

# A guide to directing multilingual theatre by Noah Birksted-Breen

Dear future theatre directors!

Here are a few thoughts about directing foreign-language dramas. I have tried to be honest about my experience as a play director and translator of new Russian plays. I hope to be encouraging, while also being realistic.

## Do:

- Become an advocate for foreign-language plays. Only about 2.5% of productions on UK stages are translated plays.<sup>1</sup> We need more! The interest by theatre programmers is likely to grow given the uncertain landscape of Brexit. Theatres understand that they should actively seek out foreign plays which are as-of-yet unknown to British audiences. In fact, 'multilingual plays' is becoming a new buzzword in British theatre. For example, this year saw the first-ever bilingual French-English drama on the West End.

## Don't:

- Expect it to be an easy path. I worked for three years unpaid to stage new Russian plays in fringe theatres. I had a full-time job and I used my free time and holiday allowance in order to produce, translate and director a team of 25 unpaid theatre professionals to make work. It paid off eventually. After five years, I was raising professional budgets to work at exciting venues like Soho Theatre, the Arcola and New Diorama. Soon after that, major organisations became interested in my work so I began collaborating with Theatre Royal Plymouth and BBC Radio 3. It's worth it in the end! But you need to be realistic about how you will support yourself through paid employment, while you figure out how to create a 'brand name' for yourself as a director of new foreign-language plays.

## Do:

- Travel to the country where you want to find new plays. For me, that means travelling at least once a year to Russia, to identify the most talented young Russian playwrights, interviewing Russian directors, attending Russian theatre festivals, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> The *British Theatre Repertoire Survey 2013* (by the British Theatre Consortium, 2015, p. 12) found that only about 2.5% of plays on British stages are translations, including existing (old) ones. New translations are approx. 1.5% of the British theatre repertoire.

**Don't:**

- Just stage the foreign playtext as if it were written by a British playwright. The most exciting thing about foreign-language plays is that they were born in a foreign performance culture. Go and visit the theatres where the play was staged originally. Be a detective: what is the theatre like? What are the audiences like? What is the atmosphere like? Is the play staged naturalistically or anti-naturalistically, or a combination of both? These experiences will allow you to find a unique 'voice' for yourself as a director who can navigate between two cultures, creating a distinctive vision which accommodates aspects of both.

**Do:**

- Find allies among other directors and translators. You will need to support, to encourage each other because you have chosen a difficult path.

**Don't:**

- Make the mistake of considering foreign-language plays to be totally 'foreign' and therefore totally different to British plays. In my experience, new Russian plays are often much 'wilder' in spirit and form than a lot of contemporary British dramatic writing. Nevertheless, there are many Russian plays which are broad comedies, melodramas and conventional dramas. Therefore:

**Do:**

- Try to direct a diverse range of plays from your chosen country or countries. Once, I translated four Russian plays which received rehearsed readings at Soho Theatre as part of a week-long festival, they ranged from naturalist dramas to sci-fi thrillers, with a few other genres in-between. This balanced diet is healthy – and it will contribute to breaking down stereotypes about foreign countries. Otherwise, you risk reinforcing those existing stereotypes e.g. that all Russian plays are wild and include scenes of drinking vodka, while all French plays are poetic and revolve around love triangles, etc.

**Don't:**

- Give up.

**Do:**

- Be realistic. If your current way of doing things isn't working, try another way. For me, that meant starting a PhD to fund my research and practice for three years. That was a game-changer. It helped me to discover a way of making work which I had never even dreamed of. I am now in a partnership with talented individuals and world-class institutions. This collaboration has enabled me to explore multilingual theatre, in ways which are innovative and potentially trailblazing.

Good luck!