



Dramaturging the Phoenix
No Resolution, No Rebirth

Shawn Sprankle

If there's no vision for what our rebirth means then there's no glory in our sacrifice pursuing it. It's true that the phoenix enjoys a long, magnificent life soaring above all else with such majesty and grace. And that in its last moments it becomes immersed in a sublime, blazing light, sinking unto the murks of its own ashes, from whence it is reborn again. However, in that final act of self immolation the true beauty doesn't lie with the furious maelstrom it displays for all the world to see; it lies in its resolute defiance of death, which no longer signifies the end, but rather a new beginning. In this moment when we're seemingly watching the world burn, and our industry collapses beneath the fire and the flames, it would be so easy for us to liken our demise to that of the phoenix. But it would be both dangerous and foolish for us to get caught up romanticizing our own spiral towards ruin without a bold, unrelenting vision for our own rise from the ashes after those last few embers fade.

There's no question that the pandemic has drastically altered the fabric of both modern society, as well as the theatrical industry at large. And there's a great deal of uncertainty that comes with both these circumstances, making a plan for the future difficult to grasp at. But in the face of that uncertainty, those of us that outlast this unceremonious, unforgiving trial by fire that has robbed so many of our colleagues of their livelihoods and their passion, we must not falter. With regards to Dramaturgy as an art form, as a field of study, and as a profession we all know what the problems are, where they lie, and those who will continue to carry them forward if we let them. With that in mind I'm not interested in vague statements calling for reform but offering no answers or plans as to how, I have no problem desecrating the altars built by any institution that are nothing more than a shrine to the supremacy of the self, and I'll feel no remorse throwing anyone engaging in the act of performative allyship to elude their own downfall back onto the funeral pyre. And if you're not willing to get onboard with the totality of that mindset, which is the only pathway towards the tried and true rebirth that we're seeking, then you have no business taking part in our future.

For those of you that would argue this kind of mentality is too harsh or unforgiving I'd be more than willing to inform you why you're wrong. For far too long Dramaturgy has suffered at the hands of a system that treats it as a peripheral part of the theatrical experience rather than a core component of that process from start to finish. The pathway of a dramaturg towards a professional career is one of the most difficult in our industry; there are far too few opportunities to study and practice the craft at every level from undergraduate and graduate programs to the sparse offerings out there in the professional world. And most of those chances are predatory in nature, in that they often lack equitable pay, instead leveraging their institutional brand, potential networking, college credit, or a place to pick up some bare-bones skills in exchange for a massive amount of work.

Any company or institution that engages in this kind of programming doesn't actually value the work that we do or the perspective that we bring to the table because they wouldn't make space for it if they had to offer fair compensation in exchange for our blood, sweat, and tears. When they contrive these kinds of experiences, purely for their own benefit, they create a massive barrier which prices so many artists out of the field, or forces them to endure unnecessary hardships to remain competitive, perpetuating the destructive notion of the starving, struggling artist. As a result this floods such a limited field with those privileged enough to float through their educational and professional career. Legitimate and organic evolution in Dramaturgy will never come from an oversaturated market full of practitioners that only serve as second hand torchbearers for the same tired philosophies of a select few academic and professional institutions.

Whether you're a seasoned veteran that has somehow managed to survive that gauntlet, an aspiring early career dramaturg about to embark on that path, or an experienced journeyman somewhere in the middle, those conditions should upset you to no end. But the future of this profession rests in our hands and we have an obligation to use our collective knowledge and experiences to alter its course for the better.

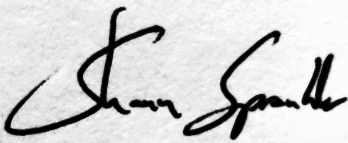
Which is why it's simply not enough to raise awareness and passively advocate for things to change. So long as those individuals and institutions continue to benefit from this system as is, they won't open the door for progress if left to their own devices. They're hopelessly dependent upon that system because it affords them an insurmountable edge that otherwise wouldn't exist, so they'll fight to protect it.

Instead we need to create solutions that will help shatter old, harmful habits, eliminate outdated traditions that only serve a select few, and forge a new foundation that will allow us to thrive and grow without restrictions or limitations. It all starts with creating a new universal set of protocols and standards that redefine what Dramaturgy is and how it functions in the 21st century. Initiatives to create more equitable and uniform experiences for dramaturgs in undergraduate programs, proactively denouncing any company, organization, or university that continue to utilize predatory internship programs, recognizing that graduate degree programs (M.A./M.F.A./PhDs) are no longer necessary or reasonable requirements to succeed professionally, the expansion of dramaturgical practice into the design sector of theatre, the inclusion of design-minded philosophy into how we create casebooks, lobby displays, portfolios, and résumés to make them legitimate metrics in the academic and professional world, as well as the acceptance and exploration of the alternative pathways to becoming a dramaturg that are of equal merit to the traditional path, without the significant financial and mental toll. All of these are necessary and simple steps we can take to foster organic and meaningful growth within our profession.

It's also imperative that the LMDA continues to evolve as an organization so it may become a more centralized and unifying force in that fight. The time for passive recommendations, private discussions, and wishful thinking has long since passed. It's necessary that a more active methodology be implemented to increase membership, expand beneficial grants and programs, create a more integrated network of dramaturgs, and encourage a form of advocacy that is much more substantial, vocal, and unafraid to call out individuals, companies, organizations, and universities that are detrimental to our profession by name.

We're striving for greater equity, diversity and inclusion but without an equal rise in accessibility, sustainability, and visibility we'll never see the growth in our field that we're truly seeking. The current system doesn't advocate for these changes, it actively suppresses and resists them, and that's not a standard that should be used to frame our profession or industry any further.

It's with all of that in mind, everything that's at stake, that compels me to keep moving forward. Now is not the time for us to get so caught up mourning the losses of our colleagues' work, because as we already know they're just going to keep coming, or we become so obsessed looking back that we fail to carve a new pathway forward, reverting to those old patterns and routines. Living up to the mythos of the phoenix is a lofty ideal, but it's only a worthwhile pursuit if it sparks the catalyst for an entirely new beginning.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shawn Sprankle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Shawn" being more prominent than the last name "Sprankle".

Shawn Sprankle

He/Him/His

June 20th, 2021