

# *Beyond the Accent Limitations: Staging Marie Jones's Stones in His Pockets to a Brazilian Audience*

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**Abstract:** *At first sight one might suppose that it would be almost impossible to stage Marie Jones's Stones in His Pockets successfully in any other language but English. As the primary idea of the play is to exploit English accents in order to delineate the characters' social roles as well as their national conflicts, any attempt to reproduce a similar situation in Brazil, a country of continental proportions and therefore with a myriad of accents, would have led us to a biased and prejudiced approach: the Brazilian political and social reality is, in many aspects, radically distinct from the one depicted by the Irish playwright. Nevertheless, when the accent limitations were given less emphasis and the translator focused on the structure of the play, entirely based on American film clichés, it was possible to establish a great number of similarities between a Brazilian and an Irish environment. The Hollywood industry model as a prototype to discuss colonizing processes, an imposed hegemony and hierarchical systems of the power turned out to be very revealing and meaningful to a contemporary Brazilian audience. The main purpose of this communication is to present the options taken in the process of translation and discuss the subsequent solutions for the stage production in Brazil and how they reverberated not only in conceptual terms, but also in the reception of the play.*

One of the first obstacles that can halt anyone interested in translating or staging Marie Jones's play *Stones in His Pockets* in Portuguese or in a non-English spoken country is put at the very beginning of the script when the list of characters is given. All of them are not described according to particularities of their features, but according to the way they are supposed to speak. And the fact that they are almost all part of the crew in a Hollywood film production in progress in "a scenic spot near a small village in Co. Kerry", seems to reveal that the intention of the playwright is to establish tight connections between the characters' accents and their social roles inside the structure of an American production. Thus, the two protagonists, Charlie and Jake, are Irish and play the extras in

the film as well as many of their partners, local people of different ages. The other people involved in the production are not, or wished were not from Ireland. The leading female part, for instance, not by any chance the daughter of a landowner, is performed by a frivolous American star; the director is an Englishman; the actress' security man is Scottish and there is even a crew member who is supposed to have a Cockney accent. All the extras are ordered to act as if they were an anonymous mass of dispossessed Irish people and are said to keep quiet and simply do what they are told. They are expected to behave in accordance to an imposed, strongly and emblematic hierarchy that places at the top those who speak with a British or an American accent, and at the bottom those with an Irish lilt.

When these elements are considered, it would seem virtually impossible to translate such a play into Portuguese or any other language, let alone perform it in any other accent but the English ones at the risk of getting a completely different result from that originally suggested by the playwright. And considering the play in performance the problem might turn out to be of impossible solution. The American star, for instance, struggles throughout the play to sound like an Irish peasant, and the first assistant of direction who having been born Irish, does all his best to sound like British, if a line uttered by one of the extras is to be given any credit. He says: 'you would think he wasn't Irish'. The answer given is that 'he just wishes he wasn't'. The imbroglio is aggravated even more when one has to take into account that all the characters are to be performed by only two actors that, besides the parts of the protagonists, are supposed to give voice to the rest of the crew.

Contrary to all the evidences, though, if one still considers the possibility of translating such a play into Portuguese without being quite unfaithful to the original script, if still wants to evaluate the chances of putting it on a Brazilian stage, the "accent problem" presented in the original is the first and maybe the most important point to tackle. At first sight it would not seem absurd to surrender to the temptation of trying to reproduce the plot imagined by Jones inside an entirely Brazilian setting. Due to its continental proportions it is just understandable that people use different ways of speaking in the various regions of the country and the Brazilian population in general is able to recognize such differences. Of course that some linguistic particularities have become more popular than others, in part because of the number of people who use a certain way of speaking, in part because the mass media, especially television, elected a couple of patterns as standard speaking models. Although most people do not use and do not even like these models, as a rule they are able to recognize them at once as being of such and such region because they are more often exposed to them. But it would be very hard, not to say impossible, to establish the same kind of relations suggested by Jones in her play taking for granted that to achieve a similar effect the characters should speak according to the variety of Brazilian modes. The result would be inevitably a superficial and biased version of the original since the extras would have to be associated to a particular regional mode of speaking and so would the rest of the crew. A consequent

element of prejudice implicit in the choices of which parts of the country the extras are from, which parts the director, his assistants and the leading roles of the film come from would contribute to put a Portuguese version to the script even farther from its English source.

The key for a solution then, should be looked for somewhere else, in unexpected places, in the historical or political field, for instance. Of course that in almost everything, the historical, social and political reality of Brazil is rather distinct from the Irish one. However, a more closely reading of the play can be very revealing in the sense that there is a much stronger line supporting the narrative than that one that just reinforces through the use of different accents, the primary idea of the play. This idea is drawn in a well-defined line able to link both Irish and Brazilian realities, because the play is not primarily about different modes of speaking, but about the power relations and negotiations among individuals and Nations within a contemporary capitalist and industrialized society. The place of accents inside such a scenario is secondary and can be very helpful to generate humour in the discussion of such a serious issue, but definitely they are not the central theme of the play. Thus, any attempt to recreate successfully *Stones in his Pockets* inside a Brazilian setting should not consider the regional linguistic variations as a real possibility, under the risk of not only reducing the scope of the original version but also its dramatic potentialities.

An attentive reading can reveal more evidences in favour of the argument that the different English accents to be used in the play are of second importance when a translation is concerned. Looking back at the list of characters in the very first page of the script and matching it with the additional information about characters' origins and the lines they actually exchange throughout the narrative, it is possible to realize that for most of time the English used is a standard one. Little effort is made to reproduce accurately the accents the actors are supposed to adopt on the stage. Apart from one expression here and there and a particular way of pronouncing a word or phrase with an Irish lilt, there are no strict indications whatsoever to an exact mode of speaking. The stage directions indicates that the action takes place in a small village in Co. Kerry; so, presumably the locals portrayed in the play are expected to adopt the linguistic mode used by the actual dwellers or something close to it. As for the foreigners it is impossible to say whether they come from Northern England or Southern Scotland or a lost place in the middle of the United States. Whatever the actors' choices might be, instructed or not by their dialect coaches, they will be always appropriated because the playwright is playing with linguistic clichés and the only thing that really matters for the narrative purpose is the fact that they are foreigners. Naturally, the fact that these foreigners being British and in a more positive key Americans, might allow an Irish audience to understand the play in a particular way, especially in regard to past and present colonizing processes of Ireland. Nevertheless, up to a certain extent, an American foreigner as a contemporary devastating colonizer is very meaningful to a Brazilian audience too, even when an actual use of a foreign accent is ignored.

Another very important evidence to be pointed out that contributes to put the “accent problem” in a secondary position is the fact that since there are only the two protagonists, that in their turn play all the other characters, it is just natural that all these latter ones ought to be filtered by the formers’ points of view. Besides, it always remains the question whether or not an American audience is able, for instance, to recognize a Scottish accent at once, or whether the options taken by two Australian actors performing the Irish extras would sound authentic.

But presuming that a great effort is made towards the achievement of an accurate accent, it will make little or no difference to the primary ideas present in the play after all. Of course that these accents used by actors who speak English can confer very colorful tones to a particular production in an English spoken country, and it might be even challenge to any hard-working performer, but it suffices the mere mentioning of characters’ origins to reach the very core of the playwright’s intentions with her script. As it has already been suggested, what is at issue in *Stones in his Pockets* is to put into question the position occupied by extras inside a film structure, in this case, emblematically, a Hollywood production. Inside such a structure it is discussed what roles extras are supposed to perform in a given and imposed hierarchy, dictated by American arbitrary and unilateral interests. There might have chances for the extras (and other members of the crew as well) to ascend in their careers, maybe, provided that they accept the American hegemony, the interference of “foreign” values to shape not only the way they have to live and work but also the way they have to interpret their own culture. In this sense the Irish extras could easily be compared with and replaced by Brazilian ones or by any others from any nationality with less power of bargain and that, therefore, have to accept the intervention of alien forces, almost always very unwelcomed. And what accent the extras might adopt to express themselves is completely irrelevant in this equation.

Curiously, the presence of a foreign crew in the Jones’s script determining the social roles of the natives in the film reverberates highly surprisingly within a Brazilian setting. Once one agrees that what is being discussed in the play goes much beyond the accent implications and that there is no need to find equivalent Brazilian regional modes of speaking to confer relevance and interest to the narrative, the foreign intermission, inside a Brazilian context, can assume not the form of actual foreigners, but of “local foreigners”. They are the result of the huge gap created by different educational and cultural backgrounds to which speakers of various modes belong, independently of what region they are from.

Up to a certain extend the American values in general are widely disseminated in the four corners of the Globe and Brazil, like many other Nations around the world, has been redefining its own cultural, social and political identity – consciously or unconsciously accepted by the population, with or without criticism – mixing local aspects with some models that helped to define the American lifestyle. And among them, the Hollywood industry in particular has lured people’s imagination for many

decades and still is a major force not only in solidifying an image of sometimes beloved and patriotic, sometimes cruel America, but also in supplying the world with formal models, not to say rules, of making films. These rules in varied degrees have been followed diligently especially by those who produce for the Brazilian television in such an extent that in some programs, such as the very well known and popular soap operas, it is relatively easy to detect outstanding vestiges of the Hollywood model, especially in regard to the organization of enterprises, based on clearly defined hierarchy, and the fabrication of idols.

Thus, it is neither surprising nor unfamiliar that the situation imagined by Jones in her play has got a vibrant echo in the minds of a Brazilian audience, since it is an usual procedure a whole television crew flying from urban areas and landing in a far-off village to shoot. Of course, local people that might eventually play the parts of extras never play the protagonists. And even when the leading performers try to reproduce the local way of speaking, what becomes clear at once to every spectator is that they do not sound natural and that they are “foreigners” in their own country because they do not belong to that place, they do not look like anyone who lives there. But any dislocation of the original plot towards a recreation of it into an entirely Brazilian setting is totally unnecessary as well as redundant. The ideas presented in the original script in the way it is structured, strongly rooted on the characters’ interrelations can be automatically get across by a Brazilian audience by the simple fact that, for instance, the “movie star” is completely inappropriate for the role and does not know how to play her part properly; the director and the assistants do not hesitate in adopting a superior posture and mistreat the extras and disrespect their habits because they consider themselves somehow “foreigners” too, special individuals separated from the rest by their backgrounds and the urban environment from where they came. As a result, and it might sound paradoxical, the avoidance of using any Portuguese linguistic variations is what gives to the Brazilian version of the play a pleasant sensation that it is very close and faithful to its original source.

For most part the task of transposing the original script to a Brazilian context and the possibility of ignoring the use of accents is facilitated by the cinematic references given by the playwright and their immediate recognition not only by Brazilians but, potentially, also by practically most of the citizens around the world. Jones structures her narrative making references to some clichés of old western melodramas produced by Hollywood industry in its early years. The film that is being shot in the small Irish village of Co. Kerry is a direct and explicit reference to John Ford’s classic *The Quiet Man* dated of 1952 and starred by John Wayne. Actually Ford had been considering to make this film since the thirties, but ‘had been continually thwarted by Hollywood’s doubts about a romantic comedy set in a far-off Ireland’. Eventually the film was produced and peculiar details about the extensive location-shooting period, as it can attest in the program notes of the 1999 London production of the play, seem to reverberate on some situations imagined by Jones in her own work. A couple of examples are fair enough to

give a partial idea of this creative process. In Ford's film there is a passage known as the fight for the Inisfree championship that began at a farm but climaxed at the village pub. There is a long pub scene imagined by Jones in her play that evolves from an exhausting shooting day on the fields in which is implicit a parody of a championship, considering that all men inside the bar 'would get a look in', 'would give [the star] one'; what means that all of them would fight to be the champion on her bed. Another scene of Ford's film that finds its echo in the Jones's play is the "horse-race at Tully Strand", shot in Connemara. The moment in which the extras have to follow the movements of imaginary horses at the end of the first act is perhaps the most hilarious of the play and pays tribute to Ford's film in the form of another parody.

But maybe the most important idea presented in *The Quiet Man* that permeates the plot of the play and goes beyond to establish its connections with the Brazilian production of *Stones in his Pockets* is the image of a desired and idealized situation in contrast with an immediate reality. One of Ford's producers' comments about a particular location that was eventually inserted in the film is very revealing in this sense and provides rich material for considerations. He describes a little cottage as being beautiful, 'with a stream in front and with stepping stones across. One would think that some set designer just dreamed it as it is'. To contrast such an idyllic image it is said in the notes of the program for the 1999 production of the play that the owners of the property 'made so much money from the film that they built a new house alongside and let the cottage fall into ruin'. The film inside the play is about giving back peacefully the land to the Irish peasants since the English landowner's daughter got married to one of them. The wedding is to represent the definite union between the two Nations. Meanwhile the reality emerges back when the extras are informed that a teenage boy committed suicide and the locals will not be allowed to go to the funeral because the final scene of the film, a happy end, is supposed to be shot at the same day.

Now, an intriguing question to be posed at this point is why a play written in 1999 uses as a model a western melodrama produced in the 50's instead of more modern trends such as adventure or science fiction films or any other. The answer seems to be that the playwright is distancing herself to discuss a colonizing process whose methods are to be reconsidered. It has already become a common place and even a cliché inside the Irish history and literature the strenuous Calvary that led so many people to shed blood and lose their lives for the land's sake. From 1999 onwards, an old American western melodrama is just a convenient prototype to make a parody of the past history and show how it contrasts with more contemporary processes of colonizing people that are much more based on 'pretending not to be' cultural and economical impositions. And Hollywood industry as a paradigm of the aspirations of contemporary men – fame, fortune, power and beauty among other consuming products – in contrast with the frustrations brought by the real daily life constitutes perhaps the strongest link that puts together the original script and a Brazilian version for it.

As a conclusion, it can be said then, that these sort of ideas are likely to be understood by any contemporary individual, Irish, English or Brazilian and, therefore, there is no need of accents to illustrate that it is necessary, and even expected, that an attempt be made towards the possibility of finding a local model as an alternative to “foreign”, imposed prototypes, if what men of today is in search is truly to live inside an “authentic” globalised and democratic world. In order to achieve this state of affairs, the individuals first, like Charlie and Jake in the play, and potentially the Nations afterwards have to be more and more conscious and alert about their roles in this game of negotiating the power relations and its possible consequences in terms of future opportunities inside a capitalist and industrialized world.

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