

Interview with Owen McCafferty

Scenes from the Big Picture

Fernanda Verçosa

Abstract: *The following interview took place at Queen's University Belfast, Northern Ireland, in August 2011. Owen McCafferty talks about his work and, in particular, on Scenes from the Big Picture. The technique of writing a play and of constructing scenes and characters is raised together with his views on translation.*

Keywords: *Owen McCafferty; Scenes from the Big Picture; writing a play; translation.*

Owen McCafferty (Belfast, 1961) is a Northern Irish playwright who has been compared to the great Irish dramatists John Millington Synge (Dublin, 1871-1909) and Sean O'Casey (Dublin, 1880-1964) for the musicality, quality and eccentricity of his dialogue. McCafferty is seen by critics and producers as the Eugene O'Neil of Belfast, his hometown and setting of his plays, which have been produced in some of the most important theatres in Northern Ireland, The Republic of Ireland, Scotland and England as he is the first truly important Northern Irish playwright to go beyond the clichés of political writing to document the lives of the ordinary men and women of his hometown.

By the time the interview took place, Fernanda Verçosa – whose work now consists of translating and analysing four different plays by Owen McCafferty namely, *The Waiting List* (1994), *Mojo Mickybo* (1997), *Closing Time* (2002) and *Quietly* (2012) – was completing her Masters degree in Translation and her dissertation revolved around the translation and analysis of *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003), one of McCafferty's most accomplished plays.

In the small, blue ceilinged Victorian classroom provided by the Modern Languages Department, Owen felt at ease not only to talk about the play in question, but also to deliberate on his work as a whole and speak a little about his personal life. Noteworthy were also the playwright's views on translation and the task of the translator in relation to his own plays. The resulting interview was so fruitful that the door has since been open for more.

FV: Owen, could you start by telling us why you wrote this play?

Owen McCafferty: There are things that are practical and there are things that are artistic. In the artistic sense, I wanted to put down as many stories as I could in one go. So I knew that I needed to populate the stage with characters. In a more philosophical sense, what I was attempting to do is related to the idea of maybe describing a reality of the universe. Well, I was working along those lines and if I told a lot of small stories then I would convey a sense of the bigger picture.

FV: And what is the big picture?

OMC: Well, given the end of the play, it is that our stories are important to us, but in the whole scheme of things we are only specs of dust. This is why, at the end, they all look up at the stars, which is in no way to belittle our own lives with the telling of our own stories. That is just to put them in perspective. It was always going to be set in Belfast as a whole lot of my plays and it was never something that was going to focus solely on the Troubles. What I can see that is important is that there are other aspects of our lives – that the conflict doesn't affect all the aspects of our lives – and that is what I wanted to show as well. Plenty of other things came on that weren't obviously political or sectarian in the same sense that things from here normally can be. In the practical sense, I just wanted to write a big play to see if I could do it.

FV: What are the themes and issues presented in the play?

OMC: That's a more difficult question because it's difficult to talk about that play in terms of themes. As I was concentrating on individuals and their stories, and on how they intertwined, something emerged out of that. I'll explain to you how I started that off and that might give you a better idea. I knew that I was going to write about a lot of people. I had done that before with other plays, but I had not used a lot of actors. In *Mojo Mickybo*, for example, there were seventeen characters and only two actors, and those characters aren't as developed as the ones in *Scenes from the Big Picture*. So I was writing about Belfast and in order to do that, because I didn't want to be sectarian, I had to make it in some sort of imagined community. If you read the notes in the published version of the play, it says, 'this play is set in an imagined area of Belfast'. So the first thing I thought was that if I wanted to do that I needed some focus of where these people would be or what they would do. So they eat and sleep, therefore there should be a house; they work, so there has to be a working environment, which is the abattoir. There is also recreation, which is the pub, and then there is sustenance, which is the grocery shop where they buy things. So the framework of that play was starting in a very general sense to work itself out. I used those four places and then people could also meet on the street, so there were five really. There were all these places and the general area of the stage. Oh there was a hospital as well because Betty is sick. Now, I just thought of something that answers your question quicker than this. You should concentrate on the idea of a lived day, because in that day everything happens: there's birth, there's death and it follows 24 hours. I always had that in mind.

I'll explain this to you, because it might be of use. I used to write in this old derelict house on the Ormeau Road, not far from here. I knew the accountant who owned the office next door so he used to let me write in this house. It was a big house and I used to write in the front room. There was a man living next door, whom I didn't know, but every day he used to leave the house at the same time. A taxi would call for him and he would get into it say about 11:30/12:00 and he would come back to the house in a taxi around 15:00. You could see that he had been drinking, but he had his groceries with him as well. I was trying to think how I would write a play that is essentially about him but you don't notice that it's about him. So that was one of the things that made me think I should write a bigger play and put him in it. Effectively you follow his day, but, on the way, you see everybody else's day unfold as well and that's the structure of it. In fact, in Germany it's called something else like *A Day in the Life of Frank Coin* because that's what the original title was. Or it could have been *A Life in a Day of Frank Coin* and I decided to change that.

By the by, this has nothing to do with the play or anything, but I went down to work one day and the police had cornered his house. I hadn't seen him for about two or three days and the police had cornered his house because someone had gone and murdered him. This was weird. I think just to rob him. Two young guys were convicted. They tortured him for a while. But that was the sort of thinking behind that. So in a way I wanted to encapsulate as much as I could of what we consider being a sort of modern/urban life day without the politics of it. I consciously stayed away from that. I've done that quite a few times and the main reason I do that is in case these plays are performed here. If you set them in either a nationalist or a loyalist community, that community will automatically think it's about them and the other community will think it's not about them, and I don't want that to happen.

I'm trying to think back now, there's a definite sort of socialism, I would say, running through it. There's the notion of infidelity, that's for sure. There's the idea of the past to do with the Troubles. There's a certain amount of economics in it regarding the running of business. There's disaffected youth. I remember reading an American play called *Street Scene* by Elmer Rice. I remember reading it and thinking that I would like to do that, but in a different way. So that's how that came out.

FV: You said that Frank Coin was inspired by that man and that things revolved around him. Is any other character inspired in anyone you know?

OMC: No. To write that play, to begin with, was quite technical. Because of the way I was doing it, there always had to be a lot of scenes. So, once I had picked where all the people were, I had to start populating the place. I was dictating, in a sense, how I was going to do it. So, for example, if there was going to be a birth in it, I had to add a family theme. There is a death in it, but it's a strange type of a death and it's related to uncovering one of the disappeared. Somebody lost their virginity on it. So, see, once

you realise you want to put those things in, you have to start thinking that that becomes a character. Or, if it's not going to be a character itself, it's going to have to relate to something. For example, the dead body couldn't obviously be a character so I had to think who was going to be connected to that and how I was going to treat that, which automatically led to that fella's parents. The planning of it is quite complicated, but the writing of it isn't. Actually, once I plan it all out I can write quite quickly. So I think it only took me six weeks to write it, because I had all those things and just had to write a dialogue for them. So there was nothing else real in it. The rest of it was all fiction.

FV: Tell me about the language you use in your plays.

OMC: Whenever I first started writing, I have become known for a certain thing, but I don't know if that's actually valid or not anymore. Whenever I first started writing plays I was interviewed and I said that what I wanted to do was bring the language spoken in Belfast to the stage. That's a very grandiose thing to say. I don't think that I have done anything anywhere near that. I think what might be slightly different is that, for whatever reason, I seem to be able to tune into the beat of language here. If you tune into that beat of language, it will sound like the way people speak even if you have changed that slightly by making it sound more poetic. It's just heightened in some way, if you know what I mean. That isn't the way people normally speak, it's not actually what people normally speak about even. I think if you follow the beat of something, it feels as if it is. That seems to me to be important to any play, actually. Most plays jar because of the dialogue in them, which is more akin to prose than it is to a speech pattern. In plays, all that people are doing is talk to each other one way or another. It has to sound as if they're talking to each other. You see, I'm not even sure sometimes what heightened means. Look at Belfast language in itself. You can think of Glaswegian or Cockney, or something that can be very inventive, but what I mean is that all languages have that within them. I think I just tapped into that. I don't think I added to it.

FV: A stage language. More inferential, perhaps?

OMC: It has to be a stage language in that it has to be more concise than we normally speak, and not as repetitive because you are, regardless of what people may think, being manipulative in the words you choose in order to set something else up further down the line. You know, you have to work that out in your head. There's a structure to that. So yeah, for want of a better word, it's dramatic language, not real speech and it shouldn't be real speech. Why would we want that? If you think how plays are performed, the more you write plays, the more you get to know this. And, this is going to sound obvious, but it's not obvious to those who are starting out. It is true that actors have to say the lines, so it has to be written in a certain way that allows them to say them. And it may well be that you're playing to an audience of 400 people and you have to write in such a way that that carries well. That isn't to say that people couldn't sit down on stage and look as if they're having a normal conversation. As practitioners, we're all aware that

it looks as though they're having a normal conversation, but they're not. Maybe that's the skill to it, which is to make the audience think that that's a normal conversation. If it is, I don't know how you acquire it. Maybe it's just something you have? Not in a bad sense, but it is a contrived thing that is obviously planned or calculated instead of spontaneous or natural. And it has to be. I can't imagine otherwise. I think plays would be boring beyond belief if they were just about normal things.

FV: How does the performance of this language work somewhere like London?

OMC: It seems to be different in different places. In Belfast, you're talking about a specific area of my work, but not all of my plays are like that. If the play is on in Belfast, what it means is that the audience has a short hand into it. Actors, for example, don't need to slow down at the start in order for an audience's ear to pick up what's being said. They get that right from the start. So you can enter at a certain speed. I think that, when performing, an actor needn't be as necessarily conscious about how they say something if the audience's ear is already tuned to it. But if you take a play like that and have it first performed in London, then it's different. I've had about six or seven plays now in London. It takes an audience sometimes ten or fifteen minutes to get into the rhythm of the way something is being said. That isn't just about language though, but about cultural things. I remember that when we first did *Scenes from the Big Picture*, the director Peter Gill got everybody into the theatre just before the first preview. He got all the actors into the theatre and we talked before they went on. He said that he needed to talk to them about the audience. Now, in the first production everything on the stage was blue, everything was painted blue. Some of these things will make sense and some of them won't. Peter Gill was also a writer himself and he said, 'the audience that is coming to see this (it was on at the National Theatre, so you're getting people who are quite well heeled, quite well off), they'll see my name and the first thing they'll think is that I've written the play, not Owen. They will also not believe that it's about Belfast, they will think it's about something else. Then, they'll go into the auditorium and they'll look at the stage and go, "oh no, everything's blue!" Then they'll all sit down and once you start speaking (the actors) they'll think, "oh no, this play really is about Belfast" and the very last thing they'll think is, "oh well, we can't laugh at it then, because it's about the poor."' Consequently, then, you could see how different audiences react differently. When Irish people were in, there was a lot more laughter. Now, the play had the same effect in the long run, I suppose. But there are cultural things there that aren't just about recognising words. I think it's also to do with an expectation about what the play is telling you. When that play went on in America and, as far as I could make out, didn't really do very well (I don't think it did anyway), it was because the gap and distance between Belfast and London isn't that huge, but the one between Belfast and America is bigger. They assumed that what they were going to see was a play about Belfast, what actually means that they were going to see as far as their perceptions about Belfast. So, whenever they didn't get anything sectarian in it, it didn't make any sense to them at all and they just thought it

was loads of meaningless stories and not about very much. Right, so, to answer your question again, I think the further you go away sometimes, the more the audiences start to lose the nuances. And I think that for that to work it has to be robust. But not just robust, it can't be too subtle. It has to tell a story to people about the place they know already. In non-English speaking countries the reaction is different. I sort of argue for this, although it would never happen, that for that play to work in America it should be translated into American English as it is translated into German, for example, because whoever's translating it uses the equivalent to all the little linguistic idiosyncrasies in it so it becomes more recognisable. It was done in Japan as well. There's something about that that's quite strange. I think all that really means is that English isn't a uniform language. We all assume, because we speak English in Ireland, England and America, that things are easily transferable and they don't seem to be. Well, my play isn't anyway and I think that it has to do with it being very recognisably Belfast.

FV: You said the first performance was in London; when you wrote the play did you have the venue in mind?

OMC: No, only in terms of size. I had already written a play for the National Theatre in London and they got back to me and said that they didn't want to do this at the moment because they had just done a couple of Irish plays that hadn't been so successful and they were going to leave it for a while. But they also asked me if I wanted another commission, that they would commission me to write another play. I had it in my head then that I was going to write a play that they couldn't refuse. I was going to write something that would blow them away. So, the only thing that I thought of was that, because it was at the National Theatre, it would allow me to write something big. Something that you wouldn't necessarily be allowed to do in smaller theatres. I didn't at all think about the audience in that sense. Not for a second. I've never done that. It would have worked to my advantage, I think, but I've never done that. The idea is that if you look at something that's specific and close and you play close attention to it, it should become universal. It should relate to all our psyches. If you just hone in on one, you know...

FV: You're talking about making a play universal. What is in this play that you see as universal and what is local?

OMC: You see, to be honest, I thought all of it was both. I tried to pack as much as I could into that. That, I considered, had to do with a normal day. The language, I think, makes it specific to here, maybe the conflict does as well, although there's plenty of conflict elsewhere in the world. You see, these things are very, very difficult to talk or argue about, because there's no right or wrong. I don't buy into the idea that we have some form of unique humour. I saw that play in America twice and they didn't find it funny at all.

FV: Were the actors from here or were they American?

OMC: No, they were American. You see, it would be wrong of me to suggest that what I'm doing is writing about Belfast. I'm a writer from Belfast, but I'm not writing state

of the nation plays. I'm not trying to describe Belfast. I see something through the eyes of someone who comes from Belfast. If that was the case, I would have called that play Belfast, but it isn't. It's invented, it's not full of real characters. Now, the problems, the happiness, the humour and the tragedy of it, I imagine, are universal. Whether this works or not, I don't know. I think I always try to write things that may have a life outside here. I wouldn't want to be that insular, where I write something that would just be understood within these shores. I don't see the point of that at all. I think that's a very negative way to write, actually. So, maybe I don't really describe a Belfast that people know as being factually true. It feels as if it might be, but I don't know. I have difficulty with that, because, as they say, the rhythm of the language is that, but then I've just written a play that hasn't anything to do with that at all. It's an adaptation of a Dostoevsky novel and it's set in rural Edinburgh and is a fictional place in itself. I don't use Belfast language in that one.

FV: It's interesting what you said about everything being local and universal at the same time. I read this play when I was already in Belfast for a couple of months and had read and heard about the Troubles. I knew then that you were not writing directly about the Troubles, but about people getting on with their lives after that: their personal stories and how they were dealing with daily matters, etc. But if I had read this play before coming here I would have easily thought that that could happen in São Paulo.

OMC: I think that's good. That's a good thing. I don't like plays that are so limited or rigid in the sense that they are only about what they are about. These things are meant to expand, not contract. They are meant to go out. If plays that are from Belfast are just about Belfast all they'll ever do is preach to the audience. What I don't like about here is that Belfast thinks that its problems are unique and, therefore, there are some things that are special about them. But this kind of thing happens everywhere, every minute of every day'. And once you know that, it makes these problems seem nonsense and that's why people don't want to know it. Part of what I want to do is to help in that expansion. That sounds very grandiose and I'm probably just a storyteller. I just don't want to be part of that insular world. It's not that I'm trying to preach to the outside world. It's just that I don't want to be part of that insular world. The way I write and what I write about is slightly different, I suppose. It seems to me that I'm attracted more to people on the periphery of things. So the characters in my plays that are talked about but are not on the stage are usually the bosses and things like that, while the centre of attention are the workers.

FV: And life is seen through their point of view...

OMC: Yes.

FV: There's something very interesting about your plays – you don't punctuate them. I'm curious about that.

OMC: Whenever I started that, I was lucky enough, because the second play I'd ever written got published and all my plays got published since then. You see, it's different to type something out yourself and to see it in book form. I was able to look at what was written and realise that there was something wrong with it. Well, there's nothing wrong with it. It's just that I didn't like it. It looked too like a prose. And I thought that because this is dialogue: it's different and it should look different. So I immediately thought that I should take out all the punctuation and capital letters, and use dashes. The dashes would be about beats or about breathing. The dashes work as punctuation. It just needs to look different. You need to look at it and see that this is the dialogue of a play and not a prose. Sometimes they have to do with a change in meaning, which is different. When it's a change in meaning, you have to stick to it. But when it comes to being about pausing, I sort of leave that up to the actors and what they feel they want to do. I don't use any question marks. But, again, that's a purposeful thing in that you want the actor to work out whether that's a question or not. Once they have worked that out for themselves they will never forget that.

FV: So you mean to give freedom to the actors...

OMC: Yes. I mean, there is a certain amount of work to be done at the start, when you are going through the script. But my experience of it is that it helps actors. They like that. From my point of view, however, I just need it to look different. It couldn't look like prose, because, again, it not only needs to look different, but it needs to be written differently and the same rules don't apply. You don't want to think about full stops, comas, capital letters and anything like that. You would just think about how someone would say something. So the attention is focused on how someone speaks.

FV: In what ways is this play typical of your theatre?

OMC: The language and the pace of it are very typical. That it's about the normality of people on the periphery and people that aren't in the spotlight, I suppose, is very typical as well. There's a lot of that in it. The small town tragedy of people's lives is something I deal with most of the time. I always think that I'm writing about love in one way or another. There are very few things I would do that wouldn't have any humour in them. I shouldn't say that because probably people don't find them funny. But I think there's humour in them. I try to write about things that are hopefully common to us all instead of specific to people here. Relationships between men and women seem to run through a lot of what I do. Addiction. I'm not really sure of how much of addiction is in *Scenes from the Big Picture*, but there is a bit. A sense of being powerless in relation to your own destiny. I didn't write a play for about a year or more after I wrote that, which isn't like me because I have a job in playwriting and I move from one thing to the next as much as I can. So I normally have something to move on to. I used up a lot of stories writing that play, so, for a while, I didn't find anything to write about 'cause I would think that I had already said all. I didn't realise I was going to do that, actually. It didn't

occur to me when I started it out. It was only after I finished that I thought, ‘oh no, what do I write about now?’

FV: You were talking about pace playing an important role in your plays. As a writer, how important to you is pace together with rhythm and musicality?

OMC: It’s everything. If a writer doesn’t have a rhythm of his own, in some way, I think the audience becomes bored or doesn’t understand and turns off within seconds. I would say the same thing about prose, to be honest. But, when it comes to dialogue, there has to be a beat to it. There’s a playwright I know that believes that theatre is about ideas. That it’s not about characters or anything else. Even if he were right, which I don’t think he is, he would still need to concern himself with the beat and the musicality of the language that he uses. It’s only after you start dealing with such things that you realise how closely connected they are to music. You need to read the dialogue in a rhythm. Now, that doesn’t mean that you can’t break the rhythm. You can, but the rhythm needs to be the base of it. It has to run right through it. I can’t think, actually, how you can write without rhythm. I have no idea how you can do that. The pace, on the other hand, varies in a play. It can be connected to what’s happening in any given moment; to the dramatic content of something; to the intellectual content of something; to what you are talking about. It can speed you up or slow you down. That’s different from the notion of rhythm – the rhythm of the words. There’s something that drives you on when you are writing a play. You know, everything regarding that task isn’t always about meaning. You can have an overall thought about a meaning within a scene or within a conversation or within a speech. But there are times, when, because of the flow of something, that flow can dictate words. Whenever I’m writing, I’m actually writing physically quite quickly. Those dashes are quite instinctive in that sense. But no, it’s of a vital importance.

FV: When you first started writing plays, did you have any background in writing for the stage?

OMC: I had written a couple of short stories.

FV: Did you already have this conceptual understanding of writing plays back then or did you start understanding it as you gained experience?

OMC: When I was in University, I studied philosophy and I wrote a thesis on a duel between two philosophers. So my dissertation was written in dialogue and was based on the notion of how dialogue works. Whenever I was writing the short stories, there were not many of them, but there was quite a bit of dialogue in them. It was, then, my wife who said to me that I should write a play. So I started writing a play. I did talk to a playwright about it. But, I have to say, I didn’t need to talk a lot about it. It’s like one of those strange situations in life when, for whatever reason that you don’t really know, you have the feeling that you know what you are doing. I didn’t, but I had a feeling that I did.

FV: So it was very instinctive for you...

OMC: When you are confronted with something like that, it either looks as if it is slightly recognisable or completely foreign, in which case you can think that you have no idea of what to do with it. But it didn't look completely foreign to me. So I got into the notion of trying to work out what to do with it. At the start, it's as simple as "he speaks, she speaks" and then somebody else needs to speak and you need to map that out. I think one of the things that I always had was a certain sense of rhythm. Then, what happens along the way is that you just learn through repetition that structure is the most important thing. It's where you hang everything on. You also need to think about what a play is. Even now, I don't go to the theatre a lot, but I read a lot of plays. Whenever I'm writing, I never see a stage or imagine anything on stage. I either see nothing and the language dictates what to do (that's a little bit the way *Mojo Mickybo* was written) or I see something in reality. In *Scenes*, if at the start it opens with a man and a woman in a kitchen talking about cheese, what I actually see is a man and a woman in a real kitchen and maybe that makes it different. Maybe it's linking those images up. It's hard to explain, but it didn't frighten me to do that. It just seemed right and, after a while, it didn't annoy me that people called me a playwright. I did all sorts of jobs and when people said to me that I was such and such it sort of annoyed me. But being called a playwright didn't annoy me, so I thought, 'I can stick at this'. You work out what to do as and when you are doing it. I don't think it's different from working with mathematical equations. You just do it in a different way.

FV: How would you brief the translator in dealing with your plays?

OMC: I would encourage them to be brave and to interpret it. Not to be rigid. See, I don't see the point in translating something unless you make it recognisable in the place where it's going on. It has to be truly recognisable in the sense that it has to have a feel to it that's connected to the language spoken on stage. So, to be inventive, I think. Not to be frightened, but inventive. I've written versions of plays and, in a way, I think there's a difference between writing versions and translating. You want the writer to recognise it's their work, but, at the same time, they should realise there's something different about it. It has to work that way. I can't see that it shouldn't.

FV: When you adapt these plays, do you work based on translations?

OMC: I did Ionesco's *Chairs*, so I worked with a commissioned translation. I did *Antigone*, which I worked from an old translation and just read other versions. *Days of Wine and Roses*, well that was a movie so it was a bit different. That was an original play as well, but different. And now I was just working with a translated version of a Dostoevsky novel and I was just given a translation. Someone said that it was the best one and that I should use it. I was told that you want flat translations. But I think the best of the choices would be to know your translator and to be able to work with them so that they know the way you work.

FV: So you believe in the collaborative work between playwright and translator...

OMC: Yes. I don't see why you wouldn't do that. Maybe you can't take something that exists here and translate it into another language so it can equally exist there. Well, maybe you can, but the best way to do that isn't in isolation. And you want it to work. You just don't want it to be a representation of what happened here, but you want it to exist as it does here. I think translators (in the same way that people do verses) have to make the text their own in some way, don't they? Some people think that you can't do that, but I think you have to. You are not just translating something word by word. I don't see the point in that. You have to try and work out what all the nuances are and see what the equivalent is – if there is an equivalent – or how to make it work – if there isn't an equivalent.

FV: Yes, the ideal work of a translator would be to interpret the original and create the new text. So the translator also works as a writer.

OMC: Well, but they have to, don't they?

FV: They do, indeed. Have you written any translations?

OMC: No. I only speak English, which is a dreadful thing. I regret not speaking other languages.

FV: We were talking about adaptations and versions of plays. Do you see them as being much different from your work as a writer, since they deal with texts that already exist?

OMC: Yes there is a difference. I was just asked to do a verbatim play as well, which is different again. There is a difference that is obvious and quite substantial. You are working from something else. If you are doing your own work you start from nothing.

FV: But, do you really?

OMC: In the sense that we are talking about, yes. You see, it's easier for me. Say you wanted to write about the Olympics and there's a blank page in front of you. But somebody else has already written about it and you have no thoughts on the topic. If somebody asked me what the difference between those two things is, I would say that the difference is that I have to fill that blank page with my thoughts and structure it in a way that somebody else will read it, while, on this other page, somebody else has already done that. So what you are doing is different. In the first case, I can do whatever I want, and in the second case I can't ignore what I've been given. I don't see the point of doing a version of something you are going to completely change. In this case, just do it yourself. As a writer, I wouldn't want another writer to see the play I worked on and see that it has their title on it but they don't recognise it. You would not have done your job properly. The reason why you picked to do a version of that play to begin with is that you saw something in it that you want the audience to see. Now, the reasons why

you do versions vary. I mean, the reason why I do it is to make plays more immediate. But they still need to have the core of what the original play is talking about, otherwise you might as well do your own thing. It is easier as well. You see, what is very difficult to deal with is the idea of when people speak. If you have four or five people in a scene and someone is talking, you have to make the decision to stop them so somebody else may talk. So the question is, 'how do you do that?' That is quite complex. If you are dealing with that in the second case, the structure of the story might already be there for you and the structure is the most important thing. It's the thing you work at the most. So, if you are dealing with your own original play, you have to work that out and, if you are dealing with somebody else's work, it's already there. Now, there may be variations on how you hang things on that structure, but it's still somebody else who has already done the hard work for you. I don't like to say that it's easier, but I can say that it's different. Well it is easier. It's less taxing so, yes, it's easier. There is also a little bit of risk in adapting regarding the critics as to getting the play wrong. If it's original, it can't be wrong 'cause it's yours. With adaptations, if you are not careful, you might miss the point and if that happens, you get slated.

FV: So you say there's no way of not having an adaptation compared to the original?

OMC: I don't know how this applies to translation, but, in adaptation, you are never trying to make something better. Well, I'm not. The reason you pick something to adapt is because you thought it was very good to begin with. It's not your job to make it better. It's your job to present it in a different way because you think that may make it more accessible to a new audience or there was something about that story that was written two hundred years ago and has relevance today because of what's happening. But it's never to make it better because that's disastrous. You wouldn't adapt something that is bad anyway. I don't know how that works in translation, because, in translation, you can be asked to translate something that you think is bad.

FV: It works very similarly, actually. The translator sees something in the text that he or she thinks is interesting. But, of course, there are translations that are commissioned. So it depends on the situation.