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'Channels': a Translation Exchange for French Plays into English

*It does not have to become normal but it should not be such an event to put on five French plays. I am glad that it was a big event, but it should not be really.*¹

BETWEEN 14 and 28 June 2002 the Lyttelton Theatre hosted a series of five rehearsed readings: Jean-Paul Wenzels's *Rising Blue* (2000), translated by Lin Coghlan and directed by Deborah Bruce; Laurent Gaudé's *Battle of Will* (1999), translated by David Greig and directed by John Tiffany; Marie N'Diaye's *Hilda* (1999), translated by Sarah Woods and directed by Dalia Ibelhauptaite; Philippe Minyana's *Habitats* (2001), translated by Steve Waters and directed by Fiona Laird; and Serge Valletti's *Le Pub!* (1998), translated by Richard Bean and directed by Mick Gordon. Part of the National Theatre's innovative 'Transformations' season, the readings constituted the public interface of what the organizers viewed as a 'new type of translation exchange'.

Initiated and co-produced by the Studio, the National's outlet for research and experiment, the rehearsed readings included some of the major plays written and staged over the last few years in France. Earlier in the year, a selection of recent English plays (Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clapp's Molly House*, Gregory Burke's *Gagarin Way*, and Richard Bean's *The Mentalists*) had already travelled to France, where they were given a public reading at the Comédie Française in Paris. In both cases, the specially commissioned translations were the work of currently active playwrights, known in Britain and France respectively for their own contribution to contemporary drama.

Reading this event as a case study, I shall try to assess the current climate with regard to the presence of international and cross-cultural work on the British stage – work manifested primarily via the medium of translation. Taking into account that from the range of cultural publications available annually in Britain (and the United States) only about two to four per cent are translations, one might be tempted to relegate such instances as marginal.² In fact, the translation figures for live theatre are slightly higher than those for other

media and, crucially, are distributed in a most uneven fashion between the various theatres, as it is only a handful of companies that regularly commission translations and put on the bulk of the foreign plays.

In other words, one can legitimately talk about a number of companies 'specializing' in the production of foreign plays, thus creating a niche for this kind of work and significantly contributing towards its constitution into an independent genre. The Gate Theatre in Notting Hill is perhaps the best known example of a consistent commitment to popularizing contemporary international work in English, though translations of new writing are also staged regularly by, among others, the Royal Court and the Almeida. Most theatres staging foreign plays, however, tend to opt for existing versions or new translations of established pieces, assimilated into the English canon, the audience reception of which is almost on a par with that of work originally written in English.

In this context of the considerable caution practised by repertory companies, the National's engagement with not one but several instances of new foreign writing constitutes a particularly notable event that challenges some of the patterns of established cultural policy. Whilst there is no guarantee that the 'Channels' series will continue – although there are plans for subsequent series involving Argentina and the Balkans – or that the plays translated will lead an independent life in the public domain, the National's very abandoning of a rigid policy in favour of an experimental pathway is worth critical attention.

Based on interviews with most of the British translators and with the National Theatre's International Projects Manager, Philippe Le Moine, I want to analyze key stages in the process that led to the public readings in the Lyttelton and the publication of the play texts in English. Thus emerges a potential route which also emphasizes the importance of co-operation at multiple levels: not only between two sets of playwrights, authors of literal translations, and translators (themselves playwrights), but also between distinct dramatic traditions (in this case the British and the French) as well as theatre and other cultural institutions.

Whilst it was the responsibility of the Studio to carry out the artistic decisions concerning the selection of the plays and the translation process itself, the project would not have come into being without the financial and moral support of the French Institute in London. Organizations like the French Institute and the Goethe Institute have the remit worldwide to channel attention to the best writers and artists of their countries; and, at least in a British context, French and German theatre

would have a considerably lower profile without their intervention.

The idea of the project, initiated in early 2000 by the National Theatre's Studio and financially supported by the French Institute, was to translate a French play into English. As Philippe Le Moine recalls, the idea was to have 'a panorama of contemporary French writing and work with British playwrights associated with the Studio who have not done [contemporary] translations yet or are not translators but may be interested in the exercise'.³ It was equally crucial to work in a collaborative way, involving the French playwright in the translation process conducted by the carefully chosen British writer. Thus, Steve Waters indicates that interacting in an immediate face-to-face fashion with another playwright helped to break down 'the provincialism of both British and French theatre and, with the aid of an interpreter, creates a more intimate relationship between writers in different languages; it also enables the possibility of a more innovative approach to the task of translation'.⁴

For Richard Bean, it was crucial to establish a translation of the play 'as true as possible to the spirit of the original (word, intention, and spirit being a continuum, with word the closest to the original text)'.⁵ Plays in translation, for him, should also work on stage and address (some of) the expectations of a British audience. David Greig equally stressed the importance of all major ideas being 'respected' and transported into the English version. He considers his new version as a kind of British play, which has remained very much a French one as well, with extensive monologues that would not be 'tolerated' by British stage conventions. Overall, however, he acknowledges his personal 'responsibility' for the English version, both as a play and performance text.⁶

In other words, whilst attempting to make these plays suit the requirements of the British stage, the translators made a definite effort to observe the distinct dramatic tradition the French plays were coming from. A key area of difference between the two dramatic languages, as Waters and Le Moine point out, is the lack of concern with dialect and class-inflected language in the French tradition. Waters adds to this a different perception of comedy and, on the French part, less preoccupation with narrative movement and psychological justification. Thus, part of what he was aiming for in his translation was to achieve 'a working roughness of stage idiom, which was more Anglo-Saxon, a shifting register, equivalents in connotations (particularly with regard to technical languages or place names)'. As a result, he aimed at finding equivalences for French particularities in the play in British life, as 'the play wasn't so much about those particularities as their significance on a more universal level'.⁷ In fact, Le Moine adds, the difficulty of finding such

parallels prevented some plays from being included in the series, as the organizers felt that the British audience would have difficulties in relating to the unfamiliar details of French daily life.

After selecting the five plays from a large pool of texts, an initial meeting with the playwrights in France was scheduled before embarking on the meticulous search for the best suited British persons to connect to each of the particular works. Also at this stage the literal translations were commissioned, aimed at including detailed notes on the texts without making any definite recommendations. The British playwrights would complete a first draft on the basis of this, and then spend a week or so with the French playwright doing the changes required by the text, often in order to pitch the translation at the right register. According to Le Moine, it was essential to give the French playwright the confidence that his/her work was 'treated properly, and to give the British playwright also the confidence to complete the translation with the knowledge that it is serving the purpose of the original playwright'.⁸ In the wake of this second draft, a joint reading would follow, so the French playwright could hear the play spoken and suggest final corrections if needed.

One of the key issues encountered by all the five translators was the existence of a written form of French that is neutral. *Rising Blue*, for instance, is a play about people who have lived their lives in the mining communities of the North of France and then retired to Central France. However, the play is written in a neutral French which is not accented. In English there is no such concept as 'neutral' for the stage – or neutrality becomes Standard English which has different connotations.

As an experiment, Lin Coghlan, the translator of *Rising Blue*, made an attempt to get as close to the word-for-word as possible, in order to keep that sense of neutrality. She ended up, however, with two middle-class people having a very distant relationship – whilst in the original people do not talk much because they know each other so well. In a British context the play also needed to be located by an accent, and in the end the translation had a very slight Irish twist because it was felt to bring in a certain degree of tenderness. When the play was presented to the public, however, the actors imprinted a Northern accent onto it. Using this example, Le Moine reiterates the difficulty and responsibility involved in taking such decisions, as placing neutral language into a specific accent can easily become the central preoccupation. In the course of the residency, such decisions were generally made in collaboration with the French playwright, thus avoiding mere foreignizing tendencies but trying to find alternatives loyal to the original yet viable in the target language as well as on stage.

This crucial collaboration with the French playwrights was doubled, for most translators in-

volved, by a close working relationship with the authors of the literal translation. Steve Waters's experience of working on *Habitats* started from Christopher Campbell's literal version alongside the French text, 'trying to build a version between the two'.⁹ When meeting Philippe Minyana after the first draft, the key area of discussion was with regard to the latter's intentions, his writerly priorities, and the provenance of the text (documentary material intertwined with fictional text). This encounter enabled the translator to take liberties with the text, including more transposition of place and detail, names of characters, turns of phrase, etc. At this stage, his task as a translator became to reconfigure the play and to construct an English equivalent, which also meant, for instance, that the nature of the differing criminal justice systems had to be taken into account.

Richard Bean referred to his collaboration with the French author, Serge Valletti, and the literal translator, Philippe Le Moine, as an intense 'three-way period of work', which successfully illuminated what he termed an 'extremely weird and difficult' original French text, before embarking on a second, more personal draft.¹⁰ Sarah Woods worked particularly closely with the literal translator of *Hilda*, Rachael McGill, throughout the entire process – an intense collaboration reflected even at the level of answering my interview questions together.¹¹ Moreover, as both Woods and Le Moine recall, there were instances when the translators did not have any other direct ways of communication with the French authors than via the mediating role of the literal translator.

For most translators, being clear about the author's intention was crucial before even getting started on the work. *Le Publ!*, for example, is written in a very colloquial French, utilizing slang and a multitude of invented words as Serge Valletti plays with language, characters, clichés, time, and space, leading us through a brutal and absurd world – a situation which represented, perhaps, the highest challenge from the translator's point of view. Nevertheless, Le Moine claims that in the English version people tend to laugh exactly at the same instances as in the French, thus offering full public approval and legitimation to Bean's translation strategies.

In the case of Waters's version of *Habitats*, an implicit priority was the idea of translating between traditions of theatre and social concerns. He aimed at finding a third text which was 'recognizably European but locally placed, that defamiliarized conventions of English life and theatre through Minyana's unique approach but which didn't feel so alien that it was merely arbitrary or the concerns of another culture'.¹² Waters also crucially claims that Minyana's play had 'real affinities' with his own writing, whilst the exercise equipped him to respond better to the ongoing translation of one of his own plays into German.

Addressing the situation of this series in the current context of British theatre politics, none of the translators envisaged a full production of their work for 'Channels' at the National. They indicate rather the possibility available for other theatres to draw on the Studio's work and to stage these plays themselves in the future. They contend that such an exchange contributes to breaking down the insularity of the British stage, yet they also find it disappointing that it is precisely the plays that offer the strongest challenge to the present aesthetic of British theatre that are the ones least likely to be produced. 'I think it's appalling that a writer of Philippe's eminence and importance has never had a production in Britain, and it's revealing that the strongest interest in *Habitats* has come from Scottish theatres' (Waters).¹³ In this view, foreign work most likely to be programmed bears the influence of our own writers: the European versions of currently popular British playwrights.

The plays, however, are available for potential staging elsewhere. Through publication, they have entered the public domain, belonging, in a sense, to anyone who is interested.¹⁴ Both the rehearsed readings at the Lyttelton and the publication of the play texts by Oberon have received considerable public interest, and there are negotiations for staging some of the work in theatres across Britain. The translators are also aware and acknowledge that, depending on the specific circumstances of a subsequent staging, further adaptations of the French original might be necessary.

In terms of foreign translations into English, most of the translators contend the need for more. Richard Bean, on the other hand, does not see drama translation as particularly important. Reiterating that Britain is the home of new theatre writing, he claims that nothing he has seen whilst involved in cross-cultural work has signalled the emergence of great new foreign plays. From a European perspective, however, such an approach oozes an almost unimaginable degree of self-confidence. The British model is unquestionably admired and copied world-wide, but even this vitality might benefit from a fresh influence, in the long run if not immediately.

According to the former producer of the Gate Theatre – and the person behind the 'Channels' project – Philippe Le Moine, theatre should indeed look much further than at what can be easily accessed. Though the term 'international work' is frequently in use when referring to cross-cultural collaboration between playwrights and theatres, he believes that there should be less fuss around such events and that they need to be given another definition, since the current term does not establish a helpful category.

Nevertheless, on the question of who exactly is best suited to carry out such work, opinions converge. All the interviewees find that playwrights, whatever their foreign-language awareness, bring,

as in the rendering of poetry, a particular and necessary expertise to the process (in case the aim is to obtain an accurate text in a foreign language, however, it is professional translators who should be involved). In fact, for most of the playwrights responsible for the translations in the 'Channels' series, the future might well bring about a further symbiosis between their own creative writing for the stage and translation work. Whilst they indicate that they would not initiate translation projects themselves, they would seriously consider taking up this type of work again if offered the chance.

Notes and References

1. Personal interview with Philippe Le Moine, London, 4 July 2002.
2. Cf. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: a History of Translation* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 12; *The Bookseller*, 20 February 1998.
3. See interview, as cited above.
4. Correspondence interview with Steve Waters, 17 July 2002.
5. Correspondence interview with Richard Bean, 6 July 2002.
6. Personal conversation with David Greig, 19 June 2002.
7. See interview, as cited above.
8. See interview, as cited above.
9. See interview, as cited above.
10. See interview, as cited above.
11. Personal conversation with Sarah Woods and Rachael McGill, 21 June, 2002.
12. See interview, as cited above.
13. See interview, as cited above. Since this interview was conducted, plans were finalized for a production of *Habitats* at the Gate Theatre in Notting Hill in December 2002.
14. See the published version of the five plays discussed above by Oberon Books, 2002.

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Clare Lidbury

Farewell to the Dancing Don

JANE WINEARLS, 'the dancing don' as one local newspaper described her,¹ has died at the age of ninety-three. She was a pioneer in many ways through her work in the professional worlds of theatre and dance, and in her work in higher education.

A colleague of Jane Winearls, on hearing of her death, was heard to mutter, 'that frightening woman'. And so she was. She was also formid-

able and forceful; she was warm, kind, supportive, and totally devoted to her work whether it was choreographing professionally, writing, directing actors in movement for the stage, or teaching. She was a dragon of a woman, with a fiery nature, possessed with phenomenal energy that she poured into her work, for her life was her work.

Her early career as a photographic artist soon gave way to a passion for dance. After initial training in Physical Education – some wonderful photographs show a Diana-like Winearls at the West of England Summer School for Physical Training in 1937 – she studied Greek dance with Ruby Ginner and Classical Ballet with Mary Skeaping. She taught in many schools and colleges, exploring her own movement theories. Already driven 'to investigate the nature of rhythmic movement', she recognized many of her own ideas in the work of Rudolf Laban, whom she first met in 1940, and attended several of his vacation courses.

But it was her meeting with the choreographer Kurt Jooss that changed the course of her life, and in 1947 she enrolled in Sigurd Leeder's newly opened London school. She became one of his first graduates and one of only a handful to receive Leeder's coveted teaching diploma. In 1952 she went as a guest teacher to Germany, working in Essen at Jooss's Volkwangschule, before returning to London to teach for Leeder.

In 1958, Winearls documented the work of these two great men in her book *Modern Dance: the Jooss–Leeder Method*. The book remains the only document of the system of dance training developed by Jooss and Leeder.² In Britain the importance of the system was largely eclipsed by the influence of American Dance, through Graham and Cunningham, but the Jooss–Leeder work has remained important in Europe and the USA, influencing such leading contemporary choreographers as Matts Ek, Pina Bausch, and Christopher Bruce. Her writing on rhythm, flow, dynamics, direction, and design remain as pertinent for the actor and dancer today as they were at the time of publication.

From the mid 1950s to the early 1960s Winearls ran her own studio and company, working with actors as well as dancers, while also teaching at Morley College and Rose Bruford College. During 1960 she choreographed the British premiere of Mayakovsky's *The Bath House* for Wandsworth School which, as Winearls states, 'attracted much attention from the cognoscenti'.³ It was at this time that she met the musician Gerald Wragg, with whom she worked for several years.

Winearls took the Jooss–Leeder work to the University of Birmingham in 1965. *The Dancing Times* declared that Birmingham had taken 'a courageous and pioneering step in appointing Jane Winearls as the first full-time lecturer in dance at a British university. . . . She established

dance in a university context in a way which seamlessly merged the worlds of dance education and profession.⁴

Initially in the Physical Education Department, Winearls also taught in the Departments of Music and Drama. Her choreographic skills were called upon for the Barber Opera productions, forming the graduate Studio Dance Company for her work on the pioneering revivals of Handel and Gluck operas, first with Anthony Lewis and then with Ivor Keys. She developed a deep working relationship with the late Professor Keys, and went on to collaborate on a series of historical dance lecture demonstrations for the BBC and other universities. Together, in 1974, they staged the first fully danced production in Britain of Orff's *Carmina Burana*, with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and the University Choir.⁵ Interest in this production led to the establishment of Birmingham University Dance Society, while the Studio Dance Company developed into a small-scale professional touring company. These two enterprises flourished for many years bringing some world-renowned performers and companies to the University campus.

In the summer of 1966 Winearls worked at Cape Town University. With Gerald Wragg, she produced a dance drama, *Dark is a Way*, an allegorical story of man's need to reach for a goal and his efforts to achieve it. The production was an experiment in its creative process and in drawing together students from the departments of drama, dance, and music to co-operate in the creation of the piece from improvisation. It was presented at the Little Theatre for several weeks to both black and white audiences, although on separate evenings. Reviews suggest that *Dark is a Way* was very successful, and Winearls and Wragg were invited to take up permanent positions at Cape Town University. However, Winearls was certain that she could not continue to work in South Africa in the political situation of the time.

Her work as a choreographer was closely linked to her teaching through her exploration of the Laban-Jooss-Leeder movement principles in all areas of her work. In an interview Winearls acknowledged that 'my greatest satisfaction of all is composing ballets'.⁶ However, she not only choreographed but was also movement director for a variety of theatre productions, ranging from John Russell Brown's production of *The Tempest* at the University (1967) to three professional productions of Schaffer's *Equus* – at Birmingham Rep (directed by Peter Dews, 1974), at Nottingham Playhouse (directed by Lionel Harris, 1976), and at Harrogate Theatre (directed by Michael Poyner, 1978).

Many will remember Winearls as a teacher. Through her work with Laban and her Jooss-Leeder training she showed that it was possible for a dancer to develop technique, artistry, and

creativity side by side. She seemed to have a wonderful ability to identify and nurture talent while, at the same time, through integrating her knowledge of the Alexander Method into her teaching, encouraging students to recognize their own habitual patterns of misuse in order to lead to improved performance and personal development. Classes with Winearls were always an adventure: dance training (she never called them technique classes), notation, improvisation: all were taught with energy and vitality to an accompaniment of her encouraging/acerbic/mocking/praising comments. Winearls would accept nothing less than the best effort from her students – lack of skill she would cope with, lack of effort offended her.

In 1976 Winearls retired from the University, convinced that dance had earned its rightful place in academia. She continued to work on a lifetime of papers and on completing her second book, *Choreography: the Art of the Body*.⁷ She continued to freelance, often working with former students and their dance companies (such as Masque Dance Theatre) as their Artistic Adviser. She settled in Alcester, Warwickshire, but as time went on she became reclusive, wanting friends and former students to remember her as the life-enhancing character she had been. She was still dancing, writing, and playing the piano until well into her eighties, when ill health intervened.

Winearls played an important role in the development of modern dance in the latter half of the twentieth century. Her long career embraced such dance legends as Rudolf Laban, Kurt Jooss, and Sigurd Leeder, and, as their correspondence reveals, she enjoyed a mutually rewarding dialogue with the American dancer-choreographer Doris Humphrey. Winearls felt that she was never really accepted by the professional dance world as she had not come through conventional routes, nor by the dance education world, which was strongly led by those turning Laban's work into Modern Educational Dance, who had little interest in dance as performance. However through her teaching, writing, choreography, and notation, Winearls documented the language of Central European Modern Dance, demonstrating how that language may be studied in practice, as an actor or dancer, and transmitted over time using notation.

Notes and References

1. 'The Dancing Don', *The Sunday Mercury*, 1971, in the Winearls memorabilia (see below).
2. Jane Winearls's *Modern Dance: the Jooss-Leeder Method* was published by A. and C. Black in 1958, with a new edition in 1968, reprinted in 1973 and 1978. It was also translated into Spanish (1968) and Japanese (1970).
3. After retirement, Winearls assembled some fourteen volumes of what she called her 'memorabilia', in which her working life is set out through photographs,

programmes, articles, newspaper reviews, letters, and publicity material, with an extended commentary stringing these disparate elements together.

4. Mary Clarke, 'Birmingham and Jooss', *The Dancing Times*, October 1992, p. 29.

5. The University Registrar wrote to Winearls: 'The Senate asked me to congratulate you on the choreography of *Carmina Burana* which it is understood was prepared during a term of study leave. In Senate's view a period of study leave has never been used to better effect.' Such things were possible before the days of the Research Assessment Exercise.

6. 'A Dancing Education', *Birmingham Post*, 1973, in the Winearls memorabilia.

7. Jane Winearls, *Choreography: the Art of the Body* (London: Dance Books, 1990).

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William M. Hawley

Hornby on Derrida: a Response

RICHARD HORNBY does well to advocate freedom of interpretation for the actor in his NTQ article of November 2002,¹ but he diminishes Jacques Derrida as a false friend of the actor in puzzling ways.

Derrida's article 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation' (1966)² is made the springboard for Prof. Hornby's reflections. But Derrida asserts that Artaud offers no programmatic approach to theatrical methods (and neither does Derrida): Artaud's texts 'are more solicitations than a sum of precepts, more a system of critiques shaking the entirety of Occidental history than a treatise on theatrical practice' ('Theatre', p. 235). Derrida does not seek to impose a system, despotically or otherwise, on the actor.

Far from supporting what Prof. Hornby calls 'the tyranny of the director' (p. 356), Derrida cites Artaud's rejection of 'an artificial and exterior

mimicry' in performance ('Theatre', p. 244). Not surprisingly, Derrida rejects binary or trinal oppositions regarding the relationship of 'directors/actors/spectators' or 'directive interpretations' in general ('Theatre', p. 244, 242). Derrida's interest in Artaud is for the most part broadly philosophical, but Prof. Hornby does not discuss the philosophical substance of what Derrida means by the 'closure of representation' and all that it entails.

To the extent that Derrida is specific about Artaud's theatre, he repeatedly refers to the event as having the quality of a 'festival' ('Theatre', p. 244). The carnival or festival scene is not generally considered a tyrannical space – quite the contrary. Derrida does not suggest that the actor be inhibited in developing a character or in discovering nuances in the role, as Prof. Hornby insists so forcefully. Derrida does not take Artaud's purple passages literally or out of context, and he often places 'master' and 'slave' in quotation marks.

Derrida's critique of Artaud is somewhat in line with what Peter Brook says in *The Empty Space*, since it concerns revitalizing theatrical presentations, giving theatre a sense of festival, breaking the fourth wall when necessary, avoiding stilted recitations of the text, etc. Brook and Derrida operate in different arenas, of course, but Brook is widely celebrated for his emancipatory thoughts about the stage; thus, Prof. Hornby's objections to Derrida on these matters seem strained. I would suggest that your readers go to Robert Eaglestone's *TLS* article of 6 September 2002, 'A Star Grows Old', for an interesting, concise, and balanced perspective on Derrida's work.³

References

1. Richard Hornby, 'Forgetting the Text: Derrida and the 'Liberation' of the Actor', *New Theatre Quarterly*, No. 72 (2002), p. 355–8.

2. Jacques Derrida, 'The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation', *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 232–50.

3. Robert Eaglestone, 'A Star Grows Old', *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5188 (Sept. 2002), p. 9–10.