

Q and A with Tanya Ronder, who has adapted Ionesco's *Macbett* for the Royal Shakespeare Company

Macbett by Eugene Ionesco, directed by Silviu Purcarete,
adapted by Tanya Ronder
The Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon
25 May – 21 July 2007
Box Office: 0844 800 1110 or www.rsc.org.uk

Can you tell me something about how you approached this adaptation of Ionesco's *Macbett*? For example, did you adapt from the original language?

I worked from a literal translation, by Simon Scardifield, with the original French alongside.

Is it a play you were particularly familiar with before you started working on the project?

I didn't know the play existed. I found it on my local library shelves two years ago, while looking at some other work of Ionesco's, and was surprised to discover it was not widely read or performed, and that it was even out of print. The last English version I could find had been published in America in the 70's, so it was really time for a re-excavation. As *La Nouvelle Revue Francaise* describes *Macbett* – it's 'the funniest and darkest of Ionesco's plays'.

Have you been in conversation with the director of this production, Silviu Purcarete, with regard to the adaptation?

I met Silviu when I had already finished the adaptation. If he had had a very different view of the play, we would, at that point, have started working together to make changes, but Silviu had very few changes to propose.

You were an actor. What made you go into writing?

The thing I loved about acting was the words. Getting amongst them, inhabiting them, finding the intentions which fuelled them. With adapting, I can lock myself in a room and have that process with all the characters, not just one, and cut out the appalling vulnerability of having to go on stage.

Has your experience in acting influenced your playwriting skills?

It has influenced my writing. I try to honour the person speaking, the intention behind the line, and the passing of the ball to the next person, rather than the literary exactitude. It also influences me as a writer in the rehearsal room. I'm still close to the actor's process – haven't yet forgotten.

With the other project I've just been doing, (*Vernon God Little* at the Young Vic Theatre), which was novel-to-stage and therefore a more collaborative, changing process right up until press night, I was probably more conscious of the actor's position regarding changes, having once been one – judging when it was possible for the actors to absorb new stuff, never wanting to overload them, knowing when they had to start galvanizing themselves for that evening's show. I guess, in time, I might forget, but at the moment I still remember what it's like to be an actor, and am filled with respect for those who can do it.

Is it very different working on an adaptation of a work by a living writer (DBC Pierre, *Vernon God Little*) and a dead one (Ionesco, *Macbeth*)?

It's probably particular to the project, rather than whether the author is alive or dead. I feel a huge responsibility to the original text, to the author's intention – but to preserving and delivering the spirit of the piece, rather than the particulars. I wouldn't want to hold the responsibility of translating something for the first time in to English. There's a freedom, for example, in knowing that two published English translations of *Macbeth* already exist, which allows me to take some liberties.

As it happens, I strayed less from Ionesco's original than in other 'versions' I've done (Lorca, Lope de Vega), because Ionesco's play is already a response to *Macbeth* – it would be inappropriate for me to do a 'take' on his take. With a living writer, such as DBC Pierre, whose book (*Vernon God Little*) I've just been adapting for the stage, it comes down to the individual. He was hugely generous in entrusting me with his novel and leaving us to our process.

Again, because my compulsion is to honour the intention and flavour of the book, it would have been hard for me to have him breathing over my shoulder, asking why I'd cut this or that. I have to be able to trust myself to digest the whole thing, then put it out in as true a spirit as I can muster. I guess that's when the difference between a living or dead author would become painfully apparent – if the author wanted to have a lot of control over the process. Although you can encounter that problem with dead authors through their estates. Sometimes an estate, who manages a deceased author, can be even more controlling about not changing a word or conceit of the original, than a living author.

Can you tell me a little about your background?

I acted as a child, in the TV series, *Survivors*, then, aged nineteen, went to RADA to train as an actress. My father, who died when I was fourteen, was a playwright. I spent fifteen years as an actress, in many of the classics, as well as TV, new plays and collaborative projects. But my love was always the old, difficult texts – Shakespeare, Webster. And I responded to the scale of the European classics, but knew first hand from acting in them, (Strindberg, Lorca) how difficult they were to achieve in English. They often lay heavy on the page, or stage. So when the thought dawned on me, five years ago, that I didn't have to be a linguist to write new English versions of these texts, I knew, even before I'd completed the first one, that it was what I wanted to do. David Lan, artistic director of the Young Vic, gave me my first opportunity, with *Peribanez*, by Lope de Vega, a beautiful, life-filled 16th century play from the Spanish Golden Age.