

dramaturgs'network

Newsletter 1

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In this the first newsletter from the DRAMATURGS' NETWORK you will find:

News in brief including notice board

A report by David Lane from the Network's inaugural Symposium on the 18th of March.

Ben Payne's talk prepared for the symposium

NEWS IN BRIEF

Get Active In the Network ! Membership & action groups: If you would like to be part of the Dramaturg's Network and help shape it in these early days, we have set up some actions groups which will focus on the following areas in the near future:

- Workshops and gatherings for dramaturgs and other interested in this area
- Outreach and Educational program
- The Newsletter; articles, book reviews, conference reports
- The New Website

If you would like to join any of these groups or just come with suggestions we would love to hear from you. Name of Dramaturg's Network competition: What shall we call our quarterly newsletter? Any ideas write to us! hanna.slattne@dramaturgy.co.uk

Book reviews request: Have you read any books on dramaturgy or general theatre book useful to Dramaturgs? We would love to receive a review from you of not more than 200 words to be published in our next newsletter.

Next event: We are currently planning a day of discussion and practice on the dramaturgs role in devised theatre. If you are interested in partaking please let us know. We will send out a mail when the details are confirmed, however in the meanwhile if you would like to tell us what you would like to get out of such a workshop that will help us put the day together please contact us at hanna.slattne@dramaturgy.co.uk.

The Website: The new website should be up and running in June so please bear with us until then. However it will be at the same address www.dramaturgy.co.uk.

Notice board: context theatre company + the dramaturgs network present a series of new play readings that take on themes of asylum, immigration and displacement Date and venue will be confirmed shortly.

Message from New Writing North "We will be advertising by the end of April for a dramaturg to work with Northern Stage in Newcastle on a venture co-funded by them and New Writing North in partnership" for details contact Claire Malcolm claire.malcolm@virgin.net

REPORT FROM THE SYMPOSIUM ON THE 18th OF MARCH AT THE ALBERY THEATRE

by David Lane

Welcome to the first Dramaturgs Network newsletter. As many of you know, our first symposium was held recently at the Albery Theatre in London, attended by a wide range of professional representatives from theatres and creative organisations from London and beyond. The symposium was intended to be not only a forum for a debate concerning the dramaturg's role in the theatre making process but also a chance for the Network to receive constructive feedback from our future collaborators and members. It was a rare opportunity to gather dramaturgs, academics, directors, writers and literary managers together to share their opinions on dramaturgy in an intellectually stimulating environment.

Despite both our speakers, Ben Payne and Elizabeth Clarke-Melville, being unable to attend through illness and an ever-unreliable public transport system, the afternoon was a resounding success as preconceptions, definitions, and the uncertainty surrounding 'dramaturgy' and the title 'dramaturg' received a focused exploration. The article that follows is both a summary of the comments and ideas raised at the symposium and our response to that feedback, in areas such as definition, the dramaturg in British theatre, a dramaturg's specific skills, the European dramaturg, the need for a grass roots approach to promoting UK dramaturgs, and the future of the Network itself.

Our Name

Some of you who attended the symposium may have already noticed one change to the Network in response to the afternoon's issues - that of our name, 'Dramaturgy Network' which has been replaced in favour of 'Dramaturgs Network'. Reasons for this will be elaborated upon below, but it is primarily to allow us to promote ourselves quite clearly as a Network of and for dramaturgs, echoing the founding aims of the organisation: to promote, support and develop the profession of the dramaturg in the UK.

Definition

Attempting to define in concrete terms the work of the dramaturg will always be problematic within a profession that inherently includes the practice of 'dramaturgy' as part of the creative process. A finished piece of theatre will always be the final product of any number of dramaturgies and dramaturgical practices that serve an artistic realisation, from a writer's second draft to the final correction of a performer's costume; theatre is alive and well as the manifestation of a multitude of dramaturgies, in itself an exponent of successful dramaturgy. So if this is already the case, why the need for a dramaturg?

The ability to refine existing theatre practice could perhaps be one suggestion, but making distinct the existence of dramaturgy from the profession of a dramaturg is made harder still within a theatre culture that has yet to fully accept the role of a dramaturg as essential to the creative process. Part of the Network's aim is to establish a collaborative role between dramaturgs and theatre companies, initiating a dialogue that will allow a stronger element of trust to evolve between the dramaturg and the director, writer or designer. This is the key strength of a collaborative approach; the process within any single theatre company's production should serve to inform their dramaturg's role. But despite the many skills a dramaturg will bring to the creation of theatre, not every company may find them of use. What are the possible reasons for this attitude, and how can a Dramaturg's Network hope to generate interest and demonstrate our value?

British Theatre and the Dramaturg

The suspicion that too often surrounds the dramaturg in the British theatre could be seen to stem from a theatre culture which seems overprotective of its titles, perpetuating a notion of exclusivity where decisions in the process become the premise of established individuals such as director, designer or writer. The relationship between the director and dramaturg has been described in the past with a rather negative vocabulary; directors are nervous about how far dramaturgs 'interfere' with the process, 'undermine' their roles or whose views 'clash' with their interpretation of the drama. Dramaturgs may be perceived as interrogators, but a more appropriate understanding would advocate their diplomatic questioning role, presenting views throughout the process that can challenge those of the director whilst honouring his or her final dramatic objectives.

This is a common misconception, that the dramaturg is out to 'replace' existing creative roles, undermining an established and often highly successful approach to producing good quality drama. This attitude frames the dramaturg as an oppositional force by the subtle implication of a 'them and us' situation, but the dramaturg in rehearsal will operate as a collaborator, or as was suggested at the symposium, a 'reader' of what is realised on stage. The dramaturg is an artistic academic who is free to probe, question, and ultimately assist in manoeuvring all elements of the process towards the required artistic vision through the application of a theoretical perspective; the ability to 'read' and constructively respond to the drama.

Intellectual Ideas

A place for an intellectual approach in the theatre is required to add a vital fourth dimension to the creative process, supporting a contextual approach that is long overdue, where both production research and audience research commences long before a creative team even meets. Therefore, by presenting such findings from the outset, the dramaturg supports the initial creation of the dramatic objectives without substituting anybody's role. Indeed, they have not only formed a fundamental role of their own but more importantly have introduced the concept of translating research practically into the dramatic production. This can endow theatre with a level of immediacy and contemporary relevance unique to the intended audience, a function that theatre must assume to ensure a healthy future. Receiving houses that suffer from a lack of awareness of their theatre's artistic relationship with an audience could benefit enormously from this approach, employing a dramaturg to help create an appropriate context for their artistic output.

It may be argued that presenting research to a production team is the role of the assistant director, and one of which they are perfectly capable, but how early does this process begin? A dramaturg is an architect, providing the foundations for the drama before it is realised as a theatrical presence. They can then negotiate their level of critical involvement with the director and creative team, and as a continuing presence throughout rehearsal fulfil their questioning role to maximum effect with

every element of the production, 'reading' the totality of the process not with an 'objective' eye but an all-encompassing theoretical eye, applying themselves beyond an exclusive relationship with writer or director.

Dramaturgs Abroad

Dramaturgs in continental theatre have a more established position that begins to approach these ideals, largely due to a greater awareness, respect, improved training and different creative methods that obviously find the dramaturg of tremendous benefit. As a Network in the future we aim to not only promote the work of dramaturgs through existing practices in the U.K. - such as the development of writers via a 'literary dramaturgy' - but also raise a consciousness of the importance surrounding undervalued and underused practices beneath the banner of 'rehearsal dramaturgy' or 'floor dramaturgy', again by operating within existing creative practices and (as illustrated above) often substantially in advance of the rehearsal period.

The Network does not want to simply 'import' European ideas of dramaturgy but instead develop a theatre culture where dramaturgs will enhance British theatre practice; continental dramaturgs may display a very effective role but their practices remain specific to a different theatre culture. There will be the need for a period of adjustment, but by raising awareness of the dramaturg at a grass roots level, such as University degree programmes, drama schools, and independently run ventures such as the Young Directors at the Young Vic, we can begin to mould a new level of appreciation and improved training for dramaturgs which can only strengthen the creative infrastructure of theatre in this country.

Beyond New Writing

Current awareness of the dramaturg often begins from an appreciation of their work in developing new writing, as Ben Payne has achieved at Birmingham Rep. Whether a literary manager is a dramaturg or not may depend on their involvement; if they advocate and partake in the nurturing of new writing, they are working in a dramaturgical capacity. More and more frequently literary managers are also wishing to push the boundaries of their role into the rehearsal space, supporting a style of dramaturgy that is at once both 'floor' and 'literary'. It is not for the Network to define in absolute terms what an individual must do to be recognised as a dramaturg, but certainly the merging of these two areas may be of great benefit if we are to develop a culture of the theoretical or 'academic' dramaturg from the existing literary definition. The dramaturg in the devised process can similarly draw on a variety of experiences both literary and practical, and assist in supporting or guiding the development of the drama. When combined with a training that emphasises the importance of research and theoretical elements, one can see how the dramaturg becomes a necessity rather than a luxury.

Grass Roots Approach

In an under-resourced profession that does not currently rely heavily on the dramaturg, it is unsurprising that we are termed as 'luxuries'. The grass roots approach needs to be reflected in an awareness among theatre management, so that provisions can be made where necessary to support the inclusion of a dramaturg. At present the distribution of production funds is unlikely to cover the cost of having a dramaturg on board, and such financial constraints steer the Network towards the provision of freelance opportunities, where theatres have the option to approach dramaturgs on their own terms. Paradoxically, this may involve targeting smaller companies on the fringes of mainstream regional and London theatre, younger and more receptive companies who could benefit greatly from the practical artistic and academic support a dramaturg can offer, but may not be in a position to offer a full contract. Exactly what shape such services take will depend on the feedback we receive from both our future member dramaturgs and all those on the Network mailing list, for it is imperative that we position ourselves as a complementary requirement for the theatre, rather than a luxury.

Future Opportunities

There is a need for a practical approach from the Network to promote dramaturgs that lies beyond simply aligning ourselves with existing theatres and waiting for a response; if the theatre culture does not exist, we need to construct it ourselves. A suitable vehicle for promoting the dramaturg may be a festival of new writing or devised work, where dramaturgs are assigned to individual projects and allow writers or directors to make decisions about how we can fit into their process. Introducing the presence of the dramaturg at an early stage, on an equal footing and allowing that opportunity to occur is the first step in building a greater reliance and appreciation of the dramaturg's role within a development process.

However, progressing beyond a building-based approach may also be preferable, for the Network can provide support and promotion for dramaturgs nation-wide. By having a presence at other professional symposiums, touring workshops or lectures to educational or vocational theatre institutions, marketing ourselves in national arts press and acting as a central body that can join dramaturgs and theatres together, the Network can promote the profession by making dramaturgs a collective success all over the country. Our success will be dependent on the help, encouragement, critical responses and generosity from the institutions and theatre professionals we have contacted, from those who are willing to give us their advice and their time to help realise our goals.

The Future

Drawing up the constitution of the Network is the first of many challenges, for it will be this first constitution that can help to guide us in our choice of services for theatre companies, writers, directors, and primarily member dramaturgs, developing as the organisation grows. Our key aim is to provide internal support between member dramaturgs that will allow us to share a diversity of skills and approaches to all aspects of our practice, giving solidarity to our profession and using the Network to educate one another.

We are hoping to begin the development of our grass-roots approach very soon, launching with lectures and workshops in September, and eagerly anticipate any responses from education programmes or vocational training centres that might be interested in hosting a workshop and joining us as an institutional member.

Our next symposium must be presented in a regional venue, supporting our intention to be recognised as a national Network of dramaturgs, and we would therefore love to hear from theatres or theatre companies in the regions, as well as in London, who wish to play an active part in the development of the Network.

The website, www.dramaturgy.co.uk, is a crucial tool for demonstrating our accessibility both in the U.K. and beyond, but is also currently under development. The site will eventually house member's CVs, a bulletin and notice board, a library of archive scripts, a full copy of our constitution and clear information explaining the services and intentions of the Network.

We are proposing the creation of action groups that will focus on developing all the sections above towards a definite plan of action, and the Network is very eager to hear from anyone who is interested in offering advice and support in these areas. The Dramaturgs Network constitution, education outreach programmes, internal support, writers and directors services, website development and grass-roots approach requires assistance and support to launch into the consciousness of British theatre with a lasting impact, in the long term leading to the recognition of the dramaturg's profession by Equity, and the concretisation of our profession within the U.K. theatre culture. Our first symposium was an opportunity to present these ideas and discuss our role, and through receiving your feedback and support and assimilating it within the Network, we can begin to realise the collaborative approach we have advocated.

David Lane, March 2002

DRAMATURGS NETWORK

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BEN PAYNE's talk prepared for the symposium on the 18th of March

First of all, an apology. I should have been with you in person today. Clare Pamment from the Dramaturgy Network has asked me to say a few things about the network and, I think, about how the dramaturg can be a force for change. I hope these thoughts are of interest to you and helpful to how you think about the network. The first thing I want to say about the network is that it is much needed and long overdue. So three cheers for you for setting it up. Long may it prosper.

You may have discovered that if you tell Europeans that you are a dramaturg they usually know what you are talking about. Edifyingly, they sometimes even have the good grace to look impressed. Tell someone from this country that this is what you are and you are more likely to be greeted with puzzled looks, mild derision or the question "fine, but what's your real job?" Of course, it beats immediately being dragged outside and strung up from the nearest lamp-post but as, any patriot with a shaky grasp of British history will tell you, we don't do things like that in this country anyway ..."

However, I suspect that the ambivalent position of the dramaturg in British theatre is based partly on this mistrust of anything too foreign sounding and an inherent cultural conservatism. It is a conservatism that knows what it likes and likes what it knows, not least in the theatre, and it definitely knows a proper play when it see one. Proper plays are the ones that have, as Neil Bartlett has put it "plenty of ironing in them and absolutely no musical numbers." And we have got on pretty well for anything over 40 or 400 years (depending on where you date the birth of "proper plays" from) without having much use for foreign imports thank you very much, so why should we start needing dramaturgs now? We don't do things like that in this country anyway ..."

So I also suspect that these questions "what is a dramaturg? What is dramaturgy?" are ones that this British network will find itself coming back to a lot. Again I think that this all to the good. They need kicking around a bit. But I think it is worth remembering that the reason that these questions seem current has as much to do with this current lack of recognition as anything else. It's a chicken and egg situation.

Nobody asks "what is a director? What is directing?" after all, do they? So the network can and should ask those questions about dramaturgy and the dramaturg (and yes, why not, those ones about directors and directing too) whilst remembering that it's not rocket science. For a start, rocket science is frightening and potentially dangerous and dramaturgy isn't - though some would have you think it might be.

I also think that it's worth remembering that your Greek derivation of the word dramaturg pinpoints an inherent problem, or shall we say, challenge, in the job. The meaning of the word suggests "maker of the action" which of course is precisely what the word "playwright" implies and, goodness me, isn't that what the modern director is supposed to be doing too? It is pretty evident that in various ways Euripedes, Shakespeare and Moliere were not just playwrights in the modern, "literary" sense of the word but makers of their plays - directors - too. So whilst the link between modern director and modern playwright can be - and sometimes even is - "umbilical", the division between their creative roles might be seen, in some ways, as entirely of our time and entirely arbitrary. And then there are these dramaturgs too. So, if you can imagine the writer and director as a pair of Siamese twins for a moment, the dramaturg must appear like some errant sibling suddenly turning up and claiming "actually, some of those essential organs belong to me ..."

It is hardly surprising then that there could be a lot to fret about your "role" as a dramaturg. But really there are usually more than enough people fretting about their role and wrestling with their's and each other's egos in a theatrical company without adding another one to the mix. So it's good that you have put the emphasis on what a dramaturg can do, rather than what a dramaturg is. The clue is in the title, as helpful game show hosts are wont to say. What I would question is that in your list of what a dramaturg can do to help writers and directors, many of these things, in my opinion, would be seen as mainly helpful to just the theatre or the director. In Europe where the dramaturg's role is accepted I would certainly think that these tasks would be what you would be expected to do. But not so here. Here we mostly have "literary managers" not dramaturgs and their jobs are defined more by their relationships with writers, not directors. They are more likely to be found in theatres and companies that specialise in new writing than regional reps or companies whose policy is more mixed. The role of the literary manager is possibly even more ambiguous than that of the dramaturg. Dave Hare did it for a little while at the Royal Court but couldn't really see the point of it, as did Lord Byron for someone else. Apparently he used to just throw scripts out of the window. Nowadays, the usually more developed nature of their relationships with playwrights entails facing in two directions at once: part of the team that guides the artistic programme of the theatre or company, but also advocating for the interests of a range of different individual playwrights within that programme. The playwright Paul Godfrey has characterised the relationship between theatre and playwright as sometimes resembling a "degraded" version of the parent/child relationship. The child craves the recognition of the parent but resents its authority. The adult delights in what the child brings to that relationship but resents the responsibility of it. And so, the literary manager sometimes finds him or herself in the role of family psychiatrist. Nevertheless, in this country, writers remain the theatre's greatest cultural resource. So the network could consider ways in which it can help playwrights too. Maybe also what the limits of that "help" might be.

In what ways can a literary manager or dramaturg contribute to change? First of all, I think it's very easy for them to contribute to the exact opposite. For the purposes of argument, I have suggested that Europeans tend to understand and appreciate dramaturgs more. This is true, but only partly so. In the aftermath of the revolutions in Eastern Europe that overthrew Communism many dramaturgs were turfed out of theatres. This was because these jobs had been perfect sinecures for Communist Party placements, where their "advisory" capacity was exploited to the full to ensure that only "safe" work made it to the stage. Similarly, you can give yourself an easy life in such a job by insisting on received ideas about the repertoire and/ or "proper plays", and by ignoring changes in the work or your audience. You could approach the job rather like the Artistic Director who is prone to making remarks like "it is apparent that the Welsh are not yet ready for Anton Chekhov", notwithstanding the fact that his company is based in Wales. I doubt you would get much joy out of it though. I think that you would not be even beginning to ask the question that might lead to the solution. So perhaps then you would have already become part of the problem.

Also, the lack of influence can be as corrupting as an excess of it. I'm told that so non-existent was one of the RSC's literary manager's relationships with the directors he was supposed to be working with, that he used to entitle memos from his department "News from Nowhere". Again, it can be quite easy to simply act as a handy set of creative buffers between the Artistic Director and anyone he or she is too busy to talk to, or simply as vaguely human form of script rejection system. Perhaps it goes without saying that to change things you have to be open to change yourself and to maintain and develop the influence to make change happen. But perhaps it goes deeper. Perhaps dramaturgs and literary managers have to be actually expressly about change for their role to have any real meaning at all. When I became one, I asked a friend of mine, who had been one, for his top tip for doing the job. He said simply "Don't become cynical". There is already plenty of cynicism in English theatre, it's clearly alive and well in Wales too, and let's not even start talking about television ... There is plenty of drama that is written, programmed and produced cynically. Hopelessly romantic though it may sound, it's crucial to keep your mind on ART and off the often equally hopelessly messy and cynical business of the PRODUCT and of "getting it on". Are we lovely angels then? No of course not. We're argumentative, opinionated, manipulative, and downright conniving - of course we are - but never cynical, no.

Last month at Birmingham REP, we staged a series of projects under the title of BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES. The aim of this was to give a platform to work that took risks in either form or subject matter, or both, to introduce our audiences to the different processes and ways that new work can be developed, and to enable writers to collaborate across disciplines. The project itself was an experiment too. We have been reasonably successful in building up audiences for new writing at the REP mostly through an emphasis on comedy and non-scary naturalism. This was starting to mix it up a bit. The results, of course, were fantastically unpredictable. Projects that we thought would happily attract an audience did not. Others that might have been perceived as "difficult" or "challenging" drew full houses.

One project in BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES was called A LION OF ALLAH. It had emerged from a discussion that the writer, Amber Lone, and I had started about what it was that was motivating young British Muslim men to fight for their faith. The period from researching this idea within her local community in Birmingham to putting a work-in-progress version of the opening section of the piece in front of an audience was about eight weeks in all. In that time, life began to imitate art when it emerged that two young Asian men from the West Midlands had turned up in Guantanamo Bay apparently having fought for the Taleban. Then the media got wind that the REP was intending to stage something "controversial" ... And, well yes, there were times, I will admit, during this project and others, when the thought struck me that reviving Charley's Aunt would have been a lot simpler and a lot less stressful.

However, watching the audience watching A LION OF ALLAH over two nights I was also struck by the impact that this piece of work was having in its performance. Of course, a certain amount of that impact rested on the piece's topicality but, in a way, that only underlines my point. It is, for instance, received wisdom, that nobody is interested in writing or indeed seeing "issue based theatre" anymore. Maybe this is no longer true. The response to A LION OF ALLAH suggested to me that there was actually a real hunger for work which said difficult and unpalatable things and which provided an alternative to the kind of media coverage that has become so managed, homogenised and sanitised that it is seen as being almost meaningless. So, there - don't accept received wisdom; don't second guess your audience; don't be cynical.

I guess this is why I am strangely drawn to the name "dramaturg" over "literary manager" and not simply because it sounds a bit more posey. Literary suggests something reflective, introverted, aloof, something done on one's own, in the comfort of one's own head rather than in public, with others. Theatre is perhaps only accidentally a "literary" activity. Meanwhile, "dramaturg" with its romantic hint of "maker of the action" seems closer to what it should be. But a word is of no use in dramatic terms at least unless it is doing something. We know the play is never what's on the page, but what happens between the stage and the audience, what it does. We know that when the play stops moving it is dead. By implication the theatre that stops moving is also dead. As dramaturgs perhaps it is less a question of what we are, more a question of what we do. These may seem fatuous or simplistic parallels to make between dramatic action and cultural action. But my only specific experience as a dramaturg is through work at one theatre in Birmingham. On the other hand, I do think that dramaturgs - perhaps more than any other person working in the theatre - have to be defined by, and responsive to, these specific cultural contexts in which they work. You will work in different contexts to this and so your work will be - should be- defined differently.

The Birmingham REP is a building based, regional repertory theatre company based in the centre of a city moving away as fast as it can from its industrial, artisan past; one that is also on course to be the first in Britain with a majority non-white population. It also exists in a world which, according to the literary critic Robert McCrum, entered an entirely unprecedented phase in the early 1980s, when the Tuareg tribe in North Africa delayed its thousands years old annual migration across the Sahara desert to find out who shot JR in Dallas.. What this suggests to me is that

there are actually few hard and fast rules anymore - except perhaps "never underestimate the power of a dramatic climax" . Moreover, it suggests that the work that we deal with is likely to emerge from a greater and more complex range of influences and inspirations than ever before. For a practice like dramaturgy, that can sometimes seem rather hung up on rules and roles, this might seem disconcerting. And so the key perhaps is to ride it, carefully, yes, but joyfully as possible, like a rollercoaster. (Actually, I never used to like rollercoasters but have begun to learn to). And in a theatre, no less a world, shot through with contingency and change, where we "fit in", what our contribution might be, might still seem ambiguous or confusing. Maybe I have just added to the confusion here! I'll conclude with the words of someone else, an American Literary Manager, which I hope might offer some kind of comfort:-

"When you consider that many people still don't know what a theatre is for, their ignorance of dramaturgy is hardly surprising. But this is no cosmic state that we must endure, it's a situation which we can help to change. If part of the problem is semiotic, perhaps part of the solution is as well. As Michael Bigelow Dixon, Literary Manager of the Actor's Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky says:-

"The word "dramaturg" is like the word "fuck".

They'll get used to it

They'll get used to us too."

Ben Payne

Associate Director (Literary)

Birmingham Repertory Theatre