

## **Dramaturgical Thinking: Locating Evidences over Artifacts**

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Last night I sat on my comfortable living room sofa with a poodle in my lap and a laptop on the coffee table, prepared for the first livestreamed theatre performance of my institution's fall theatre season.<sup>1</sup> My dramaturgy students and I have been working on these new fall productions pretty intensely since they were announced at the beginning of this semester. I'm sure many of us in academia are familiar with this current emergency theatre season: previously announced shows cancelled, rapid fire searches for scripts that can work well in a digital format, hasty changes to brochures and websites, curriculum updates to welcome in new titles and to coordinate study.

Having spent some of my freelance time this summer on phone calls with playwrights, in web-meeting-read-throughs with actors online, and enjoying scripts that zoom-debuted against virtual backdrops, I was fairly certain I'd seen the gambit of possibility for virtual performance.

However, the experience I had last night with our first virtual theatre production of the season was different. The creative use of new technologies with traditional theatrical trappings gave me the sense of being in an actual theatre again. I realized the success of this project was in large part due to the dramaturgical thinking woven in from the very beginning. It is this kind of thinking that doesn't get labeled as such often enough, and *must be labeled* so that our students and colleagues are aware of the evidences of dramaturgy, when its more tangible artifacts are less visible. It's important to me to highlight the contributions of the dramaturg when there is no lobby in which to view a lobby display, when community-outreach programs are stifled due to social distancing, and when study guides and program notes don't appear on paper. In my reflections, I find seven core elements of dramaturgical thinking, evidences that are equally as important as the artifacts.

**Creativity.** The artistic process itself is creative, but thrives when bounds are tightly set. The pandemic has given us room for creative problem solving by shrinking the physical spaces available to us. A foundation of dramaturgical thinking is solving problems in new ways. Looking at a season potentially devoid of traditional design elements, our faculty and students set about confronting that challenge by thinking dramaturgically, asking questions about the possibilities within the strict bounds that safety in a pandemic required.<sup>2</sup>

**Connection.** At its heart, dramaturgy is the combination of artistry and scholarship, a coalescence of form and function. But dramaturgical thinking allows for connections to be built in a variety of ways. The world of the play is built as we discover the dialogue between our

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<sup>1</sup> This production for Brigham Young University was titled *Illusionary Tales*, and was comprised of three commissioned 10-minute plays by alumni playwrights who adapted folklore stories to meet the technological needs of the production.

<sup>2</sup> A product of multiple brainstorming sessions with the design faculty, season selection committee, and student production team members, *Illusionary Tales* makes use of the Pepper's Ghost hologram effect, leaving one actor alone onstage to perform with holographic forms of actors, performing safely in remote locations and projected onto a solid set in a physical theatre space.

research and our re-creation, our directing and our design, our community and our creative work.<sup>3</sup>

**Curiosity.** We will always find dramaturgical thinking among the wonderings and the what-ifs; we are always asking questions! When we see curiosity among our students and colleagues, when we ask questions that may lead to more questions and then on to discovery, we can call that curiosity what it is: great dramaturgical thinking!

**Collaboration.** Among the first lessons I teach in my beginning dramaturgy course is the concept of collaboration. Creative work that solves problems and overcomes challenges must be collaborative to succeed. The discoveries of curious questioning find life in artistic form through the process of collaboration. And during the pandemic, when making art, making theatre, can feel a bit lonely, collaborative relationships narrow the masked gap between us, leading to projects that are more than the sum of their parts. As Lynn Thompson says in a *Theatre Topics* article, true dramaturgical collaboration is “an expansive landscape that includes dialogue not only between artists, but also between artists and their materials (texts, research, settings, clothes), and between makers and audience.”<sup>4</sup>

**Community.** The collaboration between artist and audience, between maker and partaker, as described above is what builds community. In a time when the political and social divides seem to pull us apart more than ever before, we can keep a community-focus at the center of our work and strengthen those relationships across demographic and geographic barriers.

**Critical Thinking.** Critical thinking is dramaturgical thinking. Approaching a theatrical text before production, or a performance text during the production process, with careful questions leads to solid analysis. This is perhaps one of the most important things we teach our students and a skill we expect in professional settings.

**Conversation.** I’ve often said to friends that I am happiest in my work when I am moderating a discussion. As important as a sense of community is to the theatrical work, it means nothing if those invisible barriers cannot be traversed with meaningful conversation. Discussions *after* the show about what the audience and artists have all just experienced together start with discussions *before* the show about what we all hope to create together. Rich conversation around the production table or the dinner table is evidence of the team’s ability to think dramaturgically.

As we approach a new post-pandemic theatrical world, we will discover new technologies, methods, and venues for performance. Enjoying what felt like “real theatre” from my living room last night, I was happy to catch a glimpse of these new theatrical spaces. And without a map to

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<sup>3</sup> In *Illusionary Tales*, the Pepper’s Ghost effect was rediscovered from its 19th century roots in melodramatic special effects and reimagined as a 21st century new projection technology, an excellent example of the coalescence of scholarship and artistry. For more information, see <http://4thwalldramaturgy.byu.edu/illusionary-tales>.

<sup>4</sup> Thomson, Lynn M. "Teaching and Rehearsing Collaboration." *Theatre Topics*, vol. 13 no. 1, 2003, p. 117-128.

follow, we have a unique opportunity to enjoy the journey and find pleasure in the process of discovery. Looking thoughtfully into our meeting rooms and rehearsal spaces, we will find evidence of the ways in which dramaturgs and those who think dramaturgically are leading the exploration.