An act of interpretation

There are many similarities between acting and interpreting. Both actor and interpreter receive a coded message which they must understand, inwardly digest and subsequently transmit. Both activities involve communication.

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Published: September 5, 2008 Last updated: December 2, 2015

I love communicating but my efforts are focused on understanding. I am not saying that I want to understand the meaning of life and death because that is a hackneyed cliché that conveys little meaning. I am happy with understanding a word, a situation or a person ... and perhaps thereby understanding myself a little. This is what we do when we go onto a stage or into a booth and have to translate a speech.

Diderot in "Paradox of the Comedian" describes the art of acting as one of the noblest of human endeavours because it involves observing others and trying to understand them in order to depict them.

I do not accept that translating equates to betrayal (traduttore tradittore) and neither do I believe that acting is simple pretence. There are many traitors and many liars who neither translate nor mount a stage. To act is to embody. Translation is moving from one world to another.

There is no doubt that the emotions triggered on a stage defy description: that uncanny power to stir the audience's emotions when we manage to convince them that we are telling the truth. This does not always happen. Sometimes we struggle against the current and the audience does not want to come with us, but when it is genuinely willing to accompany us on our journey, when it accepts what we are recounting and cries, laughs, gets angry or shocked, the thrill is immense. But yet ephemeral.

Translating is a privilege. The possibility of understanding what someone from another country and culture wants to tell a third person. We serve as a bridge, a link, the indispensable person who connects them.

On the stage I have been Marie Curie and fallen in love with Pierre Curie every night for more than 100 performances and won the Nobel Prize for Physics (I had top marks at my school in England but failed physics). I was in "Dangerous Liaisons" and played the Countess de Volanges; in "The Sleep of Reason" I was Goya's daughter-in-law... and I have been Little Red Riding Hood's mother. In a nutshell, I've played many roles.

However I cannot forget the time I interpreted the words of the leader of a group of Guatemalan refugees in the State of Chiapas in Mexico to a group of US congressmen or when I worked in Hiroshima for International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons, an association that won the Nobel Peace Prize - another winner!
This all comes because I enjoy words and how we use them. I still revel in discussion and simply love talking. Edith Evans, an English actress who established her reputation playing Lady Bracknell in "The Importance of Being Earnest", went through the whole musical scale to deliver her famous line "A handbag?" The headline in The Times when she died was: "The woman who said 'A handbag' has died..." Voice, intonation, pauses and the rhythm of speech are essential in putting across a message. Good actors and good interpreters know this.

We act in the booth and translate on stage, but above all we tackle a code, decipher it, and thus understand human nature a little better.

English version by Phil Smith.

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