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## **Weaving patterns in performance: dramaturgy and the art of performance interpreting**

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# Weaving patterns in performance: dramaturgy and the art of performance interpreting

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*Performance interpreters (PIs) working between English and British Sign Language often work alone to translate performance texts with little or no access to the creative team and are generally untrained in the specific skills required for the performance setting. In addition, the current theatre industry tends to adopt a mechanised approach to access that takes little or no account of the creative aspects of translation and interpreting work. In response to this, and to facilitate a conversation about the performance aspects of the work of the PI, this article discusses the concept of dramaturgy and considers its application to performance interpreting. The article draws on a practice-based project which embedded three PIs in a theatre production of Henry V at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and argues that performance interpreting can be framed as a dramaturgically-driven undertaking, rather than an interpreting task. The article sheds light on this frame's effects on the PIs' processes, and on the experience of the director and cast members. It proposes and evaluates five guiding principles for a dramaturgically-driven frame for use by directors of performance interpreting.*

*Keywords: BSL, interpreting, dramaturgy, performance, Shakespeare*

## **Introduction**

Research has shown that interpreting is complex and nuanced, requiring a skill of synthesis and contextualising

not generally necessary in everyday conversation (Roy, 2000; Janzen, 2008; Napier, 2002). The interpreter's task is to listen with an intensity beyond that of the everyday, to question and examine every concept presented to her, to connect people and ideas, and to facilitate the bridging of the gap between cultures and languages. Interpreters who work with the language combination British Sign Language (BSL) and English are generically trained in the UK. They work across a range of fields, such as education, social services, medicine and law, and may gravitate towards a specialism as their career develops. There is generally little or no specific post-qualification training available for these specialisations, including the focus of this article. For some, years of performance work and a chance encounter with BSL lead them to becoming learners of the language and then on to interpreter training; others find that working at nativity shows or local school plays from the earliest years of their community interpreting career sparks an interest in performance which they pursue. For those rooted in the Deaf Community as Children or Siblings of Deaf Adults (CODAs / SODAs), bilingualism is a means of creative expression in the arts. However they find themselves in the field, the performance interpreter (PI) undertakes a unique set of tasks which includes literary analysis, translation, performance and audience engagement. These are all in addition to, and sometimes in conflict with, the task of interpreting.

For theatre audiences, the image described by Siobhan Rocks (2011, p.84) of the lone interpreter standing on the side of the stage 'usually dressed in black... lit in a fixed spotlight throughout the performance, including black-outs and scene changes' is the enduring image of 'accessible' theatre. There is a temptation to see this lone PI as the one responsible for telling Deaf people in the audience what is happening in the play, with the theatre and creative team absolved of accountability for what is happening in the space. This is often perceived as the cheapest option for theatre companies wishing to meet their legal obligation for 'access' as outlined in UK legislation (Richardson, 2017). It is, however, the system that the BSL using Deaf audiences dislike and complain

about the most, a system where the physical separation of the interpreter can be seen as representing the cultural othering of BSL. It also risks compounding the negative societal stereotype that Sign Language is a language of utility, not of creativity (Schmitt, 2017). Whilst the traditional role of the interpreter emphasises strict criteria for role and boundaries, the PI can feel hindered in her work by these. Early interpreting models, such as the conduit model, have been found wanting (Pöchhacker et al., 2015; Roy, 2000) and, therefore, a new framework of understanding is required to accurately describe the specialist activity of performance interpreting, one that accommodates more appropriately the scope and motivations of the work. This article is intended as a contribution towards shaping such a framework.

Mainstream theatre industry thinking can be rather mired in the language of mechanisation and commodification with respect to performance interpreting. BSL users are informed when the interpreted performance date will be—usually a single date in a much longer run—and the theatre is content that its responsibility for access has been met. An interpreter is sought and booked after the date is advertised and preparations are made. The main drivers are usually to minimise impact on budgets and ‘normal’ staging practices. Theatres regularly cite the small number of BSL using audience members relative to restricted production budgets as a reason for their choices, not considering that, as Taylor (quoted in Turner and Behrndt, 2016, p.196) puts it, ‘the diversity of theatre flourishes with increased audience contact, which is not synonymous with larger audiences’. Attention to the structure and art of the interpreted performance can be what attracts those larger audiences. In a debate reduced only to finance, the spirit of performance can be lost.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are productions created by Deaf performers who use BSL; performances rooted in the language and culture of Deaf communities and performed by Deaf actors. Interpreters are rarely required to work on stage in such productions and so they fall outwith the scope of this research. A few select and

notable companies in the UK work with an inclusive practice approach and create productions with BSL and audio description built into the performance. Companies such as Birds of Paradise, Graeae and the Deaf Hearing Ensemble bring an inclusive ethos to their work with diverse casting as a norm. These kinds of productions are built with BSL as an intrinsic language of the piece, usually featuring Deaf performers, and again fall outwith the scope of this research.

The research described in this article focuses on mainstream theatre productions which incorporate BSL interpreting by PIs. These kinds of production are still the majority of performances seen by Deaf audiences and are most often cited as being frustrating in that they can feel disjointed or lacking in creative cohesion. This article contributes to the movement to shift the performance industry to a more holistic and inclusive practice. It draws on my practice-based research with a theatre production to argue that working with the PI in a theatrical setting can be more effectively framed as a dramaturgically-driven activity than an interpreting task.

### **Dramaturgy and performance interpreting: a case study**

Working with classical texts in performance is a challenge for all those involved. For interpreters and translators, they present specific challenges whose solutions can often feel inadequate. Archaic vocabulary, obsolete concepts and political contexts foreign to the twenty-first century audience present significant issues for the translator and interpreter. This is compounded by the canonical positioning of Shakespeare and his peers in the Western world and the need to balance the source and target text against audience engagement. Whilst performers work for several weeks in a collaborative process with a creative team, the PI responsible for translating and performing the text often toils alone to create a performance text which is then performed with little or no rehearsal with the cast. But crucially, the transition from page to performance is filled with

journeys, ideas and ghost trails of avenues not pursued: these inform the final production and can also inform and help create the final translation and PI performance. Access to the rehearsal process is, therefore, of great importance.

The production this research discusses, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, presented a meaningful opportunity to interrogate the many issues raised when approaching a classical text in a performance setting whilst working collaboratively with a director, actors and three PIs. The research took as its central tenet, 'Don't let's ask what [classical text]... is for, but let's ask what goes on in it' (Barton, 2009, p.25). Throughout the following discussion, my research seeks to frame translation concerns as dramaturgical, rather than purely linguistic or cultural.

The production process was specifically designed to interrogate the notion that performance interpreting, rather than presenting challenges for a production, offers opportunities and possibilities for augmentation if viewed through a dramaturgical lens. Dramaturgy has varied and disparate meanings and this article draws on Proehl et al, who have defined it as 'that set of elements necessary to the working of a play at any moment in its passage from imagination to embodiment' (Proehl et al., 2012, p.20). I will question whether interpreting challenges in a performance are more meaningful when framed as dramaturgically-rooted.

*The True Chronicle History of Henry V, with his battle, fought at Agincourt in France, as it hath been Sundry Times played by The Right Honourable Lord Chamberlain His Men* by William Shakespeare (hereafter referred to as *Henry V*)<sup>1</sup> was produced by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) and Bard in the Botanic, and performed by postgraduate students in the Masters course Contemporary and Classical Text (MACCT) at the RCS. The production was conceived to afford equal space for the BSL interpretation throughout the rehearsal process

and in all five subsequent live performances. From rehearsal to performance, I took on the dual role of one of three PIs performing in the production as well as Director of Performance Interpreting (DoPI), a role only rarely included in creative teams. The production was directed by Dr Marc Silberschatz. It was funded by the RCS, with an Athenaeum Award, and took place at the RCS in early March 2018.

The performance was staged in a thrust<sup>2</sup> configuration, located in a pub with a minimal set; a small bar area positioned upstage left and a pool table in the mid-upstage area. The audience were seated loosely on three sides of the performance area at cabaret style tables which facilitated the director's ambition to create a social space which could include the spectators as variously members of the court, rank and file soldiers or drinkers in the tavern. Battle scenes were replaced with songs chosen by the ensemble and director.

### **Dramaturgical Principles guiding the DoPI**

To prepare for the production, I created a set of underlying principles to guide me throughout the production process. These were a mixture of aspirational principles and statements of intent which served as reminders of the research focus. These principles were pasted prominently into my script-book and became guiding tenets throughout the rehearsals and performances. They became my support structure for each scene and guidance for decisions taken on staging and intent. Although there were initially ten such principles, this article discusses how the production process drew on five.

#### *1. Meaning is paramount*

The sense that classical text language is frozen text and has a great deal of cultural weight can bring the interpreting process to a standstill so that translation

choices are adversely affected. In this production, the language was to be translated specifically with mindfulness of the great range and scope of BSL, rather than the shape or influence of the source language. In accordance with the director's vision, the interpretation was designed to be as open to the audience as possible with no convoluted or difficult to read language constructions, and with meaning as our prime motivation in every line and couplet. To that end, we supported our translations by working with each actor's understanding of what their character was communicating; we relied on the director's considerable understanding of the text, turned to each other for support and gathered all available video sources of Shakespeare as rendered by Deaf BSL using actors. The ambition was to avoid falling into the trap of 'museum Shakespeare' (Hartley, 2005, p.17) and to offer something that was vital, dynamic and rooted in the language of the BSL using community. There is a school of thought that Shakespeare is too difficult to be presented as interpreted work (Richardson, 2017). The project did not want to contribute to this belief but attempted to offer the whole audience an engaging and visually appealing experience.

One of the project's aims was that the BSL using audience should be able to access the story and themes of the play easily, thus allowing for an emotional engagement with the characters and their relationships. We were mindful of the intent of Shakespearean textual features such as blank verse and rhyming couplets and found it useful to analyse the latter, in terms of translation, as a dramaturgical rather than linguistic process. The intent of the couplet rather than the lexical content offers the translator more scope to work into a target language effectively. I worked through the script extracting every rhyming couplet and it became clear that in this production these were most often to be found at the end of scenes, spoken by characters as they were either leaving the stage or exhorting the audience to use their imagination to move the action to the next scene, for example; 'Now forth, Lord Constable and Princes all / And quickly bring us word of England's fall' (Act 3, Sc.4).



There is a sense of movement in these packages of language and often an encouragement that the audience should do, feel or think something and this was echoed in the BSL translation. Translation choices took into consideration the need for rhythm over rhyme, for energy over specific lexicon being presented.



*The rhythm of language.*  
Photo: Robert McFadzean.

Similarly, considering that blank verse is 'very often the vehicle for naturalistic speech' and that 'poetry does not necessarily have anything to do with verse' (Barton, 2009, p.46), the wider translation was based on finding dramaturgical meaning rather than rhyme, and offering that to the audience. The performance text created took this as its touchstone and crafted speeches, monologues and dialogue in the natural rhythm of BSL with the explicit intention of fully engaging the BSL using audience on an emotional level; to offer them 'a theatre which dances' (Barba, 2010, p.24).

## *2. Nobody should get eye strain watching us*

It has become clear to me working in the field that, the more the PI is separated or even ignored in the space, the more her presence adversely affects the whole audience

engagement. In many productions stage managers ‘block’ the interpreter into the space after the play has begun its run and are, necessarily, pragmatic in their approach given health and safety considerations. In the production of *Henry V*, I purposefully avoided this and worked to ensure that the PIs’ presence would feel natural, augment the scene, and be dramaturgically meaningful. By this I mean that the relationships between the characters and the PIs would support or reinforce the themes of the play, offer the audience something more about the characters, rather than simply be located in the least problematic health and safety position. In *Henry V* the cast and PIs worked together throughout the rehearsal period to feel comfortable with each other as performers, working through challenging scenes together to resolve dramaturgical questions and building a sense of ensemble between them.



*Finding relationships in the ensemble.  
Photo: Robert McFadzean.*

The PIs were never reliant on the cast for assisting them in their positioning, but instead, functioned as their fellow drinker in the tavern, their fellow officers in battle and their fellow performers on stage taking their own agency as performers in the space. For example, in Act 2, Scene 4, when Mistress Quickly describes the death of Falstaff, a simple decision was taken to support one PI’s instinct to comfort her which wove this kind of blocking into the

performance. No global choice was made as to which model of interpreting would be utilised throughout the play: each scene was interrogated to understand the rationale, the logic, the emotional impact and the additional information about the play brought by the PI's presence.

### *3. Translation challenges are shared problems*

Translation was a major consideration for this project. As previously described, the decision had been taken to avoid any attempt at a more 'Shakespearean' BSL, acknowledging that this would have required much more time and many more skilled collaborators to achieve. Instead, the PIs were asked to translate the text into modern BSL that would convey the pace, intensity of feeling and themes of the production. This did not mean that translation was reductive or devoid of challenge; with a text as complex, as old and as culturally iconic as *Henry V*, there were considerable linguistic and cultural difficulties to overcome. Specific translation challenges such as 'treason' and 'noble line' were discussed a great deal and were finally translated respectively as concepts of violence towards the crown and the concept of familial descendants framed within a physical posture that was positive and indicated high register language use. Working together to discuss the translation challenges enabled the PIs to feel confident in their performance of the translated text and gave them space to find depth in the relationships they created with other characters in performance. Minor performance moments between PIs and actors added depth to the production and offered the audience insight into the characters and their journeys—moments that were not language-based, such as the scene (described above) where the tavern PI comforts Mistress Quickly, the English court PI and Henry sharing a moment of relief after Agincourt, and the French court PI's indignation at Mountjoy's click of the fingers to summon her. These could only begin to emerge once the PIs had moved beyond the fear of translating 'incorrectly'.

4. *Our presence on stage will always be meaningful, make sense, and has no need to be justified except dramaturgically*

This principle was, in retrospect, the crux of the project. Throughout every rehearsal for every scene we asked questions: Why is there an interpreter in this scene? Who is she? What question does she ask? What effect on the audience is she having? In collaboration with the director, the PIs and the actors, each scene was carefully analysed in response to these questions. There is often a sense that integrating PIs into a performance is a problem; this project sought to move that to a more positive paradigm framed within a dramaturgical approach, and to look for ways that the presence of the PIs in the production could augment each scene. Once the need to justify the presence of a PI was removed from our creative process, this production found that it had three additional performers with whom to ask questions, offer the audience thoughts or challenges and to create images. For example, in Act 3, Scene 3 the English forces have defeated the French at Harfleur and King Henry issues a challenge to the Governor of the city: surrender or be responsible for the horrific consequences. The scene became the pivotal moment in Henry's character journey. It was presented with a darkened stage, a lone Henry in the middle of the space and a single spotlight on the actor. This kind of staging is generally considered highly problematic because the presence of the PI is feared to 'pull focus' from the main actor's performance. In this case, however, the director saw an opportunity to give the audience an additional insight into Henry's state of mind. While the actor presented the speech on the floor of the stage, the PI was placed on the pool table behind and lit from high on the lighting rig with a spotlight that allowed the BSL to be clearly read but with an additional, ominous shadowing.



*The evocative dramaturgy of Harfleur.*  
Photo: Robert McFadzean.

The direction given to the PI was to find ways to make the translation and performance as monstrous as possible (while true to the target language), a visual representation of Henry's horrific interior landscape. In this way, the PI and BSL were used to augment the scene, to offer the audience an insight into the heart of the character and the brink to which Henry had come.

If not, why, in a moment look to see  
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand  
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking  
daughters,  
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,  
And their most reverend heads dashed to the  
walls,  
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,  
Whiles the mad mothers with their howls  
confused  
Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry  
At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.

(Act 3, Scene 4).

The translation had to find an arc that echoed the text in shape and emotion, moving from disturbing to horrific in steps and leaps and ending with a breathlessness of anticipation, standing on the precipice of a gulf awaiting the Governor of Harflueur's reply. Placed behind and high above the actor, the PI looked far out into the audience painting images of the possible horror to come. Presenting the external and the internal character simultaneously, we utilised the presence of the PI as an augmentation of the scene and offered the audience what Barba describes as evocative dramaturgy, the 'intimate resonance with the spectator' (Barba, 2010. p.10).

*5. The register we use will always be appropriate for the field*

All too often, interpreters working on a performance find themselves on stage with no training and little creative support. When working on a theatre stage they can fall back on the one field that feels familiar—conference

interpreting. It is common to see interpreters in a performance space using a language register that is more appropriate to a conference than a creative endeavour. There is a need to balance this conference register with the very theatricalised language of performance which can feel divorced from the lived language of the Deaf Community. Most interpreters in the UK are generically trained and have experience of working across multiple fields and, with three PIs bringing over fifty years of experience to the production, there was a range of linguistic registers to draw on. We were able to consider the scene, the characters and the story as it was emerging to create a performance text that felt deep-rooted in the language of the Deaf Community. We constantly asked ourselves questions, and mined our understanding and knowledge of the Deaf Community to push us beyond superficial translations. This avoided the ethically troubling position of demanding that the BSL using audience stay in the position of feeling removed from the performance, insisting that they should 'appreciate the cultural achievements of the English speaking "host" society' (Turner and Pollitt, 2008). Besides the desire to engage the widest possible theatre audience, there was a tacit underpinning of respect and value of this specific community and its language.

### **The interpreter experience in the theatre**

Collaboration at this level between a director, cast and PIs is still rare in Scotland with the exception of the aforementioned companies. It is common for a production's ambition to integrate to fall foul of the stress imposed by the demands made on time and resources during the technical week: the PI often being moved further down a long list of priorities.

During the production process of *Henry V*, the integration of PIs as a dramaturgical feature became a logical extension of the overarching dramaturgy of the creative team. For example, questions around Henry's intent in a scene were considered both for the actor and the PI while songs were choreographed so that there was a high level

of visual engagement which offered the mood and feeling of the music. The presence of the interpreter was examined in each scene in terms of narrative, organic and evocative dramaturgy. As Snyder states, 'an interpretation is a synthesis of a translation, the performances, the lights, the staging, the sound and the audience' (2009. p.127). Taking this further and incorporating the presence and work of the PI into the overall dramaturgy gives a director the opportunity to deepen the interrogation of the text in performance.

Being in rehearsal from the first day allowed the PIs to see performances change day by day as the ensemble discovered the text and characters. This continued in all five performances with new insight and fresh discoveries happening throughout. The translated performance text followed a similar process with decisions made and changed based on the energy of each performance. With each new insight into character, text or relationship, the English performance text transformed and so, necessarily, did the BSL performance text. This level of access for PIs to the rehearsal room brought depth to the translation and performance text. Just as the spoken performance text was a living, breathing thing, so too was the BSL performance text. The idea that the PIs are on stage simply to provide access for the Deaf audience was contested throughout the production: many of the decisions—for example, on thrust configuration sight line challenges and on creating authentic relationships between performers on stage,—were made in relation to how the *whole* audience would engage with the performance and this, necessarily, applied to the PIs too.

As I have said, there is currently no formal specialist training in the UK for PIs: they generally create an ad-hoc, hybrid skill base which they then develop working in the industry. An interpreter trained generically who chooses to work as a PI has not only performance skills to acquire but also the technical theatre skills required to function appropriately in a production. Without formal training, this creates an unpredictable skill set across the industry. With funding from Creative Scotland there has



been an attempt to address this, with a collaboration between National Theatre of Scotland, Solar Bear, Birds of Paradise and SignArts. The project, Creative Licht, is a two-year programme of eight sessions which offers knowledge exchange opportunities for the performance industry and interpreting professionals with masterclasses for interpreters focusing on specific performance areas such as Voice, Body Awareness in performance and Textual Analysis (National Theatre of Scotland, 2019). At time of writing, this highly successful programme is coming to the end of its second year and discussions around its legacy are under way.

There is an ongoing debate on whether PIs should be employed when there are highly skilled and experienced BSL using actors and performers in the country as well as new graduates of the ground-breaking BA Performance in BSL and English at the RCS in Glasgow. Whilst this debate is a valid and necessary one, it would be reductive to frame it as a binary choice and it behoves us to consider a nuance that is too often ignored. It would be an assumption that all BSL using actors wish to be an onstage PI. It could be a rather convenient solution, however, for an industry which struggles to be more diverse in how it casts productions, but I argue that we should resist the urge to automatically categorise every BSL using performer as an interpreter. It risks stripping them of their autonomy as actors, of their agency and their right to take on more interesting character roles that challenge themselves, their audiences and an industry only beginning to inch its way towards genuinely diverse casting. Working with professional PIs as an additional performance discipline moves us into a more positive space in which a creative and collaborative conversation can take place.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my belief is that framing performance interpreting as a strand of a production's dramaturgy is a fruitful and effective approach which benefits the *whole* audience. It is a reality in twenty-first century Scotland

that theatres are expected to offer performances that BSL users can access. As audiences have become more informed and more engaged with performance, they expect greater quality and a more fulfilling experience: it is the responsibility of both the interpreting and performance industry to respond to those expectations.

Where a director considers the presence of a PI in the performance space as something to deal with on a purely functional level, the dramaturgy of the piece may be compromised. The practice-based research outcome from *Henry V* shows that, if we understand the PI as a dramaturgical agent, productions benefit from increased creative opportunities. I therefore recommend that PIs are present in the rehearsal room as members of the cast and work as part of the ensemble to create the performance text. As I have shown, by absorbing the text and the actor's journey with the text, the PI can move beyond the fear of translating incorrectly and discover those performance moments that are not language-based but offer the whole audience insight into the characters and their journeys.

Alternative staging configurations, such as thrust, do not necessarily exclude the integration of PIs as has been traditionally thought. Given that sight lines become an important consideration for everyone in that kind of performance space, a heightened awareness of the audience is the norm for the whole ensemble, including the PIs. It may be that employing more than the traditional one or two PIs provides solutions and creative opportunities in such situations. The presence of PIs can be incorporated organically into the earliest design stages in order to ensure as much creative space to work with as may be required later in the rehearsal process. What I have also shown in this article is that the role of DoPI is a pivotal support. I argue that including a DoPI as a specialist role in a production, similar to a Movement Director or Lighting Designer, is an important dramaturgical approach to adopt in all productions that strive for a diverse audience. Bringing a specialist skill

that is both functional and creative, the DoPI offers vital contributions to finding dramaturgical opportunities.

This practice-based research on *Henry V* demonstrates that both the performers' and PIs' dramaturgical sensibility is paramount. To leave the dramaturgy of the PI unwoven risks compromising the delicate and hard-won architecture that makes a successful and enjoyable production for all audiences.

## Notes

1. The production was an edited version of Shakespeare's *Henry V* (most Shakespeare productions are edited versions of the plays in my experience) and it included text from *Henry IV Part One* and *Henry IV Part Two* to provide context to the past relationships of the characters (particularly King Henry's relationship to Bardolph, Pistol, Nym, Hostess Quickly and Falstaff). Staged as a ceilidh play, it also featured eight traditional / folk songs originating from the various cultural contexts of the performers involved. (Note by Dr. Marc Silberschatz). [↑](#)

2. Thrust configuration consists of a stage which protrudes into the auditorium so the audience is on three sides. [↑](#)

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## About the author

Catherine King has been interpreting for 25 years and is a first year PhD student at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Catherine's first performance interpreting job was a pantomime 21 years ago whilst still a trainee interpreter. This was the first pantomime she had ever seen. Since then she has worked extensively in the Scottish performing arts industry and is one of the partners on the Creative Scotland funded project, Creative Light. Catherine works closely with the National Theatre of Scotland, The Tron Theatre and Theatre Gu Leor and many others and is known for her work interpreting stand-up comedy.