

Grace Banks, "Los Angeles Film Director Frances Stark: "Language is Under Threat," *Forbes*, May 12, 2017

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Frances Stark behind the scenes of The Magic Flute 2017, image courtesy Alexa Karolinski

Los Angeles-based filmmaker [Frances Stark](#)'s *The Magic Flute* is an English translation of Mozart's 1791 opera of the same name presented in a two hour film. "I always wanted to do something with The Magic Flute, something with the translation and the music", Stark said on the day of the film's premier at [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#) in April, "I wanted to provide the libretto for the viewer so you could have access to the lyrical content as you experience the music." Stark won the [Absolut Art Award](#) for the project in 2015, and part of the money from the prize went to towards a children's choir who played the film's score.

Here, Stark talks about her approach to translating an 18th Century opera, being an artist in Los Angeles and the importance of written words over social media imagery overload.

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You did the translation for *The Magic Flute* yourself, how long did that take?

It took a long time. I don't speak German, I have a rudimentary understanding in that I can look at different translations in English and German and compare. My process became dedicated to keeping as close as possible to the spirit of the original one while still being direct and humorous. But I had time as the film took a long while to come together, it was a slow process. Especially with the new musical compositions.

How creative have you been with your translation?

I didn't try and add anything dramatically different but I did try to tease out the meaning that I felt was really critical, so I tried to be as true to the original at the same time emphasizing the things I found interesting about the original version, for example there's a lot of kissing in the original, and that never made it into any of the translations. There are a few moments where it's contemporary sounding but I did try to keep it to the original. Sometimes I had people saying 'cuz' instead of 'because', just playing around like that.

How does *The Magic Flute* fit into the wider context of your film work?

There's a moment in *The Magic Flute* where two characters start dancing in front of a green screen, that's a reference to my film *My Best Thing*, it's a feature length film made from free software and it was about internet sex but also a rumination about connecting with other people, so there are similarities between that film and *The Magic Flute*. My work is primarily text based and about the visual experience of understanding and the rhythmic nature of reading. What I'm trying to show is that reading is a visual experience as well, but we are constantly distracted by images that are irrelevant or fake. We have an appetite to gorge on imagery, and that's not what I'm delivering here, I'm not delivering a platterful of imagery.

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Were you worried people wouldn't engage with the film?

I know it's a challenge for people to potentially engage with a film that is entirely text based, but I can't make art for other people's taste. People's tastes and tolerances are changing. How's a 20th century audience going to react to a 18th century document, I don't know. People like music but people can also be too lazy to read a few words in a row at a certain speed. There are people who are programming our digital experience and I'm interested in that, that's why I choose a child choir, they all speak the language of music so well. Language is under threat and that's why it's so crucial to not cave to people's inability to pay attention.