

INTRODUCTION

At the 2021 Kennedy Center-LMDA dramaturgy fellowship this past summer, we both, as early career Dramaturgs, heard it loud and clear when mentors urged us to “LOOK TO OUR COMMUNITIES.” As we remained in touch, we found that we were both helping to launch New Works Festivals. Mutual curiosity about what we were doing and enough exchanges of thumbs-up emojis to encourage each other led to conversations that began to take shape as a cross-country Venn Diagram from Los Angeles, CA to Waco, TX. We hope sharing these reflections for how we approached emerging from the quarantined world of Zoom back to live theater will be a conversation we can continue to experience with the LMDA community.

Melanie Anthony & Suzi Elnaggar

How did you find your post-fellowship project?

M: After the LMDA convention, I was *really* eager to dive into something challenging and relevant. So I cast an ‘internet web’ out locally and saw that a longstanding community theater - The Morgan-Wixson Theatre (which I’ll call MWT here) - was asking for submissions for an inaugural New Works Festival. A deeper dive into their website showed that they were in a transitional moment and this festival was how they wanted to return to live theater. So, I took a deep breath and sent an email...

S: It was similar for me! I had a friend, Trent Sutton, with whom I had previously worked at a non-profit - he had started a performance non-profit, Wild Imaginings. They were putting the Epiphanies New Works Festival on its feet (after a fully virtual start in 2020,) and I just reached out and asked if he wanted a dramaturg on the team. He was enthused - and then asked what that meant! So, I learned throughout this whole process.

Once you were on board, did you know what your job entailed?

M: The fun thing was defining what dramaturgy is or could be.

S: Exactly. My involvement started when they had eight semifinalists. I read and looked over each script, and then we had a Zoom table read with each playwright present, as well as our creative team and the actors. From that point, as a dramaturg, I worked with the playwrights one-on-one (if they wanted) over zoom or email. As a creative team, we also talked with them directly after the read and sent them more comprehensive feedback later. We wanted every playwright that was involved to feel that their work was important and that we were invested in them. We wanted everyone to walk away with something of value.

M: When I came on at the beginning of July, they had about 35 plays selected for the next rounds out of the original 92 submissions. My *first question* to our brave and tireless producer Mirai Booth-Ong was “how do you plan to sort the responses from multiple readers”? My *first concern* was how to ensure transparent, thorough responses. I offered to create an Airtable form with a menu approach. Creating a

workable, user-friendly tool was a great start. I wanted the response forms to clearly differentiate what might be a reader's particular taste and life experience from what could specifically be considered evaluations of content, writing, characters, or relevance to the festival's DEI mission.

S: This year, Epiphanies had so many more submissions than we expected - about 60. The creative team read each and every play - It was pretty overwhelming, but we made it (I came in at the tail end of that reading.) I have already started working on the reader response forms for next year. I actually have reached out to a few LMDA mentors and colleagues, including Melanie, who have provided valuable advice on constructing a reader form. I want to make sure that we are meeting industry standards and continuing to do things in an ethical way. We are excited to implement that next year and also have more readers.

M: And, I wanted to keep the dramaturgy relationship going past the reading phase so I expressed interest in how the festival would be announced to the membership and the outside community. Knowing how important the New Works Festival was as a reflection of MWT's growing DEI mission, I created their 'boilerplate' that says:

"As we celebrate our 75th Anniversary, the Morgan-Wixson Theatre is committed to a meaningful effort to amplify new voices to engage, challenge and connect our audiences to each other and the wider community as we elevate the greater potential of what theater can offer to our lives."

This effort at consistent, outward-facing messaging led to dramaturgy being in the zoom room for the board president's YouTube broadcasts and in working with Mirai to decide how the 5 weekend/7 play slate would be scheduled: yay *Seasonturgy!* And, the message has been internalized. I still see it on Gmail signatures.

It was such a concrete way to plant the flag for dramaturgy.

S: Yes! Ultimately, I have become the dramaturg and part of the artistic team for Wild Imaginings overall, which is so exciting. As a whole, we wanted to expand our mindset to establish a more diverse and inclusive theatre space. The Epiphanies New Works Festival was a big part of telling stories here in Waco that hadn't been told before or were being overshadowed. That was (and is) part of our mission here, in the theatre space.

For Epiphanies, we had a few goals. First, to bring new and exciting plays to the Waco community that represented stories that hadn't been told before on stage. Second, to run a New Works Festival that gave thoughtful and helpful feedback to the playwrights. As far as the 2021 submissions, we gave the playwrights a month or so to revise their plays after their table reads and the dramaturgical feedback they received. Then we selected four to include in the in-person event as "elevated staged readings" - a term Melanie coined.

M: Lol, I don't know if I can take credit for it. Promoting the slate as Staged Readings created reasonable audience expectations and reduced pressure on creatives volunteering to work in short rehearsal

periods. We didn't have the same arc of time for developmental work like you, but we had very committed production participants so pumped to be back to live theater that they rapidly expanded their visions – they 'elevated' their productions by resourcing MWT's deep inventory and tech. I didn't want to lose the original intentions we had for the artists and the priority we placed on the text, so in rehearsals I'd call the shows "Elevated Staged Readings" and explain it when people asked "is that even a thing?"

Yes, it is now, because, ultimately, directors and actors could focus on text and creativity in rehearsal and not be limited by rules and pressures of being off book; playwrights got more of a sense of their plays coming alive; and audiences were clearly impressed, commenting on how easily they forgot actors held scripts. This Festival gave an established theater a successful living laboratory demonstrating how 'less is more' *can* work on the Mainstage.

S: Yea exactly, staged readings helped us manage our audience expectations. For us, it was script-in-hand, with minimal costuming and some blocking and props. Our community really responded to the format. And it helped that we had only some tech since we were putting on performances at an art gallery.

M: Ah ha! If we were local to each other, doing co-production work would be an awesome pairing!! This is a direction we are talking about pursuing more firmly. MWT is unlike any other theater I'm aware of on this side of town. With 200 seats and supporting backstage and front of house facilities, they are well known (James Dean and Beanie Feldstein are recognizable names of actors who did early work there). As a predominantly white institution located in West LA/Santa Monica, MWT wanted to return to live theater by taking a significant step to expand their reach into the artistic community and take their members, audiences and physical space into new territory. It was telling to observe how many of the Festival's participating artists were coming into the space for the first time...and liking what they saw. And as an added welcoming component of this mission, tickets were free.

S: For us, space was a real challenge, since we don't have a dedicated theatre space. But we mapped out the space we had at the gallery and then found rehearsal space for 5 projects simultaneously. Since we were restricted in the venue, our festival was over a Fri-Sun. So, the rehearsals all were over the same two-week period. There were a lot of late nights. Afterward, looking at the time and space crunch, I definitely dramaturged the process -- to see how, in the future, we could better serve everyone involved.

What were the plays that you worked with?

S: Our one full production, "Jesus and Valium" which had been part of the virtual 2020 Epiphanies, focused on Queer themes. Our 2021 Epiphanies New Works Festival coincided with a local affirming event "OUT on the Brazos," and we found that there was so much community support and excitement for the play. We had a production of the play each of the three days of the festival. For our elevated staged readings, the plays covered so many great topics. Two were historical, one play focused on the 1878 Yellow Fever Epidemic of Memphis, TN, which centered on characters of color, and one play was

about Nellie Bly and the women she met at the Blackwell Asylum, which really highlighted issues of mental health and gender norms. Of our two contemporary set plays, one play had a dual narrative that touched on reproductive rights and ethics in academia (really timely here in Texas,) and the other play focused on how we talk about the unhoused, and how we find solutions, especially through art. All of the plays were unique and interesting - and very different. Really, it was a joy to work with all of them.

M: I loved how our slate gave opportunities to new and more experienced playwrights to reflect the breadth of Los Angeles' population. We had two weekends of one acts: a play about contemporary Korean American women set in the ambitious L.A. media world that explored what constitutes racial identity paired with a piece about dreams deferred and attained for Black Americans in 1940 the night Hattie McDaniel won her Oscar. A present day 'dinner party play' where young married friends of South Asian ancestry eat, banter and stumble into uncomfortable shared history paired with a comedy where an unseen millennial character's subconscious 'bar' is populated by her exes. Then, three weekends of full length plays - one about the impacts and perils of addiction in all its forms; a zany yet pointed physical comedy that challenged rom com tropes and dug into socio-economic inequity and mental health; and a dark, heartfelt and razor sharp comedy-drama about colonialism and family ties centered upon a family of Venezuelan ancestry. It was an honor and joy to see these works come to life.

How did Dramaturgy stay in the room once plays moved into production?

S: For the staged readings, I sat down with the directors before they had cast - to talk about their initial read of the play, and what their plans were with bringing it to a physical space. Then once rehearsals started, I sat in some for each director (since sometimes the rehearsals were at the same time.) Just providing feedback and bringing in a dramaturgical lens.

Additionally, I acted as a point person in talking with the directors and playwrights, as well as our artistic director (who communicated more production-related details). I think having really open lines of communication, but not too many channels was helpful. That way, tons of people weren't bombarding a playwright with the same question. And great questions came up during the process!

Such an important part of the development process was listening to the actors and directors in the rehearsal room - I could bring back the questions they had, as a resource for the playwrights, many of whom their plays had only been in table reads previously. Some of the best questions actually came from the actors! I think that's the great thing about dramaturgy - it's an inclusive process, where everyone can become excited to discover more.

M: The majority of my time once we were underway went into the rehearsal process as a production dramaturg. I was also in overlapping work spaces since there was an ongoing flow of very tightly scheduled rehearsals. For nearly every play, I zoomed with directors prior to the start of rehearsals to learn about their vision and questions, attended the first table read to meet everyone and started off with an in-person presentation. I'd attend as many rehearsals as I could (or where I was needed). As the Festival progressed, I made Drive folders shared with the team that would get "Daily Dramaturgy Drops".

Each file Drop had a theme, introducing topics with questions from me with visuals, text, and links to answer or anticipate their questions. The wide range of worlds to explore was really exciting. The work enhanced my empathy for what was being explored in rehearsal and contributed to conversations with actors and directors as that 'informed audience member' who also advocated for accuracy on behalf of the playwrights.

We've touched on how some people are more familiar than others with Dramaturgs. That was definitely the case for me too. I learned that I could be seen as an immediately valued, necessary participant, or a nice luxury, or a possible interloper. Naturally, the collaborative and trusting relationships were the most fun and validating. But, even the few 'wincing' along the way were instructive and productive. For the majority of the people working on the Festival, I was not part of their immediate affinity groups. I evolved how I introduced myself – to not take for granted that just because I was there like everyone else to give time and love to the work, I shouldn't assume I would automatically be seen as a supportive or reliable presence. I found that those first conversations with directors were key to establishing credibility and trust. From there, it was my responsibility to be clear in my intentions toward the creative teams and their work and to follow through accordingly — from how I offered non-prescriptive, relevant production support to how I amplified the artists through the social media campaign.

Ah, Social Media, Marketing and Audience-facing outreach – what shape did your dramaturgy practices take there?

M: I am excited about the digital connections between the workings of a theater and its audiences and for opening up communication within creative teams. To create our social media Canva campaign, I gave each play its own distinct 'look' to welcome the playwrights and actors, feature excerpts from the plays, and profile the directors. I saw the entire season unified as a conversation – where no matter how unfamiliar the lives of the storytellers might be, the questions they asked were universally human and relevant. In all the outward-facing work, I introduced each play with questions and carried that thinking about questions and conversation into writing their digital program notes. I was proud of the essays, but wished we could have created more audience-facing materials. You, on the other hand, had a very cool strategy to create audience engagement!

S: Thank you! The audience guides! Let me explain from the beginning - I was the point person for all things audience-facing, from programs and audience guides to social media. I created graphics for each play, as well as research, audience guides - everything lived in the digital space. During the festival, we had a one-page handout with a QR code that led to the program and audience guide.

A really fun relationship that grew out of Epiphanies was a relationship with Baylor University Department of Theatre Arts. The chair, DeAnna Toten Beard, is a dramaturg. She suggested we could collaborate with the students in the undergraduate dramaturgy class to read the plays and work on a few audience guides, which talked more about the worlds of the plays and the history behind them. After talking to the playwrights, who were all on board, I helped oversee that project with the students. There was a great response and many students (even outside those involved) wanted to attend the festival. We

offered student pricing; so the festival was accessible to students as well. The audience guides were a great success - I love the idea of expanding dramaturgy further into the digital space.

What are Areas of Growth - as we enter into 2022 what are we doing now with what we began

S: Directly after beginning my involvement with the Epiphanies New Works Festival, I came on in an ongoing capacity as a dramaturg. We have a grant for a series of play readings, and I researched and helped select the plays. One of the plays we fell in love with, but didn't feel like a staged reading was right for, was "Fairview" by Jackie Sibblies Drury -- we wanted to do a full production. We contacted a local theatre that had basically shut down during the pandemic entirely; we are now producing it in collaboration with that theatre, Mission Waco's Jubilee Theatre, and its new director Ramad Carter. One of our directors from the New Works Festival, Breshena Crosby, also came on as a member of the creative team and cultural consultant for "Fairview," since it was important that Black voices were involved from the beginning of the process. Really, it is so fun to see the things that are growing out of Epiphanies. Through the festival, we helped build an audience for new and contemporary plays, as well as a broad and varied community of artists who can continue to come together to make theatre.

M: That last part is so key and so rewarding! Our New Works Festival opened up casting, storytelling and audience possibilities for the foreseeable future not only for the idea of New Works Festivals, but also for the impactful way MWT can lead as an institution. Some of us who were involved in the festival were nominated to run for the Board. I had some initial hesitation about this, mainly because I wanted my presence to be an appropriate fit within the theater's DEI initiatives. Once I was comfortable with that, I decided that doing the next slightly scary thing would be a good idea. With my intersectional, hyphenate interests as a dramaturg-director, theatre-maker and mentor, and audience relationship builder, I found that writing the required speech gave me a chance to reflect on that super intense 4 month period. I zeroed in on dramaturgical questions about how we define community and my thoughts about core values and institutional intentions that MWT can continue to embrace. So I put it all out there and sat down thinking that I'm okay with whatever happens next. The response was enthusiastic. I know that "all the things" can't all happen at once. But, I'm excited about the potential for dramaturging the Board (*Boardturgy?*) to work its magic.