**Lost and Gained In Translation**

The cover of my Chinglish playbill is decorated with a series of imperfect translations crowding the page. This is particularly appropriate for a play that takes a humorous yet profound look at the many issues involved in communication across different languages. As I laughed at the words and supertitles in David Henry Hwang's insightful play, I began to think about the tricky nature of translation. We spend a great deal of time around texts that are the product of translation, the Bible being the most obvious example, but what is changed when we exchange one word for another, one language for another, one cultural setting for another?   
  
Chinglish is certainly not the first play to tackle such a subject. Irish playwright Brian Friel's play Translations deals with language and love in a similar fashion, though without comic relief. It centers on a British soldier who falls in love with an Irish girl; he has come to rename the roads and cities, to put them in English, and he does not speak Irish. We hear both characters in English, yet we know they are speaking two different languages. This play has a more utopian position, in that it suggests that two people speaking different languages can say and feel exactly the same things.  
  
This romantic concept finds its opposite in Julia Cho's The Language Archive, produced by Roundabout last year. Here, language is totally separate from communication, as the character who spends his time studying and preserving dead languages cannot express himself or connect to anyone. Esperanto, "the universal language," makes an appearance here, but it becomes another overarching symbol of the difference between language and communication. The universal language doesn't help much if no one else speaks it.   
  
Why are these plays, and so many others, so interested in this idea of translation as a metaphor for communication? In our increasingly global world, translation can be as simple as running some words through Google Translate, yet that never provides a "perfect" answer. Translation is complex because language can have so many different intentions. This is why translating is as much an art as it is a science, and also why we sometimes have to take these translations with a grain of salt.   
  
This is often a discussion in the theatre, a point proven recently through the discussions about the Classic Stage Company's very modern translations of Three Sisters. There is, of course, no one translation that will ever satisfy everyone. But does this mean we should quit trying to translate such material altogether? Of course not! We are not really seeing the same play as the Russian audience Chekhov was writing for, but are we ever really seeing the same play as any other person? We are all individuals, with our own backgrounds, biases, and tastes, which means that we are all always translating, no matter what language is being spoken.  
  
This is what I thought as I watched the action and the supertitles in Chinglish. I really enjoy hearing the intonations of different foreign languages when spoken by trained voices, and I quickly became accustomed to the supertitles, which are a very useful device. They are also a source of ironic comedy throughout the piece. The irony stems from the fact that we are often laughing at translations of incorrect translations, a series of removals that returns us to the question of communication versus language. Just like the characters in Chinglish, we all try to communicate with each other, even when it is "sleepy" (one character's substitution for "tiring"), and just like them we achieve something even when we fail. Just like Daniel Cavanaugh in Chinglish, I like the missteps, mistranslations, and miscommunications, because there is some other form of truth in them too. It is this kind of unintentional genius that this play, and others like it, work to illuminate.