Review
The Journal of Dramaturgy

Published by
Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

Volume XXX • Issue I
2025

Articles

Book Reviews

*** Peer-reviewed**

LMDA LITERARY MANAGERS & DRAMATURGS OF THE AMERICAS

Review

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Review is published annually by Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA). All articles submitted to the editors for consideration should conform to the Chicago Manual of Style. The submission deadline for the 2026 issue is October 6, 2025. For more information about *Review,* please visit LMDA's website.

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Editors' Note:

For 40 years, Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas has provided community and resources for dramaturgs. 2025 marks a milestone for the organization in a time of extreme difficulty for our field and our world. The 2025 issue of *Review* meets this challenging moment with a diversity of perspectives on dramaturgy as a practice.

Davide Cioffresse examines the history and formation of dramaturgy in Italy, where the field's path has differed from those of North America and other parts of Europe. Through compelling historical research, Cioffresse outlines the field of Italian dramaturgy as it exists today, and examines the field's often overlooked national roots, arguing that, while the official title of "dramaturg" is a relatively new phenomenon in Italy, a number of Italian theatre-makers have performed dramaturgical roles since the days of 19th century.

In "Towards a Transnational Dramaturgy of SWANA Relationality," Suzi Elnagger examines the transnational, diasporic dramaturgy at play in Denmo Ibrahim's *BABA* and Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire*. Elnagger posits that these personal, identity-driven plays are what she defines as dramaturgically palindromic: their meaning is made legible through both the "left-to-right" cultural logistics of Europe and the US, and the "right-to-left" cultural logistics of the SWANA (Southwest Asian/North African) region. Drawing on an impressive array of critical scholarship to ground her methodology, Elnagger explores how these plays stage SWANA identity as diasporic, relational, and multi-legible.

In her article, Emily Dzioba outlines the formation and structure of the Storyteller Studio at the New Jersey Play Lab, a program of her own design for early-career dramaturgs and playwrights. Through poignant personal narrative, Dzioba reflects on the struggles facing emerging dramaturgs and theatre artists today and advocates for the importance of accessible, process-focused opportunities for those entering the field. By offering the Storyteller Studio as a successful model for unconventional professional development, she encourages us to consider new, innovative ways of supporting the dramaturgs of both today and tomorrow.

Curated and organized by Mark Bly, "Morgan Jenness: Moving Into Another Dimension" celebrates the legacy of the late Morgan Jenness, a pioneer in the field of American dramaturgy. In twenty-one moving tributes, Morgan's fellow North American dramaturgy pathfinders from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s reflect on how Morgan influenced them as dramaturgs and theatre-makers. These tributes honor Morgan's life and work, and they remind us to celebrate the knowledge, joy, connection, and love of performance that are so often passed from one dramaturg to another.

As we look to the future of dramaturgy, we hope to continue exploring intergenerational, intercultural, and interpersonal ways of knowing. We encourage all of our readers to explore the calls for next year's peer-reviewed articles, non-peer-reviewed pieces, book reviews, and our new section of Dramaturgical Pathfinder interviews.

Allison Backus & Sarah Johnson

A Primer on the Italian Dramaturg: *History, Practices, and Formation of a Still Largely Unofficial Role*

by Davide Cioffresse

A FUNDAMENTAL WORK, AN UNSEEN WORKER: THE DRAMATURG IN ITALY

Throughout the history of Western theatre, Italy has long been considered an exception. The country may well be seen as a trendsetter for modern European theatre from the 15th century onwards, having been instrumental to the development of art forms such as Renaissance theatre—when it comes to playwriting, Aristotelian unities, and the widespread diffusion of ancient Greek and Roman models; and Commedia dell'Arte—when it comes to actor professionalization, itinerancy, and studious improvisation between fixed characters. However, in the early years of the 20th century, a fair share of people in the Italian theatre *intelligentsia* were afflicted by the country's perceived delay in introducing theatre direction, a phenomenon which came about fully in the late 1940s, decades after other European countries.[1] Italy, previously a pioneer of theatre, had seemingly fallen behind. Many proponents of direction attributed this state of things to Italy's largely actor-led theatre: a tradition spanning generations of world-famous, itinerant actresses and actors—celebrities often befittingly referred to as *Grand'Attori* ("Great Actors")—supported predominantly by the magnetism and acting talent of its main performers, but less concerned with new or original playwriting, scenography, and costuming. Indeed, the newborn Italian directors often found themselves at odds with the actors of their time, who were used to being the main catalysts of theatre. These directing professionals, striving to make up for the time they believed had been lost on a theatre system they perceived as antiquated, frequently incorporated many functions related to adaptation, research, and textual analysis into their methods, rather

1 For an overview of the earlier introduction of directing in other European Countries—namely France in the early 19th century, Germany and Russia in the second half of it—Roberto Alonge, *Il teatro dei registi* (Laterza & Figli, 2006), 3-84.

Figure I: *Teatro Stabile di Brescia. Source*

than searching for productive and conceptual allies in other theatre practitioners (or, indeed, rather than more directly involving living playwrights in the theatre-making process). This phenomenon can likely be counted among the main factors when it comes to understanding the lack of institutionalized dramaturgs in Italy, if not the scarcity of dramaturgs openly acknowledged as such in general.[2]

Dramaturgy, understood as a form of critical consultantship, enrichment, research, analysis, adaptation, and translation, is a vital part of contemporary Italian theatre. An actual *dramaturg* hired to carry this work out themself, however, is a much rarer sight: it could be said that the function is widespread, but the *role* of one explicitly performing it is significantly scarcer. Indeed, the very perception of what a dramaturg is and what they do is reserved only for habitual theatregoers—who tend to have only a partial understanding of the role themselves due to our national unfamiliarity with it—and virtually non-existent for the general Italian population. This obscurity is increased further by the extant similarities between the word *dramaturg* and the term *drammaturgo,* Italian for "dramatist," a profession even those unaccustomed to theatre tend to be more familiar with. Freelance professionals comparable to dramaturgs when it comes to competencies and responsibilities may occasionally be involved in the work of companies or individual artists and may even be hired on a stable or quasi-stable basis; this is especially true in the field of experimental theatre and other branches more receptive to a supranational state of the art. However, it is not unusual for such professionals to be credited differently, referred to as adaptors, translators, or consultants. Artists who openly describe themselves as dramaturgs are somewhat infrequent, though some professionals have understandably opted to claim this label for themselves.[3] When it comes to national practices, however, dramaturgs at large remain an exceedingly episodic sight in the context of the country's main theatre institutions, those characterized by publicly funded stability and visibility: the *Teatri Stabili* (Stable Theatres) strewn across the Italian peninsula, generally expected to stage performances deemed significant enough to be supported—at least partially—by public money. Teatri Stabili can largely be considered the Italian equivalent of national theatres in other countries and may be comparable in scope and importance to United States-based regional theatres (with their geographical dissemination further helping the comparison).[4] The very few official hirings of dramaturgs in the context

2 On the genesis of Italian direction: Claudio Meldolesi, *Fondamenti del teatro italiano. La generazione dei registi* (Bulzoni, 2008); Ferdinando Taviani, *Uomini di scena, uomini di libro. La scena sulla coscienza* (Officina Edizioni, 2010); Stefano Locatelli, *L'eccezione e la norma. Il Piccolo Teatro di Milano alle origini della stabilità pubblica* (Dino Audino, 2023)

3 For a general outlook of Italy's situation when it comes to "freelance dramaturgs": Davide Cioffrese, *Il dramaturg in Italia. Un'anomalia storica tra Europa e Stati Uniti* (Mimesis, 2023), 265-341.

4 Livia Cavaglieri, *Il sistema teatrale, Storia dell'organizzazione, dell'economia e delle politiche del teatro in Italia* (Dino Audino, 2021), 99-104, 146-147. Though the label of *national theatre* can also be found within the Italian context, muddling the terminological situation to a degree while having no overly significant practical effects.

of *Teatri Stabili* are still too scarce and short-lived to be considered systematic.

In the rest of my article, then, I endeavor to outline the figure of the still largely unofficial Italian dramaturg through different avenues of analysis. First and foremost, I identify several dramaturg "predecessors" among significant artists active from the 19th to the 20th century, focusing on professionals who were never referred to as such in an official capacity but whose work and competencies make them comparable to practitioners of dramaturgy. Afterwards, I devote time to the attention the role of the dramaturg has received from Italian universities and institutions and people affiliated with them, highlighting an interest in the profession at the highest levels of our national academia, which may well begin spreading to theatre institutions.[5] Lastly, I will focus on the first and possibly most significant hiring of an official dramaturg by a Stable Theatre. An experiment which, while short-lived and yet to be amply imitated, constitutes—to my knowledge—the first relevant exception to the dramaturg's institutional invisibility in Italy.

TWO CENTURIES OF SUBTERRANEAN HISTORY: DRAMATURG "ANCESTORS"

The history of Italian dramaturgy is a significantly long one, with its roots spreading to the early 19th century, predating even the country's unification. What defines it, however, is not unsurprisingly its large unofficiality: historical Italian "dramaturgs" were never openly acknowledged as such, being usually involved in theatre through different and more visible roles, while at the same time displaying a plethora of dramaturgy-relevant skills and dramaturgy-informed outlooks.[6] In this context, I will be focusing on three of them, quite possibly the most significant ones.

Our first dramaturg precursor, predictably for a country with a centuries-long actor-led tradition, is one of the highest exemplars of *Grand'Attori* prevalent in the 19th century, Gustavo Modena (1803-1861). A fervent supporter of the Italian *Risorgimento* and a child of art born in the actor-led system, Modena found this system limiting and excessively commerce-driven. He was infuriated by his contemporary spectators' enthusiasm for overly flamboyant, protagonist-driven performances and trite translations of old plays. Throughout his life, Modena made several attempts at reforming the Italian theatre from within.[7] His artistic innovations pertained to both acting and proto-directing, and included staging Shakespeare—unsuccessfully—to introduce his compatriots to a less rigid division of comedy and tragedy, and coming up with highly experimental adaptations of well-known works for the time. Among these adaptations were Alessandro Manzoni's tragedy *Adelchi* as a series of separate "panels," a reading of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* as a work in progress (with Modena portraying Dante busy conceiving the poem), and Casimir Delavigne's *Louis XI* informed by Sir Walter Scott's *Quentin Durward,* widely considered to be the actor's best performance by his contemporaries. Modena was also an advocate of creating a publicly funded art theatre, largely based on the ancient Greek model of a civil institution, whose semblances would have been those of a national theatre in all but name. As a well-read artist and prolific writer, he took on the role of a translator for several of his staged works, penning new versions of well-established French plays unburdened by the previous translations' excessively pompous language, arguably making these plays more interesting for actors to perform.

During the admittedly brief leadership of his own company, the *Compagnia dei Giovani* (Company of Youngs, 1843-1846), Modena strove to abolish the then-pervasive fixed-role system (oftentimes relegating himself to secondary parts or even remaining offstage, despite his acting fame being the company's prime driving force) and promoted a directorial idea of prioritizing the "whole" staging over individual performances. His role as a pedagogue in this context cannot be understated either. Modena stressed the importance of adhering to the text by reading aloud to his disciples and counseling them about personally identifying with characters. Throughout his tenure as company lead, the actor was not unused to dealing with what the Anglo-Saxon world refers to as "unsolicited scripts,"

5 Magda Romanska, *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (Routledge, 2016), 3; Bert Cardullo, *What is Dramaturgy?* (Peter Lang Publishing, 1995), 149-151, 177-193. A situation which, from my readings on the subject in the Anglo-Saxon world, could share some similarities with that of North American theatre throughout the second half of the 20th century.

6 Claudio Meldolesi and Renata M. Molinari, *Il lavoro del dramaturg, Nel teatro dei testi con le ruote* (Ubulibri, 2007), 77-115. The first to highlight the dramaturg-like role of these disparate professionals was Claudio Meldolesi.

7 Modena was exiled from the then-fractured Italy in 1831 due to his militant patriotic fervor, with the exile only being revoked in 1838. Most of his attempted theatrical reforms were made from within Italy before and after his exile; others, such as his work on Dante were a direct result of his exile, and were first performed abroad.

consulting a few of them in his search for an effective repertoire for the company:[8] a repertoire he planned and enriched with many stagings of contemporary Italian works, mirroring—if not anticipating—other dramaturgs' efforts to promote their respective national playwriting.[9] In some regards, Modena predates the coming of Italian directing. The list of his skills and attempted innovations, however, also speaks for a dramaturgical cognizance and competence, animated by an effort to use theatre to promote a sense of national identity and cultural cohesiveness in a then-fractured country: an effort similar, in many ways, to the unsuccessful venture the founding dramaturg Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had attempted from the Hamburg National Theatre in the previous century for the German world.[10]

Figure II: *Gustavo Modena. Portrait by Matteo Bergamelli.*

Aside from being significant for direction and dramaturgy, Modena may well be considered an ancestor of sorts for other Grand'Attori, among them possibly the greatest of all, Eleonora Duse. While Duse was not a dramaturg-like figure herself, she ended up relying on a professional resembling a dramaturg: her collaborator and lover Arrigo Boito (1842-1918), a well-known librettist, scholar, musician, esotericist, and playwright. Boito was an intellectual who, throughout his Shakespearean collaborations with both his beloved and Italy's greatest composer, Giuseppe Verdi, provided ample contributions to their respective work. After adapting Shakespeare for their plays or librettos respectively, Boito went on to act as their chief consultant, helping them with many key issues: matters of textual and critical analysis, historical accuracy, staging, set designing, costuming, and actor and singer selection.[11] Verdi and Boito's *Othello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1889) also follow in Modena's footsteps in trying to introduce Italian spectators to Shakespeare's nuanced complexity, promoting the specificity of a "Shakespearean libretto" to slowly reform opera from within. As for *Antony and Cleopatra* (1888), the only Shakespearean adaptation written for Duse to hit the stage (*Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth,* penned in the same years, remained unstaged), Boito was instrumental when it came to both historical accuracy[12] and textual analysis, helping to shape Duse's understanding of Shakespeare and providing her performance with firm critical support.[13]

A lifelong passion for Duse's acting work equates Boito with the third and last historical dramaturg in this list, the one who came closest to being openly acknowledged as such (indeed, he used the label for himself in his personal notes):[14] translator, adapter, critic and scholar Gerardo Guerrieri (1920-1986). A longtime collaborator of film and theatre director Luchino Visconti, Guerrieri acted as his translator and consultant on matters of textual and critical analysis, significantly shaping his chosen repertoire.

8 Armando Petrini, ed., *Ripensare Gustavo Modena. Attore e capocomico, riformatore del teatro fra arte e politica* (Bonanno, 2012), 180.

9 For an overview of Modena's significance as a "proto-dramaturg": Cioffrese, *Il Dramaturg in Italia,* 157-193.

10 Petrini, *Ripensare Gustavo Modena,* 155-158.

11 Cioffrese, *Il Dramaturg in Italia,* 195-221.

12 Emanuele d'Angelo, *Arrigo Boito drammaturgo per musica. Idee, visioni, forma e battaglie* (Marsilio, 2010), 95-99. Particularly due to his status as an avid scholar of ancient Rome, the subject of his lifelong work on the unfinished libretto *Nerone*.

13 Piero Nardi, *Vita di Arrigo Boito* (Mondadori, 1942), 314.

14 Stefano Locatelli, "Paolo Grassi, Giorgio Strehler e Gerardo Guerrieri, primo 'dramaturg' del Piccolo Teatro?" *Biblioteca Teatrale,* no. 123-124 (2017): 194.

These contributions earned him a spot as vice-director of Visconti's *Compagnia Italiana di Prosa* (Italian Prose Company, 1946), in the context of which he was mostly an artistic consultant, rarely ever handling the direction of plays. This very role was retained for a second significant collaboration with Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler, the two figures leading Milan's *Piccolo Teatro* ("Little Theatre"), Italy's first and foremost directing theatre (founded in 1947). Officially hired as a "translator and scholar,"[15] Guerrieri spent years in close collaboration with artistic director Grassi (managing relationships with several foreign authors, securing staging rights, and significantly shaping the theatre's repertoire through his often-requested suggestions of plays) and with resident director Strehler (supplying him with translations and adaptations as well as counselling his actors during and after rehearsals). What is more, his job at Piccolo Teatro provided him the chance to work in tandem with a dramatist, Stefano Pirandello, on his play *Sacrilegio Massimo* (*Maximum Sacrilege,* 1953), taking on the dramaturgical role of a "writing partner"[16] and thus proactively contributing to new play dramaturgy.[17] Indeed, Guerrieri's tenure as Piccolo's "scholar" came close to making him the equivalent of a resident dramaturg in two separate cases, both predating Italy's first official hiring by decades: in 1952, on Strehler's offer, and once again in 1970, this time at Grassi's request, following Strehler's momentary resignation. Following Grassi's offer, Guerrieri suggested the creation of a proper dramaturgy office (described by its proposer as a "research center"),[18] which would have employed *a group* of resident dramaturgs, rather than a single professional. Unfortunately, these two opportunities did not come to fruition. Correspondences between Guerrieri, Grassi, and Strehler reveal that no real action was taken to achieve these goals, and these ideas eventually faded into obscurity. Had things gone differently, Guerrieri may well have become, in all but name, Italy's first *Chefdramaturg,* a role the country has yet to see.[19]

15 Locatelli, "Paolo Grassi", 197.

16 Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 139-140.

17 Jane Barnette, *Adapturgy: The Dramaturg's Art and Theatrical Adaptation* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2018), 33.

18 Gerardo Guerrieri, "Pagine di teatro," ed. Stefano Geraci, *Teatro e Storia,* no. 8 (1990): 39-40.

19 Cioffrese, *Il Dramaturg in Italia,* 223-264. Furthermore, Guerrieri and Grassi were part of a committee vouching for the creation of an Italian national theatre, following in Modena's footsteps with an even greater and more organized proposal.

THE DRAMATURG AS UNIVERSITY? THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO AN OFFICIALIZATION

Italian universities, so far, have displayed an interest in dramaturgy seemingly surpassing that of Italian theatres. Or rather, their professors and associates have frequently conveyed this interest through institutions affiliated with the universities themselves. The first one, chronologically speaking, dates to 1974: Milan's *Centro di Ricerca per il Teatro* (CRT, Theatre Research Center, closed in 2012) founded by Sisto Dalla Palma (1932-2011), a theatre professor for both Milan's Catholic University and the University of Pavia. Closely affiliated with the former, CRT was a prolific theatre study and production center, financing the work of new and promising artists who would go on to build their careers from there. CRT, most notably, was a hotbed when it came to the role of the dramaturg—a mainstay of its discussions, meetings, and studies—and generated a lasting interest in the role in both universities where its founder taught. The Catholic University's Brescian branch actualized this interest in 2003 by collaborating with *Centro Teatrale Bresciano* (CTB, Brescian Theatre Center, more widely known as *Teatro Stabile di Brescia*), involving students in several activities meant for them to provide a dramaturgical backbone to a production of Giovanni Raboni's *Alcestis* as staged by director Cesare Lievi.[20] This project, promoted by professors Roberta Carpani and Maria Pia Pattoni (the former an avid dramaturgy scholar herself), was appropriately titled "The University as Dramaturg."[21] As for the University of Pavia, a continued interest in the dramaturg lives on as the focus of my research, with my monographic volume on the subject having been financed by the athenaeum and my current fellowship dealing with the dramaturg's role in the context of theatre pedagogy and formation.[22]

CRT, on an even more practical side, was the place where several instrumental practitioners of Italian dramaturgy had their beginnings: aside from our first resident dramaturg (to whom the following section will be devoted), the

20 Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 134-135. In addition, between 1992 and 1994 CRT published a book series dedicated to the staging process of several plays, the "Projects for a Mise-en-scène", akin in spirit to Brecht's dramaturgy-relevant *Modellbücher.*

21 Roberta Carpani, "L'Università come Dramaturg. Prova di lavoro," *Comunicazioni sociali* 26, no. 3 (2004): 301-304.

22 "CRT50 Conference", Università Cattolica, Link. The two universities co-organized the CRT50 Conference in 2024, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Center's founding and once again drawing attention to the dramaturg's role. I attended with a speech on the Projects for a Mise-en-scène.

Center's ranks included Renata M. Molinari, one of its co-founders, reputed to be Italy's first and most famous dramaturg when it comes to freelance work with different artists,[23] and Alessandra Rossi Ghiglione, who served as dramaturg for some meaningful narrative plays before focusing her attention on social theatre, a field in which she has promoted further academic and practical interest in dramaturgy.[24] Rossi Ghiglione also contributed to spreading this interest to another university, that of Turin, where resident dance professor Alessandro Pontremoli—himself a CRT veteran—joined her in co-founding the Social Community Theatre Center. As an institution that treats the dramaturg as a precious mediator in the creation of collective, non-professional performances, the Social Community Theatre Center instructs students on skills relevant to this definition of dramaturgy.[25]

Another significant contribution came from the University of Bologna, particularly thanks to two professors: Claudio Meldolesi (1942-2009) and Claudio Longhi. Meldolesi's interest in the dramaturg, especially seen through the lens of Renata Molinari's work, led to the first Italian book on the subject, *The Dramaturg's Work* (2007).[26] Meldolesi's legacy was taken up by Longhi, who, during his tenure as director for the Emilia Romagna Theatre Foundation (ERT, 2017-2020), established an "International Dramaturg" post-master's course (2018-2020) inspired by Meldolesi and devoted solely to training participants as dramaturgs.[27] The International Dramaturg program was discontinued after two years, primarily due to the end of Longhi's direction, a change brought about by a switch in his role: Longhi was elected director of Piccolo Teatro, previously the artistic headquarters of his longtime collaborator, late director Luca Ronconi. Piccolo Teatro is a place whose significance to Italian theatre I have already dedicated several words to and a place that may yet provide great contributions to Italian dramaturgy.[28]

THE FIRST RESIDENT DRAMATURG: A PRECURSOR OF EXCEPTIONS

Without exception
a nation's first official dramaturg or literary manager
appears in its state-subsidized national theatre [...]
Mary Luckhurst [29]

In 1997, Renato Gabrielli was appointed as resident dramaturg of the above-mentioned *Centro Teatrale Bresciano*. This appointment, lasting until 2001, can still be counted among the rare instances in which a dramaturg was hired in an official capacity by a *Teatro Stabile*. Trained as an actor and predominantly active as an award-winning dramatist and teacher (collaborating with Milan's CRT in the former capacity during the 1990s),[30] Gabrielli was hired under the direction of Cesare Lievi, an artist who, having spent several years in Germany and encountered the role of the dramaturg in the profession's very homeland, subsequently felt the need to implement it in the Italian theatre he came to direct.[31] I'll be leaning on Gabrielli's words to highlight the result of this "transplant" of the German dramaturg in the Italian context:

> What did work at the Brescian theatre mean, concretely, in those four seasons?
>
> Basically, a patchwork of functions peacefully taken away from various offices already present within the theatre. Being a dramaturg in Italy involves carrying out a series of functions that exist in Italian theatres,

23 Meldolesi and Molinari, *Il lavoro del dramaturg,* 167-269.

24 Most notably Marco Paolini's and Gabriele Vacis's *The Tale of the Vajont,* broadcasted live on national television in 1997 to over three million Italian spectators.

25 Cioffrese, *Il Dramaturg in Italia,* 329-341.

26 "Teatro. Teorie e pratiche—Gli incontri in Sapienza", Accademia Silvio d'Amico, Link. The academic interest in the dramaturg's work has also been aided by the universities of central and southern Italy, among them Rome's Sapienza University, which, under the curatorship of theatre professor Stefano Locatelli (a graduate of the Catholic University as well as one of Guerrieri's foremost scholars) and PhD doctor Silvia Gussoni, devoted attention to the role during its online seminars "Teatro. Teorie e pratiche" (2020). Locatelli has also discussed the dramaturg in his playwriting course at Sapienza.

27 "Dramaturg internazionale," Emilia-Romagna Teatro, Link. International Dramaturg also involved another Bologna professor, Gerardo Guccini: a dramaturgy scholar who has provided active contributions to several stagings, most notably co-dramaturging *The Tale of the Vajont* with Rossi Ghiglione.

28 In a personal interview on October 20th, 2020, Longhi described Ronconi as one of several Italian directors who, in the absence of separate professionals, acted as "their own dramaturgs." What's more, he mentioned Ronconi's desire to create a dramaturgy office at Piccolo Teatro. Ronconi's project, just like Guerrieri's, never saw the light of day.

29 Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy*, 45.

30 "Biography," Renato Gabrielli, Link; Renato Gabrielli, Moro e il suo boia. *Progetto per una messa in scena di Mauricio Paroni De Castro*, ed. Alessandro Pontremoli (Vita e Pensiero, 1993). Gabrielli is relevant to many figures of interest mentioned in the previous section: he was counted among the teachers for the project on Lievi's *Alcestis* even after the end of his tenure, and a play of his was the subject of one of the Projects for a Mise-en-scène. I have also had the opportunity to act as Gabrielli's co-dramaturg, alongside others, for the latest edition of the Useful Theatre workshop (2024) organized by Milan's Accademia dei Filodrammatici.

but which are usually distributed among other professional figures [...]

Regarding the function of *programming dramaturg* [...] I would say that at most I could offer advice. I had no actual decision-making power over the theatre's programming and the choice of productions.

As for *the function of dramaturg who deals with the authors,* it was formally up to me [...] the scripts sent to the theatre were collected. I took it upon myself to organize them, read them and fill out forms on them: the ones I considered interesting and worthy were then passed on to the management [...]

I handled the collection of documentation and managed relationships with other study centers, universities and local cultural bodies. My role in this sector was that of the cultural consultant in some Italian theatres.

I was also responsible for theatre and season programs, and provided the press office with material related to the staged plays and the artistic line of the theatre. This was the most demanding and time-consuming function: a function generally carried out, in Italy, by a figure within the press office, if not by the head of the press office themselves; in other cases by cultural consultants.

The work naturally also involved a relationship with the directors leading the theatres' productions. I tried to support their activity with written documentation, which would then be merged with that offered to the public in the theatre programs.

As a dramaturg within the production, I often attended the rehearsals, but above all my role involved documentation and cultural study. A function which, in Italy, is usually carried out by an assistant director or by the director themselves.

I would like to add that in Italy the role of dramaturg within the company is in most cases covered by the director themselves.[32]

The overview of Gabrielli's tasks, unsurprisingly, runs the gamut of functions usually assigned to the German dramaturg (or, not infrequently, to a group of such dramaturgs): repertoire planning, relationships with playwrights, cultural archiving and consultancy, creation of program notes and other material

Figure III: *Renato Gabrielli. Source*

for spectators, and production dramaturgy. His handling of the plays sent to the theatre for reading, on the other hand, echoes the predominantly Anglo-Saxon idea of a literary manager intent on consulting unsolicited scripts.[33] While most of Gabrielli's responsibilities are outlined as partial when compared to German equivalents and partly "subtracted" from other professionals, the fact that the Italian dramaturg was able to list them is still a testament to the relative completeness of his role when it comes to a comprehensive perception of resident dramaturgy. Indeed, while Gabrielli's time at *Centro Teatrale Bresciano* was short-lived,[34] his "template" may well inform the Italian perception of a resident dramaturg, or rather, the idea of what a dramaturg *could* be in the context of an Italian publicly funded theatre if given a working continuity and a more robust dissemination.[35]

32 Teatro Aperto, ed., *Atti del convegno Walkie-Talkie* (Il Principe Costante, 2004), 40-42; translation and use of italics are mine.

33 Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making. A User's Guide for Theatre Practitioners* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), 44-45. For a study of the role of the Anglo-Saxon literary manager, from their theoretical conception to their first working applications, Cfr. William Archer and Harley Granville Barker, *A National Theatre. Schemes and Estimates* (Duckworth & Co, 1907); Harley Granville Barker, *The Exemplary Theatre* (Little, Brown and Company, 1922); Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy,* 78-102.

34 Gabrielli's tenure ended when the theatre chose not to renew his contract, despite Lievi's objections. Budget concerns likely played a role in the decision to remove Gabrielli's often nebulous professional role which, back then, was even more unusual than it is today.

35 Teatro Aperto, Atti del convegno, 130; "Fausto Paravidino's CV", Teatro Stabile Torino, Link; "Andrea Porcheddu", Arabeschi, Link. Other Italian professionals hired by *Teatri Stabili* as resident dramaturgs, usually for somewhat short tenures, include Giuseppe Manfridi (in 2003, for Teatro Stabile d'Abruzzo), Fausto Paravidino (in 2018, for Teatro Stabile di Torino) and Andrea Porcheddu (since 2021, for the National Theatre of Genoa).

CONCLUSION

Throughout my article, I have tried to highlight the significance of dramaturgy in Italy, despite the perduring absence of its professionals—at least in an official capacity—from the country's main theatre institutions. The official acknowledgment of the dramaturg's role and its addition as such to our *Teatri Stabili,* in my opinion, is a requirement for dramaturgy professionals to perform their functions fully and to best provide their contributions to Italian theatre. Dramaturgy institutionalization could empower the variously referred individuals striving to enrich and deepen Italian theatre-making (adapters, translators, consultants, researchers, playwrights), allowing them to specialize the scope of their work and integrate their dramaturgy experiences in a coherent working curriculum, rather than leaving said experiences as isolated freelance episodes. I believe audiences would benefit from the increased awareness of theatre as a versatile art form (rich in both history and producing context), hopefully, brought forth by proper, officially recognized dramaturgy professionals, as well as by the possibility of dramaturgs contributing to both meaningful adaptations and new plays. Self-referential or overly conceptual stagings are not a rare occurrence, and I fear they may eventually drive non-specialized audiences away from any theatre not immediately perceived as a plain, derivative staging of a well-known literary work, further increasing the extant gap between contemporary society and that art form which, originally, was conceived as a critical mirror reflecting its image.

Dramaturgy and *dramaturg,* when taken at face value, may simply be German-sounding terms difficult to seamlessly integrate into a national reality more accustomed to similar words (*drammaturgo* and *drammaturgia,* respectively, referring to the traditional playwright and their craft). However, I believe the significance these terms have come to assume in other countries—for instance, through the now supranational capillarity of LMDA and its myriad of practitioners—emphasizes the role they *could* play for Italian theatre, if granted a little visibility and a chance to grow with any regularity. ◆

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Towards a Transnational Dramaturgy of SWANA Relationality

by Suzi Elnaggar

Fatherland, Motherland, Homeland—terms often employed in nationalist discourses—take on deeply relational meanings for transnational individuals whose family histories are shaped by Southwest Asian/North African (SWANA) geographies. In Arabic, phrases such as *ibn al-balad* (native son/son of the homeland)[1] and Egypt's colloquial title, *Umm al-Dunya* (the mother of the world),[2] signify a relational belonging even across borders. Within many Arab and SWANA cultural frameworks, diasporic individuals are not displaced citizens but prodigal sons or daughters.[3] Belonging, in this context, becomes a form of interwoven kinship, rooted in the land, but not bound by fixed ties to geography or the nation-state.

METHODOLOGY: DRAMATURGIES OF RELATIONALITY AND THE PALINDROMIC

In this article, I propose a *dramaturgy of SWANA relationality,* a constellation of performance and narrative strategies, rooted in Arab and SWANA cultural contexts, that foreground familial, cultural, and affective ties that traverse borders.[4] Through a reading of *BABA* by Denmo Ibrahim and *9 Parts of Desire* by Heather Raffo, semi-autobiographical plays centering identity across Egyptian and Iraqi heritages, I examine how each playwright stages their transnational and diasporic identity through embodiment and aesthetics. In these performances, Raffo and Ibrahim enact a transnational translation of self through dramaturgical strategies, amid

1 ابن البلد

2 أم الدنيا

3 Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism, Nation of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), Link. I use both Arab and SWANA here, but I use SWANA throughout this article. Those that may be identifiable to the West as "Arab" may not personally describe themselves as such.

4 This builds on and is in conversation with my ongoing research into relational dramaturgies grounded in Egyptian feminist praxis. I hope to expand on this concept further in future publications.

what Black performance scholar Bimbola Akinbola calls "unruly return."[5]

In this article, I employ an *Arabbya* (Arab feminist) method/ology, building on gender and border scholar Manal Hamzeh, to read and analyze interwoven, relational dramaturgies.[6] In SWANA and Arab contexts, interwoven gestures to indigenous practices of oral storytelling: *hakawati* (storyteller) is related to the Arabic verb *haka,* "to weave" or "to narrate."[7] I use *relational* and *relationality* to mean familial, communal, and cultural networks across borders and temporalities. Relationality is both a dramaturgical strategy and scholarly stance, as seen in *Arabbya* method *haki* (conversation and relationships built over time and care).[8] In Arabic, *palindromic* signifies sacred linguistic geometries; it operates in this article as a temporality, a method/ology, and a dramaturgy.[9] I define *palindromic dramaturgies* as having context and meaning readable through Euro-American (left to right) and Arab/Egyptian/SWANA (right to left) cultural logics, rooted in situated aesthetics, embodiment, and translational poetics which produce a dynamic multi-il/legibility. I draw on radial, reflected, and reversible Arabic palindromes and calligrams,[10] as well as Jerrald Ranta's expansive notions of the palindrome as a "geometric form" and a "reversal pattern that pivots around a center" which "may vary from these ideal conditions and still be a palindrome."[11] Thus, *palindromic* does not imply symmetry, but reversal, pivoting, and geometric variation within a pattern, similar to Black performance scholar La Marr Jurelle Bruce's conception of kaleidoscopic and multidirectional *madtime*.[12]

SWANA relationality, as articulated through a palindromic dramaturgy, is given form in the performances of Denmo Ibrahim and Heather Raffo. Through dramaturgical strategies that include transported cultural forms, embodied self-translation, and art as recursive self-reflection, Ibrahim and Raffo stage SWANA diasporic realities as embodied and culturally situated. I borrow *palindromic* as a strategy from Egyptian poet Marwa Helal and her poetic structure, "The Arabic," English poems written right-to-left, using Arabic flow and spatiality.[13] In her poem "Who RealƧ," Helal employs "The Arabic," asserting her thesis behind the form:[14]

> reading hologram my this
> you to
> me showed book a writing coz
> yourselves save to read cant yall
> english you teach to arabic an write to had i guess[15]

In the predominantly white context of US theatre, Raffo and Ibrahim mirror Helal's formal poetic inversion in dramaturgies that translate and transfigure SWANA relationality. They render their diasporic identities through dramaturgies that are metaphorically "right to left" and left to right.[16] Through this palindromic and reversible

5 Bimbola Akinbola, "Disbelonging and Unruly Return in the Performance Art of Wura-Natasha Ogunji," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (March 2, 2020): 153, Link. I borrow unruly return from Akinbola to position SWANA performance in conversation with African and Black diasporic aesthetics—gestures of return that resist linearity, closure, or assimilation into national belonging. Akinbola states that through diasporic performance, 'return operates as a state of experimentation, continuous problem solving, and (re)imagining for black women, not only in Nigeria but also throughout the African diaspora.' I assert that Raffo and Ibrahim's returns, unruly both literally and staged, move to 'disrupt space and disorient audiences as a homemaking practice.'

6 Manal Hamzeh, *Women Resisting Sexual Violence and the Egyptian Revolution: Arab Feminist Testimonies* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020), 17–18.

7 حكاواتي

8 Monique Mojica and Lindsay Lachance, eds., *Staging Coyote's Dream.* Volume III, First edition (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2024), 1–13. I align SWANA dramaturgies of relationality with indigenous relational and radical dramaturgies, which are a "embodied, land-based, or culturally specific dramaturgical practice."

9 Awni Alkhatib, *The Semantic Properties of the Arabic and English Palindromes,* 2023. "The Arabic equivalent to 'Arabic palindrome' is [*mala yastaheel bil inekaas*] (ام ال يستحيل بالعناكس) meaning (what is reversible) and Arabic palindromic poetry is called [*shiiru al atarrdi*] or [*shiiru al aaks*] which means the reversible poetry."

10 Matt Reeck, trans., "The Calligraphic Trace," in *The Wound of the Name,* by Abdelkébir Khatibi (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2025), 105–19.

11 Jerrald Ranta, "Palindromes, Poems, and Geometric Form," *College English* 36, no. 2 (1974): 161, Link.

12 La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity,* Black Outdoors: Innovations in the Poetics of Study (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2021), 204. Bruce states, 'madtime is multidirectional and polymorphous, deranged and dreamy, unruly and askew, capacious and kaleidoscopic.'

13 The Arabic first appears in "poem to be read left to right" and has been subsequently developed by Helal and other SWANA and Arab poets. For more see, Marwa Helal, "Poem to Be Read from Right to Left," *Love Letter to Spooks* (Winter Tangerine, n.d.), Link; Emily Sernaker, "The Ms. Q&A: How Poet Marwa Helal Uses Poetry as Preservation," *Ms. Magazine,* January 8, 2018, Link.

14 "WHO REALƧ," in *Ante Body*, by Marwa Helal (New York: Nightboat Books, 2022), 59–36.

15 Marwa Helal, "WHO REALƧ," text, Poets.org, n.d., Link.

16 Helal, "WHO REALƧ."

directionality, they move beyond ideas of untranslatability and illegibility into multitranslatability and multi-il/legibility. They enact a multilinguality, what translation scholar Paul F. Bandia calls a *reparative translation* through "the creation of a medium for poetic and aesthetic expression as a trace of cultural representation."[17] As Meenakshi Ponnuswami writes, the children of migrants "are uniquely positioned to be agents of intercultural communication and exchange" and are seen as "reliable informants and translators by both natives and migrants."[18] Raffo and Ibrahim, through their dramaturgies, are 'intercultural informants' to multiple audiences. Rather than a palimpsest, they become a "palindrome" (as Helal writes, "lolololol palindrome is lol"), creating meaning from right|left and left|right: they write 'Arabic' to 'teach you English.'[19]

I use this poetic stance to analyze the performances of Ibrahim and Raffo. Within this palindromic and relational framework, I identify three dramaturgical strategies employed:

1. Transported forms: the migration of aesthetic and dramatic forms across geographic and linguistic contexts, often remixed and reassembled.
2. Embodied translation of self: the translation of self through narrative, semiotics, and embodied performance, often carrying others multiplied and doubled, *body in body.*
3. Art as recursive self-reflection: a reflection and investigation of the self through artistic practices within the dramatic world, relationality through love.

I frame translation here as not only a textual act but an embodied performance across transnational realities and identities. Drawing on Egyptian scholar Shereen Abouelnaga, "the [Egyptian] female body has become a text that must be read against the grain," I assert these dramaturgies as necessarily embodied.[20] Palindromic dramaturgies, in this sense, construct geometries of identity by folding performance across time, language, and cultural form. My comparative, palindromic reading of these performances emphasizes how these artists stage SWANA identity as relational, multidirectional, and deeply rooted in cultural memory.

WHY SWANA: SOUTHWEST ASIA AND NORTH AFRICA

Before turning to a *dramaturgy of SWANA relationality:* what is SWANA and why use it?[21] The term SWANA (South West Asian/North African) offers a necessary, if imperfect, intervention into naming and understanding a region long shaped by colonial cartographies. It offers a decolonial approach, reflecting the multiplicity of identities held by the diaspora. The term "Middle East," while more palatable than "Orient" and more current than "Near East," is a colonial byproduct rooted in Eurocentric geographies.[22] Other terms, such as "Islamic world" or "Hodgson's Islamicate," frame the region through religion; "Arab world" similarly assumes cultural-linguistic unity where diversity exists.[23] I use SWANA, which, while emerging from Western frameworks of visibility, enables a kaleidoscopic view that foregrounds interwoven ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities.[24]

At the same time, I recognize that terms like "SWANA," "Arab," or "Middle Eastern" are neither universally embraced nor contextually stable. Often, diasporic individuals use "Middle Eastern," "Arab," or "Arab American" collectively but not individually, privately affiliating with more specific identities: Egyptian, Nubian, Coptic, Chaldean, Assyrian, or Lebanese, for example. Still, I find

17 Paul F. Bandia, "Reparative Translation, Decoloniality, Metacoloniality," in *Translation and Decolonisation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives,* ed. Claire Chambers and Ipek Demir, 1st ed., Translation, Politics and Society (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2024), 61, Link.

18 Meenakshi Ponnuswami, "Citizenship and Gender in Asian-British Performance," in *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*, ed. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, Performance Interventions (Houndmills, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 34–35.

19 Helal, "WHO REAL?."

20 Shereen Abouelnaga, *Women in Revolutionary Egypt: Gender and the New Geographics of Identity* (Cairo, Egypt: American University in Cairo Press, 2016), 4.

21 "What Is SWANA?," SWANA Alliance, n.d., Link.; Michael E. Bonine, "Of Maps and Regions: Where Is the Geographer's Middle East?," in *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept,* ed. Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2012), 84–85. Michael E. Bonine, in his assessment of maps and geographies, notes uses of the term as early as 1992 as "SWANA" and "Southwest Asia and North Africa" He notes a 2000 usage that explicitly justifies with an editorial note using North Africa and Southwest Asia instead of Middle East in western contexts.

22 Abbas Amanat, "Introduction: Is There a Middle East? Problematizing a Virtual Space," in *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept,* ed. Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2012), 1–11.

23 Amanat, "Introduction: Is There a Middle East? Problematizing a Virtual Space," 1–11.

24 Jessie Hanna Clark, "Feminist Geopolitics and the Middle East: Refuge, Belief, and Peace," *Geography Compass* 11, no. 2 (February 2017): e12304, Link.

SWANA useful for its legibility within performance and dramaturgy contexts, especially in US academic and artistic institutions. I apply it as a conceptual frame, not as an essentialist label.[25] In this article, I use SWANA not to define a fixed identity but to offer a framework of transborder belonging and diasporic complexity.

Further, SWANA identities have historically resisted legibility within US racial and cultural frameworks; they are always visible yet rarely recognized on their own terms. As early modern performance scholar Noémie Ndiaye explains, race operates through a matrix of interlocking scripts (religion, rank, and phenotype) that determine how bodies are seen, read, and made legible within dominant systems.[26] SWANA identities, too, are filtered through these enduring scripts. The 2024 decision to include a MENA (Middle Eastern/North African) category in the US Census reflects a rare moment of recognition, yet even this emerges through the same racial matrix that shapes how SWANA bodies are seen and misread.[27] "The American and European system of illegibility," as Asian studies scholar Yan Haiping names it, extends to the stage, where SWANA performances are often rewritten/reread through Orientalist frames that obscure their complexity.[28] The performances I analyze do more than represent SWANA identities within the US; they resist these Orientalist notions by staging a SWANA relationality that is felt in the body, spoken through the text, and translated across fractal geographies.

PALINDROMIC PERFORMERS: DENMO IBRAHIM AND HEATHER RAFFO

Who are these palindromic performers? Denmo Ibrahim and Heather Raffo are artist-playwrights whose performances traverse time and borders, rich in the poetics of cultural memory. Ibrahim, a multihyphenate American artist of Egyptian descent, centers identity and belonging in her solo work; Raffo, an Iraqi-American playwright and actor, explores the lives of Iraqi women through narratives shaped by war, displacement, and migration.[29] As actors turned playwrights, Ibrahim and Raffo engage a semi-autoethnographic approach that weaves personal narrative into performance, writing themselves—left to right and right to left—across cultures and languages in a palindromic interplay of identity and form. Borrowing from scholar Laila Farah, Ibrahim is

"...their palindromic dramaturgies move across time, form, and cultural memory, staging the fluidity of *dramaturgies of relationality*.."

"dancing on a hyphen," navigating between her Egyptian and American selves.[30] She describes the impulse behind her art: "I feel [...] this question of identity, of not really fitting in any one place."[31] Similarly, Raffo moves fluidly across forms—opera, drama, and music—to express the complexity of Iraqi women's lives experienced across bodies, borders, and generations. Drawing again on Ponnuswami, both Raffo and Ibrahim, as artists situated between cultures, are "uniquely capable of transforming adopted homelands into 'diaspora spaces.'"[32] Ibrahim and Raffo are able to inhabit and transform these border-crossing spaces; their palindromic dramaturgies move across time, form, and cultural memory, staging the fluidity of *dramaturgies of relationality.*

CASE STUDIES: ENACTING SWANA RELATIONALITY

Baba (Arabic for *dad* or *father*) is a two-act solo play with the

25 In some cases, I refer specifically to Egyptian or Arab relationality or performance; in others, I use SWANA to emphasize transborder networks over linguistic or ethnic fixity.

26 Noémie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race*, RaceB4Race: Critical Race Studies of the Premodern (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania press, 2022).

27 Joseph Stepansky, "'Transformative': US Census to Add Middle Eastern, North African Category," Al Jazeera, March 28, 2024, Link.

28 Haiping Yan, "Other Transnationals: An Introductory Essay," *Modern Drama* 48, no. 2 (2005): 229.

29 Denmo Ibrahim, "Denmo Ibrahim," accessed December 4, 2023, Link.; Heather Raffo, "Bio ‹ Heather Raffo," n.d., Link.

30 Laila Farah, "Dancing on the Hyphen: Performing Diasporic Subjectivity," *Modern Drama* 48, no. 2 (2005): 316–45.

31 Nabra Nelson and Marina J. Bergenstock, "Multihyphenate Artists," Kunafa and Shay, accessed June 5, 2024, Link.

32 Ponnuswami, "Citizenship and Gender in Asian-British Performance," 34–35.

33 اباب

Figure 1: *Ahmad Kamal (Mohammed) in* BABA*. Photo by Evan Michael Woods, provided by Amphibian Stage.*

actor as Mohammed in Act One and as Layla in Act Two.[33] In 1982 New York City, Mohammed, a homesick migrant seeks to get a passport for his daughter, Layla, so she can join him on his return to Egypt. As he waits, his optimism gradually erodes in the face of bureaucratic indifference. In 2012; Layla, an artist, embarks on her first trip to Cairo. The truth of Layla and Mohammed's relationship and how the events of 1982 caused the distance of 2012 is revealed as she journeys through the sky, dreaming.

Denmo Ibrahim's *BABA* has several productions that complicate the themes of identity and intergenerational translation. Developed at the Bay Area Playwrights Festival, a reading was then produced by Noor Theatre in 2011, with Ibrahim performing both roles, directed by Isis Saratial Misdary.[34] Its 2014 world premiere at AlterTheater, directed by Sara Razavi, reaffirmed solo performance as a core dramaturgical strategy.[35] In 2023, Amphibian Stage presented *BABA* without Ibrahim, casting Ahmad Kamal as Mohammed and Savannah Yasmine Elayyach, a first-generation "eldest daughter," as Layla in her first role portraying an Arab American character.[36] Director Hamid Dehghani's decision to split the roles highlights a central dramaturgical tension: is embodied self-translation, *body in body*, intensified through solo performance or defused when multiple actors are cast?[37] The play's limited stagings without Ibrahim suggest how deeply her translational embodiment shapes this performance.

BABA came to Ibrahim after a period of family discovery and artistic growth. After eight years in ensemble theatre, Denmo Ibrahim developed a solo performance exploring her family's migration story: "That was the first piece I had written as a challenge to myself."[38] Drawing on oral histories:

> I interviewed my family and other first-generation immigrants and that became the beginning of this piece, but it also became the beginning of my process of finding a theme or a question that I was excavating and then beginning to go out into the community and start to gather documentation and research and material from true stories to begin to infiltrate the text.[39]

Ibrahim rewrites her own 'true story' through *Baba.* Here, Audre Lorde's *biomythography* offers a model for how narrative form can disrupt linear time and fixed identity through purposeful re/writing of the self.[40] Like Lorde, Ibrahim interweaves the personal with the communal, crafting a relational, palindromic dramaturgy that moves backward/forward through familial myth, memory, and return.

In *9 Parts of Desire*, Heather Raffo weaves together nine Iraqi women living through the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein's rise and fall, and the invasion of Iraq: The Mullaya, Layal, Amal, Huda, The Doctor, The Iraqi Girl, Umm Ghada, The American, and Nanna. The Mullaya (a traditional mourner in Iraqi Muslim communities) frames the interlocking monologues with Huda, Layal, and The American recurring as narrative threads.[41] Layal contemplates leaving Iraq in 1993; Huda ponders activism and exile after 2003; and The American attempts to call her family during the invasion of

34 "Production History," Noor Theatre, n.d., Link.

35 Ramzi Salti, "Denmo Ibrahim's 'BABA' Premieres in San Rafael, CA (April 4-27, 2014)," *Ramzi Salti's Arabology* (blog), April 6, 2014, Link.

36 "Baba," Amphibian Stage, n.d., Link.

37 "Baba," Amphibian Stage.

38 Nelson and Bergenstock, "Multihyphenate Artists."

39 Nelson and Bergenstock, "Multihyphenate Artists."

40 Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Crossing Press Feminist Series (Trumansburg, N.Y: Crossing Press, 1982).

41 Women to Women: Heather Raffo, Actress, "Nine Parts of Desire" (CUNY TV, 2005), Link; Jonathan Shead, "Heather Raffo Re-Imagines 'Nine Parts' Play as Film Set in Michigan," One Detroit (blog), March 21, 2023, Link.

Iraq. The play closes with Nanna offering Layal's painting, *Savagery*, to American soldiers for two dollars.

Heather Raffo's *9 Parts of Desire* has had multiple iterations since its inception as her MA acting thesis, most recently as a film adaptation in 2023.[42] Initially conceived around The Artist, later named Layal, Raffo's early drafts began with The Artist painting other women who then emerged from the canvas to tell their story.[43] The one-woman play premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival at the Traverse Theatre in August 2003 and had a run at the Bush Theatre in London.[44] In the US, the play debuted at The Public Theater in 2004 and then the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles in 2005. Berkeley Repertory Theatre staged the first production without Raffo at Thrust Stage in 2006. The largest cast was the University of South Florida, a cast of eleven (three women played The Mullaya).[45] In 2023, Raffo returned to *9 Parts*, rewriting and performing the roles in a film adaptation, *Nine Parts*, that centered on mourning her father for One Detroit PBS; it premiered nationally in April 2025.[46]

Raffo's dramaturgy was shaped by a moment of return that reconfigured her relationship to her homeland. She recounts a childhood visit to Iraq as the seed of *9 Parts*:

> This play was inspired by a life-changing trip I made to Iraq in 1993. It was only a few years after the Gulf War had ended, and I was longing to see my family. [...]
>
> [A man at passport checkpoint] said, "Welcome to your father's country, we hope you take a good impression of the Iraqi people, know our people are not our government, please be at home here, and when you return tell your people about us."[47]

This invocation, both a welcome and a mandate, placed Raffo at the threshold between witness and storyteller.[48] She was welcomed "home."[49] In accepting the charge, Raffo assumes the position of an intercultural informant, performing between legibility and illegibility, between national narrative and familial fabulation. She becomes the entrusted translator of 'Iraqi-ness' as a diasporic, transnational interlocutor. While Raffo conceived *9 Parts* before 2001, witnessing the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and her father watching the war on television reframed the story for her and brought Raffo back to the narrative. Through its evolving forms, *9 Parts* exemplifies a palindromic dramaturgy of return, echoing the structure of SWANA relationality, changing yet connected. Each iteration is compelled by and through Raffo's relation to others and Iraq.

For both Ibrahim and Raffo, these stories began as personal inquiries into diasporic and transnational belonging and became texts where SWANA relationality is made legible. Each uses her body as a conduit for translation, writing, and performing across axes of geography, memory, and lineage. Their dramaturgies unfold as palindromic acts: multidirectional and rooted in in-betweenness. By staging themselves in multiple directions, they make their own identities legible and, in doing so, illuminate those of their transnational parents and cultural communities. These are not just narratives of diasporic experience; they enact embodied memory, translating the untranslatable, and staging the illegible through form.

TRANSPORTED CULTURAL FORMS

Transported cultural forms are aesthetic practices, such as indigenous and folkloric performance, poetics, and ritual, that move across borders and generations, carrying cultural inheritance and diasporic reinvention with them. These forms do not travel in a straight line but radiate palindromically: refracted, multidirectional movement shaped by interruption, repetition, and return.[50] They

42 *Women to Women*; Shead, "Heather Raffo Re-Imagines 'Nine Parts' Play as Film Set in Michigan."

43 Heather Raffo, Phone Interview with Playwright, January 21, 2022; *Women to Women*.

44 "The Wilma Theater Presents Heather Raffo's Nine Parts of Desire | Philly Future - Philadelphia Blogs - Urbi et Orbi," *Philly Future* (blog), September 20, 2011, Link.

45 Joanna Settle, "9 Parts of Desire," n.d., Link; "Nine Parts of Desire," Geffen Playhouse, n.d., Link; "Past Productions," Berkeley Repertory Theatre, n.d., Link; University of South Florida, "9 Parts of Desire | Past Productions | School of Theatre & Dance | College of The Arts | University of South Florida," n.d., Link.

46 Shead, "Heather Raffo Re-Imagines 'Nine Parts' Play as Film Set in Michigan"; Heather Raffo, "Nine Parts Film," HEATHER RAFFO, October 27, 2024, Link.

47 Heather Raffo, *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire: A Play* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2006), ix.

48 Raffo, Heather Raffo, *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire: A Play*, ix.

49 Raffo, Heather Raffo, *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire: A Play*, ix.

50 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, 3. print (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Fred Moten, *Black and Blur,* Consent Not to Be a Single Being (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2017); Bruce, *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind*. My use of the term *transported cultural forms* is shaped by Diana Taylor's concept of the repertoire, Fred Moten's theorization of fugitivity, and La Marr Jurelle Bruce's notion of the melancholic time traveler. These theorists collectively inform my framing of cultural performance as recursive, multidirectional, and historically charged.

refuse linearity; they arrive with the residue of elsewhere, speaking across languages and histories all at once. In performance, transported forms activate a double motion: they preserve and transform, enacting relationality not as fixed but as a live and rhythmic unfolding.

Both Ibrahim and Raffo interpolate performance forms from their parents' homelands, constructing translated dramaturgies. In *BABA*, Ibrahim draws from Egyptian comedic and folkloric traditions, while in *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo weaves sacred and poetic forms rooted in Iraqi mourning. This transportation of form exceeds cultural borrowing, becoming a palindromic act of aesthetic translation.[51] It works simultaneously *within* and against dominant theatrical traditions to produce multi-il/legible dramaturgies. As performance studies scholar Diana Taylor writes, such performances resist the fixity of the archive and activate the repertoire: embodied memory, gesture, and ephemerality.[52] Ibrahim and Raffo stage cultural repertoires, transporting the forms, constituting a *translated dramaturgy* that carries memory across diasporic fracture, rendering performance as a site of survival and return. What emerges is a relationality that is performed into being—left to right and right to left—a dramaturgy of identity-making across geographies.

BABA references comedic Egyptian folk performance through exaggeration, role reversal, and gender play. Folk and indigenous performances often relied on a solo performer's ability to slip between identities, a strategy Ibrahim adopts by embodying both Layla and Mohammed. In doing so, she stages a gendered contradiction that is comedic and dramaturgically charged: the patriarchal voice is refracted through her own. Ibrahim "simultaneously cites tradition and breaks social norms in order to say something new," a strategy of Akinbola's unruly return.[53] Within Arab drama, Egyptian theatre scholar Dina Amin positions doubling and role-playing as a means of connecting with and drawing on indigenous and folkloric forms.[54] Further, folkloric performances, such as shadow plays, often used comedy to destabilize familial authority or reconfigure gendered scripts. *BABA* resituates Arab/Egyptian comedic traditions within a diasporic frame. Satire becomes a transported cultural form; through laughter and inversion, Ibrahim performs relationality.

In contrast to *BABA* and its comedic roots, *9 Parts* invokes the sacred and ritual through The Mullaya, a guide across historical and spiritual temporalities. Moving with the cadence of lament and the resonance of the Islamic call to prayer, her voice evokes Arabic poetics and ritual. The Mullaya renders land as archive and body as scripture, enacting what Jill Lane calls "deep time," where historical memory is not past but recursively activated:[55]

> Let me tell you I have walked across it
> Qurna, Eridu, Ur
> the Garden of Eden was here …
> I have walked from there to here
> from the flood
> to the highway of death
> collecting, carrying
> you can read the story
> here it is, read it all here
> on my sole.[56]

Through her, lament becomes a transported cultural form that carries memory across displacement and frames relationality as an act of embodied storytelling. The Mullaya begins and ends the narrative (excluding Nanna's coda), collecting and reframing the voices that emerge between; she is a palindrome, enacting nonlinear and geometric storytelling. Her reappearance reveals the structure not as isolated testimonies but as a woven tapestry of relationality.

51 From the early Egyptian accounts of Western theatre, such as in al-Tahtawi's travel narrative, translation has been central to understanding Arabic theatre and performance across borders and languages. For more on translation, see Rifa'a Al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris: Al-Tahtawi's Visit to France 1826-1831*, trans. Daniel L. Newman, Annotated edition (London: Saqi Books, 2011); Shaden M. Tageldin, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt*, FlashPoints 5 (Berkeley: University of California press, 2011); Sirkku Aaltonen and Areeg Ibrahim, eds., *Rewriting Narratives in Egyptian Theatre: Translation, Performance, Politics*, Routledge Advances in Theatre and Performance Studies 45 (New York: Routledge, 2016).

52 Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

53 Akinbola, "Disbelonging and Unruly Return in the Performance Art of Wura-Natasha Ogunji," 159.

54 Dina A. Amin, *Alfred Farag and Egyptian Theater: The Poetics of Disguise, with Four Short Plays and a Monologue*, Middle East Literature in Translation (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 77–87.

57 Elinor Fuchs, "Play as Landscape: Another Version of Pastoral," *Theater* 25, no. 1 (1994): 44.

58 Fuchs, "Play as Landscape, 44.

59 Ibid., 45.

EMBODIED SELF-TRANSLATION

Embodied self-translation is the enactment of self-as-relation: the performer translating identities across gender, lineage, and time. Through what I call *body in body*, performance becomes a site of 'carrying' where the actor holds ancestral, affective, and narrative knowledge within one flesh. Embodied self-translation is not a representation but a doubling: one self folded into another, voiced and embodied simultaneously. I borrow what Della Pollock describes in performance as "corporeal historiography;" inscribed by memory and written back through the body.[57] Looking to Abouelnaga's critique of the expected nationalist legibility of Arab women through idealized forms;[58] embodied self-translation resists this by foregrounding contradiction, multiplicity, and the intimate labor of carrying what cannot be fully reconciled.[59]

Subsequent productions of *BABA* and *9 Parts* show that these plays are structurally adaptable and can function with multiple actors; thus, the performance of multiple roles is neither incidental nor ego-driven. Rather, both artists engage in a dramaturgy of *body in body,* which I draw from Raffo's Layal, who asserts her artistic practice:

> so I paint my body
> but her body, herself inside me
> So it is not me alone
> it is all of us
> but I am the body that takes the experience[60]

This is relational embodiment. Raffo and Ibrahim enact relationality by carrying those who cannot represent themselves, who remain untranslatable, who speak through story and body. Their performance becomes a form of living archive, an ethics of presence.

Embodied self-translation is central to Ibrahim's *BABA*, where she originated both roles as a solo performer. This is *body in body*, a refracted, palindromic embodiment—Mohammed

Figure II: *Denmo Ibrahim (Mohammed and Layal) in her solo show* BABA *directed by Sara Razavi at Alter Theatre. Photo: Sean O'Leary*

through Layla, Layla through Ibrahim. Mohammed unsuccessfully attempts to bring Layla to Egypt. Then, this desire is reversed; Layla travels to Cairo to see the father she no longer knows intimately. These arcs reflect a palindromic dramaturgy, not symmetrical but refracted, a kaleidoscopic emotional structure, unfolding through return rather than progression. Through the mirroring of Layla and Mohammed, Ibrahim inscribes the complexity of identity and belonging across generations, highlighting the challenges of diaspora and cultural displacement.

Embodied self-translation can be read through the fictionalized Ibrahim and Raffo within the texts of *BABA* and *9 Parts of Desire*. Layla and Layal, the daughter and the artist respectively, stand in not as masks, but as mirrors, as other-selves. They are a formal relative of what Egyptian playwright Tawfiq al-Hakim called the "narrator/impersonator."[61] Ibrahim and Raffo use their family histories and personal geographies, embedding their own narratives into characters that are both themselves and not. In *BABA*, this doubling becomes corporeal:

> The actor undresses, removing the mustache, the glasses, the wig, shedding the body of Mohammed.
>
> The actor unrolls a dress beneath the costume.

57 Della Pollock, "Performing Writing," in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1998), 73–103.

58 Here, I gesture towards the village girl (*fallaha*), the pharaonic queen, and the veiled harem woman as representations of Egypt read through the female body.

59 Abouelnaga, *Women in Revolutionary Egypt*.

60 Raffo, *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire*, 8.

61 Amin, *Alfred Farag and Egyptian Theater*, 85.

LAYLA evolves as Mohammed dissolves.

[...]She unpins her hair, powders her nose, inhabits her body.[62]

This transition is not simply a costume change; it is a ritual, a shedding. Layla does not emerge separate from Mohammed; she rises through him. As the performer unrolls the dress, unpins her hair, and powders her nose, she carries the memory of the father within her. The artist becomes the archive, holding her lineage within. Her performance resists coherence and instead offers multiplicity: self is made visible through the fragments it carries.

> "In this dramaturgical logic, art does not deliver the self neatly labeled. It calls the self into presence by reaching toward another."

ART AS RECURSIVE SELF-REFLECTION

Art as recursive self-reflection is a dramaturgical mode in which characters turn to art to find what cannot be directly spoken. Drawing on Lebanese American artist and poet Etel Adnan, who used riotous color to investigate relationality, tracing and embellishing her father's Arabic, a language she didn't share, she stated, "instead of explaining, analyzing my understanding of a particular poem or text in word-language, I utilize the language of painting: in this case written words and the visual text mirror each other and form a new entity which combines them both."[63] Through painting, performance, and storytelling, the artist-characters in these plays reach toward lost family, fractured memory, and the parts of themselves made unfamiliar by time and distance.

The artist-character becomes a site of both inquiry and deferral; where the playwright-artist ends and the artist-character begins to become blurred and liminal. Layla cannot draw her own face, and Layal paints others into herself; Ibrahim and Raffo illuminate themselves in text and gesture. These gestures are not about completion but about tracing outlines where connection might emerge. This is not resolving identity but reencountering it in disruption; what Akinbola describes as "not an authentic process of going back and seamlessly 'fetching' what has been left behind, but an act of at times disruptive making and becoming."[64] In this dramaturgical logic, art does not deliver the self neatly labeled. It calls the self into presence by reaching toward another.

In *BABA*, Layla's inability to draw her face becomes a metaphor for the diasporic self: partially visible, refracted through others, never fully resolved. Her self-portraiture resists singularity. Instead of painting herself, she turns to images of her father, trying to find her outline within his. This is not representation but relation. Her art practice mirrors the play's structure, blurring lines of self:

I'm a painter. Pastel, charcoal, pen, pencil. Just started working with acrylics. My style? Sort of a neo baroque avant-realism with a post modern romantic vibe. I draw large scale mythic monsters. But right now I'm working on a series of self portraits.

Actually it's what inspired this trip.

I have painted murals large and small, all sorts of landscapes, other portraits.

But drawing my own face?

I'd set up a mirror and canvas and sketch

And everytime, it looked like a distant relative.

A copy.[65]

Her art does not offer resolution; it asks a question. What do we inherit when what we have inherited is distance? Layla's portraits do not provide an answer but hold space for inquiry and discovery. In this dramaturgical logic, art becomes relational—a means not of capturing the self but of moving toward it through the image of another.

In *9 Parts of Desire*, the artist-figure Layal echoes the Iraqi painter Layla Al-Attar, killed by a US missile strike in 1993.

62 Denmo Ibrahim, *BABA* (Florida: New Play Exchange, n.d.), 23, Link.

63 Etel Adnan, "The Unfolding of an Artist's Book," *Discourse* 20, no. 1/2 (1998): 22.

64 Akinbola, "Disbelonging and Unruly Return in the Performance Art of Wura-Natasha Ogunji," 154.

65 Ibrahim, *BABA*, 34.

Figure III: *Savannah Yasmine Elayyach (Layal), and Ahmad Kamal (Mohammed) in* BABA. *Photo by Evan Michael Woods, provided by Amphibian Stage.*

Al-Attar's paintings, many of which feature women, refuse erasure; she painted hazy primordial landscapes where women's nude bodies merge with land and trees, such as *A Woman Rooted to the Earth*.[66] The violence in al-Attar's life, of a regime, of war and imperialism, and even the violence of her eventual death are reflected in her art. Her paintings evoke the liminality of a gone world, an Edenic past that lingers still in the land and body. In *9 Parts*, violence lingers beneath imagery, when Layal paints a woman's mauled body into a forest: "See in my painting she is the branch's blossom."[67] The painting does not expose her, but shelters her silently, not as a symbol but as memory. The painting becomes a site of grief, of remembrance, and burial within its natural world. When Nanna offers the painting, called *Savage*, within the dramatic narrative, for sale at the end of the play, she speaks as the one within it:

> I give you secret
> some trees are womans
> this one, little one, is me
> I let her paint me
> *aa*, she sees me
> shhh
> don't say
> my husband he thinks it's just a tree[68]

This moment is not metaphor; it is dramaturgy. Raffo's *9 Parts* has layers beyond the surface, especially in Layal and Umm Ghada's story. The violence of imperialism is a live wire, an active current in the play. Like Layal, she sees and she paints, hiding something, someone, someone-s precious. This is a relational dramaturgy: the woman is in the tree, and the tree is in the story. Like Ibrahim's Layla, who cannot draw her own face, Raffo's Layal paints through fracture, using art to carry what cannot safely appear. Al-Attar's and other Iraqi's deaths are but a shadow upon the wall: "a silhouette of a woman / vaporized from heat" as The Mullaya says.[69] The painting is a dramaturgy of survival; the survival of a daughter writing her father's homeland as he watches it burn. This is relationality not as a statement, but as a gesture of love and care. A relationality that remembers a secret hidden in the trees, a reality written from left to right to left, a palindrome "I love you"/you love me.[70]

The art inside these dramatic worlds does not seek to represent the self in full. It holds what the self cannot carry alone. Layla's unfinished self-portrait and Layal's hidden canvas resist clarity not because they fail to capture identity, but because they frame its most essential contradiction: self is shaped through relation. Acts of creativity hold memory. Like the plays themselves, these portraits stage relationality. They depict connections of culture, family, and community beyond borders. In *BABA*

66 Layla Al-Attar, *A Woman Rooted to Earth*, 1980, Oil on Canvas, 1980, Link.

67 Raffo, *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire*, 9.

68 Raffo, *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire*, 68.

69 Raffo, *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire*, 63.

70 Raffo, *Heather Raffo's 9 Parts of Desire*, 65; Helal, "WHO REAL?."

and *9 Parts of Desire*, art becomes a palindrome—not just a motif, but a method. It is the dramaturgy of return, of echo, of the artist stepping into herself by encircling the others she holds. This artmaking gathers and makes space for the plural, the partial, the haunted.

The dramaturgical strategies explored here, transported cultural forms, embodied self-translation, and art as recursive self-reflection, shape what I call transnational SWANA relationality. This is not a regional taxonomy or an ethnic genre. It is performance grounded in entanglement: of body and body, of archive and voice, of art and absence. These dramaturgies carry memory without flattening it, stage identity without resolving it, and reach toward others without the demand for legibility. They are made of resonance and return, continually refracted. SWANA relationality offers a vocabulary for reading performance through echo and accumulation. It attends to what is untranslatable, not by speaking it, but by embodying it. These performances do not ask how to tell a story. They ask how to carry one. What remains are gestures: a portrait that will not be completed, a body folded into another, a tree that carries a woman. This dramaturgy is not exhaustive or exhausted. It is recursive. It returns.

And beyond land, we look to find home. Our mother. Our father. Ourselves. ◆

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As a dramaturg, she is experienced in both production and developmental work. She is the artistic director of Backstitch Story Project, a new storytelling initiative in Chicago and founder of the Digital Development Project, which funds emerging dramaturgs to pair with playwrights in a digital space. Selected dramaturgy credits (Production & Developmental): Silk Road's Shahadat; Backstitch Story Arts *Off-White: The Arab House Party Play*; Clamour Theatre's *Lived Experience*; TACTICS Ottawa's *ANANSI V. GOD(S)*; Jubilee Theatre Waco's *Fairview* (Texas Premiere); Wild Imaginings' *Jesus and Valium* (World Premiere), *The Way He Looks at You, Cardboard Castles Hung on Walls* (World Premiere); Northwestern University Theatre's *The Great Sea Serpent* (Workshop Premiere). Suzi was the festival dramaturg/literary manager for the Epiphanies New Works Festival for 2021 and 2022. In 2021, Suzi curated the Waco Contemporary Play Series, a full year of grant-funded staged readings. Suzi's scholarship and practice center community, collaboration, and context.

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Reimagining the Path: *The Storyteller Studio as A New Model for Artistic Development*

by Emily Dzioba

A TIME OF TRANSITION

When I graduated in 2018 as a first-generation student with my liberal arts degree in theatre, I was excited to become a career dramaturg. I had wonderful experiences as a student artist, having the good fortune to direct a student-written play into a full production and serve as the dramaturg on a devised, student-created play with a professional theatre company in residence. My undergraduate program had prepared me with the skill set to offer myself as a dramaturgical collaborator, and I had a hunger to experience all the opportunities I could. I felt a passionate drive to continue working on new plays—nothing engaged me quite like the prospect of bringing new thoughts and new ideas to an audience. The raw clay, the trial-and-error of process, the support and nurturing of a story, and a playwright's confidence all felt like an exciting, challenging puzzle. Unfortunately, nothing in the classroom or in my arts administration-focused internships had prepared me for the reality of what developing an artistic career would actually look like. There remains no clear path for those who want to work as a dramaturg, let alone a dramaturg in new play development. Even before the great reorganizations that took place because of the COVID-19 pandemic and our current challenges with arts funding, I was shocked at how few resources there were offering guidance for aspiring dramaturgs regarding how to get a gig, let alone a full-time institutional job.

My primer for learning how to navigate a dramaturgical career was piecemeal. I heeded the advice of "bloom where you're planted" as much as possible. I offered free casebooks and workshops at my high school theatre program and tried to read and see as many plays as possible. I joined Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of

the Americas as soon as I could, poring over their online resources and offerings. Living in New Jersey, I was fortunate enough to have a vibrant theatre ecosystem around me, both locally and just a train away in New York City. However, like me, most of my college friends and artistic collaborators had to move back home to other states. In the suburbs, I didn't have the built-in community I'd had in school—and even if I'd had creatives in my area, I didn't have the physical space to "just make something," which had been the repeated advice among the faculty and alumni of my program. Seemingly, only those who could afford to move to New York were able to dig into that "DIY theatre" work that our professors encouraged us to make if no one would hire us. I had no car and a high amount of student debt, and I felt unmoored.

In 2019, I became an associate dramaturg at the brand new company The New Jersey Play Lab, where my colleagues, Cheryl Katz and Kaitlin Stilwell, were cultivating an organization to support playwrights in our state with hands-on dramaturgy. This opportunity did not come with a salary, but I was able to work and gain coveted new play experience with kind professionals. I began shadowing my dramaturgical mentors at the Play Lab, slowly developing a better understanding of the storytelling craft; however, I desperately missed being part of a community with others my age and being "on my feet" with a piece in process. To continue advancing my career, I submitted a paper for the ATHE Dramaturgy Debut panel; however, I was flying blind when it came to navigating academic and professional conference spaces. Ultimately, I wasn't sure that this kind of space was for me, both personally and professionally. Did I want to pursue a master's degree and become an academic? I missed being a generative, responsive artist, but many remaining paths for dramaturgs seemed to align with acquiring more debt and degrees to unlock them.

While navigating the changing landscape of the pandemic and balancing several survival jobs with my work at the Play Lab, I applied for an open position at The Lark in June of 2021. The Lark Play Development Center in New York City was created with a clear goal: to "discover and develop new voices for the American theater."[1] Everything I read online indicated that this space was special; it was a home for playwrights to develop their craft and build community. I never thought I would be the top candidate, but I was eager to throw my hat in the ring for a full-time dramaturgy position where I could support playwrights on their professional journey. Shortly after I received an email saying that the hiring process was on pause, The Lark announced that it was closing.[2] I didn't realize it then, but this was a death knell for new play development across the American theatrical landscape.

As the pandemic stretched onward, I observed that what seemed to be a small pool of full-time dramaturgical gigs and opportunities was reduced further. These remaining opportunities were often undercompensated, as dramaturg and writer of *Nothing for the Group* Lauren Halvorsen catalogs in the "That's Not a Living Wage" section of her newsletter.[3] Opportunities to develop new plays were disappearing before many emerging artists had the chance to understand what they were losing. Numerous articles published by *American Theatre speak* of these disappearing literary programs, chiefly the closure of The Lark and the Sundance Theatre Program and the remodeling of the Humana Festival.[4]

Several years and federal administrations later, more arts spaces remain in peril. Entire academic departments are being rendered defunct.[5] Budgets and leadership positions at even the most prominent national institutions are being slashed and repurposed for motivated agendas.[6] The remaining paths that tend to lead to industry-defined success now exist in a world where professional opportunities are rapidly more infrequent and unsustainable. What is needed to ground oneself as an artist—and what is unshakeable

1 Lark Play Development Center, accessed March 1, 2025, Link.

2 Francisco Mendoza, "What Happened at the Lark?," AMERICAN THEATRE, May 2, 2022, Link.

3 Lauren Halvorsen, Nothing For the Group, accessed February 28, 2025, Link. Many of these roles, with titles such as artistic assistant or education associate, also seem to ask the "entry-level" laborer to take on more work than one person alone could feasibly handle.

4 Phillip Himberg, "Sundance Theatre Program, Rest in Power," *American Theatre*, May 18, 2022, Link.

5 Jacqueline E. Lawton and Rachel Pollock, "Escalating Drama Department Cuts and Mergers Impact Us All," Howlround Theatre Commons, September 9, 2024, Link. Federal actions in early 2025 aside, the departments serving theatre, arts, and humanities have always been on the chopping block, as Professors Lawton and Pollack illustrate in their HowlRound essay.

6 Javier C. Hernández and Robin Pogrebin, "Trump Made Chair of Kennedy Center as Its President Is Fired," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2025, Link.

amidst circumstantial industry changes—is a rooted sense of personal artistic voice and identity. These things only come with the opportunity to develop one's work through practice, frequent trial and error, and perhaps low-stakes situations, separate from the significant monetary investment of university degrees. The financial prospects of a career in the arts will never be certain, particularly in this moment of transition. So, ultimately, what is all of this investment and training for, and to what end if the economics of the industry do not offer sustainable pathways for artistic careers or fulfilling self-defined ideas of success? How can we help emerging artists find their footing?

> "...the Studio functions as an accessible, virtual, no-cost opportunity structured to champion self-determination for each artist..."

If we want to champion playwriting and dramaturgy as essential to American theatre, we need better support structures that help emerging literary artists further develop these crafts. These structures are of the best service when they remind artists that they are worthy of pursuing their craft despite financial limitations and burnout, and when they challenge arts organizations to holistically invest in artists for more than the potential financial return they may provide for the organization "someday." Abandoning this traditional mindset makes way for an opportunity to structurally codify that "success" is a flexible term, especially in a world where capital to create traditionally successful products is less accessible. To truly cultivate the next generation of artists—the ones whose craft will come of age during these times of great change—organizations should continue to break down barriers and create environments of resource sharing and authentic community support.

The American theatre needs accessible, sustainable pathways to encourage and support its early career dramaturgs and playwrights. The more artists we can support, the more truly innovative, diverse artistic creations we will see. In 2020, as a collective member at the New Jersey Play Lab, I began creating a program for early-career dramaturgs and playwrights. Fueled by my personal frustrations, professional observations, and a deep desire for a community space I did not see in New Jersey, I wanted to build a new type of option for those entering the field. This program, the Storyteller Studio, embraces the ethos of a mutual aid network: a group of folks with similar interests and values are gathered in support of one another to exchange and share resources, guided by self-identified accountability. Artists do not have to pay a fee or have professional credits to participate. Officially launched in 2021, the Studio functions as an accessible, virtual, no-cost opportunity structured to champion self-determination for each artist while offering peer support, targeted mentorship, and professional development. The Studio proves there are ways to build a new path forward.

CREATING A NEW SPACE

The Storyteller Studio is a collaborative artistic development program for self-identified playwrights and dramaturgs looking to hone their craft through peer and professional support. In its most idealized form, the program is an experimental space for artists to cultivate their skills before transitioning to the next stage of their career development. This program welcomes artists under thirty and is specifically intended for those who have already graduated from university programs or those who have established their work in these art forms through alternative avenues. It is currently limited to artists who consider New Jersey a literal or artistic home.

As the program's creator and leader, I am responsible for facilitating the artistic development of the participants' projects as well as handling the administrative planning and logistics. I had initially pitched the program idea to my colleagues at the New Jersey Play Lab in 2020, and after organizing a program flow and talking through several drafts of a schedule, we assembled a small group of "beta-test" participants for a 2021 cycle. There wasn't any kind of budget in place for this program at the time; I would be running it myself, with support from my colleagues when I needed it. As I found the program was, indeed, proving to be a crucial space for folks as they found their footing, I implemented improvements from this first cohort cycle, and we expanded the program in 2022. Much of the core infrastructure of the program remains unchanged since its early days, even as we continue to refine and evolve to meet people's current needs

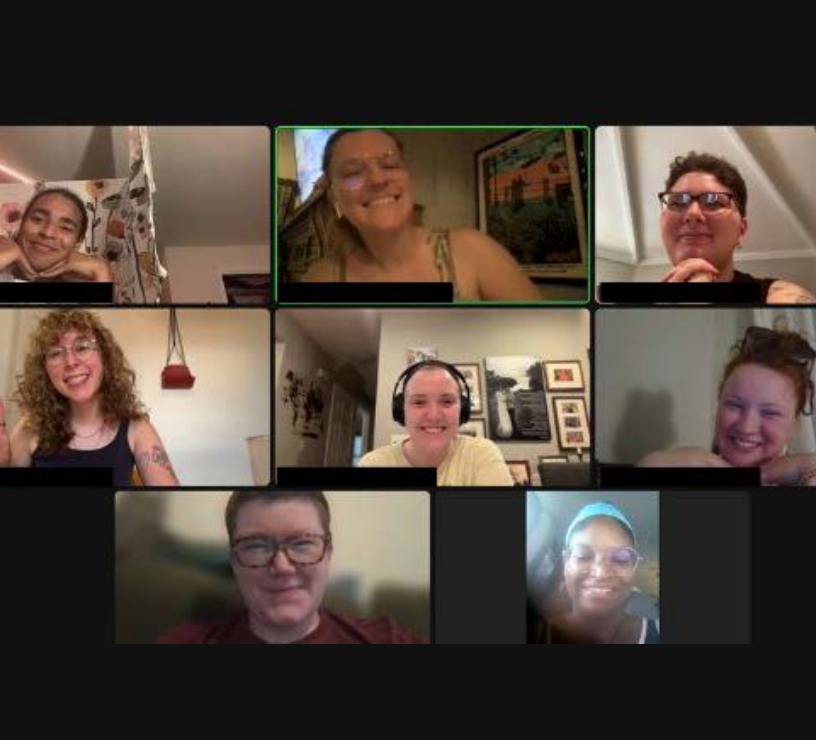

Figure I: *Members of the '23–'24 Storyteller Studio Cohort attending a Zoom meeting.*

Every year, a cohort of twelve to fifteen members is carefully chosen and welcomed for a ten-month experience. Selected artists spend the majority of their time in the winter and spring months sharing personal writing and dramaturgical projects with their fellow cohort members, responding and engaging in artistic development discussions as both artists and observers with their unique perspectives. They generate new short projects, engage with artistic professionals, and collaborate closely with each other—as well as with me, who guides their individual processes over the months.

The Storyteller Studio combines the freedom of cultivating personal best practices with the structural support of an organization committed to new play development. The New Jersey Play Lab is not a producing entity; all programs and partnerships, be they classes, residencies, or script consultations, are focused on a commitment to hands-on dramaturgy. Nesting this program within the New Jersey Play Lab's infrastructure allows the Studio to connect participants with professional connections throughout the tri-state area and access dramaturgical and playwriting opportunities within the Lab itself. Thanks to the network of local universities, theatres, and arts organizations that the Play Lab can access, we are able to connect our artists with a variety of partners, as well as open our application to a larger community of young artists who could benefit from this experience.

Accessibility is a structural cornerstone of this program. Founded in 2020, this program was virtually hosted out of necessity, and despite a return to majority in-person theatre-making over the last few years, Zoom remains a viable option for cultivating diverse professional development spaces. The Play Lab has no physical, dedicated space, so it was natural for the Studio to exist as fluidly as our other programming. Hosting this experience virtually also allows people to participate in the Studio regardless of their geographical location, access to transportation, medical needs, and so much more. Removing as many barriers as possible shouldn't be radical, but this program emphasizes access in consideration of community members who have various extenuating circumstances. All Storyteller Studio activities, save for a few special events, currently take place over Zoom.

Participating artists begin their Studio experience by identifying an artistic project to work on over the course of the program. These artists are chosen not by the quantity or quality of what is on their resume; rather, a demonstrated willingness to engage in a process-oriented approach is what's most valued. Someone who is curious, a generous collaborator, and someone who asks questions—while being familiar with the basics of theatre-making—is our ideal artist. Our playwrights' projects may take the form of a reading of a play or play excerpt, or the discussion of an outline, idea, or treatment. A dramaturgical project may take the form of a collaboration with a playwright on a work in progress, the designing and presentation of a research packet, or exploring an audience engagement concept. This project identification process, like every aspect of the Storyteller Studio, is artist-driven.

A strong dramaturgical figure, the lead mentor, serves as a guiding facilitator for both the cohort as a whole and each artist individually. Cohort "sharings" of artistic work and community-building meetings are balanced with individual check-ins in the time before and after their presentations. Ultimately, my role as the lead mentor is to support the artists in articulating their goals and piloting a course ahead. I try to see what each person needs and wants and help them take the steps to get there. I am both a dramaturgical mentor for the creative work and an advisor to the people who make it, regularly assessing and reflecting on their respective needs. The hands-on artistic work done by cohort members is shown at twice-monthly virtual "sharings," meetings dedicated to presentations of their works in progress. After the work is shared, I guide the cohort through a Liz Lerman Critical Response Process, utilized to gain feedback from

Figure II: *Actors and members of the '23–'24 Cohort at the Scripted Showcase, June 2024. Photo: Jacob Wasserman*

the group for the presenting artist.[7] Cohort members have pre- and post-presentation individual check-ins with me to talk more in-depth about their work, digest feedback, and discuss their desired steps forward.

While the Studio focuses on process, not product, we do intend for each cohort member to take "one step forward" on an artistic project. By the end of their time in the cohort, we aim for each artist to receive "artistic airtime" by sharing their project(s) with the group and receiving actionable dramaturgical feedback to take a step forward. From this, the organic growth of a personal dramaturgical process begins to emerge. We'd like to grow a garden of dramaturgically-informed collaborators, whether they write plays or support plays through dramaturgy.

The Studio retains a core characteristic of championing self-determination within each cycle. The lead mentor and Studio staff do not place pre-determined goalposts or checkpoints for the artist; the artist decides what they want and what feels right to them, and the scaffolding is built from there. Artistic work can be shared around personal and professional obligations, allowing artists space and time to respond to the season of life they are in. Personal accountability is something that cohort members cultivate and practice throughout their time, which I find particularly useful for those who have recently graduated from university. The Studio is an opportunity where people can focus on their artistry on their own terms and in their own timeline, giving them dedicated space to take their work and their identity as artists seriously.

The Studio is also designed to make space for the exploration of various possibilities and career trajectories within the fields of playwriting and dramaturgy. Throughout the program cycle, the Studio invites several guest artists to share their personal experiences and perspectives through casual conversations. Cohort members ask questions and engage directly with these artists, who range from graduate playwriting students and artistic directors to librarians and literary managers. These individuals offer their perspectives and experiences on topics relevant and resonant to the needs of the specific cohort.

Deeply embedded into this program is the notion of community. Even the language of "artistic presentation" has been deliberately shifted to "sharing," implying that everyone has a vested interest in responding to the work. By gathering artists who share common interests and come from different lived experiences, a large tapestry of collaborators is formed. Cohort members closely communicate with each other throughout the year, both in and outside of meetings– whether about the work at hand, personal successes, gigs, or their pets. As the program facilitator who knows all of the artists well, it's crucial that I facilitate and structure many points of connection. In support of their monthly project sharings, I pair artists together based on goal compatibility and personal interests. For example, a dramaturg interested in classics would be the perfect match for a playwright working on adapting a myth.

7 Liz Lerman, "Critical Response Process: A Method for Giving and Getting Feedback," Liz Lerman, May 13, 2025, Link.

The program culminates with perhaps the most community-oriented element of theatre: a performance! Cohort members are paired as collaborators and work together during the spring semester to create original short works and dramaturgical pieces to be presented to an audience. The Scripted Showcase is an opportunity for each cohort pair to make a public offering of work centered around a given unifying theme, such as "healing" or "solidarity." This opportunity encourages the artists to create new pieces for their portfolios, develop close partnerships, and bring local friends, family, and audiences together into a tangible artistic community.

At the end of the program, committed participants have the opportunity to be further connected with arts organizations and opportunities, courtesy of the New Jersey Play Lab. Whether through referrals, digital promotion, or collaboration on other in-house opportunities, the staff of The New Jersey Play Lab aims to invest in the next generation of young literary artists and assist them in taking these necessary next steps. Cohort members also have the opportunity to re-apply until they age out of the program, and a number of artists have returned to both continue their work and explore new projects. It's a joy to see the work and the people evolve and grow.

As of April 2025, The Studio has seen three cohort cycles successfully through to the end and is in the midst of its fourth. Every year, the program is further refined based on what the participants of each cycle want and need. For example, the current cohort continues to express a desire for connection with each other, so we've started a monthly play reading book club and will be offering our first in-person retreat. Every year and every cycle is a new opportunity to grow and better serve the community that needs it.

AS A MODEL

The Storyteller Studio provides crucial artistic and professional development support to artists. By design, it serves those who fall into the post-training, pre-professional category, filling a crucial gap. Much like any theatrical production, skills and craft for literary work require time and space for cultivation. Not every graduating artist is immediately ready to be a literary assistant or has a refined MFA-ready playwriting portfolio. The funds and resources to attend graduate programs are substantial, to say nothing of the competitiveness and biases within academia. It's particularly unfortunate to note that at the current moment, there is no guarantee that the existing academic or professional structures we have will remain unchanged.

Emerging artists need accessible and accommodating spaces where they can express themselves artistically, hone their dramaturgical skills, collaborate with peers, and build a more robust understanding of how the industry works within their own local ecosystems. While the realities and considerations of a professional career may be constantly evolving, it remains vital that artists be supported during their transitory steps outside of their training. Developing a network of (local) professional contacts, seeing possibilities for what to do with your skill set as a writer and dramaturg, and understanding what the local/regional arts landscape looks like are crucial building blocks to understanding how you want to carve your place out in the industry—if you choose to do so.

The Studio has proven to be successful in several different ways, but none more so than in the fact that our cohort members continue down the self-determined path of their artistry. About 90% of cohort alumni continue to pursue creative work; some of these paths include attending graduate school for creative writing, producing independent readings of their playwriting and sketch writing, conducting dramaturgical research, serving as teaching artists and performers, and working administrative careers in the professional theatre industry. Over the last several years, a community of Studio participants has steadily grown and remains connected in our online community space on Discord. Our visibility continues to grow within the greater New Jersey area. While the Studio retains a small annual budget, we are developing plans for more financial sustainability in order to be able to return investments of time and effort to the Studio staff and our cohort.

IN CONCLUSION

I am a firm believer that artistic potential exists in every person, even those working retail shifts, corporate jobs, or teaching in middle school English classrooms, feeling the push and pull of needing to survive in a capitalist system. A majority of participants in the Studio work "survival jobs" outside of the entertainment industry. Who can afford a full-time living as an artist? No person should be denied the identity of "playwright," "dramaturg," or "artist" because they cannot afford rent if that's all they do. We, as an industry, must make more room and, perhaps, remodel our house.

Programs like the Storyteller Studio are critical because they are designed to support the entire human being, not just the artist, while asking for nothing in return. I name this effort "cultivating artistic health:" making space for the growth and development of art for art's sake. Programs that create time and space for folks to practice, not merely produce, are an investment in our humanity and our craft. Amidst the ever-increasing levels of uncertainty in the professional world for job prospects and artistic opportunities, it is more crucial than ever to meet people where they are, focus on creating a stable foundation of artistic identity, and create support systems for artists to forge their own paths on their own terms.

The Studio was developed at an organization whose mission, programming, and values provide fertile ground for creating a program like the Storyteller Studio. The New Jersey Play Lab operates with a collective model; individual dramaturgs have the opportunity to engage with dramaturgy however they choose. For me, that manifested as a desire for more play development opportunities through the creation of a space where more people could find themselves and hone their craft. The lack of organizational rigidity and hierarchy and the embracing of the dramaturgical *what if?* cultivates possibility. When power is dispersed among your community, look at what can grow.

In the Studio, we investigate what we deem as success for ourselves. Is success going on to graduate school for your MFA? Is it publishing a theatre review on a blog you've conceptualized and created from scratch? Simply picking up the pen, despite imposter syndrome, after a long time? Is it something that doesn't even exist yet? We grapple with this fundamental question together, knowing that even though we are all different, we rise and fall together. Systematically unpacking the infrastructure of elitism in our industry will ensure its survival, especially as the structures of funding and business continue to evolve. Not every artist accomplishes what the industry deems as professional success. The formulation of our identity as artists comes when we are doing; doing can be done in infinite ways.

Society desperately needs more art than the commercial industry alone can provide. People don't become artists because they want to be famous, culturally relevant, and wealthy. While, of course, our artistic labors are valuable and need protection, eager hearts make art because it fulfills us as people. We make art to engage with the world; we make theatre to tell stories. Human beings are innately driven by a desire to connect with others, whether it's about things we understand intimately or things we may not understand but are deeply curious about. A professional career no longer exists in the same way it did in the past. As dramaturgical leaders and stewards of storytelling, we must assume the responsibility of cultivating creativity separate from traditional modes of success and celebrate creation at every step of the way. ◆

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Morgan Jenness: *Moving into Another Dimension*

curated by Mark Bly

> "I don't want to end up simply having visited the world..."[1]
>
> —Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes"

Those of us who attended events celebrating the life and legacy of Morgan Jenness on March 31, 2025, at select venues across New York City or watched on Howlround heard of the impact they had and would continue to have on the world we share. Over the course of a glorious day, a large and diverse community celebrated Morgan's work as a dramaturg, an agent, a political activist, an inspiring teacher and mentor, and a champion of new playwrights, plays, and artists.

One could read the time-traveling notice of their passing in *The New York Times*, which recounted their childhood, their departure from Germany, and their overcoming of hidden adversities, all topics that Morgan rarely spoke of, even to those of us who knew them since the 1970s. Then, too, there appeared Taylor Mac's lived, passionate collaborator's salute in the *American Theater Magazine* in which he called Morgan, most appropriately, "The Muse of Curiosity."[2] I was reminded of my own forty-year odyssey where Morgan appeared almost magically in my life as a theatre-worker and provocateur friend, encouraging my latest dramaturgical explorations. To me, Morgan was the embodiment of the string theory guru Brian Greene's transcendent observation that some particles vibrate so much they must move into another dimension.[3]

At the Judson Church service on March 31, luminaries such as George C. Wolfe, Shelby Jiggetts-Tivony, Brooke Berman, and Lisa Ramirez, along with family members, friends, theatre collaborators, educators, and former students, shared their often-surprising memories of Morgan. Others read Morgan's own words aloud, sharing what this artist had viewed as their personal "life markers"—the most crucial moments of

1 Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes," in *New and Selected Poems: Volume One* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 10.

2 Taylor Mac, "Morgan Jenness: A Consideration," *American Theatre*, December 6, 2024, Link.

3 *The Fabric of the Cosmos*, narrated by Brian Greene, aired November 2-23, 2011, on PBS, Link.

inflection in Morgan's life.[4] Shared photo collages illuminated Morgan's astonishing life, from protests to making masks and puppets, to hugging a multitude of friends, including my longtime collaborator Maria Irene Fornés, whom Morgan represented and guarded over until her end. It was a time of celebrating and one of quiet weeping. Yet in the midst of the invisible and visible tears, I could not help but be reminded of the words spoken by another Morgan (Freeman) when I was working as a dramaturg at the Guthrie. As the Messenger in Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's *The Gospel at Colonus*, in the aftermath of the singing of "Lift Him Up," Freeman intoned, "now let the weeping cease." Morgan Jenness's unconquerable life and spirit were summoned on the day of their service, as a faithful community celebrated what Morgan believed in and fought for.

What follows are tributes and remembrances from foundational dramaturgs, educators, and writers in the field who answered the question: *How did Morgan Jenness influence you as a dramaturg or theatre-maker?* These individuals were Morgan's colleagues and co-pathfinders in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and like Morgan, many of them explored issues of race, gender equality, LGBTQ+ equality, civil rights, and disability rights in the arts prior to the advent of the 21st Century. Morgan is, of course, not the only foundational dramaturg we have lost. The losses of dramaturgy pathfinders like Barbara Field, Iris Turcott, Doug Langworthy, Michael Lupu, Robert Blacker, Michael Feingold, Lee Devin, Steve Lawson, and William Storm are still keenly felt throughout our field.

The March 31 celebration of Morgan's life and the tributes below remind us that dramaturgy goes beyond our yearly LMDA conferences, regional gatherings, and a growing list of publications. There is a larger, transcendent, decades-long artistic dramaturgical community, one worth knowing and celebrating. Doing so will create a more informed, lasting future for our invaluable field.

—MARK BLY, *SPRING 2025*

Figure I: *Morgan Jenness receiving LMDA's G.E. Lessing Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015. Photo: Cindy SoRelle*

"Early in my career, when I'd known Morgan only briefly, I attended a panel discussion in which they appeared. The first thing I noticed superficially was the crispness of their diction and the calmness of their voice. As they drew me in, what struck me more deeply was how generously they shared their intellect, cogently synthesizing complex, sprawling ideas. They set high standards for themself, which they then extended to those around them while never abandoning kindness. In other words, they made us all better. The last time I saw them was, appropriately, in the lobby of the Public Theater. I was with a younger friend, and after we said hi and parted, I turned to him and told him that he'd just been in the presence of greatness. I've striven to emulate Morgan for the full length of my professional life, and I hope someday to come close."

—FREDDIE ASHLEY

"Morgan generously opened the door to my understanding of how to talk to artists by including me in hundreds of their conversations. A day doesn't go by that I don't use a phrase I stole from them. They also gave me the confidence to believe my knowledge had worth. Even as I type how much they taught me, I can hear what they'd say every time I said that, which was that they had been

4 Howlround, "Morgan Jenness: Day & Night at Judson Memorial Church on Monday 31 March 2025," streamed live on March 31, 2025, Youtube video, 1:28:06, Link.

equally influenced by me and quoted me often, which is a testament to what made them a genius teacher. Morgan understood that it's not simply the knowledge you pass along, but making sure your protégés understand their own value as they move into the world. It provides a great deal of comfort knowing there are generations of people who will carry that spirit forward."

—BETH BLICKERS

"I knew Morgan as a friend for many decades—as part of a larger group of friends working as dramaturgs in the New York theatre scene in the 1970s, 1980s, and on into the 1990s. I think we were always there for each other, recommending plays, going to the theatre, and eating lunch. We occasionally worked at each other's theatres. My impression was that Morgan was always the same everywhere with everyone: deeply interested in all kinds of work, eager to learn about new plays and new authors. And kind—always so kind. Well, I think most of us were. Together we made up quite a varied ecosystem of theatre practitioners, and we recognized the gift this community offered us: knowledge, friendship, support, and love."

—ANNE CATTANEO

Morgan Jenness and I became colleagues when they worked for Joe Papp, and I worked for New Dramatists. We quickly became friends. Later, when I started writing plays, Morgan was supportive. They came to a small theatre in Brooklyn to see a reading of my play *Bella Donna*. Later, on the train back to Manhattan, we sat together and held hands. I will always treasure that memory. I miss them. Morgan was a positive, insightful dramaturg. Their example, friendship, and caring taught me how to be a better dramaturg.

—DAVID COPELIN

"I don't remember the first time I met Morgan, but I vaguely remember corresponding with them about playwrights when they worked for Helen Merrill way back in the day of letters. What I do remember, though, is when I would catch their eye across a crowded lobby at a conference or theatre performance. There was a nod from them, and somehow, I felt seen. That was their superpower, of course: everyone felt seen by them. The world needs anarchists, and Morgan was an anarchist; the world needs iconoclasts, and Morgan was definitely one of those. There was always a twinkle in their eye, and you just knew they were concocting something impishly. Nature abhors a vacuum, but the hole left by their passing will never be filled. What that streak of energy, known as Morgan Jenness, taught us was to keep doing the work. That's what matters."

—LUE DOUTHIT

My epic episodic conversation with Morgan began at an LMDA conference. They were always sharp, funny, brutal, and so incredibly curious about everything. Over a period of 20 years, I thought our conversations always picked up where we left off, but I came to realize that I was on a Morgan continuum. Our longest conversation was on a walk in Ashland. We watched my kid summit a high rope structure. He was 3. Morgan asked if I should call him down, and I said no, it's scary to watch, but we have to be brave enough to let him do it. And we watched, we witnessed. They said that was dramaturgy. The world is even more wearisome a place today without her. If there is an afterlife, I imagine them fiercely fighting for us. Here on earth, where they were so fiercely alive, their memory will surely be a blessing.

—JULIE FELISE DUBINER

"Morgan widened my lens and deepened my understanding of what it meant to be a dramaturg. They embodied how to engage all five senses in the practice of dramaturgy, adding a sixth and seventh sense of their own. Morgan was in touch with a play's spirit, pulse, and life force—and was, of course, a life force all on their own. What Morgan showed me through words, impish smiles, and twinkly, playful eyes was just how many levels a play works on, how to come to a play on its own terms, and how the play itself is never only the words on the page; it's not text so much as texture. Morgan walked and talked about what it meant to support a playwright and their voice as much as the play they had written, and was living proof that active dramaturgy is the dynamic, evolving relationship between people. With their spidery hands, Morgan wove a web between plays, people, and the public—with an uppercase and lowercase *P*. Much of my life as a dramaturg comes from being caught in that web."

—LIZ ENGELMAN, *TOFTE LAKE CENTER*

Morgan was the Director of Play Development at The Public Theater when I was a new intern and wannabe dramaturg. Their great laugh and impish personality filled our tiny office with enthusiastic ideas for collaborations between all manner of theatre-makers with The Public and beyond. Their

rigorous staff meetings were lessons in grabbing handfuls of play submissions and quickly assessing which would make it into the coveted Public pipeline. They took extra-large duffle bags filled with dozens of plays to read at home, and soon returned with them all read and analyzed. Morgan was out seeing all kinds of shows every night and all weekend long. Their knowledge of the theatre landscape at large was awe-inspiring. When Morgan invited me to their note sessions with playwrights, I watched them problem-solve when issues came up. They spun metaphors into meaning, and soon the inspired writers returned with new, improved pages. I asked them how they did it. They said, "You have to go under the fence." They went under, around, over, and through the fence—whatever it took. Morgan was a warrior in the many realms they inhabited, and they taught us all how to be one. I hope I did them proud.

—SHIRLEY FISHMAN

My friendship with Morgan Jenness was never especially deep, but it lasted a long time, nearly 40 years. We first met when they came to Los Angeles to work for Center Theatre Group, by which time their reputation as an advocate for new plays and a friend to playwrights preceded them. Ever since those early days, I've never had to ask myself that favorite LMDA question—*what is a dramaturg?*—because both spiritually and through their practice, Morgan served as the perfect answer to that question. Throughout their professional life, whatever their particular job may have been at any given time—literary manager, dramaturg, agent, free-range theatrical mother hen—they demonstrated a true devotion to theatre's creators and their work and proved ever ready to facilitate their processes with the right questions and a reassuring smile.

—JOHN GLORE

"Morgan Jenness was an inspiration. The role of the dramaturg in American theatre had been slow to arrive. Yes, theatre productions in Europe, especially Germany, where Morgan was from, were using dramaturgs. But the American theatre largely relied on directors to address the needs of a script or an actor's understanding of that script. Morgan embodied the vital essence of dramaturgy, and in addition, they helped bring new and outstanding American dramatists to the fore. Their influence helped nourish the rise of dramaturgs at not-for-profit theatres across the country and also helped spur the existence of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America (LMDA)—now Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. Morgan deserves to be recognized as an outstanding feature in the history of American theatre."

—ALEXIS GREENE

"Morgan Jenness and I called each other our 'Evil Twin.' When we believed in a play or author, we would pit Mr. Papp (their boss, New York Shakespeare Festival) and Mr. Bushnell (my boss, Los Angeles Theatre Center) against each other by telling them that the other was interested in the play. I don't remember how often it worked, but it worked particularly well on *The Promise* by José Rivera. We were very sneaky and evil. Much, much later, after they died, I found out that their sending that play to me resulted in their leaving the Public because Mr. Papp didn't think it was appropriate for them to send scripts out to other theatres. Morgan thought it was appropriate, if not heroic, and they stood their ground. I did the same thing my whole career. I adored their evilness."

—MAME HUNT

"Morgan and I worked together at The Public Theater when George C. Wolfe was the artistic director. We co-created a new play festival called New Work Now. In those days, we accepted unsolicited scripts, and they taught me that the so-called "slush pile" was like mining for gold. Through that pile, Morgan found Nilo Cruz. They taught me that our mission was to do the work and not just rely on agent submissions. There are hidden jewels if we're willing to mine them."

—SHELBY JIGGETTS-TIVONY

"Morgan Jenness was the North Star of new work dramaturgy. They changed the DNA of a room, electrifying a process with their rigor and passion. Morgan taught me to be on the lookout for the talented and the inspired anywhere I went. Morgan helped me decide to move to Atlanta and was a source of career wisdom, always. When they passed, my Atlanta friends asked me who the incredible dramaturg was whose passing broke the internet. That was Morgan."

—CELISE KALKE

"Phil Hogan sings a little of the Irish folk tune, "O the Praties They Grown Small" in *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. In 1992, pre-internet, pre-FedEx, there was no way to find the tune or the words. I remember Morgan calling music libraries all over the county, making three trips to the Library of Congress, and combing Baltimore record stores until they could track it down, get someone to record it, and give it to the actor. A lesser dramaturg (that is to say, all of the rest of us) would have given up the chase. Morgan saw everything through."

—JAMES MAGRUDER

"In the late 1980s, when faced with the task of setting up the literary office at Crossroads Theatre Company in New Brunswick, I turned to Morgan for advice. I visited the literary office at the Public Theater for a tour of their filing, operations, and playwright communication systems. It was a model of excellence and professionalism. Beyond the filing cabinets and script coverage forms, years later, on a public panel at the University of Iowa Playwrights Festival, Morgan shared a luminous element of their script review process. They challenged themself, first, to define the play, asking: What is it? What is the dramatic experiment, the storytelling mode, its derivations or aspirations, the heart of the play's magic?

Over the years, I've held on to Morgan's questions and incorporated them into my practice. Even if I forget to start there, invariably it surfaces and reveals some hidden dimension of the text that moves me deeper into my analysis. I never told them how much I appreciated the simple, yet revelatory discipline of their questions. In some small way, it keeps the Book of Morgan open for me, reminding me of their devotion to unlocking and unleashing the playwright's gift of imagination, and their fearless centering of the playwright as the heart and soul of the theatre.

—SYDNE MAHONE

"Several years ago, Morgan came to the Sundance Theatre Lab in Utah as a guest dramaturg, and their luggage for the entire 3-week gig consisted of a single over-the-shoulder tote bag. That was Morgan all over: they traveled light but journeyed deep. They slipped through cracks and crevices with ease, looking for possibilities and a perch. Playwright Milcha Sanchez-Scott once told Morgan, "You put on [a] play like a coat… and speak from inside the play," a habit I've spent a career working to cultivate. But even an anti-prescriptive approach has its limits, which brings me to what I consider the second great Morgan Jenness tip: when unassailable dramaturgical insight strikes, there is only one course of action. "Must! Give! Note!" Every day is Morgan Jenness Day."

—JANICE PARAN

Morgan was a worker bee, moving among and cross-pollinating artists and theatres. I was suspect: they were downtown, especially in the East Village. They'd go north of 23rd St. to lunch, to a reading, or to teach, but they didn't like it. We met repeatedly over the decades. My favorite was at NEA panels when we handed out money when there was money and backed our aesthetics with our votes. Where we overlapped was our shared commitment to writers: their welfare, their works, and their visions. Morgan became an agent in order to buy their artist's lunch. My favorite look: their lips-closed grin, like a smiling zipper. More than most, they were the theatre's advocate for Pound's "make it new." Until they passed, I didn't know of Morgan's Dickensian origin as Heidimarie Schmiege.[5] "Make it new"—it's what they wanted from art and artists, and what they did with their own life. Morgan was our unicorn."

—JERRY PATCH

"I knew Morgan primarily through Dramaturgy in American Theatre, a collection of essays Susan Jonas, Michael Lupu, and I edited in the mid-1990s. Morgan's contribution came in the form of an interview with playwright Paul Selig. As a teacher, I always looked forward to the day we would discuss their conversation in class. Here's one of several interchanges I still love:

> **Jenness:** A lot of times dramaturgy is not about your actual suggestions to people about structuring their plays. It's about just being there with them, nearby, in that lonely, sometimes devastating, terrifying place. It's about being a spotter. Remember in high school when you jumped on the trampoline? There were spotters around you, so you could try to somersault, leap as high as possible, without worrying about breaking your neck, because you figured someone was there to catch you.

5 Morgan Jenness was born Heidimarie Schmiege in 1952. They adopted the name 'Morgan Jenness" after moving to New York City in the late 1970s. Jenness's chosen first name was a reference to Morgan le Fay, the enchantress from Arthurian legend.

I thought this was a great image. Ironically, before we can absorb it, Morgan pivots. This willingness to think and rethink their own ground of being underscores what made Morgan Morgan.

Sellig: Is that what dramaturgs actually do?

Jenness: I don't know. I have such mixed feelings about it all... I'm not sure I totally embrace the notion of it. I believe I still don't fully understand what I'm doing. I have a certain background, knowledge, and experience behind me, but every circumstance is different. Every artist is a different journey. Every time, you go with a Zen beginner's mind."

—GEOFF PROEHL

"Ah, Morgan—legendary dramaturg, theatre-maker, all-round person. The superb Morgan Jenness, arms akimbo, the unforgettable voice, and their joyous vision. Morgan embraced this youngish Canadian dramaturg in the 1990s via our mutual work with LMDA and immediately welcomed and invited me into something special. I loved them instantly for their direct, outspoken, lucid, life-filled, precise, loving advocacy for art, artists, and action. Morgan gave so much to LMDA during their years on the board—nurturing our work in NYC and at conferences across North America, and supporting me during my term as LMDA's president while I navigated a complex bi-national volunteer organization. As a person and a dramaturg, I loved how much they laughed and lived in delight, even when you disagreed with them—maybe especially when you disagreed with them. Truly, a trajectory to emulate."

—BRIAN QUIRT

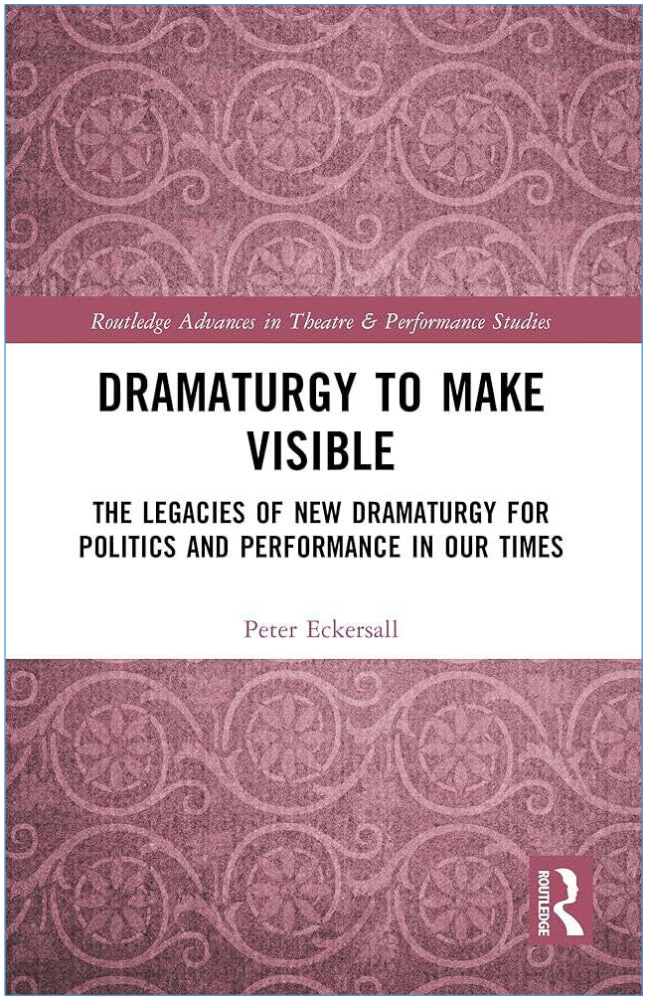
"Mentor. Muse. Magician. Morgan was there to welcome me (and so many others) into the field, providing gentle guidance and not-so-gentle opinions. A keeper of the craft, Morgan taught me how to live life fully—artistically and personally."

—MICHELE VOLANSKY ◆

MARK BLY (he/him/his) is Co-founder and Director of the Kennedy Center Dramaturgy Intensive and a recipient of the KCACTF Medallion for Lifetime Achievement in Dramaturgy. Bly has worked as a dramaturg/associate artistic director at resident theaters and on Broadway since the late 1970's with such artists as Lee Breuer, Moises Kaufman, Garland Wright, Emily Mann, Rajiv Joseph, Sarah Ruhl, Suzan Lori Parks, JoAnne Akalaitis, Doug Hughes, Molly Smith, Gregg Henry, Jane Fonda. He has helped to expand the idea of American Dramaturgy to being an active collaborative artist in the rehearsal process. He is a co-founder of LMDA, past Board President 2001-2006, recipient of the LMDA G. E. Lessing Lifetime Achievement Award, co-led and created the first ever LMDA Mexico dramaturgy workshops and events at the Puerta de la Americas Festival (2006), as a philanthropist he developed and funded the LMDA Creative Capacity Grants Program, as well as creating and editing "The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process" Project, Volumes 1 (1996) and 2 (2001) both still in print. His latest book featuring many of his former playwriting students "New Dramaturgies: Strategies and Exercises for 21st Century Playwriting" was published by Routledge/Focus in 2020. In 2023 Bly was inducted into The College of Fellows of American Theater a membership including Edward Albee, August Wilson, Ming Cho Lee, and Molly Smith, Andre de Shields among others.

Dramaturgy to Make Visible: *The Legacies of New Dramaturgy for Politics and Performance in Our Times*

Peter Eckersall / Routledge, New York, NY (2024) / 190 pages



Peter Eckersall's *Dramaturgy to Make Visible: The Legacies of New Dramaturgy for Politics and Performance in Our Times* is an essential work of critical reflection that covers how dramaturgical practice continues to expand its boundaries both within and beyond contemporary performance. Despite the complexity of interweaving ideas presented in this book, *Dramaturgy to Make Visible* is highly readable. The author accessibly guides the reader through the relevant theories and artistic practices that demonstrate the legacies of new dramaturgy. New dramaturgy is a framework that considers a broad spectrum of practical approaches to contemporary theatre-making, including the preference for non-hierarchical collaboration and devising, the interdisciplinarity and use of various forms of media, and the intention to think through the performance process politically. Eckersall's expertise in contemporary Asian and Australian dramaturgies expands the discourse on new dramaturgy developed in Europe and North America to broader geographical contexts, though he acknowledges that this work could be widened further.[1] Eckersall combines impressive scholarship spanning the last two decades with his own dramaturgical practice to offer this remarkably attentive exploration of the "dramaturgical turn" in theory and practice as it exists in the current period of crisis.

Eckersall's book consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The book is organized by topic, with each of the last three chapters covering a formal element of contemporary dramaturgical practice. While each chapter has a central theme, Eckersall reflects and builds upon preceding chapters' theoretical analysis. Eckersall's ease in comparing case studies from multiple countries

1 Peter Eckersall, *Dramaturgy to Make Visible: The Legacies of New Dramaturgy for Politics and Performance in Our Times* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 3.

demonstrates that the inclusion of contemporary intercultural perspectives simultaneously expands and homogenizes new dramaturgical practice, owing to the fact that several of the economic, social, and ecological crises of our time are indeed global. In the introduction Eckersall positions the book in the context of other recent literature on the expansive practice of dramaturgy, and offers this book as a response to the formulations of new dramaturgy that came before it.

Chapter 1, "New dramaturgy and theory," begins with a heartfelt letter to the late Flemish dramaturg and pioneer of new dramaturgy, Marianne Van Kerkhoven. Eckersall wonders what Van Kerkhoven would make of the world today, with its continued crawl towards autocracy, and ultimately uses this imagined dialogue to ask the central question of his book: "how can we make contemporary performance speak to the contemporary condition in new ways and help us to better understand, rethink, and evolve theatre as an essential expression of thinking, being, politics, and activism?"[2] The rest of the chapter provides an account of the historical conditions of Van Kerkhoven's formulation of new dramaturgy, tracked through key moments in her dramaturgical practice: her career beginnings in the wake of the May 1968 movement, her work with the Flemish pedagogical theatre Het Trojaanse Paard in the 1970s, and her reconsideration of the political in performance in the '80s and '90s that culminated in several foundational texts in the development of new dramaturgy.

Chapter 2, "Placemaking, placelessness, and spaces of disaster capitalism," considers the atmospheric dramaturgy of Japanese theatre artist Okada Toshiki and his company chelfitsch. Okada draws from various influences, including Brecht, the philosophy and practice of *Noh*, and the atmospheric possibilities of new media to reflect on questions of place and non-place. Eckersall is mainly interested in the placemaking dramaturgy Okada uses to address the biopolitical reality of placelessness in the aftermath of the "triple disaster" of Fukushima in 2011: the earthquake, followed by the tsunami that culminated in the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. The result of this approach is a haunting ambient dramaturgy that critically accounts for the biopolitical structures of presence and absence that underpin contemporary society; it gestures towards the construction of a microparadise transformed through the "overwhelming complexity of entanglements and frictions" after disaster.[3]

The third chapter, "Slow dramaturgy and theatres of extinction," builds upon Eckersall's concept of *slow dramaturgy*. With the use of case studies from Richard Maxwell, Eiko Otake, Alexis Destoop, and Kris Verdonck, Eckersall attempts to use dramaturgical practice as a means to make visible the ultimological challenges of ecological crises, such as a particularly sticky question posed by Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*: "how can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence [of the climate crisis on 'disposable people'] into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention?"[4] Slow dramaturgy transforms theatre into an "anthropocenic machine" that not only makes stories that invite a moral reaction to crisis but attempts to reconfigure the tactics of intervention and alter the politics that allow for the regime of slow violence.[5]

The final chapter, "Political bodies and ways of listening," draws on Eckersall's practice as a dramaturg for the Australian theatre company Not Yet It's Difficult (NYID) in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the center of this chapter are dramaturgical concepts conceived by Eckersall's NYID co-founder David Pledger, such as *body listening*, a technique in which a performer uses their body to listen and key into a group dynamic as a means of socially engaged community building. As a dramaturgical tactic, body listening is a unique methodology for engaging democratic discussion and activism. Eckersall gives an illuminating example of embodied listening in his description of a collaboration between NYID and the Indigenous performance group Marrugeku. The co-produced *Jurrungu Ngan-ga/Straight Talk* incorporates embodied forms of performance, including Indigenous and contemporary dance, street dance, spoken word, and music, to reference the colonial tensions and racial violence at hand in Australia's brutal carceral confinement of Indigenous populations. Eckersall conceptualizes this performance as a "resistance of a bodily archive," in which active listening is a site for creative process.[6]

2 Eckersall, *Dramaturgy to Make Visible*, 20-22.

3 Eckersall, *Dramaturgy to Make Visible*, 83-84

4 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

5 Eckersall, *Dramaturgy to Make Visible*, 98.

6 Eckersall, *Dramaturgy to Make Visible*, 161-162.

Dramaturgy to Make Visible: The Legacies of New Dramaturgy for Politics and Performance in Our Times argues that new dramaturgy presents theatre as a critical recourse against autocracy. beyond a critique of contemporary society. Borrowing terminology from Giorgio Agamben, Eckersall understands the contemporary as a gaze on one's own time that "[perceives] not its light, but rather its darkness"[7] Dramaturgy is a means to make visible this "special darkness," and grapple with the potential of our times to change the status quo. For Eckersall, theatre is not a commodity but a site for intervention against the social hegemonies and norms that structure precariousness. Dramaturgy, in this sense, enables us to pose questions about our future. This refreshingly optimistic book is a great source of hope and inspiration for what theatre is capable of performing in these times of crisis.it is full of practical guidance and resources, it instills confidence in its readers, allowing them to step into their own artistic practice. Yet the complex discussion of dramaturgy that lies at the heart of the book is expansive enough to pose questions and present ideas that will enlighten even the most seasoned professional.

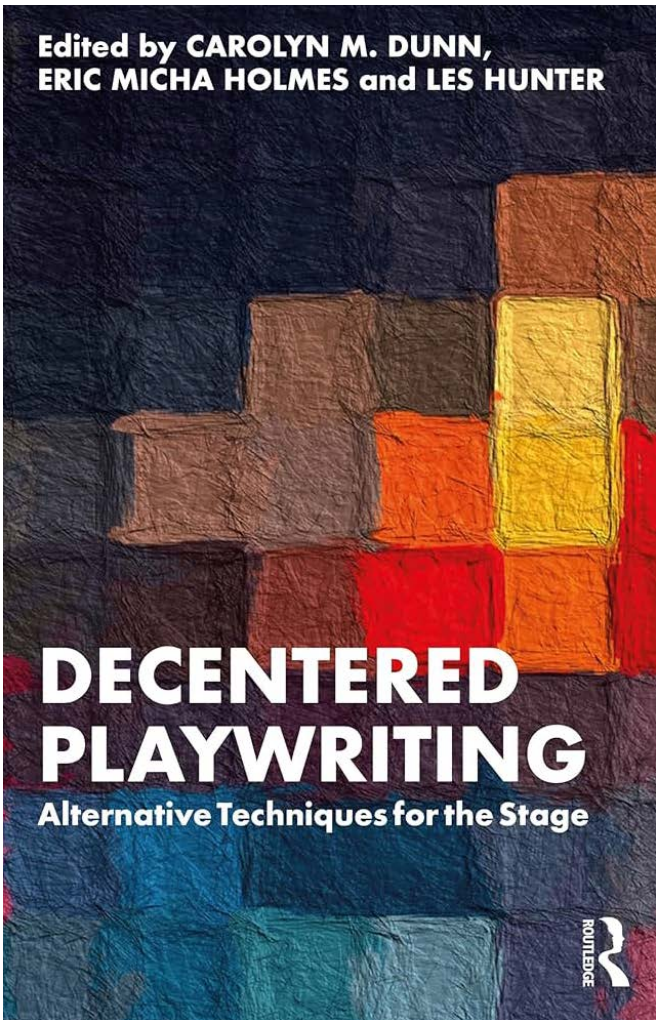
JORDAN SCOTT HARDESTY*
MOUTHS OF BABES THEATRE COMPANY

7 Eckersall, *Dramaturgy to Make Visible*, 5.

** Jordan Scott Hardesty recently accepted an offer from The Graduate Center, City University of New York PhD program, of which Peter Eckersall is the chair. Hardesty wrote this review prior to his acceptance to the program and without Eckersall's knowledge. Thus, Hardesty did not benefit professionally, financially, or contractually from writing this review.*

Decentered Playwriting: *Alternative Techniques for the Stage*

Edited by Carolyn M. Dunn, Eric Micha Holmes, & Les Hunter / Routledge, New York, NY (2024) / 212 pages



Decentered Playwriting: Alternative Techniques for the Stage highlights novel and traditional dramatic storytelling methods by sharing techniques and forms from "non-Western, Indigenous, and underrepresented" communities.[1] It is a collection of work from teachers, writers, and academics exploring pedagogy and dramatic writing through ideas and exercises, edited by Carolyn M. Dunn, Eric Micha Holmes, and Les Hunter.*

This book offers new approaches to various types of creative theatrical work and details diverse perspectives that contextualize the discussed dramaturgies within personal histories and communal traditions. The chapters emphasize place and history to showcase innovative and culturally embedded techniques that the Western white theatrical hegemony has ignored in our dominant modes of theatre-making.

The book's structure is well-organized, logically moving between a wide variety of topics, perspectives, and methods in such a way that no essay seems disparate from the preceding or subsequent essays. Linear reading is optional, but either way, no nonsensical contextual leaps are required on the reader's part. The editors' introduction acclimates readers to the structure and framework of the book, stating the intention to move from "hegeturgy" (hegemonic dramaturgy) to a recognition and adoption of alternative strategies, as offered in the following chapters.

"Part 1: Decenter(ed) Playwriting: Alternative Tools, Techniques, and Structures" acts as "the adjective," describing global

1 Carolyn M. Dunn, Eric Micha Holmes, and Les Hunter, eds., *Decentered Playwriting: Alternative Techniques for the Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 4.

* Sarah Johnson is a featured author in this book, and as such, she recused herself from providing any editorial feedback on this review.

and cultural tactics to decenter dominant playwriting modes.[2] These chapters give readers an accessible starting point for decolonization or decentralization in writing and dramaturgical work through incorporating ideologies from specific cultural practices into the creative process. Part I is a great entry point to the book's purpose, with specificity illuminated by the inclusion of exercises attached to every chapter. These exercises generally center around writing scenes or characters guided by the principles of the chapter in which they are embedded. For example, Wind Dell Woods offers an exercise in the chapter "On Disaesthetics in Hip Hop Dramaturgy" that asks readers to "create a percussive encounter" between diverging perspectives on historical events, and in "Decentering Humans," Chantal Bilodeau posits that we should "write a scene in which humans are not the main characters."[3]

The offering of exercises aligns with the book's ethos, emphasized in throughlines that tell readers to listen, try, and consider our process carefully, or as Tammy Haili'opua Baker states in my favorite chapter on "Poetic Expression in Kānaka Maoli Playwriting Praxis," to "have reverence for the process of creation."[4] These actionable items provide readers with methods for incorporating the offered theories into their own practices, challenging one's dramaturgical sensibility and process in a navigable manner by offering options for expansion and alteration instead of demanding reform. None of the chapters call for reform directly, but rather reconceptualization, remixing, and rethinking of the dominant practices that the Western theatre industry tends to take as a given.

"Part II: Decenter(ing) Playwriting: Community Practices, Ritual, and Healing" provides a more comprehensive theoretical foundation for *building* a practice of dramaturgy or playwriting in opposition to Part I's offered methods for *incorporating* into existing practice. These chapters focus intensely on collaboration and communication methods for developing dramatic work and feel best suited to those embarking on new work at any level. The chapters here offer situated frameworks and methodologies that give practitioners the opportunity to shift the foundation of their approach to theatre-making entirely. I took particular interest in the Anne Garcia-Romero and Marilo Nuñez chapter on the Fornés method, which reads as a practical love letter to maintaining María Irene Fornés's teaching methodology. The method emphasizes a nonlinear and communal approach to writing that breaks from the Aristotelian model on which Western white hegemonic theatre is built, offering a method that encourages community support in the hard work of creating and writing. The communal spirit and focus on nonlinear processes are common in this section and the book at large.

Elsewhere in this section, Les Hunter offers notes on "Horizontal Theatre," an extension of the devising process focusing on "interpersonal process and emergence" and group communication.[5] Oluwatoyin Olokodana-James outlines "*Aruku-Improv*" as a "performance-to-script technique" of devising emerging from an improvisational tradition with an "Indigenous folkloric African perspective."[6]

"Part III: Case Studies in Decentered Processes: Models and Testimonies" concludes the book with four impactfully personal case studies that demonstrate techniques and theoretical structural foundations, offering examples of what results the kinds of intentional decentering outlined in Parts I and II can yield in real-life work. In the particularly poignant chapter "Unarchaeology: Anticolonial Aesthetics and Putting Things Back in the Ground," Fargo Tbakhi likens storytelling to digging up the dead: As most stories have already been appropriated to a recognizable Western structure, writers can "rebury" or enact "unarchaeology" to "put back the contexts and meanings that those narrations have erased," and in doing so, "undo the holes in our soils made by archaeologists' bulldozers."'[7]

Because the exercises are such a large part of the ethos of this anthology, I would like to revisit them briefly as I conclude my thoughts on this book. The exercises range from directive (*follow these steps in this order*) to suggestive (*consider this approach and see where it leads*), but all share a common theme of asking to be considered rather than demanding to be followed. This framing makes the book feel approachable. It tells the reader to take what they need, leave the rest, and revisit it later if they feel inclined. In this

2 Dunn, Holmes, and Hunter, *Decentered Playwriting*, 6.

3 Dunn, Holmes, and Hunter, *Decentered Playwriting*, 59; 81.

4 Dunn, Holmes, and Hunter, *Decentered Playwriting*, 46.

5 Dunn, Holmes, and Hunter, *Decentered Playwriting*, 94.

6 Dunn, Holmes, and Hunter, *Decentered Playwriting*, 142-143.

7 Dunn, Holmes, and Hunter, *Decentered Playwriting*, 182;188.

way, the anthology is both informative and persuasive in the arguments of its diverse featured authors. There truly is a foundation-shaking framework, method, technique, story, or exercise here for any theatre-maker, whether they are looking to decolonize their work explicitly or feeling uninspired and require this sort of decentering to continue working creatively.

Decentered Playwriting: Alternative Techniques for the Stage is a valuable resource for writers and dramaturgs looking to diversify their practice by expanding their ways of thinking and perceiving to include new perspectives and modes.

ALYSSA BARRACK
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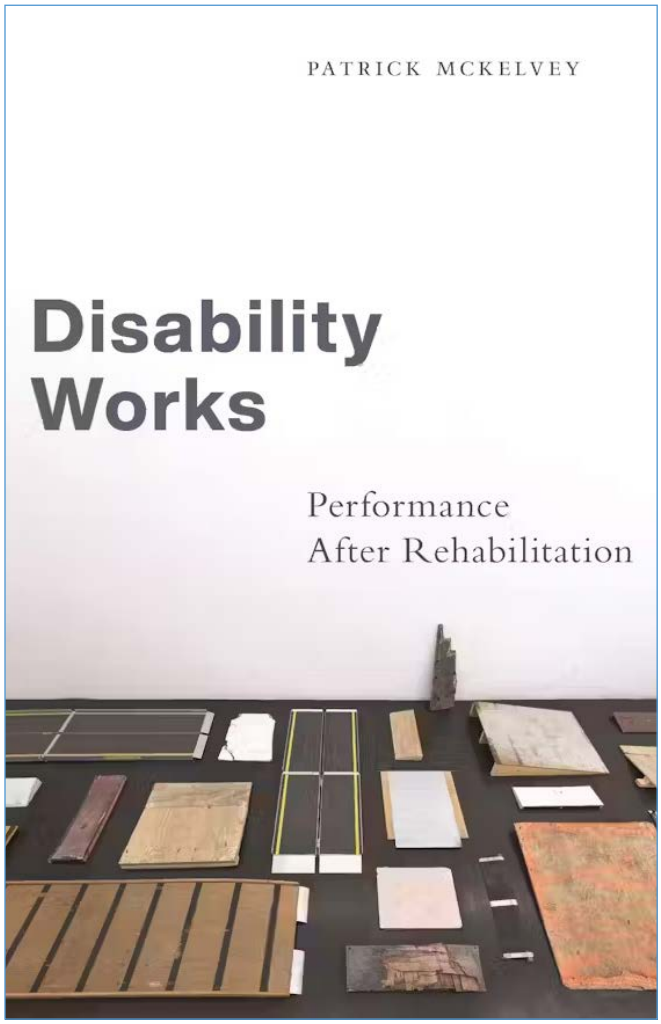
Disability Works: *Performance After Rehabilitation*

Patrick McKelvey / New York University Press, New York, NY (2024) / 329 pages



With *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation*, Patrick McKelvey offers his audience of historians, critical theorists, and performance scholars a thoughtful, nuanced, and deeply archival analysis of the intersecting histories of labor, theatre, and disability during the mid- and late-20th-century United States, through the philosophy and practice of civilian vocational rehabilitation. The dominant—and dominating—paradigm of social welfare programs from World War II through the establishment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, vocational rehabilitation prescribed "economic independence through competitive employment"[1] as the cure for passive dependence on family, charity, or government support, asserting "compulsory labor as the basis for disabled citizenship."[2] While rehabilitants' employment—or, more often, achievement of the state of theoretical "employability"—constituted the official goal, the actual ideological program of the project was far broader. Drawing on an impressive interdisciplinary array of scholars and theorists in addition to original research, McKelvey delineates the systemic interpellation of participants into compulsorily abled, heterosexual, cisgender, patriarchal, Capitalist, middle-class Whiteness as the ideal, and indeed only, model of rehabilitative success. The resultant racializing, feminizing, queering, and classing of debility was a feature, not a bug, of this construction.

On this foundation, McKelvey rigorously builds and defends the two ambitious and mutually constitutive arguments that together form the arc of the book's thesis. The first of these arguments is the centrality of performance in the project's practical and ideological work, noting that "vocational rehabilitation took place *as* performance" and that it "required a broad array of theatrical practices and

1 Patrick McKelvey, *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation* (New York: New York University Press: 2024), 2; 5.

2 McKelvey, 16.

institutions to accomplish its goals."[3] McKelvey's second argument expands and destabilizes the first, describing the myriad resistances to the project's eugenicist logic by performers associated with it, even as they labored within and for it. Together, these assertions provide the evidentiary structure for McKelvey's theory of what he names "performance after rehabilitation": that it was "a coherent, internally differentiated aesthetic and infrastructural movement in US performance history that both predates and parallels the coherence of disability arts at the threshold of the 1980s."[4] The establishment of this neglected artistic genealogy radically rewrites accepted histories of disability activism and culture in the second half of the last century, grounding the ambivalent relationship with waged labor in the contemporary dialectic of disability justice within the lingering influence of vocational rehabilitation.

Six chapters, each structured around a distinct performance institution and practice, constitute the bulk of evidence in *Disability Works*, tracking the development of this artistic movement "chronologically, ideologically, and aesthetically."[5] The first chapter begins with the founding of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation in 1950 under the auspices of Mary E. Switzer. With this context established, the focus shifts to the prototypal public-private collaboration between Switzer's Office and "social welfare theatre organization" Plays for Living to write and produce five one-act dramas designed "to promote rehabilitation as a civic project."[6] While the Plays for Living project was enacted by and for abled audiences, the book's subsequent chapters address several pedagogical programs funded through the Office, for disabled people and by a combination of abled and disabled artists. These factions often disagreed on whether the goal was to use theatre to train disabled subjects in how to better perform abledness in daily life as part of the quest for non-artistic employment, or if a professional future in the performing arts was a possible—or even desirable—goal for those undergoing rehabilitation.

Chapter two explores the expansion of vocational rehabilitation into a 1950s Cold War propaganda project, with the National Theatre of the Deaf and its successful competition with Moscow's Theatre of Sign and Gesture to define the purpose, function, and aesthetic form of deaf performance worldwide. McKelvey spends the next two chapters on the work of queer, disabled playwright Ron Whyte during the 1960s. Chapter three focuses on his work with the National Task Force for Disability and the Arts, especially Whyte's partially successful resistance to the systematic ableism of the Task Force and of the broader vocational rehabilitation. This theme of resistance continues in chapter four, which in a significant shift addresses Whyte's collaboration in a group project wholly detached from any government backing.

McKelvey returns to official Office of Vocational Rehabilitation programming with chapter five, which considers the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped's attempts to create an "anti-ableist" version of Stanislavsky's method in the 1970s and 1980s, which demonstrates the ways Whyte and other radical workers had achieved some measure of success in improving the Office's rhetorical approach to disability. However, the goal of these acting classes, "to transform disabled students, physically and psychologically, into 'abled-disabled' workers primed to meet the demands of the market," proves the reactionary ideology of vocational rehabilitation remained unchanged despite the growth of Independent Living and Disability Rights activism.[7] Finally, in chapter six, McKelvey explores the fusion of anti-racism and anti-ableism through dance at Alvin Ailey's New Visions Dance Project during the 1990s, revealing its disjunctions and continuations of rehabilitationist ideology. Notably, this final chapter spends significant time discussing the career of Suleiman Rifai, one of the only performers at New Visions or in any of these projects who successfully built a professional career in the mainstream arts world, and how the reporting on his career both contests and upholds the same productivist and eugenic logic of the vocational rehabilitation program even after the rise of the Disability Rights model of activism supposedly replaced it.

Chapter four, "Bureaucratic Drag: Queercrip Performance of Paper Work," is an anomaly in this book, as it focuses on the radically resistant yet entirely private "epistolary performance collaboration among queer and disabled artists in the 1970s,"[8] in sharp contrast to the other chapters' history of official Office

3 McKelvey, 16.

4 McKelvey, 29; 5

5 McKelvey, 29.

6 McKelvey, 37; 40.

7 McKelvey, 191.

8 McKelvey, 140.

of Vocational Rehabilitation-backed theatre programming. The collective—a core of four friends led by Whyte and queer art critic Gregory Battock, with many additional members of their circle participating to a more limited degree—spent years mailing each other paperwork related to a series of fake businesses, particularly around an imagined dedicated queer airline. Not satisfied with merely cosplaying as corporate capitalists, those involved gleefully burlesqued the entire concept of official communications. As McKelvey argues, "creating, circulating, and managing documents provided this circle of queer and disabled artists the ability to explore themes of work and employment," as well as sex, power, and institutionalization as an ever-present disciplinary threat.[9] The chapter is a compelling analysis of a fascinating archive, yet despite its success on its own merits, the chapter is not successfully integrated into the book as a whole, operating as almost a fully separate thesis from the rest of the work.

In addition, the very tight focus on civilian vocational rehabilitation means that there is no discussion of military or Veterans Affairs forerunners or concurrent programming. While there is logic to the decision, the military-related material is noticeably absent.[10] Nevertheless, *Disability Works* is a vitally important intervention in the long-neglected history of disability performance in the second half of the 20th century. Through this work, McKelvey makes a compelling argument for the centrality of theatre within the half a century of vocational rehabilitation programming, and its lingering significance in both performance and social policy related to disabled individuals today. Every scholar concerned with even loosely connected topics should have a copy on their bookshelf.

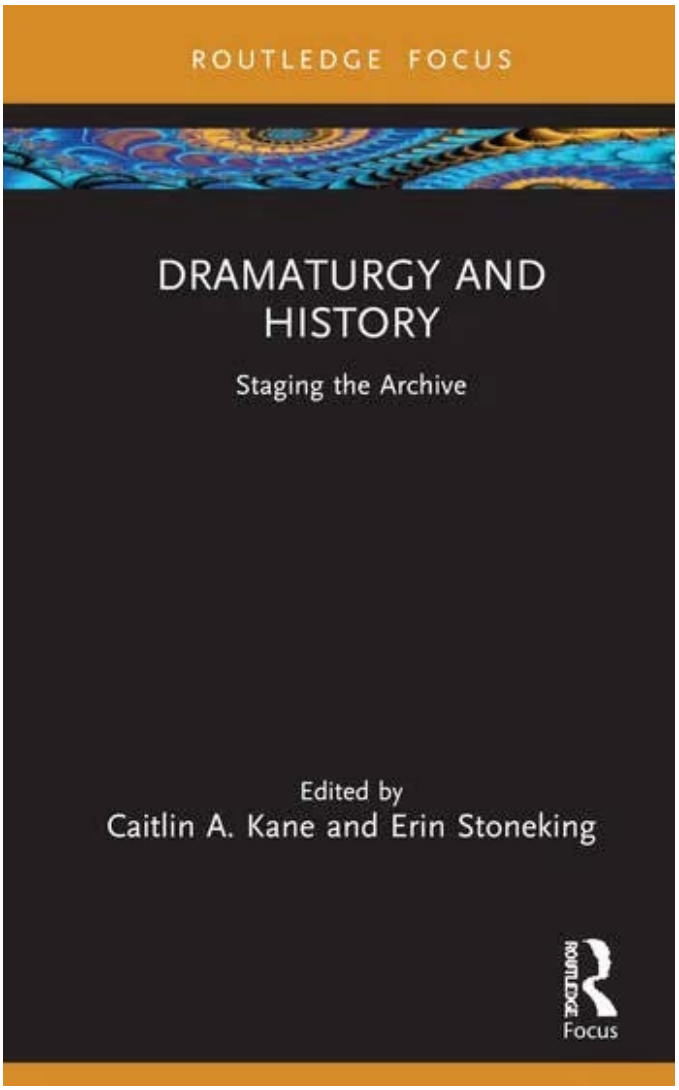
CATHERINE PECKINPAUGH VRTIS

9 McKelvey, 156.

10 For example, in the mention that National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped founder Rick Curry now works with the Wounded Warriors playwriting program. McKelvey, 185.

Dramaturgy and History: *Staging the Archive*

Focus on Dramaturgy Series/ Edited by Caitlin A. Kane and Erin Stoneking / Routledge, New York, NY (2025) / 139 pages



In *Dramaturgy and History: Staging the Archive*, editors Caitlin A Kane and Erin Stoneking curate short essays written by dramaturgs engaging with history and historiography. Their argument contends that historical research plays a vital role in the creation of performance and in the rehearsal space. Through eighteen essays, the editors provide readers with a wide range of individual practices through glimpses into how various dramaturgs navigate archives and historical inquiries within their work. The essays are divided into three sections, with multiple case studies in each, giving readers concrete examples of how these theoretical conversations play out within differing productions. They also focus on three possible areas of the dramaturg's work: production dramaturgy, new play dramaturgy, and dramaturgy as public history, allowing for a wide range of dramaturgs to enter the conversation from where they most often work within the field.

In "Production Dramaturgy: (Re)Contextualizing Existing Plays," seven authors explain how the contextualizing of performances, both within their original historical contexts and within the context of their production's local communities in the present moment, helps to provide a more nuanced and audience-centered approach to their performances. Topics such as conceptual casting, disrupting the theatrical canon, queer historiography, and the use of "adapturgy" are all considered within this section as authors break down their processes working on different productions. The dramaturgs in this section seek to enrich the reproduction of dramatic works inside and outside the canon through historiographic approaches that allow audiences to see previously produced works within new contexts. I was especially drawn to the essay on dramaturging the gaze, where Yiwen Wu argues that the dramaturgy of mutual eye contact and address between spectator and actor should not be overlooked, as it can be both an act of resistance and a means of uniquely melding the past and present.[1]

1 Caitlin A. Kane and Erin Stoneking, eds., *Dramaturgy and History: Staging the Archive* (New York: Routledge, 2025), 47-52.

The second section, "New Play Development: Staging History and Historiography," asks readers to look at newly created performance texts to illustrate how the historiographic process can be applied to new works, ensuring audiences understand the play's historical contexts and its connections to the current time and place. Productions in this section range from queer archival projects to devised works based on the lives of internally displaced persons in Nigeria to dance shows laced with augmented reality. Dramaturgs emphasize their work as collaborators in these processes, helping to shape the narrative of these stories into compelling performances. I was interested to see that many of the discussions in this section pertained to works that deal with non-existent or erased archives, places where dramaturgs utilize historiographic work to bring new voices to light that have been previously left out of the narrative. Erin Stoneking navigates this topic well in her chapter, where she discusses the theoretical concept of "animating loss" as a means of addressing archival knowledge that has been lost and may never be regained.[2]

Although written mainly for a dramaturg audience, the third section expands the scope of the book by showing how the blending of public history and dramaturgy can create unique projects that illustrate the power of historical research in both fields. In "Dramaturgy and/as Public History: Connecting with Broader Publics," five case studies show how dramaturgs have navigated the creation of performances outside of traditional theatre spaces, granting greater access to the works through public outreach. Although mentioned throughout, this section addresses some of the ethical considerations involved in working within historical archives, particularly when it comes to representing marginalized voices and histories that have often been excluded from the narrative. Essays in this section explore a wide range of productions in museums, high school classrooms, and public spaces.

In their introduction, the editors mention their hope that this book will serve as a practical handbook for dramaturgs, especially those still early in their careers. The featured authors successfully navigate sometimes difficult theoretical concepts within easy-to-understand essays that provide maneuverable insights and exercises for newer dramaturgs to learn from. This book also allows for a nuanced pedagogical approach to dramaturgical practices by giving readers a glimpse into the everyday practices of established dramaturgs, allowing readers to learn more about how they, too, can utilize these techniques within their own practices. I was especially drawn to the exercises provided at the end of each chapter, as they give concrete examples of how one can use the practices in this book in their own work, an extremely useful tool for newer dramaturgs learning to navigate the field. For example, exercises included instructions on how to intervene and understand historical subjects within older texts, how to use site-specific research to write about pressing social issues, and how to take active steps towards strengthening your knowledge of AfroLatine theatre history.[3] The chapters also navigate many sensitive and nuanced topics, such as the pitfalls of misrepresentations within historical narratives, in thoughtful and insightful ways, highlighting the importance of collaboration with communities whose histories are being staged and purposeful conversations about historiographic approaches used in production processes. Although the essays are often short, the explained processes give glimpses into each dramaturg's work in a way that could pique a reader's interest, giving them the means (and the want) to begin further research into that topic.

While this book is likely to be most relevant to scholars and practitioners in the theatre and performance studies fields, the essays provide insights into the historiographic process and the role of historians and researchers in shaping historical narratives that are broadly applicable to anyone interested in how history is constructed and communicated. *Dramaturgy and History: Staging the Archive* is a valuable contribution to the fields of theatre studies, performance theory, and historiography, and it gives a well-formulated introduction to many dramaturgical practices that allow for early-career dramaturgs to begin the process of establishing their own personal practices within the field.

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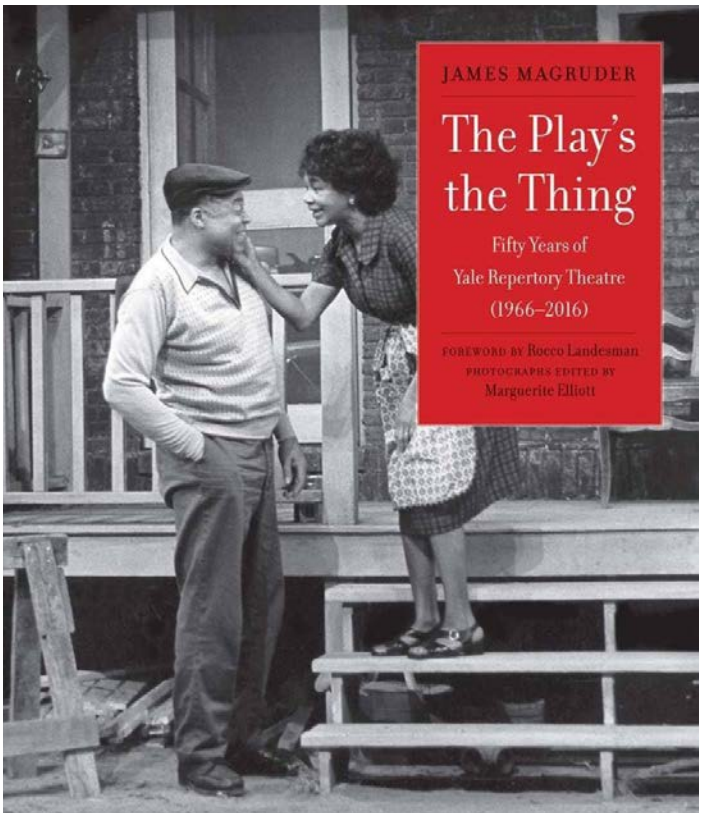
2 Kane and Stoneking, eds., *Dramaturgy and History*, 78.

3 Kane and Stoneking, eds., *Dramaturgy and History*, 135.

The Play's the Thing: *Fifty Years of Yale Repertory Theatre (1966-2016)*

James Magruder / Yale University Press, New Haven, CT (2004) / 400 pages



James Magruder's *The Play's the Thing* provides a comprehensive insider's account of Yale Repertory Theatre's fifty-year history from 1966 to 2016. This book offers valuable resources for dramaturgs, researchers studying specific Yale productions, and directors seeking to learn how to lead an organization. Each of book's four chapters follows the tenure of one of the four Yale Rep artistic directors. Magruder's book provides a detailed timeline of artistic leadership, organized in a linear structure and complemented by anecdotal information about celebrated productions and artists. Readers will find thirty-six sidebars in the book that zoom in on spaces, people, and contextual influences on Yale Rep's work from the first renovation to the Will Power! education program. The book concludes with a detailed production history and an index, which will be a valuable resource for future research.

Magruder's first chapter details Robert Brustein's time as Yale Rep's first artistic director from 1966 to 1979. This chapter follows the founding of Yale Rep and its early contribution to the American theatre scene. Due to his time as a theatre critic, Brustein was a surprise hire who ultimately refused to compromise on budget and play content with Yale President Bartlett Giamatti. Magruder poignantly frames Brunstein's era with Yale Rep as contentious, sharing that "his exit was as newsworthy as his entrance."[1] In a "By the Numbers" list of the most often produced playwrights at Yale Rep during his tenure, it is notable that only one was a woman, Sarah Ruhl, and in his thirteen years, he only produced one playwright of color, Adrienne Kennedy. Magruder names this inequity in playwright identity but does not provide further critique or analysis; instead, he focuses on celebrating the contributions of Brustein's tenure: he established Yale Rep as a producing house "to be reckoned with."[2]

1 James Magruder, *The Play's the Thing Fifty Years of Yale Repertory Theatre (1966-2016)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2024,) 91

2 Magruder, "The Play's the Thing," 93.

The second chapter covers the period from 1979 to 1991 when Lloyd Richards served as artistic director for twelve seasons. This chapter focuses on Richards's efforts to uplift new plays and playwrights while giving space for some of the greats in the American canon. Athol Fugard and August Wilson's timelines and achievements get the bulk of the chapter with an eloquent analysis of their work, rehearsal style, and impact on future playwrights. The chapter also discusses Richards's success in moving plays to New York and his acclaimed Winterfest, a showcase of new plays in development. Magruder writes about the loyalty and trust Richards and Wilson showed to designers and actors, which allowed Yale Rep to become a place where plays were not only performed but also developed: "Richards was sensitive first and foremost to the needs of the playwrights and actors," telling his collaborators to always "serve the play."[3] Magruder's chapter does not explicitly examine Richards's impact as the first Black artistic director of Yale Rep. Magruder shares that in alignment with Richards himself, "it seems beside the point to mention his race. Richards, who has broken several color barriers before coming to Yale, never made much of it publicly."[4] Audiences, actors, and playwrights experienced the difference without ever having to talk about it.

The third chapter examines Stan Wojewoldski Jr., who served as artistic director from 1991 to 2001. Wojewoldski began the associate artists programs, had an open-door policy for student dramaturgs, and reserved one show from each season for Yale undergraduate seniors to perform. He fostered the talent of playwrights Eric Overmyer and Suzan-Lori Parks and increased the time spent creating designs and budgets. He also welcomed communal theatre-making with the World Performance Project and Jeune Lune company. Magruder describes the overarching trend of Wojewoldski's time as showcasing "playwrights who deployed language idiosyncratically in form, pattern, and lexical reach," which Magruder links to Yale Rep's decline in subscribers during this time.[5] Magruder frames the celebrated legacy of this artistic director as one who said yes, was ambitious, and was too modest to advertise and highlight the prestige he brought.

The final chapter focuses on the current artistic director, James Bundy, who joined Yale Rep in 2002. Magruder details Bundy's efforts to navigate university finances amidst a shifting economic and socio-political landscape. The chapter also highlights his strong and ongoing collaboration with playwright Sarah Ruhl. Bundy views play commissions as a vital way to nurture talented writers and directors, emphasizing the importance of long-term investment in artists while addressing his inherited financial deficit. Notably, he has expanded endowments and established the Yale School of Drama Advisory Board and the Yale New Play Program. To this day, he shares his email address with audience members to encourage communication (which is also provided in the book). Magruder reflects on how "pendulums swing in both directions before they reach equilibrium; yet, stasis is detrimental to an art form and an arts institution that relies on change, revolt, and social justice." This perspective strengthens the case for the Yale School of Drama to enroll young or early-career artists and equip them with essential fluency in diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB)."[6]

Magruder expresses hope for a Yale that prepares artists to become leaders. As Bundy continues to serve as artistic director, it is too early to summarize his contributions. However, when asked, many students, collaborating directors, and playwrights agree that the next artistic director of Yale Rep should not be a cisgender man. One of Bundy's notable achievements is creating an environment where artists feel empowered to voice their opinions, revolutionize the theatre-making process, and pave the way for new leadership in the collaborative projects he has created.

When approaching this book, it is essential to read the preface. As a Yale alum and former professor, Magruder does not claim to be neutral regarding what he identifies as successes and failures in the theatre's history. His dramaturgical skill permeates every page as he poetically reflects on the process of making theatre, which he details through historical accounts and interviews. By doing so, he advocates for the dramaturg's role as an artist. From Magruder's critical telling of the legacy of the Living Theatre's residency to word choices like "handicap" and "wheelchair-bound," every reader should keep in mind

3 Magruder, "The Play's the Thing," 155.

4 Magruder, "The Play's the Thing," 154.

5 Magruder, "The Play's the Thing," 195.

6 Magruder, "The Play's the Thing," 301.

the way the book begins as they traverse its pages; a dramaturg is not neutral, nor is history. This in-depth book prepares readers for the possibility of a Volume 2 as Yale Rep continues to evolve as a reflection of the times.

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MEMBER, LMDA AND
SCHOLARS WITHOUT BORDERS

About the Editors

ALLISON BACKUS (she/her) is the current Vice President of Publications at LMDA. She is the resident dramaturg at Merrimack Repertory Theatre where she has provided research, essays, and educational programming for various shows, including *Letters From Home*, *Macbeth*, *Gaslight*, *Dishwasher Dreams*, *What You Are Know*, *The Comedy of Hamlet! (a prequel)*, and *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*. Her recent production dramaturgy credits include *A Christmas Carol* and *Back Together Again: The Music of Donny Hathaway and Roberta Flack* at MRT, and *Kevin Kling: Unraveled* at the Contemporary American Theatre Festival. She has an MA in Theatre and Performance from Queen Mary University of London, and a BA in English from Boston University.

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LMDA'S JOURNAL *REVIEW* IS CURRENTLY ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS FOR THE 2026 ISSUE.

Review is the peer-reviewed journal of dramaturgy published annually by Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. The mission of the journal is to provide a venue for the exploration of dramaturgy and to foster ongoing conversation about the work of the dramaturg and the literary manager and their relationship to all stages of theatre and performance-making. Submissions that explore dramaturgy in contexts beyond performance will also be considered. *Review* welcomes submissions by all writers regardless of professional affiliation. Inquiries to the editor are encouraged in advance of all submissions.

Review is an annual publication. This year's deadline for paper submissions is **October 6, 2025**.

To submit an article for peer review, please email the following as two separate documents:

1. The full paper submission, double-spaced 4,000-6,000 words in .docx format, formatted according to Chicago (17th Edition) style guidelines. Articles can contain footnotes and should include a Bibliography. **To ensure a fair blind review process, the author's name should be omitted from this document.**
2. A title page that includes the author's name, email address, telephone, and institutional affiliation (if applicable), as well as a brief biography.

To submit a non-peer-reviewed article, please email the following as two separate documents:

1. The full paper submission, double-spaced in .docx format, formatted according to Chicago (17th Edition) style guidelines. Articles can contain footnotes and should include a Bibliography.
2. A title page that includes the author's name, email address, telephone, and institutional affiliation (if applicable), as well as a brief biography.

Additionally, those submitting peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed articles must fill out a competing interests form, which can be found HERE.

BOOK REVIEW INQUIRIES

Review includes book reviews of publications from academic presses. If you're a published author and have a recent book publication in a related field you'd like to have reviewed, please contact the editors. If you would like to review a book for *Review*, with a book in mind or not, please fill out this form **HERE**. The length requirement for book reviews is 800-1,100 words in length.

"PATHFINDERS IN DRAMATURGY" INQUIRIES

Our 2026 issue of *Review* will feature a new recurring section titled "Pathfinders in Dramaturgy." In this new section, curated by Mark Bly, early-to-mid-career dramaturgs will interview foundational figures in the field of dramaturgy.

Selected interviewers will conduct an interview with an assigned "Pathfinder." An edited version of this interview will then be published in *Review*.

We hope this new section will foster intergenerational connection, new insights, and great conversations that will excite *Review*'s readership and the LMDA community. If you would like to apply to interview a dramaturgy pathfinder, please fill out this form **HERE**.

Please send submissions to publications@lmda.org

Review acknowledges receipt of submission via email within 1 to 2 weeks and the response time for the peer review process is typically 3 months from the submission deadline.

Read previous issues of *Review* here.