

Collectivity and Dramaturgy

Dramaturge ... most notoriously plastic word in the theatre dictionary. As a Dramaturge I've written the mission statement, themed seasons, orchestrated audience outreach , done feasibility studies for various production concepts for Shakespeare's plays, filtered new play submissions and written the yes, no, maybe letters for the artistic director, I have worked as a script fixer and (a very different process) worked with playwrights on developing new drafts. At One Yellow Rabbit and Northern Light, I've worked with actors, on our feet, to create structure and script performances through rehearsal; at Theatre Repere I've transcribed and interpreted improvisations that led to me writing the English Language script of "Polygraphe". Often the playwright and/or the theatre merge the job of dramaturge and first production director, so I've staged a lot first productions too.

Because I'm also a playwright and a director, I've also had the chance to work with other dramaturges, and a lot of my insight into the relationships that is dramaturgy have come from them.

Of the script-development dramaturge it is commonly expected :

...1... that the in-rehearsal Dramaturge is ego-flexible, functioning as a ghost or an invisible mediator between playtext & playwright and director without insisting on a personal ownership of the project. (There are differing opinions as to how communications flow best in this 3 way triangular relationship).

... 2... that out of her deep training in dramatic form, theatre and other histories, cultural and communication studies and additional research specific to the project, the dramaturg offers a playwright analysis of where they're at and options about where to go, but never asserts ownership of the work or pushes the playwright into a particular direction.

....3...that the dramaturge is motivated by love and unconditional commitment to the project, has a stimulating symbiotic intellectual/aesthetic connection with the playwright and seeks an empathic mind-bond with the playwright so as to articulate, reflect, serve and further that playwrights' true desires.

Of the in-rehearsal dramaturge, it is commonly expected

...4. ...that the in-rehearsal dramaturge will research so as to create a synaesthetic multidisciplinary environment that roots, frames and supports the core ideas of the play-in-production, and often carries this work into audience outreach and education.

....5... that the in-rehearsal dramaturge engaged as co-creator to work with a director on developing a new play has a stimulating symbiotic intellectual/aesthetic with that director, but follows a careful protocol viz-a-vis communicating with actors designers and other artists, never poaching on the director's territory.

...6...that the in-rehearsal dramaturge serves as a "second ear" and a "third eye" in an artistic editorial capacity, looking for dialogue that doesn't

sing, staging that bores, and work that is extraneous to the production concept.

I have a Masters in drama lit, an addiction to cultural studies and I was doing dramaturgy for a long time before I was aware of any theorizing about procedures. Having said that, even in the early 80's with One Yellow Rabbit, I was aware that there were two fields that would most deeply affect the creative development of production, and in which I must be different if I was to develop a different theatrical thumbprint. I still conceive of Dramaturgy operating in the nexus of these two areas.

The first of these is the most obvious, and it's what dramaturgy is most commonly understood to mean expertise in: that is dramatic structure and convention. Start with unconventional texts that challenge the unities of the TV drama, and apply to them performances strategies that challenge the contiguous logic of the North American Method.

With One Yellow Rabbit and Northern Light Theatre, I worked as a director with actors to structure unconventional text into "vital and surprising performance theatre". The poet playwrights didn't have a theatrical vision for the work and depended on me to provide it. The actors and I all shared Keith Johnstones theatre sports vocabulary, and we also worked with a vocabulary drawn from Grotowski and Barba. Our studies with Richard Fowler, our affiliation with the Off Centre Centre artists run gallery in Calgary and my research into pomo structuralism also contributed to the exercises that shaped our staging. When we started café theatre and outdoor spectacle, we also integrated our own version of Clown, Commedia and Vaudeville approaches.

I'm still adding to that tool bag of effective narrative structures and theatre conventions.

I'm lucky, as a writer, to have worked with dramaturges from diverse backgrounds of musicology, giving me structures from fugue and jazz; visual and plastic arts, giving me structures from formalism and mixed-media and architecture, giving me the language of spatial narrative. Each of these areas has a mind-set, a language, a tradition of practice. I imagine myself as an optician looking through my series of different lenses until I see clearly what it is I am working on.

Neither have any really useful meaning unless they're anchored not just in one context but several.

Collectivity is about groups, and can probably be best understood through the changeable frameworks of situation: the reasons group came together, resources, goals, processes and the developing visceral, emotional and hierarchical group dynamic of the people working together.

Dramaturgy is about drama; it is notoriously invisible. It can probably be best understood through the changeable frameworks of presented action, the circumstances behind its presentation, the resources behind it, the targets and intents of the action, the make up of the group presenting, the pragmatic processes that have created it, the training and aesthetics of the people involved, and their mode(s) of collaboration.

I say "modes" of collaboration because dramaturgy can also vary hugely depending within the same project depending on the phase it is going through. For example, with OYR's *Ilsa Queen of the Nazi Love Camp* I moved over the course of two years from contributing writer to structural script-doctor working with the composer on the scenario / song relationship, to director whose job it was to design the production, motivate the group and glue the thing together so it could open in three weeks. With Theatre Repere's "Polygraphe" I started as a translator of actors' improvisation, developed into a collaborator on the scenario, wrote the script, then eventually dropped off the team because the show continued to evolve as it toured with a third cast.

What makes dramaturgy difficult to talk about is the fact that the group dynamic and the creative work are continually shaping one another. For this reason, I find it easier to talk about dramaturgy I've enjoyed as a playwright, than about dramaturgy I've offered a playwright.

I used to think that it's because I'm a director, and a writer as well as a dramaturge, that I find the boundaries between job descriptions on the creative team can be blurry. Now I've come to think that in the collaborative theatre situation, that is always the case. Some people are frightened by the blurriness. But at different times in the process this blurriness can be both a positive "single-organism-team-brain" thing and a negative "too many voices are clouding my ability to see and hear" thing. In negotiating the twin poles of the experience, sensitivity to and awareness of the different phases of the group dynamic is important. I would say the closer the collaboration, the more essential this sensitivity becomes. It's also useful to expect any project of longevity to shift gears several times during development. In the shift, roles change, artistic emphasis can change, alliances are broken and re-made, and it's rare for a team to develop a production without any hiccups of temporary blindness towards personality, territory, or artistic difference.

As a writer, I have been fortunate to work with some excellent dramaturges from several different backgrounds including dramatic criticism & improvisation, musicology, plastic & visual arts, philosophy of science and, once, computer programming. The most useful things I learned from them, which I have tried to fold back in to my own work are:

Action Structures (What Happens Next-Mamet)
Telling the story in the action not dialogue
Simple dramatic functions for characters

Foregrounding, contrast, visual echoing

Attack in terms of colour, vivacity, word textures (Make the characters sound like who they are)

Spareness : Only necessary action & defined images

Character Journeys, Prop Journeys, Spatial Journeys through the reincorporation and transformation of story elements & items.

Commedia structures (Verbal, Body Slapstick, Fantasy, Acrobatic & Meta Theatrical)

Theatre conventions, genres and styles

Sources of improv : entry points to alpha-wave spontaneous creative expression

Mythic story structures

The power of Archetypes (Jung)

The grip of sex and death (Freud)

Earning Extremities: (Sentiment or Violence or Farce)

The power of understatement (shibumi)

Synaesthetic research (what's the gesture in other forms of expression)

Jazz

Fugue structure (repetition & counterpoint in different voices)

Affective uses of rhythm, chaos and silent stillness

Exploration & development of an idea through a series of contexts

Access paths for audience: passages through different mental spaces to inhabit the story

A dramaturge can function as a researcher, a teacher, an enabler, a story consultant, You name it. If it involves mediating between any combination of performance, performer and public, it's probably dramaturgy.