

The Dramaturg, Today

edited by Piersandra Di Matteo

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Residential Program for Dramaturg with Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi, Piersandra Di Matteo, Riccardo Fazi, Sandra Noeth, Elise Simonet. In the frame of *Les Cliniques Dramaturgiques* (Festival TransAmériques, Montréal) curated by Riccardo Fazi, in collaboration with Jessie Mill e Elise Simonet, promoted by Fabulamundi Playwriting Europe: Beyond Borders? Short Theatre, Rome 8–12 September 2020

The first Forum of *Sound Stage Screen* looks at the transformations currently affecting the dramaturg's work in various areas of the performing arts. This includes the most advanced forms of contemporary theater, experimental choreographic practices, and opera—specific collaborations with directors who work towards reinventing the possibilities of music dramaturgy. It furthermore attempts to broaden our understanding of dramaturgic processes to include the field of curatorship in the performing arts,

an area that is cooperating internationally in establishing new paradigms for theater, producing contexts, articulating new modes of perception, promoting collective discursive spaces, spatiality, and temporality situated outside the classic definition of program-making.¹

This dossier, in its range of “voices,” is an inquiry into how dramaturgs operate today, questioning their role and function. This requires, first and foremost, a full understanding of the paradigmatic shift that—to put it briefly—has undone dramaturgy’s exclusive relation with the text and theatrical literary production, to reestablish it “both as *actions that work* and as *working on actions*,”² attending to “all those actions that are constantly being produced, constantly being proposed by every single element cocreating the piece.”³ In a seminal text written in 1994, Marianne Van Kerkhoven, the Flemish essayist and dramaturg who pioneered such a renewed concept of dramaturgy, clearly expresses the idea that:

One of the fundamental characteristics of what we today call “new dramaturgy” is precisely the choice of a process-oriented method of working; the meaning, the intentions, the form and the substance of a play arise during the working process. [...] This way of working is based on the conviction that the world and life do not offer up their “meaning” just like that; perhaps they have no meaning, and the making of a play may then be considered as the quest for possible understanding. In this case dramaturgy is no longer a means of bringing out the structure of the meaning of the world in a play, but (a quest

¹ See *Curating Live Arts: Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice*, ed. Dena Davida et al. (New York: Berghahn, 2018); *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy*, ed. Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza (Berlin: Alexander, 2017); *Turn, Turtle! Reenacting the Institute*, ed. Elke van Campenhout and Lilia Mestre (Berlin: Alexander, 2016).

² *The Practice of Dramaturgy. Working on Actions in Performance*, ed. Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa and Danae Theodoridou, (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 74. This reflection is based on the word’s etymological and conceptual content (“drama” coming from the Greek words *dro* (δρῶ, to act) and *érgon* (ἔργον, to work), following the resemantization proposed by Eugenio Barba, who considers dramaturgy as the “weaving [...] of the different elements of the performance”—it deals not only with text and actors but also with sounds, lights, and changes in space; actions in theater come into play only when they weave together, when they become *performance text*. See Eugenio Barba, “The Nature of Dramaturgy: Describing Actions at Work,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1985): 75–78.

³ André Lepecki, “‘We’re Not Ready for the Dramaturge’: Some Notes for Dance Dramaturgy,” in *Repensar la dramaturgia. Errancia y transformación = Rethinking Dramaturgy: Errancy and Transformation*, ed. Manuel Bellisco, María José Cifuentes and Amparo Écija (Madrid: Centro Párraga, 2011), 194.

for) a provisional or possible arrangement which the artist imposes on those elements he gathers from a reality that appears to him chaotic. In this kind of world picture, causality and linearity lose their value, storyline and psychologically explicable characters are put at risk, there is no longer a hierarchy amongst the artistic building blocks used.⁴

Having done away with the logocentric domain, we may now conceive dramaturgy as a work that involves all types of (material and immaterial) actions active in a performance, not only through the compositional dimension of its elements, but also and more broadly through a process-oriented method of working that weaves together the relational dynamics coalescing around stage practices. Dramaturgy defines itself, from one instance to the next, based on the conditions in which it operates and without fixed preconceptions. It does not obey prearranged theoretical frames or mandatory rules. This idea, widely recognized as falling within the theoretical directions proposed by the notion of postdramatic theater,⁵ “becomes an application with which to deconstruct and decode the tropes and contradictions of contemporary performance.”⁶

Undeniably, a decisive contribution to the debate on the practice of the dramaturg and a new definition of the place of dramaturgy comes from the context of choreographic-performative developments, dealing with practices that originally developed out of drama. Dramaturgy here

functions as a place in which to structure and organize physical as well as intellectual movements in a largely closed, autopoietic construct that constitutes itself in relationship to elements such as time, space, rhythm, movement vocabulary and phrasing, figures and narration or the relationship of music and movement.⁷

⁴ Marianne Van Kerkhoven, “On Dramaturgy,” *Theaterschrift* 5/6 (1994): 18–20.

⁵ The main reference, here, is to Hans-Thies Lehmann’s 1999 seminal volume *Postdramatisches Theater*, available in English as *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁶ *Acts of Dramaturgy: The Shakespeare Trilogy*, ed. Michael Pinchbek (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), 4.

⁷ Sandra Noeth, “Protocols of Encounter: On Dance Dramaturgy,” in *Emerging Bodies: The Performance of Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography*, ed. Gabriele Klein and Sandra Noeth (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 252.

The validity of this definition extends to all the areas and operational directions taken in the Forum.

A glance at the theoretical and pragmatic writings on this topic highlights an overriding concern shown by many dramaturgs, which requires them to reexamine the links between their own dramaturgical practice and the production of knowledge.⁸ Here, the primary focus goes to the traditional assumption according to which the dramaturg is a figure endowed with largely cognitive skills, with which they become the intellectual guarantor of a performance's creation. A considerable number of expressions and epithets linked to this notion—the director's "first spectator" or "objective observer," "mind of the process," "vessel of knowledge," or again a "guarantor of objective knowledge," "locus of power and knowledge," "external eye" or "outside eye"—have thus come under intense critique.⁹ This is because they are based on an ideological reduction according to which artistic work requires intellectual legitimacy within the horizon of *disciplined* knowledge, i.e. not only subdivided into disciplines but also separated from everything that must presumably be excluded. This interpretational defect relies on the schematic supposition that "choreographers [= practitioners] are mute doers and dramaturgs [= theorists] are bodiless thinkers and writers,"¹⁰ not recognizing that practices are rooted in a complex array of processes and relational networks, underestimating artistic actions in their materiality (in which political subjectifications are embodied), and minimizing the ways in which existence produces becoming.

The "true dramaturg," in Claudio Meldolesi's words, "acts neither in the name of a supposed intellectual superiority, nor as a service provider or a specialist in occasionally adjusting the text to the work done on stage; rather, he/she humbly searches for new and perhaps original stimuli,"¹¹ suggesting and reshaping a work's layers of meaning "as an *experiencing*

⁸ See Scott deLahunta, "Dance Dramaturgy: Speculations and Reflections," *Dance Theatre Journal* 16, n. 1 (2000): 22.

⁹ This aspect is all the more significant if one recalls that many dramaturgs have practiced or practice this work alongside choreographers, directors, and artistic collectives, at the same time covering the role of performing arts scholar. I would mention, in particular, André Lepecki, Heidi Gilpin, Bojana Cvejić, Guy Cools, Christel Stalpaert, Synne K. Behrndt, and Sandra Noeth.

¹⁰ Bojana Cvejić, "The Ignorant Dramaturg," *Maska: The Performing Arts Journal* 25, no. 131–132 (2010): 41.

¹¹ Claudio Meldolesi, *Il lavoro del dramaturg. Nel teatro dei testi con le ruote* (Milano: Ubulibri, 2007), 24. Translation mine.

subject and collaborator,” to quote Pil Hansen, “instead of the objective observer and knowledgeable critic.”¹² This is a working method based on *practice-oriented theory*, understood as a particular way of fostering the metabolic mechanisms active in performance processes, and discursively encouraging, with one’s own presence, the zone of undecidability and concreteness that marks the various phases of a creation embedded in a collaborative context. This specific feature reaffirms the exclusive relation between theory and practice that is redefined from one instance to the next, and that pragmatically requires the theater, dance, and opera dramaturg to act as a force that is simultaneously analytical and inventive in the space of the creative process. It is one aspect, variously emphasized by the writers of the Forum as well, which consists in the fact that commitments, methods, and strategies of dramaturgy are defined by the peculiar approaches and aims of each singular project. While the function of such dramaturgs must not be seen as a detached and authoritative “machine for producing meaning,”¹³ they remain someone who brings a vested interest to the work and its many possible trajectories, thus soliciting and catalyzing situations that show how theater or dance or opera stagings “think dramaturgically,” as perceptive experience, through the embodied process of the performance and through the languages taken up in it (bodies, movement, colors, lights, words, sounds/music, space and time). The field of operations which they are dealing with pertains to an interaction of the visible and the invisible, as a contingent incitement involving the “distributions of the sensible” in such a way that the work itself is able to produce its own authorial force.¹⁴

In dealing with the temporal, spatial, and tactile properties of performing practices, what the dramaturg brings into play is thus a theoretical sensitivity that draws on and is rooted in practice. This sensitivity is therefore not separated from or external to the processes, but it is the fruit of a pragmatic and dialogical continuum with the subjects implicated in production, based on a theory/practice integration. In this regard, André Lepecki

¹² Pil Hansen, “Introduction,” in *Dance Dramaturgy: Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*, ed. Pil Hansen and Darcey Callison (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Synne K. Behrndt, “Dance, Dramaturgy and Dramaturgical Thinking,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 20, no. 2 (2010): 191.

¹⁴ The reference is to Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “*partage du sensible*.” See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

distinguishes between the procedures and assignments of the dramaturg¹⁵ and “the task of dramaturging,” defined as “a particular activation of sensibility, sensation, perception and imagination towards processes of actualisation of the virtual under the singularity of a compositional, and collective, process.”¹⁶ To give effectiveness to this “particular activation” of skills learned through training with a new alliance between theory and experience, the dramaturg is involved directly with a bodily engagement that requires “a (new) body”¹⁷ for each process. Guy Cools speaks of the dramaturg as a “somatic witness,” defining the dramaturg’s “creative practice [as one] in which the whole body is involved and in which somatic proximity to the creative process is as important as critical distance”¹⁸—a somatic and energetic relationship with the process that can only be produced “through the intersection of energy and silent talk,” “a kind of ‘energetic communication.’”¹⁹

The dramaturg’s work should thus be understood as the fulcrum of “collaborative practices,”²⁰ where it is possible to promote interactions, synchronic influences, and adjacencies between concepts coming from heterogeneous areas of research. This way, dramaturgy is not “a form-giving instrument” at the service of (artistic) reality, but “a shared practice of encounter.”²¹ Sandra Noeth has acutely noted that this recognition is based on a radical call as

¹⁵ Such as how to analyze the sources of inspiration, how to suggest iconographic references, how to choose materials, and by extension how to grasp poetic-musical and theatrical structures in an opera libretto and score, documenting and collecting the concepts and images produced in rehearsals or in convivial moments of the process as part of the editorial materials.

¹⁶ André Lepecki, “Errancy as Work: Seven Strewn Notes for Dance Dramaturgy,” in Hansen, *Dance Dramaturgy*, 65.

¹⁷ Lepecki’s words as quoted in DeLahunta, “Dance Dramaturgy,” 25.

¹⁸ Guy Cools, “On Dance Dramaturgy,” *Cena* 29 (2019): 42. Following this analytical perspective, Guy introduces the notion of the “outside body,” linked to the vision of a corporeal dramaturgy as proposed by Christel Stalpaert, “The Distributive Agency of Dramaturgical Labour and the Ethics of Instability. Becoming the Outside Body, Implicated in the Life of Others,” in *Dramaturgies in the New Millennium. Relationality, Performativity, and Potentiality*, ed. Katharina Pewny, Johan Callens and Jeroen Coppens (Tübingen: Narr, 2014), 97–110.

¹⁹ Eleonora Fabião, “Dramaturging with Mabou Mines: Six Proposals for *Ecco Porco*,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2003): 32.

²⁰ Martina Ruhsam, “Dramaturgy of and as Collaboration,” *Maska: The Performing Arts Journal* 25, no. 131–132 (2010): 35; see also Ruhsam, *Kollaborative Praxis: Choreographie. Die Inszenierung der Zusammenarbeit und ihre Aufführung* (Wien: Turia + Kant, 2011).

²¹ Noeth, “Protocols of Encounter,” 253.

to what “being-with-an-Other” means, questioning the modes of relationship with strangers and the “Outside.”²² This is therefore a specific form of knowledge that does not discredit but, on the contrary, prepares to welcome the unexpected, which comes to life in the contact *between* the concrete reality of the elements on stage and that which has not yet been conceived but which analysis can foster.²³ The dramaturg thus goes back and forth between research and invention, reflection and creation, details and an all-embracing view, and ultimately assembles the conceptual structure of the pragmatic space within which the work is disclosed. Dramaturgs suggest anchors that provide points of reference for the entire process. They create links between ideas and clarify how the various parts of the work can be harmonized according to an internal logic. They make inventories of the directions the work is taking, and indicate how these directions could gain intensity. They may also act as a disturbing factor, to enrich the material in terms of dynamics. They are not guardians of predetermined positions, but mobile vectors for interaction: they use a methodology that is rigorous but also based on unexpected resonances, due to a “poetics of errantry”²⁴ that implies straying from an expected course, attentive to the echoes produced by forms of excursion, a predisposition to make room for what is unfamiliar. This is where they can fully contrast forms of self-indulgence that might lead directors and choreographers to fall back on previously used formal outlines, preferences, and aversions.²⁵ By its very nature, this is a “dispersed activity,”²⁶ since their work literally dissolves into the production. They melt and become invisible,

²² Noeth, “Protocols of Encounter,” 252.

²³ “To speculate means to place thought as belief or faith in a certain outcome without having firm evidence [...] We learn to do and say, ‘let’s think again,’ because we don’t know now, but we will have known by then.” Cvejić, “The Ignorant Dramaturg,” 53.

²⁴ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 23–35.

²⁵ Within prolonged collaborations with a choreographer or director or artistic collective, gaining this *dialogical proximity* also allows one to enact a meta-reflection to grasp, embrace, and question creative and aesthetic transformations and the methodological gaps produced between one work and the next, as a sort of macro-dramaturgy that coincides with a deep theoretical understanding of the artist’s creative process in relation to the broader context of spectatorship.

²⁶ Janez Janša, “From Dramaturgy to Dramaturgical. Self-Interview,” *Maska* 25, no. 131–132 (2010): 57; Jansa considers this dispersed dimension in the working process as an expression of immaterial work *par excellence*; for the links between developments in the dramaturg’s work and cognitive labour in the post-Fordist economy, see Bojana Kunst, “The Economy of Proximity,” in *On Dramaturgy, Performance Research* 14, n. 3, 2009: 81–88.

incorporated into the work itself. This invisibility not only characterizes the dramaturgs' work, but also their very own persona, which remains in the shadows, often compared to a ghost.²⁷

In this practice of marginality, the dramaturg manages different dramaturgical energies, promoting trajectories, operating for interference, resonance, deviance, incidence, tangency, affection maintaining agonistic relationships between contradicting movements, bodies, and relationships, which coincide with a shared and temporary space for negotiation, in direct contact with all that emerges during the creative process. Antonio Cuenca Ruiz emphasizes that the same sort of operativity concerns the dramaturg working in the field of opera: what counts is the process through which the performance is “thought” and how one “operates” in the interpretative gaps that open up *between* the “fixed” nature of the libretto and the musical score. It is a question of nurturing a dramaturgical tension capable of accompanying the director's conception, through a combination of expressive systems that can suggest unexplored conceptual transplants, grafted onto and in-between the opera's musico-dramatical structures, fully coming across through the composition of the elements of the staging.²⁸

All of the aspects and dynamics mentioned above come into play when one immerses in the rehearsal process, and also when one leaves the theater to promote relations with various communities, far from places intended for theatrical production. This latter case, as Eva-Maria Bertschy suggests, involves stepping onto foreign ground, searching for unexpected common ground, constructing situations in which to cultivate misunderstanding as a tactic of reciprocity that allows new levels of stage writing to be interwoven. This is an extension of the field of dramaturgy, and calls for social responsibility and political awareness. It is a process of discovery that does not require distance and remoteness, but rather closeness, such as the one implied by a *politics of curation*—as Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi maintains, from a non-Eurocentric perspective—that indicates a specific task of the dramaturg, when they work not to stage a performance but to define the dramaturgical tensions that animate the cultural planning of a festival,

²⁷ See Myriam Van Imschoot, “Anxious Dramaturgy,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2003): 57–68.

²⁸ See Andrew Eggert, “The Role of the Dramaturg in the Creation of New Opera Works,” in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (London: Routledge, 2015), 354–358.

deeply rooted in a local contest, in urban life, or more generally in projects that do not end with the presentation of performances.

Proximity to the process, however, is never blind immersion. Remaining close to the director, the choreographer, the performers, the set designer, and the conductor, as well as the technicians, pertains to the dramaturg's physical presence in the immediacy of influences, ultimately becoming an embodied memory of praxis.²⁹ Proximity to a process can also be described, according to Florian Malzacher, as a "distance within proximity", the possibility of maintaining a critical gap with respect to the production. This begins with an exclusive ethical and aesthetic complicity with the artist with whom one chooses to collaborate, and acting as a bridge with the institution, to make the nature of the performance project and the way of communicating it legible through an act of translation.

This dramaturgical collaborator, that the Forum wishes to help discuss and problematize, thus represents the highest point of the "separation created between dramaturgs, artists, and bureaucrats."³⁰ This is because the figure in question does not work on the performances selected by the artistic director of a theater or the general director of an opera house, but rather cultivates a particular relation with an artist or a group of artists fostering a certain kind of aesthetic, theoretical, and political horizon.

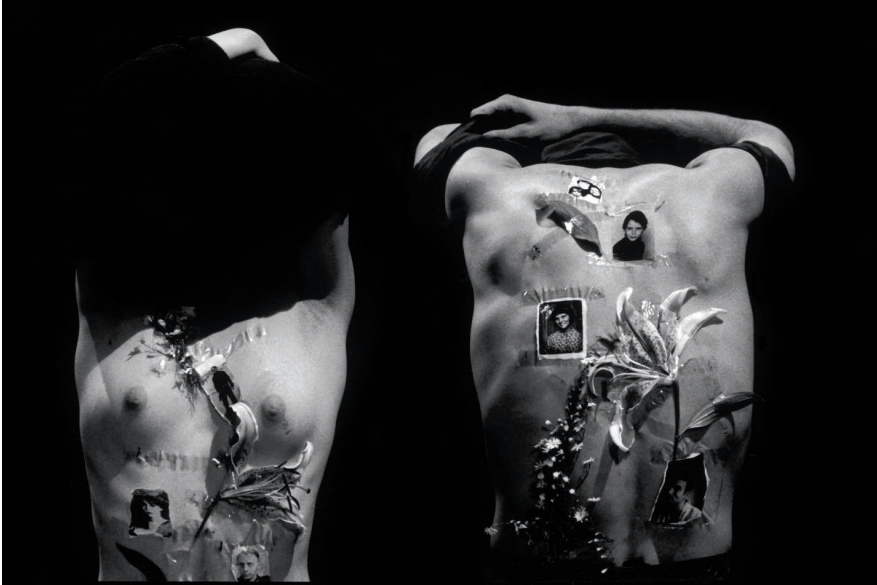
Piersandra Di Matteo

²⁹ "If you're close, you've got to remember not only the people off stage, but you are also going to remember the movie that we all went together to see after rehearsal and there was this great thing, and why don't you bring that in, or the thought that someone else had, or the dream I also had, that could be put in that scene. So for me dramaturgy is about proximity." André Lepecki, unpublished interview quoted in Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrnt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 157.

³⁰ Meldolesi, *Il lavoro del dramaturg*, 11.

The Dramaturg's Work

André Lepecki



Meg Stuart/Damaged Goods, *No Longer Readymade* ©Jan Simoons

The dramaturg's work is above all never his or her to own, to identify, or to easily point out in a given production. Contrary to all the other laborers making a piece—actors, dancers, choreographer or director, light designer, composer, technicians, who can all indicate clearly their contribution to the whole—a dramaturg's work remains boundless; even if very precise, it remains invisible; even if certainly present, it remains unclaimable; even if definitely authored, it remains unaccounted for. The dramaturg's work is, above all, invisible labor serving the conditions of visibility of each work-to-come, of each new piece.

The work of the dramaturg not being the dramaturg's work to own, it is then about working for the work being produced. In a very practical way, this is the first and most important element to always keep in mind: one works not for the choreographer, not for the producer, not for the festival (even if it is the festival, the producer, or the choreographer hiring the dramaturg and paying her salary) but one works *with* all of them, *for* the work-to-come.

What does it mean to work for a work-to-come, knowing that your labor will not lead to owning what you do (since a dramaturg is not an author, it will not be recognized as the work's author)? What does it mean to contribute to an arduous process, knowing that your actions will not be recognized as being part of the public face of the work (because the dramaturg will not be showing their face or putting their body on the line before the public as dancers and actors do)? What does it mean to engage in an activity where—as the great Flemish dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven once wrote—you know your picture will most likely not be printed in the production program?³¹ It means above all to become an impersonal agent: enabling intra-connections between the multiple elements emerging throughout the creative process, for weeks, months, and even, depending on the scale of the project, years.

Given that my professional experience as dramaturg has overwhelmingly been in the field of experimental choreography, I will draw from my practice working with choreographers such as the Portuguese Vera Mantero, or the North American Meg Stuart, while also keeping in mind how to extrapolate some of the procedures required by dramaturging for dance to other fields, disciplines, and modes of creation. I will also draw from what I learned from my students in the Department of Performance Studies at NYU, where I taught for a few years in the early to mid-2000s a post-graduate course on “Experimental Dramaturgy,” and where students were assigned to work as dramaturgs in film, visual arts exhibitions, curation, performance art, and also in the more traditional spaces of the dramaturg's intervention, theater and dance.³² This means that my experience has been always to work as dramaturg in creative processes that were not text-based, in ways of making live art that became known as, following Hans-Thies Lehmann, “postdramatic.”³³ The question then becomes quite interesting for dramaturgs: if the theatrical concept of “drama” is what has been bypassed by artists and ensembles such as Robert Lepage, Meg Stuart, Elizabeth LeCompte, Societas Raffaello Sanzio, Rimini Protokoll, Forced Entertainment, Pina Bausch, among so many others, then what is left of drama-turgy once drama, the first component of this intriguing word and work, is no longer what is at stake? If we put drama under erasure, if we write dramaturgy, then we are left with where we began: with *ergon*, or work. Once the preexisting dramatic

³¹ Marianne Van Kerkhoven, “Looking Without Pencil in the Hand,” *Theaterschrift* 5–6 (1994): 144.

³² I narrate this experiment in teaching dramaturgy in my essay “Errancy as Work.”

³³ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theater*.

text is no longer the ground and the vector aligning the entire field of composition of the work-to-come, then we are simply left with work to do. In postdramatic contexts, in experimental dance, in expanded choreography, in process theater, the question then becomes: What kind of work to do is the necessary one for a new work to come into the world? And how can the dramaturg work towards that work-to-do?

From a very pragmatic, practical point of view, the non-proprietary work of the dramaturg entails a consistent commitment to labor alongside the choreographer or director. In this sense, as soon as a dramaturg starts to operate in the rehearsal studio, this operation prompts an immediate and quite public opening up of the “author function”—for once a choreographer or a director decides to work with a dramaturg, she will embark in an open dialogical adventure, foregoing then of the exclusivity of attaching authorial will to her individual(istic) figure. It is this desire to embark in an open dialogue, and to expand and distribute the task of co-composing with yet another collaborator that becomes a crucial gesture for the dramaturg to embrace, foster, respect, and expand. Because it is not easy for creators to acknowledge that they do not hold full authorial *knowledge* over the piece they are about to create. Even being their piece, their work, and (copy)rightly so, any work-to-come is such a mysterious and vapid entity as to deserve the activation of a collective intellect in order to be worthy of its demands.

What else can we state about the pragmatics of working as a dramaturg, in the process of helping to create new works? It is worthwhile to quote somewhat extensively the dramaturg and dance scholar Pil Hansen’s excellent introduction to the volume she co-edited with Darcey Callison *Dance Dramaturgy*; most particularly, to note how Hansen calls attention to the fact that there is never one dramaturgical method, or “the” dramaturgical method, but that each specific work (even if by the same director or choreographer) requires a careful development of a method specific for the work’s own singularity. Hansen reminds us that:

The functions, approaches, and strategies of dramaturgy are dependent on the specific sources of inspiration, movement approaches, and working methods of each individual project. A definition that encapsulates the layers of dramaturgy in one project may be counterproductive to another, and thus the adaptability of the dramaturg and the continuously evolving multiplicity of approaches has become a defining feature of the field.³⁴

³⁴ Hansen, *Dance Dramaturgy*, 7.

Following this insight, then one of the tasks defining the work of the dramaturg is to attend to the specificity of each process, to take into consideration all of its components (including extra-semiotic ones, such as labor relations, the types of performers involved, the general political atmosphere at the moment when the process is unfolding, etc.) and then, to develop alongside all those components, a kind of singular method—ready to be discarded as soon as the work is deemed done (which may or may not happen on opening night...).

In these processes of splitting open the author function, attending to the matters at hand (human and non-human, dramatic and post-dramatic, choreographic and political, tangible and atmospheric, semiotic and affective), and developing process-specific methodologies for helping out the compositional task, the dramaturg must remember one thing: that objectivity regarding the work does not necessarily require “being distant” in relationship to the work. The dramaturg’s is a task predicated on intimate knowledge of all the elements required to make live performance. This does not at all mean being technically proficient in acting, dancing, designing, or composing. It rather means being aware of the complexity of labor involved in production, it means not to shy away from being close to all of those practices, and to be receptive to understanding, from that proximal attitude, the labor and craft involved in everyone’s activities.

In my own practice, I firmly believe that a total immersion in the rehearsal process is necessary, even fundamental, at least in the first few weeks of starting to work on a new project. To have everyone involved enter into the process with the same degree of excitement and trepidation, commitment and uncertainty, decisiveness and dread, knowledge and ignorance before the always daunting task of creating a new artistic proposition democratizes the collective. It helps everyone then to confront that nagging question that dramaturgs are constantly asked: who is the subject supposed to know the logic (or for some, “the truth”) of the piece? To enter the process with a sense of common loss and certainty regarding this question dispels notions that the dramaturg occupies some kind of semiotic key to the overall meaning of the piece. No one holds that key, except collectively, since the work will hold it eventually, and always, in the end.

So, immersion into the process is a necessary first step to establish with all the other co-laborers a kind of collective intellect of the group. One that can then be accessed, in intimacy and with the precision that only proximity can deliver, by the dramaturg, whose main function in that collective becomes then one of being simultaneously memory repository and artic-

ulator of all the experiences, bits of actions, lost sections, and promising experiments developed throughout the rehearsal process.

Thus, the dramaturg brings to the discussions with the director or choreographer (sometimes in private, sometimes with everyone else, depending on the dynamics of the collective) remnants from a previous conversation, or an image from a newspaper, or an art catalogue, or a film, or a performance piece, or a piece of music, or a philosophical fragment, that resonate and expand the materials developed so far in the process.

Thus, the dramaturg suggests readings, indicates directions, and asks questions to the actors, to the designers, and to the director or choreographer. I find the most productive questions not those that focus on “Why?” (which tend to be questions on meaning, or on lack of meaning, propelled by a desire to wanting to make sense), but rather questions that ask “How?” or “When?” or “Where?” or “What?” or “Who”? For instance: Who will say/dance/play What, and When, and How? And once this question is answered and a decision is reached, then the quintessential dramaturgical question becomes not “What does this decision mean?” but “What does it *do* to the overall composition?” What are the ripple effects, both towards the end of the piece *and* towards its beginning, that each decision provokes? In this sense, following these many threads, a plane of composition starts to emerge, weaved as it is by the work of the dramaturg—and here, Eugenio Barba was right when he compared dramaturgy to the art of weaving—textures, texts, and actions.³⁵ The only remark I would add to Barba’s observation is that what is weaved is also an arrangement of forces, a diagram of affects, a multi-layered field of intensities and images (sonic, visual, kinetic, conceptual, and haptic).

Finally, the work of the dramaturg must contain a certain degree of errancy, a purposeful deviation and deviancy from the “proper” paths of theatrical or choreographic semiotic behavior. It must allow and conjure a certain degree of wild thinking, of unjustifiable leaps of logic. Strong intuitions and the work of chance must remain available in the repertoire of the dramaturg, so that the work does not fall under the domain of “clear reason,” of “dramaturgical sense.” I prefer to think of the dramaturg as a careful articulator of improbable encounters and as a cartographer of that improbability. If any work of art results from an interactivity of matters, then the dramaturg must operate as a catalyst and as a particle accelerator of those matters provoking unexpected collisions, tracing with detail

³⁵ See Barba, “The Nature of Dramaturgy.”

their outcomes so these can be transformed, should the work-to-come so require, from transient clashes into sustained assemblages. Often, these procedures allow for the unexpected solution of a scene that was stuck in place, not quite feeling right. Or help deciding what object must be included in the set. Or discover a sonic quality that now adds texture to the work's overall tone. Of course, all of these discoveries are not the dramaturg's, but they are achieved with the dramaturg's collaboration, knowing that the final decision will belong to the director, the choreographer, the collective, in co-resonant dialogue. And this is why the work of dramaturgs, as already said, will never be theirs to own. The dramaturgs' work is to work for the work. This is their ethics, and task.

The Dramaturg as a Ghost in the Opera

Antonio Cuenca Ruiz



Mozart, *La clemenza di Tito*, directed by Peter Sellars at the Salzburg Festival 2017 ©Ruth Walz/Salzbürger Festspiele

I like to think of theater as an art of ghosts. The theatrical canon is, indeed, haunted and some forms such as Nō theater revolve entirely around the apparition of a phantom and the way people negotiate with it.³⁶ Opera, too, is an art of ghosts: operatic institutions rely mostly on the existence and perpetuation of a repertoire, endlessly revived, haunted by previous interpretations. The performers' existence on stage is haunted by the memory of something never lived in the present, to paraphrase Derrida's notion of *hauntology* in its elaboration by the field of Performance Studies.³⁷ Theater

³⁶ Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*, the many deceased kings in Shakespeare's plays, and various characters who have one foot in the afterlife in Maeterlinck's, Strindberg's or, closer to us, Genet's plays, spontaneously come to mind when thinking about theater and shadows. Monique Borie adds to this list various iterations of puppets (in Pirandello, Craig, and Kantor) and wanderers in Ibsen's modern plays. See Monique Borie, *Le fantôme, ou Le théâtre qui doute* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1997).

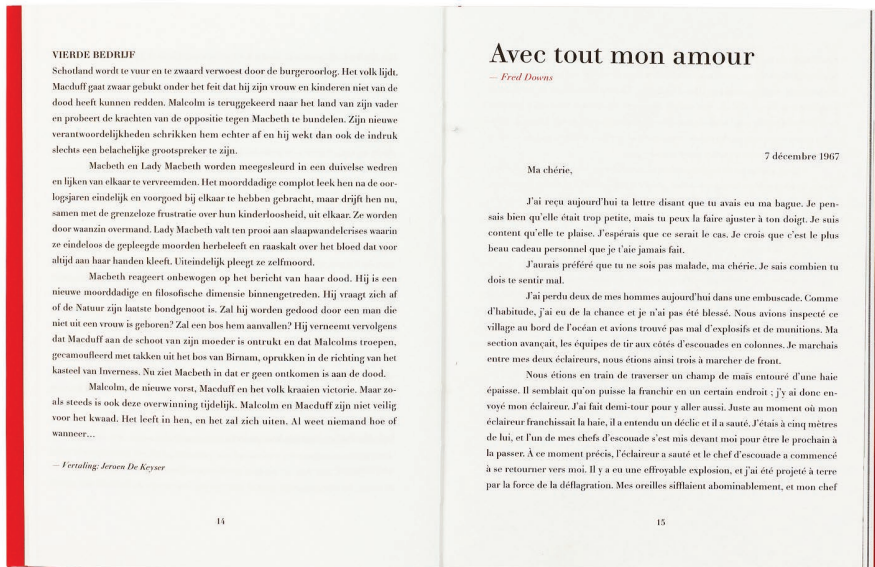
³⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). A hauntological interpretation of opera and ghosts can be found in Carlo Lanfossi, "Ghosting Agrippina: Genealogies of Performance in Italian Baroque Opera," *Journal of Musicology* 36, no. 1 (2019): 1–38.

and opera aren't such pure art forms of/in the present, happening *here* and *now*, as we tend to think they are. We must acknowledge that every performance is haunted—at least by (real or fantasized) pasts, and numerous presences and voices. In this context, I am also inclined to think about the dramaturg as a ghost.

The function of the dramaturg is often confused with that of the playwright, especially in traditional theatrical fields. In the making of an opera, the work of the dramaturg is essentially considered as preparatory work: they study musical scores in depth, they compile research and documentation on the piece, its historical context, its stakes, and they act as philologists and commentators. They take part into the crafting of meaning and significance, moving between the libretto and the score of the piece and its performances. Sometimes they adapt or rewrite part of work—this is particularly the case for baroque operas, of which there may be several versions and variants (e.g., Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*) for which one has to devise the performance starting from two different versions of the score available. This work then continues during the rehearsals when the dramaturg closely surveys the creation and follows it as a sort of "observer."

In addition to these functions, the dramaturg with a specific expertise in musical theater and with a musical background can also work with an opera house, in its dramaturgy department. This has been my case until 2019 at the Théâtre Royal de La Monnaie, where I joined a team of dramaturgs together with Marie Mergeay and Reinder Pols. An "in-house dramaturg" leads meetings and discussions with the audience, gives public presentations, briefs the theater's teams to ensure that the goals and specificities of the project are understood by all, and writes or coordinates several publications. Among them, the most important are the program booklets which are conceived to accompany the spectator before and/or after the performance. At La Monnaie, these internal editorial projects follow a relatively clear publishing trajectory: the programs shed light more on the staged performance than on the operatic text, they give the artists a voice (statements of intent, interviews, etc.), and may include other areas of study.

An article in the program booklet is thus regularly commissioned to a researcher, personality, or academic from specific fields (anthropology, sociology, gender studies, history, etc.) who is asked to interpret the opera and the artistic project from their own perspective. At the same time, photographs and art works by contemporary artists are given priority over iconography from the past, in order to offer the spectator a visual landscape



An example of a program booklet curated by the dramaturgs at La Monnaie in Brussels. All program booklets are bilingual (Dutch and French), they follow the same editorial line, and have a similar graphic design.

that opens up the performance without illustrating it. In some cases, at La Monnaie, we have moved away from our editorial line to take into account the requests of artists and directors, or the specificity of their project. This was the case, for example, with the visual artist and sculptor Berlinde de Bruyckere, who created the set design for Pascal Dusapin's *Penthesilea* directed by Pierre Audi (2015). She suggested printing a drawing on a specific paper, folded and inserted between the pages and the cover of the program; another concerns Romeo Castellucci, whose *Zauberflöte* (2019) no longer presented the original narrative to the point that it was not deemed relevant to publish a traditional synopsis in the program. These different tasks achieved by the in-house dramaturg help the opera house to achieve a consistent season so that the audience can experience a strong artistic project from one performance to the next.

In this context, considering the dramaturg as a *ghost* does not suggest that the dramaturg is haunting, almost annoying the director, in particular by being the voice of reason or philology against arbitrary artistic decisions. I also do not mean that the dramaturg is a disinterested observer, an external gaze: both presence and distance are implied in the creative process. So how do the figure of a specter and the paradoxical act of haunting inform

my practice? Two experiences as a dramaturg can help me start developing this question and provide possible answers: i.e., Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* and *Idomeneo*, staged by Peter Sellars at the Salzburg Festival respectively in 2017 and 2019.³⁸

Listening to Mozart's Voices

Most of the dramaturgical preparation on *La clemenza di Tito* and *Idomeneo* rested on putting their plots into a historical perspective and understanding their relevance and significance within their different historical contexts. Such work takes into account the historical referents of the pieces—Homeric narratives in *Idomeneo*, and the political career of the emperor Titus, initially bloodthirsty then virtuous, in *Clemenza di Tito*. It places these operas in the context of their creation—Mozart emancipating himself from Leopold's cumbersome presence; 1791 Europe, at the time of the French Revolution. Finally, it prompts us to question the music in light of our contemporary concerns—climate emergency or the attacks and violence that have shaken Europe since the mid-2010s. It appears in retrospect that the two shows formed a diptych. *La clemenza di Tito* is, if not Mozart's last opera, at least Mozart's last opera seria, the previous one being *Idomeneo*, composed ten years earlier and a milestone in the composer's path to artistic maturity.

Indeed, in *Idomeneo*, Mozart articulated his aesthetic and political project to an audience for the first time. Advancing from aria to aria, from aria to duet, and from duet to trio, the music of *Idomeneo* comes to a climax with the magnificent and intensely moving quartet of act 3. Under what conditions is it possible for a society to achieve equality, when inequality, exclusion, and slavery relentlessly contradict our values and grow more prevalent from day to day? *Idomeneo* and later operas including *La clemenza di Tito* pursue this question. Their quartets and ensembles assume an equality between their participants, and make it concrete, too. They create a community that can only exist and endure if all four voices participate

³⁸ Both productions involved the conductor Teodor Currentzis and various artistic collaborators (George Tsypin, James F. Ingalls, Robby Duiveman, and Hans-Georg Lenhardt). The creation of *La Clemenza di Tito* also resulted in a short movie starring most of its cast: *Voices of Change*, with Jeanine De Bique, Golda Schultz, Russell Thomas, and Sir Willard White; Elsa Kleinschmager (image), Sébastien Guisset (sound) and Hélène Giummelly (editing), Arte France, 2017.

equally. They embody a radical equality, fostering an intense, richly varied dialogue between equals—children and parents, women and men, enslaved people and masters. The search for truth and justice is not the prerogative of a ruler but is brought about by a sense of community.

Opera seria before Mozart was characterized by a succession of arias which expressed the personal feelings of mostly aristocratic characters, and presupposed that history was written by “great men.” In overturning the paradigms of opera seria, *Idomeneo* thus also represented a paradigmatic shift in relation to power structures. Considering this aesthetic and political project, and in order to highlight Mozart’s acute theatrical sense, bold editing choices were made; most of the recitatives were cut and other pieces by the composer were added to the original script—the concert aria K. 505 in *Idomeneo* and, among other pieces, parts of the Great Mass in C minor K. 427/417a in *La clemenza di Tito*. These choices had much less to do with any iconoclastic move than with the desire to give voice to what deeply lies in Mozart’s music. Through the forms he invents and develops, Mozart contributes to the emergence of new narratives and new ways of imagining the world. He strengthens us today with the belief that opera is a place for invention and political narratives, and not just the recycling of a repertoire that only serves an elite.³⁹

Mozart Welcoming Multiple Voices

However, we can easily state that opera today is going through a crisis, and that there is an urgent need for innovation. As a dramaturg, one question arises: under what conditions can/should this search be carried out if it involves other cultures or other artistic forms? This is a question I personally asked myself during the creation of *Idomeneo*, whose final ballet was created by the multidisciplinary artist and choreographer Lemi Ponifasio along with Brittne Mahealani Fuimaono and Arikita Tentau. Lemi Ponifasio situated the ballet in *Idomeneo*

within Pacific cosmology, at the point where we hail the return of Moana, the ancestor, as a life-giver or to close the space between the earth and the sky so

³⁹ By stating this, I do not mean that the only solution would be to compose and create contemporary operas: some of them merely revive worn-out old narratives, while operas from the past—such as Mozart’s—can be approached in a way that reinforces their relevance today.

that the cosmos might be reformed. It's the last or the first dance of the world, a call which brings about a new beginning.⁴⁰

It is easy to see how opera appropriates other horizons, other cultures—Pacific-islands culture being the one I'm interested in here. It is less obvious, however, to see how opera (as a genre, as an institution, as a rich cultural sector) is addressed by people from a specific culture.⁴¹ This concern falls under the broader issue of cultural appropriation in the realm of opera, whose history is strewn with numerous musical borrowings that have promoted the genre, beyond obvious examples such as Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* or *Turandot*, insofar as “a characteristic feature of the development of Western art forms during the twentieth century has been the frequent and highly fruitful exploitation by artistic practitioners of all kinds of materials drawn from non-Western cultures.”⁴² Without questioning the presuppositions or assumptions on which the patronizing of other cultures is based, and in spite of all good intentions, there is a great risk of keeping artists trapped in a figure of exotic otherness, that is to say in orientalist clichés.⁴³ This would mean weakening our guests' presences, having them being on stage merely as *ghosts*.

Up to now, I have used the term *ghost* as something emerging from (institutionalized) *history*—ghosts of previous opera singers, ghosts from the repertoire, ghosts from the history of the genre, etc. That is to say a figure of haunting, overlapping with *memory*. However, considering the risks implied by cultural appropriation, I ought to refine my definitions of ghosts and haunting. Following the sociologist Avery F. Gordon, one can state that the case of a ghost

⁴⁰ Antonio Cuenca Ruiz, “The Eruption of a New Shared Space. An Interview with Lemi Ponifasio,” in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Idomeneo* (Salzburger Festspiele, 2019), 35.

⁴¹ An example of this, however, is given by Lemi Ponifasio who, during the press conference presenting *Idomeneo*, shared the following anecdote: “When I was asked by Peter to create a Requiem for the New Crown Hope Festival [celebrating Mozart's 250th anniversary and curated by Peter Sellars], I went to the Kiribati island [an archipelago threatened by rising sea levels]. When I went there and met people in villages and I was talking a lot about Mozart, an old man said to me ‘Is Mozart a king?’ I said: ‘No, he is a musician!’ Now, I went back to Kiribati to ask [the dancer Arikatau Tentau to be part of *Idomeneo*] and everybody knows who Mozart is. For me, Mozart is now a global citizen.”

⁴² Brian Crow and Chris Banfield, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xi.

⁴³ See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

is a case of the difference it makes to start with ... what we normally exclude or banish, or, more commonly, with what we never even notice. ... It is not a case of dead or missing persons *sui generis*, but of the ghost as a social figure. It is often a case of inarticulate experiences, of symptoms and screen memories, of spiraling affects, of more than one story at a time, of the traffic in domains of experience that are anything but transparent and referential.⁴⁴

We could add, with Marisa Parham, that haunting is not particularly interesting in that it resonates with the supernatural, but rather because it is “appropriate to a sense of what it means to live in between things—in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces—to live with various kinds of doubled consciousnesses.”⁴⁵ The ghost as a “social figure” is therefore less that of an individual whose life is recollected in history, than that of someone, living or dead, left aside in some ways at the margins of institutionalized history or dominating memories.

In order to free myself from the sociohistorical and cultural presuppositions on which opera is still based, one of the first things I have to do as a dramaturg is therefore to become a ghost myself. By this, I mean losing all forms of sovereignty over creation: welcoming other imaginations and other narratives must be done at the risk of one’s own function, at the risk of oneself, and it results in a ghostly presence. In other words, any form of disruption can only happen if it works to erode and shake one’s own authorship and sovereignty. The figures of the ghost-dramaturg, or of haunting in its various forms, allow us to think anew about how meaning and sense emerge in a creation: “being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.”⁴⁶ Becoming a ghost oneself, joyfully abdicating one’s sovereignty in the process, means, in the end, creating the conditions for the stage itself to think.

⁴⁴ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed. with a new introduction (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 24–25.

⁴⁵ Marisa Parham, *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.

⁴⁶ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

And that Makes the Job even More Mysterious

Florian Malzacher in conversation with Piersandra Di Matteo



Artist Organisations International (2015). © Lidia Rossner/AOI

DI MATTEO: *In recent decades we have witnessed a shift in the dramaturgical paradigm. Practices of dramaturgy coming from the contemporary dance field are helping reshape the function of the dramaturg as part of a “collaborative turn.” This has prompted a more adequate understanding of this figure in the performing arts. What is your take from the perspective of practice?*

MALZACHER: Firstly, I should admit that I actually have very little experience as a dramaturg in the way the profession is usually understood in German-speaking countries, with their very specific tradition. This is mainly because the projects I have been involved in have been based neither on a dramatic text nor on common work divisions within repertoire theaters. My work is always in conversation with the realm of postdramatic, devised theater. And one of the most obvious qualities of these approaches is: they tend to be very, very different from each other. And so do the possible roles of dramaturgs in this field.

In this regard, I am mainly interested in how the model of the “dramatic dramaturg” is supplemented as well as fundamentally challenged by a

whole range of new or changing job descriptions and job divisions within the field of postdramatic theater, conceptual dance, etc.

That said, I should add that even in more conventional theaters the role of the dramaturg has never been easy to grasp and is often interpreted in quite different ways. The dramaturg is still the most mysterious figure on a theatre's payroll.

But especially in devised theater (i.e., theater in which the script takes shape through rehearsals and improvisations) the work of a dramaturg is, usually, first and foremost to figure out what the work actually is. What is needed depends on working methods, aesthetics, group constellations, but also on the specific personalities of the artists—which means primarily the directors that are most often the main conversation partners of the dramaturg. The understanding of the role of the dramaturg does not become easier due to the fact that roles in postdramatic theater are always-already in flux—there are all kinds of collective approaches and shifting positions within the artistic process, for instance between being a performer, a writer, a director, a technician, a curator—or a dramaturg. We are part of this game of shifting job descriptions.

Concerning this, Bojana Kunst points out that the postures of the dramaturg today could definitely be understood as the embodiment of creative subjectivations due to aesthetic transformations only insofar as you take into consideration the changes in the political economy of labor, where the production of languages, contexts, and human cognitive and affective abilities comes to the foreground. She invites us to include the rise of this figure within the broader spectrum of cognitive labor in the post-Fordist economy...⁴⁷

To make things even messier, it is necessary to stress that so far we have been talking about the part of dramaturgical work that is related directly to one specific artistic production. Another big part is programming a season or a festival—a work that is closer to the one of curators. Most dramaturgs in theaters or festivals do both, even though with different priorities in terms of time and interest.

Personally, I have been working mainly in the second field, as a curator and writer. But when it comes to my work as a production dramaturg, then the relationship to the artist is very different from the one as curator—I consider myself mainly in a serving position. It is a different conversation,

⁴⁷ See Bojana Kunst, *Artist at Work, Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015).

a different negotiation. As a production dramaturg, the job is to find out: What is best for the work? What is best for the director, for the other artists involved, for the performers, etc.? What is best for “an audience”? For the artwork itself? Obviously, there are no absolute answers to any of these questions—and, just as obviously, the answers might contradict each other.

The dramaturg’s work is not recognizable by an audience afterwards. And in some cases, it might even be invisible for yourself or the director. At times, the influence is very subtle, it has to be very subtle. Sure, you could say: “Here she took some of my advice, here he cut something because I said so...” but that is not the point. I even find it problematic when in certain circumstances the role of the dramaturg becomes too important—for example, if the director is an artist from a different field and does not have much experience with theater. My suggestions as a dramaturg are most often not meant to be accepted one-to-one, but rather to start a conversation, to challenge and to be challenged. In the end, I am not responsible for the production. I do not make the final decisions.

Yes, but some kind of responsibility is at stake...

Of course, because we are committed to contributing in making it a good work. But it is not in our hands. In cases where a dramaturg is also representing an institution—as artistic director, for example—one could theoretically try to force some decisions onto the artistic process. This is a thin line—and it is necessary to be very transparent about it. For an independent dramaturg, this kind of power potentially does not even exist. I cannot give any orders, nor would I want to. I have neither the power nor the mission nor the assignment to be responsible. I can try to convince—but even there I would be careful, because in the end it is the artists’ choice.

What similarities and divergences can you identify between the roles of dramaturg and art critic? A dramaturg produces theoretical texts concerning production, too. What changes in the writing?

Well, for me personally there is a connection even on a biographical level, since I used to work as a critic for several years—and I was involved in parallel as a dramaturg in a few productions while I started curating my own programs. There we have again the concept of permanently shifting roles. For me these activities are related. The reason I stopped writing criticism for newspapers and magazines was mainly due to a conflict in loyalty and not in methodology.

So, for me there is a dialectical principle inherent to the dramaturgical work which is related to the role of the critic. It can be the job of a dramaturg to challenge the production, to point out possible weaknesses, incoherencies, and such, just as a critic would do—but with the important difference that you tell it to the director, not to the world.

How much criticism, how much dialectical reasoning is useful in a specific production depends very much on the personality but also on the concrete methodology of the artists one works with. Some want to argue, some want to be challenged, others have more affirmative modes of inquiry—and others again are very vulnerable when in the middle of the artistic process. To be honest: if someone mainly needs affirmation, I am not the best dramaturg to work with. I do not say it is wrong, I am just not very good at it.

How would you describe your work as a dramaturge with the Nature Theater of Oklahoma?

My work with Nature Theater of Oklahoma is particular in that it happened mainly in the context of large state theaters such as the Burgtheater in Vienna or the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus. Within these environments, the dramaturg often becomes a negotiator between the production and the institution. Or sometimes a diplomat, and sometimes a translator between the systems.



No President, Nature Theater of Oklahoma (2018) © Heinrich Brinkmüller-Becker/Ruhrtriennale

There are still so many frictions and non-compatibilities between devised works and repertoire theaters. And it is also a different way of having to engage with the audience in these contexts, where there is less experience with non-dramatic work. More writing, more talking, more communicating.

In the case of Nature Theater of Oklahoma one must say that the directors Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška often have a very clear concept and very clear ideas from quite early on. And they are a couple—so there is a lot of dialectical work already done between the two of them. Generally, the work of a dramaturg is quite different if the work is very conceptual—for instance, you can have difficulties discussing length if the idea is to avoid cutting any part of the text, or if there is a musical score that cannot be shortened.

...and what about other artists you have worked with?

In the case of Lola Arias (or Rimini Protokoll, but I have only worked with them as a dramaturg for their very first production, *Kreuzworträtsel Boxenstopp*) the performers were not actors but amateurs, and in some cases (*Airport Kids* and *Futureland*) even children or teenagers. The work is less about a concept as it is about facilitating the needs of the performers, too, or even to protect them. In the case of *Futureland*, the performers were unaccompanied minor refugees in Berlin. There is a whole support structure for the performers, for the production, and for the director, which the dramaturg is part of. I guess at times my dialectical approach in this was challenging...

Do you follow all the rehearsals?

No, I just join every other rehearsal, sometimes even only once every couple of weeks. Not only because a freelancer has other obligations, too, but also because I need distance. For me it does not work to sit through each rehearsal.

Distance is an interesting word. Many dramaturgs used to affirm exactly the contrary. For example, André Lepecki—in this dossier as well—maintains that it is important to establish a form of proximity with the work, which inevitably involves a close relationship with the director/choreographer, performer, collaborators—the need to be part of the process and not an external eye...

Of course, I need proximity to the artist. I even usually only work with artists that I already have a relationship with. Obviously, it helps to already have an idea about how to communicate in relation to the work, what are the expectations, etc. In this kind of proximity, we can then negotiate the distance required to be able to contribute in a productive way. I know that today it is

often much more about affirmation and proximity than about criticality and distance—I guess, I am a bit old-fashioned in my dialectical thinking.

I believe the distinction you made between this proximity with the artists (and their aesthetics) and the distance from the work/production is quite important. I can also recognize how my dramaturgical practices are a continuous negotiation between being inside the process in terms of the work's aesthetic and political course, and also giving room to refresh the gaze, being able to analyze all the elements as though I was seeing and analyzing them for the first time, with all the consequences they introduce... This could be a way not to give in to consoling oneself with what is already known, with what looks good because it is familiar...

Yes, and then of course it is not about showing off how amazingly critical one can be. Sensitivity is important. Especially at the beginning things are often still very open and vulnerable. Later, a certain time pressure comes into play—the premiere has to be ready at a given date. There is a moment when things need to be uncovered, where decisions have to be made, darlings have to be killed. Here a more distant position can help to figure things out more clearly.

Coming back to what you said about working with Nature Theater of Oklahoma, what do you think about new possible forms of institutionalizing this role? As we well know, in Germany there is a solid tradition, while in Italy, for example, such role is not widely acknowledged at an institutional level, which is reflected in its economic treatment. These figures are closer to artistic projects, rather than institutions, even though we are beginning to see some signs of change.

The concept of the *Hausdramaturg* (In-house dramaturg, or Production dramaturg) was mainly fostered at the Brecht's Berliner Ensemble after the Second World War. It was not only a matter of specific people and positions—it was mostly about having a dialectical position within each production process.

In the context of independent theater companies, on the other hand, the idea of a dramaturg chosen specifically for each project, rather than being assigned due to work schedules, seems more appropriate. Especially since independent venues and production houses—if they have dramaturgs at all—face the problem of having many productions in place at the same

time. In these cases, they are often not able to be involved more than briefly, as outside eyes, only joining towards the very end of the process.

For artists, in any case, it might make more sense to have continuous relationships with dramaturgs, or perhaps to choose them for specific productions, topics, aesthetical challenges in the various roles they can play: as translators, diplomats, critics, as outside eyes, as artistic troubleshooters, or just as someone to talk to.

And since we are speaking of institutions: recently I get more and more invitations as a dramaturg with another very different function; i.e., not to accompany a specific artistic production, but rather to advise the festival or program at large; to ping-pong ideas about the institution in general as well as about certain parts of their program. This role might be called a “curatorial advisor,” but actually to me this feels very much like the work of a dramaturg, helping to find out what they actually want without being one of the in-house dramaturgs or curators myself; to shape together the core of their ideas and try to push them on a conceptual level. Here again the distance or even a certain ignorance toward their pragmatic challenges and daily routines might actually be helpful at times. If one is deeply integrated within an institution, then it is not easy to find the space for more radical thinking. At times someone is needed who does not immediately have to think about the consequences of organization, financial responsibilities, etc. Someone who is—to a degree—able to think irresponsibly. Or rather who is responsible only to the artistic or curatorial concept. It seems like we have to add “curatorial advisor” to the list of roles a dramaturg might play.

*You have worked in the editorial field, curating books that are important in fueling debates and creating discursive spaces in the performing arts. For example, *Truth is Concrete* (2014), *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats* (2017), *The Life and Work of Nature Theater of Oklahoma* (2019).⁴⁸ These books give us an idea of the different lines of tension that animate your work. How is this editorial work related to the figure of the dramaturg?*

In Germany, writing and editing used to be very much part of the work of a dramaturg—when I grew up every production in a municipal theater would have often quite ambitious program booklets with sometimes long texts and additional material. This has now largely disappeared. Today we

⁴⁸ *Truth is Concrete: A Handbook for Artistic Strategies in Real Politics*, ed. Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Sternberg, 2014); Malzacher and Warsza, *Empty Stages; The Life and Work of Nature Theater of Oklahoma*, ed. Florian Malzacher (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2019).

might rather associate this with the visual arts, where text production is usually part of the job of a curator.

For me, as a former journalist, writing about theater and the arts has always been part of my work. It is a way to communicate with a broader audience but also to take part in the internal reflections of the field. And, not least, it is a way to think through things. I also write for myself.

Again, even writing and editing comes with different agendas: if I edit a book about a company, I understand myself, to a certain degree, in a serving position. It is about trying to bring out their voice and not necessarily overwrite it with my own interpretation. It lies somewhere in the middle; I am not their spokesperson but also not a neutral critic. It is, again, a mix of proximity and distance.

You have spoken about the interconnection between dramaturgical thinking and curatorial instances. This link is interesting to me, as it concerns my practices as well. For me, performing arts curatorship is powered or nourished by a dramaturgical stance that involves questioning spectatorship, modes of perception, spatiality and temporality, multi-layered field of intensity, and diagrams of affects. In particular, I'm referring to curation that is



Jonas Staal and Florian Malzacher at the performative training camp *Training for the Future* (2018)
© Ruben Hamelink

situated outside the classic definition of program-making. What is your point of view on this? When I ask, I have in mind your curation of Truth is Concrete (2012), the 170-hours non-stop marathon camp on artistic strategies in politics you made in Graz; or the congress Artist Organisations International (2015) you curated with Jonas Staal and Joanna Warsza for Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) in Berlin; or the performative training camp Training for the Future (2019), recently programmed with Staal for the Ruhrtriennale...

Programming a festival, especially large festivals, involves a lot of pragmatic agendas. So often the result is not as consequent or clear as one would like. Specific curatorial projects have at least the possibility of being more precise. Here a more curatorial approach comes into play—and should be played with; especially in the performing arts, we should remind ourselves that the aesthetic strategies of curating can draw a lot from the strategies of a theater director (as Harald Szeemann emphasized) as well as a dramaturg (as Beatrice von Bismarck noted).

In the case of my collaboration with Jonas Staal, it is again a bit different. In *Training for the Future*, I am neither an outside-curator nor a not-so-responsible dramaturg. It is a form of shared work. Of course, the visual language and some of the conceptual rigidity comes from Jonas, as it is very much in line with his other artistic work. There are discussions about certain aspects, but generally I mostly enjoy thinking within the frame of his artistic approach. In the end, it is a shared responsibility, a shared general development, shared content etc. And again, in this collaboration there are different roles, where mine might be more concerned with pragmatics but also with bringing in other points of views, challenging a certain rigidity, contextualizing...

Again, it is about the different roles we play...

Yes, sorry to be repetitive—but the concept of role-play is helpful for me in understanding different working circumstances. The role of the dramaturg sometimes offers certain possibilities to do something, to decide something in a certain way, which an artist might not want to do. On the other hand, the role of the artist entails decisions that I would not take in the role of curator or dramaturg. Additionally, the roles of set designers, production managers, financial directors, technicians, and so on, come into play. They might even overlap or rotate in different environments. In some long-term collaborations it took years to define them, and they still might change again. There is no essentialism in this role-playing. But understanding that it is a play allows us at times to step back, breath, and then enter again. It allows a dialectical way of working.

Dramaturgy in an Extended Field

Eva-Maria Bertschy

Some years ago, I decided to move to a “proper theater” for a while. Until then, my career as a dramaturg had taken a somewhat chaotic course. I had spent several years moving from project to project, as production manager or dramaturg with various independent groups and directors, including the Swiss director Milo Rau. After a few months spent at the City Theater in Bern, for the first time I had the feeling I understood the very essence of theater: i.e., a constant circulation among a limited group of people and their ideas. Every day you go into a dark room with them and discuss *Othello* or *Antigone*. In the end, however, everyone pretty much agrees on the meaning of the texts, because they all basically share the same background. For even if some people working in a theater have a varied background, some coming from working class and others from families of artists, their ideas and experiences have become aligned over time, all the more so the longer they have been working in this rather enclosed institution.

For people working in a theater, however, much more time-consuming than dealing with the content of plays are questions such as: “Who will be cast for the leading role in this or that play? Is the design of the stage set feasible, or perhaps too expensive?” As a trained sociologist, I was able to remain enthusiastic about analyzing all these interactions for quite some time. At least, until the inevitable happened: a fight for control between the general director and the theater director, which kept the staff busy for half a year. There was no longer a discussion about what content and what political issues we should have negotiated with the audience, but rather whose ideas were enforced within the institution. That’s when I decided to leave institutional theater.

This shift from content to internal, structural issues occurs in many fields of society, and is particularly noticeable in politics or the sciences: that is, those spaces in which the subject of debate should be sought outside the institution, but where internal conflicts and motivations in day-to-day relationships dominate. In theater this is obvious due to its very comprehensive structure based on workshops, rehearsals, stage managers, dressers, administration, box offices, etc., all parts of a huge machinery that can easily keep itself in motion without external influence and without any external impact. Far be it from me to say that this is the case in all theaters. But there is a tendency to lose connection with the audience or to play only for a very limited audience which has to be constantly counteracted.

Many attempts were made over the history of twentieth-century political theater to open it up and at the same time free it from the bourgeois and hegemonic ideas produced by a limited group of people inside the institution. Bertolt Brecht undertook many experiments at the Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin, where professional actors stood on stage together with workers' choirs, students, and children and interpreted classical plays together. According to his ideas, the presence of amateurs contributed to the alienation and enabled the audience to understand the people and the characters they embody onstage, in relation to the conditions in which they themselves live. The audience can thus begin to conceive these conditions as transformable.

In his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Brazilian theater creator Augusto Boal pursued Brecht's idea of a self-empowered audience by turning it into actors who can intervene in the events on stage. Brecht's and Boal's ideas were as pedagogical as they were radical: they aimed at nothing less than a renewal of society through theater. To achieve this goal, they were also prepared to make aesthetic sacrifices. The important thing, however, was to make the dividing line between the people on stage (who talk) and the audience (who experience the performance silently) permeable. For Brecht, the workers were to enter the stage, for Boal "the oppressed" were no longer to be condemned to silence—those standing on the other side of the "abyssal line" described by the postcolonial theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos:

What most fundamentally characterizes abyssal thinking is thus the impossibility of the copresence of the two sides of the line. To the extent that it prevails, this side of the line only prevails by exhausting the field of relevant reality. Beyond it, there is only nonexistence, invisibility, nondialectical absence.⁴⁹

By exporting the modern legal system and modern science to the colonies, European delegates and salesmen installed a dividing line between the bearers of what they defined as systematic, verifiable knowledge, a legal system and culture, and the uncivilized, the savages. A dividing line that remains to this day. The problem with knowledge of the world enacted in European institutional theaters, as well as in schools and in other cultural institutions, is that it ignores, in an almost perverse way, that culture that exists beyond *Othello* and *Antigone*. We also find it hard to imagine that social orders exist beyond our liberal, democratic order and universal human rights. And so,

⁴⁹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (London: Routledge, 2016), 118.

the people who live outside this order do not appear on our stages, neither as figures nor as actors. They live in the ghettos of the megacities and in sweatshops or prisons; their organs are trafficked on the black market; they are kidnapped and then stand on the roadside a few kilometers away from seaside resorts and offer their sexual services. Only occasionally do they return to our world through force, as a threatening intrusion, terrorists, undocumented migrant workers or fugitives. After a few years they might have the chance to be given the opportunity to play Othello.

When I fled from the dark rooms of theater, walking for the first time across the shaky wooden bridge that marked the border between Rwanda and the Eastern Congo to begin research for Milo Rau's project *The Congo Tribunal*,⁵⁰ I was overcome by this bizarre enthusiasm for the many colorful and alien things we commonly subsume under the term "exoticism." Not only food and dresses, but also the meter-deep potholes, the daily power cuts, the crumbling façades—everything seemed exciting to me. Claude Lévi-Strauss mocked all explorers who give in to this feeling and, on their return, present a few accumulated images. For the audience, "platitudes and commonplaces seem to have been miraculously transmuted into revelations by the sole fact that their author, instead of doing his plagiarizing at home, has supposedly sanctified it by covering some twenty thousand miles."⁵¹ Only when the potholes and the blackouts become tedious again, you begin to approach their meaning. Then you start to ask how people can live with them, what kind of obstacles they have to overcome on a daily basis, why the roads have not been repaired, why the electricity grid is unstable, and what are the economic causes of the deteriorated (social) infrastructure and how people nevertheless resist and show resilience.

When you, as a dramaturg, decide to turn away from *Othello* and *Antigone* and travel to Congo to deal with the civil wars and conflicts surrounding mining, it is quite reassuring to know that there are many other people out there who deal with these issues and want to speak out. These include NGOs and scientists, mine workers, CEOs of mining companies

⁵⁰ In 2015, we organized a three-day tribunal in Bukavu (Eastern Congo) in cooperation with a number of civil society organizations. In three cases, the *Congo Tribunal* examined the links between the exploitation of raw materials and the ongoing civil war in the region, the responsibility of political elites, multinational companies, and the international community. In 2017, a documentary-film about the project was released. <http://www.the-congo-tribunal.com>.

⁵¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (London: Penguin, 2011), 17.

with a whole staff of employees, victims of resettlement, activists supporting their lawsuits, lawyers on both sides, politicians signing contracts with the companies, rebel groups controlling the mining areas, etc. You can choose protagonists and antagonists, curious side characters, competitors who push themselves to the fore but never gain your sympathy. Sometimes the fate of anti-heroes also somehow affects you. All of them are bearers of a very specific knowledge, which arises from a certain experience, in turn related to their position in a system, within which they enact it over and over again every day.

To overcome “abyssal thinking,” we must work towards a complex ecology of knowledge in which the knowledge of the speakers from international NGOs is complementary to the knowledge of the displaced farmers. Let us follow Santos’s reasoning a bit further:

This principle of incompleteness of all knowledges is the precondition for epistemological dialogues and debates among different knowledges. What each knowledge contributes to such a dialogue is the way in which it leads a certain practice to overcome a certain ignorance. Confrontation and dialogue among knowledges are confrontation and dialogue among the different processes through which practices that are ignorant in different ways turn into practices that are also knowledgeable in different ways.⁵²

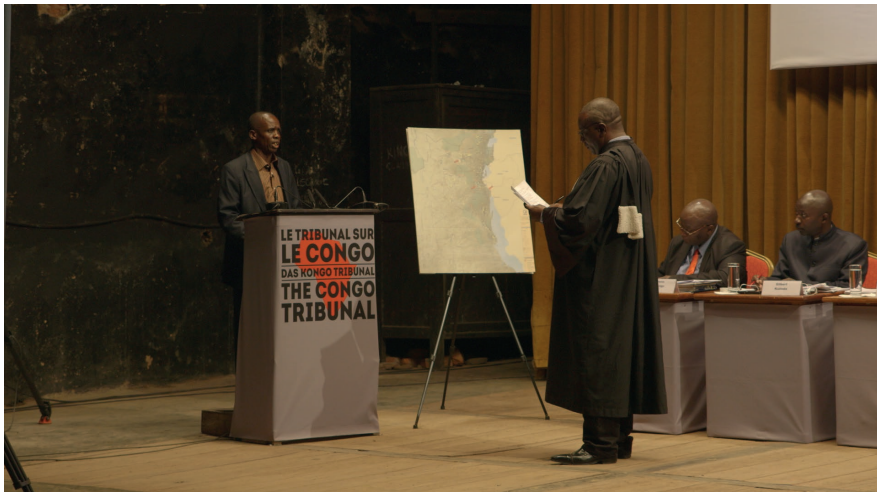
This is a dramaturgical principle that I have learned to place at the root of my own practice. And indeed, we have managed to cross the “abyssal line” to some extent by following the principle of the incompleteness of all knowledge. After having studied the conflicts surrounding mining for a while, by talking about them with all sorts of people, we understood that outside the legal system—in which mining concessions are granted by state authorities to private companies, which thus have the right to exploit the land and the subsoil—there is an opposing order: a traditional right to land. In this order, the land belongs to the village community, which has buried its ancestors there and is administered by a village chief. Various rebel groups in Eastern Congo invoke this when they defend their village community against the interests of international companies.

A few years later, when we were working on a project with the Landless Workers’ Movement in Brazil, we understood that the conflict between traditional law and the legal system in the modern state had already been

⁵² Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*, 189.

metaphorically described in *Antigone*. And yet, we had not been able to read this text in this way before, when we were sitting in dark rehearsal rooms. Antigone insists on the right to bury her brother, which he was denied because he had led a revolt against the existing order. She defends a traditional right against the logic of the modern State embodied by Creon, which also involves a different relationship with the land, which is not private property to be exploited, but a common good that must be preserved. We began to understand that perhaps beyond the so-called “civilized order” of the modern, liberal State there is another order that is now more promising.

The aim of our theater and film project *The Congo Tribunal* was to create a Court of Justice where a traditional order was respected as much as the one of the lawyers who defend the property rights of the companies. The two orders should not be exclusive, but the contradictions should become apparent. We started to analyze parliaments and courtrooms, we compared the arrangement of the tribune, the different levels of the stage, the roles assigned, the speaking times, the way questions were asked and the answers produced. We tried to understand how a conflict develops, the course of which the spectators could follow, what realities unfolded before them, from a concrete report on the victims’ lifeworld, through a political demand made by a trade union leader, up to an analysis carried out by a geologist.



Milo Rau, *The Congo Tribunal*. Prosecutor Sylvestre Bisimwa is questioning Stéphane Ikandi, representative of the artisanal miners during the *Bukavu Hearings* (2015) © Yven Augustin

The minute you leave institutionalized stages behind, you understand that you can set up a stage anywhere, that each stage can be shaped, that you can set your own rules, that you can establish alternative speaking times, that you can design the levels on the stage. The ninth point of Milo Rau's *Ghent Manifesto* is: "At least one production per season must be rehearsed or performed in a crisis or war zone without cultural infrastructure."⁵³ This rule grew out of our experience with *The Congo Tribunal*: by setting up stages where there are none—because the social infrastructure has been destroyed—and by inviting people onto the stage who otherwise would not have a chance, you can change society—at least in theater.

In 2019, we travelled to Southern Italy because Milo Rau was invited to make a film on the Gospel in Matera, the city that was elected "European Capital of Culture 2019" with its "sassi," a complex system of cave dwellings carved into the ancient river canyon. Matera is also the place where famous films about Jesus were shot, from *Il vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964) by Pier Paolo Pasolini to *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) by Mel Gibson. During our first research trip, we discovered a reality very unlike the picturesque and renovated center of Matera: a few kilometers away, refugees and migrants live in so-called "ghettos" and are exploited in tomato fields under slave-like conditions. We understood that in a contemporary interpretation of the Gospel these people must become the protagonists. For whom should Jesus be committed to today? Who are the "last" in our society? There is a peculiar parallel between Jesus Christ's revolt against the Roman occupiers and the rebellion of invisible migrant workers, underpaid, exploited, and subjected to harsh shifts of grueling work. We tried to involve the prostitutes trafficked by the Nigerian mafia, and youngsters who managed to cross the Libyan desert and the Mediterranean, and are now trapped in Southern Italy with no prospects. We wished for them to enter the European Capital of Culture from the ghettos and lay siege to it. And we wanted to support them in this undertaking, as a kind of Trojan horse, from within the cultural institution.

Although most people understood the importance of the idea of storming and laying siege to this important cultural institution in order to make their concerns heard, only a few believed that it was worth sacrificing a working day during which they could earn 30 euros. When you spend some time in one of these ghettos with its inhabitants, you get an idea of the wounds it leaves on people when a society with all its institu-

⁵³ Milo Rau, "Ghent Manifesto," May 1, 2018, <https://www.ntgent.be/assets/files/general/Manifest/manifest-in-NL-en-ENG.pdf>.



Milo Rau, *New Gospel*. Yvan Sagnet as Jesus with his Apostles during the *Entry into Jerusalem* in Matera, 2019 © Armin Smailovic



Milo Rau, *New Gospel*. Yvan Sagnet with a group of farmworkers on the way to the tomato plantation, 2019 © Armin Smailovic

tions systematically excludes them; when they are never allowed to speak, when they are expelled once again after every peaceful protest against the conditions in which they have to live, deported; when any documentation of their misery only leads to them being perceived even more as a stigma that needs to be removed. At some point people stop making themselves heard. They leave the stage. They withdraw to places that are not marked on the map. That is why the utopian revolt starting from the “ghettos” in Europe remained an idea. We tried to depict it somehow in the film. But to be honest, we also had to portray our desperate attempt to give it a bit of reality. But in the end, our film is about the relentless struggle of those who believe in trying to storm cultural institutions, regardless of whether they are heard.

Stitching Work: Dramaturgy and the Politics of Curation

Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi

Writing this article feels like standing in a station in Brussels with no trains running. There is no precise destination, as I am anchored in the *here and now*, together with the artists I accompany. At the same time, I feel impatient and full of desire to resume my many creative travels, to be reunited again with the accomplices with whom I began a journey in Marrakech and Cairo. It is the modus of someone ready to catch a train with no ability to determine the day and time of the train to come, a daring train defying our uncertain times, unsafe and unpredictable.

Many questions cross my mind concerning the collaborations I have built over more than a decade as a dramaturg and curator. This work has nourished me, carried me, and encouraged me to engage in various projects, as well as to contribute to each other's work while respecting each person's context. For many years, we/I have been doing work that goes beyond some sort of coaching and is not driven by empathy only. This work aims above all to listen to the specificities of each and every one, and to adjust to the main ideas and principles of the projects in question. This way of listening has been carefully developed, stitching together meanings while being continuously aware of the burdens of these places and their inscription in transformative geopolitical contexts: Brussels, Marrakech, and Cairo.

These cities host subjective spaces as well as physical places, such as a rehearsal space, a theater, a fictional space, a metaphorical space... Theaters, when they exist in such contexts, are not easy to access for rehearsals of contemporary dance. Meanwhile, our own kitchens play just as important a role as the missing theater. In a journey that will extend far beyond us, all the present companions, the words written on paper, the movements traced in the studio, the sounds recorded in noisy terraces in Marrakech and Cairo, host us and form an important source for the imaginations of ourselves and hopefully others.

In their valuable companionship, I was able to be nomadic, reflecting, observing, and capturing the essence of the moment and the temporality of the place. I was, in a way, able to displace notions of time. In doing so—sometimes with effort and often with pleasure and passion—the fatigue of this passion gave meaning to the individual and collective commitment to contributing to this creative dynamic, in Marrakech and Cairo in particular. A dynamic occurs that might allow a space to dream, a performative space of the body which therefore continuously questions the politics of the city.

In this time of pandemic, where the already restricted mobility of my allies is no longer limited only by visas, but also by all kind of sanitation measures—a global condition we are all facing—I keep asking myself: How can we continue to work together, to listen, to develop this artistic exchange of thought of the body, of bodies in thought?

We are perhaps at the end of some formats, and at the birth of new ones.

It is as if a new exchange is taking place with a more silent and intense listening, imagining each other's needs even more sharply, stimulating us towards more introspection, with less voyeurism and more discreteness.

The formats of European festivals have acted as the norm too much and for too long. In these formats, the canonisation process evolves through a Western lens, leading to some artists being included and other excluded. They overly focus on needs related to the art market and remain based on Western notions and linked to western expectations, all too often tipped towards voyeurism. They reveal a sort of guarded or competitive hunt for the new, the young, the latest and most promising art works... In this art market, festivals are one of the first operating tools of the system. This dynamic operates like a mental snowball within the deeply intertwined programming of festivals and theaters in the West.

They act similarly in their representations of selected pieces and the lack of possibilities of bringing to the fore the innovative and alternate processes underlying them.

Therefore, this might be the right time to think about a different dramaturgy in a “festival,” formulating a different way of listening to the support towards processes and above all developing paths in more sustainable dialogues, facilitating a platform of exchange capable of learning from others' projects. Projects which are shown not only in their staged versions, but also and especially as creative processes. In other words, as performances shown in their aptitudes towards resilience, which they continuously produce. In doing so, we need to challenge *the politics of curation*, and simultaneously push for more awareness of this concept. It is a claim to free space for other formats and listen to the African continent and its dynamics and innovations in the cultural scene. Achille Mbembe often says that Africa “is the last frontier of capitalism ... It is the last territory on earth that has not yet been entirely subjected to the rule of capital.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Achille Mbembe, “The Internet is Afropolitan,” interview by Bregtje van der Haak, *This is Africa*, August 7, 2015, <https://thisisafrika.me/politics-and-society/the-internet-is-afropolitan/>.



Botero en Orient by Taoufiq Izzediou. Dramaturgical documentation by Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi ©Dorothea Tuch

In other words, how can togetherness be reshaped?

For more than a decade, I have been involved in contributing to artistic projects in Marrakech and Cairo. I will try to give flesh to the above through my experience as curator of *Un/Controlled Gestures?* in Cairo,⁵⁵ and the *On Marche* festival in Marrakesh.⁵⁶

These curatorial experiences led to sharing a few encounters related to the creative scene with a young generation of choreographers and performers, a generation that abounds in initiatives, both individual and hyper-socialized, connected, and which, while being aware of economic and social limitations, is constantly inventing new ones. The energy of the young group proved their aptitude for an innovative generation that is open to the world and deeply rooted in the local context, whether in Marrakech or Cairo.

⁵⁵ *Un/Controlled Gestures?* is a project launched by the Goethe-Institut, curated by Nedjma Hadj Benchelabi with the support of Anna Mülter and Anna Wagner, Mohamed Benaji and Malek Sebai (2019–2020). <https://www.goethe.de/ins/eg/de/kul/sup/uncongest.html>.

⁵⁶ The International Contemporary Dance Festival *On Marche* is an ongoing annual festival in Marrakech, founded and initiated by Taoufiq Izzediou in 2005.

Within Un/Controlled Gestures?

The main curatorial focus was to offer a space dedicated to such young generation, to build together with them from the start their first concept proposal, and to accompany the singularities of each one. The curator's work consists in providing an adequate framework, by extracting the raw material of the creative process. It is not only a question of accompanying the process and presenting results, but rather the construction of a shared critical space of creation, a safe space that explores a constructive critical discussion during its own making and gathers different generations of makers around itself. It puts together and advances the subjects of contemporary creation by young artists and by more confirmed choreographers. It is highly important to stimulate exchanges between generations of choreographers in MENA and in Africa. This space of dialogue between various generations is a way of contributing to writing a proper performing art history from the continent.

This is important within the discipline itself and also in relation to other disciplines such as visual arts and cinema. Fields involving image and movement are highly interconnected and benefit from less structured “boxes” in Africa, as there is much more interaction between these disciplines.



Koboul by Manal Tass. *Un/Controlled Gestures?* © Zayene Bechir

Through this open field, indifferent to the single discipline, a proper referential framework arises. By being proper, it agitates against, or decoconstructs, the colonial, globalized cultural system. This is taking place with an astonishingly rich artistic vitality, in terms of cultural and societal diversity and resolutely contemporary artistic and cultural initiatives. Here, the cultural landscape abounds in collaborative multidisciplinary projects and non-profit cultural organizations, both nomadic and permanent.

Through the curatorial project *Un/Controlled Gestures?*, we could grasp some of the main questions and challenges through the creative process. Young artists reflected on the autonomy of the body and the social control exercised over bodies, in their political, economic, and interpersonal dimensions. All projects were based on one main common ground where the choreographer occupies the spaces as a performer. It was an intentional choice for all participants to both be onstage and to develop the art space starting from their own bodies. From this multidimensional space, they use their choreographic art to question and celebrate our capacity to move beyond received and expected vocabularies. Collectively and individually, they construct a journey where body language and the language of bodies can evoke serenity, provoke fighting, and invite us to stand up and move against oppressive systems.

The Dramaturgy of the On Marche Festival

Marrakech is a city of multiple tensions and complex realities, with raw and intense gaps. All of this is experienced in plural and entangled temporalities capable of physically exhausting the person who practices within it. The intensity of these temporalities means that we are always experiencing an inner and an outer space at the same time. Public spaces are a permanent stage in a city which knows no pause except perhaps for the call to prayer, a space of time for the city to take up its soul, a sort of respite, a suspended moment. Since coming to Marrakech, I have never used a map, whereas in all other cities I have a map that I keep careful with my notes. Here in Marrakech, human encounters guide me and constitute my cartography: Taoufiq Izzeddiou first, Laila Hida and many others... These are unique encounters that capture waves full of tension, electricity, desires, and dreams of creation. These encounters have helped me to better understand the here and the now, and to contribute as associate curator to the festival *On Marche*.

Moreover, with Taoufiq Izeddiou—apart from being associate curator for *On Marche* for the last six years—in a sort of conniving way we have been discussing all of this for ten years; my position is in between dramaturg, listener, and advisor, mostly working towards the development of the coming creation at the early stages. To be honest, it is hard to frame clearly our collaboration, since we have never been able to confine ourselves to one project and have always alternated between discussions on the festival, his ongoing creations, his commitment to guide a dance school in Marrakech, more discussions about artistic languages... everything was and still is important.

I was also part of the workshop “Temps de transe” with more than fifteen young dancers. This was structured as a workshop starting a process of creation, which is always the chosen path when working with young performers. This was especially so, since these participants had different backgrounds and were not particularly trained in dance. It was the first phase of the creation of *Borderlines*. The approach was based on traditional Gnaoua music and dance, as a valuable heritage to revisit and translate into contemporary and individual interpretations. Rhythmic breathing is a layer of composition deeply anchored in traditional dances such as Gnaoui celebrations, a sort of *reenactment* of past memories through the performative body. Breathing is part of the soundscape and is approached as a key element of composition along with guembri music,⁵⁷ performed live during the workshop. At first, we wanted to leave the space to recall body memories of known rituals and bring it, explore it within, each one opening the possibility of injecting their own specificities. And then, carefully, other layers to compose were added to amplify the intensity. Layer by layer, movements were built up, allowing us to reconstruct a proper sense, anchored in the performer, of what the “temps de transe” meant for them, then.

In this collaboration, my work as a dramaturg consisted mostly in contributing to the foundations of the creation process by proposing suggestions, books, theoretical trajectories, images that could open up the research path. After this intense moment, Taoufiq Izeddiou extracted and filtered these materials to develop a shared vocabulary. We worked to present a first stage, open to the public, involving the whole group. For both of us, it is important that artists included in the creation process are given the chance to create their proper place within the collective. I consider my collaboration with Taoufiq as based on our complementarity, as an occasion to create the

⁵⁷ The guembri is an instrument of traditional Gnawa music and rituals.

conditions for benefitting the group, giving each dancer a potential path of becoming. This process also consists in overstepping borders, often defined by the world, as much as internal limitations. The next phase was more the work of Taoufiq, continuing the errant journey with them and achieving one of the possible internal lines of tension. This, for example, was the path that led to what ultimately became *Borderlines*, involving only five selected dancers. But even then, each of the dancers have been given space and time to better understand what they could develop and grasp the potential artist they were and are.

Further on, my work in curation becomes intertwined with my dramaturgical work, since I do accompany some of them in the creation of a solo and bring it to the *On Marche* festival first, and later hopefully on another stage.

I think it is essential to be open to the unfinished, and the unforeseen. Curating with a dramaturgical approach can be more than simply contextualizing: it is the creation of a space for the fragility of a creative process, at the threshold of an aesthetic experience in staging spatial and emotional relationships. Through the years, building from one edition of the festival to another, or from one time to another, it has become a conscious process.

Contemporary dance is still searching for a full recognition in the cultural institutional system in Cairo and Marrakech. Local cultural institutions do take it as a non-conventional and somehow not permissible art form in its narratives and representations. This situation of fighting for more visibility and support, in the end, somehow brings more freedom, too. It allows for creating out of the box, even with scarce means and support. Staying at the margins of the mainstream can be liberating. It can help in getting closer to society, and consequently to everything.

The power of dance, the power of body language, is the power to imagine, move, and transform our current selves and possibly others'. Through these dynamic and vital dance scenes, their performative body liberates their and our own bodies at once. To resist is to create.

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