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The Case for Dramaturgical Leadership Post-COVID-19

By Alix Rosenfeld

As COVID-19 rages on, the future of theatre remains sickeningly murky. Companies can't say with certainty when they'll be able to stage their next production, many administrators are waiting in furlough purgatory, and artists don't know when they'll see their next paycheck. But this is for now—what comes after? Once the companies that endure are on the upswing, what lessons will they take away from this experience, and how will they make structural changes? Which artists are primed to shepherd us into this new paradigm?

I am making a case for dramaturgs.

Prior to the pandemic, there was a wave of leadership turnover in America. However, even with the ushering in of the new, tradition still dictated how those positions were filled. Artists who identify as directors or who have a hybrid career of actor/director/writer (or some combination therein) are the prime candidates. Dramaturgs in leadership roles are rare. Why is that?

One could point to the elusiveness of the job itself as a reason that dramaturgs are usually supporting characters. Whether because we're still a relatively unknown quantity in American theatre or because the role is so changeable, the result is the same; people struggle to understand what we do. All dramaturgs have their own way of defining the role—a quippy metaphor or clean sentence laying out what they do in a rehearsal room or during a script consultation: play midwife or doula; link between the days of yore and the theatre world today; a bridge for the gaps between what a playwright/production is intending and what an audience is receiving. Ask any 'turg, and they'll tell you something like this. I, myself, have used every single one of these.

Whatever the explanation, dramaturgs are, at our core, facilitators. We are the ones that stand back to see the big picture, holding the span of theatrical precedent in our minds as we simultaneously burrow deep into a play's center to identify the essence of a given moment. Then we deliver our assessments with approaches tailored for each collaboration, finding the language that suits the situation or temperament. We do not impose, but instead we strive to help a writer, director, or company achieve the best version of their play or their interpretation of a piece. And our work does not end with the play itself—we lead talkbacks, we create lobby displays, we moderate panels with members of the community and lead workshops, all with the goal of illuminating even more of a play to audiences.

That's not to say that dramaturgs are without fault, ego, or agenda, or that other artists aren't capable of seeing in broad scope. The longevity of companies with directors-as-leaders immediately refutes the notion, and I absolutely bow to the wisdom of my artistic elders. Yet even if dramaturgs have skin in the game and a belief that our view is the most astute, we still play Virgil to another artist's Dante. We are guides. We'll help you find your way and a path to potential glory, even though we know most people will probably never know the degree to which

we had a hand in the final result. Dramaturgs have creative intuition and a steady hand—useful for leading in a new frontier.

It's not only our artistic acumen and foresight that makes us attractive leaders for arts organizations. Most of us have had to exist in the margins, steadily accumulating multiple administrative skills to support freelance careers that are shakier than most; all mainstream theatre productions will have directors, actors, designers, but the inclusion of a dramaturg is never a guarantee.

As a freelance dramaturg, I have been made all too aware of the fragility of my existence and the constant career reconfiguration needed to survive. I've interned in casting, education, producing, community engagement, archival, and literary departments. I've led artistic workshops for underserved communities in foreign countries. I've been a box office associate, a patron services manager, a theatre critic, a grant writer, a script coordinator for a national playwriting conference, and I am currently the Institutional Giving Manager for a LORT company in Philadelphia. I've held all these roles in the last five years—and not because I cannot be tamed or seek a transient lifestyle. Dramaturgs often reinvent themselves, adapting their skill sets with speed and accuracy to take on whatever marketing, development, or education job (however temporary) opens up to them. We've done it all, because we've had to do it all.

This makes us formidable. Many dramaturgs have artistic minds paired with wide-ranging administrative know-how. Institutional dramaturgs weave deftly between departments and disciplines, and we're master liaisons. We can help you shape a season and reaffirm your artistic ethos, develop strategic plans for your fundraising, and aid in creating the copy for your marketing campaigns. We can do all of this while speaking to your audiences skillfully and with charm when they do come back through your doors.

So why aren't there more of us at the top?

While there are bigger companies who have a resident dramaturg on their payroll, institutional dramaturgs are still a rarity. When there are budget shortfalls or companies change direction, the permanent dramaturg is usually the first staffer to go. That's if there even was a dramaturg on the roster to begin with; smaller companies or independent producers often forgo dramaturgs altogether to spare themselves the additional artist fee. We are seen as a luxury—nice to have around, but not necessary to put a play on its feet or make a company thrive.

It's past time the field stopped seeing us that way. When the pandemic passes, a lot's going to be different; seismic shifts have already occurred. But this is can be an opportunity. Companies are being given the chance to innovate and evolve, to rebuild a theatremaking world that is more fortified and creative than it was before. So make dramaturgs your leaders. Our skills make us more than equipped for the task. Consider us when you need vision that is both imaginative and measured, when you need a collaborator. Whatever you do, don't count us out. We are the risk you should take and the post-COVID-19 leadership you're seeking.