Fresh Eyes

Artists Rep’s Fresh Eyes program brings ‘civilians’ into the rehearsal process. On selected productions each season, we invite writers from diverse backgrounds to join us for a few rehearsals, and then share their observations of the process and the play on the website. We hope the distinctive perspectives of our guests will illuminate the inner workings of a production, and enrich the experience for our audiences and community at large.

Our Fresh Eyes for Indecent is Matthew Minicucci an accomplished writer and lecturer. Matthew is a poet and teacher. His most recent collection, Small Gods (New Issues), won the 2019 Stafford/Hall Oregon Book Award in Poetry. He’s currently the Emerging Writer/Teacher Fellow in the English Department at Linfield College. Matt has previously observed our productions Magellanica and Everybody.

The Things We Bear
by Matthew Minicucci

Translation is an interesting word. So interesting, in fact, to this poet and former classicist that I made it the title of my first book. If we parse it, right down the middle, we find roots in two Greek words: trans, meaning “across,” and latus, which is the supine form of ferro, “to carry or bear.” Thus, all translation is just the act of carrying something across from one place to another. It’s is an activity we often consider an intellectual one, and for good reason, but here in its humble roots, we can almost imagine the physicality and struggle that the word emerges from: so many open suitcases, filled with the dust of ages; an immigrant (from the Latin emigrare, “to move away”) carrying something as heavy and as dear as the language one’s parents spoke to them, softly, as they sang them to bed.

Paula Vogel’s 2015 play, Indecent, considers translation in a way I’ve never before seen written for the stage. It’s a play within a play while also being about a play. I was drawn to this project because Vogel’s text focuses on the many lives of poet Sholom Asch’s 1906 Yiddish play The God of Vengeance, which has a successful run in both Europe and New York, before a translated version, opening at the Apollo Theatre on West 42nd Street in 1923, was quickly shut down and met with obscenity charges for the entirety of the cast, producers, and the owner of theatre. It’s that act of translation, of carrying the Yiddish to the English, that seems to undo so many good things. Though, perhaps, the answer to why this happens is more complicated than that.

How all of this happens is best left to Vogel’s text, Josh Hecht’s direction, and this brilliant group of actors. But just as interesting to me is how translation plays into the entirety of the drama that unfolds. Language is a challenge in this production, both in terms of the actors dealing with a multiplicity of versions and staging locations for the play and dealing with a Jewish immigrant story that parallels the rise of anti-Semitism in both Europe and America leading up and into World War II. Asch’s play, in the original Yiddish, begins life as a controversial one to the people around him, but ends up as a hit. The translated version takes a successful play and turns it into a controversial court case. How and why could something as simple as translation have had such a devastating effect?

A question I think worth asking is: what does a translated text bring with it? And further: what does it leave behind? This is a question not unfamiliar to any student of languages, or anyone at all who has heard, read, or conversed in a language not their own. Vogel’s notes on the text make clear that all conversation in a character’s native language (whatever that language might be) should be in perfect English, while any conversation in a second or third language should be...
performed with an accent. An accent, of course, is only an accent to someone outside the cultural boundaries of a language, however we might define them. It’s a marker of difference; a stranger in a strange land.

Every strange land is filled with its own expectations, its own languages, and its own mythologies and legends; ones that have to be reckoned with by audiences watching the English translation of The God of Vengeance.

Asch, in an open letter defending The God of Vengeance in March 1923 said, “[I] was not concerned whether or not he wrote a moral or immoral play. What I wanted to write was an artistic play, and a true one.” In Vogel’s playtext, Peretz, Asch’s mentor in Warsaw, asks him “who is your audience?” In this case, the answer to that question is you, dear playgoer. It’s you who must juggle the morality of presenting imperfect characters in a world that already sees far too many false or imagined imperfections. For Asch, a flawed character made perfect sense, as all people are complicated. In the real world, fathers reject their daughters, reject their choices, reject their religion even. In the real world, people fall in love with other people of the same sex. Is that an imperfection? Or is that, in fact, a perfect representation of just how unique and varied we all are?

For each play I’ve had the fortune of writing a Fresh Eyes article about, I generally come in to the first read-through thinking about one thing: what question is the play asking? Everything that happens (in the rehearsal process, tech week, previews, etc.) is all work towards refining and defining that question. I’d like to revise that just a bit for this play. I’d like to pose a question: what question is the play asking you? Remember: translation is unmoored without both a source material and a language to embrace it — a play and a new nightly audience to experience it. Just think: a language for only one person. How would we even know of it? Hear of it? There must always be two points, equally important, on the line; two places words are borne to and from, no matter how vast or difficult the distance across might be.

To read more of Matthew’s observations visit our show page.

A Language With Chutzpah: Yiddish And American Culture

The cultural reach of the Yiddish language is vast. Listen to Ilan Stavans and Josh Lambert, co-editors of the book, “How Yiddish Changed America and How America Changed Yiddish,” discuss the comeback of Yiddish in America.