

Episode Three Bonus: “Translation and The Death of My Aunt”

Transcription

Host Aaron Henne: This is Aaron Henne, Artistic Director of theatre dybbuk, and I want to welcome you to this bonus episode of *The Dybbukast*. If you haven't already, you might want to first listen to episode three, “The Death of My Aunt,” which explored a short story of the same name by Blume Lempel. In this episode, you will have a chance to hear the English translation of the story in its entirety, read by actor Diana Tanaka. However, first, Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub will share a bit about the experience of translating Blume’s writings from Yiddish into English, and about the nature of such work.

Ellen Cassedy: I always think about something that Yermiyahu told me: that writing itself is always a form of translation and interpretation of the writer’s original thoughts and original conception. There’s always a gap between what the writer intends and how it comes out on paper. But obviously when you’re going from one language to another, the issue is compounded. And my loyalty as a translator is always to the English language readership, the target readers. I love Yiddish, but I feel that my most significant contribution to this collaboration with Yermiyahu has been my love of English. I was brought up in a family that used to consult at least one dictionary during every lunch and every dinner. I love playing with words. I love savoring the different nuances of different usages, and that’s where I feel I make my best contribution. Working with Yermiyahu was a great joy. We went into the ring with each other. We’ve battled over different wordings and meanings. Sometimes Blume’s words were very challenging because she has a very private pantheon of symbols that come up over and over, and she moves from the cosmic to the everyday in the blink of an eye.

Sometimes it’s hard to hold onto your hat and know exactly where you are. This is challenging for the translator and for the reader. I felt that our job was to make things clear, but not too clear for the reader, because Blume didn’t want things to be too clear. She wanted you to feel kind of unsettled between the surreal and the real, the imaginary and the real.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub: So sometimes as translators, we had to accept uncertainty. We had to realize that we couldn’t always be absolutely sure of Lempel’s meaning, and that we might not have been sure of it even if it had been written in English. It was really rich to build a work with a partner, such as Ellen, to be able to bounce ideas off each other, to know that our interchange would strengthen the final version. I particularly derived immense satisfaction from immersion, kind of in this vision of this artist I’d loved, always searching for that best word, the clearest turn of phrase to capture her meaning in English. I loved the pleasure — this is something I do in my own writing — of moving between languages. And then of course, bringing her work to wider audiences. When you’re going to get two people together, you’re always going to get differences. And so we each read all the stories and then we made initial pitches about which ones we thought should be included and we hammered them out. And then we split up who would do first drafts, and we then exchanged those first drafts with each other and then provided extensive feedback. So that was particularly rich. I remember going over at Ellen’s house, and her dining room table would be spread out with papers, and those were good times, as they say.

So as a writer, I just want to add that, you know, I feel like I inhabit the worlds of the characters I create. And sometimes that feels like I’m in control of their creation, their destinies. And other times I feel like I’m more like a medium, a vehicle for something that is much more primary, more essential. But either way, I feel like I know their face. I know who they are. As

a translator, certainty is more elusive. The goal is to render the words of someone else in a different language. I'm always asking myself, is that really what the author meant? Have we truly captured the nuances, the true meaning? You feel responsibility. You're serving as an advocate for this writer. You're bringing this writer out into the world to audiences that would never have heard of her.



Due to copyright reasons, please note that the story featured in this bonus episode, "The Death of My Aunt" can be found in full in the book *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories*, published by Mandel Vilar Press and Dryad Press.



Aaron: Thank you for listening to this bonus episode of *The Dybbukast*, which featured scholars Ellen Cassedy and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub, as well as a reading of Blume Lempel's story, "The Death of My Aunt," translated by Ellen and Yermiyahu, performed by Diana Tanaka. The episode was edited by Mark McClain Wilson. Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. "The Death of My Aunt" is included in the book *Oedipus in Brooklyn and Other Stories*, published by Mandel Vilar Press and Dryad Press. *The Dybbukast* is produced by theatre dybbuk.