

DRAMATURGING THE PHOENIX

DENVER/MOUNTAIN WEST EDITION

Heidi Schmidt (she/her/hers), Lynde Rosario (she/her/hers), and Jessica Kahkoska (she/her/hers) are the Regional co-VPs for LMDA in the Mountain West region. The following conversation took place on May 1, 2020:

HEIDI: Hi everyone. Should we start with some introductions? My name is Heidi Schmidt and I'm the Assistant Director of Outreach / Resident Dramaturg at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival in Boulder and I also freelance as a production and new play dramaturg with other companies and artists in the area. I started my current position at CSF in January, but I've been working there as a freelancer and a part-timer since 2011, so I feel pretty entrenched there. I've been working from home since March 11.

JESS: I'm Jessica Kahkoska, and though I wear many hats, the professional title I'm most proud of to date is "Freelance Disaster Queen" (as captioned by LMDA's official Facebook page last year). I work in a mix of dramaturgy, writing, new play and musical development, and in the last year, I've been lucky to spend time in Trinidad as Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre's 2019 Writer in Residence, at Denver University as a Marsico Visiting Scholar in the Arts and Humanities, and at the Denver Center as a playwright in the 2020 Colorado New Play Summit. I love thinking about *how* plays are made as much as what goes into them, so our Mountain West LMDA cohort is my favorite visioning space for imagining possibilities for theatre in the Rockies, which we all love and care so much about.

LYNDE: I'm Lynde Rosario and I am the Dramaturg and Literary Manager for the Denver Center Theatre Company. Like Heidi, I also freelance as a production and new play dramaturg with other companies and artists in the area. I've been with the Denver Center for a year and a half. When I first started they asked me for a favorite quote to add to my company profile. The words of Slava Polunin, a famous Russian clown, always feel appropriate when I try to explain my philosophy on life: "There is no work. There is no rehearsal. There is only life." So you can imagine, when I got the news from my Artistic Director that I was to stop working and take a "mandatory leave of absence," what that did to my soul. How can you separate life and work when the two have always been synonymous? I still wrestle with that question.

A week before that news was delivered I lost a person who single-handedly changed the trajectory of my whole life as a dramaturg. Doug Langworthy passed away. I and the rest of the dramaturgs of the world were thrown into the grieving process. For me, that interim week became about honoring Doug and upholding his legacy; but it couldn't end that week, and so it won't. Every act of dramaturgy that I commit will be for me, thanks to him. The institutions that employ me, do not also get to define me. Dramaturgs are artists, and artists make art. I don't know what my future looks like, but I do know that my life will always be in service of my art (not "work") as a dramaturg.

HEIDI: I got the news about Doug the day before I started working from home. I can't separate my Doug grief from my pandemic grief right now, so I'm so glad you brought him into this conversation. He was the first person to hire me as a professional dramaturg, so I'm right there with you in feeling his influence over my life and work (and art) as a dramaturg.

JESS: Doug was our unofficial fourth regional VP, and was such a comforting and supportive force behind every regional event we've planned. To me, his love of dramaturgy/dramaturgs and fingerprints are all over our work as an LMDA region over the last few years.

HEIDI: Do you mind sharing a little bit about where you are professionally and personally with this crisis right now?

JESS: I'm a freelancer, so it's been a pretty hectic time.. It's been a mix of canceling, postponing, modifying, problem solving, calling it a day, and taking some very serious baths.... Personally, I think my biggest realization is that working from home is different when my colleagues are working from *work*. It's been a bigger collective shift than I was expecting as we all transition to mandatory remote collaboration from our own spaces.

LYNDE: I had spent over a decade as a freelancer before I took the position at DCPA. That time was mostly spent working from home as Zoom and Skype meetings were my way of avoiding paying for any travel. I purposefully chose day jobs that allowed me to work remotely so that I could do them anywhere and anytime; which gave me the flexibility to continue accepting low paying dramaturgy gigs. So when we were all told to stay in place and work from home, I was overqualified for it. But I agree with Jess that this feels very different. There was a level of control to how I managed my time that shifted when the rest of the world joined the club. It feels like we are all expected to amplify our lives outside of work in order to connect with each other as work was being lost. The work that *is* being done feels rushed as a reaction to the urgency of the situation. I'd rather be taking this time to thoughtfully reflect and regroup. So, even though I can function well working from home; I wasn't prepared for the anxiety that followed that disconnect between what I want and what the rest of the world is offering.

HEIDI: I hear you on the anxiety. Mine has abated quite a bit since this all landed, but the first few weeks were brutal. I've lost a couple of side projects, but I'm still employed, and under the circumstances, that feels a little miraculous. I'm immensely grateful. Also struggling with a certain amount of survivor's guilt and vicarious heartbreak as I watch so many artists I care about lose their income. It's not the same thing, obviously, and I don't mean to compare. But it has been a little rough on me watching friends suffer and knowing there's little I can do to help beyond a couple of donations to relief funds. And sympathetic phone calls.

The prompt we were given is about imagining the future of dramaturgy and what the landscape might look like after all of this is over, and I want to talk about that. But I'm personally more interested in the interim. What dramaturgy can offer to help us get through. And I really believe

that what we do now, while the theatres are closed, will be key in demonstrating our value to institutions once the doors open back up and audiences come back.

JESS: I'm personally inspired by the capacity of dramaturgy to offer support and clarity to both audiences and artists as we transition back to gathering in theatre spaces. What is it going to mean to return to theatre? We will need dramaturgy to help contextualize that moment for us, and also help us better understand our relationship to theatre moving forward. I feel like dramaturgy thrives in the spaces between, these complicated "both/and" experiences, and anywhere there is healing or growth to be had, so I personally will be leaning on the insights and work of my fellow dramaturgs as I return to both a rehearsal room and audience space.

LYNDE: As theatre practitioners we are wont to be solution-oriented. Tell us what the story demands and we will make it happen. "*Exit pursued by a bear*." No problem! So if our stories can only continue to be told with 6-8 feet between us, then I am apt to quote another story that came about because of plagues: "So shall it be written, so it shall be done." (Pharaoh, *The Ten Commandments*). Personally, I am not interested in seeing all theatre be consumed by virtual means only. However, I *am* interested in finding ways to employ technology to serve us in our current situation and moving forward. It can help us get to some storytelling stagecraft that helps us practice social-distancing; a safe-gathering scenario. We can use technology to aid our new normal.

HEIDI: I think I'm currently invested in the technological spaces *around* theatre more than technologically delivered theatre. Dramaturgs excel at audience engagement, and unlike live performance, that's not limited to in-person, in-theatre engagement. At CSF, I'm hosting a summer Book Club on zoom. Over the summer, we're inviting our audiences to read 6 Shakespeare plays with us, and we'll gather in a zoom room every other week to talk about them. For us, digital performance (i.e. streaming) doesn't seem viable. But our audiences are hungry for conversation, engagement, and interaction with our staff. As a dramaturg (especially as a newly minted institutional dramaturg), building and maintaining those relationships are my bread and butter. And those relationships are what will bring our audiences back when we *can* perform again.

JESS: I agree that I am less interested in translating theatre directly to zoom and internet forms, as I believe that on the whole, we'll make live theatre again when it's safe and feasible. However, the Zoom/internet capabilities that we are finding in this time make me very interested in new possibilities for the archiving of live performances, especially the implications for accessibility and sharing.

HEIDI: Yes! I've totally been watching musicals and other productions I can't afford to see live (like Phantom on YouTube) and calling it "research."

JESS: Obviously, theatre is performed live in front of an audience (and we all cherish the immediacy in space and time, but I also think that these parameters are often easily twisted into

justification for extreme/unnecessary exclusion and rigidity. I wonder if we are amassing some experiences and tools during this time that can help us reshape how we keep and share performance, as well as new models for engagement, archive, and memory. And if anything, these circumstances have shown us that we can absolutely modify what gathering means and still work and be together.

LYNDE: That makes me think: Does that look like a new routine for attendance? What was our airport routine pre 9/11? What would it take to make you feel safe? What would you do if it meant you could gather again? If we are going to maintain relationships we need to build trust between each other. Trust that we will listen when you tell us what story you need to hear right now. Trust that you will be safe with us as we share what we have to offer.

HEIDI: I think you nailed it - trust is the key. I'm a firm believer that without an audience, it's all just masturbation. So surveys of audiences about what they need to come back (and in what way) are going to be incredibly helpful. Which sounds more box office than dramaturgy office, but it's all related.

LYNDE: Can we talk a little bit about how Denver is responding to the crisis? Denver loves its theatre community. The local artists are rallying and coming together to support each other emotionally and financially. If we create a model that is unique to our situation our audiences will show up for us. Geographically we have an advantage with 300 days of sunshine and more miles of open landscape than people. If we need to get creative (and we do!) we will utilize every resource to bring people together.

HEIDI: Absolutely! I love this community - artists and audiences - and how supportive they have been in the midst of catastrophe. Can we finish up with something you're looking forward to, artistically or personally?

LYNDE: I'm looking forward to brainstorming. Getting back in a room with creative collaborators to try and fail and try again and fail better. To admit that no one knows the right answers and won't until we risk being wrong many times. I'm looking forward to watching people watch theatre.

JESS: I'm looking forward to being flustered by the small, boring things that come up when we are lucky enough to gather and work together. Give me a parking ticket! I'll gladly spill coffee in rehearsal (my favorite social nightmare)!

HEIDI: Short term, I'm looking forward to a music theory class a friend of mine is teaching through zoom next week, spring and summer weather, and catching up with friends (silver lining: people are so much more invested in maintaining relationships right now). Long term, I cannot WAIT to hug my mother once it's safe to travel 500 miles to do so.

ALL: One last thing, we Mountain Wester-s (not so humbly) pride ourselves with being early adopters of the Zoom happy hour. We have to plan our LMDA events with a huge geographic area in mind, so online events are a really important tool for us to connect to our members outside the Denver metro region. (Jessica note: I remember when we did our first zoom happy hour in 2018, Heidi had to explain this *novel* idea to me: we sit down in front of our computers with a drink in hand.... Oh, how times have changed....!)

Point is, gathering and connecting with dramaturgs [and friends of dramaturgs] in the Mountain west region (or not, we don't care!) is still the heart of what we do, and we don't plan to stop that anytime soon.



"For the Love of Dramaturgy" panel at the Denver Center's 2020 New Play Summit, February 11, 2020. Left to right: Jessica Kahkoska, Doug Langworthy, Lynde Rosario, Heidi Schmidt, Brian Colonna, Erin Rollman, Lonnie Hanzon, and Caitlin Lowans.