

Working with a dramaturg; a Directors toolkit

This document is put together to help directors and companies who would like to involve a dramaturg in their production processes for the first time and who are not sure where to start and how to get the best out of the collaboration.

The document is based on the experiences of professional dramaturgs and directors. We hope it will help you enjoy an exciting and inspiring process whilst avoiding some common difficulties inevitable when entering into a new type of working relationship.

Every collaboration is different and nothing can nor should be set in stone.

What follows is an outline of ideas and suggestions of processes for the collaboration of dramaturg and director. We would really enjoy hearing your feedback on how we can improve it for the future.

Introduction

The function and role of the dramaturg in the process

The dramaturgs approaches the performance text and the process differently than the director. He or she looks at the project through the ideas of the director. By looking at the ideas, the material, the space informed by the director's vision we can act as a first audience and a first critic early on. Coming to the process from this angle we can help ensure that the vision of the project is realised; from the big picture to the small gestures and details. You could say that the dramaturg may function as a critical advocate for the drama text or source material as it becomes the performance text. Or that the dramaturg is the advocate for the audience, as the informed spectator. Most of all we are there to be a sounding board for the director through out the process.

The dramaturg's focus is on the support, facilitation and analysis of the directorial or company vision. It should complement the director's relationships with the other practitioners involved in the project. Through sensitive observation, questioning and analysis the dramaturg brings unexpected angles, perspective, and insight to the project taking it into places and possibilities that might otherwise be missed.

Inevitably this role is a very flexible one depending on the requirements of project, why we were engaged and when we join the production. We may join the project when the playtext or venue or touring schedule has been decided. We may be part of the birth of the project, part of the initial idea or spark. The dramaturg could be part of the playtext selection, or be asked to work on the playtext or translation selected. He or she could be part of the programming team or work with the director and writer on developing a new playtext or translation.

Preparation

Sharing your vision

The dramaturg works with your vision.

It is imperative that you the director let the dramaturg into your thinking about why you have chosen this particular play at this particular time and how you interpret the text.

It is the dramaturg's task to ask you probing and critical questions in order to understand your vision. It is not about providing exact answers at this point but rather about opening up the potential and potency of the ideas in preparation for the involvement of the other collaborators. This ongoing exchange is the key to a successful collaboration and continues throughout the project.

If you do not feel comfortable with this, but you want to venture into collaboration with a dramaturg it would be good to raise this early on. Trust is the key to any successful relationship and it takes time to build up, requiring a commitment to communicate on both sides.

Modus Operandi

A mutual agreement by which the dramaturg and director work together might seem very formal but it is the foundation of the collaboration and should reflect the working processes which will ground the project. It is founded in the simple yet complex question:

'What do you as director want of me, the dramaturg; what can I as dramaturg offer you, the director?'

Some kind of protocol is particularly helpful if you are new to the collaboration between a dramaturg and a director or if you are working with someone for the first time. When relationships have been established this increasingly becomes redundant.

-agree how to keep communication regular and open throughout the project

You may wish to have the dramaturg sitting next to you having an 'open line' for continuing input.

You may wish to set aside specific meeting times: for example at the end of each days rehearsal.

You may wish the dramaturg to write notes for passing to you via the 'open line' or to save these for the meetings

You may wish the dramaturg to be present only at certain rehearsals

The dramaturg will have their own working practices and will suggest these from their experience.

Thus it is likely that the communication and working process will be some combination of the above that suit the rehearsal conditions and temperament of the collaboration.

-agree on how the dramaturg is to interact with the others in the project

You may wish all communication to go through you. If so then regular time should be set aside for feedback from the dramaturg to you. Time to give his or her notes to the actor, designer, sm and so on also needs to be planned for.

You may wish the dramaturg to give direct input actively from the floor i.e. give their own notes. In this case it is vital that the dramaturg's relationship to the director and the rehearsal is made clear to the project team from the beginning.

These are probably the two poles of a spectrum of practice and the working collaboration will move or settle along this.

-decide at the beginning how the dramaturg will be credited in the programme and other production material.

A production dramaturg who is involved throughout the rehearsals should be credited as part of the production team whilst a dramaturg who has been engaged in more of an advisory role can be credited elsewhere.

Research

As researcher the dramaturg will be building on the director's stated areas of interest, so it is vital that you make clear the initial research needed. They will suggest other areas to look into and will follow up potential areas of interest to the project. The dramaturg can manage, co-ordinate and present the information dug up by the company as well do their own research.

how will you want this research to be presented (image boards, written or verbal reports, sounds, images, video, site or field visits)?

During the rehearsal process when you and the actors are in the rehearsal room, the dramaturg can follow-up any further ideas, queries and suggestions coming out of the rehearsal process.

Text work

The dramaturg may work closely with the writer on the various drafts of the playtext in new writing or act as an editor during a production of a classical text, a translation or a devising project.

- When working with a living writer it is useful to have 3 way meetings with the writer and dramaturg and continue to keep the dramaturg informed discussions you have with the writer.

A repertory dramaturg may have been involved in choosing the plays for the season (new plays, revivals, selection of translations) and may already have a relationship with the writer. The dramaturg can function as an advocate of the playwright and the dramaturg in rehearsals and facilitate a productive dialogue in the transition from dramaturg to production text

The Rehearsal

It is likely that many of the actors and other company members are new to the dramaturg as well.

-introduce the dramaturg to the whole company and team at the start of rehearsals with an explanation of their role within and how they will contribute.

- clarify early on what the dramaturg will not do e.g. they will not be the assistant director.

In the early developmental stages the dramaturg may be involved at all levels of the emerging performance text; verbal, aural, visual, scenographic, physical and gestural. We will continue to focus on meaning and structures of the playtext whether single authored or devised. We may work with the company on textual issues, workshopping ideas, presenting and collating research. Every dramaturg will bring their own experiences and skills which they will use to analyse the process and to add to and explore the generated knowledge within the company.

As the rehearsal period moves on we will start to focus on the emerging production looking at patterns and rhythms; making observational analysis; taking research further; pushing the boundaries of the possibilities of the project's aims and visions.

You may wish the dramaturg to become a 'third' eye, remaining at one remove from the work by only coming into the rehearsals a few times a week.

- in a devising process the dramaturg may help you in working through your ideas and finding structural elements through your material to prepare for the rehearsal process.

Throughout the process the dramaturg will keep an outside view on the additional material created in the devising process and help evaluate the new material in relation to the overall idea and structure of the project.

The programme: Framing the work

The dramaturg can put together notes, essays and contextual material for the program using much of the material generated during the process, introducing the audiences to the play-performance as well as the process and interpretations explored by the company.

The dramaturg may become involved in the outreach and educational aspects of the production, or in the promotional material. Early liaison with those responsible for these areas is essential

Post – production

The dramaturg's final responsibility in the project may be one of archiving or documenting the production and its material, in consultation with the director, author, or designer. This may be producing such documentation about the making and staging processes, as complementary records to the playtext itself. The dramaturg may be involved in any preparation for publication of such archive or contextual material that accompanies the playtext.

Engaging a dramaturg

The Dramaturgs' Network can assist with finding a dramaturg, we have samples of contracts used by our members and a list of preferable fees. We are also here to advise and talk you through any queries you may have.