European – or the language which doesn’t speak to people

It’s rare for conference interpreters to take centre stage in any show. Apart from documentaries there are very few examples in the cinema and even less in the theatre.

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Indeed it’s such a rare event that it’s worthwhile spending a few moments on David Lescot’s [1]play L’Européenne, presented as a one-off adaptation at the seminar organised by AIIC France on 2 April in Paris.

The author imagines that the audience is composed entirely of conference interpreters – and here, of interpreters from the European institutions. He would certainly have been very pleased to know that on the evening in question the audience was 99% interpreters from France and abroad. These are taken to task by the characters who address them directly, in turn critically or appreciatively, in order to accuse Europe – by which is meant the European institutions – of being incoherent, unintelligible, itinerant and inefficient.

As a conference interpreter and a European civil servant I’m both fascinated and fazed by David Lescot’s work. He had evidently done his homework on the subject and describes in great detail the way he perceives the conditions under which European projects are implemented: in confusion about objectives, in a very politically correct environment and with only symbolic transparency. Even music – and David Lescot is a composer – which is commonly believed to be a universal language, is suspected of being capable of an influential or even a dissident thread.

The author doesn’t deprive us of any detail in describing the murky past, mocking the insufficient means, ridiculing the vague intentions and disproportionate ambitions, and decrying bureaucratic jargon. Rightly or wrongly, all of these elements come before a crazy, Ubu-style court where Europe appears as the creator of a new language that, whilst respecting all the others, is largely incomprehensible to those it addresses.

Europe is, in a way, the protagonist of passive mutual comprehension, which is a method of communication whereby each person speaking their own language is supposed to be understood by those listening. The play brilliantly shows up this idle fancy as the characters try it out.

The European language doesn’t speak to people because they’re not ready to listen: the interpreters are neither more nor less than the voice of this Europe pictured as distant and arrogant. They’re the only ones to really listen to this European language in order to translate its every nuance, register and meaning. They are not responsible for its lack of resonance or acceptance. They no more create content or organise language policy than they are responsible for after sales service, i.e. listening, which is as one with dialogue.
David Lescot has written a play about the Europe of 2007 as he sees it. With lots of talent and oodles of originality he mixes up several indo-european languages and music in one dramatic flow. Every consideration inherent to this unlikely coexistence is analysed, carefully distilled and harnessed to his demonstration.

*L’Européenne* hardly flatters Europe and calls on the unwitting interpreters as silent witnesses: that’s really the last straw! Brought in for the cause, they become almost accomplices of a transgression which the author so wonderfully describes as ‘hating the taste, but loving the feeling’.

**David Lescot** was kind enough to answer my questions.

**Q:** What was it that got you interested in the Europe of 2007?

**DL:** The idea for *L’Européenne* came to me after the French referendum about the European constitution. I felt involved and did some research. The idea of Europe is an emotional one. In France, internal politics were more important on the day and explains why a movement towards a supranational approach failed. People aren’t informed about the mysterious ways in which the wheels of great administrative machines turn and which to my mind lend them to comedy.

**Q:** Is it a lack of knowledge or a lack of communication which turns people away from Europe?

**DL:** People don’t know enough about the European institutions and so they don’t mean much to them. The institutions have good ideas but people don’t feel involved. In France people only react to purely French questions. The year of dialogue following the referendum went unnoticed because nobody heard about it – which is absurd. People distrust the European institutions because they see them as closed, hermetic.

**Q:** Do you have any personal experience of interpreters and interpreting?

**DL:** I admire the interpreters as athletes of word and mind. I was very impressed by a Catalan interpreter who could really read my mind and express my thoughts better and in fewer words than I could.

In the theatre I use different languages and avoid surtitles in favour of sharing out the text. So I played a monologue in French and shared with an Italian or Russian actor. Sometimes I act in Spanish too because it’s important to share and speak the languages of others

**Q:** Do you know that interpreters can interpret more than one language?

**DL:** Of course. In *L’Européenne* I pushed the question of language combinations to the absurd.

**Q:** As a composer does music have a special part in your work?

**DL:** I was a musician before I came to the theatre – which I chose because it offers a broader palette and gives greater freedom and subject matter to the author and interpretation possibilities to the actor. I’m fascinated by the rhythms of language.

I’m a trained trumpet player and mostly composed jazz, and I’m particularly interested in popular music from Eastern Europe.

**English version by Linda Fitchett.**

[1] L’Européenne, David Lescot, Actes Sud-papiers, 2007, Grand prix for dramatic literature 2008. L’Européenne, directed by the author, was created at the Comedy Theatre, Reims, in May 2009, then played at the Napoliteatro festival in Naples, the Théâtre de la Ville Paris, the TNBA Bordeaux, the Grand Theatre Nantes, the Union Theatre Limoges, the Halle aux Grains Blois
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