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Translating Marina Carr for the stage: ‘You spend so many hours weighing every word’

A reimagined *Mirandolina* will be performed at the Abbey in Italian with English subtitles. Carr’s translator Monica Capuani explains how they worked together



Mirandolina at the Abbey Theatre. Photograph: Serena Serrani

[Ruby Eastwood](#)

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The work of the literary translator is comparable to that of a lighting or sound technician in the theatre: when everything goes perfectly, nobody thinks to comment, but the moment something goes wrong, even if the slip is minor, their work becomes noticeable. It may be a thankless task, but it can make or break a work of art.

“Some time ago, the phrase ‘children of a lesser god’ came to me as a way of describing us translators,” says Monica Capuani. “We are smaller-scale writers, following in the footsteps of the ‘children of a greater god’ – the authors we translate and serve as invisibly as possible. They are artists of invention. We are artists of interpretation and humility.”

Capuani is one of the leading translators bringing international theatre to Italian audiences. To date, she has translated about 80 novels and

194 plays. One of her latest projects is a translation of [Marina Carr's](#) new play, *Mirandolina*, which arrives at the Abbey in late August after touring Italy and Croatia. The play, a reimagining of the 1753 play *La locandiera* by Carlo Goldoni, will be performed in Italian with English subtitles. Carr's version is set in contemporary Dublin and centres on the theme of female fear.

In a sense, Capuani's project changes the usual direction of literary translation. Rather than a straightforward cultural exchange from one language to another, this translation makes a full circle. First, with the help of Valentina Rapetti, Capuani was tasked with producing a very literal English translation of Goldoni's 18th-century Italian comedy, which Carr reworked and updated, infusing it with her own sensibilities and distinctly Irish speech patterns. Capuani then restored the text into Italian, while attempting to preserve the linguistic specificities and emotional textures that Carr introduced.

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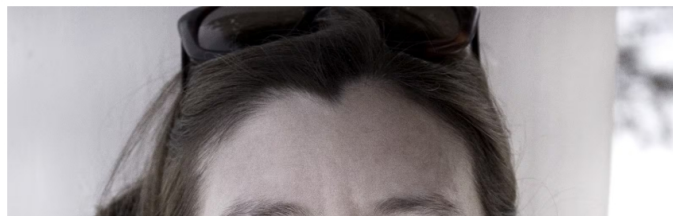
Monica explains that *Mirandolina* originated as a commission. Knowing Carr's practice of radically reimagining source texts, Monica suggested *La locandiera*, one of Goldoni's best-known and most culturally significant plays in Italy.

Carr experimented with different settings and approaches before finding her entry point in *Mirandolina*'s final monologue. There, after successfully humiliating the misogynistic Cavaliere di Ripafratta, *Mirandolina* reflects on the danger she has faced and resolves to marry Fabrizio. Carr recognised the latent threat and vulnerability within this scene and used it as the foundation for her adaptation, developing its implications to their furthest conclusion.

Although Monica trusted Carr's brilliance as a playwright, she also felt a strong sense of responsibility. As the cultural intermediary between Goldoni's Italian text and Carr's adaptation, she was both excited and apprehensive about how such an iconic work would be transformed.

She recalls receiving Marina Carr's first draft while she was in Switzerland rehearsing a production of a play by Tennessee Williams. Exhausted after an intense day in the rehearsal room, she nevertheless couldn't resist opening the email. It was about ten o'clock at night, and she had only meant to have a quick look, but ended up reading the whole play.

"I just kept thinking, 'Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.' But not because it was shocking for its own sake – because it was so brilliant. It was so dangerous, dark, and provocative." After finishing the draft, she was unable to sleep.





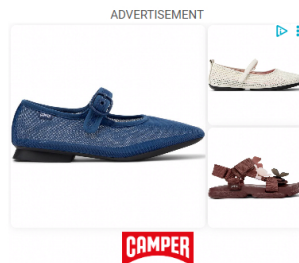
Monica Capuani, literary translator who has worked with Marina Carr.

“She intercepted something very important,” Capuani says. At the time, Italy was still grappling with the aftermath of the murder of Giulia Cecchettin, a 22-year-old university student who was killed by her ex-boyfriend in 2023 in a case that provoked widespread public outrage and renewed national discussion about femicide. The case dominated newspaper headlines and became a symbol of Italy’s broader crisis of violence against women. She noted that some people attending casting sessions for the production initially assumed that the theatre was staging a new work directly inspired by the case.

Although Marina Carr was not responding to the Cecchettin murder, Capuani observed that the adaptation inevitably acquired new resonances for Italian audiences, especially as some members of the *Mirandolina* cast were simultaneously shooting the forthcoming film *Se domani non torno* (If Tomorrow I Don’t Return), directed by Paola Randi and adapted from *Cara Giulia*, a book by the victim’s father, Gino Cecchettin.

“The first days of rehearsals were incredibly important because Marina, Caitriona [McLaughlin, the director], the cast, and I were all working together. We spent a lot of time on tiny details: rhythm, individual words, the weight of a phrase. Even the actors were impressed because they’re not used to working at that level of precision. It was all about doing justice to such a great play.”

This close collaboration proved especially valuable when Carr had deliberately chosen unusual or regionally marked language. “Marina would say, ‘This is a very strange word, even in Ireland,’ and then she would explain why she had chosen it. My job was to find an Italian working together. We spent a lot of time on tiny details: rhythm, individual words, the weight of a phrase. Even the actors were impressed because they’re not used to working at that level of precision. It was all about doing justice to such a great play.”



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word that carried the same weight, the same sound, the same effect.

The demands of theatrical translation differ from those of literary translation. A reader can pause, reread a paragraph, or return to a difficult passage if something is unclear in a book. In the theatre there's no such opportunity. "If the audience starts thinking about a sentence that doesn't sound quite right, or isn't comprehensible, or isn't consistent with the character, they've already lost track of what's happening on stage."

The translator's aim, then, is to disappear completely. Ideally, the audience should never stop to think about the translation at all. Yet, Capuani argues, this very invisibility has contributed to the profession being systematically undervalued. Despite the immense skill involved, translators are often poorly paid and rarely recognised. She recalls occasions when a play's programme omitted the translator's name altogether, as though the text had somehow arrived in the target language by itself. "It's a difficult job. It's demanding. You spend so many hours thinking, weighing every word, trying to do justice to masterpieces. But it's still not perceived as being important."

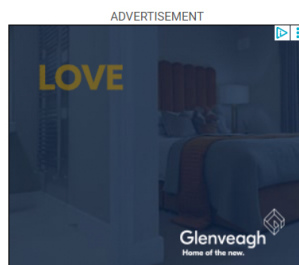


Mirandolina at the Abbey Theatre. Photograph: Serena Serrani

It's inevitable that any conversation about the profession turns to [artificial intelligence](#). Recent decisions by publishers around the world to replace human translators with machine translation software have sharpened anxieties across the industry, and Capuani is unequivocal in her concern. She compares AI's potential impact on translation to the effect the internet has had on journalism.

"Serious journalism meant that you had to verify the news. You trusted a certain newspaper because you knew its articles had been checked. Then the internet came along, and, in my opinion, it killed journalism, because on the web anyone can say anything. If people want to believe it, they do.

"I see the same risk here. We work extremely hard to remain faithful to the authors we translate. We study so much, for years and years, to have the experience to render a text. Then AI, with little or no understanding of context, can produce something similar almost instantly and at virtually no cost.



“For translators, AI can be a useful tool. It can help with research or with checking particular details. The problem comes when it’s used to replace the translator. Many publishing companies, at least in Italy, are beginning to ask translators merely to revise or correct AI-generated translations. This is not only a way of cutting costs, it kills the language. We should defend our culture.”

One of the most affecting defences of the human translator I’ve come across is offered by the interpreter Sonia Folin in her essay *Survival of the Translator*. She asks us to think about the familiar frustration of navigating an automated telephone system. We dutifully listen to the endless menu of options, not because we expect one of them to solve our problem, but because we are waiting for the moment we can press zero and speak to a real person. “There will be someone on the other end of the line to whom we can explain our problem: a problem different from the ones listed on the menu of options, a problem that no prerecorded voice, chatbox, or virtual assistant can resolve. We know this; we feel it. Only another human being will have the empathy needed to truly help us – to understand us and to feel for us.”

“This tendency to ‘press zero’ – I have no concrete data to support this, but it seems to feature in every conversation I have on the subject – says a great deal, in my view, about the resilience of the human element in forms of communication that are increasingly under threat from different applications of artificial intelligence.”

Folin’s insistence that some forms of understanding require the psychological insight of another human being reminded me of an anecdote Capuani shared in our conversation that highlighted the emotions and associations stored in words.

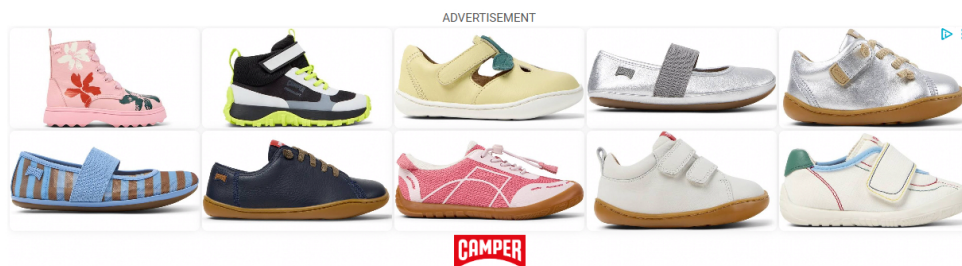
A few years ago, she began seeing a Lacanian psychoanalyst who also happened to be the Italian translator of Jacques Lacan. In the Lacanian tradition, particular attention is paid to language: the specific words a person chooses are treated as meaningful, offering clues to unconscious associations.

Capuani recalls that, during one of her first sessions, she repeatedly described herself using the English word “impaired”: “I kept using this word about myself, but for some reason I couldn’t think of the Italian equivalent.”

Knowing that she translated from English and French into Italian, her analyst paused on this linguistic slip. “He said, ‘Do you realise that in the word *impaired* there is the French word *père* – father?’ It was a revelation for me. That single word.”

Mirandolina by Marina Carr (after Carlo Goldoni), translated by Monica Capuani, is at the Abbey Theatre from August 28th to September 5th

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