

Community-Based Dramaturgy

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Theatre now and in the future? Who knows? But this I know: We, dramaturgs, are connectors. We bring together artists, community, texts, stories, artistic mediums, languages, geographies, and ages. We translate, educate, facilitate. We cultivate understanding and appreciation, work and joy. We cross aisles. We cross boundaries. We open apertures. We are archeologists and anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and high priestesses of storytelling. Now and in the future, we must continue this work, regardless of physical, social, economic and political distances.

We live in unstable times, times that demand a new way of connecting and cultivating relationships beyond the theatre. Perhaps we might call it communal dramaturgy, a dramaturgy that embraces art-making that extends our reach more fully than ever into the community, to organizations; businesses; government; individuals; and religious, social and educational institutions.

I began my efforts in community-based dramaturgy several years ago, but as I ruminate on Dramaturging the Phoenix, I suspect that my experience may be relevant to our collective future. My efforts began after I left my position as Literary Manager for Laguna Playhouse about five years ago and began a new play reading series called Bare Bones Theatre. Until the quarantine, I presented about six new play readings annually in collaboration with a local visual artist, whose studio provided a large, creative space for the series. Ironically, when the artist moved away last year, Laguna Playhouse invited Bare Bones to use its community room for our performances.

Through Bare Bones, I cultivated many relationships with arts-minded people in the community that eventually led to a two-year appointment as my small city's Literary Laureate. This city-funded position offered a public platform to advocate for dramatic and literary arts. As Literary Laureate, I developed programming with and for the local art museum, library, senior center, homeless shelter, Boys & Girls Club, and local businesses. Now, despite the shuttering of theatres, these relationships live on. These organizations can turn to me, and I to them, to figure out the future of theatre and literary arts when it is so desperately needed.

As community connectors, dramaturgs can serve at the intersection of art and community need. We can seek funding and shared efforts at producing art for a new age. We can discover spaces beyond the four walls of the theatre that might lend themselves to art-making efforts,

spaces that might be better suited than theatres to new realities of social interaction. These spaces might include digital platforms, parks, museums, even private homes for personalized performances. Likewise, we can identify non-traditional sources of talent to make art for the new age. Perhaps most importantly, doing our work in relationship with others beyond the theatre can help us learn and keep pace with the pulse of our communities so that we can respond in real time to what matters.

I've always thought of my role as a dramaturg as one of service: To actors, directors, designers and artistic staff; to playwrights; to students; to audiences. We can continue to be of service by doing what we do best: finding and making connections and building community, so that storytelling and theatre-making can continue, as it has for centuries, to bring us together.