

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

4:1 2018

Transitions

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

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Published in May 2018

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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies

<http://www.skenejournal.it>

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Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù

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ERIC NICHOLSON*

A Double *Dovere/Diletto*: Using Alessandro Serpieri's Translations for Bilingual Productions of Shakespeare's Plays

Abstract

These director's notes pay homage to Alessandro Serpieri by explaining how his outstanding translations of *The Tempest* and *Richard II* enabled experimental bilingual productions of these two plays, the one performed mainly in English in Florence (2004), the other performed mainly in Italian in Verona (2017). A case is made for appreciating how bilingualism can function as an enhancement rather than an impediment to interpretation, as part of the double 'duty and delight' of the director and cast in mixing and sometimes grafting together distinct verbal utterances, along with disparate cultural references and styles of performance. Also addressed are questions of intersemiotic translation, as well as the application of Serpieri's salient, illuminating insights into deixis and gestic language.

KEYWORDS: Translation for theatre; Shakespeare; bilingualism; hybridity; experimental *mise en scène*; intersemiotic translation

Among Alessandro Serpieri's numerous amiable traits was his exceptional generosity. I could devote this entire article to narrating specific instances of how he gave his time, energy, knowledge, insights, and genial support to his students and colleagues. Indeed, to recount these episodes adequately, we would need far more space than we have here. In my own case, I always will recall how Sandro went out of his way to provide illuminating advice and comments on several of my theatrical productions at both the Syracuse and New York University programmes in Florence, which he and his beloved, also deeply missed wife Anna made special efforts to attend. Most importantly, and most pertinently for the purposes of this commemorative volume, I need to acknowledge with the deepest gratitude my equally profound debt to the two outstanding translations Alessandro made of *The Tempest* and of *Richard II*: these enabled the bilingual scripts for my theatrical interpretations of these plays. The following pages, then, offer some anecdotes as well as analyses of the productions that I directed in 2004 and 2017, the first entitled *La Tempesta, the Imperfect Storm* (at Syracuse University in Florence), the second *Riccardo II in-contra I Sette contro Tebe*, at the Teatro Laboratorio in Verona. I will devote particular attention to questions of translating not only Shakespeare's words into Italian – as Professor Serpieri so magisterially did – but also his stagecraft into live, ensemble action, thus aiming to coordinate a bilingual text with congruent gestic language. Following the persuasive assertion of Silvia Bi-

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gliazzi, Peter Kofler, and Paola Ambrosi, namely that bilingualism can be “vindicat-ed as a cultural opportunity” (2013: 13), I also will argue that polyglot dramaturgy can overcome the potential confusion of the ‘Babel effect’, and sometimes elucidate references and associations that would remain obscure in a monolingual rendition.

Directing undergraduate actors with diverse levels of theatrical training and expe-rience, and relying on limited technical resources as well as minimal rehearsal time, I have necessarily developed my productions at Syracuse University in Flo-rence as exercises in rough, experimental theatre. To stage a complete version of a play even as relatively short as *The Tempest* would be an over-ambitious, logistically risky undertaking. Therefore the primary task is to locate the essential scenes, dia-logue, and action for an abbreviated yet dramatically coherent rendition. Given that the vast majority of the typical cast are native English speakers, with a similarly high percentage of anglophone audience members, most of the original Shakespear-ean text can be kept, excising the more verbose or lexically obscure passages. At the same time, enough non-English speakers attend the performances – usually the ac-tors’ ‘host families’ – that a good measure of translation into Italian is called for. Moreover, since all of the American student actors are required to study the local language during their semester in Florence, giving them the chance to speak even a few of their lines in Italian functions as a worthwhile teaching device. At a more in-terpretative level, and in the context of studying comparative transnational theatre history, the bilingual script de-familiarises and re-adjusts a Shakespearean play: this approach can reveal the Italianate qualities pulsing both denotatively and connota-tively through *The Tempest’s* chronotopes, intertexts, and *mise en scène*. For exam-ple, it gives an English or Theatre Studies major the opportunity to speak and body forth a character like Trinculo in all his bizarre, motley, surprising, tipsy-turvy hy-bridty, going beyond an academic study of how he mixes elements of the Tarlton/ Kemp-esque Elizabethan improvising solo clown with touches of the Neapolitan *maschera* of Pulcinella. For the entire ensemble, the very process of speaking and hearing lines in Italian, of wearing Italian-style costumes and playing Italianate *vi-vo contrasto* theatre games in rehearsal can confirm and illuminate how *The Tempest* is indeed a tragicomedy *all’italiana*, a version of late Renaissance “magical pastoral”, as Richard Andrews and Robert Henke have convincingly shown.¹

Here Alessandro’s translation provided an exact cue. When Stefano asks Trin-culo to “swear” how he escaped the shipwreck, Trinculo replies “Swum ashore, man, like a duck. I can swim like a duck, I’ll be sworn” (Shakespeare 2000: 2.2.122-3), rendered by Serpieri as “Nuotando a riva come un’anitra, caro mio. Io nuoto come un’anitra, te lo giuro” (Shakespeare 2001: 461). Although this Trinculo does not speak in a full Neapolitan dialect, his repeated “anitra” (instead of the more stand-ard “anatra”) conveys a distinct sense of his southern Italian origins. The repetition of the word, combined with the implied *gestus* of imitating a duck’s movements – then commented on by Stephano as resembling those of a goose – made this moment an

¹ See Andrews (2014: 56-8) and Henke (2014). I use *vivo contrasto* to designate the performative principle and techniques of boldly contrasting, suddenly shifting moods, thoughts, and movements – reflective of *chiaroscuro* aesthetics – that mark sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italian and Italian-influenced theatre. On this topic, see Taviani (1986).

ideal one for switching from English to Italian. Sticking out his “tail-feathers” while eagerly swigging from Stefano’s bottle, Trinculo thus translates the Italian meaning of his compound name (“Trincare”, to drink, plus “culo”, buttocks) through his body language, working in tandem with his self-conscious Neapolitan-style clowning. As Serpieri argues in an illuminating essay on “The Translator as Editor”, it is not enough to transmit the sense of the words alone, for “translating a dramatic text requires an understanding, and a rendering, not only of its verbal contents but also of the theatricality implicit in its language” (2012: 175). Thus his choice for Stefano’s immediate reply to Trinculo – “Bacia questa bibbia” for “Here, kiss the book” (2.2.124) – also strongly suggests a stage direction for Trinculo to kneel and ironically treat his wine-guzzling as an explicitly Catholic ritual. Through rehearsal, and our own repetition of listening and moving through this *lazzo*, we realised that the strongest choice was to have Stephano utter the line in both languages: the exaggerated importance of the action was thus conveyed, as was Serpieri’s inspired use of the deictic demonstrative pronoun “questa” (instead of the definite article “the”), sounding uncannily like “kiss the”, while retaining its aptly bibulous sibilant ‘s’ and comically enhancing the bilabial first consonant of “book” through the alliteration of “Bacia” and “bibbia”.

This was a satisfying application of the principle of ‘intersemiotic translation’, advocated by Serpieri himself, and articulated by several influential theorists of translating for theatrical performance (Bigliuzzi, Kofler, and Ambrosi 2013). We were also aiming to test out and express the creative potential of bilingual sonorities, dependent on the particular inflections, timbres, and rhythms of the players’ voices and varying command of Italian and English. Indeed, this was (and is) an essential facet of our physicalised inter-cultural staging, for as Jean-Michel Déprats has aptly observed, “[t]ranslating a play thus means more than just rendering a text into another language: it involves, above all, translating for the muscles, nerves, and lungs of the actors who will speak the text” (2012: 136). In this same context, we also had the pleasure of translating/reviving for a mainly American audience the suggestive and convincing directorial choice of Giorgio Strehler, whose celebrated 1978 Piccolo Teatro di Milano production of *La Tempesta* interpreted Stephano and Trinculo as the *commedia dell’arte* servant *maschere* of Brighella and Pulcinella, the latter of documented origins in Naples and indeed an iconic emblem of the city itself. Once she donned her long, flouncy, loose-fitting white chemise and her custom-made leather Pulcinella mask, the relatively inexperienced actress playing Trinculo was transported into her stage persona, so different from her real-life one in age, gender, status, attitude, and cultural historical associations. She later told me that playing Trinculo not in the ‘typically Shakespearean’ but rather in the ‘masked Italian’ way gave her the confidence to stay in character while speaking two languages, and to develop a trusting synergy with the much more experienced male actors playing Stephano and Caliban. This was thus one way of confirming the insight that a “different type of speakability” – in this case an alternation between the source-text and the target-text – entails demanding technical challenges, but in this same process “finds in ‘difficulty’ a peculiar performative asset” (Bigliuzzi, Kofler, and Ambrosi 2013: 8).

Adopting Strehler’s use of the Italian *maschere* was a deliberate homage to one of the most compelling Shakespearean productions of the twentieth century, but at a more profound interpretative level it was a realization of Serpieri’s intersemiotic al-

lusions, with their stylistic burden: once the choice is made, the director has a certain obligation, or *dovere*, to elaborate the visual, aural, and kinetic codings implicit in that choice. For as Strehler himself observed, “the problem of *The Tempest* is above all, and now more than ever, a stylistic problem” (Griga 2003: 75; translation mine). I would argue that this observation is yet another way of recognizing the well-known status of the play as an incomplete, interrupted, reticent, and elusive drama: trying to make *The Tempest* ‘mean’ something, especially in a coherent and definitive way, somehow seems obligatory for readers and spectators, yet it also seems to be an enterprise as inconclusive and insubstantial as the pageants both staged and dismissed by Prospero (Bigliazzi and Calvi 2014: 3-7). At the same time, the objective is to make this interpretative process an enjoyable one, for actors and audiences alike, bringing a spirit of delight, or *diletto* to the *dovere*, and perhaps even fusing them together. The sometimes overlooked and underrated Ferdinand, the maddened, suicidal prince of Act 1 who becomes Miranda’s “patient log-man” (3.1.67) in Act 3, serves as a model for this paradoxical engagement with the play, declaring that his labours are pleasures. Perhaps somewhat disingenuously, Prospero avows that his aim was “to please” (Epilogue, 13), even as he – or rather his author – leads audiences through a hermeneutic labyrinth. This paradigm of the ‘maze’, and its concomitant effect of ‘amazement’, is one that Serpieri convincingly identified as a key to understanding the theatrical energies of *The Tempest*, and it likewise helped me and my cast enjoy ourselves as we devised stylised movements, with characters taking sudden right-angle turns, or going around in circles, or stopping abruptly inside invisible *culs de sac* (Serpieri 2014: 101-5). Our subtitle, inspired by the then recently released Hollywood action-disaster film *The Perfect Storm* starring George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg, thus was deliberately intended both to announce a theatrical parody and to emphasize that our production would be ‘imperfect’ in every sense: rough, ragged, provisional, incomplete, and open-ended. Again Strehler’s interpretation prompted ours, as we were extending the director of the Piccolo Teatro’s contention that “the desired creative effect is that each scene [of *The Tempest*] seems to have been cut off at some point, before it could be finished. The audience ought to have a sensation of an interrupted action, they ought to feel a sensation of uncertainty” (Griga 2003: 103; translation mine). We likewise sought to create an experience of trial and error, as both an affirmation of our own university ‘rough theatre’ status and an active, mobile embodiment of the play’s own tropes of ‘trying’ things out, of ‘trying’ others, and of ‘erring’ in almost every sense, from mistaking illusory tempests, harpies, reports of death and sea-changes for realities, to wandering off course, straying about aimlessly, and launching projects – assassination attempts, political coups, a wedding masque, etc. – that suddenly dissolve, leaving no rack behind but the memory of a dream-like performance.²

² Much critical attention has been given to the intertext of the play – seen most notably in Gonzalo’s utopian “excel the Golden Age” (2.1.169) – with Michel de Montaigne’s “Des Cannibales” (as translated by John Florio) and its critique of culturally biased, ethnocentric, and colonialist attitudes. Beyond this connection, one might argue that *The Tempest* also plays out Montaigne’s fundamental premiss that his *Essais* are precisely and indeed ‘essays’ (or trials): “If any mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial” (book 3, chapter 2, “Of repentance”; Montaigne 1965: 611).

There was another crucial reason for our cinematic allusion. Our theatrical intertext – or more appropriately *inter-mise en scène* – attempted a variation on Strehler’s (and not only Strehler’s) interpretative chronotope of the ‘uninhabited island’ as the bare theatre stage/duration of performance: we altered our adapted salone/lecture hall playing space to suggest a film studio, specifically Teatro 5 of Cinecittà, where Federico Fellini created most of his major productions. Our low-budget, ‘low-tech’ circumstances limited us to using a few tripods and video cameras, a spotlight, ladder, electrical cords, and the lecture hall’s projection screen. The idea was that our live audience members were guests at a series of takes for a theatrical-style, bilingual cinematic adaptation of *The Tempest*. Thus the director, dressed in Fellini style with signature long white scarf, sat adjacent to the audience in his folding chair (with “IL REGISTA” written on the back), exhorting the actors, whispering notes to his assistant (Ariel), and periodically calling out “Azione!” [Action!] and “Cut!”. As our performance progressed, this “regista” entered into the action as none other than Prospero. Our cinematic allusions did not stop there, however: taking cues from Peter Greenaway’s 1991 adaptation *Prospero’s Books*, there were multiple Ariels/assistant film directors (three, instead of four, two of them played by women, and each with varying levels of deference to the lead director/Prospero). For the opening ‘storm-at-sea’ scene, we shook a thunder sheet, banged on percussion instruments (devices also used by Strehler in his stage version), and repeatedly fast-flashed the spotlight and the actual light switches of the lecture hall/playing space, to create a crude but strangely persuasive effect of lighting. Inspired by Greenaway’s model of a ship held and splashed around by Prospero (John Gielgud) in his bathtub beneath urinating Ariels suspended on ropes, one of our (non-urinating!) Ariels dangled and more and more rapidly-zigzaggedly swung a toy schooner above the heads of the audience.³ The fact that this toy boat was attached to a long fishing pole was itself an act of translation, communicating a gestic/verbal pun: the fishing-reel played on the idea of a film reel, while also looping into the script’s “reeling ripe” (5.1.279) description of Trinculo, spoken by Alonso at the end of the play. Here we also took a slight bilingual liberty, as after our American-born Alonso spoke the line in English, the native Florentine actor playing Antonio interjected “sì, è così cotto da *barcollare*”, thus emphasizing “reeling” in the equivalent Italian form astutely chosen by Serpieri, with its etymologi-

³ See the opening sequence of *Prospero’s Books*, directed by Peter Greenaway and released in 1991 (Miramax Films). Greenaway’s choice of action for Ariel is most likely an allusion to the famous ‘Manneken Pis’ fountain of Bruxelles, as well as a physical-visual troping of the British popular expression “taking the piss”, or making fun of something.

cal root of “barca” (“boat”).⁴

Our pseudo-, mini-Cinecittà set also supported use of projections of clips from pre-taped filmings. The first was a brief excerpt from the recently released movie *The Beach*, starring Leonardo Di Caprio, providing a vision of the (then) paradisiacal Phi Phi island of Thailand for the “three men of sin” Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio (3.3.18-53). This clip was then put on pause at the sudden entrance of Ariel as Harpy, in our version spreading his multi-coloured cloth wings while perched upon a tall ladder, his cast shadow overwhelming the film projection behind him. The second was a video recording we ourselves had made, of Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess, with the board and Queen and King pieces seen in close-up. The clip paused as the live Prospero called out “Azione”, and the live Miranda spoke the line “Sweet lord, you play me false” (5.1.172), before the playing-area lights came up gradually, between her words “fair play” (spoken in English) and Sebastian’s “grandissimo miracolo” (spoken in Italian, 177).

Given, however, the ‘most fair’ play-ability as well as exceptional speakability of Alessandro’s translation, it was neither a miracle nor any surprise at all that our audience members – including those with little command of English – responded favourably to the bilingualism of the production. The Italian speakers also could more fully understand and appreciate special dramatic effects, such as the dissenting status of the unrepentant Antonio, who spoke nearly 100% of his lines in translation. For example, the insinuating “What might, / Worthy Sebastian, O, what might –? No more; / And yet, methinks I see it in thy face / What thou shouldst be” (2.1.204-7) became instead “Cosa potrebbe, buon Sebastiano, cosa potrebbe...? / Basta. Eppure mi sembra di leggertelo in faccia / che cosa tu dovresti essere” (Shakespeare 2001: 451). With its usage of the fortuitous long ‘o’ of “cosa” to convey the vocative ‘O’ of the original, of “Basta” to match the disyllabic cadence of “no more”, and of the line-ending cognate word “faccia” (instead of ‘viso’) for “face” – also preserving the consequent *enjambment* – this is an admirable example of Serpieri’s commitment to emulating the phonic values, metrical rhythms, and syntactical structures of Shakespeare’s scripts. In this particular case, however, he allowed himself an intertextual citation/extrapolation, which enriches and possibly even improves on the English of *The Tempest*’s script. Antonio’s “leggerte-

⁴ Shakespeare’s script itself invites bilingual jesting at this point, since Stefano twice repeats “Coraggio” (F2 revision of the First Folio’s “corasio”, possibly rendering Stefano’s drunken state, or a Neapolitan dialectal form) as he enters this scene, addressing Caliban as “bully monster”, with an adjective derived from ‘bello’: again we used Serpieri’s translation, also preferring the exact cognate “crampo” for Stefano’s later quip “I am not Stefano but a cramp”, especially because of its deictic “non toccatemi” (5.1.286; an inevitable stage direction for Sebastian to pinch or tickle him). Although we maintained the original English punning on “pickle” spoken by Alonso and Trinculo, I would like to acknowledge Serpieri’s brilliantly accurate as well as redolent translation here, which overcomes a potential ‘loss’: as he explains, “The English ‘pickle’ here means both ‘pickle-brine’ (and indicates the liquid, the filthy water of the swamp, or the wine that he has drunk, with which Trinculo stinks) and, figuratively, a botched-up mess. The Italian ‘intruglio’ can render both meanings” (Shakespeare 2001: 502; translation mine).

lo” is not a strictly accurate version of “see it”, but rather an ingenious – and contextually apt – evocation of the famous line uttered by Lady Macbeth as she and her husband begin to plot the assassination of King Duncan: “your face, my thane, is as a book, where men / May *read* strange matters” (Shakespeare 2015: 1.5.62-3; my emphasis). In fact, our Italian actor playing Antonio knew and deeply admired *Macbeth*, and thus the allusive ‘mis-translation’ helped him to focus and sharpen his actor’s interpretation of the ambitious conspirator and would-be regicide role.

We thus maintained our *dovere* of respecting our chosen Italian translation, in the process obtaining *diletto* for both performer and audience. Without the burden of maintaining absolute fidelity to English lines originally written and spoken in 1610-11, we found that using a polyglot approach offered fresh vitality and truly playful impromptu delights. For instance, when our fully bilingual, guitar-strumming Stephano entered through the audience, he lugubriously belted out the lyrics “Here shall I die ashore...”, “su questa spiaggia io morirò” (2.2.42), but then interrupted himself to exclaim with a drunken cadence, “for a desert island there sure are a lot of people around here!” (performance improvisation, November 2004). Finally, while we deliberately aimed for an imperfect, open-ended ‘conclusion’, we felt satisfied that our hybrid theatrical/cinematic staging encouraged a collective interpretation of the play, in a salutary repudiation of potentially Prospero-centred, autobiographical ones.⁵ Resuming the Fellini references that included themes from the soundtrack of *E la nave va* [And the Ship Sails On], there appeared on the screen a silent projection of the famous collective farewell to the ‘Rex’ ocean-liner from *Amarcord*, as Prospero promised “mari calmi” and “venti favorevoli” to Alonso and his cohorts. The third, least obedient “assistant director” Ariel then removed Prospero’s white scarf/magic cloak and meerscham pipe/magic wand, before proceeding to shout “Ciak!”, as he used the clapperboard one last time and introduced the Epilogue, its clauses spoken first by the Prospero-Regista, but then in turns by each member of the cast, with recorded music from the finale of Stravinsky’s *Fire-bird* growing louder, climaxing with “set us free” sung in choral unison. This, then, was neither a palinodic Prospero/Shakespeare taking leave of his poetic-theatrical ‘art’, nor a conflicted colonialist invader relinquishing control of the island to its prior inhabitant, nor even a solo *auteur* making one last metatheatrical/metacinematic flourish, but rather one member among more than a dozen, of a primarily young and amateur performing ensemble. This choice also aligned with several of Serpieri’s theoretical writings, which emphasize the particularly collective, multimedial and multisemiotic nature of the theatrical *mise en scène* and therefore of conscientious theatre translation (Serpieri 1977; Serpieri et al. 1978).

In contrast to this ‘Imperfect Storm’ version of *The Tempest*, the adaptation of *Richard II* that I directed in Verona in the spring of 2017 was performed mainly in Italian, by a cast whose majority were native Italian speakers; in addition, this Practice-as-Research production grafted scenes from Shakespeare’s lyrical history play with scenes from another classic, Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* (*Sette contro Tebe*, here translated brilliantly by Guido Avezzi). I gave the resulting hybrid the title of

⁵ On this long-standing tradition, its traps, variations, and distortions, see Gurr (2014).

Riccardo II in-contra I Sette contro Tebe, with the verb indicating how our adaptation had Shakespeare's doomed king encounter the Greek tragedy by watching key scenes from the latter being performed as a 'play-within-the-play', for his close observation and potential instruction. It was a challenging and certainly original experiment, and in fact I would not have attempted it without the availability of Alessandro's outstanding and recently published translation (Shakespeare 2014). At first glance, the two disparate plays would seem to have little in common, but our mixture of them managed to bring out their dynamically similar as well as contrasting qualities.⁶ One of their shared characteristics is brilliant use of tragic irony, and thus it was a truly heavy and sorrowful burden to suffer a real-life tragic irony, soon after the beginnings of my preparations for the production: with Alessandro's sudden passing, what was intended as a project he could advise on, and eventually enjoy seeing on stage, turned into a commemoration of his illustrious career, his innumerable scholarly and creative contributions, and his treasured friendship.

With all the more poignancy, then, resounded the line I chose as the starting and ending utterance of the entire performance, spoken in choral unison by several members of the cast both in English and in Serpieri's translation: "they breathe truth that breathe their words in pain", "soffia verità chi soffia le parole con affanno" (2.1.8). My choice was a deliberate tribute to the translator himself, since he had so incisively explained how Shakespearean theatre deploys "a dynamic development of speech acts" (Serpieri 1985: 122), and so convincingly taught the primacy of the act of breathing/speaking – stressed by Émile Benveniste as the *énonciation* – in the deictic orientations of theatrical discourse (Serpieri 1978; see also Elam 1980: 144-5). As with the epilogue/*envoi* of my bilingual 'Imperfect Storm' production, a usually solo speech was delivered by a group of actors, this time in Italian: again, this move towards emphasizing the communal over the individual perspective of John of Gaunt's monologues was itself a post-Brechtian act of translation, aiming at an "epic" effect, and thus a contemporary "interlingual and intertemporal transfer" of the kind that Susan Bassnett, citing Walter Benjamin's "justification for free translation" (Benjamin 1992: 80), has posited as capable of achieving gain, and not merely loss (Bassnett 2012: 53-4). Thus, while we did have a single mature actor play the role of the dying Gaunt, there were also his brother York and six members of his household supporting and collaborating with him, alternating lines not only of the famous "This England" speech, but also of the direct harangue of the insolent Richard, before reaching a powerful in-unison crescendo with "Proprietario dell'Inghilterra ora tu sei, non re" ("Landlord of England art thou now, not king", 2.1.113). If this climactic line's two opening substantives, one of them a proper name, call for semantic accuracy and thus in Italian double and treble in syllabic length, Serpieri at least was able to preserve the strong monosyllabic rhythm and hammering spondee at the end. Having a crowd of voices shout these final words provoked all the more fury and outrage in our Richard, and also increased the king's motivation to interrupt, with impatient vehemence, Gaunt's next status-lowering jibe, "Thy state of law is bondslave to the law, / And thou –"

⁶ For more on this point, and for a more extended account of the production and its various elements, see Nicholson (2017).

(“Tu che sei la legge ora sei schiavo della comune legge, / e tu –”, 2.1.114-15). We returned to the single voice here, partially to clarify the subtle adjustment made in the Italian rendition, with the addition of the adjective “comune” (“common”) underlining the self-debasement and therefore regal and national humiliation that Richard’s uncle claims his nephew is making. This kind of semantically precise locution recurs in Serpieri’s translation of Richard’s retort, as the “lean-witted” insult-epithet becomes the much more exactly and vividly physical “cervello smagrito”, qualifying “uno stolto lunatico” in a deft preservation of the lilting, alliterative ‘l’s’ and ‘t’s’ of the original’s “lunatic lean-witted fool” (2.1.115; Shakespeare 2014: 119). Our fluently bilingual actor of Richard, Ms Elena Pellone, could easily have spoken the original text, but she felt that at this point the Italian wording gave her more force, impetus, and authenticity, especially in response to the chorally uttered Italian version of Gaunt’s mocking denunciation.

In his stimulating and eloquent study entitled *Polifonia Shakespeariana* (2002), Serpieri makes a compelling argument for understanding Shakespeare’s theatre as one that continually stages the early modern European crisis of monological representation, as seen in the multiple dismantlings and de-mystifications of kingly rituals, ceremonies, and paraphernalia in *Richard II*. As he observes, “the decisive deposition in this play is not so much that of a king as it is that of a symbolic cosmos, and of the sun-king that represents, interprets, and guarantees it” (Serpieri 2002: 57; translation mine). And indeed, since this deposition is a symbolic and epistemological one – and here Serpieri acknowledges the salient reading of Foucault’s *Order of Things* (1970) – the intersemiotic translation privileges props, costumes, set items, movements, and gestures over verbal signifiers. To convey the paradoxical sense of a cycle of royal power that was devolving toward nothingness and yet was destined to resume and move towards another cycle, we not only used a circular mirror but also a circular mound of actual earth – placed at the centre of our playing area – to match the circular, hollow crown which Richard holds out and ultimately hands over to Bolingbroke. It was over this central ‘earthy pit’ – where the king of Thebes Eteocles, in the prior scene of our hybrid script, had just donned his armour in preparation for his climactic, fatal duel with his brother Polynices – that our Richard divested himself, crowning his cousin, taking off the latter’s leather jacket and replacing it with his ermine-lined regal robe, before hailing him with “God save King Henry, unking’d Richard says, / And send him many years of sunshine days” (4.2.220-1).

If at this point it seemed to be our own duty to respect the English rhyming couplet flourish of Richard’s ambivalently full/empty salutation/blessing, conveying a touch of hyperbolic sarcasm and thus a potential ‘infelicity condition’ that might undo the perlocutionary speech-act, it was a delight to return to Italian a few moments later, for the performance of Richard’s contemplation of the mirror. No longer king but instead a witty poetical satirist, Richard devises a series of variations on the noun/verb signifier “face”, made all the more unstable and self-destructive through anaphoric questioning combined with the ostensive deixis of Richard’s simultaneous physical (actor’s) face and “shadow” or reflection in the mirror (in the process also obliquely and appositely echoing Faustus’s famous “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships [?]”, Marlowe 1995: 5.1.93):

RICHARD. Was this face the face
 That every day under his household roof
 Did keep ten thousand men? Was this the face
 That like the sun did make beholders wink?
 Is this the face which faced so many follies,
 That was at last outfaced by Bolingbroke?
 A brittle glory shineth in this face;
 As brittle as the glory is the face
 [*Dashes the glass against the ground*]
 For there it is, cracked in a hundred shivers.
 (4.2.281-9)

By switching into Italian for the question “Era questa faccia la faccia che teneva / ogni giorno sotto il tetto del suo palazzo / diecimila uomini?” (Shakespeare 2014: 243), then back to the English, and finally to Italian once more for the two lines immediately preceding the violent climactic gesture, our Richard’s bilingual delivery accentuated all the more vividly the decline, fall, and dissolution of previously unitary regal signs. The perfect rhyme of “face/face”, preserved by Serpieri in “Una fragile gloria splende su questa faccia, / e fragile come la gloria è la faccia” (ibid.) cannot cover the fragile, fleetingly imperfect status of the mortal, deposed king’s face/image, an insight punctuated and demonstrated by the shattered looking-glass.

In conclusion, I acknowledge that my bilingual, hybrid, Practice-as-Research Shakespearean productions often have been things, if not of darkness, at least of varying kinds and degrees of lucidity. In their brighter and clearer moments, they perhaps have revealed a few brave new worlds of interpretation: if so, much of the credit must go to Alessandro Serpieri’s illuminating, vigorous, and sustaining translations. It is fitting to close with citations of his own wry, sceptical, but also encouraging reflections on the theatre translator’s task, as well as of lines by his beloved John Donne, to whose poetry he also gave eloquent voice and powerful energy in modern Italian (Donne 2009): “Any translator is doomed to lose the game. Still, translation does cooperate to give new life to Shakespeare’s plays, introducing them into a new language and a new world” (Serpieri 2012: 169).

. . . small things seem great
 Below; but up into the watch-tower get,
 And see all things despoiled of fallacies:
 Thou shalt not peep through lattices of eyes,
 Nor hear through labyrinths of ears, nor learn
 By circuit, or collections to discern.
 (Donne 1977, “The Second Anniversary”, ll. 293-8)

Alessandro Serpieri was a unique and brilliant scholar-translator, a true friend and *bravissimo* maestro. His work remains a genuine inspiration, for as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare’s well-turned and true-filéd lines, it “seems to shake a lance, / As brandished at the eyes of ignorance” (Ben Jonson, “To the Memory of my Beloved”, ll. 69-70). To the elements be free, Sandro, and fare thee well!

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