What the professionals really think of The Interpreter

The director and his team did their homework but there are a few details that jump out at the interpreters in the audience.

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In Sydney Pollack’s latest film Nicole Kidman plays an interpreter who overhears details of a conspiracy to assassinate an African leader during the UN General Assembly yet finds herself both suspect and victim in this fast-paced thriller, filmed mostly within the UN building (right).

Venturing into unknown territory, the directors took the trouble to consult UN interpreters at length (you see some of them during the film) to make Kidman’s character as convincing as possible. The scenes of her interpreting are pretty realistic, but for a few small details.

It’s remarkable that the film is called “The Interpreter” and not “The Translator” because people often muddle interpretation of the spoken word and translation of the written word. The movie’s official website makes a commendable effort to explain the difference between these two diverse professions.

Nicole Kidman’s character is clearly a staff interpreter at the UN, i.e. someone on the payroll rather than a freelance like so many in the profession. She is a “conference interpreter”, so it strikes a slightly discordant note to see one of her colleagues helping Sean Penn (playing an FBI agent) to question a Portuguese usher; UN staff-interpreters do not work as court or police interpreters in real life.

Any professional will be struck by the absence of clutter in the interpreter’s booth, because we usually have glossaries, speeches, resolutions within easy reach. Even Nicole’s own bookcase seems better supplied with travel guides that our standard reference works. Pollack’s interpreter appears to have learned her languages on the way as she was born in Africa, brought up in Europe, and attended university in several countries; this fits with the CV of many professional interpreters. Kidman’s character doesn’t appear to do much preparation for her meetings. Lucky her. In real life preparation is part of the interpreter’s daily routine.
All interpreters work within some kind of administration. We have a work roster and a chief interpreter issuing instructions about who goes where. Kidman’s character seems to exist outside any formal management structure. The only person giving her instructions and concerned for her welfare is the sound engineer. She is not given carefully prepared assignments by the Chief Interpreter – which is how things work during the General Assembly – but is “roped in” in a corridor by an official to interpret between the US and an African delegation. She doesn’t provide simultaneous interpretation from a booth but consecutive. Yet instead of sitting at the table with the delegations and taking notes so she can interpret like a professional would, Nicole remains standing clasping an agenda and hardly taking any notes. She then provides an imaginative voiceover of what is said in English and “Ku”. But she’s such a great actor that you can excuse her personal style of interpreting.

Her performance brings her to understand fully the threat of assassination that she’d overheard. It might be reasonable to ask if she breaks professional secrecy as defined by the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC). As the plotting had not been divulged in a meeting it is clear that the obligation to speak outweighs any duty of confidentiality[1]. But she pays a high price for speaking out.

Sydney Pollack says on the website that only the interpreting booths were not the genuine UN item. He found the real booths to be rather cramped and cluttered so he preferred to build his own from scratch on a stage for ease of filming. Indeed, despite the best efforts of ISO and AIIC to achieve standard booth dimensions, many booths remain small and poky.

Although The Interpreter is the first feature film made in the UN, in 1996 AIIC co-sponsored “The Interpreters: a historic perspective,” a documentary undertaken by UN staff interpreter Evelyn Moggio using archival material and interviews. The film depicts the history of the profession and the constant challenges interpreters face. It is a stimulating and exciting profession but luckily rarely as dangerous as you might think when you follow the gripping adventures of our heroine, brilliantly portrayed by Nicole Kidman.

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Phil Smith

[1] For a discussion of interpreters’ professional secrecy see these articles on the AIIC website:

- Professional Secrecy: Until the Bitter End? by Danielle Grée
- Professional Secrecy by Juiz Cunha Rodrigues
- AIIC and Ethics by Benoit Kremer

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Recommended citation format: