

# Review

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## The Journal of Dramaturgy

Published by  
*Literary Managers and  
Dramaturgs of the Americas*

Volume XXXI • Issue I  
2026

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# 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 2027 issue is October 1, 2026. For more information about *Review*, please visit LMDA's [website](http://lmda.org).

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# Editors' Note:

This issue of *Review* captures the evolving landscape of dramaturgical practice. The topography of the field of dramaturgy is dynamic, and our work requires the ability to consider the terrain. From a high enough vantage point, the landscape reveals its past, present, and future. Examined in detail, the nuances of specific elements come into focus, highlighting the stories of dramaturgy across time, cultures, and geography. Featuring work from dramaturgs in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, *Review's* 2026 issue exhibits the transnational reach of LMDA and the vital work of its members.

We start with the detail, examining case studies of dramaturgy in practice. Thomas Underdal explores the lobby as a transitional site for audiences using a practice-as-research methodology, investigating the lobby display he created as a case study to argue for the impact of collaborative meaning-making possible in lobbies. Khristián Méndez Aguirre articulates ecodramaturgical practice through analysis of two ecoplays and their new play development process, using new dramaturgy theory to reflexively analyze dramaturgical methodology in the specific context of ecotheatre. In her article, Martha Herrera-Lasso González explores the dramaturgical sensibility in the work and initiatives of Theatre Hace Teatro, a company dedicated to meeting the theatre-related needs of its community and fostering arts engagement across an array of demographics. In "What here did miss?" Stephen Drover reflects on his process for staging *Romeo and Juliet* in reverse assembly and astutely shares the experiment's resulting dramaturgical and pedagogical insights.

We also look at the landscape more broadly, reflexively applying dramaturgical thinking to the field as a whole. Lynde Rosario, former LMDA president and winner of the Leon Katz Award for Teaching & Mentoring, asks us to contemplate the ways in which we value creative work in her inspiring dramaturgical invitation to consider the impact of the language we use as working artists. First delivered at LMDA's 2025 bi-national conference, Simón Franco Suárez's "To Find a Genealogy" / "Para encontrar una genealogía" recounts the emergence and state of dramaturgy in Mexico, and Franco Suárez's own personal journey to the field.

This issue of *Review* also includes our first "Pathfinders in Dramaturgy" feature. In this new section of *Review*, Mark Bly curates conversations with foundational North American dramaturgs and early-mid career dramaturgs. Brian Quirt, Jenna Rodgers, and Sierra Haynes present us with a compelling intergenerational dialogue rife with wisdom, joy, and personal history that reads as a love letter to our field.

Allison Backus & Sarah Johnson

# Dramaturgical Infrastructures: Bridging Story, Space, Community, and Engagement through Interactive Lobby Displays

by Thomas Underdal

In its most fundamental architectural conception, a bridge is an intentional structure designed to span divides, linking otherwise disconnected points through planning, investment, and coordinated labor. It is a product of infrastructure, deliberate design, collaboration, and sustained resourcing. If we allow ourselves to view a bridge through a more imaginative lens, then we might see a gateway that invites movement, wonder, and a sense of discovery. Within a dramaturgical framework, the bridge brings together the utilitarian and the imaginative, offering a way to think about how information, experience, and meaning are carried across thresholds. As a liminal space, the bridge does not function as a destination but as a transitory zone between here and there, between what was and what is to come. It is an active site of passage, where one begins to loosen their grip on the familiar and prepare to enter a new imaginative order.

This metaphor offers a productive framework for reconsidering the theatre lobby as a critical site of connection within a larger experiential infrastructure. In the context of performance and exhibition spaces, this article posits that lobby displays and information environments function as infrastructural bridges between the external world and the constructed world of a performance. As transitional spaces, lobbies mediate audience movement from everyday time into theatrical time, shaping perception, expectation, and readiness to engage. In this capacity, the lobby operates as a liminal space, echoing Victor Turner's concept of the "betwixt and between,"<sup>1</sup> wherein conventional rules and expectations are suspended, allowing new modes of perception and engagement to emerge. Turner's analysis of liminality in social spheres frames my thinking of social space and how we might approach dramaturgical thresholds using the liminalities that exist in

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in *The Forest of Symbols* (Cornell University Press: 1967), 338.

communal space as a jumping-off point for engagement and instigation with the audience.

Under this framing, the lobby is not a passive or peripheral space but a site of intentional activation. Information design becomes important as a practice of organizing and presenting information in clear and meaningful forms to guide understanding and engagement. Approaching lobby design through an information design lens reveals its potential as an activated, multi-sensory system that communicates context, frames thematic inquiry, and supports diverse modes of access. For example,

**“...the lobby is not a passive or peripheral space but a site of intentional activation.”**

information design in this context might take the form of participatory elements, tactile or audio elements, spatial storytelling, and collaboratively produced materials, including community-generated content or dramaturgical prompts. Crucially, this work cannot be accomplished by a single department or discipline. Like bridges in the built environment, effective lobby displays depend on collaboration among a network of collaborators: dramaturgs, directors, designers, curators, educators, front-of-house staff, and external partners such as community organizations, scholars, and audiences. Collaboration, then, is not incidental but foundational, shaping whether the lobby operates as an intentional site of meaning-making or remains an underutilized architectural pause.

In this article, I use my dramaturgical work on *Sometimes the Rain, Sometimes the Sea* by Julia Izumi at Arizona State University as a case study to explore these ideas in practice. I reflect on and examine the conceptualization, resourcing, and collaborative development of the production's lobby displays, showing how collaboration and engagement function as infrastructural labor. These internal and external collaborators were central to shaping the lobby as an interpretive bridge, providing contextual frameworks, thematic cues, and access points that supported audiences' navigation of the play's playful yet

layered narrative world. By situating this case study within a broader discussion of infrastructure and collaboration, this article makes the case for better-resourced lobby environments that recognize information design as a shared, interdisciplinary practice. In doing so, it positions the lobby not only as a physical threshold but as a vital infrastructural node where intentional investment in collaboration directly translates into deeper engagement, broader access, and more coherent audience experiences.

## **FOUNDATIONAL STRUCTURING FOR THE PLAY AND PRODUCTION**

*Sometimes the Rain, Sometimes the Sea* by Julia Izumi is an intricate play that layers historical biography, fairy-tale adaptation, and contemporary queer reimagining into a complex, interwoven narrative. Drawing simultaneously on the life and afterlives of Hans Christian Andersen and on “The Little Mermaid,” the play's unfolding reveals Hans Christian Andersen as a composite figure navigating queerness, authorship, celebrity, and the porous boundary between the historical and fictional. At its core, the play operates through four primary narrative layers: a contemporary story titled “The Little Rain Cloud,” a retelling more closely aligned with Andersen's “The Little Mermaid;” the historical figure of Hans Christian Andersen and his many afterlives; and a youth character known as Little One, whose imaginative interventions actively reshape the story. This deliberate narrative layering became a central organizing principle for the production and significantly shaped both rehearsal-room dramaturgy and the design of audience-facing materials, including the lobby environment.

The play opens with “The Little Rain Cloud,” a modern reimagining of “The Little Mermaid” set in a contemporary urban landscape known as the Far Off City. In this iteration, Rain Cloud substitutes for the mermaid as a magical, anthropomorphized force of nature. Rain Cloud falls in love with Ralmond, who professes his love to the rain, despite navigating a strained relationship with his partner Midi. This story is narrated by Dolan, who is eventually revealed to be Hans Christian Andersen himself. By telling this new tale, Dolan attempts to revise his earlier work and reassert his authority as a master storyteller in response to contemporary critique.

As Dolan is telling “The Little Rain Cloud,” a second story begins to intrude and disrupt his storytelling. This narrative more closely resembles the familiar contours of “The Little Mermaid,” including characters like the Prince and Princess,

who are falling in love. Notably, the mermaid figure does not appear until much later, when Dolan/Hans is forcibly cast into the role he is attempting to avoid. This echoes Andersen's positioning within a relationship from his real life, which led to his writing of "The Little Mermaid." As critic Jackie Wulfschläger writes, "he casts himself a mermaid, sexless, voiceless companion to her prince, who, like him, cannot express what she feels and is denied the reality of love as the prince marries someone else."<sup>2</sup> Wulfschläger's interpretation provided an important dramaturgical lens for understanding Dolan/Hans's movement through the play as biography, fantasy, and self-critique converge.

The intrusion of the alternate narrative, told by Little One, destabilizes Dolan's authority, exposing traits like his perceived childishness and fantastical ego, often attributed to Andersen in the writings of his contemporaries and acquaintances. Dolan repeatedly attempts to reclaim narrative dominance through theatrical displays of thunder and lightning, using climactic interventions to redirect the story toward his preferred conclusion. These moments function both as narrative devices and as metatheatrical signals of shifting power between competing storytellers. Over the course of the play, storm imagery intensifies, becoming a recurring motif that underscores the escalating struggle for authorship and control, a thematic element we brought into the lobby.

As we progress deeper into the play's narrative, "ghosts" from Andersen's past appear to disrupt the storytelling. These figures form a collection of love interests from Andersen's life, often believed to be subjects of his unrequited affection. Their presence further entangles biography with fiction, folding emotional memory into the play's evolving narrative structure and complicating the audience's relationship to Dolan/Hans as both character and authorial presence.

As the play progresses, the audience discovers that Little One is responsible for the intrusion of these alternative narratives and is, in fact, the author of "The Little Rain Cloud." As a storyteller, Little One operates with power equal to, if not greater than, Dolan/Hans, reshaping characters and events through imaginative play. A young admirer of Andersen's work, Little One reinterprets and

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<sup>2</sup> Jackie Wulfschläger, "Introduction," in *Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales*, translated by Tiina Nunnally, (Viking, 2004), xxviii.

engages with the canon through a lens of play and joy in order to generate their own narrative. The director, Amanda Pintore, and I had many discussions about Little One's role in the play and how she fit in with both the historical figures and fairy-tale characters. We came to understand Little One as a figure of multiplicity, historically linked to Edvard Collin's child, who referred to Andersen as "Uncle Hans." Collin was an acquaintance of Andersen's throughout his life, whom Andersen showed great affection towards and who is imagined as a love interest within the world of this play. Little One also embodies both the immediate, physical presence of a child affected by Andersen's stories and a broader, metaphorical expression of the imaginative agency of young audiences engaging with narratives over time.

Taken together, these elements form a dramaturgical structure organized around Hans/Dolan and Little One, who both exert control over different narrative threads at different moments. The cast came to describe these figures not simply as narrators but as "storybuilders," actively constructing and contesting the world of the play. This structure brings together the past, the present, and the fantastical, iterating different configurations of "The Little Mermaid's" plot through different narratives. Based on this framework, Pintore and I developed a dramaturgical "guidebook" to help us understand and articulate how the play functioned both as a theatrical text and in our production. Key to our understanding of the mechanics of the show was the recurring storm imagery as a visual and structural marker of power shifts. For Dolan/Hans, this struggle represents a reclamation of narrative authority; for Little One, it is an imaginative act of play. Within this hierarchy, Little One ultimately emerged as the most powerful figure, embodying imaginative possibility rather than authorial dominance.

Two additional interpretive "rules" shaped our world-building. First, "The Little Rain Cloud" is framed as Dolan's escape from the narrative that Little One insists on telling. This echoes Andersen's own turn to storytelling as a means of processing emotional loss and exclusion, particularly following Edvard Collin's wedding, from which Andersen was barred. Dolan's narrative becomes a space for him to reframe his many unrequited loves and reconstruct himself as a storyteller. This narrative setup could risk falling into the trope of queer trauma in which queer characters are defined primarily through suffering, with trauma serving as the primary vehicle for their development. However, Izumi's play resists positioning queer experience solely through trauma. While the text engages deeply with longing and loss, it ultimately reorients

its narrative toward queer joy, play, and imaginative freedom. Rather than reproducing familiar tropes of queer suffering, the play affords its characters space for humor, reinvention, and emotional complexity. Our production embraced this orientation, understanding queer joy not only as an aesthetic choice but as dramaturgy and resistance. This became particularly relevant in the current political moment marked by anti-queer rhetoric and policies.

### DESIGNING THE LOBBY

From the earliest stages of the planning process, I approached the lobby as an infrastructural extension of the production rather than as a site for supplemental explanation. This approach was not just a stylistic preference but a conceptual one that resonated with the play's dramaturgical architecture, which privileges queer joy, nonlinear narrative, and immersive storytelling. I deliberately minimized the use of explanatory or expository texts in the lobby display, choosing to prioritize the creation of embodied experiences. We designed the lobby to distribute knowledge across sensory, spatial, and participatory systems. These elements weren't just aesthetic choices but invitations that asked the audience to enter a space of playful attentiveness. We conceptualized the lobby as a bridge where imaginative play and participatory acts carried audiences from passive observation into active participation in the production's narrative logic.

Using the play's structure as a guide, I designed the lobby as a multi-layered experience. The traditional dramaturgy boards (eight boards with sixteen total sides) provided thematic framing, contextual research, and production credits. Beneath this surface layer, a series of interactive installations invited deeper engagement. These included a reading corner featuring children's literature from Andersen's canon, where audiences could read or listen to stories, and a participatory arts installation. A final layer consisted of toys and play-based manipulatives dispersed throughout the space, functioning as a direct material extension of the character Little One and extending her influence from the stage.

### THE DRAMATURGY BOARDS

While designing the dramaturgy boards, I was intentional about creating aesthetic connections to both the show and to other elements within the lobby. A series of boards explored themes of queer identity, joy, and play. One board traced Romanticism and the archetype of the "romantic male" as the blueprint for how Andersen identified and constructed his own queer personage. Another board

centered queer joy as a present-day touchstone for queer narratives, identifying it as an embodied practice and encouraging audiences to reflect on its manifestations in their own everyday lives. A third board focused on imagination, play, and power, drawing a thematic connection to Little One and how her character operates within the world of the play. This board was also attached to others, which addressed the idea of a queer continuum. Pintore and I had many conversations in which we contextualized youth space within this production as a queer space of possibility. Crayon marks were used as an aesthetic motif to suggest Little One's presence, as if she had doodled on the boards herself. On the queer joy board, Little One included

**"In introducing the audience to the play's layered structure in the lobby, I conceived the lobby as a form of infrastructural support..."**

questions designed to prompt reflection from the audience, including, "When you're feeling your most joyful, how do you know? Is it a smile, a dance, or something else?"

When the audience entered the lobby, I positioned them within the dramaturgical power struggle between Dolan/Hans and Little One. The first board encountered in the lobby introduced the title and cast, featuring two distinct speech bubbles. One, in a crayon-like font designed for Little One, reads, "Welcome to the fantastical love story of 'The Little Rain Cloud.'" Below it, a cursive calligraphy-like font associated with Dolan/Hans counters: "Nothing like 'The Little Mermaid.' Who's even heard of that Hans Christian Andersen guy?" These dueling fonts reappeared across the lobby boards, embedding the play's central tension of authorship and play into the very infrastructure of the audience's pre-performance experience.

In introducing the audience to the play's layered structure in the lobby, I conceived the lobby as a form of infrastructural support that conveyed key information without overwhelming or preempting their experience of the performance. One area where I took this most into consideration was in presenting



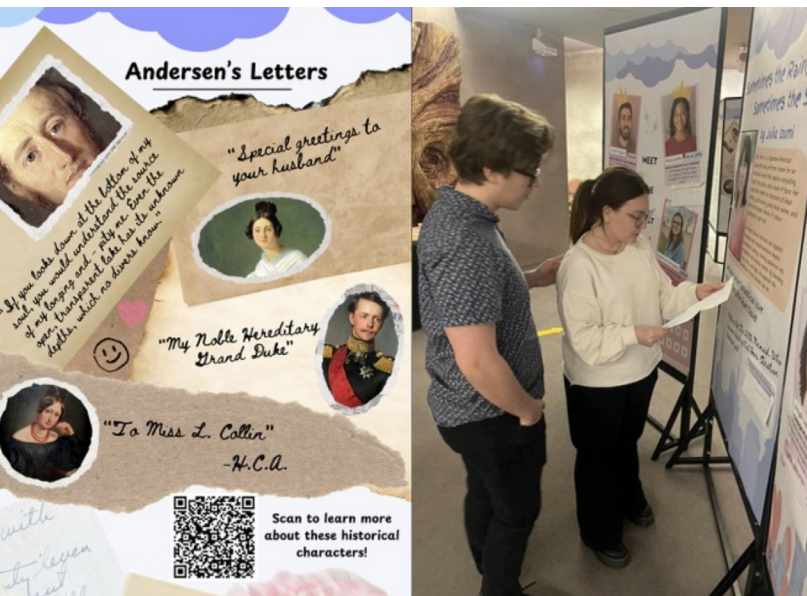
the historical references and figures within the play. At a pivotal moment in the play, the characters reveal themselves to be these different historical figures from Andersen's life by reading from physical letters. These letters function as both narrative anchors and material symbols of Andersen's relationships and correspondences. In translating this into the lobby, I treated the letters as connective nodes within a broader informational network. The dramaturgy board on historical figures (fig. I) featured a motif of envelopes, each containing the face of a historical figure alongside a brief quote from their correspondence with Andersen. Again, I maintained a minimal textual approach, with more extended

Little One, reinforcing her presence as an active agent within the narrative and illustrating how she draws on these histories as creative stimuli.

## THE READING CORNER

An entire section of the lobby was dedicated to the reading corner (fig. II), which featured comfy cushions, curated books, and supporting dramaturgy boards, creating a space that invited audiences to linger, explore, and inhabit the production's imaginative terrain. One board focused on "The Little Mermaid," sharing Andersen's version of the story to aid the audience in recognizing its intertextual echoes across the play's many narratives. Another board focused more broadly on children's literature and its importance as a literary field. With this board, there was a QR code linking to recordings of Andersen's stories read by the actor who played Little One, including "The Little Mermaid," "Thumbelina,"<sup>3</sup> "The Princess on the Pea,"<sup>4</sup> and "The Ugly Duckling."<sup>5</sup> These audio recordings echoed Little One's recurring presence in the play, creating continuity between the lobby experience and the performance itself while providing an additional sensory entry point into the layered lobby structure.

This space was made possible through a network of collaborations that exemplify the infrastructural logic of the lobby as a bridge. Working with Caelin Ross and Corrie Cisco from Arizona State University's library, we curated a collection of books for audience members to read that combined classical Andersen texts with contemporary adaptations. One of my favorites was *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, about a queer youth wanting to become a mermaid, which resonated with the play's themes of queer identity and imaginative possibility. Partnership with the School of Music, Dance, and Theatre's Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accountability (IDEA) Student Committee brought board games into the reading corner, further reinforcing the lobby as a space for play, rest, and informal exploration. Finally, collaboration with sound faculty and students, led by Daniel Jaquette, Assistant Professor of Sound Design for



**Figure I:** The historical character dramaturgy board (Left); Audience members reading letters from cast members featured on the headshot and bio dramaturgy board. Photo: Thomas Underdal

writings on each of these figures available via QR code linking to the digital lobby. The motif of letters was further extended across the lobby with the cast contributing personal love letters, which were displayed near their headshots on the cast and crew boards. (fig. I)

A Hans Christian Andersen board accompanied this board with a concise history of Andersen's life, giving the audience some foundational information on the nuances of Hans/Dolan's characterization within the play. This board also continued the ongoing dialogue between Hans/Dolan and Little One established throughout the lobby, featuring a stylized lightning bolt striking an image of Andersen looking upward. This visual cue signaled Andersen's awareness of the narrative mechanics at work in the play and signified an ability to recognize and manipulate this power. Both of these boards also featured doodles and annotations from

3 Within the story of "Thumbelina," one of the characters is described as "little one," and it is widely understood that the titular character was inspired by Henriette Wulff, who is portrayed as the character Jette in Izumi's play.

4 This story is referenced in the play, and it informed our production's portrayal of the prince and princess.

5 It is generally believed that the character of the Ugly Duckling is a stand in for Andersen within his canon.



**Figure II:** *The lobby reading corner.* Photo: Thomas Underal

Live Performance, enabled the creation of the digital audio recordings. This collaboration not only extended the lobby's narrative infrastructure into an auditory dimension but also served as a practical learning opportunity for emerging sound designers, demonstrating how audience-facing infrastructure can operate as both a pedagogical tool and an immersive experience.

### EXPLORATION OF THE PARTICIPATORY LOBBY ELEMENTS

Another section of the lobby was dedicated to the participatory art installation centered around the practice of leaving love notes. This area was supported by three dramaturgy boards (fig. III), which included questions that prompted audience members to consider the idea of love using their senses (What are different types of love? What does love look like? What does love sound like? Etc). Accompanying the questions on the board was a collage of responses from cast members about their relationship to love, using the same guiding questions.

An unused stairwell in the Galvin Playhouse became the physical site for the participatory love-note installation (fig. III), transforming a previously underutilized space into a node within the lobby's broader infrastructural network. Upside-down umbrellas, a recurring visual motif throughout the production, served as receptacles for audience-submitted love notes, while colorful fabrics inspired by the rainbow flag reinforced the thematic connections to queer identity and joy. The installation was both site-specific and temporally resonant with our opening on Valentine's Day, foregrounding the play's focus on love while creating a bridge between the external world and the imagination of the production. By inviting audiences to leave

and reflect on love notes, the installation echoed Andersen's lifelong practice of letter writing, linking historical and contemporary modes of expression and embedding embodied reflection into the lobby's dramaturgical infrastructure. It also prompted audiences to consider how they personally understand love through the senses. The latter was an activity that we did early in the rehearsal process with the actors, and incorporating this into the lobby display created a feedback loop between rehearsal-room dramaturgy and audience-facing dramaturgy.

The final and most expansive layer of the lobby was the collection of play manipulatives and toys scattered throughout the space, extending Little One's presence from the stage to the lobby. Hopscotch patterns, directional arrows, beanbag games, and other interactive elements invited audiences to move through the lobby in non-traditional ways. This playful infrastructure functioned as a form of creative placemaking, prompting the audience to consider the construction of the space and allowing them to renegotiate how they might be present. The design of these elements was informed by a workshop I conducted with ten- to twelve-year-old young people at Childsplay, a theatre for youth company located in Tempe, Arizona, as part of an existing class I was teaching on devised story making. In the workshop, participants used the manipulatives and toys to design a space that told a story, and I noted how the youth participants played with the manipulatives and used them to define how a space could be reconfigured using ideas of story, movement, and function. Observations from the workshop informed the lobby layout, using play logic from the young people to design placements of hopscotch, orientations of reading forts, and thematic and spatial rhythms of play.

The toys also served as a form of community building within the production and the theater department ecosystem more broadly. On the first day of lobby load-in, we hosted a "play day" to add another level of inquiry, inviting cast and crew members to play in the lobby and prompting those who were knowledgeable about the production to consider how acts of play might operate. By observing how participants engaged or failed to engage throughout the day, I was able to better design the spaces of play. For example, in the first design, there was a large area dedicated to a ring toss located within the center of the lobby areas. In the final design, I removed the ring toss because its prominent placement and lack of engagement made it ineffective.





**Figure III:** The sensorial exploration of love dramaturgy boards and interactive art installation (Left); and the Umbrella Art Installation (Right). Photo: Thomas Underdal

Beyond design feedback, this event served as a moment of decompression during the midpoint of tech rehearsals, offering self-care and stress relief while deepening communal investment in the lobby’s conceptual framework. This thread of community self-care is an interesting one that I am taking away from this part of the process, considering how the process of dramaturgy and the spaces we facilitate might serve dual purposes in serving productions and communities. This specific thread has opened up many new ideas for me about how dramaturgs operate in different modalities within production spaces. Throughout this process, I became a wearer of many hats, or better yet, I had a sash that I was able to pin things onto to show the different ways that I could be present in the space. I am interested in the many ways a dramaturg might exist within the theatrical infrastructure, offering perspectives and supporting the ways in which collaborators and audience move through spaces. We create bridges and wayfinding to traverse them.

### CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

The lobby ultimately emerged as an activated bridge that embodied the conceptual and thematic intent at the core of *Sometimes the Rain, Sometimes the Sea*. This dramaturgical infrastructure became a site of wonder, play, and imaginative preparation, creating a threshold where the boundaries between the external world and the theatrical narrative began to blur. This vision came to life most vividly during a field trip performance attended by a sold-out audience of middle and high school students. When they arrived, the lobby reached its fullest potential as the young audience members interacted with the space intuitively and joyfully, responding not as spectators passing through a waiting area

but as participants inhabiting, exploring, and co-creating within the environment. This was the most active the lobby would be throughout the entire run, which is notable as it was the most predominantly “youth” audience the production had. I observed that adult audiences were most engaged with the participatory art installation, likely because it had the clearest parameters and the directions were clearly laid out. While this space was constructed with youth primarily in mind, this process illuminated how these are still spaces shared with adults, and how, as a dramaturg, I need to construct these spaces in a way that gives clear entry points for adults that are specific and clear. This discovery has raised other questions for me to consider when creating spaces like this in the future. How do we invite different audiences to participate clearly? How do we help them best interface with the world we are crafting while guiding interaction and engagement appropriately? While we didn’t experience poor behavior or “bad engagement,” I did not create a structure that disincentivized or forbade that, which could have been riskier in another environment.

The lobby succeeded because it functioned as the production’s prologue; written in crayon, in movement, in sound, and above all, in joy. It framed the performance not as a fixed event to be received, but as a participatory world to be entered. Crucially, this infrastructure was built not only through design and dramaturgical intent but also through partnership with key collaborators contributing structural supports to the lobby’s network. These collaborators functioned as both architects and connectors, helping shape the resources, content, and experiences that allowed the lobby to operate as a multi-sensory, layered environment. Without these collaborative contributions, the lobby would

not have achieved the richness or functionality that allowed audiences to traverse the space as a site of imagination, reflection, and play.

In this model, the dramaturg becomes a designer of experience, a facilitator of bridges that link story, space, audience, and the broader ecosystem of collaborators who make theatrical experience possible. The dramaturg models the architecture of the space, choreographs arrivals, places objects, and invites audiences to engage cognitively, emotionally, and physically. The lobby is not merely ancillary infrastructure; it is a functional and symbolic node capable of shaping attention, activating imagination, and conditioning engagement. Thinking of the lobby as a bridge encourages a broader vision of theater-making, leveraging infrastructure, stakeholder collaboration, and multi-sensory design to reimagine how stories are encountered, understood, and felt. The bridge, in practice, is both method and metaphor, calling to connect, to reframe, and to expand the possibilities of theatrical experience. ♦

**THOMAS UNDERDAL (he/him)** is an interdisciplinary theatre maker, educator, and scholar. His work as a theatre maker spans the roles of director, writer, dramaturg, and designer whose work is situated at the crossroads of theatre for youth, community based theatre, and new work development. His research and creative practice center on generative and responsive new work methodologies, and developing pedagogies and dramaturgies for the current and future ecological realities. He is the cofounder and resident dramaturg of Honeycomb Theatre Collective, a new work development space that centers community partnership as a structuring condition for theatre-making and for building broader social connection. His recent projects include *The Beanstalk Project* developing new work by, for, and with youth through classical fairy tales and an *Earth Day Celebration* featuring original ecological theatre for youth. His dramaturgy credits include *Sometimes the Rain*, *Sometimes the Sea* (Arizona State University), *For The Good of the Union* by Jacob Buttry (Nuebox Seed Residency/Honeycomb Theatre Collective), and *over my dead body there'll be a pillow fight* by Claire Dettloff (ASU New Works Festival). Administratively, he has worked with Theatre Works as Director of Education, Childsplay as Academy Associate, and served as Play Works Coordinator for AZ Thespians. He holds an MFA Theatre for Youth and Community from Arizona State University.

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# An Ecodramaturgical Ethos in New Play Development: Re-composing Environmentalisms on a Damaged Planet

by Khristián Méndez Aguirre

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I build on previous scholarship on eco-theatre (works that engage with environmental issues as content, form, or context) and ecodramaturgy (a play's specific configuration of the relationship among theatre, environment, and audiences). I expand the meaning of ecodramaturgy from an analytical method for studying eco-theatre to a process for *creating* it. Using two eco-plays and key moments from their developmental processes as evidence, I argue that ecodramaturgical new play development remakes environmentalism. Because these plays' developmental processes are rooted in feeling and embodiment, rather than the traditional environmentalist approach of communicating the authenticity of an environmental issue, these plays create experiences that implicate the audience in a broader constellation of forces that sustain environmental degradation, rather than charging them with solving environmental degradation through their individual choices. The result is a renewed environmentalism that better matches the audience's experience of environmental degradation, a renewed set of artistic strategies, and new horizons for both artistic and environmental praxis.

Scholarship in the field of performance and ecology (P&E) argues that theater carries embedded relationships to the natural environment.<sup>1</sup> Those relationships are theatre's ecodramaturgical qualities, which Lisa Woynarski and Theresa May locate in American and Transatlantic performances, using ecodramaturgy as an analytical

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<sup>1</sup> See Una Chaudhuri, "'There Must Be a Lot of Fish in That Lake': Toward an Ecological Theater," *Theater* 25, no. 1 (1994): 23–31; Downing Cless, *Ecology and Environment in European Drama* (Routledge, 2010); Wendy Arons and Theresa J. May, eds., *Readings in Performance and Ecology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).



method and as a designation for these works.<sup>2</sup> Because ecodramaturgy is a quality of eco-plays and eco-performances, it arises from and during their developmental process. A particularly apt lens for studying process is the New Dramaturgical theory of playmaking, which argues that play development processes “propose relations and connections” among action, idea, movement, texts, and others as particular articulations of “thinking through practice.”<sup>3</sup> An eco-play’s ecodramaturgy is, then, shaped by the relationships that are foregrounded in its developmental process. To support my argument, I perform dramaturgical analyses of Caroline Reck and Indigo Rael’s *Polly Mermaid Apocalypse WOW!*—presented by Glass Half Full Theatre at the VORTEX Theatre (2018)—and the Off-Broadway premiere of Steve Cosson and Michael Friedman’s *The Great Immensity*—made under the umbrella of The Civilians and performed at The Public Theatre (2014)—which are contextualized with archival research and interviews with their makers to characterize each play’s development process. The evidence and my framework allow me to make visible how ecodramaturgical practice, in this case, new play development, remakes environmentalism through process and products that center feeling and embodiment.

Through this work, I contribute to debates in various fields—the meaning of ecodramaturgy in performance and ecology, the relationship between theory and practice in the environmental humanities, and theorizations of dramaturgy and its real-world applications in theatre studies. Most importantly, this work centers dramaturgy as a tool to meet our current political and environmental moment.

## REMAKING ENVIRONMENTALISM THROUGH DRAMATURGY

Dramaturgs approach new play development with various, sometimes overlapping purposes: Dramaturgs can help a work find its own unique expression,<sup>4</sup> and they can also interpret a historical context’s relationship

to a play.<sup>5</sup> While both of these aspects of dramaturgical practice are relevant to eco-theatre, dramaturgy’s most powerful potential to remake environmentalism lies in its ability to sense and re-compose the relationships that form its basis. This vision of dramaturgy differs from production dramaturgy and is most closely aligned with the dramaturg as imagined in European New Dramaturgy. This perspective destabilizes dramaturgy, moving it away from a single dramaturg toward a shared collaborative process.<sup>6</sup> The product of that collaboration is a “thinking that is done together” embedded in the production.<sup>7</sup> After Deleuze and Guattari, Bleeker argues that the arts think through composition.<sup>8</sup> These collaboratively generated compositions are what dramaturg-scholar Zoë Svendsen calls “structures of attention,” which determine the relationship among an audience, the theatrical event, and their broader contexts.<sup>9</sup> For example, the foundational dramaturgical relationship between eco-plays, their audiences, and the environmental context is the exposition of scientific information to characterize a problem that the audience is then charged with solving directly or indirectly.<sup>10</sup> Ecodramaturgical new play development, as I demonstrate momentarily, centers inquiry, not communication, and therefore moves away from these relationships.

The precise nature by which a play’s structures of attention come together can certainly be ascribed to a particular company’s signature approach, or particular directing style: Glass Half Full Theatre’s signature work is devised, object, and puppetry-based theater.<sup>11</sup> The Civilians, on the other hand, is an “investigative theatre” company.<sup>12</sup> Reck and Cosson, as founders of their respective companies, have signature styles that span multiple productions. However, the kinds

<sup>2</sup> See Theresa J. May, *Earth Matters on Stage: Ecology and Environment in American Theater* (Routledge, 2021); Lisa Woynarski, *Ecodramaturgies: Theatre, Performance and Climate Change* (Springer International Publishing, 2020), [Link](#).

<sup>3</sup> Maaike Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy: Thinking Through Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Andrea Romaldi, “Master Class: Dramaturgy and New Play Development,” in *The Directors Lab*, ed. Evan Tsitsias (Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2019), 99–123.

<sup>5</sup> Graça P. Correa, “Dramaturg as Context Manager: A Phenomenological and Political Practice” in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (Routledge, 2015) 308–312.

<sup>6</sup> Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (Columbia University Press, 1994), 204.

<sup>9</sup> Zoë Svendsen, *Theatre & Dramaturgy* (Methuen Drama, 2023), 2.

<sup>10</sup> The clearest examples can be found in eco-plays for young audiences like Elena Araoz’ *Plastic Drastic* (2016), in which its young protagonists learn to ask for fewer plastic toys after a long ocean Odyssey.

<sup>11</sup> “History,” Glass Half Full Theatre, accessed May 4, 2026, [Link](#).

<sup>12</sup> “About Us,” The Civilians, accessed May 4, 2026, [Link](#).

of attentional structures I locate in my two case studies—remaking environmentalism by questioning its central tenets—can be found in other genres. Instead, I theorize how the structures of attention in these works—the assumptions they question and the thoughts they contain—arise during their developmental process, where “meaning, form and content come about in the making process,” rather than “representing an already existing structure of meaning.”<sup>13</sup>

Whereas new play development can be practiced (and taught) in a sequence that involves readings, workshop productions, or world premieres, here I characterize process using the mix of categories that Bleeker theorizes. The most salient aspect of these processes, for my purposes, is what Bleeker calls “speculating,” or the process of imagining, proposing relations, and making work past constraints: thinking-making from within the work, listening to its “logic,” not to fix it, but to notice and nurture what is emerging.<sup>14</sup> In this context, the generative artists practice process-oriented ecodramaturgy as they imagine and create theatrical relationships that move past the environmentalist tenets they sense and critique.

The affective experiences that these artists draw from to structure their processes can be understood in several ways because the terminology used to describe emotions or feelings is historically contingent.<sup>15</sup> Recognizing this contingency, I use emotion and affect as theorized by contemporary affect theorists. Sianne Ngai traces the contemporary distinction between emotion and affect to psychoanalysis, where the desire to distinguish “third-person from first-person representations of feeling” drove the terminological split.<sup>16</sup> Under that distinction, affects exist in the third person. Affect describes what an observer registers, or a disposition without a clear subject. This third-person framing aligns with Brian Massumi’s argument for affect as “unformed and unstructured.”<sup>17</sup> Ngai—along with Heather Houser and Nicole Seymour—ultimately disregards the distinction between affect and emotion as a productive

one for their study, using the terms “more or less interchangeably.”<sup>18</sup> Because I am writing dramaturgically, I find Sianne Ngai’s definition of affect as a “disposition towards its audience and the world” most useful.<sup>19</sup> I am interested in how performance might produce affects that propose—or reaffirm—relationships between humans and environmentalisms, and how affects might open—or dispose—characters and audiences to new possibilities.

**“I am interested in how performance might produce affects that propose—or reaffirm—relationships between humans and environmentalisms...”**

#### **FEELING UNTHINKABLE RELATIONSHIPS IN POLLY MERMAID APOCALYPSE WOW!**

Despite the questionable impacts of recycling and the private sector’s ample efforts to resist legislation curbing plastic production, the plastic crisis is often communicated through appeals to recycle, refuse, or reduce plastic consumption. Marketing campaigns by environmental NGOs like Greenpeace and the Alliance to End Plastic Waste burden audiences with the responsibility to recycle through what I am calling a “wasteful binary”: should they recycle, they are managing the negative impacts of plastics; should they choose not to, they perpetuate those harms. However, as ecocritic Heather Davis has argued—based on the number of places that plastic can now be found, which include every system in the human body and ecosystems as remote as hydrothermal vents deep in the ocean—“the world is now plastic.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the structures of attention that cue audiences to recycle practice an interpretation of

<sup>13</sup> Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy*, 45.

<sup>14</sup> Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> For a theorization between emotion, performance and science, see Joseph Roach’s *The Player’s Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*.

<sup>16</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>17</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002), 260.

<sup>18</sup> Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 224; Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 17; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Heather Davis, *Plastic Matter* (Duke University Press, 2022), 3.

the plastics crisis that is not commensurate with its reality.

Managing the impact of plastic pollution might involve rejecting individual choice and embracing the ubiquity of plastics, as in Caroline Reck and Indigo Rael's *Polly Mermaid Apocalypse WOW!* (PMAW!), presented by Glass Half Full Theatre in 2018 at the VORTEX Repertory Theatre in Austin, Texas. The play contains structures of attention I describe as "unthinkable affective relationships." These are the romantic, narrative, spatial, and temporal entanglements between the play's characters and their environments that underpin the play's thesis that plastic cannot truly be done away with. These structures of attention arise from a process that began with Rael and Reck's deeply embodied and affective experience with plastic waste.

PMAW!'s central unthinkable affective relationship is a love triangle between a Styrofoam Cup (puppeteered by Gricelda Silva), physicist Debórah Degudere (Kate Taylor), and the half-plastic, half-fish mermaid Polly (Indigo Rael). While demonstrating her plastic-disposal technology to investors, Deb uses a Styrofoam Cup and then flushes it through a wormhole. The Cup lands in Polly's reef, where other items-turned-sentient (puppeteered by an ensemble of "Skubukis") co-exist under the Mermaid's care. There, we learn that Cup is infatuated with Deb: "She picked me. She filled me up. She put me in her mouth."<sup>21</sup> Empathizing with the Cup, Polly returns her to Deb through the wormhole, and both land back in the physicist's lab. At first sight, Deb crushes on Polly and follows her back to her reef. There, in conversation with her old computer Mac, Deb has a revelation (one of the meanings of "Apocalypse")—seeing the plastic-filled future that annihilates humanity, Deb becomes resolute to convince people in her timeline to curb plastic production: "We made the thing that destroyed us. ... Objectively, I understand. But subjectively, I can't accept that. I have to believe it could have turned out another way."<sup>22</sup> Deb—advised by Polly to feel "dry"—returns to the present. The play's triangle establishes its dramatic conflict as a clear refusal of the wasteful binary.

The triangle makes possible yet another unthinkable affective relationship, the entanglement between Deb's lab (in the present) and Polly's reef (in the future). At the

<sup>21</sup> Indigo Rael and Caroline Reck, *Polly Mermaid Apocalypse WOW!*, unpublished manuscript, undated, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Rael and Reck, *Polly Mermaid*, 23.

beginning of the play, Deb desires to know *where* the trash goes and obsesses over this. This obsession is fed once she meets Polly, who travels through the wormhole and makes her *feel* that it's possible to see this alternate universe. The mechanism that connects both spaces, the flushing device that Deb invented, is the "Portal Potty," which Polly teaches Deb to use by channeling *feeling* in her body:

**DEB:** How can you be sure you'll reach your intended destination?...

**POLLY:** You'll feel it. Just think of something that makes you wet.<sup>23</sup>

Feeling, as PMAW! proposes, can be a place to speculate from and imagine other possibilities. The ample sexual innuendos also recognize and reconfigure the assumption that adults already understand everything about plastic pollution. The triangle, the play's entangled structure, and its adult focus are a rebuttal of the traditional villainization of plastic in eco-plays and environmentalism. The play makes speculative structures of attention to circumvent the mental obstacles of plastic pollution and its traditional characterization.

When Deb returns to the present resolute to save humanity, she has a cold reckoning. She learns that in her absence, her former advisor (and lover) Linda has sold her research: It will be weaponized by the US government to dump plastic in other countries. She refuses, and Linda incarcerates her. With the Portal Potty technology privatized, Deb communicates with Polly in the future by sending her an Emergen-C packet. Polly then comes back to rescue her, telling her that reconfiguring possibilities is the stuff of science. Seeing that science and feeling are more entangled than she previously thought, Deb reconstructs her Portal Potty and asks it to "take me somewhere where the good I can do is equal to or greater than the bullshit I cause."<sup>24</sup> She lands on the surface of the ocean, where Polly once again waits for her, but this time she has more organic matter than before and invites Deborah to swim underwater with her: "Change hurts. The quicker it happens, the more it hurts... But you'll catch up! C'mon!"<sup>25</sup> Leaving behind a false binary of safety versus danger, Deb embraces discomfort

<sup>23</sup> Rael and Reck, *Polly Mermaid*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Rael and Reck, *Polly Mermaid*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Rael and Reck, *Polly Mermaid*, 39.

in pursuit of the impossible; she dives into an ocean made of blue bubble wrap, encountering organisms composed of endless combinations of organic and plastic matter, and presumably learning to breathe underwater. The logical extension of its various unthinkable affective relationships, the play proposes, is unimaginable, likely uncomfortable, but *not* impossible. Though not perfect—the play prioritizes structure as a delivery of information and feeling over character and dialogue—*Polly Mermaid Apocalypse Wow!* reconfigures the wasteful binary.

**“The various unthinkable affective relationships result from a development process shaped by embodied and affective experiences...”**

The various unthinkable affective relationships result from a development process shaped by embodied and affective experiences that serve to do what Bleeker calls “speculating,” “articulating,” and “structuring.” Polly’s origins are an act of speculative feeling: Writer/performer Indigo Rael felt frustrated and futile about recycling, interpreting the current state of waste pollution as a matter of inaction. Rael created Polly as an attempt to “just get out there and do it!”<sup>26</sup> She fashioned a wig made of plastic bags and a plastic-decorated bikini and drove around Austin, Texas, during the city’s South by Southwest Festival in 2014, sorting trash into the right bins. Rael met Reck in Fall 2014, following an earlier Glass Half Full show about waste (titled *The Orchid Flotilla*). In 2017, the two began developing the show together, drawing on Glass Half Full’s tradition of movement, personal experience, objects, and puppetry to create audience-experience arcs that offered new perspectives on environmental issues.

Their process began by naming the aspects of the affective binary that were frustrating for them—an aspect of the developmental process that Bleeker calls “Articulating,”

26 Indigo Rael, personal interview with the author, July 2023.

or naming emergent qualities.<sup>27</sup> The devising process for PMAW! began from Rael and writer/director/performer Caroline Reck’s common frustration with environmentalist eco-theatre. They identified frustration with the idea of having a ‘right’ choice, and Reck and Rael wanted to “poke fun at the idea of getting it right.”<sup>28</sup> Rael and Reck suspected that Deborah’s desire to follow the wasteful binary to its logical conclusion would create problems elsewhere. They followed that intuition into various clowning and Lecoq exercises, often with sanitized trash that Rael would bring to rehearsal. These methods brought forward humorous structures—puns, incongruence—that advanced the play’s ideas. In an interview with me, Caroline Reck summarized the values guiding play’s development:

[Eco-theatre tends to] take itself seriously because the issue is extremely serious. I agree that the issue is extremely serious... Humor is an effective way to loosen up our thinking about a topic so we can reflect on it more... As an adult person listening to that story, it puts people in a mental space of learning and openness, which we learned from puppets as kids, or learned from imaginary experiences. We don’t let ourselves learn things about environmental issues when facts are centered... Laughter loosens you up.<sup>29</sup>

Here, Reck and Rael’s articulation of eco-theatre and environmentalism notes its seriousness as a dramaturgical quality that makes certain kinds of thinking possible. It is also carried by assumptions about its audience: Adults do not have the same space to question and learn about reality as young people, and puppets are, in fact, part of that aesthetic tradition.

Through its imperfect yet effective reconfiguration of the wasteful binary, PMAW! dissolves the traditional implication of the audience with both the problem and the solution to plastic pollution through recycling. Rooted in a development process that speculates past, and articulates and restructures environmentalism’s affective

27 Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy*, 66.

28 Indigo Rael, personal interview with the author, April 2026.

29 Caroline Reck, personal interview with the author, April 2026.

binary, PMAW! proposes the more realistic idea that plastic may be here to stay, but whereas plastic presence is interpreted by the wasteful binary as a reason for despair, the play's unthinkable affective relationships propose we may find both freedom and optimism in embracing a life with plastics. What PMAW! does not address—and criticisms of its naiveté are valid here—is the cost of holding contradictory emotions simultaneously.

### FEELING INFORMATION IN *THE GREAT IMMENSITY*

The wasteful binary and appeals to recycle rely on the clarity of identifying plastic. Climate change, on the other hand, can be found in just about any individual consumer choice,<sup>30</sup> creating a much more diffuse and contested set of relationships between the audience and the issue. What recurs in the structures of attention that frame climate change, instead, is the emphasis on the cost of acting the “right” way and the uncertainty about whether the choice is, indeed, correct.<sup>31</sup> I call this dramaturgical structure the “calculus of cost”: the weighing of personal and collective sacrifice against uncertain outcomes *as well as* the potential cost of calculating for too long. It underlies climate negotiations, policy debates, and climate dramas. This ongoing weighing, which results in overwhelm, is partially an outcome of extensive misinformation campaigns that emphasize uncertainty and controversy<sup>32</sup> to discredit climate science,<sup>33</sup> as well as a true reflection of the emergent and complex nature of climate change adaptation. No matter the source, however, the calculus of cost forecloses wide interpretations because it emphasizes two emotions, hope and despair, by attaching them to a successful or failed calculus. In doing so, it renders other emotions inadequate in climate information, for they come

to feel like detractions from the seriousness of the issue.

In Steve Cosson and the late Michael Friedman's *The Great Immensity*,<sup>34</sup> recurrent atmospheres of felt information replace the calculus of cost. Established through song, these atmospheres articulate emotion in response to an excess of information; at the same time, they serve as a mechanism for interpreting information. In doing so, they cue the audience to experience the climate crisis through a range of feelings different from the overwhelm, anxiety, and uncertainty that define the calculus of cost. The play's protagonist, Karl, and the group of teen activists known as the Earth Ambassadors perform this substitution as they refuse to wait for the calculations of science and policy and instead pursue what their feelings tell them to do. Even if the play's proposed solution—abandoning one's family—is implausible, its central structure of attention serves to recognize the role that emotions can play in finding alternatives to the calculus of cost.

Disillusioned with TV after his network re-cuts his documentary on vanishing ocean wildlife into yet another audience-ensnaring “shark week,” Karl (played by Chris Sullivan) disappears while working on a project in Panama. His refusal to keep producing information for an audience that will receive it as spectacle rather than as occasion for action is the play's first refusal of the calculus of cost—Karl is disengaging from the foreclosed deliberation it demands. His spouse, Phyllis (Rebecca Hart), ventures across the continent in search of him, and through her quest, the audience learns that Karl has joined a group of teens known as the Earth Ambassadors, who plan to leave their families and board a cargo ship called *The Great Immensity*. Led by American teen Julie (Erin Wilhelmi), the Earth Ambassadors understand that “the information is already there” and that meaningful action requires changing “hearts and minds”<sup>35</sup> before the 2015 UN climate talks in Paris. They will not wait for the calculations of science and policy to resolve, and are instead using their feelings to interpret the same information: If the Climate Talks keep delaying action because countries

30 See Michael Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” *Global Environmental Politics* 1, no. 3 (2001): 31–52.

31 This debate is most clearly conceptualized in Nicholas Stern, *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review* (Cambridge University Press, 2007) and William Nordhaus, “A Review of the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change,” *Journal of Economic Literature* 45, no. 3 (2007): 686–702.

32 Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011), esp. chap. 7.

33 Geoffrey Supran and Naomi Oreskes, “Rhetoric and Frame Analysis of ExxonMobil's Climate Change Communications,” *One Earth* 4, no. 5 (2021): 696–719; Benjamin Franta, “On Its Hundredth Birthday in 1959, Edward Teller Warned the Oil Industry about Global Warming,” *The Guardian*, January 1, 2018, [Link](#).

34 The play premiered at Kansas City Rep in 2012, but that version differed substantially from its 2014 Off-Broadway run at the Public Theatre. My analysis relies on the recording of the 2014 performance and the final draft of the script submitted to the publisher, shared with the author.

35 Steve Cosson and Michael Friedman, *The Great Immensity*, unpublished manuscript, 2015, act 1, scene 5.



cannot reach an agreement about what cost they are willing to bear, they will make them *feel*/ what is at stake if they disagree. Phyllis tracks down Karl's footsteps and thinks through the clues available to her. Interspersed throughout the story, non-diegetic musical numbers (performed by Dan Domingues, Cindy Cheung, Damian Baldet, and Trey Lyford in wildlife safari hats and UN negotiator suits) cover earth science, the toll of natural disasters, vanishing species, and the failure of climate negotiations to produce meaningful commitments. While the songs do not drive action forward, each one stages an atmosphere of felt information in which emotion arises from, and then re-interprets, the abundance of climate knowledge the play places before its audience.

The play's structure results from the Civilians' signature style of investigative theatre, which focuses on encountering information as always carrying an affective quality. Their methodology is described by Cosson as "neutral empathetic,"<sup>36</sup> in which each interviewer attempts to become the "ideal listener" for their subjects.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the interviewer's affective neutrality allows the subject to control the interview's affective tone, which in turn influences what information they are open to sharing.<sup>38</sup> For *The Great Immensity*, Cosson, Friedman, and additional interviewers generated "felt information" through involved site visits to Barro Colorado Island in Panama and Churchill in Manitoba, Canada, where they interviewed scientists and people who interact with climate change on a daily basis. This accumulation of information is what Bleeker calls "feeding," and it served as the basis for the project's thrust to speculate beyond the obstacles posed by the calculus of cost, resulting in atmospheres of felt information.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike verbatim theatre, which prioritizes physical, textual, and vocal precision, the Civilians' style restructures some of the material for the stage, preserving the subjects' emotions. For example, "We Are All Panamanian" is a song performed by Marcos (Dan Domingues), which is based on an interview

with Colombian geologist Carlos Jaramillo. The song adapts Jaramillo's two central emotions—gratitude and frustration—to organize the information that underpins the themes in *The Great Immensity*. Throughout his interview, Jaramillo emphasized his gratitude for the contingencies—random events with profound consequences that helped humans become the dominant species. These include the formation of the Gulf Stream and the meteorite that landed in the Yucatan Peninsula and extinguished most animal species alive then: "So [knowing those facts] makes you realize how lucky we are."<sup>40</sup> He is also keenly aware that humans are destroying the very systems that are necessary for our survival: "At the rate we are destroying the forest, we're going to be in big trouble... So it's not about 'Be nice to plants and animals,' it's a matter of survival."<sup>41</sup> Friedman and Cosson restructure this material into a song that contains much of this information, organized by amazement and irony, summarized by the song's ending, which Domingues performs with precision and gusto:

IT'S VERY FUNNY DON'T YOU THINK?

HERE IS THIS PLACE PANAMA

THAT MADE US YOU KNOW.

(spoken, critical) and we cut it in half!

BECAUSE WE THINK THE WORLD SHOULD BE  
MORE CONVENIENT.

THAT IS OUR CONTINGENCY.

SO YOU GET THESE BIG SHIPS MOVING ALL  
OVER THE WORLD

AND GLOBAL TRADE AND CORPORATIONS

AND EMISSIONS AND POPULATION

AND EXTINCTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

AND WHO KNOWS

(spoken) Someday, maybe the Gulf Stream will  
change because of that. And, you know, that might  
not be so... convenient.<sup>42</sup>

36 Sarah Kozinn, "Discovering What We Don't Know: An Interview with Steve Cosson of the Civilians," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 190.

37 Steve Cosson, course materials shared with the author

38 I have co-taught investigative theater with Steve Cosson, so here, I am adapting some of the material he has introduced to our students.

39 Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy*, 65–66.

40 Carlos Jaramillo, interview transcript shared with the author, undated, 13.

41 Carlos Jaramillo, interview transcript shared with the author, undated, 10.

42 Cosson and Friedman, *The Great Immensity* act 1, scene 3.

Through this translation of interview to song, we encounter the Civilians's "neutral empathetic" listening as a process of both feeding and structuring an eco-play that speculates past the challenge of environmental issues. Many of Jaramillo's statements in the interview and Carlos' statements in the song emphasize the cost of what we are doing: the destruction of the forests that we depend on and the threat to the Gulf Stream that allows humans to exist. However, instead of using these concerns to trouble what should be done, they emphasize their *irony* against the backdrop of the geologic history that brought us here. Like other songs in *The Great Immensity*, "We Are All Panamanian" assembles an atmosphere so that information can be felt as much as it is known. Its effect is a deeply felt, ironic understanding of geologic cycles that created our modern climate: both our insignificance in planetary history and our capacity to shape it. The song establishes the scientific parameters that also give weight to the dramatic action in *The Great Immensity*.

The atmospheres of felt information, however, all need to align towards the broader narrative resolution. In the process of finding that broader structure, Cosson and Friedman performed what Bleeker calls "questioning,"<sup>43</sup> or inquiring into artistic choices to make assumptions visible, instead of finding answers. Its most salient example was in the significant rewrite of the lead character's arc between the play's premiere at Kansas City Rep in 2012 and its Off-Broadway run at the Public Theater in 2014. In 2012, *The Great Immensity* followed twins Phyllis and Polly. Whereas Polly's arc resembled Karl's in that she abandoned Phyllis to join the Earth Ambassadors, Polly came to trust the Earth Ambassadors rather quickly and followed them based on that trust (whereas Julie, as I tend to momentarily, tries repeatedly to convince Karl). However, Cosson and Friedman felt that something "was missing," and they wanted to heighten the dramatic stakes so the story felt more powerful. To achieve this, they replaced Polly with Karl. Julie uses Karl's frustrations about his nature documentarian job to enlist him: "You know why your switch got turned, Karl? Because you realized that something you love is going away. Sharks. You love sharks, Karl."<sup>44</sup> As he meets the Earth Ambassadors and the Ship Spotters, their network of online supporters, Karl

finds a way to channel his disillusionment towards his nature documentarian job. His *feeling* that something else is possible and that he can be the one to find it helps him find a place in the teenagers' plot. This change refined the play's thesis that information is ultimately interpreted through *feeling* to yield varying conclusions: with the same information about the state of the world, Karl comes to see his own skills as an asset in finding the unthinkable.

In light of that protagonist arc for Karl, the play's other atmospheres of felt information become very palpable. The musical's opening number, "The Hot World" (sung by Julie), produces fear and anxiety arising from the overwhelming amount of information about disaster, which would have been familiar to an audience. *The Great Immensity* contrasts these emotions with "We Are All Panamanian," introducing irony within the latter number, but also between the first two songs. Almost all of the remaining songs let their singers (and the audience) feel information through a range of emotions, sometimes contrasting ones. "Charismatic Megafauna" is an ironic ballad where a biologist sings of her love for vanishing species by comparing them to emotionally unavailable human partners. "The Climate Summit Suite" parodies the decades of failed government policy by quoting its results. The songs and their atmospheres of felt information provide contextual information that clarifies the stakes around Karl and the Earth Ambassadors' plans while cementing the idea that information can be felt.

What the play and its developmental process amount to in the end is the proposal that feeling emotions at the same time can help its lead character find coherence in his actions. Karl begins the story aware and deeply depressed at the state of the ocean: "You're right that I'm not optimistic / I guess when like me you just look at statistics." He is also mourning the loss of his relationship: "You were my contingency / the stray chance that changed just who I hoped I could be." But the despondency and mourning now co-exist alongside hope: "I'll just keep looking for what I can see / trying to look for each contingency."<sup>45</sup> Like Karl, the audience begins the play with that same sense of despondency—captured in the play's opening number—but the story exposes us to gratitude, irony, satire, love, selfishness, and fear as mechanisms to interpret various

<sup>43</sup> Bleeker, *Doing Dramaturgy*, 67–68.

<sup>44</sup> Cosson and Friedman, *The Great Immensity*, act 1, scene 5.

<sup>45</sup> Cosson and Friedman, *The Great Immensity*, act 2, scene 9.

kinds of information. In doing so, *The Great Immensity* is not proposing solutions, nor is it charging the audience with sole responsibility for the problem. Rather than using theatre to explore or promote specific solutions, *The Great Immensity* implicates audiences by offering them much more

*“The Great Immensity  
implicates audiences by  
offering them much more  
information than the calculus  
of cost normally offers...”*

information than the calculus of cost normally offers—about the contingency of the human race, about the governmental origins of the problem, and about how emotion influences what we know—while letting them feel that information. It may not propose that we all take Karl’s path, but it points to emotion as a driver of new arrangements.

#### ECODRAMATURGICAL NEW PLAY DEVELOPMENT AS PRACTICE

Ecodramaturgical practice, in new play development, undoes the assumptions that underpin traditional environmentalism and its structures of attention by building new structures organized around affective experience. Environmentalism’s traditional structures of attention—for example, the wasteful binary of plastics and the calculus of cost for climate change—are denaturalized by works like *Polly Mermaid Apocalypse Wow!* and *The Great Immensity*. These works put forth dramaturgical structures that are sometimes outlandish—like unthinkable affective relationships—and without easy answers—like atmospheres of felt information—but which reveal that environmentalism as predominantly practiced in the Global North may just be one of many kinds of environmentalisms, depending on what we choose to prioritize as we remake it.

Bleeker’s categories to theorize the dramaturgy of new play development, in combination with information about how new eco-plays come to take shape, help characterize otherwise undertheorized ecodramaturgical new play development,<sup>46</sup> moving it away from a question of taste or

genre and toward a process where specific relationships are proposed, explored, and refined. Theater artists making eco-plays may *speculate* past the current state of affairs, *feed* their creative process, *articulate* the frustrations and contexts they are responding to, *question* their own creative choices, and ultimately *structure* their own work as a gesture to remake environmentalism. Seen through these categories, ecodramaturgy becomes something that can be practiced, rather than only studied.

The potential of ecodramaturgy as a practice will only gain urgency as eco-theatre continues to gain visibility in the theater industry and academia. Insights generated from close study can open new avenues for scholarship and artistic form, renewing artistic practice and our capacity to respond to the many complexities of environmental issues. ♦

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46 Two of her seven processual categories—*creating conditions* and *analyzing*—were not included in my analysis because they did not fit my evidence. This is partially because in some ways they are the most traditional work that a dramaturg does: responding to work as an outsider and shaping the conditions under which the work is created and discussed. I take those categories up in forthcoming work.

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# Tijuana Hace Teatro: Of Theatre Ecologies and Sustainable Interdependence

by Martha Herrera-Lasso González

Something very valuable is the impact a theatre experience can have on a spectator. In a recent session, a middle school teacher who is also a member of our School of Spectators shared that, after seeing a play about immigration and family separation, she was able to support students who had arrived in Tijuana at the end of the school year due to the United States' most recent migratory policies. Thanks to the play, this teacher found a way to offer her students hope.

—Ramón Verdugo,  
*on the Escuela Binacional de Espectadores*<sup>1</sup>

Tijuana Hace Teatro has run the Escuela Binacional de Espectadores (EBDE or Binational School of Spectators) for fifteen years. The annual program admits twenty Tijuana residents who are not regular theatre goers or artists, but who are interested in learning more about theatre. The diverse adult participants span a wide range of genders, ages, professions, and backgrounds. The school provides them free access to theatre and dance shows in both Tijuana and San Diego for a year and convenes monthly conversations to talk through these experiences. The opening testimony included above reflects the heart and spirit of the initiative, but it is only the tip of the iceberg of a much deeper movement.

Anyone who has ever put on a show knows that the complex art of cultivating audiences is one of the most difficult challenges we face as theatre-makers. In his book *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook to Dramaturgy*,

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<sup>1</sup> Ramón Verdugo, personal interview by Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Zoom, July 3, 2025, translated by the author. All quotations of Verdugo are translations unless stated otherwise.

Michael Chemers invites us to ask ourselves, “Why this play now?” every time we produce a show. “In other words,” he writes, “why have we chosen this play to present at this moment in history in front of this audience?”<sup>2</sup> In his well-known dramaturgy class at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City, Mexican theatre scholar Emilio Méndez uses Chemers’s handbook and adds the awareness of place to Chemers’s interrogation: “Why this play *here* and now?”<sup>3</sup> Hidden in those two provocations lives an unnamed audience. So, I venture to continue expanding this exploration: “Why this play here, now, *and for whom?*”

In this article, I sieve the question of “Why this play here, now, and for whom?” through the work of Tijuana Hace Teatro (THT—Tijuana Makes Theatre), a Tijuana-based company that has been asking itself this question for over seventeen years. While both Chemers and Méndez invite us to ask this of a theatre text or production (that is, how is a given dramatic text or theatre production relevant, attractive, or problematic to a specific audience at a specific time and place), in my analysis of THT’s work I expand the question beyond the theatre product to include other theatre-related practices, initiatives, and innovative types of programming. Because at times, when we find little justification for why a play here and now, we need to look beyond a dramatic repertoire if we are to meet our community’s needs. As dramaturgs, we can become the conduits to different types of cultural initiatives that better respond to our environment and best serve its audiences. In order for a play or cultural product to have a good life, it has to know how to survive within its local ecologies, and I argue here that the question of “Why this play (practice) here, now, and for whom?” can serve as a useful methodological tool towards the nourishment of said ecologies.

Canadian theatre scholar Ric Knowles developed the term “performance ecologies” as a metaphor, one that refers to “the complex ecosystem that is constituted by a city’s shifting networks of ‘actors’—performers, performances,

institutions, artists, administrators, and audiences—organized variously into companies, caucuses, committees, and communities.”<sup>4</sup> In this article, I use Knowles’s framework to analyze the performance ecologies that THT has fostered over the last seventeen years, arguing that such a reading may expose actionable strategies for cultivating audiences from a place of listening, service, and generosity. In their quest to grow theatre audiences, Ramón Verdugo (Artistic Director) and Jesús Quintero (Executive Director) offer incredibly useful lessons and tools to consider our work as artists and dramaturgs in service of those audiences.

**“...it started as a statement,  
an enunciation in the public  
sphere that Tijuana is a city  
that makes theatre...”**

Historically, many dramaturgs working through the lens of the national (Lessing himself or even Kenneth Tynan at England’s National Theatre Company in the ‘60s) in national theatre institutions have thought of identity as part of an abstract, nation-making project. When refocusing that lens beyond the political agenda of a current government and onto the local, we find that there is a different kind of dramaturgical approach, one that helps draft collective, local imaginaries through theatrical narratives that are locally produced by the community. When THT began in 2007, it started as a statement, an enunciation in the public sphere that Tijuana is a city that makes theatre: a slogan, a manifesto, and a call to both artists and audiences to pay attention. As the last seventeen years have shown, that call went far beyond filling up the empty seats of their own theatre venue (Las Tablas, opened in 2004). The assertion that Tijuana

2 Michael Mark Chemers, *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook to Dramaturgy* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 108.

3 Emilio Méndez, “Dramaturgistas, dramaturgismo y teatrología en la organización, realización y exhibición de una puesta en escena,” *Fundamentos de Teatrología*, UNAM, February 2024, translated by the author.

4 Ric Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), 5. Knowles warns us that when using the term ecology, it is important to identify its metaphorical quality and recognize that, by using it in this way, we are not considering the specific effects on an ecosystem that any human activity has—an important acknowledgment that has been made by indigenous scholars whose worldview and material reality is inseparable from the land itself, a repository of complex colonial and extractivist histories.

Makes Theater has become a life-long project that is much larger than their work as individual artists or even as a company.

I argue that the approach offered by THT works because, as a company, they have had the sensibility to listen to the needs and preferences of the community—both their artistic community and their city—and have woven together a series of diverse, interdependent initiatives that feed and sustain one another.<sup>5</sup> Their work contemplates a large demographic landscape, and the way the initiatives were designed has proved sustainable in ways that are rare. In what follows, I map out the history and interdependence of these initiatives in order to extract tools and strategies that might help dramaturgs and theatre artists more generally to connect to our audiences and communities from our different corners of the world and better answer the questions of why our theatre here, now, and for whom.

THE STARTING GROUND

In line with the metaphorical connotation of performance ecologies, I invite us to imagine the planting of a garden. The first thing we must attend to is the existing landscape: analyze the quality of the soil, the sun and wind exposure, and identify trees that cast large shadows or might be acidifying the soil. Listening to the soil before intervening is the key to a healthy and lasting garden if our objective is to plant seeds that will flourish within the conditions of the place and with the life that already inhabits it. The theatrical landscape in which the many seeds of THT were first planted is very different from the one that exists today, and it is for that reason that I think it important to begin with a brief overview of the conditions of that starting ground.

As academics and artists of the Mexican northern border have expressed, some of the first cultural initiatives that prompted a growth in Tijuana’s performing arts began in the 1970s with the creation of a cultural outreach office,

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5 In this article I will delve into the following initiatives: Festival THT (2008–2015), Escuela Binacional de Espectadores (Binational Spectator School, 2010–to date), Festival Interprepas (High School Theatre Festival, 2010 –to date), Taller THT (Workshop, 2013–to date), Laboratorio THT (Lab, 2014–to date), Festival de Teatro íntimo (Intimate Theatre Festival, 2018–2024), Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes (Theatre for Young Audiences, 2021–2025), and Cartografía Escénica (Theatre Mappings, 2020–to date). I don’t look closely into their productions as a professional theatre company or at programming at their independent theatre space, Las Tablas.

la Dirección de Difusión Cultural in 1974; a cultural center, la Casa de Cultura in 1975; and the creation of companies such as Los de pie and Los desarraigados, amongst others. In his study of Tijuana’s cultural infrastructures, Isaac Sainz Castillo argues that two phenomena of the 1980s set the stage for this growth: first, the region’s *fronterización* (a more formal establishment of border policies), and second, an attempt by the federal government to decentralize the country (prompted by the López Portillo presidency, 1976–1982) and implemented fully by Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988)).<sup>6</sup> It was due to this administrative and economic redistribution of resources that in 1982 the Muestra Nacional de Teatro (National Theatre Showcase) was hosted in Tijuana for the first time, the Tijuana Cultural Center (CECUT) was built in 1984, and the Border Culture Program (PCF) was created. These efforts, in addition to the theatre workshops offered by UABC (the Autonomous University of Baja California)—which constituted the most important artistic training and development initiative of the ‘80s—prompted a boom in plays written from and about the border, which contributed to the construction of a regional identity via theatrical narratives.<sup>7</sup>

In 1987, the regional Border Culture Program was replaced by the National Council for the Arts (CONACULTA), and in 1989, the National Fund for the Arts and Culture (FONCA) was created with the objective of providing creators with funding that would allow them to work full-time as artists. Along with these initiatives of cultural institutionalization, in 1993, the Center for Northwestern Performing Arts (CAEN) was founded in Tijuana—the largest professionalization effort in the region at that time, sponsored by the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) and located at CECUT.

In the ‘90s, Jesús Quintero partook in the wide range of theatre training offers in the region. While in high school, he studied acting at the Andrés Soler Institute and went

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6 Isaac Sainz Castillo, “El campo teatral en Baja California. Historia e impacto del Centro de Artes Escénicas del Noroeste (1993-2006)” (master’s thesis, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2024), 6.

7 For a wider scope on these dramaturgies, see Rosa María Sáenz Fierro, Teatro del norte/Teatro de frontera: Antología de ensayos y ponencias; Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, La gran bonanza, Crónica del teatro en Baja California 1856-2006; Armando Partida, Teatro del Norte y Fronterizo; Enrique Mijares, Dramaturgia del Norte. Antología. Rocío Galicia, Dramaturgia en contexto II. Diálogo con dieciséis dramaturgos del Noroeste de México / Entrevistada por Rocío Galicia. Webpage with plays and other theatre resources of the region: [Link](#)

on to get a BA in Spanish Literature at UABC (where the degree in theatre did not yet exist). He pursued the theatre diploma at CAEN and participated in the national training plenaries organized by the Programa Nacional de Teatro Escolar through INBA, supervised by Casa del Teatro (based in Mexico City), where people from all over the country were invited to participate. His diverse training, along with a self-taught interest that found inspiration from the production books and videos that he could get access to, led Quintero to think of himself as a “type of orphan,” without recognizable mentors or theatre genealogies.<sup>8</sup>

Ramón Verdugo trained in the first decade of the 2000s, before the BA in theatre existed, so he studied Communications at UABC. Like Quintero, he pursued the diploma offered by CAEN and was self-educated through the works of artists such as Peter Brook and Yoshi Oida. Both Verdugo’s and Quintero’s training reflects an important contrast to the more common theatre training offered in Mexico City, a type of training which is based on the teacher-apprentice model. Quintero refers to a kind of “irreverence” in which training doesn’t depend so much on “paying reverence” to a teacher and instead depends on finding one’s own way.<sup>9</sup> The “irreverence” that results from this kind of professional orphanhood gave them both the freedom to pave their own way in conversation with the needs of their surroundings, not having to pay attention to the expectations of any given legacy or genealogy.

Ramón Verdugo and Jesús Quintero met around 2006 and soon after began conversing about the state of theatre in Tijuana. By this time, Quintero had been a member of the theatre company Grupo Ojo for almost eleven years. After a fateful Mother’s Day, Quintero found the elaborate set pieces of his production of the classical comedy, *El servidor de los patrones*, had been destroyed backstage at the IMSS (Mexican Institute for Social Security) theatre by careless parents. After that frustrating event, Quintero decided to build his own theatre space, Teatro Las Tablas, in 2004.

The encounter between Verdugo and Quintero in 2006 coincided with an important moment in Tijuana’s theatre

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<sup>8</sup> Jesús Quintero, personal interview by Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Zoom, July 3, 2025, translated by the author. All quotations of Quintero are translations unless stated otherwise.

<sup>9</sup> Quintero, interview, July 3, 2025.

scene: The CAEN was to be dissolved and transformed into a performing arts production department within CECUT, and an undergraduate degree was about to open at the local university, UABC (where many of the CAEN professors would migrate). The first initiatives that had been seeded thirty years back began to take root and bear fruit in Tijuana’s performance ecology, both in terms of theatre training and in the construction of spaces and institutions that could host and sustain a growing cultural production.

By this time, Verdugo was working on an analysis of the local theatre landscape, and Quintero was using the phrase “Tijuana Hace Teatro” (Tijuana Makes Theatre) as a way to give visibility to Tijuana’s growing guild and theatre culture. When they came together, their first impulse was to connect the dots, and in December of 2007, they officially launched Tijuana Hace Teatro not just as a theatre company, but as a database that mapped Tijuana’s theatrical landscape at that moment—one that resulted from a particularly fertile time.

### THE FIRST THT SPROUTS

Faced with the question of what prompted their many initiatives, Verdugo and Quintero have plenty of clarity. The process went as follows: they did a general reading of the theatrical landscape by mapping local companies, working venues, theatre listings, and programming, and then identified what they considered to be the most urgent needs within these ecologies. Honoring their independent spirit, they sketched these priorities with freedom and intuition. In 2008, after Tijuana Hace Teatro had launched as a database, the first big initiative began:

The first action we took was the THT Festival... in December of 2007 we presented THT and the first thing we said was, the theatre spaces in the city don’t open their doors to local companies. We went, we knocked on the doors of the institutional theatres, and we said, we want to do a festival. At first two theatres opened their doors and that’s how the THT Festival started, which lasted for eight years.<sup>10</sup>

This festival responded to several needs of Tijuana’s theatrical community, in addition to gaining increased

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<sup>10</sup> Ramón Verdugo, personal interview by Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Zoom, July 10, 2025.

access to the more institutionalized local theatre spaces, since they often relied on independent venues only. The festival aimed to create community, or as Quintero remembers, to create “a festival that unites us.”<sup>11</sup> In what could sometimes feel like a fragmented guild, the festival would offer a space to strengthen ties and generate bridges not only through the presentation of their plays but also in the organization of a THT Gala and red carpets. For this reason, it was decided that the festival would open on World Theatre Day, March 27<sup>th</sup>.

Four local companies participated in the first festival, presenting their work in four different Tijuana theatres over three days. Throughout the following eight years, seventy-eight plays by over thirty theatre groups and companies were showcased at the festival. Every year, THT sent out a call to local companies, inviting them to the festival, and slowly, THT won their trust. In exchange for their participation, THT offered the companies a photographic and videographic record of their production, a box office percentage, and the festival’s shared publicity and network of local companies and cultural institutions.

If the first pressing need that Verdugo and Quintero identified was a need to access local theatre spaces, the second need concerned the question of generating audiences: How can we fill seats? Influenced by Anne Ubersfeld’s *École du spectateur*, in January 2010, Quintero and Verdugo sent out a call to the general local population, asking people to send a brief letter of interest explaining why they wanted to participate in a school for audiences. Priority was given to people who were not regular theatre goers. Selected students did not have to pay to be a part of the school; the only thing asked of them was their time and commitment to see as many plays as they possibly could throughout the year, and attend monthly meetings to talk about their spectating experiences. The second step was finding the seats. Used to seeing empty seats throughout the city, Verdugo and Quintero reached out to theatres and asked for a fixed number of comps a year, seats usually reserved for press or sponsors that often went unused. In this way, they ensured tickets for their students to attend a large range of plays and dance shows in both Tijuana and San Diego.

Verdugo and Quintero’s keen intuition in this design was to create a scheme that did not require an exchange of money, and I argue that this is possibly the most important reason why the school has lasted for so long. To date, the monthly sessions are hosted at Teatro Las Tablas and moderated by Verdugo and Quintero, or by one-time guests invited to moderate. Thus, students have free access to shows, and theatres and companies grow their audiences and fill their seats (something actors are always grateful for), with the hope that these audiences will become paying audiences once they graduate. As a professional company, THT has gained invaluable insight from this initiative. First, the school forces Verdugo and Quintero to see as much theatre as they can in order to effectively moderate the sessions, and in this way, they are up to date with the local theatre scene and can identify companies, casts, and creatives with whom they might want to collaborate. Most importantly, the monthly conversations with audiences have given THT immense amounts of direct feedback on what local audiences like and dislike, both in terms of content and how the theatrical experience is designed.

Once these two pressing needs had been met—to strengthen the local theatre community and generate new audiences—the third one presented itself quite naturally. Both the festival and the school served an adult population, and yet the question of engaging young audiences remained. In 2010, the Faculty of Arts at UABC (where Verdugo taught) wanted to grow enrollment in their newly established theatre undergraduate program. Thus, THT created an initiative for a high school population of fourteen-to-nineteen-year-olds who were discovering new hobbies and in the process of deciding on college degrees. Beyond enrollment, exposing them at that age to a theatre-making experience would be a long-term investment in local theatre culture, THT’s existing initiatives, and in the general project of cultivating new audiences.

That is how, in November of 2010, the first Festival Interpretas (Inter-High School Festival) was presented at the Teatro Rubén Vizcaíno Valencia at UABC’s Faculty of Arts, where, in the course of two days, six local high schools showcased their theatrical works (either devised by the schools or based on existing texts). Since then, over 1,500 young men and women, and a total of twenty-five high schools, have participated in the annual

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11 Jesús Quintero, personal interview by Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Zoom, July 10, 2025.



Festival Interpretas.<sup>12</sup> While there are no entry fees and no curatorial processes that would exclude schools from the Festival, there are a few guidelines: schools can only submit one play, and all shows have a time limit. In addition to the performances, the festival also consists of activities and forums around socialization, exchange, and integration for students from both public and private schools. Just like they had done with local companies and institutional theatres with the THT Festival, Verdugo and Quintero generated an alliance between the Faculty of Arts and local high schools. For ten years, the university lent its facilities as a way of promoting its own academic offerings, and consequently, it saw its theatre enrollment grow considerably. In 2020, the Faculty of Arts management changed hands, and since 2021, the festival has been hosted at CECUT. The Faculty of Arts is still involved through its undergraduate students who advise and accompany the high school groups in a somewhat dramaturgical role.

**“The origin story of the three initiatives developed between 2008 and 2010 reveals principles of interdependence that promote healthy performance ecologies...”**

This alliance has lasted in other ways, as often undergraduate students at the university volunteer or do their professional practices at the Festival Interpretas.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, after graduation, some of them are hired in permanent positions as theatre teachers in the local high schools. Again, a relevant connection exists between the different initiatives, with concrete and long-term benefits for those involved.

The origin story of the three initiatives developed between

<sup>12</sup> As of 2025, 39% of participating high schools are private and 61% are public.

<sup>13</sup> Before the Festival Interpretas, students would volunteer at the THT Festival and eventually at the young audiences' festival (Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes).

2008 and 2010 reveals principles of interdependence that promote healthy performance ecologies that go beyond traditional ideas of economic productivity and are instead understood as alliances and exchanges derived from real necessities. A bartering spirit permeates these practices, in which alliances don't necessarily depend on economic transactions but instead on a resource exchange that is feasible and sustainable, and which moves away from the market logic that drives many “successful” cultural production models. While it must be noted that THT has received various public grants at different points in its history, which have been essential to its sustainability, public funding is intermittent and has only covered a fraction of the costs. I attribute the success of the first initiatives to three factors: first, Quintero and Verdugo expanded their perception of what constitutes a resource beyond money; second, they knew how to connect seemingly marginal players with more central, institutional participants within this ecology; and third, they knew to adjust the economic scale of their initiatives to the realistic possibilities of their surroundings.

Finally, the three initiatives presented thus far serve different demographics, which diversifies THT's reach, allows for a varied distribution of local resources, and grows audiences in different directions. Together, theatre culture is nurtured and expanded in a more general sense due to an understanding that creation, training, and spectating are intertwined practices, without placing professional theatre in a hierarchy above other kinds of theatre programming.

## MATURATION PERIOD

The performance ecologies described by Knowles “consist of a shifting and unstable constellation of human and nonhuman actors and factors operating interdependently to constitute an ecosystem.”<sup>14</sup> This shifting and unstable flux explains why, in 2015, THT decided not to continue with the THT Festival. After eight years, the festival had made waves in Tijuana, inspiring similar actions by other theatre companies, which gained a life of their own. THT had also begun to shift its attention to other matters.

In 2012, THT began sketching an education program of their own, and in 2013, they invited CECUT to host a

<sup>14</sup> Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 6.

long-format workshop for non-professionals. They noticed a need for training programs that, in contrast to other workshops, were long-term, during which people could really deepen their training, explore different creative methodologies, and build strong bonds with a group. So, THT designed a program that consisted of three modules over nine months, and a total commitment of 144 hours. It would not result in a university diploma, but it would offer training for non-professionals interested in a serious approach to initiation as theatre artists. The first workshop enrollment reflected interest (twenty-nine participants signed up), and once it ended, people looked to continue the training. In 2014, a continuation program called Laboratorio THT was established. People who enroll in these education programs are interested in learning about acting and are looking for a creative space for personal development at different life stages (there is an age minimum—eighteen—but people of a large range of ages sign up). The Lab is a place for acting exploration and constant training for its students, and for Quintero and Verdugo, it has become a space where they can explore directing and creative process methodologies. The success behind this academic offer after twelve years proves that there was a real need in Tijuana for serious performance training spaces that are not associated with a university degree and where theatre making becomes a serious and disciplined practice for people who are not necessarily looking to become theatre professionals.<sup>15</sup> Similar to many community theatre projects, many of the people interested in these training spaces want to further their creative interests and connect with their local community.

Three years after the THT Festival closed in 2015, Quintero and Verdugo took on the festival format once more, this time with a more specific aim. Looking once again to meet certain needs which they found to be urgent—prompting small-scale productions and serving young audiences—they devised two new festivals. Through these, their local theatre community connected beyond the border region, first with a nation-wide network through the Festival de Teatro Íntimo (FeTI, Intimate Theatre Festival) and later with an international network via the Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes (Childhood and Youth Theatre Festival).

In 2018, the first edition of Festival de Teatro Íntimo took place in collaboration with Teatro Las Tablas—consisting of artistic, academic, and reflection activities aimed at celebrating a more independent and intimate theatre format. Each edition would have a specific theme as well as a guest city or state. With this, THT set out for the first time to extend its reach nationally based on the specific needs of the local landscape. Quintero explains:

...we realized that a format that was predominating was smaller shows with few actors, in small spaces and with more basic technical needs, so there was an opportunity there to create a space that would celebrate work made in smaller formats and independent venues—a format that for a long time had been minimized.<sup>16</sup>

Having taken up the spirit of the THT Festival once more to promote collaboration amongst Tijuana’s companies, in 2021, an important juncture prompted a new international initiative: the Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes. This festival for young audiences was devised in collaboration with CECUT and the International Association of Theatre and Performing Arts for Children and Young People. Jornadas was designed as a project that “would showcase artistic works but also generate dialogue... so that companies who were making theatre for young audiences here could find dialogue with other latitudes.”<sup>17</sup> That year, THT hosted the first Jornadas in Tijuana, a mix of conference and festival that included shows for young audiences as well as staged readings, professional workshops, roundtables, panels, working groups, and editorial presentations.<sup>18</sup> In November 2025, THT hosted the fifth edition of the event, with invited companies from Chile, Chihuahua, and Mexico City.

Finally, THT has continued the outreach efforts that launched the company in 2007 with a more recent initiative: *Cartografía escénica: una mirada a las poéticas creativas de la region* (Stage mappings: a look at regional creative poetics). This recorded online video interview series is in its fourth season with twenty-eight episodes so far. Each

<sup>15</sup> As of 2025, there have been twelve full cycles of THT Workshops, with over 130 graduates and twelve productions, and eleven full cycles of THT Labs with over 127 participants and twelve stage productions with a season at Las Tablas.

<sup>16</sup> Quintero, interview, July 10, 2025.  
<sup>17</sup> Ramón Verdugo, personal interview by Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Mexico City, Mexico, July 24, 2025.  
<sup>18</sup> There have been five annual editions of Jornadas.

one consists of an interview with an artist who works in the region, giving visibility to their work, deepening conversations around process and infrastructure, and generating an archive of many diverse actors that make up these performance ecologies. The company's origins are reflected in this recent initiative: offering maps of the regional theatrical landscapes and strengthening connections amongst local theatre communities. Two decades later, THT's spirit remains the same.

## HARVESTING A FEW CONCLUSIONS

Every initiative described in this article—THT Festival, the Escuela Binacional de Espectadores, Festival Interprepas, Workshops and Labs THT, Festival de Teatro Íntimo, Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes y Cartografía Escénica—has attracted different demographics to the local theatre scene. Under THT's logic, theatre is not an entertainment commodity, but a heterogeneous social practice, accessible to all types of people and with many diverse objectives. Thus, the measure of "success" of each initiative is unique and is not subject to the market logic of other urban performance ecologies that often—and wrongly—act as the models to be followed. As Jen Harvie warns in *Theatre & The City*, "a cultural materialist reading of theatre in its geo-social context thus reveals that the attribution of 'goodness' to central urban theatre—such as that on Broadway or in London's West End—risks conflating positive value with neoliberal market priorities and their threat of vicious economic and social inequality."<sup>19</sup> In the case of the landscapes described in this article, the "good" seems to be that which persists, diversifies, and feeds the ecosystem and not that which hoards and multiplies resources only for its own benefit. Largely, the different initiatives have had a long life thanks to the fact that the other initiatives exist alongside them—it is their interdependence and capacity to nurture each other and share resources that have kept them alive.

Something else that helps to keep these programs sustainable is that Verdugo and Quintero have been realistic about the reach and economic model of each initiative. They have not aimed to grow beyond what is economically feasible, and the programs keep to the scale that is sustainable given the available resources. As Quintero himself expressed when he described the creation of Las

Tablas twenty-one years ago: "around thirty people were going to each show... so the theatre space that I created responded to that demand."<sup>20</sup> Throughout these two decades, THT has known where and how to look for public funds that have added to the feasibility and accessibility of the initiatives, diversifying income sources in sustainable ways: state and federal resources, collaborations with local institutions such as CECUT and UABC, private fundraising, box office revenue, festival registrations, paid performances, and workshop and lab enrollment fees.<sup>21</sup>

THT's program design reflects an evolution in Quintero and Verdugo's methodologies as organizers and cultural promoters, and an awareness of structure that has allowed for better care practices both at a personal and an institutional level. Quintero reflects: "From the conception of FeTI and Jornadas you can tell that these are more recent projects since they are much better structured in terms of aims and objectives, in contrast to, for example, the EBDC in the beginning."<sup>22</sup> It is Quintero and Verdugo's long-term perspective and commitment to place that have given this garden the necessary time to find its balance and deepen its roots:

The first five years, we often said, we must invest time, money, and effort... we've never been businesspeople, but we intuit that the first five years of any business are a time to invest so that you can begin to build results: when maybe you make ends meet but there is no profit. Yet from the get-go, we decided that many of these things were conceived as medium- or long-term projects, and after seventeen years, we can say there are things that now run organically on their own.<sup>23</sup>

20 Quintero, interview, July 3, 2025.

21 Grants and public funding that THT has been awarded include: Programa México en Escena de SACyPC (2021–2023 y 2024–2026); Programa de Aceleración de Negocios de las ICC de CETYS Universidad y CIPE (2023, 2024); Programa ENARTES del FONCA (2020, 2024); Beca MAP Fund, USA (2020); Fondo Apoyo para Actividades Artísticas y Culturales Independientes de Baja California (2020); Beca TCG, EUA (2019); Programa Nacional de Teatro Escolar Baja California (2019); Programa de Estímulo a la Creación y Desarrollo Artístico de Baja California (2016); Programa de Fomento a Proyectos y Coinversiones Culturales del FONCA (2011, 2012); Programa de Desarrollo de Cultural Municipal de Baja California (2012, 2013, 2018).

22 Jesús Quintero, personal interview by Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Mexico City, Mexico, July 24, 2025.

23 Verdugo, interview, July 24, 2025.

19 Jen Harvie, *Theatre & the City* (Red Globe Press, 2009), 32.

THT, as an initiative, has generated spaces so that people who are usually distant from the theatre have an accessible and inviting doorway into the theatre world. As of 2025, they have created Comunidad THT, a group chat that includes everyone who has participated in any of their programs in the last seventeen years: “People who are part of the school of spectators, of our workshops, labs, volunteers at the festivals... the idea behind the Comunidad THT slogan is to build the sense that together, we are part of something bigger.”<sup>24</sup>

There is a key discursive—and highly performative—component in the narrative that THT has constructed that has been key to their success: since the first enunciation of “Tijuana Hace Teatro/Tijuana makes theatre,” Verdugo and Quintero put forth an invitation to Tijuana’s theatre community to enunciate themselves and in that enunciation, perform themselves into being as participants in Tijuana’s performance ecology.

As dramaturgs, we help to weave narratives that constitute the imaginaries of a place, and in that labor, THT has articulated a local identity through diverse theatre participation that is accessible to many publics. I quote Knowles once again: “The social—in which I include theatrical practice—consists of ‘webs of heterogeneous material and social practices that are *performative*, that generate realities’ (Law 12, emphasis added)—webs, that is, through which realities are explicitly *enacted into being*.”<sup>25</sup> My perception is that Verdugo and Quintero are a particularly performative node of Tijuana’s urban stages. In this way, a big part of their contribution to local performance ecologies has been the performative act of naming the existence of its theatre culture and thus enacting it into being. THT has strengthened a network and a theatre community through this performance of belonging in the form of festivals, training spaces, promotion, and outreach both within and beyond traditional theatre spaces. Almost twenty years ago, THT invited the local Tijuana community to enunciate: “Tijuana makes theatre, and I am a part of that making,” and today, new voices continue to join this collective act of performative enunciation.

I go back now to the opening question: “Why this play (practice) here and now, and for whom?” Applied not only to a theatre text, but to broader theatre-related initiatives (“why this festival, why this training program, why this venue, why this collaboration here, now, and for whom?”), this line of questioning helps us broaden our perspective when designing outreach and audience engagement programs and when analyzing our local performance ecologies. If the history of Tijuana Hace Teatro were a dramatic text being evaluated for production on the international stage of dramaturgical conversations, I would justify the relevance of its production (and the publication of this piece, for that matter) by stating that this play is crystal clear on who it’s for: it is a play at the service of shifting actors who recognize, name and perform themselves as living components of a rich performance ecology, and thus, as part of a living community. ♦

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<sup>24</sup> Verdugo, interview, July 24, 2025.

<sup>25</sup> Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City* 7–8; John Law, “Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics,” modified version, April 25, 2007, quoted in Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 7–8).

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# Tijuana Hace Teatro: De ecologías teatrales e interdependencias sustentables

por Martha Herrera-Lasso González

Algo muy valioso es cómo una experiencia escénica puede impactar a quien la vive. En una sesión reciente, un docente que participa en nuestra 'Escuela de Espectadores' compartió que, tras ver una obra sobre migración y separación familiar, pudo acompañar a unos alumnos que llegaron a Tijuana casi al cierre del ciclo escolar debido a las políticas recientes en Estados Unidos. Gracias a la obra, encontró una manera de darles esperanza.

—Ramón Verdugo,  
*sobre la Escuela Binacional de Espectadores*<sup>1</sup>

**T**ijuana Hace Teatro empezó la Escuela Binacional de Espectadores hace quince años. El programa acepta anualmente a veinte residentes (adultos) de Tijuana, personas que no sean creadores escénicos ni públicos regulares de teatro, pero que estén interesadas en aprender sobre el arte de espectar. Un grupo diverso en género, edad, profesión y origen, la EBDE les provee acceso gratuito a espectáculos de teatro y danza en Tijuana y en San Diego a lo largo de un año, y convoca conversaciones mensuales dedicadas a reflexionar sobre estas experiencias. El testimonio de la EBDE con los que arranca este texto reflejan el corazón y el espíritu de la iniciativa, pero es solo la punta del *iceberg* de un movimiento mucho más profundo liderado por Quintero y Verdugo en su ciudad.

El arte de cultivar públicos es complejo y cualquiera que alguna vez ha montado una obra sabe que es uno de los retos más difíciles a los que nos enfrentamos como gremio. En su libro *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook to Dramaturgy*, el dramaturgista y teórico teatral

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<sup>1</sup> Ramón Verdugo, entrevista personal con Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Zoom, 3 de julio, 2025.

estadounidense Michael Chemers nos invita a preguntarnos “¿por qué esta obra ahora?” siempre que montamos una producción. “En otras palabras,” escribe, “¿por qué hemos elegido presentar esta obra en este momento de la historia frente a este público?”<sup>2</sup> El investigador teatral mexicano Emilio Méndez suma a la interrogante de Chemers la conciencia explícita del lugar: “¿por qué esta obra *aquí* y ahora?”<sup>3</sup> Detrás de ambas provocaciones subyace un público sin nombrar. Entonces, me aventuro a sumar a la pregunta: “¿por qué esta obra aquí, ahora *y para quiénes?*”

En este artículo parto de la pregunta “¿por qué esta obra aquí, ahora... y para quién?” para analizar el trabajo de Tijuana Hace Teatro (THT), una compañía que lleva más de 17 años planteándose esta interrogante. Aun cuando tanto Chemers como Méndez nos invitan a hacernos esta pregunta frente a un texto dramático o producción teatral (es decir, de qué maneras una obra de literatura dramática o un montaje teatral son relevantes, atractivos o problemáticos frente a un determinado público en un tiempo y un lugar), en mi análisis del trabajo de THT amplió la pregunta más allá del producto teatral hacia otro tipo de prácticas, iniciativas y estrategias de programación. Porque a veces, cuando encontramos poca justificación para montar una obra aquí y ahora, necesitamos buscar más allá del repertorio dramático si es que queremos atender a las necesidades de una comunidad. Como dramaturgistas podemos convertirnos en conductos para otro tipo de iniciativas culturales que responden de maneras más eficaces al entorno y que saben servir a sus públicos. Si un obra o producto cultural va a tener larga vida, debe saber sobrevivir dentro de sus ecologías locales, y yo sostengo que la pregunta de “¿por qué esta obra (o práctica) aquí, ahora y para quiénes?” puede servir como una herramienta metodológica útil hacia la alimentación de dichas ecologías.

Haciendo uso del término *performance ecologies* (ecologías de *performance*), desarrollado por el teórico teatral canadiense Ric Knowles como metáfora para referirse a “ecosistemas complejos constituidos por las redes fluidas de “actores” dentro de una ciudad —intérpretes, representaciones, instituciones, artistas, administradores y públicos— organizados de maneras diversas en compañías,

asambleas, comités y comunidades”,<sup>4</sup> sostengo que en las ecologías teatrales que THT ha fomentado en los últimos 17 años, existen valiosas metodologías para cultivar públicos desde un lugar de escucha, servicio y generosidad. En su búsqueda por crecer públicos, Ramón Verdugo (Director Artístico) y Jesús Quintero (Director Ejecutivo) ofrecen lecciones y herramientas sumamente útiles en torno a cómo pensar nuestro quehacer teatral al servicio de esas audiencias.

**“...empezó como una afirmación, una enunciación en la esfera pública de que Tijuana es una ciudad que hace teatro...”**

Históricamente, muchos dramaturgistas han trabajado desde una perspectiva de lo nacional para pensar la identidad colectiva como un proyecto abstracto de nación (el mismo Lessing o Kenneth Tynan en la Compañía Nacional de Teatro de Inglaterra en los años sesenta). Cuando renfocamos ese lente hacia lo local y más allá de la agenda política de un gobierno en turno, encontramos nuevos acercamientos dramaturgísticos al ejercicio de trazar imaginarios colectivos a través de narrativas teatrales. Cuando Tijuana Hace Teatro arrancó en 2007, empezó como una afirmación, una enunciación en la esfera pública de que Tijuana es una ciudad que hace teatro—un eslogan, un manifiesto y un llamado tanto al gremio como al público general a poner atención en ello. Como demuestran sus 17 años de trayectoria, ese llamado fue mucho más allá de solo llenar las butacas de su propio espacio teatral (Las Tablas, inaugurado en 2004). La afirmación de que Tijuana Hace Teatro se ha convertido en un proyecto de vida que, con su red de iniciativas, ha transformado las ecologías teatrales de su ciudad.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Mark Chemers, *Luz testigo: dramaturgismo. Manual introductorio*. Trad. Martha Herrera-Lasso González (Escenología, 2022), 163.

<sup>3</sup> Emilio Méndez, “Dramaturgistas, dramaturgismo y teatrología en la organización, realización y exhibición de una puesta en escena,” *Fundamentos de Teatrología*, UNAM, febrero 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Ric Knowles. *Performing the Intercultural City* (University of Michigan Press, 2017), mi traducción. Knowles nos advierte que al emplear el uso del término ecología, es importante distinguir su cualidad metafórica y acotar que, al usarlo en este sentido, no estamos tomando en consideración los efectos específicos sobre el ecosistema que cualquier actividad humana tiene. Un reconocimiento importante que han hecho académicos indígenas cuya cosmovisión y materialidad son inseparables de la tierra misma, repositorio de complejas historias de colonización y explotación de los recursos de un lugar.

Sostengo que el acercamiento de THT funciona porque han tenido la sensibilidad de escuchar las necesidades y preferencias de sus comunidades y han tejido una serie de iniciativas diversas en una *interdependencia* que permite que se alimenten y se sostengan entre sí.<sup>5</sup> Estas han acercado a poblaciones diversas al teatro desde distintos frentes, y sus modelos han resultado sustentables de maneras que son poco comunes. A continuación, mapeo la historia e interdependencia de estos proyectos con el fin de extraer herramientas y estrategias que nos puedan ayudar en la labor de conectar con nuestros públicos desde distintos rincones del mundo, y nos ayuden a encontrar mejores respuestas a las preguntas de por qué nuestro teatro aquí, ahora y para quiénes.

## EL TERRENO INICIAL

En línea con el sentido metafórico de ecologías de *performance*, nos invito a imaginar el ejercicio de la siembra. Frente al terreno inicial, hemos de observar el panorama existente, analizar la calidad de suelo, la exposición al sol y al viento, identificar si algún árbol nos hace mucha sombra o si algún otro acidifica la tierra. Todo esto con el objetivo de sembrar semillas que florecerán en conversación con las condiciones del lugar y con la vida que habita en ella. Escuchar al suelo antes de intervenir es la clave a un jardín sano y duradero. El terreno teatral sobre el cual se fueron sembrando las diversas semillas de THT es muy distinto al que hoy existe, y precisamente por eso es importante arrancar con un breve panorama de las condiciones de inicio.

Como han expuesto académicos y creadores de la frontera Norte, algunas de las primeras iniciativas culturales que dieron pie al crecimiento de las artes escénicas en Tijuana iniciaron en los años setenta, con la creación de la Dirección de Difusión Cultural (1974), la Casa de Cultura en 1975 y la formación de compañías como *Los de pie* y *Los desarraigados*, entre otras. En su estudio sobre las infraestructuras culturales tijuanaenses, Isaac Sainz Castillo argumenta que son dos los fenómenos de los años ochenta que sentaron las bases para el crecimiento de las artes escénicas: primero, la fronterización de la región y segundo,

5 En este artículo trataré sobre todo las siguientes iniciativas: Festival THT (2008–2015), Escuela Binacional de Espectadores (2010–a la fecha), Festival Interprepas (2010–a la fecha), Taller THT (2013–a la fecha), Laboratorio THT (2014–a la fecha), Festival de Teatro Íntimo (2018–2024), Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes (2021–a la fecha) y Cartografía Escénica (2020–a la fecha). No indagaré en su trabajo como compañía profesional ni en la programación de su espacio teatral Las Tablas más allá de estas iniciativas.

el ejercicio de descentralización por parte del gobierno federal que inició con López Portillo (1976–1982) y que Miguel de la Madrid continuaría (1982–1988).<sup>6</sup> Fue a partir de esta redistribución administrativa y económica que en 1984 se construyeron el Centro Cultural Tijuana (CECUT) y el Programa Cultural de las Fronteras (PCF) y se llevaron por primera vez muestras de teatro a Tijuana (la quinta MNT en 1982 y la primera Muestra Regional de Teatro del Noroeste en 1984). Estos esfuerzos, sumados a los Talleres de Teatro que ofertaba el departamento de Difusión Cultural de la Extensión Universitaria de la UABC desde de los años ochenta y que constituyeron el esfuerzo de formación y desarrollo de propuesta artística más importante de la década, fueron en gran medida lo que dio pie al auge de las dramaturgias de la frontera y la construcción de una conciencia identitaria de la región a través de sus narrativas teatrales.<sup>7</sup>

En 1987 el PCF da paso al Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA) y en 1989 se crea el Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA), con el objetivo de otorgar estímulos a creadores que les permitieran dedicarse de tiempo completo a las artes. Junto con estas iniciativas de institucionalización cultural, en 1993 se fundó el Centro de Artes Escénicas del Noroeste (CAEN) —el mayor esfuerzo de profesionalización de la región hasta ese momento, auspiciado por el INBA y con sede en el CECUT.

Quintero se formó en los años noventa como actor a través de la colección de oferta de formación escénica de la región. Al paralelo de sus estudios de preparatoria, cursó la carrera de actuación en el Andrés Soler (que dependía de la ANDA), y después estudió la Licenciatura en Lengua y Literatura de Hispanoamérica en la UABC. A eso le sumó el diplomado del CAEN, y tuvo oportunidad también de participar en las plenarias de formación del Programa Nacional de Teatro Escolar del INBA, supervisadas por

6 Isaac Sainz Castillo, “El campo teatral en Baja California. Historia e impacto del Centro de Artes Escénicas del Noroeste (1993–2006)” (Tesis de Maestría, *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte*, 2024), 6.

7 Para un panorama más extenso sobre esta dramaturgia, ver Sáenz, R. (coord.) (2012) *Teatro del norte/Teatro de frontera: Antología de ensayos y ponencias*. Colección Estudios Teatrales, 2012. Trujillo G. (2006). *La gran bonanza, Crónica del teatro en Baja California 1856–2006*. UABC. Partida, A. (2021). *Teatro del Norte y Fronterizo*. México: Asociación Mexicana de Investigación Teatral. Mijares E. (2003). *Dramaturgia del Norte*. Antología. Fondo Regional para la Cultural y las Artes del Noroeste. Hernández, V. (2015) *Dramaturgia en contexto II. Diálogo con dieciséis dramaturgos dle Noroeste de México / Entrevistada por Rocío Galicia*. INBA. Página con textos dramáticos y otros recursos teatrales sobre la región: [Enlace](#)

Casa del Teatro, que convocaban a gente de todos los estados. Esta formación diversificada, aunada a un interés autodidacta que buscó inspiración en libros de producción y material videográfico a su disposición, llevó a Quintero a definirse como “una especie de huérfano”, sin maestros o genealogías teatrales reconocibles.<sup>8</sup>

Verdugo se forma en los dos miles, antes de que existiera la licenciatura en Teatro, por lo que estudia Comunicación en la UABC. Igual que Quintero, se formó en el CAEN a la par de que encontró su propia inspiración de manera autodidacta en influencia de lecturas como Peter Brook y Yoshi Oida. La formación de ambos refleja un contraste importante con la formación teatral de sus contemporáneos en el centro del país, una formación basada en el modelo del maestro y el aprendiz. Quintero hace referencia a una especie de “irreverencia” en donde la formación no depende tanto en rendir reverencia a un maestro, si no a ir encontrando su propio camino.<sup>9</sup> La irreverencia que resulta de esa “especie de orfandad” a la que se refiere Quintero les dio también una libertad importante para trazar los caminos muchos más en comunicación con las necesidades de su entorno que con las expectativas de un legado.

Ramón Verdugo y Jesús Quintero se conocieron circa 2006 y un tiempo después arrancaron conversaciones sobre el estado del teatro en Tijuana. Para ese momento, Quintero llevaba casi once años con su compañía, *Grupo Ojo*, misma que se enfocaba principalmente en producción teatral. Después de un fatídico diez de mayo, durante el cual la elaborada escenografía de su producción de la comedia clásica, *El servidor de los patrones*, fue destruida en un deshago del teatro del IMSS (Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social) por un grupo de papás antes del festival del día de las madres, Quintero tomó la iniciativa de construir su propio espacio teatral, Teatro Las Tablas, en 2004.

El encuentro de Verdugo y Quintero en 2006 coincidió con un momento importante en el que estaba por disolverse el CAEN (que se transformaría en un área de gestión de producción escénica del Centro Cultural Tijuana) y pronta a inaugurarse la carrera en teatro de la UABC (a donde se fue mucho del equipo del CAEN). Fue un momento en el que las iniciativas que empezaron a

8 Jesús Quintero, entrevista personal con Martha Herrera-Lasso, Zoom, 3 de julio 2025.  
9 Quintero, 3 de julio 2025.

enraizar treinta años atrás, habían tomado forma y daban frutos diversos en la ecología teatral de Tijuana, tanto en la formación como en la construcción de espacios e instituciones que podrían albergar y sostener una creciente producción cultural.

Para este momento Ramón había tenido ya la inquietud de analizar el panorama teatral actual tijuanense y Jesús había empezado a utilizar la frase Tijuana Hace Teatro como un llamado intermitente a dar visibilidad al gremio. Frente a estas circunstancias, el primer impulso de Verdugo y Quintero fue el de conectar los puntos. Así, en diciembre del 2007 presentaron Tijuana Hace Teatro no sólo como una compañía teatral, si no como una página de base de datos que mapeaba panorama de producción teatral tijuanense en ese momento — un momento que resultó ser particularmente fértil para sembrar nuevas semillas en las ecologías teatrales de la región.

LOS PRIMEROS BROTES DE THT

Frente a la pregunta de qué detonó las distintas iniciativas, Verdugo y Quintero lo tienen muy claro. El proceso se dio de la siguiente manera: hacían una lectura general del panorama teatral, identificaban lo que consideraban la necesidad más urgente en ese momento y a partir de ella, actuaban. Haciendo honor a su irreverencia, fueron trazando con mucha libertad e intuición aquello que les iba pareciendo prioritario. En 2008, después de que Tijuana Hace Teatro había arrancado en la forma de una base de datos, se detonó la primera iniciativa importante:

La primera acción que tuvimos fue el Festival THT... en diciembre del 2007 presentamos THT y lo primero que dijimos fue, los teatros de la ciudad no nos abren las puertas a las compañías. Fuimos, tocamos las puertas a los teatros institucionales y les dijimos, queremos hacer un festival. Nos las abrieron primero dos teatros y así empezó el festival THT, que duró 8 años.<sup>10</sup>

Este festival respondía a varias necesidades de la comunidad teatral en Tijuana, además de obtener mayor acceso a los teatros de Tijuana. Primero, el festival buscaba generar comunidad, o como el mismo Quintero lo recuerda, hacer “un festival que nos hermane”.<sup>11</sup> Frente a lo que podría sentirse como un gremio

10 Ramón Verdugo, entrevista personal con Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Zoom, 10 de julio 2025.

fragmentado, el festival brindaría un espacio para fortalecer vínculos y tender puentes no solo a través de las presentaciones de las obras, sino también en la organización de una Gala THT y alfombras rojas. Segundo, la iniciativa buscaba unir esfuerzos entre compañías compartiendo públicos y fortaleciendo la imagen del gremio hacia afuera. Por esa razón, se decidió que el festival arrancararía el día mundial del teatro, 27 de marzo, usando el ímpetu de la efeméride para sembrar conciencia teatral en Tijuana.

En su primera edición participaron 4 compañías locales que se presentaron en 4 teatros de Tijuana durante 3 días. A lo largo de los siguientes 8 años, se presentarían 78 obras de más de 30 grupos y compañías. Anualmente hasta el 2015, se lanzó una convocatoria a compañías locales con las cuales el festival poco a poco fue ganando confianza, y a cambio de su participación, se les ofrecía un registro fotográfico y videográfico de su puesta en escena, ganancias de taquilla y la publicidad compartida del festival, además de la vinculación con colegas y otros participantes.

Desde el primer año, Verdugo y Quintero tuvieron claro que era importante cobrar la entrada, aunque los costos fueran bajos. Esto no solo porque había una concepción general entre públicos tijuanense que lo gratuito era de mala calidad, si no que era una manera de dignificar el trabajo de todos los involucrados y hacer que el festival fuera sustentable a futuro. La colaboración con la Facultad de Artes de la UABC, el CECUT, el Instituto de Cultura de Baja California y el Instituto Municipal de Arte y Cultura permitió que el festival tuviera financiamiento y apoyos de diversas fuentes y poco a poco, creciera en formato y alcance. Estas alianzas lograron el objetivo inicial de la primera edición: crear vínculos entre las compañías y las instituciones culturales de la ciudad.

Si la primera necesidad que se detectó fue que las compañías tijuanenses se presentaran en los teatros importantes de la ciudad, la segunda respondía a la pregunta de creación de públicos: ¿cómo llenamos butacas? Esta reflexión resultó en la Escuela Binacional de Espectadores<sup>12</sup> en enero del 2010, tomando como punto de partida la Escuela del Espectador de Anne Ubersfeld.

El primer paso fue conseguir públicos y el segundo, conseguir butacas. La convocatoria que se lanzó a la población general pedía una exposición de motivos de por qué querían participar en una escuela de espectadores —dando preferencia a quienes no tuvieran ya extensos hábitos teatrales. Una vez hecha la selección, los becarios no tendrían que pagar para formar parte de la escuela. Lo único que se les pedía era su compromiso y su tiempo— ver el mayor número de obras posibles a lo largo del año y asistir una vez al mes a conversaciones alrededor de su experiencia como espectadores. El segundo paso fue conseguir las butacas. Acostumbrados a ver butacas vacías alrededor de la ciudad, Verdugo y Quintero buscaron a los teatros para pedirles un número fijo de boletos al año, boletos muchas veces reservados para prensa o patrocinadores pero frecuentemente se quedan sin usar, y así aseguraron la entrada de sus becarios a una gran diversidad de obras tanto en Tijuana como en San Diego.

La intuición más afortunada de Verdugo y Quintero en este diseño fue armar un esquema que no requiriera de un intercambio económico, y argumentaría que es en gran medida la razón por la cual ha perdurado tantos años. A la fecha, las sesiones mensuales son en Teatro Las Tablas y las moderan Verdugo y Quintero o invitan a artistas especializados a llevar alguna sesión. Así, los becarios tienen acceso gratuito a espectáculos, los teatros y compañías crecen sus públicos y llenan butacas (cosa que los elencos siempre agradecerán) con la esperanza de que estos públicos se convertirán en públicos de paga a futuro. Como compañía profesional, THT se ha alimentado de maneras invaluable de esta iniciativa. Primero, la escuela les obliga a ver todo lo que pueden en cartelera y así, están al día en cuanto a la oferta teatral y tienen en el radar a compañías, elencos y creativos con los que después pueden armar sus propios equipos de montaje. Pero sobre todo, las conversaciones mensuales con públicos suman inmensas cantidades de retroalimentación directa sobre qué gusta a los públicos y qué no, tanto en contenidos como en diseño de la experiencia teatral en general.

Una vez cubiertas estas dos necesidades, la tercera se presentó de manera natural. Tanto el Festival THT como la EBDE servían sobre todo a una población adulta, pero.....

11 Jesús Quintero, entrevista personal con Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Zoom, 10 de julio 2025.

12 Para el 2024 suman más de 140 egresados en 15 grupos de formación anual. En colaboración con Facultad de Artes (UABC), Centro Cultural Tijuana, Instituto de Cultura de Baja California, Teatro Las Tablas, Loft Espacio de Creación, The Old Globe, La Jolla Playhouse, Moxie Theatre y Diversionary Theatre.



recurría la pregunta de si había actividades específicas para jóvenes. Al mismo tiempo, por parte de la Facultad de Artes, en donde Verdugo era docente, se buscaba crecer la matrícula de la licenciatura en teatro que se había establecido unos años atrás. Fue ahí desde donde surgió el impulso de crear una iniciativa para una población de preparatoria (entre 14 y 19 años), jóvenes en ciernes de cultivar hábitos de ocio y en proceso de elegir carreras universitarias. Exponerlos desde esa edad al teatro sería una inversión a largo plazo para el gremio teatral, para las iniciativas ya existentes de THT y para el crecimiento de públicos generales.

Así fue como en noviembre del 2010 se presentó el primer Festival Interprepas en el Teatro Rubén Vizcaíno Valencia de la Facultad de Artes de la UABC, en donde a lo largo de dos días de muestra, 6 preparatorias locales presentaron sus trabajos teatrales.<sup>13</sup> La inscripción no tenía costo y aunque había algunas limitaciones (una obra por escuela o duración del espectáculo), no existía una curaduría que dejara a escuelas fuera. Al día de hoy, además de la muestra, el festival consiste también en actividades de socialización, intercambio, integración y foros entre estudiantes de las distintas prepas públicas y privadas. Así como en su momento lo hicieron con compañías locales y teatros institucionales, en este caso Verdugo y Quintero generaron una alianza entre la Facultad de Artes y preparatorias de la ciudad, una alianza que duró 10 años donde la UABC aportaba el préstamo del espacio, y donde a su vez promovía la oferta académica de Teatro, incluso, donde vio crecer su matrícula. Para 2020, la gestión del teatro por parte de la Facultad de Artes cambió en el ámbito universitario y desde el 2021 CECUT es sede del festival.

La alianza ha perdurado también en otros sentidos, donde jóvenes universitarios de la licenciatura en teatro de la Facultad de Artes, son voluntarios o pueden realizar su servicio social o prácticas profesionales tanto en el Festival Interprepas, en su momento, el Festival THT y posteriormente para lo que serían las Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes. En varias ocasiones, algunos de ellos conseguirían trabajo de manera permanente como maestros de teatro en las escuelas. Una vez más, se refleja una conexión relevante entre las distintas iniciativas, con beneficios concretos y a largo plazo para los actores involucrados.

La historia de origen de las tres iniciativas que surgen entre 2008 y 2010, revela los principios de interdependencia que promueven ecologías teatrales sanas, que van más allá de principios de *productividad y extractivismo* y se entienden más bien como alianzas e intercambios a partir de necesidades reales. Se refleja una especie de espíritu de trueque en donde las alianzas no dependen necesariamente de una transacción económica sino de un intercambio de recursos que es factible y sustentable, que se aleja de las lógicas de mercado que rigen muchos de los

**“La historia de origen de las tres iniciativas que surgen entre 2008 y 2010, revela los principios de interdependencia que promueven ecologías teatrales sanas...”**

esquemas “exitosos” de producción cultural, aun cuando han recibido en distintos momentos apoyos por parte de financiamientos públicos. Yo atribuyo este éxito en parte a tres factores: primero, han expandido su concepción de recursos más allá del financiamiento económico; segundo, han sabido vincular actores aparentemente marginales con actores centrales, y tres, han sabido ajustar la escala económica de las iniciativas a las posibilidades del entorno.

Finalmente, las tres iniciativas sirven a demográficas distintas, lo cual diversifica su alcance, permite una repartición variada de recursos locales y crece públicos en distintas direcciones. En conjunto, se alimenta y se crece la cultura teatral de manera general, entendiendo la creación, la formación y la práctica de espectar como labores paralelas, simultáneas y entrecruzadas, sin jerarquizar el teatro profesional por encima de otras actividades teatrales.

#### PERIODO DE MADURACIÓN

Las ecologías de performance que describe Knowles “consisten en una constelación cambiante e inestable

13 Para el 2025, han participado más de 1500 jóvenes, un total de 25 escuelas preparatorias, 39% privadas y 61% públicas.

de actores y factores humanos y no-humanos operando de manera interdependiente en la constitución de un ecosistema”.<sup>14</sup> Este inestable y cambiante movimiento explica por qué, en 2015, THT decide no retomar el Festival THT. La misma iniciativa había hecho olas en Tijuana, detonando acciones similares que cobraron vida propia. Como compañía veían otros horizontes.

En el 2012, empezaron a bocetar un programa educativo y en 2013 invitaron al CECUT a ser sede de un taller de largo formato. Había una intuición por ofrecer espacios de formación que, a diferencia de otros talleres, fueran de duración larga: tres módulos a lo largo de 9 meses, un compromiso total de 144 horas. No sería una formación universitaria pero sí una formación para quienes estuvieran interesados en tener un acercamiento de iniciación al teatro con profundidad. Ya que este primer taller tuvo éxito (al primer módulo se inscribieron 29 participantes), en 2014 se forma la continuación (Procesos Escénicos, ahora Laboratorio THT). En general, el perfil de inscripción consiste en personas interesadas en acercarse a la práctica de la actuación con un mínimo de 18 años y sin límite de edad, que buscan un espacio creativo y de formación personal durante distintas etapas de vida. El laboratorio se ha convertido en un espacio de exploración actoral y entrenamiento constantes para los alumnos, y para Quintero y Verdugo se ha convertido en un lugar de exploración de metodologías de acompañamiento de proceso y dirección. El éxito de esta oferta académica tras 12 años refleja que respondió a una necesidad específica entre la comunidad tijuanense —un espacio de formación escénica sería no universitaria en donde el quehacer teatral se torna una práctica seria y disciplinada para quienes no necesariamente buscan hacer una carrera profesional.<sup>15</sup>

Después de haber dado cierre al Festival THT en 2015, en los siguientes años Quintero y Verdugo retomaron el formato festival con objetivos más específicos, buscando una vez más cubrir necesidades que les parecían urgentes y servir a un rango más amplio de poblaciones locales. En estos nuevos festivales, esa red local se ha ido conectando primero con una red nacional a través del Festival de

Teatro Íntimo (FeTI) e internacional con las Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes.

En 2018 se lanzó la primera edición del Festival del Teatro Íntimo en colaboración con Teatro Las Tablas— actividades artísticas, académicas y de reflexión pensadas para celebrar lo independiente y el formato íntimo. Cada edición tendría un tema específico y con una ciudad o estado invitado. Con esto se plantearon por primera vez extender una de sus iniciativas a un alcance nacional en el mismo diseño del programa, a partir de necesidades específicas del panorama local. Explica Quintero:

...respondía a que veíamos que gran parte de los formatos que estaban predominando eran de pocas personas, en espacios pequeños, con necesidades técnicas básicas y había una oportunidad ahí para darle un espacio que celebrara el trabajo hecho en los espacios de formato pequeño y teatros independiente que por un tiempo fue un formato que se minimizó.<sup>16</sup>

Habiendo retomado el espíritu del Festival THT promover el encuentro y el diálogo entre compañías de Tijuana en una actividad en común, en 2021 se dio una coyuntura importante para echar a andar otra iniciativa que tendría un vínculo internacional: las Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes en colaboración con el CECUT, en donde se han establecido redes con entidades como ASSITEJ (Asociación Internacional de Teatro y Artes Escénicas para la Infancia y la Juventud), entre otras nacionales. Así se creó este proyecto “que sí tuviera presencia artística pero también diálogo... que las compañías que estábamos haciendo teatro para infancias encontraran diálogo con otras latitudes”.<sup>17</sup> Ese año THT fueron anfitriones de las primeras Jornadas, una combinación entre congreso y festival con puestas en escena para infancias y juventudes, pero también lecturas dramatizadas, talleres de profesionalización, conversatorios, conferencias, mesas de trabajo y reflexión y presentaciones editoriales.<sup>18</sup> En noviembre del 2025 se llevará a cabo la quinta edición de las Jornadas de Teatro, con compañías invitadas de Chile, Chihuahua y Ciudad de México.

14 Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 6, mi traducción.

15 Para el 2025 se han impartido 12 ciclos de Talleres THT, con más de 130 egresados y 12 producciones escénicas y 11 ciclos de Procesos/Laboratorios THT con más de 127 participantes y 12 producciones escénicas que se presentan en una temporada corta en Las Tablas.

16 Quintero, 10 de julio 2025.

17 Ramón Verdugo, entrevista personal con Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Ciudad de México, 24 de julio 2025.

18 Producción de 4 ediciones anuales (la 5ta está programada para noviembre 2025).

Por último, THT ha continuado el impulso de divulgación con el que inició en 2007, más recientemente con iniciativas como *Cartografía escénica: una mirada a las poéticas creativas de la región*. Esta serie de entrevistas suma cuatro temporadas y 28 programas de entrevista con creadores de la región, dando visibilidad a su trabajo, profundizando conversaciones sobre proceso e infraestructura, y generando un registro de actores diversos dentro de estas ecologías de performance. El origen de THT se ve reflejado en esta última iniciativa: ofrecer mapeos de los panoramas teatrales de la región y fortalecer los vínculos entre integrantes del gremio. Dos décadas después, el espíritu sigue siendo el mismo.

COSECHANDO ALGUNAS CONCLUSIONES

Cada una de las iniciativas descritas en este trabajo — Festival THT, la Escuela Binacional de Espectadores, Festival Interprepas, Talleres y Laboratorios THT, Festival de Teatro Íntimo, Jornadas de Teatro Infancias y Juventudes y Cartografía Escénica— ha atraído a distintas demográficas al teatro desde diversos frentes. Bajo su lógica, el teatro no se piensa como un consumible de entretenimiento, sino como una práctica social heterogénea, accesible a todo tipo de perfiles y con múltiples finalidades. Así, la medición de “éxito” de cada iniciativa es distinta y no se rige por la lógica de mercado de otras ecologías teatrales urbanas que frecuentemente fungen —equivocadamente— omo los modelos a seguir. Como advierte la investigadora teatral canadiense Jen Harvie en su libro *Theatre & The City*, “una lectura materialista cultural del teatro en su contexto geosocial revela que la designación de ‘bueno’ al teatro urbano central —como es el caso de Broadway o el West End de Londres— corre el riesgo de confundir el valor positivo con prioridades neoliberales de mercado y su brutal amenaza de desigualdad económica y social”.<sup>19</sup> En el caso del panorama descrito en este artículo, lo ‘bueno’ parece ser aquello que persiste, diversifica y alimenta al ecosistema y no aquello que acapara y multiplica recursos para su propio beneficio. En gran medida las iniciativas han tenido tan larga vida gracias a que las otras existen — es su misma *interdependencia* y capacidad de nutrir al otro lo que las mantiene vivas.

18 Producción de 4 ediciones anuales (la 5ta está programada para noviembre 2025).

19 Jen Harvie, *Theatre & the City*, (Red Globe Press, 2009), 32, mi traducción.

También ayuda que Verdugo y Quintero han sido realistas en el alcance de las iniciativas y en sus modelos económicos. No han buscado crecer más allá de lo que es económicamente factible y los programas tienen la escala de lo que se puede sustentar con los recursos disponibles. Como lo expresa el mismo Quintero cuando describe la creación de Las Tablas 21 años atrás: “eran 30 personas las que iban a cada función... cuando se proyecta Las Tablas, era un espacio para 35 personas... respondía el tamaño del espacio a la demanda”.<sup>20</sup> A lo largo de esas casi dos décadas, THT ha sabido buscar y gestionar los recursos públicos que han permitido sumar a la viabilidad de las iniciativas, diversificando de maneras sustentables sus fuentes de ingreso: apoyos estatales y federales, colaboraciones con instituciones locales como CECUT y UABC, fondeadores con donativos privados, taquilla, inscripción a festivales, venta de funciones y matriculas de talleres y laboratorios.<sup>21</sup>

Los diseños de programas de THT reflejan una evolución en sus metodologías como organización y gestores de iniciativas culturales, una conciencia en la estructura que ha permitido a su vez una conciencia de cuidado tanto personal como con participantes y aliados. Quintero reflexiona: “El FeTI y las Jornadas desde su concepción se puede notar que son de los proyectos más recientes porque ya están mucho más estructuradas en cuanto a metas y objetivos que por ejemplo, la EBDE en sus inicios”.<sup>22</sup> Una postura a largo plazo y un arraigo en el lugar le ha dado a este jardín el tiempo necesario para encontrar su equilibrio y enraizar con fuerza:

Los primero cinco años hubo mucho tema de vamos a invertir tiempo, dinero y esfuerzo... nunca hemos sido empresarios, pero intuimos que en los primeros cinco años del negocio eran para comenzar a construir resultados. Sale para la parte operativa pero tarda la ganancia.

20 Quintero, 3 de julio 2025.

21 Programa México en Escena de SACyPC (2021–2023 y 2024–2026); Programa de Aceleración de Negocios de las ICC de CETYS Universidad y CIPE (2023, 2024); Programa ENARTES del FONCA (2020, 2024); Beca MAP Fund, EUA (2020); Fondo Apoyo para Actividades Artísticas y Culturales Independientes de Baja California (2020); Beca TCG, EUA (2019); Programa Nacional de Teatro Escolar Baja California (2019); Programa de Estímulo a la Creación y Desarrollo Artístico de Baja California (2016); Programa de Fomento a Proyectos y Coinversiones Culturales del FONCA (2011, 2012); Programa de Desarrollo de Cultural Municipal de Baja California (2012, 2013, 2018).

22 Jesús Quintero, entrevista personal con Martha Herrera-Lasso González, Ciudad de México, 24 de julio 2025.

Pero una decisión que tomamos fue que muchas cosas eran a mediano o largo plazo y 17 años después hay cosas que están avanzando solitas de manera orgánica.<sup>23</sup>

THT como iniciativa ha generado los espacios para que perfiles y demográficas alejadas del teatro tengan una entrada al mundo del teatro. Hoy existe la Comunidad THT, un grupo que incluye a todas las personas que han participado en los últimos 17 años en cualquiera de los múltiples programas de THT. “Hemos instalado la idea de la Comunidad THT. Gente que forma parte de la escuela de espectadores, de nuestros talleres, laboratorio, la gente que ha participado como voluntaria en Jornadas, en Interprepas... la idea de generar este slogan de Comunidad THT es construir que juntas/os somos parte de algo más grande”.<sup>24</sup>

Rescato entonces dos ejes importantes en el trabajo de THT: la interdependencia y la visión a largo plazo. Sin duda hay estrategias replicables que han aportado a la sustentabilidad de THT que se pueden extraer y repensar en nuevos contextos: promover la lógica de trueque, suavizar las líneas entre lo profesional y lo amateur, dignificar a los públicos y a los creadores, diseñar las iniciativas a partir de las necesidades y posibilidades de sus públicos, vincular instituciones grandes con actores más pequeños a través de la identificación de recursos e intereses mutuos, apostarle a largo plazo a la creación de públicos y gremios. Pero hay también un componente discursivo y, quiero argumentar, performático, en la narrativa que ha construido THT en las últimas dos décadas que ha sido clave para su éxito: desde la enunciación “Tijuana Hace Teatro”, Verdugo y Quintero proponen una práctica social que se *performea* a través de la gestión de sus iniciativas, mismas que invitan a sus participantes, ya sean espectadores, estudiantes de preparatoria o compañías independientes a enunciarse también y así, *performarse* como miembros de esta ecología teatral.

Como dramaturgistas ayudamos a hilar las narrativas que constituyen el imaginario de un lugar y en esa labor, THT ha articulado una identidad local a través de la participación teatral diversa y accesible a muchos públicos. Cito de nuevo a Knowles: “Lo social —dentro de lo cual incluyo la

práctica teatral— consiste en ‘redes de prácticas materiales y sociales heterogéneas que son *performáticas*, que generan realidades’ (Law 12, énfasis añadido) —redes a través de las cuales las realidades *se gestan a través de su representación*”.<sup>25</sup> Mi percepción es que Verdugo y Quintero son un nodo del escenario urbano tijuanense con una cualidad particularmente *performática*. Así, gran parte de la aportación de THT a estas ecologías teatrales ha sido el acto performático de enunciación del quehacer escénico, que nace de un ímpetu activista de visibilización. THT ha fortalecido una red y una comunidad teatral a partir de ese *performance* de pertenencia en la forma de diversos festivales, espacios de formación, difusión y divulgación dentro y fuera de espacios teatrales. Hace casi veinte años, THT invitó a la comunidad de Tijuana a enunciar: “Tijuana Hace Teatro y yo soy parte de ese quehacer” y hoy, nuevas voces se siguen sumando a esa enunciación colectiva.

Vuelvo a la pregunta inicial de esta reflexión: ¿por qué esta obra aquí, ahora... y para quién? Al plantearla no solo frente a un texto dramático si no frente a un más amplio de iniciativas teatrales (¿por qué este festival, por qué este programa de formación, por qué este recinto, por qué esta colaboración aquí ahora y para quién?), esta indagación nos ayuda a ampliar nuestra perspectiva al momento de diseñar programas de participación y alcance con públicos, y de analizar nuestras ecologías de *performance* a nivel local. Si la historia de Tijuana Hace Teatro fuese un texto dramático bajo evaluación para su producción sobre el escenario internacional de conversaciones dramaturgísticas, yo justificaría la relevancia de su montaje (y para el caso, de la publicación de este ensayo) argumentando que esta obra tiene completa claridad sobre su por qué aquí, ahora y para quién: es un proyecto al servicio de un público que es también creador, comunidad y ciudad, que se sabe, se enuncia y se representa como componente vivo de una rica ecología de *performance*. ♦

23 Verdugo, 24 de julio 2025.

24 Verdugo, 24 de julio 2025.

25 Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 7–8, mi traducción; John Law, “Actor Network Theory and Material Semiotics,” version modificada, April 25, 2007, citado en Knowles, *Performing the Intercultural City*, 7–8, mi traducción.

## MARTHA HERRERA-LASSO GONZÁLEZ

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# “What here did miss”: Dramaturgy of Reverse Assembly in *Romeo and Juliet*

by Stephen Drover

As the lights fade to begin *Romeo and Juliet*, the audience settles to an expectant silence, prepared to ride the familiar narrative wave that begins with the very famous line, “Two households, both alike in dignity.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, confusion ripples through the crowd when dim lights come up on two figures sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood, with a third figure lying in the upstage shadows. Six people frantically enter from the dark, one proclaiming, “This is the place.”<sup>2</sup> Another—he appears to be a policeman—holds up his hand: “Hence and stand aloof,”<sup>3</sup> he says to the others who hang back impatiently. When he recognizes the dead figures on the ground, he quickly checks for a pulse. Finding none, he breathes deeply with exasperation and frustration before calling to the others. “Where be these enemies? Capulet! Montague!”<sup>4</sup> The four parents enter the space and collapse to the ground, crying inconsolably over their dead children. The officer angrily lays blame on the parents for this tragedy, and the two fathers finally see their failures—they reconcile with a handshake. As the officer turns to the audience and begins speaking—“A gloomy peace this morning with it brings”—an ensemble of actors gathers on stage in a quiet vigil.<sup>5</sup> When the public address concludes with the words “Never was there a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo,”<sup>6</sup> the lights abruptly shift, and the actors (including

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1 William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. René Weis (Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2012), Prologue.1. References are to act, scene, and line.

2 *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.171.

3 *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.2.20.

4 *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.290.

5 *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.305.

6 *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.310.



**Figure 1:** At the Capulets' party. Photo: Moonrider Productions.

those on the ground) instantly clean up the blood and exit. When the lights restore, the audience is transported fifteen minutes back in time: Paris has arrived at the tomb with flowers to mourn the dead Juliet.

Confusing the audience at the very beginning of a well-worn narrative was an intended and anticipated part of a recent production of *Romeo and Juliet* at Studio 58, Langara College's professional training program in Vancouver, British Columbia. The project was envisioned as an experiment and, as its director, I became deeply curious about several aspects of the play: how the familiar narrative lives in a contemporary imagination, how we might invite a reconsideration of that familiarity without considerably changing the essential story, and, most notably, how time serves as the fatal mechanism in the play—both in the action of the plot and the audience's experience. A characteristic of my neurodivergent brain (I have diagnoses of Autism Spectrum Disorder and ADHD) is a complicated relationship to time: I have a well-developed sense of chronoception (perceiving time as it is being experienced) but a very unreliable intuition for time horizon (predicting how long a task will take). This ubiquitous temporal framework that filters how I interpret the world relates well to *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that both advises the sobriety of taking one's time and planning carefully ("Wisely and slow, they stumble that run fast"<sup>7</sup>) and also celebrates the urge for accelerated time and the excitement of novelty ("Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds"<sup>8</sup>). Such a perspective brought me to the theoretical question that would drive the project: How does time function

<sup>7</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.4.90.

<sup>8</sup> *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.2.1.

in the theatre (most specifically in *Romeo and Juliet*), and how does an audience parse through plot to construct a linear, chronological story in their imaginations? Taking an inquiry-based approach to the creation process—allowing the production to evolve from a curiosity rather than from a product-oriented plan—was an incredibly exciting beginning for the student actors. Liberated somewhat from the pressure to "get the play right," they could experiment with what questions it could pose and treat rehearsals as research.

Nestled in the basement of Langara College—a degree-granting public college in Vancouver, BC—is the Theatre Arts Program. Named for room 58 that has been refashioned as a small theatre, Studio 58 is a conservatory-style professional training program that offers a diploma in acting and has garnered a national reputation for its pedagogical rigor and its exacting approach to high-caliber productions. A typical season of public performances includes a new play, a script from the world repertoire, a large-scale musical, and several nights of student-created original work. Studio 58 calibrates its programming choices in relation to the local theatre ecology, aims to provide students with a simulation of professional production experiences, and engages established directors and designers to build the shows with the students. Despite being an admiring audience member for years, I'd never worked there professionally. When invited to direct a Shakespeare play of my choosing in their upcoming season, I felt that the opportunity to work with twenty actors in their late teens and early twenties made the obvious choice *Romeo and Juliet*, a play whose plot is famously driven by youthful energy.

Over twenty-five years ago, I directed this play for the first time, likewise with a cast of young actors. The second week of those rehearsals coincided with the Columbine High School massacre—the deadliest school shooting in US history at that time—and even though we were some distance from it in Canada, the cultural reverberations were deeply impactful. The unavoidable and grisly reality of children killing children immediately colored how we regarded the script, and it informed our process with a new and unexpected gravitas. Conversations, both private and in the media, seemed to revolve around the recurring question of “How did that happen?” which inspired in us an almost forensic approach to investigating the story: not as a narrative that unfolded before us but as something that had already happened. Since then, I have always understood the play in terms of its inevitable conclusion and regarded its dramaturgy as the reverse-engineering of a narrative.

For this new production in 2025, such a teleological perspective on the play was also prompted by Emma Smith’s observation that the play forecasts its own outcome. By virtue of the proleptic nature of tragedy (we know it’s going to end, well, tragically), the familiarity that Shakespeare’s audience already had with the narrative, and the explicit statement in the prologue that reveals the outcome of the story before it even begins, we already start at the end: “So *Romeo and Juliet* has already happened, is already written in some metaphysical sense, because that’s the genre of tragedy. And in a more local sense, it’s already written because, like pretty much every play he wrote, here the story preexists Shakespeare’s re-telling.”<sup>9</sup> The play’s undeniable cultural capital confirms the foregone conclusion of the lovers’ deaths. A contemporary audience coming to see *Romeo and Juliet* very likely has read the play and almost assuredly knows the broad strokes of its tragic finale. If the theatrical experience *begins* with the dead kids (via the prologue spoiler), we are thus invited to ask, “How did that happen?” With act 1, scene 1, the play begins answering that question by going back five days from the conclusion evoked in the prologue. The temporal displacement baked into the play’s dramaturgy determines how an audience creates meaning from it.

So, if the end of the play is a done deal, a *fait accompli*, why not *start* there? Perhaps experiencing the play in

reverse—watching each scene as if it were the prequel to the previous scene—might present the question “How did that happen?” as a recurring gesture. Could such a temporal transgression serve as an estrangement tactic that might allow us to see the well-worn narrative with a fresh perspective? This inquiry was our starting point. Exploring this concept began with the challenge of deciding which narrative unit to reverse. Pursuing a full realization of text reversal would have meant actually speaking the lines backward (beginning the play with “Romeo her and Juliet of this than woe more of story a there was never”), which, although possibly a fun experiment, would make any actual understanding of the story practically impossible. I drew inspiration from established works that successfully reverse the scene order of a linear story. Plays such as Colleen Murphy’s *The December Man* and Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal*, as well as Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento*, arrange a linear story into a reversed plot, requiring audiences to reassemble the plot pieces in their imagination to effectively create the story. Applying Linda Hutcheon’s adaptation theory, I came

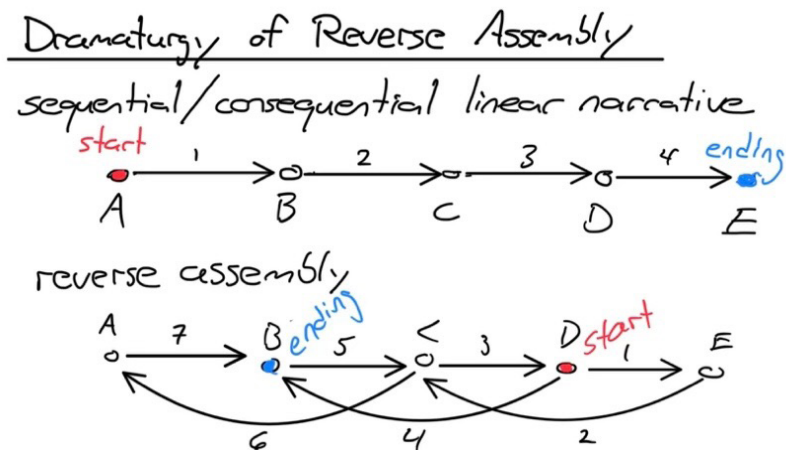


Figure II: From the writer’s production notebook.

to see how these works can be regarded as adaptations of themselves: the receiver simultaneously experiences the forward-moving story and the reverse-engineered plot, invariably comparing them to one another. The “adaptation” becomes “its own palimpsestic thing.”<sup>10</sup>

These other works had the advantage of being custom-made for a model of reverse assembly (see Figure II) and were crafted to provide an experiential climax near the end of the work while retaining the story’s climax that is seen near the

<sup>9</sup> Emma Smith, *This is Shakespeare: How to Read the World’s Greatest Playwright* (Penguin Random House, 2019), 73.

<sup>10</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006), 9.

beginning. But *Romeo and Juliet* was not written with this model in mind. If played backward, the first few minutes of the play would include a scene with undeniable climactic tones (which then must become the *de facto* inciting incident of the show), yet the first scene of act 1 presents limited opportunities for fashioning a fulfilling and natural conclusion to the experience if relocated to the end of the performance. Although I was employing a model of reverse assembly, I was also interested in creating a satisfying theatre event from a text that, structurally, might resist such a model. This proved to be the greatest challenge.

Once I had identified and articulated a structural framework for the plot, the next step was to prepare the script for rehearsal. When it comes to adaptation, I tend to prioritize narrative clarity, and this inclination proved to be an asset for a project whose concept could too easily obfuscate the story. I based my approach to editing the text on two guiding values: liberal textual intervention and temporal cue creation. Starting with the premise that Shakespeare is more than just the words,<sup>11</sup> I chose to prioritize the contemporary reception of the performed moment and downplay textual fidelity. Rather than rely on a supposed understanding of authorial intent, I was more interested in how a moment would be perceived. For instance, cutting the well-known act 1, scene 4 Queen Mab speech and replacing it with an impromptu karaoke performance of Aerosmith’s “Dream On” by Mercutio and his friends helped embody Mercutio’s rebellious, fun, and angry qualities—a moment that resonated with a Gen Z audience in a way I’ve not seen when using the source text. In another instance, I spliced together text from other sources to create a speech for Romeo during the act 1, scene 1 exchange with Benvolio as he languishes in his yearning for love. Entwined excerpts from *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and Sonnet 116 with text that I wrote formed a speech that was spoken a moment before the end of the play, helping to create an emotional climax to our inverted narrative and providing insight into Romeo’s pain. When Benvolio scoffs, “There is no greater grief than grief from love,” Romeo replies:

11 At the 2024 LMDA conference in Kansas City, I attended a session with Lue Douthit—co-founder of Play On Shakespeare—who shared her philosophy on textual fidelity when developing new translations of Shakespeare. Her invitation to reconsider how the plays live in our imaginations beyond just the language was inspiring and reassuring.

Nay, paint not love with grief and troubled woes  
Nor bitter hues tarnished with thy bitter pasts.  
Love’s tides lift our little world toward the sun  
Unto new lands, new worlds, new life.<sup>12</sup>  
It is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wandering barque,  
Whose worth’s unknown although his height be taken.  
Love alters not with Time’s brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.<sup>13</sup>  
And when love speaks, the voice of all the gods  
Make heaven drowsy with the harmony.<sup>14</sup>  
There is no better thing. And yet the love  
That belongs to her she keeps for herself,  
Locked up, and dares not share or show it.<sup>15</sup>

Although this kind of text-source assemblage did not occur frequently enough to particularly define the performance script, it is a good example of the degree and type of textual intervention I practice. I believe that even though all spoken text should be received as if it originates from the same world (Shakespeare’s canon), it can come from a variety of sources—real or speculative. If I’m honest, Shakespeare’s work consistently forces me to overcome confusion and mentally parse the text for meaning. While I maintain that the right degree of textual complexity makes for a rewarding theatre event, as an editor/artist I wish to move the comprehension slider a little in favor of clarity. This means embracing sober perspectives on authorial intent and textual fidelity, and deprioritizing the retention of scansion, punctuation, and orthography of the source material. These approaches help to make the text a bespoke asset for a particular production idea—like with *Romeo and Juliet*—and to engage with Shakespeare as a collaborator, rather than a proprietor.

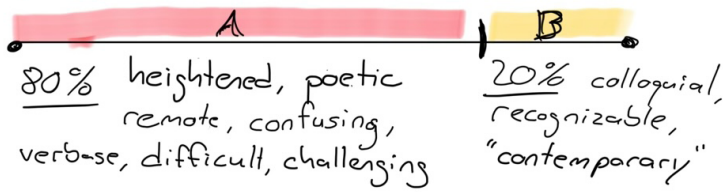
The division of scenes was another area that benefited from liberal emendation at this early stage. Rather than simply retaining the scene structures of the source material,

12 My interpolation.  
13 William Shakespeare, “Sonnet 116”, in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan (Oxford University Press, 2016), 2866, lines abridged.  
14 William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, in *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan (Oxford University Press, 2016), 816.  
15 My interpolation.



scene breaks were created for dramatic effect. This helped the audience reconstruct the forward, linear narrative in their imaginations—in other words, help them “re-wright” the source story. To do this, I integrated a convention of

My typical Shakespeare experience:



What I prefer to aim for:



Figure III: From the writer's production notebook.

cues: the first moment of one scene would be identically repeated as the last moment of the next scene, thus providing the audience with a clear marker of where to join them together. These overlapping moments—which we affectionately took to calling the “glue lines”—provided additional clarity in the performance, despite creating considerable confusion in the rehearsal and production process (entire scene changes were sometimes required to perform a five-second glue line).

This concept deeply affected how we rehearsed and, in many cases, the kinds of conversations I had with the actors. An experiment that prioritizes clarity sometimes inversely tends to eschew ambiguity—as it did with this project—and our creative considerations skewed towards the practical, resulting in a plot-centered process. In my experience, actors undertake Shakespeare's text with two particular frameworks of analysis: (1) some version of the Stanislavski “Method” that is concerned with identifying intention, objective, and motivation; and (2) a granular dissection of the punctuation, spelling, and meter in each line of text. These character-centered approaches can result in nuanced and complex performances, but, given the modest amount of rehearsal time and our primary concern for clarity, we instead focused on a structural approach to analyzing the performance requirements. Standard questions such as “What is your objective?” or “What might this semi-colon mean?” were instead replaced by “What is the climax of this speech and how can we lean into it?” and “How can we end this scene so that it

naturally becomes the point of departure for the scene the audience just saw ten minutes ago?” Thinking of character as a function of plot proved to be very liberating for the student actors and allowed them to focus on what the audience is receiving, or what Bridget Escolme refers to as the “theatrically self-conscious notion of the ‘performance objective.’”<sup>16</sup>

An additional tactic for guiding the actors towards a structural approach to the text was encouraging them to bypass (or at least delay) scrutinizing the text for meaning. The first stage of table work frequently involves a detailed line-by-line, word-by-word probe for meaning, supported in the room by ubiquitous reference volumes such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*, David Crystal and Ben Crystal's *Shakespeare's Words*, or Alexander Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary*. Instead, I asked the actors to allow the meaning of the words the opportunity to emerge from the textual structure and for it to evolve on the rehearsal room floor. Although initially drawing apprehension, this obstruction invited closer consideration of the play's structure and helped us see Shakespeare's dramaturgy as a recurring pattern governing the concentric rings of the narrative. The play, the act, the scene, the speech, and the thought were all interrogated for the same arrangement of five “movements.” Analyzing how the text changed gears helped the actor to generate a “map” that guided simple physical choices—walking, changing direction, sitting, standing, etc. Although most movements were arbitrary and often inappropriate for the actual dramatic moment, they helped physicalize the landscape of the text and served as placeholders for concrete performance gestures. Responding to how the text shifted by activating the body's impulses allowed meaning to slowly emerge on the rehearsal room floor. After working this way for several days, one actor said, “I still don't fully know what it means,” tapping his head, “but I totally know what it *means*,” placing his hand on his chest. After a couple of weeks, we folded the well-worn reference books back into our workflow and sought or confirmed word definitions, bolstering the experiential understanding of textual structure with an intellectual understanding of meaning. This unconventional order of operations clarified the structure of each scene, which served us well when we presented them in reverse order.

<sup>16</sup> Bridget Escolme, *Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, Performance, Self* (Routledge, 2005), 21.





**Figure IV:** Prologue as epilogue. Photo: Moonrider Productions.

It is ironic that the moment a show is being received by an audience—when the rehearsal process of discovery and implementation has passed—is when we really start to see the work in the most crucial light. The production run helped crystallize incredibly valuable lessons and observations resulting from our experiment. Most recognizably, it highlighted the tonal and generic disparity between the two halves of the play. Many Shakespeare scholars have explored the dual nature of comedy and tragedy in *Romeo and Juliet*—most notably Susan Snyder, who proposed that “action and characters begin in the familiar comic mold and are then transformed, or discarded, to compose the shape of tragedy.”<sup>17</sup> The deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt turn what is poised to be a comedic romance into a fateful tragedy (in a conventional presentation, this scene typically precedes the intermission). Thanks to the prologue, throughout the levity of the first act, the audience is aware of the dormant specter of tragedy waiting to pounce. However, when played in reverse, the tragedy can be wholly released from the narrative at the midpoint. After the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio in our production, there was only the excitement of clandestine love as we reverse-engineered its origin story. The concluding moment in our performance—when Benvolio invites Romeo to join him at the party where we know he will meet Juliet—was both full of optimism and framed as the decisive moment in the narrative when Romeo chooses the crucial path. It felt most appropriate at this moment to finally integrate the play’s famous prologue to encapsulate what

the audience had seen and remind them of the gravity of Romeo’s decision. As he contemplated Benvolio’s invitation, the cast assembled on stage to deliver—in fourteen shared lines—the words of the prologue in the past tense: “In fair Verona where we laid our scene.” Romeo finally responded with “Ay, I’ll go,” and the lights faded as the cast watched Juliet, aloft in her “balcony” turn, lock eyes with Romeo, and smile—a loving hint at their imminent meeting. During the run of the show, the actors took to calling act 1 the “sad act” and act 2 the “happy act.” When the comedic half of the play was relieved of the tragic foreboding to come, the generic duality appeared particularly clear and obvious to us.

However, there was an inevitable, dubious flavor to the narrative as the lights faded. The sense of hope and optimism in this last moment was skewed by the pervasive dramatic irony baked into the bones of the story and confirmed by the reintegration of the prologue as epilogue. Interestingly, reversing the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* turns it into a “problem play”: in performance, it is semiotically a comedy (moving from darkness to light and ending with hope) but is semantically a tragedy (ending with a tonal uncertainty and unease). Despite what we’ve already seen happen and in defiance of the prologue’s recollection of events, we *want* their love to work out and will actively encourage our cognitive dissonance.<sup>18</sup> Changing the tense of the events in the prologue (“a pair of star-crossed lovers *took* their life” and “*was* now the two hours traffic of our

<sup>17</sup> Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies: Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear* (Princeton University Press, 1979), 57.

<sup>18</sup> A friend of mine who loves the film *Titanic* admits that, despite innumerable viewings, each time she watches it she thinks, “Maybe it won’t sink this time!” For her, the film fosters an unrequited yearning for a happy ending.

stage”) gave us permission to think about the tragic aspect of the story having already happened, thus allowing us to imagine the optimistic promise—rather than the tragic fate—of the lovers. However, their deaths are always there, like a shadow. Audience members shared with us feelings of distinct pleasure at seeing a production of *Romeo and Juliet* that “ends well,” but they also noted an anxiety that tinged the experience. One patron commented to a cast member, “I feel so happy for them [Romeo and Juliet], but part of me also feels worried. I think I’ll ignore that part for now.” The tonal contradiction the dramaturgy of our production provoked created a friction that spurred exciting post-show conversations on genre, tone, and the relevance of the play.

“By prioritizing a reversed chronology, characters evolved through a gradual shedding of experiences.”

In addition to the generic reconsiderations this experiment provoked, it also offered student actors a fresh approach to developing character. During a rehearsal period for a conventional production (and I’m being very general and somewhat reductive), the process of creating a character is cumulative: as the actor works chronologically forward through the narrative, they build the character by assembling more and more details. Like sculpting with clay, it is an additive process. During our project, the actors regularly remarked how *subtractive* the process felt, like sculpting with marble. By prioritizing a reversed chronology, characters evolved through a gradual shedding of experiences. One actor described it as “unlearning,” since over the course of the plot, characters become more innocent. Another actor commented that they were not building a character, but rather “unpeeling” one.

Another unintended but happy by-product of this investigation was the freedom felt by the actors in approaching the text. Unencumbered by the common pressure of approaching Shakespeare (which carries with it a theatrical legacy rife with implied expectations, rules, and loyalties), they felt permission to pull

Shakespeare down from an intimidating pedestal and wrestle with the text in a new way. Director Peter Hinton once reflected on a discrepancy between two types of theatre creation processes: “I am often amazed, when working on a classical text, by the lengths to which all involved will go to honor (let’s say) Shakespeare’s intent: to make a five hundred-year-old joke about the possible threat of Spanish invasion work for an audience today: while on a new play, a difficult emotional transition is challenged and questioned, and sometimes a rewrite is demanded.”<sup>19</sup> By permitting a plasticity to the text and jettisoning rigid “Shakespearean” expectations, we could almost approach the work as a new play, full of possibilities, and regard Shakespeare as a valued collaborator, not a deific measure of perfection. Our uncertainty around the production concept (“Will this even work?!”) became creative fuel as we embraced a spirit of adventure in rehearsal daily. Our process—geared towards a concrete objective of exploring the function of time by performing the play backward—generated an unintended outcome. It seemed to occupy a middle ground between new play development and classical text production.

When I return to my original question of “How does time function in the theatre?” in the context of this project, I’m inspired by how embodied practice can expand theoretical knowledge. That, in the theatre, time is a construct based on the rules of the world of the play is an understanding I thought I’d always had. However, to place time at the center of the process—to, in effect, make it the protagonist—deepened my appreciation for the impact of collective perceived time. Part of this appreciation came from recognizing how a narrative measures out time and how it can provide its own clock for reference. Colleen Murphy’s *The December Man*, which also plots its story in a reverse chronology, features a prop architectural model onstage that—depending on the scene—appears in various phases of construction, repair, and neglect. The viewer can gauge *when* they are in the story based on the appearance of the prop at the beginning of each scene.<sup>20</sup> For our production of *Romeo and Juliet*, we explored time measurement and indexing in a variety of ways: in addition to the “glue lines”

<sup>19</sup> Peter Hinton, “Dramaturgy: Forging Definition,” in *Developing Nation: New Play Creation in English-Speaking Canada*, ed. Bruce Barton (Playwrights Canada Press, 2008), 142.

<sup>20</sup> Colleen Murphy, *The December Man* (Playwrights Canada Press, 2007).

that functioned as a key or legend for the reassembly of linear narrative, the set featured a sort of “calendar.” An architectural post in the performance space was fashioned to display the days of the week and indicate on which day each scene occurred, beginning on Friday when the kids are found in the tomb and going back to Sunday when Romeo decides to attend the Capulets’ ball. This convention accentuated the rapid movement of the second half of the story (or, in our case, the first half) in which the journey from late Monday to early Friday is compressed into sixty minutes of stage time. That compression was relaxed for the other half of the play (our so-called “happy act”), in which barely more than twenty-four hours (early Sunday to mid-day Monday) were presented over another hour.<sup>21</sup> Our “clock” underlined the subjective experience of time for the characters: the first twenty-four hours feel like a lifetime of events (meeting someone, courting them, falling in love, getting married, and life falling apart), and the next four days are a whirlwind of accelerated plotting and panicking. Even after reading, studying, watching, and staging *Romeo and Juliet* over several decades, it was only through this embodied experience that I truly recognized and appreciated the impact that time has on how the story is received. I hope that this experience became quantified for the audience as well. I acknowledge that engaging in an inquiry-based production process and reflecting on it post-mortem cannot generate a sufficient conclusion to the question “How does time function in the theatre?” Rather, perhaps such a project can only restate and rephrase the question in a variety of ways. As theatre-makers, our medium is time—shaping and reshaping is, itself, an inconclusive effort. ♦

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<sup>21</sup> I was delighted that the performance came in at two hours (plus a fifteen-minute intermission), thus fulfilling the prologue’s promise of “two hours traffic.”

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# Quantifying Creation

by Lynde Rosario

I am a dramaturg. I believe art is why I am alive. I labor at it daily as a literary artist who works with text in all its forms. I begin by reading the work, usually a play, perceiving the intentions of its writer, and then I develop strategies to execute those intentions. I am a professional collaborator, supporting the director, actors, and designers in a shared vision that morphs as it is shaped by each artist's input. My practice, and the lens through which I see the world, is dramaturgy. This often means that I interpret art made by others. Although my initial experience is textual, rather than performative, I consider myself a new play's first audience member. Though my process may begin with language—the articulation of an idea—ultimately the interpretation and embodiment of that idea determines the worth of my labor. The value of such labor is obvious to me. But it is by no means apparent to everyone.

Every artist's definition of value or worth will be as subjective as their work. Every artist's practice will be as individual as they are; and yet, all artists hold shared experiences. Whether painter or player, building a life's work takes a great deal of physical, mental, and emotional labor. When the monetary value of such labor goes unrecognized, it becomes more and more difficult for artists to accurately judge their own worth and demand fair compensation for it. Vital questions emerge when we start taking a deeper look at this issue: What is the labor of creation and how is it measured? How is art defined, and how is it valued? What is born of our labors and what must be sacrificed to fulfill them?

You'll notice I ask more questions than I answer, a signature trait of dramaturgical inquiry. We can, in fact, read this essay as a dramaturg might approach a new work: digesting the text and then enacting the solutions discussed. Whether trying to achieve that elusive "work-life balance," understanding how artists can be monetarily compensated, or simply recognizing non-monetary definitions of worth, examining the language we use to talk about the value of our labor reveals how we can actively build more equitable practices around professional art-making.



## A LIFE'S WORK

I once worked for an artistic director who would say, “There is no work, there is no rehearsal, there is only life.” She was paraphrasing the Russian clown Vyacheslav Ivanovich “Slava” Polunin. I quickly adopted her phrasing as my mantra. The words always feel appropriate when explaining my own ideas of “work-life balance.” Are not all moments spent working also moments spent living? How can an artist separate life and work and art when all are synonymous?

But living your craft is a double-edged sword. Those who do not wish to fairly compensate artists for their labor often argue, “If you love art, wouldn’t you be making it anyway?” Yes, I would, but then the work would be for me, not you. When you pay me, it becomes yours. I make art for the love of it, but I also do it to make a life. When your labor is your life’s love, when what you make is a reflection of who you are, and *how* you make it *is* who you are, must it then, once made, be sold or used for profit?

Even without monetary profit, love’s labors are not lost, because they come from that place of love. Still, it is important to recognize when it’s time to be practical. Therein lies the individuality of experiences that can help you determine your value, whether monetary or not. How were you prepared or trained in your craft? What is your level of expertise? What experiences inform your art and become the tools of your labor? Answering these questions can help you identify fair compensation for your work, and this work looks and feels different for each artist.

## ART AS SERVICE

Even if artists determine the fair value of their labor, whether monetary, emotional, or social, gatekeepers will still determine what can be called “art” and who gets to make a living from it. These gatekeepers vary depending largely on a society’s economic structure. Capitalism teaches us that profiting off of our art is necessary if we wish to demonstrate its worth, and thus our own worth, to others. How much does what you create make for you? Are we the things we produce? Socialist countries whose governments subsidize art may offer more opportunities for artists, but those artists are often subject to censorship not found in the free market. Financial autonomy can lead to freedom of expression. But how much is lost in a culture when art is determined worthy of distribution, access, or visibility by only a selected few?

Economically speaking, artists provide an essential service. As an example of this type of “commodity,” I look again to “Slava” Polunin who, in describing his profession’s worth, said, “A clown is trying to protect what is essential for the soul of humanity.” In Russian culture, clowns have long been considered particularly moving and necessary artists. Whether in literature or performance, the clown makes us laugh at our own misery and shows us the follies of our world, but always with a smile. He offers laughter and hope. What is the going rate for providing such a service? According to Forbes, “Slava” Polunin was Russia’s fourth highest-paid celebrity, earning 4.2 million dollars in 2005. I dream that one day all artists will be rewarded for their work so adequately, but as we all know, this is not currently the case. Can we rethink our scarcity mentality and find a more equitable way to compensate artists for their contributions? Everyone’s needs and desires are as individual as they are; therefore, their labors will be equally as distinct. Can bottom-line pay rates and budgets reflect that? What do the ratios of art making to money making tell us? Who will ultimately decide what is equitable? If we replace the current gatekeepers, who will be in charge?

“As a dramaturg, I wonder if we can similarly democratize our language...”

## LANGUAGE FOR LABOR

Typically, the theatre—like most systems—establishes a clear linear hierarchy with a sole arbiter. Ensembles, in contrast, give each member, regardless of role, an equal creative voice, and therefore exemplify labor sharing and power sharing in the theatre. In such a model, artists serve the work first, and to do that, they must understand, appreciate, and advocate for one another’s contributions. The structure of the hierarchy is democratized: a circle rather than a pyramid.

As a dramaturg, I wonder if we can similarly democratize our language. Hierarchical power structures are embedded in the very words we use to describe ourselves in relation to others. Before any system can change, we must first change how we speak. Rather than *submitting* work to a *superior*, which reinforces a disadvantaged position, can we not *share* work with a *colleague*? Even simple changes

in terminology, such as these, model inclusive behavior.

Evaluating how your own definitions of “value” and “worth” do or do not align with those of your society is the next step to remedying misconceptions around these terms. An age-old trope advises, “Know your audience.” When speaking of your art, your craft, your ideas, you want your audience to value them as highly as you do. Is the language you use supportive or self-deprecating? It is our shared responsibility to lift up the value of art for the sake of ourselves and for society as a whole.

What is the power you have and hold over each moment of your life, each creation, each ideation, each collaboration? Must that power be shared with those who pay you? What can you do with the skills that you have? How can you wield the power of your art and labor? These answers will be unique to you as you define your life and your practice. But we can all strive to create an environment that fosters communication and makes everyone feel comfortable enough to participate in the conversation. When a thought is freely expressed, it can contribute to a cumulative culture, allowing for abundance. How do you quantify your art and its worth? You have the power to determine how that value is measured. How will you define it?

*Thank you to the Tilt West Journal as the commissioner and original publisher. ♦*

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# To Find a Genealogy

by Simón Franco Suárez

*An earlier version of this address was given at the binational LMDA Tijuana-San Diego Conference in July 2025 by Simón Franco Suárez in Spanish (translated into English for publication by Martha Herrera-Lasso González).*

I

**H**ello. My name is Simón, and I would like to begin by telling you the story behind my name. My father is Colombian, and my mother is Mexican. When I was born, they were young and idealistic. Now, not so much, but back then, they felt a sort of nostalgia for the Latin-American revolution—a natural sentiment for people who were born around the ‘60s and for whom, by the ‘90s, when they were old enough to have a child, the only thing they could feel for the word “revolution” was nostalgia. That is why they decided to name their first and only child after a Latin American liberator. Hence, I am called Simón, after Bolívar.

No one chooses the name with which they come into the world, yet it seems to be something that determines who we are more than we imagine. As if that decision that my parents made twenty-nine years ago—a rather corny decision—was a way of inheriting nostalgia, ideals, and something of a path.

II

What is your first thought when you are told about dramaturgy in Mexico? What have you repeatedly heard in this context?

I, personally, have often heard the phrase, “Dramaturgy in Mexico is in diapers,” said both by Mexicans and foreigners.

What does this mean? What should those of us who practice dramaturgy in Mexico feel? Should we perhaps work on our sphincter control? That and more is what I would like to discuss today.

### III

When I sat down to write this text, I knew I wanted to say something about genealogies, about the origins of my becoming, but I wasn't sure what I would say or how I was going to say it. My eyes glanced across the ceiling, then my bookcase, in search of ideas. That is when I somewhat randomly grabbed this book—*The General in His Labyrinth* by Gabriel García Márquez. A page was folded at the corner, signaling a moment that, when I first read it, seemed important.

### IV

The novel narrates the last trip and the last days of Simón Bolívar's life. In one of the small towns he visits, people joyfully greet him, unaware that the liberator is at that moment headed towards exile, the last chapter of his path. Ignorant of this tragic detail, the people of the town, hoping to celebrate his arrival, organize an abundant feast at one of the town's most elegant houses. A Frenchman who had been taken in by the family that was hosting the event was also invited. This Frenchman, despite the heat of May, arrived well dressed, as if attending the winter salons of Paris, and from start to end he did not stop talking for a second, delivering an encyclopedic lecture during which he jumped from cock to donkey.

Have you heard the expression "From cock to donkey?" It is a French expression that refers to people jumping from one topic to another in conversation without any apparent logic.

In Mexico, we have a word for this phenomenon: *cantinfleo*.

### V

The word refers to the popular Mexican actor Mario Moreno Cantinflas, who spoke of everything to end up—apparently—saying nothing. I say apparently because I consider this an elevated form of knowledge, the mental drift where thought can go from one place to another creating unexpected connections: a baroque machine, where it would seem the subject will never find the predicate in the sentence, because what matters is not the end, but the means without end—like the last trip Bolívar ever made, but in the case of *cantinfleo*, it is the ideas that travel.

Anyway, the Frenchman, going from cock to donkey, ended his extenuating lecture with a harsh criticism of the systems of government in the new republics of the Americas, telling Bolívar what they should and shouldn't do. Simón, who

until that moment had been very patient, finally snapped and said to the Frenchman: "Do not try to teach us how we should be, do not try to make us into your likeness, do not pretend we do well in twenty years what you have managed to do so poorly in two thousand...Please, damn it, let us have our Middle Ages in peace."<sup>1</sup>

### VI

I closed the book and thought maybe I could end my speech with that: "Please, damn it, let us have our Middle Ages in peace," because that's what I feel every time I hear "Dramaturgy in Mexico is in diapers." But no, it would be a very resentful way to end my address.

I returned to the initial question, and I realized I was completely lost. What is the origin or genealogy of dramaturgy in Mexico? It suddenly felt too big a task, and I considered abandoning it and changing the topic. But an unknown impulse, like a faraway breeze from the underworld, led me to persist.

### VII

There's something that I've always found specific to our scenic art, and that is the impossibility of directly revisiting our history. Say, if you study painting, you can visit the Altamira caves. If you study film, you can watch the Lumière brothers' movies. If you study literature, you can read *Don Quixote*. But in our case, no one can see Sophocles's plays as they were originally performed. We only have access to dramatic literature and to some historical documents, but we know that is not theatre; the literature is not the event itself. Hence, speaking of genealogies or of a conversation with tradition in an art like ours is almost an esoteric act.

Be that as it may, every day I am more convinced that nothing comes from nothing. That our creative forces are, deep down, also the creative forces of those who preceded us. That our ancestors' decisions, even when they are corny, determine more than we imagine. That is why deciding how and with which tradition we are to converse is perhaps the most important decision an artist will make in their career.

### VIII

I speak of it as a decision because if we assume that a genealogy is something that is given, we would also be

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<sup>1</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *El general en su laberinto*, 1st ed. (Editorial Oveja Negra, 1989), 130.

assuming that history is set and there is only one: linear, continuous, and causal. But that is not the case. History is not only a way of organizing information from the past, but first and foremost, it is a way of explaining the present, of finding in the past the genealogies that give our present meaning.

If we all shared a genealogy, we could easily fall into a teleological narrative in which the history of dramaturgy, art, or thought is the irrevocable result of a set of ideas by a few white, European men who wore wigs or tunics. And I don't want to over-cantinflear in an effort to explain why this thought is, at the very least, sad.

**“My point is that origin and tradition are decisions we make in the present, and not things that are fully determined by the past.”**

My point is that origin and tradition are decisions we make in the present, and not things that are fully determined by the past. Finding a genealogy is primarily a decision, a practice that comes into being with time.

But then, what is my genealogy as a dramaturg in Mexico?

## IX

I returned to my bookshelf, and I found this book—*The Hamburg Dramaturgy* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. A foundational book, as a nearly total consensus attributes the origin of the dramaturg to this book, or, as we know the role in Latin America: the *dramaturgista*.

I opened the book and, in its foreword written by Luis de Tavira, it reads: “In the face of a European spiritual project, it seems that a book like G.E. Lessing’s *Hamburg Dramaturgy* still has more to say, while in Mexico it has yet to say anything at all.”<sup>2</sup> A scathing sentence...

.....  
<sup>2</sup> Luis de Tavira, “Presentación,” in *Dramaturgia de Hamburgo*, by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, 1st ed. (Cien del Mundo CONACULTA, 1997), 13, (translated by Martha Herrera-Lasso González).

## X

In order to explain what Luis de Tavira means, I need to say a little about the history of Mexican theatre. Or about one of the histories of Mexican theatre, because there are many, as our colleagues in Tijuana have taught us in their presentations. But given that I am, for better or for worse, *Chilango* (from Mexico City), I will talk to you about the history of the theatre in Mexico City. By the beginning of the previous century, it was divided into two traditions. The first was the Spanish theatre tradition, understood as the more cultured theatre, where only plays by Spanish authors were staged and actors were trained to speak with a Spanish accent. This disappeared from Mexican stages not too long ago, around the 70s, as incredible as that sounds. The other was the *Teatro de carpa* (tent shows), a widely popular tradition where actors with Mexican accents performed in comedy sketches that were usually political in theme. It's worth mentioning that the great Cantinflas and his acting style originated in *Teatro de carpa*.

Around the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, with the arrival of Seki Sano and Stanislavsky's method, these two traditions weakened, and thus began the era of the theatre director. A theatre that, emancipated from the text, gravitated around the director and their *mise-en-scene*. A theatre that, in most cases, was fully funded by the state and which held directors at the highest apex of the artistic hierarchy. This is what gave rise to the generation of the great teachers of Mexican theatre, of which Luis de Tavira is perhaps the last. I speak of a time when what mattered was not *where* one studied theatre, but under *whom*. Luis de Tavira was Héctor Mendoza's disciple, who in turn was Seki Sano's disciple. And so there were many genealogies or lineages of teachers that confronted one another. On the one hand, there were Margules's disciples (depressed), on the other, Héctor Azar's disciples (who fought with Héctor Mendoza's disciples, since it is said the *hectorines*'s children were always going at it), and finally, there were Gurrola's disciples (who were almost always drunk). Anyway, if you wanted to make theatre during that time, choosing a genealogy meant choosing under which teacher you would train.

## XI

This theatre model and its echoes remain in many aspects of Mexican theatre today. The truth is that this era is coming to an end. Not only because pedagogies have changed (as well as narratives, aesthetics, and work ethics), but also



because it was a model that depended on the state as benefactor, a state that almost entirely funded art in Mexico. And that national model is disappearing, which is why someone like de Tavira is so paradigmatic. He is perhaps the last representative of this era of Mexican theatre.

## XII

I continued reading de Tavira's prologue, and it said: "*The Hamburg Dramaturgy* founded a theoretical tradition and a poetical praxis which precedes, anticipates and determines what will be the *mise-en-scene* of a play. This dramaturg is the historical predecessor of the modern stage director."<sup>3</sup> That is to say, de Tavira identifies Lessing within his genealogy as a director, not as a dramaturg.

Then he has a phrase that is fit for Cantinflas, and I won't deny that I find it very ingenious and largely agree with it: "Theatre is a practice which is primarily a theory which is primarily a practice; because no one truly practices theatre if they don't simultaneously theorize, as much as no one theorizes theatre if they don't simultaneously practice it."<sup>4</sup>

I closed the book and wondered if *The Hamburg Dramaturgy* is present in my genealogy as much as the vestiges of the director's theatre.

## XIII

When I began working at the National Theatre Company (CNT) in 2022, the first project I was assigned was to investigate its history in preparation for the events that were being planned for its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I found this to be a great first project since it helped me understand the company's history. I will try to summarize:

The CNT's model is fully inspired by the European national theatre model: companies such as La Comédie in France, or the National Theatre in England. A model popularized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the creation of the nation-state, around the same time that Bolívar plotted the independence of the South American colonies and Lessing wrote *The Hamburg Dramaturgy*. Lessing wrote this book precisely because he started working as an advisor in one of the first national theatres. I'm referring to the National Theatre in Hamburg. That is to say, the dramaturg is irremediably linked to the history of national theatres.

However, the CNT in Mexico was not founded during that time. It was founded hundreds of years later in 1972 by Héctor Azar, who directed it for three years before the project was interrupted. In 1977, José Solé, recently arrived from the USSR and inspired by Soviet cultural institutions, resumed these efforts, and the company stayed active for another five years. After its dissolution, it became a production fund and not a repertory company until 2008, when Luis de Tavira decided that what Mexican theatre needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century was to return to a European repertory theatre model. He argued that this was a stable model and that only through stability could tradition be forged—in other words, genealogy. Amid an apparent lack of Mexican theatre tradition came the idea that whatever the Comédie did for French theatre tradition, the CNT would do for Mexican theatre tradition—ignoring the fact that we are talking about abysmally different geographies, contexts, cultures, economies, and histories. And this is where I get the sense that, just like the Frenchman in the García Márquez novel, Luis de Tavira and many other agents who have marked our history consider that what Latin America needs is to import the models, books, and ideas that have worked in Europe and the United States, assuming that they will have the same effects in these territories. But the histories and traditions of our Latin America have been very different.

## XIV

I, like many other dramaturgs, have arrived at this profession more by accident than by conviction.

## XV

When I graduated, all I wanted to do was travel and live abroad, so I took the first scholarship program that accepted me for a residency in another country. Curiously, it was a research residency focused on the role of the director in devised theatre. The residency took place in Buenos Aires, and my tutor was Jorge Dubatti, from whom I learned something that was crucial to my training: mapping thought, as well as thinking about theatre from the perspective of *radicant thinking*.<sup>5</sup> What does this mean?

It means that, when doing research, it is necessary to

3 de Tavira, "Presentación," 16, (translated by Martha Herrera-Lasso González).

4 de Tavira, 15.

5 Dubatti draws on Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of the *radicant*. For more on this, see Bourriaud's *The Radicant*.

understand the singularity of the phenomena that we study, especially the singularity of its context (historical, geographic, cultural, economic, etc.), and not only apply theories that may overlook the singularity of each context. For example, Dubatti told the anecdote of when Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* was translated into Spanish, and everyone wanted to analyze the theatre made in Buenos Aires through that lens (the same thing happened in Mexico City), despite the fact that Lehmann wasn't even aware of Latin American theatre.

#### XVI

During my residency in Buenos Aires, I began writing my undergraduate thesis. My supervisor was Didanwy Kent, who taught me to make the praxis itself my primary object of study: to think the practice in order to do the theory, and then, why not, think through the praxis of theory. I think that is when I became a dramaturg, even though it wasn't completely clear to me yet.

#### XVII

I still thought of myself more as a director than a dramaturg, and while I was directing shows at La Compañíasaria (my independent theatre collective), the truth is, I didn't make a living from theatre. One day, I received a call from Didanwy, telling me that the CNT was opening a new position for a dramaturg.

Aurora Cano, who has become one of my greatest teachers and who was about to become the director of the CNT, decided to open this new position at the company because she wanted someone young with whom to dialogue about curation, programming, and mediation.

#### XVIII

The application process consisted of a CV submission, followed by an interview. In the end, despite my nerves, I got the job, and I became the first full-time dramaturg at the CNT. I say "full-time dramaturg" because there have been dramaturgs before assigned to specific projects, but not a dramaturg who oversaw all the plays, as well as the programming and repertory processes. That role had never existed at the National Theatre Company.

I was very excited to get the news, but the excitement quickly dissipated and turned into complete panic. How was I going to be the dramaturg of a repertory company if I didn't fully think of myself as a dramaturg?

#### XIX

I remember the first thing I did was look for advice and a bit of stability from the dramaturgy colleagues whom I admired. I naturally spoke with Didanwy, but I also spoke with Martha Herrera-Lasso González, who had been my teacher; with Gabriela Aparicio; with Janeth Piña, who had worked as a dramaturg in La Compañíasaria; and with Stawrula Panagiotaki, who at the time worked as a dramaturg at Sauspeil Köln and was visiting Mexico.

What was very interesting about these encounters was that everyone shared with me a very different vision of dramaturgy and of what they did as dramaturgs. That is when I realized that everyone constructs their own way of inhabiting and practicing dramaturgy in ways that are cartographic, holistic, and based on personal experience, and that, in a nutshell, is what I needed to do in order to think of myself as a dramaturg.

#### XX

Something that stood out in my conversation with Stawrula, who worked for a repertory company in the German tradition, was that, based on her own dramaturgical practice, it seemed to her impossible that I would be able to take on all the tasks that were asked of me at the CNT. The company she worked for employed five full-time dramaturgs and produced fewer plays a year than the CNT.

This helped me see that adapting my practice to my context meant adapting to the production models in which I work without expecting those models to change. That is why I think importing work methodologies or epistemologies without previous analysis and an understanding of where one is situated is a very delicate issue.

#### XXI

Then came the challenge of working with directors who had drastically different work processes and artistic visions. Some of them had never worked with a dramaturg. At first, in order to feel more prepared, I read many resources about dramaturgy (primarily in German and English). Many times, I was disappointed when I arrived at rehearsal with something prepared, and what I had prepared, instead of helping, made the director's work awkward or negatively affected the process. That is when I realized that what works best for me as a dramaturg is adapting to how each individual director works and establishing my dramaturgical strategies in conversation with the unique nature and

development of each process.

In the end, I think the most important aspect of the dramaturgical practice that I've cultivated is learning to listen and observe. Not only the cultural, historical, geographic, and economic context, but also the vital context of those with whom one collaborates.

At first, as a dramaturg, I wanted to say and do many things, but deep down, I just wanted to feel useful. Often, that was a mistake. Now I think it's crucial to know when it's best for the process not to do or say something, which is not the same as doing nothing or saying nothing.

## XXII

While I was writing this and sporadically glancing at my bookcase, I came across this notebook. My first notebook from when I started at the CNT. I would like to share with you a fragment I had forgotten, but now makes sense to me:

July 14, 2022.

Today I was under the blankets, overwhelmed and frightened. There is a storm outside. Frightened of this new job. Frightened of ruining this opportunity, of not being good enough. Overwhelmed at not knowing how to be a dramaturg, not knowing where to start or what I need to do. Frightened also of what others might think or say of me. Last night I dreamt of my grandfather, Manuel, when he was young. When he didn't know how to make television, he had to invent the trade. I think in a way it's my turn to invent my trade, my own system. And there's something exciting to that.

## XXIII

My grandfather, Manuel, may he rest in peace, never finished elementary school. The people who knew him say he was very charming when he was young, and by chatting people up in cantinas, he was able to get a job in Colombian television when it was just starting. Apparently, back then, no one knew how to make television in Colombia, and what little they learned came from some Cubans who had taught a few courses in film and photography. My grandfather began carrying cables, and eventually he became a television director. He would tell me that back then, given a lack of references or

professional training, it fell upon them to invent the trade.

## XXIV

Reading my first diary at the CNT, there are a few other things I don't want to forget:

1. The value in registering our creative process. *The Hamburg Dramaturgy*, which Lessing refers to as a "critical register," has many moments that seem like a diary or a work log. The first advice Didanwy gave me for my thesis was to keep a worklog. Back then, I didn't imagine that a practice that seemed so innocent would link me to this tradition.
2. We will never be prepared enough to take on the things that life puts before us. I don't believe that Lessing, who had studied theology, was fully prepared to work at the National Theatre in Hamburg. He had to invent his trade within the context of where he was situated.
3. The force of our ancestors is fundamental to what we do today. These are the forces that will make us get out of bed even when there is a storm outside. Choosing a genealogy is also choosing the ghosts we want to converse with.

## XXV

Many of the colleagues whom I've mentioned so far are young. By that I mean under forty-five years old, which I think is pretty young, especially if we compare this to dramaturgy guilds in other countries. This doesn't mean that there were no dramaturgs in Mexico before. Scholarship, like the work by Gabriela Aparicio, shows that there were dramaturgical practices in Mexico during the previous century, but the reality is that these were undertaken by people who did not consider themselves dramaturgs. So, in some ways, we are the first generation of people in Mexico who have adopted dramaturgy as a profession and as a lifestyle, and that is very exciting.

For many people, this suggests that we prioritize the future of dramaturgy in Mexico, but I disagree with this statement. I believe that our first and primary commitment is to the past.

## XXVI

To the Aymara people, history and time are nonlinear, even more so if they don't follow a teleological order. Time is closer to a spiral or a cycle, in which eternal feedback constantly comes back to the present. The future, on

the other hand, is behind us. Because we can't see it, it is uncertain; we don't even know if it exists, because it hasn't arrived. The past is the only thing in front of us, and it is contained in the present, so that its repetition or its overcoming is at stake in every instant.

That is why I disagree with the supposed responsibility for a future that doesn't even exist. Which hasn't arrived yet. Our responsibility as young dramaturgs is and can only be to the past. And that is why I find it urgent that we find the blessed genealogy.

## XXVII

"The origin, even when it is a wholly historical category, has nothing to do with the genesis of things. Origin doesn't designate the fate of what has been born, but more certainly of what is being born in fate and in decline. Origin is a swirl in the river of fate and it drags in its rhythm the matter or what is becoming."<sup>6</sup>

What I've just read was written by Walter Benjamin, and I think it is very relevant to the bifurcation upon which we find ourselves.

That is, the current state of dramaturgy in Mexico, which is not the current state of dramaturgy in Germany or in England, demands that we create our own historicity. It demands that we cast a light on the traditions that make us feel stronger—and not feel as though we are in diapers—and that we invoke those forces from the past that will help us leave the house, even in the harshest storms. The current state of dramaturgy in Mexico demands that we find a genealogy of our own.

## XXVIII

While I sometimes feel very far away from Lessing, I believe there is something in the spirit of *The Hamburg Dramaturgy* that is supremely inspiring. This is a book that is at times a chronicle, at times an essay, at times poetry, and at times a philosophical dissertation. And while some say the book is unfinished, I think in reality it is an unfinishable book.

To Lessing, as to many of us, there was no clear tradition in front of him. He had to find his genealogy, taking from

philosophy, pedagogy, politics, literature, and even theology, finding in every new entry the swirls of his thoughts.



Figure 1: Simón Franco Suárez. Photo: Aarón Hernández

## XXIX

Twenty-nine years ago, I was named Simón, and that is part of my genealogy. But I have also been able to decide how to grant it meaning, and decide what other forces I want to make my own and turn into a river. I still haven't found a clear sense of my genealogy as a dramaturg, and sometimes I still question if what I do is, strictly speaking, dramaturgy. However, I find comfort in the anecdote of when they told Bertolt Brecht (another notable dramaturg) that what he did was not theatre. Brecht responded, "Call it *thaetre*, then." Perhaps the best thing we can do is to give our profession a different name, so that Lessing's ghost doesn't haunt us late at night. But that is a topic for another time.

Thank you. ♦

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Origine du drame baroque allemand*, trans. S. Muller (Flammarion, 1985), 43. .

## SIMÓN FRANCO SUÁREZ

Of Colombian-Mexican origin, I studied Dramatic Literature and Theatre at UNAM. There, in 2016, I co-founded La Compañíasauria with a group of friends interested in devised theater labs. I later carried out a research residency in Buenos Aires focused on group theatre in Latin America, under the mentorship of Jorge Dubatti.

With La Compañíasauria, we have sustained over ten years of continuous work, developing a range of projects at the intersection of the performing arts, performance, video, and communal practices. My work centers on stage direction through collective creation processes that do not begin from a pre-existing text: laboratory and research-creation spaces where direction acts as a catalyst for creative flows. I have worked in both film and theatre, and I am particularly drawn to the dialogue between these disciplines.

I have also worked as a dramaturg with the National Theatre Company, accompanying processes grounded in very different methodologies and artistic premises. As a dramaturg, my research engages with the tensions between artistic creation, research, and production models; within this intersection, I see dramaturgy as a space of critical observation that allows us to experiment with alternative models of creation and production from a decolonial perspective.

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# Para encontrar una genealogía

por Simón Franco Suárez

*Esta conferencia se presentó en el congreso binacional LMDA Tijuana-San Diego, en julio de 2025.*

I

Hola. Me llamo Simón y me gustaría empezar contándoles la historia de mi nombre. Mi padre es colombiano y mi madre mexicana. Cuando yo nací ellos eran jóvenes e idealistas, ahora ya no tanto, pero en ese entonces sentían algo así como una nostalgia por la revolución en Latinoamérica. Un sentimiento natural para las personas que nacieron en Latinoamérica alrededor de los 60's y que para los 90's, cuando tenían edad para tener un hijo, lo único que se podía sentir por una palabra como "revolución" era nostalgia. Por eso decidieron ponerle a su primer y único hijo el nombre de algún libertador latinoamericano. Entonces me llamaron Simón, por Bolívar.

Nadie escoge el nombre con el que llega al mundo, y sin embargo pareciera ser algo que nos determina mucho más de lo que imaginamos. Como si esa decisión que tomaron mis padres hace veintinueve años, una decisión más bien cursi, fuera una forma de heredar nostalgias, ideales y algo así como un derrotero.

II

¿Qué es lo primero en lo que piensan cuando les hablan del dramaturgismo en México? ¿O qué frase o sentencia han escuchado de manera repetida en ese contexto?

Yo en lo personal he escuchado en repetidas ocasiones la frase "el dramaturgismo en México está en pañales". Dicha tanto por extranjeros como por mexicanos.

¿Qué significa eso? ¿Qué deberíamos de sentir las personas que nos dedicamos al dramaturgismo en México? ¿Deberíamos acaso trabajar en nuestro control de esfínteres? Sobre eso y más quisiera hablar.

### III

Cuando me senté a escribir este texto sabía que quería decir algo sobre las genealogías, sobre los orígenes de mi devenir, pero no sabía muy bien qué o cómo lo iba a decir. Paseaba mi mirada por el techo, mi librero, buscando ideas. Fue ahí donde de manera un tanto azarosa agarré este libro (El geneal en su laberinto de Gabriel García Márquez)

El libro tenía un doblez en una página, señalando un momento que cuando lo leí, me había parecido importante.

### IV

La novela narra el último viaje y los últimos días de Simón Bolívar. En uno de los pueblos que visita, la gente lo recibe llena de júbilo, sin saber que el libertador se dirigía al exilio, al último capítulo de su derrotero. Ignorantes de este trágico detalle, la gente del pueblo, en ánimos de celebrar su llegada, le organiza una abundante comida en una de las casas más elegantes que había en el pueblo. A la cual se invitó también a un francés que vivía al amparo de la familia de la casa. El francés, a pesar del calor de mayo, llegó muy bien vestido, como en los salones invernales de París, y desde que empezó la comida no dejó de hablar un solo segundo, una cátedra enciclopédica en donde pasaba del gallo al burro.

¿Ustedes han escuchado esa expresión, “del gallo al burro”? Es una expresión francesa que se refiere a este fenómeno donde la gente salta de un tema a otro durante una conversación, sin una conexión lógica aparente.

En México tenemos una palabra para nombrar un fenómeno parecido: el cantinfléo.

### V

La palabra hace referencia al actor popular mexicano Mario Moreno Cantinflas. Que hablaba de todo, para finalmente no hablar de nada, aparentemente. Y digo aparentemente porque considero a ésta una forma elevada del conocimiento, la deriva mental, donde el pensamiento puede ir de un lugar a otro creando las conexiones más insospechadas, una máquina barroca, donde parece que el sujeto jamás encontrará al predicado de la oración, porque lo importante no es el fin, sino el medio sin fin, como el último viaje de Bolívar, pero en el caso del cantinfléo es un viaje de las ideas.

En fin, el francés pasando del gallo al burro, terminó su extenuante cátedra criticando duramente los sistemas de gobierno de las nuevas repúblicas en América, diciéndole a Bolívar lo que deberían o no deberían hacer. Simón,

que hasta entonces había sido muy paciente, terminó por explotar y le dijo al francés: “No traten de enseñarnos cómo debemos ser, no traten de que seamos iguales a ustedes, no pretendan que hagamos bien en veinte años lo que ustedes han hecho tan mal en dos mil” (...) “Por favor, carajos, déjenos hacer tranquilos nuestra Edad Media”<sup>1</sup>.

### VI

Cerré el libro y pensé: tal vez podría terminar mi conferencia así “por favor, carajos, déjenos hacer tranquilos nuestra Edad Media”. Porque algo así siento cada vez que escucho que “el dramaturgismo en México está en pañales”. Pero no, sería una forma muy resentida de concluir mi conferencia.

Vuelvo a la pregunta inicial, y me doy cuenta que estoy completamente perdido. ¿Cuál es el origen o la genealogía, en este caso, del dramaturgismo en México? De pronto me pareció una tarea demasiado grande y pensé en desistir, cambiar de tema, pero un impulso desconocido, como una brisa lejana, de inframundo, me hizo persistir.

### VII

Hay algo que siempre se me ha hecho muy particular de nuestro arte y es la imposibilidad de revisar de manera directa nuestra historia. Es decir, si tú estudias pintura, tienes la posibilidad de ver las cuevas de Altamira. Si tú estudias cine puedes ver las películas de los hermanos Lumiere. Si estudias letras puedes leer el Quijote. Pero en nuestro caso, nadie puede ver los montajes originales de las obras de Sófocles. Solo tenemos acceso a las obras dramáticas y a algunos documentos históricos, pero bien sabemos que eso no es el teatro, la literatura no es el acontecimiento. Entonces hablar de genealogías o diálogos con la tradición en un arte como el nuestro es un acto casi esotérico.

Aun así, cada vez me convenzo más de que nada viene de la nada. Que nuestras fuerzas creativas en el fondo son también las fuerzas de las personas que nos precedieron, que las decisiones de nuestros antepasados, aunque sean cursis, nos determinan más de lo que imaginamos. Por eso, escoger con qué tradición dialogar y cómo dialogar con esa tradición es quizás la decisión más importante que un artista debe tomar en su carrera.

### VIII

Digo escoger porque si partiéramos de que la genealogía

1 Gabriel García Márquez, *El general en su laberinto*, La oveja negra editorial (Bogotá, 1989), 129–130.

es algo dado, estaríamos también suponiendo que la historia es una sola: lineal, continua y causal. Pero no es así. La historia no solo es una forma de organizar la información sobre el pasado, es ante todo, una forma de explicar el presente, de encontrar en el pasado las genealogías que le den sentido a nuestro ahora.

Si todos compartiéramos una misma genealogía fácilmente podríamos caer en una narrativa teleológica donde la historia del dramaturgismo, del arte o del pensamiento es producto irremediable de las ideas de unos cuantos señores blancos, europeos, que usaban pelucas o túnicas. Y no quiero cantinflear de más para explicar por qué pensar eso es, de menos, triste.

Mi punto, es que el origen y la tradición son cosas que decidimos en el presente y no algo que está

**“Mi punto, es que el origen y la tradición son cosas que decidimos en el presente y no algo que está completamente determinado por el pasado.”**

completamente determinado por el pasado. Encontrar una genealogía es ante todo una decisión, una práctica que deviene en el tiempo.

Pero entonces ¿cuál es mi genealogía como dramaturgista en México?

## IX

Vuelvo a ver mi librero y me encuentro con este libro (La Dramaturgia de Hamburgo de G.E. Lessing) Un libro fundacional, pues en un consenso casi total se le atribuye a este libro el origen de la figura del dramaturgo, o como lo entendemos aquí en Latinoamérica: dramaturgista.

Abro el libro y en su presentación, hecha por Luis de Tavira, dice: “... sin bien, frente al proyecto espiritual de Europa, un libro como Dramaturgia de Hamburgo de G.E. Lessing parece que no ha terminado de decir lo que aún

tiene que decir, en México en cambio, ciertamente no ha dicho nada todavía”.<sup>2</sup> Una frase lapidaria.

## X

Para entender la figura de Luis de Tavira yo tendría que explicarles un poco de la historia del teatro en México. O una de las historias del teatro en México, porque también son varias, cómo bien nos han demostrado las colegas de Tijuana en sus conferencias. Pero yo que soy, para bien y para mal, chilango, les hablaré de la historia del teatro en la Ciudad de México. Para inicios del siglo pasado estaba dividido en dos tradiciones: por un lado la tradición del teatro español, que correspondía a lo que se entendía como la tradición culta del teatro, donde solo se montaban autores españoles y era parte de la técnica de actuación sesear con acento español. Esto es algo que desapareció de los escenarios en México hasta hace muy poco —como los 70’s— por más increíble que parezca. Por el otro lado, estaba la tradición del teatro de carpa, la cuál era una tradición enteramente popular, los actores hablaban con acento mexicano, y se representaban sketches cómicos y usualmente con temáticas políticas. Cabe mencionar que el gran Cantinflas y su forma de actuar tiene su genealogía en el teatro de carpa.

A la mitad del siglo pasado, con la llegada de Seki Sano y el método Stanislavsky, estas dos tradiciones se debilitaron y empezó así la era del teatro de director. Un teatro, que emancipado del texto, veía en la puesta en escena y en la figura del director su centro. Un teatro, en la mayoría de los casos, enteramente financiado por el estado y que tenía a los directores en el punto más alto de la jerarquía artística. Es aquí donde surge la generación de los grandes maestros del teatro en México. De los cuáles Luis de Tavira es quizás el último. Hablamos de una época donde lo importante no era dónde uno estudiaba teatro sino con qué maestro. Luis de Tavira fue discípulo de Héctor Mendoza, quien a su vez fue discípulo de Seki Sano. Y así había genealogías, o linajes, de maestros que se enfrentaban unas con otras. Por una lado estaban los discípulos de Margules, deprimidos, por otro los de Héctor Azar, que se enfrentaban con los de Héctor Mendoza, pues decían que los hijos de los hectorines se la pasaban peleando, y ya por último estaban los discípulos de Gurrola que casi siempre estaban alcoholizados. En fin, si uno en esa época se quería dedicar al teatro, escoger tu genealogía implicaba escoger también con que maestro ibas a estudiar.

.....  
<sup>2</sup> Luis de Tavira, Luis, “Lessing el sabio”, *Dramaturgia de Hamburgo*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (CONACULTA, 1997), 13.

## XI

Este modelo de teatro, o sus ecos, siguen vigentes en muchos aspectos del medio teatral mexicano. Pero lo cierto es que es una época del teatro que está en su ocaso. No sólo porque las pedagogías cambiaron, así como los discursos, las estéticas y las éticas de trabajo. Sino porque también era un modelo que dependía del estado benefactor, un estado que financiaba casi enteramente el arte en México. Y ese modelo de país está desapareciendo. Por eso la figura de Tavira resulta tan paradigmática, es el último representante de esa era del teatro en México, que para bien y para mal, también está desapareciendo.

## XII

Sigo leyendo la presentación de Tavira y dice: “La Dramaturgia de Hamburgo funda una tradición teórica y una praxis poética que precede, anticipa y determina lo que será la puesta en escena de una obra. Este dramaturgista es el antecedente histórico del director de escena moderno”.<sup>3</sup> Es decir, Tavira encuentra en su genealogía a Lessing, no como dramaturgista sino como director.

Luego tiene una frase digna de Cantinflas que, no lo voy a negar, me parece muy ingeniosa, y con la cual coincido en buena medida: “El teatro es un hacer que es sobre todo un pensar que es sobre todo un hacer; porque nadie practica verdaderamente el teatro si al mismo tiempo no lo teoriza, tanto como nadie teoriza el teatro si al mismo tiempo no lo practica”.<sup>4</sup>

Cierro el libro, y me pregunto si en mi genealogía está la dramaturgia de Hamburgo tanto como las herencias del teatro de director.

## XIII

Cuando yo entré a la Compañía Nacional de Teatro (CNT), en 2022, el primer proyecto que me asignaron fue investigar su historia para los homenajes que se iban a realizar en torno a sus 50 años. Me pareció muy afortunado que este fuera mi primer proyecto puesto que me ayudó a entender mejor a esta compañía. Intentaré resumirla de manera breve:

El modelo de Compañía Nacional está totalmente inspirado en el modelo de los teatros nacionales europeos: compañías como la Comédie en Francia o el National Theater en Inglaterra. Un modelo que se populariza en el siglo XVIII, en

3 de Tavira, “Lessing el sabio”, 16.

4 de Tavira, “Lessing el sabio”, 15.

la época en que se conforman los estados nacionales en el mundo, la misma época en la que Bolívar estaba planeando la independencia de las colonias en Sudamérica, y la misma época en la que Lessing escribe la dramaturgia de Hamburgo. De hecho Lessing escribe este libro porque entra a trabajar como asesor en uno de los primeros teatros nacionales. Me refiero al Teatro Nacional de Hamburgo. Es decir, la historia de la figura del dramaturgista, está irremediabilmente ligada a la historia de los teatros nacionales.

Sin embargo, la CNT en México no se fundó en esa época. Se funda cientos de años después, en 1972 con Héctor Azar, funciona unos 3 años y luego se interrumpe. En 1977 José Solé, que venía de la URSS e inspirado por las instituciones culturales soviéticas, retoma el proyecto y esa compañía dura unos escasos cinco años más. Tras su disolución la Compañía Nacional pasa a ser un fondo de producción y no una compañía de repertorio, y es hasta 2008 que Luis de Tavira, decide que lo que el teatro mexicano necesita, en pleno siglo 21, es volver al modelo de compañía de repertorio europeo. Argumentando que es un modelo de estabilidad y que solo la estabilidad puede crear tradición, es decir genealogía. Y ante la aparente falta de tradición teatral mexicana, viene la idea de que probablemente lo que hace la Comédie en la tradición teatral francesa, hará una CNT en la tradición teatral mexicana. Pasando por alto que estamos hablando de geografías, contextos, culturas, economías e historias abismalmente distintas. Y es ahí donde me da la sensación que al igual que el francés de la novela de García Márquez, Luis de Tavira y muchos otros agentes que han marcado nuestra historia consideran que lo que América Latina necesita es importar los modelos, los libros y las ideas que en Europa o Estados Unidos han funcionado. Suponiendo que tendrán el mismo efecto en estos territorios. Pero las historias y las tradiciones de nuestra América Latina han sido muy distintas.

## XIV

Yo al igual que muchos otros dramaturgistas, creo que llegamos a este oficio más por accidente que por convicción.

## XV

Cuando salí de la carrera mi único deseo era viajar, vivir en otro país, por lo que tomé la primera beca que me aceptó para hacer una residencia en el extranjero, curiosamente fue una residencia de investigación en torno a la figura de la dirección en procesos de creación colectiva. La residencia sucedió en Buenos Aires y mi tutor fue Jorge Dubatti. De

quien aprendí algo que fue determinante en mi formación: Cartografiar el pensamiento, así como pensar el teatro desde un *pensamiento radicante*<sup>5</sup>. ¿Qué significa esto?

Qué a la hora de investigar es necesario entender la singularidad de los fenómenos que estudiamos, y sobre todo la singularidad de su contexto (histórico, geográfico, cultural, económico, etc). Y no solo aplicar teorías, que podrían pasar por alto la singularidad de cada contexto. Por ejemplo, Dubatti refería el fenómeno de cuando se tradujo al castellano el teatro posdramático, y todos querían analizar el teatro de Buenos Aires desde esas coordenadas, (lo mismo pasó en CDMX) pasando por alto que Lehmann jamás se enteró del teatro en Latinoamérica.

### XVI

A partir de mi residencia en Buenos Aires, empecé a escribir mi tesis de licenciatura y mi asesora fue Didanwy Kent. Quien me invitó y me enseñó a hacer de la propia praxis mi objeto principal de estudio. A pensar el hacer, para luego hacer el pensar, y luego también ¿por qué no? Pensar el hacer del pensar. Y creo que ahí me volví dramaturgista, aunque yo no lo tuviera completamente claro.

### XVII

Yo seguía viéndome a mí más como director que como dramaturgista, y aunque sí estaba dirigiendo cosas con La Compañíasauria (mi colectivo de teatro independiente), lo cierto es que no vivía del teatro. Un día recibí una llamada de Didanwy, diciéndome que La CNT iba a abrir un nuevo puesto de dramaturgista.

Aurora Cano, que ahora se ha convertido en otra de mis grandes maestras, y que en ese entonces acababa de tomar la dirección de la CNT, decidió abrir este nuevo puesto en el CNT porque le interesaba tener alguien joven con quien dialogar en torno a temas de curaduría, programación y mediación.

### XVIII

El proceso de selección consistía en mandar mi CV y una posterior entrevista. Al final, a pesar de mis nervios, me quedé, y pasé a ser el primer dramaturgista fijo en la CNT. Hago la aclaración de “dramaturgista fijo” porque antes había habido dramaturgistas específicos por proyectos. Pero no un dramaturgista que acompañara todas las obras,  
.....

<sup>5</sup> Dubatti toma la noción de Radicante de Nicolas Borriaud. Ver *Radicante* de Nicolas Borriaud.

así como los procesos de repertorio y programación. Un puesto así nunca había existido en la Compañía Nacional.

La emoción de recibir esta noticia fue grande, pero se disipó rápidamente y se convirtió en un pánico total. ¿Cómo iba a ser yo el dramaturgista de una compañía de repertorio si yo mismo no terminaba de asumirme como dramaturgista?

### XIX

Me acuerdo que lo primero que hice fue buscar consejo, y también un poco de contención, en colegas dramaturgistas a quienes yo admiraba. Naturalmente hablé con Didanwy, pero también hablé Martha Herrera Lasso que fue mi maestra, con Gabriela Aparicio, con Janeth Piña que ha sido dramaturgista en la Compañíasauria y con Stawrula Panagiotaki, que en ese entonces era dramaturgista en la Sauspiel Köln y estaba de visita en México.

Lo que fue muy interesante de estos encuentros es que cada una me compartió una visión muy distinta de lo que era el dramaturgismo y de lo que ellas hacían como dramaturgistas. Fue ahí que me di cuenta que cada quien construye su propia forma de habitar y practicar el dramaturgismo de manera cartografiada, holística y basada en la experiencia propia. Y que en síntesis eso era lo que yo tenía que hacer para asumirme como dramaturgista.

### XX

Algo que me pareció particular de mi charla con Stawrula, que venía de trabajar en una compañía de repertorio de la tradición alemana, era que, basándose en su forma de hacer dramaturgismo, le parecía casi imposible que yo pudiera hacer todo lo que tenía que hacer en la CNT. Ya que en la compañía en la que ella trabajaba, que producía menos obras al año que las que se acostumbra producir en la CNT, habían 5 dramaturgistas contratados.

Esto me hizo entender que adaptar mi práctica a mi contexto implicaba también adaptarme a los modelos de producción en los que yo podía trabajar, y no esperar a que esos modelos cambiaran. Por eso a veces me parece tan delicado importar metodologías de trabajo o epistemologías sin un análisis previo y un entendimiento profundo del lugar en el que uno está situado.

### XXI

Luego vino el reto de empezar a trabajar con directoras y directores con metodologías de trabajo y visiones artísticas abismalmente diferentes. Algunos de ellos jamás habían



trabajado con un dramaturgista. Al principio, para sentirme más preparado, leía muchos referentes (principalmente alemanes y anglosajones) sobre dramaturgismo. Y muchas veces fue grande mi desilusión cuando llegaba con trabajo preparado para el ensayo, y eso en lugar de ayudar, entorpecía o perturbaba el trabajo del director o directora en cuestión. Fue ahí que entendí, que lo que más me funciona a mí como dramaturgista, es adaptarme a la forma de trabajo de cada director o directora. Establecer mis estrategias dramaturgísticas en función del desarrollo y la naturaleza singular de cada proceso.

Al final creo que lo más importante para la práctica dramaturgística que yo he ido forjando es aprender a observar y escuchar. No solo el contexto cultural, histórico, geográfico y económico, sino también el contexto vital de las personas con las que uno va a colaborar.

Al principio, como dramaturgista yo quería decir y hacer muchas cosas, en el fondo quería sentirme útil. Y creo que muchas veces me equivoqué en ese afán. Ahora creo que es vital saber cuándo es mejor para el proceso no-hacer, no-decir. Que no es lo mismo que hacer nada o decir nada.

## XXII

Mientras escribía esto y observaba esporádicamente mi librero, me encontré con esta libreta. Que fue mi primera libreta de apuntes cuando entré a la CNT. Quisiera compartirles un fragmento que no recordaba, pero ahora que lo leo, casi tres años después, me hace mucho sentido:

14 de julio 2022

Hoy estaba abrumado y miedoso bajo las cobijas. Afuera hay una tormenta. Miedoso por estar en este nuevo trabajo. Tengo miedo de arruinar esta oportunidad, de no ser suficientemente bueno. Y abrumado por no saber cómo ser dramaturgista, por no saber cómo empezar a hacer lo que tengo que hacer. Tengo miedo también de lo que los demás dirán o pensarán de mí. Anoche soñé con mi abuelo Manuel, lo soñé de joven. Cuando no sabía cómo hacer televisión y tuvo que inventar el oficio. Creo que me toca de alguna manera inventar mi oficio, mi propio sistema. Y eso tiene algo de emocionante.

## XXIII

Mi abuelo Manuel, que en paz descanse, no terminó la primaria. Pero dicen que era muy encantador de joven y así fue que en pláticas de cantina logró conseguir un trabajo en la televisión colombiana, cuando ésta empezaba. Al parecer en ese entonces nadie sabía hacer televisión en Colombia, y lo poco que aprendieron fue por unos cubanos, que vinieron a dar unos cursos sobre cine y fotografía. Mi abuelo empezó cargando cables y eventualmente llegó a dirigir algunos programas de televisión. Él me decía que en ese entonces, a falta de referentes o formación profesional, les tocó inventarse el oficio.

## XXIV

Ahora que leo éste diario de mis inicios en la CNT, hay algunas cosas que no quisiera olvidar:

1. El valor de registrar nuestros procesos creativos. La dramaturgia de Hamburgo, que Lessing califica como un “registro crítico” tiene muchos pasajes que bastante se parecen a un diario o a una bitácora de trabajo. El primer consejo que me dió Didanwy para realizar mi tesis fue llevar una bitácora de trabajo. En ese entonces no imaginaba que una práctica tan aparentemente inocente me ligaría a esta tradición.
2. Nunca estaremos suficientemente preparados para hacer las cosas que la vida nos pone enfrente. No creo que Lessing, que estudió teología, haya estado completamente preparado para trabajar en el Teatro Nacional de Hamburgo. Él, de manera notable, tuvo que inventar su oficio, situado en el contexto en el que vivía.
3. Las fuerzas de nuestras antepasadas y antepasados son fundamentales para lo que hacemos en tiempo presente. Son esas fuerzas las que nos hacen salir de la cama aunque afuera haya una tormenta. Escoger una genealogía es también escoger con qué fantasmas queremos conversar.

## XXV

Muchas de las colegas que hasta ahora he mencionado son jóvenes. Quiero decir, menores de 45 años, lo cual me parece bastante joven, sobre todo si lo comparamos con los gremios de dramaturgistas en otros países. Y eso no quiere decir que antes no hubiera habido dramaturgistas en México. Investigaciones como las de Gabriela Aparicio, demuestran que sí hubo prácticas dramaturgísticas durante el siglo pasado en México, pero lo cierto es que eran realizadas por personas que no se asumían a sí mismas como dramaturgistas.

Entonces sí somos de alguna manera las primeras generaciones de personas en México que han adoptado el dramaturgismo como profesión y como forma de vida. Y eso es bastante emocionante.

Para muchas personas esto implica un compromiso con el futuro del dramaturgismo en México. Pero yo me siento un poco en desacuerdo con esa afirmación, creo que nuestro primer y principal compromiso es con el pasado.

## XXVI

Para el pueblo Aymara, la historia y el tiempo no son lineales, mucho menos siguen un orden teleológico. Tiene más la forma de un espiral o de ciclos, donde en su eterno retroalimentarse el pasado vuelve sobre el presente constantemente. El futuro, en cambio, se encuentra atrás de nosotros, porque no lo vemos, es incierto, ni siquiera sabemos si existe, porque no ha llegado. Es el pasado lo único que tenemos enfrente, y está contenido en el presente, su repetición o su superación se juegan en cada instante presente.

Por eso me siento en desacuerdo con esa supuesta responsabilidad con un futuro que ni siquiera existe. Que no ha llegado aún. Nuestra responsabilidad como dramaturgistas jóvenes está y solo puede estar en el pasado. Y es ahí donde me parece urgente encontrar la dichosa genealogía.

## XXVII

“El origen, aun cuando es una categoría enteramente histórica, no tiene sin embargo nada que ver con la génesis de las cosas. El origen no designa el devenir de lo que ha nacido, sino ciertamente de lo que está naciendo en el devenir y la declinación. El origen es un remolino en el río del devenir y arrastra en su ritmo la materia de lo que está apareciendo”.<sup>6</sup>

Lo que acabo de leer es de Walter Benjamin y creo que tiene mucho sentido para la encrucijada en la que nos encontramos.

Es decir, la actualidad del dramaturgismo en México, que no es la misma actualidad del dramaturgismo en Alemania o en Inglaterra, nos demanda que nos hagamos de nuestra propia historicidad. Que iluminemos esa tradición que nos haga sentir más fuertes y no en pañales. Que invoquemos esas fuerzas del pasado, que incluso en las tormentas más



**Figura 1:** Simón Franco Suárez. Foto: Aarón Hernández

agrestes, nos ayuden a salir de casa. La actualidad del dramaturgismo en México, nos demanda encontrar una genealogía que nos sea propia.

## XXVIII

Aunque a veces me sienta muy distante de Lessing, creo que hay algo en el espíritu de su Dramaturgia de Hamburgo que es supremamente inspirador. Un libro que a veces es crónica, a veces ensayo, a veces poema, a veces disertación filosófica. Y aunque algunos digan que es un libro inacabado, yo pienso que en realidad es un libro inacabable.

Para Lessing, al igual que para muchos de nosotros, no había una tradición clara en frente. Y tuvo que encontrar en cierta medida su genealogía, abrevando de la filosofía, de la pedagogía, de la política, de la literatura e incluso de la teología, encontrando en cada nueva entrega los remolinos de su pensamiento.

## XXIX

Hace 29 años me nombraron Simón, y eso es parte de mi genealogía. Pero también yo he podido escoger cómo darle sentido y con qué otras fuerzas hacer río. Aún no encuentro con total claridad mi genealogía como dramaturgista, incluso a veces todavía dudo de si lo que hago es dramaturgismo en rigor. Pero me consuelo recordando la anécdota de cuando le dijeron a Brecht (otro notable dramaturgista) que lo que él hacía no era teatro, y Bertolt respondió “díganle entonces taetro”. Quizás lo mejor sería nombrar de otra forma esto que hacemos, y así nos aseguramos que el fantasma de Lessing no nos atormente por las noches, pero eso sería tema de otra conferencia.

Muchas gracias. ♦

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *El origen del drama barroco alemán* (Editorial Taurus, 1990), 44.

## SIMÓN FRANCO SUÁREZ

De origen colombo-mexicano, estudié Literatura Dramática y Teatro en la UNAM. Ahí fundamos La Compañíasauria en 2016, junto a un grupo de amigos interesados en procesos de laboratorio. Posteriormente realicé en Buenos Aires una residencia de investigación en torno al teatro de grupo y la creación colectiva latinoamericana, bajo la tutoría de Jorge Dubatti.

Con La Compañíasauria llevamos más de diez años de trabajo continuo, en los que hemos desarrollado diversos proyectos en el cruce de las artes escénicas, el performance, el video y la comuna. Mi práctica se centra en la dirección escénica desde procesos de creación colectiva que no parten de un texto previo: espacios de laboratorio e investigación-creación donde la dirección funciona como detonadora de flujos creativos. He trabajado en cine y teatro, y me seduce el diálogo entre ambas disciplinas.

También me he desempeñado como dramaturgista en la Compañía Nacional de Teatro, acompañando procesos con metodologías y premisas artísticas muy distintas entre sí. Como dramaturgista, mi investigación se sitúa en las tensiones entre creación artística, investigación y modelos de producción; en ese cruce, creo que el dramaturgismo funciona como un espacio de observación crítica, que nos permita ensayar modelos distintos de creación y producción, desde una perspectiva descolonial.

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# *Pathways to Dramaturgy:* Mentors, Magpies, and Misfits

Brian Quirt in conversation with Jenna Rodgers & Sierra Haynes

## INTRODUCTION

LMDA is celebrating its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, and I proposed to Allison Backus and Sarah Johnson that we should celebrate the work of those foundational artists in the field of North American Dramaturgy from the early 1970s to the early 2000s. We felt one way this could be achieved was through a series of intergenerational conversations and interviews. The *Pathfinders in Dramaturgy* series is eager to address how pathfinders entered the field of dramaturgy, their contribution to the field, their diverse practices, and how they sense the field of dramaturgy has changed since they entered it.

I felt Brian Quirt would be a natural choice for the *Pathfinders* series, as 2026 is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of [Nightswimming](#), a unique dramaturgical research center in Toronto that has had major international reach and influence. As founder and artistic director, Brian has created and traveled down invisible tracks that would not be laid or followed by others for years. Brian has also had a significant impact as the director of the [Banff Playwrights Lab](#), as founder of LMDA Canada, and as a former president and board chair of LMDA.

In the three-way conversation below, Jenna Rodgers and Sierra Haynes, who have worked with Brian, acknowledge his continued impact as a mentor. Brian, an artist and friend I have known for over thirty years, demonstrates his uncommon humility and humanity by reflecting on the impact Jenna and Sierra have had on him through their collaborations at venues such as the Playwrights Lab and Nightswimming.

The *Pathfinders in Dramaturgy* series is not designed to be a linear history lesson on dramaturgy prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To the contrary, what follows demonstrates an intergenerational fluidity of time; each artist, regardless of age and experience, has had an impact on the others over the years. When I first read this unique, oxygenating exchange, I thought about one of my favorite films, *Arrival*, based on Ted



**Figure 1:** Sierra Haynes, Brian Quirt, and Jenna Rodgers conversing over Zoom.

Chiang's time-shifting novella *Story of Your Life*. I do not want to untwist the plot for anyone encountering either art form, but the Quirt/Rodgers/Haynes conversation "behaves" with an understanding of past, present, and future that opens up time for us, revealing what it means to mentor in unexpected, healing ways.

#### MARK BLY,

Creator and Curator of *Pathfinders in Dramaturgy*

#### BRIAN QUIRT:

When Mark Bly and Allison Backus asked me about being part of *Review's* Pathfinders series, I said I'd love to make this less an interview, and more of a conversation, a conversation with two dramaturgs that I've worked with a lot over the last decade, who have seen a lot of my work, that I've collaborated with in different ways, in different places around Canada. I'm really looking forward to having an intergenerational conversation about dramaturgy, in the hope that this will offer something to readers who follow us in this illustrious pastime.

I'm going to start by introducing Jenna Rodgers, who is currently in Edmonton, at the offices of [Concrete Theatre](#), where she's the artistic director (though by the time this is published, Jenna will be the artistic director of Edmonton's [Theatre Network](#)). Jenna and I first met in China, at a theatre conference in Xiamen. Some years later, when I was looking for an assistant dramaturg at the Banff Centre Playwrights Lab, playwright Mieko Ouchi recommended Jenna, and I invited her to join the Lab. Jenna became the dramaturg of that program, and I was the director. For a decade, we had an extraordinary collaboration, dramaturgically and administratively, and have remained colleagues and friends.

Part of what I love about these relationships is that we often start as mentors, then become colleagues, and then become friends and collaborators. That pathway with Jenna has been one of the most satisfying that I've experienced. So, Jenna, thank you for being part of this conversation with Sierra and me today.

#### JENNA RODGERS:

It's my absolute pleasure. My job is to introduce the wonderful Sierra Haynes, whom Brian and I also met through the Playwrights Lab. Sierra applied to our posting for an apprentice dramaturg, and we were floored by this accomplished young artist, who not only had an interest and passion for dramaturgy but was also a skilled composer and fiddler, as well as a performer for both the stage and screen. Sierra is also delightful, quirky, and charming in all the wonderful, nerdy ways that dramaturgs are, eager to dive into questions and research, and it truly just felt like she would be a perfect addition to our team. I know she and Brian have continued to collaborate through *Nightswimming* which I'll let the two of them discuss.

#### SIERRA HAYNES:

Well, thank you, Jenna, that's so kind. Being invited out to the Banff Playwrights Lab was a really special experience, so thank you for asking me to work and learn with you. Now I get to circle around and introduce my mentor, Brian! I first encountered Brian's work in my last year of theatre school. We went to see [Broken Tailbone](#) by Carmen Aguirre, which was a *Nightswimming* project. It was the last play that my class went to before the pandemic shut everything down. It was the most fun I had had in a theatre in a really long time, and it was certainly necessary just



before we all had to leave each other for months and sit in our homes. That show has everyone up and dancing while listening to Carmen's *insane* stories.

When I left theatre school, I applied to be an apprentice dramaturg at the Playwrights Lab. Brian and Jenna said yes, and Brian and I have kept working together since I became the Metcalf Foundation Dramaturgy and Producing intern at Nightswimming.

#### **BRIAN QUIRT:**

One of the joys of my career is being able to make these opportunities reveal themselves at the various organizations that I've worked at. To be able to provide and then benefit enormously from these collaborations has been one of the great parts of my work as a dramaturg over many, many years. So, thank you both for being part of this conversation.

#### **JENNA RODGERS:**

Thinking about the metaphor of pathfinding—so much in our industry is tied to relationship building. Starting from this little circle of humans, we've seen so many paths emerge. Without Brian gently suggesting it, I would never have been involved with LMDA.

Additionally, LMDA Canada wouldn't exist if it weren't for Brian. Canadian dramaturgy has its own sense of identity because our practices and our ecology are different from our colleagues across the border. LMDA Canada has affected the paths of so many people.

I also continue to collaborate with Brian through Nightswimming. We are working on a long-term publication project, looking towards the company's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2030, which is a really rich opportunity to examine all of the dramaturgical paths that have been forged by this company Brian leads.

Sierra, I'm sure you also have moments of how your pathway has been affected by this circle; ways in which we leave and come back and enrich this relationship that we all have together.

#### **SIERRA HAYNES:**

It's a constellation of artists, I think. We're all in relation to each other in certain ways, and I've learned that as I've been able to move forward in my career.

Brian, my first question when I started interning with

you was, "How did Nightswimming become what Nightswimming is?" Because it's so... unusual. I think how you started it is the most interesting thing to me, as someone who is dreaming about what she wants to do. How did you come up with this dramaturgical company?

#### **BRIAN QUIRT:**

The short-form version is that I was working as a dramaturg on a play written by Don Druick. At that point in my career, I had not yet become a director; I was not a playwright or a playmaker; I was a dramaturg. And I realized, as I worked on the play, that if it moved on to production somewhere, I would probably not go with it, as often happens for dramaturgs early in their careers. Plays move on, and sometimes the dramaturg doesn't.

I could see that happening with Don's play, and I decided that I wanted to be there when it was ultimately performed and premiered. Talking about paths—I wanted to be there for the full pathway of that piece, including fully staged productions and audiences. I realized that the only way that would be possible is if I directed it myself and somehow formed an entity to make it happen. So, I called my friend Naomi Campbell, a producer here in Toronto, and asked whether she would produce a workshop and then the show, if we could raise the money to do it independently. And we did over the course of a year and a half, eventually producing it at Toronto's [Theatre Centre](#) in 1995. It was a beautiful play called [Through the Eyes](#). But we left the success of that production, going, "We never want to do that again."

Two things: We wanted to collaborate together, and we still do. But we didn't want to live on the treadmill of a small, tiny, independent theatre company that has to raise the money to do a show every two or three years. That didn't interest us, and Toronto didn't need yet another company like that.

So rather than just fold the company, we went away and made it a dramaturgical project to rethink what this company, if it chose to exist, might be.

We reframed it through a series of dramaturgical questions. Basically, we decided that if we didn't want to be part of the producing treadmill, what if we just didn't produce? What do you do if you don't produce?

I tried to make it an easier question by saying, "What if, instead of it being about what I don't want to do, it only did things that I loved doing? And what if it only did things that

I couldn't do anywhere else?" Those became the critical, foundational premises for Nightswimming.

**“What I couldn't do anywhere else, at least at the time, was to start projects from scratch, not to join in progress, as dramaturgs so often do..”**

One of the things that I loved doing was working with playwrights and artists on the creation of new work. What I couldn't do anywhere else, at least at the time, was to start projects from scratch, not to join in progress, as dramaturgs so often do. I wanted to be there before the beginning. For example, you mentioned Carmen Aguirre's *Broken Tailbone*, which Nightswimming commissioned many years later. It came out of a previous show we did with Carmen called [Blue Box](#).

There was a moment in the middle of *Blue Box* when a song came on, and Carmen danced, and she invited members of the audience to salsa on stage with her, and sometimes people did, and sometimes people didn't. This was in lieu of an intermission. One time I watched a group of young women join her, and they clearly didn't know how to salsa. I loved that they went up, and then I watched Carmen teach them the basic steps.

So, our then-producer, Rupal Shah, and I went to her, and we had dinner and said, "Carmen, what about a new show that is about you teaching the audience to salsa because you're really good at it, and you do it in a very beautiful, practical way. People pick it up very swiftly. We saw it in action. What about that as the starting point of the show?" This is an example of Nightswimming saying we want to be there at the beginning, to be there before it exists, and to commit to it, to commission it, as we did with Carmen and what became *Broken Tailbone*. We had no idea what the show would be, the form it would take, what the stories would be, what the music would be. But there was a commitment to make a show together. That's what Nightswimming wanted to be, a

place where the dramaturgy begins at the very conception of the show. Our collaboration begins there, too. That's what Naomi and I started to do after that first show with Don.

In the 1990s, when we created Nightswimming, often shows had to fit into play development boxes at various theatres or developmental organizations, and you kind of had to work within the structure. And some shows don't fit the structures that are offered to them. This is still true today, thirty-plus years later.

We decided we would invent a company where there were no boxes. The pieces of theatre, dance, and music that we wished to commission, we would design the pathway for each of those, tailored to each show, rather than asking the show to fit into a developmental box.

So, for *Broken Tailbone*, we designed a process with Carmen to create that show over a couple of years that was unique to that show. That felt like a better and more fun way to work dramaturgically.

So that's what Nightswimming became, and with variations over the years—I can't quite believe we're in the middle of our 30<sup>th</sup> year—we've stuck to that premise. The company shifts from year to year or decade to decade because the shows change, and the artists we work with change. That's as it should be for a company that we wanted to be uniquely shaped by the artists that we collaborated with.

That's the pathway that we took to reimagine not just the company, but how we wanted to work and how we wanted to be in a relationship with the artists that we wanted to work with.

#### SIERRA HAYNES:

I love that vision. Because it's so fresh, even though it's obvious. But it's not obvious. Like you said, you had to dramaturgically go back and think about what you wanted to do, and how to accomplish it.

#### BRIAN QUIRT:

Sparking off something Jenna said about me nudging her towards LMDA—I, too, was nudged into LMDA. I wanted to bring this up because DD Kugler, a dramaturg, director, artistic director, and teacher, was the person who nudged me into LMDA a long time ago. He was among the first Canadians to join LMDA in the late 1980s. I knew him when I worked at Canadian Stage, and every once in a while, he would mention LMDA and whisper, "You should

come to the conference; you should join if you can.” And I didn’t, as one does.

And then finally, I did. I went to the 1993 conference in Montreal. I didn’t know any of the US members, but I knew some of the Canadians. DD was there, and he introduced me to people. I ended up at a baseball game with Don Druick, DD, the literary manager from the National Theatre in England, and Shelley Tepperman, who is an amazing translator in Montreal. Immediately, my connections and my network started to expand. DD’s nudging was a total success in that it led me to the thing I hadn’t realized I sought. LMDA is one of the places that provided connections to like-minded people that helped me think creatively about what Nightswimming might be a couple of years later, when its origin story started in ’95 and ’96.

So, thank you, DD.

#### **JENNA RODGERS:**

A question I have for you, Brian, is about choosing to become a dramaturg. When in your career as an artist did you realize that dramaturgy was the pathway for you?

#### **BRIAN QUIRT:**

When I was doing my MA at the University of Toronto, I took a post-war British drama course taught by Ronald Bryden, the director of the graduate program. Ron lived and worked in England as a critic for the *New Statesman* and *The Observer* in the late 60s, where he encountered the work of Tom Stoppard, John Arden, John Osborne, and Harold Pinter, among many others. In the 70s, he worked for the Royal Shakespeare Company, where he did the work of what we would now think of as a literary manager. I gravitated to dramaturgy because of the conversations Ron casually shared with us.

It was the stories he told about collaborating with those playwrights that landed somewhere in me. *What were those conversations? How did they talk with one another? What was the impact?* That felt like a place where I might fit into the theatre, because I was not a writer, I didn’t study to be an actor, and I didn’t train as a director.

Those conversations are the things I loved, that I wanted to pursue, that keep me going, that are constantly fresh and new. Ron’s stories about them, way back at the end of that degree, were the spark that told me there was an entry point for someone like me. This idea that you

could collaborate with creators to foster and nurture their work—that was an entry point, that was a doorway. Those conversations have been the substance of my career for forty years now.

When I graduated, I knocked on a lot of doors. I wrote to the [Tarragon Theatre](#) and eventually met with Urjo Kareda, the then-artistic director, and a number of other theatres. Some of them were very positive about dramaturgs, and some of them were super negative about dramaturgs. I had one interview with an artistic director who hated the idea of dramaturgs and thought dramaturgs were leeches and parasites. My meeting with Urjo was very positive, but they all said there were no jobs for dramaturgs in Toronto at that time, and they were correct. A lot of doors were closed, but I persevered and eventually found doors that did open for me. Initially, at what is now Toronto’s [Canadian Stage](#).

I love being asked this question because it took me years to realize what the answer was and why this pathway that I have been on for so long has been so important, and wonderful, and beautiful.

#### **SIERRA HAYNES:**

I have a question for both of you about your time working together at the Playwrights Lab. You would have seen so much work in that decade together. What’s changed for you in your practice as dramaturgs? Or what did you come to realize about the practice of dramaturgy, having seen such a breadth of work at the Lab?

#### **JENNA RODGERS:**

I think that, as a dramaturg, I’m drawn to trying to observe, build, replicate, or improve systems. Calling back to the way that Brian talks about the creation of Nightswimming and the idea that new Canadian theatre has to fit into a “box,” and that I think he has a bit of an aversion to that.

#### **BRIAN QUIRT:**

(laughs) Maybe.

#### **JENNA RODGERS:**

It was quite fun to have ten years of working together, thinking, *What’s he doing?* Or *What is this pattern?* Or *Oh, I see how this was adapted differently,* or *Oh, I see how this tactic from three years ago is being reused in this moment, and I understand why.*

I think some people do practice dramaturgy in a relatively formulaic way. In our time together, I feel like my practice could be categorized as a growth or evolution, but it doesn't feel quite as linear as that suggests. My understanding of dramaturgy and dramaturgical practice over ten years has expanded. There is a circular nature to it, where I can reach into my accumulated toolbox to grab the appropriate tool for the situation. I think that sort of nimbleness or flexibility is a trait that I emulate from Brian.

I still like systems, and as much as I say all of these things about Brian, I will divulge that if you've ever had the pleasure of peeking into his notebook, he's quite organized. He puts a lot of thought into how he designs and sets up a space, and how he hosts and cares for that creative process. It is particularly special that he always resists the temptation to create a repeatable box around process.

### **BRIAN QUIRT:**

My response to that picks up a word that you just mentioned, Jenna, which is "care."

We didn't use that word in Nightswimming's early years, but the way we work on the shows is with the artists, for the artists, in the context of their work, and their lives. Rather than their lives being an impediment to the way we work, we work with them as they manage their lives, and sometimes that means you speed up, and sometimes it means you slow down.

I think I found ways to amplify that at the Lab. But that evolved in a hugely important way when Jenna joined the Lab, and we started talking about how best to collaborate with the large range and number of artists that we were working with—up to fifty each Lab by the peak—including actors, directors, playwrights, designers, and collaborators from all sorts of disparate fields. "Manage" seems like the wrong word, and "care" feels sort of cliché sometimes, but it's both. You are managing a very large group of people, their ideas, and their time, but you're also caring for them literally by hosting them. Some of them are vulnerable, some are scared, some are aggressive and bold in their ideas, and some are not. Some come from other places in the world with different approaches, interests, habits, and ways of working. Communities connect and intersect, and there's tension and friction, and collaboration and discovery.

I continued to learn how to care and manage, dramaturgically speaking, over those years of our collaboration, because we

thought about it even more carefully and overtly than I had before. I think it was instinctual before, and Jenna made it conscious in a way that was joyous and thoughtful. That has become part of the dramaturgical practice that I carried back with me to Nightswimming and the other places that I've worked since.

The other thing, when I think about the Playwrights Lab, is that—despite all the planning I did and do—my notebook doesn't feel organized to me. It feels like a mess, so it's interesting to hear that, Jenna. But I do plan a lot. I even have notes for this conversation.

Despite all my planning, I felt the Lab gave me a lot of license to be spontaneous dramaturgically, because you're responding to people in the moment and you're living with them to a certain degree over those couple of weeks in Banff. Responding in the moment to what they need and how their play has shifted, regressed, gone sideways, or moved forward during their time in Banff is different from our day-to-day urban city lives, where we don't see the people we collaborate with on the same regular basis.

I realized that my approaches to dramaturgy can and could be adapted and spontaneously utilized in the moment. To throw away the plan if there was one. That dramaturgy is a creative act. And to trust what one has built up in oneself and has built up through the people that you surround the process with. And in many cases, that was in collaboration with Jenna. Then, as we were able to hire assistant dramaturgs and apprentice dramaturgs, to have them, too, become part of that unbelievably stable, yet spontaneous dramaturgical entity was a very powerful thing to both work within while we were there, and for me, at least, to continue to see how that can live in my other work more recently.

Sierra, I know you do lots of other things in the theatre world, so what was it about dramaturgy that hooked you?

### **SIERRA HAYNES:**

It was already one of my favorite things about making theatre. I just didn't realize that it was an actual job.

I'd grown up doing devised theatre, creating and writing my own shows as a kid. The whole time I was doing that, I was always pretty critical of what the audience understood versus what our ensembles had in our minds. I could see that we weren't always bridging the gap. And I still have strong memories of cut creation moments from rehearsals that I felt were huge missed opportunities! ... Lots of opinions, haha.

As a younger person, I wasn't always in a position to be the one who says, "Actually, I don't think that's gonna work," or "I think we should do this," but it just meant that as I got older, I collected more tools to understand what the audience was looking for when we were building shows from scratch.

So, as I continued through theatre school, people would bring me their stories, and I'd share my notes and thoughts with them. I especially loved that about playwriting class—any opportunity where we were hashing out the details of a narrative.

Then, when I saw that you were both looking for an apprentice dramaturg in 2023 for the next year's Playwrights Lab, I was like, "Oh my god, wait! This is a job that people can do?!" Dramaturgy wasn't just something that I could *enjoy*, but something I could study, and people could specifically come to me and ask me about my thoughts on their work

I love listening to other people tell me about what they're creating, and helping them make it sparklier—figuring out what gems they have inside the initial mess that they bring me, you know?

**BRIAN QUIRT:**

Absolutely. Thanks. So, you're saying it's our fault, basically.

**SIERRA HAYNES:**

Yeah, it's your fault. I didn't know dramaturgy was real until it became real and possible thanks to both of you. Jenna, how did you get into dramaturgy?

**JENNA RODGERS:**

I think I just wanted to be in the room for anything and everything! Like many folks, the siren song of acting drew me towards the theatre, but when I was in school, I received a lot of messaging about how the theatre might not be a good place for me. I think this mostly had to do with my race—but it may have also had to do with being more academically inclined and not particularly skilled as an actor.

I ended up getting a master's degree at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, which really opened my eyes to the breadth of what dramaturgy could be. There, the dramaturg often functioned like an assistant to the director, or a really rigorous sort of story handler, and I thought that that was quite compelling.

Post-graduation, I landed in Toronto to work with [fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre Company](#). This was at a time when a re-granting program called the Theatre Creator's Reserve existed, in which a company would be granted funds, and then they'd use that money to pick a number of writers or projects that they would be able to support.

I was adjudicating these grants with fu-GEN, and having a great time. The leadership at the time (David Yee and Nina Lee Aquino) saw that I enjoyed the work, and they were like, "Why don't we get you into a new play development room?"

That's always what I wanted to hear! Yes, get me in the room. fu-GEN had a playwright's unit, which really existed because we wanted to do something with plays that grew out of the support of that granting program. I just remember a really rich culture of new play development happening at a micro level in Toronto, and I really benefitted from that. These programs and writer's units helped me understand how to formulate good questions, how to be a better listener, and just how much work goes into writing a new play.

I feel like Brian saw this raw interest that I had in dramaturgy, that I was someone who kept dipping my toe in the pool, and he asked me to take the plunge with the Playwrights Lab and eventually LMDA. Spending time with Brian really honed and sharpened my instincts, and spending time with exceptional playwrights each year really helped me understand the breadth of what dramaturgical practice can be. Being at Banff always felt quite electric, and since then, it's just felt like dramaturgy is part of who I am.

I have a two-part question for both of you. Because LMDA is the reason that we're all together today, I'm curious, Sierra: What do you know about LMDA, LMDA Canada, and what are your current sentiments about this organization? Brian: I know you've been working on this LMDA history project, so I'm curious: Have you had any recent revelations about the time that you've spent with LMDA and the various roles that you've held?

**SIERRA HAYNES:**

I'm still learning a lot about LMDA, but something that I've been appreciating over my last year with the internship is just how connected everybody is inside the organization. For example, Nightswimming had the opportunity to go out to do this cool workshop project in Banff last summer (Anosh Irani's [We Go By Many Names](#), in association with the National Arts Centre English Theatre). There were some



artists and dramaturgs there who are also part of LMDA that I got to sit down and speak with.

I could see the influence that this organization has inside our practice as theater-makers, and that's really special. It also has lots of resources that I know I can take better advantage of, and I want to learn more about.

Last night, I had one of my friends who's an artistic director over for dinner, and she was talking about all these people, and I think, *Nope, don't know! Nope, don't know!*

That's just sort of where I'm at in my career, and I know that at some point in the future, I'm going to be sitting at that table with somebody younger than me, spouting names of people who are wonderful artists and connections that I've met in my career who have influenced my work, you know? But right now, I'm a sponge. I'm taking in all the information. It's moments like this where I get to sit down with you, Jenna, and Brian, and the artists who have forged the pathway for me to take as an example, to learn from all of you and continue to try to see what those resources are.

Maybe one day I will get to go to an LMDA conference and see what it's all about.

#### **BRIAN QUIRT:**

Perhaps when the LMDA conference returns to Canada in 2027.

#### **SIERRA HAYNES:**

Exactly!

#### **BRIAN QUIRT:**

As LMDA marks its 40<sup>th</sup> year, its current leadership asked me to go back and look at LMDA's history. Much of which has been carefully cataloged by American dramaturg, friend, and former LMDA President, Geoff Proehl, over many years in the form of a chronology that captures the organization's major events.

I've been updating it, and completing the last eight or nine years of the chronology and also creating a new document that captures key moments in LMDA's story for the LMDA website and for a publication about the 40th year.

A group of dramaturgs in New York City in the mid-to-late 1980s started having lunch together so that they could talk about their work as dramaturgs, because, as we all know, dramaturgy and dramaturgical work can be invisible to

those who see the shows that are generated through this labor. Also, dramaturgs rarely work together; we work in parallel at other organizations or on other projects, and our paths don't necessarily cross in the rooms that we work in.

Those conversations initiated a desire to connect with dramaturgs working across the United States, to broaden the conversation from that super-local level to something with more scope, from which LMDA was born.

LMDA Canada also started because of a local conversation. At the end of the 1996 LMDA conference in Toronto, Canadian dramaturgs from across Canada who were attending the conference got together on the final day and said, "All of us coming together here has been very powerful and effective. What can we do to continue this conversation? Would anyone say, put together a newsletter or a mailing list or something?" I put up my hand and said, "I'll put together that mailing list and figure out what a newsletter might be for LMDA members in Canada."

LMDA Canada came out of people wanting to continue that conversation with just a little more shape and structure. It became a way to encourage dramaturgs spread across our thinly populated land, have them meet each other, talk, share, and do all the things that help ground our profession.

Once LMDA started including Canada, it became international. Delegations to Mexico made it trinational, if that's the word. Then, over the last ten years, it has become increasingly international. The [Dramaturg's Network](#) in the UK is now marking its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Liz Engelman and I made several trips early in its evolution to help them formulate—to dramaturg what a dramaturg's organization might be in the UK. It's been fantastic the way that dramaturgs have come together in Mexico City as part of this conversation with LMDA and LMDA Canada. A dramaturg from [Center 42](#) in Singapore came to our conference in Kansas City and recently invited me to do an online seminar for Singapore dramaturgs. Those sorts of connections are starting to tumble forward with increasing impact.

That increasingly global conversation about dramaturgy is exemplified for me by the [International Dramaturgy Lab](#) of a couple of years ago. During the pandemic, LMDA reached out far beyond our continent to set up this laboratory of conversations among eighty-four dramaturgs from eighteen nations who set up projects to ensure they would have reasons to communicate and collaborate.

I still keep in touch with the dramaturgs I connected with during that International Dramaturgy Lab every two months. This shift from local to global has been so rewarding to watch and be part of—a pathway now laid out so clearly in the organization's updated chronology.

**JENNA RODGERS:**

I think that was a very beautiful and complex bid for your membership, Sierra.

**SIERRA HAYNES:**

Haha!

So, is that how you see dramaturgy being more connected internationally?

**BRIAN QUIRT:**

The ease with which one is able to do that today, compared to when LMDA or LMDA Canada were launched, is a night-and-day difference in terms of our capacity to reach out to people anywhere in the world—and to connect and collaborate with them, and maybe even meet them and spend time with them. That obviously involves funds and funding, and those are challenges that are no less real today, but the conversations can happen, and if you commit to them and figure out how to sustain them—the returns are substantial.

I've made a commitment to do that, knowing that it ensures that I'm consistently engaged with people working well outside my own sphere, dramaturgically and theatrically. That forces me to check my own assumptions about how to work and what I'm interested in.

I said that with *Nightswimming*, I wanted to only do things I love doing. And to do things you can't do anywhere else, or to do things you don't know how to do, and to not repeat oneself unless one chooses to. One of the ways I have chosen to do that is to consistently sustain relationships with artists working in other places, other fields, in other ways. So, if I do choose to do something that I have done before, or in a way that I know how to do, that's a conscious choice.

If you're able to incorporate ways of working from those you meet elsewhere, great. But often it isn't about that, necessarily. It isn't always about being a magpie. Although I think dramaturgs *are* [magpies](#). We do pick up things that are shiny from elsewhere and add them to our toolkit.

That isn't, to me, the purpose of these broad networks and

conversations. It's to remain inspired and to remain articulate about what we are doing, how we want to work, and why we're working. It's to remain fluid, flexible, spontaneous, charged. That's what I think the conversations, whether they're local, national, or global, can pay back into your own working landscape.

That's a path that I've pursued through all of these organizations. These conversations require nurturing. You have to consciously feed them. If you do, and you can make use of organizations like LMDA to put those conversations within reach, then I think there are huge benefits to be harvested.

**JENNA RODGERS:**

Brian, reflecting on all the experience you've gained throughout your career, I think both Sierra and I are curious to hear your perspective on the future of dramaturgy. Can you offer us some comments on where you think dramaturgy might be going? How do you perceive the field to be developing?

**BRIAN QUIRT:**

Sure, I will try to...read the entrails, as it were. Um, I may change that in the transcript.

I would say that despite the cutbacks in the arts that have been happening in North America, England, and other places in the world, particularly in the play development, literary management, and dramaturgy fields, I would absolutely say that dramaturgy is more accepted and more understood, if perhaps not fully, than ever before. Certainly far, far more than when I started. It's not just that the positions and the people undertaking them have expanded—I believe the understanding of dramaturgy has expanded in the theatre, in the performance world, and beyond it.

That's because it's such a powerful idea. A person, whether they use the word dramaturg or not, whose multifaceted role is to help make the thing you're working on stronger, more effective, and more of what it wants to be. Someone devoted to invention, communication, and care, someone focused on the strategies of effective storytelling. Whatever the story is, and whatever the field is.

It's just a good idea and a great role to play. Lots of people play that role, and increasingly, some of them are being acknowledged as dramaturgs, not only in our world but in other worlds, too.

We've seen over the past thirty years the idea of dramaturgy seep into those other worlds, whether they know it or not, and make huge contributions in those landscapes. We had a great conference in Washington many years ago, and one of the speakers was an exhibition designer at the Smithsonian. They didn't think of themselves as a dramaturg, but it was clear that's the role they played in that institution, because they were mediating between museum displays and how to display them to the audience; how the audience receives the objects in their world.

My favorite example, as I've watched how dramaturgy has become entwined and integrated into other fields and professions, is Hallmark Cards. There's a great book by an artist named Gordon Mackenzie, who became one of the senior designers at Hallmark, a huge multi-billion-dollar corporation that's very conservative in many ways. Mackenzie wrote a book called [\*Orbiting the Giant Hairball\*](#), about how to survive as a creative in a huge bureaucratic organization, which he calls "the giant hairball." It's also a book about dramaturgy because it's about invention, creation, audiences, institutions, and strategies for telling stories well and effectively. I love recommending that book.

Two other things before I finish. First, I would say that, for all the reasons we've discussed in this conversation, dramaturgy has become global. It's always happened in other places in the world, and now there's a name for it, for better or worse. We're collaborating with people in other countries on how they support people telling stories, and those conversations are so rich.

The last thing I want to say—and it came out of the conversations the three of us have had to build this interview—is that, most importantly for us, and for those who will follow us in this pathway, dramaturgy will continue to be an entry point for the misfits, the people like us who can do a lot of things, but aren't sure where the doorway is, perhaps, into the theatre world. At least that's true for me. For the folks looking for a way into this magical and potent world we work in, dramaturgy will be one of those pathways. A less common pathway, and perhaps a slightly mysterious one, but less mysterious than it used to be.

That pathway connects to other pathways, as it has for each of us, into a whole range of opportunities in the theatre.

And that, looking back, and also looking ahead, makes me really happy. ♦

**BRIAN QUIRT (he/him)** is the founding Artistic Director of Nightswimming, a dramaturgical company based in Toronto since 1995. He was the Director of the Banff Centre Playwrights Lab from 2012-24. With Nightswimming he has commissioned and developed 35 new works, toured 10 shows nationally, and directed the premieres of many Nightswimming commissions including Carmen Aguirre's *Broken Tailbone*, Anita Majumdar's *The Fish Eyes Trilogy*, and *Bombay Black* by Anosh Irani.

He has created and toured eight of his own plays. *The Wolf in the Voice* (with Martin Julien) premiered at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre in 2025. His other plays include *These Are The Songs That I Sing When I'm Sad* (with Jane Miller), *Why We Are Here* (with Martin Julien) and the Iranian play *Aurash* (with Soheil Parsa/Modern Times Theatre).

Brian has held senior artistic positions at Factory Theatre, The Theatre Centre, Canadian Stage Company and the Great Canadian Theatre Company.

Brian is the past Board Chair and a past-President of the Literary Managers & Dramaturgs of the Americas. He established LMDA Canada and was its President from 1996-2006. He is a two-time recipient of LMDA's Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dramaturgy, and in 2023 received LMDA's Lessing Award for Lifetime Achievement in Dramaturgy.

**JENNA RODGERS (she/her)** is a Director and Dramaturg of Chinese and Welsh descent from amiskwaciy-wâskahikan (Edmonton). She is an Artistic Director who strives to blend community-based ethos with professional practice. Currently, she's the Outgoing Artistic Director of Concrete Theatre, the Incoming Artistic Director of Theatre Network, and a Board Member with LMDA. She is the founding Artistic Director of Chromatic Theatre – a company dedicated to developing and supporting work by racialized artists.

Jenna values the intersection of art and education, especially as she learns to raise small

responsible humans while maintaining a career in the arts. She is a passionate advocate for anti-racism in the arts, and is a fierce supporter of new play development. She volunteers with a number of arts organizations locally and internationally, and is the proud recipient of the “Artist, Scholar, Activist” award from Performance Studies International.

**SIERRA HAYNES (she/her)** is a Dora Mavor Moore Award winning, multi-disciplinary artist from Treaty 4 (Regina, SK), now establishing herself in Toronto, ON. Working primarily in theatre across the country, some of her recent credits include: *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Globe Theatre); *Bad Hats Narnia* (Bad Hats Theatre/ Souleppper Theatre/ Crow’s Theatre); directing & devising *The Raft* (Studio 58); *Miss Caledonia* as Peggy Ann Douglas and music director (Globe Theatre); *A Tonic for Desperate Times* (Theatre Gargantua); *The Drowning Girls* as Asst. Director and Composer/Sound Designer (Guild Festival Theatre).

Sierra released a podcast commissioned by the Globe Theatre, *STAGE WRITE: The Playwright’s Podcast*, where she facilitated conversations between some of Canada’s most exciting playwrights in discussion about their craft. She was the Apprentice Dramaturg at the Banff Centre’s 2024 Playwrights Lab. Sierra was the 2025 dramaturgy and producing intern through the Metcalf Foundation with *Nightswimming*, mentored by Brian Quirt and Gloria Mok. Since then, Sierra was a dramaturg for Vancouver’s 2026 Fates Festival, presented by Promethean Theatre. Sierra is a series writer on AMI-tv network’s Canadian Screen Award nominated scripted comedy series, *The Squeaky Wheel: Canada*.

Sierra is a proud graduate of Studio 58. Keep up with her online on instagram: @thesinkingcanoe

**MARK BLY (he/him/him)** 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.

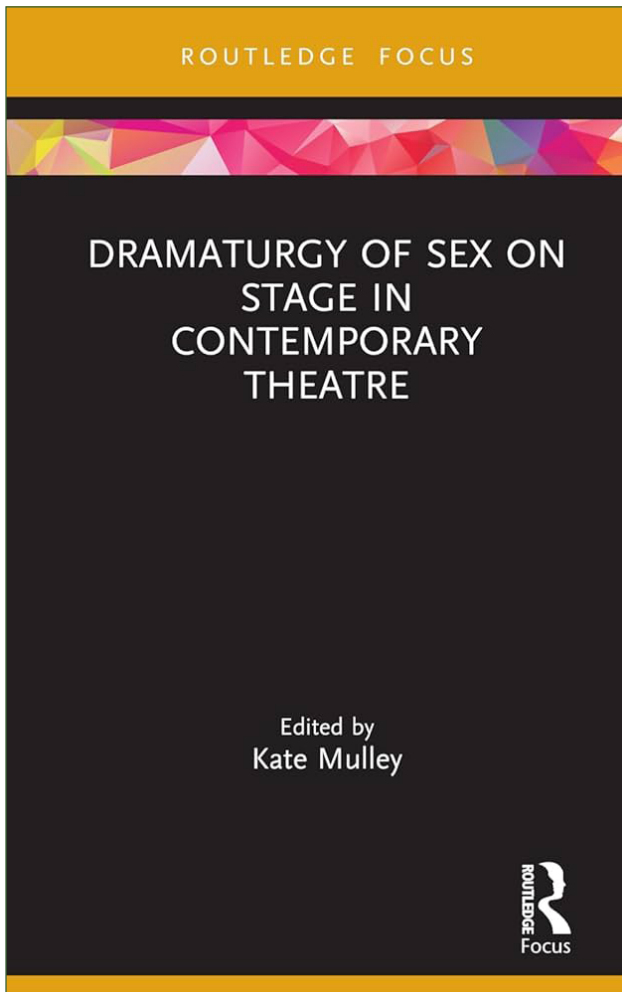
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# Dramaturgy of Sex on Stage in Contemporary Theatre

Focus on Dramatury Series / Edited by Kate Mulley / Routledge, New York, NY (2024) / 128 pages



In *Dramaturgy of Sex on Stage in Contemporary Theatre*, editor Kate Mulley curates a series of short essays examining representations of sexual identities and intimate storytelling in theatrical productions since the mid-1990s. Mulley frames this collection with her assertion that sex is often discussed but not depicted onstage, and when sex is shown to audiences, “what these audiences are seeing, why they are seeing it, and how it has been staged are acts of dramaturgy.”<sup>1</sup> The seventeen essays included in this collection cover each of these elements, from textual analysis to commentary upon staging approaches and dramaturgical interpretations of performances. Playwrights, dramaturgs, fight directors, intimacy coordinators, graduate students, and professors of various ranks contributed to this collection, offering a broad range of lenses through which to investigate this work. Together, these essays consider the ways in which enculturation, narrative structures, creative choices, and systems of power impact artists’ telling—and audiences’ understanding—of onstage discussions and depictions of sex.

Mulley’s introduction states that while the book is organized into five sections, the chapters are “intersectional in nature.”<sup>2</sup> The five sections are defined by the type of performance content discussed in the included essays. With this organizational logic, argumentative throughlines for some sections in this volume were unclear, even when the essays presented and supported intriguing arguments on their own. Part I, “Depicting Sexual Discovery and Desire,” exclusively presents four chapters discussing plays about queer sexual awakenings and experiences, despite omitting queerness from its title. The remaining sections are more straightforwardly named. Part II, “Depicting Stylized Sex,” includes four essays,

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Mulley, “Introduction,” in *Dramaturgy of Sex on Stage in Contemporary Theatre*, ed. Kate Mulley (Routledge, 2024), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Mulley, “Introduction,” 4.

each examining physical poeticizations of sexual activity and desire. Parts III and IV—“Depicting Transactional Sex” and “Depicting Female Desire,” respectively—feature two essays apiece, lacking clear connective tissue beyond considering plays which include similar content, indicated by the section titles. Part V, “Depicting Sexual Violence,” rounds out the volume with five chapters that, taken together, robustly question the way we communicate stories in which boundaries between intimacy, care, and harm are unclear or purposefully crossed.

“Depicting Sexual Discovery and Desire” opens with George Sampatakakis’s classification of three historical turns in the onstage representation of queerness since the AIDS crisis and Joey Massa’s theorizing of the “tacit requirements for queer intimacy in mainstream theatre,”<sup>3</sup> establishing a sociological lens that can inform future dramaturgical considerations of queer narratives. Alexander Millington then investigates the practice of audience participation in narratives of queer discovery in British Fringe productions during the 2010s, examining how these dramaturgical decisions impact audience comfort with and reception of these stories. Shane Kinghorn assesses the dramaturgical reasoning behind presenting verbatim theatre as fictionalized conversations when aiming to represent queer communities with fidelity and complexity. Together, these chapters wrestle with artists’ attempts to represent queerness fully and with freedom while working within and against cis-hetero social standards that shape theatre industries and audiences alike.

Part II highlights how innovative staging approaches impact audiences’ perceptions of sexual narratives. Lindsey Barr’s evocative review considers Deaf West’s multimodal and multi-person embodiment of characters in *Spring Awakening*, illustrating how presenting disability as inevitable and as additive to characters’ sexual experiences refocuses the musical’s narrative towards communal exploration while poeticizing shared humanity. Karen Morash considers *Stockholm*, arguing that Frantic Assembly and Bryony Lavery’s collaborative process and the resulting physical, aural, and metaphorical representation of intimate violence achieves “in-yer-mind” theatre, contrasting the previous “in-yer-face” theatrical movement. Huyau Yang reviews the precarious intimacy of unrehearsed

actors and audience encounters in *Good Sex*, arguing that this performance’s metatextuality invites audiences to consider the nature of intimacy beyond the stage. Anne Lempicki then dramaturgically interprets the use of bodysuits, inanimate objects, and choral performance in Mette Ingvarsen’s work as deconstructions of gendered presumptions and sexuality, and acts of emancipatory performance. Considered together, these chapters argue that poeticized—rather than simulated—intimacy can create a layered audience experience of inquiry, interpretation, and understanding that shifts with each breath of a performance as the audience encounters new imagery and makes meaning of the texts and images presented by the bodies onstage, interpreted through the lens of their own lived experiences.

The next two sections, similarly short at two essays apiece, present performance reviews and interviews responding to specific productions. “Depicting Transactional Sex” presents two reviews of performances, opening with Sophie Bastien’s review of *La Paix de Femmes*. Bastien’s essay interrogates the play’s presentation of consent and economic domination as “conflicting criteria for measuring the commodification of the female body.”<sup>4</sup> Stefania Lodi Rizzini’s essay then recounts how Giuliana Muso’s *Sexmachine* uses the form of a one-woman show as liberation from stifling gender norms while promoting social reflection on enculturated assumptions and commercialized sex. All productions discussed in this section implement narrative description to depict transactional sex, although no dramaturgical or editorial argument promotes this format above others; it is an interesting, yet seemingly coincidental, detail. Section IV opens with a transcribed discussion between intimacy choreographers Cha Ramos and Claire Warden. The two practitioners discuss staging techniques, cultural understanding, and audience reception of female desire, specifically reflecting upon *Company*. Leïla Caspar’s essay then analyzes two works that consider how enculturation can impede women’s agency in sexuality, engaging in deep dramaturgical analysis and inspecting specific grammatical choices playwrights make to reflect subjectivity, objectivity, and monstrosity in feminine desire. Due to brevity—containing two chapters each—these sections lack clear, cohesive arguments, despite including insightful essays.

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3 Joey Baeil Massa, “Respectable Queer Sex: Criteria for Permissible Representations in Contemporary Mainstream Theatre,” in *Dramaturgy of Sex on Stage in Contemporary Theatre*, ed. Kate Mulley (Routledge, 2024), 16.

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4 Sophie Bastien, “Commodification of Women’s Bodies,” in *Dramaturgy of Sex on Stage in Contemporary Theatre*, ed. Kate Mulley (Routledge, 2024), 68.

“Depicting Sexual Violence” considers the mechanics and meanings of sexually violent storytelling. Kate Mulley’s essay defines patriarchal sex as inescapably intertwined with power imbalances and coercion, illustrating her point by analyzing patriarchal sex as cold and disappointing in *The Blue Room*, clouded by each character’s experiences in *Slave Play*, and entirely less remarkable than its impact on women in *Ruined*. This is followed by Jessica Ellison’s keen dramaturgical inspection of the efficacy of Jeremy O. Harris’s *Slave Play* through a lens informed by BDSM slave play practices. She concludes that by “showing acts of slave play to an audience that lacks an intimate understanding of the practice, O. Harris... trivializes the racialized sexual violence that black women have historically and currently faced,”<sup>5</sup> solidifying the importance of thorough dramaturgical consideration in both writing and staging sexual violence. Hannah Simpson reviews *It’s True, It’s True, It’s True*, positing that this performance challenges the “narrow signifying demands placed on the female body in the rape trial” by using un- and re- dressing to assert agency.<sup>6</sup> Youn Le Guern-Herry then identifies patterns in Dea Loher’s use of sex to communicate characters’ mortality, corporeality, and fear of disappearance, regardless of whether the sex is tender and consensual or violent assault. Finally, Meron Langsner and Cha Ramos introduce their Multi-Axis Spectrum of Dramaturgical Variables for Intimate Violence, discussing how they use this spectrum alongside script analysis to inform their staging of intimate violence onstage, ending this collection with a practice-based application of dramaturgy in sexual storytelling.

Often reading as an insightful collection of dramaturgically focused performance reviews, this text serves as a valuable historical resource by presenting a snapshot of stagings of sex from the period bracketed by the AIDS and COVID crises, especially pertinent to theatre and performance scholars investigating the intersection of identity and sexuality in storytelling. This collection’s dramaturgical analyses of performance texts from different cultures and languages celebrate the range of artistic experimentations in staging sexual narratives while

questioning the limitations that imperialist and patriarchal societies impose upon the communication of queer, female, and racial liberation in sexual storytelling. Perhaps most productive are the brief introductions to new theories for analyzing and approaching sexual narratives—Massa’s tacit requirements, Sampatakakis’s historical turns, Langsner and Ramos’s multi-axis spectrum, among others—and the second section’s argument for poeticized intimacy as strikingly more effective than realistically simulated sex. As a whole, this collection pointedly reinforces artists’ responsibility to rigorously and dramaturgically consider our stagings of sex, from what we show to audiences and why we wish to share these stories to how we both stage and analyze them.

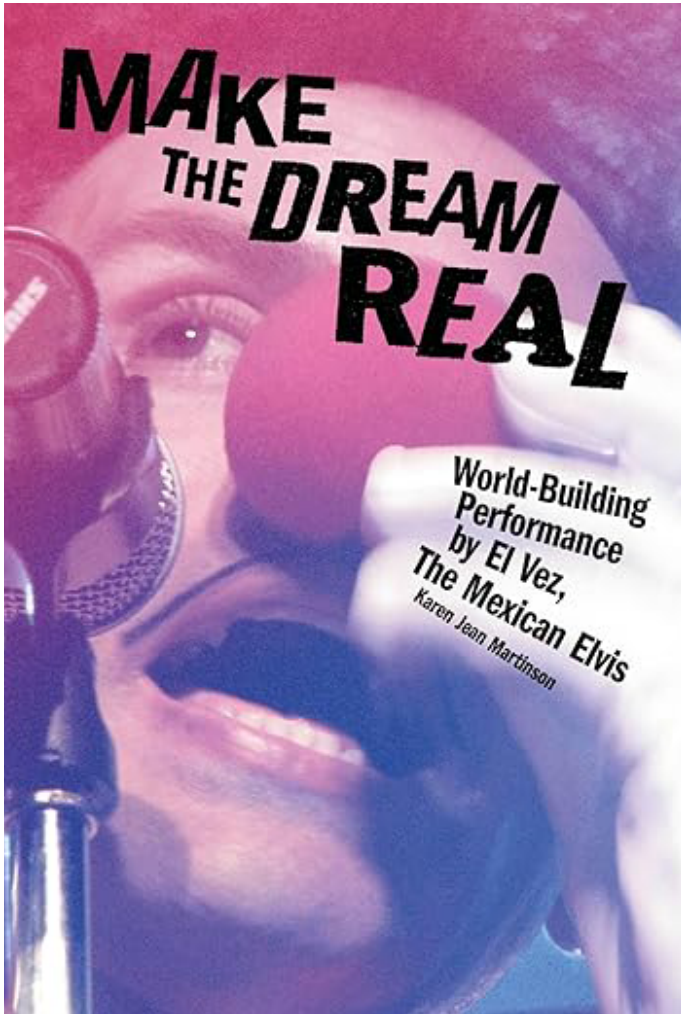
**AMANDA ROSE VILLARREAL, PHD**

5 Jessica Ellison, “Interrogating Racialized Sexual Violence in *Slave Play*,” in *Dramaturgy of Sex on Stage in Contemporary Theatre*, ed. Kate Mulley (Routledge, 2024), 109.

6 Hannah Simpson, “Sexual Assault and the Criminal Justice System: The Naked Female Body in Breach Theatre’s *It’s True, It’s True, It’s True*,” in *Dramaturgy of Sex on Stage in Contemporary Theatre*, ed. Kate Mulley (Routledge, 2024), 115.

# Make the Dream Real: World Building Performance by El Vez, The Mexican Elvis

Karen Jean Martinson / Intellect: The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL (2025) / 256 pages



*Make the Dream Real: World Building Performance by El Vez, The Mexican Elvis* by Karen Jean Martinson, strives to answer one of the fundamental questions of dramaturgy: “Where is meaning found?”<sup>1</sup> Over the course of this sweeping book, Martinson employs theoretical, dramaturgical, and autoethnographic analysis to highlight rock musician Robert Lopez’s strategies for building worlds of resistance and hope throughout his thirty years performing across the United States as El Vez, The Mexican Elvis. Both Martinson and Lopez embrace the claim that artists are generators of theory: that meaning is made in performative action. Lopez himself opens the book with a bold foreword in which he declares, “Wrong wrong wrong. The Doctor has gotten it all wrong,” and that his true intent will never be known.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Martinson delivers not a single truth, but a multiplicity of dramaturgical interpretations. Beneficial to both students and practitioners, Martinson’s innovative “dramaturgical methodology” for analyzing El Vez’s work argues for the utopian potential of performance within a neoliberal framework.

Chapter One outlines how Robert Lopez went from a young Chicano punk to niche stardom as El Vez, the Mexican Elvis, and considers how the cultural persona of Elvis Presley’s memory “becomes a conduit for world-building, for the creation of a progressive social space that affords the inclusion of all identities.”<sup>3</sup> Martinson theorizes Lopez’s embodiment of Elvis as a Chicano man as a vehicle for critiquing race and ethnicity, a way of exploring the good

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Jean Martinson, *Make the Dream Real: World Building Performance by El Vez, The Mexican Elvis* (Intellect, 2025), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Lopez, foreword to *Make the Dream Real: World Building Performance by El Vez, The Mexican Elvis*, by Karen Jean Martinson (Intellect, 2025), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Martinson, *Make the Dream Real*, 44.

and bad of the American experiment without falling into the trap of essentialization. Though Presley notably appropriated African American musical traditions in his work, his ability to do so was a result of his American multicultural upbringing. While he achieved a level of superstardom rarely seen, the kitschy nostalgia of his later career slid into a form of parody. Lopez's embrace of this nuance in persona and lyricism allows the audience to hold these competing legacies together, generating new, progressive meanings.

Chapter Two considers the stakes of authenticity and empathy in live performance, particularly in El Vez's use of irony as a minoritarian performer. Dispelling the notion that the act of witnessing a performance is an inherently empathetic act, Martinson puts forth that El Vez's over-the-top, spectacular performances inject critical thought into spectatorship. For example, because the cultural memory of Elvis leans on an element of entertainment, El Vez's ironic political commentary in his lyrics often challenges the audience's expectations. Though there is no guarantee that an audience will understand the ironic turns, taking the risk allows for the possibility of creating new communities.

In Chapter Three, Martinson reads El Vez's costumes and merchandise through a dramaturgical lens, analyzing how objects function as "archive, commodity, souvenir, and relic," both in and out of the performance space.<sup>4</sup> Costume functions as a vehicle through which El Vez escapes objectification, offering semiotic codes through which the audience makes meaning. Merchandise, in turn, allows the ephemeral experience of performance to live on, allowing a viewer to give meaning to an object through their personal connection to it. Chapter Four considers sound, both in the form of Lopez's performative accent and the popular music he chooses to parody, and how these choices acknowledge the reading of his racialized body while also inviting an affective response that goes beyond empathy and prompts critical thought. These two chapters are particularly useful for dramaturgy students, as they reveal how theory and practice can be effectively merged into scholarly writing.

Dramaturgical methodology is Martinson's most innovative contribution. This mode of analysis combines autoethnography, performance studies, theatre

historiography, and cultural studies to critically consider meaning-making in El Vez's performances. Evoking Geoff Proehl's call to adapt a "dramaturgical sensibility," Martinson consistently remains cognizant of the political, social, institutional, and artistic structures governing El Vez's performance both on and off the stage. Throughout the book, Martinson acknowledges the layers of performance by making distinctions between Robert Lopez's creative choices as the show's director/writer; El Vez's character choices as a stage persona; and a mode Martinson refers to as "Lopez-as-El-Vez," moments where Lopez's creative choices are made visible to the audience within the theatrical framework. Her thick descriptions of El Vez's shows and the various audience reactions submerge the reader in the rock 'n' roll culture, while guiding us through a theoretical and critical interpretation. Dramaturgical methodology also involves looking beyond the shows themselves into the wider cultural and socioeconomic circumstances. In particular, Martinson highlights the struggles of the artist working within a neoliberal framework without necessarily condemning or endorsing Lopez's strategies. Her attention to institutional realities is deeply refreshing and a reminder to scholar-artists of all possibilities offered by looking outward from performance into the systems that govern us.

As a reader, the most memorable aspects of this book for me are the moments in which Martinson unironically revels in her own experience of fandom. She wholeheartedly embraces her identity as an "acafan" in dialogue with Henry Jenkins—that is, an academic for whom fandom is a badge of pride rather than a mark of shame. Adopting an autoethnographic voice, she shares a number of memorable anecdotes from her over twenty years of involvement with the El Vez fandom, from the dozens of concerts she's attended to Lopez officiating her wedding. Never does this love hinder her critical analysis; as an expert in her subject matter, her perceptions are only further heightened. Her close personal relationship with Lopez is thoughtfully presented through excerpts from their text exchanges, emails, and interviews, making the performer an integral part of the theoretical analysis. Martinson's refreshing embrace of her positionality and her genuine love for her subject while maintaining critical proximity provide an inspiring model for young dramaturgs and scholars alike.

As Martinson writes, no book can adequately capture the experience of seeing El Vez live, but many different

4 Martinson, *Make the Dream Real*, 141.



disciplines can and will benefit from *Make the Dream Real*. Performance studies scholars can shift their gaze to a dramaturgical mindset, while practicing dramaturgs can thoroughly engage in critical theory. This book is a valuable addition to the field and will surely produce a new generation of El Vez fans as well.

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# About the Editors

**ALLISON BACKUS (she/her)** is a dramaturg, literary manager, and educator based in the Boston area. She is the resident dramaturg at Merrimack Repertory Theatre and the online editor and editorial assistant for *Theatre Topics*. She is the current Vice President of Publications at LMDA, where she also facilitates the monthly Disability Affinity Space. 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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**BECCA KITT (she/her)** is a dramaturg and writer from California. She recently earned her master's degree in Dramaturgy and Writing for Performance from Goldsmiths, University of London. She has been an Artist Panel script reader for the Jewish Plays Project (JPP) for several years, and she recently read for the Koestler Arts Awards. Before moving to London, she spent a year as an intern in the literary office at Florida Studio Theatre, where she read and evaluated scripts, assisted with new play development workshops, and created dramaturgical materials for current productions. She graduated with honors from the University of Puget Sound, receiving a BA in English with minors in Theatre Arts and Music.

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