Translating into Polyphony: Creating a Dramaturgical Translation for *Three Sisters* at Steppenwolf

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At the end of act 2 in the recent Steppenwolf Theatre Company production of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (adapted by Tracy Letts, directed by Anna D. Shapiro),† Irina Prozorova sits alone on a chaise at the edge of a starkly whitewashed stage. Behind her, hanging in midair, looms her house, a massive, solid, structure made ethereal with blue, wintery light, a picture frame enclosing it and holding it at a distance from her. While Irina’s refrain of longing (“To Moscow, to Moscow, to Moscow”) merges with the sounds around her, her suspended house is surrounded on all sides by falling snow. The audience cannot see where the snow comes from, nor does it seem to come to a rest on anything; instead, it falls above, beside, but also through and under the house, giving the sense that the audience is witness to a small piece of something infinite.

Besides the fact that this snow provides practical temporal exposition, it is a precisely rendered metaphor for Irina’s state of yearning and an echo of Tusenbach’s assertion that life, like snow, does not have meaning—it simply is. But it is how designers Todd Rosenthal and Donald Holder constructed this theatrical image that is most significant; with this image, they visually transposed a fundamental structural aspect of Chekhov’s play. In each act, scene, and conversation, the action begins and ends in full motion: everything is a continuation of something that happened before, while each scene points forward to action still to come.

This falling snow is one example of how a theatrical production can interpret something essential about a play that is unrelated to the meaning of the dialogue that is spoken. This idea is not new, of course; fundamental to the theatre is its ability to generate images that draw from several planes of meaning and have resonances in multiple sign systems. Mining a play for such things becomes more challenging, however, when working with plays in translation, as all translations, to varying degrees, inevitably differ from their source. As this production’s dramaturg, my attempt to confront this dilemma was to create what I have come to call a “dramaturgical” translation of the play.

In December 2011, Shapiro asked me to be the dramaturg for *Three Sisters*. Letts had premiered his adaptation of the play at Artists Repertory Theatre in Oregon (2009), but he had not yet finalized or published the script, intending to make final revisions during rehearsals with Shapiro at Steppenwolf. For the initial development process at Artists Repertory, he at first worked exclusively with the literal translation that theatre had given him: a word-for-word, “interlinear” translation photocopied from Hugo’s Russian Made Easy (1916); he later sought additional help from Charlotte Hobson, a British novelist and Russian speaker, who shared her literal translation of *Three Sisters* with him and answered questions via e-mail.‡

For the Steppenwolf production, Shapiro sought me out as a Russian-speaking dramaturg who could provide Letts and herself with detailed information on Chekhov’s play and world. As part of the preproduction process, she asked me to create a new translation of the play that conversed with Letts’s adaptation and that helped her to understand Chekhov’s source text more thoroughly. In response, I decided to superimpose my translation onto Letts’s adaptation, writing below and around his printed words on the page, showing how his version conversed with Chekhov’s; I also worked...
dramaturgical commentary into my translation. Once rehearsals began, Letts used this double text, in conjunction with listening to the actors and in collaboration with Shapiro and myself, to make final revisions. For the purpose of this essay, however, I will focus not on these revisions, but on how my dramaturgical translation was used during the production process. Shapiro, Letts, and I actively used this dual translation throughout rehearsals to clarify interpretations, to aid actors in developing their characters and relationships, and to track and artistically illuminate patterns, rhythms, and structural elements of the play.

Although I will be identified as one of the literal translators in the published version of Letts’s adaptation (forthcoming), my dramaturgical translation was not a literal translation in the sense that this is often meant: a word-for-word rendering of the original that retains grammatical structure, but does not always consider idioms, rhythm, sound, style, or context. Somewhat depending on the skill of the translator, such “cribs” can add complexity and fog to the process of a writer trying to make sense of a foreign language she/he does not know by struggling to decipher a version that she/he cannot understand. Michael Frayn has equated working from such verbatim translations to “performing brain surgery wearing thick gloves” (Frayn, qtd. in D. Rosenthal).

A dramaturgical translation is created in specific response to several things: to the source text, to an extant translation/adaptation of the play, and to the aims of a particular production. It does not simply transmit the meanings of the playwright’s words, but also explores the particularities and idiosyncrasies of the writing style and of the world that produced the play. For the Steppenwolf process, rather than translating verbatim, I aimed to convey the structure and emphasis of complete phrases, including the punctuation. In doing this, I provided variants that illuminated nuances and double meanings and were accompanied by notes on Chekhov’s use of repetition, sound, word order, punctuation, character-specific language, and literary and cultural references. While it is not uncommon for a dramaturg or translator to create a mixture of information and translation to develop a performance text, my translation was somewhat atypical in the sense that it was aimed primarily at supporting a rehearsal process. Additionally, I followed both the dual translation and the Russian source text throughout rehearsals, which allowed me to spontaneously add to or alter what I had originally proposed as questions arose.

Translation and rehearsal, although often developed separately, have very similar creative processes. As Laurence Senelick observes, both involve “interrogating the text closely and transplanting it carefully” (2007b, 372); both also provoke understanding of a play that reading alone cannot provide: “The pressures of the rehearsal room . . . can force insights unavailable in the closest reading. The only comparable experience is to translate a play, paying close attention to such things as lexical repetition, sentence structure and levels of discourse” (1997, 6). The translation process is also liminal in a way that mirrors the malleable, open-ended nature of theatrical rehearsals, particularly in the stage where meaning is being explored but has not yet been fixed.

The dramaturgical translation brings the liminal space between the source play and a fixed translingual rendering of it into the rehearsal room. In the space between languages, before the translator has settled on a final version, multiple interpretations of a phrase and varied renderings of it into English remain possible. When given a polyphony of possible meanings, the director, actors, and designers are able to delay fixing those meanings until they are fully understood and become an organic part of the production. Thus the dramaturgical translation can uphold and complement the ambiguity and incompleteness necessary to the creative process.

Using the Steppenwolf production of Three Sisters as a case study, this essay will explore some ways that a dramaturgical translation can support the development of a production. These include investigating, tracking, and clarifying the systems the play uses to generate meaning; making the production team aware of differences between the source play and the performance text; and communicating the play’s meanings in an open-ended, flexible format that aids their transmission from
the source language into the multiple sign-systems of the theatre. I will give examples of how our rehearsals at Steppenwolf investigated these points, before, in conclusion, exploring the potential value of dramaturgical translations beyond this specific production.

**Systems of Meaning**

In *Stanislavsky in Focus*, Sharon Marie Carnicke reiterates Stanislavsky’s notion of the through-line of a play not as a single strand of meaning, but as a rope comprised of intertwining strands “woven together” (2009b, 2). While Stanislavsky’s through-lines focus primarily on the experience of the actor in time, space, and action, there are many other through-systems in a play, each of which generates meaning in a manner not unlike instrumental parts in a musical score: each can be followed independently, but the meaning of each is also more clear when played with the full orchestra. Semantic meaning is one of these systems, but others are equally significant; as Ronald Heyman observes: “We do well to think of the text as a score for a series of theatrical impacts, many of which are not verbal” (17).

Translation, in its earliest stage, is essentially an intense form of script analysis that seeks to discover and illuminate these ‘systems of meaning’ (Chemers 73). Chekhov’s plays teem with “funny, nonsensical words, puns, malapropisms, literary quotations, speech mannerisms, distorted grammar, verbal incontinence, foreign words, obscure terminology, bombast, pseudo-intellectual, pseudo-elevated and just plain inane discourse” (Admantova and Williamson 212). They are carefully orchestrated collections of sounds, repetitions, echoes, and odd juxtapositions, infused throughout with subtle irony.

In seeking to identify systems of meaning in *Three Sisters*, I investigated word order and emphasis; cadence, length, and sound patterns of lines; punctuation as an indicator of thought, state of mind, and breath; character-specific use of language; repetition of words, stage business, and other verbal and physical leitmotifs; double or multiple meanings; dialogue or action deliberately left incomplete or ambiguous; and culturally and linguistically specific signifiers. Naturally, translators and dramaturgs typically consider such patterns when analyzing a play; I include them not as novel categories of investigation, but because, while they are essential to the spirit and individual voice of a play, things like punctuation, sound, and double meanings are more likely to have been altered in translation than semantic meaning. Yet these systems of meaning lend themselves well to transposition into visual, rhythmical, and corporeal modes.

Senelick, among others, has described Chekhov’s plays as pointillist, observing that they are comprised of varied “dots” of sound and dialogue that cumulatively create a portrait of life when viewed at a distance (2007a, 78). A snatch of music here or a repetition there might seem insignificant until it is eliminated and the picture changes. To continue with a painting analogy, I would add that Chekhov’s dramatic structure is akin to divisionism, a technique some pointillist painters used to juxtapose (rather than mix) dots of contrasting color in an attempt to make their fusion appear more vivid (Chilvers). Chekhov’s dramatic structure is based on a poetics of contrast; each dot of “color” (clothing, sounds, actions, character types, seasons) is juxtaposed with contrasting ones, creating uneasy collisions of past and present, change and inertia, life and death. In the act 2 moment described at the beginning of this essay, for example, Irina’s yearning for Moscow is juxtaposed with an offstage lullaby and a Shrovetide concertina, weaving three strains from the cacophony of life into a single dissonant moment.

To make such patterns more accessible to the creative team, I created through-system charts to track several things: sound and music, with notes on origins and significance; character-specific language; all recurrences of oft-repeated phrases; and literary and foreign-language quotations, with notes on their dramaturgical function. I also noted double meanings and unfinished thoughts that had been simplified or completed in the performance text.
ContraPuntal Plays

In tandem with identifying and charting these through-systems, I investigated how Letts’s adaptation differed from Chekhov’s play and why. My aim was to create a translation that responded closely to the source text in order to provide the production team with information on what had been cut or changed, but might still be useful. One of the challenges to this process was defining what it means for a translation to be close to its source.

There are many theories of dramatic translation, each of which grapples in some way with how a translation can convey an “authentic core of meaning” while acknowledging the fundamental impossibility of the task (Milner-Gulland and Soboleva 119). Most fall on a philosophical spectrum that negotiates what are sometimes presented as paradoxical challenges: how to balance the foreign and the local; how to make the unfamiliar accessible; and, in the case of theatrical translation in particular, how to be both accurate and playable. One of the most enduring debates centers on how “literal” or “free” a translation should be: “On one side there are the literalists, who place priority on preserving the integrity of the text, and may have to use extensive notes. . . . On the other hand, the proponents of free translation hold that the task of the translator is to provide a version that seeks to convey to the reader the ‘spirit’ of a work” (113–14). In theatrical translation, finding a balance among these concerns is made more difficult by the fact that dialogue needs to be speakable and intelligible to the audience (Levy 129–34), the action playable, and the translation sensitive to “the imperatives of stagecraft” (Versényi 434). Practically speaking, comic language must also provoke laughter; if a character waxes eloquent, the translated language should be accordingly effusive; where dialogue both establishes a relationship and provides exposition, the translation ideally should capture both.

In his Three Sisters adaptation, Letts’s primary concern was what Sophia Totzeva has called “communicative pragmatics” (85); for Letts, the playability of the language was paramount. He used his expertise as an actor and playwright to generate language that consistently elicited audience responses, and sometimes chose such language over variants that were closer in meaning or syntax to Chekhov’s Russian. Regarding his “guiding principle” for the adaptation process, he stated that

[i]there has to be a guiding principle going into it—and for me, it was the fact that, as an audience member, I don’t much like going to see Chekhov. They start talking about name days . . . and everybody’s got a big beard, and I check out early and often. . . . So my guiding principle was, I’m going to try to eliminate for the audience any further act of translation; they’re going to have direct communication with the ideas and the characters. (Letts, qtd. in Weinert-Kent 57)

His changes were therefore aimed at making the play immediately intelligible to an American audience; in order to increase the speakability of the dialogue, he favored the pithy over the verbose, broke long sentences into shorter ones, and rendered the dialogue into contemporary, sometimes colloquial American English. He also reduced the characters’ use of repetition, sometimes translating a word or phrase repeated in Chekhov in several different ways, and sometimes cutting repetitions altogether.

The most significant change Letts made was to cut most of the play’s cultural and temporal references—literary references, foreign languages, patronyms, characters’ ages, and culturally specific holidays—retaining only those without which a scene would not make sense. In Letts’s words: “I made a conscious decision pretty early on to strip away all of one thing and then see the places it just couldn’t survive without it . . . not because I think that stuff’s useless or pointless” . . . but because “my guiding principle was to try to deliver his ideas as directly to the audience as I could through the actors.” Letts valued the “push-back” that this provoked from “Shapiro, dramaturg and Russian-theater historian Dassia N. Posner, and cast member Yasen Peyankov,” who played Kulygin. Letts added that “[i]t makes for a great dynamic in the rehearsal room, them sort of fighting to get some of these things back in, me sort of fighting to keep them out” (Vire).
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It is precisely in providing push-back that a dramaturgical translation can be most useful. Where Letts sometimes deviated from the source text in favor of playable, accessible speech, the dramaturgical translation provided information on what had been omitted or changed. Sometimes Letts made textual changes in response to the attempts “to get . . . things back in,” while at others, the director, actors, or designers interpreted them in nonverbal ways. Shapiro frequently commented during rehearsals that she did not always need Letts to change a line if a variant nuance could be captured in some other way.

This pairing of two texts with different concerns and tactics creates a fruitful contrapuntal relationship between the source play and the spoken text, and allows a production to welcome multiple philosophies of translation into the staging process. It also provides a production’s artists with information that allows them to choose one set of meanings over another, but more importantly, to retain multiple meanings in different ways, to embrace the foreign and the local, the literal and the playable, the concrete and the ambiguous.

**Translating into Theatrical Polyphony**

Retaining a rich body of meanings with which to feed a rehearsal process is especially important, since theatre does not simply move words from one language to another, but from a verbal sign-system to multiple “intersemiotic” ones (Totzeva 84). As Christopher Balme observes: “Every theatrical sign can be replaced by another sign or class of signs: for example, space by language, an object by a person or vice versa” (80). Verbal repetitions cut from the performance text might appear instead in the sound design or in the mise en scène. An actor might capture an omitted double meaning through gesture, tempo, or interaction with the physical environment.

This approach seems particularly relevant to Chekhov. As Chekhov’s contemporary Leonid Andreev wrote:

> Chekhov animated everything that meets the eye: his landscape is no less psychological than his characters; his characters are no more psychological than the clouds, stones, chairs, drinking glasses and rooms. . . . He paints the life of his hero by means of landscapes, relates his past with clouds, portrays his tears with rain, uses a suite of rooms to show that the immortality of the soul does not exist. . . . The dialogue, so to speak, never ceases: it is transferred from persons to things, from things to persons again, and from persons to time . . . to a cricket or shouting at the fire. Everything lives, has a soul and a voice. (239–41; emphasis in original)

Chekhov’s words are only one part of a world that is continually lived in all its variety and dissonance.

One practical way of nurturing this is to create a dramaturgical translation that retains multiple variations for a phrase; as the text in a dramaturgical translation will not be spoken, it can serve as a repository of nuance for as long as this is useful. Another is to point to sound, rhythm, silence, and other things that might be fruitful generators of action, design, or atmosphere. Yet another is to explain seemingly untranslatable phrases without trying to translate them precisely; something open-ended sometimes provides more room for an artist’s interpretation.

**Three Sisters at Steppenwolf**

During rehearsals, Shapiro often talked about *Three Sisters* in terms of counterpoint and dialectic; as a director, she believes that different elements in a theatrical story should contrast with and comment on, not repeat, one another. Where Letts’s language was peppered with American colloquialisms, Shapiro’s production was firmly set in Chekhov’s world and time—not to be natu-
ralistic or historically reverent, but to explore fully the circumstances that create the psychological and physical world the characters inhabit. The actors also lived in counterpoint to Rosenthal’s set: the physical objects with which they interacted were, in Rosenthal’s words, “meticulously authentic to evoke the period,” but they were surrounded by emptiness. This space contrasted, in turn, with another: a giant picture frame that enclosed a translucent birch grove, through which could be seen a suspended house (fig. 1). This floating house, “both an emblem of prosperity and a burden to the Prozorov family,” was dappled by the spring sun, surrounded by falling snow, and stained with the glow of flames in the first three acts, after which it disappeared altogether, visually depicting the void left in the wake of the military's departure. As Shapiro said during rehearsal: “The set frames the action and comments on it. A dialectic is created between what the people are doing and what the space is doing” (2012a). And, of course, the play is constructed around similar collisions; as Shapiro mused just before opening: “Hope and futility in Chekhov always run alongside one another simultaneously” (2012b). Where the design and Letts’s adaptation did coincide was in an essentialized approach to Chekhov’s play. As Rosenthal explained: “[w]e removed all the masking and walls to strip the play of artifice. There is a raw, honest simplicity to the performances, so the stage was bare and unembellished.”

It was in the spirit of Shapiro’s dialectic that, where Letts focused on the direct transmission of ideas, I concentrated on patterns and nuances that shape ideas. Although each artistic solution was generated in collaboration, what follows are descriptions of instances where conversations in rehearsal focused specifically on the differences between the dramaturgical translation (DT) and the performance text (PT), divergences that the director, actors, and designers used to inform line interpretations, character choices, and production motifs. This interplay resulted in richer, polyphonic systems of meaning that ranged, as charted in the following examples, from nuances to leitmotifs.

**Nuance and Double Meaning**

In several cases, Letts made cuts to streamline the dialogue. The DT identified such places to retain the option of expressing these words physically. For instance, in act 1 of the adaptation, when Irina asks Tusenbach for information about Lieutenant Colonel Vershinin, Tusenbach replies:

**TUSENBACh**: I know he's smart. He talks a lot.

**IRINA**: Is he interesting?

**TUSENBACh**: I guess. He has a wife and a mother-in-law and two girls. (3)

In the Russian, Tusenbach uses the word “only” twice: “Only he talks a lot,” and “only he has a wife, a mother-in-law and two little girls.” This implied “only” prompted Derek Gaspar, who played Tusenbach, to respond with increased reticence to Irina’s question, and, on a larger scale, to consider restraint as a possible character trait.

When the PT and DT provided variations on the same thought, they sometimes generated contrapuntal meaning. For instance, after Vershinin speaks eloquently of a future world, Masha decides not to leave her sister’s party after all:

**PT**: MASHA: I'll stay for lunch.

**DT**: MASHA: I'm staying for lunch. [Masha's line is decisive.] (15)"
Punctuation

Punctuation in *Three Sisters* provides specific information for the actors. As Carnicke observes, in Chekhov “[p]auses and ellipses can suggest many different things: a thought that remains unspoken, the interruption of one character by another, a momentary lapse, confusion, embarrassment, or a willful refusal to speak. But whatever the function, during every pause or ellipsis something unspoken happens” (2009a, xxxix). There are hundreds of ellipses in *Three Sisters*, each of which allows a character to live and think outside the spoken words (xl). By way of example, Olga’s language becomes disjointed and trails off when she is tired or has a headache. Actor Ora Jones developed a physical leitmotif that physicalized some of Olga’s absent ellipses: when she complained—of a headache, or of life not giving her what she expected—she pursed her lips, drew in a breath, and gave a wry, weary smile.

Chekhov also frequently connects multiple sentences with commas and semi-colons, helping the actor make sense of a line while communicating phrasing and momentum; practically speaking, this punctuation tells the actor where to breathe. The two longest sentences in the play are spoken by Vershinin and Andrey. Vershinin’s act 1 speech about how people will live “in two hundred years” contains the eight-liner that convinces Masha to stay for lunch. Andrey’s equally long sentence in act 4, by contrast, is spoken only to old Ferapont, who is too deaf hear him; nor is it about mankind’s bright future, but the dismal present. Vershinin’s long sentence allows him to command the attention of a room; Andrey’s outpouring of poetic honesty goes unheard. Although Letts broke these sentences into smaller ones, drawing attention to the original punctuation gave actors John Judd (Vershinin) and Dan Waller (Andrey) practical information about the trajectory, and sheer length, of their thoughts.

Shapiro felt that the punctuation the DT drew attention to provided useful “given circumstances” for the actors. In an interview with Steppenwolf artistic director Martha Lavey, Shapiro notes the significance of Vershinin’s punctuation shift between acts 1 and 2:
[T]he language in adaptation and translation is really critical. For instance, there’s a character in the play who speaks in very long sentences because he is often philosophizing. Then you see him again later, and he’s speaking in clipped sentences and he says after a little while, “I haven’t eaten all day.” Well, that’s given circumstances. If you’re playing a part . . . you feel in your body what it tells you about yourself when you are able to take a breath and speak for forty seconds without stopping. And then what happens to you when you aren’t fortified and you can’t do that? (Shapiro and Lavey 27–28)

**Verbal Relationship Markers**

Some of the most difficult things to translate are linguistic conventions for which there is no equivalent in the target language, yet which carry precise information about relationships. Russian uses the formal “you” (ты) and a name and patronymic (for example, Andrey Sergeevich, or Andrey, Sergei’s son) to mark a respectful relationship, and an informal “you” (ты) for close friends, family members, and lovers. The patronymic is dropped in informal relationships, but names can be altered with a range of nicknames and diminutives; Olga Sergeevna becomes “Olia” to her family, “Oliushka” to her affectionate nanny, and “Olechka” to her patronizing sister-in-law (fig. 2).

The shift from ты to ты also marks relationship changes. For example, a Russian audience understands immediately from the first word of act 2 that Andrey and Natasha have married: act 1 ends with Andrey crooning “I love you [formal],” while act 2 opens with Natasha’s “You [informal], Andriusha, what are you doing?” (23–24). Despite his prolific, varied terms of endearment, Chebutykin uses the formal address with the Prozorovs except in two private exchanges with Andrey that, in Shapiro’s production, became sincere moments of revelatory honesty. Upon deciding to resign his military commission in the hope of pursuing a new life with Irina, Tusenbach proposes that he and Andrey “drink to ты” (39), a toast marking the shift to the informal “you.” Understanding the significance of Tusenbach’s attempt at closeness with Irina’s brother provided fuel for the angry outbursts of Solyony, who, in this act, begins to see Tusenbach as a more active rival for Irina’s affection.

During rehearsals, one actor asked when Masha and Vershinin’s love affair begins. Although there are historical cues that point to it commencing during the act 3 fire (Benedetti 100), the Russian formal and informal “you” also provide clarity: in their first solo scene in act 2, both use the formal “you,” meaning that they are still fairly early in their courtship. In act 3, they avoid speaking directly to each other, except to use a private language of “Tram-tam-tam.” However, in act 4, in the few words they say to each other in farewell, they have shifted, desperately and unabashedly, to the informal “you.”

**Quotation**

Foreign languages and literary references in *Three Sisters* present a different challenge. Without having them in the performance text, audiences miss that Masha quotes Pushkin and that Vershinin later sings Pushkin to her; that Solyony refers to Russian classics with poetic heroes who have been misunderstood by a banal society; or that Chebutykin’s indiscriminate snatches of popular music augment the sense that the town is a hodgepodge of would-be culture and vulgarity. Even when a performance text retains these references, it remains a challenge to communicate this range of meanings to an audience unfamiliar with their context.

Shapiro staged the few literary references that remained in Letts’s adaptation with a keen awareness of this challenge. For Masha’s first and last repetition of the opening lines from *Ruslan and Liudmila*, Shapiro circumvented the audience’s need to know Pushkin’s fairy tale by using the quotes as moments of framed stillness: Masha recited them looking out, while the other characters
focused their attention on her. Both moments were downstage left, making one a visual palimpsest of the other: in the first, Masha reads on a chaise lounge, thinking about leaving her siblings’ house; in the second, she has lost her lover and the refuge of her family home and sits on the bare stage floor. The two moments were connected by this spiral structure, where the same moment is and is not returned to.

Letts cut most of Chekhov’s other literary references or gave them a new context. For instance, he rewrote Solyony’s act 2 reference to the Russian poet Lermontov:

PT: SOLYONY: I don’t have anything against you, Baron. But I have a temper. (quietly) I have a temper.
DT: SOLYONY: I have never had anything against you, Baron. But I have the temperament/personality of Lermontov. (quietly) I even look a little like Lermontov . . . so they say . . . (38)

Actor Usman Ally found Solyony’s “trying on” of Lermontov’s personality and biography useful; not only did the actor gain a defiant dignity after reading several of Lermontov’s works, but the dramaturgical translation encouraged him to similarly try on the idea that he has a temper.

The actors were eager to use their quotes as creative fuel, even when they did not speak them. Simply knowing where the French was significantly changed the physicality of Alana Arenas, who played Natasha. The first time she rehearsed the moment where, in the source text, Natasha uses bad French to scold Masha’s bad manners, her voice was smooth and gracious, but she gave a pretentious little prance. Later, she developed an exaggerated double-arm sweep to indicate the dreadful plight of poor, awakened Bobik; a few times, her gesture almost knocked over a lamp.
Irony

One of the most pervasive elements of Chekhov’s work, and one of the most difficult to translate, is his use of irony. Chekhov’s ironic collisions help the audience to reconcile different planes of meaning, while also capturing life’s inevitable, impossible contradictions. As J. Douglas Clayton observes, “while the structure and material of Chekhov’s major plays is derived from his careful observations of humanity, they are suffused with an element of vaudeville that is inherent in life itself” (28).

Chekhov frequently uses irony to undercut and temper his characters, especially when they are at their most earnest. This irony makes fixed character types moot in Chekhov’s plays; it is difficult to view Natasha as “pure evil” when she gushes about baby eyes and raves about a fork in a single breath (Brustein xiii). The characters simply are who they are, in all their earnest blindness. Vershinin may speak grandly, but he too has an ample share of meaningless interjections.

Each character has a unique ironic melody. Natasha’s is comprised of ludicrous diminutives, ungrammatical French, and ostensible non sequiturs that inevitably bring the conversation back to what she wants. She wants to appear cultured, but names her son “Bobik”—a common name for dogs. Although many of these ironies did not appear in the performance text, composer David Singer’s mildly mischievous opening music captured some of Chekhov’s playfulness. Singer also gave Natasha’s offstage act 4 piano performance of “The Maiden’s Prayer” a light smattering of obviously wrong notes (fig. 3).

Costume designer Jess Goldstein transferred some of Andrey’s verbal irony to his appearance. In act 1, when his sisters tease him in front of their new guest, he replies:

PT: ANDREY: I haven’t slept. I was up all night translating a book from English.
DT: ANDREY: All night long I didn’t sleep and now I’m feeling a little off/not myself, as they say. I read until 4 AM, then lay down, but nothing doing. I thought about this, and that, and then it’s dawn already, the sun comes/creeps right into the bedroom. This summer, while I’m here, there’s a [little] book I want to translate from English. (14)
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Goldstein captured this contrast between what Andrey is and what he wants to be by putting him in a neatly buttoned vest that is too tight around his recently expanded waist. Andrey’s hair stuck up unevenly, giving him an unkempt, startled look.

Irina’s personal ironic refrain is one of hyperbole. Her effusive act 1 epiphanies about the glory of work are one side of a coin that is flipped in act 3, where she wails desolately over having forgotten the Italian for “window” and “ceiling.” In pointing out verbal exaggerations that were more pronounced in the source text, the dramaturgical translation helped actor Caroline Neff to track her extremes. She came to embody her uninformed glorification of work in a wide-eyed, youthful physical and vocal exuberance (fig. 4).

**Repetition and Echo**

During rehearsals I also used Stanislavsky’s “score” from the inaugural production of *Three Sisters* (1901) to answer questions, clarify line readings, and use for occasional inspiration. What ultimately became a production leitmotif began as a question from sound designers Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen about the act 3 fire alarm. After observing that Stanislavsky’s properties list called for church bells in varying tones (189), it struck me that these bells, especially in contrast to Olga’s futile ringing for help at the beginning of act 3, were linked to a pattern of verbal repetition: Masha is “sick and tired, sick and tired, sick and tired”; Irina wants to go “to Moscow, to Moscow, to Moscow”; and Olga continually repeats “my head aches, my head.” Acts 1, 3, and 4 also mark the passing of time with the chiming of clocks. Here also, Stanislavsky’s promptbook provided inspiration for a bell-as-repetition leitmotif: in his act 1, when a large clock chimed onstage, a little clock chimed in higher tones from far away in the house, as if in answer (91); in act 3, as Chebutykin held “mama’s clock,” the large, distant clock chimed first, and the one in his hands answered, provoking him to drop and break it (213). By integrating these bells, the production captured repetition and Chekhov’s reminders of passing time in new ways.

Bells, chimes, and Olga’s headache also reverberated in the music between acts: a single, repeated cello note at the end of act 3 overlapped with intricate Russian Orthodox Church bell patterns that signaled the start of act 4 and the military’s pending departure. In the scene change, a few sparse furniture items replaced Olga and Irina’s crowded attic room and the suspended house disappeared. Chebutykin, still immersed in his act 3 existential quandary, entered during the scene change and watched as emptiness enveloped the space around him. In act 4, for the first time, characters entered the void beneath the now absent house, Kulygin crossing it as he called “Maaa-shaaa,” Andrey doggedly pushing a pram through it, and Masha traversing it to give Vershinin her final farewell. Thus repetition inspired by a throbbing headache turned into a repetition of echoes (fig. 5).

**Conclusion: Making Echoes**

Rather than describing every aspect of this production, these examples illustrate and advocate for a way to help directors, actors, and designers mindfully interpret plays originally written in languages they do not speak. It is my hope that this account may also encourage theatres to stage foreign-language plays more confidently and more frequently, and to work directly with translators or translator-dramaturgs when they do.

Although I was not initially aware of the rehearsal potential for this kind of translation, I discovered that the dramaturgical translation can provide a creative team with an invitation to participate in a close translingual reading of a play and to interpret polyphonic meanings with confidence, yet the liminality and malleability of the dramaturgical translation help it to inspire rather than dictate a creative path. Additionally, the dramaturgical translation facilitates the transposition of nonverbal
Fig. 4. Irina (Caroline Neff) and Masha (Carrie Coon) in act 1 of *Three Sisters*, by Anton Chekhov. Adapted by Tracy Letts; directed by Anna D. Shapiro. Steppenwolf Theatre Company (2012). (Photo: Michael Brosilow.)

Fig. 5. Final image of *Three Sisters*, by Anton Chekhov. Adapted by Tracy Letts; directed by Anna D. Shapiro. Steppenwolf Theatre Company (2012). (Photo: Michael Brosilow.)
Creating a Dramaturgical Translation for *Three Sisters* at Steppenwolf

meanings into nonverbal theatrical sign systems. This is useful for actors, who not only speak lines, but embody characters; for directors, who create stage compositions with multilayered meanings; and for designers, who shape tangible and intangible materials. For avid miners of “the ‘submarine’ course of the through-action,” the dramaturgical translation, practically speaking, provides many kinds of subtext to mine (Senelick 1997, 9).

According to Walter Benjamin, the task of the translator is to find “that intended effect . . . upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (177). The primary purpose of the dramaturgical translation is to engage in a collaborative search for these theatrical echoes. After all, in Chekhov’s pointillist vision of the theatre, a small echo can have existential reverberations.

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**Notes**

1. The production opened on 8 July 2012.

2. All Russian names from *Three Sisters* are transliterated as they appear in Letts’s adaptation. When they do not appear in the adaptation, I use a simplified form of the Library of Congress system.

3. For more on Letts’s process, see Rob Weinert-Kent, “Sarah Ruhl and Tracy Letts: Two Playwrights and Three Sisters.”

4. See, for instance, Allison Horsley, “Translation for Performance: Another Chekhov Play?”

5. I use the word “transposition” here in deliberate reference to the transposition studies of Caryl Emerson, Alexander Burry, and others, who have investigated how works are transferred from one medium or genre into another. See Emerson, *Boris Godunov: Transpositions of a Russian Theme*; and Burry, *Multi-Mediated Dostoevsky: Transposing Novels into Opera, Film, and Drama*.

6. For a similar observation, see Savely Senderovich, “Chekhov and Impressionism.”
7. It lies outside the scope of this essay to engage in a detailed investigation of the schools of thought surrounding theatrical translation. For a concise overview of current thinking, see Kevin Windle, “The Translation of Drama”; for varied perspectives based on interviews with contemporary theatre translators, see Phyllis Zatlin, Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation: A Practitioner’s View.

8. Yasen Peyankov, a Russian speaker and Steppenwolf ensemble member, was a generous resource throughout the rehearsal process.

9. Brackets indicate a dramaturgical note; a forward slash indicates a translation variant.

10. In response to this information, Letts rendered this line as “Andrey, sweet-sweet, what are you doing?”

11. For an English-language reconstruction of this production, see Nick Worrall, “Stanislavsky’s Production of Chekhov’s Three Sisters.”

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