

## Preface

It is now common practice for literary texts to be taught in translation at universities. The plays of Chekhov are taught not only by Russian scholars but also by academics trained in such disciplines as English who have little or no knowledge of the Russian language. Understandably, many scholars who are Russian language experts question this practice and imply that critical insight into the works of a writer such as Chekhov can be achieved only by those who have a command of the Russian language. While I have some sympathy for this view, I believe that it is flawed because it fails to take into account the legitimate aims and objectives of disciplines other than the discipline of Russian language and literature.

Apart from his short stories Chekhov wrote plays and these latter works clearly become the legitimate object of investigation by scholars such as myself who teach in the discipline of Drama and Theatre Studies. Having published a translation of Racine's only comedy, *Les Plaideurs*,<sup>1</sup> and written about the nature and process of translation,<sup>2</sup> I realise that a knowledge of the language of the source text is the *sine qua non* of translation. It is true that knowledge of Russian would have been useful to me when writing about Chekhov, as it would have allowed me to read the considerable amount of Russian scholarly work on Chekhov that has not yet been translated into English. However, knowledge of the Russian language is *not* the *sine qua non* of a Theatre Studies analysis of this playwright.

It is the normal function of translation experts such as Ronald Hingley to convert Russian source texts into English target texts. These English versions of the plays then become the source texts used by critics writing about how Chekhov's plays function as pieces of drama and theatre. Similarly, directors of Chekhov's plays in the English-speaking theatre use translations as source texts which they transform into the target texts of theatrical production. Drama and Theatre Studies departments nearly always rely on translations of playtexts and do not require either the teachers or students to have a knowledge of the original language in which the plays were written. If this were not the case, then a course on Modern European Drama and Theatre would require a knowledge of Swedish (Strindberg), Norwegian (Ibsen), German (Brecht), French (Ionesco), Spanish (Lorca), and Russian (Chekhov).

Given that the use of translations for the purpose of critical analysis is normal practice in the discipline of Drama and Theatre Studies, the question of which translation to use remains. Although every translator of Chekhov's plays has a mastery of the Russian language, the translations that they produce vary considerably. Not surprisingly, American translators tend to produce target texts that sound natural when performed by American actors, while English

translators such as Ronald Hingley tend to produce target texts that have a noticeably British quality about them. It is quite common for individual directors to commission new translations, or to adapt existing translations, to make them sound more natural and intelligible to their target audience. Provided that the translations being considered are accurate ones, the choice of which one to use in performance becomes a question of personal taste.

I have chosen to use Ronald Hingley's translations in the Oxford University Press edition of Chekhov's works for a number of reasons. In the first place, the OUP edition is the most recent English translation of Chekhov's works to include both the short stories and the plays, all of which I refer to in this study. In addition, Hingley includes important variants and early draft versions of some of the plays that I also wished to refer to in my analysis. Forsås–Scott's notes on *The Cherry Orchard* include laudatory comments about Volume 3 of Hingley's *Oxford Chekhov* translation. Her observations apply with equal validity to the other collections of plays in *The Oxford Chekhov* series:

Hingley's volume contains a general introduction, but particularly useful are the appendices which accompany each of the plays. In these the translator has gathered Chekhov's comments on the plays, arranging the material under headings such as 'The composition', 'The text', and 'Some further comments by Chekhov'. In Hingley's translation are also included notes on words and phrases, details about the pronunciation of Russian names, and a bibliography.<sup>3</sup>

Hingley's translation is recognised as being accurate, even though it has been criticised by some scholars for being too British in tone. It is perhaps worth noting that, while there will never be general agreement about which English translation is the best, Hingley's version is highly regarded by a number of scholars both for his accuracy and, significantly for my purpose, for his performability. As Lauren Leighton notes in his review of English translations of Chekhov:

Among modern translations of Chekhov's plays Bristow finds ... that only Tyrone Guthrie's translation done with Leonid Kipnis and Ronald Hingley's Oxford translations serve performance and diction sufficiently well to be recommended.<sup>4</sup>

The question of the transliteration of Russian names is an important one for any translator. In the 1999 *Modern Drama* special issue on Chekhov, the editor, Ralph Lindheim, ensured that there was an overall consistency among the various essays by adopting clear principles of transliteration:

Throughout these essays on Chekhov I have employed, whenever possible, a modified version of the Library of Congress transliteration schemes that is similar to the system developed by Frank Whitfield for his edition of D. S. Mirsky's *A*

*History of Russian Literature*, which was originally published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1949.<sup>5</sup>

The editors of *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov* take an altogether different approach from Lindheim. In their Editorial Notes, Gottlieb and Allain state that:

The editors took the decision *not* to standardize the various systems of transliteration used by contributors from Russia, from the United States, France, the Irish Republic and the UK. In the case of this volume, where there are different scholarly approaches, varied angles, emphases and priorities, one contributor may need one of the four systems of transliteration (American Library of Congress Systems, I, II, III, IV) while another may require either a different system — or none at all, as in the case of chapters 9 and 11, for instance.<sup>6</sup>

Significantly, the chapters referred to were written by two theatre practitioners: the director Trevor Nunn and the actor Ian McKellen. They are less interested in the niceties of translation than in problems involved in interpreting Chekhov for the stage.

In my own study I have not felt the need to utilise any specific system of transliteration. I have chosen particular spellings of Russian names that are generally regarded as acceptable versions. For example, 'Stanislavski' and 'Chekhov' are used throughout my text. Whenever I have quoted from a critic I have followed the practice of Gottlieb and Allain who 'left each contributor free to choose the transliteration system that suits him or her, rather than enforce consistency of any one system.'<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the reader may often find variant versions of names appearing in quotations — 'Stanislavsky' and 'Tchekoff' are two examples. The variants should cause no problem for the reader.

Hingley has taken the unusual course of anglicising the Russian names of the characters. Whenever it seemed necessary to avoid confusion, I have inserted in brackets the names used by Hingley in quotations from critical works which use alternative Russian names — for example, 'Konstantin [Treplev]'. Similarly, wherever there is a possibility of confusion when quoting from Hingley's translation, I have inserted in brackets the Russian version of each name — for example, 'Helen [Yeliena]'.

While I have employed no fixed system of transliteration, I have attempted to ensure that readers are not confused by the complexity of Russian names and titles. This flexible approach may not seem rigorous enough to some scholars but we should keep in mind Michael Frayn's comment on transliteration that 'Rigidity can in any case produce nonsense'.<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Borny, G., *Petty Sessions*, a verse translation of Racine's *Les Plaideurs*, University of New England Press, Armidale, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Borny, G., 'Appropriate Mis/Appropriations: Translating Racine's *Les Plaideurs*', in *Dis/Orientations Conference Proceedings*, Australasian Drama Studies Association, Centre for Drama and Theatre Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 12–19.

<sup>3</sup> Forsås-Scott, H., *The Cherry Orchard: York Notes*, Longman York Press, Beirut, 1983, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Leighton, L. G., 'Chekhov in English', in Clyman, T. W., *A Chekhov Companion*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1985, p. 304.

<sup>5</sup> Lindheim, R., 'A Note on the Transliteration of Russian Names, Words, and Titles', *Modern Drama*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 1999, p. 470.

<sup>6</sup> Gottlieb, V. and Allain, P., 'Editorial Notes', *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. xxvi.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Frayn, M., 'A Note on the Translation' in Frayn, M, trans., *Chekhov Plays*, Methuen, London, 1991, p. 358.