

dramaturgs'network

Welcome to the first newsletter from the Dramaturgs' Network in 2004

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NETWORK NEWS

With apologies for the lateness, at last the next edition of the Network newsletter.

The usual reasons of not enough time and too much to do for both editor and contributors, but that's the life of a dramaturg.

The Network has been very busy over the recent months with members involved in events at Battersea Arts Centre (a discussion on work practices in devising); 2 joint events with the Directors Guild of GB (a networking evening at the Theatre Museum, and a day-long event at the Soho Theatre as part of its New Writing Festival -an account of this with some of the network's contributions will be appearing in the next 2 issues of "Direct"); a workshop on dramaturgy at the Young Vic for the Young Director's program.

We met at the RSC offices in London to thrash out a programme and aims for the next couple of years. Our membership is growing and our ongoing activities include developing network resources, starting a Continued Professional Development program for our members, creating shadowing or placement opportunities for young dramaturgs and of course to continue to seek collaborations exploring the practice and role of the dramaturg.

We are running a workshop and will have a surgery at this year's National Student Drama Festival and the festival is introduced below by Andrew Loretto. Followed by a piece on last years festival by Lyndsay Allison who represented the network.

Other News:

The LMDA (Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America) conference will take place in

Philadelphia 24-27 June.

The Canadian mini conference on dramaturgy will take place in Toronto 5-6 July.

So we continue to be as active as we can and continue to look at ways in which we can develop our work.

John Keefe
Editor

NSDF04 31st March - 7th April 2004, Scarborough, Yorkshire

The National Student Drama Festival is a unique, week-long experience bringing together students with leading theatre and media professionals.

NSDF showcases and nurtures enterprising theatre and live performance by young people and offers Festival-goers the chance to take part in masterclasses and workshops led by seminal practitioners and forums for debate and discussion.

NSDF is a public event open to everyone. Performances come from all parts of the UK from colleges, youth theatres, community organisations and universities.

NSDF offers fantastic opportunities to learn more about all aspects of theatre and for 2004, the Festival will feature writers and new writing organisations from Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England, exploring different languages and regional dialects in writing for the stage today.

New NSDF Artistic Director, Andrew Loretto, is developing a series of national roadshow events which will, for the first time, extend training provision beyond the festival itself. These roadshows, which comprise workshops and information sessions, started last month in Belfast and will soon take place in Cardiff, Manchester, Newcastle and a range of other locations throughout the year.

Andrew, who was previously director of Theatre in the Mill, Bradford, is also currently developing new international collaborations with other festivals across Europe, increasing the range of opportunities at NSDF.

For further general information on NSDF, including how to buy tickets and enter a production, contact Rachel Williams or Ian Abbott at the NSDF admin office on 01803 864836 or 01803 847711. Further information is also available on the website: www.nsdff.org.uk.

Andrew Loretto

FESTIVAL OF THE IMAGINATION - 9 - 16 April 2003

I visited Scarborough on 11th April 2003 on behalf of the Dramayurgs' Network to attend as many events as I could possibly fit in to 48 hours. I was kindly invited by Nick Stimson, the outgoing Artistic Director to view performances, take part in the discussion sessions and get a feel for the festival itself. This was a pilot visit by the Network to assess what we can offer the NSDF in the future and how a workshop could be tailor-made for next year. The first thing that struck me on arrival was the sheer buzz of the place, a great sense of relaxed chaos which leaves little time to catch your breath: best just to dive in.

The productions I went to see represented a cross section of student work not only being showcased at the Festival, but also developed in educational institutions across the country. It was interesting to note that the Festival attracts the most outspoken and passionate theatre students. The emerging talent for the future who would be an open and welcoming audience to experimentation, and therefore the ideal forum for dramaturgy to begin to take root with a new generation of practitioners. The first piece, *'The King of Prussia'* by Nick Darke, University of Bristol Dramsoc was a transfer that complimented the coastal setting of Scarborough, featuring an ensemble cast, a traditional script and musical score. Underlying the presentation of new theatre is fierce competition for the prestigious awards on offer, not that this is the ostensive focus, but it does raise the stakes nicely for those chosen to participate. The distinguished list of awarding bodies really covers the gamete of theatre making, including a 'Sunday Times Harold Hobson Student Drama Critic Award' and 'The Stephen Joseph Theatre Production Residency Award', and awards for new writing from the Personal Management Association and the Sunday Times.

The next piece I saw, *'The Freudian Slip'* from the University of Exeter, had already been flagged as one to watch in *Noises Off*, the Festival news and reviews paper. Extremely popular with the student audience, it was an entertaining piece devised by the company, and reviewed favourably almost across the board. The festival had also attracted many practitioners of legendary status to participate in the Gulbenkian Foundation Workshop Programme. I was sad to have missed an exciting New Writing Forum at the start of the week that included Tim Fountain, Mark Ravenhill, Stephen Jeffreys, Mike Bradwell and Jenny Worton. Although I was happy and excited to dip in to the festival for one day, I felt the immediate regret of needing much more time to become involved in what was on offer, it does take a day to become orientated to the pace of life.

If I needed convincing of the high calibre of the work, the final production for me that day was by Cambridge University, *'bedbound'*, and it transcended the work I saw. This was a visceral, moving and dramaturgically impeccable production that was to sweep awards at the end of the week. It really encapsulated the celebration of live theatre that the festival advocates. In the words of Alan Ayckbourn from the brochure: 'May a good, thought-provoking, creative and exciting time be had by all. Long live live

theatre!' This production illustrated the way that the Festival aspires to the highest level of professional theatre practice: this is why the festival attracts enormous loyalty from the regular attendees over the 50 years it has been running.

Next year's festival runs from 31st of March to 7th April, and 2005 will be its 50th Anniversary. The new Artistic Director Andrew Loretto has invited the Dramaturgs' Network to run an '*Introduction to Dramaturgy*' at the NSDF this year, to take place on Friday 2nd April at 11am for students at the festival. This workshop shall be run by myself and Duska Radosavljevic and will focus on dramaturgy in devised theatre and will hopefully be the first of many. During the week, we will also be offering surgeries to the visiting theatre companies who request them and Hanna Slattne will be contributing to '*Sound and Fury*' on Monday 5th and '*The Parting Shots*' on Wed 7th: these are two festival generated performances. With the increasing thirst for innovation exemplified by the NSDF and the desire for the Network to increase outreach work, we have before us a golden opportunity to create an exciting and fresh addition to the NSDF this year. Not only can we target young and emerging practitioners to increase awareness of the discipline of Dramaturgy, we can offer advice and constructive criticism at a crucial point in their artistic development. With all the enthusiasm and vigour that the festival-goers exude, it is an ideal forum to showcase new ways of working and an ideal opportunity to stage a practical workshop on Dramaturgy to inform and provoke. I look forward to the challenge that the NSDF presents to me personally, and will be spending as much time as I possibly can in Scarborough to watch the future of British Theatre emerge.

Lyndsay Allison

Information provided by '*The 48th Sunday Times National Student Drama Festival of the Imagination*' Brochure 2003.

Work in Progress Dramaturgy Festival at Newcastle Playhouse.

- Inspiring and daunting.

Two years ago Newcastle Playhouse employed a resident dramaturg: Duska Radosavljevic. Partly in response to questions of what a dramaturg does Duska and Claire Malcolm of New Writing North staged a pioneering festival exploring dramaturgy as a craft in the autumn of 2003 at the Playhouse. It was a brave and ambitious project realised through a joint effort between Northern Stage, Newcastle University and New Writing North setting out to explore work processes in developing new writing involving a dramaturg. The four-week project consisted of three weeklong workshops developing 3 plays by authors associated with Newcastle Playhouse and New Writing North. Present in the room were actors, a director, the writer(s) and a dramaturg. In the fourth week the work was presented either in the form of a reading or a discussion

on the process to an audience. The festival also included dramaturg-led workshops for writers on verbatim theatre and on exploring non - dramatic writing for the stage.

I was invited to work with the director Deborah Bruce on an idea for a play by Bea Campbell and Judith Jones. A meeting was set up a few weeks before our work together started where we were introduced to each other and to the idea of the play. There was no script yet, but Bea and Judith had done a huge amount of research on their idea which focussed on contemporary Protestant masculinity in Northern Ireland. I realised quickly that neither of Deborah, Bea nor Judith had worked with a dramaturg before and was not entirely sure what I could contribute. I also had a notion that this aspect of the project had not been emphasised to other participants as we set out on our collaboration. Therefore we all came to the workshop with different agendas which proved to create a challenging scenario for me as a dramaturg and as the 'newcomer'.

As there was no script for me and Deborah to discuss prior to the workshop and we had not access to the research which had been done, our discussions centred on what we knew of the characters and how to use the time most efficiently. I did as much research I could which I sent to Deborah but we were not sure how relevant it would be to the actual story. We both read books on Loyalists and Northern Ireland and came to the workshop as prepared as we could.

The workshop was a most inspiring experience mainly due to Deborah's sensitive and challenging approach to exploring the ideas of Bea and Judith and a group of very experienced and intelligent actors. For me as a dramaturg it was stimulating but difficult. I had no script to work with; the playwrights were not forth coming with sharing their vision. As fairly inexperienced theatre writers their agenda was less to explore collaborative theatre practice in developing their play but more to get ideas of how to transform their substantial amount of research and thinking on the subject to the stage. Deborah made most use of me in our discussions after each day reflecting and planning the following day. We were both at a loss initially with what was expected of us but agreed that Deborah's job was to make it an interesting and challenging week for the actors whilst my job was to support her, reflect on the process in the rehearsal room and afterwards to the festival team: Alan Lydiard, Duska Radosavljevic and Claire Malcolm.

As the week went on the actors did some wonderful and inspiring work and we were given some material by the writers consisting of monologues exploring the characters and then eventually some dialogue. Using this material and the improvisations the actors had done Deborah started to explore different potential structures of the piece and the use of the space, physicality and crucial to this piece time. As the week went on she turned less to me for support and used less of my prepared research, suggestions and structural work. This is something every dramaturg is familiar with and albeit it is frustrating, I understand that it happens when directors don't actually know how to work with a dramaturg.

The Newcastle workshop made me acutely aware of the difficult task that the Dramaturgs' Network has taken on. At the time it seemed nearly impossible to explore a relationship, which should evolve over a full production in a short week with

participants who were not committed to that exploration or had an interest in using a dramaturg. How do we constructively explore the work processes? How do we introduce dramaturgs to director's who have not worked with them before? How do we allow the dramaturg the space to do his or her job within tight existing processes and resources? I am not even considering what many people probably think at this moment - just don't do it! Because I firmly believe that the contributions by a dramaturg do add value and will make theatre take a leap forward. Hence for me and for the network, the big question remains, how do we find those interested theatre practitioners who might be new to the idea but willing to commit to the process to see what we can do together?

Hanna Slattne
Freelance Dramaturg

Interview with Duska Radosavljevic by Marina Burton

MB: What inspired you to become a dramaturg?

DR: Even though I had strong interests in performance and directing to begin with, I gradually discovered during my first degree in Theatre Studies and Communication Arts that my particular skill lay in the analysis of verbal and non-verbal texts. I was far more interested in the process rather than the product and by the time I had to choose my final year project, it ended up being in playwriting and the dramaturgy of theatre translation. In effect I gradually went back to the source of the creative process in theatre - the blueprint for performance. This was reversed once again when on completion of my first degree, by coincidence of circumstances I became a theatre reviewer - which is anyway a constituent part of the dramaturg's practice in the rest of Europe.

MB: What do you consider your role to be within the theatre?

DR: The dramaturg's role can be described in any number of ways - from 'the guardian of the written word' to 'the theatre intellectual' and 'the company psychiatrist'. I don't identify with any of these. I am interested in the quality of the process and the quality of the result. I am interested in helping people achieve their best and eliminate any sloppiness they might overlook because they are so immersed in the work itself. There are degrees of the dramaturg's involvement in the process. Ideally the dramaturg should be present in a creative capacity. This could feature preparation of the text

(through adaptation, devising, editing etc) or definitive input into the rehearsal process itself. If the dramaturg is not given a creative role however, he/she can become an in-house critic, which is a tricky position to be in. In any case, I do bring a lot of my reviewing skills into the rehearsal as my understanding of the production dramaturg's role is very much linked to an anticipation of the audience and critical response.

MB: Do you feel that as a dramaturg it is your duty to challenge the establishment?

DR: I'm not sure what is meant by the 'establishment'. I think that my duty is primarily to challenge theatrically bad choices and decisions. The politics of a particular theatre or a particular show is a result of a whole lot of perspectives including the writer's, the director's but also the audience's. Sometimes it is even more important to challenge the audience's views than it is to challenge the establishment. Only in that case you have to do it in a much more strategic way.

MB: Are there, or, have there been strict guidelines imposed on you when selecting scripts? How much artistic freedom do you have?

DR: Because Northern Stage is primarily a performance rather than a play-oriented company, my particular position does not include a great deal of literary management. I do read submissions and sometimes I come across interesting pieces of work which I may recommend to someone within the company. Essentially, the process of generating ideas and work which may subsequently be programmed is quite fluid and dynamic and may involve any member of the company.

MB: What do you believe to be the social function of theatre?

DR: This is a very broad question and my answer to it would probably change case by case. I like it when theatre has the ability to transport you fully into a different world and act on the consciousness subliminally rather than overtly. I do not like didactic or primarily political theatre, although theatre is inevitably political (whether it upholds or challenges the status quo). I think one of the social functions of theatre is certainly to understand, examine and celebrate the human nature.

MB: Are you committed to finding new material? Is there a balance between revivals and new plays?

DR: As mentioned above, Northern Stage has a very particular approach to production and, if anything, we already have more things in the pipeline than we could ask for. As for the revivals-new plays ratio we actually have a healthy balance because we often do new dramatisations of classical scripts (prose and film scripts in particular) and we are also committed to uncovering new relevant material and talent both locally and internationally. This is a Northern Stage speciality in fact - the fusion of the 'classical' and the 'cutting edge' within a new space which

is both explicitly-Geordie and ultra-European.

MB: How important do you feel it is to update plays making older scripts relevant?

DR: I'm personally very fond of this practice as a creative and cognitive exercise. I'm referring mainly to full-on adaptations such as for example Crimp's *Misanthrope* or Kushner's *The Illusion*. I don't think it helps to cheat though and create half-hearted attempts or anachronisms, I think consistency is very important. What often puzzles me is sci-fi Shakespeare for example, where the production is futuristic and the language is archaic. Of course not much can be done about this in an English speaking world where any attempt at translation into modern English would be heavily condemned in one way or another. The one that worked for me though was the *Bombitty of Errors* - a production from Chicago which treated the archaic language of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* as urban American slang. But I do think Shakespeare would rather have his plays brought up to date than have them performed as museum pieces.

MB: Are you involved with the marketing of a new play/playwright?

DR: I am involved in marketing in as much as I may occasionally write a brochure introduction and provide programme notes or proofread press releases and copies. I have also done some media interviews in relation to big events such as festivals etc. And of course there is always the word of mouth which all of us do.

MB: Are you bilingual? How important is it for a dramaturg to have another language?

DR: I am bilingual but I cannot really say anything prescriptive in answer to this question. It does help me that I am bilingual because I can look into the same texts differently. For example, at the moment we are working on Chekhov and I have the facility of reading him closely in two different translations (as well as also being able to read him in the original). However, the language of theatre is a universal language and the written or spoken word is only an aspect of it.

MB: Do you think that a Dramaturg is any different to a Literary Manager? If so/not why?

DR: The dramaturg possibly has a more active role within the organisation and the ongoing in-house work than a literary manager. There are huge overlaps and it is hard to generalise. Hopefully these roles will become more and more defined over time in terms of their respective drawbacks as well as advantages. However, the way I see it, the primary purpose of my particular job as Dramaturg is not necessarily script-reading or talent-scouting but quality control and enlightenment.

If you do not wish to receive further newsletters from the Dramaturgs' Network please send an e-mail stating so to info@dramaturgy.co.uk