



Translating Vanishing in Kristian Smeds' Texts for the Stage

JANKÓ SZÉP Yvette

Babeş-Bolyai University
furmanovic@hotmail.com

Abstract: *This paper proposes to explore phenomena of vanishing and invisibility related to theatre translation. After a brief introduction on the paradox of invisibly successful translation and the theatrical convention closely associated with it, I go on to study the changing attitude towards text in performance in contemporary Finnish theatre, as well as its implications for the translator. I will follow the gradual vanishing of textuality in performances created by Kristian Smeds, one of Finland's best-known and critically acclaimed contemporary theatrical auteurs. The different types of stage texts employed in his performances may be seen as a gradual vanishing of verbal articulation, that is, of plainly translatable texts. This vanishing textuality calls for a changing attitude on the part of the translator, too. In my conclusions, I will try to reflect on this problematic of metamorphosing theatre translation, and to rethink translation as cultural mediation and documentation of the vanishing translatable.*

Keywords: *translation, performance, contemporary Finnish theatre, auteur, Kristian Smeds.*

“Under the regime of fluent translating, the translator works to make his or her work ‘invisible,’ producing the illusory effect of transparency that simultaneously masks its status as an illusion: the translated text seems ‘natural,’ i.e., not translated.”

Lawrence Venuti (1995, 5)

“These ideas seem to be no longer serviceable to a theory that looks for other things in a translation than reproduction of a meaning.”

Walter Benjamin (2000, 20)

This paper is not intended as a reiteration of the Venutian axiom about the relation between the fluency of translation and the vanishing of the translator into invisibility, but rather as an attempt to muse over the adaptability of this paradox of “masking transparency” to the context of theatre and drama translation and, on the other hand, to continue this line of thought and explore a quite different kind of two-way vanishing in contemporary performance texts. This latter two-faceted phenomenon is condensed in the intended double meaning of the title: the gradual vanishing of the ready-made and routinely translatable drama from the contemporary stage in Finland (that is, text and its



translation losing its primary role), on the one hand; and the challenging task of translating and transfiguring this vanishing theatre text, on the other.

It is important to note that the source and target cultures involved in the present inquiry into the role of translation and of the translator in the intercultural mediation of theatre are two smaller and peripheral European cultures with their own, distinct theatre traditions and slight differences in the configuration of the contemporary theatre scene, although the languages happen to be (very distantly) related. When considering the dilemmas and choices faced in translating contemporary Finnish theatre texts into Hungarian, the questions will probably group around other key concepts than in the case of more 'saleable' combinations, which usually involve at least one widely spoken language. (And, to complicate the situation even further, the perspective here is multiply marginal: that of an academic translator/researcher belonging to a Hungarian minority group). I would even presume to argue that the questionable presupposition (founded on easy generalization) that the same rules apply and the same values prevail in the exchange between two more marginal European cultures as in relation to English, German or French, might feature among the main causes accounting for the lack of continuous theatrical exchange and the scarcity of drama translation between the two cultures.

Let us start our search for the vanishing theatre translator, however, from one of the most general notions frequently recurring in discussions on theatre translation: 'performability', and the fading into invisibility it involves on the part of the translator. Although we are not primarily interested in the conventional illusion game played by translators, translator–rewriters and dramaturge–translators of the naturalistic theatre tradition, a closer look at the notion of 'performability' and the related terms 'playability', 'theatricality' (see Espasa 2000), 'speakability', 'actability', 'stageability' (see Windle 2011) may prove interesting. This controversial concept elusive of definition started out as a kind of *raison d'être* for the study of theatre translation as a specialized subdiscipline in the field of translation studies. Playability/performability, characterized by Susan Bassnett in 1980 as "an extra dimension to the written text that the translator must somehow be able to grasp" (Bassnett 1980, 126), has persisted as a problematically vague notion ghosting throughout the discourse on theatre translation. As Eva Espasa pointed out in a recent article: "The connections – or tensions – between textual and extra-textual factors in translation have often been addressed under the umbrella term of 'performability'. Despite the elusiveness of the term [...] the research and practice of translation for the stage in the new millennium still address this issue" (Espasa 2017). The focus has, however, long shifted from attempts at an unequivocal definition of the term to the study of the multiplicity of interpretations generated by it throughout its life, of the different viewpoints it has been examined from. Susan Bassnett herself wrestled in her writings with this notion for long: after having introduced it, mapped it (in her 1985 article *Ways through the Labyrinth*), then having made her "case against" it (Bassnett 1991), she seems to have completely dismissed the term, together with the idea of an essential theatrical quality inherent in all theatre texts:



the “gestic dimension” somehow embedded in the text, “waiting to be realized in performance” (Bassnett 1991, 99).

This rejection of the idea (1) of performability encoded in all dramatic and theatrical texts in theatre translation studies came, of course, together with loss of faith in the primacy and even the necessity of a pre-existing written text in theatre making. As a late reaction to the performative turn in humanities research, theatre translation scholars started to turn their attention from the “page” to the “stage”, that is, from the textual dimension to the complex multimedial nature of theatre, in the late 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, growing interest in the cultural aspects of translation pointed in the direction of an interdisciplinary approach to theatre translation. The realization that the search for the “concealed gestic text within the written” is tied up with a specific theatre tradition, namely twentieth century naturalist and post-naturalist theatre and drama, led Bassnett to draw the frustrating conclusion that, since the concept of theatre on which the assumptions concerning ‘performability’ are based is “extremely restricted”, the attempts at defining ‘performability’ inherent in a text are often oversimplistic and “never go further than generalized discussion about the need for fluent speech rhythms in the target text,” (Bassnett 1991, 102). We may, however, take a step back and take a look at the image of vanishing translation these words convey. We may see this conclusion as reflective of the discontent (showing itself in the 1990s already) with the old-fashioned idea of transparent, easily consumable, domesticating translation vanishing into invisibility between (dramatic) source text and target performance, or dematerialising (being reduced to raw material status: crude ‘literal’ translation) and giving way to target language rewriting (see Bassnett 1991 and Aaltonen 1996). Vanishing is thus only a trick of illusion: only the translatedness of the playtext is meant to be unobservable by the consumer-spectator. ‘Performability’, together with the above-mentioned (relatively) synonymous ‘-abilities’ seem to be just slightly varying adaptations of the quality of domesticating ‘fluency’ criticized by Lawrence Venuti (1995) to the context of theatre translation. ‘Fluency’ of translation in general might create an illusory effect analogous to the transparent fourth wall of the proscenium-type theatre: translatedness is effaced just like representativeness in the theatre based on the convention of peeping through the invisible wall. In theatre this illusion is doubled if the otherness of the foreign playtext is carefully masked into a familiar shape by performable/playable/speakable/etc. translation and/or rewriting. In other words, the concept of ‘performability’ is closely linked with the tradition of Stanislavskian naturalism and psychological realism on stage, and domesticating translation techniques naturally reinforce the convention of the theatre of ‘vraisemblance’. The term, however, is devoid of a stable meaning and loses its purpose and justification when stepping outside of that convention. The idea of a performative dimension or *mise en scène* invisibly encoded in drama (Pavis 1992) has indeed become more than suspicious in theatre translation discourse, especially after the appearance of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s seminal work on postdramatic theatre. As William B. Worthen formulates it: “Texts do



not direct how we use them, though they may point to contemporary theatrical conventions” (Worthen, 2010).

In the following, we continue our inquiry into a less mainstream phenomenon than the transparency of saleable drama translation and the fate of the dispossessed ‘pariah translator’ (see Aaltonen 1996), namely that of the vanishing performance text and the implications of deverbalization on the task of the translator in contemporary theatrical exchange. My field of interest is a quite marginal segment in it: the translation of contemporary Finnish drama and stage texts into Hungarian; but it is still too broad and varied a field to formulate generally valid statements about it, so I will single out a theatrical author whose career – with its cycles of experimentation and institutionalization – may be seen as representative of the dynamics of contemporary Finnish theatre art and of the quite radical changes in the role of verblability and the use of textual material in performance.

A new wave of *auteur* theatre on the contemporary Finnish scene

Kristian Smeds is one of Finland’s internationally best-known and most-awarded theatre-makers at present and, we may add, he has been in the focus of critical attention (more or less intensively) for almost two decades. He belongs to a generation of theatrical creators for whom working in ensemble, as well as experimentation within or without the bounds of institutional theatre are naturally part of the process of creation. Having gone through half-amateur, independent and institutional stages of theatre-making, having wandered through a great multiplicity of ensemble constellations in Finland and abroad, Smeds still retains a personal, not easily imitable touch, a mixture of grave playfulness, madness, openness, a signature style, that classifies him among the most challenging *auteurs* of the contemporary stage.

Auteur theatre in today’s Finland does not necessarily or strictly mean director’s theatre, that is, the theatre of a privileged eye (of an exclusive viewing point mirroring the single vanishing point of the perfectly constructed illusionary performance). The theatrical creator may dissolve into a multiplicity of authorial roles: of writer/rewriter/adaptor, dramaturge, director, visual designer, actor, master of ceremony, stage-manager, etc.; consequently, the creator’s viewpoint may multiply and become self-reflective, self-deconstructive.

In Smeds’ case, we may have witnessed several radical changes in the authorial role combinations, ensemble constellations he has gone through in these past years. After having secured his position among the critically-acclaimed innovators of the contemporary stage as the founder and artistic director of the independent theatre group Takomo in the 1990s, his theatre career has been a series of vanishings and re-emergings in changed “settings”, alternating between institutional and independent spheres: after a three-year period as the leader of the Kajaani City Theatre between 2001-2004, he went on to post-secular theatrical experiments with the Houkka Brothers group and



adventurous international productions, returning then to the Finnish stage with a controversial, epoch-making deconstructive adaptation of the classical novel on the main stage of the National Theatre in 2007 (see Pajunen 2017); in the following years, as the main name behind Smeds Ensemble, he continued to receive, apart from awards, also critical and audience attention as an independent director; retiring then into the reclusive role of resident artist at the National Theatre from 2015 on, and recently appointed Professor in Acting at the Theatre Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki. Following with attention these cycles of visibility and reclusiveness, his professional life as a theatre-maker may be viewed as an inventive performance of becoming, of constant metamorphoses, that is, a career speeding through a vanishing point.

The vanishing of the verbal in Smeds' theatre

The different stages of the artist's career marked by this dialectic of vanishing–re-emerging reflect a constantly-changing attitude towards text and the verbal dimension of performances. His stage texts range from ready-made plays (like *Yhä pimenevä talo* [*Darkening House*], 1995) to fragmentary, post-Heiner-Müllerian performance texts (*Kullervo*, 1993), textual mosaics (*Jääkuvia* [*Frozen Images*], 1996, *Jumala on kauneus* [*God is Beauty*], 2000) and site-specific, intertextual adaptations of classics (*Vanja-eno* [*Uncle Vanya*], 1998), radically domesticated rewritings of classics (*Kolme sisarta* [*Three Sisters*], 2004), minimalist epic theatre texts (*Vaeltaja* [*The Wanderer*] 2003), deconstructive stage adaptations of novels (*Tuntematon sotilas* [*The Unknown Soldier*] 2007; *Mr Vertigo*, 2010), scriptless on-stage radio broadcast (*Radio Doomsday*, 2008), stage scripts based on improvisation (*Mental Finland*, 2009), and then to complete deverbilization in a performance of mute choreography (*Tabu – ihmisen ääni* [*Taboo – Man's Voice*], 2015). The point of departure for most of his works for the stage is, quite traditionally, a pre-existing literary text (or multiple texts): his own, written with co-authors or a classic, radically deconstructed and appropriated afterwards. And, although Smeds himself seems to differentiate clearly between his own (and the ensemble's) playtexts and classical dramas or other texts adapted for the stage (Ruuskanen–Smeds 2005, 122), the borderline between these categories is always blurred, and Smeds' name usually appears as author along with the writer of the appropriated text. The difference between starting the creative process with or without a text of departure seems to be only a matter of lower or "higher heart rate and pressure", but "stage-writing"¹ (Ruuskanen–Smeds 2005, 19) always starts from scratch even in the case of apparent adaptations.

"Everything in between and behind the text is most important material, lines are just the surface.[...] I have a non-respectful relation to text, but an extremely respectful relation to

¹ In the original "näyttämökirjoittaminen" [stage-writing], as Smeds prefers to call it instead of "näytelmän kirjoittaminen" [playwriting].



bringing the subject of the play to stage”¹ (Ruskanen–Smeds 2005, 122), states Smeds. This disregard for the authority of the written text can be observed in his own published texts, too. They usually contain some sort of vaguely generous instructions regarding the rights to use the text freely within reasonable boundaries: “All instructions regarding the staging/action may be disregarded. There are places in the text where there is clearly room for improvisation without requesting permission. Major changes to the text and/or breaking up the entire structure of the play must be discussed separately” (Smeds 2010, 2).

Although slightly less compliant in being deconstructed than in deconstructing others, Smeds seems quite consistent in his ‘textoclasm’². Word-for-word fidelity to a ready-made play or stage script is completely rejected, and what we may perceive as constant in Smeds’ performance texts is only a quite subjective sense of fidelity to the subject (that is to say, probably, to the artist’s own interpretation and abstraction of the original text’s subject), and the *auteur*’s signature style materialising in often partially improvised, untamed direct speech, self-reflective auto-theatricalization and a harshly playful/ playfully harsh deconstructive touch: “My plays are manipulating, emotional, and sometimes aggressive”³ (Kylänpää 2008).

Moreover, these different types of texts representing different stages of decomposition may be seen by the researcher and translator as a loose sequence, a gradual vanishing of verbal articulation, that is, of the plainly translatable text. This vanishing textuality calls for a changing attitude on the part of the translator, too.

Translating (transmitting, interpreting and transfiguring) the vanishing theatre text

The changing attitude towards textuality in Smeds’ performances, the growing reluctance to rely on the dramatic text, calls for the reinterpretation of the notion of theatre translation, for a shift from translating theatre as text to translating theatre as performance. However, this is not a routine task with a ready arsenal of methods. To borrow Walter Benjamin’s formulation of the translator’s perplexity: “traditional concepts in any discussion of translations [...] fidelity and license – the freedom of faithful reproduction and, in its service, fidelity to the word [...] seem to be no longer serviceable” (Benjamin 2000, 17). Even notions of ‘performability’ in the saleable sense are without use for translating works that may not be reduced to the words uttered on stage or written down by the author of the performance.

¹ In the original: ”Kaikki tekstin välissä ja alla oleva on tärkeintä ainesta, repliikki on vain pintaa.[...] Minulla on ei-kunnioittava suhde tekstiin, mutta äärimmäisen kunnioittava suhde näytelmän aiheen valjastamiseen näyttämölliselle tasolle”

² Smeds’ dismissal of the hegemony of text may even turn into the playful destruction and scattering of the classical dramatic text, as in his *Uncle Vanya*, where the lines of the old Maria Vasilyevna are read by the other characters from scraps of paper (pages of Chekhov’s play torn to pieces) hanging from the twigs of a dry plant.

³ In the original: ”näytelmäni ovat aika manipuloivia, tunteikkaita, ja välillä aggressiivisia”.



We must look for new modes of translating theatre when faced with this (otherwise by no means new) phenomenon of performance authorship that cannot be separated from text authorship. Performances can be and often are, of course, invited to tour internationally, which implicates translators, too, but is caption-translation the only alternative left for these professionals? Sub- and surtitle translation is understandably a growing industrial-level subfield of theatre translation, but in more marginal relations, like in the case of Finnish–Hungarian theatrical exchange, there is hardly any popular demand for performances to be imported, except for small-scale art theatre festivals, independent intercultural projects or results of rare gestures of cultural diplomacy.

Drama translators should look for new roles in this era of cross-cultural, transnational, multilingual and post-dramatic theatre, as Christina Marinetti (among others) points out (Marinetti 2013). Translation in the theatre should be reconsidered, re-evaluated, however “not in terms of ‘reproduction’” (Marinetti 2013, 36). Maybe translation should not be reduced to the interlingual transfer of the lines of the performance, but it should become cultural mediation, too. To Marinetti’s interest in the interpreter in theatre we may add, that in the utopian future translators may become aware of the importance of foreignization (see Venuti 1995) in intercultural transfer and become more visible and active, even if “only” as creative researchers of the foreign theatre culture. The “thick description” (in Clifford Geertz’s well known term) or transverbalization¹ of performance, that is, the verbalization in another language of the partially verbal (or non-verbal) complex, multimedial theatre event is a challenging alternative opening up for idle drama translators in search of the vanishing translatable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AALTONEN, Sirkku, 1997. “Translator in Theatre – Pariah or Master“. In Klaudy, Kinga, János Kohn (eds.), *Transfere necesse est*, Budapest, Scholastica, p. 455-459.
- BASSNETT, Susan, 1980, 1991, 2002. *Translation Studies*, New York and London: Routledge. (First published in 1980 by Methuen & Co. Ltd).
- BASSNETT, Susan, 1991. “Translating for the Theatre: The Case Against Performability“. *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, Vol. 4, Nr. 1, 1991/I., p. 99–111. Retrieved from: <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ttr/1991-v4-n1-ttr1474/037084ar/>, [accessed 26 May 2016].
- BENJAMIN, Walter, 2000. “The Task of the Translator“. (trans. Harry Zohn). In Venuti, Lawrence (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, London:Routledge, p. 15-25.
- ESPASA, Eva, 2000. “Performability in Translation: Speakability? Playability? Or just Saleability?“. In Carole-Anne Upton (ed), *Moving Target. Theatre. Translation*

¹ As an interpretive intersemiotic transformation, not word-to-word translation in the traditional sense of the term.



- and Cultural. Relocation*, Manchester, UK & Northampton MA: St. Jerome Publishing, p. 49-62.
- ESPASA, Eva, 2017. "Adapting – and accessing – translation for the stage". In Brodie, Geraldine, Emma Cole (eds). *Adapting Translation for the Stage*, London: Routledge.
- KYLÄNPÄÄ, Riitta, 2008. "Smedsin teesit". *Suomen Kuvalehti*, 25.7.2008, 92./30, p. 24–33.
- LEHMANN, Hans-Thies, 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre* (trans. Karen Jürs-Munby). London: Routledge.
- MARINETTI, Cristina, 2013. "Transnational, Multilingual and Post-dramatic". In Bigliazzi, Silvia, Peter Kofler, Paola Ambrosi (eds.), *Theatre Translation in Performance*, New York and London: Routledge.
- PAJUNEN, Julia, 2017. *Tulkintojen ristitulessa: Kristian Smedsin Tuntematon sotilas teatteri- ja mediaesityksenä*. Diss. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto.
- PAVIS, Patrice, 1992. *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- RUUSKANEN, Annukka, SMEDS, Kristian, 2005. *Kätetty näkyväksi: Mielikuvituksen ja toden tilat Kristian Smedsin teatterissa*. Helsinki: Tammi.
- SMEDS, Kristian, 2000. *Jumala on kauneus*, manuscript.
- SMEDS, Kristian, 2010. *God is Beauty*. (trans. Kristian London), Helsinki: Nordic Drama Corner.
- VENUTI, Lawrence, 1995. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London and New York: Routledge.
- WINDLE, Kevin, 2011. "The Translation of Drama". In Malmkjær, Kirsten, Windle, Kevin (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Translation Studies*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- WORTHEN, William B., 2010. *Drama: Between Poetry and Performance*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.