

Translated drama under the spotlight: the case of Irish and other languages

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Introduction

Certain scholarly commentary suggests that a drama script only represents one piece of its entire story and, as a result, it is frequently not afforded a status equal to that assigned to other genres in literature. In the following article, the subject of drama, especially as it pertains to translation, will be discussed. International examples will be drawn upon to assert that drama deserves its own space within the field of literary endeavour and that it is not as easy as one might think to distinguish between literary and dramatic works. The difficulties in defining what is meant by drama as well as the complications involved in staging a drama will be illustrated. Even though Irish-language drama, particularly in Irish cities, has generally been considered as underground theatre down the years, examples from international drama will be used as a mechanism to compare and contrast them with Irish-language equivalents, thus demonstrating that Irish-language drama and international drama have many traits in common in this context.

Defining drama

Ploix (2019: 61) states that the integrity of dramatic texts has to be looked at as a complete entity so that they can be analysed correctly. If this analysis is approached in a diachronic way, drama texts can be used as a useful historical tool to map the cultural evolution of a language. Drama texts and translations exist in an interconnected space, i.e. between the dramatic and literary systems. In the western world, for the most part, a drama emerges from a written text and it is accepted that every element needed to stage the drama is already part of that text (Aaltonen 2000: 33). Can this ever be entirely true, however? If we examine two different examples in exploring this point, we see that the statement is not as clear-cut as might first appear. In Chinese drama, for example, the dramatic text is used as a framework on which the production is built and it is on the stage itself that the majority of the work is executed and seen. In this case, it can be claimed that the text performed on stage does not have the same status in comparison to a book in the literary system, as the production of the drama depends on the physical work carried out on stage by the actors (Aaltonen 2000: 27). Italian drama between the 16th and 18th centuries, known as '*Commedia dell'arte*', supports this assertion, as the drama is completely based on the actors' skills in putting the show together on the spot without any mention of scripts or texts (Aaltonen 2000: 34).

On the other hand, we can consider 'closet drama' as being in contrast to this, where a text is written by an author but might not necessarily be intended for the stage. Aaltonen has observed that many of the translations she analysed were never officially published and were only available in the form of typewritten scripts. These texts were usually not available publicly and thus had to be requested from the Central Library in Helsinki (Aaltonen 2000: 39).

With regard to the Irish language, it could be argued that an opposing paradox exists. On the whole, source dramas or foreign texts are translated into Irish so that they can be performed on stage. In certain cases, these texts are only performed once and, for the most part, an official version of the Irish-language drama is never officially published. A number of reasons can be attributed to this: (1) Out of the 736 Irish-language plays (excluding pantomimes) that were staged in Ireland between 1901 and 2010, over half were translations (384 in total) (Irish Theatre Institute, 2011). (2) As well as the widespread use of translations to fill Irish-language theatre seats, many plays were written for literary competitions as part of Oireachtas na Gaeilge

(a bi-annual Irish-language festival of culture and heritage). This meant that dramas were available for theatres like the Abbey and the Damer in the 20th century but that also, more often than not, an official version of the Irish-language drama was never published.

With no funding or support, many Irish-language plays only exist in typescript form in the archive of An Comhlachas Náisiúnta Drámaíochta (The National Drama Association) and in other archives around the country. *Dúirt Bean Liom* by Aisteoirí Ghobnatan (1959), *Éirí na Gealaí* by Eoghan Ó Lionáird and Máirtín Mac Donnchadha (1952), *Uaigneas an Ghleanna* by Risteárd Ó Foghludha (1923) or *Leannáin* by Máire Stafford (1988) all fall into this category. Even though these plays did not start out as closet dramas, they became closet dramas retrospectively, as the public could not access them and, in many cases, the plays are no longer staged.¹

Staging a drama

In other cases, plays have acquired a dual role in that while they may have been written for the stage only at first, they now exist in the literary canon as well as still being performed. If we take Shakespeare or perhaps Molière, for example, even though their works are still being shown on stage, in certain cultures such as Finland, they are read primarily as part of the literary canon (Aaltonen 2000: 39). On the whole, dramatic texts and their translations are written primarily for the stage, and the writer and the translator alike have to be aware of the crucial element of the stage itself, and that there is a rigid bond between what is written and what is ultimately shown on stage (Bassnett 1985: 87). According to the Cameroonian director, Pierre Makon, the writer must foresee how the text will come together on stage when writing: ‘un créateur théâtral qui se veut constructeur, écrit-il dans la perspective d’une réalisation concrète pour un public’ (Makon 1988: 262). The ability to realise this prophecy shows that the writer is able to produce a text that will work effectively on stage and so bridge the gap between literature and drama. Scholars such as Susan Bassnett call this concept ‘performability.’ The concept is often discussed in the context of drama and the term itself is meant to encompass a wide number of aspects including the ability (a) to compose a text that will transfer easily to the stage and (b) to ensure that every effort is made to realise this aspect in the staged production. Bassnett readily admits, however, that it is almost impossible to fully define ‘performability’, as the concept changes from culture to culture, from era to era and from text to text (Bassnett 1991: 102).

As well as performability, Jiří Levý also alludes to ‘speakability’ as another demand that the text must aim to fulfil, i.e. using short sentences, avoiding the use of rare or obscure words or sentence structures with difficult consonant clusters, which will add to the overall effect of the drama on stage and will impress the audience as a result (Levý 1969: 128). To support the importance of this point we can consider a review of a show by the drama society, An Comhar, which appeared in the newspaper, *An Phoblacht*, in 1930. The actors’ stage skills were called into question by the reviewer, as it appeared to him that they had spent the night simply trying to memorise their lines in Irish. The reviewer’s contention was that they did not have enough time to bring all the necessary elements together in the play, i.e. good acting and fluent Irish. A similar issue was noted by another reviewer in *Star* in 1929 who observed that the prompter was the busiest person in the theatre on the night he watched the show (O’Leary 2004: 470-71). One might have a degree of sympathy for the actors in these instances, however, as it was amateur theatre and the actors simply did not have enough time to master entirely all the necessary elements of the plays before the opening night. It seemed that reviewers of the time, in particular, expected a professional standard of acting from the performers (even though these

¹ This situation is not unique to Irish, as the same applies to translations into English, e.g. Sebastian Barry’s ‘version’ of Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* <http://www.irishplayography.com/play.aspx?playid=30646>. Some plays written in English have also never been published.

were often low-budget productions) and to hear fluent, mellifluous Irish on stage. Even on the west coast of the country, where the Irish language was stronger and more widely spoken, similar difficulties were faced by actors. It was noted that the dialectal and acting skills of the cast performing *Hyacinth Halvey* by Lady Gregory in An Taibhdhearc were substandard and that the actors' spoken Irish, in particular, was unsatisfactory. In a review in *Éireannach* in 1935, the actors were criticised for not attaching enough importance to the issue of Irish-language phonology. It was noted that the standard of delivery itself was poor and that the accent of the actors was less than desirable (O'Leary 2004: 473-75). These examples tie into Levý and Bassnett's ideas of speakability and performability but concern over the issues of phonology and ease of capacity regarding spoken Irish on stage stretches back to the start of the 20th century. In a review of *Tobar Draoidheachta* by Father Pádraig Ó Duinnín, which appeared in *Muimhneach Óg* in 1903, it was reported that '[the play] was generally enjoyed even by people who did not understand a word of Irish (O'Leary 2017: 4).' This point illustrates that Irish-language drama had to kill two birds with the one stone, as it were – to stage entertaining and enjoyable plays but to do so in such a way that would draw a sizable audience that might not necessarily have fluency in Irish.

In order to overcome this issue the playwright, Mairéad Ní Ghráda, has often been in favour of writing Irish-language plays in such a way that they could be understood by those whose command of the language might be limited. She often wrote original plays using simple yet effective Irish, to make easily the language easily comprehensible. This ensured that she was able to build a sufficiently broad Irish-language audience and thus draw more people into theatres to see her plays (Ní Bhrádaigh 1996: 36 & 42). It is evident that this did not detract from the overall standard of Irish in her work, as *An Triail* was one of the first original Irish-language plays to be translated into English and subsequently enjoyed significant success in that language (Ní Bhrádaigh 1996: 57).

In similar fashion, Mícheál Ó Conghaile, the translator of the works of Martin McDonagh, used English words in his translations in order to facilitate the audience's understanding of the language spoken on stage. In the Irish translation of *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, he retained English words like 'cancer' and 'T.B.' in the play in order not only to stress the power of those words in English but also to give an opportunity to the audience to keep up with the pace of the play itself. According to Ó Conghaile, if the listener is immersed in the live story of the play, they do not have two or three seconds to register the word and its implications in their mind. This eases the sharpness and power of the play as a result.

Má tá éisteoir báite i scéal beo an dráma níl an dá nó an trí soicind sin aige leis an bhfocal agus a impleachtaí a chhlárú ina intinn. Maolaítear faobhar agus cumhacht an dráma dá réir creidim. (Ó Conghaile 2015: 119).

However, with regard to translation, performability or speakability should not be understood to mean free rein to shape the source text so that it suits the stage of the target culture. As the translation scholar, Christiane Nord (2018) has observed, some textual loyalty needs to be retained and cultivated as, ultimately, the text itself is the starting point for the translator. To help retain this textual loyalty as well as ensuring the suitability of the translation for the stage, the theatre semiologist, Tadeusz Kowzan, suggests five categories that the playwright or translator should bear in mind when producing a text:

1. The spoken text
2. The expression of the body
3. The external appearance of the actor (gestures and physical traits)
4. The acting space (the size and layout of the space, props, lighting effects, etc.)

5. Non-verbal sound (Bassnett 1985: 88)

These five points can also be compared to the concept of *mise en scène*. According to the actor and director, Antoine Vitez, ‘because it is a work in itself, a great translation already contains its *mise en scène*. Ideally the translation should be able to command the *mise en scène* and not the reverse’ (Vitez 1982: 9).

Once again, a comparison can be drawn here to works by Shakespeare; translations of his plays are based on the text itself as it is frequently thought that the power of the word lies in the original script. Even though plays by Shakespeare can be staged without too much difficulty, the text stands as the reference point for translators when translating. It is not often that the performability of his plays is discussed, as significantly more emphasis is placed on the well-written text, which shows that the performance element is intertwined in the text and is waiting for playwrights and translators to work it out, allowing actors to then perform it on stage (Bassnett 1991: 106). This view was reinforced by Heiner Müller when talking about the famed theatre director, Robert Wilson, observing that ‘He never interprets a text, contrary to the practice of directors in Europe. A good text does not have to be “interpreted” by a director or by an actor (Pavis 1992: 39).’

The chain of players in translated drama

Another aspect within the drama translation process also emerges from this discussion, i.e. who are the players in this system? In the literary system, we talk about publishers, producers, writers, translators, readers or receivers. In the dramatic system, however, other players are added to the chain, i.e. directors, producers, actors, the audience (as well as readers) and dramaturgs. With respect to the place of the translator in this process, Bassnett believes that they still have a marginalised role within this system and that very often translators are only asked to produce a version of the original text so that a monolingual dramatist can adapt the script for the stage in the receiving culture (Bassnett 1991: 101). In such cases, textual loyalty between the source and target text is cast aside in order to focus on filling theatre seats which is often a challenge in itself, especially for Irish-language theatres in the 20th century like the Damer and the Abbey Theatre. Even if a true translation of a text is produced, Bassnett has indicated that loyalty to the translator’s text cannot always be assured as directors, actors and dramaturgs have their own way of interpreting and registering a text before finally putting it on stage in front of an audience who will also react to the staged play in their own unique way (Bassnett 1998: 101).

This was an issue seen in the case of the Irish-language play, *An Triail*, for example. The play’s producer, Tomás Mac Anna, said that he discussed the play with Mairéad Ní Ghráda and that the ending was rewritten after the first production to dramatise and add further to the overall impact of the play. It was decided that it would make more sense for the play to end with the suicide of the main character (Ní Bhrádaigh 1996: 65). In this instance, it is clear that this was an effective decision as is evident from the international success subsequently enjoyed by the play.

Mícheál Ó Conghaile mentioned that he and playwright Martin McDonagh often contacted one another while he was translating *The Cripple of Inishmaan* into Irish (Ó Conghaile 2015: 125). While he was working on his translation of the play, Ó Conghaile said that difficulties arose with the translation of the insult ‘goose’ in the English version, as its equivalent in Irish, ‘gé’, might have implications for the phonology of the words, as ‘gay’ and ‘gé’ are homonyms of one another. Having contacted McDonagh and suggested ‘gandal’ as an alternative version, McDonagh replied saying, ‘gandal is good.’ In the same correspondence, Ó Conghaile mentioned that he and the actor playing the main character (Billy) didn’t see eye to eye regarding Scene Seven. The actor believed that the scene should be kept in English as in it

Billy was observed rehearsing a script in Hollywood but Ó Conghaile and the producer thought that the scene represented events in Billy's own life and that it should be translated into Irish. McDonagh confirmed that Billy was in fact rehearsing in the scene but that it should not be kept in English as it would expose a giveaway in the following scene that the audience should not be aware of at that stage in the play (Ó Conghaile 2015: 126).

Therefore, where there is a chain of players in the dramatic process, it is almost certain that there will be some sort of alteration to the final presentation of the content. This can be looked at negatively or positively, as these players could potentially rescue a bad play on stage or, perhaps, even destroy a good text during its production phase due to conflicts of interest that may arise before the play ever sees the light of the stage. In spite of that possibility, however, Ploix (2019: 68) refers to some examples where it was the text itself that had the final say. He references Serpieri (2013) and his Italian translation of *Hamlet*. After much toing and froing with the actors about the speakability of the text on stage, the translated text was completely adhered to in the end in order to preserve the complexity of the written script.

Reinforcing this consideration, Barker claims that 'If language is restored to the actor he ruptures the imaginative blockade of the culture, if he speaks banality he batteries up servitude' (1997: 18). A writer, therefore, can offer a helping hand to the various players in the chain, too, so that the original idea in the text is maintained and brought through to the stage itself. In that context, as well as the main body of the text, writers can use stage directions as a metatext with an exact description of the body language that should be employed when saying certain lines, if they wish to control the behaviour of the actors to a certain degree, as well as other minor details that might not necessarily be obvious in the text itself (Pavis 1992: 28).

To adapt or translate a play?

In engaging with the challenges that often attach to the staging of a written text, the idea of adaptation is sometimes discussed as a phenomenon that pertains to drama as a whole. If we take *Romeo and Juliet* by Goethe, for example, his version of the play drew sustained criticism, as it was a complete adaptation and did not adhere to the source text. This was deemed to be an 'amazing travesty' by certain Shakespearean scholars throughout the years that followed Goethe's published version of the play (Aaltonen 2000: 22).

By contrast, however, the playwright, David Hare, actually prefers using the term 'adaptation' when he speaks about his version of *Pirandello*. He believes that there is a sense of achievement associated with the term, as it suggests that he was able to address elements that were lacking in the source text and rectify them in the target text. 'Adaptation' instead of 'translation' underpins the idea that the 'translator' succeeded in producing a text that was natural instead of static (Aaltonen 2000: 45).

Another example of this is the English 'translation' of *Godot* by Samuel Beckett himself. When he was translating this play from French, it is clear that he emphasised the speech of the tramps through use of Hiberno-English, i.e. 'Ah, stop blathering' or 'It'd be gas', which is something that was not evident in the original French version of the same text (Roche 2006: 489). This indicates the right of the original author to produce a version of the original play without having to adhere to the convention of translating a text word for word.

As well as this, when deciding whether to adapt or translate any particular play, a writer may decide that a significant differential in time between the appearance of the original text and the new version being prepared may need to be addressed. If we consider *The Plough and the Stars* by Seán O'Casey, for example, the play ends with the complete defeat of the freedom fighters. When that play was staged in Finland in 1972, however, an extra scene was added to illustrate that the struggle against the English continued long after. It is thought that this was done to remind the audience of the recommencement in 1968 of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and that this was not in fact the true ending of the story (Aaltonen 2000: 93). Seamus Heaney, in

his version of Sophocles' *Antigone (The Burial at Thebes)*, also adopted a markedly Hiberno-English idiom in the text of the play and explained his approach thus:

R. C. Jebb, for example, and E. F. Watling, who did the old Penguin translations of The Theban Plays, were under an obligation to render the Greek correctly. They had a scholarly discipline to obey. I, on the other hand, did want to give the substance of the meaning, but my first consideration was speakability. I also wanted different registers, in the musical sense, for different characters and movements in the play.²

These examples serve to illustrate that the way in which the passage of time is handled in particular plays also plays an important role in drama. As well as various readings and interpretations of the same text by actors, directors and dramaturgs, it should also be noted that these readings or interpretations can change over time and that the same person may read the same text in a new light years later and derive from a fresh reading a different take-home message. This may be one of the reasons why a new adaptation or translation of a text can emerge (Aaltonen 2000: 37).

En Attendant Godot is a good example of this. When the play was first written, it was described as a non-political play but when it was staged years later in Algeria, the play was interpreted as having adopted a revolutionary stance on behalf of peasants who possessed no land in their own country (Aaltonen 2000: 78).

Adaptation as a practice was also popular in the Irish-language community. The writer and translator, Liam Ó Rinn, was ahead of his time in that he understood that there was more to translation than a mechanical process whereby the translator went from word to word or from line to line in order to transplant the source text into the new culture. To avoid the intrusive influence of the English language on the Irish language, he proposed that it was best to read twenty lines, stand back, and then translate them into Irish in a summarised version so that the language would sound more natural and that the deposits of English would not be sensed in the new Irish translation. He coined the term *dlúth-plagiarizm* ('close plagiarism') for his *modus operandi*. He then revisited this idea and advised that the best solution was to adapt the text instead of translating it in an arbitrary way. Ó Rinn went on to suggest that it would be more beneficial to the development of the language to produce the text as a free rendering so that translators and writers would have more freedom to weave foreign texts into Gaelic culture. This also meant that it was preferable to domesticate the translated texts and essentially gaelicise them. This approach was seen in translations by Shán Ó Cúiv such as *An Bhean ón dTuath* based on *La Vieille Cousine* by Émile Souvestre or *An Uadhacht* by Máiréad Ní Ghráda, based on *Gianni Schicchi* by Puccini (O'Leary 2004: 402).

The notion of culture and nationalism

The previous discussion drew attention to the importance of culture in terms of the Irish language, an aspect that is so omnipresent that it cannot be ignored. Bassnett claims that culture is central in the translation of drama and refers to the phenomenon as 'theatre anthropology' to show that the cultural aspect is intrinsically woven into the theatre. This underpins the idea that there will always be various production conventions based on any given culture (Nikolarea 2002).

Furthermore, Annie Brisset states that drama emerges from society and that often we can see a verisimilitude between what is happening on stage during a play and what is actually going on in a society. She uses the case of Québécois to reinforce her point and to highlight the immense effort expended during the 20th century to use drama in this language for the purpose of

² Cited in a review of *The Burial at Thebes* by Eileen Battersby in *The Irish Times* (3 April, 2004).

promoting nationalism in Canada (Brisset 1996: 5). Throughout the 20th century, these productions stood as a nationalistic symbol against other imports of English and French literary texts that were used to create a cultural distance between these infiltrating cultures and Québec. This in turn fortified their own culture as a result (Brisset 1996: 54-55). Similar to the Irish language in the 20th century, drama in Québec was used as a propagandist tool to promote nationalistic thinking, as it was difficult to censor live drama on stage in comparison to printed books, for example (Aaltonen 2000: 83). According to Ó Siadhail, the Irish League regarded drama as a propagandist tool to promote the language whereas Yeats and Gregory regarded the craft as a living art form that needed to be preserved (Ó Siadhail 1993: 29). As Irish speakers and as Irish people, it was thought at the time that it was their duty to retain a loyalty to the concept of Gaelachas – a sense of being that was understood to derive from speaking the Irish language – and from practising Catholicism. As a result of that understanding, some of what was being written at the time was restricted in order to realise this vision and conform to it. The Irish-language community came down harshly on some Irish playwrights writing in English like J. M. Synge, as it was assumed at the time that in his work, he intentionally attacked their dearly held concepts of Gaelachas and Catholicism. At the start of the 20th century, Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, was widely rejected by the Irish-language community, as it was thought that it went against the values Irish-language writers strove to promote through their literary work in the Ireland of the time.

Writers like Pearse and Hyde endeavoured to promote the Irish language in a positive manner, to highlight Ireland as a prosperous place and to entice those considering leaving for greener pastures to stay in Ireland thereby continuing the growth of the Irish-language revival. Ó Siadhail saw such a propagandist mentality as a contagious disease that was prevalent at the start of the 20th century. The plays that were being written at that time frequently explored historical themes and the revival of the Irish language, and the Gaels were portrayed as brave heroes on stage in order to challenge the idea of the 'stage Irishman' that was often presented in English literature and drama (Ó Siadhail 1993: 30 & 34). Highlighting the importance of literary propaganda in Irish, Art Ó Gríofa wrote in the newspaper, *Sinn Féin*: 'The performer of an Irish play in a public theatre is worth more to Irish nationality than fifty pamphlets or bilingual plays with a propagandist moral at the end' (Ó Siadhail 1993: 47).

Conclusion

In the history of various languages, the status assigned to texts in the literary canon is frequently not assigned to drama. Even though O'Leary considered Irish-language drama to be an underground theatre in the cities of Ireland, it cannot be denied that such a label has remained a central feature of the history of the Irish language for more than 100 years now – especially during the early years of the 20th century – as the Irish-language revival movement gathered momentum.

As has been noted previously, however, even on an international level, drama and literature are quite often not regarded in the same way, as certain literary scholars believe that a script or drama text only contains one element of the complete process and that the play itself is only ever fully realised when it is produced on stage.

However, the arguments advanced in this essay suggest otherwise. The story of drama on an international level – and on a national level, in the case of Irish – is a great deal more complex than what is normally considered to be the case. It may therefore be argued that plays and texts in the literary system confront and engage with the same challenges. In the case of closet drama, even though such a play can be produced on stage, the complete product is deemed to be mostly in the script itself. This idea was clearly evidenced in the case of Irish because, very often, scripts written for the stage become closet plays thereafter, as they are never officially published.

Furthermore, in exploring the concepts of speakability and performability in drama, and the difficulties such ideas pose, it is clear that they emerge as significant factors in considering the case of Irish-language drama and its evolution during the 20th century. Written dramatic texts are complex and have the capacity to become even more so when they end up in the hands of all those in the chain of people a play must pass through on its way to being staged. Such complexity pertains to numerous cultures across the world, including the complex culture of the Irish language and the history of its development throughout the 20th century. In fact, the notion of culture is hugely important in any language and sometimes, therefore, it is better to adapt a play in certain instances in order to domesticate (or, in the case of Ireland), to gaelicise the text which will eventually be encountered by the target audience. Drama, then, can be used in the same manner as literature to encourage a certain way of thinking among a group of people or to promote a propagandist agenda such as the case of Québécois in Canada or, indeed, the Irish language in Ireland.

It is essential, therefore, that plays, whether original texts or translations, be treated as key elements in the history and cultural evolution of any language. The same respect and treatment is due to them as would be assigned to any literary text as representing invaluable features of the cultural heritage of a language including, as has been asserted here, the context of the Irish language.

The primary contention in this article is that one can regard drama in any literary system as a highly relevant entity and that it merits its own space in the canon. Irish-language drama contributed greatly to the literature and culture of the language throughout the 20th century and appropriate status must therefore be assigned in the literary canon to such scripts and plays. It is only by doing so that the literary heritage of the language can be properly analysed, studied and assessed. Dramatic output must deal with its own particular challenges but if the script or play itself is afforded proper standing within the literary canon, much can be learned about the development of a language and its culture. Even though official versions of some Irish-language plays have never been published, it is imperative that an appropriate space is created for them in Irish-language literary discourse, as they have their own story to tell and it is one that has much to say.

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