The Delights and Sorrows of being a Translator and a Cultural Mediator

Margaret ROSE

Abstract: Over the last three decades I have worked as a co-translator and a cultural mediator between the UK and Italy, bringing plays by Alan Bennett, Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, Claire Dowie, David Greig, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Hanif Kureishi, Liz Lochhead, Sabrina Mahfouz, Rani Moorthy, among others, to the Italian stage. Bearing in mind a complex web of Italo-British relations, I will discuss how my strategies of cultural mediation have evolved over the years as a response to significant changes in the two theatre cultures. I will explore why the task of finding a publisher and a producer/director for some British authors has been more difficult than for others, the stage and critical success of certain dramatists in Italy more limited. I will look specifically at the Italian "journeys" of the following writers: Caryl Churchill and my co-translation of *Top Girls (1986)* and *A Mouthful of Birds*, Edward Bond and my co-translation of *The War Plays* for the 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin and Alan Bennett and my co-translation of *The History Boys* at Teatro Elfo Pucini from 2011-3013, including two national tours.

I will be addressing the question as to why and how in the early 1980s in Milan I began forging a new role for myself not just as a theatre translator, but as a cultural mediator (Rose 2015).[1] At the time, as a theatre translator, working from English into Italian, I started experimenting with collaborative translations. I was well aware that my knowledge of Italian was insufficient to translate on my own and sought Italian mother-tongue co-translators to work with. In the 1980s collaborative translations were almost totally unheard of, whereas in the last decade it has become a common practice. However, this is a subject I have written about before, and consequently I

will concentrate mainly on my work as a cultural mediator (Marinetti and Rose 2011: 139-154; Rose 2013:147-156[2]).

By the term "cultural mediator", I mean somebody, who as well as translating plays, assigns herself a number of different tasks in the hope that her translations will make that crucial leap from page to stage. In my experience I have found that many theatre translators are reluctant to take on the role of cultural mediator because they feel they are stepping into territory they are unfamiliar with and do not have the competency to navigate successfully. Instead the widening of one's job remit is well worth undertaking, and beneficial both to the translator as well as the theatre practitioners she works with. The five tasks outlined below are of course appropriate to my particular objectives and circumstances as a British mother tongue translator, living and working in Milan. Still they will hopefully be useful for other theatre translators and perhaps even provide guidelines for young people envisioning working in the field of theatre translation.

The Tasks

1. A cultural mediator needs to be well acquainted with the theatre culture of the country of origin of the plays she intends translating as well as possessing a knowledge of the theatre scene, whose language she translates into. She will therefore have a clear sense of which playwrights' work is most suitable to make that journey from one language and culture to another. She may be asked, or choose, to translate well-known playwrights, once she herself is well-established in her field, but the real challenge, to my mind, will be to turn herself into something of a talent scout, who manages to recognise the potential of an emerging author, before others have got there.

2. Whenever possible a cultural mediator should make contact with the author and directors of the source play, to learn as much as possible about the play and its author. This is particularly true in the case of contemporary theatre, which naturally is not the only option available.

3. A cultural mediator needs to seek a director and a company that might stage the translated play. This means that she has to network with directors, who will be selected according to the play at hand. If the play is written by an emerging playwright, it is probably best to select a young company who might be interested in working with an author of their own generation. On the other hand, a well- established playwright, whose work perhaps has already been performed in the target country, will warrant a more experienced director and company.

4. Once her translation has been taken up by a theatre company and is being used in a production, she will do her best to make sure the playwright sees a performance. She has various options: she can present her play in post-performance meetings, take part in panel discussions and/or run seminars and workshops devoted to the author. Such workshops might possibly be co-led with the author and other members of the creative team.

5. A cultural mediator can also write scholarly articles about the translations and stage histories of the plays, in addition to less specialised articles that she publishes in newspapers and magazines and on social platforms.

In the early 1980s when I embarked on the dual role of translator and cultural mediator, it was not a conscious decision. I was prompted by the adverse circumstances I encountered in the Italian theatre culture: namely a lack of interest in contemporary plays, not just foreign ones but Italian ones too. Furthermore, the plays that were translated and staged, by playwrights like Harold Pinter and Edward Bond, were almost always translated by Italian men, so my identity as a woman and a UK national did not help. Added to that, Italian publishers tended to prefer classical authors, such as Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde, whose plays were on school syllabuses and so sold well. Consequently, in the 1980s there were very few contemporary British plays published in Italy. This means, had I not adopted this proactive stance, many of my translations would still be awaiting a production.

From England to Milan

When I left England in the late 1970s, contemporary theatre and playwriting were already a part of British theatre culture. Along with the phenomenal success of pop music and British fashion, the work of contemporary playwrights, such as Shelagh Delaney, Anne Jellicoe, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Arnold Wesker, and a little later Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, Pam Gems, David Hare, were being performed in London as well as in regional theatres, like Manchester's Royal Exchange and the Liverpool Everyman, both situated in the Northwest of England, where I grew up and studied.

Instead in Milan, in the late 1970s and early eighties, the programming of the thirty or so theatres tended to be rather conservative, offering audiences plays by Pirandello, Goldoni, Shakespeare, commercial comedies and farces. There were of course exceptions: Giorgio Strehler, director of Milan's Piccolo Theatre, aimed at creating "un théâtre d'art" for a popular audience. He made stunningly innovative productions of the classical plays just mentioned, and also programmed foreign authors, like Gorky, Camus and Chekhov who had been rarely, or never, staged in Italy. However, this highly talented, pro-European director, even if he had the funding to do so, never set up a new writers' programme and rarely encouraged young Italian playwrights to develop their craft at the Piccolo (Bentoglio 2002). In the period there were some contemporary Italian playwrights, living and working in Milan whom Strehler could have commissioned, such as Dario Fo and Franca Rame. The couple were attracting large popular audiences to their shows, which they wrote, performed and directed. Nor was it only Strehler who shunned the couple; Milan City Council never gave them their own theatre, and Fo and Rame found themselves permanently on the move from one venue to another, except for a brief period at Milan's Palazzina Liberty. These two radical left-wing practitioners were made to pay for their anti-establishment stance. This lack of recognition persists even now they are both dead; their archive has not found a home in Milan, but has been relocated to Verona.

In the early 1980s, then, in Milan's theatreland, a sort of desert as far as contemporary playwriting was concerned, I discovered the Elfo company, a group of young, radical practitioners, who had set up their own company in 1972 (Bentoglio 2013). And fortunately for me, Elio De Capitani and Gabriele Salvatores, two of the founder members, nurtured a passion for contemporary British theatre. In 1983 I saw De Capitani's *Class Enemy* (Williams 1978) by Nigel Williams and was blown away by the energy of the production and particularly by the talent of a young Paolo Rossi in the leading role. In the following decades Rossi was to become a huge name in Italian theatre, cabaret and television. In *Class Enemy* Williams dramatizes the disenchantment of a group of young men towards the establishment, and specifically towards the British education system. In a string of violent clashes, the students revolt against their teachers and wreck the school. De Capitani's directorial choices made the play chime with a generation of young Italians who identified with Williams's characters because, like them, they felt they did not have a voice. The 1968 Revolution in Italy had not lived up to its promises, and in the aftermath many people, young and old, felt thwarted. Hence, I think, the appeal of Williams's play in 1980s Milan.

Trevor Griffiths's *Comedians*. Translation or Adaptation?

In 1985, for the first time after I left Lancaster University, where I had taken part in theatre productions, I found myself directly involved in the creative process of transferring a play from one culture and language to another. The Elfo company was planning a production of Manchester playwright Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* (Griffiths 1973) and I was asked to work with Ettore Capriolo on the play's translation. While Capriolo was an outstanding and highly respected translator, he was not familiar with some of the culturally specific items and idioms so important in *Comedians*. As Griffiths notes, "In *Comedians* we are not talking about linguistic functions in a superficial or obvious way, but rather about a kind of language which is deeply embedded in the history of the cultural formations of a particular

community which uses that language."[3] Capriolo and I went through the text, discussing this aspect of the play, and my knowledge of the working-class language and culture typical of working-class communities in the postwar era in the Northwest of England fed into the translation. Comedian Phil Murray's opening lines may serve as an example, illustrating the notable divergences from RP English, regarding both lexicon and syntax:

> Christ, what a flap. God knows where that bloody idiot of a brother of mine's got to. (*he checks his watch against the clock*) Be having a game of bones in the New Inn. He's probably forgot the stupid mare… I've worked meself puce for tonight. I have, I have that. And if that dozy prick… (*Comedians* 1988, 26)

The experience of collaborating on this translation made me realise the importance of both language and culture for theatre translation. While Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere were theorising what became known as the "cultural turn" in theatre translation studies, I was experimenting what it meant at first hand (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990). Using Capriolo's translation as a starting point, director Gabriele Salvatores, together with Gino Vignali and Michele Mozzati, made an adaptation of *Comedians (*Griffiths *1986)*, re-locating the play to Milan and seeking Italian counterparts for Griffiths' comedians. Griffiths' Manchester Jewish character, Samuels, his Ulsterman, George McBrain and his Welshman, Gethin Pryce, were given new Italian identities. Claudio Bisio magisterially played McBrain, morphing this Northern Irish docker into a Northern Italian warehouse man. This first taste of working collaboratively with an Italian translator encouraged me to take my first steps as a cultural mediator on behalf of Trevor Griffiths, who was unknown in Italy at the time. I published a critical article about my involvement in the translation process of *Comedians* in what was one of Italy's leading journals, *Alfabeta*, directed by Goffredo Fofi (Rose 1986). Instead with Guerini, a small independent publisher, based in Milan, I brought out an edited edition of Capriolo's Italian translation. The volume contains a bilingual playtext, interviews with the director and various members of the creative team, as well as essays by critics and academics. The material provides

a record of what proved to be a seminal production in the early career of members of the Elfo Theatre and a significant landmark in contemporary theatre in Italy. The phenomenal success of the Italian production of *Comedians* actually marked the start of a brilliant career path for many of this group of young professionals, some of whom went on to become stellar actors in cinema and cabaret. The cabaret performers among them put Milan's Zelig club on the map as a venue for cabaret and a Milanese brand of standup comedy. Trevor Griffiths visited Milan to attend the play's opening and show his praise and unbridled enthusiasm for the adaptation and the performance of the cast.

Women Playwrights in 1980s Italy

If new playwriting by male writers was generally neglected in 1980s Italy, the situation was even worse for women dramatists. While in Britain the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s was instrumental in the development of women's theatre, in Italy women writers, despite the presence of many feminist groups, struggled much harder to get their work produced. Franca Rame worked collaboratively with Dario Fo on the writing of several of his plays, but her involvement was not always formally recognized. This means that even a staunch feminist, like Rame, opted to take a backseat as a writer. Her motives probably included her well-established and much praised role as an actress – she hailed from a famous theatre family and had trod the boards from a very early age – coupled to a wish to allow her husband to enjoy alone the critical accolades many of his plays received. There were exceptions: in 1977 Rame and Fo co-wrote *Tutto casa, letto e Chiesa* (*All House, Bed and Church 1977)*, and in 1983 Rame penned singlehandedly *Lo stupro* (*I don't move, I don't scream, my voice is gone*, also known as *The Rape)*, a play about her experience of rape by a group of men, who are thought to have been political adversaries.

In the UK, the situation was very different. The work of Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, Timberlake Wertenbaker was being performed in theatres like London's Royal Court. Women's work was also nurtured in all female collectives, such as Monstrous Regiment. From

this rich array of talent, I decided to start with a translation of one of Churchill's plays. From early on it struck me that her theatre was in a league of its own, and that her plays were more likely to stand the test of time compared to other contemporary women writers.[4] And not least, I felt that the political and social issues, emerging in these plays, would be of interest to Italian audiences, and particularly to women. Having received permission from Churchill's Italian agent, Monica Castoldi and I set to work on a co-translation of *Top Girls.* Even if we could not be sure of earning anything from our work, I came to the rather obvious conclusion that until there was a translation available, many directors, who might potentially be interested, could not read the play. Today in 2019 theatre practitioners in Italy tend to know English at least well enough to be able to get the gist of a new play in the original language. This was not certainly the case thirty years ago.

A year later in 1987, I was approached by stage and opera director Marina Bianchi, who had been given the translation of *Top Girls* by Churchill's agent and had decided to stage it. On this occasion I found myself working with an all-female group, not just the cast, but the director, costume and stage designer were women. Our discussions about the play and its significance in the context of women's theatre went well beyond issues concerning the play's translation. I was invited to attend rehearsals and continued to adjust my translation as rehearsals progressed. For example, the characters Lady Nijo and Marlene deploy startlingly different linguistic registers. Nijo, a thirteenth century Japanese concubine, uses beautiful poetic English, laced with archaic expressions, whereas Marlene, the boss at a Temps agency in 1980s London, speaks a kind of English that is fast-paced, slick and to the point. With the cast and director, I discussed these registers, and we thought a lot about the kind of Italian a self-made, working woman originally from a provincial town, might use in a similar workplace to Marlene's in Milan. Some of Marlene's expressions, which the director and cast came up with, fed into the Italian translation. This experience certainly made me realise the huge advantage of working closely with a theatre company, in the process from page to stage (Aaltonen 2000, Marinetti and Rose 2013). *Top Girls*, whose

title remains the same in the Italian version, was performed for a week at the Chiesa di San Carpoforo (a former church) in central Milan as part of a summer festival, "Milano d'estate". The staging was favourably received by two critics, one of whom was Paolo Paganini. The title of Paganini's review in the *Notte* newspaper, "A Group of Twenty Amazons Attacks the Citadel" reveals how this critic captured the almost heroic feat of the women involved. We were all struggling young professionals, outsiders from the theatrical mainstream, but bursting with creative energy and determined to introduce a woman's play into a male dominated theatre culture. However, when the moment came for Gianni Valle, director of the Carcano theatre, who had given his support to the production, to programme *Top Girls* for the following season, he decided against it, without ever explaining why. To date a production of *Top Girls* in a regular theatre season has never happened in Italy. We need to ask ourselves why this is so. Was it because of a lack of funding for contemporary plays? Was it because *Top Girls* has a large cast and neither male nor lead roles? Or does this particular closure simply indicate a widespread reluctance on the part of producers in Italy to invest in women's work? Was Churchill's theatre, and not just *Top Girls*, considered just too radical an onslaught on patriarchy, to secure a place in a theatre season? I honestly do not have a definite answer to these questions.

Parallel to the translation and the staging of *Top Girls*, I set to work in my role as social mediator, meeting and interviewing Caryl Churchill in London; the interview came out in the Italian theatre magazine, S*ipario* (Rose 1987). I also found a publisher for *Top Girls* in the Genoese editors, Costa & Nolan (Churchill 1990). My work on Churchill's plays has continued, with a co-translation of *A Mouthful of Birds* (Churchill 1997) and *Blue Heart* (Churchill 2000). Having written several scholarly articles on Churchill, in 2010 Cristina Cavecchi and I edited the first volume of collected essays devoted to Churchill's theatre, *Un teatro necessario. Il teatro di Caryl Churchill* (Cavecchi and Rose 2010). In 2009 I also co-organised a public meeting, together with Milan's cutting edge Teatroi, to celebrate Churchill's 70th birthday. Together with Federica Fracassi, co-artistic director

of Teatroi, I invited practitioners from the Royal Court to Milan to stage two rehearsed readings, *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* and *A Number* directed by Lyndsey Turner, while Renzo Martinelli, co-artistic director of Teatroi, supervised a platform reading of *TG*. This international meeting, supported by Milan City Council, Milan University and British Council, raised awareness of Churchill's work, on the part of critics, theatre practitioners and theatregoers. In 2019, as I write this essay, I am happy to say that Churchill's plays are performed fairly frequently in different parts of Italy. Since 2014 Paola Bono has brought out five volumes of Churchill's plays in Italian, with the publisher Editoria dello Spettacolo. These new publications have aroused considerable interest; among recent productions, Giorgina Pi's stagings of *Cloud Nine* and *Blue Heart*, with her company Blue Motion.

Translating Edward Bond's Theatre

By 2006 I was well enough established to be commissioned to carry out a translation for an important theatre festival. I had admired Edward Bond's plays from his early ones, such as *Saved* and *The Pope's Wedding* in the 1960s and 1970s and early in the new Millennium I had co-translated *Eleven Vests* for a production by director Mattia Giorgetti. Even so my prior engagement with Bond's work did not totally prepare me for this new translation. Luca Ronconi, the then artistic director at Milan's Piccolo Teatro, was planning a cycle of plays and talks during the Winter Olympic Games in Turin. The programme, entitled "Domani", was devoted to the theme of war. On the bill was Bond's *The War Plays*, a nine-hour trilogy, dealing with the impact of a nuclear war (Bond 1985), first staged in England by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1985. My co-translator Salvatore Cabras and I were given just three months to complete the translation, which meant working flat out. In this case. many of the tasks outlined at the beginning of the present essay were carried out by other people, in the context of what was a huge production team and promotion campaign. Prior to the beginning of rehearsals Cabras and I were invited to discuss our translation with Ronconi and later

attended rehearsals. We were expecting to be asked about our translation choices, with specific reference to the source text, but this did not happen. It turned out that Ronconi, who did not know English well, was interested to discover whether the Italian translation worked in the dynamic of each scene, rather than discussing precise philological points. We also visited Cambridge to interview Edward Bond for the theatre programme and gave talks about the play and our translation once the festival was under way. While it was tremendously satisfying to see our translation performed by such a talented cast and before an international audience, the production was almost immediately withdrawn, due to the ill health of the leading actor, Maurizio Popolizio. Just the same the production sparked a great deal of interest in Bond's work, and since then *In The Company of Men, Lear* and *Summer* have had productions in major theatres and festivals. While we were not involved in the translation of the first two plays, Cabras and I were approached by director Daniele Salvo who commissioned us to translate *Summer*. We had met Salvo, who had worked as one of Ronconi's assistant directors on the Domani programme. As so often happens in Italy, it is thanks to personal acquaintances that a translator finds work. *Summer* was performed at the Naples Festival in July 2012, but unfortunately had no afterlife.

The Astounding Success of Alan Bennett's Theatre in Italy

Probably the introduction of Alan Bennett's work onto the Italian stage has proved my most successful cultural mediatory exercise to date. To make Bennett's work better known in Italy, I started by writing scholarly articles and supervising dissertations on the author. As a fellow Northerner, I felt, and I still feel, a great affinity for Bennett's work which I encountered for the first time with *Beyond the Fringe*, the political cabaret he co-wrote with Jonathan Miller, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore and which premièred at the Edinburgh Fringe in 1966. However, it was in the late 1980s, that I first toyed with the idea of translating Bennett. At the time I recall discussing his work with critics and colleagues, who responded negatively, declaring his plays

"too British" and "too provincial" to find a place on the Italian stage. I paid no heed to their dismissive attitude and by the early 1990s I had made contact with the author, and his London agent encouraged me not to give up on my idea. Consequently, Adele D'Arcangelo and I decided to bring out a selection of his plays and monologues in Italian. Once again a small independent publisher, Gianni Gremese, took a financial risk. It was a labour of love on the part of the six translators involved because none of us received an advance payment, and even more important, we did not have the faintest idea whether our translations would ever make it to the Italian stage and so earn us royalties. *Drammi e monologhi di Alan Bennett* (Bennett 1996), the title of the anthology, contains my introduction, some sketches from *Beyond the Fringe*, the first cycle of the *Talking Heads* monologues and a couple of stage plays. Our gamble paid off when well-known television and theatre actress Anna Marchesini decided to perform two of the *Talking Heads* monologues: *A Bed Among the Lentils* (1998) and *A Chip in the Sugar* (1999) at Vicenza's Teatro Olimpico. These plays were later broadcast on RAI television and were seen by thousands of people all over Italy. As I have learnt over the years, you often only need one well-established actor or theatre company to use your translation, and after actors and companies come looking for you. Indeed, the reputation of Bennett's work in Italy went from strength to strength post-Marchesini. Following Marchesini's success, I decided to take a risk with another Bennett play, *The History Boys,* which in 2004 had enjoyed an excellent run at London's National Theatre, followed by a Broadway transfer and a film. It struck me that given its investigation into student-teacher relationships, its exploration of the role of literature and history in the British education system, and gay culture in a boys' grammar school, *The History Boys* would be of deep interest to Italian audiences. So in 2008 Salvatore Cabras and I were given permission to translate the play by Bennett's agent and we set to work. Cabras also drew up a glossary dealing with the many citations in the play from Auden, Shakespeare, Larkin, etc., in a bid to make the play more accessible to directors and producers. In 2009, Elio De Capitani and Ferdinando Bruni decided to produce *The History Boys* at Milan's

Teatro Elfo Puccini. It was a bittersweet time for Cabras and me, because we had the satisfaction of seeing the translation produced by one of the most talented companies in Italy, but our translation was never published. A publishing house, Adelphi, had obtained the publication rights and used one of their translators. So while *The History Boys* had a three-year run in Italy in our translation, a different translation circulated throughout Italy, with the title, *Gli studenti di storia* (Bennett 2011). In Italy publication and stage rights are distinct, and in this case Cabras and I had been granted only the second, creating a frustrating state of affairs. Despite such difficulties, I have continued working on Bennett's plays, co-translating *Wind in the Willows* (with Salvatore Cabras) and *Lady in the Van* (with Adele D'Arcangelo) – both of which have still to be staged. Today in Italy Bennett's theatre is much appreciated. *The Talking Heads* monologues are frequently seen in theatre seasons; in 2017 and 2018 at the Elfo Puccini theatre, Luca Toracca performed *A Chip in the Sugar* to great critical acclaim, while in 2014 De Capitani and Bruni added another Bennett to their repertoire by directing *The Habit of Art*.

Introducing Multicultural Plays to the Italian Stage

In 2011 I set up a new three-year project, "Intercultural Dialogues", based at Milan University and in several Milanese theatres. With Cristina Marinetti from Warwick University and my colleague Cristina Cavecchi, I wished to explore the work of some UK playwrights with hybrid identities, whose work deals with issues of identity and migration. The support of British Council allowed us to invite three authors, for three consecutive years, to spend a week in Milan. Rani Moorthy, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Hanif Kureishi, all gave generously of their time. They presented their work to a group of MA students, specialising in British theatre, and took part in the translation of a few scenes from one of their plays. With a co-translator, I went on to translate the entire plays and secured a rehearsed reading or full-scale production. Still the reception of these works was not without difficulty. When we presented a rehearsed reading of Moorthy's *A Handful*

of Henna at a Sri Lankan restaurant in Milan the audience of Sri Lankans and Italians responded well, as did spectators of Kwei-Armah's *Let There be Love* in a small theatre in the suburbs of Milan. Instead audience response to the production of Kureishi's *Borderline* in my co-translation at Milan's Piccolo Teatro was lukewarm. Critics, too, did not review the productions, making me realise that the Italian theatre culture was not ready for these playwrights, all of whom have enjoyed success in the UK.

In conclusion it is worth mentioning that contemporary British playwriting today has an important role in theatre seasons all over present-day Italy. In recent decades new voices, like Mike Bartlett, Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Philip Ridley, Chris Thorpe, Simon Stephens, and more recently Lucie Prebble and debbie tucker green (the author signs her name low case) have joined the older ones. Even if today most of my translations are from Italian into English, I am still working in my role as cultural meditator on a project supported by British Council, involving Milan and Rome Universities, the aim of which is to bring contemporary British playwrights to Italy, to attend the Italian opening of one of their plays. Our plan is to combine this visit with the organisation of a writing workshop led by the author. In spring 2018 we kicked off with Chris Thorpe and his play, *Confirmation*; programming is now underway for 2019.

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1 In this article, I explore my experience as a translator and a cultural mediator in a much more personal way, while the present essay is more exhaustive of my experience.

2 Cristina Marinetti and I discuss theatre translation as teamwork, starting from the specific study of our collaborative Italian translation and our involvement in the rehearsed reading of Rani Moorthy's *A Handful of Henna* in 2012.

[3] See the conference Trevor Griffiths gave at Milan University during a symposium devoted *to Comedians*, published as "Narrare, descrivere, criticare" in Comedians/Comici, 40

[4] The style of Churchill's plays, a blend of realism with dreamlike, surreal elements, suggested they had a timeless quality and might well become classics in the course of time.