

Translating: a Frayn of mind

Michael Frayn is lauded as a novelist and playwright, but some of his most enduring works are his translations of Chekhov. **Jill Dunning** finds out what fascinates him about translating

Michael Frayn is making literary news again. His 10th novel *Spies* was shortlisted for the Whitbread and Booker awards. It's an intriguing story as his wife Claire Tomalin was shortlisted in the Whitbread biography section for her *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self*. But while Frayn is celebrated for his fiction and has won awards for his plays, he is less widely known to the general public as a critically acclaimed Russian translator. His versions of Anton Chekhov's plays have been variously described as 'needle-sharp' and 'splendidly lucid and alive'.

Jacek Laskowski, a fellow translator, lecturer and dramatic adaptor, has dubbed Frayn's translations of the works of playwright Anton Chekhov as 'as close to perfection in the translator's art as it is possible to get'.

Frayn puts the translator's art and skill up there with the original writer, although he does admit that translating a play is all too often like 'a child sitting in daddy's lap who is apparently driving the car by holding the steering wheel – but papa has actually got his foot on the clutch, accelerator, and brake, and is doing all the work'.

When it comes to translating Chekhov, Frayn is first to admit that 'Chekhov has done all the real work – invented the plot and the characters.'

Frayn's interest in foreign languages goes right back to when he was at school but it really began to pay dividends when he entered National

Service between school and university.

‘At that stage the army had a course for Russian translators and interpreters – in fact several courses – and I was sent on the Russian interpreters course at Cambridge,’ Frayn explains. ‘It was run by the university. You were living in army officers’ quarters but being taught each day by university staff.’

The Cambridge course lasted six months, followed by a six-month continuation course at an army camp in Bodmin – though Frayn is cynical about his linguistic skills and whether they helped much towards Britain’s understanding of Russia.

‘I never did any interpreting for the army; there was just translating of documents,’ he says. ‘They were all marked “secret” but they were actually mostly cuttings from Soviet newspapers, so in what way they were secret, God only knows.’

‘They concerned topics such as radio design. Well, although my Russian was reasonable by that stage, I didn’t know anything about radio design and you can’t really translate a technical subject that you don’t understand. I doubt whether my translations were comprehensible to anyone.’

Frayn went on to study at Cambridge as a contemporary of Alan Bennett and Bamber Gascoigne. Initially, he studied French and Russian but swapped to ‘moral sciences’, now better known as philosophy. Frayn’s first love, however, was writing. He became involved with university magazine *Granta* at a time when film director and restaurant critic Michael Winner was editor and was also a principle writer for the Footlights Revue which helped establish a whole generation of comic performers.

Professionally, his writing career started when he went to work for the *Manchester Guardian* and as a journalist with a knowledge of Russian, he was doubtless an obvious candidate to cover Harold Macmillan’s visit to Moscow. With his Footlights experience under his belt, it’s hardly surprising that he established his name as columnist with a flair for satire and comedy.

During the 1960s, when he was working for *The Observer*, he published his first novels: *The Tin Men* (1965); *The Russian Interpreter* (1966); and *A Very Private Life* (1968). It wasn’t until 1970 that his first play was performed – to less than enthusiastic reviews. But in 1975, *Alphabetical Order* won the Evening Standard Best Comedy of the Year Award. Over the next few years,



nevertheless he persevered. The first of his Chekhov translations to be performed was *The Cherry Orchard* in 1978.

‘I got in quite an emotional state translating that,’ he admits. ‘I was absolutely taken over by the play. Translating is a very good way of reading a text as you get to know it very well before you even start on the translation.’

‘You have to understand how it works as a play and what the dynamics are, otherwise you are not going to manage to reproduce it in the target language. And, of course, you have to track down all the allusions. I really marinated myself in that text.’

‘I went through the text over and over again until I felt absolutely at home with it and then sat down to produce an English version. And then I got that moment of panic when I realised that the play was inherently in Russian and there was no way it could ever be got out of Russian and into English – I couldn’t even translate the first stage direction because it seemed to be irremovably lodged in Russian.’

‘To create deliberately anachronistic translations that some people have done, where Chekhov characters say “oh, shit!” and so forth, is really not satisfactory.’

there was further critical acclaim for his plays such as *Donkey’s Years* and *Make a Break*.

It was around this time that Frayn was asked by the National Theatre if he would like to do some translation. It was suggested that he attempted the works the Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni.

‘Unfortunately, I’ve only got tourist Italian which is rather inadequate for translating an 18th-century playwright,’ says Frayn. ‘But I was very keen to work for the National Theatre, so I went and read some translations of Goldoni, but I couldn’t see from the translations how the plays worked, I couldn’t get the feel of them at all. It was like trying to do brain surgery in thick fur gloves.’

‘So, hesitantly, I said “why don’t you ask me to translate some Russian plays because I can actually read the original”.’

Frayn reckons the National thought that commissioning a writer to translate a play who could read the original was a very bizarre idea, but

‘But the panic passed and I just had to get on with it.’

Frayn avoided reading any other translations until he had finished his version, although he confesses that he ‘managed to correct one or two howlers’ after consulting earlier works and has since amended many of his Chekhov translations thanks to input from other specialists – particularly Dr Donald Rayfield, who now lectures at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London.

Besides his skill at Russian and his ear for dialogue – evident in both his own plays and novels – his tools of the translation trade include the Russian Academy of Science of the Soviet Union’s *Use of the Russian Language*, which he describes as a ‘wonderful four-volume dictionary, which is a bit like our *Oxford Dictionary*’. He also admires Marcus Wheeler’s *Russian Oxford Dictionary* and *Unbegaun’s Russian Surnames*, published by Oxford’s Clarendon Press.

In *Chekhov Plays*, translated and

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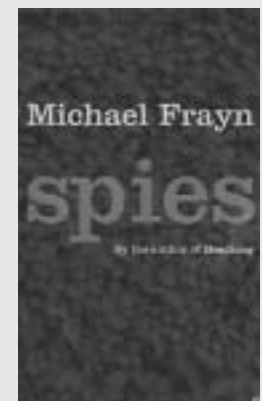
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introduced by Michael Frayn, published by Methuen, he says that translating a play is akin to writing one. ‘The first principle, surely, is that each line should be what that particular character would have said at that particular moment if he had been a native English-speaker.’

But does this mean there’s a danger of removing the innate national character – in this case ‘Russianness’ – of the original work? Frayn thinks not: ‘I think the Russianness has to come out of the substance of what the character is saying, not the style he is saying it in.’

‘I don’t think you can have “little mothers” and such phrases. I don’t think anyone thinks that they should be in translations now, but they were there in earlier versions.’

‘I really do believe the characters have to express themselves in absolute English otherwise it’s not really a translation. The point is that the original doesn’t sound quaint and odd and foreign to Russians, so it shouldn’t sound quaint and odd to English people.’

‘It should sound at least as much well-worn as the original does to people that speak that language.’

There is a school of thought in the theatre world that thinks a translation has a shelf-life of around 10 years before the language used starts to go out of fashion, in which case the Frayn versions of Chekhov would be starting

to date. Frayn considers the point before largely dismissing it, adding that his translation of *The Seagull* is soon to be performed at The Royal Exchange in Manchester (February 26 to May 10).

‘When I say that the dialogue should be what the character would have said at that particular point in the play, I think that does imply that the language is suitable for the period of the play,’ he explains. ‘I don’t think it should be archaic, but it shouldn’t be anachronistic.’

For instance, the characters in *The Cherry Orchard* are talking as they would talk in Russia at the turn of the 20th century, so the translation should sound like how they would have spoken in English in the same period.

‘In that sense, I think translations shouldn’t age. To create deliberately anachronistic translations, that some people have done where Chekhov characters say “oh, shit!” and so forth, is really not satisfactory.’

However, many producers in the British theatre like to commission someone new to do translation when they are planning a production. But as

far as he’s aware, Frayn is the only playwright working in English who can read the Russian originals.

‘I wouldn’t dream of doing a translation for the page, as there are vastly better Russian translators around,’ he adds.

He strongly believes that there isn’t enough foreign drama translated and produced in the UK. ‘This country is very chauvinistic about literature in general,’ he says, going on to rue the fact that besides Chekhov ‘which is done over and over again’ and possibly Ibsen, Strindberg and Molière, there are few foreign classics performed on the British stage.

‘For a long time, people said that Molière would never work in English, but there have been some brilliant translations,’ he says.

After all the emotion that has gone into producing a translation he is happy with, Frayn seems as protective about his translated plays as he is about his original work.

‘Actors tend to turn up with their standard translation and four others and say, “I see in the Penguin

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Robert Glenister as Astrov and Helen Schlesinger as Yelena in Frayn's translation of *Uncle Vanya* at The Royal Exchange Theatre

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translation, the character says such and such – I'd rather go back to that".

'So now, if I go to rehearsals I give them a pep talk on how I'm as committed to my translation as I am to one of my original texts – and I wouldn't be any more sympathetic to the ideas of changing it as I would to changing some of my own plays.

'You can't pick and chose like that. You've got to follow the voice of the translator.'

Frayn is clear about the difference of a translation and an adaptation. He freely admits that his play *Wild Honey* was a version of Chekhov's first untitled play which was written when the Russian writer was only 21 and didn't know much about playwriting. His adaptation – billed as a 'translation' by publisher Methuen – of Yuri Trifonov's *The Exchange*, is a different story.

'I saw the play in Moscow. Trifonov was not a playwright, but writer of novels and novellas, and he adapted two of his novellas for Yuri Lyubimov, director at the Theatre on the Taganka in Moscow,' explains Frayn.

'Lyubimov was a very stylised director. His production of *The Exchange* was done with all the cast sitting in a row on the stage with a heap of junk behind them, it worked because everyone in the audience lived in Moscow and didn't need things explained to them.

'When I translated it, I thought it really ought to be fleshed out more for an English audience who weren't familiar with living conditions in the city or all the allusions of the play.

'I expanded it slightly – partly by putting bits back in from the original story and dividing it into two acts. I

went back to Moscow and showed Trifonov my version, he got it read for him, and he approved it.'

Conversely, Frayn has also witnessed having his own original work translated into other languages. Besides Russian, he can read Czech, French and German and always checks beforehand to make sure he's happy with the text.

'If it's a good production, then I like it. If it's not, I don't,' he says. 'There was an absolutely wonderful production of *Noises Off* in Russian about 12 years ago. It was before the changes and at a time when they didn't play farces in Moscow,' he recalls.

'They didn't know how to go about it, so they rehearsed for a year in the Russian style and did it seriously – and comedy is always funnier when it's played seriously. The play is about a company of not very good actors putting on a rotten play, and they did it as a company of actors who were really working hard to make a success of a second-rate play.'

But did the audience get the farce element? 'It took them a long time. I saw it just after it had opened and there was absolute silence during act one, but then they began to get the point. It ran for 10 years.'

Whether writing original works or translating, Frayn endeavours to adhere to office hours. For many years, he has kept a flat in Regents Park, not far from where he lives with Tomalin, which he uses for working.

'It just seems the natural way to do it,' he explains. 'It depends what stage I'm at with a project but I tend to work from around 10am to 5pm on serious writing and then work on clerking and so forth for a couple of hours after that.'

Whether he will continue with that practice when he and Tomalin move to Richmond, Surrey, is difficult to say. 'We both intend to give up but it almost certainly won't happen,' he says. 'One of the attractions of the new house is that it's big enough for Claire and myself to work in.'

So will we see anymore translations from Frayn after he moves out to the roomy Richmond residence? 'I'll see what turns up,' he says. 'I find translating something that's too beguiling and it's hard. It's not as hard as writing original plays but it feels as if you are.

'You know that it's a workable play otherwise you wouldn't be translating it,' he adds. 'The nice thing about writing your own play is you haven't the faintest idea whether it's going to work.'

