

TRANSFORMING *COR, DIE ANDER VAN GOGH* FROM RADIO PLAY TO STAGE PRODUCTION FOR MULTICULTURAL AUDIENCES

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ABSTRACT

When adapting a radio play to be performed on a stage, the limitations and capabilities of both mediums have to be considered and dealt with in the adaptation process. Such an adaptation and transformation was attempted with Cor, die ander van Gogh, initially written by Naomi Morgan for radio broadcast. It relates the life of Cor, youngest brother to Vincent and Theo van Gogh. Cor emigrated to South Africa in the late 1880s and fought on the side of the Boers in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 - 1902. The stage performance had to be accessible also to a non-Afrikaans speaking audience which necessitated careful planning to ensure that the communication is unambiguous and as comprehensible as possible. There are three partners to this process: the text, the actor and the audience themselves. Regarding the text, care should be taken to ensure a tight dramatic structure and the various functions of the dialogue should be identified to ensure a clear message. Contextualisation of the character(s) and events is important to give the necessary details for the audience to understand the dramatic progression. The audience then has to interpret cognitively what has been offered to them on a sensual level and appreciative feedback would indicate the success of the whole process.

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INTRODUCTION

“Communication is the most important thing in life: it is what makes the human predicament bearable. And art is the most profound way in which one person communicates with another.” These are the presumed words of Maria Callas, celebrated opera singer of the 20th century (Fernald 1971: 65).

Although art (as a means of expressive communication) takes on many faces, this article will focus on the process of transforming and adapting a radio play for stage performance accessible to a non-Afrikaans speaking audience, as was the case with *Cor, die ander van Gogh* by Nadmi Morgan (2000). This Afrikaans drama was initially written as a radio play, then transformed and adapted for the stage by the director and toured to Belgium and the Netherlands where it was performed in front of mainly Dutch speaking audiences.

Transforming and adapting a dramatic text for performance in another medium is no new phenomenon in the world of drama. Examples of such adaptations include, amongst others, Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood* which began as a radio play, but was also staged and recorded for television. Harold Pinter’s *A Slight Ache*, Robert Bolt’s *A Man for all Seasons* and *The Mousetrap* by Agatha Christie, which started out as a radio play by the name of *Three Blind Mice*, are well-known examples (Brandt 1971: 141; Esslin 1978: 77).

When transforming a play from one medium to another, it is essential to know the possibilities and limitations of both mediums, how these affect the script and how to accommodate these qualities in the transformation process. Additionally, for this transformation and adaptation, the script, the actor(s) and the audience were all considered important variables to the process of making the text accessible to the Flemish and Dutch audiences. These variables were considered analytically when making cuts or giving directions to the actor(s) regarding the purpose of a dialogue or the rendering of a speech. Technical enrichment by means of sound and visual material was also utilised to contextualise the dialogue and thereby supplying comprehensible symbols to the audience.

BASIC SIMILARITIES OF AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO MEDIUMS

The first difference in communication between the two mediums (radio play and stage play) is probably the type of communication elicited by each. The radio communicates in one direction only. Although there may be a communication reaction present in the audience, this does not reach the broadcaster directly, whereas in the theatre the presence of the audience and their reactions is an immediate feedback process.

The radio also allows for time, space and events to be endlessly diversified – there are no physical boundaries that limit (in time/space) the movement from one milieu to another. This means that the chronology of events/time sequences can easily be varied, as is often done. In the theatre this can also be achieved with clever directing and appropriate text organisation.

Another main difference is that, with radio drama, less acting is actually more – the radio player has to create a picture in the mind of the listener without any aid, but his/her voice and sound affects or technical enhancement of sound. In the theatre, the actor has the added advantage of physicality – being seen portraying a character by means of acting using verbal and nonverbal codes. The equipment of radio makes it unnecessary to project the character (in voice and sound) beyond the ether. The theater, on the other hand, demands that the person in the back row also sees and hears – often leading to larger than life projection.

“Radio, the ‘blind man’s theatre’, translates all action into sound” (Brandt 1971: 135). This means that the radio play is found on the extreme of the continuum

Visual \longleftrightarrow Auditory

This would imply that a radio play would rather avoid happenings that can not be fully portrayed by sound (Cazeaux 2005: 159). The stage play however, is midway between the two extremes with both visual and auditory aspects in its scope of communication.

One of the strongest elements of the radio play is its ability to relate. The narrator, in the radio play, is found as character in the progression of the play and/or as commentator, either in the action of the play, or outside of it. The use of a “Greek chorus” (or a similar symbolic voice) is a typical device used in this respect by the radio play (Schutte 1978: 141). In theatre, many isolated narratives can be problematic to handle on the stage if not accompanied by representation or “acting out” which enhances its visual communication. Yet, the narrator in the radio play also bridges the divide between the theatre play and the radio play when the former is adapted to suit the ether. Drakakis (1981: 123) states it as follows: “...in many radio adaptations, explicit direction in the form of a narrator used to be regarded as the most expedient way of overcoming the problems of translation from theatre performance to radio broadcast.”

ADAPTING *COR, DIE ANDER VAN GOGH*

Content background

The play, *Cor die ander van Gogh*, deals mainly with the life story of Cornelis van Gogh, youngest brother to Theo and the famous artist Vincent van Gogh. Very little mention is ever made of Cor, as he was considered to be the outcast of the Van Gogh family. Unlike his brothers who stayed in Europe, Cor came to South Africa in the time of the discovery of diamonds, just before the gold rush of 1886. He kept in contact with his family by means of letters, mostly to his mother and brother Theo. With his decision to emigrate to South Africa, his life turned out to be disastrous: he never became rich, he married the wrong wife and supported the losing side during the Anglo-Boer War. During this war he fought on the side of the Boers in a foreigner’s league under command of Villebois-Mareuil. He was captured and detained in a camp near Brandfort in the Free State where he allegedly committed suicide. This play traces his life through five moments (scenes) where he had made the wrong choices, eventually resulting in his death (Morgan 2000).

Radio play elements present in *Cor, die ander van Gogh*

In order to shift this play from the extreme auditory end of the communication spectrum to also include the visual, certain changes were necessary, a necessity stated by Drakakis as follows: "... here questions of cutting, and the concentration of dramatic focus that follows this operation, have considerable relevance – the process is generally seen to involve the extracting and reproducing of an 'essence' enclosed within the original text itself" (1981: 129). This was also the consideration in *Cor, die ander van Gogh* where changes were made in the order of the original radio play scenes to add visual qualities to a logical flow of events while not losing the inner essence of the play.

Since time and events are not necessarily flowing chronologically in a radio play, this can be problematic when adapting a radio text for stage performance. In the case of *Cor, die ander van Gogh*, the overall progression of time is linear, starting from his arrival in South Africa and leading to his suicide approximately fourteen years later. However, within the action of the scenes, the progression is not always linear, as there are sequences of parallels that repeat each other and overlap in the process, rendering a non-linear structure.

Although *Cor, die ander van Gogh* is essentially a historic play, dealing with a character and circumstances around the Anglo-Boer war, the past is not only an exposition, but a very real present force, gauging the development of the plot and the decline of the main character. According to Brink, in modern drama the past is brought to life before an audience, not merely by symbols, but by acting out the events (1974: 91 – 92). This was done in the adaptation so that the audience had the opportunity to share the emotive qualities of such a force and to interpret the past for themselves, guided by the enactment of the most important details.

Being originally conceived for the radio, there are only four characters, namely Cor himself, and three symbolic types, Woman, Man and Woman-man, acting as a type of Greek Chorus with a strong commentary role. In adapting the radio drama, no changes were made here, as the three characters from the Chorus represent three different viewpoints of the action. These characters have an important communication role as they are not bound by time constraints and can span time barriers, capable of predictions and also communicating with hindsight. These qualities were used to accentuate the predicament of the main character and thereby guiding the audience to a more comprehensive understanding.

As the original text of *Cor, die ander van Gogh* has strong (and long) narrative passages, mainly in the form of monologues, this aspect especially had to be adapted to make it also visually dramatic. It was decided to cut most of the purely descriptive passages within the monologues and to enhance its performance by action (movement from inner emotions, or functional) to focus the attention of the audience on the dramatic progression rather than the purely descriptive aspects. In this respect the Chorus was also used to act out sequences, thereby adding to the visual quality of the performance.

It is a known fact that music/sound can be used to create events and moods. Cazeaux (2005: 167) identifies 3 aspects of sound (in a radio drama) that are used to create meaning. These three are: i) evocation, ii) psychological sound and iii) the voice. These aspects were incorporated in the stage performance of *Cor, die ander van Gogh*. Evocation, in addition to being an index for an event, also reveals wider connections with the specific sound. A soundtrack with the aim to enhance atmosphere and give communicative expression to emotional states was prepared and used in the performances locally and abroad. Sounds that would have dramatic meaning and would enhance the audience's understanding were included. In the stage performance the use of sound often referred to milieu setting or emotional states (e.g. the use of industrial sounds when Cor makes a remark about his stay in England or a train whistling and rambling off when Cor's life has taken a final turn for the worse). Sound was therefore used as a descriptive and indicative means of communication. Additional use of sound to express /describe a psychological state was mostly done by means of paralinguistics like tone, pitch, pace etc. which supported the verbal manifestation.

A great difference between the two mediums, radio and stage, is the use of visuals in the theatre. In the case of *Cor, die ander van Gogh*, apart from stage movements and body language by the actors; use was also made of slide projections of demonstrative as well as implicative material to enhance meaning and as milieu setting. Lighting was also used to focus attention and as a conveyer of mood. Slow fading of light is a well-known device to express the passing of time or to emphasise an emotional state. Repeated sectional lighting of certain stage areas for specific milieus in the play aids the audience in making the connections between the areas and the places/mental states they represent.

Proxemics, as part of the visual aspect of theatre communication is important. As Stanton puts it: "We read the actors' bodies in relation to each other as an integral part of the *mise-en-scène*" (2004: 97). In a radio play, this refers simply to the distance between actor and ether, in the theatre this is a communicative force that indicates to the audience the relationship between characters. In *Cor, die ander van Gogh* this was especially used to enhance the comments of the Chorus. They always maintained a distinct distance from Cor, indicating their detachment, physical or emotional. This was reinforced when the "symbolic" characters portrayed other minor roles, e.g. when Woman acted as Cor's mother in the Anglo-Boer War scene, hurling her advice to her son almost right across the stage.

MAKING THE PERFORMANCE ACCESSIBLE TO NON-AFRIKAANS SPEAKERS

This play, after having been performed locally in Bloemfontein, went on tour to Belgium and Amsterdam where it played before Flemish and Dutch audiences. Although there are linguistic similarities between Flemish, Dutch and Afrikaans, it was felt that a conscious effort was necessary to enhance the understanding of the play for the non-Afrikaans speaking audiences. According to Cazeaux (2005: 164 – 166), there are three partners in the process of creating meaning in a stage production, namely the

performer, the text and the audience, and all three have to actively take part in this communication process.

Making the text accessible

The first step in the process to enhance the audience's understanding of the performance was to take a critical look at the text itself. Although the transition from radio play to stage production had already been made and the text had been tested on a stage, it was decided that additional text cuts were necessary to ensure an even tighter dramatic progression. Focus was placed only on the relevant experiences, yet not sacrificing emotive qualities of the dialogue. The shorter text also allowed for a slower pace of delivery for the unaccustomed ear of the mainly Dutch speakers.

Although Keuris (1996: 61) emphasises that the referential function of the dialogue in a play is especially prominent in the exposition, in the case of *Cor, die ander van Gogh* this quality was also being exploited in the monologues and soliloquies throughout the play. These monologues and soliloquies (mostly uttered by Cor) varied in content, mainly between letters to his family (mother and brothers) and descriptive or narrative passages, rendering reference to the most important aspects in the life of the main character. Through this means the audiences received the necessary background information to contextualise the events and understand the character development of Cor van Gogh.

Code switching in itself is a device often used in a production to elicit audience reaction (Grobler 1990: 41). As this play is a portrayal of a Dutch character, use was also made of code switching between Afrikaans and Dutch, already present in the original radio text. In this sense no real changes were made with the Dutch speaking audience in mind. The code switching, in this play, however, fulfills a narrative (when uttered by the Chorus) and an emotional function when Cor proudly states that he is a senior employer of the South African Railway Company. It was therefore not used to elicit audience reaction, but to enhance the message.

Concerning the textual connotations and denotations made by the audience, one can never precisely predict what inferences would be made. According to Johansen this depends, amongst others, on the audience's knowledge of the specific language used and the similarity of their experience of life (1993: 211). Stanton concludes "all of language and consciousness, and therefore art, is constituted by nothing but the evanescent, uncertain play of signification" (2004: 102). As stated previously, Afrikaans, Dutch and Flemish do have linguistic similarities, but the life experiences of these audiences might be very different from that being portrayed by the play. Therefore, it was imperative that the portrayal of the events and character had to be unambiguous and contextualised.

The performer as living link between text and audience

It is the task of the actor to bring the written text to life by means of all his physical and mental capabilities in a clear and comprehensible way. Banning defines the various

roles of the actor in the following words: "During a performance the actor speaks as himself, as a representative of the author and as an autonomous character inhabiting the dramatic world. He is simultaneously playing a social rôle, a material representation of authorial and/or directorial intention and a character in rôle" (1990: 28).

The actor renders his/her presentation by means of projection of feelings, thoughts, intentions etc. through the spoken word given to him/her by the dramatist and guided by the director. Yet, it remains a rendition enhanced (and limited) by the actor's own body, language, social background and orientation. Although the actor is portraying a character from another culture, he/she is in essence a person from a specific community and society and these factors are reflected (knowingly or unknowingly) in the voice. Cazeaux states it as follows: "Speech is of particular importance in that it is the occasion when conditions which locate a person in the world, that is their physical and cultural situation and all that they are bodily capable of in that situation, are revealed..." (2005: 169).

All of an actor's vocal capabilities are used to convey the referential (referring to something), emotive (reveals emotion), phatic (dialogue for the purpose of making contact), appellative (with the aim to influence), metalingual (talking about language) and poetic (using literary technique in dialogue) functions of the dialogue (Keuris 1996: 61 – 64). Here the cooperation between actor and director is the decisive factor to choose and emphasise the required function(s) of the dialogue in the particular scene.

In *Cor, die ander van Gogh*, it was mainly Cor who used the emotive and poetic functions of the dialogue which was conveyed through pacing of the dialogue, emphasis and intonation, supported by appropriate nonverbal codes. The dialogue ascribed to the characters in the Chorus was mostly referential, although several passages also expressed an emotive quality, especially if the characters doubled as other minor characters. As in Cor's case, the dialogue was accompanied by appropriate nonverbal codes.

But the actor does not bring a character to life in a void, and therefore contextualisation is of considerable importance. Johansen is of the opinion that the actor has to take the communicative and referential contexts into consideration in his interpretation of the text (1993: 202). To this end, several discussions were held with the actors and a visit to the area where Cor was allegedly buried was undertaken, all to enhance an understanding for the conditions, background and character. Once placed in a clear context, the actor is more capable to communicate his characterisation to an audience. In this regard this specific text is explanatory and contextualises all major events leading to Cor's suicide.

The audience as the final link in the performance

The audience, as the ultimate communication recipient in a stage performance, is by no means inferior to any of the other elements and has to take the role of an active communication partner. Banning states that the obligation of the audience lies in "making meaning out of the signs of meaning that the performance is constructing"

(1990: 29). Stanton (2004: 95), in quoting from Anne Ubersfeld's essay "The pleasure of the spectator", also refers to this obligation of active communication partner on the side of the audience. "...the spectator, too, is a *bricoleur*, a kind of DIY enthusiast who enjoys the specifically theatrical pleasure of doing 'his own thing' with the elements offered to him".

Not only is it the aim of stage communication to aid an audience in cognitive interpretation of a live text, it also strives to recreate human states of emotion, allowing the audience to experience these emotions as a means of inner emotional enrichment (Esslin 1978: 117). This emotional experience of the audience is guided by means of mutually understood signs. From this flows that these "signs of meaning" must be comprehensible to the audience in order to be interpreted. Johansen refers to a shared knowledge: "we need a certain amount of shared knowledge and common presuppositions between utterer and interpreter" (1993: 202). These mutually understood signs constitute the expressiveness of the work and Cazeaux (2005: 164 – 166) explains that the expressiveness of a work refers to the way meaning is created, and this meaning stems from the way the cognitive processes in the receiver are stimulated by the work. Yet, the play is presented to both the mind and the senses of the audience, although initially perceived by the senses. It is the cognitive interpretation of the sensual mix of set, script and characterisation that finally constitutes the expressiveness of the particular work.

In *Cor, die ander van Gogh*, this mutual knowledge of the meaning of signs was taken into consideration in the production of the text. Since the sensual receipt of the performance precedes the cognitive interpretation in the audience, much attention was given to the auditory and visual representation. Often sound and visual material accompanied the dialogue to aid the interpretation on the side of the audience. According to Parker and Smith (1974: 352 – 356) stage lighting has the following functions: to establish a milieu for the action, making all action visible, establish the mood of a scene/moment, reinforcing the theme of a scene and staging the story. For this production lighting was used as a mood setter and to guide transitions from one milieu to a next, to indicate movement in time as well as to indicate emotional transitions in the characters. Certain stage areas were repeatedly used for scenes depicting events involving the same milieu/characters to guide the audience in their interpretation.

Keuris states that the audience receives the message in the present time and the production cannot be interrupted if something slipped the attention of the audience (1996: 76). To accommodate this, the general tempo and rhythm of the performance was slowed down without sacrificing emotional intensity. With the aim of an uninterrupted thought process on the side of the audience, the play was performed without an interval.

Although everything possible was done to create mutually understood signs to which the audience could react, there will never be just one interpretation stemming from the

performance, for the audience represents not only a unified body, but also a grouping of individual members of a specific society. Therefore there can never be an aspiration for a uniquely unified interpretation of the stage communication. The aim is therefore to aid the audience in interpreting the communication message, but not to compel them to make a specific interpretation. In this regard, Esslin states that the stage is open to varied interpretations and requires combined powers, sensitivity and awareness to make interpretations possible on a number of different levels (1978: 112). Banning states it this way: "... (theatrical activity) is distinguished as a particular form of social action by its specifically theatrical (rather than dramatic) practices, which involve all the features of performance – acting in a continuous present; continuously making unstable incomplete meanings; and participating in conceptual exchanges within a group" (1990: 13).

TO CONCLUDE

When an audience reacts to the communication offered to them in a stage performance, the communication cycle is completed. The audiences in Belgium and the Netherlands cried with the downfall of Cor and smiled with the characters in the lighter moments. Could there be a clearer indication of appreciative feedback? In both countries, the final applause did not cease until after the second curtain call of the actors.

Although no formal analysis has been undertaken to rate the degree of accessibility and understandability attained in the adapted stage play, informal discussions with audience members in Belgium and Amsterdam resulted in an estimate of at least 85 per cent being understandable. However subjective this estimate may be, comparable results were obtained from different audiences. This is certainly no measure for communication efficiency, but perhaps an indication of the success rate of transforming and adapting an Afrikaans radio play and making it accessible to Flemish and Dutch speakers.

Perhaps the greatest value of stage communication as a mode of communication can be found in the words of Martin Esslin: "Drama is as multifaceted in its images, as ambivalent in its meanings, as the world it mirrors. That is its main strength, its characteristic as a mode of expression – and its greatness (1978: 118). If a comprehensible reflection of the life of Cor has been achieved, the aim of the communication has been fulfilled.

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