

dramaturgs' network

NEWSLETTER

Winter Issue

Welcome to the winter issue of the Dramaturgs' Network's Newsletter!

In this issue...

A full account of the "New writing: How do we develop new plays?" discussion organised by the Dramaturgs' Network and the Literary Mangers and Dramaturgs of the Americas at the Albery Theatre last autumn forms a major part of this newsletter. We also have some other responses to the presentations and material of the morning: provoking thoughts from a director, a dramaturg and a playwright. We hope that all of these will help to take the issues and ideas further into the arena of debate and exchange of ideas and practice.

If you wish to comment on these articles or want to have a debate on other issues concerning dramaturgy, log on to our forum on: www.dramaturgy.co.uk/forum and let us hear from you.

We also welcome letters and articles responding to our newsletter. If you would like to contribute with an article, please send it to: newsletter@dramaturgy.co.uk (If you are writing for us, please note that our article submitting deadline for our next issue is 21st March 2005.)

We look forward to hearing from you!

Katalin Trencsényi and John Keefe
Editors

Content

New writing: How do we develop new plays?

Edited version of a panel discussion at the Albery Theatre, London

Ken Bentley: a director's diagnosis

John Keefe: A dramaturg's deduction

Sara Clifford: A playwright's perspective

New writing: How do we develop new plays?

Panel discussion hosted by the Dramaturgs' Network in association with Literary Mangers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

Albery Theatre, London, 5th October 2004

Present: Hanna Slättne (literary manager, Tinderbox Theatre, Northern-Ireland), Sara Clifford (playwright), Toby Clarke (student, CSSD), Katalin Trencsényi (freelance dramaturg), Elyssa Livergrant (lecturer in dramaturgy, CSSD) Ken Bentley (freelance director), Matthew Crampton (Old Vic New Voices), Christine Paris (Writers Guild), Susannah White (student), Lucy Linger (director), Richard Shannon (director of new writing, Polka Theatre), Abigail Gonda (freelance script worker), Liz Engleman (president of LMDA, USA), Brian Quirt (Director of Nightswimming, Canada), John Keefe (lecturer in dramaturgy and performance, Queens University ISC, Kingston University), Lyndsay Allison (freelance dramaturg), Ashmeed Sohoje (New Writing Manager, Theatre Royal Stratford East), Frances Stirk, (Literary Manager, Hampstead Theatre), Stephen Castell.

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Panel: Liz Engleman, Abigail Gonda, Brian Quirt, Ashmeed Sohoje

Chair: Hanna Slättne

Hanna Slättne: Welcome everybody! We wanted to find out from different practitioners how they look on new writing and what new work means in different capacities, areas or practice. That's why we have asked our panel to talk about their work and about what structures they employ. We also wanted to find out how they see the future: what processes might be changed, extended or added? One of the themes of today's discussion is collaboration, because as dramaturg or literary manager we all function in a collaborative way with the writer and the director. So, we'd like to have a look at how that collaboration works in different theatres and in different countries.

Ashmeed Sohoje: To me new writing should be at the centre of the theatre and the playwright should be at the very centre of it. Whatever the process is, if you are devising a piece or however you are working, the writer pulls everything together. You have to trust the writer, as we do, but also have to acknowledge that plays are never written alone, it's a collaborative process. But directors have to respect the writer. I find sometimes that directors want to 'write' the play. I try to encourage the writers. It always has to be their play. How do we do that in practice? It depends on the individual writer. Some people want deadlines, some people prefer diagrams and a day-long discussion, some people prefer you just leave them alone. It's better to find out about the writers and the type of work they do and tailor the help to the individual.

Hanna Slättne: I know that you've been working with different groups, like people from the Hindu speaking communities. How do we encourage people who have a story to say or to write, to share, but who might not easily come to us to write them?

Ashmeed Sohoje: In terms of working with people from different communities in our area, we work with young writers and try to attract people from the area, who are from different groups, but whom also have a British experience as well, so this culture is not alien to them. Although we try to attract those communities, we accept that they are also part of our community; they aren't separate. So, we try not to do it much differently. We still try to engage them in the same way we would treat the other writers. The difficulty for us is rather that we work with lots of first time writers. Ordinarily that's not so bad, but when you have to write for quite a big stage (that's the demand of our proscenium arch theatre) then that becomes a difficulty. That's more the difficulty rather than working with different communities.

Hanna Slättne: Brian, with "Nightswimming" you approach new work from a dramaturgical point of view. How does that work?

Brian Quirt: My interest in new writing is partly about discovering new writers and perhaps even more so discovering people saying things that haven't been said before, or if those things have been articulated before they are finding new ways to express them. The research, the discovery, the pursuit of those ideas and those individuals is what generates my interest in the work and secondly the puzzle of how to express those new ideas through that work.

"Nightswimming" is about ten years old. It's a non-producing company or as I call it "a dramaturgical company". What would that be? There are non-producing play development centres all across Canada (some nine or ten) and they have a network we are part of but we are not a play development centre in the sense that we don't have a membership or we're not serving an area or a region. "Nightswimming" is a different model in that we work entirely from commission: all the artists we work with are invited to work with us. I usually go to an artist whose work I find particularly interesting, let it be a play or dance or music; "I'm interested in commissioning you because I've seen something in your work that intrigues me and I'd love to hear about ideas that you're interested in pursuing. But I'm not really interested in the first couple of ideas on your list, maybe you want to offer those to a producing company whom have the carrot of offering you a production." What I can offer is a fairly substantial commission, but perhaps more importantly I can offer

freedom. I don't have a season to fill, I don't have slots that I have to find certain shows for, I don't have a particular audience, I don't have the marketing department that has any concerns about what type of work we do. I can offer them time, I can offer them freedom of pursuit and resources that they might need, from the obvious (like money and workshops and readings which we do a lot over the course of the year), to travel, research and links to collaborators in all the other fields we work in. Whether it's playwrights wanting to work with choreographers or choreographers wanting to work with leading actors in the country, that sort of mashing of forms; if it's interesting for the particular project then this is one of the great things we provide when it's appropriate for the artist of a particular commission.

The other aspect of "Nighswimming" is that while we continue to develop each of these commissions, of course we want to get them produced, even though that we are not going to produce them. So a lot of my work is about finding the appropriate company to match that project with. And when we commission something, although we can't guarantee its production, we do commit to work with and on that project and with that creator until it's produced. Whether it takes three years, which is a normal gestation period for of a piece of work in Canada, or ten years, as it is sometimes the case, particularly with large cast plays. We have several large cast plays which we have pursued because we can afford to, in a way that producing theatres often can't. The extra cost of workshoping and developing a large cast play when we don't have the fearsome possibility having to produce it allows us again the freedom to encourage our writers to work with large cast.

So, a large part of my work as the play is being developed is canvassing, soliciting, contacting and promoting the work as it develops. Informing people, using stuff like our brochure and the newsletter inside it and any other means, like trips to promote the company. And through promoting the company, our relatively unique model, I suppose, we promote the work of the writers, choreographers and other artists we consistently work with.

I'm happy to say that the idea seems to work effectively. Our shows do get produced, some of them had second productions and one of them is touring currently. That we are committed to the show regardless of how long it takes is something that I'm particularly happy about. Because the big problem in commissioning is that you can commission a show as many theatres do. And then the rub comes when the play that arrives is not actually of interest or isn't felt to be appropriate to the company who has commissioned it. What

do you do then? To pursue it in the larger interest of the theatre and the artist or cut the ties so you are not misleading the artist? We fortunately don't have that problem. I carefully choose the projects. If it's a dream project of the artist he's interested in and I'm interested in, it is guaranteed that we are not going to lose our interest, we'll support his dream and won't say at any point, "You know it's not right for us anymore". Sometimes projects dissolve because the artist moves on, or decides that it's not something they want to pursue; that's life and we absorb that, but in general we maintain the relationship with the show through the development process and through the production. I often direct the production or if I don't, I maintain the position of dramaturg. The producing theatre gets the credit for the premiere and we happily give that, we don't co-produce with them, we are not interested in that form of credit. So again, it keeps all the lines straight. So we offer producing theatres a development process that they often can't afford or don't have in-house and they get a show what they might not have generated otherwise. It seems like a really fruitful partnership.

I'd like to think that with "Nightswimming", because I can design (and for me dramaturgy is a designing process: how do you design the process for a particular show) I've had the happy opportunity over ten years to develop a company that is all about designing the process for individual shows. The company in fact is almost virtual. It has as minimal structure as possible; we don't have very many programmes, we don't organise festivals, we don't have events.

How could the process of developing new works be improved? There are things that would improve our work and perhaps the work of other people: more travel, being at events like this, going to conferences, but perhaps more importantly trying to figure out ways of exchange where we can not only talk about it, but periodically observe each other's work, I think that would be great benefit. It's a great weakness that dramaturgs never work together after a certain point and directors never work together after a certain point. You stop being fed by the observations of others which is so important as we develop as artists in our twenties and thirties then it ends.

And the other thing that we give is more time in the room for the creators and regular access to space. By space I mean that one of the great crises of the Canadian theatre is that we've priced our performance spaces out of reach, we made them inaccessible for the process of the creation of a work. Even in our smaller theatres and not-for-profit theatres the situation is such that we can't develop the work on that very

stage where it is designed to be performed. Yes, you can do a lot in rehearsal halls, but it's different, theatre spaces are different and we've cut ourselves off from them continually. And some of the programmes I do are called "pure research", which is a research-oriented effort that is not about development or production. We always do it in a theatre in a belief that work in theatres is in fact, different. It has a different quality. I think our practise would improve if we could work more consistently in theatre spaces, so that if we wanted to use the lights or the sound or the other resources, even if we chose not to, the opportunity of those being there would be good to have.

Katalin Trencsényi: How is your company funded?

Brian Quirt: It's funded quite generously by the federal government, particularly by the Canada Council for the Arts, also from the provincial government and the municipal government. Increasingly through foundations in the province of Ontario. And there are a number of private foundations that support performing arts quite substantially and through individual donations.

The rub of the design of our company is that we have no earned income, because we don't produce. And rather than being a weakness I figured out how to articulate that as a strength. It allows us to eliminate an enormous amount of overhead that would go toward the revenue anyway. It also means that there's no risk within our annual operating budget. The producing is always a risk. What would the box office be? Do I have enough money to be able to do that show every year? We never face that dilemma. We never have to have a certain amount for each year. If we raise less money in one year, we can defer things. The fluidity of the creative process allows us to massage things and never face a financial crisis or even a crunch. And I think we've been able to articulate that to the funding bodies and other patrons that in fact it allows us stability and allows us to do an enormous amount of work. We have about a dozen or fifteen active development projects on a budget of under \$100 000.

Katalin Trencsényi: Do you do showcases at the end of a project?

Brian Quirt: We often do public readings or presentations of works in development at the concluding or often just before our workshop finishes in the belief that it is of course important to have the work exposed. Both for promotional purposes, so the potential producers might come and see it, and also so we learn when the audience arrives and watches the work with us. We've increasingly taken to not doing them in the evening in the belief that if you do a workshop presentation in the evening, it becomes a show. Always. The

audience sees it differently and we see it differently. We do them in the afternoon now. Presentations are important particularly with projects with a very physical nature where the show has to be performed to be developed. Sometimes it's a single work in process showing, or in January we are doing a ten-performance run of a dance piece, because it's the only way to work on it, to present it over the course of two weeks.

Ashmeed Sohoye: Do you get anything from the box office when the piece is produced?

Brian Quirt: No. We make no contracts with the producers of our work other than an agreement that they will offer us a substantial credit, like a page in their programme to acknowledge and recognise the work we've put into creating these pieces. But we didn't want to be co-producers. That requires money that we didn't want to spend on the projects. With some of the shows we have agreements with the playwrights; subsidiary participation rights, which starts after a certain number of productions or after a very high level of box office take, so the show has to be very successful before we'd receive anything on it, which I think is only fair.

Hanna Slättne: Liz, you're a freelance literary manager and dramaturg and you've just started a research project, called "Innovation in America", looking at new plays by new playwrights. What structure and framework do you employ to support the development of a new work?

Liz Engleman: What I'm realising is that as much as the writer is the centre of the process, the other important thing is how do you create opportunities for writers to express themselves? That always has been my mission. I'm finding more and more that the dramaturg can be the generator of the project: the generator of an idea, the context or the form from which plays, events or even a festival can come out. So, I've started lots of different festivals or projects where writers have worked together in a kind of a community around an idea that they each write small plays.

What I'm working with now is that not every idea forms a play. Not every commission needs to be ninety pages. Like the play I've just worked on last February. It's called the Bill of (W)Rights. We took the actual American Bill of Rights with its ten amendments and we commissioned a writer to write an eight-minute play about how each of those amendments (one writer to each) affects our life today. What does it mean, the right to bear arms? How does that affect your life? So at the end we had ten eight-minute plays, which made one 80 page play that was set in the Mixed Blood Theatre, which is an old fire station. And the audience went through in ten groups, and each play was happening simultaneously. And after eight

minutes you went to another space. One piece was done in a dressing room, one piece was done in the room where they store the lights, one outside in a car; so you go through and by the end it all ends up as a contemporary meditation about what the Bill of Rights can mean today. But each writer was only responsible for their ten pages. So, I've been working on a lot of projects like that where the play would be one minute, three minutes, five minutes, twenty minutes or a full length. But it can come from my interaction or the creator's interaction with what's going on in the world today.

It's two sides of a coin. Sometimes it's figuring out who is the writer to whom I want to say: "What's on your mind? You've got great ideas. How can I commission you?" And that usually I can do when I work in a theatre. But when I'm not working in a theatre and I don't have the money to commission I still can have an idea and find people. Because it doesn't cost much to ask somebody to write a monologue, then you show it to someone else and he responds to it with another monologue then you send that to someone else. By the end we had this telephone conversation of monologues that ran around the world. It was like a Chinese Whisper game via telephones and emails. So you had a conversation of monologues around the world. The theme was to cross the border. Maybe you've never worked with this playwright before, so that was a border in your mind, or it was an actual geographical border. And each writer got \$100 and they worked on it for a week. So it's not that much money that you paid the writers for their monologues and still you had a play. And it didn't cost much, but the impact is large. It gave the writers an opportunity to collaborate. I find this, finding alternative ways to come up with an event more interesting than those years of sitting in a rehearsal room of one play, one month.

My other research project is "Innovation in the non-profit theatre in America". With a grant from the Theatre Development Fund (New York), Princeton University Centre for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies (with my involvement) was researching the landscape of new play development and production in the U.S. right now. We did a huge random sampling of hundreds of theatres around the country with an in-depth questionnaire about the kinds of work they were doing, about the theatre's size & budget, how were they working in co-productions, how many new plays were they doing, how many premieres were they doing with writers new to the theatre, how many times did they do a premiere with a writer who came back to the theatre, etc. Because it's not only about how many premieres you do, but also how that contributes to the national conversation.

We have found that there is an interesting relationship between mid-sized theatres. (We distinguish between small theatres, mid-sized theatres and large theatres.) The small theatres were theatres where they were actually taking the most risk on writers that no one had ever heard of. They are doing lots of readings, they are doing workshops and giving birth to the work of a playwright. Then once that play has established itself or the writer has been heard of, somebody comes from a large theatre and seeing that it's a safe bet takes up that playwright. And they are able to commission that playwright for his next play and re-commission for another play and they start to become a home for that playwright. The smaller theatres can't necessarily afford to do that, but they can expose him/her.

The mid-sized theatres were having the most problem entering into that conversation, because they might do a production of a play but it's been reviewed, it's been done, so the larger theatre can't necessarily take it and make it exciting. But with the small theatre it wasn't really a big deal, so the bigger theatre could have a relationship with a small theatre in an interesting way. So the mid-sized theatres came up with a network called National New Play Network. There are between 20 and 30 theatres that are part of that network trying to focus on a continuing life of new plays. Let's say this mid-size theatre loves a certain playwright. When they promote her/him they say "I'm part of this network of mid-sized theatres like myself". And four out of the network are interested in that work as well. I can't give you lots of money do to your play right now. You could wait around and see whether the bigger theatres will give you more money. Or the other theatres of our network will also pay to produce your play. So you're going to get four premieres of your play. So, it's not the same production, it's not like a co-production, but it's my invitation to say: "Work with me and you will also work with three others". So, it's four different theatres, four different directors and four different dramaturgs. So the playwright gets to see four different rehearsals and productions of the same play, even more the play can get developed between productions, so there might be four different scripts for the four productions. It's a nice way of being able to see your play and though it's not a development process, it's a production process whereby the play still can be developed. So the royalties that the playwright receives are obviously more than that one mid-sized theatre can give but could be equal to what a larger theatre would have given just for one production. So mid-sized theatres have started to work together saying: "Don't you want to get your play produced more than one time

rather than that one time and then it's killed?"

Lucy Linger: Picking up on this idea of several theatres doing the same production I was just wondering whether it works better in America because of the size of the country? Because by the time you'd get to the fourth production over here, the hype would be dead and nobody would be interested in the play.

Liz Engleman: That would be interesting if you'd start to think to network with Ireland for example, so you'd spread it out a bit more: have a premiere in Belfast then in London then in Birmingham. But that's a good question because the network restricts productions between a certain distance so that theatres wouldn't compete with each other.

Richard Shannon: It makes perfect sense. The problem culturally here is in my perception is that there is a great deal of competition between new writing houses in the UK and in London particularly. The model you describe is very interesting to me personally, because next year with "Playgrounding" we are going to work with a number of regional theatres to develop similar models. The amount of investment in individual writers which get maybe a showcase of one production then the thing is dead is awful. And it's awful for the individual writer too. So, it's very encouraging to hear that it functions, because it's something we want to try.

Liz Engleman: If you're interested, the website is:

www.nnpn.org

Stephen Castell: Is that something you'd consider trying in Europe? Although we have English language, we are also part of Europe...

Hanna Slättne: Yes, that's an interesting idea to return to. First let's move to our fourth panellist, Abigail. Having been in lots of the new writing venues in Britain how do you see the way we deal with new work?

Abigail Gonda: If I can answer it jokingly what does new writing mean to me, I'd say it's a sore back (because my bag is always heavy with lots of scripts) while I have not been able to pay my rent. Although it can give you freedom it is also sad when economic reasons dictate the theatre done. At the Latchmere Th. where I worked before and helped to launch an interesting new writing venue in London we had absolute freedom, because we had no money. But I find it problematic relying on people to do stuff for no money. So working at the Latchmere in a way was fantastic, but after a couple of years of doing that, investing the better part of my 24 hours working there it became a strain. There is a lot of good will in theatre, but there's a problem in the fact that most of these small theatres are hugely responsible for shows which later

get picked up by big theatres. How important these theatres are, and yet people say you've done a great job when you've managed to get a group of 15 actors to work for nothing; it's not how you'd prove that artistic process.

Right now I feel excited working freelance, working for different theatres, although most of my work is at the Royal Court Theatre where they have an incredibly supportive system in place for young playwrights. And people from the Young Writers Programme are feeding into the main stage of the Royal Court or are picked up by other theatres. At the Royal Court most of my days are dedicated to writing feedback to all the 600 young playwrights who had applied this year and make sure that they all feel supported. Luckily they have the resources to have 2-5 people to read each play and at the script meetings we discuss every script for 15-20 minutes, sometimes even for half an hour. So each play is really carefully considered. And the Educational Department of the theatre is working hard reaching out to young people, creating a dialogue between London and the wider region. And reading hundreds of plays a week, what I'm getting excited about is that young voices are very interesting.

Hanna Slättne: For those young writers (aged 13 - 25) do they have opportunities like workshops, possibilities of meeting actors and other collaborators to help them to understand the theatre process?

Abigail Gonda: Yes, the great thing about the Royal Court is that there are endless tutorials and workshops that happen.

Liz Engleman: It was interesting to hear you talking about reading hundreds of scripts each week and that made me think about what Brian was saying in terms of that it's not always a script first, it's the person. And I remember when I was working on a festival where there was a play contest every year. And we'd read about 1000 ten-minute plays. One got an award, three got produced during the festival. Obviously, it wasn't about to find the world's best ten-minute play, it was rather finding voices. Advertising for a ten-minute play contest is like saying: "Date me, I'll marry one of you." To find a voice that you want to flirt with later on or if that ten-minute play is really strong, puts the writer in a family and maybe you're going to commission him/her to write a one act and then a maybe you commission him/her to write a full length piece. But it's through reading through the page you are really trying to find the voice of a person with whom you are going to spend the next ten years working with. And after reading hundreds or thousands of plays you don't want to read plays anymore. After ten years I found that I didn't want to read any more plays, there were too many bad fonts and bad spelling in front of me. But I knew who were

writing them and I knew who was out there. And over a time you know whom you want to work with. And you go back to those people. And they will recommend someone else and the connections with people will start to give you the answers rather than a submission in a manila envelope.

Abigail Gonda: I'd like to mention one more thing. In the LMDA's newsletter you can always find synopses of new plays. It is a great resource and I know that so many of the plays have ended up at production companies. It is so useful. And I don't know whether there's a way whereby you could have it over here?

Hanna Slättne: We've been looking at lots of different ways of generating new work. Now I'd like to examine what do we mean by workshopping new work? How do we look at structures with writers in a workshop situation or one-one?

Richard Shannon: Can I respond to that? First though this kind of meeting is useful in terms of communicating intelligence about writers, in terms of wanting to develop people. I detect nationally a change in mood in the way literary managers connect with each other. There's the Writer's Guild Forum, which is held every six months and something else that I'm initiating which will be a regular meeting of various dramaturgs and literary managers around the country. You spoke about how we respond to writers. The reality for me, and I imagine for other theatres, is that the volume of unsolicited material you get is vast. You cannot and should not encourage people you are not 100% committed to. I cannot feedback to every script. I read 5 pages and then the end. I am fighting very hard for an increased budget, and a proper reading panel, the whole paraphernalia that Soho Th. might have.

The other issue is commissioning. It's fantastic that with "Nightswimming" you have a commissioning factory that can afford not to produce, but Polka can't afford not to go with the commission. I have pulled or blocked a number of commissions because it wasn't working and that was a catastrophe because of the financial commitment for us. In terms of structuring workshops there are a number of things. When you are committed to a writer it's gestation time that's key. So many writers are rushed into production for all the wrong imperatives and I think this damages the theatre and the writer.

Also I'm sick of reading playscripts which are really television or film scripts. I have worked in all media, particularly radio - I come from a radio drama production background both as a writer and a director - and I see people that don't write for a theatre space, don't smell theatre, have no understanding of theatre. The entire raison d'être of "Playgrounding" is to

expose people to the theatre, to get their hands dirty with theatre processes and get them collaborating with different theatre artists. The writers come up with a fragment; a synopsis and 5 pages and that will be workshopped for a week. It's not product driven either and I think that's absolutely vital at that stage in a scripts life.

As it happens, last year's "Playgrounding" led to two straight commissions. Both of these plays are new works, with unknown writers and unknown titles. Now Polka has made a habit of producing this kind of work over the last two years and the drop-off in box office has been unbelievable and a huge shock to our systems because we believed new work of excellence will find an audience. Well yes and no. Polka is known for a particular kind of brand, it attracts a particular type of audience. For us to produce work for teenagers or that is unknown we will have to put structures in place well in advance. We're learning on the job. Roy Williams is producing a play for us in a year's time, and his play is for teenagers. We did a play by a wonderful new, first time writer developed through the PAL's Lab, which reminded me a little of "Nightswimming" as a highly resourced development agency. We took that play on because it was the best play that passed over my desk in 10 years and it did not find its teenage audience because we do not have the right brand or environment. What is so tragic about this? Because the writer did not find an audience, I think the writer was set back. I certainly feel that play desperately needs a second production. I'm increasingly angered by the attitude that when a play is produced somehow it's soiled goods, it's been done and you've explored it! How the hell is a writer going to learn? Another point, Brian, you were making about workshopping after you've shown the work and learning from the audience. For me that is an absolutely key stage in the process. It's vital. You learn more exposing that work to a live audience, you add to that knowledge.

John Keefe: Two reactions to that. There have been so many initiatives over the years to develop new audiences and they tend to fail. Why? I think we have to recognise that audiences are as narrow minded, as reactionary, as conservative as any other group in society. There is no god-given right for new writing to attract an audience.

The other is gestation periods. Yes, gestation for all sorts of procedures, parts of the processes, not just the writing, I would urge.

My next point is that there has to be dramaturgical input into the production and staging process also. In other words, the dramaturg is more than just a literary editor or literary manager with no disrespect to people whose function that is.

These are not the same roles. A dramaturg has to be connected not only with the commissioning or developing or supporting of the new work, the dramaturg has to then be part of the production process. So the collaboration goes from being with the writer to the director to the production and I think that is something that is lost. It's not happening enough and there is other resistance to this. If you're going to talk about dramaturgical input than you have to look at those procedures and processes (and I emphasise the plural!). It is a complex collaboration and the final part of that collaboration, coming back to the first point, is the audience. How long does it take to develop an audience? Do we need to investigate what audience's like as well as what they don't like?

Stephen Castell: That's an interesting point because the most important part of all of this is the audience. How far is the dramaturg, indeed anybody (apart from the marketing people who might do market research) from the audience? Is it something that the dramaturg, who stands between developing new writers and the product getting to an audience, should be concerned with? Is it our role, or your role as the dramaturg, to go out and do the 'audiencing'? What sort of audiences and what sort of plays? Isn't that the question everybody should be asking?

Frances Stirk: Hampstead Th., its no secret, have had financial difficulties adjusting to its beautiful new premises and having a 325-seat theatre. That had to change some of the ways we approach commissioning. I think in its history Hampstead was able to give open commissions to writers that the artistic team were excited about and now we're in a position where we will not commission blind. We have to work from a commission proposal. Its an interesting vantage point where you know there is a writer who is exciting but unless they give you that page that you think could work in that space and for a loyal audience that you don't want to alienate its unviable; that conflicts with your trying to bring in a new audience. When all of those questions are being asked when you're being presented with a treatment its an unenviable position. It's not a way you would want to approach working with writers.

Stephen Castell: Does anybody have any mechanisms for doing 'audiencing' actually at the time of commissioning? Actually getting your audience involved in the initial choice of what gets developed?

Frances Stirk: Audiences are quite fickle though, aren't they?

Lucy Linger: It's interesting what you were saying about the dramaturgs role in terms of what audiences to attract. I think because theatre is a non-static art and for an audience, that

the writer, director, dramaturg and actors are creating art but creating it with a person in mind to receive it. I think it's absolutely vital not just in terms of your brand, but in terms of what audience you want to attract and what you want to say.

Stephen Castell: Shouldn't they be brought into the process at a much earlier point? How do we do that?

Katalin Trencsényi: The Place did an interesting thing recently with its "Place Prize" for young choreographers. Each night, the audience's favourite work won £1000. So the audience whittled down all the competing choreographers' work and at the end they decided who should be commissioned by the theatre to do a full-length production.

Liz Engleman: Or you can invite the audience in for the whole process. Ann Bogard and City Company did something called "Cabin Pressure" where audience's were interviewed about what it is like being an audience member and from those interviews they selected audience members to be part of the whole rehearsal process and created a piece about an audience in and for a theatre. Quite interesting.

Hanna Slättne: I'd like to come back to what we've been looking at prior to this: developing work and the different constraints placed upon us. I'd like to follow up on John's point about the dramaturg. Obviously I feel passionately about that. Particularly in the UK, where we have so little time to rehearse, until we can expand and try new models that to have an extra brain in the process from the beginning to the end. Someone who is standing 'outside', trying to engage from the outside and the inside. I think it's really exciting to have that person on board. What can we do to extend how we work that will incorporate engaging the audience. Indeed, having a play on at several places at the same time may be an advantage because you can bring up a different kind of audience engagement with a script and with theatre as a medium. Indeed, how different audiences interpret a script. I think that is a model that is interesting both from an audience's point of view and a practitioner point of view. Now the collaborators. We need people involved from the inception of creating new work who are exchanging ideas and challenging ideas and the process all the way through. I would like to hear what the writers in the room think about that and how you look upon an idea and sharing an idea. How would you like to do that, exposing an idea to a group of different theatre practitioners?

Sara Clifford: What do you mean exactly?

Hanna Slättne: From a dramaturg's point of view I would be an additional person to the relationship between the writer and director, for example. And bringing in other people, like a

choreographer or musicians and those kinds of processes when you put together more of a devising team and a writer. The notion of the idea and who has ownership of the idea seems to be quite a big issue. Where we're talking about a collaborative process where ideas are pulled apart and put back together. For the writer, who very often initiates an idea, how does this scenario of people questioning his or her work sounds?

Sara Clifford: I think you have to be fairly robust as a writer. I think a lot of early career writers would find that difficult. It would be fantastic to think you could ask early career writers to sit in a room and open up what they've been thinking about to all that range of influences, but you can imagine scenarios where people would find that really difficult and it's a fragile process. As people become more confident with their writing it's really exciting. Going back to the idea of being a collaborator in a team that is the theatre process. You initiate the idea but it does become collective, there comes the director, there comes the lighting designer. If you can bring those ideas on earlier rather than becoming disassociated from the process which can happen when you're in rehearsal or can get even worse, as you said before, when writers can completely lose it. Like film when you can't even be credited at the end. That's something that theatre can still hold on to, that the writer still has the initial idea or impulse, to still retain the ownership of the idea I think. I remember Tony Craig saying to me that the writer of the project is the person who structures the project; that is usually the writer but it could be somebody else. You can have all those influences, you can have the wonderful week of working, but at the end of the week you take that back and as the writer it's your project, it's your play.

Richard Shannon: It can be damaging for a writer to absorb wholesale influences if it isn't part of their voice. Dramaturgy in the UK is a real hot potato, particularly amongst directors. One of my hats is that of director but I'm also a dramaturg and literary manager. Those three roles are very distinct and the timescales of those three roles is very distinct. For example if a company had three months, a dramaturg could function very well because everybody would be quite comfortable with deconstruction, taking an idea apart, going down a blind alley and coming back, trying different things stylistically. Well, the rhythm for most rehearsals isn't even 6 weeks. How can I as a director afford to have that third dialogue with another person who could probably contribute hugely? I'm sympathetic to dramaturgy but I'm working with directors who are absolutely opposed to it. They think they do that anyway, they don't have the time

to build what I think is the most important ingredient, a shared aesthetics and a shared sense of exploration and trust.

Fundamental to all the work we do is relationships and the ability to take a risk with your idea and I think a lot of directors are quite insecure when faced with a third voice, friendly and constructive as this may be. One has to battle through time constraints and personal relationships. And how does the writer cope with the third relationship? I have a recent experience of being a dramaturg in a team and handing over the role as I moved out of that artistic team and then seeing my ideas not accepted, all the work I'd put in go completely by the board because of a new dialogue which revised and backtracked on the original ideas. I kept putting notes in that were completely ignored; now I'm in a more senior position in the organisation but it's too late to alter that dynamic. It all becomes very protective, suddenly an 'us-against-them-or-me' conflict. So it's a very complex set of relationships and the key to these, as you hinted at it Hanna, is for the dramaturg to be built into the process from the beginning so that it's a natural part of the processes.

Liz Engleman: I think it's interesting that when you find a play people ask "who's the right director for this? Let's get the right person for this play in terms of sensibility, in terms of aesthetics, whatever". But then often there's the dramaturg at the theatre where it's being done and then boom they're the dramaturg, they're working on that play. The sensibility, aesthetics and personality might not be right but they work there. It's like a blind date with your dramaturg, hiring a dramaturg for the evening to work on your play but there is no established trust, it might not be the right match. I find the most successful relationships are usually when people know each other from the start. You're the right dramaturg and you're the right director for this play. Let's be in a room. Who needs to be in the room to make this play work? We're all working towards the play and how can the dramaturg, director and writer work together can be useful towards making it happen. It's all towards this.

We often talk in LMDA about how dramaturgy is a function and a role and how the role needs to be there. Sometimes maybe the director has an amazing dramaturgical mind, or an actor in the play is forming that, asking those same questions. So forcing a dramaturg on a production isn't a good idea either. It's figuring out when it needs to be a role and when it needs to be a function.

Katalin Trencsényi: I think a huge part of our work as dramaturgs is diplomacy. I've been in some projects where it's been a condition set by the Arts Council to have a

dramaturg on board. Then I went to meet the directors and they smiled at me with gritted teeth. My policy was to show them what I could offer, a range of things I could do for the company and for the production and then let them choose what they want. This way it seemed to work out for me. We shouldn't force anything on a company. We need to communicate well and be tactful.

Brian Quirt: When I do production dramaturgy, which I don't do so much anymore, I always made my commitment to the playwright in the belief that it was always better to have a bad or weak production of a better play than a better production of a weaker play. There's always the hope then that the production isn't ideal, but you want the play, regardless of that production, to get as far as possible. So as a dramaturg when I was working at Factory Theatre in Toronto, which produces exclusively new plays, I had to commit to the playwright. And when a director comes on board, (and yes, you hope you bring a director on board as early as possible in the development of the process), the relationship between director and playwright can be firmly established before beginning rehearsal, and also a relationship with the theatre and the artistic director; so those notes can have value rather than just being about authority, and ultimately between the director and dramaturg.

And sometimes that becomes a relationship and sometimes it doesn't. I try to create a context where if that didn't happen it didn't matter because I always had exchange with the playwright, and that their sense of being supported was always a constant. If that is established, that the theatre's responsibility is to create an environment for the playwright, for them to feel comfortable and confident regardless of how the production was going was met, then I felt I'd done a substantial part of my job. You can't fix everything and nor should you have to and sometimes productions didn't need or want a dramaturg because someone else is doing it.

I want to draw your attention to an edition of Canadian Theatre Review I co-edited over the course of the summer. It's about creative research and new play development across Canada. One article is about stage managers as dramaturgs. Stage managers see more rehearsal processes and see more directors and actors at work over the course of their careers than any of us will. They can have an extremely valuable aesthetic view (not all do, of course), and that can be a valuable part of the dramaturgical process. Another article is about a company in Edmonton that has an in-house designer who designs all their productions and is part of the creation of their productions from moment one. And again, essentially plays a dramaturgical role. I've often used designers in

workshops because their vantage point is often profoundly useful in terms of storytelling. They're looking at certain things that are critical and highlight the nature of the storytelling at any given point.

One creator in Toronto, speaking back to the audience, is a writer and creates rule plays which he workshops over development periods, substantial amounts of time. He creates an elaborate series of rules, which becomes a thick book that governs the action of what happens on stage. He produces each piece three times and the opening night each time is the last performance of the three or four weeks that they work throughout that process. The price of the ticket goes up each week as more of the elements are put in place. It's a particular and perhaps a luxurious way of working but they prefer to see it as essential and I think that's what we have to get our mind around. They work on it each day and perform each night and are always adjusting and responding to the audience and open on the last night - the highest ticket price. They then wrap it up and come back to it in a year or two and it's worked very successfully. Not every show is equal in quality, of course not, but it's a premise they believe in because of the process that it allows the audience and the artists.

John Keefe: It sounds like what you've got there is an ethos. An ethos in what we call the ensemble. A word that should be defined, and not misused as it often is, as a commitment by the writer, director, designer, dramaturg, actors to be part of a continuous workshoping process

I suspect that most people would not want to take that on board for a variety of reasons outlined by other people in the room. But what you've got there is an extraordinary example which represents a fundamental principle of ethos.

Brian Quirt: And it's an extreme example and I'm not recommending everyone take it on. I don't either. But there are elements of it and premises underlying it that are really valuable. My own approach and I'm going to toss a word in the middle that one of my commissioned writers used, is something called a "researchal". It's not a workshop and it's not a rehearsal and it's not just pure research, it's a "researchal". A name to a thing I realised we were doing anyway. It's something I started doing initially to give the playwright, or whatever creator happens to be at the centre of the piece, more power to design the process around them. In several cases we've given money to a playwright or an actor and said here's a chunk of money and we want you to use that in a way you want to create a piece. Instead of us booking the space and setting up the rehearsals, you do that when they fit your schedule and your life and you tell us when they are and

whether you want me there or not.

Eventually it develops into something, which resembles a more traditional rehearsal process, and we are invited back in. The relationship is launched on their terms essentially.

Sara Clifford: Can I just say that I've just been given a bursary by the Arts Council to do pretty much that and to employ actors when I'm ready to workshop the piece and bring on a dramaturg. That seems to just give the power back to me. I really had to push the Arts Council to get that but I really feel that whole process is so empowering as a writer. To feel that it comes from you, it is with you, the whole process has started with you.

Ashmeed Sohoje: This is a luxury of working outside a building and the demands of a building. And outside the demands of a very limiting approach, the contracts of commissions which here don't seem to reflect or understand the process of how plays are made. All those demands of the contract hold the writer back.

Richard Shannon: It's very interesting about the role shifting, working outside the box you've been given. It's a power relationship. Essentially all dramaturgs and literary managers will ultimately fall in with the artistic directors decision. The extent to which you are listened to depends on the culture and ethos of the building or company you are in. I think that's a goal to work for, that the voice of that person is heard more powerfully. I also think in terms of liberating the writer from just that role. In your case Sara, you're the director, and producer and all of a sudden you may hire a director. The Writers Guild, many years ago, did a programme called "Five plays in five days". The writers interviewed the director's and appointed them. I was one of the lucky ones to get chosen and it was an extraordinary reversal of the telescope and I felt really privileged. Liberating yourself from hierarchy is key to the dramaturgical process. What you just said about stage management is fascinating. In this country, I don't know about Canada, I certainly find an anti-intellectual tradition in theatre that is suspicious of any European model per se and anything research-led which is outside the bread-and-butter process on the floor. My understanding of dramaturgy is limited but I do know that it's also a very practical exploration of theatre languages which I think is enormously valuable and stage managers will have a whole host of different languages to offer. I think we need to be less precious about these roles.

Hanna Slättne: I'm quite excited about what we've been talking about. Shifting the power back to the writer or to anyone with a vision. With my Dramaturgs' Network hat on I'd like to look, in the future, at how we get on with each other

in various different models so that dramaturgs get to develop their craft. At the end of the day we need to have really good dramaturgs if the role is going to work when it is appropriate.

With my literary manager hat on it can be so disempowering when you sit with a wonderful script and you can see lots of things in it but it doesn't fit into an artistic policy and you want to say something to the writer but you know you can't promise anything.

Liz Engleman: Speaking with an LMDA hat on for a second, there is the mission of LMDA, some values that we came up with a few years ago. We're a 20-year organisation. Our point is to defend the function, explore the practice and promote the profession. We realised over time that when we started out we were almost like 'Dramaturgs Anonymous'. Who are we and what do we do? That went on for a long time and it was hard to get others on board with us when we didn't know what we were doing or why either. It was only in finding strength and confidence in what we do that people want to come on board and respect us as an organisation because "look at what we've done to the field".

Just in response to what you said; you have this script and these ideas and you know these ideas won't be heard in my theatre. How do I use a network of other dramaturgs and literary managers? I say you need to look at this script for your theatre, or you "X theatre" need to know this writer and commission them for another play because our theatre is not going to. It's about finding the other avenues to get work out there versus just your own theatre box. I've started to feel that we might work for a theatre in America but we also work for the American Theatre, and internationally too, so it's negotiating that. Yes, we are institutional sometimes but we're using our role in the institution for a larger purpose.

Lucy Linger: I wanted to comment on giving back the power to the playwright. I went up to Edinburgh with a show where I was employed by the playwright and the producer and I had a completely different experience. It was the playwright's first play so I think that had an impact. It's difficult when a writer is starting out and they're feeling very precious about their work. I would certainly not work in that situation again as a director where the funding side is coming from them because you have to have the final decision being made by someone who is familiar with theatre and knows the audience. I think it's an interesting idea giving more power back to the writer but it has to be measured against experience and the responsibilities that come with that when we are talking about showing to the public and the importance that has in the development of the play.

Again, it's a similar experience; we wanted to show to the public to get that feedback and the writer was keen as well. Unfortunately we had press reaction to that which we weren't aware of and the writer then completely clamed up to the point now where she is not actually continuing with the process because she took such a big knock from it. We should have been more aware at that early stage in her career we should have sheltered her more. I think when you show to the public, handing over power to the writer is interesting but we need to think about the responsibility of the collaborative team, whether they can bear that responsibility.

Hanna Slättne: I'm afraid, we need to cut it here. Thank you all for coming and for an interesting discussion.

(Transcribed and edited by: Elyssa Livergrant, John Keefe and Katalin Trencsényi)

A Director's Diagnosis

By Ken Bentley

I'm a big fan of American writing. It's my opinion that, currently, the Americans are writing more good new plays than we are in the UK. There, I've said it.

I don't have a patriotic axe to grind. It's just that the Americans are telling great stories and they're telling them well. They've learnt to create vivid works of fiction and mythology based on their own contemporary culture and society. But why, right now, are they capable of doing this more consistently than we are? What is it about the development process in the USA that fosters so much good new work? What do writers have in the US that they don't have in the UK? These are questions I'm always searching for answers to and, when the Dramaturgs' Network announced a panel discussion on new writing in association with the LMDA, I was there with bells on.

It was a candid discussion and it soon became clear that the Americans and the Canadians are streets ahead in the development of new work. In comparison our literary departments seem like glorified script reading services. It was readily admitted by all that it's extremely unlikely an unsolicited manuscript will be picked up and produced in the UK. Where does this leave our playwrights? How do they improve their writing and practice their craft? With fringe theatres charging up to £2000 a week for venue hire it's no longer the place to cut your teeth, the National Theatre Studio is the only place I know of that can afford to embrace any kind of development process.

Since learning about 'Nightswimming' at the panel discussion, the company has become my benchmark for new play development. It describes itself as 'devoted to advancing dramaturgy and play development in Canada' and by all accounts they're doing a bloody good job of it. Anybody serious about developing new work, speculatively, freelance or within an institution or producing venue, should visit their website (www.nightswimmingtheatre.com) and learn from their example.

It seems that the Americans and Canadians have models and processes in place to actively develop new writing. Be it through a small scale theatre company, producing venue or development initiative, writers can find the help and support they need to develop an idea, and when their idea has been developed there's a network of dramaturgs, literary managers, directors and producing venues that communicate and work with each other to find the right home for a new play.

What does the North American writer have that our writers don't? Hope.

A Dramaturg's Deduction

By John Keefe

As so often in a 'seminar-discussion' situation there are many points and ideas that are raised but not picked up in the subsequent exchanges; the outstanding 'baton' that was not grasped was the issue of 'audience' and yet this was circled around many times. Thus not only should the question be 'why is this being written?' but also 'for whom'? These are the kind of hard questions that theatre seems so often to avoid.

It is quite clear that the initiative-project that caught all our imaginations (amid gasps of envy...) was "Nightswimming", of which more elsewhere. But I found myself musing on other questions that came out of the presentations and exchanges. If we put 'new writing' at the centre and focus of theatre activity then what hard questions must we put as dramaturgs to the writers and producing houses concerning the purpose and quality of such work.

Thus at one point I found myself asking (to my self) "is the theatre policy being discussed here to encourage writing as a social-personal therapy? What is the artistic purpose or intention behind the stories which 'need to be told'?" Because without such artistic intention all we have is scheduling or funding fodder which shows the world as it is rather than how it can/must/should be changed.

“Nightswimming” seemed to have an artistic ethos which was predicated on a theatre maker proving or demonstrating they had something artistically interesting to say as well as writing a personal-social document, and therefore a work that was worth supporting and developing. Thus I agree with Richard Shannon’s point that too many new scripts are rushed into production when they would better benefit from a proper gestation period when the writing and performance potential could be better realised.

But I was also struck by Liz Engleman’s image of the search for new writers/writing matched to directors and dramaturgs and theatres as “Date me and perhaps we’ll marry”. I liked the brutal yet tender honesty of this. Because it’s a search which we hope will have a successful consummation - but whether one of convenience or bliss will always only be answered in the processes themselves. Truly a “blind date”.

A number of dramaturgical principles were given which need more prominence, best seen I feel as practical questions i.e.:

- ‘How should the dramaturg be part of designing a process for a show?’,
- ‘What structuring frameworks and principles are to be used in developing new work?’,
- ‘How is a new work to be script-read so that the potential of its form as well as content may be realised?’.

I was struck by the desire for processes to be collaborative and the writer to be part of a robust yet supportive tension between the creative elements of theatre yet... How often this is not the case under pressures of funding/policy/ego/negative pragmatism is much more the common experience, sadly.

One has to ask, of course, to what degree writers themselves are in denial regarding collaboration.

The dramaturg can only be ‘advocate-critic-friend’ to the writer, the work, the staging if welcomed as the close collaborator who maintains a critical distance, to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar on the basis of the structuring framework and principles I would advocate.

A number of initiatives were described as means of encouraging new writing (some of these elsewhere characterised as gimmicks at the expense of proper development) but none came near the selection, incubation and gestation ethos that marks “Nightswimming” as a unique initiative, although some ventures were outlined that are working on the same ground.

The dramaturg’s role was also given a push into new directions e.g.: why not be proactive as well active in what is

already ongoing?

My final image for my self was the script as a 'lab for development'; the centre ground for the ongoing processes with which the writer, the dramaturg, the director, the designer engage when reading a script with an eye and an ear for its performance potential. How it's images and metaphors and statements and passions and resonances will be present on stage, how it will allow the actors and figures to be present on stage in both body and voice, how it will challenge it's audience.

This will be tested in the 'researchal', whose outcome will be then tested on some form of stage in some form of performance in some kind of theatre.

However the central questions remain.

Perhaps they always will remain questions.

A Playwright's Perspective

By Sara Clifford

I was asked to attend the discussion on new writing at the Albery Theatre by Hanna Slättne from the Dramaturgs' Network, now working as Literary Manager for Tinderbox Theatre Company in Belfast, and Chair for the event. It was only about halfway through the morning, that I realised that, although I have written around twelve produced plays, I have rarely worked with a dramaturg - usually I work with the director, and have been lucky to have directors who also have these dramaturgical skills. On the couple of occasions that I have had dramaturgical input, I have been fascinated both by the role of the dramaturg within the company - Advocate? Critic? Friend? (sad, we writers, we don't get out much, get our friends where we can...) - and also the dramaturgical input itself, which is independent of production and, presumably, aimed at facilitating the writer to write the best play s/he can. Whether the play will then be produced is, of course, another matter, with many a Jolly Good Play being consigned to a bottom drawer, as the theatres, with their over-commissioning policies, may only choose one (or even none) of their commissions to actually produce - and you try selling a play that the Soho has turned down. Talk about soiled goods!

Anyway, I digress. As I say, I was keen to see dramaturgs up close and personal, to hear what they had to say, and how it might be relevant to me as a playwright (let's not beat about the bush here), and also how the international panel might agree and differ on the subject.

So, after introductions, we heard from a distinguished panel - the American LMDA president, Liz Engleman; the Canadian LMDA chair, Brian Quirt; Abigail Gonda, currently at the Royal Court Th.; and Ashmeed Sohoje, from Theatre Royal Stratford East. The theme of the day was about developing new plays, and how different theatres and countries respond to this challenge.

Ashmeed kicked us off with his assertion that the writer must always be at the centre of the work, but that the same writer must understand that a play is never written alone, that the final piece is the result of a collaborative process. I couldn't help but agree here, having been lucky enough to workshop several of my plays with actors at an early stage, a process I find invaluable, and something which relates also to the dramaturgical input - although I feel strongly that the final text must always belong to the writer, the person who structures all the information and input.

He also wondered how the British theatre establishment could respond to young writers from different cultures or under-represented communities, when the majority of directors and dramaturgs come from the dominant culture; and how to encourage new writers to write for a bigger stage (such as Stratford East), when they usually write for studio spaces. Perennial problems, easily solved by increasing the number of culturally diverse theatre professionals at senior management level, and the amount of money available for productions. Simple! Hmmm.... To be continued, I think...

Next up was Brian Quirt, who encourages new ideas and new ways of saying them. His company, "Nightswimming", is outstandingly different, in that it has no intention of producing plays, and acts as a kind of dramaturgical agency, working with writers on their 'wilder ideas' - he will never go for the first couple of ideas on the writer's list, feeling they will get commissioned elsewhere. What he likes are the couple of stray things at the end, the ones you think - well, they'll never go for that. Well, Brian does. And he also likes to encourage large cast plays. He sees all this as a development service, if you like, for the companies that might want this kind of play, but cannot afford the time or money to develop them themselves. Inspiring - you could almost see the British people thinking, well that will never happen here. And yet, why not?

Liz felt she was creating opportunities for writers to express themselves, and generating ideas and projects. She likes to link this work with high profile events, such as her Festival of Short plays on the theme of the Bill of Rights, when she commissioned 10 x 8 minute plays - one writer on each amendment - with site specific performances. If I

remember correctly, she paid each writer \$100, conveniently raising the issue of writers' pay. It was pointed out that this was a good start for early career writers, but it seemed that in the States playwrights cannot expect to get paid in the same way as they are here - and certainly not as they are in Canada. It seems to be seen as more of a hobby, until you hit the Broadway (or TV) Jackpot, and then you start earning - although then you probably lose all control of your idea, watching it being rewritten by someone else, or writing virtually anonymously as part of a team.

This issue of money ran throughout her presentation, as she described ways in which producing theatres might collaborate and all put some money in a pot, so that you would have four productions of the same play. This was felt to be a good idea in somewhere as big as the US, but not something that would work in the somewhat smaller UK.

Abigail then talked about her work, and particularly the importance of responding to 13-25 year olds and how to offer a theatre vocabulary to young writers who usually watch television and may rarely see any theatre. She reiterated the need to develop culturally diverse readers, script editors and dramaturgs, and how difficult it was to respond to a play written in language the average script editor might not grasp, or that plays with form, challenging the traditionally accepted forms.

Matthew Crampton from the Old Vic Th. contributed here with his experience, where they do not claim to be a reading service and will not accept unsolicited scripts: the writers he is currently working with are very well known (and indeed one of them was mentioned by three different dramaturgs in the same day). He is also experimenting with form, commissioning 10-minute plays created in 24 hours - a process I felt was actively trying to induce nervous breakdowns in writers, although he assured us they all loved responding to the deadline. I did wonder why we had to keep coming up with these slightly gimmicky pieces, why we couldn't just be paid - properly, mind - to write plays and work on them with a dramaturg and maybe some actors. And then get it produced. Hmm... another one to be continued...

The discussion then broadened, to include the dramaturg's role in rehearsal, which someone had renamed: 'researchal', a self-explanatory word.

There were no real answers about what the relationship is between the dramaturg and the director - as I say, my experience was that the literary manager loved the work she had commissioned and worked on, but the final decision lay with the Artistic Director. We talked about the difference between literary managers and freelance dramaturgs, and

how LMs are paid to commission and develop work for that company, as opposed to work with the writer and develop that writer and his/her work, and this led on to a discussion about the empowerment of the writer and what the writer's relationship was with dramaturgs. And here I was able to contribute something, as I have recently received a bursary from the Arts Council, which I consider to be quite empowering (and, as it turned out, closer to the Canadian model than any other). I have received an upfront fee, which is about twice the normal amount for writing the first two drafts. What really makes it special is that I have also been given some money to pay actors to workshop it, and a dramaturg to edit it. This is revolutionary for writers, and although I am fairly sure I was successful in my application because they knew I was working closely with a company and therefore had a stronger chance of production, it is still a breakthrough for the Arts Council to acknowledge this and to trust me to write a play and pay other professionals to collaborate with me. Writer as Business? Writer as Entrepreneur? And this is, of course, where the freelance dramaturg comes in - because you can work on those plays with us, keep your artistic integrity, and be part of the creation of a play that is brand new and can be sold on somewhere - and is NOT soiled goods! We all win!

And even the Writers' Guild were interested in how I did it, something we can encourage other writers to do and find a return to the old system of bursaries, lost in the ACE reshuffle.

The morning finished, and I was left feeling that dramaturgs were mostly a rather altruistic bunch, who genuinely wanted to develop new work with new and different writers, as well as wanting to work with more established writers to push them on and develop their work even further - and yet were then happy to sit back and let the writer continue with her or his work, not necessarily even receiving credit for their work.

My version of events is somewhat biased, but I say, all power to dramaturgs, and that the fight should continue for an independent eye for the script.

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The *Dramaturgs Network* is an organisation of professional dramaturgs and literary managers. Its aim is:

- 1, To promote dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg in British theatre and performance arts

through practical means;

2, To create a nation-wide network for practicing dramaturgs and a forum for support, shared ideas, knowledge and resources.

You can find more information about the network on:

www.dramaturgy.co.uk

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