

# Interpreting as storytelling

*Jozefina Komporaly attended a storytelling performance by Around the Well, dramatising the concerns faced by interpreters in the community*



Jozefina Komporaly is a London-based academic, interpreter and translator, working from Hungarian and Romanian into English. She specialises in contemporary theatre and fiction, and is editor and co-translator of Matéi Visniec's *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays* (Seagull Books, 2015) and András Visky's *Barrack Dramaturgy: Memories of the Body* (Intellect, 2017). Her translations have appeared in *Words Without Borders*, *Asymptote* and *Index on Censorship*, and were staged by [Foreign Affairs] in London and by Theatre Y in Chicago. She has published extensively on translation and adaptation for the stage, including the monograph *Radical Revival as Adaptation* (Palgrave, 2017).

Europe House in London was packed for this event on 15 March – mainly with interpreters, rounded off for good measure with academics, linguists and translators. It was an international and multi-ethnic group, in terms of both audience and performers. *Between* wove together stories of migration, multilingualism, agency, empathy, loss and renewal. Unlike many drama-based projects, this performance was also promoted as a platform drawing on the real experiences of interpreters, and we were looking forward to a fresh encounter with the tradition of documentary theatre. Six amazing women conveyed autobiographically rooted stories drawing on their personal histories of interpreting in challenging and sensitive situations, and exploring what can happen when one person takes the initiative to interpret for another person in the community.

## Multilingual performance

The company Around the Well was set up to showcase multilingualism in performance, and to consider the issue of linguistic exclusion and the relevance of the latter to current debates around insider and outsider status, both within Europe and beyond. The company came into being in the wake of the pioneering work conducted by Mothertongue, a multi-ethnic counselling and interpreting service that operated until 2018, led by Dr Beverley Costa of Birkbeck College, University of London. Over the

years, Mothertongue, and now the organisation Pasalo ([www.pasaloproject.org](http://www.pasaloproject.org)), have worked with dozens of interpreters in the Reading area, encouraging them to tell their untold narratives of in-betweenness, and publishing two anthologies of interpreters' stories.

The stories shared with the audience in *Between* covered themes similar to those in the anthologies. To my knowledge, *Around the Well* is unique among performance

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companies, being formed by professional interpreters who contribute their own accounts of events grounded in interpreting. Under Costa's supervision, Kamaljit Dosanjh (Punjabi and Urdu), San Maya Gurung (Nepali), Joanna Mungai (Polish) and Guida Shields (Portuguese) began uncovering the stories, which were then dramatised in a process involving Dr Teresa Murjas, Associate Professor in Theatre and Performance at the University of Reading (where the company is based). The storytelling performance we witnessed was the outcome of this manifold

collaboration, scripted and staged through an extensive process of devising led by Murjas, and exploring all company members' (occasionally fictionalised) memories and experiences. Over time, this process has produced a significant amount of reflection and new writing, and resulted in new perspectives on what the company aims to articulate as a collective, and what kind of performance form would be best suited to communicate that to a wider audience.

## Challenges and quandaries

Audience members witnessing *Between* found themselves sharing the challenges and ethical quandaries of interpreting for people in delicate situations. The group made an effort to consider the act of interpreting from multiple perspectives, and highlighted the dynamics of power that underpin the interpreter-mediated encounter. As Costa reflects in the foreword to the first collection of stories, *In Other Words*, 'These stories concern clients who are otherwise doubly silenced – by having to speak through an interpreter's voice, and by having no one who will tell their story, and listen to it fully and with compassion.' Through the platform offered by *Between*, these dramatised stories were able to shed light on the dilemmas interpreters face as professionals and compassionate human beings, fully aware of the confidential nature of these encounters, and the vulnerability of those involved.

## Reaching a wider audience

*Between* excelled in foregrounding the experiences of multilingual people, at both a personal and a professional level, and invited connections with their stories. The 100 or so people in the multi-ethnic audience found instant resonance with their own lived experiences, and they were genuinely touched by these stories that drew attention to the unpredictability and sheer difficulty of the tasks and situations that interpreters negotiate day in, day out. There was also a clear consensus that this material, highlighting as it does the urgent need for linguistic agency, deserved to be shared with a much broader audience. 