CHAPTER 5

Ethical Challenges in Adaptation: Gothic Eurico from Novel to Performance

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Abstract

Although ephemeral, theatre is a site of deep ethical questioning, a place where choices are made by working with our individual emotions and social existences. This chapter reflects upon the ethical-political challenges that were faced during a collective dramaturgical process of “adapting” a literary narrative—Alexandre Herculano’s novel Eurico o Presbítero (Eurico the monk, 1844)—into a theatre performance, staged at Lisbon’s National Theatre (TNDMII) in 2012. A major challenge of this devised theatre process consisted in “translating” the ethical drive of the nineteenth-century Gothic novel for a contemporary audience in the context of Portugal’s ongoing debt crisis within the EU.

In 1873, Portuguese historian, playwright, novelist, and political polemicist Alexandre Herculano (1810-1877) wrote, “Freedom is not so much an end as a means; we seek freedom in order to become happy” (Opúsculos 24, my translation). In this commentary, as in most of his writings, Herculano draws a close association between personal agency and a reinvention of social practices, between political improvement and subjective change. The pursuit of freedom is an ethical exercise that must be first sought individually, as the sound foundation of a collective politics with a soul.

Contemporary critics have similarly underscored a close association between individual ethics and political practice, among them Martha Nussbaum, who asserts that what animates present-day ethical theory is “The sense that we are social beings puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live” (101). Drawing on the ethical concepts of seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, Brian Massumi claims that ethics is the philosophy of the becoming-active (Parables 32), an embodied praxis that arises from being deeply immersed in the larger field of life, or from experiencing an intense belonging to a world that comprises human and non-human otherness. Ethics is therefore “a political knowledge-practice that takes an inclusive, nonjudgmental approach to tending belonging-together in an
intense, affectively engaged way” (255). Encompassing political perspectives and practices, ethics involves affects and reciprocity among living beings immersed in actual situations, and is therefore inherently concerned with the connections and tensions between personal and collective agency.

Due to the interplay between individual creation and collective work, between personal ethical choices (by authors, actors, directors, designers, producers and managers), and political effects (upon the performance collective, audience members, and the wider societal context), theatre is, perhaps more than any other art, a key and fertile terrain for ethical questioning. Accordingly, this chapter reflects upon the ethical-political challenges of collaboratively adapting Herculano’s canonical novel *Eurico o Presbítero* (*Eurico the monk*) as a theatre performance, *A Paixão Segundo Eurico* (*Passion According to Eurico*). Commissioned by and presented at the National Theatre in Lisbon (Teatro Nacional D. Maria II) from 1 December 2011 until 29 January 2012, the adaptation was collectively created by a group of six artists: Cristina Carvalhal (actress/director), Sara Carinhas (actress/director), Inês Rosado (actress), Graça P. Corrêa (dramaturg/director), Pedro Marques (film director/photographer), and Ana Vaz (costume and set designer). Mostly inspired by Herculano’s novel, the performance script ensued from the interweaving of multimedia texts brought about by our distinct artistic itineraries and practices. Consequently, a first major ethical challenge of the adaptation was that of the collaborative process itself, or the ways affective interactions with otherness, and operating principles in teamwork, eventually led to particular outcomes in performance.

The ethical and political questions of puzzling out “what might be, for us, the best way to live” animate the source novel of *Eurico* (Nussbaum 101; my emphasis), upon which the theatre production was based. Accordingly, this chapter assesses two additional ethical issues arising from our devised theatre process: a dramaturgical consideration of the ethical drive and political dimension of the nineteenth-century Gothic novel; and the challenges of translating the ethical-political traits of the source material for a contemporary audience within the present historical moment, i.e., of relating Herculano’s nostalgic idea of a distinctive communal *Portugueseness* to Portugal’s current cultural crisis within the European Union.

My goal is to reflect upon how the collective practice of adapting a novel to a theatre performance entails an exercise in ethics. Although this collaborative process involves an inclusive nonjudgmental approach of tending to one another and to the group in an affectively engaged way, it risks sacrificing—especially if it is consensus-driven—valuable dramaturgical possibilities towards production, in terms of ethical-political correspondences between the source text and the contemporary moment.