



## **UWL REPOSITORY**

**repository.uwl.ac.uk**

Adapting Copla: the interplay of languages in making The Copla Musical

Postigo, Alejandro ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7922-8953> (2021) Adapting Copla: the interplay of languages in making The Copla Musical. *European Journal of Theatre and Performance*, 3 (SEPT). pp. 214-255. ISSN 2664-1860

10.36828/Positigo.265

This is the Accepted Version of the final output.

UWL repository link: <https://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/7619/>

**Alternative formats:** If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact: [open.research@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:open.research@uwl.ac.uk)

### **Copyright:**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy:** If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us at [open.research@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:open.research@uwl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **Rights Retention Statement:**

## **Adapting *copla*: the interplay of languages in making *The Copla Musical*.**

Throughout the last century, musical theatre has increasingly become an Anglo-dominated industry where opportunities for cultural exchange are rare and often limited to translations of Anglo-American commodities exported around the world. Translation theorist André Lefevere argues that the distribution and regulation of cultural capital by means of translation depends on the needs of the audience, the patron or initiator of the translation and the relative prestige of the source and target cultures and their languages (1998: 44). In this article, I will explore the linguistic negotiations and politics of translation involved in the making of my musical theatre show *The Copla Musical*. Through the development of this artistic project, I have somehow rebelled against the current impositions of musical theatre in Spain, which is heavily influenced by Anglo-American imports and uniform globalizing tendencies. In exploring the potential of Spanish *copla*, a cultural form of the Spanish past that did not cross Spanish-language boundaries, I aim to contribute to reversing this uniform tendency. In *The Copla Musical*, I look at the political and linguistic implications of *copla*, a historical song genre that, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, creatively managed to slip past censorship mechanisms at a time of dictatorial control in Spain, and popularised at both ends of a divided country and society. By doing so, I irremediably challenge the natural market flow of many Anglophone musical theatre imports to Spain, but few Spanish exports abroad.

The development of an autochthonous musical theatre tradition in Spain was disrupted during the Francoist dictatorship (1939-1975) and progressively replaced with the importation of Anglo-American musicals in the period that followed the transition to democracy post-1975. This historical disruption of Spanish musical theatre occurred at a parallel historical moment to the American integration of song and plot into what is known as 'the book musical' (1927-43).<sup>1</sup> The Spanish musical theatre of this period was populated with *copla* songs: evocative songs that find their first musical foundations in folkloric forms like *pasodoble* and *flamenco*, and are mainly

---

<sup>1</sup> The establishment of the book musical is pinned to the period between the opening of American musicals *Showboat* (1927) and *Oklahoma!* (1943), the first musicals to integrate libretto, score and choreography with a dramatic goal.

differentiated from those musical forms by their theatrical quality. Despite *copla*'s popularity in Spain, which extends to this day, its relationship to other song styles and musical theatre forms which prevailed from the UK and USA has not been explored in any degree of detail. But given the increasing sensitivity towards mega-musical<sup>2</sup> imports in Spain,<sup>3</sup> during the last decade I have researched historical comparisons between *copla* and the musical theatre produced in Britain and America with a view to facilitating the intercultural exploration proposed in my Practice-as-Research (PaR) show *The Copla Musical*, a project that investigates *copla*'s roots as a storytelling form, its position as a folkloric genre and its role as a subversive tool in the Spanish 20<sup>th</sup>-century zeitgeist.

In creating *The Copla Musical*, I followed a phased intercultural process focused on collaborating with a group of artists representing both Anglophone and Spanish cultures, and presenting each iteration of the work to a diverse audience from Spanish and non-Spanish backgrounds who experienced the show from various cultural perspectives. My collaborators throughout the various phases of development have included American directors Sarah Johnson and RM Sánchez-Camus, British directors Dom Riley and Tian Glasgow and Spanish directors Reyes Hiraldo, Andrea Jiménez and Enrique Muñoz. Equally the creative team has included a variety of actors, musicians and artists from British, Spanish and other international backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> This example of PaR looks at different traditions of musical theatre in Spain, Britain and America and attempts to create a show that draws on all of these. The intercultural creation of a modern *copla* musical also engages with the principles underpinning the creation of musicals in a globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century. I would argue that the process of crafting a hybrid form of musical theatre through collaborative processes responds to the manner that musical theatre generally developed in America, through appropriations of new forms and functions from other local and foreign cultures.

---

<sup>2</sup> Playwright and scholar Dan Rebellato defines mega-musicals as 'visually spectacular, quasi-operatic musical theatre productions, many of them globally successful, performed thousands of times in front of millions of people in hundreds of productions in dozens of cities worldwide' (Rebellato 2006: 98).

<sup>3</sup> Marta Mateo (2008) and Mia Patterson (2010) explain in detail the growing demand of Anglo-American mega-musicals in Spain throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

<sup>4</sup> Including artists from Brazil, Greece, Colombia, Portugal, Italy and Germany.

In this article, I will explore the dynamics of translation, history and culture involved in the making of *The Copla Musical*, for which I will engage with the debate of foreignization versus domestication in the translation of texts, and discuss the theories of translation and intercultural exchange as presented by Lawrence Venuti, Sirkku Aaltonen, Steve Gooch, Eugenio Barba, André Lefevere and Richard Schechner, among others. This research identifies the discourses of dramaturgy and performance style(s) in the context of the dominant paradigms of musical theatre produced in America and Britain, and analyses how an intercultural approach drawing on a specific Spanish tradition challenges and explores the creation of a new musical by bringing material that has not circulated outside the Spanish-speaking world, in this case *copla*, into the arena of Anglo-American musical theatre. At the same time, the practice generates questions that challenge, renew or complement current theory about intercultural adaptation.

### **An introduction to our intercultural processes**

*The Copla Musical* explores how the *copla* songs that once formed part of revues and folkloric theatre shows might be adapted and integrated into a contemporary musical theatre show conceived and presented outside Spain that negotiates *copla*'s cultural identity in alternative linguistic and cultural contexts. The practice thus aims to combine this Spanish folkloric song-form with principles inherent to the musical theatre artworks found in Britain and America that I group under the term 'Anglophone musical theatre'. Anglophone musical theatre has drawn on and adopted a variety of indigenous art forms through its historical development; therefore, it could arguably facilitate too the integration of Spanish *copla* into a book musical structure that could generate new interest in the genre outside of Spain. As per the book musical integrative structure of plot and songs, the individual self-contained narratives of participating *copla* songs in *The Copla Musical* required a process of restructuring to fit the newly written dramatic English text.

*Copla* songs often told stories of love, jealousy and disillusion, in which the singer either exposed their religious beliefs, protested abuses of power, enhanced national traditions such as bullfighting or professed their love for the homeland, its

landscapes and its customs. Song narratives were mostly defined by an emotional journey in which the character either resolved their conflict at the end of the song, or often died. These self-contained narratives made structural journeys of a beginning, a climax and an ending within the short timeframe of 3 or 4 minutes. Integrating a selection of 16 songs into *The Copla Musical* involved several compromises, such as modifying or opening the songs' beginnings and endings in favour of a longer narrative. This longer narrative aimed to introduce spectators to the political and historical context of the songs, and so its plot is set in 1939, taking the audience in a journey from the Spanish Civil War into post-war Spain and America, through the experiences of a transgender artist exiled to America, a direct parallel to the reality lived by many artists that did not align with the socio-political impositions of Franco's dictatorial regime and were persecuted because of their beliefs, identities and sexual orientations.

The selection of songs responded to thematic concerns and suitability to contribute to this storytelling. As author of *The Copla Musical*, I spent a few years crafting the script in negotiation with various fitting songs that in turn determined some plot points and character developments. Like most creative processes in musical theatre, the storytelling impulse started with the writer, and his creation was handed to a group of actors and directors to facilitate dramatic exploration and the transformation of words into actions. With aims to create an equitable basis of exchange, the Spanish author gathered an international team of mainly Spanish, British and American actors and directors that collaborated in the creation of the work. Additionally, the input of other international artists such as a dramaturges, lyricists and musical arrangers has been essential in creating a bridge between Anglo-American and Spanish musical theatre cultures to facilitate this cultural exchange. Shannon Scrofano questions the possibility to develop a cross-cultural dialogue without sacrificing the unique identities of individual speakers (2012: 290), as actually in a creative engagement of these characteristics, artists must be willing to let go of their own referents and understand how to position themselves within the project. Participants must be open to adapt their cultural knowledge and mode of expression for a common

cause: a bridge of readability that represents an intercultural commitment. But what does it take for this cultural bridge to become the final goal, the performance?

Translation theorist Lawrence Venuti explains that a translator consults many different target-language cultural materials (dictionaries, texts, values, paradigms, ideologies) throughout his activity, and that this consultation reduces and supplements the text, even when source-language cultural materials are also consulted (2012: 24). This process is replicated to a variable extent in the creation of *The Copla Musical*. In leading the writing and production processes of this PaR through its several phases, I have identified as Spanish author, and assumed a representative position of my Spanish culture, especially when collaborating with British artists. Nonetheless, since 2007 I live and am fully immersed in Anglophone culture, where I encounter cultural values, paradigms and ideas that I interact with at both personal and creative levels. The meeting of these values is an unavoidable consequence of my life in England, but this must also remain an active initiative, an effort to approach and understand a whole signifying system in which I have not grown or developed my cultural references. In seeking the positive acceptance of *The Copla Musical*, and generally in the interests of this research project, I have put my best efforts and immersed into the UK target culture. However, this is not necessarily the case of my British collaborators: none of them spoke Spanish, neither they were familiar with Spanish culture before this project, or had any previous knowledge of *copla*. Their experience of Spanish culture was filtered through my own, as well as through my artistic vision as the project's lead artist. In principle, this does not sound like an equitable basis of exchange, as both cultural agents do not participate in the project with equal conditions. Nonetheless, the act of collaboration was a chief motive in this project where we reached for relevance of new and hybrid forms, with an understanding of the needs of the show to speak to today's world.

My artistic vision guided a process focused on incorporating other artists and, through a collective act of will and effort, expressing that vision on stage for others to experience. In *The Copla Musical* I used the source, Spanish *copla*, to explore the historical development of Spanish musical theatre and its potential externalization beyond Spanish culture. My personal practice aims to rejuvenate *copla* in an

international context while critically reflect on the intercultural processes that are implicit in my research of historical revisionism in international musical theatre making. Practice enabled my position as a researcher and as an artist; it allowed me to explore changing modes of readability from one culture to another. There was a quest to move from what are independent forms of musical theatre towards the recognizable musical theatre in the context as we know it. The 'known' was placed on a stage to be witnessed. But the 'not known' (*copla*) was also placed at the same intersection, in relation to the 'known'. The challenges of adapting the 'not known' into the 'known' affected several areas including the dramaturgy, music, lyrics, performance, production and reception of the new intercultural work.

### **Translating *copla* into musical theatre**

As defined by Venuti, 'translation is the forcible replacement of the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text with a text that will be intelligible to the target-language reader' (2012: 18).<sup>5</sup> Venuti asserts that translators receive minimal recognition for their work, and that praise occurs by operating in an unnoticed manner.<sup>6</sup> The transparency that Venuti refers to is, in most cases, challenging to achieve and, if taken too literally, can possibly be counter-productive. Such is the case of *The Copla Musical*, in which the translation of *copla* songs takes place in a new historical and geographical context, which differs from their original site of production in post-Civil War Spain: a political context marked by artistic censorship. The social relevance of *copla* songs in Spain is manifest in their role as part of the collective memory of Spanish society and a key component of popular culture throughout a difficult period in the country's history. *The Copla Musical* must be formulated for an audience in Britain that is not familiar with *copla* or its history, and this audience needs, I would argue, to understand the contents of the show in order to engage with

---

<sup>5</sup> Venuti specifies further that while 'this cultural difference cannot be fully eliminated, it must however be reduced in favour of intelligibility in the new culture, which in itself offers a new set of creative possibilities' (2012: 18).

<sup>6</sup> 'The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator's effort to ensure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning' (Venuti 2012: 1). Venuti defends that 'the more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the more visible the writer of the foreign text' (2012: 2).

it. Alternatively, other strategies must be put in place to appeal to the emotions, as the original song lyrics did.

Venuti talks about aiming for an ‘illusion of transparency’ to ensure easy readability of the original works in the new language (2012: 1). But how can translation make social, political and personal contexts visible in the limited text enclosed in the lyrics of a song? *Copla* songs were mostly written and reached their peak of popularity during Franco’s dictatorship in Spain (1939-75). The meaning that these songs might achieve in 21<sup>st</sup> century England and beyond, is unlikely to be concerned with the historical references that influenced the creation of the songs, as their new audience is not privy to this history. In order to achieve this illusion of transparency, one must question how to convey the contextual messages of these songs, but also reflect on whether they can stand alone outside the context in which they first existed. Ultimately, I must consider the relevance of those historical premises when the songs are presented in a new language, out of their original context. Margherita Laera defends that ‘a translation must above all “create a context” for the foreign text in the target-language performance. [...] The creation of a new context is necessarily achieved in collaboration with the director of the new theatre version’ (2011: 215). In *The Copla Musical* there is a double adaptation at play: first there is a linguistic translation of the song lyrics from Spanish to English, addressing the easy readability that adheres to the usage Venuti talks about, but secondly, there is a dramatic adaptation that involves the insertion of the newly translated lyrics into a longer narrative. This dramatic adaptation provides opportunities to further contextualise the original meanings and significance of the songs within the new narrative.

Many of the songs included in the project are authored by composer Maestro Quiroga and lyricist Rafael de León, one of the most prolific writing teams of copla.<sup>7</sup> As this project advanced through its research stages, I sought permission from Manuel López-Quiroga, son of the prolific composer of the same name, and inheritor of the copyright<sup>8</sup> of his father’s songs.<sup>9</sup> Sixteen of these songs have been part of the different

---

<sup>7</sup> Song titles in the project include: Y sin embargo te quiero (But I Love You Anyway), Te lo juro yo (This I Swear To You), María de la O, Dime que me quieres (Tell Me That You Love Me) and Tatuaje (Tattoo).

<sup>8</sup> In relation to authorship, British and American law define translation as an ‘adaptation’ or ‘derivative work’ based on an ‘original work of authorship’, whose copyright, including the exclusive right ‘to

versions of *The Copla Musical*. Permission was granted and I proceeded to undertake the translations in collaboration with a team of British lyricists. The translation of these songs has been a collaborative effort in which I attempted a first version in verse (a direct translation from the Spanish original), that my British collaborators then modified to achieve greater connection with English rhyme, prose and general idiosyncrasy, and that I finally reviewed to ensure the modifications adjusted to the show's dramatic narrative while they preserved the essence of the original material. This team activity encouraged a transparent discourse and the illusion of authorial presence that Venuti writes about. As there is no single authorial voice dominating the translation of the lyrics, these translations remain faithful to the original writing of *copla* songs, a many-authored product of a similarly cooperation themselves, as well as help develop the new narrative of *The Copla Musical*. For example, in the adaptation of *copla* song 'Tattoo' shown below, we can see the journey from the literal translation of the Spanish original lyrics, respecting the Spanish grammatical construction of each verse, to the reordering of the sentence in a manner that adheres more naturally to English prosody and grammar, and finally a rewriting that takes some artistic licences to develop the dramatic atmospheres of the song in the context of the show. This particularity about grammatical reconstructions demands special care when placing the stresses in verses, especially for the melody to underline the expressive nature of the words, as well as the original affectation of the musical beats:

SPANISH ORIGINAL

Errante lo busco por todos los puertos,  
a los marineros pregunto por él,

GRAMMATICAL REWRITING

Since then I've been searching and wandering the  
ports  
And I ask the sailors if they know of him

LITERAL TRANSLATION

Wandering I'm searching for him at the ports  
And to other sailors I ask about him

DRAMATIC REWRITING

Since that day I've wandered and searched all the  
dockyard  
Not a soul has heard of, or once seen his face.

---

prepare derivative works' or 'adaptations', is vested in the 'author'. The translator is thus subordinated to the author, who decisively controls the publication of the translation during the term of copyright for the 'original' text, currently the author's lifetime plus fifty years (Venuti 2012: 8). In Spain, this expands up to 70 from the death of the author in accordance to EU Law.

<sup>9</sup> Editorial Company Seemsa, overseen by Manuel López-Quiroga y Clavero, owns the rights to most *copla* songs included in *The Copla Musical*.

Throughout the process of translation, we kept thinking of the new dramatic purposes of the *copla* songs inserted within *The Copla Musical*. We treated the English lyrics as a monologues and dialogues set to musical underscoring in order to gain new insights into how and why the characters might need to sing their thoughts, and how these songs advanced the narrative sometimes with the assistance of underscored dialogues. With this approach, the new lyrics attempt to maintain deep emotional truth while they activate dramatic structures. Venuti presents a theoretical basis from which translations can be read as texts ‘in their own right’, with an aim to demystify transparency (2012: 17).<sup>10</sup> Following his theory, it would be fair to say that *The Copla Musical* is a text of its own, that departs from well-known but also historically and geographically localised sources, and reinterprets them in a new context, where a new set of signifiers applies to accommodate and strengthen the value of the original sources. As such, the piece was created out of a negotiation between my love towards the Spanish original songs and the pragmatic idea that translations must function dramatically in the context of a musical theatre show for a UK theatre audience. Translation in this case must fulfil the objective of connecting with the audience, and the sense of authorial presence is not a priority.

*Copla* songs in *The Copla Musical* try to evoke the historical function they originally intended. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, *copla* became a dominant genre in Spain’s intellectual, political and artistic spheres, and was disseminated through performances in cafes and cabarets with audiences that blended different social classes. During the years of the Second Republic (1931-36), *copla* songs popularised across a divided population of opposing ideologies. This popularity continued for both factions throughout the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). However, at the start of Franco’s dictatorship (1939), fascist propaganda appropriated and manipulated these songs, as they did with many other art forms that had flourished in Republican Spain. Thus, during the Franco regime, *copla* singers were forced to present strong conservative images in tune with the national-catholic ideals of the regime. Those artists who did not align with the regime’s ethos were persecuted, exiled or at worst assassinated, as

---

<sup>10</sup> Venuti’s theory sees transparency as one discursive effect among others: translation is a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source-language text is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language which the translator provides on the strength of an interpretation (2012: 17).

was the case of playwright Federico García Lorca, one of the first writers of *copla* songs. Nonetheless, many artists continued writing *copla* songs with implicit messages and signifiers that managed to navigate censorship and connect with oppressed collectives at the time such as women, gypsies, leftist ideologies, and LGBT closeted citizens. As the songs shifted their distribution focus from the theatres and cabarets to the radio, their reach extended beyond expectations and managed to bring hope into many people's existences.<sup>11</sup> This history of the songs, widely known among Spanish older populations, might be key to facilitate a connection with a Spanish audience. However, in trying to avail some of this context to a non-Spanish audience, Venuti identifies some violent effects of translation that could apply to this project.<sup>12</sup>

One of the biggest risks of translating *copla* songs in this theatrical context is to distort their original idiosyncrasy to fit a constructed image of Francoist Spain. The songs are subject to misinterpretation in their new settings, and international audiences run the risk of framing and classifying *copla* within the parameters of their own historical knowledge, therefore creating an image of *copla*'s cultural identity that adheres to a fascist ideology. This risk is also very much present in the national interpretations of the form,<sup>13</sup> and to think of crossing national boundaries to export a controversially politicized genre only maximizes the challenge. Other concerns responding to Venuti's violent effects of translation relate to the characteristics of the form itself: the metrics of the songs, types of rhyme, semantic considerations, and how those are reinterpreted in the new language. Spanish is a syllable-based language, as opposed to English, which is stress-based. The regularity of Spanish rhyme, like most Romance languages, is very different from the irregularity of English rhyme, and this affects the structuring of the language of songs.<sup>14</sup> A clear example of this distortion can

---

<sup>11</sup> This is why Stephanie Sieburth refers to *copla* as "survival songs" for the oppressed collectives during Franco's fascist dictatorship (2014).

<sup>12</sup> Some of these effects are 'the construction of national identities for foreign cultures, the maintenance or revision of literary canons in the target-language culture and of dominant conceptual paradigms, research methodologies, and clinical practices in target-language disciplines and professions [...] constructing or critiquing ideology-stamped identities for foreign cultures, affirming or transgressing discursive values and institutional limits in the target-language culture' (Venuti 2012: 19).

<sup>13</sup> During the dictatorship, censors changed some lyrics of existing *copla* songs, generating a lasting image of association to Franco's ideals. This image was often reinforced by the performance of the genre of artists of known allegiance to the fascist regime.

<sup>14</sup> As dramatist Colin Teevan puts it: 'You cannot actually translate an Alexandrine into English and achieve the same effect. One always has to devise a strategy, a correlative form, you can choose a non-verse form or an iambic pentameter form' (in Laera 2011: 222).

be exemplified when adjusting the *bulería* rhythm<sup>15</sup> of *copla* song ‘Carceleras del Puerto’ (translated as ‘Jailer of the Port’), for prosodic considerations. While the Spanish original lyrics matched the accents of *bulería*, that was not always the case in the English translation. The decision of altering the accentuation of this rhythm was made in order not to complicate the readability of the lyrics in English and to naturalize their delivery (Postigo 2016: 105).

Most studies devoted to translation and music have so far been centred on opera, a genre in which the text is primarily transmitted through singing. This is often the case as well for musicals, although musicals are ‘more realistic than opera in terms of singer-role matching and are closer to productions of plays’ (Mateo 2008: 320). While opera generally uses subtitles in its performances, musicals performed in foreign countries where English is not generally spoken (including Spain) are translated: this divergence is mostly due to social, historical, ideological and economic factors rather than technical or artistic ones (ibid).<sup>16</sup> As Marta Mateo recalls, there is danger in adapting foreign musical theatre texts according to what is assumed performable, based on cultural expectations. These expectations might not always match the stylistic boundaries of the form and might call for an expansion of the audience’s cultural boundaries. Gideon Toury emphasizes that the nature of translating is conditioned by ‘factors that govern the choice of text-types, or even of individual texts, to be imported through translation into a particular culture/language at a particular point in time’ (Toury 1995: 98). Mateo defends that while the source text of the musical is sometimes a factor in choosing its production, the most commercially successful shows rely largely on their popular music, as there is a ‘universal’ nature to these works, whether the music is known worldwide or the scripts deal with cross-cultural and timeless issues (Mateo 2008: 334).

The absence of a cultural connection is one of the main problems in exporting a foreign musical to Spain, as in the case of long-running UK-US musical *Jersey Boys*

---

<sup>15</sup> a Spanish rhythm with beats specific to Flamenco music. There are a total of 12 beats, with the phrase beginning on the 11<sup>th</sup>, accentuated as follows: 11 **12** 1 2 **3** 4 5 **6** 7 **8** 9 **10**.

<sup>16</sup> The translation of musicals is affected by the semiotic complexity of the text, the ephemeral and transitory nature of its reception, the multiplicity of agents taking part in a single production, and the confusion to describe the target texts, variously labelled as ‘translations, versions, adaptations, and/or rewritings’ (Mateo 2008: 321).

(2005), based on a biographical narrative of 1960s rock 'n' roll band The Four Seasons. In Spain, there are simply not strong enough cultural references to make the product widely appealing, or most primarily, understood. In musical theatre, there are internal consistencies that need to be observed, such as the interaction of music and text, and the intertextual references that are created through those interactions. Musical motifs often recall other musical experiences attached to a specific culture: these referents are not shared across cultures because of linguistic, cultural and historical specificity, so in the translation process, cultural proximity (or being too source culture-specific) can hinder musical translation. In Spain, Anglo-American musicals are frequently adapted to a Spanish context. For instance, the translation and adaptation of original libretti like *Victor Victoria* (1995) and *The Producers* (2001) have experienced strong text changes in order to gain acceptability in the target society (Mateo 2008: 57).<sup>17</sup> In these and other cases, although the texts often remain source-specific, a strategy to tone down the reverence towards the foreign source is implemented. This results in a process of 'acculturation' which removes the cultural anchoring and eliminates or minimises the relationship to any specific culture (Aaltonen 2000: 55).<sup>18</sup>

Venuti argues that 'the translator always exercises a choice concerning the degree and direction of the violence at work in any translating' (2012: 19). As co-translator of the *copla* songs, and author of *The Copla Musical*, I am responsible for the compromises made in the interpretation and choices in the translation of the songs. The consequences of this responsibility are determined by my personal experience of *copla*, acquired through years of research rather than a lived-experience of its development period. Nonetheless, my experience echoes the past experiences of some of the communities that originally identified with *copla*. Being displaced from my country sparked a new-born interest in exploring my Spanish cultural identity through the study of *copla*. It is as an immigrant that I have noticed its evocative power, and practiced a personal approach to these songs that has made me consider studying and disseminating my experience of *copla* to other cultures. The effects of my re-

---

<sup>17</sup> Moreover, American poet Charles Bernstein reflects on why contemporary writing is enforced by its economic value. He affirms that 'we are not free to choose the language of the workplace or the family we are born into, though we are free, within limits, to rebel against it' (Bernstein 1986, in Venuti, 2012:5).

<sup>18</sup> Aaltonen also argues that this cultural relocation is a useful method when a translator wishes to guarantee the intelligibility of a foreign play as a piece of theatre (2000: 256).

contextualisation of *copla* in a new language and cultural setting will however involve an inevitable partiality to the form, by which non-Spanish audiences will encounter *copla* through my artistic lens with no other referents in English to locate the form.

### **Foreignizing / domesticating debate**

As Laera notes, theatre translators metaphorically pull in two opposite directions: ‘on the one hand, the source (con)text, and on the other, the target (con)text’ (2011: 214). The opposing worlds of source and target feature at the centre of Lawrence Venuti’s definition of domesticating versus foreignizing translation strategies. Venuti establishes an opposition between these two, and favours foreignizing translation, which ‘signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language’ (2012: 20).<sup>19</sup> This translation method is dominant in countries like France or Germany. Anglo-American culture, on the contrary, is dominated by domesticating theories that ‘recommend fluent translating, reducing if not simply excluding the very difference that translation is called on to convey’ (2012: 21).<sup>20</sup> The domesticating method is very much aimed to facilitate the understanding of receiving audiences, and so Venuti warns of a risk in the appropriation of foreign cultures for domestic, cultural, economic and political agendas (2012: 18).

The debate of foreignization and domestication is relevant to the adaptation of the original Spanish *copla* lyrics into English for *The Copla Musical*: throughout the writing of the piece I have often questioned whether I should try to maintain the idiosyncrasy of the original lyrics, or prioritise accessibility in the new language. This dichotomy is often present in any translation work at the beginning of the process.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> For Venuti, this translation strategy can be a form of resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism, in the interest of democratic geopolitical relations: ‘The theory implies that in its effort to do right abroad, the text must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience’ (2012: 20).

<sup>20</sup> ‘Domestication replaces source-language features that are not recognizable with target-language ones that are’ (Venuti 2012: 21).

<sup>21</sup> Jean Graham-Jones addresses this translator’s dilemma: ‘Do we translators make the play accessible to the audience or do we make the audience accessible to the play? Do we attempt to do both?’ (in Laera 2011: 214). Translator and dramatist Steve Gooch also warns about ‘twin crimes of translation: academicism, where obscure literary or social references are pursued to the detriment of idiomatic

Throughout the development and various international presentations of *The Copla Musical*, I have been attempted different strategies to try and find the right balance between foreignization and domestication. In the English performances of the show, songs often combine verses in English and Spanish, thus maintaining a small percentage of the original Spanish lyrics. It is assumed that untranslated verses will remain inaccessible to audiences in terms of dramatic content. However, the English translations provided before or after each Spanish delivery offer context and a sense of the song, telling enough of the story so that non-Spanish-speaking audiences can still follow the general narrative; and these audiences are also offered a glimpse of what the song sounds like in its original language. I have experimented extensively with this idea: in some performances songs have been performed fully translated, while in others they have mixed English and Spanish. This has been the case as well when the show has been presented in Spanish-speaking countries: the songs have been sung in their original versions, but sometimes English verses have been included to test the audience's acceptance.

The debate between foreignizing and domesticating approaches in translation has consistently featured across international currents of thought. In Friedrich Schleiermacher's words, there are only two methods of translation: either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him (in Lefevere 1977: 74).<sup>22</sup> In *The Copla Musical*, I have often veered from one extreme to the other. While I consider it key to preserve the original meaning and context of the songs, it is also essential to try and speak 'culturally' to the reader (or spectator) and adapt both language and cultural referents, as the acceptance of this project partially depends on its relationship with its audiences. To a certain extent, I want to send the spectator abroad (and this is the case with many current cultural products, including musicals with strong elements of orientalism), but to do that I need

---

English; and the opposite ill where, in order to make an irritating foreigner "accessible", an off-the-peg style is reached for' (Gooch 1996: 17).

<sup>22</sup> Venuti elaborates on Schleiermacher's dichotomy as choosing between an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, or an ethnodeliant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad, which are his definitions for domesticating and foreignizing within the debate he establishes (2012: 20).

to be able to ‘anglicize’ those foreign universes. There is, thus, some inevitable ethnocentric reduction of the songs, as Venuti suggests. My fear is that untranslated concepts in songs remain impenetrable to non-Spanish audiences, and this most possibly results in a lack of dramatic appeal to those audiences without a very specific interest in Spanish folkloric culture, especially in this type of folklore developed more than half a century ago. By compromising some details, such as argots and manners of expression, the spectator will be more drawn into the narratives told in the songs. But then again, they will inevitably miss some original references, so it seems impossible to win on both fronts. For instance, the protagonists of some *copla* songs were often gypsies that spoke a language named *caló*. *Caló* words are likely to remain completely inaccessible to foreign audiences, even though those are commonly accepted in the Spanish versions of the songs (although their meanings are not always known). As Ivo Buzek points out, *copla* is generally written in an Andalusian flavoured Spanish and splashed with a few words from *caló* language to give the folklore a slightly exotic taste.<sup>23</sup>

Accents and modes of speech are also something to take into consideration in translation. For instance, domesticating advocate Eugene Nida defends that transparency and accuracy in translation depend on generating an equivalent effect in the target-language culture (Venuti 2012: 22). This implies that communication is then controlled by the target-language culture, and for Venuti therefore it seems less an exchange of information than an appropriation of a foreign text for domestic purposes (ibid).<sup>24</sup> When thinking of applying these methods to *The Copla Musical*, I could argue that if Andalusian words/accents were for instance translated into Northern English words and expressions, that would compromise characters’ backgrounds and distance the songs from their cultural heritage. In a way, this would imply a distinct attempt towards domestication that I choose not to engage with, and that is one of the reasons this project sits in the middle of the debate. However, according to French translator

---

<sup>23</sup> (cf. Ropero Núñez 1978) ‘Las coplas generalmente [son] escritas en un español andaluzado y salpicadas con alguna que otra palabra del caló para darle al folklore un sabor ligeramente exótico’. (*Copla* songs are generally written in an Andalusian Spanish and sprinkled with a few *caló* words to season the folkloric form with a light exotic taste) (Buzek 2013: 39).

<sup>24</sup> An example of this equivalent can be seen in Laera’s translation of Bola Agbaje’s *Gone Too Far!* (2007) from English to Italian. The Italian translation ‘plays on the language differences between the rich and dominant North (Milan in particular) and the disadvantaged, dominated South of Italy’ (2011: 215).

and theorist Antoine Berman, even when applying a foreignizing choice, 'an otherness can never be manifested in its own terms, only in those of the target language, and hence always already encoded' (Berman 1985: 87-91, in Venuti 2012: 20). So that also implies that Andalusian features or heritage might provide unreadable to the target audience. For defender of domestication Berman, the priority is the effect of the text in the target culture. In theatre, this might happen even more prominently, as words are heard as opposed to only read. In practice, Andalusian accents tend to shorten words, aspirate some consonants, interchange /s/ and /z/ sounds, and apply a cadence or musicality to the phrasing. This sometime presents a challenge for non-native Spanish speakers to fully understand Andalusian speech, but this challenge is incremented when applying these features to the performance texts and songs in English, often rendering them practicably illegible.

As we can see through the few examples given, there is a difficult challenge in presenting *copla* out of its historical context. Klaudyna Rozhin speaks about 'the difficulty presented by the cultural context of foreign plays, and claims that although there are ways of domesticating foreign concepts, these are likely to undermine the otherness of the text' (in Aaltonen 2000: 256). Venuti talks about an illusionism produced by fluent translating, by which the translator's invisibility at once enacts and masks an insidious domestication of foreign texts, rewriting them in the transparent discourse that prevails in English and that selects precisely those foreign texts amenable to fluent translating (2012: 16). In using either strategy, *copla* songs are difficult to be considered as transparent or amenable to fluent translating. This is maybe why this translation has not been fully attempted before,<sup>25</sup> or that it has been attempted in Spain mainly for comedic purposes (for example, on TV shows). The thought of providing an accurate translation of a genre like *copla*, that is so historically charged, often results in parodic gestures aimed at Spanish audiences that reinforce the idea of *copla* being 'untranslatable', as no other culture would have the history and tools to fully understand all the layers and the idiom of these songs. *The Copla Musical* makes a non-exhaustive (as there are thousands of *coplas*), but rather qualitative

---

<sup>25</sup> Prior experiments presenting some *copla* songs in Anglo-speaking contexts are limited to Spanish stars like Lola Flores or Marifé de Triana who performed internationally in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s, but the songs would be performed in Spanish.

research-led attempt at trying to recreate the value of a selection of songs in a new context, and even if presented out of their time and place, their context is also recreated in the narrative and dramaturgy of the play.

It is not immediately apparent to audiences that *copla* songs offered a subversive tool of resistance to the Franco regime. American scholar Stephanie Sieburth talks about the enduring power of these songs.<sup>26</sup> A translation that could reproduce the infatuation that Spanish audiences felt towards those songs should most definitely include some contextualisation of the realities people experienced at the time, whether of a repressive nature, or a cultural attraction and identification with social, political and sexual symbols of freedom. In this context, for dramatist Steve Gooch translating plays can only be an 'act of love' that relates to discovering in the original play some new and slightly exotic quality that the home audience should know about: 'like a love affair with a fascinating foreigner whom you feel compelled to introduce to your family' (Gooch 1996: 13). My challenge when translating *copla* songs is to assume the position of the foreigner, and to present my cultural background to the new culture I am now immersed in. So effectively, and in reverse to Gooch's process, I want international audiences to love *copla*, but my question remains 'how to share my Spanish experience of *copla* and make non-Spanish audiences feel or understand it.' This question prompted the development of *The Copla Cabaret* in 2015, a follow-up iteration within my PaR that revolved specifically around the translation and presentation of *copla* to non-Spanish audiences and in the style of an interactive cabaret. Gooch interestingly points out:

If you love a person, after all, you hate to see your view of them misrepresented or misunderstood - even if you yourself are blind to their worst qualities. 'Faithful' certainly can mean 'objective' in this context because the translator's subjectivity necessarily stands behind his or her efforts. This is not simply a matter of how you view the foreign work, but also of the geographic, cultural and social limits through which your unconscious use of your home language has been formed (1996: 18).

---

<sup>26</sup> In *Survival Songs: Conchita Piquer's coplas and Franco's regime of terror* (2014) Sieburth theorises on how *copla* songs helped people work through feelings of terror and grief in ways that were politically safe and emotionally manageable.

Any translation is subjective to a personal view, and as Gooch suggests, I want audiences to see what I regard as the best of *copla*. Within my subjectivity, I have chosen for the project some of my favourite songs that I found fitting to a newly written dramatic narrative, through which, in turn, I have equally tried to enhance the songs. In addition, I have channelled them through a performative style in which my personal interpretation of the songs is even more latent. All of it a labour of love, entirely personal and subjective, but as Venuti observes, legitimate and unique 'in its own right' (2012: 17).

### **The performance of English *copla***

In his introductory article to *Stages of Translation*, Steve Gooch acknowledges that 'actors can't act what they can't perceive, and if a translation doesn't communicate directly, directors rarely have enough time to provide a compensating explication (always assuming they've seen the difficulty themselves)' (1996: 13). Gooch's faith in the actor and director seems limited, and presumably he wishes them to not face the additional challenge of cultural translation. In *The Copla Musical*, however, both actors and directors exist at the core of the creative process, which in turn is fully dependant on their intercultural bond. Spanish and British performers bring distinct interpretative qualities into this project, given their various trainings and cultural influences. A performer's adaptation to a foreign culture involves a gradual and organic transformation, which reflects their growing cultural awareness. In a musical theatre project, an actor-singer's performance normally becomes fuller, more animated, especially in the use of gesture, facial expressions and diction when understanding musical and semantic subtexts. Equally, in *The Copla Musical* actors from English-speaking backgrounds were briefed on the characteristics and style of *copla*, so that they could intellectually engage with the songs' features and background. Nonetheless, I would argue that actors can only achieve deeper and more empowered performances of the songs when their understanding is embodied and not exclusively intellectual. This has often been the result of exploring a full rendering of the *copla* songs' dramatic potential in relation to the structure of the overall story written in their language. Songs in musical theatre often help the storytelling through the

expression of feeling. Similarly, *copla* songs have been translated into English with a strong dramatic purpose that in my view helps preserving the emotions that exist in their original lyrics.

So, what happens after translation, for example, to the Spanish performers facing the responsibility of singing these songs and telling a familiar story in a new and unfamiliar language? Violeta García has been a performer in *The Copla Musical* for many years. She used to sing Spanish *copla* professionally, but in this project, she has undergone a process of artistic self-discovery, reshaping her cultural understanding through the reinterpretation of *copla* in a new context.<sup>27</sup> The transmission of interpretation begins with the assimilation of technical knowledge that the performer learns and personalises. Spanish and British performers need to find their own way of handling these materials. Spanish actors need to perform the new English *copla* while preserving the implied emotions they identify in the original songs. British performers find it helpful to know the original style and context of *copla* songs, however mimesis is not a useful tool in this intercultural process. If actors apply their own cultural skills to singing English *copla*, they will probably develop more nuanced, textured and compelling performances.<sup>28</sup> By approaching the text from their own cultural knowledge, British performers slowly build their awareness towards the material's original culture, which in turn brings them closer to the audience's comprehension, expanding this circle of intercultural exchanges.

Eugenio Barba defines inculturation as 'the process of passive sensory-motor absorption of the daily behaviour of a given culture' (Barba 1991: 219). A performer's adaptation to a foreign culture involves a gradual and organic transformation, which is also a reflection of their growing cultural awareness. Ian Sanderson is a British actor who has been involved in *The Copla Musical* since 2011. By 2013, he had developed a

---

<sup>27</sup> 'Singing *Copla* in English is weird, especially when being used to singing it in Spanish. In exploring how to find the best way of singing English *Copla*, I realized that the more I shaped the phrasing and articulation attending to the rules of English language, the closer I got to finding a new truth in this so particularly Spanish genre' (Violeta García. Interviews with the cast of *The Copla Musical*, London: Roundhouse, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> A performance approach that is commonly encouraged in musical theatre is 'to imbue songs with psychological realism, organically, delivering the lyrics as if they were a realistic passage of conventional prose' (for instance, approaching the song as a monologue) (Bell 2012: 252). 'The theory behind this approach suggests that by treating the text as a monologue set to music, the actor will gain new insights into how and why the character might need to sing the thoughts' (ibid).

stronger sense and understanding of *copla* through performing the songs in English, which led him to a more visceral performance of these songs. Native English-speaking performers are modified through their contact with Spanish culture, and are transported somewhere new, unusual and specific. As Richard Schechner puts it:

Performing someone else's culture takes a knowledge, a "translation" that is different, more viscerally experiential, than translating a book. Intercultural exchange takes a teacher: someone who knows the body of performance of the culture being translated. The translator of the culture is not a mere agent, as a translator of words might be, but an actual culture-bearer (1991: 314).

In this sense, a culture-bearer will facilitate the understanding of their culture through different practices of translation involving various languages that include musical and performative ones. *The Copla Musical* is full of culture-bearers and their function varies depending on their position within the project. Starting with the author and performers from Spain who are familiar with the tradition of *copla*, and ending with the lyricists, musical directors and other collaborators who come from an Anglophone musical theatre background. At the other end of the cultural-bearing prompted by the Spanish, British and international artists involved in this project, there is a wide multicultural audience that completes the exchange. We all complement each other in this intercultural process, as the cast and creative team work together to find out the dynamics of the new English *copla*, and how it must be performed. My re-imagination of *copla* follows a method to re-engage with old cultural codes that are put into perspective and updated in an intercultural musical aimed at a contemporary, multicultural and predominantly urban audience. This process has probed the notion of cultural sensitivity through the complex dialogue already inherent in collaborative performance. Through addressing cultural sensitivity, I sought to render transparent the challenges and solutions that pertain to one of the intercultural principles I pursued: that of maintaining cultural visibility on both sides of the cultural dialogue through a process of identifying cultural frames of reference. This discourse is defined in terms of a target British audience, but it does not erase or flatten the Spanish source material, and by extension, its culture; on the contrary, although speaking the language of Anglophone musical theatre, Spanish *copla* still

manages to keep a visible identity, and English allows *copla* to be presented in new international contexts. This intercultural experiment highlights new dynamics of collaboration and creativity and, in a modernised context, also illuminates a way forward for intercultural musical theatre as a distinct form within the dominant Anglophone, West End-Broadway genus.

## Conclusion

*The Copla Musical* originally aimed to produce a full-length musical that re-imagined and expanded *copla* beyond its Spanish context. During Franco's dictatorship (1939-75), *copla* represented a series of national-catholic values imposed by the fascist regime, which prompted dissident artists to defy existing censorships and explore powerful subtexts to relate to oppressed collectives. This politicization of *copla* diverted from its original entertainment and poetic purposes prior to the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), and paved the way to transform *copla* into a subversive tool of expression in democracy (post-1975). In the political climate of 21<sup>st</sup> century, these songs still register a new cultural significance in the realm of musical theatre as they enter in contact with other histories and identities. Further possibilities for identification with the melodramatic narratives and emotions embedded in *copla* lyrics become available inside and outside of Spain, and social links and ambiguities such as those experienced by homosexual groups silenced during the dictatorship can now be explored artistically through reinterpretations of the form's historical subtexts. These significant possibilities entirely depend on how *copla* is translated and presented into the new cultural settings.

Throughout the development and multiple iterations of *The Copla Musical*, I have tried to facilitate a cultural connection that permits the readability and acceptance of *copla* as a cultural form with potential to contribute to the making of musical theatre in Anglo-dominant contexts. While doing so, I have made equal efforts to maintain the songs' idiosyncrasies and some of the historical matters that remain key to the identity of *copla*, often calculating the balance between foreignization and domestication. Throughout this process, I have challenged Venuti's notion of 'illusion of transparency', as our process of translating *copla* was overt, and required an

intercultural effort from adaptation to performance. This process involved actors and musicians and much as lyricists and dramaturges, as they were all encouraged to reflect on their own experience of *copla* and bring their cultural knowledge and identities into the adaptation and performance of the art form. In selecting the songs and coordinating the adaptation process, I have safeguarded most of the songs' original contents, but at the same time I have ensured that *The Copla Musical* exists in its own context, as a 'text in its own right', trying to navigate Venuti's violent effects of translation. But it is my 'act of love' for *copla* that has empowered *The Copla Musical* to become my own contribution towards culture-bearing this essential form from writing to performance.

## **Bibliography**

- Aaltonen, Sirkku (2000). *Time-Sharing on Stage. Drama Translation in Theatre and Society*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Barba, Eugenio, and Nicola Salvatore (1991). *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*. London: Routledge.
- Bell, John (2012). 'Modulating theory: breaking new ground in musical theatre study' in *Playing with Theory in Theatre Practice*, ed. by Megan Alrutz and Julia Listengarten. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 251-253.
- Buzek, Ivo (2013). 'Sobre el caló a comienzos del siglo XXI: el componente gitano en el español mexicano a través de la lexicografía', in *De parces y troncos*, ed. by Vila Rubio, N. Lleida: Edicions de la Universitat de Lleida, pp. 35-76.
- Gooch, Steve (1996). 'Fatal Attraction', in *Stages of Translation*, ed. by David Johnston. Bath: Absolute, pp. 13-21.
- Laera, Margherita (2011). 'Theatre translation as collaboration: Aleks Sierz, Martin Crimp, Nathalie Abrahams, Colin Teevan, Zoë Svendsen and Michael Walton discuss translation for the stage'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21 (2), pp. 213-225.
- Lefevere, André (1998). 'Translation practice(s) and the circulation of cultural capital: some aeneids in English', in *Constructing Cultures. Essays on Literary Translation*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, pp. 41-56.

- Mateo, Marta (2008). 'Anglo-American musicals in Spanish theatres'. *The Translator*, 14 (2), Special Issue: Translation and Music, pp. 319-342.
- Patterson, Mia (2010). *75 años de historia del musical en España (1930-2005)*. Madrid: Ediciones y Publicaciones Autor, SRL; Tramart.
- Postigo Gomez, Alejandro (2016). 'New insights into the notion of interculturalism and hybridity in musical theatre' in *Music on Stage Volume II*, ed. by Fiona Jane Schopf, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 96-110.
- Rebellato, Dan (2006). 'Playwriting and globalisation: towards a site-unspecific theatre'. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 16 (1), pp. 96-112.
- Schechner, Richard (1991). 'Intercultural themes', in *Interculturalism and Performance*, ed. by Bonnie Marranca. New York: PAJ Publications, pp. 308-320.
- Scrofano, Shannon (2012). 'Seven introductions: a dialogue' in *Playing with Theory in Theatre Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 281-294.
- Sieburth, Stephanie (2014). *Survival Songs: Conchita Piquer's Coplas and Franco's Regime of Terror*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Toury, Gideon (1995). *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Venuti, Lawrence (2012). *The Translator's Invisibility*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.