

dramaturgs'network

Newsletter 3

11.03.2003

Welcome to the first newsletter from the dramaturgs'network in 2003.

In this edition of the newsletter you will get an update on our activities followed by 3 articles:

- A reflection on the discussion at the In-yer-face conference in Bristol last year by Hanna Slattne

- The notes from the session of 'alternative dramaturgies' at the Writers Expo last year by the chair John Keefe and some reflections on the discussion that followed.

- A report on Theatre and Beyond's second TABSLABS, a project with the aim to develop new writers in the South East by project dramaturg David Lane.

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Network Update

Collaboration with the Director's Guild

The Dramaturgs' Network has during the autumn established a close relationship with the Directors Guild of Great Britain. We are planning a long term collaboration in which we will present a range of events where we will explore and develop the relationship between the director and dramaturg together. As one of the main aims of the network is to collaborate with others in developing the role of the dramaturg in the UK, we are very excited about this link between the guild and the network.

The launch of the collaboration will take place in April providing an opportunity for the members of the two organisations to meet each other. This event will be followed in the autumn with a seminar as part of the Directors Guild Continuous Development Series on the practical aspects of working with a dramaturg. We hope that this project will result in a more hands on toolkit for the working relationship between dramaturgs and directors.

Outreach Activities

The Young Vic Directors

On the 12th February, the Dramaturgs' Network was invited to hold a talk with the Young Directors at the Young Vic about the collaboration between the dramaturg and the director. John Keefe and Hanna Slattne focused on the practical aspects of working together throughout an entire production process. The emphasis was on good communication and good working processes including setting role boundaries. The response from the young directors was very encouraging and became a full dialogue between the dramaturgs and directors present. We would like to thank Sue Emmas for inviting us and a special thanks to Katalin Trencsényi, a member both of the Young Directors Scheme and of the Network for working so hard to make this happen. We are looking forward to a continued collaboration with the Young Vic.

NSDF

The Dramaturgs' Network has also been invited to take part in the National Student Drama Festival for the first time this year by Nick Stimson, the Artistic Director. He feels that we can offer valuable advice and support to the new talented theatre practitioners taking part. We will also be raising awareness of the existence of the network for those interested in working with dramaturgs, explaining what it means in practical terms and how we can help. It is a good opportunity to offer mentorship to aspiring dramaturgs in the UK, and we hope it will inspire fruitful relationships in the future.

University Outreach and Writers' Outreach

Network dramaturg David Lane will be visiting Exeter University later this month to give a presentation to final year students on the work of the dramaturg and the politics involved in advocating a critical role within the artistic process. There will be an emphasis not only on the role of the dramaturg, but also on possible pathways to establishing a career as a freelance dramaturg fresh from University, and the pragmatics involved in self-promotion and individual networking.

Hammersmith Actors and Writers' Group and Player Playwrights will also both play host to visiting dramaturgs in the next couple of months to discuss their role in relation to new writing and the individual writers' process. It is hoped that these sessions will increase awareness among both amateur and professional writers in the work of the dramaturg.

Future work...

In our first year we have experienced increased interest in our work, gradually establishing a presence and involving ourselves in numerous projects. During our second year we will be developing our Outreach activities to attract more dramaturgs across the UK, therefore increasing our numbers and aiming to attract more collaboration with producing theatres. This will allow us to share information about our pool of dramaturgs, their specialisms and the range of opportunities available to them.

Hanna Slattné

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In-Yer-Face conference

In September 2002 the University of the West of England hosted a conference on British drama in the 1990's, named after Aleks Siertz's book 'In-Yer -Face Theatre' (2001). I only attended the second day of the conference[1] in Bristol, but after studying Abigail Gonda's response to both days in Writernet's newsletter, I have found my observations to be very similar.

The conference delegate kept returning to problems with the category of 'In-ye-face' theatre, a term coined in the 90's to describe a wave of new writing dealing with contemporary society. Writing in what Siertz sees as a post-ideological society this theatre is experiential and emotive, adopting a confrontational and violent style to explore the zeitgeist. Problems arise from Siertz's study as it focuses on only a few of these playwrights and new writing development in the 1990's, to the exclusion and marginalisation of other writing.

This label, absorbed into the new writing parlance, has been to the detriment of the chosen plays in spite of their being dramaturgically different in structure, literary and conceptual merit. They are treated more or less as a coherent group; not so much by Aleks Siertz himself but as a consequence of being labelled under the term 'In-ye-face'. This was illustrated in the chosen papers for the conference, concerning

themselves in particular with Sarah Kane but also with the plays of Mark Ravenhill and Jez Butterworth.

From a dramaturg's point of view - and from that of the network - a key debate at the conference surrounded discussions concerning the direction of new writing in the present theatrical climate. In the plenary session at the end of the conference the playwright David Grieg outlined a vision of a 'rough theatre' inspired by his experiences in Palestine, where theatre exists in the midst of and for a community under attack by bullets and bulldozers. 'Rough as in a rough draft', Grieg explained, in a space far away from 'bullet hole chic' of today's new writing spaces.

This rough theatre, resistant rather than political, is a theatre of liberty far from the smooth theatre machinery of the lottery funded new writing houses with their recognisable styles. It is a theatre responding to a need and working against what Grieg sees as the right-wing theatre's strongest message, a message in which resistance is seen as useless, as psychopathic, and therefore made impotent. Grieg mentioned examples of this in recent new writing.

He believes that theatre is one of the best places for resistance against the management of our imagination by global capitalism, as it is a space that cannot be globalised by the very nature of the space-time-audience-performer relationship. This rough theatre is written, rehearsed and performed fast; it is unfinished, childish, transcendent, cheap, spiritual and unsuccessful. Using Adorno's metaphor of 'a tear in the fabric of meanings' this theatre's task (according to Grieg) is imagining the unimaginable.

I found myself being seduced by Grieg's passion and vision at first; but in Palestine the need which theatre can respond to is very direct and part of an everyday living environment. The need in the UK is less direct, very complex and multi layered. It is quite a task to recognise the need and address it without undermining other needs in society. This is a problem I found with many of the plays under the In Yer Face label and one which many of the speakers at the conference highlighted again and again.

As Gonda points out in her conference report, apart from not having taken into consideration the economical survival of those involved in any rough projects, I feel that this idea of theatre making does not take into consideration the nature of today's audiences, nor the cultural context in which we operate. I find when going to see plays whether in the institutions or on the fringe that the biggest challenge is how to creatively and aesthetically expose the tears in the fabric of today's issues, not only to actually imagine the imaginable but to make its staging sharp, original and challenging. The need as I see it is to take time to think seriously about our society and lifestyle, and in order to do that, a company needs to ask questions of itself and of its time and boundaries.

I am not sure that this can be done if the theatre is written, rehearsed and performed fast. Maybe I misunderstand Grieg's idea of unfinished and childish, but too much theatre which I see today is unfinished, it is limping and hesitating and strands of thoughts fizzle out without conviction. The requirement seems not only to be daring enough to confront the underlying intellectual structures and ideas of our media-oriented, commercialised and, if you like 'post ideological society' but to allow the opportunity for the company to stop, think and feel. To dig a little bit further down into our experiences, to look for the tears in the fabric and have the time to develop those ideas and to stage them. Then maybe we successfully can imagine the unimaginable.

To have a person dedicated to posing questions of the 'theatre project' seems to me an efficient and exciting way of doing this, whether theatre happens in a rough space, or in the 'smooth' machinery of the subsidised theatres. The dramaturg can function in all types of projects as there are many different types of dramaturgs. The sooner there is an acceptance of the young, dynamic and freelancing dramaturg who can function in this way on the fringe and in unfinished, childish, transcendent, cheap, spiritual and unsuccessful theatre project, if you like, the sooner we can build collaborative partnerships with directors and companies which can take theatre into exciting new spaces in our culture and theatre practice.

Another comment on the future of new writing at the conference in Bristol came from Steve Waters who warned of the 'vast enterprise of new writing'[2] wanting to keep plays away from the literary managers and the new writing houses. This is less likely to happen; however, I do believe that the dramaturg is essential in this equation, in the guise of the literary manager who invests more into the production by following it through into rehearsals. That kind of move from literary management through literary dramaturgy to production dramaturgy would need the endorsement of the artistic director, the director and the producer.

The dramaturg as an independent agent working in-between a visiting production and the theatre management as well as in-between the writer and the director on a production would potentially carry another enabling function in the theatre project. The dramaturg would in this position, at a minimum, aim to safeguard the project, the plays's as well as the theatre's artistic integrity and at best push the production as far as possible, creating the sharp, challenging and resistant theatre that excites and changes us.

Hanna Slattne Dramaturg

[1] In-Yer-Face? British Drama in the 1990s at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 6-7th of September 2002

[1] Abigail Gonda, Writernet Newsletter Autumn 2002

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Dramaturgies, the Writer, the Audience; A panel session at Writers Expo, November 2002

I want to come at the many issues and ideas already in the air from a structural perspective; a structural model for, initially, theatre which sets the ground for the dramaturg's role.

theatre; a complex network of autonomous, interactive sign systems which, working on each other, make the performance totality (the *mise-en-scène*) seen and heard by the audience. Notationally this gives a performance text or score.

I would further argue that this structural model defines all art forms which use or involve the actions of drama or performance ie beyond theatre itself.

It is this created text or score (which includes the drama text itself) that I, as performance dramaturg, work with:

as collaborator

as consultant

as the one who 'makers strange'.

By this I mean the one who has regard for the structural model and processes that make this text through question, interrogation, reflection & self reflection, observation & suggestion, and critical support such that whatever stage of 'fixedness' settled on, the performance text does not become static but remains dynamic; open to further resonance's and layers of reading; maintaining the sign systems as an ongoing collaboration.

On this model the crucial issue becomes one of the relationship between the sign systems, primarily for this panel session that between the writer, the drama text and the other signifying systems which put that text into performance.

Thus I am wary of the title, which implies alternative to what?

That is alternatives to the dominant sign system within the spectrum already described- the drama script in the modern European tradition.

- do writers want alternatives?

- how are writers to go beyond the dominant script form of dialogue and psychologism?

- how is the drama script to be rebalanced within the structural model?

- do writers want a rebalancing?

9 November 2002

Afterthoughts (24 November 2002)

Writing this up some time after the session gives me the opportunity to slightly amend the paper as given, and to reflect on the discussion that followed, the issues that arose. As Chair, I am aware of the dominance of the panel in the discussion; clearly I should have pulled it back into the arena of the writer, which I attempted to open up in the closing questions/provocations above. But I think there are other reasons why the session seemed not to take off as intended in these questions.

On reflection the session should have been titled "Alternative Texts"; we seemed to be circling this issue of what the text is/could be without the audience picking up and running with it. The focus on dramaturgy and its role(s) became too dominant. But I also find myself wondering why the audience, predominantly writers, did not rise to the questions being mooted; taking the opportunity to raise ideas and possibilities about the text and what it is.

The pressures to remain within the orthodoxy are immense; the two most disturbing contributions from the floor were those concerning the demands on the writer re the Edinburgh project, and the description of the conservative training approaches given re one London drama conservatory. In both cases the demands for conventional orthodoxy I found both startling and saddening.

But are the writers themselves responsible for the alternative text remaining a minority form, despite its (misleading) profile amongst those who are practitioners of visual-physical-mime theatre? When placed against the quantity of writing for other

media, that for the theatre of all kinds is comparatively small. This came up obliquely with the question of television; the demands of the tv style would seem to be having a distorting effect on writing for stage or live space. Thus are writers happy with the status quo of a writing style which sets the parameters of the career arch and path which mean acceptance and success? All too often 'new writing' seems to mean merely a new piece of work meeting the demands of commissioners, producers or companies rather than new forms of writing or new methods of composition and working as the panel suggested. Hence my question regarding 'alternative texts'?

The opportunity to discuss the role(s) of the dramaturg were invaluable, Felix' description of the role as "assistance in holding the project together, from initiation to conclusion" being especially resonant and one I would absolutely agree with. But again the audience did not pick up on these openings and seek to develop them with questions, rebuttals, agreements, etc.

I would see a session such as this as one of provocation (complementing those of information, advice and so on). But if the discussion does not pick up this opportunity and the audience its responsibility then such a session cannot fulfil its potential. I am reminded of Jonathan's first question to me re the audience's place in my model and my answer. The audience is outside the model but a crucial part of it; its responses and readings complete the equation, the performance event. the audience does not take up this responsibility then the performance remains incomplete.

John Keefe © November 2002

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DRAMATURG

Theatre and Beyond are one of the South East's leading new writing theatre companies. In September last year they launched their second series of TABLABS, designed to seek out the best new writers in a region where opportunities for development and production of new writing are often limited. With bases in Maidstone, Hastings, Walton-on-Thames and finally in Brighton, the TAB team took on a total of sixteen new writers in an effort to develop innovative and exciting work. Project dramaturg David Lane offers this reflection on the dramaturgical processes at work.

Tucked away on Brighton's seafront, Theatre and Beyond have been building their reputation as one of the region's leading new writing companies for just over three years. Artistic Director Maria Pattinson launched the first TABLABS project in 2001 to seek out new writers in the region. In 2002 writers were offered a five-day collaborative workshop process over two months involving actors, directors, a

dramaturg, digital artists, technicians, audiences and their fellow playwrights. The workshops were for writers excited by new ideas and technology who wanted to experiment with forms that challenge conventional theatre – the function of the workshops was to tap into these ideas and evolve them to the point of a work-in-progress.

The collaborative emphasis behind TAB's work provides a very supportive and experimental environment in which to place a playwright, particularly when ideas and scenarios may be in their infancy. The key role of the dramaturg in this particular process was as a provider of literary dramaturgical support. Following an initial workshop day that helped each writer to focus upon a few starting points for their pieces, the second day was facilitated by the dramaturg, introducing a firmly grounded theoretical approach to playwriting through a number of discussions and exercises.

We began by asking each writer to be open about what they felt their strengths and weaknesses were, then proceeded to look at the theoretical journey of playmaking and the multitude of decisions a playwright will have to consider. The emphasis was on writers understanding the direct relation of these decisions to the dramatic intention that was driving their desire to write - essentially how to begin communicating their ideas through the medium of theatre in the most effective manner. By continually unpicking the relationship between form, content and structure through the comparison of texts, open discussion and short writing exercises, the intention was not to dictate to the writer a restrictive and rigid set of rules for playwriting, but to introduce a suggested structure advocating the importance of knowledge of craft, and therefore what could possibly be achieved by 'breaking' certain rules.

A desire to suggest as well as teach, inspire as well as guide can be integral to the dramaturg's role, whether acting as a constructive critic in the rehearsal room or in a more literary centred capacity. Introducing the dramaturg as somebody who can help to nurture and shape not only performance itself, but also the broadening approach of any practitioners to their work is vital in the process of progressing theatre practice and discovering new approaches to developing contemporary theatre. Our aim was to develop a group of individuals proficient in playmaking. Accessing the visual shape of their work, the use of the audience's senses through lighting, sound and movement, and in particular the use of multi-media would all prove instrumental in the progression of their work.

The new writing culture in this country remains rather logo-centric; a commitment to strong dialogue through the use of naturalistic language dominates the genres of film and television, and this trend is reflected in theatre as the word is frequently emphasised as the heart of the writer's craft. Coupled with a great tradition of literary-centred works both contemporary and classic, this attitude can influence the work of emerging writers and lead perhaps to a homogenised 'new writer', producing plays that fail to illustrate an understanding of theatrical production and the languages of performance that exist beyond the literary. Writers unfamiliar with the

immense possibilities of theatrical production – particularly with the onset of the digital age – are perhaps in danger of limiting their understanding of writing for the stage in the twenty-first century.

The collaborative nature of the TABLABS meant that the physical and technical languages of performance were developed alongside the literary. Writers were actively encouraged to access their visual imaginations and become 'playmakers' from the outset, avoiding the traditional routine of a text first written and subsequently made 'live' by the director and actors, with both tasks often undertaken in isolation. This application of active dramaturgy allows writers to experiment with their concepts before appearing to concretise them in print; the writing is evolving continuously as a product of experiment and exploration.

The flexibility of a project brief is essential when the intention is to service the writer's idea, but our intention was also to introduce new forms or alternative avenues through which to explore the text and educate the writer - to experiment, and to play. Whilst it may seem unusual to 'impose' multimedia techniques on any piece with a strong literary style, an aversion to such experiments in theatrical form may prevent us from generating new performance languages. Educating writers and audiences by producing a style of theatre that reflects our age - dominated by the possibilities of technology - may steer us towards the discovery of far more contemporary and accessible theatrical languages. The emphasis in this project was on that aspect of writer's development, from the initial workshops on mapping dramatic structure to those with actors improvising around the text. Equipping playwrights with the ability to approach their craft as both an individual and collaborative (and progressive) practice is an essential part of theatre-making today, as well as forming the cornerstone of TAB'S work.

Asking a writer to release their work into this hotbed of ideas and stimuli before more than a couple of scenarios have been drafted can be a daunting experience, particularly for writers used to a more 'traditional' or individual approach. The playwright's ability to engage with an experimental approach was essential, and when successful resulted in a more holistic approach and a greater understanding between the company members. The single shared aim of a work-in-progress rather than a finished play meant that scripts could be developed, reworked and redrafted with greater fluidity - what was eventually presented to an audience was a tantalising glimpse of 'what ifs', to which they were free to respond with criticisms and suggestions.

As well as asking the writer to reflect an awareness of theatrical languages in their work, the TAB team was faced with the opposite challenge; how to explore work that began with a committed literary or naturalistic tone through a multimedia perspective. The use of film, digital projection and sound or interactive media, for audience and performers, can be utilised in a multitude of ways. The excitement came with the opportunity to blend traditional and non-traditional forms in an attempt to explore the work, and introduce both audience and playwright to new and challenging ways to consider their subject matter.

Playwright Caroline Hurt's piece 'Making History' explored the process of making contemporary history and provoked the audience into considering why we view characters mythologised in the media in a certain light. A glimpse of the last minutes before Princess Diana's ill-fated car journey, it began as two separate scenes: the first conveying a familiar interpretation of the events and characters, the second introducing a heightened and exaggerated view, but both written in a naturalistic style.

In preparation the two scenes were shot as CCTV, docu-drama and rehearsal footage and then spliced together. In performance the opening of the first scene was played live three times, whilst these various pre-recorded versions were projected simultaneously on screen. When the piece was played in full, the addition of sound and film excerpts and the projection of a silent scene showing past events had built a complex mise-en-scene, forcing our attention towards the issue of character representation. The existence of untold and incomplete histories had been suggested through a live multi-media experience. Whilst pushing our understanding of live performance as the accepted 'reality' of a dramatic situation to its limits, the piece had also introduced an intriguing theatrical territory that could successfully marry the technological and dramaturgical.

The use of 'grideo' - an interactive tool for performers consisting of floor sensor pads triggering video and sound clips - held a variety of responses among the audience. People felt disorientated and unsure as to what was 'real', some found the video more compelling than the live action, others took the scene to be an 'experience' from which they could take their own version of the story amalgamated from the simultaneous options. The writer also felt that this innovative blurring of multimedia, the imagination and the live medium could capture the intention of the piece more effectively than the original naturalistic style.

Natasha Langridge's piece posed a similar challenge. By no means naturalistic but certainly literary in style, 'Method' blended storytelling, monologue, present, past and future action to tell the story of Eva, a young actress searching for a multitude of life-forming experiences but unwittingly spiraling down into a dark and sinister world. In the case of 'Method' it soon became apparent that the physical staging was the vital element in the clear communication of a story with overlapping narratives and timeframes. Clarity, rather than confusion and disorientation as in 'Making History', was the key. Sound and music were subtly employed to add a textured backdrop to the action, but care was taken not to diffuse the writer's intention to 'make us work, to make us listen' to the language.

Although to an extent the project was only a brief simulation of a particular style of creative process, and a springboard for further work, it did raise some interesting issues surrounding the nature of collaborative work, particularly concerning authorship and artistic control. The playwright may be the author of the written text, but who is granted final control over a piece of theatre developed in collaboration, particularly when the intention is also to experiment and seek out innovative ways of interpreting the work? Is our tendency to segregate and compartmentalise the

individual practices within the theatre-making process preventing us from fully committing to the artistic advantages of collaboration or devised work?

If a full commission were to be undertaken in this way, it may well be the dramaturg who operates alongside the writer and director, actors, technicians and designers as an overseer of sorts. By offering a theoretical and practical insight into all the production elements - literary, contextual, technical and theatrical - they can safeguard the text whilst leaving opportunities for experiment available.

One must also not ignore the capabilities of the actor in undertaking the role of dramaturg to develop the relationship between text, language and character. In fact, during the TAB project it was the playwrights who acted as a dramaturgical collective, providing invaluable support and criticism to one another when called upon. The use of more experienced playwrights as mentors for younger writers has already been adopted by Soho Theatre and Writers' Centre, and the more experimental and collaborative outfit of Theatre Centre, often to good effect. In a collaborative or devising process a project dramaturg could also assimilate these criticisms and concerns and act as a dramaturgical link between individuals, the company and the artistic intention.

Unfortunately our understanding of a collaborative approach in British theatre seems heavily influenced by our need to place an individual - the writer or director - at the centre, when a collaborative approach surely suggests an equal distribution of creative influence. We talk of a writer or director working 'collaboratively' when perhaps we should simply refer to a company of theatre practitioners working 'in collaboration'. Is this a question of terminology and perspective - that we should honour not the playwright's intention but the dramatic intention? Perhaps final say should not rest upon an individual but via a collective understanding of this intention? And should we also be reminded that argument can be as potent a force in creative work as agreement?

In the present climate there remains the need for a delicate balance between experiment and respect for the playwright's intention (and skill), and this was sometimes a problematic area within the project. Time was often instrumental in the decision making process when experimentation had to make way for rehearsal. Introducing production elements to the final pieces may have appeared to obstruct a more in-depth discussion or exploration later in the project, but it was fundamental to showing audiences how TAB worked and to listen to their feedback.

Involving the audience in the creative process can be both rewarding and problematic. Occasionally writers were reluctant to talk about their plays and felt as if a defence of their work was unnecessary, and with a finished product, perhaps there is a general understanding that the work should speak for itself. However, with work in progress one must remember that the dramaturgies we have applied are experimental, and that the work is not yet mature - if the voice of the piece seems muffled or incoherent to our audiences, we should listen to their comments. Clearing

away dramaturgical terminology and treating the audience as equals, discovering if theatre is achieving clear communication is an essential aspect of using the audience in this way, especially if they are invited specifically to respond to the work. The audience is important – without them the theatre becomes obsolete. So if they cannot hear us, we know we need to speak up; if they cannot understand us, we know we need to make things clearer.

By introducing the nature of the project as experimental, the pieces as work-in-progress, and asking audiences to be candid and honest, responses were often insightful and telling. The use of video and digital media often drew the most attention, inspiring comments upon the 'imaginative use of stagecraft', 'unique and absorbing concepts' and pieces that were 'intriguing, full of possibilities.' Many of the writers responded well to the process as a whole, expressing an overall positive view of TAB's collaborative methods as an education for the writer. Playwright Jo Monks told us that 'the input of sound, lighting, direction, choreography and of course the actors added a new dimension to my play and gave me and the audience new insights. I think it was like discovering new depths'.

Creating an awareness of TAB's work and the wealth of writing existing in the region is essential to the health of the company, and so the four TAB SLAMS - extensions of the TABLABS that each showcased five minutes of work by ten regional writers to a paying audience - were introduced. This was also a litmus test for local audiences, asked to vote for the piece that intrigued them the most. Exposing writers and audiences to a new way of working was both an educative and an inspiring experience, and writers who found the process particularly useful were firmly encouraged to seek out future collaborators in their area in an effort to promote innovative and original approaches to creative work. This revitalised approach towards theatre-making can only contribute to a region already rich with talent but still searching for opportunities to have their work seen and heard.

TAB are funded to commission two writers every year and hope to take on one of the writers from the TABLABS project. They are also hoping to pursue their work in schools through the region and develop work for young writers in the near future.

David Lane

Project Dramaturg

January 2003