Teaching Dramaturgy for the Post-Covid19 World

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What will dramaturgs do when there are no theatre productions? The thought is sobering for those of us who have struggled for visibility as collaborative theatre artists. On the other hand, with no traditional productions--no lobby displays to design and install, no program notes to write, no post-show talks to host--the Pandemic has liberated dramaturgy from the task-driven modes it has adopted in regional theatres and universities in the United States. With the disappearance of many dramaturgy tasks, how can dramaturgs lead us confidently into the post-pandemic theatre landscape?

There is no doubt that our LMDA peers will imagine new models for theatrical production driven by the dramaturg's creative sensibility. But one thing is certain: Dramaturgs will not rise along with "the theatrical phoenix" posited in this call for papers if we do not train our students to see dramaturgy as a way of thinking rather than a set of tasks. As theatre studies professors, we (Jeanmarie and Jen) wonder here how we can train new dramaturgs to lead the way in creating new modes of production, spectatorship, and critical reflection on performance. The answer seems to lie in creating a classroom and research space of provocation and reflection that complements the dramaturg's usual mode of research and action.

Things to Teach Now: During the Pandemic

Dramaturgy of Pandemic
Students might ask: what use is dramaturgy when there are no performances? It is worth pointing out that in extra-disciplinary practice, dramaturgy has extended its reach into many different modes of practice. Like performance studies strongholds Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, who used dramaturgy to think through ethnography and ethnography to think through dramaturgy, we have a unique opportunity to introduce students to the narratology and dramaturgy of public crises. Thus, dramaturgy instructors can design a module on the Dramaturgy of the Pandemic that travels along several modes of discourse. In addition to researching, discussing, and presenting on past Pandemics, students might consider:
- What is the dramatic structure of the global Covid19 pandemic? What is its inciting incident?
- If we were to imagine the pandemic as a completed event, where are we in its dramatic timeline? Are we approaching climax? Denouement?
- How would you compare and contrast narratives of the Pandemic as they have emerged through the media?
- How might you analyze the White House Press Conferences as their own discrete plays-within-a play?

Forms for the Pandemic
What happens when theatre can only happen in front of small groups of people? On April 30, 2020 A.R.T announced a collaboration between Artistic Director Diane Paulus and the Chan School of Public Health. The collaboration promises to deliver a publicly shared document with guidelines for safe theatre practices while the Pandemic is ongoing. Of interest to dramaturgy, the document will

include creative application of site-specific and mobile theatre formats that use small audiences instead of the larger ones to which we've become accustomed.

Instructors might lead students in discussion of the Chan-A.R.T. document and ask them to imagine their own solutions in form. Further, this collaboration points to a longer-term collaboration between the performing arts and public health. This model asserts that, not only must theatrical practice be shaped by public health concerns, but that theatrical practice is essential to (even constitutive of) public health. Invite students to think through what collaborations between public health organizations and the performing arts might look like in the future.

The Dramaturgy of Virtual Space
Many important questions concerning the dramaturgy of virtual spaces have come up during this time of Pandemic. An instructor might pose such questions to students as:
- What are the divisions between the virtual and the real? The live and the filmed? The filmed and the streamed? Have these divisions held up during the Pandemic? Or have they weakened? Did the Pandemic weaken them, or is the Pandemic revealing the extant weaknesses in these divisions?
- Do virtual and streaming formats produce more or less intimate spaces than "live" venues? Why or why not?
- What critical language should we employ for streamed performances and Zoom plays? Is it fair or apt to use the same critical tools and language we use for live performances? Why or why not?

Things to Address this coming academic year

This fall, we propose to extend dramaturgy-as-collaboration in a radical way that builds relationships, makes what's possible legible, and leads the way for interdisciplinary work. Some ways this might happen:
- In the classroom: Emphasize thought instead of tasks. Build more theory into your syllabus. Ask students to read work about what theatre is and does. (That is, after all, the dramaturg's role--to question the why and the how of things.) To Aristotle and Lessing, add theorists of time and space--Guy Debord and Yi-Fu Tuan.
- Use plays as theory. Study "difficult" playwrights. To Brecht and Soyinka, add Erik Ehn and Sarah Kane--writers who confuse structures of storytelling to spiritual and boundary-breaking effect.
- Throughout the university: Bring performance to non-performance arenas. Encourage students to participate in their undergraduate research symposia this year - and not in a "performance" category. They can share what they've discovered about how storytelling informs all practices, not just theatre.

What this might achieve
By deemphasizing what a dramaturg does, and focusing on how a dramaturg thinks, and, furthermore, how a dramaturg might contribute to fields not traditionally their own, we might develop students who are interested *in* theatre and performance in addition to students who are interested in *making* theatre and performance. When students graduate without the expectation of participating in traditional theatre production in traditional ways, they will be equipped to take their places in defining what theatre is and can be. Applying dramaturgical principles to a broad array of everyday events, imagining the uses of technology and the ways it shapes performance, and

connecting to a history of like-minded innovators--is not only a good way to engage students, but it is also vital for our (precarious, beautiful) performance practices going forward.

Jennifer Ewing-Pierce and **Jeanmarie Higgins** are friends who have talked through the ideas in this essay over the past several weeks using Zoom, text, Marco Polo, and email. Jen is a visiting assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her chapter on situated cognition in theatre pedagogy appears in *Teaching Critical Performance Theory in Today's Theatre Classroom, Studio, and Communities* (Routledge 2020), a book that **Jeanmarie Higgins** edited. **Jeanmarie** is an associate professor in the School of Theatre at the Pennsylvania State University. A new works dramaturg, she publishes widely on the intersection of critical theory and pedagogy. Lately, she and writing partner Michael Schweikardt are scheming new projects in design and pedagogy scholarship.