

## Intersensory Decadence: Three Colourful Estonian Versions of *Salomé* and a Vocal Stage Interpretation from 1919

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The article explores the history of theatre translation in Estonia, focusing specifically on the case of Oscar Wilde's one-act symbolist-decadent tragedy *Salomé*. It offers a comparative analysis of three Estonian translations – Aleksander Tassa's manuscript version (1917, likely translated from Russian), Henrik Visnapuu's rendition (1919, probably based on an indirect translation), and Linnar Priimägi's recent translation (2023, from English). Particular attention is given to how decadent symbolism – especially colour and sound – is transmitted through intersemiotic processes from page to stage. The study examines the 1919 premiere at the Estonian Drama Theatre, analysing how visual and auditory codes were transformed in performance and interpreted by contemporary critics.

In *Salomé*, colour and sound function as integral elements of Wilde's decadent aesthetic, operating as complex, multi-layered sensory code systems. However, Decadent discourse frequently subverts conventional symbolism: white may signify both innocence and cruelty; black may suggest death as well as purity; purple and gold evoke majesty alongside moral decay. The language of the play is marked by recurring visual and auditory motifs, generating a synesthetic texture of colour and sound. *Salomé* is described through imagery of whiteness, silver and pallor. In contrast, Jokanaan's colour is black; red transitions in meaning from seduction to bloodshed and guilt. Sound imagery is similarly prominent: voices are depicted as seductive, irritating, or terrifying, while silence functions as a powerful marker of dramatic tension. Wilde's dramaturgy is grounded in rhythmic repetition and ornate similes, producing a ritualistic and incantatory cadence.

The three Estonian translations exhibit notable differences in their handling of key stylistic and symbolic features. Tassa's (1917) version demonstrates a tendency toward literalism, marked by syntactic awkwardness and likely influenced by mediation through Russian. Visnapuu's (1919) translation adopts a more fluid and poetic register but frequently omits repetition and modifies colour terminology, possibly to accommodate the demands of stage performance. Priimägi's 2023 translation adheres more closely to the English source text, maintaining Wilde's rhythmic repetitions and deliberate structural patterning. Across all three translations, there is a consistent tendency to substitute colour terms with near-synonyms. For instance, "black" is variously rendered as "dark" or "pitch-black," while "scarlet" appears inconsistently, thereby weakening the coherence of Wilde's decadent colour symbolism.

The 1919 production at the Estonian Drama Theatre, directed by Paul Pinna with stage and costume design by avant-garde artist Ado Vabbe, emerged as a significant cultural milestone, signalling a transition from theatrical realism to modernist aesthetics in Estonia. Vabbe's design eschewed orientalist exoticism in favour of large, symbolically coded colour fields – black representing Jokanaan's asceticism, red signifying passion, and yellow connoting jealousy. Although material shortages constrained the full execution of Vabbe's scenographic vision, contemporary critics noted a heightened stylistic coherence compared to earlier productions. The casting of dancer Elmerice Parts in the role

## Summary

of *Salomé* foregrounded corporeal expression and movement, despite the limited choreographic directives in Wilde's original text. Critics' reactions varied, with some praising visual symbolism and others finding elements grotesque or inconsistent.

The study highlights the transformative nature of intersemiotic translation from verbal to visual and auditory media. In the 1919 *Salomé*, certain symbolic associations were retained (e.g., colour coding of characters' thematic roles), while other textual elements were altered or omitted. The translation of sound imagery was also a crucial factor: the prophetic disembodied voice of Jokanaan and moments of staged silence were integral to Wilde's symbolism and were recognized by reviewers, though not always in their original decadent sense.

In the broader cultural context, *Salomé* is placed within the reception of decadence in Estonia. Decadent and symbolist aesthetics entered Estonia at the turn of the 20th century via translation, with Wilde's works arriving later than in Western Europe. The *Salomé* myth was popular in Estonian literature, art and dance during the 1910s–1920s, providing a vehicle for exoticism, eroticism and artistic experimentation. Wilde's play, rich in sensory symbolism, proved adaptable to theatrical innovation and remains significant for discussions of intersensory translation in performance.

In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that both linguistic and intersemiotic translation choices shape the reception of Wilde's decadent symbolism in new cultural environments. The three Estonian translations show substantial differences in their fidelity to the source, their handling of repetition and their preservation of colour and sound motifs. The 1919 production's visual and auditory interpretations both reflected and transformed Wilde's sensory codes, illustrating the complex processes involved when literary decadence is adapted from page to stage.

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