Die Unvermeidlichen

Following a performance of Kathrin Röggla’s play in Mannheim on 14th May, Angela Drösser, PR officer of AIIC Germany, in cooperation with the conference interpreting section of the German Association of Interpreters and Translators, organised a discussion on the topics explored in the drama.

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There have already been enough reviews written about Die Unvermeidlichen, so this is very much my personal opinion. I was royally entertained, I recognised myself in much of what I saw and I even learnt things about myself which, up until then, I hadn’t been aware of.

Furthermore I was extremely impressed by the way the author dealt with the material at her disposal. From my time as a PR representative I have experience of the journalistic fraternity: hacks in pursuit of lurid details, who refuse to let go until they have homed in on an anecdote which either lays bare the interpreting profession or ridicules the speakers, conference participants or conference organisers who are our customers. These represent violations of our professional and ethical code of conduct at every level. The author, however, manages to pack 75 minutes of entertaining reality into her play without such clichés.

It reminded me of a colleague who yearned at long last for an evening serial about interpreters along the lines of the numerous programs about attorneys, law enforcement and PR agencies which give viewers an insight into a profession while entertaining them at the same time. Perhaps a possible future project for Ms Röggla – although from what I hear a book is currently being planned. As I say, an excellent evening’s entertainment, even though I heard from some colleagues who had already seen the play that the actors weren’t on top form. True, one might have had an inkling of greater acting potential on the night, but then which one of us is able to perform in the booth to 120% of our ability day in, day out?

After the performance a panel discussion took place, facilitated by the artistic director Stefanie Gottfried and Angela Drösser. The panel consisted of the author Kathrin Röggla, the MEP and former President of the European Parliament, Dr Klaus Hänsch, together with Oliver Pospiech, AIIC council member for Germany. The repartee between Angela Drösser and Ms Gottfried provided insights into the intention and the approach of the author, the role of the interpreter and the experience of a seasoned user of interpreting services, Klaus Hänsch, both as a speaker and listener. As we rarely get a chance to have an informed discussion with our users about interpreting, I found his comments the most instructive. One sensed that he respected our work and understood our difficulties; equally, his stance on ‘bad’ interpretation was carefully thought through, as were his views on when interpretation makes sense and when it doesn’t (see his book ‘Kontinent der Hoffnunten’ (Continent of Hopes).

I particularly liked the following anecdote: Once – perhaps it was April Fools’ Day – Klaus Hänsch
was presented with demands to do away with the ‘expensive’ interpretation of the diverse languages at the European Parliament. He reacted with a proposal to conduct all meetings in only English and French - which astonished those who had made the request. He added a rider, however: all the French would have to speak English and all the English would have to speak French!

On the subject ‘Foregoing the use of interpreters and English as the Lingua Franca’, Birgit Christensen informed us of studies which prove that the content of speeches, particularly those given in English by non mother-tongue English speakers, are better understood by their audience when interpreted into the respective mother tongue, even though the participants’ knowledge of (technical) English may be good. Such studies would be useful aids in presenting our case to customers. Mention was made of the role of interpreters as people cleared for access to secret information and the importance of a professional and ethical code of conduct. There was also a discussion as to what extent it is possible for interpreters to withdraw from a contract (or to refuse it from the outset) if, for example, it involves a conflict of conscience.

When the discussion was extended to include the audience, the issues raised were explored further through answers given to more detailed questions. One of the actresses asked the interesting question as to whether interpreters also express the non-verbal elements of a speech, e.g. emotion in the voice, and to what extent. After hearing from several interpreters, Klaus Hänsch also addressed this issue and said that in his work as a politician, he had sometimes resorted to the use of English or French as the lingua franca in situations involving direct contact with his counterparts, but had otherwise chosen to rely on tried and tested cooperation with interpreters, who had often given him useful tips and suggestions on amending his speeches. His comment that the important thing was mutual trust and support between speaker and interpreter was the ideal note on which to conclude the event.

English version by Lindsay Dyson-Smith

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