

Shakespeare's Languages

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Shakespeare's language has rightly been considered one of the glories of his achievement. Yet in recent years, critics have increasingly drawn attention to Shakespeare productions in languages other than English performed for audiences who may not understand the words, to Shakespeare without his language, as it were. But the diversity of languages can also be used productively in staging the plays, to articulate diverse identities and conflicts. In the following, examples of multilingual productions in a multilingual country, Switzerland, will be discussed. A trilingual *Romeo and Juliet* in particular will be used to highlight the problems and opportunities of such productions.

In 1986 the Finnish president, Mauno Koivisto, made a state visit to Switzerland. He brought along, on the same plane, the company of the Lilla Teatern in Helsinki which offered a single performance of *Hamlet* in Finnish at the Théâtre de la Comédie in Geneva, a French-speaking city. The director, Benno Besson, a French-speaking Swiss, had earlier directed this English play in Geneva, at the same theatre, in French, but also at the Zurich Schauspielhaus, in German, and finally in Helsinki at the Lilla Teatern—a truly international production. The Lilla Teatern itself functions in a particular linguistic situation: it is a Swedish-speaking theatre in the Finnish capital, but had put on *Hamlet* in Finnish for economic reasons to draw larger audiences than would have been possible in the language of the Swedish-speaking minority.¹ In Geneva, of course, only very few people would understand Finnish, and the Lilla Teatern's daring was the greater since they played *Hamlet* in masks, a theatrical device which places additional emphasis on voice and language.²

Fortunately, the story of *Hamlet* is so familiar to theatre audiences that they can follow it without understanding the language. Nevertheless, an all-

¹ For a review, see Mustanoja, Tauno, „Shakespeare in Finland”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 (1980), 434-35. The masks were by Ezio Toffolutti.

² Few of those who admire Aki Kaurismäki's films, with their cheerless working-class stories, are aware that his characters usually speak exquisite literary Finnish, creating an ironic contrast that totally escapes foreign audiences.

Finnish performance in Geneva is a complex, multilingual/multicultural event. The theatre company which the Finnish head of state brought along forced the Swiss public, to their surprise, to revise stereotypes of the Finns as taciturn, heavy-drinking peasants. In a sophisticated gesture, this production drew attention to Finland as one of the great European theatre nations. The Swiss audience that was confronted with this spectacle—and this point is central to my argument—also played its part in the complexity of the performance, precisely as an audience. Students of the theatre who come to it from the study of texts often neglect this dimension.

Multilingualism can go further. As we have known at least since Karin Beyer's production of *A Midsummernight's Dream* in Düsseldorf with fourteen actors from nine countries in 1995, multilingualism (and in this case also in the diverse "languages" of national acting styles) may be used to show that language does not really matter, that the plays exist beyond the languages that are used to perform them. Dennis Kennedy has impressively reminded us of that, and in fact³ Beyer's production was hailed as being "European Shakespeare" at the time. In contrast, the 2006 *ROMEO + ДЖУЛИЕТТА* production,⁴ in which the Montagues spoke German, and the Capulets Russian, made language central to its concept of Shakespeare's play in yet another different way, using it to articulate identity and conflict. It is this use of language—as in the case of the Geneva *Hamlet*—that is crucial to a trilingual production of *Romeo and Juliet*, in German, French, and English, in a Swiss city where language communities clash politically.

Switzerland, a country with four official languages, German, French, Italian and Rumansh, is a place which may seem to cry out for multilingual experiments in the theatre,. Three cantons, Valais, Fribourg and Berne, are themselves bilingual, and the

³ *Foreign Shakespeare: Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Dennis Kennedy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare : a visual history of twentieth-century performance* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Cf. also Balz Engler, "Shakespeare's Passports." *International Shakespeare: The Tragedies*, ed. Patricia Kennan and Mariangela Tempera. Bologna: Clueb, 1996. 11-16

⁴ Directed by Katrin Kazubko. A collaboration of the Lessja Ukrainka Theatre, Kiew and the Institut für Theaterwissenschaft der Universität München. Performed in the Ukraine, Germany and Switzerland. Problems of understanding were dealt with by cutting long passages and by translating speech into gesture wherever this was possible.

Grisons (in the Alpine valleys), is trilingual, with communities that use German, Italian and/or Rumansh.⁵ People in the Grisons are used to employing different languages, depending on the context and the person they are addressing, while most outside property owners and tourists patronizing local hotels speak German or Italian. Language is therefore not only a regional, but also a social marker.

There has been a lively tradition of amateur theatre in these valleys, which, after a period of decline after the advent of television in the villages, was reinvigorated by productions specifically taking account of local conditions. In such stagings, a community may be seen as presenting itself to itself, working out and emphasizing what makes it special, in plays that may be commissioned for the purpose. Not unexpectedly, multilingualism is often topical, even where a Shakespeare play is produced. In a production of *The Tempest* the ship foundering on the (all-too distant) sea was replaced by a train of the local railway blocked in a tunnel which had collapsed in an earthquake... The production, which played to mixed reviews, was largely in Rumansh; German and Italian were reserved for the spirit world.⁶

One director who has been particularly interested in multilingual work of this kind is Gian Gianotti, who was born in the Italian-speaking Val Bregaglia.⁷ In the early 1980s Gianotti tried to set up a *Teater Retic—Rätisches Theater—Teatro Retico*, a professional company which was to serve the whole canton of the Grisons, collaborating with amateur groups, and highlighting the special features of the community. For financial reasons the project never got off the ground.⁸ One of the first productions he planned was a trilingual production of *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the Capulets and the Montagues would speak Rumansh and German,

⁵ Rumansh is a romance language spoken in various dialects in secluded Alpine valleys. In the 2000 national census about 35'000 people declared it to be their main language.

⁶ *Igl Orcan u La muntogna striunada*, directed by Giovanni Netzer, performed in Savognin, Scuol, Disentis/Mustér and Chur in October 1995. See Fromm, Georg, "Mit Shakespeare in die Höhle", *Bündner Zeitung*, 13 October, 1995.

⁷ Born 1949 in Vicosoprano, but equally fluent in Rumansh and German (and in French), who has directed plays and operas in various European countries and languages, and is now the artistic director of the Winterthur theatre in Switzerland.

⁸ See Maurer, Roland, "Rätisches Theater", *Zytlogge Zytig*, February 1984; Hänni, Hanspeter, "Theaterlandschaft Graubünden braucht neue Ideen: Gian Gianotti äussert sich zu einigen offenen Fragen der Theaterpolitik", *Bündner Tagblatt*, 13 June, 1991.

Duke Escalus Italian or possibly Latin,⁹ a production that would thematize issues that preoccupied the community.

This production could never be realized, but in 1989 an opportunity presented itself in another part of Switzerland, in Fribourg, the capital of a bilingual French-German canton. The canton of Fribourg is situated between the French and German speaking parts of the country, sitting across a metaphorical trench that is supposed to divide the two parts of the country (which often do not see eye to eye politically either). Within the canton itself there is a French-speaking majority and a (Swiss)German speaking minority. The German-speaking minority tends to insist that the canton and all its institutions should be bilingual; the French-speaking majority tends to prefer the territorial principle, which distinguishes between French and German speaking areas. The issues raised by a multilingual Shakespeare production were obviously of interest to both language communities; and they both supported the project, as did the cantonal and city governments. This, in itself, was a first success for the production, which finally enabled Gian Gianotti to realize his project of a trilingual production under conditions, though bilingual, similar to those in the Grisons.

Gianotti's trilingual production was advertised as *Romeo & Juliet*; Juliet's name, which would have been *Juliette* in French and *Julia* in German was left in the original English. The names were linked with a linguistically neutral ampersand; in other words, it could be read as the English title of the play--a point to which I shall return. The Montagues spoke High German,¹⁰ the Capulets French, and Escalus English. Extensive cuts were made with an eye to preserve the uncompromising confrontation between the families—there was no reconciliation over the dead bodies of the lovers in this production.¹¹ The risks of doing *Romeo and Juliet* in this way were considerable; associating the discord between the Montagues and the Capulets with the languages spoken in a split community would

⁹ Gian Gianotti, private communication.

¹⁰ The German-speaking Swiss usually converse in their various dialects, none of which is accepted as a standard. Public communication is therefore usually done in High German, also out of respect for the French and Italian-speaking compatriots.

¹¹ Baschong, Niklaus, "Theater kann die Welt nicht verändern", *Bieler Tagblatt*, 8 September, 1989.

easily exacerbate local conflicts rather than help to resolve them.

The choice of having the Capulets speak French and the Montagues German (rather than the other way round) was not random. According to the producer, Klaus Hersche, Shakespeare's Capulets seem to be more emotionally volatile: they organize a great party and are characterized by strong emotions like rage and despair; the Montagues, on the other hand, are more reserved and severe, possibly characterized by a Northern melancholy.¹² Clichés about the characteristics of the "Latin" French Swiss and the Protestant German Swiss could thus be used to make it easier for the language communities to recognize themselves and each other in the production.¹³

However, there are a number of moments in the play when sustaining such a distribution of languages is problematic: the prologue, the first meeting between Romeo and Juliet, and the scenes with Friar Lawrence, who is not a member of either family. I'd like to look at these in turn.¹⁴

The prologue was spoken by a chorus consisting of six persons, dressed in white, part French part German speaking, and the text was presented line-by-line in the alternative languages. This was an important decision, as it indicated from the outset how the two languages would be juxtaposed with each other. The prologue suggested, at a level beyond the story presented in the play, that languages might co-exist in harmony, even though no longer in the one suggested by the poetic form of the sonnet in the English text.

When Romeo and Juliet first meet at the party of the Capulets, they speak in rhymed verse with each other, perhaps even in a sonnet, suggesting the ideal harmony between them. In this production, their entire dialogue was cut, their meeting, crucial in any production of the play, took place in silence. Later, in the balcony scene, each spoke their own language, but they interlaced it with phrases from the other's (probably with a perceptible accent), in a free adaptation of Shakespeare's text:

¹² Giuseppe Rusconi in *Corriere del Ticino*, 22 September, 1989.

¹³ Strictly speaking, the Montagues should probably have spoken the Swiss-German Freiburg dialect. See on this Zysset, Sylvia, "Wie uns dr Schnabel gwachse-n-isch: Shakespeare auf Mundart", *Basler Zeitung, Magazin*, 10. November 2001 (the text can be found under <http://pages.unibas.ch/shine/texts.html>)

¹⁴ I am grateful to Gian Gianotti for lending me his script, as well as his collection of newspaper reports on the production.

Romeo. Ich will nicht gehn, je suis bien avec toi.
Der Tod soll kommen, Julia will es so.
Non, mon amour. Noch ist nicht Tag.
Juliette. C'est le jour, es ist Tag. Geh, tu dois partir.
Es ist die Lerche, c'est l'alouette qui chante [...]

Finally, Friar Lawrence, standing between the parties, and ineffectually trying to work for a happy outcome, was the one figure who spoke in all three languages, in the scene where the members of the two families and the Duke come together. When, at the end of the play, he explains what exactly has happened, extensive cuts were made, and Friar Lawrence switched between three languages, adapting his speech to the persons he was addressing:

I am the most suspected of this direful murder
And here I stand both to impeach and purge myself.
Romeo war Julias Gemahl, Juliette l'épouse de Roméo.
I married them. Ihr heimlicher Hochzeitstag
war Tybalts Todestag. Sa mort subite
a banni Roméo de la ville. Um ihn und nicht um Tybalt
weinte Julia ihre Tränen.
Vous vouliez la forcer à épouser Paris.
Alors elle est venue chez moi, hors d'elle,
pour me demander conseil et pour la sauver de ce second mariage
Sinon elle se serait tuée devant mes yeux.
Da gab ich ihr, so tutored by my art, ein Schlafmittel,
un somnifère qui a agi exactement comme je l'avais prévu:
il lui a donné l'apparence d'une morte. Sie schien nur tot.

The macaronic mixing of languages seemed to work well. Rather than having a comical effect, it was strangely poetical, due to the repetition and variation of semantic units. The juxtaposition of languages highlighted their different sound qualities and simultaneously emphasized emotions beyond words.¹⁵

The reviews of the production were positive, also where the possible message of such a production was concerned.¹⁶ The aim of the production was, after

¹⁵ "Ce mélange linguistique ne nuit pas au spectacle. Il peut freiner le rythme, étouffer les émotions, mais l'histoire, certes archiconnue, demeure limpide." M.C. in *24 Heures*, 9 September, 1989. «En entrant dans le jeu, la pièce devient une découverte stimulante où « la musicalité des sentiments », comme dit le metteur en scène Gian Gianotti, est totale. Rythme des mots, des strophes, dissonances et harmonies des langues forment un tout. Véritable symbiose, ces tirades ! Ni plus, ni moins. » Christophe Schaller in *La Liberté*, 9-10 September, 1989.

¹⁶ Only one critic felt that the production did not manage to bring across its message, which should have been, according to him, that language, that communication is the central problem and that everybody should contribute their part to living together peacefully. "Das aber müsste der Freiburger Inszenierung eigentliche Botschaft sein: Dass die Sprache (bzw. das Kommunikationsproblem) im Zentrum steht oder dass halt jeder sich einigermaßen anpassen sollte, dann

all, as one critic observed, to bring together two audiences, speaking different languages, on the same benches—an aim that was admirably achieved.¹⁷ And the German-speaking amateur actor of Romeo, Karl Ehrler, saw the political dimension of the production in that, for the first time in his extensive theatrical experience, he could be on stage together with his French-speaking *compatriots*.¹⁸ This may serve as a useful warning to text-oriented students of Shakespeare: The meaning of a theatrical production may be contrary to what the text acted seems to suggest.

A further issue of the multilingual production was addressed by Gianotti in an interview. Escalus, in re-establishing order, addressed the Veronese in English, and the reporter wondered whether the fact that “the authorities” spoke in English was meant to illustrate the inability of the political institutions to communicate. Gianotti replied (my translation)

No, we are not illustrating the inability [...] to communicate. We show that in spite of active and passive knowledge of the others’ language one’s own identity is not at risk. Understanding the others’ language enriches one’s own culture. Here, English is a meta-language, a law, a basic order we all want to accept. Under this law, however, there must be a readiness among people to talk with each other.¹⁹

This decision (which possibly also determined the quasi-English title of the play in this production) posits English as a neutral meta-language of authority above the conflicting local communities. In a world where English is the language of a world power that, no matter who is in government, has a tradition of intervening in other countries’ affairs and, with various degrees of subtlety, to force its decisions on them, the

ginge schon irgendwie alles einigermaßen gut oder so. Davon war herzlich wenig zu spüren.“ Urs W. Scheidegger in *Solothurner Zeitung*, 16 September, 1989.

¹⁷ Anna Lietti in *L'hédo*, 14 September, 1989

¹⁸ Giuseppe Rusconi in *Corriere del Ticino*, 22 September, 1989.

¹⁹ Baschong. „*B.T. :In Ihrer Inszenierung spricht die Obrigkeit Englisch, also eine Sprache, die das Volk wiederum nicht versteht. Zeigen Sie damit die Kommunikationsunfähigkeit der politischen Instanzen auf?*“

Gianotti: Nein, wir zeigen nicht die Kommunikationsunfähigkeit auf. Wir zeigen, dass trotz passivem und aktivem Verständnis der andern Sprache die eigene Identität nicht gefährdet wird. Durch das sprachliche Verständnis wird die eigene Kultur ausgeweitet. Englisch ist hier eine Uebersprache, ein Gesetz, eine Grundordnung, die wir akzeptieren wollen. Unter diesem Gesetz müssen aber bei den Menschen die Strukturen zur Gesprächsbereitschaft liegen.“ Anybody who has ever conducted an interview knows how difficult it is to render a conversation in print; this may also play a role here.

choice of English for Duke Escalus must be problematic.²⁰ Strangely, the problem is not mentioned in any of the reviews. But perhaps we should remember the date and the place of the production: In the late eighties and in a country known for its settled, even sedate political conditions, English obviously could still be read as the language of an admired Elizabethan author and universal genius whose language could serve to represent an authority accepted by all.

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²⁰ Latin would not really have served either, in a part of the country that is heavily Roman-Catholic.

Zysset, Sylvia, "Wie uns dr Schnabel gwachse-n-isch:
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