

**Michael Ewans, Academic, Translator and Director
in interview with Lorna Hardwick
Milton Keynes, 4th September 2007**

LH This is part of our series of interviews with translators of classical material. Lorna Hardwick interviewing for the Reception of Classical Text Research Project on Tuesday 4th September 2007 at Milton Keynes.

Our contributor this time is Professor Michael Ewans of the University of Newcastle, New South Wales. Michael is Drama Performance Co-ordinator and Professor of Music and Drama and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, widely known not only for his work in reception studies but also for his editing and translation for performance and for his work as a theatre director.

Michael, thank you very much for coming along this morning.

ME Pleasure.

LH I'd like to start off by asking you about how your initial interest in translation and the practice of translation came about. And then we can open out afterwards to the way in which it intersects with your other activities.

ME Thank you, yes, I will. Well, that was fairly simple in fact. When I transferred over from the Department of Classics to the Department of Drama, mainly because I wanted to take a more active, practically based approach to researching Greek tragedy, I found myself teaching a course which I still teach today, twenty five years on, on the Greek theatre. This was unlike the classics courses which I had previously taught. It was a course which included practical acting out. And I took along or prescribed the best available translations at that time, which were the ones in the Lattimore Greek series, or some of them [Ed's Note: Series edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, originally published by the University of Chicago – and then in the Modern Library Series by Random House]. Most of that series is of a fairly high standard for its time.

And I very quickly found out that my students couldn't speak this language with any sort of confidence – and these are students who had been studying acting – so some alarm bells began to ring and altogether I felt that they were too formal and stilted in language to be appropriate in the early to mid eighties, which is when I started translating. So partly because of that and partly because as a new head of a drama department I was expected to sort of put my money where my mouth was, and direct something, I embarked on the translation of *Libation Bearers* the next year, for no other good reason except that it has a female chorus and we had even more young women in our course as opposed to young men than is usual at that time.

And I tried to develop a new style – and this is something we'll probably come back to in the interview – which attempts to live up to ideals which are not in harmony with each other. In other words some sort of split down the middle. On the one hand there is the issue of accuracy. I take pretty grave exception to things like the Fagles' translations on the simple grounds that they put in things that Aeschylus and Sophocles never thought of and take out some quite important things they did write. So accuracy is one criterion for me.

And the other criterion, and in the light of what I've just been saying about my experience, is actability. I wanted to provide texts which my students could speak clearly and be understood by modern Australian audiences.

LH Could I ask you ... you mentioned that your students in the mid eighties, for instance, found the language of existing translations to be very stilted and formal and difficult to speak. Do you think it was because those translations had been prepared in the context of a previous generation's language, or do you think it was because those translations were perhaps trying to reproduce the Greek very literally? What do you think was underlying that?

ME I think it's partly that you're looking at very fine scholar poets, like Lattimore, but towards the end of their career – so there is that generational thing – but also I think there's a feeling,

probably due to the fact that as we both very well know Greek tragedy uses a *Kunstsprache*, an artistic language, which is not that of normal everyday Greek, or at least I hope people didn't go round speaking like Aeschylus and Sophocles in their daily discourse. Because of that, some translators feel that they need to provide an English which is not every day English. And I'm quite opposed to that.

It seems to me that you've got to recognise that there is no such thing as a living verse drama in English, since the sudden and total fading out of fashion of Eliot and Fry with the arrival of the angry young men of the next generation in the fifties. We have no poetic language available that an audience is prepared to accept, so I think a little bit of plain English has a lot to recommend it.

I should add, however, just as a footnote to that, that of course I still write in verse, and it's a quite structured verse. I use a four, five or six beat line for the iambic trimeters of the original and a two, three or four beat line, trying to keep to two or three most of the time, for translating the lyric portions of the original. But just because there is an underlying pulse of stress accents going through it, which the actor can actually find very useful, that doesn't make it a separate language remote from the audience. And I think that's the key factor for me and I suspect for a number of other translators, working in the last ten to fifteen years or so. It's trying to get away from that feeling that because Aeschylus wrote in an elevated Greek style that we must try at all costs for an elevated English style. I don't think that's right.

LH You mentioned that your target audiences and your target actors, as it were, are Australians. Do you think that modern Australian English makes particular demands on the translator?

ME Well, yes. And especially with my current work on Aristophanes, I actually find modern Australian English a great source of strength because it's neither British nor American. A sort of separate country with a distinctive idiom of its own. And it's a very straightforward country. With Aristophanes I've been quite happily using some elements of Australian slang which come from the sort of larrikinness aspect of our national character. And that has come in very useful when dramatising the sorts of things that Aristophanes' revolutionary heroes say as they go about their cutting a swathe through the life of the comedy.

Dicaeopolis, for example, goes very nicely as an Australian country town citizen, reluctantly coerced inside the big city which is a big resonance for us. Australia is a much more urbanised nation than most modern nations and a countryman would feel very cooped up if he was forced to live in Sydney, for obvious reasons. So, yes, I found it a great source of strength and my only worry is that when I get to British and American publishers, they may ask me to edit some of it out. When we were workshopping my *Acharnians* in Exeter three weeks ago, I had to get rid of 'hoons' which is a very nice Australian word and replace it with 'yobs,' which means the same and will have the same effect! And I suspect that will have to stay in the published translation. That's just one example.

LH I want to ask you about the way which your translation work either converges or diverges with the demands made on you as a classicist and as a theatre director. You are one of the very few people who actually works in all three spheres.

ME Yes, and it's a hard question to answer even with the advance notice that I've had that I was going to be asked it. I think that there is an inbuilt and good creative tension between me with my classical hat on surrounded by the latest learned editions from OUP, CUP or Aris and Phillips, lexica and all that sort of stuff and me trying to move forward from that in my imagination to how it would work in my production. And I think that is all to the good. I think it makes me a more comprehensive translator than someone who, for various reasons, is simply doing translation and then handing the translation over to someone else to direct. Because I'm always thinking as I draft my translations, how is this going to be spoken? And even more directorially, given the circular shape, because as you know I produce all mine in a replica of the circular shape. I've tried both indoor studio work and outdoor amphitheatre work towards this end. 'How's this going to work in the circular shape?' 'What sort of movements might go with this speech?' So already I'm thinking ahead as I translate to how it will shape and sound in the theatre.

And I think that's an important difference from most translators who some of them I'm sorry to say, publish translations without having them staged before the publication. This is very obvious with the Fagles, Aeschylus and Sophocles, they would not have survived in that form in a

serious production. Whereas I don't publish until after I've workshopped it. And this involves seeing if it all works; asking the actors if it works for them and if something is patently not working for the actor, taking it home overnight and coming back with a new draft afterwards, of words, phrases or even, I'm sorry to say in one case in the Women's Festival, the whole lyric had to go: it just wasn't good enough. I got myself on a sort of cute combination of words which was unthinkable.

So I think it's a sort of continuity, if you analyse my roles as I go through. I start as a classicist and then almost immediately overlay onto that the role of translator and then overlay onto that the role of director. So the whole project is forward-moving through the three roles. I think it's very important to be able to integrate them. I think I'm very lucky that I don't publish a translation unless it's been performed and so I've got the whole grappling with the Greek right through to the aftermath of production process all as one continuous evolution of the script.

LH I want to ask you a little bit more about this relationship between the ancient text, your translation and the way in which it's going to be staged. You mentioned, for instance, the importance you give to the actual playing space. And yet, isn't it the case that however much one researches the ancient conditions of the performance they're never going to be directly replicated? What importance would you give to the use of masks, for instance? What assumptions do you make about the potential size of audience and distance from the actors, about the difference in acting styles, in ancient and modern traditions and so on? How does all that come in?

ME Well, it impacts in quite a major way. I don't use masks in my productions, simply because the modern spaces, both the outdoor and indoor spaces which I use in Newcastle are too small to need a mask for the original purpose of revealing ... remember of course *prosopon* doesn't mean mask it means face. And the original *prosopon*, they had to show the people at the back of the audience the status and gender of the people who otherwise, if it was just a human face, would be microscopic. So I find the mask inappropriate for the spaces I'm working in.

Also, since my *Libation Bearers*, which I wasn't terribly happy with as a production, I've abandoned ancient dress or even attempts to simulate ancient dress. And I've had a lot more success in recent years with modern dress, perhaps in particular with the *Antigone* I did in 1995 which I set in Sarajevo, with Creon as a much younger Creon than is normal: a leather-jacketed warlord, and of course using the fact that Ismene and Eurydice both costume themselves fully from head to toe, fully veiled, while Antigone in a more sort of insouciant and defiant way wears jeans and just throws a little headscarf over her head as a sort of nod to the convention of the hijab.

Also, Tiresias as an Imam almost literally throwing the book, in this case the Koran, at Creon, made a great effect. So I'm translating with the expectation that I will be doing a modern dress production and a word which has come to dominate my thinking in recent years is 'fluidity.' I want everything to flow. When I first directed *Libation Bearers* and after it *Eumenides*, I was very much 'This is a scene; this is a chorus; this is a scene; this is a chorus. Stop at the end of this one and then start something else.'

Now by contrast, after thirty years, I'm saying segue, segue, segue. Let's glide everything smoothly into the next moment. Let's not let the audience be able to pull back from the show at all. In other words, a theatre of involvement. So these are the sort of things I'm translating for. I feel very passionately that – as has been amply documented, especially by Stanford in *Greek tragedy and the Emotions* – Greek tragedy in particular was received with intense emotional response. Therefore our aim is to stop people thinking, 'Oh dear, this is a Greek tragedy, I'm going to be bored.' And instead become emotionally involved with what's going on in the show.

And I was very proud of the *Antigone*. You could see people – I snuck up into the top gallery where I could see the audience some nights – and you could see them sort of leaning forward and peering down into the circle, so gripped were they by the performance. So I'm going for fluidity in the translation and production and I'm going for involvement by the audience in the show.

And another reason for not using masks is of course that I'm using student actors who haven't got that much body training and it's almost professional suicide to deprive a student actor of what he or she can use best which is the face. Also the small spaces are an argument. So my productions are conceived, as I think any responsible modern translation should be conceived,

by the way, in the expectation that it will probably be an unmasked or maybe occasionally half-masked production.

With my *Acharnians* in Exeter three weeks ago, we experimented with using masks for some of the other characters but not for Dicaeopolis and this actually worked very well. It was fascinating. We had the demi-god, for example, and the Acharnians themselves fully masked as opposed to Dicaeopolis who was able to use his unmasked state to take the audience into his confidence and get them on his side at the beginning of the play and then stay there. So that leads me to the thinking that maybe my translations are suitable for masks for some of the more stylised roles, without compromising their basic ability to be, preferably, I think, done unmasked. So those are the sort of considerations that would be in my mind.

LH You mentioned, when we were talking earlier, your experience of using or working with student actors alongside more experienced professionals. Could you say something about the kind of working approaches, workshoping approaches and so on that you would use in those circumstances?

ME I'm relatively straightforward in my production techniques. I tend not to spend a lot of time messing around around the text and improvising around it, for example. I tend to get stuck straight into, 'Here is the text, how are you going to speak this?' And once we've got you speaking it properly, what sort of movement is implied by the text. So I have a sort of very micro-level approach to the directing.

Very often – this is not quite answering your question but it's something I want to talk about – even students can give you invaluable clues to developing your production and I'll give you a famous example from *Agamemnon*: 'I stand just where I struck,' says Clytemnestra over the bodies and it's quite evident at that point about four or five lines into the great speech, she's up by the bodies on the *ekkukléma* and by up I mean towards the back of the orchestra, but I couldn't help noticing in a very early rehearsal that Vanessa Turton, who was playing the role of Clytemnestra, was starting to tap her foot impatiently about three or four lines after that and I suddenly realised why she was doing that, she wants to get down there and mix it with the elders. She wants to come into the front of the orchestra and deliver the speech of defiance from a much more central position, the remaining part of the speech. 'There it is, Elders of Argos, this is how things are. Take it or leave it.'

And in contrast to productions like Peter Hall's, where the poor Clytemnestra is ... well you've got several problems: one of them is he's got a left hand with a bloody glove on it, although it's clearly said that Agamemnon's death is the work of his right hand, but he's also stuck up on a platform away from the Elders and not moving among them. And the contrast between that and what we eventually evolved through to following that insight that she should move is chalk and cheese. My and the opinion of many people who have seen videos of both is that it was a far more electrifying way to stage the scene. So, that all stemmed from just watching a student actress on her first and second attempts at the text, and seeing what she wanted to do with it.

So I find student actors very useful. The other problem with professionals of course is that they need to be very self-aware to really help you with the process of improving a translation. I did have a situation in Exeter – I was very glad of it – but in general I actually prefer working with students because professionals can make something lyrical and moving out of the Yellow Pages if they are required to do so. In other words they can deal with virtually anything the translator throws at them. Whereas, just as Vanessa's foot was terribly important to my staging of *Agamemnon*, so if somebody is consistently stumbling over a line after a couple of readings and rehearsals, then you've got to think whether there's something seriously wrong with the line. And students are more likely to tell you that than professionals are.

So, yes, I do like working with professionals very much of course, but they need to be professionals who have been properly briefed that their job is not to take the script uncomplainingly and act it to their best ability, but to see if it works, and then tell me if it doesn't at a particular point and I'll change it.

LH Right. You've talked very interestingly about how your approach as a classicist and as a translator and as a director all inform each other. What about experiences of having your translations directed by someone else?

ME I have not yet seen a production of one of my translations done by someone else. I know that they've been done in the States inside educational institutions but I haven't been game to let go

of my babies while I'm in Australia simply because I want that sort of whole integral approach we were talking about earlier, so that would be exciting.

LH Do you think that academic classicists, for want of a better term, value sufficiently the role of translators? I'm thinking about the kind of discourse which always emphasises that in translation something is lost, that it's in some sense a pale imitation or a feeble substitute for use with people who don't know the languages etc. Do you think attitudes are changing at all?

ME Well I hope so. There has been a lot of that in classical circles as you quite rightly remarked, which is why I hope there'll be great success for Michael Walton's new book which as you know is called *Found in Translation* and proudly proclaims that this person is likely to have abuse hurled at him from two sides, from the classicist if it's too free and from the theatre practitioners if too much of a crib. The translator is or should be a separate person in his or her own right whose brief is to recognise that something always will be lost in translation but also quite simply to make the play as accessible to audiences and one phenomenon which certainly hasn't escaped your notice is just how much more Greek plays are being done these days.

And they're not being done in the original Greek, except in the Cambridge Greek Play, for very obvious reasons. There's only so far that supertitles can take you. We need translations of all sorts of different kinds and we're getting translations of all sort of different kinds. I think this is very exciting and I'm hoping that classicists are prepared to recognise that the problems the translator faces are very real ones which he or she has to solve.

As I said earlier, I think accuracy is very important and I was very pleased when, at a conference in Christchurch, New Zealand a few years ago, Oliver Taplin did a survey of translations of the *Oresteia* and was trying to promote the Ted Hughes' as the best of the ones in his survey bunch. Unfortunately the bunch included mine and a couple of very definitely classical people categorically preferred my version of a particular ode which Oliver had chosen for his example, on the simple grounds that it was far more accurate to what Aeschylus actually wrote.

So I would like to think that classicists should be quite happy with the appearance of many recent translations which are a lot more responsible and careful about how they look at the original Greek. A sort of footnote to that of course is that we translators need classicists to do something for us, which is to provide really first rate editions. That's something I can't do – I'm not a philologist – and I need as I labour on the translation, I need someone who can advise me very clearly on what the Greek means, what options there are for what the Greek means, what readings I have to choose between and why the editor prefers one of them, if he or she does. And so the advent of newer and better commentaries has been extremely helpful.

With Aristophanes of course we've got now both the complete Aris and Phillips from Sommerstein and the OUP (Oxford University Press), are getting on with a complete edition of Aristophanes, which includes classics like *Frogs*. Now these are a tremendous help and I'm hoping that classicists will recognise that the better among us translators take very seriously the issue of what the Greek might actually mean. Even if what we eventually come up with in some places isn't quite exactly what they would have done in the literal version.

LH Do you think that the kinds of editions that you've described and that are going to be needed in the future will still need to be prepared primarily for use by classicists? Or are there ways of making their use more accessible to people who are interested in producing versions or translation-type responses to the Greek plays but don't have that systematic training in the ancient languages which you had?

ME Well there's a fairly clear divergence, isn't there, in practice among publishing classicists at the moment. And mentioning the two series on Aristophanes that I just did, there's a very clear divergence between Sommerstein who provides his own English literal translation and in that edition anyone who wants to get closer to Aristophanes can successfully do so thanks to the English-only policy of the notes. And on the other hand OUP where really quite a lot of the stuff is only accessible to people who have a full training or background in the classical languages. I note that in Olson's latest two, *Acharnians* and *Peace*, he's sort of tried to write it so that only the notes that are on philological points of the language are inaccessible to the English speaking reader. But on the other hand the notes are keyed to Greek phrases and there is no translation provided, so I think that might cause difficulties.

I guess the issue which this raises or brings us towards is, to what extent one can approve of poets coming along taking a literal version and turning it into their sort of poetry. And my straight answer to that is really on the evidence of what I've been seeing recently, 'Not at all.' I am quite happy to dissent from this general trend. There are some very great poets who've quite rightly, not claiming to be translating but to provide a new version. Seamus Heaney comes straight to my mind with two plays which are called *The Cure at Troy* and the *Burial at Thebes*. They don't say they are Sophocles's *Philoctetes* and *Antigone*, though they quite well could actually be by the standards of some other modern verse versions. He's actually more faithful in his guise as a poet doing what I think would be called a *Bearbeitung* than some of the verse translators.

But while I admire Oliver Taplin very greatly, I cannot follow him into his admiration for the two National Theatre *Oresteias*. I'm not talking about the production, I'm talking about the versions by Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes. I don't know what the law is in this country but we've got a thing called the Trade Descriptions Act in Australia and I think that Harrison and Hughes could both be prosecuted under it for purporting to be representing Aeschylus when what you actually get is great chunks of their own personal imagery. We won't even debate whether Beowulf is a convincing style for Aeschylus; I don't find that to be the case. I find it quite reductive as a verse form.

And I get very, very cross with the fact that Katy Mitchell had nothing better to work with than the Ted Hughes which is absolutely full of Hughes' characteristic animal and countryside imagery. And this quite overwhelms the Aeschylus – as a footnote to that the *Alcestis* is even worse, and I'm afraid I agreed with every word of Bernard Knox's demolition job on that in the *New York Review of Books*.

So I'm very, very wary of this trend towards the free adaptation by the Greek-less person. I think my wariness started with the BBC Sophocles done by Don Taylor, where he managed to make a very long play even longer by suddenly sort of adding ten lines of pure Taylor and, of course, not telling anybody.

I think a translation needs to be quite scrupulous about what it puts in, even where, for example, in *Acharnians* there's half a line missing at one point, and I put my version of that in brackets: it's a conjecture. It should be clearly stated that here is Ewans guessing what Aristophanes might have wrote where clearly half a line has dropped out of the manuscript with some metrical reason, it's obvious. Even if it's only half a line, we need to know about it. And when you come to something like *Bacchae* which my colleague and friend, Greg McCart has translated but not yet published, he quite rightly puts all the bits he's invented in the great lacuna at the end of the play into square brackets, so that we know exactly what is McCart reading *Christus Patiens* and what is actual surviving Euripides.

So as a general enterprise I fairly strongly disapprove of the OUP New York series which as you know has a scholar and a poet working together. Ironically one of my favourite volumes in that is one where the scholar and the translator are the same person and that's the Richmond Lattimore *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which I think is one of his best pieces of work. But in general I find that series unsatisfying and my reason for it of course is that there's a third person missing here. We've got a classicist, we've got a poet but we haven't got anyone who knows anything about theatre. And the results tend not to be very theatrical in my judgement. For all his stature as a poet himself, someone like Ted Hughes simply doesn't have that theatrical nous. And I think that's very evident in the translations that he's published.

LH

I think that raises really interesting points about the way in which versions of Greek drama, usually Greek drama, sometimes Roman drama made by poets who are not dramatists are especially vulnerable to directorial intervention. I'm thinking, for instance, of the Seamus Heaney production of *Burial at Thebes* at the Abbey Theatre, which, although a brilliant poetic text, was totally at variance with the production style that was chosen by the director. So this aesthetic impact was actually very odd. But it seems to me that underlying what you've said, there are a couple more points that we might perhaps just try to unpick.

I mean you mentioned Heaney, for instance, and Heaney, although he, as you say, does not claim to be producing a translation – he says it's 'after' Sophocles and so on, he actually makes very close use as a mediating text of translations notably by Richard Jebb and also by Hugh Lloyd-Jones. And I wonder whether that has influenced the way in which the Heaney text is actually very closely aligned with Sophocles in terms of formal elements, the selection of different rhythms and metres, you know, for lyric and for the *agon* and so on. Is there a

difference between that kind of mediated engagement with the ancient text and, for example, a more recent trend whereby somebody is commissioned – probably an academic – to make a close translation and then to work with a dramatist who in some sense turns it into an acting script? I'm thinking, for instance, of the Frank McGuinness *Hecuba* which used a close translation or the recent David Greig *Bacchae* which used a close translation prepared by Ian Ruffell from the Glasgow Classics department. And where those were specially commissioned, there was perhaps an ongoing engagement between the translator and the dramatist, in a sense that obviously it isn't possible if somebody's using Jebb's translation or one of the older versions, or a translation that was not prepared specifically to be staged.

ME It raises a number of interesting points that, doesn't it? Because the Heaney is very, as you say, very close and respectful and I think that's a notion I'd like to hang onto. I'm inclined to think that I admire Heaney's work simply because although he is a poet, he is still showing enormous respect for as much as he can find out. That sort of basic respect gives his translations a certain amount of credibility even though he very modestly says they are not translations.

I think it's that notion of respect that has to underpin this because it's very sad if something like the Heaney *Burial at Thebes* then becomes the vehicle for a director with a quite different concept. And I don't think he deserves that; I think that he is accurate enough to deserve to be approached respectfully by directors because that's another thing: we do get an awful lot of blatant disrespect by directors for scripts, which tends to get worse the older the scripts are. It's an unfortunate fact that some young Turks like to cut their teeth and make their reputations with a sort of radical view or interpretation of some kind or another of a Greek Tragedy, which is very sad.

Now, I think it is quite a good road obviously for a classicist who is not a theatre person to provide a very close translation but it's a question of who they provide it to and what use is made of it. As you can see, I am highly critical of someone such as Ted Hughes letting his own extraordinary poetic talents – which are so powerful in most of his own verse – loose on Aeschylus, who ends up the loser in quite a number of ways, with all the additions, the extra excremental imagery and all the stuff that the author of *Crow* does so very well. Simply superimposed on top of the *Oresteia*. I can't really accept that at all.

But if your classicist supplies a text direct to a theatre company and is then mediated out by dramaturg or the director into something they want to play, that seems to be an altogether more responsible exercise and it's probably the nearest that the professional theatre can come to the relatively luxurious academic position I'm in, where I can be translator and dramaturg and director, all for the same show. It seems to me that that's probably one of the better ways for professional companies wishing to approach Greek drama to do it, in that what they get may be a bit too plain and simple for them to act but at least it's close and then they can start working on it and turning it into an acting text.

LH One thing which is very frequently said is that translations last for a generation and then there are constant needs for new ones. Bearing in mind what you've been saying about the relationship between the linguistic aspects and the staging, do you think that need for rewriting, rethinking, re-invention of the translation is primarily triggered by changes in language or is it also triggered by changes in theatrical approach, acting priorities and so on?

ME I definitely think both. For a start I definitely agree with that proposition. I think the active life for a translation has probably shrunk to about twenty to twenty five years now. Looking at the evolution of versions of the Greek tragedians since the Penguins. That was all we knew; that was all we had in British English when I grew up, through to the multiplicity of different new versions that are coming out now. I think it's a combination of not so much language in itself but what kind of language actors find appropriate to speak in the theatre and what kind of language directors are comfortable with bringing out the meanings from.

To go back to something we were talking about earlier, the Lattimore is still in print from Chicago but no-one in their right mind would dream of directing one of those today. Not through any lack of merit – they had great merit in their time – but simply because as we said earlier, there's a sort of stylisation to the language, a feeling that Aeschylus and Sophocles in particular must impose. Actually some of the most interesting translations in that series are of Euripides where some of the translators – I'm afraid I've forgotten the name of the person who did *Andromache* – but he rips into it with highly colloquial American language and makes something which is still quite exciting today [eds note: *John Frederick Nims, 1956*] It's not one of their main

translators but this guy has really seized the potential of an out of the way play which nobody thinks terribly much of, and gave it a vivid contemporary hue.

But in general that approach is dated. And it's dated because I think both actors and directors and audiences, all three of them together, want something more fluid and more capable of being related to by a contemporary audience. And I think they no longer want to be awed and shocked by the grandeur of Greek tragedy. They are asking to be moved by the power of Greek tragedy. And that's a distinctly different thing, which I think more and more translators are aiming for today.

LH Yes, I'd like to push you on that one, I think. This change in audiences; even ten years ago it was not uncommon to go to a Greek play that was being performed in translation and see people with their heads buried in the text. And you rarely, if ever, see that now. Even at productions of plays in the original language you hardly ever see it, and certainly not for translated plays. And you've talked about the power of the audience, both obviously in commercial terms but also culturally. Now, given that because classical subjects are no longer central to the basic educational curriculum in the way that they used to be, a lot of people are getting their notion of the ancient world and its society and its culture and its art through various kinds of translations, of which theatrical translations are probably the most important, along perhaps with film. How do you see that developing over the next ten or twenty years? What would you like to see happen? What do you think will happen?

ME Well, it can only continue and I guess one should say one feels slightly sorry for the gradual fading out of the classicist with his or her OCT firmly in hand, but they are a dying breed. And they don't always even come to my productions. Not everyone in my classics department turns up to my productions, though some of them certainly do and enjoy the translations. But yes, we've quite simply got to face the fact that the majority of our audiences are going to be people who don't know classical Greek at all and who want to find out more about this marvellous world. And this is where the translator becomes very, very important. That's why I'm so anxious, as several of the things I've said in this recording have made plain, I think, for responsible translation. Because really the translator has now devolved the sort of responsibility that two generations ago was the editor's responsibility or even if we go back as far as Jebb whom we mentioned, towards the end of the nineteenth century the editor was handing down a vision of Sophocles complete with, in Jebb's case, some comments on staging which then went very much out of fashion. It was quite ahead of its time in that respect. He talked about staging and not unintentionally either, despite the fact that his own primary qualifications were philological, he also provided quite a translation, given that it's also supposed to be a literal guide to expounding the Greek as Jebb sees it. It's also surprisingly readable even today.

So I feel that while editors remain important, very important to the translator, as I've said earlier, the translator can only become more important and has to be more aware of his or her responsibilities as a result. I guess that's why I'm so non-plussed by the choice of The National Theatre here to put first Harrison and then Hughes into their theatres. Quite simply because as a national theatre they are going to have an awful lot of influence and the Peter Hall one is even video-recorded and broadcast, which seems quite extraordinary given that as a production it was incredibly boring. Let's be blunt about this. And that's unfortunate.

So what's going to happen, as I see it is, the translator is going to become more important and what I'm hoping for and I also hope that Michael Walton's book will be widely read because he hopes for this too, is for translators to become more aware of their responsibilities to mediate between the modern audience and the classical text.

While we were working in Exeter on the *Acharnians*, Graham Ley and I came up with a very interesting formulation of what I'm trying to do which is very kind of Graham to think about it this much and work on it. He said, 'What you're trying to do, Michael, is not to bring Aristophanes to the modern audience but to take the modern audience to Aristophanes'. And especially with comedy where so many free adaptations are important in the norm, this is actually quite a difficult and important thing to do, to present as much as is possible of what Aristophanes actually wrote in such a way that it plays well in a modern theatre. And so I'm hoping that the trend will be away from free adaptations and more towards translations which strive for accuracy, as well as for actability.

LH In terms of Aristophanes do you think it is more difficult to translate humour into a modern idiom and context than to translate tragedy?

ME Oh absolutely, totally and infinitely more difficult! I came to a fork in the road about five years ago where I had the option, going on from Aeschylus and Sophocles to Euripides – or attempting Aristophanes. And I did actually translate a play of Euripides – it was *Hecuba* – but I actually found myself not warming to the language which I find more prolix and less challenging than Aeschylus and Sophocles. So I attempted *Frogs* and was not entirely happy with the result. I had to redraft that a lot. But with *Lysistrata*, *Women's Festival* and now *Achamians* I'm getting a more confident comic voice. Yes, it's very difficult because as an acting translation it doesn't have the luxury which some published translations of Aristophanes do of being festooned with a kid you not about a hundred and fifty footnotes explaining all the allusions. It's got to work for an audience and audiences can't read footnotes. So you have to invent all sorts of little tricks to ease understanding and this raises a question which we should have asked earlier perhaps, which is how much knowledge can you take for granted? Is it safe that you write Aphrodite? You and I know who Aphrodite is, but there are plenty of people in a potential audience who might not. So I tend to slip in 'the love goddess' instead, especially in comedy, just to make sure people understand.

One example which I talked about in the preface to the volume of *Lysistrata*, *The Women's Festival* and *Frogs* is the very beginning of *Lysistrata* where she says, 'Oh, if someone had called them to ...' and then there's a list of three or four very specific festivals at Athens – all of which need a footnote and duly get it in all commentaries, all translations that I have seen. Well it won't do. So I ended up with something like – I can't remember my exact words but it's something like, 'if someone had called them out for a sleep-out or an orgy or a celebration of the love goddess – they'd all be here.' You've got to do things like that.

And I even put square brackets round some bits, which don't indicate that they are spurious, it indicates that I don't think they can be properly played to the modern audience. Sometimes it's just cutting out a name that was significant then but is no longer significant now. Sometimes there's a whole chunk where the humour is simply too obscure to be worth doing.

There's that terrible bit for example in the *Women's Festival* where the women go on about how we've got superior people, just look at their names. This falls dead. It doesn't work. For a start people don't understand that Stratonike means successful in battle, so they don't even get the pun. You've got to gloss it for them and by the time you've done that the joke's dead in the water.

So with comedy, something quite different from my ethos for tragedy, you've got to make a few deft cuts. There are some things that at least this translator – me – feels simply can't be teased into modern English and just won't work. That doesn't mean that you should abandon the whole enterprise and cut and run and be terribly free. On the contrary, you've still got to work very hard, where he's got puns, you've got to try and find an equivalent English pun. Where he's got proper names that have to stay, you have to make sure that the audience will be involved. 'Who the hell's Cleon?' you might well ask at the beginning of *Achamians*. Well, you'll find out if you're patient, so it's worth leaving him in. Obviously, taking Cleon out of the *Achamians* would take a lot of excellent venom out of that play. So you've just got to hope that the audience will be excited by the reference near the beginning to the knights getting back the money that Cleon had stolen and then if they get that into their memory bank, when Aristophanes comes out more blatantly against Cleon later in the play, they'll be fine.

So, yes, comedy is far more challenging because although I believe that several of the tragedies have very direct contemporary reference starting with obvious ones like *Eumenides*, none the less comedy is much more specific in its contemporary reference. And you've got to do something about this. For example, there's a notorious homosexual, as you know, by the name of Cleisthenes who cops a serve in all three of the plays I've just been discussing. I call him The Queen with capital letters and that's what he's called in the cast list of *Women's Festival* when he actually appears – brackets Cleisthenes brackets – but we need to establish straight away that this is Athens's most notorious homosexual and you've got to do something to clue the modern audience to that.

So comedy needs a number of strategies on a number of fronts: sometimes internal glossing; sometimes changing the joke to something parallel in modern English, but mostly either glossing or cutting proper names that aren't going to do anything for the modern audience. So they stay in my translations but they're in square brackets with a recommendation to cut and the reason why.

So those are some of the things that I have found necessary to do. And this is quite a pioneering venture actually. I know of no translation of Aristophanes in print at the moment in English which attempts to translate – translate as opposed to adapt – and to translate without footnotes, as opposed to annotating freely. It's been quite an exciting learning curve so far and I think I'll only do my favourite six plays. I'm not sure I'm up to all eleven! But let's see how we go.

But it is getting better. The *Women's Festival* and *Acharnians*, I'm quite pleased with. I've sort of found a voice for him now which took me a couple of plays to do.

LH Given the importance of translation as transmitting not only enjoyment but also knowledge about ancient society and its arts, would you like to see translation awareness and indeed translation activity taking a more prominent place in, for instance, undergraduate and masters level courses?

ME Absolutely. I think it's a very neglected field which would profitably be pursued. We translators have a pride, it's quite a hard craft to learn. Just as my *Libation Bearers* is a much worse translation than the *Agamemnon* I did three years later, simply because it was the first one, so too, as I've just mentioned I'm very pleased with the improvement in my Aristophanes-techniques which took me about three plays before I found exactly the right voice.

So it's a craft and therefore it should be studied. It's a very important craft because as we've said earlier in another context, the number of people who can read these plays in the original Greek is diminishing, while the number of people who want to have exposure to these plays, either through reading or through theatre attendance is increasing. Therefore the study of translation and translation strategies would be a very good thing for people to do.

Obviously, I can't do this in my current position in a drama discipline because you need some knowledge of the original language but even with my drama students, I talk to them about the choices that a translator has both on a macro level of the overall style and concept and relationship between the English and the Greek and on a micro level I showed them – I've actually got a rather nice little spreadsheet in seven modern versions including my own and we look at the strengths and weaknesses of each of these from a theatrical point of view. Obviously, they've got to take my word for it being drama students, that some are closer to the Greek than others. But you can still have an intelligent debate from a theatrical end and we do that in a second year course.

But what I would really like to see is classicists who have reinvented themselves in so many other ways – I think of comp. lit. for instance, which was virtually unstudied in English thirty years ago and is now a thriving industry for reception studies. If classicists can reinvent themselves in that particular way, I think it would be nice if classicists could reinvent themselves into offering to their students of the original language a strong awareness that translation isn't just that naughty crib you use when you can't quite get through the Greek, but a craft in itself which they ought to be able to have a view of their own on, an informed view and indeed they should attempt bits themselves, and have them judged as potentially actable translations. I can see nothing but good coming from such a venture.

LH This sounds to me like a rather exciting new project. Maybe with that gleam in our eyes we ought to draw the discussion to a close, but as always in coming towards the end of an interview, I would like to ask you whether there are points that you had hoped to talk about or issues that you wanted to raise that we haven't managed to touch on.

ME There aren't actually, Lorna. I think we've covered how I see translation both tragedy and comedy. We talked about the relationship between the translator and the director. I've been able to indicate why I feel that some combinations of classicist and poet have not been entirely successful, and I just hope that the interview throughout has stressed that translation far from being a sort of ignoble handmaiden to be slightly despised, is actually becoming more important. And as more and more directors, professional directors, seem thank goodness to be turning away from accepting an adaptation towards more and more, trying to seek out somehow a translation which is close to the Greek as a jumping off point for their productions. I mean, we will still get the odd silly production of a silly concept by the director aligned to a free translation. This is inevitable but I don't know how you feel about this, but I feel that there seems to have been an increase in the level of understanding expected.

For example, there has only been one professional production in Sydney recently of a Greek tragedy. It was at the Sydney Theatre Company which is our flagship producer and I was

delighted that they sought out Gregory McCart from the University of Southern Queensland, commissioned him to do a *Medea* and then listened to his advice about the stage shape and acting style. It was a delight to walk into their little theatre and find it transformed into a – it's not that little, it's their second largest theatre – translated into a Greek circular shape with a pair of double doors at the back, and a spectacular ending in which suddenly the roof of the *skene* disappears. There's a gigantic disc of a sun and there's Medea standing on the roof – delivering the last speeches over the bodies of the children.

And an extra point: all the entrances and exits were right because it's a very odd play. The only person who comes in from the out of town is entrance is Aegeus; everybody else comes in from downtown and that was respected as well. The *parodoi* were used correctly, so it was really heartening that our national flagship carrier which occasionally can do the most stupendous cock-ups of classical plays with a small 'c' from Shakespeare onwards, actually when going to the Greeks went to one of the only two men in Australia who could really help them, got his help, listened to his advice and as a result produced quite a successful production. So that's the sort of thing which I sense might be happening elsewhere as well. And that I think is good.

LH I'm sure you're right in saying that now that there are more productions of Greek plays and a much greater sense of the possibilities for collaboration that there is already evidence that audiences are getting much more discriminating and thoughtful, both aesthetically and in terms of authenticity and everything else that goes up to make a production. That sounds to me a very encouraging note on which to end. And I'd like to thank you very much indeed for coming this morning and for being so willing to raise a terrific variety of issues and to give us the benefit of your experience and insights on these. Thank you very much.

ME It's been a pleasure, thank you.