

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

THE DRAMATURGY OF HISTORY

Tom Bryant

ROUTLEDGE

Focus

The Dramaturgy of History

In this book, dramaturg Tom Bryant shares with readers and writers his insights into the process of historical adaptation.

The book uses case studies from Bryant's collaborations with playwrights on successful Broadway and regional productions to work through the fundamental questions of historical adaptation: Why do you want to adapt history? For what purpose? What is your approach? How does that approach affect the portrayal of events? How does that choice by the playwright and the dramaturg then determine the framing and focus in the story, the selection of the key events and the choice of characters? What is the meaning you want the audience to take away from the events? How is your adaptation of past events relevant to contemporary times? In addition, the author explores the moral and ethical responsibilities involved for the dramaturg and the playwright in the adaptation of history and how issues of diversity, equity and inclusion impact the presentation of historical material.

This is an indispensable resource for anyone whose craft brings them to the task of adapting historical material for the stage—in postgraduate work, teaching or professional practice.

Tom Bryant is known for his work as a dramaturg in the development of new plays on Broadway and in America's regional theaters, most prominently Robert Schenkkan's *All the Way*, which won the Tony award for best play in 2014, and *The Kentucky Cycle*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1992. Other notable productions include Lisa Loomer's *Roe*, at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Arena Stage and Berkeley Repertory Theater, which won the Pen Center Literary Award for Drama in 2017. He served as head of the theater program at Crafton Hills College from 2004 to 2018 and currently serves on the faculty in the Department of Theater and New Dance at California Polytechnic State University, Pomona, USA.

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The Dramaturgy of History

Tom Bryant

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To Anne and Ben



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Introduction

Most of my experience with the adaptation of history to drama came about through my work as a dramaturg collaborating with contemporary playwrights on new plays. From the mid-1980s through the time of this writing, in 2023, I have been employed by regional theaters such as the Center Theater Group in Los Angeles, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Intiman Theater in Seattle, as well as for Broadway productions, to do new play development as a dramaturg. Beginning with my work with Robert Schenkkan on *The Kentucky Cycle* in 1989, over time, I came to specialize in working with playwrights who focused on historical adaptation. These included Schenkkan's *Lewis and Clark Reach the Euphrates*, *All the Way*, and *The Great Society*; Lisa Loomer's *Roe*; Arthur Kopit's *The Discovery of America*; and Nancy Keystone and the Critical Mass Performance Group's *Apollo* and *Ameryka*. In the development process of many of these plays, I began collaborating with the playwright either before the piece was written or during the process of the first draft. In many cases, I also continued with the revision process during the first production and on several subsequent productions.

In my experience, the first research usually develops out of the playwright's early exploration of the material, and then a larger research base is acquired in the process of finding key events, identifying possible characters and understanding the overall issues of a particular period, place and time. The process of researching usually involves identifying key books that correspond to the playwright's perspective on the historical material being dramatized. It also involves locating many other books and other materials that cover the much more specific aspects of history. Some of these texts are discovered by the playwright, and some emerge from the dramaturg's research.

An example of this process is the development of *The Kentucky Cycle* by Robert Schenkkan. *The Kentucky Cycle* covers a 250-year period in the history of Eastern Kentucky from the 1700s to the 1980s. Schenkkan initially used the books of Harry Caudill as a key, essential resource for understanding the overall history of the area. But during the development process, we also used many books on specialized aspects of that history such as the practice of

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coal mining, Native American tribal groups in Appalachia, the Civil War in the border-states and the economic consequences of the War of 1812.

All the Way and *Roe* also required a huge variety of specific historical references. *Roe*, by Lisa Loomer tells the story of the historic U.S. Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision and the subsequent political consequences that followed in the 1980s and 1990s. For this play, research topics included the legal history of abortion rights in America from the 1830s to the time of the play's writing, in 2014; the development of the second-wave feminist movement in the 1970s; and the increasing political power of the evangelical Christian movement in the 1980s. Sarah Weddington was the lawyer who argued the case and Norma McCorvey was the plaintiff, that is, Jane Roe. Their books, Weddington's *A Question of Choice* (1992), McCorvey's *I Am Roe* (1994) and *Won by Love* (1997), were key historical resources for the dramaturgy of the play because they offered detailed accounts by the two women that the play's major characters are based on.

All the Way by Robert Schenkkan is an account of President Lyndon Johnson's struggle to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the research process, we ultimately located at least 60 different books on historical figures, specific issues and events. Some of these were the spine of the research: Taylor Branch's trilogy of books on the civil rights movement, *Parting the Waters*, *Pillar of Fire* and *At Canaan's Edge*; Nick Kotz's *Judgment Days*; and Robert Caro's *Master of the Senate*. But there were also seven books on Lyndon Johnson alone about various aspects of his life. There were even books on relatively minor characters in the play, like Representative Wilbur Mills and Senator Strom Thurmond. And there were books about specific events such as the Mississippi Freedom Summer voter registration drive in 1964. An incredibly rich and varied research base had to be assembled to provide the underpinnings of scenes and character work.

Sometimes highly specialized forms of research are needed to understand historical contexts and events. In *Roe*, an essential focus was on Sarah Weddington's battle contesting the complex legal issues before the Supreme Court. Actual transcripts of the oral arguments during the two court proceedings were necessary. Then, because the specific case was about abortion, a large amount of *medical* research was necessary to understand related medical procedures and the process of pregnancy. The historical background of religious and moral views that influenced the legal arguments also required research. The play also involved the public reaction to the *Roe* decision: much of the detailed information about the later evangelical opposition to the *Roe* decision after 1973 was mainly available in newspapers, on websites, or in obscure newsletters. All these areas required detailed exploration beyond more conventional texts.

Conversely, sometimes only a few key books are the accepted main sources for a historical period, movement or figure, and there is little other authoritative material available. Or sometimes a book contains so much of

the desired historical material that it becomes the main source for research. Leaning so heavily on one source puts the playwright in the position of having to acknowledge that debt: for example, although the musical *Hamilton* is a unique work with its own brilliant theatrical style and form, Lin-Manuel Miranda prominently cited Ron Chernow in programs and publication of the book for *Hamilton* thus: “Inspired by the book *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow.” In movies and television, research attribution becomes a very particular legal issue.

In my experience, approaching the dramaturgical research process for new play development is different from approaching formal academic research. In choosing events, one is searching for dramatizable material: what’s most useful is detailed information about the backgrounds of the characters in the play, the events, and the specifics of period, place and time; less useful are theoretical ideas about historical events.

Although the details of the day-to-day development process and the delineation of exactly what research sources formed the basis of a given scene in a play are interesting and valuable that is not the specific focus of this book. It is also not meant to be an academic work on dramaturgical theory, although aspects such as theme, the relevance of historical material to contemporary times, and the major issues of inclusion, appropriation and diversity are also discussed. Rather the book is meant to serve as a practical, technical aid to playwrights, dramaturgs and directors. The process of adapting history to drama is a particular form of dramaturgy and the chapters in this book are designed to focus on specific choices that playwrights made during the process of adapting history to drama: framing the story, choosing the events, making choices about plot structure and character form the main focus of the dramaturgical analysis and discussion. By looking at examples from plays like *The Kentucky Cycle* and *All the Way* by Robert Schenkkan, *Roe* by Lisa Loomer and *Apollo* by Nancy Keystone, I hope the reader can acquire some useful, dramaturgical methodologies to facilitate the process of historical adaptation. I use these playwrights’ works, which I helped to develop, as some of the main examples of historical adaptation because of my intimate familiarity with their development process and the creative decisions the playwrights made in their writing process. I also use examples from other plays. In particular, I analyze *Julius Caesar* because Shakespeare’s adaptation of Roman history provides a master class in the techniques of adapting history to drama and it is a work most of us are familiar with.

The first six chapters of the book show examples of the playwright’s craft in framing the story, choosing the events, creating plot and structure, translating historical figures into characters and the use of theme in focusing the meaning of the play. The later Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the relevance of the historical material and issues of racial sensitivity, inclusion and cultural appropriation that the material might present in the contemporary theatrical and cultural context. In the final chapter, I go over some of the specific aspects