

# Travelling Plays, Travelling Audiences: From Carr's Irish Midlands to Somewhere Lost and Found in Brazil

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## Abstract

Translating for the stage involves a multiple range of negotiations. Based on Carlson's (2001) notion of the «haunted stage» and Budick's (1996) conception of translation as inhabiting the «in-between», this paper addresses the question of location in the dramaturgical translation of Marina Carr's (1998) *By the Bog of Cats...* into Brazilian Portuguese under the title *Era uma vez, no Pântano dos Gatos...* The original play is set in the Irish Midlands, and its language sets a tone of bleakness and desolation, enlivened by crucial notes of humour. The challenge of translating this play into Brazilian Portuguese revolves around the dialogical movement between two different landscapes in which hidden similarities remain to be unlocked. That is to say that, when re-creating Ireland in Brazil, Brazil itself is also re-created in multiple versions on the theatrical stage. Therefore, this paper exposes the way a translated play travels from the Irish Midlands to diaphanous «wheres» in Brazil, and reveals competing notions of familiarity and strangeness.

**Keywords:** theatre translation; dramaturgy; «in-betweenness».

## Resum

Traduir per a l'escena implica un ampli espectre de negociacions. Partint de la noció del «haunted stage» ('l'escenari embruixat') de Carlson (2001) i la concepció de Budick's (1996) de la traducció com a estadi intermedi, aquest article tracta la qüestió de l'entorn en la traducció dramaturgical de *By the Bog of Cats...*, de Marina Carr (1998) al portuguès del Brasil amb el títol *Era uma vez, no Pântano dos Gatos...* L'obra original està ambientada a la regió central d'Irlanda, amb un llenguatge de to desesperat i de desolació, animat per notes d'humor. El repte de traduir aquesta obra al portuguès del Brasil gira al voltant del diàleg entre dos paisatges diferents en què cal descobrir les semblances amagades. És a dir, quan es recrea Irlanda al Brasil, el mateix Brasil també es recrea en múltiples versions a l'escenari. Per tant, aquest article exposa com l'obra traduïda viatja des d'Irlanda als diàfans paisatges del Brasil, i revela la lluita entre el que és conegut i el que és forà.

**Paraules clau:** traducció teatral; dramaturgia; «in-betweenness».

## Summary

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## Introduction

The translator, in manner consonant with his/her own translation, is a traveller who straddles two cultures and two landscapes. Physically and mentally the translator moves back and forth from the exporting culture to the receiving one. Translating, therefore, may be seen as a process that involves a constant negotiation of memories evoked by places and embedded in the self. This paper is part of ongoing doctoral research that has a twofold nature: analysis of the theoretical and ethical dimension of theatre translation, and reflection on my own dramaturgical translation of Marina Carr's (1998) play *By the Bog of Cats...* for the Brazilian stage. The scope of the present paper is limited to an enquiry into the re-creation of location and the verbal language of a translated play —how does this travelling text reconstruct landscapes? How does a translated play hark back to its exporting culture and yet resonate with the receiving one? Since the earliest discussions in the discipline of drama translation, it has been generally recognised that one of the characteristic features of translating for the stage is that it involves taking into consideration and playing with a series of performative paralinguistic elements which are interwoven with the play-script (cf. BASSNETT(-MCGUIRE) 1978, 1984, 1988, 1991 & 1998; ZUBER 1980 & 1984).

The framework of this ongoing piece of research emerges from an examination of the theories that have informed the translation of drama since the onset of discipline's formalisation. To put it briefly, the structuralist debates of the 1960s pioneered by the Czechoslovakian literary historian and translator Jiří Levý attempted to systematise the study of translated play-texts in terms of their form and style (cf. SNELL-HORNBY 2006). The central concern of that time was a supposed «faithfulness» and «accuracy» of the translation in relation to its source text. The functionalist turn of the 1980s, however, advocated the function of translated play-texts in the receiving literary system, based on the literary and linguistic theories of the day (cf. LEFEVERE 1980). The study of theatre translation still remained, nonetheless, an extension of literary studies, in which drama translation was treated more as a «literary text» and its theatrical aspects and a more creative agency on the part of the translator were still being ignored. In face of the early discussions and of the most contemporary developments and «turns» of the discipline, this ongoing piece of research argues for a dramaturgical approach to the study and practice of theatre translation bringing together both translation and theatre theories in crossfertilisation.<sup>1</sup>

1. In this respect, the international conference «Invisible Presences: Translation, Dramaturgy and Performance», held at Queen's University Belfast in April 2011, is probably a milestone in the

This discussion will start with Brian Friel's view of theatre translation. Friel is probably the most prolific Irish playwright of the present time, who having re-created Chekhov's *Three Sisters* without knowing a word of Russian, once said that:

The ideal condition would be to have a playwright who was fluent in Russian. But if you have to forgo the one, it's better for the translator to be a dramatist. There are bigger truths beyond that of the literal translation. (MURRAY 1999: 100)

Friel's observation is a critique of the guilt and responsibility that many translators feel towards the immediate source text. But what is the function of a translated play-text? Who should it please? More than rendering a play-text *speakable* by actors, the ultimate duty of the play-text is to engage its potential audience and enable its truths to be excavated. In other words, the re-creation of a play-text can be equalled to the making of a play as a work of art in its own right.

If we follow this line of reasoning, theatre translation offers a range of restrictions and opportunities. When writing for the theatre, the translator is empowered and constrained by the requirements of a paying audience. These requirements provide opportunity for change and re-creation, and, at the same time, they restrict and narrow the possibilities of re-creation according to the demands and expectations of a potential audience. In the case of the present study, the translation of *By the Bog of Cats...*, written by the contemporary Irish playwright Marina Carr, so linguistically rooted in the Irish Midlands, presents demands that will certainly lead to losses. At the same time what is at stake is the performing of a rural and boggy Ireland on the Brazilian stage—in other words, about making two very distinct realities meet—in a way that is enjoyable, entertaining, and that engages a new audience. This realisation triggers an unsettling question: how does one recreate location without essentialising a foreign culture? In order to address these issues, this discussion is organised into two main parts, both revolving around the re-creation and negotiation of location: the first deals with the idea that a play's location is re-created by the setting; and the second examines how a play's location can be re-created by its verbal language.

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historiography of theatre translation. With the presence of some of the most prominent scholars in the fields of Translation and Theatre Studies, the conference explored dramaturgical processes in the practice of theatre and translation, gathered both translation and theatre practitioners and theoreticians with a view towards creating dialogues across the disciplines. The conference dealt with topics that ranged from dramaturgy, translation, rehearsal, production and theatre reception. For more detailed information, see <<http://blog.outofthewings.org/2010/07/call-for-papers-invisible-presences-translation-dramaturgy-and-performance/>> [last access 16 June 2011]. Some recent publications on theatre translation which foster the «practitioners' turn» in the discipline are Johnston's (1996) *Stages of Translation*, Upton's (2000) *Moving Target* and Baines, Marinetti & Perteghella's (2011) *Staging and Performing Translation*.

## Setting

A recent production of *The Mai*, a play written by Carr and published one year prior to *By the Bog of Cats...*, also set in the Midlands, was premiered in the Czech Republic in 2001. Wallace (2003) observes how some signs of «Irishness» were overemphasised in this production. Images of a bucolic and romantic Irish landscape were incorporated into the setting, fetishising an imaginary Irish landscape through a supposed iconography of dolmens, cliffs, Celtic crosses and whitewashed cottages. Celtic music, Irish dancing and the omnipresence of whiskey were emphasised to an extent that the actual storyline was impacted negatively upon. To contextualise the play: *The Mai* is a domestic drama about three generations of women in the same family. It employs storytelling as a resource for re-signifying the characters' identities, and it takes place in a small town, specifically in the sophisticated house of an Irish upper-bourgeois family. It deals with the roots of the disruption and dysfunctions of the modern Irish family, a very distant proposition from the representation of a bucolic Ireland in the early twentieth-century. Wallace notes that the characters' explicitly passionate and maudlin dramatisation added up to the flavour of «Irishness» of the translated play performed to a non-Irish and non-English speaking audience. The Czech production nurtured a stereotypical imagery of Ireland with icons that did not even make any allusion to the actual setting of *The Mai*: the Midlands of Ireland, a region of bogs and lakes, as opposed to the cliffs of touristic postcards.

Three of Carr's Midlands plays toured in the United States during 2001. While in that context the plays did not require interlinguistic translation, although some culture-specific symbols had to be explained in order to assure a more meaningful engagement on the part of the audience; in other words a type of translation, an intra-lingual one, was carried out. Sihra (2003) reported on her experience as a dramaturg of Carr's plays in the US, explaining that a dramaturg is, in her view:

[A] «playwriting specialist» who works closely with a playwright in terms of drafting a new piece for production. If the play is already in its final draft, or indeed, already published, the dramaturg will then work with the director, actors and designers in a consultancy capacity, contextualising the play socially, politically and historically, advising on set and costume design, musical score and so on. The dramaturg will also offer input on narrative and thematic interpretation, in addition to writing programme notes, subscribers' newsletter essays, mounting exhibitions, and participating in post-show discussions. (SIHRA 2003: 93)

For the purpose of the present work, the theatre translator is regarded as someone who can and should be as equipped as a dramaturg both in writing a play-text for performance and taking part in the development and production of the play as an agent equipped with relevant cultural and technical knowledge.

In contextualising Carr's plays historically, it is important to bear in mind that she writes from the viewpoint of someone who witnessed Ireland's transformations from a rural-based economy to the substantial changes that led to Ire-

land's economic boom within the framework of its membership of the European Union. In spite of the country's economic growth, however, modernity may still be considered liminal in the Irish theatre —at least on the mainstream Irish stage. Irish playwrights inevitably draw upon a sense of past to articulate with the present. In terms of form, Irish theatrical tradition is still heavily text-based, henceforth the emphasis on storytelling as a means for negotiating issues of memory and identity. Even though Carr is now part of this theatre tradition, she started her career as a playwright writing experimental and absurdist plays, bearing aesthetic resemblances with Beckett's works, but, interestingly enough, plays that never really appealed to Irish audiences —nor did Beckett's.

Carr's rural plays are all set in the Irish Midlands, a space that, in contradistinction to the one suggested in the Czech production, is browner than green, more cryptically forlorn and dark than bucolic. The specific case of *By the Bog of Cats...*, in which practically the entire play is set on a bog except for the wedding scene, which is set inside a house, is an example of re-negotiation of cultural stereotype. Bogs in Ireland resonate with death, ghosts and repositories of memories. In this respect, Sihra suggests that the term *mid-lands*, «between worlds» (SIHRA 2003: 94) represents Ireland's reflection upon «contemporary social images of turbulence and anomie» (*ibid*).

In Brazilian Portuguese, there is no word or expression capable of either capturing or suggesting the idea of a bog. The translation of «bog» as «pântano», the swamp of the wetlands, provides an approximate idea, but falls short in conveying how the word resonates in Ireland. Brazil, as a continental country, nonetheless, does possess a complex set of geographical features, from rain forests to swamps and huge pockets of desert-like areas, the latter being known as «sertões», «caatingas» and «cerrado», especially in the Northeast and Midwest of that country, which can be quite desolate and bleak at times. This illustration is not to say that bogs can be replaced with «sertões» or «caatingas», but it may serve to explore the reception and engagement of a potential Brazilian audience.

According to Carlson (2001), the reception of a play depends on the memories of audience members and their capability of relating what is being performed on stage to what they have experienced before. From this perspective, a translated play —that is, a play that is travelling and is being performed out of its context— creates new and different images; images that converse both with what the audience members have already seen and with what is new; what they are experiencing for the first time. Carlson refers to this «seeing again» or «remembering» as «ghosting». He explains that «ghosting presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context» (CARLSON 2001: 7). If theatre is itself a repository of memories in constant communication with previous texts, and that is the case of *By the Bog of Cats...* with Euripides's *Medea*, John B. Keane's *The Field*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlett Letter*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* translation certainly adds another layer(s) to that palimpsest. One solution for the play's setting is, of course, to stage it conceptually. Monica Murray, a character in the play, provides a magical-realist hint of what the place might look like: «ya know this auld bog, always shiftin' and changin' and cod-

din' the eye.» (CARR 2005: 267). The *mise-en-scène* could thus be organised around metonymical scenery by means of indexical elements that convey the idea of a place that could possibly exist in the world, but that belongs most completely on the ephemeral stage of the theatre.

### Verbal Language

As well as the play's geographical reference, its verbal language plays a vital role in engendering notions of location. Carr wrote the play with what she calls «a slight flavour» of the Irish Midland accent, which is a sociolect of Hiberno-English, a variation of Standard English. Carr (1998/2005: 261) explains that «the real Midland accent is a lot flatter and rougher and more guttural than the written word allows». The play's dialect strongly signals the play's rootedness in place, which, out of its context, has to give way to the contingent uprootedness of translation. However, this is not to suggest that this translation of *By the Bog of Cats...* into Brazilian Portuguese attempts in any way to reproduce an accent related or similar to the Irish Midland accent. Such an attempt would be pointless and, most probably, stereotypical. The Midland Hiberno-English accent has to step out of the stage and yield to new verbal codes that will never be used to convey any fabricated sense of «Irishness». Such a thought would certainly lead to an ethereal notion of the mutual translatability of cultures.

The crucial question at stake here is that, as Budick (1996) suggests, every act of translation involves a certain type of crisis, or «self-reflection». A translated play enables its spectator to look at the other at the same time as s/he looks back at the self. The crisis that ensues from this imposed doubleness invariably engenders a sense of unavoidable loss, which, in turn, brings about a new beginning. Budick, in reflecting on the functions of translation, is of the view that: «Translation necessarily marks the border crossing where, if anywhere, one culture passes over to the other, whether to inform it, to further its development, to capture or enslave it, or merely open a space between the other and itself.» (BUDICK 1996: 11). The space that is opened creates a utopia, a no-place, where, the translated text is placed neither here nor there but «in-between».<sup>2</sup>

That said, the main preoccupation with regards to the verbal signs of the play-text lies on more technical aspects of theatre-making —the semantics and actions that are ingrained in the characters' illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.<sup>3</sup> *By the*

2. The idea that the translator, and thus, translation inhabit the «in-between» is developed by Kelly, in «The Island that is Nowhere: or, Cultural Translation, a Utopian Project?», where he compares «[t]he paradox of a city under conditions of exodus» to «the *betwixt and between* inhabited by the translator». (KELLY 2007: 12). This idea has become the central theme of Queen's University Belfast's Translation Research Forum. For more information on this see < <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofEnglish/Research/ResearchForums/BetwixtandBetween/> [last access 16 June 11].
3. The concepts of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts are borrowed from Austin (1975), in which the former refers to the intent of speaker, or, in this case actor/character, and the latter to the effect or impact upon the other speaker (actor/character) or audience members.

*Bog of Cats...* is a play open to conjecture in the sense that it is meant to leave the audience with the mysterious touch of open endings. In that respect, Sihra observes that «mystery, suggestive polysemy, the quest for a character's motivation —this is the journey on which great storytelling must bring us. Historical “fact” is never accessible; because with absolute closure comes a negation of mythic possibility and licence, and, above all, the agency of the audience». (SIHRA 2003: 100). Yet, one cannot forget that translation (as well as acting) is inherently constituted of acts of interpretation, which constantly run the risk of making implicit meanings explicit, and, of course, vice-versa.

*By the Bog of Cats'* constant interplays between what belongs «here», to this world, and «there», to the world of the departed, allows its translation to deal with a wide range of symbolism, in the form of the ghosts who wander among the living in that play. Although all they see is darkness and they cannot be seen by the living, they can communicate with the most sentient ones, such as Hester Swane, the protagonist, and Catwoman, the prophetess figure of the play, a woman who eats mice and whose body is covered with cat skin. They are marginalised characters, who live with a constant feeling of not belonging. They are social outcasts, despised and judged by their origins and by the fact that their behaviour does not comply with the social norm. Hester, who was abandoned by her mother Big Josie Swane at the age of seven, spends all the time she has left to live trying to gather information about her mother. The play is, in this way, constructed by a series of duologues in which the audience learns different versions of the past of Hester's mother. The play is a meta-theatrical exercise of the subjectivity of memory and historical narrative, in which we, readers, spectators and translators, will never be able to access *the truth* —if it actually exists.

As the play's dialect deliberately breaks from Standard English, my translation had to violate Standard Portuguese. Some of the characters had to be rude, visceral and violent in their language; others had to be devious, others naïve, others extremely eloquent and polite. The first draft of my translation found a solution for linguistic transgression: instead of using the standard translation «você» for «you» in Portuguese, for instance, I would use the contracted form «cê», which would evoke a rural tone. This decision could, however, cause unwanted problems in terms of the transposition of dialect, of how audiences imagine the situatedness of dialect and accent: consequently, it is a translation decision that, in practice, is wholly contingent upon a host of variables: will the actors be able to perform in that linguistic variation without sounding like a caricature of the Brazilian countryside, and thus giving an inadequate tone to the play? How would a performance in such linguistic variation sound to the ears of its potential audiences? Would it be a statement of social transgression, or would it, again, simply be a caricature in performance? Those questions should be carefully thought through in a way that permits the «bigger truths» of the original play, whether tone, register, form or attitude, to be re-created as constitutive elements of translated play-text. Again, one cannot forget that such variables are adjusted and played with according to the material conditions of the receiving culture's

local theatre, and that encompasses both the production team, the theatre as a physical space, and its potential audience.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, let us refer back to Friel's idea of «bigger truths» in translation. In order to reach those «bigger truths», a translator ought to position him/herself as a playwright, actor, dramaturg and audience member of the play. Among all of the individuals involved in the production and reception of theatre, the translator is, nonetheless, perhaps the most self-conscious one. The central concern of this discussion which is part of ongoing doctoral research, in exposing the peculiarities of how space is conveyed in *By the Bog of Cats...* in terms of its historical, political and cultural contexts, was to demonstrate at least two things about theatre translation: firstly, that each play creates its own world so that each new play must be treated as an exclusive case study; and secondly, that the time has come when translators make use of their self-consciousness to empower themselves and work actively in theatre productions as cultural mediators, dramaturgs and, thus, articulators of theatre-making.

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