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ESSAYS IN POETICS

THE JOURNAL OF THE BRITISH NEO-FORMALIST CIRCLE

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KIRA MURATOVA'S CINEMATIC ENCOUNTER WITH CHEKHOV

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CHEKHOV'S RECEPTION IN RUSSIAN WOMEN'S PERIODICAL PRESS

**Three Irish Sisters:
Brian Friel's Version of Chekhov's Play for the Irish stage**

by

KEVIN WINDLE

Many of the English-language versions of Chekhov's great plays have been the object of much study and criticism. The version of his *Three Sisters* considered below is less well known than some others, but in my view has much to commend it. It deserves attention both for its handling of practical translation problems, and for the polemical statement (not too grand a term) which it makes.

The translator, Brian Friel (b. Omagh, Co. Tyrone, 1929) is one of the most eminent (if not *the* most eminent) of modern Irish playwrights. He has a keen interest in Russian literature and drama and very considerable knowledge of it, as may be seen from his stage adaptation of *Fathers and Sons* and a version of *A Month in the Country*, said to be 'after Turgenev'. He is also the author of a play called *Translations*, and many other plays which have nothing remotely Russian about them, but much to do with language, as the English language, especially as spoken in Ireland, is something that Friel cares deeply about and for which he evinces much sensitivity.

His 'Russian' works include *Three Sisters*. His translation, published in 1981, was made with a very specific purpose in mind, which is stated on the cover: 'to make the unique experience of Chekhov more accessible to Irish

It is worth considering a critical survey of English versions of *Three Sisters*, in which Friel's version is examined, with many others, at some length. This is Munir Sendich's, *English Counter Russian*, in which Friel's version is classed with those of Michael Frayn, Lanford Wilson and Richard Nelson as a 'stage translation' (the other categories being 'Early Translations' and 'Standard/Scholarly Translations'). Friel's version is given much space but short shrift in a critique which finds him guilty of 'mistranslation', 'mutilation', 'monstrous renditions', 'hideous renditions', 'concoction', 'disregard for the author', 'restructuring', 'distortion', 'futile endeavours', 'alliterated nonsense', 'banality', 'bungling' and 'blunders'. Friel is in good company, however: Ronald Hingley, no less, is said to have 'heavily damaged the style of the original' in what many would regard as the authoritative Oxford Chekhov. Such contentious and categorical statements hinge largely, of course, on the criteria one chooses to apply, and on questions of definition, but it is clearly important to take account of the translator's purpose and method.

As noted, Friel has clearly stated his purpose: a Chekhov naturalized for an Irish audience. As for his method, this is not stated in the published volume, so may have escaped notice, but he has made no secret of his working procedure. Not being a speaker of Russian, and therefore unable to work directly from the original, he relies instead on a kind of triangulation, based on a number of existing versions, apparently six.⁴ I am not in possession of a complete list, but the internal evidence at many points suggests Elizaveta Fen and Hingley, and Friel himself has mentioned these two, as well as Stark Young and Michael Frayn.⁵ Elmer Andrews thinks it likely that a version by Tyrone Guthrie and Leonid Kipnis was also used.⁶

Friel is not, of course, alone in producing a version of this play by this or a similar procedure. Others, like Richard Nelson, have worked from a 'literal'

Playhouse (2003) is but one example among many.) In all cases, and however 'literal' or however polished the 'crib', the shared assumption is that the 'foreign' artefact must be brought to its new audience in a form fully attuned to the cultural expectations of that audience, with its 'foreign-ness' minimized if not expunged. The same assumption guides the work of translators as different from each other as Friel and Hingley.

Here it is necessary to make brief reference to the theoretical reflections of Lawrence Venuti, which have been influential in some circles since the mid-nineties and provided the keynote statement for a conference on literary translation held in Oxford in April 2004: 'The English language should not subsume the original; the reader should be made to confront the otherness of the foreign culture'.⁸ At the basis of this thinking lies the 'foreignizing' policy advocated by Venuti, in place of the traditional 'domesticating' tendency. The former is defined as 'a theory and practice of translation that resists dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text'.⁹ It is, in Venuti's view, not only desirable but actually necessary as a constant reminder that the re-created cultural artefact is in truth the property of another culture. This policy did not, of course, originate in the 1990s. One has only to think of Richard Burton's supposedly 'plain and literal' *Book of One Thousand Nights and a Night*, rendered into what J.M. Cohen calls 'pseudo-Arabic convolutions',¹⁰ or of Vladimir Nabokov's contemptuous dismissal of all who seek to produce, or to find, elegance in a translation:

The experienced hack ... will tone down everything that might seem unfamiliar to the meek and imbecile reader visualised by his publisher. But the honest translator is faced with a different task. ... We must dismiss once and for all the conventional notion that a translation

native English-speaker. ... The second basic principle ... is that every line must be as immediately comprehensible as it was in the original.¹²

Christopher Hampton, speaking of his 2003 production of *Three Sisters*, has articulated a very similar view.¹³

The principles guiding Friel in his version are no different. He too aims to domesticate - not 'foreignize' - the *Sisters*; in this case the domestic audience (like the players) happen to be in Ireland, and he domesticates less than, say, Claude Miller in his film *La Petite Lili* (which is based on *The Seagull* but does not purport to be a 'translation' of it; rather it is '*librement inspiré*'). Friel sets out to produce an idiomatic version, a text which actors can speak and feel at ease with. It is certainly true that in doing so he permits himself greater liberties than most other translators (that is, than most working from the original), and many of Munir Sendich's objections have to do with precisely this. They rest on an understanding of 'fidelity' which is essentially literal fidelity, and has much in common with the view of the 'foreignizer' Venuti. It must be said that fidelity of this kind would require the 'honest' translator (Nabokov's term) to eschew idiomatic English and adopt opaque and unnatural forms of language, where there was nothing opaque or unnatural in the Russian, and overcome considerable audience resistance while so doing.

Friel, who is a playwright first and a translator second, feels bound by no such constraints. Indeed, one of the more striking features of his version, when set beside the original or other translations is that he frequently does not observe Chekhov's divisions or sequencing of speech, that is, he will often splice short lines into longer speeches by way of verbal punctuation. Thus in an important monologue by Irina in the first scene of act one, beginning 'Когда я сегодня проснулась, встала и умылась ...' ('When I woke up this morning, got up

Irina's speech as written by Chekhov. Friel proceeds in similar fashion at other points, for example, in the closing scene of the play, where responses by Kulygin are interpolated while Natasha is speaking.

This rejigging, one presumes, has to do with the Irish playwright's views on stage technique and the manipulation of dialogue. Modifications of this nature, affecting the architecture of the dialogue, will not, however, contribute to the Irish flavour. How, then, does the text display its Irishness? Here we need, of course, to consider the linguistic detail.

Friel is not afraid to inject some good Catholic expletives where these seem to him appropriate (and where there may be nothing strictly comparable in the original), and these make a vital contribution to the tone which is set. It is particularly, but not exclusively, apparent in the speech of those of lower social standing, the servants and retainers, and the 'vulgar' Natasha. In the closing scene, Natasha speaks at some length and is startled when Kulygin enters the room wearing a false beard and resembling the German teacher at his school. Her natural reaction is, 'Ну вас совсем, испугали!' ('What a fright you gave me!'). Friel, transposing this line to its new context, renders this as: 'Jesus Mary and Joseph! You put the heart across me!'¹⁶ To this Kulygin responds - and this is pure invention: (*German accent*) 'What means I put the heart across you?' (In the original Kulygin says nothing.)

Here is Natasha again, with Olga on the night of the fire: 'Да, я, должно быть, растрепанная. (*Перед зеркалом*) Говорят, я пополнила ... И неправда! Ничуть!' ('Yes, I suppose I'm dishevelled. (*At the mirror*) They tell me I've put on weight ... It's not true! Not a word of it!'). Friel has: 'Sweet mother of God, would you look at that hair! D'you think I've put on weight? Maybe a bit. Some people tell me I'm not near as soigné [sic] as I

it is lower-class speech that betrays the clearest Irish influence, rather than that of the sisters or those with more education. Here Anfisa serves tea and is somewhat put out to see Vershinin departing: 'Куда же он? А я чай подала ... Экой какой' ('Where's he off to? I've just served tea ... What a one he is!'). Friel remodels the grumbled protest to conform to its new social and linguistic context: 'Where's he away to? Haven't I just poured him his teal What sort of a quare buck's that?'²⁰ (This last, the quare buck, gets special mention from Sendich as a 'hideous rendition'.)²¹

Cultural and geographical displacement may be achieved by no more than a single word in a sentence: Natasha [to Andrei]: 'Если хочешь разговаривать, то отдай колясочку с ребенком кому-нибудь другому' ('If you want to talk, give the child and pram to somebody else'). The Irish Natasha uses her own native idiom: 'If you can't keep your big mouth shut, let somebody else mind *the wean*'²² [my emphasis].

In the last act, Vershinin is taking his leave and Masha is nowhere to be found. When Irina offers to look for her in the garden, Anfisa responds by offering to go with her: 'Пойду и я поищу' ('I'll go and look too'). 'Irished' by Friel, the localizing effect is striking: 'Sure you couldn't find your right hand. I'll get her'.²³

Anfisa in Friel's version becomes markedly more garrulous than in the original, and some of her lines have no exact equivalent in Chekhov. In the same scene she makes a relatively long speech, thanking the lord for all the creature comforts she enjoys with Olga, from which I quote only a fragment of a considerably expanded English version: 'Sure aren't we as happy as a pair of pups together! And amn't I living the life of a queen?' is only a loose match for 'Отродясь я, грешница, так не жила' ('In all my life, sinner that I am, I

'Seven whole years since she and I were conjugated - ha-ha, there's a splendid pun for you!'²⁵

In addition to Friel's many intentional modifications, a small number of minor distortions of sense occur, the inevitable result of lapses in the versions used (the English 'source texts') being replicated in the 'Irish' target text. Some exemplary English versions, including Fen, Hingley and Frayn, show surprising unanimity in their treatment of 'интересный' at two points in act one.²⁶ First, Irina enquires about the newcomer Vershinin: 'Интересный человек?' The versions named all interpret the adjective as 'interesting', although Tuzenbakh's response 'Ничего себе' ('Not bad') shows clearly that he is in no doubt as to Irina's meaning: 'Is he good-looking?' Friel, naturally, follows where he is led: 'I'm sure he's a bore'. Curiously, at the second occurrence, where Fedotik pays Irina a compliment, there is no misinterpretation: 'Вы сегодня замечательно интересны'. Fen, Hingley and Frayn have, respectively, 'attractive', 'nice' and 'pretty'. Hence Friel's 'you're looking terrific today'.²⁷

Friel's cultural transfer entails a temporal shift as well as a geographical one. Other translators, particularly those whose 'Edwardian' versions he deplores, would have forsworn the modernizing tendency which is very much part of his method. It is apparent in much of the detail of the dialogue, for example in 'бедные' rendered as 'underprivileged'.²⁸ It is also visible in the expletives which would have offended Edwardian ears but are now seen as merely colloquial and emphatic: Chebutykin accompanies the delivery of his gift, a silver samovar, with the words: 'Дорогие подарки. Ну вас совсем! Неси самовар туда' ('Expensive presents. Be off with you! Take the samovar in there'). The new Chebutykin expresses himself as follows: 'Who gives a damn about expense? Take that bloody thing in there.'²⁹

Your Polish wife will hug you and say: Kochanie!'). Friel elaborates here with a brand of humour beloved of British television comedy, and less commonly met with in Russian:

Kulygin: You'll not be three months in Poland till you find yourself a splendid Polish wife. And every night she'll throw her arms around you and whisper 'Kohany' [sic].

Fedotik: (*pretended shock*) Kulygin!

Kulygin: (*confused*) It means - it simply means 'beloved' - that's all.³¹

There can be no indecent suggestion in the original, since - as Chekhov well knew - most Russian speakers recognize this Polish word (also used in Ukrainian), whereas it can safely be assumed that no Irish or British readers will recognize 'kochać' in any form unless they happen to have studied Polish.

Irishisms and innuendo apart, it will be noticed that the Irish playwright gives free rein to a taste for imaginative and whimsical invention, writing into the text much that had never occurred to the Chekhov. The line 'Бальзак венчался в Бердичеве' ('Balzac got married in Berdichev') is the catalyst for a whole new tableau in act two, in which 'Roddey' plays the guitar and Irina and Fedotik sing, 'Balzac was married in Berdichev town, Berdichev town, Berdichev town, to a Polish girl called Hanka'.³²

Friel's inventiveness and resourcefulness manifest themselves at many points, for example in his handling of the music and song in the original. Chekhov's songs, often used to help identify characters, are replaced by English (possibly Irish) ditties, or song-like snatches of verse: in place of the folk song 'Ах вы сени мои сени' he inserts, 'There are many sad and weary in this pleasant world of ours'.³³ 'Та-ра-па-бумбия' ('Tarara-boom-de-ay') is similarly

always coincide with that of the Russian playwright, but the introduced gestures are generally apt in the setting as Friel sees it. Chekhov gives no directions to accompany Irina's well-known line 'Жизнь заглушила нас, как сорная трава' ('Life has stifled us, the way weeds stifle'). Friel stipulates at the very beginning that Irina 'has a basket filled with flowers and is arranging them in vases around the room',³⁶ and much later she is 'fingering flowers in a vase and now picks out a withered one'.³⁷ Chekhov signals only that Natasha notices Irina ('Увидев Ирину') before addressing her. Friel insists on a marked change of tone:³⁸ 'She sees Irina and goes to her. Her accent becomes slightly posh').

At this level there is perhaps less 'Irishness' in evidence. Nor is his treatment of the famous long-standing translation problems notably 'Irish'. His rendering of 'чепуха/реникса' and 'мерলেখлюндия' etc. is derived from his English source texts. It is the dialogue itself which marks Friel's Sisters and their friends as belonging in a new geographical setting. If one compares this play with his other 'Russian' works, *A Month in the Country* and *Fathers and Sons*, we see that these too are in a modern idiom, with modern English phrasing, vocabulary and curses. They are, however, less 'localized' in a particular English-language milieu than his *Three Sisters*. They have the virtue of natural speech and carefully crafted dialogue, with lines fashioned for ease of stage delivery. They do not, in the main, suggest or require an Irish accent, in the way that this play clearly, and deliberately, does. In *Three Sisters*, he may be seen deftly and readily adjusting his word choice, syntax and phrasing to the speech community which is his primary audience.

It needs to be said, however, that in this play, notwithstanding Friel's stated purpose, the Irishness of his version does not obtrude, and much of the time the speech of many of the characters is not strongly marked as Irish. Those who

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At the same time, the essential reference points remain Chekhov's Russian reference points. In Claude Miller's *La Petite Lili*, the centre of the cultural universe is Paris, which is where his film-stars and film directors have their artistic being when not on holiday on the Brittany coast. Friel's *Sisters*, by contrast, yearn to go to Moscow, we are told, just as they did in the original over a century ago. Yet from their accents and idiom, Friel's sisters might be spending the summer in County Waterford and dreaming of Dublin, and the fact that Dublin suggests itself to us as the sisters' destination rather than Moscow, (or London or New York), is a measure of the playwright-translator's success. He achieves what he sets out to achieve, with a version which produces an impression (at least) of independence, of a translation which is not British or American, though actually derived from earlier translations made in Britain and the USA; a version which focuses our attention on language as the medium, and has flawless internal linguistic and stylistic consistency, but, paradoxically perhaps, might well seem linguistically transparent on a Dublin stage, and 'draw no attention to itself' as a translation (Hampton's ideal). If theatre is illusion, and a translated play is designed to produce an equivalent illusion in the mind of the new audience, Friel's version does much to provide exactly that.⁴¹

Regional accents are, of course, the bane of the literary translator, bringing with them the often insoluble problem of relocating the text in a particular geographical area. The case of the Irish *Three Sisters* is unusual in that Chekhov's original places little emphasis on a precise geographical location. Friel's procedure is a bold one, and likely to encounter some audience resistance, but made necessary by his stated purpose: 'to make Chekhov more clearly audible to an Irish audience and to rescue him from English versions that always seem to place him in genteel and polite English big houses'.⁴² This form of domestication is bound to make the original new, 'different',

NOTES

1. Brian Friel, *Three Sisters: A Translation of the Play by Anton Chekhov*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, 1992 (first published 1981).
2. Quoted in Elmer Andrews, *The Art of Brian Friel: Neither Reality Nor Dreams*, St Martin's Press, New York, 1995, p. 182.
3. Munir Sendich, *English Counter Russian: Essays on Criticism of Literary Translation in America*, Peter Lang, New York, 1999, pp. 145-51.
4. Andrews, op. cit., p. 181.
5. Brian Friel, personal communication.
6. Andrews, loc. cit.
7. Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, translated by Richard Nelson, Broadway Play Publishing Co., New York, 1991.
8. Call for papers: 'Shelving Translation', www.shelvingtranslation.com
9. Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 23.
10. J.M. Cohen, *English Translators and Translations*, Longmans Green, London, 1962, p. 30.

12. Anton Chekhov, *Plays: The Seagull, Uncle Vanya, Three Sisters, The Cherry Orchard*, translated and introduced by Michael Frayn, Methuen, London, 1988, p. 353.
13. 'Word Play: interview with Jo Litson', *Weekend Australian*, 2-3 March, 2002.
14. A. P. Chekhov, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh*, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, 1963, IX, p. 536 (hereafter *Sob. soch.*); Friel p. 16.
15. *Sob. soch.*, p. 599; Friel, p. 120.
16. *Sob. soch.*, loc. cit.; Friel, loc. cit.
17. *Sob. soch.*, p. 572; Friel, p. 76.
18. *Sob. soch.*, p. 595; Friel, p. 113.
19. *Sob. soch.*, p. 599; Friel, p. 120.
20. *Sob. soch.*, p. 563; Friel, p. 60.
21. Sendich, op. cit., p. 148.
22. *Sob. soch.*, p. 595; Friel, p. 113.
23. *Sob. soch.*, p. 596; Friel, p. 115.
24. *Sob. soch.*, p. 596; Friel, p. 114.

27. *Sob. soch.*, p. 551; Friel, p. 39; Fen, p. 114; Hingley, p. 188; Frayn, op. cit., p. 213.
28. (Natasha speaking.) *Sob. soch.*, p. 572; Friel, p. 76.
29. *Sob. soch.*, p. 540; Friel, p. 21.
30. *Sob. soch.*, p. 591; Friel, p. 105.
31. *Sob. soch.*, p. 585; Friel, p. 96.
32. *Sob. soch.*, p. 561; Friel, p. 55.
33. *Sob. soch.*, p. 565; Friel, p. 64.
34. *Sob. soch.*, p. 600; Friel, p. 123.
35. *Sob. soch.*, p. 539; Friel, p. 18.
36. *Sob. soch.*, p. 534; Friel, 11.
37. *Sob. soch.*, p. 549; Friel, p. 36.
38. *Sob. soch.*, p. 550; Friel, loc. cit.
39. Some may object that clichés can, in fact, be found, and that Anfisa's 'quare buck', for example, belongs to a kind of imagined 'stage Irish', rather than a living form of the colloquial.

Anton Chekhov in English, 1998–2004: A Bibliography*by***PETER HENRY**

This comprehensive bibliography, containing some three hundred entries, provides information in the following areas:

- Chekhov's works in English translation
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- Chekhov's correspondence
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