

Translating Texts: Transforming Potential – New translation workshops to reach new audiences

Alan McKendrick, Kevin Rittberger, Catherine Grosvenor and Grzegorz Stosz

Introduction

Ian Brown

From Monday 10 to Friday 21 September 2012, the Scottish Society of Playwrights (SSP), with the support of Playwrights' Studio Scotland (PSS), promoted translation workshops in Glasgow. The over-arching aim was to develop and reinforce the international dimension of individual younger Scottish playwrights' work through creative engagement with mainland European theatre artists and, through those, audiences. As Chair of the Society, I was charged with planning, developing and organising the workshops. The project, supported financially by Creative Scotland, was an SSP initiative whose formal objectives were to:

- establish collaboration between translators and authors of the plays to ensure a high-quality translation and an adequate adaptation of the Scottish context
- promote in mainland Europe new Scottish plays of up-and-coming and/or well-established Scottish playwrights
- reach diverse and multigenerational international audiences.

In the first quarter of 2012, public invitations were published both through SSP and PSS channels to playwrights to submit plays recently premiered in Scotland and as yet untranslated. A selection panel was set up including Ian Brown and Peter Arnott, Chair and Vice-Chair of the SSP, who were debarred from submitting a play, Fiona Sturgeon Shea Creative Director of PSS and Lorne Boswell, Scottish Organiser of Equity. The plays selected to be worked on were Alan McKendrick's *Finished with Engines* and Catherine Grosvenor's *Gabriel*. Kevin Rittberger translated the former into German and Grzegorz Stosz the latter into Polish.

There were two public work-in-progress presentations to members of both the theatre community and the general public as part of the project and a company of German-speaking and one of Polish-speaking actors were engaged for these workshop performances in the second week. The first presentation, at the Citizens' Theatre on Monday 17 September, saw work-in-progress translations read aloud and discussed with an audience. The second, at the Centre for Contemporary Art in Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, on Friday 21 September, involved workshop performances in front of audiences who again fed back their reactions to the plays being presented. The workshop presentation of playreadings meant that an original proposal simply to hold public seminars to report back on the translation process could become much more dynamic. This was because the audience was able to share the experience of the workshop performance of the translations in public and then to discuss their impact and meaning with the playwrights and translators. Obviously the audiences for the readings were a little restricted given that they were presentations in German and Polish, but both events attracted interested and active audiences of approximately fifty.

The formal assessment for Creative Scotland of the project, submitted at the end of 2012 identified that the first two objectives set out above were entirely fulfilled. The third, meantime, had been partly fulfilled in terms of the age range and national origin of the audiences at the workshops in Glasgow. It is still expected that it would be further fulfilled when production of the translated plays is achieved in Germany and Poland, respectively. The formal assessment, however, can hardly address the sense of creative excitement such a project may generate. In order to break through the confines of bureaucratic jargon, therefore, the participants were asked to evaluate, guided by a number of common subheadings, their experience of the workshops and their importance to them as artists.

The reports take account of the fact that, besides formal objectives, incidental benefits were hoped for. These included that participant playwrights would develop their creative dramaturgical skills through their engagement with mainland European theatre cultures. Further, it was hoped that they would extend their playwriting skills by working on translation of their original work and develop additionally confidence

in their ability to write plays that carry meaning for other cultures. Arising from this, it was hoped that they would establish new creative relationships with their translators with a view to continuing that relationship for future plays. The reports make illuminating reading, not only on the workshop process, but also on the nature of translation itself. The following reports by the participating playwrights and translators appear to suggest that the additional aims appear to have been fulfilled.

Alan McKendrick

Our general experience of the process (Overview)

The overall experience was one which I found to be unutterably positive – the time period allotted us for the project felt right, as did the facilities in terms of what was afforded us in terms of practical working space, access to performers and so on.

It was certainly also of help that Kevin and I had some previous experience working together (in that prior instance, me translating his work rather than vice versa), and that both of us are conversant in both the source language and target language of the play being translated. This enabled discussion at a high level of sophistication throughout, both linguistically and conceptually.

Ultimately, we have ended up with a translation which both of us are very happy with, and feel represents a strong German-language analogue to the original English-language playtext. This goal being achieved would in and of itself be enough, but the fact that the support and facilities we were afforded made the entire working experience such a continually pleasant one added to the experience.

What worked well

The format whereby I had the opportunity to prepare an annotated copy of the playscript in advance was (for this specific play at least) absolutely invaluable in the end. (The copy given to Kevin ended up with no less than 129 explanatory footnotes, ranging in length from a single line to several paragraphs each). While this extensive notation was often only a starting point for face-to-face discussion, my having been afforded the time to do it was of crucial importance (and meant that I personally came to the project knowing my own play pretty well off by heart again, after a four-year gap since its last production).

The opportunity to work in the same room was also of great use (this again particularly because we were able to discuss points in fine detail in both German and English).

Leaving the individual working groups to source their own foreign-language performers seemed to work very well, both for ourselves and for the Polish group – I personally certainly relished the autonomy afforded us in that regard. It was much more fun to be able to assemble a group than just to be handed designated performers. I found that working with the performers broke things up and stopped Kevin and I going too far down a rabbit-hole of only communicating with one another... We did a session with two of the performers on the Friday of the first week, then a session with Miriam (who was reading the stage directions, but also a linguist) on the Monday and Wednesday of Week 2, followed by working with all three performers on the Thursday and Friday of Week 2. I would recommend a similar approach to any other groups undertaking a similar project in future – don't just bring in the actors at the very end in preparation for the public reading, rather use them as much as possible throughout if you can (budget and schedules allowing of course).

What could be improved

The working facilities at the Citizens, while adequate for the discussion and for 'rehearsal' (i.e. moving to the staging of the reading, as opposed to all the tablework with the performers that preceded that) were not ideal for close playwright-and-translator table work, being a bit cold and gloomy at that time of year (this was in our

case though exacerbated by the fact that Kevin became quite ill, as I don't recall the other group having any major problems).

In future I would suggest more advance liaison with any relevant cultural institutions (in our case, the Goethe Institut) in order to ensure that there is no clash with any other events they might have on. I would go so far as to suggest that the public discussion should either be directly hosted by such an organisation, and/or the relevant modern language department at Glasgow University. This time round, it felt that the discussion was very much pitched at a general theatre audience, which ended up not being especially numerous. What we got instead were language students from the university trekking out to the Citizens'. I'd suggest that, in future, it would make more sense to do the discussion actually at the university in the first place, making it a more welcome prospect for such students to attend, while still being easily accessible to any general theatre/theatre industry public who might wish to attend.

In the end, the Goethe Institut's mailout provided us with a respectably-sized audience, but it could have been double that with a little more foresight and synchronisation with relevant organisations (like the Goethe and the University of Glasgow German department).

Personal benefits

An unexpectedly huge thing for me was actually having the opportunity to run a rehearsal room for several days in the German language. The experience of directing in my second language was not one I had heretofore had, and I found it to be a major thing I took away from the whole project. It was rewarding, just to have established that this is something I can do, communicate confidently and clearly with native German-speaking performers at the level of nuance required for good stage direction.

This aside, the simple opportunity to work on the opposite side of the translation equation from normal was an exhilarating one. I actually think that the experience of now having been translated myself will definitely make me an even

better translator of the work of others in future. I feel more competent for now having a practical understanding of the process from both sides.

Also, the chance to consolidate my working relationship with Kevin Rittberger I found hugely positive. While I had translated him in the past, we were in that prior instance restricted to three rushed days together at the National Theatre Studio in London. A fortnight in Glasgow allowed us to approach this project at a more appropriate and conducive pace, and to get to know each other better. Whatever else happens, hopefully this fortnight in Glasgow will be the foundation upon which future collaboration between Kevin and myself may now be built, whether that might be my translating his work further, his translating mine, and/or one of us directing the work of the other. An international relationship that was before only tentatively established now feels much more strongly forged, and we have stayed in regular contact since.

Kevin Rittberger

Our general experience of the process (Overview)

After having met Alan McKendrick as a translator in London in 2011, it was now a real pleasure to have the opportunity to give something back to him. He did a great job translating a play I was working on for a dramatic reading at the National Theatre Studio and now asked me to come to Glasgow to do a translation of *Finished with Engines*. I couldn't resist, although it seemed to me at first sight a tough job.

It was my first translation of a drama and I was really happy to spend time on a piece of work that I found fascinating. The play seemed to me to use muscular, unique language, heavily loaded characters (without being psychological), a huge amount of humour – not only in between the lines, but also between the two of the characters – and to have a strong sense of rhythm that pulsed through the text until the final line. I was aware that the play was dealing with a specific question that had not been at the forefront of my own mind in quite some time. Although the prospect of a

devastating nuclear incident was once a real fear for us in Germany, as it was for the people of Scotland. So the question of sudden death, making the two characters as nervous and unbalanced as human beings can be, came back into my mind. And like the two characters in the play I was asking myself how the situation has changed nowadays: if we are, or feel, more safe now because there are only suicide bombers crossing our way from time to time – or if there is a new menace because of a multi-polar world, developing and bringing back the haunting from the past in another guise.

On first arriving in Glasgow, it was time for me to ask Alan for help and to go through every single word and syllable. I wanted to be aware of the exact meaning of the text (because I had already done a first draft, and this had missing parts and a lot of question marks). I also wanted to feel the poetry of it, a poetry of a grotesque, one perfectly aware that good humour always has to be very close to the other – gloomy – side of the same story.

Of course, in the early days we were discussing things that are not in the script, not even between the lines, but that needed to be said to orbit the truth. And of course the truth also needed to be two-sided. At least. One lay in *Finished with Engines*, and the other in a bunch of German words, that slowly were forming a mosaic, and later wanted to become more than the sum of their parts.

So it was learning to know the art to think in another person's mind - and a permanent distancing, which turned into a close-up in the next minute and the opposite way around.

What worked well

It was very helpful to be in one room with Alan. We both were working silently in the first few days, but I could go ahead asking him questions whenever necessary.

Both of us are directors as well, so we were also talking about a language that is working not only as literature but also as gestural and scenic material, a language that is meant to be spoken, played, alive.

Also very helpful was the opportunity to have some days of rehearsals at the end, to get the opportunity to hear the draft within a dramatic reading.

What could be improved

As far as I can remember I was really happy that everything went well; also the organisational side left nothing to be desired.

Personal benefits

As I've already said, it was valuable to have the chance to look very closely at another playwright and his work – to somehow study his handcraft. Alan gave me an insight into his thoughts and ideas, his concept of theatre and the inner process of it.

Of course my experience in Scotland will be reflected in my own work. That now continues as it went before, but will be richer, not richer as in having read a good book, but as in gaining a dimension, feeling a bit closer to theatre itself – if that doesn't sound too esoteric.

As stated earlier, I had no previous experience in translation and had not ever really thought too far down such lines before Alan approached me and asked me about working on this project. I have, however, found the experience of translating another playwright's work so satisfying that I think it is now an avenue I will definitely be open to exploring in future. So, I would certainly consider having been awakened to the interesting possibilities inherent in my potentially operating as a translator to be a major personal benefit.

Catherine Grosvenor

Our general experience of the process (Overview)

This project is one of the most positive experiences I have had both as a translator and as a playwright. Firstly, it's great to see the process of translation being valued and foregrounded in this way. The work that translators do often falls into a blind spot, partly because they work alone and partly owing to a lack of awareness of the skills and the process involved. This workshop residency really brought that work out into the open. I think that Grzegorz learned a lot about translating theatre, and so did I. I also feel that the public learned something about it too, thanks to the Question & Answer session and the public readings at the end of the process. The Polish translation of *Gabriel* received very strongly positive feedback at the reading, with many people feeling that it sounded like a play that had originally been written in Polish. That is a huge achievement, and the residency played a large part in that achievement.

It was rewarding to have quite a long period of time to spend together and go through the play. *Gabriel* is an elusive piece in places and many of the lines seem simple but actually work on a number of levels. So, it took us a long time to work through all the subtexts and for Grzegorz to find the right words in Polish which would provide the same nuances of meaning as the English.

We also spent three very productive days with the actors. This proved to be hugely beneficial, as all three actors had both a native Polish perspective on the piece and a perspective shaped by their years of living and working in Scotland. All three had experienced Scottish hospitals and Polish ones, and the actress had experience of a Scottish labour unit. This meant that we had a collective pool of resources round the table that really helped Grzegorz understand the Scottish context and the differences between the UK system and the Polish one.

Each actor also brought a more focused response to her own character. For example, Iwona (who played Julie) picked up on the different emotional intensity of Grzegorz's first and second drafts. Grzegorz and I felt his second draft was stronger, but Iwona pointed out that the choices he had made in his second draft limited her options as an actress, so we reverted to the first draft with some minor changes. From

this, we understood how much translation choices could mediate for the actor, the experience and even the meaning of the play in translation.

What worked well

Originally, we had intended that Grzegorz would spend both weeks of the workshop in Glasgow, but other unexpected commitments made it impossible for us to spend the first week in the same country. Nonetheless, the model we ended up working with was excellent. Grzegorz had to prepare the first draft alone, but we were in fact in close touch by email and skype as he prepared his first draft. This meant that when he did arrive in Scotland, we could start fine-tuning and discussing the draft straight away.

A particularly strong part of the second week for me was the idea of involving actors. The experience of hearing a text read out is particularly important for translators who are producing drama. In our instance, the skills of the actors provided further insight into the issues Grzegorz was exploring in the piece, and enabled him to take far more informed decisions.

As the writer, I also found the residency extremely useful from a dramaturgical perspective – because each line is pored over and examined from every angle for connotation and meaning, all sorts of discoveries about the text emerge. These discoveries led me to rewrite sections of the play, vastly improving the flow and logic of the original piece.

What could be improved

I would suggest that future projects allow a first phase in which the translator completes a first draft alone, with support from the writer if requested. In the second phase, the writer and the translator would then spend a week together, using this completed first draft as a starting point.

To increase public awareness of both the event and the residency, it could be interesting to offer a form of lecture or open workshop on the specific challenges faced by the translator. For example, the translator could select sections of the play he or she has found particularly difficult, and invite students or professional translators to take part in a master class. We had good attendance for the public discussion from students at Glasgow University so this could be capitalised on in the future.

We were very lucky in the fact that there is a wide community of Poles in Glasgow. As such, it was relatively easy to find actors and an audience for our reading and discussion. For other languages, it may not be so easy to find native speakers in Glasgow. In this case, it would be worth considering sending the writer to the foreign country. The access to actors and a native-speaker audience is incredibly important when developing the final version of a translation. However, it is also important for the translator to experience the culture in which the play was created. In our case, it was Grzegorz's first time in Scotland. He was able to visit the Oran Mor where Gabriel was first performed and get a feel for the wider culture of the play.

Personal benefits

I benefited from this residency enormously as both a writer and a translator. As a writer, the sustained, focused period of attention on the script allowed me to see the strengths and weaknesses of the piece very clearly, and to rewrite sections that lacked clarity. The resulting draft is clearer and more satisfying dramatically. I hadn't expected a translation workshop to be so useful for me from a dramaturgical perspective but the close attention and the lack of hidden agendas from the other participants proved to be very useful resources.

As a translator, I felt that I gained more insight into the process of translating and the issues we face when translating for the stage. Even though I have several years of experience, a lot of that experience has been gained working entirely alone, so it was very good to work in collaboration with three colleagues. I particularly appreciated the opportunities to discuss and reflect on our work.

The residency has left me with a stronger script in English and a strong script in Polish. I have greater awareness of the cultural aspects that need to be taken into consideration when translating, as well as various options and strategies for dealing with problem zones in translations. These skills will be very useful for me in my future work as a translator.

Grzegorz Stosz

Our general experience of the process (Overview))

My adventure with *Gabriel* looks surprising even to me. Before the project started I had read the play and made first attempt at translating some scenes. It was just for fun, but I had hopes and enthusiasm. Then the possibility of flying to Scotland came and many things changed. It would be really difficult to overestimate the experience of this residency.

My first impulse to translate *Gabriel* was an emotional one. Simply – as an actor I fell in love with the part of Gabriel. From the moment I read the text I imagined it both as an actor and a director. That feeling made me believe that I could also hear how all the characters would speak in Polish. This kind of enchantment is probably a common reaction for artists who feel a sudden connection with someone or something. During my meetings with Catherine in Scotland I found that this strong relation with the text had imperceptibly become an obstacle during the time when I was working on it alone. From the very beginning of my work on *Gabriel*, I felt a great need to translate the emotions hidden behind the expressions the characters used, not the expressions themselves. But during the workshop I realized that in some places my ‘stories behind the words’ were different from Catherine’s original ideas. I understood that I had been slightly obscured by my own vision. For me this was the most important moment of the whole event.

We shared a lot of our life stories, ideas about the play, points of view and luckily we found the common place for both of us somewhere in the middle. I had to

rebuild my ideas for the piece but Catherine also saw some new possibilities in the original text. So sometimes the residency wasn't a translation workshop any more but jumped into a writing process in the here and now, with Catherine creating new text and me translating 'live'. I also write myself, so this experience was doubly valuable for me. Having the possibility to observe a good writer like Catherine working was also very useful. Watching her take a half-day discussion and turn it into a half-page of new dialogue, which becomes crucial for a new image of the play or the development of a certain character, was invaluable. One could say that I took a double lesson, not just as a translator but also as a writer myself.

What worked well

The conditions made by the organisers worked perfectly for me. I could work alone, then I could look at the new drafts with Catherine, and then we could get help from the actors. I'm aware that this is not a usual way of translating but for dramaturgy texts it should be a normal routine, I believe.

For example, there came an issue of how to translate 'you'. In Polish there are two options – 'ty', which is not formal and is used between friends or family members, and 'Pan' or 'Pani', which are the polite forms. Firstly I translated the whole piece using 'ty' only. I felt that the characters are somehow close to each other and I liked the effect of using this informal language. But Catherine came up with the suggestion that maybe we should think it over once again. And then appeared an idea that couldn't have existed in the original text – the characters start with the polite form and say 'Pan' and 'Pani' to each other, but as the atmosphere grows more intense they switch into 'ty' instinctively. This was particularly the case for the character of the midwife, who hides behind formal language at the start of the play. For the character of the new mother, Julie, we found a way of avoiding any direct forms in the dialogue for as long as possible, by using the impersonal form in Polish. This makes her sound even ruder. Of course it took us a step away from the original piece but now in a conscious way. In this matter the difference between our languages was turned from an obstacle into an advantage.

But such a risky idea placed on the border of psychology and specific language forms may work on paper but maybe not on the stage. Fortunately we could ask our actors for help at this stage. They not only read the parts but also gave their characters lives. It was much easier to hear if our ideas worked or not. The actors gave us useful feedback about the different forms of 'you' and the effect this has on their acting. I believe our final choices worked well.

Coincidentally we had a real nurse in our cast and a real young mother so their specific help influenced some parts of the translation as well. Some emotions and language forms can be given or imagined only by people who know the reality of a situation. Making even small changes according to their suggestions enriched the realism of the play I also used my own experiences of my recent stay in hospital and also being a new father. *Gabriel* is not a realistic piece and that's why it was so important for me to keep this inside reality which was achieved by Catherine in the original text – something that an audience can recognize and follow during this hour-long, abstract, newborn baby's hospital life-adventure.

Also the whole atmosphere around this residence and people involved helped us perfectly to achieve the final open reading which was very well received.

What could be improved

It's really hard to answer this. I came back to Poland with such great experiences and memories that I can't find anything that I would change. The only thing I have on my mind is time. A writer's work needs a distanced look, some fresh air. I believe that my work on *Gabriel* is still in progress and giving it time to mature is an inherent part of the translating process. Of course, each person has her or his own way of working. Maybe I should speak on my own behalf only. So then I would say that - forgetting for a while the logistical matters - it would be not a bad idea to split these two weeks and give the translator some free time in between. After one week of very intensive work I felt that nothing fresh could come to me on an easy way any more. I believe that intense work gives a different kind of progress than work that comes from greater distance, and both are equally important. It could be good if there was a possibility of

a meeting between the translator and the author some weeks before and/or after the residence with the purpose to look at the translation once again.

Personal benefits

I have taken a wider view of my own work. This new experience taught me much about my own abilities, self-awareness, being open and reacting quickly, which are indispensable in teamwork. I also feel that I took part not only in a translation process but also in Catherine's writing process. This is a priceless bonus.

Concluding remarks.

These artists' reports make it clear that, besides the formal objectives mentioned in the *Introduction*, the kind of incidental benefits that might have been hoped for emerged. These included that participant playwrights would develop their creative dramaturgical skills through their engagement with mainland European theatre cultures. This appears to have taken place. Further, it was hoped that they would extend their playwriting skills by working on translation of their original work and develop additionally confidence in their ability to write plays that carry meaning for other cultures. Arising from this, it was hoped that they would establish new creative relationships with their translators with a view to continuing that relationship for future plays. Again, these additional incidental benefits seem to have been achieved.

The translation workshop *Translating Text: Transforming Potential* marked a new initiative in developing the international links of contemporary Scottish theatre, offering a fresh pathway to translation, one that involving the direct collaboration of playwright and translator. The generally positive nature of the first-hand accounts by the playwrights and translators of their experience of the workshop as artists and its impact on them as theatre writers suggests that the models adopted may be valuable ones to follow in future. The SSP at its Annual General Meeting on 29 June 2013 agreed to follow through with discussions with Playwrights Studio Scotland, who were very supportive of the whole project. The hope is that it will be possible to establish further workshops based on this initiative, itself derived from the praxis

developed by the model initiated and tested by the SSP in the early years of its existence.