

Ana Elena Puga

**TRANSLATION AND PERFORMANCE: A PREVIEW
OF *THEATRE SURVEY*'S FIRST WORKING SESSION
(NASHVILLE, NOVEMBER 2012)**

I recently translated and then served as dramaturge on the English-language world premiere of Patricia Suárez's *Matchmaker* (*Casamentera*), a contemporary Argentine play about the early twentieth-century sex trade in Jewish women imported from Eastern European villages to Buenos Aires brothels. *Matchmaker* was published in an anthology I edited, *Spectacular Bodies, Dangerous Borders: Three New Latin American Plays*, along with my translation of *The Girls from the 3.5 Floppies* (*Las chicas del tres y media floppies*) by the Mexican playwright Luis Enrique Gutiérrez Ortiz Monasterio (who goes by the acronym LEGOM) and Heather McKay's translation of *Passport* by the Venezuelan playwright Gustavo Ott. In February 2012, *Matchmaker* was staged in the Thurber Theatre at The Ohio State University. The production was directed by Lesley Ferris.¹

This is the second time I have undertaken a major translation project before tenure, despite having been warned early in my career that translation can be hazardous to one's career prospects. Despite the risk, I translated and continue to translate and will translate yet again because it is vital to forge connections between disparate languages and cultures and because it is fun to play with words. Not to mention the thrill of listening and watching as those words come out of actors' mouths onstage.

Suárez's play, the second in a trilogy titled *The Polish Women*,² is set in a village in Poland in 1920 and features a Celestina-like go-between, Mrs. Golde, who essentially sells young Jewish women desperate to escape poverty to a

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pimp who poses as an eligible bachelor seeking a young wife. The play is based on the historical facts of the criminal organization that operated first as La Varsovia and later as Zwi Migdal in early twentieth-century Argentina. In *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*,³ historian Donna J. Guy recounts how, as is depicted in *Matchmaker*, Jewish pimps would sometimes participate in false religious marriages and then take advantage of strict traditions that mandated a wife's submission to her husband, thereby pressuring their "wives" to cooperate with their plans to prostitute them. According to Guy, criminal charges were finally brought against the organization in 1930.

Matchmaker attracted me for several reasons. First, it deals with a topic, the connection between migration and sex work, that is unfortunately still very relevant today, not just in Argentina but all around the world. Second, I was fascinated by the artistry with which *Matchmaker* deploys metatheatricity to stage a series of surprises that gradually reveal a complicated blend of competition and collaboration among women forced to scramble for extremely scarce resources. And third, the play's delicate language and sly humor makes it a wonderful counterpoint to LEGOM's in-your-face bawdy two-hander. Because LEGOM's play is also about prostitution, however, I proposed that we produce *Matchmaker* in OSU's Theatre Department together with a lighter comedy that I thought might appeal more to college-age women because of its college-age protagonist: Josefina López's *Real Women Have Curves*. Under the vigorous direction of Francesca Spedalieri, *Real Women's* farcical humor about undocumented immigration and the bodies of U.S. Latina immigrant women provided a good balance to *Matchmaker's* far darker theme. At Ferris's suggestion, we applied for a grant from OSU's Center for Ethics and Human Values, which provided seed money for an accompanying symposium, "The Brothel and the Factory: Staging Immigration and Women's Labor."

Ferris's sure-footed direction somehow made an intimate play work in a 600-seat theatre with a 35-foot-wide by 22-foot-high proscenium. Scenic designer Divya Murthy contributed with a set that narrowed and moved forward the playing area, which was created by a delightfully nonnaturalistic, bare-bones "house" of mostly beams and posts seemingly held up by little more than air. The top of the flat that served as a suggestion of a back wall was purposely angled to give the sensation that something was off-kilter, a sensation echoed in the design of the most distinctive of the stage properties, a set of three vaguely Japanese-style screens that rose at odd angles, like slanted rooftops. The screens were crisscrossed by a network of spider-web-like lines, a pattern repeated on a larger scale on a huge scrim that covered the upstage wall, which magically suspended five dress forms at various levels. The haunting image of the female torsos floating, as if caught in a giant web, resonated with a secret that is gradually revealed through the dialogue: over the years Schlomo has taken a total of five women from Eastern Europe to Argentina to work in brothels.

An additional dress form on the stage floor literally grounded the image of the female torso. The female form served a realistic function as part of Mrs. Golde's sewing while at the same time it conceptually connected *Matchmaker* with *Real Women*, which takes place in a family-owned Los

Angeles sweatshop. Space and place were a challenge in *Matchmaker*, not only because the revolving set had to transform Los Angeles in the 1980s into Poland in 1920, but also because that set in Poland also had to evoke Argentina for the audience, even a non-Argentine audience. In our production, the layering of Poland and Argentina was accomplished in part through musical choices, klezmer and the tangos of Carlos Gardel, selected by Ferris and sound designer Ruth S. Luketic.

Layers, ambiguities, mysteries, cover-ups, and revelations in *Matchmaker* were integral to Ferris's directorial concept. For instance, as the action started, Mrs. Golde bustled about placing doilies on tables and arranging an old shawl over a threadbare couch in an attempt to hide her obvious poverty. Every one of the play's five scenes began with an ominous knocking at the door, regardless of whether someone entered or not, a reminder that someone will always come looking for vulnerable women. A fight between two "sisters" who turn out not to be sisters at all, Edit/Ada and Emma, crescendoed into a knock-down, drag-out battle, then subsided into a moment of terrible understanding between the two young women. A baby that had been hidden behind the screens during most of the action suddenly emitted an audible cry at the end, letting us know that little Moishe was indeed "real." What neither the direction nor the script ever reveals is the identity of the father.

As the translator-dramaturge, during rehearsals I was gratified to see that certain choices I had made in the interest of keeping the play in 1920, such as referring to "cine" as a "movie palace" rather than a "movie theatre," seemed spot on. And my use of research indicating that almost a century ago some contractions were used less frequently, whereas other contractions that are rarely used today were used more frequently, also gave the dialogue a tinge of formality while, for the most part, successfully avoiding the death trap of stiltedness.

I became painfully aware, however, of some of the limitations of my translation, which led to some on-the-spot revisions. For instance, Schlomo declares in scene 4: "To my mother all those who go to Argentina are dead." This was my rendition of "Para mi madre todos los que van a la Argentina están muertos." After listening to the line aloud in rehearsal, it became obvious that what sounds merely formal in Spanish can in fact come across as stilted in English. We changed the line so it sounded more natural: "To my mother everyone who goes to Argentina is dead." Just as important, my knowledge of the subdued tone of the Spanish-language version of the text and of the choices I had made in an attempt to retain that tone allowed me to make suggestions that sometimes made difficult-to-stage moments more effective. For instance, later in scene 4, Schlomo picks up the scissors from a sewing basket and, according to the stage directions, threatens Mrs. Golde from a distance ("amenaza a Golde a la distancia"), a moment that could easily slip into melodramatic excess. What if instead of pointing the scissors at her, I suggested, the actor simply caresses them? Ferris readily agreed, and the suggestion was adopted.

A suggestion I made in the interest of preserving the play's potential for political contestation perhaps had unintended consequences. Taking to heart Brecht's and Boal's injunctions against Aristotelian catharsis, I suggested that we reverse



Figure 1.

Left to right: Kimberly S. Martin as Edit/Ada, Casey May as Schlomo, Genevieve Simon as Emma, and Kelsey Jo Evans as Mrs. Golde in The Ohio State University Department of Theatre's production of Patricia Suárez's *Matchmaker*. Photo by Matt Hazard, courtesy of The Ohio State University's Department of Theatre.



Figure 2.

Left to right: Genevieve Simon as Emma, Kelsey Jo Evans as Mrs. Golde, and Kimberly S. Martin as Edit/Ada perform in The Ohio State University Department of Theatre's production of Patricia Suárez's *Matchmaker*. Photo by Matt Hazard, courtesy of The Ohio State University's Department of Theatre.

the traditional order of comedies and tragedies on theatrical double bills, putting the comedy first in order to let the audience leave the theatre disturbed by *Matchmaker's* open ending rather than reassured by *Real Women's* happy resolution. And so it was. Yet unfortunately, in the wake of the farcical antics of *Real Women*, the more wry humor of *Matchmaker* was often lost on spectators accidentally primed to regard this as the *serious* play about a *serious* subject. During a previous reading of my translation of *Matchmaker* in May 2011 directed by OSU Theatre doctoral candidate Emily Davis, the very same words, often delivered in a similar fashion (though admittedly by different actors), had evoked more laughter from a similar audience of mostly students and faculty. Live and learn.

One of the most rewarding elements of work as a translator-dramaturge is how it provides the wherewithal to create an intellectual climate for the reception of a work. Program notes, teaching packets, lobby exhibits, postshow discussions, conferences, symposiums, even promotional media interviews all add up to the creation and cultivation of an informed audience that will hopefully take the ideas raised by a play back out into the life of its community. In an interview with Michael Grossberg, a reporter for the *Columbus Dispatch*, I struggled to come up with a quotable, brief description of *Matchmaker* that wouldn't give away the surprise that one of the key players in the sex-trafficking ring is herself a woman and that wouldn't turn off potential audience members before they even got to the theatre by making the play sound, God forbid, depressing. I found myself dancing around the subject of the sex trade, trying to turn a downbeat into an upbeat. When I read Grossberg's article I cringed a bit:

"It's a very touching story of how women band together to try to resist a system of exploitation of poor women," said Puga, also dramaturge for the production. "The writing is very beautiful, delicate, subtle and optimistic about a dark subject: young women who are looking for a way out of horrific circumstances and who find ways to collaborate with each other to survive."⁴

I certainly can't claim that I was misquoted or quoted out of context. Yet Grossberg chose not to include a few other things I'd said, for instance, about how sex trafficking in migrant women was most likely alive and well in Columbus, Ohio, as it is in many places around the world today. I was able to make this point more fully during a postshow discussion and in a lobby exhibit played on a flat-screen television, organized with the help of Phil Garrett, an MFA student and assistant director of the production, who captured video from a Web site advertising "Polish brides." Garrett edited the video to give the viewer a sense of the wide variety of women selling themselves, or being sold, online today and to offer deeper looks into the online personae of a few of these women, so seemingly eager to please and seduce men from the richer countries of the world.

The symposium I organized to accompany the double bill gradually grew from a \$1,500 grant from the Center for Ethics and Human Values to bring a single speaker to campus into an almost \$10,000 two-day interdisciplinary extravaganza involving fifteen participants, hailing from Arizona to New York State, and

sponsorship from a wide variety of departments, programs, and student organizations across the campus. As organizer, I relied heavily on graduate student labor, which was ably supplied by Elizabeth Harelik, the treasurer of the Department of Theatre's graduate student organization, The Theatre Syndicate, and by another Syndicate member, assistant dramaturge Pamela Decker, who did everything from organizing a bulletin-board display on Patricia Suárez and her work, to moderating a postshow discussion with the cast, to organizing food and escorting out-of-town guests around our huge campus. Decker also found the perfect image for the poster and program: a midnight blue-toned drawing by muralist Joel Bergner that epitomizes the anxieties of immigration with just three figures: a ship on the ocean, the silhouetted back of a man who hails the boat from the shore, and a serious, wide-eyed face in foreground facing the viewer.

At the symposium, I found myself immersed in the intellectual issues raised by the faculty and graduate student presenters. On one panel, moderated by OSU assistant professor of comparative studies Theresa Delgadillo, sociologist Mary Romero (Arizona State University), and media studies scholar Isabel Molina-Guzmán (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign), discussed whether *Real Women*, written in the late 1980s, is something of a period piece more than two decades later, in a post-9/11 era in which undocumented migration has become increasingly criminalized and more dangerous. On another panel, moderated by Emily Davis, faculty and students from The College of Wooster discussed violence against women, including director Jimmy A. Noriega's presentation on his play *Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez* and its indictment of femicide in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Jason Bush, a lecturer in OSU's Department of Spanish and Portuguese, moderated a panel that brought together three graduate students from OSU with one from Northwestern University to explore the theme of cultural identities on the stage. And on the *Matchmaker* panel, moderated by yours truly, Paola S. Hernández (University of Wisconsin, Madison) and May Farnsworth (Hobart and William Smith Colleges) discussed *Matchmaker* in relationship to the nineteenth-century Argentine goal of civilization through immigration and the 1930s tradition of Argentine melodramas written by women.

Those who stayed through to the end of the symposium were rewarded—at least I think it was a reward—by an invitation to a party at my home at which we drank Spanish sherry and played Argentine techno-tango at high volume, an odd combination now that I think about it. In the midst of the festivities I paused for a moment to recall George Woodyard, the University of Kansas Professor Emeritus of Spanish and Portuguese who first commissioned the translation of *Matchmaker* but then died on 10 November 2010, before the volume was published, leaving it to Stuart A. Day to shepherd the project to completion. Woodyard was beloved (among many reasons) and notorious for the *pachangas* he would host at the end of the many Latin American Theatre conferences he organized. I remember an especially wonderful one with a divine Panamanian dance band that ended only after his neighbors called the police to complain about the noise in the wee hours of the morning. Despite my best techno-tango efforts, my postsymposium party, I am sorry to say, ended far earlier and with less commotion.

ENDNOTES

1. The complete production team included director Lesley Ferris, stage manager Jaclyn M. Benedict, scenic designer Divya Murthy, costume designer Shiree Houf, lighting designer Brian Elston, and sound designer Ruth S. Luketic. The cast included Kelsey Jo Evans as Mrs. Golde, Casey May as Schlomo, Kimberly S. Martin as Edit/Ada, and Genevieve Simon as Emma.

2. Patricia Suárez, *Las polacas: "Historias tártaras," "Casamentera," "La Varsovia"* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Teatro Vivo, 2002).

3. Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

4. "One-Act Turns Spotlight on Female Challenges," *Columbus Dispatch*, 2 February 2010.