The crucial difference between reading a novel and watching the performance of a play is the transitory nature of the theatrical event and the complexity of the semantic codes involved. In the theatre, dramatic dialogue, therefore, is far more than a linguistic artefact. Both the corporeal nature of the spoken text presented on stage and the reception process operative in the theatre seem to interact with the linguistic side of rewriting dialogue. These qualities may account for the fact that a theatrical event tends to emphasize, and indeed even demand, the dovetailing of the (historical) text and its actual performance, expressing (and re-interpreting) the old in terms of the present. Accordingly, stage translation has always been a ‘go-between’, a hybrid form combining translation strategies with theatrical know-how and contemporary aesthetic discourse. In this paper case studies from two centuries and different translation cultures will focus on the influences exerted on the texts in the process of translation and on the innovative potential of stage translations as adaptations. What the cultural history of stage translations shows is not only the fact that every translation for the stage tends to consider the theatrical context and the conditions of production and thus tends to be a rewrite, but that stage translation is necessarily of a double nature translating a text from source to target culture – and at the same time translating a text into a production in the theatre of our minds, with or without linguistic translation involved.

Translating for the theatre has always been considered a special case. Theories of translation take little or no account of the processes and constraints that a translator of plays for the stage is subject to. And it is a well-known fact that for periods where we have an adequate supply of ‘literal’ translations of other literary texts (as is, for example, the case with eighteenth-century translations of English novels) the situation is totally different in the field of theatre translation. Apart from linguistic problems and cultural restrictions, both the corporeal nature of the spoken text presented on stage and the reception process operative in the theatre – watching a play being performed ‘live’ by actual human beings – seem to interact with the linguistic side of rewriting dialogue (cf. Greiner, “Profiles” 2010).

Accordingly, theories of translation in the eighteenth century and descriptive studies of eighteenth-century translations very often miss the point when they try to apply philological standards to the analysis of dramatic texts without considering the impact that non-textual factors have on the physiognomy of a text written for stage production. Dramatic dialogue is far more than a linguistic artefact. It is a densely woven and
highly intricate semantic feat combining linguistic, corporeal and scenic codes of communication (cf. Barthes 103; Greiner and Jenkins). The production of a play is both the presentation of a fictional world and the live, histrionic act of representing it to an audience, complete with the use of real voices and the physiognomies of real people. Watching a play is both an encounter with another world and the physical response to actual people ‘doing’ something for, and to, the spectator (cf. Pavis 115ff.). In this context words perform a dual function. They symbolize a meaningful fictional world and at the same time they impact as material sound waves on the ears of the audience. Here ‘literary communication’ encompasses both the aesthetic reception process and the stimulus-response situation (liking/disliking, etc.) in which actual physical individuals find themselves in the ‘here and now’ of the auditorium.

The crucial difference between reading a novel and watching the performance of a play is the transitory nature of the theatrical event and the complexity of the semantic codes involved. At each and every moment, a complex set of interrelated semantic codes assails the spectator without giving him any opportunity to halt the insistent flow of powerful meanings or to recollect them in tranquillity. ‘Coherence’ is established not as a given, static and hence scrutinizable structure, but as a gradually unfolding process in which particular items – once registered – can only be recalled by memory. Unlike reading, receptive experience in the theatre imitates the process of actual, ‘live’ communication. This, too, may account for the fact that a theatrical event tends to emphasize, and indeed even demand, the dovetailing of the (historical) text and its actual performance, expressing (and re-interpreting) the old in terms of the present. It is, after all, the production of a play an audience enjoys, and not its textual basis, as Thomas Mann has reminded us: “Die Aufführung ist das Kunstwerk, der Text nur eine Unterlage” (154). The living presence of body and voice underlines the ‘here and now’ as the locus of the events taking place on stage. This implies, of course, that many of the norms and conventions that have shaped the text and the performance are also operative in conditioning the spectators’ aesthetic perceptions and responses. In addition, the public nature of a theatre event exposes the individual spectator to a group-dynamic process and a confrontation with fashionable standards of taste and judgement. And as public taste is almost always in line with mainstream sensibilities, a public event is by its very nature more responsive to the demands made by the fashions of the day. Accordingly, stage translation has always been a ‘go-between’, a hybrid form combining translation strategies with theatrical know-how and contemporary aesthetic discourse (cf. Bassnett-McGuire 93).

Long before the ‘belles infidèles’ triumphed in late seventeenth-century France, stage adaptations had taken priority over ‘literal’ translations which