

# Just for the Thrill of It!



By *Ángeles Estrada*

**There are a few** professions that have an exhilarating and somewhat addictive quality—professional sports, acting, and politics come to mind. Athletes stay in the game despite their injuries, actors notwithstanding financial insecurity, and politicians regardless of the pandering and dishonesty around them. There are others, I am sure.

I am not just talking about a passionate commitment. Computer nerds get a kick out of lonely hours outsmarting the machine, scientists spend a lifetime researching a microorganism, writers take years working on something no one may read, while doctors and lawyers have been known to risk divorce for their dedication.

You will seldom meet an interpreter who does not love what he or she does. But, dedication aside, my emphasis here is on the intensity of the profession. In that sense, interpreters fall more closely in line with athletes, actors, and politicians.

In interpreting there is a heightened experience for a 30-minute span, and

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then, after a break, you go back for more punishment.

On the surface, it would seem that the common thread between the latter professions is the public attention enjoyed by practitioners. Picture the hard-muscled football player waving to a throng of fans, the actor exulting in the empathy inspired by the character he or she plays, the politician spurred on into making bombastic promises by a cheering crowd. If only we possessed an ideal athletic physique, generated sympathy in the limelight, or could speak for ourselves while on the job! Interpreters have none of this.

Some interpreters may strut into assignments like prima donnas, demanding perfect conditions to per-

form, but this is the nitpicking of one who knows that a chink in the ice will foil any triple lutz. There is always the anticipation of a fall—overcoming the fear of a fall, and surviving the fall smoothly, so all the audience remembers is a fluid performance.

**Interpreters, like actors, have an audience that hangs on their every word. However, we need to hear every “crucial” word to make sense of the whole. We walk into a job fearing the acronyms that will stump us, the dates we may not catch, the proper names we will certainly butcher, the figures—here is a big one!—that we may shrink or expand, because the speaker could not be heard properly, or we were lagging too far behind to write them down.**

It is this “all or nothing experi-

ence”—the difference between producing a nonsensical string of words and well-articulated meaningful speech—that drives and sustains us. Yet, although there is no denying the adrenaline factor, we are not just caught in a cycle of strain and relief.

There are **blissful moments** when **we are one with the speaker**, when he is so clear, well prepared, and eloquent that we can read him like a picture, and similes come easily in the other language; when we are perfectly in tune with the speech, its mood and emphasis, and can reach for seldom used words without any great effort. And other times—just as pleasing—when we are baffled, struggling to make sense of the words, and then something suddenly brings clarity, allowing us to infuse meaning into what we were botching. There are times when things go so well that we would not mind stepping up and sharing the limelight.

Yet, most interpreters do not seek the limelight. Even the most gifted consecutive interpreter finds it more stressful to work at a podium than to interpret simultaneously in a booth, sitting comfortably, notepad at the ready, with space to spread out and peruse printed references. You may see us eloquently waving our hands in an operatic fashion in the penumbra of the booth. However, before reaching for the “frustrated actor” epithet, just check to see if we have our eyes closed, trying to shut out the world in a Vulcan mind-meld with the speaker.

For an interpreter, **being ignored is a rewarding indication of competence**. Some viewers reading subtitles in a foreign film walk away thinking the actors spoke their language. The master of ceremonies at a conference may remember to thank the interpreters when all is done (if there is a good feeling about the meeting and enough mirth to go around). For the most part,

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however, an audience that is used to working with interpreters forgets that we exist, while the unsophisticated user, who has never experienced simultaneous interpreting before, is interested in buying the technology of such a miraculous headset. This “invisibility” is pure affirmation for the interpreter, a sign that all went well.

We are disembodied voices. Yet, there is the elation—and the uneasiness—of knowing that an **event hinges on the interpretation**. We must remain anonymous, while serving as the linchpin that will allow weeks, or even months, of preparation to fall into place and make the event a success.

**We gain admittance behind closed doors, are entrusted with privileged information, and give voice to personalities few people ever meet. In each assignment we are exposed to condensed and current information about the state of affairs in various fields.** We see deals made, new paths chartered, findings revealed.

**Each time** we take the microphone, **we are tested anew**, in real time. This is when résumés do not matter and reputations are made, or ruined, in one fell swoop. We go for the triple lutz and either soar or fall flat—years of training and good work erased by a *faux pas*.

We are egged on by the intensity and the promise of the work: the immediate **gratification** when things go well; the **feeling of being on top of the world**, and getting an insider’s look on each subject, conveying the speaker’s thoughts as if our own and

expressing both sides of an argument. Nonetheless, it is nerve-racking not having sufficient background on a subject and missing key nuances because of a poor frame of reference.

Interpreters get fully wired for 30 minutes and then need some down time so their circuits do not melt. This is not an endurance sport, but a relay race, where you give all you have and are **always on the final sprint**.

**The brain thrives on that kind of rush, and the profession creates, or attracts, unique (do not say neurotic!) personalities well suited to such a roller coaster ride.** Many interpreters work into their 70s with alert minds and good short-term memory. Few other professions can boast the same.

Now, it is time to come down from the clouds. Interpreters have no telepathic connection with presenters. For every time we are tempted to finish the speaker’s sentences, there are a hundred other instances where it is simply a question of stitching one thought after another without fireworks.

**There is always the prepared speech, with unnatural sentence constructions, worked and reworked into a pretzel in the weeks leading up to the event. There is the 20-page presentation, read at 250 words per minute in an effort to jam it into a 10-minute time slot, and with no copy provided to the interpreter. There is the heavily rhetorical with little substance, the extremely content laden, the jokes that lack comic effect in the other language, and the play on words that cannot be conveyed.**

Sometimes the linguistic chal- ➔

lenge is simply making sense of poor diction and strong accents. Conferences are not necessarily on interesting subjects and speakers are not always eloquent or well prepared. We do a lot of grunt work with only a handful of choice assignments per year. It is a job, like any other, and sometimes worse than most.

For many interpreters, it is a chore to travel constantly and live out of a suitcase—our personal lives suffer. The job often entails babysitting foreign guests, and many of us have attended enough receptions to last us two lifetimes. We go to luncheons and do not eat, or go to meetings and have to justify the need to sit close enough to hear and be heard. As freelancers, we live from one assignment to the next, juggling unpredictable schedules and not knowing when future jobs will come, or when the client will pay. We go to filthy jails and lofty courts, are acquainted with the dregs of humanity, and get to see how the system does and does not work. Still, there are bonuses.

We can swear like a sailor, with impunity, whenever a witness does,

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and enjoy the exquisite precision of consecutive court interpreting. At a conference, we can sail through a stream-of-consciousness speech that would drive any translator mad, but yet it is crystal clear when spoken and can be easily and faithfully reproduced without missing a beat, with the same inflection and tone.

Interpreters can give free rein to the occasional multiple personality and be considered, not deranged, but rather brilliant. At the podium and at the witness stand, we role-play. In the booth, we do anything that releases the mind. We doodle, examine any object at hand, twist bits of paper into shapes, and smooth out the folds on the tablecloth while we work.

Actually, there is nothing weird or magical about it. Thoughts flow more easily when they are not rushed. As bilingual (sometimes multilingual) and multicultural people, we carry separate and distinct legacies. Interpreting is the medium that allows both strands to come together and then simultaneously follow their individual paths. Interpreting and, to a different extent, translating have an intrinsic element of fulfillment that is not so much tied to what we do, but who we are.

And, when all the external allure of the profession falls away, we have words. Like translators, we love words. But at the end of the day, there is nothing to edit or review. We turn off the mic and go home.

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## In Memoriam

### César Rouben • 1931–2012

César Rouben died on March 9, 2012, at Baycrest Hospital in Toronto, Canada. An ATA-certified English→ French translator, he had been a member of ATA since 1996.

He was professor emeritus of French at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, where he taught from 1974 to 1997. During his time at McMaster, he served as chair of the French Department. Rouben was also a professor of French and translation at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, from 1964 to 1974. A freelance translator, his specializations included journalism, advertising and public relations, economics and finance, and international development. Rouben received his MA and PhD in French from McGill University.

He was a member of ATA's French, Literary, Medical, and Translation Company Divisions. In addition to ATA, he was a certified member of the Association des traducteurs et interprètes de l' Ontario and the Canadian Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters Council.