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Hosanna in Toronto: «Tour de force» or «Détour de traduction»?

Jane Koustas

Described as a « heart-pounding tour de force » (Herbert Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, May 16, 1964) and a « shimmering production » (Urjo Kareda, *Toronto Daily Star*, May 16, 1974), Tarragon Theatre's production of *Hosanna* (May 15-June 1, 1974) established Michel Tremblay as « the darling of the critics and the chosen one of the Toronto theatre scene » (Ed Bean, *Varsity*, Sept. 29, 1974). A resounding success when it first opened at the Tarragon (May 15 — June 1, 1974), *Hosanna* continued to draw Toronto crowds to three subsequent productions (Global Village Theatre, Sept. 6 — Oct. 4, 1974, Toronto Workshop Productions, Jan. 13 — Feb. 14, 1977, NDWT Theatre, March 11-22, 1980) and also ran at the Bijou theatre on Broadway. It was undoubtedly « Tremblay's most successful play to date » (D. McCaughna, *Motion*, July/Aug. 1974) and « one of the most popular plays ever to be written by a Canadian playwright » (D. Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 2, 1977). However were English theatregoers flocking to see the same *Hosanna* as that which had delighted Montrealers the previous year (Théâtre de Quat'Sous from May 10, 1973)? Was « Toronto's favourite playwright », Michel Tremblay (U. Kareda, *Toronto Daily Star*, June 5, 1975), when viewed by the anglophone, Toronto audience the same as when interpreted by his native Quebec fans? This study will examine audience reception as it pertains to translated theatre using Tarragon's production of Tremblay's *Hosanna* in English as an example and will focus on the importance of cultural difference in the reception of this play. The paper will first briefly

consider theoretical aspects of audience reception and their application to translation. The second part of this study will consist of an historical review of the Toronto English audience's reception of Quebec theatre. Critical reviews covering a period of approximately thirty years (1950-80) will be summarized. The paper will then focus on *Hosanna* in Toronto. The extent to which the translation either preserved, emphasized or neutralized cultural differences and the effect of this on audience reception will be studied.

Like all translators, the theatre translator is confronted with the much studied yet never resolved dilemma of « allegiance ». Should he or she « invade, extract and bring home » (Steiner, p. 298) or « traduire oui, mais sans traduire » (Brault, p. 50) ? This question is very important to translators of Quebec literature of the 60's and 70's, particularly to those translating from joual, which was indeed « the revelation of the aspirations of Quebec society » (Homel and Simon, p. 83). Allegiance to the target language, English, could in this case be a form of assimilation (Blodgett, pp. 13-14). However the task of the theatre translator, like that of the theatre researcher, is further complicated since he or she faces « two quite dissimilar, although intimately related, types of material : that produced *in* the theatre and that produced *for* the theatre (Elam, p. 3). As Jean-Michel Déprats stated, the translator must decide whether to « traduire pour le théâtre » or to « traduire du théâtre » (Déprats). This distinction between the performance text, produced in the theatre, and the dramatic text, produced for the theatre, is of particular importance here because the objectives of translators who assume the priority of the written play over the performance, viewing the latter as « a realization (actual or potential) of the former » (Elam, p. 208) are different from those who see the dramatic or written text as « a linguistic transcription of stage potentiality » (Gulli Pugliatti, p. 18). Translators who accept this view, which is similar to that held by Anne Ubersfeld who claims that « par nature [...] le texte du théâtre est fait pour être joué » (Ubersfeld, p. 12) and that « le théâtre n'est pas un genre littéraire. Il est une pratique scénique » (Ubersfeld, p. 9) would, as Annie Brisset suggests, « act in response to the needs of the performance » (Homel and Simon, p. 28) thus chosing to « traduire du théâtre ». Factors such as the performability or playability (Bassnett-McGuire, pp. 120-132, Corrigan) of the translation as well as the immediacy and rapidity of reception are then important. As Dragoslav Andric states, referring to the latter aspect, « he or she [the translator] has to grab the baton from the author, and hand it to the actor, who passes it on to the theatre-goers, who must reach the end of the track by themselves. And the race is fast. » (Homel and Simon, p. 34). Given that John Van Burek and Bill Glassco, Tremblay and Tarragon's translating/directing team, translated *Hosanna* in order to stage it and that the translation was published following the stage production, it

can be assumed that *Hosanna* is a performance oriented text. Audience reception will therefore be discussed in terms of a reaction to a performance rather than a dramatic text. Critics' comments cited later similarily refer to the stage production. Before considering the Toronto audience's reception of *Hosanna*, it is necessary to briefly study the influence of cultural factors on performance.

In his discussion of the theatre as a « multi-channelled, multi-systematic communications system » (Elam, p. 44), Elam establishes the importance of cultural principles in audience reception. After outlining the importance of theatrical codes, « codes specific to performance » and dramatic codes, « codes related to the drama and its composition » (Elam, p. 52) as well as that of the spectator's ability or competence to interpret these codes, he states :

> We (the audience) cannot leave at home the whole framework of more general cultural, ideological, ethical and epistemological principles which we apply in our extra-theatrical activities. On the contrary, the performance will inevitably make continual appeal to our general understanding of the world. [...] Every spectator's interpretation of the text is in effect a new construction of it according to the cultural and ideological disposition of the subject (Elam, p. 52).

Referring to the difference between the expectations and reactions of the oriental and western spectator, Anne Ubersfeld similarily concludes, « Il est difficile de penser que le spectateur perçoit le théâtre de façon uniforme ; il suit les signes de la représentation de manière extraordinairement diverse suivant les codes théâtraux » (Ubersfeld, p. 318). Referring specifically to the relative importance of the fable or story and that of the performance she states : « Toute forme de théâtre suppose chez le spectateur un rapport entre la perception des images spectaculaires et l'écoute de la fable, rapport différent selon les cultures » (Ubersfeld, p. 319). In other words different cultural groups will have a different « horizon of expectations » (Jauss, 1970, Segers, 1978) which Elam defines as « the spectator's cognitive hold on the theatrical frame, his knowledge of texts, textual laws and conventions together with his general cultural preparation » (Elam, p. 94). The theatrical performance draws therefore on numerous codes and systems « more or less common to the sources, performance and audience » (Elam, p. 49) as well as « any number of cultural, topical, and popular references assuming various kinds of extra-theatrical competence on the part of the spectator » (Elam, p. 93).

Elam explains the interaction of cultural codes with theatrical and dramatic subcodes grouping them according to the type of principle involved. He identifies twelve principles : systematic, linguistic, generic, intertextual, textual structural, formal presentational, epistemic, aesthetic, logical, behavioural ethical, ideological , psychological and historical (Elam, pp. 57-62). These principles, when generated into

performance, are reflected by culturally based theatrical and dramatic subcodes. An exhaustive comparison of the Montreal and Tarragon productions of *Hosanna* would involve the systematic comparison of all of these factors. This would necessitate however not only a filmed version of both productions in order to correctly assess proximic relationships for example but a thorough knowledge of how cultural codes, such as musical or cosmetic codes, differ from one audience to another. Such a study is not within the scope of this paper. It can be assumed however that differences concerning, for example, knowledge of historical and political events do exist. Similarily, though the complete performance text, meaning a filmed version, is not available, the prompt script as well as some technical information can be obtained and conclusions will be based on these sources.

Toronto's love of Tremblay is all the more interesting given its considerably less enthusiastic reception of other Quebec playwrights. Up until the arrival of Tremblay on the Toronto English theatre circuit, an average of only one Quebec play in translation was staged a year (for the 1953-80 period). However from 1972-1980 Toronto audiences had the opportunity to see usually two, if not three, professional productions at least one of these being a Tremblay play (O'Neill-Karch and Karch).

Until Tremblay's début in 1972, Gratien Gélinas and Jacques Languirand were the most often produced playwrights. However, as a review of the critics' comments indicates, the authors earned more praise than the plays themselves : the seventies clearly belonged to Tremblay. Though not all of his plays received the same enthusiastic reviews, the number of plays professionally staged proved the writer's popularity and the theatre companies' confidence in his ability to attract an audience. Other playwrights, Michel Garneau, Jovette Marchessault and Roch Carrier, had only one play produced. Furthermore, unlike Tremblay plays that were often staged by various companies, *Hosanna* in particular, each of their plays was produced only once. It is clear that Tremblay's work survived translation better than that of Jean Barbeau, Anne Hébert, Roland Lepage, Jovette Marchessault and Roch Carrier which, though frequently praised for its literary merit, seemed to remain firmly rooted in the soil of Quebec and thus somewhat remote to the Toronto audience. Attention was frequently drawn to translation problems.

However, as Paula Dancy points out in her study *Tremblay at Tarragon*, the initial decision to produce Tremblay was not without risks :

> Tarragon made a daring decision to produce Tremblay because of his newness to the audience, his political affiliation, which always leaked through (intentionally) into the theme and structure of his plays, his

subject matter and the questionable quality of the translation of his plays (Dancy, abstract).

This latter point, the problem of translating Tremblay's trademark joual, is perhaps the most serious (see Homel and Simon, pp. 83-86) not only, as Vivien Bosley points out in her study of the English version of *les Belles-sœurs*, because of the difficulty of finding an English equivalent, but because of joual's social, political and religious connotations and their repercussions in the text. She states :

> As we look at a page of Tremblay in the original and in the translation what strikes us immediately is the fact that the English text looks like a drawing room version of the French[...]. The elements that we recognize immediately in the French text as being very specific to a relatively small linguistic group fade away and the language is diluted as it is standardized into generic North American. What this also means is that the linguistic specifics that we have come to associate with valorization of Quebec's identity disappear, so that the overtones of nationalism which are inherent in the attempt to represent in a phonetic way the speech associations with the movement of emancipation from the linguistic hegemony of the French of France are completely lost (Bosley, pp. 140-141).

She supports this statement with examples of the « dilution » of « sacres » and anglicisms.

Bill Glassco was aware of this difficulty and, when referring to a discussion with John Van Burek, stated :

> He (Van Burek) warned me however that it would be difficult to translate because of the joual, a peculiarly vibrant Québécois French which had become the language of the Quiet Revolution. (Glassco, 1978).

This problem was far from surmounted. Tremblay himself claims that « the folkloric aspect of the language » was missing and that his plays will « never be as good in English as in French » (Tremblay, 1979, p. 37). When asked for his opinion of the English translations of Tremblay, André Brassard, the author's friend and colleague replied, « Fatal. With a text whose main asset is the language, you lose at least a third of it » (Brassard, p. 41). Theatre critics described the translation of *Hosanna* as « occasionally clumsy » (Ed Bean, *Varsity*, Sept. 20, 1974), « a repetition of the same four letter words » (A. Ashley, *Ottawa Citizen*, Oct. 7, 1974) and as « too awkward and poetic » (David McCaughna, *Motion*, July/Aug. 1974) as well as « too shrill » (Jack Kapica, *Globe and Mail*, Jan. 14, 1977). However more important than the flow of the English version was its failure to convey the political and social connotations of Tremblay's work.

Like all of Tremblay's plays, *Hosanna* contains a political message. As Tremblay himself stated :

> I do not mean that they [Hosanna and Cuirette] are Quebec or symbols or images of Quebec. But their problems with the wider society are

political problems. Because they are the fringe group in society, this society in a way hates them. But they want to be happy and they want to be somebody. Hosanna is a man who always wanted to be a woman. This woman always wanted to be Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*. In other words this Québécois always wanted to be an English actress in an American movie about an Egyptian myth in a movie shot in Spain. In a way, that is a typically Québécois problem. For the past 300 years we were not taught that we were a people, so we were dreaming about somebody else instead of ourselves. So *Hosanna* is a political play (Anthony, p. 283).

However, based on the critics' comments, the political aspect was largely missed by the Toronto audience. The play was instead seen as an exploration of the « poetics of love » (Agnes Kruchio, *Excalibur*, Sept. 19, 1974), a study of « the pain of deception and humiliation and the loss of dreams » (U. Kareda, *Toronto Daily Star*, May 16, 1974), a « sensitive dealienation of a homosexual relationship » (D. McCaughna, *Motion*, July/August, 1974), or « a classic study of homosexual revenge » (George Anthony, *The Toronto Sun*, Sept. 13, 1974) by « the Canadian theatre's most compassionate poet of *individual* (my emphasis) isolation » (U. Kareda, *Toronto Star*, May 16, 1974). According to H. Whittaker, Tremblay was talking about « deceptions and the need for them, and the loss of them and comfort in misery. About *any* (my emphasis) life, in fact » (H. Whittaker, *Globe and Mail*, May 15, 1974).

Those critics who did recognize an attempt at a political message downplayed it claiming that such an allegory was « far-fetched » (Charles Pope, *Scene Changes*, Jan. 1977) or that « there was no inkling of such an idea to be found in the play no matter how hard one looked for signs » (John Hebert, *Onion*, Feb. 15, 1977). More relevant to this study is D. McCaughna's comment that though Tremblay is « a very political writer and all of his plays have dealt in one way or another with the condition of Quebec society, it does not hit home that this is a play which has a great deal to do with Quebec » (*Motion*, July/Aug. 1974).

The loss of meaning is partially due to the « dilution » of joual to « drawing room » or perhaps more accurately pool-room English. Though the translation contains many four letter words as well as slang expressions such as « we all got plastered » (prompt script, p. 57), it fails to compensate for example for anglicisms. Such words as « cheap » used by Tremblay in French with, as Bosley points out, certain political connotations, were simply left as such, « cheap ».

Furthermore, as the following examples illustrate, in the reading or prompt script, as opposed to the published translation, all gallicisms of vocabulary and syntax were eliminated :

Original : Maudite kétaine ! Maudite kétaine ! Maudite kétaine ! (p. 13)

Published translation : Stupid bitch ! Cheap stupid bitch ! Stupide, stupide, stupide (p. 10).

Prompt script : Stupid bitch, Cheap stupid bitch ! Stupid. Stupid bitch (p. 3).

Original : Ah oui ! Chus la coiffeuse la plus drôle en ville (p. 18).

Published translation : Ah oui.... me, I'm the funniest hairdresser in town (p. 18).

Prompt script : Oh sure. I'm the funniest hairdresser in town (p. 11).

Original : Ah ! Pis j'ai pas le cœur à ça à soir... Les pauses volupteuses et provocantes, ça s'ra pour une autre fois. Aie... (p. 24).

Published translation : Me, I'm not up to it tonight. « Les pauses volupteuses et provocantes » will have to wait. Aie... (p. 29).

Prompt script : Oh no, tonight I'm just not up to it. The voluptuous, provocative pauses will have to wait. Hey... (p. 20).

Furthermore, all of the « sacres » often used in the published version were given an approximate, and frequently diluted, English equivalent : « Maudit que t'es bête » (p. 28), published as « Sacrement are you stupid » (p. 35) was read as « Christ are you stupid. » (p. 25).

It should be noted however that Richard Monette, who played *Hosanna*, adopted a heavy French-Canadian accent perhaps to compensate for this dilution. Described by one critic as both « ludicrous » and « helpful and endearing » (D. McCaughna, *Motion*, July/Aug. 1974), it was also judged to be « distracting » (Myron Galloway, *Montreal Star*, Jan.11, 1974). Furthermore, Hosanna's partner, Cuirette, played by Richard Donat, did not use an accent thus possibly introducing another conflict, English (dominant/male) versus French (passive/female), into their relationship.

Diluting joual, the Quebec slang which to an informed, competent audience carries political connotations, contributed to the loss of meaning. Using French accents represented an unsatisfactory compromise as the play was then neither correctly situated in its Quebec context nor « brought home » to the Toronto audience. However as this study set out to examine audience reception in terms of various culturally based theatrical and dramatic codes other aspects of the performance text must also be considered to account for the loss of meaning.

Firstly, Tarragon itself downplayed the play's political message. While billing it as a « Quebec play », the theatre in its program notes focused on the couple's problems making no reference to the struggle of the collectivity :

> The two characters have somehow realized their dreams. Their coming to grips with themselves and the reality of their lives is perhaps more brutal (Tarragon Theatre Archives, Program *Hosanna*, Box A185, Folder 013).

The « horizon of expectations » then of the Toronto audience differed greatly from that of the Quebec audience who, familiar with Tremblay and their own situation, would look for political allegory.

Having thus been prepared for a Quebec play about a homosexual couple, the audience's expectations were further confirmed by other performance factors. As with most of Tarragon's productions of Tremblay's work, the staging of *Hosanna* closely followed the model used in Montreal (Dancy, pp. 91-92). The set, including the Pharmacie Beaubien sign which Tremblay himself imported, the costumes (systematic principles) and the blocking were copied almost directly from the Montreal version. Furthermore, the characters' names, Hosanna and Cuirette, remained unaltered thus losing their connotative value (see Bosley, pp. 144-45) : Hosanna implying « Ose Anna » and Cuirette being the one who cooks from the verb « cuire » as well as a feminization of « cuir » or leather. Similarly, geographical references, though sometimes used in their English form, Avenue du Parc becomes Park Avenue, were neither changed nor explained (see Homel and Simon, pp. 39-38). Can it be assumed that the Toronto audience is immediately aware of the value of jewellery purchased from shops on la rue Sainte-Catherine between Amherst and Saint-Laurent or of the activities that Cuirette might pursue in Parc Lafontaine ?

Furthermore judging from the critics' comments, Richard Monette's acting, though judged as « fabulous » (U. Kareda, *Toronto Daily Star*, May 16, 1974) and a « tour de force » (M. Galloway) did not suggest that he represented « a group (collectivité) and not just an individual », an ability which Brassard deems necessary for an actor in a Tremblay play (Brassard, p. 40).

Acting styles, like interpretations of set, costumes and staging are, as Elam states, culturally based and these were neither sufficiently explained to draw the audience into the Quebec context nor adapted to relate to a similiar situation familiar to the Toronto theatregoers.

In summary, Tarragon's production was a compromise : the play was neither anchored firmly enough in the Quebec context, largely due to the dilution of joual, to portray, albeit to an informed audience, the national identity crisis suggested, nor sufficiently transposed to convey a similar political message immediately relevant and perceptible to the Toronto audience. The political message was therefore « diluted » if not entirely lost and *Hosanna* remained merely a « play about a relationship between two homosexual males » (J. Herbert *Onion*, Feb. 16, 1977) or « a brillant exploration of a ménage à deux » (*Toronto Citizen*, May 24, 1974) set in « a Montreal boudoir livingroom » (David Ossea, *Varsity*, Jan. 21, 1977).

According to Dancy, Tremblay's popularity was in fact largely due to this « exotic » element which appealed to the curiosity of the

Toronto theatregoers. She concludes, « To Toronto, the appeal of Tremblay did not lie in his political statement, but in his stories about Montreal » (p. 10). Stephen Mezei as well stresses the importance of the exotic flavour in the success of Tremblay's work stating that the plays represented « something alien with an exotic flavour » (Mezei).

The play's success however cannot be attributed solely to the curiosity of Toronto theatregoers. Its popularity, in spite of the loss of meaning, can also be explained by Tremblay's ability to write and communicate on several levels, a talent which he deems necessary for success not only in Quebec theatre circles where political allegory becomes rapidly dated but on the international scene where it loses its significance. He stated :

> If it [political allegory] becomes obsolete after three or four years, it means that the play has been effective. [...] That's why I always say it is important that the play I write have two or three levels. Well evidently a play isn't going to mean exactly the same thing in Czechoslovakia as here, there will be other things the audience will see in it. That's what a good play is all about (Tremblay, 1974, p. 3).

Following the production of *Hosanna*, it was stated that « no other Canadian dramatist had succeeded so completely in creating startling, in terms of psychological insights as well as shock tactics and [sic] original theatre that was inherently Canadian without being provincial to the point of being incomprehensible to a non-Canadian audience [...] Tremblay's talent is big enough to encompass matters beyond Quebec borders » (Charles Pope, *Scene Changes*, Jan. 1977). It cannot be assumed, as H. Whittaker suggests, that the Toronto audience attends Quebec plays in translation « to learn, to know its [Quebec's] differences, to understand Quebec's background and motivations » (*Globe and Mail*, Nov. 24, 1972). The Toronto audience was looking for more than a lesson in Quebec culture and Tremblay's succcess lay in his ability to write on several levels.

In conclusion, it would seem as P. Dancy suggests that « Tarragon did not meet the challenge of conveying Tremblay's themes as effectively as possible to the Toronto audience, an audience that was not sympathetic to Tremblay's political or social vision of Quebec » (p. 96). However it must be noted that one of the challenges for any theatre company is to sell tickets and the overwhelming success of *Hosanna*, it was the most successful show in the theatre's first four years, might lead one to reply to Dancy, « Don't fix it if it ain't broke ». John Van Burek's and Bill Glassco's interpretation clearly « worked » in these terms. However the loss of meaning, though it may not have translated as such in terms of box office sales, is nonetheless regrettable to those who see translation as « a vehicle through which cultures travel » (Homel and Simon, p. 9). The vehicle in this case seems to have gotten stuck between Montreal and Toronto.

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