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[**The World on Stage: Micro-Plays in Translation**](https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/december-2016-microplays-the-world-on-stage-sarah-maitland)

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One of the unique qualities of theater translation is that the text the translator translates is not really a “text” at all. It is a written invitation to make theater—to occasion a moment of fleeting complicity between an actor on the stage and a spectator in the audience. In the movement from page to stage, the otherness of the playwright’s words—written in another language, in another time, and another place, imbued with dramatic potential and gesturing toward an untouchable, invisible, futurity of performance—are given dramatic substance. Through translation, contemporary performance can inhabit a contiguous border between past and present, arching backward and across this otherness of time, space, and language to make accessible, to audiences speaking a different language and living in a different time and place, the possibility in the past of the presence of something new.

It is this capacity for instruction, for renovation and contemporaneity, that encapsulates microtheater as a genre. “Microtheater,” “café-théàtre,” “short form theater,” “teatro por horas,” “theater in brief”—the mode itself is not new and its historical foundations, over a century in the making, are rich. But its (re)emergence in our cities today, in established theaters, cafés, bars, bookshops, and temporary spaces not previously designated for dramatic performance, is testament to microtheater’s continued offer. Pieces are quick to run, usually fifteen or twenty minutes to an hour, and because they are designed to be portable, with simple-to-no set or prop requirements and pared down casts, they are also quick to stage. In a context of fiscal austerity, where public funding for the arts has been reduced significantly and theater companies must seek alternative routes to performance, microtheater offers the shock of the new at a fraction of the cost of full-scale commercial performance. Companies such as [Microteatro Por Dinero](http://microteatro.es/), sited in a former brothel in the center of Madrid, for example, are making the most of this most flexible of genres, staging fifteen-minute plays in parallel series, seven days a week, for audiences of fifteen, in rooms no larger than a hundred and sixty square feet. This structural flexibility gives rise to diverse programming, sensitive to the changing needs and interests of spectators. It is this ready route to the public, and the immediacy of response to some of the most urgent questions of our time, that gives microtheater its enduring appeal.

In this special issue we present five micro-plays in translation, each selected as much for its unique geographical and historical dimensions as for its potential to bring readers and new spectators to this re-emerging genre. Three of our selections (Number Six, No Direction, and Grandmother’s Little Hut) form part of [an evening of microtheater performance in New York City on December 13, 2016](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/events/the-world-on-stage-readings-from-micro-plays-in-translation), co-sponsored by Words Without Borders and the Center for the Humanities’ Translation Seminar on Public Engagement and Collaborative Research at the Graduate Center, CUNY.

[Number Six, “a micro-comedy” by José Ignacio Valenzuela](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/december-2016-microplays-number-six-jose-ignacio-valenzuela), and [Visitors from on High: A Tragiccomedy in Science Fiction, by Roberto Athayde](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/december-2016-microplays-visitors-from-on-high-roberto-athayde), invite us to suspend our disbelief and enjoy the power of microtheater to craft scenarios with a cinematic edge that transport us outside the mundanity of the day to day toward a place where the extraordinary reigns. Translated from the Spanish by Sofía García Deliz and Edil Ramos Pagán, and edited by Aurora Lauzardo, Number Six is the story of a man caught out in a thunderstorm and a woman, safe and dry in her home not far from where the man’s car has broken down. When the man comes to her door seeking help, the woman faces a singular question: should she let him in? Visitors from on High, translated from the Portuguese by the author Roberto Athayde, presents an encounter with extraterrestrial life. Dr. Antaris and his assistant, Louis, are astronomers with the University of Brazil, chosen by a visitor from Venus, on a ten-year scientific and cultural mission with his mother, to learn the secrets of the universe. Visitors is a raucous journey across space and time that urges us to reflect on questions of language, existence, faith, and free will.

[No Direction, by Miguel Alcantud and Santiago Molero](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/december-2016-microplays-no-direction-miguel-alcantud-santiago-molero), and translated by Sarah Maitland, makes the most of microtheater’s capacity to explore new modes of dramaturgy. The setting is tense, claustrophobic, and confusing by design. A man appears to be locked inside a basement or bunker room. There is a woman, Ana, who insists that he cannot be let out. Although the audience never learns his name, we are pulled inexorably into the mysteries surrounding the man’s evolving story. Alcantud and Molero craft their play in a space of temporal dislocation that requires spectators to collude in the destruction of any narrative structure that has a clear beginning and end.

Two plays situated in a very different historical context are [Grandmother’s Little Hut, by Andrei Platonov](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/december-2016-microplays-grandmothers-little-hut-andrei-platonov-jesse-irwi), and Love Thy Savior, Part Three, by Jerzy Lutowski. Grandmother’s Little Hut, translated from the Russian by Jesse Irwin, is an unfinished play written in 1938. When we first meet Dusya, a young woman who has been orphaned, she has received a cold welcome at her relatives’ house. To her aunt and uncle, she is yet another mouth to feed. But her plucky spirit cannot be quashed, and she befriends the young Mitya, a fellow orphan who tells her of the hut where his grandmother lives. After the death of his mother, she is the only source of love in his life. In this moving play where the adults in charge seem cruel and uncaring, the grandmother’s hut, with its warm lights and gentle willow trees, is their promised land—if only they can get to it.

[Love Thy Savior, Part Three, by Jerzy Lutowski,](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/december-2016-microplays-love-thy-savior-jerzy-lutowski-kevin-windle) is a thoughtful comment on social and moral issues. Written between 1956 and 1964 and published in Poland in 1980 during a temporary relaxation of censorship rules, it is the third of three acts. Each act enjoys a very different geographical, historical, and sociocultural setting and each offers its own invitation to be staged as a separate piece. The setting for Part Three is Inquisition-era Spain, 1493. Rachel is prepared to renounce Judaism, much to the distress of her father, Abraham, so that she can marry Alonso, a Spanish nobleman who is helping her father flee Spain and the Inquisition. But their plan is shattered when Alonso reveals his true feelings about her faith and Rachel must make a terrible choice with profound implications.

Across the theater spectrum, cuts to public funding for the arts means reduced subsidies, more short-term contracts, and fewer paid hours for theater workers. While microtheater is not a new phenomenon, at a time of national budget-deficits, its commitment to a sustainable business model represents not only a potent artistic response to negative economic growth but also an opportunity to embrace the radical creative output that more conservative stages tend to reject. In an age of profound economic and social change, as well as cultural and political entrenchment, this may be microtheater’s most important role of all.