

Interpreter/Interloper : Challenges of Simultaneous Translation for Traditional Theatre Practice

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Traditional theatre training in much of Asian and particularly Japan depends on one-on-one, face-to-face, master/disciple practice. Using modeling and molding techniques developed over centuries, masters encourage students to learn the “foreign language” of ancient arts through “legitimate peripheral participation” (Lave), “situated learning” (Singleton), “minarai,” “mi ni tsukeru” shugyou”.

Yet when a non-Japanese student of traditional arts attempts to learn noh or nihonbuyo today, the normal in-body methods often give way to gentle physical molding, exaggerated and repeated “pidgin English” expressions, or Western-style “exercises”.

At the request of the teacher or student or producer of the international workshop interpreters may intervene, friendly bilingual disciples or professional translators or even one of the teacher’s family members. This interpreter steps between the normally sacro-sanct bond of teacher and student to explain, in the native’s own language, what’s going on. Yet the mediating interpreter is continuously challenged to be both accurate and simultaneous, yet not distract from the master’s demonstration of correct form. Eventually both master and disciple must adjust to the vital center of interpreter. What is intended as an “invisible conduit” may result in distracting interloping.

This paper employs participant observation in traditional practices in the Kansai area of noh, kyogen, and nihonbuyo training in Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe for two decades, especially with the Traditional Theatre Training program in Kyoto, as well as numerous trips abroad for noh and kyogen actors. Assisted by the writings of Barbara Sellars-Young, Tomie Hahn on the somatic nature of Japanese training, Lawrence Venuti on the “invisible translator”, and Abe Mark Nornes on interlocutor dynamics in diasporic cinema, I will seek to discover the shifts of authority and practice when dancers and theatre practitioners seek “authentic” lessons in Japan. And I hope to demonstrate that what begins as helpful Interpretation results, inevitably, in an uneasy Interloping in the traditional master-student bond.