

# Five-Fold Translation in the Theatre of Marco Micone

by Joseph J. Pivato

In the complex relationship between the literatures of English Canada and Quebec translation has played an important role. Now with the emergence of ethnic minority writing in Canada this binary model of the literary institutions must be reformulated. The processes of translation are made even more complex by the phenomena of heritage languages and ethnic minority cultures. How are these developments represented on stage in the French theatres of Montreal?



One Quebec writer, Marco Micone, has tried to explore and explain the experiences of Italian immigrants in Montreal. His four plays, *Gens du silence*, *Addolorata*, *Déjà l'agonie* and *Babele*, deal with many questions: ethnic duality and identity in French Canada, the function of different languages in nationalistic Quebec, the political, social and educational problems of immigrants in the French province. Within these controversies the plays of Micone are involved in a complicated system of translation on several levels. We will examine five levels that are not simply layers of meaning in the texts but pairs set in dynamic process. On stage these dynamic interactions have varied with different productions, actors and changing political climates in the neighborhoods of Montreal. For our discussion we can identify these epistemological dualities with these labels: 1. Silence and voice, 2. Knowledge and form, 3. Language and lingua, 4. Culture and cultura, 5. Discourse and discovery.

For this essay I will use the English versions of Micone's plays printed by Guernica Editions, a press which was first established in Montreal as a trilingual publisher. The creation of a trilingual world in Montreal, French, Italian and English, is not just an act of the imagination but a reflection of local reality. The English translation of these plays adds yet another dimension beyond the control of Micone's French theatre. While Micone's French plays have been produced in Montreal several times, only one of his plays, *Voiceless People*, was staged in English, and this took place not in Toronto but in Vancouver during Expo '86 and at the founding of the Association of Italian-Canadian Writers; art and politics combine.

Micone was born in the town of Montelongo in central Italy and came to Canada in 1958. He earned French degrees from Loyola and McGill and focused on Quebec theatre. Through his original plays, his translations and his other writing, Micone has demonstrated that he is one of those rare intellectuals and writers from the immigrant community who has effectively integrated himself into Quebec society.

## Silence and Voice

Micone begins with silence, the silence that he attributes to Italian immigrants in Quebec and, by extension, the rest of Canada. In his first play, *Gens du silence*, the Italians are not only voiceless but invisible and powerless. The political conflicts in Canada between the English and the French have resulted in the marginalization of Italians and other immigrant groups. In this first play Nancy expresses this condition of being *irraciné*, uprooted:

I teach teenagers who all have Italian names and  
who have one culture, that of silence.  
Silence about the peasant origin of their parents.  
Silence about the manipulation they're victims of.  
Silence about the country they live in.  
Silence about the reasons for their silence. (71)

Given this voiceless state how does Micone make these immigrants express themselves on stage? How does he translate this silence into words that can speak for these people? Words that can be understood by both the Italo-québécois and the Québécois? Micone gives these people a French voice with Italian and English accents. It is a kind of hybrid French language. Nancy expresses the language choice with these words,

Write, fine, but in a way that everyone can understand. Young people must find themselves in the texts written by someone who lived like them, who understands and wants to help them. Their being different has to become a reason for them to struggle, and not a cause of complexes and passivity. (71)

The plays of Marco Micone try to give voice to many different people: young and old, immigrant parents and children, immigrant girls and women. The plays present many voices and different points of view in polyphonic fashion. Micone enters the Quebec discourse with plays that are dialogic and often question long-held assumptions about Quebec (Bakhtin). The dramatic situations in Micone's plays manifest a dynamic process of debate about the nature of society, language and culture in Quebec and Canada. Using the conflicted relations of immigrant families Micone explores the relations of different cultural groups. Nancy's brother, Gino, warns her,

We are a minority, and a minority which is beginning to speak up is not well regarded. It becomes dangerous, subversive. The only choice we were given was to unite what we are with what they are, the better to squash us under the weight of their majority. (72)

Micone is challenged by another silence. When he first produced his play, *Gens du silence*, in 1979 there were no models in Quebec writing for a theatre of immigrants. His task was not only

to give a voice to a silent community, but to create a whole new theatre in Quebec and in Canada, a theatre of immigrant voices that spoke French. And what kind of French was Micone to use: standard international French or the patois of the street? Like many other Italian-Canadian writers he avoided the stereotype of the immigrant speaking a broken language or an Italian dialect, and chose instead to use a language which is a simplified standard French with bits of patois, English words and Italian expressions. It is a compromise language which reflects the reality of the community without the negative aspects of dialects.

In his book of narrative essays, *Le figuier enchanté*, Micone speaks about his early experiences as a shy pupil in grade school being forced to learn English, but at the same time being treated as someone who was 'retarded.' It was a way of putting him and other immigrant children in their place and keeping them silent. With his first play, *Gens du silence*, and the creation of a theatre on ethnic themes Micone is able to shatter that silence and try to recover the lost history.

## Knowledge and Form

Related to the layer of silence and voice is that of knowledge and form. In addition to finding a voice Micone's task is to give symbolic form to the lives of these immigrants. He achieves this through the form of the play. The quotidian experience of Italian immigrants is transferred from an inarticulate state into the structure of the play. The Italian characters in the play speak with words, but also with their bodies as they must. The immigrants and their children are to recognize themselves in the dramatic representation. They are to be recognized by the Quebec audience. They begin to see themselves as others see them. In this way they are to achieve self-knowledge. Nancy tells her brother,

We have to find the ways that ghetto-keepers haven't used yet. We must replace the culture of silence by immigrant culture, so that the peasant in us stands up, so that the immigrant in us remembers, and so that the Québécois in us can start to live. (71)

The fiction of the plays give reality to the immigrants. Micone is idealistic and epistemological in his drama. The none-existent Italo-québécois begin to take form only as they begin to apprehend themselves both as distinct individuals and as a community. This affects our understanding of what it means to be Québécois. In that province the discourse is one of opposition between the ideal and the practice of being Québécois. When the former Quebec premier, Jacques Parizeau, criticized the results of the 1995 referendum results by claiming that the Québécois lost because the NO forces had "money and the ethnic vote" he was trying to separate the true Quebecer from the newer arrivals. The notion that we can know what a Québécois is presupposes knowledge of the conditions under which theory and action can correlate. And who is to determine the qualities of a true Québécois? In his third play, *Déjà l'agonie*, Micone takes a satirical approach to this question. He has the Italian character, Luigi, ask his Québécois wife, Danielle,

A real Québécois? Tell me how to behave. Do I look more real when I'm standing up or sitting down? Naked or dressed? In the sunlight or in the shade. Eating pasta or paté? Listening to Vigneault or to Verdi? Going to vote for the Parti Québécois or the New Democratic Party? You have to tell me, my love, what does it mean to be a real Québécois? What should I do to become one? ( 17)

These words are spoken not by an anglophone, but by an immigrant. The Italian references are not the ones normally expected in the Québec debate. The total effect of these plays is to decentre the focus of the debate by displacing the usual assumptions. Even Jacques Parizeau had to acknowledge the existence of the ethnic as a possible political force in Quebec. Micone translates immigrant questions into the Quebec discourse and thus undercuts notions about pure Quebec culture and a national Canadian literature.

There is another translation going on in this play that the above scene suggests. Even in the English version we can detect the echo of Dario Fo the Italian playwright of absurdist comedies and satires. Micone's play implicitly uses the marriage metaphor for the political relations between Quebec and its new citizens. Through the echoes of Dario Fo is Micone suggesting that we should follow the Italian playwright's model in the play, Open Marriage?

Unlike the majority of naturalized citizens of Quebec Micone has been a long-time souverainiste. In an interview he pointed out; however, that the PQ has not been inclusive when it comes to ethnic minorities. The PQ does not parachute immigrant PQ candidates into ridings as it does old stock Quebecers (Lachance, 14).

## Language and Lingua

Italian-Canadian writers in Quebec have grown up with the language debate. In addition to Micone they include Fulvio Caccia, Antonio D'Alfonso, Lisa Carducci, Filippo Salvatore and Bianca Zagolin. They have lived with the conflict and many have moved from one language to another at different stages in their lives. This process of crossing language barriers is a common problem for Italian immigrants. In addition to standard French and street French, and the lure of English, they often have to function in standard Italian and in their regional dialect. This linguistic schizophrenia is reflected in the dialogues and the personalities of characters. In *Gens du silence* where Gino and Mario explain their language levels,

I speak Calabrese with my parents, French with my sister and my girlfriend, and English with my buddies. (54)

In *Addolorata Lolita* claims she has four languages,

I can speak English with my friends, French with my neighbours, Italian with the machos, and Spanish with certain customers. With my four languages, I never get bored. With my four languages, I can watch soaps in English, read the French TV Guide, and the Italian *fotoromanzi* and sing "Guantanamera". (137)

There is humour, but it is a kind of gallows humour, with the edge that recognizes the hopelessness of the situation. The ironies in the plays demonstrate that with all these choices the characters have few real possibilities. The many languages imply the impossibility of translation and the linguistic dysfunction of the immigrant condition. In his one-act, absurdist play, *Babele*, Micone explores the communication problems in one family. The dialogues are a mixture of standard Italian, Molisan dialect, French and English. The father, Pasquale uses his Italian language with gestures,

Tony, chiude iusc'te mò a televisione e viè qua. Viè v'dè ch'vo sc'tu m'ssiù. Fa priesc'te. Mon garzon, parla tutte le lingue. (30)

The linguistic contortions of such scenes require the skills of trilingual actors like Tony Nardi who has often performed in plays by Dario Fo in Toronto and Montreal. The Italians in Micone's plays reflect the various points of view from within the language debate, and the disagreement within an Italian community that is further fragmented by language politics. Nancy tells her father, Antonio, about languages of education and the politics of power,

The real English send their kids to French school so that they can stay bosses. It's the phony English like you who don't understand a word of English who send their kids to English school. Your candidate, that hypocrite, that defender of English schools, married a French-speaking Québécois. Do you think she'll let her kids go to an English school? (47)

Like all his plays, *Gens du silence* is permeated with explicit social and political criticism. We may even feel that at times the drama cannot rise beyond the political context. It is through the different levels of translation that Micone is able to give his plays a literary dimension. This literariness flows through the interference of languages in the characters and the drama. While he shares a concern for language issues with other contemporary Québécois authors, he sees language in a context of political power and class relationships. As Sherry Simon has observed,

Language becomes an instrument and a manifestation of authority. To master language, and this involves mastering particular languages, is to be able to impose one's interpretation of reality. (58)

Micone questions the acculturation process of immigrants in Quebec whether through French language laws or English language schools. Is the new Quebec of the PQ a truly inclusive democratic society or one which is meant only for le Québécois pure laine?

The power of language was extended further in Micone's first two plays, *Gens du silence* and *Addolorata*, when they were translated into English. The experience of the marginalized immigrant is moved from the minority into the majority culture of English North America. How do you translate such a foreign experience of immigrants in Quebec? Can such a reality be understood and shared by the wider English audience, or does translation render it only as a caricature of marginalized ethnics, the exotic and the strange?

As an important translator for Quebec theatre Micone has had to deal with these questions for the French audience. He has adapted a number of classical Italian plays for the Quebec stage. They include Goldoni's *La Locandiera* (1993) and *La serva amorosa*, Pirandello's *Six personnages en quête d'auteur*, and Gozzi's *l'Oiseau vert*. The first French version of Goldoni's *Les femmes de bonne humeur* premiered in April, 2000. Micone is not afraid to give these plays a feminist adaptation which he did in his controversial version of Shakespeare's *le Mégère apprivoisée* (*Taming of the Shrew*). In addition to arousing debate about the adaptations of different cultures in Quebec theatre, Micone's translations have also won several awards.

## Culture and Cultura

Into the Quebec discourse about the survival of language and culture Micone introduces the questions of immigrant culture, class and power. The immigrant culture of Italian peasants is to be transformed into the culture of the new Quebec, but will this change the status and political power of the immigrant as a marginalized outsider? Giovanni explains this pessimism to Addolorata,

Forty years from now we'll still be immigrants. Sempre. Its not the number of years you stay here that makes immigrants out of us, it's the way we live. In a country where the rich and the employers lead the government around by the nose, poor people and workers are immigrants, even if their names are Tremblay or Smith. If we, the workers, don't make the decisions, we'll never have a country. That's why we're all immigrants. (132)

For these people the translation from immigrant to Quebecois does not take place even after forty years. Micone does not separate questions of culture from those of power, the power of self-determination, the political power to affect social change. If political power is necessary for the survival of French culture in Canada, then some degree of power is also required for the continuation of other ethnic and aboriginal cultures.

Into this dialectic of culture and power Micone also introduces the plight of women, not the articulate, educated, bourgeois feminist, but the exploited, immigrant woman. Both *Gens du silence* and *Addolorata* have been called feminist plays because the two women protagonists present the case for marginalized, powerless ethnic women.

We don't carry integration in our dowery chest, we the well-educated virgins of Chiuso. And you want me to stay here? Unlike you, Gino, I'm twice an immigrant over here: as an Italian in Quebec, and as a woman in Chiuso. Stay, Gino, you're a man. (73)

More often there is no support for the education of immigrant girls, as Nancy's father tells her, "The future is not important for women."

## Discourse and Discovery

Marco Micone is one of the ten writers of Italian origin who are having an impact on the literature of this country. His play, *Déjà l'agonie*, was short listed for the 1988 Governor General's Literary Award in the French theatre category. His friend, Fulvio Caccia won the GG for French poetry in 1994. Many of these writers, like Filippo Salvatore and Antonio D'Alfonso have deliberately chosen to write in French and to make their presence felt in the Quebec discourse over language, culture and society. In the past this discourse often demonstrated assumptions about a unitary Quebec with a homogeneous culture and dominated by people who see themselves as Québécois pure laine. These myths have been used by political parties in Quebec to control the social agenda, education laws and the population. In an interview Micone observed the exclusionary behaviour of the PQ:

Le PQ propose une société tricotée serré et pure laine ....Dès son arrivée au pouvoir, il a exclu tous les immigrants des postes politiques. (Boulin, 70)

In his plays Micone questions the nationalist assumptions and is critical of social engineering. His strategy is to bring the other voices of Quebec into the discourse. The polyphonic nature of the plays gives free expression to various points of view and tries to give a voice to immigrant women. The dramatic monologues of Addolorata speak for many immigrant women trapped in their situations of despair:

I've had enough of your black dresses.  
I've had enough of seeing your death-like faces next to your husbands...  
I've had enough of seeing you die for your children.  
I've had enough of seeing your children all dresses like fashion plates...  
I've had enough of seeing you come out of your basements like moles.  
I've had enough of seeing you make tons of preserves.  
Enough of seeing you hide your sickness and play the role of tireless woman.  
I've had enough of seeing you come back from the factory, prepare dinner, serve it and eat standing up.... (141)

Into the abstract discourse of political identity Micone introduces the mundane reality of the immigrant woman. Translation becomes a subversive activity as it gives these marginalized people a voice in the dominant society. In addition to the emotional impact of the drama, there is the shock of recognition as the Quebec audience begin to discover the diverse nature of their society. Parizeau made this discover on the night of the referendum, "l'argent et le vote ethnique."

The many levels of Micone's translations contribute to a heuristic process that seeks out the truth and meaning in the immigrant experience in order to arrive at an understanding of what it is to be Italo-quebécois. The polemical strategy of the plays is one way of discovering these questions. To the ontological question of being, Micone has added the question of cultural difference: what does it mean to be a Quebécois, a Canadian, an Italian? Micone's vision is one of a hybrid cultures for Quebec. It is a vision not shared by many of the old guard writers. This was best demonstrated by the negative reactions to Micone's poem, "Speak What" which is a culturally diverse adaptation of Michele Lalonde's famous separatist poem, "Speak White." The dramatic last lines can be read as a manifesto for Micone's theatre of hybrid cultures:

et nos accents fêlés  
du Cambodge et du Salvador  
du Chili et de la Roumanie  
de la Molise et du Péloponnèse  
jusqu'à notre dernier regard  
.....speak what  
nous sommes cents peuples venus de loin  
pour vous dire que nous n'êtes pas seuls.

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