

TWITTER-TURGY

Somehow I'm 25 years old and I'm in the generation of "old people" who still use Facebook. I don't know how to use Instagram and Twitter, but I'm trying. When I was in my teen years I remember thinking that Instagram was for people who just wanted to take pictures of their food and Twitter was for people who wanted to describe it in 140 characters or less. Neither is correct, but I mean, I was still hanging out on Facebook with the "old people." After starting my own small business over a year ago, I've put a lot of effort into learning about Instagram and Twitter and learning how to interact with the people in our field in meaningful ways. A lot of those meaningful interactions have come from Twitter.

My Twitter feed is currently composed of mostly playwrights and dramaturgs, and recently a lot of the tweets passing through my feed that have caught my eye are about play submissions and applications. I have met (in person) only a handful of the people that I follow on Twitter. That doesn't mean that they haven't already been giving me a lot to think about and a lot to respond to, particularly in regards to playwrights and the way we treat them in our field. In April 2021, within a week of each other, three playwrights I follow (whose tweets I have come to enjoy reading), all tweeted about issues in the play submission process. These are issues that hadn't occurred to me, but having been a reader for three festivals in the last two years I should be paying attention to how playwrights feel about their end of the process.

WHY ARTIST STATEMENTS?

"If it were up to me I'd never write an artist statement again. When I ran my company we were dead set against them. If we liked your play, we interviewed you. You like my plays? Then you don't need me to explain myself or [be] this vulnerable. Get to know me after you read it."

Kari Bentley-Quinn, @KBQWrites, 4/11/2021

What is the point of including an artist statement? As I read for a festival this past winter where artist statements were required of every playwright for every submission, I often found myself asking "why," as every good dramaturg does. Of the 30+ plays that I read for that festival, I think I only read a couple of the artist statements. I didn't see the point. The art would speak for itself. If the playwright needed to defend their work, then maybe it wasn't quite ready for festival submission yet. The problem though, was that it wasn't the playwright defending their work. It was the playwright simply doing what was asked of them so that they could submit their work and hopefully move forward onto a production. As if playwrights don't already put in so much work and effort writing their truths, we're now asking, or rather forcing, them to write more and explain the work that is laid out before us? A piece of art is already one of the ways that someone can be at their absolute most vulnerable. We don't need to ask for more than that.

WHAT IS A NEW PLAY?

“Quick Q to all the literary managers out there! Can we soon stop adding “unproduced” to the guidelines of submission ops?? Because by wanting to find “the new, next great thing,” we’re missing out on plays that should be done, I dunno, maybe more than once? Just a thought.”

River (BLM/ACAB), @RT_Woven, 4/16/2021

Who is out here deciding what a “new play” is? Why does something have to be unproduced to be considered a new play? As a dramaturg, I have worked with playwrights who have given me a draft, seen that work produced, and then worked with them again on a new draft after post-production revisions. So does that mean it’s no longer a “new play” the second time that I work on it? Absolutely not. I don’t know how to define a new play, but it isn’t a play that has never been produced. New works are important. I’m tired of seeing theatres produce the same shows over and over again. Just as important as producing new works, is defining what “new works” means. It’s not going to happen overnight, but those of us who identify as new play dramaturgs have a responsibility to the playwrights we work with and the organizations we affiliate ourselves with to protect playwrights and continue to keep those doors open for new works, even after the first production.

WHO IS OUR AUDIENCE?

“Can we please stop asking artists ‘WHO’S YOUR AUDIENCE’ for a particular show/project? I don’t know who could be ‘my audience’ I suspect ALL HUMAN BEINGS who would go to the theatre are potentially an audience?”

Alex Istudor, @istudor_alex, 4/16/2021

As a dramaturg, as a playwright, as a director, as a writer; I have never understood this question. “Who’s your audience?” Personally, my audience is anyone who wants to listen. The idea that something has to be written for a certain reason or a certain person is a flawed one. Who are we to know who needs to hear our message? When I work on productions as a dramaturg and facilitate post-show discussions, my favorite comments are from the people who say something like, “I wasn’t planning on coming to this show but it affected me by...” Or the people who say, “This wasn’t what I was expecting, but I loved it.” We don’t know what people are going to like. We don’t know what stories are going to reach certain people. So, why are we asking, “Who’s your audience?” Alex didn’t hit on this with their tweet, but I personally also hate the questions, “Why now?” and “Why you?” Because I felt like writing this play. Does there have to be a majorly significant reason why I feel like I’m the best one to tell the story or why it’s relevant now? Relevance and personal connections are not the only reasons to write or produce theatre.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

These are just a few examples from three playwrights that I follow on Twitter. I wouldn't be able to comment on any of the hundreds of other playwrights on Twitter that I don't follow and if they have shared their thoughts on the flawed nature of the play submission process. Nor did I include any of the responses to these tweets from other playwrights. I don't know how to use Twitter, but I'm trying. There's so much dramaturgy to be done on Twitter that I never expected. I think every dramaturg should be on Twitter. If you don't know how to use it, even better. We can learn how to use it together.

Twitter-turgy is the next big step for dramaturgs. Name a better place for getting real thoughts from real professionals than a social media platform that allows only 280 characters for each tweet. 280 characters that can shape the future of our field if we let them. (267/280)

Samantha Baird
(She/Her/Hers)
April 30, 2021

Note: Cited tweets are used with permission from their respective owners.