his work has been widely produced in a variety of media. Further Brecht translations include *St Joan Of The Stockyards*, for the Derby Playhouse, and *The Mother*, for the National (published in Methuen). Among the modern playwrights he has translated are Fassbinder, Kroetz and Mueller. His association with Mueller goes back to the 1972 Royal Court production of *Big Wolf*, and he has also translated Mueller's radio plays *Rosie* and *Delinquent* for the BBC. Steve Gooch has also worked on adaptations of *Great Expectations*, *Candide*, *Fuenteovejuna* and Terence's *The Brothers*. More recently he has been commissioned to produce versions of Wedekind's *Lulu* and *Marquis Of Keith*, for Red Shift and the Gate respectively (to be published by Absolute), and of Tankred Dorst's post-reunification play *Mr Paul*, for the National. He is currently working on a film version of his play *The Women Pirates*, for Roger Corman's Transpacific Corporation.

The very act of speaking is a kind of translation. From a baby's first words to a dying man's groan, people's urges and needs attempt to cross the divide of understanding between transmitter and receiver. Even within intellectual discourse the desire to persuade other people has to find its appropriate expression within a given tradition. In this sense the distinctive 'voice' of an individual is formed by the three-way traffic of communication between people and their surroundings.

In a world of satellite communications – not to mention a two-year cycle of world-cinema repeats on television – those 'surroundings' can become pretty extensive. And while the voice of the individual is squeezed into ever narrower channels, the media barons are creating a multi-lane highway in the other direction. Into this world steps the translator, someone who probably has a natural receptivity, a propensity for listening, understanding, and interpreting rather than imposing his or her views upon the world. For this is not, in the first instance, an egocentric activity. Its commonest motive is to build bridges and promote the exchange of ideas and experience.

Exchange, in the sense of dialogue as it expresses the clash of characters' discrete aspirations, is of course central to drama. This is also the literary form most dependent on speech as a physical, rather than intellectual, activity. As such it plugs directly into the emotions of its characters, its practitioners and ultimately its audience. It also demands a healthy egocentricity – the author is displayed through the play, the actors in their roles. Thus, translators of plays often find themselves 'translating' twice: first, into the foreign language; then, into the primal motion of the characters.

In addition, translators can often find themselves filling in (if not falling down) the gap between the practitioners' demands. On the one hand the original author, on the other hand the receiving culture; on the one hand the actors, on the other hand the audience. It is the translator's business to be aware of both sides of the argument, while their collaborators are primarily only interested in – let alone aware of – one.

When this more individualistic side of the theatre is compounded by a predominantly competitive economic system, the tentative desire to build bridges finds little comfort and even less reward among the jostling claims and counter-claims of the other participants. A translator could be forgiven for believing that the only common path to the truth of the play lies through the translation. But actors can't act what they can't perceive, and if a translation doesn't communicate directly, directors rarely have enough time to provide a compensating explication (always assuming they've seen the difficulty themselves). More common is the resort to some dramatic precedent within the home tradition. When you consider that translators also have egos, may also have faulty perception, and are also on display, the chances of the original play being squarely represented are slim indeed.

In this context translating plays can only be an act of love. For me it invariably has to do with discovering in the original play some new and slightly exotic quality quite outside the more familiar ground of home-grown plays, which I feel the home audience should know about: like a love affair with a fascinating foreigner whom you feel compelled to introduce to your family. I was once asked to translate some journalism and, although I liked the pieces concerned, I found the work quite different. It didn't draw me in the way a good play does. There seemed to be nothing else beyond the sheer literalism of the words. With a play, you are drawn in behind the dialogue to the imagined world of the characters' lives and ideas. Drawn in, fascinated, and wanting to tell the family.

The first plays I translated were done as a student, looking for something to direct. This was almost exclusively about the joy of discovery. First being introduced to the 'alien' world of the original text, then finding out how it worked on the rehearsal floor in English. As a student of languages who also did a lot of theatre, the difference, in both texts and production, between our culture and the

rest of Europe was striking – most notably in the engagement with ideas. Even the socially conscious playwrights of late fifties and early sixties England seemed stuck in the literal-minded depiction of an everyday class-conscious reality which made metaphor impossible. Whenever ‘ideas’ surfaced in a British play, they appeared whimsical or clodhopping or grafted on like some overpowering Ibsenesque symbol. The more I looked at this, the more it seemed this limitation was in the dialogue. Writers seemed so hell-bent on getting their characters’ language and milieu ‘right’ that what was actually expressed was often mundane and trivial.

It’s still the case today that the language of most commercially successful English plays relies on tickling the nerve-ends of our national class-consciousness. A whole range of social responses is invoked by verbal mannerisms, which in turn imply a particular milieu, which in turn enable the audience to ‘place’ the characters within well-worn social definitions. Even in the large subsidised theatres, the audiences are there, primarily, it seems, to have their sense of social superiority massaged. Not just in new plays, but even in the acting style of classics, nothing tickles an English audience better than showing up some social gaffe which they, of course, would never commit. If you can get a laugh playing *Macbeth* like Noel Coward, why struggle to find the unique style in something strange and new?

I resolved to try and ‘elasticate’ the language of my own plays so as to remain true to the actual experience drawn on for the play, but also to enable the play to carry a broader significance. Leaving university, I was awarded a creative writing and travel scholarship on the strength of some scenes for a play I’d sketched in this mode. Initially the stretch I’d set myself proved more than I could cope with. But for the travel part of the scholarship I’d gone to Berlin and witnessed rehearsals of Brecht’s *Man Is Man* at the Berliner Ensemble, so I turned in a translation of that play, just to prove I hadn’t been idle. Apart from the play itself, my greatest discovery of that visit was that, even with so many months of rehearsal that a whole morning could be spent on a mere half-dozen lines of text, the Ensemble itself could end up keeping in the production a moment that was pure accident. The second great discovery was that Pinter and Stoppard played better in German.

I had already grown weary of the mannered, stagey ambiguity with which Pinter was delivered here, so it was a delight to see a West Berlin production of *The Homecoming* where the subtext was played with greater explicitness. I imagine that both the translator and actors may have had difficulty either understanding or transposing the social nuances of the English original, and had been forced to dig out as much hard evidence of the plot as they could. The play was much harder, much more tense, and far less stagey than any English production I’ve seen before or since. Similarly with *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern*, a play I saw first in German. Stoppard’s familiar philosophical concerns were brought out with a great physical and colourful theatricality which dwarfed the fudged productions I saw in England later.

Back home from the scholarship I submitted my script of *Man Is Man* to the Royal Court, where I'd been a member of the Writers' Group in my last months at school. Thanks to the Brecht estate's preference for another translation (which neither the Court nor Stoke-on Trent, who were also interested, wanted to do), it was two years before my translation finally got on. For a few years it was very popular, enjoying amongst others an excellent production by Howard Davies at the RSC but as soon as John Willett's 'official' version was published, it was no longer performed.

During the mid-seventies I was also discovering the new German playwrights of the period and felt an almost missionary zeal about introducing the then unknown Fassbinder, Kroetz and Harald Mueller to a still largely insular and culturally xenophobic British public. Both in subject matter and style these writers were pushing beyond boundaries known to the theatre world in Britain. Given my disaffection with the class-ridden, contemporary English tradition, it was perhaps no surprise that these plays represented a context that I felt I could engage with more readily. Needless to say, they met with the cool reception reserved by viewers for all truly challenging innovation – in their case (as with Brecht) this was aggravated by the common booword 'teutonic'. It was only when Fassbinder's films became known, and Kroetz's work was picked up by so many small theatres, that attitudes began to change. Mueller – to my mind the psychologically most interesting of the three – is still not well-known.

Cultural xenophobia can express itself in a number of ways. Because my own plays were produced in the East End and I translated from German, many people I met in the theatre at that time assumed I must be Jewish. At the Greenwich Theatre I was even asked if English was my first language (also, if I was a member of the Communist Party). A fellow playwright used jokingly to recommend my mother's chicken soup. I had hoped that translating would keep me going financially while I worked on my own plays. This hope backfired in two ways. First I earned less from translation than playwriting; second, I became identified in people's minds as a translator first and an original playwright second.

One of the difficulties I observed in rehearsing these plays is that actors can sense when the method of playing them is different from what they're used to, but they have no first-hand experience of what that method is. If you play Shakespeare or Restoration Comedy or Pinter, you'll have, for better or worse, models to work from. But what actor can afford to spend time off touring the Continent, watching avant-garde plays in a foreign language in order to stimulate their style back home (even if direct simulation were desirable)? Directors may be able to explain a play's intention in words, but enabling actors to feel a style for themselves is another matter. I remember, on the inaugural production at the Half Moon of *Jungle Of The Cities* – which I hadn't translated but was called in to help with – the actor playing Schlink was having great difficulties with the American-translated text, till I