

# Translating Metaphors from Québec to Kansas

**A**s a child growing up in Detroit, I always viewed (English) Canada more as a close, next door neighbour than as a distant, “foreign” country. So when I saw the Théâtre de la Marmaille (now Le Théâtre des Deux Mondes) perform *Crying to Laugh* at their US debut in my home town in 1984, I felt an immediate closeness. This is what children’s theatre ought to be, I thought, for they had captured the essence of what it means to be a child in an adult culture (see Klein, “Le Théâtre”). The fact that Monique Rioux played Mea (a linguistic play on the word “me”) only added to my feelings of intracultural connectedness, since Rioux is my Québec-born mother’s maiden name. When I visited Montreal for the first time the following year to explore my dormant Québécois roots through theatre, I felt an overwhelming, yet inexplicable, sensation of having arrived “home.” How could this be – *moi*, the incompetent French-speaking “foreigner” in this “separate and distinct society”?

Yet Québécois theatre for young audiences had touched my very soul. Here was a highly theatricalized form of presentational theatre that went beyond representational storytelling about child characters to metaphoric spaces that *signified* the underlying complexities of childhood. This “theatre of images” fired my aesthetic imagination with its compelling, stylistic differences, which departed wildly from US norms of realism. Each subsequent year of Coups de Théâtre, Montreal’s biennial international TYA festival, allowed me to understand more deeply how universal metaphors of childhood crossed international boundaries (see Klein, Montréal’s 1992, ‘94, ‘96, ‘97; “Review”). Furthermore, Montreal’s young audiences taught me to *see* theatricalized images anew by paying closer attention to every visual detail and aural nuance. Lacking the listening ability to discern verbal meaning quickly from texts spoken in French, I was forced to rely upon visualizations (and written synopses) to interpret meanings. I learned, quite to my surprise, that when I grew restless straining to translate dialogue, children, too, grew restless *because nothing was happening on stage*. When characters were just “tawking” about the story rather than

*doing* something of relational importance, I realized more than ever the etymological origin of the word “theatre” – “to gaze upon.”

With these fresh insights, I embarked upon a series of reception studies to analyze how children (and adults) translate the visual and aural signs of theatre into semiotic depths of meanings. As Virginia Nightingale argues in *Studying Audiences*, “Translation is crucial and inescapable in cultural research, whether as reading or as a variety of linguistic interpretation” (111). Reception studies, whether formal or anecdotal, inevitably involve multilinguistic interpretations and intersemiotic transmutations as researchers attempt to transcribe spectators’ translations of performances transposed from linguistic texts in any given language. In this essay, I explore a variety of such “translations” by discussing how young spectators interpreted culturally bound ideologies beneath performative and scenographic translations of three plays from Québec.

As a result of my department’s promotion of international theatre, I directed the English translations of three very different Québécois plays, produced respectively in 1989, 1992 and 1998: *I Am a Bear!* by Gilles Gauthier, *Crying to Laugh* by Marcel Sabourin and *Little Monster* by Jasmine Dubé. With each production, I wondered how I could possibly recreate the organic, collective nature of Québécois methods in which all artists (playwright, director, actors and designers alike) collaborate equally around thematic metaphors for over a year. Under the constraints of what I call the “linear-additive, assembly-line” model of US production, I must reproduce ready-made scripts hierarchically within a four-week period. As director, how was I to rekindle the original artistic impulses of these textual “blueprints” and unify aesthetic sensibilities when designers worked wholly separately from actors under university conditions? Knowing that I could not reconstitute the unique “trademarks” of Théâtre de l’Arrière-Scène, Théâtre de/des Deux Mondes, and Théâtre Bouches Décousues, how could I at least transpose Québécois sensibilities in a different context geographically removed far from Canadian borders? Would audiences, young and old alike, accept or reject these theatrical differences or even acknowledge the plays’ Québécois origins?



Designer Delbert Unruh "trapped" the Bear (Sean Gutteridge) in Jeanne Klein's production of Gilles Gauthier's *I am a Bear* (translated by Linda Gaboriau) behind a barbed wire fence that extended across the proscenium.

PHOTO: EARL IVERSEN



"How come they couldn't tell he was a bear?" The President (Joseph Bugni) sweet-talks the Bear in his office at the Pulp and Paper Mill.

PHOTO: EARL IVERSEN

At the risk of oversimplifying or essentializing the multifarious characteristics of Québécois theatre, what intrigues me most about Québécois scripts are the textual, performative and scenographic spaces they offer for artistic resistance to US norms of realism. Episodic, expressionistic texts resist common, "well-made play" models usually found in the more realist US repertoire; improvisational *jeu* (play) defies applications of Stanislavskian psychological realism; and scenographic manifestations of organic metaphors counter otherwise redundant representations

of place and time. In effect, taking my cue from *la marmaille* (bratty children), I sought to resist my audiences' resistances to anti-realism. Through the expressionistic characters of the Bear, Mea and Seluf and the Child himself, I hoped that young audiences might recognize themselves in their daily struggles to communicate their distinctive identities, emotional needs and playful desires to patriarchal figures – just as Québec struggles to achieve parity with English Canadian majorities. In turn, I trusted that adults would embrace children's perspectives with a renewed respect for their minority rights.

Structurally, *I Am a Bear!* retains the linear plot of its original US source, Frank Tashlin's 1946 *The Bear That Wasn't*, despite its transcontinental travels via Europe and Canada. Gauthier's version adapts illustrations from a 1977 Swiss picture book entitled *The Bear Who Wanted To Be a Bear* (Steiner). For our production, faculty scenographer Delbert Unruh applied Czechoslovakian action design principles by "trapping" the Bear behind a barbed wire fence that extended across the proscenium, as stage crew members in hard hats "built" the flown-in factory over the Bear's den (a floor trap). In addition to using Catherine Nosaty's evocative music, we also rented the Bear's costume from Manitoba's Theatre for Young People. (Ironically, its derivative identity, fake fur made in China, had to be negotiated with US-Canadian Customs before the Bear could traverse the border!)

Local sixth-graders had little trouble summarizing the play's plot, as this example from one classroom demonstrates:

There was a bear that got a factory built on his home. They think he's a human. He has to get a job at the factory. Finally they kick him out. So the bear goes on believing he's a human till someone says you're a bear. In the end he goes back to his hole and hibernates.

However, the satiric irony of this anthropomorphic tale was completely lost on most literal-minded children. Just as *L'Arrière-Scène* had parodied the factory's President as a corporate tycoon with a US accent, we parodied him as an avid bear hunter, with vocal inflections taken from Joe Isuzu, a popular TV commercial character, to intensify his patronizing sales pitch. Yet most children failed to appreciate this brand of deceptive humour, for they questioned the play's entire premise – "How come they couldn't tell he was a bear?" The play's stinging irony went beyond their cognitive developmental level simply because they could not grasp why anyone would intentionally speak obvious falsehoods.

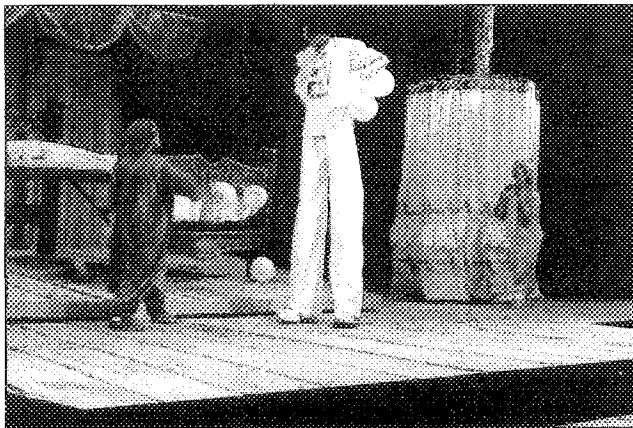
Given that animal stories are usually intended for younger children, many nine- to twelve-year-olds thought the play was too "juvenile" and "childish," despite its challenging ironies and expressionistic symbolism, which demanded inferential reasoning. Rather than associating the Bear's questioned identity with their own identity quests, or recognizing how powerful (school) institutions force conformity and cultural assimilation into the dominant mainstream, most children interpreted the play as an environmental tale about the cruel destruction of an animal's habitat. When asked to summarize its "message," sixth-graders expressed compassion for the Bear's plight but staunchly maintained: "You should not just build

things anywhere, especially where there is wildlife." "Too many forests are being cut down, but many animals live in these forests." "People are taking animals' homes for factories and things when the animals were there first and humans kick them out." "We don't need so much progress in development." Teachers affirmed their students' responses in production evaluations:

After discussion, the students understood that the "theme" was to remain true to yourself and to not allow others to shape your character. However, they would not have discovered this element on their own, without benefit of whole-class guidance.

Given these developmental constraints, how could a production alone encourage child audiences to apply a protagonist's dramatic situation directly to their own childhoods? The Russian children in Anna Mikhailova's study distanced themselves similarly from Bambi's life in a Leningrad production; how could theatre artists manifest a play's "semantic field" by guiding children to generalize ideological metaphors from dramatic parables? When the rights for *Crying to Laugh* became available, I believed I had the perfect vehicle to tackle such issues in a formal reception study (see Klein, "Reading"; "Performance").

The expressionistic text of *Crying to Laugh* infuses child-adult power struggles directly into its characters, dramatic situations and scenography. Sabourin names his Freudian characters Mea (Me, the ego), Seluf (Myself, the id) and Yua (You, the superego) and literally underscores the physical differences between "big" authority figures and "little" children by having Yua wear stilts to indicate his artificial superiority. In keeping with his eight-foot height, a proportionately sized shower, bed and mirror signify Yua's oppressive world from Mea's "lowly" vantage point. When Mea's dog accidentally drowns, Yua cajoles her not to cry or she won't grow up big like him. But when she looks into the mirror, she literally sees her Seluf, her repressed emotions yearning for release, crying actual tears. Not until Seluf exposes Yua's hypocritical standing by removing his stilts does Mea realize the joys of emotional self-expression.



In *Crying to Laugh*, playwright Marcel Sabourin, in Jeanne Klein's production of John van Burek's translation, literally underscores the differences between "big" authority figures and "little" children by having Yua (Jared Khan) wear stilts. Mea is played by Cinnamon Schultz and Seluf by Elizabeth d'Amato.

PHOTO: EARL IVERSEN

In an attempt to encourage children to interpret the play's themes rather than summarizing its plot, we asked seven-, nine-, and eleven-year-olds to show or tell "what the play was about." Nevertheless, most described characters' actions rather than generalized metaphoric themes underlying theatrical signs. When asked more directly what Mea learned, most fifth-graders (93%), more than first- (57%) and third-graders (71%), abstracted prescriptive rules that "you should express your feelings" or "it's okay to cry" "because Seluf taught Mea to cry." Here, one first-grade boy recalled that Mea learned "not to hide her crying. [How do you know?] Because she had balloons. [Seluf] put like a black balloon here [in Mea's stomach], and that's] what makes her not feel so good; and so [Seluf] pops it and it's like letting the laughter and crying out and then [Mea] feels better."

Despite this explicit metaphor, no one appeared to connect the balloons' significance to the play's resolution, when Mea pops falling balloons to symbolize her emotional release. Instead, those who sympathized for her in the end expressed their surprise or happiness by describing the "territory" of Mea's physical activities rather than inferring the symbolic "map" of her emotional actions underlying these activities. For example, one third-grade boy repeated how "she was messing up the bed, and she was throwing that pillow around and popping balloons [and] she didn't have to keep everything clean." Those who empathized with Mea's happiness, including a fifth-grade girl, realized that "she finally knew that you don't have to always smile and stuff to grow up. She could cry and stuff, and she probably wouldn't have any more stomach aches." Those who distanced themselves from Mea's reasoning recalled similar, personal activities or reacted contagiously to the climactic spectacle because, as one third-grade girl said, "I like to jump all over my mom's bed [and] all these balloons were coming down and she looked really happy." Accordingly, when asked how they were similar to or different from each character, fifth-graders were more likely to compare themselves against characters' emotional dispositions than first-graders, who perceived themselves as *different* from Mea and Seluf primarily on the basis of *physical appearances*. Thus, eleven-year-old girls admitted to not expressing their feelings, more than boys of all age groups combined, by identifying with a college-age female actor.

If young children translate actors' physical bodies into gender- and age-coded messages, what happens when racial features are added to a play that pits "victim" against "oppressor"? When Pamela Sterling directed *Crying to Laugh* at Honolulu Theatre for Youth, she discovered that "in a culture with our racial tensions, where there is a deeply entrenched mistrust of white, 'haole' people, this is a play where 'color-blind' casting may convey a loaded message, even for the youngest of audiences." She sensed that her audiences "aligned" themselves with Yua, an Asian-American actor, by yelling out to let him know where Seluf, a fair-skinned, Caucasian actor, was hiding. However, given that my predominantly white audiences behaved similarly toward our white actor, perhaps youngsters "just wanted Yua to discover Seluf so they could



The five-year-old “Little Monster” (Jeremy Spencer) in Jeanne Klein’s production of Maureen LaBonté’s translation of Jasmine Dubé’s *Little Monster* wakes up his sleeping father (Brad Douglas) early one Saturday morning....

PHOTO: LUKE JORDAN

experience the confrontation,” as Sterling also surmises. Nevertheless, casting adult actors in child roles problematizes age translations for audiences and actors alike, as I found again with *Little Monster*.

*Little Monster* focuses on one dramatic situation in which a five-year-old Child tries to wake up his sleepy Father early one Saturday morning. This “one-scene” play forces two actors to treat a familial relationship as a “planned-out” improvisation. What actors *do* with the words of the text – physically, vocally and emotionally – becomes far more important than what they say. Given few stage directions, actors must fill out the relational details of child’s play by inventing their own mnemonic links from beat to beat *within* nine episodes. Asking “What’s my motivation?” becomes an irrelevant, even absurd, Stanislavskian question because, unlike adults, five- to eight-year-olds reason transductively by jumping instantaneously from one non sequitur to another with no logical rationale for switching ideas. *Little Monster*, then, demanded alternative acting methods to achieve its seemingly simple theme of father–son reconciliation.

As Jeremy Spencer, the actor playing the Child, recalled, “I didn’t think I would be able to memorize the script. The hardest thing for me to do was to get inside the head of a child.” So we watched kindergartners at play, and I urged the actors to “just play” without the script in early rehearsals. From playing, Jeremy began to get a clearer sense of how a child thinks by allowing each moment to lead him where it was going:

At first, I thought this just sounds like a kid playing, but then I realized that his playing was a language. In a sense, I had to learn his language by using my whole body to convey what I was saying. I had to figure out what story he was making from “titititi kaboom” (12) with his stuffed animal puppets. And every time, I wasn’t recreating that story but creating it all over again because I kept finding new stuff every time I performed.

Throughout this highly physical rehearsal process, we kept imagining what the original actors must have experienced, given the Child’s boundless energy. In fact, we realized that having the father and son eat an orange together



Father (Brad Douglas) and Child (Jeremy Spencer) share an intimate moment in *Little Monster*, a moment subject to cross-cultural misinterpretation in performance.

PHOTO: LUKE JORDAN

midway through the play became a “lifesaver,” allowing some juice and sugar to rejuvenate their tired bodies.

To situate the play locally, I cut bilingual references (45) but retained Québécois flavours with pre- and post-show French lullabies (e.g., “*Bonne nuit*” after Brahms, “*Maman fait dodo*” and “*Poulette grise*”). Yet the play subverted assumptions about family relationships with its close physical contact between Father and Child, their affectionate Québécois endearments (e.g., “kiss kiss”) and an absent Mother. Despite their different heights, some youngsters still saw two grown men from a homophobic perspective. As one teacher noted, “For third-graders, the men crawling on top of each other and having males kiss seemed inappropriate and they checked out my response.” After performances, children did not openly question these “unconventional” behaviours; but they did want to know actors’ “real” ages, for, as another teacher wrote, “children always want to know ‘what’s real’ (e.g., the knives and fire from the toaster).”

The fact that Mother was not a “real” presence on stage but a live, offstage phone voice also raised the recurring question, “Where’s the mother?” As one colleague, Iris Smith, discovered, quite to her surprise,

When the Father said the Mother was in “the operating room” [at the very beginning], I thought she was having an operation! So I was waiting for the melodrama to begin. Obviously the play took a very different tack. The “waking up” sequence is not just a prelude; it’s the play. So I had to retool my assumptions. But then kids probably don’t have to retool. They don’t have the assumptions to begin with.

On the contrary, children also assumed that Mother was a patient (“having a baby?”), unless they inferred otherwise, especially at the very end when Father suggested picking her up from “work” at the hospital. Only by questioning assumptions did they realize she could have been a nurse or doctor *performing* an operation.

While adults appreciated the “common ’90s theme of finding quality time for family members” (Near), many found the play “too long” and “monotonous” because of its repetitive dramatic situation. For James Still, screen-

writer for Nickelodeon's *Little Bear* series, "repetition is a powerful tool in play and in theatre for preschoolers and all ages" that differs from rhythm as "a kind of 'secret language.'" But after seeing a performance of our *Little Monster*, he felt that the performative use of repetition wasn't helping to shape, support or build the play's rhythms, so that nothing new was revealed "as a backdrop for an emotional experience." I had hoped that the "monster box" I designed as a kitchen unit would add little ongoing surprises while symbolizing the play's title and holding our props on tour. As the Child opened each door, another body part of a painted monster revealed itself, arousing curiosity and suspense for those choosing to solve this visual puzzle. But Still's response leads me to wonder whether the actors and I and this scenic device did, in fact, shape rhythms with sufficient emotional variety.

Whether or not these three productions transposed Québécois aesthetics faithfully remains a question for others to judge beyond the selected reception examples here, for I am in no position, as a subjective director, to qualify their actual successes or failures with multi-age audiences. Although child and adult spectators control their own aesthetic tastes and ideological interpretations, I will probably continue to resist literal translations by continually experimenting with the visual languages of Québec's imagistic theatre. Like Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, who labels her feminist translation strategies "*re-belles et infidèles*" (98-9), I can only hope that my future directing of Québécois texts in translation may reclaim the cultural power of these ostensibly unfaithful yet subversively rebellious beauties. □

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