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Laera, Margherita (2018) Performing Heteroglossia: The 'Translating Theatre' Project in London. *Modern Drama*, 61 (3). ISSN 0026-7694. (In press)

### DOI

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# Performing Heteroglossia: The “Translating Theatre” Project in London

Margherita Laera

## Abstract

London is home to more than eight million people who speak more than three hundred languages, but the theatre scene in the British capital far from adequately represents this cultural richness and diversity. London theatre remains predominantly white, British, middle-class, and performed in the standard London dialect and accent combination. In the first part of this article I offer a contextualization and classification of types of heteroglossia available to London theatre-goers. In the second part, I describe my research project “Translation, Adaptation, Otherness: ‘Foreignisation’ in Theatre Practice”. The aim of the project was to investigate new strategies in theatre translation that would enable us to disrupt audience expectation and challenge ethnocentrism. In this article, I assess the difficulties we encountered and the audience’s response to our experiments. The project offered many timely opportunities to interrogate perceptions of “foreignness” among London-based theatre-makers, scholars, and spectators, immediately following the “Brexit” referendum vote.

## Keywords

heteroglossia; translation; dialect; accent; foreignization; Gliwice Hamlet; Piotr Peter Lachmann; Denise Despeyroux, Ternura Negra; Marie NDiaye; Les Serpents

## Bio

Margherita Laera is a Senior Lecturer in Drama and Theatre at the University of Kent, Canterbury, where she is co-Director of the European Theatre Research Network based in the School of Arts. She has published widely on Italian theatre, theatre criticism, theatre translation, and adaptation. She is the author of *Theatre & Translation* (Palgrave, 2019) and *Reaching Athens: Community, Democracy and Other Mythologies in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy* (Peter Lang, 2013), and the editor of *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat* (Bloomsbury, 2014). Laera’s Italian translations of plays from French (Jean-Luc Lagarce; Mohamed Kacimi) and English (Bola Agbaje; Athol Fugard) have been staged at Milan’s Piccolo Teatro.

## **I. Introduction**

This paper investigates the politics of performing heteroglossia on contemporary London stages through a discussion of three performances produced as part of my research project, “Translation, Adaptation, Otherness: ‘Foreignization’ in Theatre Practice” (TAO). TAO was designed to explore ways to disrupt current British theatre translation practices, which favour over-domestication of the source text to fit the target language, culture, and theatrical conventions.<sup>1</sup> Our aim was to investigate alternative strategies, specific to the stage medium, and that would communicate linguistic and cultural difference without turning the “foreign” into an overly “domestic” product. For the first phase of this project, I collaborated with a team of scholar-translators and theatre-makers to translate into English three continental European plays by writers with a migrant background. Staged readings were presented at the Gate Theatre in Notting Hill, London, in the summer of 2016, immediately following the “Brexit” referendum vote. The project offered opportunities to reflect on current modes of, and attitudes towards, heteroglossia on London stages, such as perceptions around (the performance of) foreign and regional accents and dialects, and translational strategies that interweave source and target language traits. In particular, the translation and staging of Piotr Lachmann’s multilingual reimagining of Hamlet, *Gliwice Hamlet* (2006), allowed us to challenge ethnocentric views about the “purity” of the English language and to experiment with non-standard accents and casting.

In what follows, I assess qualitative data gathered during the project through participant observation and interviews with audience members. This article considers heteroglossia by reflecting on the malleability and stratifications of the English language and analysing what is at stake in its theatrical representation alongside other languages in the symbolic seat of “English” power.<sup>2</sup> I argue that the tendency towards monolingualism on London stages results in the

marginalization of other cultures and languages, and that performing heteroglossia, in its various forms, can contribute to building a more democratic theatre. I construe heteroglossia as a potentially subversive strategy able to challenge the perceived supremacy of standard English in the capital's theatre ecology. In order to contextualize the theatre culture in which TAO operated, I distinguish between "horizontal" and "vertical" heteroglossia and consider five different modes that are available to London audiences. I conclude by evaluating the potential of the various forms of heteroglossia employed in TAO to shape more equal, representative and open attitudes in British theatre.

## **II. Challenging Ethnocentrism**

Sponsored by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council, TAO sought to intervene in the ecologies of London theatre by challenging current modes of representations of "other" identities on stage. Our aim was to investigate the opportunities and challenges afforded by discursive, non-discursive, and performative strategies that challenged the prevailing over-domesticating approach to theatre translation, which tends to select foreign plays that already conform to the dominant expectations in British theatre – anchored in realism – and to turn them into fully integrated "domestic" products.<sup>3</sup> The first phase of TAO, entitled "Translating Theatre," consisted of a series of workshops to translate, rehearse, and present three plays that would not otherwise have been staged in London. The texts we chose resisted any easy integration into both the corpus of plays normally presented in the British capital, and into the corpus of translated plays from the chosen source languages: Polish, French, and Spanish, three of the four most widely spoken European languages in the United Kingdom. The three plays challenged stereotypes about "Polishness," "Frenchness," or "Spanishness" and subverted preconceptions

about Polish, French, or Spanish plays.

The selection process and discursive strategies adopted by the scholar-translators I invited as project collaborators were driven by criteria inspired, but not entirely determined, by translation scholar Lawrence Venuti's notion of "foreignization." Each scholar-translator and director worked towards the project's brief independently and engaged with Venuti's concerns in different ways, at times consciously departing from his theories and recommendations. Venuti defines foreignization as an ethical effect on readers sought by adopting strategies that position the translated text outside standard practices, conventions, and expectations in the receiving locale, in order to signify its difference (Venuti 15–16, 18–20, 125). By selecting texts that did not conform to canonical standards and dominant taste, and by translating them in ways that aimed to subvert socially constructed notions of "fluency" and "naturalness," we sought to challenge the unacknowledged ethnocentrism that, I argue, currently characterizes the U.K. theatre industry's dealings with linguistic and cultural difference. Our aim was to deviate from dominant translation and performance practices, subtly challenging audience expectations in terms of dramatic forms, language use, and performance aesthetics. In order to communicate a text's "otherness," we sought textual strategies that went against the commonly accepted tendency to stage monolingualism, that is, exclusively featuring the capital's standard Estuary English dialect and accent (Hughes et al 5–6), and crafting a kind of multicultural, heteroglossic English that would push the boundaries of the standard dialect spoken on London stages. As Venuti writes:

the 'foreign' in foreignizing translation is not a transparent representation of an essence that resides in the foreign text and is valuable in itself, but a strategic construction whose value is contingent on the current situation in the receiving

culture. Foreignizing translation signifies the differences of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the translating language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation practice must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience – choosing to translate a foreign text excluded by literary canons in the receiving culture, for instance, or using a marginal discourse to translate it. [...] Foreignizing translation in English can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interest of democratic geopolitical relations. (Venuti 15–16)

The project's research questions included: What kinds of plays would be able to disrupt cultural codes in contemporary London theatre? What marginal discourses would we use to translate them? How might the live and embodied element of performance complicate the notion of foreignization? How might marginal performance strategies supplement and/or replace specific marginal discursive strategies? What would constitute a foreignizing approach to casting, acting, and *mise en scène* given current hegemonic discourses and common sense among London theatre-goers and makers?

The three week-long workshops with London-based practitioners were crucial in our continuing exploration of resistant practices in translation and the representation of cultural and linguistic “otherness” on stage. We may not have produced a flawlessly “foreignized” audience experience according to Venuti's definition, but we are now closer to understanding how to subvert audience expectations in contemporary London. To document this phase of the project, we produced a video documentary and an archive featuring video interviews with participants, extracts of performances, and photographs, which can be accessed on the project's website,

www.translatingtheatre.com.

### **III. Mapping Heteroglossia in London Theatre**

As a global and multicultural city, London is home to more than eight million people who speak more than 320 languages (Ahn et al 4). Figures from the 2011 census show that 37% of Londoners are foreign born, 22.1% do not speak English as their main language at home, and 4.1% do not speak English very well or at all (Office [2013]). With more migrants reaching the capital than ever before, these figures are likely to have increased since 2011. These data do not capture the estimated population of more than 400,000 illegal residents as of 2007 (Gordon et al 8) or the tens of millions of tourists that visit London every year – 39.7 million were forecasted by VisitBritain for 2017 – some of whom speak English as a foreign language and form a significant percentage of theatre audiences in the city. It is fair to assume, therefore, that in 2018, multilingualism is the everyday condition of at least a quarter of London's population. And yet, this does not mean that the rest of London's population is "monoglossic." In fact, the linguistic competence required of Londoners when going about everyday situations is far from singular. The sheer variety of accents, dialects, sociolects, registers, slangs, and patois spoken in the city is vast: from the prevailing Estuary English to Scottish, from Indian to Nigerian, from "urban patois" to cockney, not to mention Polish, Spanish, French, and other foreign accents, plus any idiosyncratic combination of the above. This variety makes linguistic life in London remarkably textured and complex, but the varieties of English spoken in the capital come with considerable baggage: how one speaks marks one out within the notoriously hierarchical class structure of British society. Issues of power and legitimacy can never be separated from a discussion of language: perceptions, value judgements, stereotypes, and even stigma around dialects and

accents from within and without the British Isles persist and serve to reinforce hegemonic relations, such as native versus migrant, English versus Scottish/Welsh/Northern Irish, rich versus poor, educated versus uneducated, and so on (see, e.g., Hughes et al 1–72).

Theatre in the capital far from adequately represents or embraces London's cultural richness and linguistic diversity. London theatre, especially in the commercial West End and subsidized mainstream, remains largely monoglossic, white, and middle-class. Plays are predominantly written in standard English, and performers tend to use variations of Estuary or Received Pronunciation (RP) English. While regional and post-colonial dialects and accents have gained traction in the last twenty years, they are still largely used to depict characters' voices realistically rather than accepted as "neutral" alongside the "standard" English dialects and accents. Horizontal heteroglossia, or the blending of more than one national languages, is very uncommon, especially in the mainstream, while non-native English speakers form a minority of makers and are often able to work only in the fringe sector. Vertical heteroglossia is more widespread, but the frequent realist use of English dialects and accents, whereby only marginalized characters speak in marginalized dialects or accents, is consistent with ideological mechanisms that perpetuate stereotypes. Despite the acting that is done in non-native accents, a discussion of heteroglossia on the London stage must go hand in hand with a discussion of casting conventions, as voice is an embodied practice and utterances cannot be separated from speakers. Lack of diversity in the British cultural system – from the behind-the-scenes workforce, to artists, audiences, and reviewers – is a problem capturing more and more attention.<sup>4</sup> However, discrimination on the basis of linguistic difference is hardly ever discussed in the public sphere. Translations of plays originally written in languages other than English formed about 3.8% of the total number of "straight theatre" productions staged in the United Kingdom in 2013 (Rebellato



and Edgar 12) and only 2.2% of all professional productions (10–12). Figures in London are not significantly distant from the national average despite the larger share of migrants living in the capital (38), and as Rebellato and Edgar note, “translations are the smallest proportion of the repertoire in every region” (37). Moreover, the widespread practice of commissioning celebrity British playwrights to rewrite foreign plays on the basis of “literal” translations only exacerbates the degree to which the linguistic and cultural difference is made to suit existing expectations and tastes.

Scripts featuring more than one national language are fewer and further between on London stages than those blending regional and social dialects of English. Due to the intricate histories of English/British colonialism and the current status of English as the international lingua franca, many Northern Irish, Welsh, Scottish, and also Black and Asian British writers have embraced geographical variations of English as a way to displace the dominance of standard English and RP, rather than attempting to resist the colonial language by writing in any “local” or “native” tongue. A significant proportion of migrant playwrights in the United Kingdom already have English, or variations of it, as their first or second language, and code-switching between regional English dialects, sociolects, and accents serves as an identity claim that inevitably evokes social status and power imbalances. Despite the rich tapestry of twenty-first-century Englishes, performing vertical heteroglossia on London stages has only recently become a common practice. In her important study *Voice and New Writing, 1997–2007*, Maggie Inchley explores the repercussions of New Labour’s inclusive rhetoric and insistence on diversity on British playwriting, arguing that this period coincided with a more widely representative use of the English language on stage. When Tony Blair was elected Prime Minister after eighteen years of Conservative rule, the political discourse in Westminster shifted toward a concern with

representation and an encouragement for people from more socially diverse backgrounds to “make their voices heard” (2). According to Inchley, this emphasis led to a more widespread and wide-ranging use of regional and social dialects on the British stage, supported by policies set out by the Arts Council, the main state-sponsored art funding body in England, in their “Agenda for the Arts 2006–8”, which encouraged participation of a wider and more diverse section of the population in the arts (27). For Black British playwrights such as Winsome Pinnock, Debbie Tucker Green, Roy Williams, and Kwame Kwei-Armah, who employ vertical heteroglossia, this shift meant more visibility in prestigious venues, such as the National Theatre and Royal Court. However, if the persistently naturalistic use of non-standard dialects to depict marginalized characters does increase their visibility and representation, it also perpetuates the hierarchies and stereotypes that the British class system imposes on embodied linguistic varieties.

The issue of verisimilitude in relation to heteroglossia on stage is of particular relevance to theatre in London. In *Speaking in Tongues*, Marvin Carlson distinguishes between the modernist penchant for monolingualism and what he terms “postmodern heteroglossia” (150–79), arguing that the fascination with foreign languages reflects the globalized and postcolonial world we live in. Carlson notes that, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, European playwrights often used different languages in order to enhance verisimilitude, so that foreign characters spoke their own mother tongue. He locates a shift in the nineteenth century, coinciding with the rise of nationalism, specifically articulated by Victor Hugo in his Preface to *Cromwell*. Hugo recommended that writers depict “reality according to art,” not “reality according to nature” (qtd. in Carlson 21–22). This attitude inaugurated a season of relative monolingualism that lasted, according to Carlson, until the second half of the twentieth century.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Carlson argues, playwrights and theatre-

makers began to re-engage with multilingualism in a way that was not preoccupied with verisimilitude, coinciding with the proliferation of anti-realist dramaturgy (150–79). However, in London and the United Kingdom as a whole, where naturalism and realism never ceased to dominate, this shift is harder to locate if not simply absent. In the past fifteen years, Tim Supple’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for the RSC (2006) – performed in English and seven Indian and Sri Lankan languages (Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Bangali, Sinhalese, Marathi, and Sanskrit) – was one of the very few multilingual productions to reach London that was not entirely preoccupied with credibility, that is, it did not match “foreign” characters with their “foreign” languages in a realist fashion, instead pursuing its own (debatable) intercultural agenda. Its use of multilingualism, driven by the casting, meant that each performer spoke a different language, but by stage convention each understood the others, no matter what language they were speaking, creating a sort of xenoglossic world in which no barriers existed and no translation was required. Supple also opted to avoid subtitles, assuming that one did not need to know the plot in order to enjoy the production (O’Toole 293). Because the story was relocated to a generic location in India and performed by a pan-Indian cast, some spectators may have assumed that performers had competence in several other Indian languages, as well as sharing English. In reality, not only did many performers have no English, but those coming from Northern Indian regions (who understood Hindi as well as their regional tongues) also had no language in common with those from the South (who mostly used Malayalam to communicate) (O’Toole 292).

In order to provide a sense of what has been available to London theatre-goers in the past fifteen years, I propose an incomplete inventory of productions featuring heteroglossia below:

### 1. Productions that feature two or more national languages, or horizontal heteroglossia

In the fringe and semi-professional scene, multilingual productions are more frequent yet still far from common. In 2017, the Voilà! Europe Festival, produced by the Cockpit Theatre, included six fringe productions featuring more than one language, performed by professional and semi-professional European migrant artists for one or two nights in small, local venues (Voilà! Europe Festival), such as Przymierska Morgan's *Crossing the Line*, a devised piece performed in English, Polish, French, German, and Italian. Examples of multilingual plays produced in more mainstream venues include *Static* by Dan Rebellato (Soho Theatre, 2008) and *Tribes* by Nina Raine (Royal Court, 2010), both in English and British Sign Language featuring deaf characters. Touring productions made for international audiences included Lola Arias's *Minefield* (Royal Court, 2016), a devised show with Argentinian and British non-professional performers speaking their respective languages; Katie Mitchell's *The Forbidden Zone* (Barbican, 2016), a multimedia production with actors speaking in English and German; Simon Stephens's *Three Kingdoms* (Lyric Hammersmith, 2012), which featured English, German, and Estonian characters speaking their respective languages; Robert Lepage's *Lipsynch* (Barbican, 2008), with characters speaking in English, French, German, and Spanish; and Supple's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Roundhouse, 2007). These made-to-tour shows are an expression of transnational flows of capital and the international co-production system, and their use of horizontal heteroglossia articulates elite versions of globalization.

### 2. Productions that feature one or more regional/social English dialects/accents, or vertical heteroglossia

Variations can include postcolonial Englishes or dialect/accent combinations originating within

the United Kingdom, such as Scottish, Northern Irish, or Welsh inflections. In this category, we find what Maggie Inchley has called “post-devolutionary voicescapes” (63), such as the work of David Greig and Gregory Burke, who have sought to represent the complexity of British identity, and indeed identity in general, through code-switching between regional English variations. In Greig’s *Pyrenees* (Menier Chocolate Factory, 2005), an amnesiac man’s identity is revealed when his accent is confirmed as “‘posh Edinburgh’, tempered by a few years in Africa, but still bearing ‘a tiny amount of residual Aberdeenshire’” (qtd. in Inchley 66). Black and Asian British writers such as Debbie Tucker Green, Inua Ellams, Bola Agbaje, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Winsome Pinnock, Roy Williams, Tanika Gupta, Hanif Kureishi, Parv Bancil, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, Alia Bano, and Athia Sen Gupta also feature in this category for their depiction of characters whose English is not “standard.” Following the ground-breaking work of Black and Asian British writers and theatre companies in the 1970s and 80s, such as Mustafa Matura, Jatinder Verma of Tara Arts, Talawa Arts, and Black Theatre Co-operative, productions featuring regional inflections from the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and other contexts have gained some visibility (Goddard). Verma has called for theatre to be representative of the multicultural make-up of London and the United Kingdom as a whole, and for classics such as Shakespeare to be liberated from the artificiality of RP through so-called “Binglish,” or imperfect, multicultural English. Among his most recent adaptations, *Macbeth* (Tara Arts, 2015) was recast as a British Asian story, with the witches portrayed as hijras. Again, the accents were justified on the ground of verisimilitude, so that audiences would hear English as plausibly spoken by British Asian family. The majority of the works in this category uses vertical heteroglossia in pursuit of such verisimilitude, to create characters whose lines reflect social status and cultural background. Bola Agbaje’s *Gone Too Far!* (Royal Court, 2008), for instance, highlights racial tensions between

African and Caribbean youngsters in an East London estate, featuring Nigerian and Jamaican characters, as well as cockney policemen, a Pakistani shopkeeper, and an elderly white lady, all speaking different regional variations of English. Femi Ogun's *Torn* (Arcola Theatre, 2009) tells the story of two lovers from Nigerian and Caribbean backgrounds who speak their respective regional variations of English. Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* (National Theatre, 2003) features Deli, a West Indian migrant running a cafe in London's borough of Hackney who switches between Jamaican and standard English, and Digger, a Grenadine-born gangster who "swings from his native Grenadian to hard-core Jamaican to authentic black London" (Kwei-Armah qtd. in Inchley 84).

### 3. Plays that feature characters speaking in both "native" English varieties and "foreign" accents

These plays are often about migration; instead of focusing on regional variations of English, they present characters speaking English as a foreign language. For instance, the controversial comedy by Richard Bean, *England People Very Nice* (National Theatre, 2009), explored three consecutive waves of migration to London's East End and included characters speaking English with Kosovan, Palestinian, Azerbaijani, Yemeni, and Serbian accents, as well as regional variations of English from Northern Ireland, England, and Nigeria. David Edgar's *Testing the Echo* (Tricycle Theatre, 2008), a play questioning what it means to be British, presented a group of immigrants from Kosovo, Egypt, Somalia, the Congo, and India wishing to apply for British citizenship. Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Let There Be Love* (Tricycle, 2008), set in an immigrant family of West Indian background, introduced the character of a Polish carer who looks after the geriatric patriarch and whose accent is heavily influenced by her Polish upbringing.

#### 4. Plays in translation

Plays originally written in a foreign language and performed in English can feature a degree of horizontal or vertical heteroglossia, the intensity of which may depend on the source text itself, the translation strategy, its mise en scène, casting, and acting approaches, but generally translations on London stages tend to edit out both forms of heteroglossia. Degrees of horizontal heteroglossia can be said to feature in a translation if culture-specific objects or names are inscribed in the target text or if the structures and idioms of the source language can be seen to have influenced the resulting English through forms of calque or borrowing.<sup>5</sup> For instance, French-Algerian playwright Mohamed Kacimi's *Holyland* (2006)— a play depicting the violence of the Palestinian frontline, translated by Colin Teevan for a reading at the National Theatre in 2009—featured characters drinking whiskey instead of the traditional Arabic spirit, arak, which appears in the French source. However, in a note, Teevan explains that it is up to the director of the play to choose between the two drinks. In my project, calques and borrowings played an important part among other discursive strategies, such as playing with registers and dialects of English. Scholar-translators working for TAO have used calques and borrowings not as “essences” of the foreign text to be carried across but as pretexts to shift and subvert the known paths and tropes of the standard English dialect used on London stages.

Translations can also feature degrees of vertical heteroglossia, or linguistic heterogeneity, if they experiment with registers, dialects, and styles—for instance by using colloquialisms or archaisms, mixing regionalisms, or quoting the tropes of particular English-language works or authors in order to position the translated text within the literary tradition of the target language. Such an approach is not common in London, where performed translations mostly display traditional notions of linguistic “fluency,” which exclude heterogeneity. Another uncommon

(and not necessarily desirable) way a translated play can be heteroglossic in performance is by featuring actors whose cultural, ethnic, or linguistic background is linked to the source material. For instance, in Dalia Taha's *Fireworks* (Royal Court, 2015), originally written in Palestinian Arabic, performers spoke with a slight Arabic accent, although it was unclear if the cast was specifically Palestinian or more generically of middle-Eastern origin.

##### 5. Productions featuring various degrees of accent-blind casting

The practice of accent-blind casting is not well established and difficult to define. I refer to it as an anti-realist aesthetic practice that disregards accents or does not exclude performers on the basis of their native accents (or on the basis of the accents they are able to perform in). The predominant convention in British casting is to assign parts to actors according to the characters' age, gender, and ethnicity, and often actors are required to put on specific accents to complement characterization. While experimenting with colour-blind and gender-blind casting is not unheard of, casting actors regardless of their native accent, without requesting they switch to an accent that is consistent with characterization, is not standard practice. While the Shakespeare's Globe's flagship touring *Hamlet* production, directed by Dominic Dromgoole (2012), featured a rotating cast of white and BAME (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) performers, it was entirely performed in an Estuary accent, for example. In a report commissioned by the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation, Suba Das of the Leicester-based Curve Theatre stated: "I have lost count of BAME actors and directors who have told me that they have said to agents and directors they are great at Shakespeare, but instead they are told they need to 'develop a London accent' if they are to get work" (qtd. in Kean and Larsen 11). Accent-blind casting occurs more frequently in fringe productions where speakers of non-standard English dialects can find it easier to work. For



instance, LegalAliens' production of *Poker Face* (King's Head, 2016), by the Czech playwright Petr Kolečko, featured performers from Czech, German, Lithuanian, and Italian backgrounds speaking with light foreign accents, but their characters were Czech, so their accents were not the characters'. Similarly, Papercut Theatre's staging of Romanian writer Maria Manolescu's *I'm Not Jesus Christ* (Theatre N16, 2016) was performed by one Northern Irish, one Polish-English, and two Romanian actors, while the characters were all Romanian. In Magali Mougel's *Suzy Storck* (Gate Theatre, 2017), translated from French, the protagonist, an Irish actor, spoke in her native Irish accent, while the other three characters – her mother, her husband, and the Chorus – performed in different social accents from southeast England: a standard Estuary, an Estuary with lower class inflections, and RP, respectively. In the case of the husband and the Chorus, accents seemed to be part of the characterization. In the case of Suzy and her mother, the actors may have been cast accent-blind. There is no indication of accents or dialect variation in the French source.

If North American cadences are usually adopted for the purposes of realist characterization, postcolonial accents are almost always adopted for this reason. One might conclude that, while color-blind casting is becoming more mainstream, accent-blind casting is less common. If an understanding of ethnicity as “unmarked” is slowly becoming accepted, conceiving of regional and social variations of English in this way still seems impossible – unless these variations are light, middle-class regional accents from the British Isles and Ireland. The reason is that certain accents are considered more “acceptable” or “neutral” than others, and the predominantly realist tradition in the British theatre scene has taught its spectators to read accents as significant for the purposes of psychological characterization.

From this analysis, it is clear that covert forms of institutional racism and discrimination

are still present in British theatre practices, so much so that campaigns and charities such as Act for Change, Tonic, Equity's Play Fair, Andrew Lloyd Webber's Centre Stage, and the Arts Council England's own Equality and Diversity policy are demanding action, especially in London, where the percentage of BAME population has reached 41% against an average of 10% in the rest of England (Tinson et al 19). However, in spite of recent calls for gender, racial, and social equality, there is little awareness in the field about discrimination on the basis of language, dialect, or accent. This is precisely the area in which the "Translating Theatre" project sought to make an intervention.

### **III. Three Case Studies**

In what follows, I draw on ethnographic notes, personal observations and conversations, video footage, and recorded interviews to examine: (a) the discursive, non-discursive, and performative strategies we employed to position our translations and performances as non-standard in the context of London theatre; (b) the issues we encountered; and (c) the audience responses to our staged readings.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Black Tenderness**

On 20 June 2016, we gathered in a small room at King's College London for the first day of rehearsals of our chosen Spanish play. My Research Associate, Flora Pitrolo, and I were joined by our producer, a director, three performers, the translator, a designer, a composer, and a stage manager. Our cast consisted of three performers whose native accents were from Ireland, Wales, and southeast England. Written in 2015 by Madrid-based Denise Despeyroux, a young writer originally from Uruguay, *Ternura Negra: La Pasion de Maria Estuarda* – translated by Simon

Breden as *Black Tenderness: The Passion of Mary Stuart* – is a magical realist comedy exploring questions of history and fiction through the character of Andreas, a theatre director obsessed with Mary, Queen of Scots, and his two performers, Paloma and Hugo, who play the roles of Mary and Elizabeth I, respectively. Due to its puns and hard-to-translate jokes, *Ternura Negra* challenges British ideas about comedy and stands in contrast to the Spanish plays most often staged in London—that is, Golden Age “classics” by Calderón de la Barca and Tirso de Molina or the rural trilogy of Federico García Lorca.<sup>7</sup> At first impression, Despeyroux’s plot might map onto the realist conventions that dominate London stages, but her characters are best understood as idiosyncratic caricatures with no correspondence to British or other Spanish types. Long sentences and difficult prosody jar with British standards of dramatic expression. Breden sought to mimic the original’s syntax in order to show how its characters constructed their thoughts. Resisting the urge to make the characters sound like locals, he produced a script that was judged by our team of theatre-makers as “out of place.”

On the first day of rehearsals, the director started with a read-through, followed by a session in which each participant could anonymously pose questions; the rest of the day was spent addressing them. The conversations that ensued indicated a degree of resistance to the script and puzzlement about the aims of the workshop, which was perceived as being too academic in nature and somehow detached from the reality of stage business. The very choice of source text was questioned and its value queried on the grounds of taste. The option of cutting the script was floated, and varying degrees of frustration with the prospect of the week ahead were expressed. Anonymous questions included: “Some things sound out of place. What do we do with them? Are those language choices owned by the character?”; “Is there a Spanishness to the characters?”; “Are there too many historical facts for the play to be dramatic?”; “What would

it sound like if everyone had Spanish accents?” (“Translating” [20 June 2016]). Breden stated that his aim was to avoid pretending the Spanish language had disappeared but not to communicate “Spanishness.” The ensuing discussion focused on communicating “otherness” through the play’s language and its performance. What would the purpose of communicating “otherness” be? Would it be fair to the author of the play to frame it in this way? Would the acting need to exaggerate or hide the characters’ idiosyncrasies?

Discursive strategies employed by Breden included experimentation with various modulations of English (geographical and temporal dialects, register variations), but also unusual collocations and unidiomatic expressions mapping onto the source text. For instance, in the play’s first scene, Paloma rehearses a wordy monologue from Andreas’ script about Mary Stuart. The sequence is meant to exasperate audiences before introducing a comical twist, when, after two and a half pages, Paloma breaks character to protest that the script is “unsustainable”:

Esto es insostenible. Yo no puedo defender un texto así, con esta solemnidad, con este exceso de información retorcida... Esto es un bombardeo para el espectador, ¿para qué tanto dato? Además, ¿qué sentido tiene que estando en la antesala de mi muerte yo me ponga a hablar de mi nacimiento, de mi infancia, de política? ¿Y a quién? ¿A quién le hablo? Ya te lo dije desde el principio... yo no puedo estar hablando sola. Yo no pienso hablar sola. Va en contra de mi criterio artístico.  
(Despeyroux 23)

Breden’s script read as follows:

This is unsustainable. I can’t defend a text like this, with this solemnity, with this excess of twisted information ... this is a bombardment for the audience, why all these facts? Besides, what sense does it make for me to be on my deathbed and to

start talking about my birth, my childhood, about politics? And to whom? Who am I talking to? I told you from the start ... I can't be talking to myself. I will not consider talking to myself. It goes against my aesthetic principles. (Breden 18)

In the rehearsal room, performers perceived Paloma's reaction as equally problematic, lacking immediacy and comic rhythm. Suggestions to increase the tempo through rewriting and cutting were made. The situation was unwittingly self-referential: actors were querying the artistic merits of a play in which an actor queries the artistic merits of a play. Like Paloma vis-à-vis Andreas's text, our collaborators found Despeyroux's script a "bombardment for the audience" that "went against [their] aesthetic principles." The theatre-makers' reaction prompted questions about the value and purpose of the project: what would be the point of presenting the audience with a play that "does not work"? ("Translating" [22 June 2016]). This question touched the heart of the project: it was precisely what it means for a translated play to "work" that we were attempting to assess by incorporating a degree of heteroglossia into the translated script. A conflict generated frustration in the rehearsal room: between the project's aim to stage "otherness," on one hand, and the theatre-makers' expertise and desire to please the audience and reinforce their expectations, on the other.

In order to position the script within dominant or "legitimate" British practices, a playwright-translator under commission to write "a new version" of Despeyroux's script might have been compelled to rewrite Paloma's lines. One of the performers suggested we replace "This is unsustainable" with "Fuck this shit" and cut much of the following speech. A fully "monolingual" version, cutting out unidiomatic expressions, shortening phrases, and upping the tempo, might read as follows:

Fuck this shit! I can't do this. It's like bombarding the audience. What's the

bloody point of saying any of this? And who am I talking to? I've already told you, I am not going to talk to myself. It goes against my aesthetic principles.

This sort of linguistic, cultural and theatrical adaptation, based on a particular taste for rhythm, syntax, and lexicon alleged to reflect everyday conversation, is considered best practice in British theatre's dealings with foreign texts. Instead, Breden opted for semantic correspondence and avoided idiomatic expressions that would have reinforced the dominance of the standard, idiomatic British English spoken in London. While Venuti recommends experimenting boldly with language by mixing marginal dialects and variant registers (such as colloquialisms), and by reorienting the target text to a new setting (by quoting or imitating relevant target language literature, for instance, and using idioms where relevant), Breden pursued a different set of concerns. The assumption challenged by Breden's script was that theatrical characters must express themselves in a locally recognizable fashion that irons out "foreign" idiosyncrasies — in other words, any hint of heteroglossia. The over-domesticating British theatre translator usually asks, "How would a British character express this thought?" But Breden rejected this question as an imperative. While the result was certainly not a "literal translation" — there is no such thing — neither was it a "bad translation" written in so-called "translationese." His script displayed a degree of heteroglossia that was both vertical, with its unidiomatic expressions creating a new sort of dialect, and horizontal, as these expressions, often functioning as calques, pointed to a different culture and language.

Another heteroglossic layer was added at the level of performance. On the second day of rehearsals, performers tested whether playing with accents was productive in communicating the play as "foreign." Sections were rehearsed with Spanish accents, but nobody perceived their own attempts as skilful. Subsequently, one of the performers proposed that, if we were not

representing “Spanishness,” it would not matter if the characters spoke with other foreign accents. A scene was then rehearsed with one of the actors putting on a very convincing German accent, resulting in much laughter in the rehearsal room. However, after this experiment, the consensus was that we had laughed for the wrong reasons, that the exaggeration of non-native accents indulged in exoticization or lampooning. It was decided that the performers should use their own regional accents, rather than RP, in order to add a layer of heterogeneity to the performance. While this choice was not specifically linked to characterization, the accents could have been perceived as belonging to the characters.

Responses to the staged reading ranged widely. Interviewed together, audience members D and E wondered what aspects of the production were meant to be “foreign,” as they could not locate any. Audience member A remarked: “The actors and the translator did a really phenomenal job in making the English kind of colloquial ... I kind of forgot that it wasn’t in the UK.” Audience member C, a theatre translator, commented: “The actors delivered the text very smoothly and very naturally. I didn’t get the impression that they were struggling linguistically or culturally with what they were presented with.” This audience member also questioned the choice of play, finding it had no “sociopolitical urgency,” while others judged the language to be “wordy,” “verbose,” “dense,” or “heavy” (Audience Members B and G). Audience member G, a theatre director, stated: “There were certain points where I was thinking, I don’t know, I don’t know who speaks like that, I’ve never heard anyone speak like that so it felt a little bit distant.” Overall, *Black Tenderness* generated mixed responses among what was an “expert” audience of theatre-makers, theatre scholars, students, and translators. What was unanimously perceived as “out of place” by performers was not unanimously understood as “alien” by our audiences.

## The Snakes

Our second text, *Les Serpents* (The Snakes) by French-Senegalese novelist and playwright Marie NDiaye, more specifically challenged British expectations of what a play is or ought to be.

Unlike the vast majority of plays staged in the United Kingdom, *The Snakes* hinges on a very thin and mysterious plot, inexorably progressing without a single change of set in a constantly shifting, cyclical progression of time. The characters – the mother (Madame Diss), wife (France), and ex-wife (Nancy) of a man we never see or hear – do little apart from speaking to one another, playing power games and exchanging identities. The impression is of stillness, suffocation, paralysis. We do not know where we are: if the talk of Bastille Day fireworks suggests a French location, the isolation of cornfields recalls a North American one. As such, the play sits uncomfortably within the contemporary British playwriting tradition, challenging ideas of “drama” as the place of “action” and displaying ambiguity in plot and character.

During our rehearsal workshop, one of the actors expressed the view that NDiaye “is not a playwright, but a novelist,” implying that her script lacked the dynamism and character development associated with theatre, featuring instead more markedly “readerly” traits. Although plotlessness and a focus on the poetic, sonic, and rhythmic functions of language feature commonly in contemporary French drama, French plays translated and staged in London in recent years have primarily been plot-driven and more traditional, such as Yasmina Reza’s *The God of Carnage* (Gielgud Theatre, 2008), Caroline-Anne Toupin’s *Right Now* (Bush Theatre, 2016), and the numerous, highly successful texts by Florian Zeller, including *The Father* (Tricycle Theatre, 2014), and *The Truth* (Menier Chocolate Factory, 2016). NDiaye’s play operates on a literal level of meaning but also, more importantly, on a richly layered and nearly impenetrable symbolic level, with its opaque references to classical mythology, colonial history,



class hierarchies, nation building, and the construction of subjective identity. In her English rendition, Kéline Gotman highlighted how NDiaye's language is already foreign to itself. In her translator's note, Gotman described her discursive strategies as interwoven with, and reflective of, the poetics of the play itself:

bearing in mind the effort we set out with in this project to resist over-domestication, to resist rendering overly English what is not in so many ways English at all, I found that I could and had to preserve this strange, tense syntax. The way the sentences find their objects after they have set out. This seemed crucial for the play. Indeed it is a play that leaves us hanging, to the very end. Even at the very end, we still don't know what has hit us. Where we were. What journey NDiaye has taken us on. The language requires such a laborious game of waiting: just as the three women are waiting, in the hot sun, not knowing whether they will be allowed to go inside the house (and what is this house?). This results in an English that seems odd, uncomfortable, nearly stilted. (Gotman 11–12)

Given the singularity of this play, Gotman, the director, and I spent several days discussing the appropriate casting strategy for our reading, asking ourselves how the characters, with their acute symbolism and indeterminacy, could be conveyed by single bodies on stage speaking in distinct dialects and accents. Would we try to cast according to the gender, age, and ethnicity of the characters, despite the fact that NDiaye does not give much information about them? Or would we cast against, or in spite of, those material characteristics? Was there racial tension between the women or did they belong to the same ethnic group? If so, were they all black, white, or mixed race? Did it matter? Could our casting be colour-blind, and what implications would this decision have on the play's reception? We were aware that any choice would restrict the

interpretive possibilities offered by NDiaye's writing. In the end, we opted for mixed ethnicity in order to reflect the composition of French society today, but also to avoid both an all-white cast, which may have marginalized non-white performers, and an all-black cast, which may have been read as an attempt to label a black writer as one who wrote solely black characters and stories. Regrettably, two out of three performers left the process half-way through the week because they felt uncomfortable with the choice of text and the project's unconventional creative process. Disappointingly, our emergency replacement cast was entirely white.

Discussions about, and experimentation with, accent and pronunciation started on the first day of rehearsals. Driven by the need to identify the basic coordinates of the play – where are we? who are the characters? what do they want? – we discovered *The Snakes* required us to allow more fluidity in our answers than some practitioners were expecting. For instance, the play is set in France but, according to NDiaye, it could also be set in the United States, and the 14th of July fête could also be the 4th of July parade (Ndiaye). Equally, sporadic clues may lead a reader to think that the character of Madame Diss represents the aristocracy, France the lower classes, and Nancy the bourgeoisie, but these roles are not so clear-cut: Madame Diss has certainly lost her high status, and the two younger characters swap clothes and identities at the end of the play. The three could be read as the Furies of Greek mythology, haunting the man in the house, but there are echoes with the myth of Demeter and Persephone, too. No definitive parallels can be established.

On the first day of rehearsals, 27 June 2016, performers were encouraged to experiment freely with pitch, tone, rhythm, volume, and accents, without the need to find justifications in the text. On the second day, we reverted to more traditional, Stanislavski-inspired psychological work, and the performers singled out intentions and development for each scene, experimenting

with accents marking class or regions, to clarify the swapping of identities between Nancy and France. By day three, it was decided that performers ought to experiment with accent variations in order to communicate their unstable identities: Madame Diss would go “up and down the scale of RP,” Nancy would perform as a “self-made Essex girl” with some American English inflections, and France would use variations inspired by American and Canadian dialects. While these specific combinations find little direct justification in NDiaye’s script, the heteroglossic differentiation we proposed complicated any easy correspondence the audience might have made between this script and preconceived ideas of “Frenchness.” The fluidity of the characters’ accents and inflections also added to the strangeness of the performance.

Nonetheless, one audience member familiar with French literature, J, remarked that the text felt “very French” and that the translation “didn’t feel quite legitimately English”:

To me it sounded like a text coming from the voice of a French intellectual or a French creative rather than anything we would probably write over here [in the United Kingdom], I don’t know why, it just felt place-specific. That sort of weird, bizarre, philosophical, visceral narrative, that’s so French, so I was like, “OK”. [...]. There’s some bizarre otherness to [the translation], isn’t there? Which is just the case with translating, I guess, any text. It does feel like a foreign sound, it doesn’t feel quite legitimately English, does it? I don’t know why. I think it just sounds somewhat alien, but I think perhaps that’s just conceptually. The words themselves also, some of them – there are certain words, I thought, “Well, we never use them...”

This particular response is significant because it came from a British-French theatre-maker who was able to identify both familiarity and otherness in the performance. Along the same lines,

spectators stressed that they were not sure they “fully understood” the play as it was “slightly outside of [their] cultural frame” (Audience member I). None of the interviewed audience remarked on our experimentation with accents. Upon reflection, while our use of accents in the Spanish and French plays was not justified by regional variations in the source texts, the accents displayed by our characters could be interpreted naturalistically – that is, as belonging to the characters and contributing to their identity – and therefore did not offer a significant challenge to audience expectations.

### Gliwice Hamlet

With our third and last experiment, the Polish play *Gliwice Hamlet*, our choice to cast two black British-Zimbabwean actors – one of whom spoke with a London accent, the other with a markedly idiosyncratic accent that blended an African inflection with London modulations – was remarked upon, if not questioned, in at least half of the audience interviews we carried out. In what follows, I discuss our choices regarding casting and accent – and audience remarks about both – as intimately linked, even if they may seem two different issues, because performers used their native accent and were judged on the basis of their accent’s relationship to their ethnicity.

Piotr Peter Lachmann’s 2008 *Hamlet gliwicki. Próba albo dotyk przez szybę* (*Gliwice Hamlet: Rehearsal or Touch Through the Pane*) was translated by Aneta Mancewicz and Bryce Lease. A post-dramatic collage of short monologues and dialogues between He and She – sometimes to be understood as Hamlet and Gertrude, sometimes as the author and his mother, sometimes as actors rehearsing a play – *Gliwice Hamlet* featured a strong component of multilingualism, with sections in German, some words in English, and references to Polish literature and Shakespeare. One of the most prominent themes is the author’s unstable identity: a

German Protestant by birth, he became a Polish Catholic because of his mother's decision to rebaptise him following border shifts after World War II, when the Silesian city of Gleiwitz became Gliwice. Written for a site-specific performance in Gliwice's theatre by the author's multimedia performance company, Videoteatr Poza (Videotheatre Beyond), the script mixes prose and free verse, and is riddled with intertextual, culture-specific, and autobiographical references that are difficult to grasp even for a learned Polish audience. The script was written and performed in Gliwice and Warsaw as a multimedia meditation on memory, identity, and history, in which the author performed as a VJ, mixing live and pre-recorded video with images from his childhood. The fragmented and self-reflexive aesthetics of Videoteatr Poza, coupled with an anti-naturalistic script, are rarely ever seen on British and London stages.

One of the very few Polish plays in translation to hit the West End in recent years was *A Couple of Poor, English-Speaking Romanians* (Soho Theatre, 2008) by Dorota Maslowska, a play with a traditional plot and characters written within a realist framework. A small number of Polish directors have had their shows performed at the Barbican theatre – such as Grzegorz Jarzyna's *Nosferatu* (2012) and Krzysztof Warlikowski's *Phaedra(s)* (2016) – but these were still plot-based works. By contrast, the marked particularity of *Gliwice Hamlet* – the fact that it is about the author's biography and memories, his own fractured identity, his little-known hometown, and his family experience intertwining with the historical events of World War II – marks a radical departure from other Polish products recently reaching London, challenging the generally held view that only “relevant” plays displaying degrees of “universality” can and should be translated into different contexts.<sup>8</sup> The very choice of this text disrupted the assumption that the particular does not “translate,” that particularity cannot concern spectators from different contexts. What we confronted was precisely the definitions of particularity and

universality, a dubious binary that has nonetheless been influential in filtering what is selected (or not) for translation into English.

The casting also offered an opportunity to interrogate perceptions of particularity and “universality.” In contrast to standard practices in London, we offered “white roles” to black performers, as if to say that the colour of their skin was irrelevant and unmarked. The director disregarded the actors’ accents completely and did not ask them to adopt others while speaking English. The performers repeatedly expressed their delight with being offered roles so distant from the ones they were normally offered, and that their ethnicity was considered “irrelevant” instead of “a pretext.” Rehearsals were marked by their growing excitement about the text’s complexity, its references to history, literature, and biography, and the possible parallels between Lachmann’s story of displacement with their own experiences of marginalization in British society. However, instead of trying to turn Gliwice Hamlet into their own story, most conversations in the rehearsal room focused on discovering the layers of the two roles line by line and on understanding the play’s context in order to inhabit and represent its particularity without making it more accessible to the audience through adaptation. When the director proposed to add to the play by making reference to the performers’ own biographies, we agreed that we had too little time. My view was that it was not necessary or appropriate to make the performers’ biography explicit, as the production could then be perceived as a black adaptation of this play, or even a version set in Zimbabwe.

The performers’ non-standard English accent and macaronic pronunciation of German (which remained untranslated in the target text) and Polish (which the translators used to translate segments of the source already in English) further complicated the communication of Gliwice Hamlet to our London audience, who expected to experience a “Polish play” in

translation. Much time was devoted to teaching the performers the correct pronunciation of these foreign words, but the task proved too difficult in one week. The inevitable result was that they pronounced German and Polish with a British accent at best, incorrectly at worst. However, the director, translators, and I partly enjoyed the visible fact that they struggled to pronounce foreign words while holding the script during the performance, as their efforts reinforced the metatheatrical game already present in Lachmann's writing, highlighting the labour required in speaking a new language and encountering the other.

Generally, reactions to and observations about Gliwice Hamlet could be divided into two broad themes: about the text and its difficulty, and about the cast's ethnicity. About the latter, some expressed more reservations than others. One audience member with in-depth knowledge of Poland, P, felt that the play "hadn't made the journey." Another said:

I thought it was very interesting to have two actors of Afro-Caribbean origin, but I wonder what then happens to the specificity of the Polish context where, from what I understand – looking at anti-Semitism in Poland – it is something very recent and still quite taboo. So can that be fully explored outside Poland when we then add another layer of an Afro-Caribbean context? I'm not sure. (Audience member M)

In five of the nine interviews, the interviewee, unprompted by a specific question, made remarks about the ethnicity of the cast, the performers' accents, or both. While audience member M questioned whether it is possible to explore Lachmann's themes with a black cast, others wondered whether race "mattered": "I think the staging put quite a lot of other layers in to process, as well. So I spent maybe the first quarter going, 'Oh, does the setting matter? Does the actors' ethnicity matter, is that telling a story as well or not?'" (Audience member R). Audience

member P expressed discomfort:

– Yeah, I found it quite difficult, I didn't really understand the play particularly.

And I found the black actors being Poles quite difficult, so I felt actually if they had somehow adapted it to something more familiar to them... but it felt like they were kind of removed from the subject they were talking about.

– Do you mean if they had moved it to a different context?

– Yeah, like London or something. Something a bit more – I felt it was a bit adrift.

While the latter spectator saw the superimposition of cultural identities, locations, and stories as a shortcoming, another found it a “really interesting” experience:

You're in Denmark [because of Hamlet] but then you're in Poland because you know it's a translation of Polish, but then you're in Germany and then we're in a kind of hot, muggy, maybe African climate. I'm hot as well so I feel it... And also the accents of one of the actors just made me feel like I was maybe actually in that climate and not the kind of cold, Eastern European climate that maybe some of the text was taking me to. So it was really interesting being pulled between these different contexts. (Audience member U)

Another spectator made explicit remarks about the accents, wishing the actors had sounded more “African”:

– Because by picking black actors to perform German accents and tell this German-Polish story... I wasn't sure, I thought it created new problems [...] It's a terribly local play with a very local context and here watching it performed by a black African ensemble it made me more withdrawn, more... less emotional about the story in some ways. Apart from the part where [it] clearly worked for the



actors, where the story became universal.

– It what sense do you mean universal? In the way that the story became...

– Basically an experience of war and violence against women, for example, so actors played it beautifully. It's a very universal story, I thought immediately about genocide in Africa and, so I was thinking, "Why not then 'foreignize' this play by making actors play with African accents and completely get rid of the German, Polish, Latin, Turkish... sort of, yes, change it culturally?" (Audience member Q)

It is difficult to draw conclusions on the basis of few interviews. However, it is striking that, particularly in comparison to the responses gathered at the other two readings, comments were made about the performers' ethnicity and accents, whether about what they were or what they could or should have been. Seen as a whole, these responses, which came from an audience of mostly theatre students, makers, and scholars, suggest that "expert" spectators in London do not expect black actors being cast for anything other than "black roles." When the casting of black actors with a non-standard English accent is not or cannot be justified realistically by the character, questions arise as to how such a choice can be read, and whether it makes for a confusing, confused, or jarring aesthetics. In our reading, perhaps because the script was written for two actors playing multiple voices and characters, the cast was perceived as "all black," suggesting "Africa" or "Afro-Caribbean" – rather than multicultural London – as a location or cultural association for our staging, bringing issues of universality versus particularity, markedness versus unmarkedness, self versus other to the fore. Audience responses made it clear to me that the combination of this anti-realist, post-dramatic source text, featuring horizontal heteroglossia, with our accent- and color-blind casting choices had been the most successful in

challenging audience expectations.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

I have explored how theatre translation can challenge the expectations of its target spectators and present a world in which linguistic and cultural difference is highlighted rather than silenced through performing various forms of heteroglossia. A classification of types of heteroglossia available on London stages has enabled me to contextualize and position my collaborators' performances of *Black Tenderness*, *The Snakes*, and *Gliwice Hamlet*. By selecting texts that do not conform with the expectations of the target culture, by challenging conventional notions of fluency based on the dominance of monolingual models in theatre, and by experimenting with non-standard practices such as accent-blind casting, we have adopted an integrated approach to theatre translation for contemporary London, which aims to subvert the clear predominance of the standard London dialect and its exclusion of cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic difference in order to create a fairer, more equal world on our stages.

London's share of the population not born in the United Kingdom increased by 54% between 2001 and 2011 (Migration). Given the current trend, migrants will soon be a majority in the UK capital. And yet, as the recent Brexit referendum vote and the ensuing Conservative election victory showed, the majority of the United Kingdom's voting population sees migration as a problem to get rid of, rather than a rich contribution to cultural and economic prosperity. In this context, it is crucial that the theatre plays its part in constructing a more representative view of society, for instance by producing more translations and casting performers against cultural and ethnic stereotypes; that it stops employing conventional practices that edit out what is perceived as "foreign" from the stage; and that it starts experimenting with social and regional

dialects and accents against realist conventions. More efforts must be made for the theatre to represent linguistic and cultural difference in all its complexity, without necessarily trying to mirror reality, instead challenging it in order to be representative of more audiences, with a view to unsettle the theatre-going population's horizons of expectation. The TAO project was a small contribution in that direction.

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<sup>1</sup> The idea that a foreign text ought to be made “relevant” and “accessible” to the target audience is dominant in British theatre practice, as evidenced by the widespread practice of commissioning a “literal” translation of the source and a second, “adapted” version by a British playwright. This practice inevitably has the effect of taming the otherness of a given text, in that the British adaptor’s task is to dress the “visitor” in British clothes, often by editing out “irrelevant” elements. From the point of view of the commissioning venue, the British adaptor brings assurances that the play will suit British-trained actors’ expectations of an “actable” text and the perceived expectations of London-based theatre-goers of “accessible” entertainment.

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This is particularly true for older texts, where the source is not only linguistically and culturally but also historically distant. One example is Katie Mitchell's *Cherry Orchard* (Young Vic, 2014), translated from Russian by Helen Rappaport and adapted by Simon Stephens. As Stephens puts it, "The judgment behind my word choices in *The Cherry Orchard* is entirely subjective and based on no linguistic consideration of original Russian syntax or grammar." Stephens aimed to make the play "urgent" for target audiences, removing putatively out-dated conventions and expressions. He wanted to suggest a parallel between the two historical moments – turn-of-the-century Russia and contemporary Britain – so that audiences never needed to ask, "Why is this play relevant to me?" He and Mitchell therefore removed all references to local Russian elements and culture, "simplified the nomenclature" (Stephens), tightened the plot to fit the standard ninety-minute format (the unabridged play usually lasts over three hours), highlighted the theme of the lost child, and used language that felt both contemporary and entirely local or, in Stephens' words, "simple and clear and economic." Further evidence is provided by the small number of translations performed every year, which demonstrates an aversion to what is not "domestic" in terms of aesthetics and cultural references. Plays that are translated mostly conform to existing expectations, or, in the case of the Royal Court, foreign plays are commissioned and developed with mentorship from Royal Court writers themselves, often steering the writing style towards known paradigms (see Aston and O'Thomas 28–50).

<sup>2</sup> I understand English as a language that is always already multiple, porous, and heteroglossic due to its history and multiple centres. I refer to its regional and social user-related variations as "dialects": for instance, the syntax and lexicon of Jamaican English, British English, or alternative forms used by different social groups. A given region's "standard dialect" is that taught in schools and used on television and in the press, while "non-standard dialects" are all other dialects available. I use "accent" to denote pronunciations of any dialect of the English language, regardless of grammar and vocabulary, in the utterance of the same word chain. "Standard pronunciation" is the pronunciation usually associated to a given dialect; "non-standard pronunciation" is any pronunciation that deviates. Finally, use-related variations are referred to as "registers" – that is, the different syntax, lexicon, or even pronunciation that users apply to different contexts, such as communication to different interlocutors, in different situations, or in different modes (written, spoken) or means (letter, email, text).

<sup>3</sup> Realism is the dominant paradigm on mainstream British stages, despite a recent history of experimentation (see, for instance, the work of Caryl Churchill and Martin Crimp). This dominance is evident not only in playwriting, which favours psychological depth and plot-driven structures, but also in the directorial approaches taken to those rare texts that deliberately craft less-than-round characters, which French theatre scholarship has referred to as "figures."

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the Act for Change campaign, <http://www.act-for-change.com>.

<sup>5</sup> Venuti does not recommend using either calques or borrowings in order to achieve foreignizing effects, as this use would suggest the existence of a foreign "essence" that can be carried across languages. He calls similar approaches "exoticizing" (160, 163). Venuti argues that it is a translator's "dissident stance that enables foreignizing translation to signal the linguistic and

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cultural differences of the foreign text and perform a work of cultural restoration, admitting the ethnoveinant and potentially revising literary canons in the translating language” (125).

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Gay McAuley’s research on theatre rehearsal ethnography (see *Not Magic, “Towards”*) and to Penelope Woods for advice on audience research methodology. Audiences attending the staged readings were a mix of invited and self-selected individuals. The Gate Theatre did not advertise the event on its website, but the project collaborators spread the word among personal networks, and I sent announcements through the Standard Conference of University Drama Departments (SCUDD) email list. Around forty people attended each reading (a different group each time), and given the way the event was advertised, they cannot be seen as representative of London theatre audiences in general. Many attendees were scholars and/or practitioners or friends of people involved. Since the readings took place on three consecutive Fridays at 2:00 p.m., it is fair to assume that no one attending had a standard nine-to-five job.

<sup>7</sup> Contemporary Spanish plays are rarely staged in London: a rare exception was Juan Mayorga’s *Way to Heaven* (Royal Court, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> I am referring here to popular discourses, rather than scholarly arguments, about what kinds of plays have potential in translation. Generally in British theatre, a text is construed to be “relevant” to audiences outside its original context if it goes beyond the so-called particular and moves toward the so-called universal. The more a work is seen to be able to cross borders, the more it is “translatable,” and the more it accrues prestige and value. In popular discourses, “universality” and “translatability” go hand in hand. As categories of a literary work’s value, however, they should be closely scrutinized, in that they can be, and indeed have been, used to oppress difference. As key dispositifs in the establishment of the Western canon, “classics” and their supposed “hyper-translatability” have played an important role in colonialism, establishing the superiority of colonizer literatures over local, colonized ones. The view that a literary work’s “quality” and “translatability” are interlinked is also expressed in scholarly work—for instance, in Walter Benjamin’s influential essay “The Task of the Translator” (81)—but of course quality is culturally, socially, and historically determined. David Johnston proposes a similar argument when he maintains that a work’s translatability depends on “the metaphorical sweep of the text” (21). According to him, the richer a play’s metaphors, the wider its interpretive possibilities, and the more translatable it becomes. Given the highly contentious and ideologically driven nature of the act of attributing “value” to a work of art, it is important to challenge preconceived notions about what is “applicable,” “accessible,” “relevant,” “metaphorically rich,” or “universal,” and therefore “of value.”