

Dramaturg as context manager

A phenomenological and political practice

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Dramaturgy implies a keen perception, an extensively sought orientation, and a steadfast purpose in the process of interpreting and creating an artwork. Dramaturgs love texts, and texts are everywhere: not relegated to written or verbal words, they exist as you walk, as you gaze, as you breathe. Within the premise that texts are compositions of signs in every form – as Jacques Derrida proclaims, “all is text and all is writing [écriture]”¹ – dramaturgy may be seen as what animates the text; it is the spirit of the text. Dramaturgy is also a political practice. Dramaturg-director Bertolt Brecht was concerned with producing a political theatre that would galvanize historical consciousness and ignite social change; he therefore broke away from mimetic representation and provoked spectating awareness through distancing/estranging effects and other “epic” techniques.² Brecht’s political aesthetics, however, is inseparable from a specific historical context, namely the need to discontinue the dramatic illusion produced by well-made naturalistic drama that tended to elicit passive empathy from the audience. Following Augusto Boal, who claims that “all theatre is necessarily political,”³ I consider that playtexts may produce oppositional political effects in many forms and through different techniques, without being committed to conveying a prescriptive political message. In effect, a contemporary political dramaturgy should address the micropolitics of power or the ways normative values and institutionalized modes of production permeate personal relationships and individual desires.

In a dramaturgical encounter we aesthetically engage with a text by experiencing its material qualities and letting it interact with our own lived body and imagination. That is why, dramaturgically speaking, the same play can be viewed differently by separate individuals and at distinct times, since it is a compositional score of ideas, sensations, and emotions that is open to new configurations through an interaction with the individual imaginative activity of dramaturgs, directors, designers, and actors. By implying a subjective engagement with an object-text, dramaturgy is also a phenomenological practice. Inspired by the writings of French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard, phenomenology foregrounds the non-linguistic material aspects of both drama and performance, calling attention to space, bodily configuration, kinesthetic patterns, handling and presence of objects, light and

darkness, sound and taste. A phenomenologist rehearsals, so as to worlds of the play

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French theatre tends to state of mind (*un état d'esprit*) should not remain static; indeed concern all practice can advise suggestion put forward by Ensemble) that the key collaborator of marketing agency endeavor may perhaps as a dramaturg and most theatre companies assigned to one or more in 1990 by director Graça, in Lisbon Teatro e Cinema. repertoire was originally (Tennessee Williams, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen and

darkness, sound and silence, temporalities, and other interconnected sensory effects. A phenomenological-dramaturgical approach is useful in bringing sensory material into rehearsals, so as to “carry over” to the stage the cultural, conceptual, and imaginary worlds of the play through a dynamic language that is specifically theatrical.⁴

Dramaturgical practice varies with the dramaturg’s own epochal context, since it should endow the spectators of a particular production with knowledge and ability to speculate about the interrelationship between the performance-text and the world in which they live. In *Performing Drama*, Vanden Heuvel asks for the return of an ethical and political function of art, “an art directly related to the polis.”⁵ In my professional practice as a dramaturg, I have always been concerned with theatre as a forum for the exchange of ideas and as a public art that can actively engage in social transformation.

Dramaturgy inevitably has political dimensions because theatre, by the very fact of being publicly performed, is not an “autonomous” art dissociated from social reality. Theatre produces political effects whenever it produces a gesture towards an event/situation. These may be effects of political compliance with normative morality and ideology or effects of wonder, perplexity, revolt, and opposition. As philosopher Theodor Adorno suggests, political art “is not intended to generate ameliorative measures” but instead “to work at the level of fundamental attitudes.”⁶ Following the tradition initiated in the 1760s in Germany by Lessing, the dramaturg performs “an approach to staging based on a thorough dramaturgical interrogation of text and context, both historically and in its relationship to the present.”⁷ The dramaturg is thus a decision-maker of what to highlight in a playtext so as to make it topical or relevant for contemporary times. Consequently, dramaturgical practice is not exempt from ideology (in the sense of production of meanings and ideas) or from embracing select theories/perspectives.

French theatre theorist and practitioner Bernard Dort wrote that dramaturgy is a state of mind (*un état d'esprit*) extensive to all participants in a theatre production and should not remain the job of a specialist.⁸ Although dramaturgical awareness should indeed concern all theatre performers and mediators, I propose that dramaturgical practice can advantageously be assigned to a specialist. In this sense I follow the suggestion put forward by Joachim Tenschert (a long-standing dramaturg at the Berliner Ensemble) that the dramaturg is par excellence the theorist in a theatre collective and a key collaborator of the director, designers, actors, executive producers, stage managers, and marketing agents.⁹ The fact that dramaturgy is a phenomenological and political endeavor may perhaps be elucidated by sharing a few of my professional experiences as a dramaturg and by discussing how they varied according to the text in question. In most theatre companies in Portugal, the need for dramaturgy as a resident practice assigned to one or more specialists is rarely acknowledged. Nonetheless, I was invited in 1990 by director Carlos Fernando to become resident dramaturg of GTH-Theatro da Graça, in Lisbon, immediately after I graduated in theatre at Escola Superior de Teatro e Cinema. During the five years of my dramaturgical work at GTH, the repertoire was organized into seasonal cycles, namely of North-American drama (Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Paul Selig), of Russian works (Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorki, and Aleksandr Galin), and of Scandinavian plays (Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg). This enabled us to explore cultural contexts

in depth, to write up extensive didactic programs, and produce related activities (exhibitions, poetry readings, music recitals) that enriched the audience's reception of the text.

Although any playtext evokes a singular world and must be approached specifically, there are basic tools and methodological procedures of dramaturgical analysis that may be applied to most scripts. As dramaturg Karen Jean Martinson states, the first impressions from the first reading of a play should always be kept present, since "[t]his first moment is all about affect – how does the play impact me on an emotional, impressionistic level?"¹⁰ I consider this initial intimate moment with the text to be deeply phenomenological, for it is an embodied perceptual experience of an object that speaks to my mind-body and connects to the way I live in my own existential and social habitat. During this first reading the dramaturg should note down how the play interacts with other texts that come to mind – be it drama, fiction, philosophy, poetry, dance, paintings, sculptures, or films – and retain them as potential evocative materials in the scripting of its performance.

music

When dealing with a foreign-language play, the choice of its translation or version becomes crucial. From my experience as resident dramaturg at GTH-Teatro da Graça, I recall two instances of flawed and censored versions that we managed to avoid. The first occurred when we were preparing a production of Maxim Gorki's *Vassa Gelezova* (1910); as the company's dramaturg, I started analyzing the play from an English translation, while director Elisa Lisboa was translating it from the French. Shortly before the beginning of rehearsals, and because we were working on a tight schedule, I helped type Elisa's translation and was amazed to discover that in our Portuguese translation there were no references to the 1905 Revolution in Russia, a violently repressed social upheaval that dramaturgically structures Gorki's play. Apparently the French translator had eliminated all such references and focused merely on the play's domestic plot, thereby turning it into a lighter "apolitical" drama. Two years later, when we were producing *The Pelican* (1907) by August Strindberg, we also came across several different versions of the play, including a Spanish one that replaced the final devastating fire, in which both house and family members burn, with a happy ending. In both cases we revised our translations and had them examined by Portuguese readers of Russian and Swedish. Matters of translation are thus at the heart of dramaturgical practice.

On other occasions, however, the dramaturg must adapt the play, by adding, editing, and subtracting scenes and roles, so as to make the performance's concept clearer and feasible, provided there is authorization from the playwright. When at GTH we produced Brian Friel's *Fathers and Sons* (1987), a brilliant adaptation of a very complex Russian novel by Turgenev, we saw the need to modify a scene in which the revolutionary proletarian Bazarov confessed his infatuation for Anna, a conservative landowner. In Turgenev's book the episode makes us realize Bazarov's micropolitical dilemma of feeling attracted to someone ideologically opposed to him; in contrast, Friel's love scene appeared flimsy and, unlike the rest of his adaptation, dramaturgically astray from the novel.

In a production of Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde* (1897) presented in 1996 at the Emerson Stage Festival in Boston, I introduced a young contemporary heterosexual couple between scenes. Although their outward appearance and physical behavior

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