



Dramaturging the Phoenix

Gateway Shuffle

Shawn Sprankle

What does evolution look like in an industry that's designed to resist change? How do we measure progress in a field that refuses to accept new methods, techniques, platforms, and tools? Is it possible to achieve legitimate change in a profession that refuses to break down its archaic barriers? These are just some of the questions that many of us have struggled with during one of the greatest periods of uncertainty in theaters' expansive history. The pandemic has decimated the industry and with no clear end in sight it continues to shine a light on the inequities that were present long before it's beginning. It's even more frustrating when you consider that it's also been an opportunity for immense growth on an industry wide scale; but the institutions that claim to lead the charge into the future have desperately clung to the past.

The models, platforms, and technology to shatter those gateways holding us back and usher in the next great wave of theatrical innovation are there for the taking. There's been plenty of time to study, adopt, and adapt those components, but nearly two years later we're still arguing about the merits of digital theatre with institutions and individuals that have no credible experience to speak from. It's why there's so much value in the perspective of early career artists, freelancers, and indie art collectives that have been creating the most promising forms of digital theatre. Especially when those same artists are being dismissed and excluded from the conversations surrounding digital programming in theatre. And as a dramaturg that falls into the early career classification, as well as an artist that has spent more time studying the platforms and tools behind digital theatre than anyone else in this industry, the potential is truly limitless but only if we fully embrace it.

In terms of my own personal progression over time it's come in the form of two distinct phases. The first being the work I've done at my alma mater as a student and as the Resident Dramaturg since I've graduated. And the second being the work that I've done as a freelancer since the beginning of the pandemic. But the basic philosophy that I use as a dramaturg has always remained the same. Periodically I reflect on the current dramaturgical landscape and ask myself two questions:

“What's the current standard and how can we improve it?”

“What other fields can we study and learn from to expand our own practice?”

In that first phase of dramaturgical practice, aside from having to figure out the basics of what it meant to be a dramaturg, I spent a great deal of focus on including design principles into my process. In my early experience, and based on dozens of conversations with colleagues, dramaturgs rarely make significant contributions to design elements during concept development. It's certainly the exception and not the rule when it comes to standard practices. So I committed to developing a research methodology that was more comprehensive, visually engaging, and built to better serve every type of designer. It also meant honing my own artistic sensibilities and skills geared towards curating better codexes (or casebooks if you're basic), creating more striking and engaging lobby displays, and building a better visual representation of my own work. I surveyed portfolios of roughly 300 dramaturgs and literary managers online, in order to get a good sense of how design factors into the work of others in our field.

And I quickly realized that there are so few dramaturgs that have a refined visual component to their work; there's also zero consideration for design as a metric of quality or success at any academic or professional theatre organization in the United States. So I made every effort to incorporate those components into my own dramaturgical philosophy.

During the second phase of dramaturgical progression my focus has been turned towards every aspect of theatre and the digital world. Even before the onset of the pandemic I had been researching advanced remote-work setups as a way to expand my own job prospects. It's no secret that most dramaturgy gigs have excessive experience requirements, educational barriers, and in most cases they're not financially viable positions. (Especially if we're talking about apprenticeships, fellowships, and internships.) So I was looking for ways to make long distance opportunities more accessible for myself in the short term and potentially others in the long term. But the perpetual nature of the pandemic forced everyone from individuals to entire institutions towards online platforms and remote-work. What was viewed in our industry as a novelty and impossibility suddenly became the new reality. It also meant that digitally-based programs needed to be adopted and adapted to create a hybrid model if theatres had any hope of continuing their work while supporting artists.

So I did a lot of freelance work consulting on budgeting and building flexible remote-work setups for other artists, administrators, content-creators and various independent arts collectives. I've studied every aspect of digitally based programming from conceptualization to execution. The physical hardware from computers to monitors, cameras, lighting equipment, sound equipment, and other peripherals devices. Audio and video editing software, broadcasting software, transcription software, third-party hosting platforms, and social media platforms. And how all of it can be used to curate more engaging archival work, blogs, live-streamed productions, panels, podcasts, radio-plays, staged readings, talkbacks, workshops or any other type of theatre adjacent projects you can think of.

Theatre was in dire need of artists with these skill-sets and the knowledge behind them to make its new programming a reality. Digitally based programs can open the door to new audiences, community building platforms, and revenue streams. They also offer a path forward in creating a modern theatrical structure that can forge greater anti-racist practices, accessibility, diversity, equity, inclusion, sustainability, transparency, and visibility initiatives. It's also why I believe that assimilating these skill-sets into dramaturgical practice offers us a unique opportunity to address all of these issues that dramaturgs in particular seem to suffer from. If advocacy is at the heart of the work that we do as dramaturgs, and I believe that it is, there is no greater set of tools than the ones built in the digital world.

But no level of personal growth as a dramaturg matters if theatre itself doesn't also respond in kind. If the industry as a collective doesn't make an effort to assess the current standards and address how outdated they are then there won't be any growth that is built to last. In my first contribution to this series I spoke on the necessity of making significant progress with decisive, swift action. Since that point in time, over a year ago, there has been very little growth from a general perspective and almost none from a dramaturgical one.

Given the fact that my work lies at the intersection of dramaturgy and digital programming, I feel uniquely positioned to highlight some of the indicators of an industry looking to discount and discredit the platforms and technology, while rushing back into the arms of the old and outdated way of doing things.

When it comes to digital programming there are few others out there in theatre, if any at all, that have spent as much time consuming, researching, and analyzing that kind of content or working with the technology that goes into making it possible. The vast majority of the online programs that I've experienced in theatre have been poorly conceived, under-developed, and reflect organizations' lack of capacity, personnel, and vision to execute these initiatives beyond the most basic level possible. The kind of work that independent artists, small collectives, and grassroots organizations put together using Zoom should absolutely be applauded. But there is nothing impressive or innovative about bigger budget companies with the resources to properly invest in the hardware, software and personnel leaning so heavily on Zoom. What's more frustrating is that the model for everything from online panels, podcasts, radio plays, staged readings, and workshops to hybrid and traditional staged productions has been developed and refined over the last 5-7 years in several other sectors of entertainment. It was pioneered by independent artists and content creators working with considerably smaller budgets, setups, studio spaces, and general experience than what many top tier companies claim to have in their ranks.

["The Jury Is In on Virtual Theatre"](#) written by Rosie Brownlow-Calkin, with the research conducted through the University of Nevada at Reno, has been one of the few sources for assessing the general approach that some companies took when it comes to digital theatre programs. I had the opportunity to chat with her about the process behind putting the survey together and sorting through the results. While some of her conclusions about the potential future of digital theatre line up with my own research on the subject, the composition of the survey itself is missing several key components, and the reliability of many of the participants is questionable.

It only included 4 out of 75 LORT theatres and you can't see the full picture of digital programs when you're missing a vast majority of the most well funded companies in the United States. There are also 10-12 significant data points which weren't included that cover various social media platforms, peripheral digital programs, and elements of production quality that severely limit the survey's accuracy in portraying the full story behind digital trends in theatre during the pandemic. It's also difficult to rely firmly on the results when only a small sample size of their findings were published, with select quotes from a handful of the organizations surveyed. Unfortunately there was a non-disclosure agreement which prevented the university from sharing the complete results without seeking secondary permissions from each individual company. I'm particularly skeptical of anyone that participated in this survey and took the stance that digital theatre doesn't work, hiding being a veil of secrecy that prevents any kind of secondary inspection of their opinion. Without that transparency it severely compromises the integrity of the survey and the results reported in the article have to be approached with skepticism and a critical eye to gain any reliable insight from it.

And that skepticism is heavily warranted when you consider the fact that the overall consensus was that digital theatre isn't a viable long term investment. When in reality the true value in the article is that it underscores the misconceptions traditional theatre-makers have about digital theatre; it also reveals how misguided many of these companies were in their overall approach and execution. So I've included some quotes from the article to analyze that reinforce the many ways in which theatre missed the mark on digital programs:

"When creating virtual content, we are in competition with Netflix, Hulu, HBO, etc., who are all creating streaming content as well... This is a challenge for many small theatres (us included) who have had to shift to essentially operating as small film production houses. This is not necessarily our strength, as we have spent many years honing the craft of creating live theatre. Different mediums require different skills, attention to different details, etc."

-Jake Nice, Producing Artistic Associate / Dallas's Undermain Theatre

The notion that theatre companies in the United States are 'competing' with major streaming services is ludicrous. Amazon Prime, Disney+, HBO, Hulu, and Netflix all have their own dedicated platforms, cater to broader audiences, and they are in a completely different content market than what theatres should be working in. The financial disparity between these streaming platforms and any theatre organization is so massive there's no comparison whatsoever. Even companies like the Met, that have invested considerable time and money into archiving and live broadcasting their productions, don't merit a legitimate comparison. Let alone an organization like Undermain Theatre that has a house capacity of 80 people and an annual operating budget of \$350,000. For reference here are a few general stats on those streaming services from 2020:

Amazon Prime Video

Subscribers: **150 million**

Subscription cost: **\$8.99**

Net income: **\$2.00 billion**

Disney Plus

Subscribers: **94.9 million**

Subscription cost: **\$8**

Net income: **\$4.50 billion**

Hulu

Subscribers: **38.8 million**

Subscription cost: **\$6**

Net income: **\$4.40 billion**

HBO Max

Subscribers: **17.2 million**

Subscription cost: **\$15**

Net income: **\$1.8 billion**

Netflix

Subscribers: **203.7 million**

Subscription cost: **\$9**

Net income: **\$2.76 billion**

“The extensive amount of time and money that goes into creating these is in no way well spent on a tiny handful of views. We sincerely hoped to consider this as a way for those with other barriers to participate in live theatre to be included, but those numbers are in no way significant enough to justify the heavy investment for a theatre our size.”

-David Jenkins, Jobsite Theater in Tampa, Florida

It's obvious here that Jobsite Theater also misunderstood their online market for content. Their limited viewership numbers online indicates that their patron base is older, so realistically they've never properly invested in their social media platforms as places of community engagement or online marketing, which means they have an underdeveloped digital presence and weren't built to make it in a digital market in the first place. It's tough to discuss the cost since those details weren't made available to us, but based on what we do know I'd be willing to bet they only focused on 1:1 live-streamed productions that cost significantly more, without putting any focus on alternative programming that costs less in terms of time and resources. There's also the fact that theatre organizations have never invested in the personnel or skill-sets needed to produce this kind of content. Which means that there's no labor pool of young artists that they can exploit for the work, so they have to pay full price, which also figures into cost.

“While virtual theatre may increase accessibility, there is something about it that is inherently not theatre. There is no direct actor-to-audience contact in live virtual theatre, pre-recorded virtual theatre, or the releasing of archival footage. Actors cannot relate to an audience and audience members cannot relate to actors as they could in person.”

-Kim Greenwalt, Director of Development / Gamut Theatre Group

“I find that virtual theatre, Zoom theatre, really leaves me wanting. It feels too technical, too much like movie-making to have the energy and connection that theatre offers.”

-Carrie Van Hallgren, Managing Director / American Players Theatre

There are also organizations like these that were never interested in digital programming from the start. Similar to the others there's no awareness of the content market, no developed online presence to support the work, and certainly no one with the training and experience to make it a reality. Each of these point to the idea that theatre has to have a distinct connection with the audience, one that can only be created in person, with the latter pointing to technical aspects as an obstacle in creating that connection online. But at the same time they're admitting to working with platforms that aren't inherently built for that kind of relationship between creator and audience. There's a limit on how technical a production can be based on the hardware, software, and other peripherals they're using.

Zoom is on the low end of that spectrum and it's the platform that most companies defaulted to. If you're not using graphics, overlays, virtual cams, or pairing it with OBS and other broadcast software, it requires a very limited investment and almost no effort to utilize. Since they've indicated Zoom as the base of their programs, it's safe to say they never had any intention to accept or incorporate the practice, which is also apparent in their hasty return to traditional productions with little to no digital programs currently in their lineup. And there's no value in the perspective or opinions of anyone that has taken the low road on digital programs.

"I cringe when people say theatre is only theatre if it's live and in person. We are an evolving art form, and I've always been inspired by my colleagues who play within, beyond, and around four walls and a stage. I find it exhilarating that our field was forced to play in the virtual world last year. Creatively and economically, I am excited about what's possible moving forward."

-Pesha Rudnick, Artistic Director / Local Theater Company

"For us, it is not an economic question—it is an accessibility and engagement question." Measuring by revenue is "the wrong frame. Virtual theatre brings greater engagement."

-Liz Lisle, Managing Director / Shotgun Players

However, there were a few bright spots in the article that displayed a deeper understanding and appreciation for the short term and long term benefits. Theater has been around in some form or another for over 2,000 years, but this kind of technology has been around for only 20 years. If theatre organizations want to create truly innovative programs that open their doors to new audiences, experiences, and sources of revenue then there is no other platform for that than online. But it takes years of investment and development to make these programs come to life; it means assimilating new knowledge, platforms, personnel, skill-sets and techniques that are required to make them successful. Which also means that in the short term their success can't be measured in terms of monetary gains or viewership numbers.

Where there is resistance to a digital transformation there is also a similar feeling when it comes to a dramaturgical one. There are so many problematic aspects to a dramaturg or literary manager's professional path; it's a field that requires excessive education, experience, and specialized skills without an equal return on investment financially. It's a system that only honors experience from a handful of places and discounts it from anywhere else. (But instead of acknowledging that in a constructive way we just say that "*...everyone's path is different.*") It's built on a foundation of apprenticeships, internships, and fellowships that rely on paying you nothing and teaching you even less.

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and innovation aren't born out of a system that is designed to exclude artists based on financial circumstances. The pandemic provided a chance for so many organizations to reckon with these practices that exist only through exploitation. But when it comes to our profession, literary departments have been reduced, internship programs have been closed without any plan for an equitable replacement, major institutions have shuttered, and the field is shrinking. And most of the organizations that have maintained their staff, programs, etc. have continued to operate under the same pretenses.

I've never taken an apprenticeship, internship, or fellowship with a major company at any point in my career and that's because of these circumstances. If they're only willing to engage with those services when they can get them for free, then they don't actually value the work without the pretext of exploitation. So many organizations rely on the prestige of their brand to create the illusion that they've created a unique form of dramaturgy that only they can offer. When in reality most of the skills and techniques that these programs have to offer are things that can be picked up in undergrad, even without guidance or mentorship.

There have been numerous job postings that have appeared over the last six months that reinforce how backwards the profession is in terms of expectations versus compensation. For each of them the payscale is insulting compared to the extensive scope of duties, the lack of transparent qualifications and the required skills they want you to have. And most of them only provide a living wage if you're a single adult with no children and no considerable debt.

Boston Court Pasadena

Location: **Pasadena, California**

Position: **Literary Manager**

Salary: **\$39,000 (\$25 per hour)**

Cost of living: **\$40,238 (\$19.35 per hour)**

Hours per week: **30 (Duties suggest 50-60)**

Qualifications: **No hard skills or experience**

Alleyway Theatre:

Location: **Buffalo, New York**

Position: **Director of New Work**

Salary: **\$35,600 (\$17.11 per hour)**

Cost of living: **\$30,300 (\$14.59 per hour)**

Hours per week: **40 (Duties suggest 50-60)**

Qualifications: **No hard skills or experience**

Geva Theatre:

Location: **Rochester, New York**

Position: **Associate Literary Manager**

Original Salary: **\$35,360 (\$17.00 per hour)**

Salary: **\$40,000-42,000 (\$19.65 per hour)**

Cost of living: **\$30,264 (\$14.55 per hour)**

Hours per week: **40 (Job duties suggests 50)**

Qualifications: **No hard skills or experience**

Geva Theatre:

Location: **Rochester, New York**

Position: **Literary & Artistic Associate**

Original Salary: **\$35,360 (\$17.00 per hour)**

Salary: **\$40,000-42,000 (\$19.65 per hour)**

Cost of living: **\$30,264 (\$14.55 per hour)**

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Boston Court Pasadena's Literary Manager position is easily the worst of the bunch. It's a low paying job that's \$1,000 below the living wage for Los Angeles county, and they label it as a part time position at 30 hours, despite asking for 45-60 worth of work per week. The job posting itself has a very lengthy scope of duties but there are almost no hard skills or qualifications listed.

Alleyway Theatre's Director of New Work is the next one down on that list. It's above the threshold for a living wage in Erie county but the salary is atrocious based on the job title, pay, and the hefty scope of duties. Lauren Halvorsen highlighted each of these positions in various editions of her weekly newsletter [Nothing for the Group](#), but called this one out in particular on [Twitter](#):

"Looking for a Director of New Work to manage a 1200+ play submission process, dramaturg the whole season, season planning, marketing & engagement writing and programming....for \$36,500. Institutional dramaturgy is not a sustainable profession! The biggest obstacle with negotiating lit salaries is that theaters will point to the "market value" but the industry as a whole financially devalues dramaturgical labor, yet relies on dramaturgs to be elastic institutional utility players with a ridiculous scope of duties."

And as someone that's based in Western New York and is familiar with this organizations' leadership and body of work over the past few years, the kind of programming they're trying to orchestrate here goes well beyond the capabilities of a one person literary department or a company of their size.

The Geva Theatre's Associate Literary Manager position is better than the first two but it's still very problematic. This job's original posting was a much lower salary (\$35,000) and was also heavily criticized on the LMDA Listserv. Much of the discourse stemmed from the fact that during 2020/2021 the Geva still managed to generate \$7.8 million in revenue, it's Artistic Director made \$200,000 in salary, and the Executive Director made \$155,000. This was also coming at a time when they were conducting a search for a new Artistic Director at a starting salary of \$160,000. It's an absolute joke that an organization with that kind of substantial financial resources would offer such a low salary range for this job posting. Especially when you consider that they're seeking someone with an M.F.A and a minimum of 5-7 years of experience for an entry level position. There's also the fact that the literary department was responsible for some of the limited peripheral digital programs that the Geva offered during the pandemic, which requires an additional set of knowledge and skills to produce.

After going through the hiring process for that Associate Literary Manager position over 3-4 months, they've recently posted an identical listing with a slightly modified job title. I find it difficult to believe that there were so few qualified candidates that they were unable to find someone and had to re-initiate the hiring process from the beginning. In this case it clearly has nothing to do with a lack of suitable candidates and speaks more to an organization that has extremely outdated and unrealistic expectations for their literary staff. If a literary department is more concerned with empty pedigree than they are with the actual quality of the work itself, what kind of standard does that set? It's an embarrassing one that no one should be proud of and reflects a trend of theatrical companies promoting their dramaturgy as unique and outstanding, when in actuality it's mediocre and unexceptional. And the Geva just recently announced Elizabeth Williamson, who is a seasoned dramaturg, as their new Artistic Director. But just because one of our own is now at the helm of the ship, does it actually mean that there will be some drastic shift in the way they navigate the rough seas of dramaturgy in the 21st century? That remains to be seen, but I highly doubt it.

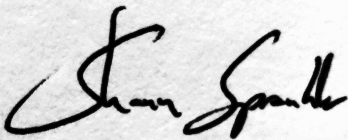
Cincinnati Playhouse is the only job posting listed above that pays a salary that's commensurate with the duties and skills they're asking for. I'll always scoff at the idea of an M.F.A. or M.A./PhD and extensive experience at a brand name theatre being the baseline for any position like this. But in this case they're actually paying well above the living wage and clearly value the work in a way that isn't based on some principle of exploitation. They're certainly the exception in an industry where similar positions at other companies pay considerably less for the same general job scope.

That's why any conversation about personal artistic growth has to be paired with a discussion about the current structures and systems dramaturgs are faced with. There needs to be an evolution in the standard for both dramaturgy and theatre that makes it receptive to change. What good is individual progression if the industry is built to reject it almost by default? This is an issue we've seen play out in real time over the past several years and it continues to escalate even now. Dramaturgy has always been a dramatically undervalued practice and profession despite the overwhelming merits of the work, the versatility of the skill-sets involved, and the excessive requirements that have held it back for decades.

Digital programming, virtual theatre, or whatever other term you want to use, has the potential to revolutionize both theatrical and dramaturgical practices. It's the answer for more sufficient anti-racist practices, accessibility, diversity, equity, inclusion, sustainability, transparency, and visibility initiatives. And the model has already been created and refined in several other sectors of entertainment. So for me the fusion of dramaturgical practice with digital platforms and tools is a natural progression because it combines two heavily underestimated components of theatre that are designed to overcome the inequities that exist in it. Elevating these practices and accepting the changes that come with them doesn't necessitate a slow-moving, micro-analytical process. We've lost so many artists, and dramaturgs in particular, to the educational and financial pitfalls that existed in theatre pre-pandemic, and even more promising careers continue to disappear as those conditions worsen.

So if we're really invested in preserving and protecting the next generation of dramaturgs and literary managers then who does that approach really help? There's no honor in fighting for past traditions when they no longer serve our best interests; there's no benefit to halting progress because major institutions and the old guard theatre makers behind them are stuck in the dark ages. There can't simply be an acknowledgement that there are new methods and platforms out there with potential; passive aggressive statements that don't seek to actively advocate for or explore them further will never go far enough. Those same kinds of sentiments are ever-present in the dramaturgical world and in many ways they are the reason why dramaturgy still struggles to find mainstream acceptance in theatre. There aren't enough academic programs that teach it, there aren't nearly enough companies hiring those positions in a meaningful way, and there's the internalized confusion as to what we do as dramaturgs. And if we set that same precedent for digital programs they will surely meet the same fate; they'll become outliers in the theatrical world beset by the walls that have been constructed to keep them out and limit their practice.

It's why I believe dramaturgs are perfectly poised to lead the charge into the digital frontier. It's been my experience having to fight like hell for every inch that I've gained in my career and I know that I'm far from alone in that feeling. And leaning on that experience I've watched the machinations of this industry unfold in real time, as they conveniently hesitate and resist to adapt digital platforms in the same ways that they've done with dramaturgy. Is the old guard finally coming to terms with the necessity to break down the barriers and accept real innovation or is this just a cleverly disguised gateway shuffle?

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Shawn Sprankle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Shawn" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Sprankle".

Shawn Sprankle

[He/Him/His]

March 6th, 2022