

Some reflections on (Post)modern Adaptations and Reinterpretations of Ancient Drama

I have decided to reflect in my talk today on “the crossroads”, so to speak, between Ancient Drama and adaptation, for two reasons. One of them is mostly of a personal and professional nature, and the other one is related to some of the things that were discussed during our previous Arion project meeting in April this year.

The personal reason is that adaptation has been a recurring focus in my work as researcher, translator and Professor of Literature at the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia. My involvement in the theoretical and practical aspects of the adaptation process resulted in my book “Texts in Motion: Problems of Translation and Adaptation”. It was published in the year 2005 and explores interdisciplinary issues of theatre translation, stage and screen adaptation – issues, which, by the way, I have found to be of particular interest to theatre and film students and professionals.

The second reason for my addressing the topic of adaptation today is related to some of the observations and comments made during the Arion Project Seminar in April, the key theme of which was the reception of Ancient Drama in Bulgarian theatre. Our discussion of the theatre situation in Bulgaria led to the conclusion that in the end of the 20th and in the beginning of the 21st century Ancient Drama tends to be presented more successfully not in its original versions, as it were, but through various kinds of adaptations – either based on already existing modern texts, or initiated by the directors themselves.

Some of the leading Bulgarian theatre directors, two of which were present at the Arion Seminar, have produced adaptations based on ancient Greek plays.

This predominance of adaptations over the original plays on the Bulgarian theatre stage in the past few decades may at first sight seem surprising, or even deplorable. But upon further reflection it could be argued that such or similar developments are neither country-specific, nor theatre-specific. They involve a much more general process which is part of what we, more or less, define as postmodern culture and art. And it is in this broader perspective that I am going to look at some aspects of the adaptation of Ancient Drama.

In modern and postmodern times adaptation has been the subject of much debate and controversy. An insightful study of the problem is presented, for instance, in the essay "Adaptation, or Cinema as Digest", which was written by the prominent French film critic and theorist André Bazin more than half a century ago, in 1948. Bazin's text focuses mainly on screen adaptation but is also relevant to other media such as theatre, radio, etc. In the introductory part of his essay, Bazin points out that the adaptation "of original works of art has become so customary and so frequent that it is next to impossible to question their existence today". Not only in practical but also in theoretical terms, Bazin's prediction that "we are moving toward a reign of adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed" has come true to a considerable extent. It has been confirmed by the subsequent "death of the author" polemics and by the rich diversity of postmodern intertextual practices.

Broadly speaking, adaptation involves interchange between different sign systems, arts, genres, media and cultures. It spans a vast and varied territory bordering on translation, on the one hand, and on the collage, on the other hand. It is often a collaborative process, in which the transition from page to stage or screen requires not only textual, conceptual and intermedial transformations but

also adaptation to specific target audiences, horizons of expectation and modes of reception. The ultimate phase which may sometimes occur is the so-called “adaptation displacement”, in which a derivative work becomes so successful that it totally displaces the original in the minds of the audience.

I shall not dwell here on the many arguments for and against adaptation. Just by way of example, I would like to say that even the use of some of the terms, related to it, reflect a range of controversial attitudes and points of view. So, for instance, André Bazin uses the word “digest” in a more or less positive sense, emphasizing the role adaptation can play in audience education and in the popularization of “high art”, which to him is a laudable and progressive idea. But some see it rather as profanation and mutilation of the original – criticism of this nature has been leveled, for example, at Peter Brook's staging of "Mahabharata", which I personally perceive as a fascinating revival of the great Indian epic. But some Indian critics have dubbed it "the Reader's Digest Mahabharata" and have attacked Brook for "westernizing" and "assimilating" the Indian masterpiece. The "Mahabharata" controversy reflects the tension between the Western and the post-colonial points of view. In opposition against the assimilating effects of "westernization", the post-colonial cultures have developed their own strategies and ways to "strike back".

The relationships of cultural domination and dependence have been increasingly questioned, subverted and fought against. An early example of these developments is the so-called "cannibalistic theory" which was propagated by the "Antropofagista movement" in Brazil in the 1920s, and which was revived later in the 20th century by a new generation of Brazilian writers and translators, among which Augusto de Campos and his brother Haroldo de Campos (who is also the translator of Homer's “Iliad”). The metaphoric description of intercultural transfer as "cannibalization” challenges the hierarchy and the boundaries between source and target culture. It involves the

appropriation and selective digestion of differences, "like cannibals eating the enemies, to incorporate some of their virtues". In a similar vein the contemporary adaptation theorist Julie Sanders uses the term "appropriation" with a positive connotation in her influential book "Adaptation and Appropriation". In this book she investigates the complex cultural, aesthetic, ideological and theoretical driving forces behind the "impulse to adapt", as she puts it, and defines adaptation as a "textual take-over" and as a process of re-imagining the source text in a new context. The German Professor of British Literature and Cultural Studies Anette Pankratz, in her article „Greek to Us? Appropriations of Myths in Plays by Howard Barker, Timberlake Wertenbaker, Sarah Kane, Maureen Duffy and Sarah Daniels", remarks that these contemporary authors make myths cross the borders between past and present, between centre and periphery; they use the classics as a "Trojan horse", in order to generate provocative new readings and interpretations.

With the advance of the so-called "cultural turn" in the last decades of the 20th century, particular attention was given to the intercultural and transcultural aspects of adaptation. In his book "Performance studies", the American theatre director, scholar and Professor in Performance studies Richard Schechner distinguishes two types of transculturalism which are relevant also with regard to the choice of adaptation strategies. The first type is called by Schechner "vertical transculturalism" and, according to him, it is most fully epitomized by the "intercultural explorations" of the prominent Polish theatre director and creator of the "theatre laboratory" concept Jerzy Grotowski. This type of interculturalism involves the interaction between archetypal cultural practices and deep individual experiences. In Bulgaria the "Sfumato" theatre workshop and especially its co-founders are well-known for their commitment to this "deep" or "vertical" type of work. In 1998 they created two ground-breaking productions, based on ancient Greek sources:

One of them was “Antigone the Mortal”, directed by Margarita Mladenova, who used fragments of the Sophocles play, in the poetical translation of Kiril Merdzanski, based on the literal translation of Nikolai Gochev. This production was part of the Sfumato “Myths” programme and received well-merited critical and scholarly acclaim. “The interpretation of Antigone in the Sfumato Theatre” was one of the topics presented in the Seminar “Contextualizing Classics” which was a joint project of Sofia University and Open Society-Budapest in the period 2005-2007.

The other 1998 Sfumato production was “Thiresius the Blind”, based on the Oedipus myth and the Sophocles’ play “Oedipus Rex”; the text was written by Kiril Merdjanski and directed by Ivan Dobchev. Like “Antigone the Mortal” it also provoked critical and scholarly interest. In May 2010 the University of Plovdiv hosted a workshop called “Oedipus and His Fate – Bulgarian Trajectories” – Prof. Cleo Protohristova was one of the organizers of this workshop. Several of the papers which were presented there and which were published afterwards in a special volume, deal with the Merdzanski – Dobchev production of “Thiresius the Blind”; this production is the central theme, for instance, in the essays of Ameliya Licheva and Kameliya Spasova.

So far I have given some examples of adaptations based on the principle of “vertical interculturalism”, as defined by Richard Schechner. But he distinguishes also a “horizontal” dimension of interculturalism, which, according to him, is best represented in the “anthropological theatre” of Eugenio Barba. Here the focus is not so much on archetypes, but on the juxtaposition of different cultures, working both in parallel and in contrast. The result represents some kind of intertextual and intercultural collage. An interesting experimental work in a similar intertextual vein was shown, again at the Sfumato theatre, in 1997. It was created by Javor Gardev, a theatre-maker of international renown, who then belonged to the younger generation of Bulgarian theatre directors. The

production was called “The Dream of Odysseus” and, in a way, it was an adaptation “of a second degree”, because one of its source materials was Heiner Müller’s adaptation of Sophocles’ tragedy “Philoctetes”. Other materials used by Gardev were some poems by the Russian dissident poet and Nobel prize winner Iosif Brodski and texts by the Bulgarian authors Georgi Tenev and Kiril Merdzhanski.

Another production which employs successfully the collage principle is the project “Medea”, conceived by theatre director and actress Diana Dobрева, which was originally shown in the Sfumato theatre in 2006, and which won the Director’s Debut Award of the Bulgarian Theatre-Makers’ Union. For this production Diana Dobрева combined classical texts of Euripides and Ovid with modern and postmodern ones by Borges, Heiner Müller and the Serbian modernist poet Vasko Popa.

Maybe some of my Bulgarian colleagues will speak in more detail about the above-mentioned and other noteworthy adaptations and re-interpretations of Ancient Drama made by Bulgarian theatre directors. But I would like in the final part of my talk to focus briefly on another adaptation-related area – namely, the translations of already existing foreign dramatic texts. My personal experience in this regard includes the translation from English into Bulgarian of the play “Medea’s Children” by Per Lysander and Suzanne Osten, in which the plot has undergone relocation and retemporalisation. The central theme is the divorce of the parents as seen through the eyes of the children. It was particularly challenging that, interspersed with the contemporary prose episodes, the play contained fragments of the Euripides text. Thus I had to do some research and, so to say, to perform some “patchwork” using two different Bulgarian translations of “Medea” by Euripides. I was privileged to have as a consultant in my work on this translation the late Professor Dimitar Boyadzhiev, an outstanding classical scholar.

Another translation, which I made in collaboration with theatre director and professor in Acting Snežina Tankovska, was of the play "A Mouthful of Birds", by the well-known British playwright Caryl Churchill and David Lan, Drawing its themes from "The Bacchae" of Euripides but set in the present, "A Mouthful of Birds" explores the themes of possession, madness and violence. It was staged at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts.

From my personal experience I can say that the translation of this kind of adaptations is quite a difficult task, precisely because of their intertextual and intercultural character.

I would like to mention also two more recent translations of theatre adaptations which merit attention. One of them is "Electra, or the Dropping of the Masks", a play by the French writer Marguerite Yourcenar which was translated in Bulgarian by Valentina Boyadzhieva and staged at the Theatre Sofia by the director Zdravko Mitkov. And the other one is the translation of the play „Phaedra's Love" by Sarah Kane, a British playwright and a key figure in the so-called "in-yer-face theatre" movement. The translation was made by one of my former students in Theatre Studies, and I hope that it will make its way to the stage.

In conclusion I would like to say that adaptation does not offer a wholesale guarantee of success, nor does it always portend failure. It is simply an alternative way, or rather a variety of ways, to re-read classical texts and to articulate their relevance to present-day audiences. And each particular re-writing or re-interpretation should be judged upon its individual features and qualities.