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Katalin Trencsényi

DRAMATURGY IN THE MAKING

A User's Guide for Theatre Practitioners

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Bloomsbury Methuen Drama
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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Bloomsbury Methuen Drama
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2015

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4725-7675-0
PB: 978-1-4081-5565-3
ePDF: 978-1-4081-5566-0
ePub: 978-1-4081-5567-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Trencsényi, Katalin.
Dramaturgy in the making : a user's guide for theatre practitioners / Katalin Trencsényi.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4081-5565-3 (pbk.) — ISBN 978-1-4725-7675-0 (hardback)
1. Drama—Technique. 2. Playwriting. I. Title.
PN1660.5.T84 2015
808.2—dc23
2014037429

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

To the memory of Géza Fodor (1943–2008),
dramaturg of the Katona József Theatre, Budapest,
my mentor.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to all those professionals who agreed to an interview with me to share their methods and help my research. For reasons of space, I could not include everybody's thoughts, although I am sure that every conversation I had was influential in forming my thoughts. Therefore, I want to say a heartfelt thank you to: Teresa Ariosto, Van Badham, Penny Black, Robert Blacker, Mark Bly, Sebastian Born, Elizabeth Bourget, Jack Bradley, Christopher Campbell, Tim Carroll, Guy Cools, Zoi Dimitriou, Robin Dingemans, Rachel Ditor, Elyse Dodgson, Liz Engelman, Éva Enyedi, Bart Van den Eynde, Géza Fodor, Philip Himberg, Owen Horsley, Nicholas Hytner, Péter Kárpáti, Gábor M. Koltai, DD Kugler, Maureen Labonté, Elizabeth Langley, Ruth Little, Ildikó Lőkös, Ben Power, Geoff Proehl, Brian Quirt, Annamária Radnai, Zsuzsa Radnóti, Nóra Sediánszky, Roxana Silbert, Bernd Stegemann, Zoë Svendsen, Emma Tibaldo, Mischa Twitchin, Júlia Ungár, László Upor, Hildegard De Vuyst, Paul Walsh, Bob White, Jenny Worton, Maja Zade and Jacob Zimmer. I thank Joseph Danan, Veronika Darida, Denise Fujiwara, Mark Lord, and Tracy Tynan for their notes.

I am also grateful for the support I received from the Institute for Art Theory and Media Studies at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, the Nemzeti Kulturális Alap (National Cultural Fund) Hungary, the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas, and the Canadian Government.

I am indebted to Peter Eckersall, Geoff Proehl and Dan Steward who advised me on the manuscript.

I owe a huge thank you to my family and friends who helped and encouraged me throughout this journey, particularly: Béla Bacsó, Mary-Lou Coates, Elly Davies, Frauke Franz, Sarah E.A. MacDonald, Éva Makai, Bálint Somlyó, Nick Tomalin, László Trencsényi and Teresa Webb.

This book could not have been written without all of you.

FOREWORD:
THE ROLES WE PLAY

Geoff Proehl[1]

> Accommodate, Administer, Advance, Advise, Advocate, Analyse, Approach, Argue, Arrange, Ask, Articulate, Attend, Be, Care, Challenge, Champion, Chart, Choose, Clarify, Coach, Collaborate, Commission, Communicate, Confront, Connect, Consider, Contextualise . . .

In recent years, particularly in North America and the United Kingdom, writers have employed thousands of words – many of which I've read, a few of which I've written – in an effort to explain what it means to do dramaturgy, to be a dramaturg: first in periodicals and at conferences, then in book-length studies, and more recently by way of listservs, web pages, tweets, and blogs. While Katalin Trencsényi's *Dramaturgy in the Making* builds upon much of this foundational work, it also signals a generational shift. It assumes that for many answering the founding question of Dramaturgy 101 – 'What is dramaturgy?' – is no longer the central challenge for the field. It addresses instead a new and, for many of us, most welcome focus: exploring the rich range of practices found in the lives of individuals who have again and again demonstrated in their work as theatre artists why dramaturgy matters. Katalin Trencsényi asks of dramaturgs not 'Who are you?', but 'How are you finding your way?'

> Consult, Converse, Correspond, Create, Critique, Cultivate, Curate, Decide, Define, Describe, Develop, Dialogue, Disagree, Discover, Discuss, Distance, Draw, Edit, Educate, Elevate, Embrace, Encourage, Enhance, Enlarge, Ensure . . .

One reason for the number of questions (and words) dramaturgy has spawned over the years may be the way in which it butts up against what it is to be human. I'm not saying that 'What is dramaturgy?' or 'How are you finding your way?' can go head to head with 'To be or not to be', but the potential is there, guaranteed by the location of dramaturgy within theatre (that collusion of truth and lies, of masks and faces), the residence of theatre within the arts (dark and light, metaphysical or not), of the arts within the humanities, of the humanities within

considerations that range from the inwardness we sometimes call soul to the outwardness we sometimes call infinity. We should not then apologise for speaking to questions as generative as these, particularly within a field that embraces questioning itself with so much affection.

> Enter, Envision, Examine, Facilitate, Find, Formulate, Give, Guide, Heal, Help, Highlight, Hone, Identify, Ignite, Imagine, Immerse, Interpret, Interrogate, Intervene, Introduce, Join, Jolt, Keep, Know, Leave . . .

Our interest in what dramaturgs do has perhaps become caught up in a bigger conversation about how humans make sense not just of their jobs, but also of their existence. One function of these larger conversations is that the more we try to analyse or understand a big idea, the more elusive some part of that idea almost invariably becomes. It is not so much that we are less clear about dramaturgy than we were thirty years ago – nor that what this book works to accomplish is impossible – but that dramaturgy is entangled with aspects of our living important enough to make this accumulation of meditations almost inevitable.

In this, dramaturgy is finally no different than its siblings (directing, acting, and design) and its close cousins (history, philosophy, and literature). As realms of humanistic endeavour, these fields of awareness and interaction regularly engage in an ongoing dialogue between the known and unknown. Part of what draws us to these disciplines is the way in which they contain spaces just outside the range of our vision, sensed but never fully seen. I'm not sure when we knew – in the history of thinking, talking, and writing about dramaturgy – that it would be this way. At first, some of us believed it might be possible to capture this new word's meaning in a couple of succinct sentences or with the perfect metaphor. But then one image spawned another until just tracking the similes (midwife, bridge, outside eye, architect, engineer, wrangler, composter . . .) required a database.[2]

> Lecture, Liaise, Link, Look, Make, Map, Mediate, Mentor, Mirror, Navigate, Nurture, Observe, Open, Perform, Plan, Polemicise, Present, Produce, Push, Question, Radicalise, Reach, Read, Recommend, Reflect, Reform, Relate . . .

If we need a finite job description to pop into an organisational chart, we can find one. But another approach is to think of the dramaturg's role in another sense of the word, as in the role an actor plays, as one of

those fictional figures found in a list opposite the first lines of dialogue. To do so may help us short circuit the desire to capture dramaturgy's essence in a pithy epigram. We know, or at least we have been taught, that characters in plays are figures of some complexity, a complexity we have been trained to expect and appreciate, even if he or she is one of those stock types (parasite, braggart, lover) who has been haunting the stage for hundreds of years. Perhaps our understanding of their dramaturgies, of how we let these masks have their way with us, might contribute to an ongoing conversation of what is going on in the field.

For example, many actors, as they approach a new role, turn their attention not to what the character they are playing is feeling but to what he or she is trying to accomplish – to what Sanford Meisner calls the 'reality of doing'. Directors, according to William Ball in *A Sense of Direction*, should, if nothing else, ask actors in rehearsal over and again, 'What is your character trying to get? To make?'

If we read *Dramaturgy in the Making* with an eye toward the verbs Katalin and her interviewees use in sentences that begin with phrases like, 'As a dramaturg on this project' or 'At this stage in this project, my role was to . . .', then the words we find to complete these expressions, almost always action verbs, will help us better understand how dramaturgs inhabit one creative process or another. Taken as a whole, these words create a landscape of doing. We see before us not just one plot or even plot itself, but a field of positions, moves, gestures, states of being – in and around acts of performance.

> Represent, Research, Respond, Retain, See, Seek, Select, Serve, Shape, Shine, Shove, Show, Simplify, Stimulate, Structure, Suggest, Support, Talk, Tell, Think, Translate, Vivisect, Watch, Weed, Work, Write . . .

The indented lists of verbs cited throughout this foreword are taken from *Dramaturgy in the Making*. In each case, they are either the author's or an interviewee's response to a question (implicit or explicit): 'What do you, the dramaturg, do in working on a given project? What are you trying to get done or make happen?' Some of these verbs are repeated over and over; others only appear once, but in each instance, any one could be used to complete this sentence: 'The role of the dramaturg is to _____.'

The length of this list, far from being exhaustive, underscores the breadth and depth of this book's exploration of dramaturgy as action. It helps us to understand why using four or five words to describe what a dramaturg does on a production leaves us feeling as if another hundred are

waiting in the wings. A class of young actors would likely be able – with just this list – to score all the roles given to them during their first year of scene study, which is to say that collectively these verbs describe serious, complex, and far-ranging instances of human action. As a field, we need to embrace the diversity of these terms and explore their implications, resisting the urge to emphasise words like *support*, *facilitate*, and *nurture*, while quietly expunging *push*, *shove*, and *vivisect*.

We might, while we are at it, borrow another idea from an actor's lexicon: *given circumstances*. Each of these verbs lives in a context, some general, others more specific. In these pages, we learn that John Corbin, America's first literary manager, *read* 2,000 new scripts in his first year on the job; that Kenneth Tynan *drew* up a list of 1,000 and more plays for the National Theatre to consider including in its repertoire; that director–choreographer, Alain Platel, and dramaturg, Hildegard De Vuyst, in the dramaturg's words, 'try to *radicalise* each other's ideas and to really *push* them to the extreme'; that Lessing *wrote* a year's worth of essays as part of his employment at the Hamburg Theatre: '*supporting*, *polemicising*, *arguing*, *analysing*, *explaining*, *attacking*, *educating*, *performing a vivisection* in front of the public' in the attempt to create a national theatre. A central feature of *Dramaturgy in the Making* is the way in which it addresses the range of given circumstances in which this list of verbs lives: institutional theatre, production dramaturgy, new play development, of course; but also, translation, dance, devising, and more.

Finally, in addition to verbs and their contexts, we might turn to the roles themselves; to those fictions we call characters in our efforts at better understanding the how of dramaturgy. If they could, these personae might remind us of the ways in which any role we assume always exists in the tensions of form and flux, cautioning against any notion of the self that supposes a stability only found in the stasis of fiction or death. The image of a priest awakening from a nap to a spring day in Pirandello's *Henry IV* underscores those moments in which our assumptions about who and what we are as dramaturgs drop away ('in that moment he did not know that he was a priest, or even where he was') but also how quickly and easily we return to habitual routines, ('all at once, he pulled himself together, and stretched out his priest's cassock'), how effortlessly we slip back into those forms that hold off the flux, that keep our collaborators and us from being apprehensive about what this strange person with the strange name might want next. The stories of dramaturgs found in these pages should make automated returns to habit more difficult.

To know (and know how little we know) yet still go on is a central feature of what it means to take upon us the role of dramaturg at any moment in any process. Dramatic figures model this for us as well. They show us time and again, relentlessly, what it is to know – for better and for worse, in pleasure and in loss – and *continue*: in the midst of illusion, illness, accident, irrationality, failure, and fatigue; of hubris, pity, and fear; when noble goals are overridden by personal agendas; when the verb we think informs our work is undercut by an intention ridden with self-interest; on days when, despite our best efforts, we end up being more lost than found; on days when even character and narrative drop away until all that is left is a fading memory of a body in some form of time, in some kind of space.

From one verb to the next, one circumstance after another, dramaturgs, like characters and the actors who play them, enact this simple phrase: 'I know now, *and* . . .' The conjunction is, appropriately, both almost invisible and clearly pivotal. Time and again, *Dramaturgy in the Making* speaks to this *and* of dramaturgy.

The human and dramatic conditions described here – both mundane and exceptional – speak to what it means to find ourselves in a field of verbs, a land of given circumstances, even if we do not think of them while devising the next season's schedule, even if they are not included in our job descriptions and employment guidelines. All this applies to the work this book so carefully describes because it, like the performances we create, lives in a place where the smallest number of parts is two. In taking on this role called Dramaturg, we step, first of all, into a little room, a not quite empty space that will always contain, if nothing else, an awareness, however fractured, of some kind of self and some kind of other.

One of my favourite passages in the pages that follow is Katalin's description of getting lost, first in a town, then in some fields. She lets us into these moments as known experience, in the head, but also in the body and the heart. We can see where she is, feel where she is, understand how she is trying to find her way: alone but heading toward a rendezvous with a friend, a colleague. She is learning a landscape but, even more importantly, finding different ways of knowing who she is and where she is, just as readers will find their way through this book – getting lost, wondering and wandering around, finding others but also themselves – dramaturgy in the making.

In *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett places two figures, Clov and Hamm, before us. We watch them inhabit, as best they can, a little room with two high windows, each possessing his own potential for movement, for action, each limited in his own ways.

As we sit with them in this space (so empty and so full), Beckett asks us to consider what they are doing and have done. They rehearse versions of the past that may or may not have happened. They go from one small but precise unit of action to another: a look out a window, a turn about the room, the beginning of a story. A list of verbs drawn from *Endgame's* world would find many points in common with this list of verbs that people Katalin's text.

Hamm's short imperative recalls for us what it means to take on a role: 'Me to play.'

Clov dressed for the road – 'Panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, umbrella, bag' – echoes moments in which we step into or out of a relationship with another. His image poses what may be the most fundamental choice of all: the decision, when it is ours to make, to stay or leave.

Although the possibility of Clov's departure fills the air, the final tableau is not of Hamm alone, but of two shadows, silent yet within the sound of a human voice. Despite the space between them, they are icons for existing in and as relationship, as two who are also one. They embody the question, 'What are the parts to this thing? And how do they go together?'[3]

Like this book, they remind us why dramaturgy matters.

. . . those of us working in the field need to continually describe ways of working as seriously and carefully as possible – as if the future of the discipline depended on them . . .

—Geoffrey S. Proehl[4]

PREFACE

I was nineteen years old when I was first confronted with the riddle of dramaturgy. I was part of a youth theatre group in Budapest, a close-knit bunch of teenagers, and we were celebrating New Year's Eve together in the theatre with the director and our tutors. It was the part of the night when people are tired of being cheerful and celebratory, and just enjoy quiet discussions, so some of us were sitting in a corner around the theatre's dramaturg, having a conversation. Suddenly, one of the actors turned to her: 'I've always wanted to ask you: what is a dramaturg?' The dramaturg took a deep breath, and talked until morning . . .

Ten years later, I moved to the United Kingdom and started working there as a dramaturg, and now it was I who was asked this question again and again. As co-founder of the Dramaturgs' Network, and later as its elected president, I spent the next decade trying to describe what I do.

What led to my research, and to this book, was the renewed discourse in dramaturgy I came across in the United Kingdom. As the role of the dramaturg was a relatively recent phenomenon there (starting only in the 1960s), the dialogue about the profession was still fresh, encouraged by fairly recent publications on the subject by Mary Luckhurst,[1] Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt.[2] This new discourse tried to settle the term dramaturgy within British theatre practices, at the same time that fairly new areas of theoretisation of the field (performance studies), practices (devised theatre, dance theatre) and new terms (new dramaturgy, postdramatic theatre, new media dramaturgy) have left their mark on it. In this I saw an opportunity for dramaturgy to rethink and revise its terms and practices in the context of contemporary theatre and performance, and perhaps even rejuvenate itself.

My other motivator was a pair of 'What is dramaturgy?' bookmarks I was given, created by the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas.[3] One bookmark read: 'When you do this work, you're doing dramaturgy', and then listed various jobs from 'help planning the season' through 'commissioning new work' to activities such as 'collate, cut, track, edit, rewrite, construct, arrange', etc. The other bookmark read: 'When you use these words, you're committing dramaturgy', and a long list of words followed, including: action, character, concept, form/content, journey/arc, motivation, part-to-whole, rhythm, tension, etc.

What I liked about these bookmarks was that, instead of trying to explain the role with reference to its dubious etymology of 'drama' and 'ergon', or clarifying the various meanings and layers of the word 'dramaturgy' and separating its function from the role or when it is an attribute,[4] it took a practical approach and focused on the activities the work involves.

This shift made me turn from the question of 'what is a dramaturg?' to 'how does a dramaturg operate?'; 'how is dramaturgy done?'; and 'what do we need in our "dramaturgical toolbox"'? If dramaturgy is indeed a craft (and an art), surely there must be certain methods, skills and proficiencies to be learned in order to do it well; to be (with a wink to Bruno Bettelheim) a 'good enough' dramaturg.

Of course, unlike flat-pack furniture, there is no 'assembly book' for dramaturgy, as that would be not only 'counterproductive and limiting, but harmful to our collective evolution as artists',[5] to quote dramaturg Mark Bly. Yet I was convinced that there must be a 'red thread' beyond individual case studies, a collection of interviews or fly-on-the-wall reports on our work. If I could examine several dramaturgs' processes, maybe I would be able to map various currents and tendencies in our ways of working, and even find some patterns?

For the purpose of my research, I marked the territory of dramaturgy into three distinct strands: institutional dramaturgy, production dramaturgy and new dramaturgy. From each strand I selected leading professionals from Europe and North America, working mainly for non-profit theatres and companies, and interviewed them about one recent dramaturgical work in which they had been involved, scrutinising their dramaturgical processes throughout the various stages of the work. I made fifty interviews with theatre professionals from Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and the United States, covering companies such as the National Theatre, London, the Schaubühne, the Royal Flemish Theatre and the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab, to name but a few.

I then used comparative method to study each phase of the work within the chosen strand. I present these comparative case studies alongside my own experience as a dramaturg with the idea that by grouping certain dramaturgical processes thematically, and by juxtaposing various methods and working processes, some sort of organic system or at least certain dynamics and tendencies (patterns) will reveal themselves in a way that can be useful for those practising dramaturgy. These case studies are supported by textual analysis, factual evidence and theatre and performance theories – as a result of my

seven-year-long research, including access to the Kenneth Tynan and the National Theatre archives.

Throughout the book I use the terms 'theatre', 'piece of theatre', 'show' and 'performance' interchangeably, meaning a repeatable theatre or dance event intended for an audience, regardless of whether it is text-based, devised, or choreographed.

When using the term 'dramaturgy', my understanding is extended from its traditional meaning of 'composition of a drama'. Instead, I apply it to the performance experience as a whole and, as such, I regard it as an inner flow of a dynamic system.

Neuroscientists and psychologists argue that pattern recognition is an essential tool for human survival. We look at occurrences or seemingly random data, compare them to other occurrences we have experienced before or learned about, and recognise a pattern. Once the pattern recognition has been done, we assign meaning to that pattern, and thus try to interpret and understand ourselves and the world around us.

Similarly, when experiencing an artwork (a piece of theatre for instance), we try to recognise a pattern or patterns that will help us create meaning. The curiosity of approaching something unfamiliar and trying to relate it to things familiar to us, the pleasure of recognition and the joy of understanding, the engagement in connecting with the artwork and making it our own: these are at the heart of enjoying art.

When creating an artwork, the journey is similar: in the material that is generated we begin to recognise patterns, rhythms and dynamics, and arrange them in order to emphasise this, creating a unique chemistry between familiar and unfamiliar, excitement and reassurance.

Dramaturgy is the action through which meaning is created by the recognition and arrangement of patterns. This act of composition or construction in the theatre today is understood in the context of the performance as a dynamic and durational whole. Tim Etchells calls it 'doing time',[6] Eugenio Barba refers to this as the 'the work of the actions'.[7]

When talking about 'doing dramaturgy' or referring to 'the work of dramaturgs', I mean professionals engaged in a dynamic dialogue-relationship with a theatre-maker, a collective or a theatre; a collaborative, hermeneutical, facilitating role that is characterised by a high level of communication. They are not necessarily called dramaturgs.

There are no productions without dramaturgy – yet there may well be productions without a dramaturg. The reason for this (bearing the LMDA's bookmarks in mind) is that it is a process, a relationship, an approach to work, a role that can be played partly or fully by skilful

professionals. It's not the name that bears it, but the skills and attitude employed to the process. Sometimes the dramaturgical work of a given production (or a theatre) is shared between various participants of the process.

I bore this in mind when choosing my interviewees. This book, therefore, also contains the thoughts of directors, assistant directors and choreographers.

What I examine in this book are those areas of the profession that I know from within, have worked in, and therefore feel confident talking about. Perhaps because of my classical, continental European training there is a strong emphasis on text-based theatre and traditional dramaturgy. I find that traditional or text-based dramaturgy is not only at the heart of the eighteenth-century origins of our profession, but also a very important reference point for contemporary dramaturgy. It is essential to have a good knowledge and understanding of the processes of 'classical', text-based work before 'working against it' or 'abandoning it' or developing it into a different type of dramaturgy.

I am aware of this book's limitations in a geographical sense – it would be worthwhile for someone to document the dramaturgical practices extending beyond the Western tradition . . .

'Dramaturgy is always concerned with the conversion of feeling into knowledge, and vice versa', it is 'the twilight zone between art and science', wrote dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven.[8] Jayme Koszyn[9] and Geoff Proehl[10] also suggest that it would limit our thinking about dramaturgy if we were to take into account only the Apollonian side of the role – 'causality, linearity, tangibility, reflection, control, and prescription'[11] – and neglect its Dionysian side – 'that embraces chaos, strangeness, mystery, intuition, associative thinking, physicality, dance, music and soul'.[12]

Similarly, in this book, I am trying to spin together these two threads, Apollonian and Dionysian dramaturgy, theory and practice, arguing that they are the two sides of the same thing. Therefore, the writing style reflects this: it is nearer to the genre of essay (including personal reminiscences in some places), but the references supporting my arguments can be found in the form of endnotes. As the focus of my research is the practice of contemporary dramaturgy, in this volume I examine theoretical writings from this practical angle only, in order to interpret their implications for a dramaturg today.

This book covers three important areas of the dramaturg's work: institutional dramaturgy, production dramaturgy and dance dramaturgy. Each part begins with a brief theoretical and historical investigation, to

contextualise the comparative case studies that follow. Each practitioner's interview used here was focused on one particular project, and the methods mentioned there refer to one concrete work and its particular needs. Therefore I would warn against reading these chapters as best practice documents. However, I feel that the tendencies they show are worth consideration.

Part I discusses institutional dramaturgy, the work of dramaturgs, literary managers, artistic associates based at an organisation (let it be a theatre, a company or a festival). This is where the profession started, and at its core is curating and new drama development.

Chapter 1 gives a brief historical and aesthetical overview of institutional dramaturgy. It argues that the emergence of the role of the dramaturg happens together with the development of bourgeois drama. It examines the formation of national theatres, and shows that the role of the dramaturg comes with progressive changes in the way we make theatre, particularly a people's theatre, especially a national theatre. The chapter then follows the work of three dramaturgs (G.E. Lessing, J. Corbin and K. Tynan) at the formation of three national theatres (the Hamburg National Theatre, the New Theatre, New York, and the National Theatre, London) and examines their legacies in relation to the work of today's institutional dramaturgs. It also explores the emergence of the literary manager and the function of the role, and argues that the distinction between dramaturg and literary manager is artificial.

Chapter 2, through concrete examples, including the National Theatre, London, the Schaubühne, Berlin, the Royal Flemish Theatre, Brussels, and the Stratford Festival, Stratford, Canada, discusses the curatorial role of the institutional dramaturg.

Chapter 3 takes two case studies (the Royal Court Theatre and the National Theatre, London) and discusses the dramaturg's facilitating role when working on a play in translation. It investigates where and how, once a theatre decides to produce a play in translation, from choosing a suitable play, up to the end of its run, a dramaturg can help a foreign play find its home on the stage. Each case study deals with translation for the stage in a different paradigm, thus the chapter examines the various roles of the dramaturg when dealing with a version made from a literal translation compared with commissioning translation proper.

Chapter 4, via several case studies, follows the work of dramaturgs in new drama development: when starting from scratch (Nightswimming,

Toronto), when working with a pre-existing first draft (Finborough Theatre, London), when working with an established playwright (Paines Plough, London), and when working with several playwrights simultaneously in a retreat environment (Sundance Theatre Lab, Utah, and Banff Playwrights Colony, Banff).

Part II discusses production dramaturgy.

Chapter 5 gives a brief historical overview of production dramaturgy and the formation of the role. It shows how the role of the production dramaturg developed hand in hand with the emergence of the *mise en scène* and the role of the modern director; how Brecht's legacy shaped the production dramaturg's work; and, in responding to the challenges of postdramatic theatre, how the role has been re-shaped in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 6, through two case studies (Toneelgroep, Amsterdam, and the József Attila Theatre, Budapest) and various other dramaturgs' comments, shows the production dramaturg's work in text-based theatre, and examines the process using the four stages of the work, distinguished by dramaturg Mira Rafalowicz.[13]

Chapter 7, through three case studies (The Factory, London, Shunt, London, and the Secret Company, Budapest), using the same system as in the previous chapter, examines the role of the production dramaturg when working on a devised production.

Part III discusses dance dramaturgy.

This is perhaps the most dynamically evolving strand of new dramaturgy – an important area which has changed the way we think about dramaturgy today.

Chapter 8 follows through the history of dramaturgical thinking in dance from Lucian to the twentieth century, arguing that dance dramaturgy was not born in a void in the twentieth century, but the history of dramaturgical thinking in dance can be almost continuously followed. It shows that dance dramaturgy was thought about and discussed before there was even a word to describe it.

Chapter 9 examines the history of the profession of the dance dramaturg – beginning around the time where the previous chapter left it, the second half of the twentieth century.

Chapter 10, through three case studies (les ballets C de la B, Ghent; Akram Khan Company, London; and Fujiwara Dance Inventions, Toronto), shows dance dramaturgs at work, presenting the methods at various stages of the process, using the same Rafalowicz system as before.

The book closes with a *Conclusion*.
This volume, while mapping contemporary dramaturgical processes, argues that there is not only one method of dramaturgy. Our individual quest cannot be avoided: all of us who want to engage in this profession need to create our own dramaturgical toolboxes. It may take years to devise a 'starter kit', and perhaps our entire career is spent in further refining, adding to it and sometimes discarding tools from it. This will probably be a life-long quest for every dramaturg, an ongoing journey to keep our curiosity about our profession alive; to nourish, maintain and sharpen our dramaturgical practices, to revisit and challenge our own processes, and continue to observe, reflect on and describe our work 'as if the future of the discipline depended on them'.[14]

Part I

Institutional Dramaturgy

Chapter 1

Institutional Dramaturgy: The Beginnings

> No theatre could sanely flourish until there was an umbilical cord between what was happening on the stage and what was happening in the world.
>
> —Kenneth Tynan[1]

If we look at the history of theatre, we can recognise that the role of the dramaturg emerged together with the development of bourgeois drama, that is to say it came about at the conception of modern drama. The professionalisation of the role of the dramaturg arrived with progressive changes in the way we make theatre, particularly a people's theatre or a national theatre. This theatre is characterised by having a permanent venue, and presenting plays, written in the community's language, which embody the values of a democratic idea of the nation.

This endeavour is often strongly linked to the idea of a 'public theatre', to which everybody has access, regardless of their social status. This new notion of accessibility arises around the seventeenth century as a consequence of the rise of the bourgeoisie and the transformation of the public sphere.[2]

A strong political gesture is made when the theatre acknowledges its place in the society, aims to belong to everyone (to the 'nation'), and consciously defines its artistic policy in order to communicate its values. It often appears alongside the aim of creating a theatre institution of national importance. With a national theatre, the idea of accessibility is coupled with a pledge of quality, and with a commitment to national ('home grown') drama.

The emergence of national theatres is also connected with the theatre (re-)establishing itself within the high arts and at the same time finding its place and voice within the nation. It is often part of a country's national movement: to stage plays in the mother tongue, and to encourage and show plays written by native playwrights.

When it first arises, the idea of the national theatre is put forward in order to cultivate national consciousness. This is often accompanied by an ambition to expand the notion of what constitutes the nation beyond the ruling classes.

National theatre movements

History provides two different models of national theatre founding. Both of them emerged in the seventeenth century.

One is the endeavour of the establishment: the French (or aristocratic/absolutist) model. This model defines what art, good taste and good drama – as opposed to popular culture – are from the point of view of the establishment, and creates national theatres by royal decree. The mile stone is François-Hédelin d'Aubignac's *Pratique du théâtre (The Whole Art of the Stage*), published in 1657 – which was the first book in France written on dramaturgy. In 1680, by a royal decree, the Comédie-Française was created. With this move, as theorist J.G. Robertson observes, 'the stage entered the service of the state as something more than a mere provider of entertainment – a vehicle of education, an "école de vertu"'.[3]

National theatres in other countries that followed the French (absolutist) model are the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen (1748), the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg (1756), the Burgtheater in Vienna (1776)[4] and the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm (1788). These theatres mainly played French dramas and Italian operas (the highest quality entertainment of the time), and only later (around the nineteenth century) recognised the importance of drama written in the mother tongue, and gave their support to it.

The other model of establishing a national theatre is an effort by the emerging, enlightened and wealthy middle class of trying to gain more political power and representation. In the world of the theatre this means an entertainment in the mother tongue, 'validating their world-view and embodying their values'.[5] This can happen only when there is a paying audience that can support and sustain an independent theatre. Therefore, it emerges in towns where the bourgeoisie is strong.

The German (or bourgeois/democratic) national theatre model is a gathering place for civic society, and begins in Amsterdam in 1638, when the *Schouwburg* (City Theatre) opens – the first republican, municipal theatre;[6] followed by academic Johann Christoph Gottsched and theatre manager Caroline Neuber's attempt to create a German

theatre in Leipzig (1727–1740);[7] and gaining momentum with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and the establishment of the Hamburg National Theatre (1767–1769).

The most relevant work relating to this model is Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy (Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 1767–1769). In this collection of reviews and responses to the Hamburg National Theatre's work, Lessing turns away from the French neoclassical theatre, and urges German playwrights to develop great tragedies of their own. In Lessing's opinion, if German playwrights would write plays adhering to Aristotle (not in the letter but in the spirit), the result would be great tragedy. This conviction underlies his reviews of all the performances of the Hamburg National Theatre in the volumes of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

The subsequent emergence of the role of the dramaturg occurs alongside the development of bourgeois drama. This shift of emphasis, from the heroic actions of emperors taking place in a public arena to the intimate lives of ordinary people in their own homes, is nothing less than the beginning of modern drama, which in the German-speaking world started with Lessing.[8] The change of subject matter in bourgeois drama reflects a corresponding transformation in the public sphere: from the publicity of the court we turn inwards to the domestic sphere of the middle class.[9] Instead of depicting princes and heroes, the playwright chooses ordinary people: friends, fathers, lovers, husbands, sons, mothers, with whom the audience can better identify. These people speak a language not heard before on the stage: it is intimate, everyday and emotional. With Lessing's words:

> There [in the antique tragedies] all the personages speak and converse in a free public place, in presence of an inquisitive multitude. They must therefore nearly always speak with reserve and due regard to their dignity (. . .). But we moderns, who have abolished the chorus, who generally leave our personages between four walls, what reason have we to let them employ such choice stilted rhetorical speech notwithstanding? Nobody hears it except those whom they permit to hear it; nobody speaks to them but people who are involved in the action, who are therefore themselves affected and have neither desire nor leisure to control expressions.[10]

The German model of a national theatre was the first independent, middle-class, 'republican' model of a permanent repertory theatre with articulate artistic aims that set out to raise the status of theatre and improve the quality of drama and acting.

While the Hamburg National Theatre was heralding a change in the public sphere and an opening up towards a wider public, Lessing with his plays and with the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* paved the way for the development of 'new drama' in the German speaking world. With it a new professional role was emerging: the dramaturg, whose main concern was the development of quality national drama, and who paid as much attention to its form as to its content.

The Hamburg National Theatre

In his Preface to the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (on 22 April 1767), Lessing noted:

> If therefore nothing further has been attained here than that an association of friends of the stage have laid their hands to the work and have combined to work according to a common plan for the public good, even then, and just through this, much would have been gained.[11]

Almost exactly a year later (on 19 April 1768) he wrote:

> If the public asks, 'What has been done?' and answers itself with a sarcastic, 'Nothing,' then I ask on my part, 'What has the public done in order that something might be achieved?' Nothing also, ay, and something worse than nothing. Not enough that it did not help on the work, it did not even permit to its natural life-course. Out of the good natured idea to procure for the Germans a national theatre, when we Germans are not yet a nation![12]

In between these quotations lie 'one hundred and four' volumes of passionate writing: supporting, polemicising, analysing, explaining, attacking, educating – in other words, performing a vivisection in front of the public on the attempt at creating a German national theatre in the wealthy port town of Hamburg.

The Hamburg National Theatre aimed to become a theatre of national importance. The endeavour cannot be considered purely literary, but is also political. The theatre was to be the means of forging national unity in a country divided into some 300 principalities; and at the same time the German language and literature would be elevated to the heights of the ancient Greek tradition. Naturally, if the ideal is

ancient Greece, and the endeavour is financed by a consort of twelve prestigious bourgeois of a wealthy merchant town, the inadvertent political message of the pursuit is independence from any kind of political authority, and a step towards the political freedom of the middle class, free from feudalistic rulers. The ideas of the Enlightenment are bubbling: we are only a generation away from the French Revolution.

A potential national theatre was not only to be a national forum but also a source of cultural identity. As theorist Michael Patterson notes, 'there was, outside the theatre no national forum where German was spoken – no parliament, no central court, no Académie Française.'[13]

This move was also a strong step towards an independent art theatre: an attempt to form a repertoire according to literary and artistic merits.

If we consider the main changes this enterprise was about to achieve, we can form a picture of the scale of this undertaking. Residing in the Gänsemarkt in Hamburg, in a theatre building with a capacity of 1,600,[14] the Hamburg National Theatre aimed to give a permanent home to German language theatre. They offered a regular salary (and pension) to actors, whose natural state in those days was peripatetic: wandering in troupes and performing for an unpredictable income (today we would say box office split). They changed the system of running a theatre from a solely principal (director or owner)-led institution to an organisation managed by a consort (or board as we would say today). They had visions of actors' training (to the height of the English standard) and tried to establish an academy that operated in conjunction with the theatre, led by the best actor of the times, Konrad Ekhof (1720–1778). They aimed to develop the marginal German language drama to the height of the contemporary world standard.

To seal the success of this ambitious endeavour, the theatre invited the star in literary circles, Lessing – who was well known, controversial and cutting edge – to give his name and support to the project.

Positioned between theatre and audience, Lessing's role was at least as ambiguous and unclearly defined as the role of the dramaturg is nowadays. He was invited to be a resident playwright, a post he turned down, so he became, and this was his official title, a 'legal adviser'.[15] Of course, he wasn't advising on legal matters!

Finding that he had no power to influence either the conduct of the theatre[16] or the repertory, Lessing joined forces with Johann Joachim Christoph Bode (1731–1793), translator, bookstore owner and printer, and used his own money to argue his case for a better German theatre and drama in the volumes of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.

Initially it was planned that twice a week Lessing would publish a volume, in which he responded to the plays shown by the theatre, thus engaging the audience in a critical discourse. After a while it became unsustainable. The leading actors' interference made Lessing stop writing about the acting. The company's move to Hannover during the Advent period of 1767 (when theatre performances were banned in Hamburg) to tour there with the existing productions, deprived Lessing of new shows to write about, so he moved towards theory in his later essays.[17] Soaring printing prices and the lack of enough subscribers prompted him to publish several volumes together. Nevertheless, he completed his undertakings within two years, although the last (101st) volume he cheekily entitled, Volume 101–104.

As a critic and playwright himself, Lessing was aware of the acute problems of the German language theatre well before this endeavour:

> We have no theatre. We have no actors. We have no audience. (. . .) At any rate the Frenchman has a theatre; whereas the German barely has booths. The Frenchman's theatre at any rate is the entertainment of a very large capital city; whereas in the German's main cities the booth is the mockery of the populace. The Frenchman at any rate can boast that he diverts his monarch, an entire splendid court, the greatest and worthiest men in the realm, the highest society; whereas the German has to be satisfied if a few dozen honest private citizens, who have timidly sneaked up to his booth, are prepared to listen.[18]

No wonder that when he accepted his post on the board, Lessing's aims were no less ambitious than the theatre's: to address the poor state of contemporary German language drama and theatre with the aim of elevating it to the heights of the best contemporary theatre.

For the German drama to develop, in Lessing's opinion, the German theatre needed to stop copying the prevailing French model. Instead, it ought to return to the true roots of the Aristotelian dramaturgy.

Rather than insisting on the three unities of drama (even when it is detrimental to the plot or character development), Lessing suggests that the unity of action is the rule that needs to be observed most strongly, and the other two rules (unity of time and place) are there in order to help trim the actions. Instead of the complicated plots, therefore, Lessing argues for simplicity.[19] To replace dramas about princes and heroes written in verse, Lessing argues for domestic tragedies written in prose.[20] Finally, he condemns the banishment of Harlequin (and with him the character of the fool) from the stage.[21]

According to Lessing, tragedy needed to imitate life, be truthful, and aim to improve the audience's morals. It ought to achieve this by purging the audience's emotions through recognition and fear. In the objective of truthful imitation of life (mimesis) we can recognise the beginning of the concept of realism and modernism, a notion that theorist Erich Auerbach also traces back to the rise of the middle class.[22]

As we know now, the theatre under the artistic directorship of J.F. Löwen failed to fulfil its mission. Its repertoire was mediocre, largely owing to the fact that there were insufficient good contemporary German plays around to choose from, but also because of incompetent leadership that allowed actors' whims to influence programming decisions. The theatre was also plagued with financial difficulties and quarrels – thus it was forced into making too many compromises.

Nevertheless, the example of the Hamburg National Theatre encouraged the opening of other national theatres in the German speaking world: Gotha (1775), Berlin (1786), Breslau (1797), Mannheim (1777), Munich (1778), and Weimar (1791).

Furthermore, in the figure of Lessing, the role of the dramaturg (conjoining the theory and practice of dramaturgy) had been established. As Anthony Meech noted: 'He was unique in combining critical sense of the highest order and an ability and willingness to read foreign texts in the original with the talent of a dramatist and an acute awareness of the practicalities of stage performance.'[23]

Lessing's example was followed, and the role of the dramaturg was further developed by professionals such as Friedrich Schiller, working as resident playwright and dramaturg in Mannheim (1783–1784), and Ludwig Tieck, solidifying the role with his long tenure in Dresden (1825–1841), to name but a couple.

Lessing's legacy

There are many ways of interpreting the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. From a practising dramaturg's point of view, what is important is the attention Lessing gives to 'new drama development', which is the underlying current of the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*: how to write good plays that work on the stage here and now. At the birth of the profession of institutional dramaturgy, the most important role is already here: *to nurture contemporary drama*.

One of the most frequently used expressions when referring to Lessing's role at the Hamburg National Theatre is the 'in-house critic'[24]