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A Dramaturgy of Translation: The Brussels City Theatre as a Site of Negotiation between Language Policy and Practice

Abstract

State-funded city theatres play an important role in keeping a finger on the pulse of society. As porous institutions that act as meeting places between artists and citizens, they can present themselves as reflexive or subversive voices. The combination of Brussels' idiosyncratic sociolinguistic situation and its artist-driven performing arts landscape provides an exceptional context for encounter between the wealth of language communities and heterogeneous audiences. In this article, I examine how the Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS) uses this bottom-up dynamic to reflect the city's urban multilingualism both on stage and in its outreach strategies. I consider the institution's exemplary role in structurally embedding a trilingual translation policy, and its latitude in relation to politically conditioned requirements in a city where Dutch is increasingly becoming a minority language. This way, I demonstrate that, far beyond catering for the Flemish minority, KVS's language and translation policy, as well as its principles, align with a future-oriented political project based in actual language practices. Furthermore, I highlight the particular role of the in-house "city dramaturg," who probes the urban fabric and guards the institution's vision while navigating the conditions imposed by funding bodies. It is argued that, by destabilising long-standing linguistic and cultural relations, KVS functions as a translation site, a shared space of debate to negotiate language relations and translation practices.

Keywords: performing arts, translation policy, Brussels, surtitling, translation site, institutional dramaturgy.

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> "Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice."
>
> (hooks 23)

Structurally funded by the Flemish government, city theatres in Flanders are entrusted with the task of taking the pulse of society. As they are expected to be porous institutions which function as places of encounter between artists and citizens, they can assert themselves as reflexive or subversive voices. At the same time, the specific artistic ecosystem of the Flemish and Belgian capital, Brussels, is situated in a highly complex sociolinguistic environment. As a consequence of multiple migration waves and the presence of the headquarters of the EU, Brussels is confronted with a fascinating tension between its traditional, official bilingualism and the multilingual urban reality. Although it has moved far beyond the historical Flemish-French duality, the city's bi-communitarian institutional organisation and concomitant language policies, which also govern its cultural institutions, are out of tune with the current sociodemographic reality.

In *Cities in Translation*, Sherry Simon offers tools for how to conceive of cities which have historically housed more than one linguistic community. She investigates the potential for creative interaction between languages in linguistically divided cities, marked by a degree of conflict between competing languages. In contrast with the bi- or multilingual city, her concept of the more dynamic "translational city" emphasises the points of contact and mutual efforts to communicate, rather than the parallel presence of multiple languages in the urban sphere: it considers the "multilingual, multi-ethnic urban space as a translation space, where the focus is not on multiplicity but on interaction" (*Cities* 7). Simon recognises how translation in the form of an encounter between language communities encourages urban cohesion. Translation sites, then, "crystallize language relations in time and space, defining specific moments of exchange or confrontation" (*Translation Sites* 5). Across the divisions present in historically bilingual cities, Simon advocates a uniting view that overcomes the duality in the shape of a polymorphous "third space," defined as "the urban zones and forms of expression which cut across and destabilize the old divisions" (*Cities* 119). This ultimately "disturbing" and "altering" third space "not only allows for representations of new communities but at the same time modifies the long-standing polarities which have defined the city" (148).

This article argues that the Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS) in Brussels casts itself as such a third space by sensing the pulse of the city and challenging its rigid language-political structures. By examining the role of

KVS in representing language interactions in the urban metropole, it explains how the theatre utilises the artist-driven dynamic of the Flemish performing arts sector to ensure adequate reflection of urban multilingualism on stage as well as in communication and public outreach. An important role is reserved for the theatre's city dramaturg, whose objective it is to explore the urban fabric as well as to secure these artist-driven dynamics. They act as curators of language diversity, while navigating the conditions imposed by funding bodies and the institution's artistic vision. Their role is to encourage the theatre to function as a shared space for every citizen by challenging linguistic hierarchies and promoting the dialogue between languages.

Firstly, the essay demonstrates how the pacification model underlying language legislation in Brussels reveals its limits. Then, the outlines of a political proposal for the promotion of multilingualism in Brussels are discussed. Following this, it is argued that KVS's language and translation policy as well as practice both expand and challenge top-down language management, acting as a counter-current to the monolingual policy imposed on Flemish cultural institutions. An interview with KVS dramaturg Gerardo Salinas sheds light on the incentives behind the institution's artistic and organisational program.

THE LINGUISTICALLY DIVIDED CITY

With almost 180 nationalities represented and, after Dubai, the highest percentage of residents born outside the country, Brussels is considered the second most superdiverse[1] city in the world, resulting in an estimated use of 100 different languages (André et al. 199). However, the present sociolinguistic make-up of Brussels is rooted in a long history of language tensions. While the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) is officially bilingual (French/Dutch[2]), the lingua franca is de facto French. The rapid Francisation, since the 1920s, of the originally monolingual Dutch city effectively reduced Dutch to a minority language. The implementation of language legislation that secured the equal status of Dutch resulted in bilingual institutions as well as parallel institutions managed by the Flemish

[1] The concept of "superdiversity" was coined by Steven Vertovec to denote how diversification processes condition social patterns and stratification. As a consequence mostly of migration, social configurations have become more complex than ever before, causing the predictability of sociocultural features among people with migration background to dissolve.

[2] Note that the term "Dutch" refers to the standard language for the entire Dutch language area, including the Netherlands, Flanders, Suriname, and the Netherlands Antilles. "Flemish," then, refers to the regional variant as spoken in Belgium.

and the French Communities, respectively. The current political model adopted in Brussels to ease the tensions between the two traditional language communities is what sociolinguist Rudi Janssens dubbed the "pacification model" ("Language Policies"). A result of multiple state reforms, it assumes official language use as the central political dividing line.

Jan Blommaert explains how the language-ideological debate in Belgium, as part of a larger democratisation process, resulted in the transformation from bilingualism into juxtaposed monolingualisms, whereby Brussels increasingly formed an "unsolvable problem." He criticises an institutional sociolinguistic regime that is at odds with sociolinguistic reality. Not only does it deny bilingualism as a social fact, it also selectively rejects forms of linguistic diversity. This intolerance, Blommaert argues, is manifested by systematically presenting the "plebeian" multilingualism of labour migrants as a threat to social cohesion, an obstacle to integration and social mobility to be combated, while commending the "elite" English-other language multilingualism of highly-skilled migrants as a mark of social mobility. The bias towards English as an accepted non-official language in official domains is apparent from the availability of English on the Flemish government's website, alongside Belgium's official languages, and the existence of English higher education programmes.

In the 21st century, the number of Dutch speakers in Brussels is still declining. The BRIO language barometer surveys, held in Brussels at regular intervals between 2001 and 2024,[3] testify to this trend: compared to the beginning of the century, knowledge of Dutch had halved by 2018 (Saeys). Despite a small growth again by 2024, partly explained by a recent influx of Dutch speakers from the Flemish Region, the latest barometer showed that more respondents reported competence in English than in Dutch (ibid.). French, Dutch, and English are considered the city's contact languages, as they fulfil a significant communicative role regardless of their status as home languages (Janssens, *Meertaligheid* 33). However, the survey revealed that, by 2024, 10.5% percent of the population is not competent in any of these contact languages, a number which has more than tripled since 2001 (Saeys). Even acquiring the two official languages is shown to be an arduous task, hampered by the linguistic organisation of education, which strictly distinguishes French-speaking and Dutch-speaking schools in the city. This arrangement is perceived as a missed opportunity for stimulating bilingual proficiency (Meylaerts, "Bilingual City" 103).

Following Spolsky's model, language policy takes shape through a triadic interplay of language practices, beliefs, and management. Practices

[3] The results are based on a sample of 2,500 respondents. Language competence is measured through self-reporting.

are the observable behaviours and choices that people make; beliefs relate to the values assigned to certain varieties, associated with identification and group belonging; and management is the explicit effort made by an authoritative group to modify the first two elements. Setting out from Spolsky's statement that the effectiveness of language policy depends on its consistency with practices and beliefs, Meylaerts et al. reveal the lack of alignment of official translation policy in Brussels with pertinent and pragmatic community-based translation needs. Contending that language policy and translation policy go hand in hand, Meylaerts finds that monolingual, territory-based language policy and the communitarian separation of institutions in Belgium engenders a discouragement of translation ("Urban Super-Diversity"). Especially in the domain of education, she highlights the fact that Flemish language policy, which insists on the learning of Dutch as a means of integration, endorses a policy of non-translation, effectively forcing pupils into a monolingual mould (464).

Today, the city oscillates between its traditional, official bilingualism and the current multilingual urban reality. It is clear that the institutionalised pacification model underlying both language and translation policy is inconsistent with practices on multiple levels. Belgian language legislation dating back to 1966 causes a fissure between a rigid bilingual (or juxtaposed monolingual) policy and unbounded multilingual practice. Adequate policy is required to accommodate the superdiversity that is increasingly impacting communication in the urban metropole.

THE PROMOTION OF MULTILINGUALISM

Various initiatives to better align policy with practice have been put in place. With over 100 languages distributed over 180 nationalities, Brussels serves as a laboratory for the fostering of tolerance and mutual understanding between cultural communities. In 2019, Sven Gatz was appointed Brussels Minister for the Promotion of Multilingualism, a first for Europe. Gatz made the case that multilingualism was crucial for the success of future generations in the region (3). To this end, he proposed an ambitious mission: by the age of 18, every Brussels citizen should be trilingual (ibid.). By extension, he advocated the 3+1 approach, promoting acquisition of the city's three contact languages—Dutch, French, and English—but allowing due recognition for other languages spoken at home. This project fosters the horizontality of language legitimacy and reasserts the expansion of language repertoires as an asset. It is no coincidence that this vision aligns with EU language policy. The EU prioritises the protection of linguistic diversity and, in addition, promotes individual multilingualism, with the goal of each citizen obtaining "practical

knowledge" in at least two languages other than their mother tongue (Vogl). The 3+1 approach as proposed by Gatz aimed to accommodate this two-tier aspiration: multilingualism, considered crucial for social cohesion and mobility, is stimulated, while linguistic diversity is preserved.

Since 2020, Brussels has a Council for Multilingualism. Its mission is to bring "all relevant players to the table in order to develop a clear action plan on multilingualism" by actively contributing to the domains of policy advice, policy support, and information exchange ("Brussels Council for Multilingualism"). It provides concrete (non-binding) recommendations on language policy to the different government levels, calling for both the stimulation of linguistic diversity and the accommodation of translation, with the explicit double objective to better serve a linguistically diverse population, as well as to render the population more multilingual (Brusselse Raad voor Meertaligheid), in line with EU language policy. For example, it is recommended that the Flemish Community should stimulate the use of the home language(s) as a stepping stone to the acquisition of the language of instruction in school (2). The BCR is advised to expand social interpreting services (such as Brussel Onthaal/Bruxelles Accueil) and invest in multilingual public services, encouraging the use of other languages for communication wherever it is deemed useful (4). Furthermore, an explicit call is made to the governments of the Flemish and French Communities for a non-binary culture that supports bi-communal cultural initiatives which defy the current binary structure. These recommendations, based on the EU's two-fold policy and in accordance with Gatz's project, seek to mitigate the tension between, on the one hand, stringent communitarian language management that discourages translation and, on the other, the socio-economic needs on the ground.

LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION POLICY AT KVS

The Flemish performing arts are internationally renowned for their organic, bottom-up approach and democratic funding procedures. The particular architecture of the performing arts scene represents an integrated and multi-layered ecosystem with a strong bond between artists and audiences, whose key features are modularisation and decentralisation (Janssens et al.). This artistic ecosystem consists of a finely branched web of infrastructure, created by the interplay between several policy areas, such as heritage and education, and policy levels, such as the Community-level and the local level. The well-developed and networked infrastructure available serves to label Brussels as an "artistic metropolis" with laboratories for artistic research and experimentation, and a strong network of community centres with a social

function, which connect the neighbourhoods with the arts through cultural participation (De Spiegelaere et al.). The Flemish government has nurtured and sustained the scene ever since the first Performing Arts Decree in 1993, through democratic funding procedures that grant maximal freedom to artists and artistic directors, the allocation of which is in the hands of an independent assessment committee consisting of experts in the arts, to ensure that the government interferes minimally with the distribution of this funding. Structural subsidies ensure a continuity of support for companies and arts centres, leaving space for daring experimentation and failure, which grant opportunities to young and emerging new voices in the landscape. This artist-driven approach is embodied by a custom-made attitude enabling structures to be put in place according to the artist's or company's individual needs, rather than imposing normative output standards (Janssens et al. 38–39). The scene serves as a junction thanks to its strong connectivity, accessibility, and rich infrastructure, supported by well-developed internationalisation (207). As a result, the number of international co-productions quadrupled between 2000 and 2016 (48). The consequent touring opportunities reinforce the scene's international visibility and appeal, attracting artists from all over the world, and, in turn, adding to the city's ethno-cultural diversity. The combination of the city's specific sociolinguistic situation and the multi-layered performing arts ecosystem provides an exceptional context for encounter between the wealth of language communities among artists and heterogeneous audiences alike.

KVS uses this bottom-up, artist-driven dynamic to reflect the city's urban multilingualism both on stage and in its outreach strategies. The theatre's current management agreement with the Flemish Community demonstrates its commitment to engaging with this opportunity: "We are a Dutch-language theatre. This is our DNA and our strength. Yet KVS does not shy away from multilingualism, as it is undeniably an enrichment for artists and audiences alike. Moreover, it is the most natural way to connect with our environment" (*Beheersovereenkomst* 4, translation mine). This vision has resulted not only in increasingly multilingual performance texts, but also in systematically trilingual programme brochures and online communication in the city's contact languages since the turn of the millennium. Belgian language legislation prescribes that institutions supported by the Flemish Community should provide full communication in Dutch. Therefore, KVS is legally obliged to offer a Dutch translation if another language is spoken in a production. Moreover, management administrator Moon Shik Vergeylen points out that the provision of surtitles in one or two languages for every in-house production has become part of the theatre's accessibility policy since 2007 (personal interview), as is reflected in the management agreement: "Our language policy is always inclusive, open and welcoming.

Therefore, every performance is surtitled in two languages. It is a service our audience has come to expect from us, which attracts many people with different language backgrounds to KVS and leads many Flemish artists to new (international) audiences" (*Beheersovereenkomst* 4, translation mine).

KVS is required to provide translation into Dutch for every staged performance, not only to comply with language legislation imposed by its Flemish funder, but also with its primary mission of representing the Flemish minority and its heritage. This raises the question of who exactly is implied in this category. The notably small segment of monolingual Dutch speakers in Brussels—only 0.8% of them speak neither French nor English (Saeys)—does not constitute a sufficiently viable range of potential visitors. Therefore, KVS's primary target group is assumed to master at least one other contact language in addition to Dutch. Another factor indicating the eroding delineation of this targeted Flemish minority is self-reported group identification. A survey carried out among Brussels citizens reveals a preference for identification with geographical determiners over language-related ones. That is, citizens identify significantly more with attributes such as "Brussels," their local municipality, "Belgium," or "Europe," than with a concept related to one of the traditional language communities (Janssens, "Language Policies" 31–32). Within the latter category, identification with the concept "Dutch speaker" [Nederlandstalige] is significantly preferred over "Fleming" [Vlaming], a term which has not only cultural, but also specific (nationalistic) political connotations. Indeed, residents whose only original home language is Dutch also identify less and less frequently as "Flemish" (Janssens, *Meertaligheid* 110–11). Due to increased multilingual competence and shifts in indicators of group belonging, the Flemish minority, based on a shared identity and cultural heritage, is increasingly becoming a heterogeneous group, a segment of the population difficult to identify.

Therefore, despite its name and the subsidiary prerequisites, KVS has long ceased appealing predominantly to the Dutch-speaking segment of Brussels. KVS insists on creating theatre in relation with the city, in which the spectator can recognise herself. In doing so, it often explicitly targets youngsters, a generation for whom everyday multilingualism and the use of English are considered a matter of course (Vergeylen). Hence, the choice to add French and English surtitles is for the sake of attracting audiences and for promoting Belgium's international appeal, but is neither imposed nor financially supported by the Flemish funder. Translation into French is not at the request of the city of Brussels, as the institution is only subsidised by the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) in Brussels and the Flemish branches of Brussels funds. At present, the Flemish government confers the responsibility for implementing translation into a language other than Dutch on the theatres themselves.

A HISTORY OF MULTILINGUAL POLICY: INSTITUTIONAL DRAMATURGY

KVS's cultural diversity has not always been as categorical as it is today, and has faced resistance throughout its history. The seeds of the theatre's multilingual communication and translation policy had been sown when theatre collective Dito'Dito merged into the artistic core group of KVS in 2005 under the artistic direction of Jan Goossens. Goossens reformed the city theatre in order to attract many new local audiences. Before his arrival, KVS was experiencing an existential crisis, no longer able to validate its *raison d'être* as the nationalist, conservative monolingual theatre that continually reperformed, or added to, the "national" repertoire. Theatre scholar Peter Boenisch recounts how—since the turn of the millennium, and under the influence of socio-cultural movements that questioned institutional power structures underlying artistic production—several European city and state theatres started to rethink and rebuild their practices from within. Under the heading of "institutional dramaturgy," Boenisch examines the value systems—both aesthetic and ethical—that guided the course of KVS in Brussels. During the theatre's relocation to Bottelarij (1999–2004), a building in the middle of the Molenbeek district, predominantly inhabited by people with a migration background, KVS produced so-called "allochtone theatre" by, with, and for the local uprooted communities. Goossens replaced the permanent ensemble of actors with a more diverse group of performers, not always formally trained (Boenisch 75), who crossed disciplinary boundaries and whose aesthetics were often influenced by urban performance genres. Moreover, he handed the programming over to resident artists, to counter the permeation of institutional conventions. Boenisch captures the changes that KVS underwent during Goossens's tenure as follows: "From promoting Flemish national culture, KVS turned into a postcolonial contact zone that also stimulated wider debates on diversity and global arts within mainstream Flemish theatre" (76). By reorganising the institution from within in a critically self-reflexive manner, as well as by welcoming playwriting and theatre practices from other regions, multilingualism came as an organic consequence. This also resulted in remarkably more heterogeneous audiences. Under Goossens's leadership, from 2001 to 2015, 35% of the audience were eventually non- or non-native Dutch speakers (ibid.). In 2016, Michael De Cock succeeded Goossens as artistic director and continued this path unabatedly. An audience survey for the 2021–22 season indicated that, out of the three languages of communication, 60% of visitors primarily engaged with Dutch, a quarter with French, and the remainder with English (Vergeylen).

The shift from a systematically upheld conservation and consecration of a(n illusory) singular and monocultural heritage to promoting cultural plurality attests to the institution's awareness of its own influence, canonical power, and accountability. Through a continual practice of introspection, this institutional dramaturgy functions as a critical lens through which to evaluate and redirect the institutional dynamics accordingly. With a view to epistemological democracy, KVS presents itself as a space for the plurilogical renegotiation of meanings, whereby the theatre audience operates, in the words of Boenisch, as an assembly "to jointly reflect on the present" (79)—one that seeks not only to mirror society, but also to propose imagined alternatives. The theatre thus acts as a laboratory, a testing ground.

THE POROUS INSTITUTION: CITY DRAMATURGY

Rather than proposing alternative realities, current house dramaturg Gerardo Salinas aims to expose the city fabric and bring it inside the theatre walls, in order to ensure that the programme adequately reflects the socio-ethnic reality *extra muros*. Originally from Argentina, Salinas has been active in the Belgian cultural field for over 20 years. In his early artistic career, as a newly arrived migrant, he was forced into the pigeonholes of "socio-artistic work" and "diversity" (personal interview). Salinas noticed how the wealth of (his) stories and experiences present in the city operated separately from one another, thereby upholding a degree of ethnic and artistic ghettoisation. He contended that if, instead of roots or descent, dramaturgs would foreground the city upon which artists mutually drew, this city would soon be viewed as a shared space used in various ways all at once. In response, he abandoned the imposed label of "diversity" in favour of "urbanity," creating his own tools to define his practice in an attempt to expand the theatre canon with the dynamics already present in the city. This not only implies reshuffling the concept of ethno-cultural diversity, Salinas remarks, but diversity in artistic career paths, too. By promoting the representational distribution of artists that have followed tracks other than the established—and largely academy-based—professional ones, KVS subverts the common understanding of the arts sector as restricted to the registered, usually subsidised corpus of artistic practices, and gives the floor to those from the underground scene. In doing so, it allows for experimentation, and challenges the established frames of reference that dictate what qualifies as art and who can claim the attribute of "artist" (ibid.).

The call for dramaturgs to safeguard and stimulate the dynamic exchange between the fabric of the city and the performing arts was already voiced in Marianne Van Kerkhoven's plea to acknowledge that

"the theatre is in the city and the city is in the world and its walls are of skin." To this end, Salinas started operating under the self-attributed label of "city dramaturg," a function he currently performs jointly with Dina Dooreman. He contends that it is the city dramaturg's task to stimulate the dramatic and narrative power of a particular city, secure its pluralism, and ensure that the institution renders itself porous, by giving agency to a variety of groups ("Heeft de stad een dramaturg nodig?"). This practice is locally situated, tailored onto, and arising from the specific urban character. It is actionable, as it unfolds through practice: by responding to its environment, it embeds itself in the urban fabric to which it relates. Consequently, Salinas is wary of any assumptions that a city dramaturg "imposes" alternative realities, attempting to reshape the city rather than echoing it (personal interview). Hence, this dramaturgical body aims to act not so much as a compass, indicating direction, but rather as a monitor, taking the pulse of the city as it is actually composed.

The shift of focus from ethnic diversity in favour of urbanity befits a wider practice of decolonisation of the public space, important aspects of which are language use, selection, and availability. Therefore, it is important to examine whose story is being told in whose language. For example, in the production *Who's Tupac?* (2021), of which Salinas supervised the dramaturgy, one voice speaks Quechua, while another responds in Yoruba. Salinas explains how a connection between Latin America and Africa is created by making these seemingly unaffiliated languages interact, thus generating an unexpected exchange. Decolonisation is also reflected in the curation. For the *Proximamente* festival, Salinas handed the helm over to curators in Latin America, who were given free rein in composing the programme. Producing and programming linguistically mixed performances,[4] then, is not so much an aim in itself as an organic consequence of the commitment to stage the underrepresented urban art forms practised by underrepresented urban communities.

The city theatre's bold attitude and subversive agenda have not been unanimously commended. In 2005, accused of being too diverse and insufficiently Flemish, KVS became the target of a culture war (van der Kris). Clearly, in the wake of Goossens's cultural policy, KVS could no longer be considered a monolithic Flemish beacon in the centre of the city. Opponents demanded that there be adequate political interference in the institution's programming,[5] to ensure its Flemish character. In an

[4] In the programme brochure of the season 2024–25, 8 out of 22 KVS (co-) productions were performed in a language other than Dutch, French, or English; or were language-labelled as "multi," which indicates the use of more than two different languages.

[5] Since 1972, the Cultuurpact prescribes that the executive boards of the subsidised Flemish cultural institutions should adequately reflect the politico-ideological equilibria

open letter, the theatre replied that "KVS is as Flemish as Brussels can be" by proposing a thoroughly urban project which embraces the entire city of Brussels, and makes the institution's walls as transparent as possible (Goossens et al.). Goossens proclaimed that KVS's attitude was one of a (Flemish) minority realising that we are all becoming minorities: the city's dominant French, too, was slowly experiencing pressure from English and Arabic (qtd. in Coussens). This is still reflected in today's programming. Goossens even went so far as to claim that the government actively sought to sabotage the rapprochement between the Flemish and the French in Brussels (ibid.). This leads us back to the difficult point raised at the beginning: communal politics lags behind when it comes to institutional regulations. The Flemish city theatre, then, casts itself as a conciliator among the many language communities present in Brussels. It does so by offering resistance to a top-down imposed language policy, and by functioning as a site of negotiation between this stringent policy and the state of affairs in practice.

The theatre is no longer a physically or socially separated centre of cultural "bildung," but aims to be a place for everyone by embracing knowledge of the city and the citizens themselves. This focus on the local has become a central concern for the renewed city theatre project, which "fits within a larger history of the institutionalization of socially engaged art within the public theatre's curatorial turn, transforming theatres into agents of exchange and mediums of communication for larger societal discussions" (Climenhaga 60), such as that about language. However, performing this socially engaged function runs the risk of turning the institutional dramaturg into a gatekeeper in their own right, who curates urban socio-ethnic (and thus linguistic) representation. Dewinter et al. note that the underlying motivations of such arts intermediaries may have an important impact "upon notions of what, and thereby who, is legitimate, desirable and worthy" (98). Although it is an institution founded for the Flemish minority in Brussels and subsidised by the Flemish government, KVS does not function as a mouthpiece of government ideology. However, the institution must carefully navigate bottom-up interests from the artists, top-down forces informed by policy priorities, and its own socially oriented agenda.

("7 basisregels"). Political parties may nominate candidates for representation. In 2024, this led to tensions between artistic director Michael De Cock and right-wing conservative politician Filip Brusselmans, who maintained that funding should be revoked from cultural institutions engaging in politics. Although the funding of KVS depends on the Flemish government, the allocation of grants is in the hands of an independent assessment committee consisting of experts in the arts. Therefore, despite political tensions, the institution's funding should not be jeopardised.

THE THEATRICAL SPACE AS A SITE OF TRANSLATION

The aforementioned dramaturgical approach results in a specific institutional dramaturgy of translation, with the intention of promoting inclusivity. However, translation scholar Louise Ladouceur has highlighted the political implications of using surtitles in minority cultural spaces. She notes how the use of English surtitles in Franco-Canadian theatre, a space traditionally designed to defend the French minority culture, creates an asymmetrical treatment of language in contrast with English-majority theatres that do not provide French surtitles. Although implemented to attract a larger audience, the translation can be viewed as a transgression that undermines the integrity of the cultural experience of those for whom the original work was intended. Accordingly, the provision of French surtitles at KVS may be perceived as contributing to undermining the Dutch language in Brussels.

Similarly, studying theatre practices in Berlin, theatre scholar Ulrike Garde questions whether making multilingualism accessible through surtitles is in fact conducive to an intercultural encounter, or whether it actually encourages the exclusion of certain groups, including non-privileged ones ("Multilingualism"). She points to the "privilege of access" that the use of certain languages and the provision of translation into certain languages may engender, and how this reinforces language hierarchies; some languages enjoy more symbolic capital than others, either in a local context or globally. Elsewhere, she argues that by providing smooth access through surtitles, the "foreign" is effectively absorbed, leading to the assimilation of linguistic diversity ("Unfamiliar Languages"). She maintains that linguistic policy frameworks set by funding agencies and programming institutions are responsible for enforcing maximal linguistic transparency. However, Garde states that, by taking a stance towards such pressure, theatres may serve as soft powers in the negotiation of language relationships and the representation of diverse linguistic communities (ibid.). She contends that the apparatus of the theatre-as-soft-power has the objective of shifting conventions and opening up debate, which may in turn challenge established assumptions and nationalist ideologies. When dramaturgical incentives conflict with institutional policy, they may act as subversive forces in this debate. Through its approach towards multilingualism, the theatre venue becomes a physical space of encounter where public discussions about identity and belonging are instigated.

With regard to translation, KVS dramaturg Gerardo Salinas is adamant that the spectator ought to abandon the urge to grasp a performance's

every word, by accepting a certain level of "non-understanding" (personal interview). This mirrors the experience of strolling through Brussels, where linguistic plurality leaves many utterances obscured. One who does not speak the language, Salinas contends, will extract a different reading of the performance. Hence, not every phrase uttered on stage requires translation. The spectator, Salinas believes, has to accept the fragmentary nature of the city and tie together the loose ends herself to confer meaning upon a performance within her own frame of reference. Since the theatrical space is envisaged as reflective of the city, linguistic diversity is desired not only on stage, but also in the auditorium. A culturally heterogeneous audience may lead the spectator to realise that someone else might understand something that s/he does not. It is key to ensuring a complementarity of understanding among different segments of the audience by means of disparate frames of reference. KVS is strongly aware of the richness of linguistic diversity and is therefore wary of assimilation into the dominant language(s). It seeks to strike a balance between being as accessible as possible and allowing a certain level of opacity in order to preserve a speaker's identity.

In doing so, the theatre highlights the horizontality of language legitimacy. The provision of access must be warranted in the language of the Flemish community which the theatre primarily serves. However, it must also take into account the fact that language communities are not segregated in this linguistically diverse city, and that spectators often attend performances with companions who may speak, read, or understand languages other than their own. In this way, KVS's decolonising dramaturgical course challenges dominant conceptions about translation, in favour of a model attending to the cultural heterogeneity inherent to postcolonial societies:

> Dominant models . . . see translation as a form of mediation between two monolingual communities, but the multilingualism and cultural hybridity of most postcolonial contexts challenge this assumption. Translation is not simply a meeting of a self and an other, mediated by a translator. Often it is a way for a heterogeneous culture or nation to define itself, to come to know itself, to come to terms with its own hybridity, and to construct a national identity. (Tymoczko 197–98)

By providing translation into the contact languages, KVS establishes itself as a postcolonial contact zone, a translation site allowing for linguistic confrontation and exchange, in order to dismantle the fictitious segregation of language communities, and welcome younger and more ethnoculturally diverse spectators all at once.

CONCLUSION

The Royal Flemish Theatre articulates a multilingual vision by implementing a trilingual communication and translation policy in the city's contact languages while embracing other minority languages. Besides the economical incentive, it does so in compliance with its mission as a city theatre. An institution originally founded to accommodate the project of Flemish emancipation in Brussels, it recognises that the Flemish minority for which it caters is increasingly becoming a heterogeneous group. Therefore, it extends this emancipatory role to the struggle facing other minorities and communities.

To achieve this, it deploys a democratic performing arts ecosystem to monitor and reflect the city's true composition. Urban art forms are brought to the fore in the programme and are accorded a proper place alongside well-established and institutionalised theatre practices. The fragmentary nature of these practices is reflected in the seemingly haphazard way in which languages are mixed on stage. The city theatre welcomes the urban linguistic fabric into its artistic repertoire and leverages its position of power and commensurate budget to amplify the urban artistic breeding grounds. In this way, it functions as a highly permeable third space that disturbs and destabilises long-standing linguistic and cultural relations. This is a translation space where the home language is welcomed as much as—and, through the systematic availability of surtitles, interacts with—the city's contact languages. KVS no longer solely represents the Dutch-speaking segment of Brussels, but aims to be a place for every citizen. By bringing together different perspectives and languages, this actionable city dramaturgy manifests as a dramaturgy of translation solidified in policy. In doing so, it reflects the vision of the future posited by the Brussels Minister for the Promotion of Multilingualism.

Attracting previously disinterested sectors of the urban population to the theatre and involving them in the discussion, KVS acts as a central and active mediator in the translational city. It (cor)responds to the language practices that structure the theatre's sociocultural context, while challenging the incongruous political language management induced by its Flemish funder. In doing so, the theatre functions as a soft power in the debate about language legitimacy and shows how a space, at once physical and conceptual, can be interrupted and transformed.

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