CURATING INTERCULTURAL ACTION: AGENCY BETWEEN EPISTEMOLOGIES

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for Frank Hilton (1945-2024)

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Abstract: Sociological, cognitive as well as epistemological differences complicate and often limit or even block intercultural communication. This article theorizes concrete strategies of understanding and interacting across cultural divides, between "us" and "them," and offers possible strategies of overcoming epistemological differences in curating intercultural action. Inherited traditions and human reason itself complicate the task due to prejudice, epistemic vigilance (Sperber and Mercier), mutual assumptions and other factors. Analysing concrete examples of successful and failed intercultural action, the article draws on sociological concepts of action (Habermas), cognitive science and evolutionary psychology (Dunbar's concept of mentalisation), and theatre practice (dramaturgical translation). It offers a theory of intercultural action and concrete strategies of curating interactions, which give participants autonomy and agency.

Keywords: intercultural action, interaction, performance, agency, epistemology, dramaturgical translation, postcolonial theory, slow trading

Introduction

A global issue that has occupied humans in many walks of life – from thinkers and scholars, through politicians and diplomats, to travellers and tradespeople – is understanding across cultural divides, between "us" and "them," and overcoming differences in cultural values, customs, knowledges – in a word, epistemologies. Inherited traditions themselves have further complicated the task.[1] Prominently,

[1] Several of my case studies involve only different Western cultures. However, the Book Industry Forum has involved participants from non-Western countries, and so have other practical explorations that I have not included in this essay: the global PQ Talks

Western logocentrism – the emphasis we place on the word, especially the written and the printed (not to mention the divine Revealed Word), on given rules and laws, and on discursive deliberation in the Classical tradition of the Socratic dialogue. The overreliance on logocentric knowledge has produced theoretical fallacies, such as the flawed concepts of Speech Act Theory that reduce theories of action to verbal utterances (performatives) with a complex set of accompanying rules and conditions.[2] In 1971, Searle made an influential, but syllogistic assertion: "a theory of language is part of a theory of action, simply because speaking is a rule-governed form of behavior. Now, being rule-governed, it has formal features which admit of independent study."[3] This proposition brackets off non-verbal action and reality, limiting the theorist's perspective solely on what happens in the verbal domain. Action that is entirely non-verbal, without language, is ignored in favour of the verbal utterances.

Critics of Speech Act Theory – and of linguistic philosophy as such – have gone even further, pointing out the disconnect between theory and the lived world. In a foreword to Ernest Gellner's unjustly neglected study *Words and Things: An Examination of, and an Attack on, Linguistic Philosophy* (1959), Bertrand Russell, ever the witty commentator, had quipped, targeting the philosophical school of J.L. Austin and his follower John Searle:

> When I was a boy, I had a clock with a pendulum which could be lifted off. I found that the clock went very much faster without the pendulum. If the main purpose of a clock is to go, the clock was the better for losing its pendulum. True, it could no longer tell the time, but that did not matter if one could teach oneself to be indifferent to the passage of time. The linguistic philosophy, which cares only about language, and not about the world, is like the boy who preferred the clock without the pendulum because, although it no longer told the time, it went more easily than before and at a more exhilarating pace.[4]

2019 and 2023, or a dramaturgical workshop in Taiwan in 2025. The principles remain the same: the starting point for all is that we do *not* share value systems, but we have in common a shared actuality and we may interact on its basis.

2 My critique of Speech Act Theory as untenable came out in this journal. See Pavel Drábek, "Heterotelic Models as Performatives: From Speech Acts to Propositionality," *Litteraria Pragensia* 30, no. 60 (2021): 100-17; and "Performative Models and Physical Fictions: Dialogic Performance as Social Coevolution. A Case for Arcadian Theatre (Modelling the World through Play)," *Litteraria Pragensia* 32, no. 64 (2022): 8-36.

3 John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 17.

4 Ernest Gellner, *Words and Things: An Examination of, and an Attack on, Linguistic Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), iii.

Disconnecting verbal utterances – speech acts – from reality is symptomatic of linguistic philosophy. Speech Act Theory is an extreme case, but its overreliance on words, rules and discourse has shaped most other intercultural theory, relegating intercultural contact to a similarly rule-governed domain of *communication*. Within humanities and several social sciences, Speech Act Theory continues to be the philosophical basis of discourse on performatives – that is, on statements that constitute social reality. It is beyond the scope and objective of this essay to elaborate on the logocentric impasse. Ever since Kurt Gödel's 1931 Incompleteness Theorem, logical calculus is proven to exist in a parallel noetic realm, independent of actuality. It's probably also beyond my own capacities to follow the epistemological implications of Gödel's Theorem through to AI hallucinations, unchecked by some pendulum that would anchor it in the world.

In this article, I propose to move beyond logocentric thinking, from communicative, verbal transactions to full interaction across epistemological divides. In Part I, I draw on interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives that pertain to intercultural action, often identifying the cognitive obstacles or indirectly inferring them. My objective is to focus on *action* itself, rather than on mere *communicative action* (in Habermas's sense), which presupposes a shared social reality. Recent relational psychology (Sperber and Mercier) has identified cognitive barriers to embrace the behaviours and cultures of others. Stephen Greenblatt's Cardenio project serves as a case study of an attempted creative bridge across cultural divides; I discuss it as an instance of a failed intercultural action, arguing that it lapsed on assumed shared body of classical literature (Shakespeare). In Part II, I take lead from these insights and examples, and offer a theoretical model of understanding and refining intercultural action that does not assume shared epistemologies – irrespective of how distant or close the participating cultures are. With the help of evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar's concept of mentalisation, I offer theoretical tools for describing and understanding intercultural action and agency in constant recourse to a shared actuality. Rather than approaching intercultural action *logocentrically*, the proposed focus on action is *dramacentric* (from the Greek *dramein*, to act, to execute action). The final section offers two case studies of curated events that offer possible strategies of enabling agency between epistemologies as a path to full intercultural action.

Liabilities in Ludwigsburg and Derridean Deconstruction

In December 2025, with Kateřina Jebavá and Michal Zetel, my colleagues and theatre professionals from the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts (JAMU, Brno, Czech Republic), we met for a couple of seminars and workshops with Carolin

Hochleichter and her graduate students of dramaturgy at the Academy of Performing Arts (ADK) in Ludwigsburg, just north of Stuttgart. We share an interest in theatrical translation – a topic I'll return to in my final case study in this article – and met to (1) discuss and (2) trial the method we call *dramaturgical translation*.[5] We wanted to understand the differences between our thinking about the theatre, broker terminological agreement, and simply to get to know one another. Until then, we had tried out dramaturgical translation *into* Czech, and we needed to test its viability and relevance for another linguistic culture before we, inductively, broaden the scope and formulate more general theories. Our meeting exceeded our expectations: it was generous, friendly and very productive, but there was a telling moment, which relates specifically to intercultural encounters. I would like to reflect on it briefly: it fits organically into my argument and will segue to the theoretical part.

The order we adopted for our meeting in Ludwigsburg – first discuss, then trial – is logical and probably the default respectful procedure. It may have been tactless to do practical work before the necessary phatic and social bonding, before explaining what we were planning to do, and before both sides of the encounter had a chance to adjust the plan. But that order of events also complicated the encounter.

The gist of the dramaturgical translation method is collaborative, collective work on the translation of a play; it brings together the philologist, the theatre historian, the dramaturg, the actor(s) and the scenographer and/or producer.[6] The objective of the emerging method is not to translate spoken lines to spoken lines, but rather theatrical action into theatrical action – or more accurately, potential for theatrical action in the source to potential for theatrical action in the target. This entails finding a balance between philological translation (speech for speech) at one end of a notional scale, and dramaturgical adaptation for a specific production (show for show) at the other end. The novelty of the method is that the theatrical indeterminacy of the original script (with its dependence on contemporary context and practices) is translated into a new text that creates theatrical potential for present-day theatre makers. The current status quo operates at the two extreme ends of the scale: plays are translated by (primarily) philologists for a reader, and

5 As mentioned in the opening, the example of dramaturgical translation serves here not as a translation method per se, but as a strategy that may serve as the basis for intercultural action that is rooted in actuality and encourages intellectual sophistication with regular heuristic feedback.

6 A prolegomenon to the method is formulated here: Filip Krajník, Anna Mikyšková and Pavel Drábek, "Dramaturgical Translation as a Means of Training a Young Generation of Translators for the Theatre," in *Teaching Translation vs. Training Translators*, ed. Michal Kubánek, Ondřej Klabal and Ondřej Molnár (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého, 2022), 69-77.

printed, or plays are adapted by (primarily) dramaturgs for a specific production. Involving an interdisciplinary collective in creating dramaturgical translation acknowledges that a live theatrical culture (now) is capable of rethinking and transforming a dramatic text originally written for a theatrical culture (then) into a new dramatic text that will offer a comparably diverse range of theatrical potential for any theatre makers (now).[7]

In discussing the model in Ludwigsburg (step 1), the twelve or so participants understood the concept, related it to their professional experience, and started to reflect on it. Several crucial questions were raised: How can we avoid narrowing down and shoehorning the theatrical potential to our immediate ends? How can we make sure that we are not manipulating the original? Can we actually avoid our purely subjective reading? Will the dramaturgical translation have any validity and authority beyond the collective that created it? How can we communicate and pass on our collective findings? Will we need a notation of sorts? Do we have trust in an author-less open, indeterminate text to communicate any determinate quality? These are all relevant and valuable questions but they got us into a polyphonic Babel that threatened operability. It seemed that the complexity of the endeavour and the theoretical questions the model triggered might create an impasse.

We proceeded to step 2, workshopping a brief passage of 10 lines (150 words) from George Lillo's tragedy *The London Merchant* (1731). We worked from the English original with a knowledge of the play's summary, explaining any challenging expressions. Groups of three to four worked for half an hour reading through it, performing the situation in space – not for the aesthetic effect, but to understand proxemic relations, experiment with physical postures and gestures, and try out the potential for staging one's authority, for social niceties and attitudes, and for reactions and reversals of attitude in this brief dialogue. The two groups also improvised a translation in performance. A couple of other participants studied and discussed H.A. Bassewitz's 1776 translation of the

[7] It might seem, to the economically minded, that the expense of such a collective process is prohibitive and impracticable. In actual fact, a stageable translation saves hundreds of hours in rehearsal. The current practice, both in the Czech Republic and in Germany (as we heard in Ludwigsburg), is that a lot of time and creative energy goes into bringing a philological translation (i.e., often disembodied, acoustically and spatially dead) to life. The hidden casualties of this onerous rehearsal process are actors, whom an unstageable translation relegates to more-or-less mechanical 'heaters' of a 'cold' text. Involving actors in dramaturgical translation is salutary: they are acknowledged as creatives who constitute and carry their theatrical culture. (This is of course not to assume that other theatre cultures face the same problems.)

corresponding passage. (Bassewitz probably translated via French.) With this embodied experience, most of the previous problematising questions disappeared. What had seemed principal differences and insurmountable obstacles turned out to be minor, aesthetic details. The findings were convincing – while the two groups had worked independently, their performances shared a great deal of matter: from non-verbal tensions between personas, through speaking images (a posture and a gesture expressive of the situation), to the structure of the utterance spoken.

The discussion that followed the brief practical trial bore no comparison to the previous theoretical speculations. The starting position was not where to place oneself on the hypothetical scale between a philological translation and a production adaptation; the point of departure was the shared embodied, empirical reality of the two performances we had just experienced. Formulating those findings was the new shared goal: it was interpersonal, far beyond the subjective. The shared experience also allowed an even greater amount of focused sophistication and theoretical complexity.

What we had experienced in step 1 was cerebral, logocentric. We realised that the participants, confronted with the new method of dramaturgical translation, had logically positioned themselves in relation to it – dialectically, oppositionally, critically. They approached the model with *suspicion* in the Derridean sense of deconstruction.[8] Like any text, it needed interpretation, and the seminar setting and the overriding habits of academic discourse co-opted the dialectical mode – that which allows individual voices in the debate to stand out more clearly. The empirical trial shifted the ground fundamentally: the discussion became truly cooperative and we afforded ourselves intercultural agency, in spite of our epistemological differences. The shared collective experience to which we all contributed – as individuals and in the aggregate – became the foundation for future interaction.

On one level, this incident was no more than teeming issues of communication that got resolved in the practical. On another – if we take dramaturgical translation not just as a translation method – the impasse may serve as inspiration for a model strategy of interacting across cultural divides.

8 I am grateful to Tomáš Kačer for pointing this out during a debrief following the workshop. I would also like to acknowledge Hana Pavelková and David Drozd, my colleagues, with whom we collaborate on the *dramaturgical translation* model as a theoretical concept. For Derrida's theory of suspicious texts, see Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 76, and Peter V. Zima, *Deconstruction and Critical Theory*, trans. Rainer Emig (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 32.

Part I: Towards a Theory of Intercultural Action

Communicative Action: Jürgen Habermas

In his trend-setting book *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, 1981), Jürgen Habermas operates with four sociological concepts of action:

> 1. "*teleological action*"
> The actor attains an end or brings about the occurrence of a desired state by choosing means that have promise of being successful in the given situation and applying them in a suitable manner. The central concept is that of a decision among alternative courses of action, with a view to the realisation of an end, guided by maxims, and based on an interpretation of the situation.[9]
>
> 2. "*normatively regulated action*"
> The individual actor complies with (or violates) a norm when in a given situation the conditions are present to which the norm has application. Norms express an agreement that obtains in a social group. All members of a group for whom a given norm has validity may expect of one another that in certain situations they will carry out (or abstain from) the actions commanded (or proscribed). The central concept of *complying with a norm* means fulfilling a generalized expectation of behaviour. (85)
>
> 3. "*dramaturgical action*"
> The actor evokes in his public a certain image, an impression of himself, by more or less purposefully disclosing his subjectivity. Each agent can monitor public access to the system of his own intentions, thoughts, attitudes, desires, feelings, and the like, to which only he has privileged access. In dramaturgical action, participants make use of this and steer their interactions through regulating mutual access to their own subjectivities. Thus the *central concept of presentation of self* does not signify spontaneous expressive behaviour but stylising the expression of one's own experience with a view to the audience. The dramaturgical model of

[9] Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 85. Subsequent page references are given in parentheses in the text.

> action is used primarily in phenomenologically oriented descriptions of interaction; but it has not yet been developed into a theoretically generalizing approach. (85-86)
>
> 4. "*communicative action*"
> [R]efers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or extra-verbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of *interpretation* refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus. […] [L]anguage is given a prominent place in this model. (86)

Habermas's taxonomy presupposes a society – he refers to *sociological* concepts of action. In other words, the unspoken premise of such action is a shared set of values, maxims, norms and agreements. His definitions of individual concepts build on maxims, norms, "mutual access to […] subjectivities" (86) and a shared language. How much of this can be replicated in an intercultural and inter-epistemological setting?

Before proceeding to the four types of action, Habermas nuances the unspoken premise. He offers to "replace the ontological concept of 'world' with one derived from the phenomenological tradition and to adopt the pair of concepts 'world' and 'lifeworld'" (82). Very importantly, he asserts that the "intersubjectively shared *lifeworld* forms the background for communicative action. [… It is] the unthematically given horizon within which participants in communication move in common when they refer thematically to something in the *world*" (82). In other words, Habermas builds his theory of communicative action on the premise of an existing, axiologically unified society. Naturally, values, norms and maxims are not fixed but they may be assumed as points of departure, and they become part of the social negotiations and interpretations in which a society evolves. However, that is not intercultural action as such when no such assumption of a shared lifeworld exists. How then is action made possible if no such premised society is involved but rather heterogeneous individuals or groups?

It is also worth observing that Habermas's model of the four concepts of sociological action does not include *collective* action and especially collective action based on *propositional values* – on what I have called *physical fictions*. Assuming a pre-existing set of maxims, norms, values and language would result in hierarchical, asymmetrical intercultural action – painfully reminiscent of colonial history.

Even if an agreement is reached and there is a will for a shared, symmetrical community (if not a full society), what are the obstacles for collective intercultural action?

The Enigma of Interactive Reasoning

Was the impasse we encountered and luckily overcame in Ludwigsburg inevitable? It is apparent that without the practical collective experience we would never have talked ourselves out of it and remained stuck in the logocentric trap of logical, generous, respectful, seemingly constructive but ultimately paralysing deliberations. In a recent book entitled *The Enigma of Reason*, cognitive scientists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber show how "reason fits in individual minds, in social interactions, and in human evolution."[10] They point out:

> Whereas reason is commonly viewed as a superior means to think better of one's own, we argue that it is mainly used in our interactions with others. We produce reasons in order to justify our thoughts and actions to others and to produce arguments to convince others to think and act as we suggest. We also use reason to evaluate not so much our own thought as the reasons others produce to justify themselves or to convince us.[11]

For my present purpose, their theory is particularly relevant in differentiating between the role of reasoning in human cooperation and in human communication – in a word, reasoning plays a smaller part in the former and engages primarily in the latter, and that in a very specific, self-justifying way. It is beyond the scope of this essay to include their detailed discussion of shared norms and cultural codes – though these would be very relevant for a complete theory of intercultural action. Here, I will only focus on what they call "the challenge of communication":

> Even more than human cooperation, human communication stands apart by its scale, its diversity, and the complexity of its mechanisms. […] Humans have languages with huge vocabularies and powerful syntax with which they can produce an unbounded variety of linguistic utterances. With the help of language, they are able to communicate simple or complex

[10] Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason: A New Theory of Human Understanding* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 4.

[11] Mercier and Sperber, *Enigma of Reason*, 7.

> ideas about any conceivable topic, about events distant in space and time, about general facts, or about abstractions, topics that are absent from animal communication and that are at the centre of human cultural knowledge.[12]

That complexity of human cultural knowledge necessitates what they call *epistemic vigilance* – an innate skepticism towards communicated information. In that process, trust plays a crucial role and we tend to trust differently based on how close we are to the speaker; how vested they are; how important the information is for us:

> We accept different advice from a doctor or a plumber. We believe more easily witnesses who have no personal interests at stake. We are on alert when people hesitate or, on the contrary, insist too much. We take into account people's reputation for honesty and competence. And so on.[13]

Mercier and Sperber point out that epistemic vigilance is not just useful and often necessary, but it also represents an obstacle in the sharing of information. The fact that a complex set of variables is at play – a weighing of trust, reputations, shared values, perceived honesty and disinterestedness, including mind-reading and second-guessing, etc. – brings another crucial factor into the mix: as recipients of the information we need to justify our standing in relation to the speaker. Mercier and Sperber argue that this is a primary evolutionary purpose of reason: positioning ourselves *vis-à-vis* others. How much we are aware of this habitual process is yet another matter.

That was arguably what fomented the impasse in Ludwigsburg. While we were getting to know one another, building trust, establishing a collegial mode of working, coming to terms with academic and professional seniority, negotiating cultural, ethnic and even political differences,[14] etc., but also engaging in a critique of unsustainable, exploitative or unfair industry practices, it was only to be expected that individual self-justifying – how do I position myself in relation to all this – would become part of the discussions. The matrix of issues to address was

12 Mercier and Sperber, *Enigma of Reason*, 187.

13 Mercier and Sperber, *Enigma of Reason*, 191.

14 Social differences aside, the twelve participants in the workshop were of six different nationalities. Such a mixture inevitably includes nationals from countries that are or recently have been in conflict. While this did not create a tension, it was another factor to negotiate in the group dynamics: we could not assume shared norms, maxims, values and agreements. Those perceived conflicting nationalities were not just for the relevant nationals to reconcile, but to reconcile in the presence of all the others.

many-tiered; 'digging one's heels in' and protecting one's intellectual autonomy and identity joined the fray.

How can we, as curators of intercultural action, incorporate epistemic vigilance into our process without cornering ourselves into an epistemic impasse?

Greenblatt's Abrahamic Hubris

In his essay "Theatrical Mobility," a chapter in *Cultural Mobility*, Stephen Greenblatt recounts the truly global project of theatrical translation that gave individual theatre companies from all over the world creative freedom to explore the same material. Led by the question "how can one do justice to theatrical mobility, that is, how can one get sufficiently close and inward with its processes?"[15] Greenblatt approached the American playwright Charles Mee and explained his hope: "to be close enough to track and understand every move" in Shakespeare's creative process as one would "with a living playwright" (78). Let me pass by the apparent essentialism of Greenblatt's approach to the playwriting process – as if there was a unified, mechanical set of steps that turn sources into a play. Mee and Greenblatt collaborated on "a fairly obvious" choice: writing a modern version of Shakespeare and Fletcher's lost play *Cardenio*, which took Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as source.

Reflecting on the writing experience with playwright Charles Mee, Greenblatt speaks of "the exhilarating experience of license associated with mobility" and of the sense of "almost complete freedom" in the creation (90). He doesn't specify the freedoms and the constraints they encountered but the enigmatic summary seems to suggest that the creative process surprised him. The experience also encouraged him to branch out internationally:

> Making contact with theatre companies in different parts of the world, I invited them to take the same materials, now including the play Mee and I had written, and rework them into a form that was appropriate for their particular culture. […S]pecifying that a straightforward production of our *Cardenio* was not an option, I commissioned translations of the relevant texts […]. And similarly I commissioned a translation of the new text back into English, so that I could understand something of what was going on, when I travelled to see the production.
>
> (90)

[15] Stephen Greenblatt, "Theatrical Mobility," in Stephen Greenblatt, with Ines G. Županov, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus, Heike Paul, Pál Nyíri, and Friederike Pannewick, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77. Subsequent page references are given in parentheses in the text.

Again, let me pass by the apparently default perception of the translation process and Greenblatt's trust in equivalence in translation. The results of Greenblatt's global project, again, are given very little attention. He sums up that every adaptation was widely different, despite working from the same source.

For his final reflection, Greenblatt singles out the Japanese version by playwright and director Akio Miyazawa, which clearly countered all his expectations in more than one way:

> Miyazawa remarked to me that for him mobility depends on misunderstanding, especially cross-cultural misunderstanding. Perhaps that was the principle that led him in his version of the play to undo or reverse, as in a photographic negative, virtually everything that Mee and I had done.
>
> (91)

As readers of Greenblatt's account, we cannot see all the details of the failed expectations and the cross-cultural misunderstandings at play, but it seems clear that Miyazawa is giving self-justifying reasons and is explicitly positioning himself against the creative impulse – the convolute of texts – that had been supplied as the creative impulse, or rather springboard. The intercultural misunderstanding escalated to an epistemic impasse – as Greenblatt's account infers:

> In a public discussion […] I attended in Yokohama, Miyazawa asked me what I made of all the American touches in his production – the rock music, the heavy allusions to *Easy Rider*, and so forth. I said that I regarded them as at once pervasive and superficial, since none of the depicted relationships seemed remotely conceivable to me as an American.
>
> (94)

Discussing the final scene of the play, Greenblatt and Miyazawa missed one another's points:

> Even the recognizable touch of Chekhov, I explained, was not enough to make this moment seem to me anything but strange and incomprehensible. "I understand you," Miyazawa said; "you expect that the wife should embrace her husband and welcome him home, as an American woman would do. But Japanese people do not so easily hug and kiss one another." I had, of course, thought something like the opposite: that no wife I could conceive of would, in those circumstances, welcome her husband back at all.
>
> (95)

The difference in views between Greenblatt – who presents himself and emphasises his cultural identity as an American – and Miyazawa – who is well aware of the hiatus and does his polite best to bridge it, making a gesture towards, and assumptions about the American cultural norms – underlines the impasse. They do not talk about the action, nor about the plot, nor about the writing and the creative processes of dealing with extraneous set texts. They talk about individual reasons why a moment is acceptable or objectionable; they emphasise cultural difference on symbolic action and their moral judgements of it. No wonder the deflated Greenblatt concludes his chapter "Theatrical Mobility" with the bleak, hurt words: "On the stage of the darkened theater in Yokohama, I felt I had been thoroughly initiated into the phenomenon of cultural mobility as misunderstanding" (95).

Greenblatt starts his essay with a triumphalist fantasy of a world at the Marxist end of history. He had hoped to forge bridges between cultures on the humanistic belief that in essence we are one. He transposes his glimpse of oneness in spite of differences onto Shakespeare and attempts to probe into the world's diverse institutional and intellectual legacies by studying how we (humanity) work with texts and how we transform them into new creation. There is, however, little awareness of the quasi-colonial dynamics at play. In launching his global project he not only imposes a foreign, European classic – whose work and cult rose to notoriety at the height of the Enlightenment's colonial expansion.[16] Additionally, he also replicates the epistemological model of Abrahamic religions: sending a convolute of disparate texts to the nations and engaging them in new creation according to these – an endeavour that parallels missionary work.

It is unsurprising that in such cross-cultural dynamics Miyazawa would go against the scripture, and 'undo' and 'reverse' the dictum. How else would one retain dignity and identity in such a hierarchical, asymmetrical regime?

Part II: Strategies of Curating Intercultural Action with Feedback Loops to Actuality

Dramacentrism, Mentalising and Thinking with Others

In elaborating a theory of intercultural action, the objective is to eschew the obstacles – to pass the straits of cross-cultural misunderstanding, of epistemic vigilance, of impasse – and building on a symmetrical, relationship with an embodied

[16] For a critique of the continuing cultural colonialism of Shakespeare studies, see Pavel Drábek, "'You have served me well': The Shakespeare Empire in Central Europe," *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* 28, no. 43 (2023): 83-114.

rooting in a shared experience. Of course, this does not mean disengaging reason, forcing uncritical acceptance or paralysing individuality. Any repressive or coercive models would be counterproductive in the long run. The need for retaining individual and cultural identities, a sense of uniqueness, as well as an open, transparent access to the intercultural processes we are engaging in, and its critical, rational interpretation, is paramount. I argue that in order to achieve this, the model of intercultural action has to move beyond logocentrism and build on the very *action* itself. It needs to be *dramacentric*. The intercultural action I propose is experienced collectively – we see it unravelling before us and we participate in it as direct witnesses or even actors. But how do we reflect critically on the process of experiencing it with others? How do we think with others – or mind-read, to use Mercier and Sperber's expression?

The evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, in his *How Religion Evolved: And Why It Endures*, elaborates a theory of the mind along those lines, calling it *mentalisation* and speaking of our human *capacity to mentalise*:

> Also known variously as theory of mind or mindreading, mentalizing is the ability to understand someone else's intentions. […] This capacity is exemplified by the ability to use words like *knowing*, *thinking*, *supposing*, *wondering*, *imagining*, *intending* – known collectively to philosophers of language as intentional terms.[17]

Humans are capable of high-order mentalisation: in first-order intentionality, I *know* what the image in my head is (e.g., I conjure up the image of a camel). In the second order, I am *aware* that you *know* something different to what I do (e.g., I think that your idea of a camel is mistaken, because…). Human capacity for mentalising is much greater. Dunbar and his team have discovered that 80% of adults are capable of operating on five orders of mentalisation.[18] Dunbar uses this theory to elaborate on his argument for the evolution of religion: from religious facts (third-order

[17] Robin Dunbar, *How Religion Evolved: And Why It Endures* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), 112.

[18] I have worked on theatrical mentalisation previously. The first attempt was published in Pavel Drábek, "Playing, Viewing, Touching, Modelling, Mentalizing: Theoretical Reflections on PQ 2023," *Theatre and Performance Design* 10, no. 1-2 (2024): 88-104. A more recent and more elaborate endeavour was a paper, "Theatrical Mentalisation: Experiencing Performance with Others," presented at a conference on Art as Experience (Brno: JAMU, 2025). The recording is available at https://www.theatreconferencejamu.cz/en/book-proceeding/art-of-experience/lecture/theatrical-mentalisation-experiencing-performance-with-others.

intentionality), through personal religions (fourth-order), to communal religions (fifth-order).

For my present purpose, I adopt and adapt Dunbar's concept into *theatrical mentalisation* – the collective process of experiencing performance with others. First-order theatrical mentalisation involves experiencing action as a collective, either by performing it ourselves, or by participating as immediate spectators/ witnesses. Second-order theatrical mentalisation entails my individual sensing and realising the reception of others around me. Higher orders involve confronting the experienced action with received and assumed habits, norms and values. It is the higher-order mentalising that occupies the mind the most, but it is important that as individuals within the collective we have recourse to shared experience of the action – to the new physical reality that emerged from within the collective. This recursive step gives us agency as members of the collective: it allows us to feed back to the action, to discuss the experience and confront our understanding with that of others, to modify future action, etc. In other words, the collective, shared recourse to the action is the anchor – the pendulum of Bertrand Russell's anecdote – that grounds us and brings us back to the first-order mentalisation: the act of collective experiencing in the physical world and the communal building of *lifeworld*.

This is crucial for social bonding and corresponds to Dunbar's evolutionary argument. Overcoming individual differences in building a cohesive social group necessitated a series of behaviours that "did not require direct physical touch […] laughter, singing, dancing, emotional storytelling, feasting (communal eating and the social drinking of alcohol) and, last but not least, the rituals of religion."[19] While Dunbar is concerned with the evolution of religion, there is nothing specifically theological about his concept of religion. I would argue that the collective rituals of culture – especially performative culture (music, theatre, dance) – fit the bill too. Theatre, with its holistic approach that involves all aspects of the human experience and involves language (both verbal and non-verbal), is cognate with Dunbar's notion of religion. What is more, theatre adds another order of mentalisation: as participants in a performance, we reflect not only on this world and its customs, norms, values and beliefs, but also a propositional, fictive world that is *not* ours. We are invited to experience it collectively, as a society, and come to terms with it or undo and reverse it.

[19] Dunbar, *How Religion Evolved*, 102.

Part III: Case Studies

The final section of this article briefly analyses two instances of intercultural action that I participated in conceiving and realising. They offer instances of curated activities that have successfully and effectively facilitated intercultural action.[20]

Book Industry Forum

The literary festival Authors' Reading Month (Měsíc autorského čtení, www.autorskecteni.cz) was established by the Větrné mlýny Publishers in Brno in 2000. Since then, it has grown into probably the largest event of its kind in Central Europe, taking place in two cities in the Czech Republic, two cities in Slovakia, in Lviv in Ukraine – and in several past editions also in Poland. Every year, it hosts 31 domestic authors and 31 authors from the country of honour. In 2023, for the Norwegian edition, we launched a three-day meeting of professionals working in the book industry. The Book Industry Forum hosted publishers, literary agents, literary festival organisers, cultural agencies and funders, who also met with authors, literary translators and literary scholars. In the first edition of 2023, there were participants from five countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Norway). The following year, during the Taiwanese edition of 2024, there were participants from nine countries (including Ukraine, Romania, Taiwan, Greenland and the Faroe Islands).

The concept for the forum[21] grew from the realisation that professional meetings at other book fairs and festivals – from the Frankfurt Book Fair, through the London Book Fair, to TiBE Taipei International Book Exhibition – are (1) too brief and fast; (2) too transactional, commercial and profit-driven; and (3) only for those who can afford it. Time is money is doubly true at these high-profile events and most independent and smaller publishing houses – not to mention translators and other book professionals – cannot afford to attend. Meetings at such events prioritise the big names that warrant the return of the investments. The transactions are pure business, effectively equating cultural value with economic

[20] In my article, "Playing, Viewing, Touching, Modelling, Mentalizing," 88-104, I analyse the performance *What Do Astronauts Do?* by Complejo Conejo, presented at the Prague Quadrennial in 2023. This is a remarkable instance of not only engaging the whole gamut of theatrical mentalisation, but also creating a fictive experience of intercultural action.

[21] I would like to acknowledge the sterling work of my colleagues from the Větrné mlýny Publishers and the Authors' Reading Month festival with whom we created the concept, Petr Minařík, Pavel Řehořík, Renata Obadálková, Věra Svobodová and Táňa Dluhošová in particular.

value. The fact is that this fast trading serves the large corporations best, while disadvantaging the smaller and independent book industry enterprises. The meetings also disadvantage smaller language cultures that operate in different regimes – necessitating governmental subsidies for authors, publishers and translators. Small language cultures – such as Latvian, Slovenian, Lithuanian or Armenian with 2-3 million speakers; Georgian, Slovak, Croatian and Norwegian with 4-5 million speakers; and even Czech and Greek with 10 million speakers and Taiwanese with 20 million – cannot rely on a self-sustaining book market. Subsidies are a necessary fact.

Acknowledging the different dynamics of different book cultures led us to develop the Book Industry Forum as a model of *slow trading*. Professionals who would commonly sit on the opposite sides of the table, negotiating a transaction, applying for funding or pitching a translation and negotiating the best fee, are invited to briefly present their activities – not primarily with a view to closing a deal, but to allow others from other cultures and other branches of the book industry (who also have their idiosyncratic cultures) to understand how they operate; in what circumstances and business dynamics; and what actually constitutes the bulk of their professional work. Soon we found that the cultural differences were staggering – and the reality is widely different from how professionals commonly present themselves at international events. Just like Miyazawa who was trying to second-guess Greenblatt's expectations and politely tried to bridge the cultural hiatus, most professionals adopt the assumed cross-cultural modus operandi and second-guess how they would best be understood to the "others." Getting a glimpse of the actual operational reality of their activities humanised the industry: there suddenly was a lifeworld to relate to. This also opened an opportunity for bonding.

During the social parts of the programme, participants could talk, free from any agendas. This autotelic social activity did most of the intercultural work. Understanding who I am talking to and how different I am from them, while sharing a common interest in books – largely a selfless and altruistic interest – allowed participants to negotiate their own relationships, and if they liked being in the relationship, they started talking about new book projects. (And there are already books published that started at the forums.) Very interestingly, the format of the Book Industry Forum levelled economic differences: a major publishing house representative with Nobelists in their portfolio was talking with an independent publisher (a one-person enterprise in a distant settlement in the middle of Norway).

This was *slow trading*: building a new international and interdisciplinary culture that suits its participants and builds on complementarity and the possibility of future collaborations.

Dramaturgical Translation as a Blueprint for Intercultural Action

Our meeting in Ludwigsburg, discussed in my opening section, was motivated by our shared interest in theatre translation. The model we presented – which I call *dramaturgical translation* – arises from the fact that a majority of the titles produced in Czech theatres are plays in translation.[22] And yet, very little attention is given to the theatrical qualities of the translations themselves, especially compared with the attention that new plays receive in good creative settings.

The common practice of theatre translation is that an agency negotiates the translation rights from the foreign copyright holder, and then commissions a translation from a translator. (In small countries this is often the same person, who commissions him- or herself, or a permanent agency collaborator. There are also frequent instances of translation monopolies.) This translation is then offered to theatres for productions. But it comes with several prohibitive conditions; the two most prominent (though certainly not universal) are these: (1) Very often the foreign copyright owner does not permit any changes to the play; not infrequently even no cuts are allowed. (2) The translator exercises their own copyright and refuses any adjustments or changes to be made to their translation: it is often a matter of informal, unofficial or personal negotiations, arm-twistings and flattery that makes the translator relent and adopt proposed changes. Failing that, either the company make the changes anyway, or the performance suffers – i.e., everyone from the actors to the spectators. On a philological level, the translation may well be correct; any mistakes of that kind can be argued with the translator (if discovered, that is). Otherwise, the painful reality of the rehearsal room entails actors, dramaturgs and directors battling with lines that have little gestic quality,

[22] The exact statistics is a difficult issue. New productions, as documented by the Theatre Institute (Czech Cultural Institute), often feature the adapter as the leading author, though the play in question comes from another language. This is itself a symptom of the prominent place that plays in translation have in Czech culture. While the absolute number of productions may be originally Czech, the number of shows (the length of the run) and the audience numbers (how many people actually saw the show), are incomplete or not documented. A studio production of a dance piece, performed once or twice for a small audience, features in the documentation in the same way as a musical or an agency production of a comedy that has hundreds of nights with large audiences. In most cases, these box office hits are plays in translation.

ignore or entirely misunderstand the dramatic situation, and have no rhythm and cadence.[23]

The objective of *dramaturgical translation* is to co-create a performance text of the play in translation while keeping its semantic indeterminacy (ambiguities and intentionally fluid meanings). This is motivated by a wish to:

1. improve the quality of translated plays, and in so doing the quality of the performance culture;
2. save time, effort and creative energies in the rehearsal room;
3. acknowledge the importance of the creative input of actors, dramaturgs, scenographers and producers, and enhance their interdisciplinary cooperation;
4. establish translation as an original creative cultural act, not a mechanical or derivative process, and in so doing to:
5. emancipate the unique, relational position of smaller, subdominant cultures, who are not satellites of cultural centres, but creative actors in their own right.[24]

As mentioned in the opening section of this article, *dramaturgical translation* is collective work that brings together:

- the philologist, who understands the original;
- the theatre historian, who understands the theatrical culture that produced the original play;
- the dramaturg, who understands the receiving theatrical culture;
- the actors, who are willing to experiment with transpersonation and transbodiment[25] in exploring the theatrical potential of the play (the *give*, to use the theatre jargon); and,
- the scenographer and/or producer, who considers the material, spatial and institutional aspects of performance and how these condition the production of a play.

23 I apologise to any readers who find this petty or upsetting. Discussions with international colleagues have confirmed that this is far from rare. They know that reality from their theatre as well.

24 This last point was the subject of my keynote lecture "Cultural Reception as Culinary Recipes: Critical Macaronism and Intercultural Dialogues," delivered *ad honorem* Professor Bohuslav Mánek at the University of Hradec Králové, 27 March 2025.

25 For transpersonation and transbodiment, see Otakar Zich's *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy*, ed. David Drozd and Pavel Drábek, trans. Pavel Drábek and Tomáš Kačer (Prague: Karolinum, 2024), 464.

In the collective process of the *dramaturgical translation* as a performance model engages the group in reading the dramatic text in several interdisciplinary ways:[26]

1. *dramaturgical reading*: dramatic persona; dramatic situation; utterance (stage rhetoric);
2. *linguistic reading*: semantic density; phonetic qualities; sociolinguistic methods;
3. *sociocultural reading*: convention and style as a social fact; social commentary, humour; regional, social and artificial accents;
4. *versological and musicological reading*: rhythm, prosody; musical qualities; gesticity and breath; and,
5. *anthropological reading*: proxemics, spatial aspects; cultural materiality; embodiment.

In the workshops, participants are given extracts from the play. To flesh out the model, we designed three manuals to focus the participants' attention to specific problems – for actors, for dramaturgs and directors, and for scenographers and producers.[27] The proviso was that we have a reliable philological translation of the play in hand but it needs thinking through as a *theatrical* text. Everyone received the following pointers:

- The embodied text: the translation does not think through our bodies yet. To what extent should the personas be humans made of flesh and bones and to what extent are they abstractions, stereotypes, or perhaps caricatures? Which of these features are carried by the costumes?
- Social conventions (the style, the stylization): personas speak in some way, they interact in some way and think together in some way. How do they interact and respond to one another? What do they say to themselves, to one another, and which of it is a public matter?
- The spatial text: gestures, distances, spatial relations, intimacy and proxemics (in the sense of Henri Lefebvre and Gay McAuley).

[26] By way of acknowledgement, the methodology of *dramaturgical translation* results from the work we did as a team, including Hana Pavelková, Tomáš Kačer, David Drozd and myself. We have benefitted from the advice and help from Kateřina Jebavá, Michal Zetel, Lukáš Rieger, Lukáš Kopecký, Michal Zahálka, and numerous actors and students who have participated in the dramaturgical translation workshops.

[27] For a workshop at JAMU, which included theatre historians, I devised a specific manual asking about the type of historical knowledge that would help actors, dramaturgs, directors, scenographers and producers in their creative work with a particular play.

- Material relations and the public sphere: what does this theatre as an institution aim at? What does it want to achieve? What motivates the participants of this social event? What is their relationship to material wealth? What are the social values of this world?

Individual manuals ask more specific questions. Here is a short selection:

From the Actors' Manual:

- Some plays are intentionally conceived as conversational flourishes and that's how they are stylised. Finding a sensible compromise or balance between this ostentatious artistry and period speech is significant.
- Please reflect on your and our work with rhythm, with the cadence of sentences, with focusing and gradating lines and jokes. Not always does the joke want to be straightforward; that would come across in the genre as cheap. Personas love to present their public face ostentatiously hand in hand with their ability to be in perfect control of it.
- We need to look for what individual personas are playing about. If it is only some abstract idea, then we are wrong. The question then is: what is the dramatic effect of their personas and their actions? What is the role in this of their outward mask and of their stylised speech?

From the Dramaturgs' and Directors' Manual:

- For each scene or rhythmical sequence, please formulate briefly (in a few words) what is going on, what the personas' motivations are and what they manage to achieve.
- Please reflect on the work with rhythm, the cadence of sentences, the focusing of actors' lines and the punchlines of jokes.
- The sophistication/artificiality of the dialogue. Some plays are intentionally conceived as conversational flourishes. Finding a sensible compromise or balance between this artifice and period language is crucial.
- Consider what role language and its stylisation plays. This of course differs from author to author and sometimes even from play to play. Clarifying to what extent stylised language plays a significant role is crucial.

From the Scenographers' and Producers' Manual:

- What are the possible spatial relations between personas on the stage? What are the spatial relations between the spectators as individuals, the audience as a whole, and the scene portrayed by the action?

- The personas are not our contemporaries. To what extent are they people made of flesh and bones and to what extent are they abstractions, stereotypes, or perhaps caricatures? How *material* (tangible) are they then and how is their materiality carried by the costumes? What properties and objects do they operate with? How real (seemingly real) are the spaces they occupy (i.e., how real should the space we make for them be)?
- Theatre optics: how do personas *see* other personas? Do they speak directly to them, or do they speak 'through' the spectators? How much do the personas and the actors *see* the audience and what kind of spatial relations do they set up?
- What kind of public sphere is being created here? What are the principles and social mechanisms on which people meet at this event?

The manuals take five minutes to read and the pointers comprised are not hard-and-fast rules to follow in the workshops. They only help focus the participants' attention with a view to the professional role they play in the team.[28] With that focusing they workshop short scenes from the translated play. Some participants may wish to only observe while others prefer to get involved physically – again, this openness enhances inclusivity and allows for individual approaches.

The *dramaturgical translation* model has so far proven very effective. While it allows for a significant element of playfulness and creativity, it formalises the shared objectives of the collective. The constant recourse to ostensive, empirical facts – the exploratory performances of the scenes – and the collective reflection on the process has successfully broken down the boundaries of epistemic vigilance and, as mentioned above, prevented the impasse of suspicious readings and speculations. Though necessarily inconclusive over the short periods of the workshops we realised, the knowledge and insights generated from the explorations have been immensely instructive and helpful. For theatre professionals there was an additional positive outcome: their immaterial and often selfless, idealistic and altruistic work became visible and acknowledged as valuable by others. The model worked not only across different professional cultures but also internationally – as I mentioned in the opening section on Ludwigsburg.

Curating such collective activities engendered efficacious intercultural action: individuals from different professional and cultural backgrounds gained agency in the shared work. The individual's contribution complemented others; the differences became a strength. I argue that this model is far from just a method of

[28] This methodology is inspired in no small way by Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

translation. The interactive strategies at its core can serve – and have served – as blueprints for intercultural action in non-theatrical and non-educational settings. What participants agree on is not a verbal utterance, a statement, but action that consensually determines and changes their social reality, their lifeworld.

Conclusion: Not Just Sailing Together: Agency in Shared Values

In his influential book *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, Rutger Bregman draws on historic examples to address such crucial questions as "How do you reconcile sworn enemies?"[29] Citing research conducted by psychologist Gordon Allport, he asserts that it is direct contact that overcomes ingrained hostilities and animosities. He concludes:

> Perhaps the most powerful proof for Allport's contact hypothesis came from the sea. When African Americans were first admitted to the largest seamen's union in 1938, there was initially widespread resistance. But once black and white seamen actually began working together, the protests ceased.[30]

Being on the same boat – literally and metaphorically – is the way forward, he argues. He proceeds to give further examples of cooperation in war and tribal conflict across enemy lines. I don't undermine, nor discredit the historic examples Bregman brings. But the existential circumstances of war, public violence, or the dangers of sailing bring in different dynamics. The issue in curating intercultural action is how to foster thorough interaction rather than simple transactional cooperation. In other words, intercultural action requires not just working towards an immediate shared goal (such as keeping a ship afloat, moving a heavy object, concluding an exchange of goods) but also engaging shared objectives, values and collective growth. In a word, progressing from confrontation to coevolution. Such a process requires that participants – the interactors – both work and think together, and allow one another the freedom – the agency – to grow and evolve in the collective process, not only despite their cultural and epistemological differences, but thanks to them.

[29] Rutger Bregman, *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, trans. Elizabeth Manton and Erica Moore (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 353-56.

[30] Bregman, *Humankind*, 355.

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