

dramaturgs'network

Welcome to the second issue of the dramaturgs'networks newsletter.

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THE DRAMATURG'S ROLE IN THE DEVISING PROCESS one day WORKSHOP

Organised by the Dramaturgs' Network together with Leeds University and Central School of Speech and Drama.

Lead by: Alison Oddey (professor of drama, the author of '*Devising Theatre*')

Aims: During our one day workshop, through practical, hands-on approach we will be exploring the dramaturg's role in the devising process. What is the dramaturg's special contribution to devising? How can we engage with the existing devising processes? How can a devised performance benefit from the skills of a dramaturg?

We invite you: if you are a professional dramaturg or literary manager (or study one of these subjects), happy to take part in all the exercises during the day, and are willing to contribute with your knowledge to the success of the workshop.

Dates: - 18 October 2002 (Wakefield, at the Powerhouses of Leeds University)
- 25 October 2002 (London, at Central School of Speech and Drama)

Price: £15, (concessions: £10 for the dramaturgs' network members and students only)

Apply with: a cheque and the application form below. (Please note that we've got limited number of places available. We take the applications on a first come first served basis)

Please send your application to: dramaturgs' network
devised workshop
139/B Tooting Bec Rd.
London
SW17 8BW

For more information contact: Katalin Trencsényi at:
katalin@dramaturgy.co.uk

APPLICATION FORM

Please write in capitals and send to: dramaturgs' network, devised workshop, 139/B Tooting Bec Rd., London, SW17 8BW.

I'd like to take part in the THE DRAMATURG'S ROLE IN DEVISING PROCESS workshop.

I am applying for the workshop in Wakefield/London. (Please delete as appropriate.)

NAME:

Profession / + company if applicable:

ADDRESS:

PHONE:

E-MAIL:

Please, indicate if you have any special requirements (mobility etc.):

I enclose a cheque of £15 / £10. (Please delete as appropriate.)

I do/don't need a receipt. (Please delete as appropriate.)

Date:

Signature:

Dramaturgs' Picnic

We are delighted to invite anyone who wants to join us for a **social picnic** in Kensington Gardens (Hyde Park) on Sunday 8th of September at 14.00. We will put our blankets down on the grass between Speke's Monument (it is in the A to Z) and The Long Water. Nearest gate is Lancaster Gate off Bayswater Road and the nearest tube stations are Lancaster Gate or Queensway.

Bring some food and drink and something to sit on. If it looks as if the weather will be bad please look here for alternative meeting point or send us an e-mail to find out what is happening.

The New Website!

The Dramaturgs' network would like to say a huge THANK YOU to Adrian Toll for the wonderful work he has done in creating our new website! Please go to www.dramaturgy.co.uk to explore it; take part in debates, browse the CV's of our member dramaturgs and find out what is happening in dramaturgy. We would very much appreciate input, contributions and suggestions.

Thanks again to Adrian and if you would like to find out more about who he is and his other work please visit www.adriantoll.com .

Networking in Action by Hanna Slattné

Our intention behind setting up the network was always to enable people to meet and to keep the debate about dramaturgy in the UK active, opening up possibilities for collaboration. In the middle of June we had a first taste of what can come out of the network when Katalin Trencsényi and I set out to meet the team behind the first BA program in Dramaturgy in the UK at Bretton Hall (part of University of Leeds). Kara McKechnie and her team in the department; Linda, Melissa and Dougie, met us at a sundrenched campus where the dust had just settled after the departure of the students for the summer break.

There were two aims with the meeting; to discuss a possible collaboration for the workshop on the dramaturg's role in devised theatre and to expand the network's connections outside London to make sure it is not London-centric. After general introductions, we heard about the challenges in

setting up the first and path-breaking BA program on dramaturgy for British students.

The same issues and questions came up when devising the course as we have posed ourselves within the network, essentially around how we develop the role of the Dramaturg for British theatre rather than impose a role already established within other theatre traditions; reassuring the sceptics that we believe the dramaturg is not a threat but will enhance an already strong and successful theatre tradition in this country.

It was encouraging to hear from the University Department's point of view what benefits they can foresee with the network; access to freelance people for projects and teaching through the website as well as support for their students after leaving the campus and of course the opportunity for further collaborations in exploring issues in dramaturgy. We are also looking forward to discussing further links in the future between the dramaturgs' network and Bretton Hall and other courses. We are hoping to be able to feature an introduction to the course and the work they do at Bretton Hall in our next newsletter, and we are developing a page on our website where we introduce the different training choices in the UK for aspiring dramaturgs.

EXPLORING THE TEXT

Two months ago the Network was invited by Context Theatre to contribute to the development of new work dealing with issues of asylum, exile and displacement. Context Theatre are a company in development that seek to promote the social relevance of theatre as the essence of their work, investigating new ways to mediate and contextualise theatre through all elements of its structure and holding a dramaturgical perspective at the centre of their practice.

The Play

Network dramaturgs David Lane and Katalin Trenszenyi undertook the exploration of a short play in a workshop with actors and the writer, Mavis Howard. *Tora Bora Interlude* was a snapshot of the world fifteen years in the future, following the disintegration of the West by global warming and anti-capitalist terrorism, and exploring the enduring loyalties, patriotism and faith that surround a highly relevant issue for a contemporary audience.

The play drew together an ageing British aid worker, George, an American female ex-fighter pilot, Cranley, and a British Muslim fifteen years in hiding, Colin Mohammed. Stranded by a cave entrance in the infamous Tora Bora mountain region, they are forced to come to terms with their pasts and

their prejudices. What follows is a brief reflection by the dramaturgs and writer on the processes we applied to her work:

The Workshop

We began with some helpful loosening up exercises and some games to familiarise us with each other, and the environment within the play. Although darting through imaginary minefields, improvising a day's routine in a pitch black cave, and limping around the rehearsal room with injuries whilst attempting to escape from soldiers appeared to be a tool for simply introducing the play in a relaxed way, they gained more relevance as we drew in research and considered the real-life experiences of those individuals the characters might be based on. These simulated experiences made sense in terms of preparing the characters as we delved deeper into their backgrounds, considering the pressures they may find themselves under before, during, and after the dramatic action.

One of our concerns about the piece was the elusiveness of the characters' individual histories. Although this may have been something the writer could be free to develop on her own, we agreed that in a dramatic environment that so often referenced past events, set in a future close enough to reflect a contemporary world, and concerning characters who are either overcoming, facing, or escaping from their past lives, there needed to be a greater understanding of these areas reflected in the text.

We gave monologue exercises to the actors, encouraging them to write small individual scenes that could tell us about their attitudes to the past: George wrote about his childhood memories in Afghanistan, Cranley spoke at her daughter's headstone, Colin read a diary entry the day he decided to join the Muslim fighters. Aside from revealing some new aspects of the characters' lives, it was also a chance for us to understand what the original play had communicated to the actors about these people - and therefore what still needed to be said, left out or developed in the writing, in relation to the play's overarching theme of facing the past.

Improvised duologues based on the characters meeting *before* the events of the play were also very beneficial for both the actors and the writer. By emphasising key characteristics of their roles, the actors found it easier to relate to the piece and to their parts, which made further work on developing the existing text much easier. In turn, this served to illustrate new ways in which the play might develop from its existing shape as a dramatic 'interlude'; as our understanding of the subject matter within the piece began to grow in complexity, the interaction between the characters also gained more depth. In terms of development, the writer realised the importance of maintaining a balanced relationship between the characters, and the growth of the play as a vehicle for exploring conflicting arguments.

The emphasis in the first part of the workshop was upon improvising scenes around the text to explore character, whereas the second half looked at developing the original scenes and uncovering new possibilities that could

enhance the dramatic action. This included taking arguments and conflicts to their highest point, manufacturing scenarios where the characters were forced to make decisions that involved judging what one another's lives were worth, and removing the luxury of a common language to see how the characters dealt with Mohammed when verbal negotiation was not an option.

For each scenario the actors were given the existing text as a starting point, along with clear objectives - usually conflicting - and then asked to find a natural compromise to end the improvisation. These exercises served to clarify the intention behind the writing in particular sections of dialogue, and allowed the writer to see where scenes could be developed or constructed differently to really expose the characters' complexities and desires in such a hostile situation.

The rehearsed reading was an opportunity to incorporate our new understanding about the characters, the scenarios and the history of the dramatic world into a performance that reflected a thorough understanding of the contemporary context of the piece. For the writer, several conclusions were drawn about the clarity of the history she had created in the fifteen years leading up to the time of the play, both globally and concerning the individual characters themselves; principally how much more (or less) was required within the text for the audience to grasp the severity of the impact of terrorism upon each of these characters' lives.

The writer found the workshop to be an imaginative and thought-provoking approach, which drew together research, the creativity of actors and a willingness to engage with and expand contemporary issues, whilst holding the writer's intentions behind the play at the forefront of the day's work.

Context Theatre have currently secured funding to support further work in the realm of asylum and exile and are looking forward to presenting a new production in asylum centres, schools and colleges in the Cambridge area towards the end of 2002.

"Looking and Listening with Knowledge"

This is a revised version of a paper originally published in "state of Mime", Summer 1995, European Mime Federation.

I envisage this paper as part of a dialogue: with Marianne van Kerkhoven's original piece (see after word), and with those who are now about to read it as an exchange of responses and observations.

The paragraphs (an extending echo to 'Looking without pencil in hand') are dense, complex, rich; designed to provoke a wry smile, an insight, a ripple of response across the pond of thought and feelings. But mainly to reveal the work of the dramaturg as interrogative, metaphoric, penetrative, catalytic.....

They appear in no particular order.

Some definitions;

Dramaturg: the author of the playtext.

Dramaturg: the literary editor or manager or researcher.

Dramaturgy: the text or weave or work of the actions in performance (from Barba).

Visual Dramaturgy: when all the means of expression have equal status (from Arntzen).

Dramaturgy: (from 'wissenschaft'; of knowledge) is the science or knowledge of drama, theatre, performance and the stage. Science not only as theory but also as practical craft and passionate vision.

Dramaturg: the theatre scientist who collaborates with the director, having a questioning oversight of the making of the performance text or score: the construction of interacting sign systems that make the narrative whole.

I subscribe to my final 2 modern definitions whilst happily acknowledging all performance practice that has gone before.

1. The Dramaturg sits quietly, looking and listening with knowledge. Sometimes with pencil in hand, sometimes without; always noting what is seen and heard. Always part of the processes of construction.
2. Theatre is framed and grounded in common and universal principles of art: perspective, balance, movement, rhythm, mass, weight, colour, sound, chaos, order, structure, space, play. Whilst there may be no 'fixed laws' application of such universal principles. Each production rests on and is informed by these principles in practice.
3. Theatre sits between the lasting and the ephemeral, sits on the cusp between the real and the sur-real, the rational and the irrational; reveals the shadow between the mythic and the every-day, play and caprice, Apollo and Dionysus; is individual purpose and intention becoming a collective, shared experience.
4. The Dramaturg draws on the universal, the everyday, the mythic, the archetypal, the erotic to look at each work for itself through his/her own evolving processes, vocabularies and methods; draws on accumulated knowledge expressed through the passionate instinct and considered insight, the act of the moment.
5. Of course dramaturgy is also the *passion* of looking and listening.
6. The dramaturg *does not* perform or usurp the function of writer or director (although works with the eye of both) but *is* the first spectator. He/she *is not* the 'outside eye or ear' but is both inside and outside the work at the same time. This cannot be 'pure'; the dramaturg cannot escape his/her own biases and should not seek to. ('work with your prejudices do not deny them', Enrique Pardo)

7. A dramaturgy of this kind rests on the practice of *Verfremdung* (after Brecht and Schiller) and *Dialectic* (after Benjamin and Adorno); looking and acting with the engaged detachment and the passionate thinking to render the familiar strange and the strange familiar. This is the central paradox that orders the dramaturg's role; to be within and of the creative process yet estranged from it to best serve it.
8. To extend this defining image further. To be a friend to the work from this position of intimate distance. To suggest order to the chaos of creating without being remote from that chaos as force and energy. To act in the finding of the extraordinary within the ordinary routines and accidents of the creative process. To affirm whilst challenging, to be a collaborator in the creation of text and narrative. To have a 'Brechtian' cast of mind that looks directly yet obliquely, seeing the same piece as it changes phase by phase.
9. If what is performed is in some respects only an echo of the original impulse of intention, then it is an echo with its own substance. The echo *is* the work insofar as it is the work as seen, with its own richness and complexity whilst remaining the child of the original impulse. The dramaturg does then have concern for the first ideas, not as stultifying genesis but as touchstones for the evolving work giving visibility to the echo, the shadow.
10. Clearly, if the dramaturg acts with knowledge then this is *always* being accumulated from all fields, experiences and forms (looking at the picture, reading the book, listening to the music, watching the film, observing the world).
The dramaturg is a store of facts and connections; instinctively or half remembered things that are jogged into life by what is seen and heard. But it is not a dry store of dusty goods and withered material. It is a store that is replenished and fertilised by use, passion, and desire. Dramaturgy *is not* in the twilight zone of art and science, but of both, of all forms and materials.
11. Dramaturgy is the wooden walls of small drawers with brass handles found in the hardware store of my childhood: the dramaturg opens each drawer to reveal new objects of indeterminate but indispensable use.
12. However, dramaturgy *is not* dramatology (the history-analysis of theatre) but of course performance dramaturgy will draw on dramatology.
13. Dramaturgy sees the poetry of theatre, but not this alone nor at the expense of ideas and intellect within the theatre work. The dramaturg thinks with feeling and feels with reason with the awareness that the processes of the intellect and the emotions can become self blinding or dazzling. Both the intellect and the emotions can become the seduced or seducer.
14. The performance dramaturg has concern for the 'mise-en-scène': the performance text or score, the narrative whole, the *recit*.
15. Dramaturgy has concern for language: as carrier/shaper of meaning and social relations; as the articulation not only of ideas but also of

what may go beyond words yet must be brought into the dialogue of texts, rhythms, and images that is the work.

16. The dramaturg is concerned to restore the language of the theatre to its practitioners. The dramaturg confronts 'jargon' as the esoteric extremes and exclusions that disenfranchise practitioner and audience without denying the place of the technical vocabulary of a craft, skill, or art form.
17. First and last, the dramaturg shares the responsibility of art to reveal humanity to itself; is aware that the theatre is not the church of the brothel, not the pulpit or the bear pit, not sacred or secular but is of all these, as humanity itself is. As the dramaturg looks and listens with knowledge so, finally, these are the actions of self knowledge.

"The chorus holds the individual parts of the tragedy apart and enters between passionate outbursts with contemplation." (after von Schiller)

"Be for what you are against and against what you are for." (after Decroux)

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After word.

This paper draws on my experience as dramaturg for the Mime Action Group/European Mime Federation workshop-symposium "Moving Into Performance", Manchester, 1994 and on subsequent professional practice.

It is also a response to Marianne van Kerkhoven's text "Looking without pencil in hand" (Theatreschrift 5-6 1994).

The concepts of *Verfremdung* and *Gestus* were further developed as part of a paper on dramaturgy and transversality given at the symposium on Transversal Theatre, "Artistic Boundaries Crossed" in Amsterdam, September, 1995.

Disclaimer – Please note that the views and arguments expressed is the sole responsibility of the individual author and do not reflect the views of the dramaturgs' network.

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