

A Rave for Dramaturgs

by Emma Goldman-Sherman

Dramaturgs may be the smartest people in the room, but we're not all doing the right math. The world is filled with playwrights. As a playwright myself, I'm sure that 90% of us crave feedback. We might not call it dramaturgy. Some have never read *The Cherry Orchard* and may never revise, but playwrights want your eyes.

Donna Hoke (creator of Official Playwrights of Facebook) says she currently has "12,633 members with 7,500 active in the past month." Gwydion Suleibhan (creator with Nan Barnett of the NPX) estimates there are approximately 10-15k working playwrights in the U.S. That's a lot of playwrights. Several for every dramaturg!

In 2014, the Dramatists Guild offered an event called "Emerging Later in Life" for playwrights over 50. Mine was the last comment, "so this has been great, but what will the Dramatists Guild do to support mature emerging playwrights?" The panel froze. Some shook their heads no. I said, "I'd like to offer a playwrights group, and anyone who is interested, please sign up with me." So the 29th Street Playwrights Collective was born. We are unlike other collectives in that we don't produce our own work; we develop it.

We began in January of 2015 meeting once a week. Dues were paid. The Dramatists Guild Foundation came through with free space once a month. The rest of the time we rent. I bring in prompts. Everyone writes, shares and discusses the work. I made guidelines for feedback. The work improved. We have readings. We get grants. Very few of my playwrights have MFAs. I offer classes. I encourage them to learn from others. I do what I can do as I figure out how to do it.

There are not enough stages for all the work that is written. There are thousands of playwrights who want their work to be seen. Dramaturgs can hold up a mirror to reflect for playwrights what can be seen/felt/known in their plays.

Playwrights might not be aware that we dramaturgs exist. They may not know how to ask for the mirroring they crave. We need to make it clear to playwrights that dramaturgy=feedback, nurturing feedback, feedback that grows plays. We must tell them!

Five years after starting, 29StPWC has received 3 Creative Engagement grants (LMCC); we've held over 150 readings of plays in development and worked with over 100 playwrights (almost none of whom you would recognize). Some of their plays are winning awards. We would have had our first world premiere this spring.

The Collective gave birth to the WriteNow Workshop so that I could work with more playwrights and make more money. I run it 30 weeks a year (3 10-week Seasons). We write for an hour with a prompt. We discuss the writing process. Then we hear 5 excerpts of new plays each week. I charge \$40 for each 10 minute excerpt and provide notes afterwards. I'll be demonstrating this live at the LMMA conference in June.

In March 2020 I was finishing up the Winter Season of WriteNow when I had to quarantine. So we finished on Zoom. I started a company via Zoom last year called Brave Space for female-identified writers of any genre. It was easy for me to shift the Workshop to Zoom because I was already using it. Spring Workshop just ended, and Zoom is so simple to use, I may for the first time offer a Summer Workshop.

We do not need a theatre to do this work. We don't need to promise production. Dramaturgs are in demand - the playwrights just don't know it yet. Let's make it happen!

- try Molly Beck's book Reach Out to expand your network
- use social media to offer helpful content to the masses
- try assuming playwrights are out there already paying attention
- use NPX, read and recommend what you like, and if you end up in discussion with a few playwrights, make them your own! (At least add them to your contact list.)
- offer pay-what-you-can classes, talks, interviews
- break down the strategies of any famous playwright and offer it as a class or a prompt, e.g. "How the Bard Structures Comedy"
- use what you're good at to attract the playwrights who need what you do

Offering your insight with kindness can only help! Expect a small percentage to actually show up. If they have to pay for it, there is a better chance they will actually show up.

Once you have a few playwrights, you can turn them into a group by offering guided feedback workshops where you can facilitate reading the work amongst each other. The playwrights can be a mix of levels. They will inspire each other within the structure you create.

Dramaturgs, we must stop lamenting our status as wallflowers; we must start asking playwrights to dance. I suggest a Rave where many playwrights uphold a body-surfing dramaturg. Let the dramaturg be lifted, held by and supported (financially) by as many playwrights as they can attract!

Where to find playwrights?

- your local area, put up a call for playwrights on a message board, supermarket bulleting board, local newsletter, restaurant bulletin board, laundry room in a high rise
- on the interwebs through Zoom, Patreon, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
- through word of mouth and mutual attraction
- NPX newplayexchange.org

Once playwrights realize that dramaturgy means feedback, and feedback helps a play to grow, dramaturgs will always be in demand.