

Publication or Performance? Documenting the processes of translating two one-act Strindberg plays

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Theatre is known for its collaborative practices. Literary translation, on the other hand, is reputed to be a solitary pursuit. So when four academic researchers teamed up to translate August Strindberg's plays *Simoom* (1889) and *The Bond* (1892), producing single texts that would be both publishable and performable, their working procedures reflected the contrasting destinations of their product. This article documents the dynamic processes of an exercise applying collaborative techniques to literary translation, and then adapting those techniques further in recognition of the performability and speakability requirements for the actors presenting these translations. The project is noteworthy from the point of view of translation studies in its demonstration of the relevance of skopos theory (Vermeer 227-38) for practical approaches to translations influenced by their commission and aim. However, its principal interest for students of theatre translation lies in the adoption of quasi-theatrical collaborative techniques to create translated texts which, while intended primarily for pedagogical purposes, seek to incorporate staging and theatrical elements within a literary text for immediate performance.

In theatre, translated playtexts generally pass through a vigorous revision process before performance, the very fact of translation inviting interpretive intervention by a range of theatre practitioners from the writer/translator, through the creative cast of directors and designers, to the actors charged with delivering the text to the audience. A detailed example of this procedure is described by Kate Eaton in her analysis of translating the Cuban playwright Virgilio Piñera for performance in London (171-87). Theatre translation into English, especially from lesser-spoken languages such as Swedish, frequently extends this multi-layered process by commissioning an expert linguist to produce a 'literal' translation of the source text which is then used by an English-speaking playwright to create a translation/version/adaptation for performance. Helen Rappaport critiques the role of the literal translator from her practical experience translating from Russian (66-77). As she suggests, these collaborations vary considerably in their synchronicity and internal hierarchies. Eva Espasa further questions the factors behind speakability and playability, arguing that 'theatre ideology and power negotiation [are] at the heart of performability' (58). Nevertheless, theatre translation displays attributes of cooperation and polyphony which differentiate its detailed processes from the single-translator mode generally found in literary translation. In order to investigate the application of such techniques, I recorded interviews with the translators during which they recounted and reflected on their working methods, shortly after their work had been performed. The resulting dialogues, between translating partners, between linguistic and translation theories, and between publication and performance requirements, are analysed below.

The Strindberg project consisted of six 'emerging literary translators', connected with the Department of Scandinavian Studies at University College London (UCL), marking the 2012 centenary of Strindberg's death by translating four of his lesser-known one-act plays from Swedish into English

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(Broomé 11). The translations were published under the title *August Strindberg's One-Act Plays: A Selection* (Strindberg) by Norvik Press, a London-based publishing house specialising in translations of Nordic literature and critical works on Nordic culture. In accordance with the mainly academic market for Norvik's publications, the English translations were intended for educational purposes. However, it was also agreed that two of the plays would be performed in the Bloomsbury Studio Theatre by the professional theatre company, [Foreign Affairs] (sic.), an international group aiming to 'embrace national differences and traverse artistic boundaries' ([Foreign Affairs]). Agnes Broomé, the lead coordinator of the project, teamed up with Mathelinda Nabugodi to translate *The Bond*. Nichola Smalley and Anna Tebelius translated *Simoom*, along with a second play that was not performed, *Facing Death* (1892). A fourth play, *The Outlaw* (1871), translated by Anna Holmwood and John K. Mitchinson, was also included in the volume but not performed. The remainder of this article discusses only the two performed texts.

As the project coordinator, Broomé was responsible for the composition of the teams and the allocation of texts. She aimed to match complementing skills and experience, focusing on linguistic balance in the *Simoom* team where Smalley had English as her mother-tongue while Tebelius was a native Swedish speaker. As an intellectual exercise, *Simoom* held many challenges, prefiguring Strindberg's later shift away from Naturalism in its fantastical and experimental technique (Broomé 9) but also, in dealing with Franco-Algerian political relations, addressing themes likely to resonate differently for a modern post-colonial audience than for contemporary reception. *Simoom* was nevertheless chosen as the first of the plays to be performed as it provided a counterpoint to the second production, *The Bond*, both in length - the published translation covers eight pages as opposed to thirty required for *The Bond* - and in its contrast to the recognisably Strindbergian themes of broken marriage, stifling convention, small-community claustrophobia and bitter verbal conflict in the second play. It was these same qualities which prompted Broomé to take on *The Bond* for her own pairing with Nabugodi: Broomé has been 'immersed in Strindberg' (AB)<sup>1</sup> as a teacher and researcher for over four years, and also teaches drama translation, whereas Nabugodi had not previously worked on translating Strindberg or dramatic texts, although her engagement with the theoretical study of the nature of translation as a practice and concept informed her approach to the project. Although Broomé and Nabugodi were both translating from their native Swedish, the range of their experience and academic background offered the potential for translational dialogue during the process, Broomé's familiarity with Strindberg complementing Nabugodi's theoretical interrogation of the translation practice. Furthermore, all three pairs of translators in the project were provided with experienced mentors. The literary and theatre translator Charlotte Barslund, whose literal translations of Ibsen's plays have been used by the English playwrights David Eldridge

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are taken from the following interviews recorded by the author. The speakers are identified in the article by their initials in parentheses, where necessary for clarity.

Mathelinda Nabugodi (MN) and Anna Tebelius (AT), interviewed at University College London, 26 October 2012.

Agnes Broomé (AB) and Nichola Smalley (NS), interviewed at University College London, 14 November 2012.

and Simon Stephens to create their award-winning versions of *The Wild Duck* (2005) and *A Doll's House* (2012) respectively, advised Broomé and Nabugodi. Smalley and Tebelius had access to Dr. Marie Wells, recently retired W. P. Ker lecturer in Norwegian at UCL, translator, critic, Ibsen-specialist and adviser to professional theatre companies on Ibsen productions, for example *Rosmersholm* at the Almeida Theatre in London (2008).

All four translators acknowledged the value of their mentors as a resource in the translation process. Barslund and Wells brought an intimate knowledge of literary translation and, more crucially, the technicalities of dramaturgical writing for translation, to which none of the participants had previously been exposed. Broomé admitted that, even though she taught drama translation to students of the Swedish language, and had also previously translated professionally into English, she had never worked with this type of text before, and found Strindberg 'very difficult but very rewarding'. Nabugodi remembered particularly helpful advice from Barslund which she characterised as thinking about 'the development of the characters within the play, what they feel and think', and also the recommendation that 'you don't have to be word-for-word, you can move away from the original, be more colloquial, more English'. Nabugodi found that with these suggestions, Barslund 'pulled us out from the text to see it as a play'.

The recognition of the translation as a performable play was a striking moment for all the translators, as I discuss in further detail below. In the early stages of translation, however, this interrogation of the closeness of the translation featured significantly both in the translating pairs' interaction with the Swedish text and their conversations with each other. All were aware of their obligations to Norvik to create translations that would serve for the purposes of academic study, and conducted their translations as close readings of Strindberg's text. Tebelius itemised the complementing linguistic strengths within her pair: 'There were some occasions where Nicky [Smalley] was stronger in grammar, for example, whereas she would rely on me for subtleties of meaning.' Within this boundary, however, both teams wished to incorporate a reading that not only illustrated their own interpretations of the text but also cast a light back onto Strindberg, and his critical reputation. Nabugodi recalled an early meeting in which the whole translating group had discussed postcolonial feminist issues and their potential influences on the translations. Smalley had investigated Swedish research into Strindberg's reputed 'misogyny'. Tebelius explained that even in a close translation, she and Smalley attempted to make such areas 'visible', albeit in 'tiny little instances'. In this, she felt that they had shifted the focus of their translation from an earlier English version (Strindberg 1921), making it more relevant for the modern reader without attempting a full-scale transposition. As Smalley and Tebelius write in their *Translators' Note*, their intention is that 'parallels might be drawn with later conflicts' without overly imposing their own interpretation of 'what Strindberg was trying to do with his play' (62).

Although all the translators conducted academic research around the project, they were insistent that they aimed to avoid being influenced by previous translations, wishing to create distinctive new translations in comparison with the extant English versions of Strindberg's one-act plays. They did not therefore read the previous translations until they had produced several of their own drafts. Neither did they view versions of Strindberg's more well-known plays on stage in London in 2012,

during the time that they were translating, which included Patrick Marber's *After Miss Julie* at the Young Vic Theatre and *Mademoiselle Julie*, a French translation by Terje Sinding, at the Barbican Theatre. They were therefore reliant on their research and their mentors for elements of performability in their translations, and all agreed that their approach was initially from an academic standpoint. Nabugodi considered that her academic training was of assistance to the extent that she could 'better word' the translation choices that she was making. She also professed the realisation of a divide between some of the 'more fancy forms of translation theory' and the practicalities of translating.

The negotiations conducted by all four translators with the source text, and any potential tensions between their linguistic and theoretical training, were, however, supported by a further dialogue: characterising her shared practice with Tebelius as translating 'together at every stage, sitting in front of a keyboard with lots of cups of tea', Smalley conjured up an image that reflected the overriding enthusiasm for the collaborative process. Although the translators were colleagues, they had not previously worked so closely together, but all found the experience positive and enriching, both personally and in respect of the quality of the translation. Broomé enjoyed the reflection on 'interpretational choices' which resulted from her interaction with Nabugodi, but also identified team strength in the confidence-building exercise of 'confirming or questioning' translation choices: 'It would have been scarier to hand things over to an experienced mentor if I had been alone'. Smalley agreed in relation to her own collaboration with Tebelius that 'making decisions becomes much easier and more well-considered'. Nabugodi added, 'We motivate one another. We play off one another'. This consensus with regard to the value of collaborative working extended to additional revision features built into this translation project: the dynamic microactivity of translating in pairs was supplemented by formally arranged group discussions (including all six translators), peer review, mentor review and, most significantly for the performance, dramatic readings by the professional actors and, ultimately, the production. The translation process thus reflected the multi-collaborative procedure adopted for theatrical texts, reflected in the final published translation.

That a translation initially intended for study purposes should be thus influenced by collaborative theatre techniques was not a primary intention of the project. Although dramatic texts, the plays included in this project are rarely staged, with a limited performance history or expectation. Sirku Aaltonen's identification of the 'duality of dramatic texts as elements of both the literary and theatrical [national] systems' highlights the differently defined translating strategies which apply dependent on the relevant system, although she points out that such systems may 'cooperate [and] benefit from each other's activities' ( 38). This Strindberg project is an example of such cooperation, inasmuch as the collaborative practices originally, and unusually, adopted for literary translation purposes grew to include a dramatic reading by the professional theatre company [Foreign Affairs]. In recollection, this reading was a pivotal moment in the direction of the translation. Tebelius remembered that, although she and Smalley had been reading their text to each other as they translated, now they 'were performing the translation, all of a sudden'. Broomé and Nabugodi separately recalled the unexpected comedy of *The Bond* on its first reading: 'We realised that the whole thing is a very black, dark but funny play. Spontaneously, there was a lot of laughter. So we

went back and made it stronger' (AB). Smalley recognised that the professional reading 'made us aware that we were doing things in a very writerly way that maybe wasn't appropriate'.

The dramatic reading thus strongly influenced subsequent revisions of the translations. Among the amendments noted by the translators were issues of speakability: 'the focus of the sentence, or people stumbled over a word' (NS); comprehension: 'feedback from the actors that they hadn't understood, for instance, that Biskra [an Arabic girl] is dressed as a male' (AT); genre: 'we're not doing this tedious court-room drama, it's actually very humorous' (MN); and general tonal approach: 'the voices, consistency in each character, flow, rhythm, sentence length' (AB). Playability was thus inscribed in the published text, melding the literary with the performable. The reading in itself, however, was insufficient to 'create a context' for a performed translation, a phenomenon that is 'necessarily achieved in collaboration with the director of a new theatre version', according to a panel of experienced theatre practitioners and academics (Laera 215). The specificity of a performed translation is shaped in the rehearsal room. David Johnston's analysis of theatre translation praxis, a theoretically constructed interrogation of translation theory in theatre, insists on the translator's engagement with 'the interactive practice of theatre-making which [...] is subject to a continual process of cultural re-evaluation' ( 28); the evolution of a performed text continues beyond the translator's finished draft, into rehearsal, and onto the stage in production. The translator can expect to be consulted, but may not be heeded. The published text for a performed play evidences a point in the translation's trajectory, but not necessarily the work presented to the audience.

The Strindberg translators saw the post-dramatic-reading adjustments as improvements to their translations, and anticipated further movement during rehearsal. However, they accepted that the transformative role would be undertaken by the theatre practitioners of [Foreign Affairs], while they as translators occupied a consultancy status. Nabugodi explained, 'In rehearsal they asked us questions, but we didn't want to comment on the direction'. Tebelius went further: 'There was a feeling [among us] that their work was very separate [...] like when you have written something or translated something, you give it to the world, it's no longer yours'. Broomé, as coordinator, met the theatre company leaders, and felt that she could have had a stronger voice in the production if she had chosen to do so, but preferred not to 'get involved with directing or step on their toes'. In retrospect, however, there was a sense of regret that the intimacy with the text gained from translation was not fully conveyed in performance. In this sense, the translators displayed the 'translator doubleness' identified by Johnston, approaching their texts with 'the atterritoriality of a reader-practitioner who simultaneously exists within the world of the text whilst plundering it for its potential resonances within the contours of a new target language and culture' ( 13). The translators expressed surprise that the actors remained so close to the written text. Nabugodi was concerned that the 'resonances and echoes' of the play did not always come through in performance. Smalley would have preferred to maintain a flexibility in the performance text that might allow more of the meaning to be transmitted: 'The actors said that they could not change the text. I was almost offended that my words were in some way unchangeable.' For the translators, faithfulness to the text need not entail such reverence to Strindberg that it becomes impossible to investigate 'what he is and what he isn't' (AT). The opportunities afforded by this project to re-position Strindberg in a

modern context should also allow for a re-evaluation of translation strategies, where accepted verbal choices can be queried alongside accepted reputational values.

The Strindberg project began as the literary translation of dramatic texts, but its adoption of theatrical methodologies of collaboration, trial and review, introduced an element of performance into the act of translation that was captured by publication, although perhaps not fully represented in the staged production. The translators were increasingly aware of the tensions between literary and performable translation, along with the context in which the translation would be used, but saw the benefits of collaboration for improving the variability and outcomes of translation decisions, creating enjoyable working practices and producing translations that were more appropriately focused for their users: dramatic texts that remained close to their sources but also instantly performable. The project provided an introduction to the different approaches required for theatre translation, with its many drafts and flexibility of language, and the translators rose to this challenge. One criticism made of academic translators, especially for theatre, is that they can be too averse to the adjustments necessary for stagecraft, but I found no sense of 'protection' among this group of translators with regard to their translations. Their emphasis was rather on communicating with the receivers of the translation, projecting Strindberg to a new audience who should be allowed to draw their own conclusions about the author and his work. If anything, Broomé, Nabugodi, Smalley and Tebelius were prepared to go further than their professional acting colleagues in tailoring the translation to make an appropriate and convincing presentation for these lesser-known works, and their significance among Strindberg's output as a whole. Thus the collaborative techniques of theatre are inscribed in dramatic translations for publication. The Strindberg project marked out a space where literary and theatre translation could co-exist, representing the original for different audiences, but there was a clear recognition among the translators that, as with all translatorial activity, this was but one more development in the eternal contingency of transformation that is translation.

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