

TRANSLATION AND THE THEATRE

BY OLIVER M. SAYLER

ONE of the phases of our awakening theatre which marks most distinctly its broadening scope is the prevalence of more or less literal translations of foreign plays. The influx of drama from overseas, apparently, is in flood tide. Guests from British stages we have always had with us, but the time is not so far distant when plays from the Continent had to submit to adaptation rather than mere translation. In the last few seasons, however, the expedient of adaptation has been used chiefly as a subterfuge for killing the scent of Teutonic sources, and nearly every other foreign piece has come to us in translation of varying faithfulness.

This apparent improvement in the fortunes of plays from other languages is not, however, as substantial as it seems. There are translations—and translations. The range in quality of the English guise under which the works of foreign playwrights are revealed to us is almost as wide as the flood of original manuscripts in the playreaders' offices. Despite the fact that translation is a cardinal step in the process of interpretation of a composition in an alien tongue, that consideration has usually been neglected as unimportant, and even when attention has been paid to it, a false psychology and a false æsthesi have often vitiated the decision.

Except in class room work, where the premium rests on the exact and literal rendering of word, phrase and line, the task of the translator is to make clear the content and the significance of the original. It is far more important to convey this content and the purport of it in unmistakable, idiomatic English than it is to preserve a slavish "respect for the author's style." The question is not what words the author has utilized and what are their English equivalents, but what ideas lie beneath those words and how to express those ideas in eloquent English. That is the only practical, artistic, unpedantic way to look at the problem,

whether in general literature or in the drama. There is another consideration, however, applicable especially to the theatre, and that is the need of an approximation to the general tone effect of the author's lines when spoken.

Here, then, is the crux of the matter. Any kind of translation and especially translation for the theatre should be done by those who have an intimate and native knowledge of the language into which the translation is to be made. The measuring-stick afforded by the most perfect scientific knowledge of English which a Russian or a Frenchman or a German could command, is far less effective than the keen intuition and the homely, idiomatic ease of expression of one brought up in our own tongue.

Confusion has resulted in determining the most natural and most ideal conditions for translation by drawing an obvious but false analogy with the conditions of teaching a foreign language. Experience has long proved the superior advantage of teachers native to the language to be taught, and the same advantage has been supposed mistakenly to hold true in translation. Such an analogy, however, rests on a disregard of the essential purposes of the two processes. The learning of a foreign tongue has as its aim acquaintance with the peculiarities, the fine points and the idioms of that tongue, while translation should stress the peculiarities, the fine points and the idioms of the language into which the translation is to be done. The ideal teacher as well as the ideal translator will know both languages equally well, but the teacher will find comparative deficiency in the tongue of his pupil the lesser handicap just as the translator will be able to do a finished and effective piece of work with a limited command of the original author's tongue or even, in case he has a collaborator in that tongue, with no knowledge of it at all.

Oversight of the contradictory nature of these essential purposes and of the conditions they entail lies back of many of the unsatisfactory versions of foreign plays which have reached our stage. Maeterlinck has suffered, in the version of Alexander Teixeira de Mattos, from inadequate transvaluation of the overtones of his vibrant, rhythmic French. Through those overtones in the original, as anyone knows who is able to read the French or who has heard it from Parisian stages, the Belgian

mystic has imparted a subtle psychological and atmospheric mood which amounts to an interpretation of the subconscious, but in de Mattos's English they seem to be mere monotonous and irritating repetitions of inconsequential phrases. Faithfulness to the spirit of the original here would have dictated the use of another expedient to achieve the same effect, if a literal translation were thus found to prove barren.

Occasionally, an English translator into English falls into the same error as the foreigner. It seems at times as if he were guided by the same obsession of the literal and meticulously exact rendering of word upon word, rather than by a desire to comprehend and pass on the playwright's meaning and mood; thus throwing away all the natural advantages of perspective which he possesses. It is no disparagement of William Archer's pioneer service as critic and herald, in his disclosure of the genius of Ibsen to the English-speaking races, to admit that as translator he has frequently fallen short of his opportunities. In his broadly sympathetic mentality there is yet a Scotch inclination toward downright phrases, with a corresponding lack of very sensitive feeling for the poetic. To the Archer translations of Ibsen, therefore, as well as to the various propagandists who have drafted the great Norwegian into their petty services, we owe our impression of a publicist who used the theatre only for social ends. The truer picture, of course, as those who know the playwright in the original or in German or Russian can understand, is that of a poet whose imagination revealed to him a social vision, who abandoned pure poetic drama after *Peer Gynt* to answer this summons, but who carried through to his last line the poet's reverence for beauty of expression. Until we have a translation to replace the often awkward phrases of Archer we shall not know the real Ibsen.

To complete the types of play translation, though far from covering the wide field of modern drama, it is necessary only to cite Ludwig Lewisohn's English version of the works of Hauptmann. Here is translation in the spirit and the atmosphere of the original German, expressed in so simple, idiomatic and even colloquial English that the works seem almost to have been written in that tongue. Lewisohn, like all translators

from the German, had the advantage of being compelled to remold the order of every sentence, with the result that he could not yield to a possible temptation to easy transliteration, but in addition he has achieved the rich, full-bodied, convincing flavor of every-day human speech, a task which he could not have accomplished, it is safe to say, in any other language than that to which he has been accustomed through instinctive association since childhood.

In the light of these three conceivable approaches to translation—the obtuse, inflexible way of the foreigner; the similarly unpliant manner of the too literal-minded native; and the sensitive course of the one who adds reinterpretation to the mere interchange of words—it is interesting to examine a few of the most recent examples of plays which have reached our stage from alien tongues.

Outstanding cases of adaptation during the past year have been those of *Spanish Love*, adroitly but not very deferentially modified from a comparatively obscure Spanish original; of *The Silver Fox*, credited remotely to Franz Herczeg; and of *The Tyranny of Love*, based on George de Porto-Riche's *Amoureuse*. The first attained a popular success largely because of the provocative but incongruous manner in which audience and actors were intermingled. The second departed so far from the original that the mention of the Hungarian author was merely an acknowledgment of borrowed stimulus. The last name won skeptical critical favor and scant audiences as long as its obviously French characters and narrative and psychology wore American guise; opinion and attendance both looked up the moment the producer restored the original locale and terminology, thus affording substantial proof of the ready reception awaiting honest versions of significant foreign dramas; for aside from the mistake of shifting the scene to this country, the transcript was faithful to the original play in style, in realistic detail and in spirit. The fortunes of *Amoureuse*, therefore, should point the way more decisively than ever from adaptation as a contemporary dramatic expedient.

The poor judgment of permitting anyone but an American brought up in familiar association with our habits of speech to translate for our stage the realistic drama of the Continental

theatres was glaringly illustrated in the stiff and awkwardly pedantic version of *Samson and Delilah*, Sven Lange's modern Danish tragedy, which served to introduce Jacob Ben-Ami as an actor to the English-speaking stage. The translation of a realistic play of contemporary life must, of course, remain true to the psychology round which the dramatist has built it; but the more unconscious the spectator is that the words the characters speak originated in another tongue, the more readily will he accept ideals and customs and moral standards alien to his own. The least jar, therefore, the least false phrase, the slightest departure from the homely way in which the people we know say homely things, is sufficient to make our backs bristle and start us questioning the entire structure which the playwright has erected; while a sensitive and instinctive attention to such details as these will lure us far along strange intellectual and imaginative byways. It was just these failings which destroyed illusion time after time in the English version of *Samson and Delilah*, and laid upon Mr. Ben-Ami needless burdens to be counteracted by his power of interpretation.

Plays from the Russian have, as a rule, suffered even more grievously than those from the French, German and Scandinavian. Inured to language difficulties by the complexity of their own, Russians gain a tolerable command of English in a short time and deem themselves fitted thereby to unlock for us their literary and dramatic treasures. It is to these precocious immigrants, then, rather than to native Americans or to Americans in collaboration with Russians, that we have usually entrusted the works of the Slavic masters, despite the fact that their remote and exotic form and content demand every conceivable advantage of intimate and facile introduction. Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, above all, needed such considerate attention when Arthur Hopkins presented it briefly on Broadway a season ago under the title of *Night Lodging*, for the wild patois and slang of the denizens of the lowest rung of Russia's social ladder defied the ingenuity of those who were unfamiliar in the slightest degree with our corresponding idioms. Another instance of the incompetence of a Russian as translator into English is the recently published version of Andreieff's last play, *The Man Who Gets*

Slapped, prepared by Gregory Zilboorg and discussed for possible production on our stage. If a manager risks that rigid test of its worth, he is likely to find his audience cold in the presence of characters whose naturally strange and aloof qualities have been unfortunately magnified by a stolid and monotonous translation, while occasionally a thoroughly blind sentence will shatter the illusion completely. Zilboorg should have collaborated with an American in his work—or rather, the American should have borne the greater responsibility, with the Russian at his elbow to elucidate the vagaries of the Russian psychology.

Probably the most universally condemned translation of the last season, Granville Barker's verse version of Sacha Guitry's *Deburau*, was not due to a misapprehension of the ideal conditions for the work, for everything pointed to a playwright and artist of the theatre of Mr. Barker's standing as a model choice for the task. Failure, however, was as egregious as it was unexpected, and it was due, to all appearances, to a faulty conception of the nature of Guitry's whimsically artificial and theatrical viewpoint, an angle which was decidedly not to be conveyed by sing-song rhymed verse. The English *Deburau* was an accident, a sport, proving that the most obvious axioms are not always infallible.

For his second venture with Guitry, in this season's production of *The Grand Duke*, Mr. Belasco has ventured more and gained correspondingly. The suave niceties of a Turk, Achmed Abdullah, have replaced the ineptitudes of Mr. Barker, with results as accidentally fortunate as those of *Deburau* were disastrous. *The Grand Duke*, however, exhibits a curious example of the kind of difficulties a translator encounters, and Mr. Abdullah has not surmounted it. In the original French, the scion of Russian royalty, on his uppers, provides amusement by awkward attempts to instruct a Parisian demoiselle in English. In the English version, the lesson is still conducted in English—an embarrassing incongruity which robs the situation of its humor. And yet, what could the translator have done? Depict His Highness teaching a French girl her own tongue? That would be just as paradoxical. Or German? The time may not yet be ripe. And the American ear is insufficiently

trained to Russian, Czech or Armenian to substitute one of them effectively. The situation manifestly called for something more difficult and adroit than mere translation.

Just as unexpected and unpredictable as Mr. Barker's failure with *Deburau*, was the spirited and finely-wrought version of Franz Molnar's *Liliom* which Benjamin F. Glazer prepared for The Theatre Guild's production. His undertaking was similar to that presented by *The Lower Depths*, for *Liliom* is a fabric of slang and the unlettered dialogue of the riff-raff of a Hungarian city. He set out, therefore, on the errand of running down corresponding idioms in English, preserving all the while the literal details essential to conservation of the Hungarian atmosphere as long as they were comprehensible to his American audience. He called to his aid not only the German translation of the play but also the combined ingenuity of the members of the Guild's directorate. The result was that *Liliom* was actually rethought and recomposed from beginning to end, until it achieved the doubly secure illusion of truth to a foreign psychology and to our own.

The outcome when the search for idioms is not so earnest and exhaustive was illustrated recently in Mr. Glazer's befogged version of Carl Schoenherr's *The Children's Tragedy* for the uses of Arnold Daly. Here the translator lacked the corrective assistance which had saved him at the Guild with *Liliom*, and his failure was largely contributory to the ensuing fiasco. An example once more of the advantages of collaboration is visible in the English version of Henry Bernstein's *The Claw* in which the guiding hands of Arthur Hopkins and Lionel Barrymore are happily evident. And yet, after all, it is preferable if the work of translation be done by a single able and subtly sentient pen, as Lawrence Langner proved with his suave but unobtrusive English version of Henri Bataille's *Don Juan*. There is a unity of mood to be obtained in this way which the best equipped collaboration in the world cannot hope to attain.

The current season proves that the tide of drama is still running strongly toward the West. In addition to the productions cited above, Guitry's *Pasteur* is overdue. The Hungarian, Arpad Pasztor, is on the horizon with *Vengerkas* and *The Song Eternal*. The Russian, Semyon Youshkievitch, gained a foothold during

recent sojourn that may later bring his plays over the ocean. Karl Schoenherr and Georg Kaiser are German prospects. The younger Schildkraut, who shared with Molnar and The Theatre Guild the laurels of *Liliom*, toys with the ambition to revive *Peer Gynt*. Several plays are announced from the pen of Melchior Lengyel, the Hungarian dramatist whose *Typhoon* reached us in garbled form a decade ago, and whose first visit to America last winter established valuable and interesting personal contacts. One of them is *The Tsarina*, a *tour de force* characterization of Catherine of Russia. Another is *The Kingdom of Sancho Panza*, a variant of the Don Quixote legend, which Sidney Howard is transcribing for our theatre. Mr. Howard is a newcomer who has disclosed a command of vibrant language if not great originality of conception in his own play, *Swords*.

It augurs well for the future of our imported drama that its reinterpretation is falling into the hands of such young men as Messrs. Glazer and Howard and Langner. The profession of translation, however, is not necessarily limited to the younger generation. Nor is it a calling perforce separated from creative composition. Victor Hugo's translation of Shakespeare is one of the proudest possessions of French letters. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to hope that our own poets may be stirred to make for us genuinely poetic and genuinely American versions of the new poetic drama of Europe, and that our realists may perform a like service for Chekhov and Wedekind and De Curel and their kindred overseas, while such men as Vachel Lindsay and Alfred Kreymborg might achieve something really exciting in transcriptions of the ultra-modernists of the Continent. Our literary and dramatic and artistic vision is broader than ever before, and it is inconceivable that out of our own virile and varied resources we shall not find those who will reclothe the dreams of the world in guise that we can comprehend.

OLIVER M. SAYLER.

MUSIC OF THE MONTH

FROM STRAVINSKY TO SIBELIUS

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

ONCE upon a time (it was, to be painfully exact, just twenty years ago) a Russian was, for a while, lord of the musical scene. That Russian was Peter Ilytch Tchaikovsky, whose Pathetic Symphony was then breaking the hearts of concert audiences all over the world, and who seemed at that time so significant and consequential a figure that a magazine as cautious as the great *Contemporary Review* gave space to a series of studies upon his music by the most eminent of British critics. But styles in composers have their term; and poor Tchaikovsky has long since been put away on the topmost shelf.

Yet great is the Slavic genius! To-day, less than a generation later, we find another Russian at the top of the musical heap, with the tone-world at his feet; for the most fashionable, the most discussed, the most radiantly distinguished of contemporary music-makers is Igor Stravinsky—King of the ultra-moderns, secure upon his throne; the unchallenged master of *Les Jeunes*, a remarkable and fascinating apparition in the current musical mêlée. Oceans of critical blood and ink have been spilt in the æsthetic battles that have raged about his music within the last few years. He is not only a Personage, dazzlingly triumphant and salient, a great figure in Paris and London; he is already a Legend. Only the other day his chief apostle, the able if not wholly persuasive Edwin Evans, hailed him as in fact “the Bach of to-day”; and a distinguished young British composer, Arthur Bliss, has recently enumerated the achievements of Stravinsky as follows: He has abolished “the symphonic poem à la Strauss”, the “pseudo-intellectuality of the Brahms camp-followers, with their classical sonatas and concertos, variations, etc., and the Wagnerian opera”—not a bad record for so young a man as Stravinsky; for he is still under forty.