

The Collaboration between Writer Daniel Keene and his Translator Séverine Magois: A Successful Mediation

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In Bordeaux, at the beginning of the 2009–2010 season, two plays by Daniel Keene were produced simultaneously by two different Bordeaux companies. A third play was read by yet another company.² Translator Séverine Magois was present at these events.

Before 2008, programming at the Théâtre National de Bordeaux Aquitaine (TNBA) had only ever accorded two playwrights the honour of having two different plays performed during the same season, one of whom was Keene, the other, Edward Bond.³ The double performance of Bond's plays was not unusual since *Chair* (*Chaise*, 2000) and *Have I None* (*Si ce n'est toi*, 2000) are two 'short' plays which are also complementary pieces (L'Arche Éditeur 2003). They had already been on the circuit for some time and the English playwright, now in his 70s, needed no introduction in France,

¹ Translated by Phoebe Weston-Evans.

² Daniel Keene season at the Théâtre du Pont-Tournant from October 14 to 24, with *Marie and Marguerite*, performed by the Théâtre de la Source (directed by Jean-Pierre Nercam), *Silence Complice*, performed by the Compagnie des Labyrinthes (directed by Gérard David), and a reading of extracts of the play *L'apprenti*, by the Compagnie du Si.

³ Both were performed under the direction of Alain Françon, director of the Théâtre national de la Colline and performed at the TNBA, from 18 to 21 March 2008.

notably due to the work of Alain Françon from 1992. Two of the *War Plays* (*Pièces de Guerre*) had been on the *baccalauréat* reading lists, which is one indication of his renown in France; for this and many other reasons the double performance of his plays at the TNBA was no surprise.

Such is not the case for Daniel Keene. The two plays performed were 'long' pieces and there is no reason that they would be classed as complementary. The only thing linking them is the author. In addition, the two directors, although both from the Aquitaine region, did not know each other except by name nor had they worked together. Yet, in a very short space of time, no less than five professional companies in the south-west of France began to take an interest in the Australian playwright.

At a national level, whether directed by Dominique Pitoiset in 2007 or staged in local neighbourhood theatres in 2009, it seems Keene enjoyed considerable popularity in the Gironde. He drew attention from directors with different backgrounds and with varying areas of interest, but who were united by their presence in Aquitaine. The involvement of his translator, Séverine Magois, was pivotal for Keene, whose plays are now, after just a few years, among the most performed pieces both in the Gironde and elsewhere in France.

Daniel Keene before Séverine Magois: the playwright on his own turf

Just as there is no writer without writing, equally there is no writer without a reader. Recognition of an author's work in a particular market is the prime objective of those promoting a writer's work. Of course, the body of work has to exist, and the author has to be a veritable author. This was the situation when Daniel Keene's work first started to garner interest, from around 1995. He was invited to travel to Europe for the first time to attend a week-long workshop dedicated to Australian authors, for which one of his texts had been selected for a reading and public performance at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier.⁴

⁴ [Eds: *The Hour Before My Brother Dies* (*Une heure avant la mort de mon frère*) was first published in 1995 (Lansman Éditeur, Belgium) then republished by Lansman in 2004 and 2010. The *Semaine des auteurs australiens* was organised by the Comédie-Française in association with SACD (Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques) and the Sydney Theatre Company. The plays were read at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in June 1995. The Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier is one of three theatres belonging to the Comédie-Française].

By this fact alone, Keene was *recognised* as a serious author by all those involved in the production including members of the public in the audience and those who heard about it. The event took place only in one venue, but it was a prestigious one, and it was the first step in establishing his fame in France.

This leap to Europe was possible only because he had already accomplished certain steps in his own country, where some of his plays had already been staged. As an ‘emerging author’, Daniel Keene was far from unknown in the Australian theatre world. And on a few occasions, some of his plays had been performed outside his country. However, the liberalism of the English-speaking world is such that playwrights are left to promote their work themselves. Distinct private and public theatres, which are common in France, are unknown in Australia. [Eds: The *Comédie-Française* is one of the few state-owned theatres/theatre companies in France and is considered part of *le patrimoine culturel* (the French heritage). Australia has two state-owned theatre companies (the State Theatre Company of South Australia and the Queensland Theatre Company) and two Australian state governments own performing arts centres. Many Australian theatre companies receive some government as well as corporate funding.] The territory is large and distribution of plays difficult, apart from very well-known plays. Keene could not rely on an established Australian network to help make his work known. In a country where public funding of creative projects is limited, it is only ‘from the bottom up’ that a writer can start to forge a reputation, starting with a specific place, be it a city or theatre.

Keene’s works were, nonetheless, already being performed from time to time. Then, in collaboration with Ariette Taylor he set up his own company and in 1997 they opened with a collection of short plays. This production, which had a shoestring budget, created a real impact, with some well-known Melbourne actors involved to champion the texts. The collaboration with Taylor lasted five years, until 2002, and provided his plays with a certain level of exposure, without ever quite bridging the desert of his own country, a desert which he has only just managed to cross, if indeed he really has.

Daniel Keene never directed his own plays, and the co-founding of his theatre company is a reminder of just how dependent playwrights are on directors, as is more or less the case in France. However, similarities stop there—in France there are many more means of support for creation and distribution. France, however, suffers from a different burden which is no

less difficult to overcome, that of the shadow of past masters. Australia, even more so than in England, is free from this weight. The prevailing attitude to drama in the English-speaking world tends to bring the weight of history into perspective and devotion to artistic heritage plays a less central role, perhaps due to Australia's relative youth. In contrast, veneration of writers is a distinct cultural trait peculiar to France. If one looks at the authors in the prestigious Pléiade collection, one sees that the surest path to fame for a writer is to be white, male and deceased—it is a simple matter of statistics.



It is clear from this that Daniel Keene was, by 1995, already recognised as a 'minor' author in his own country; his plays were staged from time to time, mostly in Melbourne where he was based. Even the description 'minor' was hard-earned and can be interpreted as indicating the amount of royalties paid or the number of plays published or performed. Keene didn't have to contend with an audience overly attached to performances of the classics, but still, each play had to work hard for recognition in a context in which theatre remains a minority art form. Productions of his work remained limited, and he reconciled himself to being an emerging artist, or even a second rank artist whose work was not destined to reach a large audience.

Although his work had received acclaim, it was not necessarily from within the theatre world. From around this time, some of Keene's texts were awarded prestigious prizes, but these were attributed to plays as works of literature, independent of any actual performance. This is even more surprising given that in Australia, theatre publishing is almost non-existent. [Eds: AustralianPlays.org features the combined catalogues of Australia's leading theatrical publishers. This site is set up and managed by the Australian Script Centre in collaboration with PlayWriting Australia, Currency Press and Playlab.] At forty, Daniel Keene was still young for an author, but by 1995 only one of his texts, followed shortly by a second, had been published by Currency Press, a small publishing house,⁵ which is the only one in Australia dedicated to drama. [Eds: See previous note.] Theatre publishing in Australia is always linked to a performance [sic]; the published products, with photographs and CVs of the actors,

⁵ March 1995. A collection of texts has since been published by a publishing house in Cambridge.

look more like expanded programmes than books. They are usually restricted to a limited readership (similar to poetry), and are often only sold at the performance venue.

Performance of Keene's work didn't depend entirely on director Ariette Taylor; other directors had sought out Keene's work too. One of them was Tim Maddock, of the Adelaide-based Red Shed Company, who put on *Because You are Mine* and *Terminus*, before commissioning *The Architect's Walk*, which was performed at the Adelaide Festival in 1998.⁶ The two latter plays are those which really sealed the author's reputation in France, as we'll see further on. Keene's still nascent network confined him to relative isolation. The handful of translations into Italian, the somewhat precarious founding and directing of a review, his short-lived and rather unsuccessful stint as an actor and as a director, and his writing for radio and television were not enough to provide a stable and sufficient income. Daniel Keene could no longer rely on his writing for theatre to make a living, and although he was involved in plenty of peripheral activities, Séverine Magois could see that they did not constitute enough to live on.

Daniel Keene 'discovered' by translator Séverine Magois

An author's success is not just a matter of chance, and neither is it simply to do with perseverance. Keene's *writing* was there already, whether his plays had been performed or not, and the most salient thing about them was the expression of an individual identity. For Bordeaux director Frédéric Maragnani, being a writer is about having a 'distinctive voice.' 'This is what we identify in the writing of the great authors: you open one of their books, read a page, and you immediately recognise the voice.'⁷ Maragnani was speaking about the English writer, Barker, but his words could easily have referred to Keene. Does talking about 'talent' make sense? Let it just be said that although chance played an important role in bringing Séverine Magois and Keene together, the personal investment that followed provided both parties with meaningful outcomes.

⁶ It was once again thanks to Tim Maddock that Daniel Keene's work came to the fore again on his home territory ten years later. He staged one part of *The Serpent's Teeth*, a diptych performed at the *Sydney Theatre Company* in April 2008, which marked the beginning of a Keene 'renaissance' in Australia.

⁷ Frédéric Maragnani, presentation of Howard Barker's *Cas Blanche Neige* at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, February 2009.

Author, director or actress? The path leading to her career in translation was not laid out from the start and as a student Séverine Magois dreamed of working in theatre. After a short spell on the stage, and aware of the industry's precariousness, she returned to her university studies. Although she never finished her Masters degree, by going back to university she was introduced to Jean-Michel Déprats⁸ by one of her teachers. She was looking for a way to combine her passion for theatre with her language skills, so making contact with the Maison Antoine Vitez⁹ was a logical move, and Déprats was one of its founding members. Magois's dual talents as linguist and artist earned her a place on the institution's English committee. She discovered a number of Australian plays and was captivated when she read two works by a certain Daniel Keene, sent to her by the Sydney Theatre Company. After this initial Australian experience she became involved in translating for an event to showcase Australian authors, organised by the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier.

Séverine Magois immediately recognised the 'voice', as evoked by Maragnani, in Keene's writing. Magois says that back then she translated differently from how she does today: with fidelity, of course, but also with a tendency to erase some repetitions, or to soften a certain sparseness in the original text. A naïve way of trying to adapt a text to her conception of the French and francophone audience; an audience for whom the beauty of the language would be transmitted by richness in adjectives; an audience she wanted to seduce just as she had been seduced. Very soon Séverine Magois delved more deeply into Keene's writing as a whole, and began to take on a role far exceeding that of simple translator. She adored Keene's texts and had every intention of promoting them.

I had the impression, at once very clear yet still nebulous, of having in my hands a body of work of rare quality (I'd hardly read anything like it) whose unique dialogue was immediately apparent. I didn't think about it... I decided to dive in. In keeping with the betting metaphors

⁸ Jean-Michel Déprats was a lecturer at Paris X and was one of the translators of the complete works of Shakespeare. He worked first in theatre before translating plays.

⁹ The Maison Antoine Vitez describes itself as 'an association bringing together linguists and theatre practitioners to collaborate and promote theatrical translation, promoting discovery of works from around the world and contemporary drama.' Déprats was vice-president. See <http://www.maisonantoinevitez.fr/>

much loved by Keene, I put my money on an unknown author, on a work in progress without having the slightest idea how it would be received here. But I was convinced I wasn't the only one to be so taken by his universe and captivated by his writing. Captive is no exaggeration because his work—his writing—touched me so deeply that I could not but translate it. It practically became a need, really it was of the order of necessity.¹⁰

With the readings organised by the Vieux-Colombier, which were part of a framework of exchange between authors, Séverine Magois was invited to Sydney in February 1995 to accompany the French authors selected by the Sydney Theatre Company. Following this, Keene was invited to France in June 1995. They met on these two occasions and began communicating, first by fax, before email made things easier. In Melbourne, Keene entrusted her with three new texts, and continued thereafter to send further texts regularly on floppy disk, including *Terminus*, as well as some shorter plays. Eventually he sent her all of his work to date, both long and short plays, staged and un-staged. Magois put some works aside and translated others. A friendship began, conducive to a trusting working relationship. By simple verbal agreement, he gave her exclusive permission to pursue the translation of his texts, without really believing anything would come of it. She asked him many questions, whenever she had a doubt or was unsure about an expression or a reference, and he replied in great detail. Magois translated a number of plays off her own bat and without assurance of any outcome, simply with the conviction that she was doing good work for a deserving writer.

¹⁰ *Dans l'écoute de Daniel Keene*, interview with Séverine Magois, in *Numéro 14*, Library of Saint-Herblain newspaper, summer 2002.

J'avais l'impression à la fois nette et diffuse d'avoir entre les mains une œuvre d'une rare qualité (comme j'en avais peu lu) où j'ai perçu d'emblée un sens inouï du dialogue. Donc, je n'ai guère réfléchi... j'ai décidé simplement de me jeter à l'eau [...] J'ai misé – pour rester dans la métaphore du jeu chère à l'auteur – sur un auteur inconnu, sur une œuvre encore en devenir sans avoir la moindre idée de comment cette écriture serait reçue ici. Mais j'étais persuadée de n'être pas assez extravagante pour être la seule à être ainsi sensible à cet univers, captive de cette écriture. Captive n'est pas un mot trop fort car son œuvre – son écriture – me touchait de si près que je ne pouvais pas ne pas la traduire. C'est devenu pour ainsi dire un besoin... oui, franchement, quelque chose de l'ordre de la nécessité.

Her investment was driven by purely artistic interest and a passion for Keene's work. Séverine Magois is not rich, and if she is, that is beside the point. However, she demonstrated extreme generosity towards an artist whom, at this stage, she hardly knew. This rather unique kind of artistic engagement could be described as 'symbolic patronage'¹¹ whose unwritten contracts are based on a significant donation of time that helps bring a work into existence, rather than commissioning or purchasing a work. Séverine Magois worked without reimbursement to support the recognition and appreciation of Daniel Keene's work.

The risk taken, both in time and energy was, nonetheless not disinterested, in that it related, to some extent, to a strategy of gaining recognition in the world of translation, which is itself often under-appreciated. 'Discovering' the author entitles Séverine Magois to part of the success as a 'secondary author', in the same way as an editor or a director would be. The term 'secondary author' here refers to the adoption of the initial text with the intention of turning it into a published or performed work. Conventionally this role is attributed mainly to the literary editor, but here the guiding role was greater since she was more visible in her engagement, and intervened after the conception of the original work, which itself remained unchanged. It was the same case for the first director who took an interest in Keene's work. Daniel Keene would not argue with this. As a translator, Séverine Magois also leaves her mark on the texts, fully earning the title of 'secondary author' as the first link in the chain leading to his work's acclaim and status.

Daniel Keene 'discovered' by literary agent Séverine Magois

Hoping to make something of all the time and energy invested, Séverine Magois took every opportunity to circulate her translations among potential directors. By meeting Keene's potential audience, a somewhat subjective

¹¹ Patronage: the action of a 'rich and generous individual who helps writers and artists.' From *Le Robert*. The website *definitions-marketing.com* indicates that the patron provides 'financial or material help through a business or an individual to support activities of general interest (cultural, research, humanitarian, etc.) [...] there isn't normally any contractual media recognition for the patron's support. The patron's visibility in terms of an event supported is generally relatively discreet [...]. [Patronage] is sometimes motivated by personal interest for the supported cause. My emphases.

and psychological element came into play that was decisive in bringing about his work's success. Magois acted as Keene's unofficial agent in France, before later taking on this role officially. But the first step to serious dissemination was finding a publisher. Séverine Magois knew the ropes; to increase the chance of success, it is preferable to avoid the traditional and highly unpredictable route from typescript to stage—an arduous battle. By creating a 'climate of confidence' for those reading Keene's writing, she could accelerate its emergence.

The climate of confidence around a work is what separates personal admiration for a text—or a performance—and the conviction that this admiration is shared by a significant number of others. It is the climate of confidence that forms the basis of how a work is perceived. One of the factors of this climate of confidence lies in publishing. Séverine Magois was well aware that you cannot gain literary renown without the book as a material object. No amount of admiration for a work affords the status that publishing does. It takes believing in a work, believing in it enough to become a committed advocate oneself. Keene's texts first had to be read, and Séverine Magois was persuasive. Having already persuaded the director Jacques Nichet to take on *Silence Complice*, and despite a first publishing house turning it down, she personally went knocking at the door of Éditions Théâtrales to convince them to publish Keene. Éditions Théâtrales were persuaded to get on board and, after reading his plays in translation, they decided to publish *Terminus*, which was then staged by Laurent Laffargue.

Theatre publishing

For an agent trying to promote a work in a new place, the first thing is to find a 'central point' around which to create an initial circle of confidence from which the work can emanate. This central point could be a creative space, a distribution venue, an established network of individuals, a print publication with significant or widespread circulation or a media figure willing to publicly speak out on behalf of the work. In any case, this central point constitutes the first stage. Séverine Magois was responsible for establishing links with a publisher and a director and assuring their involvement.

Theatre publishing is a precarious business. An editor's decision to publish a second play by an author should be interpreted as a concrete sign of

long-term commitment¹² and demonstration that the climate of confidence is well established. Then it is up to the publisher and the director to develop it further. In this case, both translator and publisher believed more strongly in the play *Terminus* than *Silence Complice*, which had been earmarked for the first stage production. Although publishing costs were practically the same (difference in costs for a ninety-page book or a one-hundred-and-eighty-page book is negligible), the decision was based on the conviction, shared by Magois and the publisher, that the published play was much more likely to garner a following. She embarked on a strategic and determined editorial policy, since the success of his work would obviously benefit not only the author himself, but also the whole ensemble, starting, of course, with the publishing house and including Séverine Magois.

Thanks to Séverine Magois's intervention and adept skills of persuasion, being published by Éditions Théâtrales elevated Daniel Keene's body of work directly into the current repertoire of plays and it was designated, in the words of Pierre Banos, a 'contemporary classic'.¹³

The first performance

Séverine Magois's symbolic position as a member of the Maison Antoine Vitez was certainly a positive factor, bolstering the climate of confidence required. Her affiliation with the company meant she was not 'just anyone', and was more likely to be listened to than an unknown translator. However, in order to gain an audience for translated plays, a second step after finding

¹² *Terminus* was combined with *Silence Complice*, and published by Éditions Théâtrales in 1999. Although the current trend is towards greater parity between publishing and performance, it was then the case that half of all published plays were never performed, and that one in two performed plays came from unpublished sources. Disparity between supply and demand made the situation increasingly precarious for authors, who were at pains to convince editors of the viability of their works. A sign of the success of the publishing industry is that directors nowadays are more likely to go and look through the shelves of a bookstore for their next play and the influence of theatrical presentation in which a text serves simply as raw material is decreasing—there is a return to emphasis on the author.

¹³ For further reading on this topic see Pierre Banos, 'L'Édition Théâtrale aujourd'hui, enjeux artistiques, économiques et politiques', Doctoral Thesis in Performance Arts, supervised by Christian Biet, February 2008.

a publisher was equally essential: finding a director, as well-known and well-respected as possible, who could act as a stepping-stone towards the work's recognition. The relationship between publisher and director is fundamental, especially in the context of an unknown play by an unknown author.

Once again, Séverine Magois went about directly contacting those whom she thought most able to bring the texts alive on stage, and in doing so, she went above and beyond her role as translator. She personally sought out directors whom she thought would be willing to turn Keene's texts into performed pieces. She used the credibility invested in her through the publishing house, with which she had already made contacts, and her association with the Maison Antoine Vitez. Éditions Théâtrales' commitment to publish carried greater weight than her words alone would have done. But Magois still faced resistance from the system because Keene was unknown. In addition to the work she put in as a professional translator, she invested a considerable amount of personal effort. Once again, she went to the first cog in the distribution chain: her network of contacts. She sought out and contacted directors whom she had met. After a first, short-lived performance in Paris, it was Jacques Nichet of the Scène Nationale de Toulouse who eventually agreed to stage *Silence Complice* (*Silent Partner*). Jacques Nichet had been director at the Théâtre Nationale de Toulouse Midi-Pyrénées since October 1998 and was another of the founding members of the Maison Antoine Vitez. Aside from the intrinsic merit of the text itself, it is easy to imagine that the direct contact between translator and director played a decisive role in Nichet's decision to stage the play.

Securing Nichet's agreement to stage the play *Silence Complice*, which took place the following year in 1999, contributed to convincing the publisher to take on the text. In this way, the 'stepping-stones' towards Keene's eventual renown came by involving individuals who were already known and recognised. There are only limited ways of going about it: aside from someone's willingness, the fate of a work depends on the help of a particular individual who is already known and recognised within the target milieu, such as a well-known actor, an established director or a publishing house renowned for its prior output. In Australia, it was the personal involvement of well-known actors that was the clincher for Keene. It was the other two of the three criteria that came together in the production of *Silence Complice* in France. From there, the play's renown began to grow, and hasn't stopped since.

'I was sure I wasn't so crazy as to be the only one so taken by his universe' writes Séverine Magois.¹⁴

That Keene's text held the same currency as that of a French author in France is thanks to the fact it was taken up by a publishing house of high-ranking reputation and performed by a renowned theatre company. With these essential conditions fulfilled for a climate of confidence, the work was launched. At the risk of putting the lie to the myth of the universal and timeless work instantly recognised by all, it is clear how much the success of this work relied on human interaction and contact.

From first forays to full recognition: a series of encounters

Jacques Nichet wasn't entirely satisfied with the staging of *Silence Complice*. From what was a humorous text, he had emphasised the drama. What he himself considered to have been an injustice done to the Australian work had to be repaired. The opportunity soon arose when Laurent Laffargue began looking for a partner for a co-production. When Laffargue, a director from Aquitaine, staged *Terminus* in 2002, his company¹⁵ had only been active for around ten years. Keene's name and first texts were already starting to circulate, so he was not the play's discoverer, so to speak. He was, however, the quickest to seize on it. Following Laffargue's meeting with an anglophone contemporary theatre company which had started up a few years before, Keene's work found its way from the Midi-Pyrénées region to Aquitaine.

The stage design of *Terminus* was highly impressive, even including the illusion of a suburban railway station, all of which added to the climate of confidence in the eyes of the audience. Laffargue delivered an ambitious production in harmony with the writing's elements of film noir. The performance of *Terminus* met the expectations of the cultural elite who were eager to discover great texts. The play conquered its audience and the production was successful enough for its renown to spread outside the immediate region.

¹⁴ Séverine Magois, see footnote 10.

J'étais persuadée de n'être pas assez extravagante pour être la seule à être ainsi sensible à cet univers.

¹⁵ Compagnie du Soleil Bleu, founded in 1992 and established in Bordeaux.

However, Laurent Laffargue's production of *Terminus* upset the plans of another director from Aquitaine, Renaud Cojo (from the company Ouvre le Chien). The two directors knew each other well, and it was in fact Cojo who introduced Laffargue to Keene's plays after his initial meeting with his translator. He had met Séverine Magois through a Sarah Kane production, also translated by Magois.¹⁶ It is not known whether these two Bordeaux directors remained on good terms following their rivalry over this text but judging by their relative successes, it is probable that they did. So, finding himself without a project and not wanting to stop there, Cojo asked Séverine Magois which of Keene's other plays were available. From that point on, it was simply a matter of time: Keene's work was ripe for success, just waiting for the spark to set the fire alight definitively.

From solitary translator canvassing major players of the theatrical world, Séverine Magois became the go-to person for information about Keene's new texts. This transposition constituted in itself a recognition of her work as a translator, alongside the success of a foreign work in France. To really claim one's fame in France, there was another stage yet to conquer: Avignon, the holy grail of French theatre. Cojo had just been approached by Vincent Baudriller, then in charge of the festival's programming, for a potential proposal. It was then that Séverine Magois suggested the famous *Marche de l'Architecte* (*The Architect's Walk*), which at that point had only been staged in Australia. Exploring the boundaries of humanity is a leitmotif running through Cojo's own work, so the play's theme resonated strongly with him and he seized the opportunity. Although audience reactions weren't quite what they had hoped, by the simple fact of being performed in Avignon Keene was henceforth an 'author who counts.'

Avignon, the largest theatre festival in France, acted as catapult to national and even European recognition, since it is only at this stage that the media really became involved. The more articles about the show there are, the more people talk about it, whether or not they have seen it, thereby acting as means of transmission. Having heard others talk about it, people talk about it too.

Thus, paradoxically, although the play directed by Renaud Cojo at Avignon was not taken up elsewhere in France, it remained the most tangible sign of the artist's recognition. Having been performed 'in Avignon', Daniel Keene

¹⁶ *Phaedra's Love*, performed in Bordeaux in 2001.

could no longer be considered a minor author, and Séverine Magois's gamble had paid off. Being part of the festival also increased Renaud Cojo's renown and status in Aquitaine and further afield. He too benefitted from the level of credibility which positioned him amongst 'interesting' directors. In other words, he profited from the symbolic capital that made it possible to envisage more ambitious projects. Séverine Magois's efforts thus had a wider impact than on just one writer, but affected all those who were subsequently involved, with varying degrees of success. Some of them were aware of this and commissioned further work.

Commissions and loyalty to Keene: the tale of *Elephant People*

In 2004, Laurent Laffargue asked Keene to write a new play for him—the play he produced for this commission was *Paradise*. The following year, Renaud Cojo too wanted to work with Keene again and commissioned, through the intermediary of Séverine Magois, a play completed in 2007. This play was *Elephant People*.

We will now focus more closely on this production. Pursuing his exploration of the extremes of humanity, the Bordeaux director, Renaud Cojo, included in his specifications of the text, the inclusion of the Barnum and Bailey Circus monsters and the emblematic figure of Merrick, commonly known by the pseudonym 'Elephant Man.' The paradox of *Elephant People*, which is an extremely rich play in its own right, was that a large proportion of its fame came simply from the author's notoriety—a brief analysis of the programmes of the theatre where the play was performed and the websites mentioning it clearly demonstrates this. Most often, Keene's name is shown in the same font-size as that of the director, with the names of others involved in a smaller type (beginning with Séverine Magois, and other names that have less media clout). This indicated the equal importance of the contributions of writer and director, which could be due to both being responsible for the play's creation.

In reality the more likely explanation is down to strategic use of Keene's growing fame. The Australian author's contribution to the work in fact appears more limited than one might expect in relation to the traditional conception of the author, since it is not so much a play but a 'sideshow opera', a contemporary operatic play with reduced textual dimension. In terms of the text, rather than author of a play as such, Keene was presented as the author of a libretto which emphasised the production's musical dimension.

What is perhaps even more interesting is that he was not the only author of the project's textual component. For example, the play gives free rein for the celebrity Vincent McDoom to introduce himself. His role here could no more be qualified as that of author than actor; his involvement isn't creative since he performs no other character than himself. The textual material adds to—or even interferes with—that of Keene, since it occupies the place normally the author's territory, that of language, in the overall work. This is again the case when Delphine Censier, a young paraplegic woman who has posed for glamour photos, is introduced via a long video cut, and this without interrupting the scene's coherence. Here again, the play makes room for testimonial accounts which have nothing to do with Keene.

Seeking out a range of voices whose messages resonate with his and incorporating them into his work is a characteristic of Renaud Cojo's artistic process, and in the end it is primarily Cojo's work, in which Keene's talents as a writer are included like those of other contributors. Although the collaboration between Keene and Cojo, through the intermediary of Séverine Magois, was of great benefit to all three participants, it was not through these collaborations that each immediately found the most propitious environment for their work in terms of creativity. It seemed that the catalysing function played by Séverine Magois, which went above and beyond that of a wordsmith, rather than bringing about short-term outcomes, was set on a long-term strength of conviction; she became so much part of the work that she could not go back to life in an ivory tower full of dictionaries.

Cojo thought of Keene as a 'poet', consciously or unconsciously going against other visions of the playwright whose work 'precedes' production. Rather than the usual theatre scripts they produced annotated librettos. In place of the semi-divine Author with a capital A, we have a poet whose 'ode' or 'ballad' is incorporated into the artist's score alongside a myriad of other themes to create a polyphonic composition. Séverine Magois, as Keene's discoverer, is an equally important part of this, participating to a certain extent in the authorship. As a playwright, but also a practitioner and theatre expert, Keene could share his talents without feeling that they were being diminished. On the contrary, he could make the most of such opportunities, fully recognising himself as a poet perhaps more readily than as a playwright or dramaturge.

I think a play is like a poem in as much as poetry is language under pressure, a kind of compressed language, because there's no room for anything superfluous. Language is the most important element. In the theatre, of course, it's the same: language for theatre is written to be heard, and is heard only once. You can't go back and listen again. You can come back and watch the performance again, but it'll never be the same performance. So the words have to be able to transmit their meaning, their emotion and their intention right there, in the moment. Language has to be immediate.

And poetry is, at its origin, a spoken art form—to be recited rather than written.¹⁷

Translating after Keene

Secondary school teachers, still stuck in the elevated 'classical illusion' of the author were not accustomed to a deconsecrated notion of literary creation. However, this didn't bother Keene at all, quite the contrary. The inherent orality of theatre is itself part of its ephemerality.

I love theatre because for me it is the most human of art forms, because people come together in a particular place, at a given moment, to see other people do something that they will only ever do once—even if they repeat it over and over again, it's never the same. I love the idea of its ephemerality. It's like life. It has a beginning and an ending.¹⁸

¹⁷ 'Daniel Keene, La liberté de l'étranger' by Chantal Boiron. Interview with Daniel Keene and Séverine Magois, in *UBU* n° 20/21 (May 2001). Translated by Séverine Magois.

Je pense qu'une pièce est comme un poème dans la mesure où un poème c'est du langage sous pression, comme une langue pressurisée, parce que vous ne pouvez pas écrire de mots superflus. Le langage est ce qui importe. Au théâtre, bien sûr, c'est pareil : la langue que vous écrivez doit être entendue et ne peut être entendue qu'une fois. Vous ne pouvez pas revenir en arrière. Vous pouvez revenir voir le spectacle mais ce ne sera pas le même spectacle. Donc les mots doivent être en mesure de charrier leur sens, leur émotion et leur intention sur-le-champ, immédiatement. La langue doit être immédiate. Et la poésie est à l'origine un art oral – quelque chose qui est proféré et non écrit.

¹⁸ See footnote 17.

J'aime le théâtre parce que pour moi c'est le plus humain des arts, parce que des gens se rassemblent en un lieu, à un moment donné, pour voir d'autres gens faire des choses qu'ils ne vont faire qu'une fois—ils ont beau les répéter, ce ne sera jamais pareil. J'aime l'idée que c'est éphémère. C'est comme la vie. Ça commence et ça se termine.

Through his work, and given Magois's involvement, Keene found himself increasingly writing 'directly' for a French audience, since these were the only commissions he was receiving and his own country was neglecting him. This form of linguistic exile didn't infringe on his freedom. He invested himself in the milieu in which he was living, far from any deification of his status and he simply adapted to a situation in which his work had a greater audience. The close working relationship established with his translator meant he could confidently pursue this course.

Awareness that his writing was either destined for translation or disappearance was, paradoxically, that which brought about a kind of universal quality to his work (one would be hard pressed to criticise Keene's writing as 'too Australian') and, as posterity will confirm, a timeless quality too. Keene is spared the complex of the deified writer. Coming from a young country, working in theatre, unmarked by the Aristotelian tyranny of genre¹⁹, he is aware of and asserts the freedom of a work that is anchored in its time and its space. Not that his plays are set in a specific time or place—*Terminus*, for example, takes place 'in the present day', 'on the outskirts of a big city'—but rather are situated in time through their themes and style, without punctuation and alternating between prosaic and poetic language. Keene's plays are conscious of contemporary currents and the part played by other art forms in writing.

For the last thirty years we have witnessed a process of deconsecration of the literary, which can be understood through an historical framework: the normalising of the book-as-object since the beginning of the so-called consumer society and the relativisation of the cultural figure of the writer, with his entry into what is known as 'showbusiness' society [...]. Literature has thus been annexed as a branch of the leisure industry, whilst still being an ambitious mode of creation and the writer has become a social actor like any other, without ever having stopped participating in public life. It is the end of the French 'cultural exception', which was historically determined and thus necessarily transitory; the most surprising aspect is that it should have lasted for four centuries.²⁰

¹⁹ For further reading, see *Aristote, ou le vampire du théâtre occidental*, Florence Dupont. Éd. Flammarion, Paris 2007, coll. Libelles.

²⁰ *L'écrivain dans la cité*, introduction by Bruno Blanckeman (Université de Rennes II), 'L'écrivain dans la cité, du rang d'honneur au rang d'infamie ? Petit récapitulatif d'une relation complexe', Dossier de la SGDL, Paris, 2008 (original text bottom of next page).

The cinematographic quality of Keene's writing has already been evoked. It is an artistic quality that he and Cojo share, with both artists exploiting the full range of mechanisms available to the contemporary creator, and willing to 'make theatre from anything', to borrow Vitez's expression. It is through this that he has forged his identity and made his mark as a significant artist.

By returning to work with Keene again and again, Cojo and Laffargue revealed, first and foremost, an artistic preference and demonstrated their complete trust in the 'poet', as Cojo designated him. Being commissioned for writing is the ultimate sign of the 'climate of confidence' that the Australian playwright now enjoys. For the mediators of his work, those directors who adopted his plays from the outset, commissioning his plays demonstrates their continuing trust: working with Keene is to underscore and reiterate this trust to the whole range of artists involved, and in doing so, to advocate and champion his work. It also further solidifies the association of their names with that of the playwright. Working on another collaboration with Keene after an initial successful experience is not just about a symbolic or artistic association, but now also offers material benefit, because financial backers soon followed.



Interest in Keene in France naturally spread abroad, and once again Séverine Magois's role was pivotal. This is all the more surprising given that Keene's language is not an uncommon one.

Indeed, it would be easier to understand if the 'intermediary' of an uncommon language towards an international language had a strong influence on whether a work becomes widely known, because its success

continuation of footnote 20:

On assiste depuis une trentaine d'années à un phénomène de désacralisation du littéraire qui s'explique par des raisons d'ordre historique : la banalisation de l'objet-livre depuis l'entrée dans une société dite de consommation, la relativisation de la figure culturelle de l'écrivain avec l'entrée dans une société dite du spectacle. [...] La littérature est aussi devenue une branche annexe de l'industrie des loisirs, mais sans cesser d'être pour autant un mode ambitieux de création, l'écrivain est devenu un acteur social parmi d'autres, sans cesser pour autant de participer à la vie publique : fin d'une certaine exception française en la matière, historiquement déterminée et donc nécessairement transitoire, le plus étonnant étant qu'elle ait duré quatre siècles.

would depend on it being taken outside the boundaries of a small country or of a relatively little spoken language. There are many examples of this. One could imagine, in contrast, that the accessibility of English would lessen the importance of Séverine Magois's role, at least once Keene had become well known and established. However, this did not turn out to be the case at all. The dynamic between institutional roles and constructive action, which was the real spur in terms of getting a work well known, remained highly valuable for Keene, whose works, in spite of their success, still hadn't been performed in England and were struggling to generate interest in Australia. Beyond questions of language, the job of promoting a work cannot be taken on by the author himself. Being both judge and jury, he wouldn't be able to support and 'sell' his own work with the same credibility and conviction as a third party.

In this case, what influence could Séverine Magois have on Keene's work in an English-speaking country? Overcoming resistance to Keene's works in the anglophone world was a real test of her influence. Following his success and because he lived so far away, Magois was regularly invited to performances of his work or other events, to talk about him and their collaboration, all with his consent of course. She became the 'authorised representative', even the 'ambassador' for Keene and his work in France. And this role extended internationally to non-anglophone countries. However, we are still waiting for the day when a serious director decides to take Keene to the UK.

Since his works have become well-known in France, some other European countries have started to take an interest in his work. Seven of his plays have so far been translated into German by Paul Bäcker (performance of *Half & Half* in December 2005 at the Staatstheater in Mayence and three short plays in March 2007 at the Sozietätstheater in Dresden). In April 2007, *Scissors, Paper, Rock* was staged at the Almada Teatro in Lisbon. *To Whom it May Concern* was performed in January 2008 at the Teatre Tantarantana in Barcelona. *Silent Partner* was translated into Japanese and performed in Tokyo in March 2003.²¹

This is not to overstate the role played by Séverine Magois. Keene has also been performed in China, Poland and the United States. But even without direct intervention on her part, it is quite clear that his success in France,

²¹ Notes reproduced in 2009 by Séverine Magois at the interview published in the review *UBU* n° 20/21 May, 2001 (original text bottom of next page).

for which she is largely responsible, contributed once again to establishing a climate of confidence overseas. The range of Magois' work shows just how important the influence of an individual can be in the recognition of a writer's work, even if it subsequently relies on the framework of an institution for its development. When we begin to examine the boundaries of creative production, we can identify a characteristic peculiar to the performing arts when compared with other art forms. It is a requirement, as with any artistic endeavour, for the artist to produce something distinctive and highly personal if they are to make a place for themselves in a highly competitive field. But the fate of a work depends equally on the investment of a whole range of other players. The romantic myth of the inspired 'great work' is shattered in the light of reality, but this allows greater opportunity for living artists to find their due place in the world in which they belong, simply, as human beings—artists as part of life.

As for Séverine Magois, now an established first-rate translator, it is time for her to emerge from Keene's shadow, to turn to other emerging and less well-known authors, to champion them and to make her own career independently of her Pygmalion—or her Galatea—since it is hard to say now who is in which role. And this is exactly what she is doing: writer Mike Kenny, for example, is one grateful beneficiary.

continuation of footnote 21:

Depuis que ses textes sont diffusés en France, certains pays européens commencent à s'intéresser à son travail. Sept de ses pièces sont désormais traduites en allemand par Paul Bäcker (création de Half & Half en décembre 2005 au Staatstheater de Mayence et de 3 pièces courtes en mars 2007 au Sozietätstheater de Dresde). En avril 2007, Ciseaux, papier, caillou est créée à l'Almada Teatro de Lisbonne. Avis aux intéressés a été créée en janvier 2008 au Teatre Tantarantana de Barcelone. Silent Partner avait pour sa part été traduite en japonais et créée à Tokyo en mars 2003.

Editors' Note

Florent Viguié teaches literature and theatre studies and is coordinator of events at the *Action Culturelle de l'Inspection Académique* for the department of the Gironde. From the outset of his career, he has been a keen supporter of partnership between artists and teachers, to foster a greater presence of artists in schools as well as that of young people in performing arts venues. He is a member of the administrative council of ANRAT (*Association Nationale de Recherche et d'Action Théâtrale*) in Paris and regional France. His experience working with young people led him to his interest in contemporary theatre. He supports a reform of theatre studies pedagogy, through a reduction of the central place accorded to classic texts and greater emphasis on contemporary writing, physical theatre and drama games as well as close reading. Several of his plays for young people have been performed. Florent Viguié is a member of SACD (*Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques*). He is currently working in the field of Comparative Literature, specialising in *Les frontières de la création théâtrale* (Bordeaux 3).

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