From the AACT Knowledge Base

What's a Dramaturg?

Many theaters use one, but few agree on the job description.

By Stephen Peithman

Many theater people don't know what one *is.* And even those who do don't always agree what one actually *does.*

That's what we found out when we asked theater people around the country, "What is a dramaturg, and what role does the position play in theater?"

The diversity of their responses surprised us, because the term is used in theater circles as if there were a common definition. In fact, the dramaturg fills many different roles according to the needs of the production or the theater company. Some actively solicit and review new plays for production. The primary responsibility of others is historical, literary, or other research that helps the director, playwright, or actors. A dramaturg also may act as a "third eye" to help the playwright or director work out a play's structure or staging. Some even help design lobby displays or write program notes to help the audience understand the world of the play.

All this makes it clear that the dramaturg--whatever the job description--addresses critical needs not met in any other way. If your company doesn't=t use one, this article may help you evaluate the benefits. If you do use a dramaturg, you'll be able to compare your experience with that of other companies.

While the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites "dramaturg" as early as 1859, Jeffrey Sweet, coeditor of *The Best Plays* annual, says he first heard the term at New York=s Eugene O'Neill Center in 1970.

"At the O'Neill, the dramaturg was a critic on the playwright's side, and assumed to be widely read with a good grasp of craft issues," Sweet explains. The dramaturg was to ask questions of playwrights that would generate responses to answer problems in their scripts.

In the last 25 years the role of dramaturg has evolved and expanded. Today, while there is no single definition, Sweet says, "in practice, the dramaturg is generally supposed to have some kind of literary bent, be capable of research, and to utter opinions which by dint of schooling are supposed to be taken seriously."

Sweet's multi-faceted definition is mirrored in the responses we got from theater people in the U.S., Canada, England, and Germany. The variety of response, interesting in itself, also points out specific theater needs that are being addressed in addition to those dealt with by that traditional wielder of power, the director.

Screening and Evaluating Plays

Some dramaturgs focus exclusively on soliciting and evaluating plays for production.

Charles Kruger, for example, served as an assistant dramaturg with a theater company in Long Beach, California, which produced only original plays.

"It was the dramaturg's responsibility to solicit manuscripts, assess their merit, and make recommendations to the rest of the staff as to what should be produced," Kruger explains. "As assistant, I was responsible for correspondence with playwrights, placing ads for scripts, writing synopses, and reading through unsolicited manuscripts to discard the obviously non-producible ones."

Konrad Settler of Munich reports that in Germany, "you are responsible for the plays being given in a year, or you have close contracts with the actors, or you have to organize tours with the ensemble. A dramaturg reads new plays being offered to a theater and decides whether the author might be of interest or not."

The plays being screened don't have to be new ones, however. Kenneth Tynan, who was Laurence Olivier's dramaturg at Britain's National Theatre, would find plays from the past and explain why they were important, and suggest how they might be mounted to appeal to a modern audience.

However, Jeffrey Sweet points out a potential problem in giving the dramaturg instead of directors the task of reviewing plays for production.

"Some dramaturgs," he explains, "being schooled in literary traditions, make the mistake of thinking playwriting is a literary pursuit. It is not. A good play is not necessarily good literature. The essence of the theater is the primacy of the action rather than the word. Dramaturgs who focus on the literary tend to fall in love with plays that pour on the language and give less consideration to plays in which the poetry is in the behavior."

The Research Function

New York-based playwright-director Elyse Singer has known several dramaturgs and has been one herself for the New York Theatre Workshop's *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, in 1991. "My role was primarily as a researcher," she says. "I did an enormous amount of research on the English Civil Wars, brought in books, photocopied articles and pictures (which we hung in the rehearsal room), and wrote a time line which was printed in the program."

This research function seems to be widespread, and seen as particularly helpful by many.

"Some years ago I acted in Tennessee Williams' *The Long Goodbye*, a play that takes place in the South during the thirties," says Dean Fleming of Montreal. "The dramaturg on this production was incredibly valuable. We, the actors, were instructed by the director to ask for any information we deemed valuable. This included life in the thirties, in the South, what living in tenement housing was like, information on Williams and his life, etc. By the middle of the rehearsal we had approximately 15 folders at our disposal and all this was needed to make the production successful. I also directed *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and, thank God, had a dramaturg on hand to research asylums in the sixties, drugs, shock therapy, and so on. Of course, the audience does not know half of the information we do, but the production and our performance are so much more complete with it."

Jeffrey Sweet agrees: "For instance, what does Shakespeare mean by "corn" in *Coriolanus*? What was going on in Moscow when the three sisters were so eager to get there?" Answers, he points out, are essential for deeper understanding of a play.

Martin Lyle, technical director of Atlanta's barking dog theatre, reports that a dramaturg's research can prove useful in unexpected ways.

"In our recent production, *Tales of the Lost Formicans* by Constance Congdon, we found that Tony Kushner, author of *Angels in America,* said *Tales* provided him with the inspiration to write *Angels*. What a great marketing tool *that* was!"

On the other hand, Charles Kruger says, "While a dramaturg is usually thought of as a literary expert who offers literary or historical perspective to directors and casts of any production, I have never seen anybody actually perform this function as a primary job. Perhaps that's because really good directors are well aware of literary and historical perspectives and don't require additional help in this area."

Timothy Reed, a member of the Upstart Crow Theatre Company of Boulder, Colorado, puts it more forcefully: "A director who needs someone to tell him what a word means, what period dress is, and what period mannerisms are is simply lazy and has not done the requisite research. And a director who needs someone to tell him what the play is about has no business directing a play."

Feedback

Reed's comment brought a quick response from dramaturg Ross D. Willits, of Minneapolis' Cricket Theatre.

"While I agree a director should pursue his or her own research and develop ideas and interpretations based on that research," Willits says, "I do not subscribe to the notion that collaborating with another artist on questions of interpretive detail makes a director incompetent."

Willits says on the contrary, he likes to think of himself as a mirror for the director and an advocate for the text.

"As the mirror, I remind the director of the interpretive direction that was agreed upon as the basis of the production and continually ask whether directorial choices serve to enhance or detract from that basis, and whether, if it detracts, it is a choice to be kept or discarded." As advocate for the text, he has argued for "ideas and choices contained in the text but ignored or overlooked by the (often very busy) director."

Martin Lyle calls the dramaturg "the initial resource of the director, providing him with the information he needs to bring comprehensive unity to his talks with the designers and actors, and to produce the most effective and communicative show possible."

That is the experience of Elyse Singer, who recalls a play she conceived, co-wrote, and directed, *Private Property*, on which she "had the good fortune to work with Susan Mendelssohn, a terrific

dramaturg. Her main contribution was to ask the right questions at the right time. She was able to help me see things that worked or didn't work, without telling me what to do."

Large regional theaters are not the only ones to use a dramaturg. The Market House Theatre of Paducah, Kentucky, is a community theater company that uses a dramaturg on an occasional basis. At the invitation of the director or producer, a dramaturg comes in during a few of the final rehearsals to give feedback to the actors. According to April Cochran, MHT usually asks university people who have also worked in community theater, and the dramaturg is encouraged to use such phrases as "You might want to consider . . ." and to be as objective as possible about what he sees and says.

However the dramaturg is used, the benefits expressed by our respondents seem to boil down to one point. As Ross D. Willits puts it, "Never underestimate the importance of an engaged, informed, and creative mind in the artistic process. Theater artists flourish in collaboration."

That concept of collaboration seems to be at the heart of the dramaturg's work--whatever it's defined to be.

"I would think the reason you receive so many opinions on what a dramaturg does is because a dramaturg does so many different things, especially nowadays," says Dean Fleming. "It all depends on the production. One thing is certain: If the money is there for a dramaturg, I would rather have one than not."

Basic Job Description

1. A thorough text/story analysis.
2. Research into the prior productions of the text as needed.
3. Historical research of various sorts.
4. Attendance at least one quarter of the rehearsals, the first read-through, and as many run-throughs as possible.
5. Oral or written notes for the director.
6. Attendance at some preproduction meetings.
7. A loyalty to the basic mission and ideas of the production and the text. Maintaining that loyalty in the midst of technical difficulties.
8. Program contributions.

Other tasks for the dramaturg, especially in an institution.

1. Advising the marketing team.
2. Working with the education staff.

3. Participation in post-play discussions.
4. Input on press releases.
5. Text work -- ranging from true adaptation to suggesting cuts. Keeping a copy of the script as performed (working with the stage manager).
6. Historical research in conversation with the sound, light and set designers.
7. Text work with the actors - especially on poetic drama.
8. Active collaboration with the director during the rehearsal process -- A vocal presence in rehearsals.
9. Play selection.
10. Organizing readings of new plays.
11. Rooting and keeping logs of collaborative writing/performances.
12. Keeping track of research materials -- both those provided by the dramaturg and those brought in by other people.

Postscript: Where It Comes From

"Dramaturg" or "dramaturgist"--the preferred terms until "dramaturg" took over--come from "dramaturgy," which in turn derives from the Greek *dramatourgos*, meaning a dramatist or "contriver of drama."

Webster's New World Dictionary defines dramaturgy as "the art of writing plays or producing them," and "dramaturgist" or "dramaturg" as a person who practices this art.

Since the "g" in "dramaturgy" is pronounced like a "j," as it is in "dramaturgist" (and "metallurgist"--there are no "metallurgs"), it's unclear how and when the spelling "dramaturg" came to be. The term seems to have dropped letters as it picked up additional meanings.