

Director as Translator: The Case of Latvian Director Oļģerts Kroders

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Abstract: The article aims to tackle the creative work of the eminent Latvian stage director Oļģerts Kroders (1921–2012). Kroders, as a representative of the psychological theatre, was one of the first in Soviet Latvia who dared to break with the canon of socialist realism and portrayed the characters of literary classics on the stage without heroic overtones. The cornerstone of his creative work was a detailed approach to the literary source text, adapting it to the intended concept of the production. He even used to adjust the interpretation of the text to the potential of a particular actor in a particular role. The article deals with text interpretation in two productions of Alexander Ostrovsky's play "Without a Dowry", translated by the director himself and adapted for two different productions. The article demonstrates that due to the director's careful interpretation the spoken text is precisely integrated into the performance.

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The article aims to analyse the work of the eminent Latvian stage director Oļģerts Kroders (1921–2012), who was the leading representative of the psychological approach in Latvian theatre. Kroders used to translate plays from Russian and English into Latvian, simultaneously adapting texts for the purposes of staging. Thus, Kroders combined the translation and text interpretation that paved the way to new stage versions of the classical drama. The article argues that Kroders' approach to the literary text while translating Alexander Ostrovsky's play "Without a Dowry" ("Бесприданница") from Russian into Latvian, and adapting the text for each of the different productions of the play, was an innovation in the Soviet theatre of the 1980s. The research is based on the ideas of hermeneutic scholars, who argue about the openness of the literary text as a structure and the vastness of context, as well as on theatre semiotics, which allows comparing the different and complex languages and sign systems present in literature and theatre.

Among Latvian theatre directors, Kroders had the longest professional career. He worked at various professional theatres in Latvia for 53 years, and received several national and international awards. The main line in the creative activity of Kroders is marked by the stage interpretations of classical drama and prose. About a half of his 134 productions are based on literary works that due to their impor-



"Without a Dowry" at the Liepaja Theatre (1981). Knurov—Mārtiņš Vilsons; Vozhevatov—Juris Bartkevičs. Photo from the archive of the Liepaja Theatre.



"Without a Dowry" at the Valmiera Drama Theatre (2012). Knurov—Agris Masēns; Vozhevatov—Krišjānis Salmiņš. Photo by Matīss Markovskis from the archive of the Valmiera Drama Theatre.

tance can be regarded as classics, a stable cultural value. Kroders staged some of the classical pieces several times at different theatres with different actors and in various historical and social environments¹. All these productions raise similar themes: they deal with the disharmony between morals and power; they tackle problems of individual's spiritual freedom; they look for a psychological motivation of action within existentially important moments of choice. However, keeping the same dominant motive, the interpretation of characters is rooted in the mood of a specific period.

The personality of Kroders was formed in the circles of intelligentsia of the independent Republic of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as his early acquaintance with different forms of stage art that provided him with an understanding of theatre, literature, and other cultural values (Kroders 1993). His deportation to Siberia in 1941 was a traumatic physical and mental experience that stimulated his perception of theatre as a spiritual asylum. However, he always actively kept abreast of contemporary social life, with deep interest and emotional perception of reality that had a substantial impact on his creative activities. During the last years of his exile, Kroders started autodidactic studies of theatre theories, and staged his first productions with the participation of his co-deportees and local people. After returning to Latvia in 1956, he worked unofficially as an assistant to the great Latvian director Eduards Smiļģis at the Daile (Arts) Theatre in Riga for two years. In 1959, Kroders took the position of a director at the Liepaja Theatre. A few years later, in 1963/64, Kroders attended the advanced courses of stage direction, provided by the Lunacharsky State Institute of Theatre Arts (GITIS) in Moscow. After studies in Moscow, he worked at the Valmiera Drama Theatre, and later returned to the Liepaja Theatre for the period between 1974 and 1990 as the main stage director. Only in the 1990s, when Latvia regained independence, did Kroders finally have the opportunity to work in Riga, since former deportees had not been allowed to work in the capital after their return. During his last creative period (2001–2012), Kroders once again worked and lived in Valmiera.

Kroders' approach to the work of the director incorporates a continuous search for a new theatre language and constant innovations. His early productions were influenced by Peter Brook, Anatoly Efros and Jerzy Grotowski. Kroders was the first Latvian director to stage a production without a curtain, in which the action takes place on the proscenium (1959). He was one of the first directors in the Union of

1 Especially Shakespeare's tragedy "Hamlet", which Kroders staged four times (1972, 1984, 1997, 2008), as well as dramas by Friedrich Schiller, Anton Chekhov, Alexander Ostrovsky, Ferdinand Bruckner, and other well-known authors.

Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) to democratize Shakespeare's protagonists and make them contemporary (1966), as well as the first to apply postmodernist aesthetics in Latvian theatre while staging a classical play ("The Seagull" by Anton Chekhov, 1987, Liepaja Theatre). Kroders admitted the importance of the literary source and the spoken word in a production, and paid scrupulous attention to the quality of the text. Work with the literary text was a fundamental element of Kroders' concept in all of his productions. By adapting the text to the psychology of each character and the potential of a particular actor—body language, emotional amplitude, and natural acting skills, the director created a psychologically motivated development of action. In the rehearsal period, Kroders always worked carefully with the text of the play, adapting it to his vision, and often combining the work of a translator and a dramatist. Kroders avoided deconstruction of the original text; he respected the author and maintained the literary qualities of the source text, at the same time recontextualizing the main ideas in a contemporary environment. His attitude towards drama material is marked by three different approaches to the creation of the production text. The first one is the adaptation of an already translated play for a particular production. The second approach refers to the creation of the stage version of novels, transforming the prose text into performance. The third approach means the translation of the play was done by the director himself. This article examines an example of the third type. These approaches differ in detail and aim at a single goal—the exact message of the performance.

Why should a stage director himself translate a play if the quality of the original text was sufficient as rendered by professional translators or writers to create a congenial translation into Latvian? The translation theorist and scholar of comparative literature Susan Bassnett admitted the difference between drama translation "for pages" and "for stages" as the written text in the performance is only a part of a larger complex of sign systems, including paralinguistic² and kinesic³ signs, the translation for reading is *a priori* incomplete, containing a concealed gestic text:

And whereas Stanislavski or Brecht would have assumed that the responsibility for decoding the gestic text lay with the performers, the assumption in the translating process is that this respon-

2 Paralinguistic signs are the part of communication outside of the words themselves—the volume, speed, intonation of a voice along with gestures and other non-verbal cues.

3 Body language.

sibility can be assumed by the translator sitting at the desk and imagining the performance dimension. (Bassnett 1991, 3)

Although the difference between the text for reading and the text for staging is acknowledged, Bassnett does not mention a very important subject—the director’s vision. Since the beginning of the 20th century, as the scenic interpreter, the director is a demiurge of performance, while the dramatist is the author of the play. The concept, genre and style of the production, even the function of the spoken text, all depend on the director. Kroders considered that

[. . .] without the director and actor, the play is literature. It can be picked up and read, just like a novel or a book of poetry. In the theatre, something completely different is created on the basis of the play—a production. [. . .] The performance becomes so meaningful and unique in the artistic composition, that the creation of it is unthinkable without the director’s leading role. [. . .] Theatre is actually a conversation, where the spectator has an internal dialogue with the Stage.⁴ [My emphasis—V. L.]

This idea relates to what is accepted in hermeneutics.

One partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning. [. . .] It is like a real conversation in that the common subject matter is what binds the two partners, the text and the interpreter, to each other. When a translator interprets a conversation, he can make mutual understanding possible only if he participates in the subject under discussion; so also in relation to a text it is indispensable that the interpreter participate in its meaning. (Gadamer 2013, 405, 406)

For Gadamer, a work of art is a form of knowledge that can be interpreted as text, where the interaction between the artwork and the audience results in self-acquaintance and self-comprehension. This process is accompanied by the confrontation and tension between how the work of art is perceived both in the past and the present, as well as between the artwork and the audience (Gadamer 2013, 88–90). According to Kroders, the task of the stage director consists of the following steps: firstly, decoding the author’s text; secondly, adapting this text to the director’s vision; thirdly, achieving the best possible interpretation of the director’s perspective for the audience. Thus, the work of each and every stage director with the

4 Oļģerts Kroders, interview by Vesma Lēvalde, 2011. Recording kept in personal archives of the author.

text is a creative activity, which starts with identifying the meaning created by the author, the comprehension of it, followed by a new, individual interpretation in order to uncover the text to the audience.

The first play translated and staged by Kroders at the Liepaja Theatre (1962) was “The Little Foxes” by the American dramatist Lillian Hellmann. Later, in 1968, Kroders translated and was preparing to stage at the Valmiera Drama Theatre the script of the movie “Youthful Sinners” (“*Les tricheurs*”) by the French film director and screenwriter Marcel Carné, to address young audiences who could identify with Carné’s protagonists, “rejecting the austerity and discipline of the previous generation” (Travers 2002). Unfortunately this plan was stopped by the theatre management and replaced with a Soviet play without any explanation.⁵ At the end of the 1970s, Kroders returned to the Liepaja Theatre as the main director and spent several years translating the famous play “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?” written by the American playwright, absurdist Edward Albee. He entrusted the production of the play to the young and innovative stage director Nauris Klētnieks in 1980.⁶ The motivation to translate the aforementioned western sources into Latvian came from an acute lack of high-quality world drama on the stages of Soviet Latvia and Kroders’ personal ambition to enrich a theatre repertoire dominated by low-quality and Soviet ideology-based plays. It was difficult to put on Western plays due to the censorship, but there was no obstacle to staging Russian classics. Clever interpretation of classical texts allowed an interpretation of psychologically refined and contradictory characters that differed from those portrayed in the socialist realist plays.

The Russian classic Alexander Ostrovsky (1823–1886), often called “the Russian Shakespeare” in Russian literary history, is one of the authors whose play “Without a Dowry” was staged by Kroders twice—in 1982 and 2012. Spoken texts of the two productions were different with respect to detail as well as in their message. Kroders translated the play specifically for his own 1982 production at the Liepaja Theatre. During the translation process, the language was adapted to the character and specific features of the actor or actress playing it in the particular production. Subsequently, the spoken text was intentionally transformed according to the intended *mise-en-scène* and adapted to the director’s vision.

Kroders’ translation differs from the previous translations of the play in its modern and stylistically pure Latvian language⁷. While translating the play, the

5 Rihards Rudāks, interview by Vesma Lēvalde, 2016. Recording kept in personal archives of the author.

6 Dzintra Klētniece, interview by Vesma Lēvalde, 2015. Transcript kept in personal archives of the author.

7 A previous translation was made in 1948, and the language used in it was outdated, literal and cumbersome.

director tried to adapt every single word and phrase to the Latvian language, to modify the syntax and the word order according to the rules of the Latvian language, as well as to adapt semantically all Russian expressions and phraseology to avoid literal translation. Thus, the text became more emotionally expressive, facilitating the audience's perception of the idea, and creating a subtle linkage, even a space of mutual understanding between the stage and the audience.

The content of the play "Without a Dowry" tells about Russian society of the late 1870s. In the play, the audience encounters a young woman Larisa, the main character, at the most critical moment of her life. Passions have already burned out, hope replaced by disappointment hundreds of times. Larisa decides to marry the first man who would approach her, and this happens to be Karandyshev. The return of Paratov, her former lover, provides the last seduction, a deceitful call for happiness, followed by her personal crisis and moral breakdown. Larisa feels humiliated, betrayed and compromised. The millionaire Knurov, Larisa's childhood friend, and a successful merchant, Vozhevatov, discuss her position between themselves; they end up tossing a coin to decide who will be lucky enough to take her on to a romantic trip to Paris. Knurov wins while a drunken Karandyshev appears and implores Larisa to return home. Full of desperation, he draws a pistol and shoots her.

The production of "Without a Dowry" staged by Kroders in 1982 at the Liepaja Theatre is considered one of the best productions in Kroders' career. Critics wrote that "the interpretation breaks away from the usual interpretation of this work rooted in theatre tradition, namely, the division of characters into "wolves and sheep; those, who pick up the fruit of life, on the one hand, and their victims, on the other" (Čakare 1983, 111). Kroders saw the events differently: he examined human nature as subject to the impact of the immoral, power-based and betrayal-based system that was corrupting everyone. The most striking example is the interpretation of Larisa⁸, traditionally portrayed as the victim of immoral, cruel and greedy people, with her spiritual superiority being her only value. In Kroders' interpretation, Larisa is trying to find her place in society under the rule of power and false moral principles. The director focused on Larisa's feelings, analyzed her personality, and made the audience realize that Larisa is a person unable to reconcile. The concept of the first production of "Without a Dowry" and the interpretation of Larisa's character reflected the main theme of Kroders' creative work in the 1970s and the early 1980s—the protagonist is forced either to submit to a cruel and immoral sys-

8 Played by Indra Briķe.

tem or die⁹. In Kroders' version, Larisa intentionally defies Karandyshev, who has the gun in his hands. It is essentially suicide. This interpretation is emphasized in the final words of Larisa's death scene. Kroders describes the fatal choice—"to succumb to perversion or to commit suicide" (Freinberga 1996, 181). The director has omitted the part of Larisa's text that sounds like the farewell of an all-forgiving victim¹⁰. In Kroders' version, Larisa's last words are: "No one is to blame. I did it [myself]."¹¹ The intonation is calm, even slightly ironic. Larisa realizes the paradoxical situation—the gunshot released her from the submission to a system completely ruled by power and influence, revealing that the price of recovery of one's dignity and self-estimation is death. Only death allows moral resurrection.

As for Karandyshev, Kroders portrayed this character differently compared to earlier productions. Traditionally, in Soviet theatre, Karandyshev used to be a personification of the tragic fate of a "little man", thus bringing his suffering and despair to the point of absurdity. In Kroders' version, this miserable man is no less power-hungry than the others. On the contrary, his morbid ambition combines with small-mindedness and meanness. He kills Larisa realizing that his newly acquired "property" is slipping out of his hands. He is miserable and therefore deserves Larisa's irony instead of honour for her disengagement. Kroders also emphasized the miserable nature of Karandyshev in a tiny nuance of the linguistic text, namely, translating the name of the place where Karandyshev plans to stand for elections—Zabolotyē—literally as "Over-the-Swamp", providing the connotation of a place in the middle of nowhere, far from civilization, in a swamp. In the conversation between Larisa and Ogudalova this location sounds like the place where one might serve a sentence. Karandyshev appears as a caricature of power; meanwhile the embodiment of power is Knurov¹²—a powerful and charismatic personality taking everything he wants without any moral judgement. The dominance of power in this production is also revealed in the scene where Knurov tries to convince Vozhevatov¹³

9 First of all, Shakespeare's "Hamlet" which became a cornerstone in the series of creative manifestos for Kroders, a play to which he returned several times, creating a new version every dozen years. For further reading, cf. Lēvalde 2016.

10 Larisa (gradually weakening voice): No, not, why ... Let have fun to whom it is cheerful ... I don't want to disturb anybody! Live, live! You should live, and I should ... die ... I don't complain of anybody... I don't take offence ... All of you are good people ... All of you ... I love. (Sends a kiss)

11 My translation—V. L.

12 Played by Mārtiņš Vilsons.

13 Played by Juris Bartkevičs.

not to stand in the way regarding his plan to make Larisa his lover. During the dialogue, Vozhevatov takes a coin out of his pocket and offers to play a game where Larisa is the prize, yet he loses. The actor interprets this moment as emotionally thrilling to Vozhevatov, revealing his internal battle between the desire to protect Larisa and the submission to “merchant’s honour”—following business principles without involving any feelings even in a questionable deal: “Yours. Well. Maybe it’s even better...”

One of the most complicated roles in Ostrovsky’s play is Paratov. It is not easy for an actor to embody his superiority over the merchants and his power over Larisa. In Kroders’ version, he was neither a malicious pragmatist nor a spendthrift. Played by a very young and handsome actor, Aigars Birznieks, Paratov appeared as a latitudinarian, young man of a wide scope and the ability to capture the right moment. For Paratov, egoism is as natural as the ability to ignore disturbing facts. His words in conversation with Ogudalova sound like a practical credo of life: “Aunty, we lose in one place, win in another: this is how we live.” The original text contains another nuance¹⁴—“this is our story”—keeping the focus on the particular story of lost fortune and marriage. The relationship between Larisa and Paratov is not a sentimental romance; it is rather a battle between two equal and proud characters.

With minor stylistic changes, Kroders used the same text in 2012, when he staged the play at the Valmiera Drama Theatre. In the 2012 production, Kroders again referred to several important themes—the resistance to the system and betrayal as an established norm of the system. This time the accents were put differently, determined by the different period in which the play was staged. According to the American scholar Lawrence Venuti:

The foreign text is not only de-contextualized, but re-contextualized insofar as translating rewrites it in terms that are intelligible and interesting to receptors, situating it in different language use, in different cultural values, in different literary traditions, in different social institutions, and often in a different historical moment. (Venuti 2009, 162) [My emphasis—V. L.]

Power is replaced by money as the strongest motivating force. And Larisa has become a more contradictory character. This production of “Without a Dowry” does not show strong personalities acting as the driving force of the play. Rather, it calls to mind the interpretation of the last production of “Hamlet” by Kroders in 2008

14 *На одном потеряем, на другом выиграем, тетенька; вот наше дело какое.*

where Claudius was an absolute non-entity, seeing the throne primarily as a guarantee of luxurious life. Like Larisa, Hamlet was a young person trying to find his place in a society ruled by money and the lack of moral principles. These features, inspired by 21st century reality, were reflected in changes of the literary text. For instance, in the Valmiera Theatre production, the same dialogue between Knurov¹⁵ and Vozhevatov¹⁶ sounds terse and business-like. Vozhevatov does not face an emotional dilemma; his betrayal of Larisa seems to be a self-evident deal: “Yours. It means I will travel alone to Paris. Though, I haven’t lost much: at least it will be less expensive.”

The last production of “Without a Dowry” by Kroders portrayed Knurov and Vozhevatov as equals. Unlike other characters, their games and intrigues are not about survival but the quality of life (Čakare 2012). This is what makes the 2012 production of Ostrovsky’s play different from the previous one. The aspiration for power is emphasised in the context of the 1980s. The 21st century production tells about the dominance of money in the value system of society. In both cases, the dissonance between morals and power is emphasised. Nevertheless, the actors in the 2012 production bring in different nuances to the characters. In the new production, Larisa seems more demoralised. The actress Ieva Puķe plays Larisa not as a victim driven into a corner but as a mature woman unable to resist the temptations of passion and riches. Possibly, this is the reason why the final scene of the latest production seems stilted in comparison to the production of the 1980s. However, both productions of Ostrovsky’s play staged by Kroders precisely reflect their time, the 1980s and 2012, respectively. The spoken text is precisely integrated into the performance text¹⁷, taking into consideration the contexts deliberately accentuated by the director.

Conclusions

Kroders treats the drama text as a source for interpretation and considers the work of the director as an original creation, providing a new, individual sense to the particular production.

Self-made translations of the play by the director allow the written source (or drama text) to be contextualised according to the director’s vision and the intended

15 Played by Agris Māsēns.

16 Played by Krišjānis Salmiņš.

17 PT is the relationship of all the signifying systems used in performance, whose arrangement and interaction constitute the mise-ne-scene (Pavis 1998, 261).

portrayal of the characters, while emphasising and expressing the director's perception of the time and society in which the staging was created. By adapting the text to the planned cast and the director's vision during the translation process, the director achieves more precise compliance of the spoken text to the performance as a synthetic artwork, which includes other elements of the production and affects the audience during a particular situation in the performance.

Ostrovsky's play "Without a Dowry", staged by Kroders in 1982, reveals Larisa as a contradictory personality in an immoral system with machinery of power that cannot be ignored. Kroders showed the fatal choice of the protagonist which makes her either fall in line with the immoral system or die and be morally resurrected.

In the production of "Without a Dowry" staged in 2012, Kroders' changes to the literary text were adapted to the psychological nuances of the characters. The narrative was re-contextualised in a different time frame aimed towards the dominating desire for money, as opposed to the influence that was attributed to the role of power in the 1980s.

Kroders' method of adapting the interpretation of the text to the potential of a particular actor and their understanding of the character achieved an emotionally effective psychological expression of the characters, extending the stylistic framework of mainstream interpretations of the classics.

Kroders' thinking in stage language crosses the borders of the drama text, creating new and contemporary artworks, and paving the path to an approach which is one of the most important trends in Latvian theatre today.

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Lavastaja kui tõlkija: läti lavastaja Oļģerts Kroders

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Märksõnad: tõlkimine, tekst, tõlgendamine, psühholoogiline teater, Oļģerts Kroders, Aleksandr Ostrovski

Artikkel käsitleb väljapaistva läti teatrilavastaja Oļģerts Krodersi (1921–2012) loomingut. Psühholoogilise teatri esindaja Kroders oli üks esimesi lavastajaid Nõukogude Lätis, kes julges eemalduda sotsialistliku realismi kaanonist ja kujutada kirjandusklassika teoste tegelasi laval ilma kangelasliku alatoonita. Kõik need lavastused on sarnastel teemadel: nad uurivad ebakõla moraali ja võimu vahel, lahkavad üksikisiku vaimse vabadusega seotud probleeme ja otsivad eksistentsiaalselt olulistest valikumomentides peituvat psühholoogilist tegevusmotivatsiooni. Krodersi lähenemine lavastajatööle kujutab endast pidevaid uue teatrikeeles otsinguid ja katkematut uuenduslikkust. Kroders tunnistas kirjandusliku allika ja kõneldud sõna tähtsust lavastuses ja pööras üksikasjalikku tähelepanu teksti kvaliteedile. Krodersi meetod, mis seisnes kirjandusliku teksti tõlgendamise kohandamises konkreetse näitleja potentsiaalile ja tema võimele oma tegelast mõista, saavutab emotsionaalselt mõjuva psühholoogilise väljenduse, avardades tavapärasest klassikute tõlgendamise stilistilist raamistikku. Artikkel vaatleb teksti tõlgendamist Aleksandr Ostrovski näidendi „Kaasavaratu“ kahes eri lavastuses. Näidendi teksti tõlkis lavastaja ise ja kohandas selle kahe lavastuse jaoks. Artikkel näitab, et tänu lavastaja hoolikale tõlgendamisele on kõneldud tekst väga täpselt lavastusse integreeritud. Artikkel näitab, et Krodersi lavakeelne mõtlemine ületab näidendi teksti piire, luues uusi tänapäevaseid kunstiteoseid, mis on üks tänapäeva läti teatri tähtsamaid suundumusi.

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