Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Theatre's Dramaturgs, and Their Profession

Jaz Dorsey · Thursday, August 2nd, 2012

Cultural Weekly contributor Jaz Dorsey, a dramaturg in New Orleans, recently had a conversation with Anne Hamilton.

Jaz: People ask me "What do you do?" I reply "I'm a dramaturg."

The response about 90% of the time is "What the %#^$ is a 'dramaturg'?" so this is a question I have been answering – or attempting to answer – for the past 32 years. There is, actually, a finite academic answer and a "job description" if you will, and for that I will direct y'all to the website of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of The Americas.

But whatever duties may be allotted to the dramaturg, either in the office or in the rehearsal space and on the stage, there is one thing I can tell you for sure: Dramaturgy is a calling. Believe me, you don't run around calling yourself a dramaturg for the fun of it and, sadly, probably not for the money, either.

Which brings me back to the LMDA – the professional organization for dramaturgs (and literary managers) founded just a bit under 30 years ago, when dramaturgy really began to take root in North America. (The first recognized dramaturg was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who launched the profession in Germany in the 1780s. Dramaturgy flourished in Germany. I suspect that your average German high school student is familiar with dramaturgs and dramaturgy.)

Among other objectives, the LMDA networks dramaturgs, which is how I connected with Anne Hamilton. Anne is on my short list of the most fascinating dramaturgs because she has taken the bull by the horns and established what you might call a "dramaturgy firm."

I asked Anne to weigh in on the "what is a dramaturg" question and to share with us her personal and unique approach to this unusual and unique profession.

Anne: I describe myself as a literary and historical advisor to the playwright, director, or theatre company I am working with.

Just like an actor or an artist, I believe that the dramaturg's position in the field derives from her output.

Dramaturgy is a practical profession. We give advice and support to help the playwright advance her play to its next level. We provide and share research in pre-production, and write program notes. We translate and adapt.

Almost everyone in the theatre profession performs dramaturgical duties – certainly this can be seen when directors cut classic plays; when actors immerse themselves in research to prepare to create a character; and when a playwright rewrites and reshapes her play. So all of us are being dramaturgs all the time.

The difference comes, however, when someone takes on the role of dramaturg in production, with

her own set of responsibilities. The person who consistently chooses the role of the dramaturg within the collaboration, naturally, is the dramaturg.

That said, a dramaturg serves many functions and has many skills which she brings to bear according to the needs of the project at hand. These many include: script development; production dramaturgy; translations; adaptations; research for playwrights, actors and directors; program notes; educational materials; leading public discussions before or after productions or staged readings; serving as a reader for a theatre company trying to find new scripts; serving as a reader for new play competitions; and theatre or cultural criticism.

The dramaturg can have specializations, including new play development, Shakespeare, classics, devised work, new musical development, dance dramaturgy, or opera dramaturgy. At this point in the profession in America, a dramaturg builds her career according to her interests, and creates new opportunities based on her skills and favorite arenas. She can exercise a range of skills at the same time, or remain deeply involved in a very narrow range of activities that please her.

The joy of being a dramaturg is working with anyone who comes along, trying to create collaborations with artists who fascinate me, and taking advantage of new movements, new forms, new artists, and new places. My practice, Hamilton Dramaturgy, just celebrated its twenty-year anniversary and I'm still learning, still going strong, and still excited about expanding my talents and knowledge. I took an entrepreneurial approach to the profession and set up a consultancy like that of a physician, attorney, architect or engineer. This allows me full authority to treat my clients with the respect and individual attention that they deserve, and frees me from political considerations often faced by dramaturgs working for Off-Broadway or regional theatres. I wanted to do my own thing, and I've been thoroughly busy since the day I set up shop.

I publish ScriptForward, a newsletter for professional and aspiring scriptwriters, which is up to issue 26 now. You can subscribe here.

Three years ago, I decided to create a podcast series of important contemporary theatre women and I named it HamiltonDramaturgy's TheatreNow! I've just launched a new website, which is http://hamiltondramaturgystheatrenow.com/ and everyone is invited to subscribe or to follow it by RSS feed. My first guest was Quiara Alegría Hudes, and since then I've interviewed Jennifer Tipton, Paule Constable, and many others in my first two seasons. My guests – from all disciplines of the professional theatre – talk about their early artistic influences, their creative processes, and their current projects.

Photo: Anne Hamilton speaks at the Great Plains Theatre Conference.

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