

Yana Meerzon

Foreword

Marriage: An Absolutely Impossible Event in Two Acts is a masterpiece of the Russian dramatic literature. Written by Nikolay Gogol in 1833-35 and produced for the first time in 1842 at the Alexandrinsky theatre, St. Petersburg, it is often identified as an encyclopedia of comedic devices. The play continues to hold its sway over generations of theatre makers and theatre writers across the world. The current translation and adaptation is the result of a pedagogical exercise and an artistic project initiated by Nicholas Leno, a student in the MFA program in Directing, at the Department of Theatre, University of Ottawa. Interested in presenting dramatic texts of the European canon in new translations and adaptations on Canadian stage, Leno has chosen Gogol's text as his graduation project, which proved to become an exciting dramaturgical, directorial and translator's journey. Not only Leno had to re-create Gogol's grotesque world in performance, the world somewhat remote from Canadian spectators today, he also had to make the play's conflict accessible, so his Canadian audience could identify with the characters and recognize themselves in them. To do this, Leno was to find an English translation of this text that in its rhythmical designs, vocabulary, and contextual references would invite his spectators for a theatre voyage not alienate them. The task proved to be difficult, as among recently published translations of this play only the 1995 version by Christopher English seemed to be doing the job¹. Still, English's translation proved to be challenging to work with, as it was full of idiomatic constructions and vocabulary common in Great Britain. It sounded somewhat foreign to a Canadian ear. In addition, this translation – as detailed, thorough, and loyal to the original as any translation could be - did not properly channel the specificity of Gogol's humor in English. As theatre people would say, it proved to be “heavy on a tongue”. As the result, Leno decided to seek a new translation of Gogol's text. As a native speaker of Russian, I volunteered to help him to try to re-create the soundscape of Gogol's original comedy in English.

The work unfolded in two stages: first we analyzed Gogol's text from the viewpoint of actors, searching for the characters' objectives as embedded in their dialogue and on-stage actions. As we were identifying an overarching objective of each scene, dialogue or line, we would also

¹ Gogol, Nikolay. *Plays and Petersburg Tales: Petersburg Tales, Marriage, The Government Inspector*. Trans. Christopher English. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995 [2nd edition 2008].

pay attention to their rhythmical patterns and designs. We aimed to preserve these rhythms in English, understanding, however, that this approach will lead to the sacrifices of the play's historical context and cultural references. In the commentary section that follows the text of the play we discuss these choices at length. The second step was to transpose this new dramatic score from the page of our translation to the stage of Leno's production. The play was cast in December 2016 and opened to full audiences in March 2017. By the time the rehearsals began, the cast was asked to learn their lines. This approach liberated the team from the lengthy intellectual analysis of the text or table work. It allowed the director to work with the actors "on their feet" from the start of the rehearsal period. A part of the process, Leno introduced exercises in actor training, which included the work in clown and physical comedy. Leno speaks about his approach and directorial choices at length in the second part of the commentary.

The translation/adaptation a reader holds in his/her hand is the result of our pre-production discussions, Leno's work with the actors, and a post-production commentary provided to the director by the graduate studies committee and his supervisor, Dr. Peter Froehlich, who collectively evaluated this project. A suggestion to publish this script came from the Ottawa theatre critics and academics, who have seen the production or had a chance to read the new translation. This text is the first published Canadian translation/adaptation of the Gogol's text in English. It is accompanied by a dramaturgical report and a theoretical reflection on the challenges and pleasures of intercultural translation. In their respective commentary, Meerzon and Leno show that despite the common belief that it is the cultural context of the original text that often predetermines the shortcomings of literary translations (as the target audience does not have enough historical or cultural knowledge to which the original refers); it is the play's aesthetics (the rhythms of its dialogue, language games and idioms it employs, pauses and silences it engages with) that is most vulnerable to the act of a theatrical border-crossing.