

2011

# They reckon I need a dramaturg : examining the value of a dramaturg to both the playwright and the professional theatre company in Australia

Polly Low  
*Edith Cowan University*

Appendix not available

---

## Recommended Citation

Low, P. (2011). *They reckon I need a dramaturg : examining the value of a dramaturg to both the playwright and the professional theatre company in Australia*. Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/507>

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.  
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/507>

# Edith Cowan University

## Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement.
- A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

***THEY RECKON I NEED A DRAMATURG:***

**Examining the value of a dramaturg to both the playwright and the professional theatre company in Australia.**

PAULINE TERESA LOW

Bachelor of Arts (Performing Arts); Diploma of Teaching  
(Drama)

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

This thesis is submitted in fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Creative Arts

Submitted January 2011

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines aspects of dramaturgy delivered by a dramaturg, and the practical contributions of dramaturgs to both the writer and the theatre industry in Australia. It investigates elements of the working relationship between dramaturgs and playwrights, looks at the chameleon-like nature of the theatre dramaturg and examines how Australian writers, directors and dramaturgs perceive the role/s of the dramaturg.

The thesis is partly a reflective investigation of personal practice, partly an historical investigation of the emergence of Australian ideas about dramaturgy, and partly an active investigation into what can help to make a constructive playwright/dramaturg relationship. A major aim of this investigation is to examine the practical aspects of the dramaturg's work, and the effect of dramaturgy on playwrights and their scripts.

What outcomes of a writer/dramaturg relationship can be observed? Can the effect of discussion and oral examination of a script be measured accurately? Outlining the areas considered by a dramaturg when discussing a script gives an indication of how a playwright is urged to think more deeply about the world of his or her play. Additionally, placing myself in the position of receiving dramaturgical input has expanded my understanding of the doors dramaturgy opens and the dead-end alleys it can warn against.

Through my research I have discovered that there are important questions to consider regarding the parameters of the playwright/dramaturg relationship. These considerations need to be addressed at the beginning of any collaboration between a dramaturg and playwright. However the two individuals are also subject to the ambiguous nature of dramaturgy in the Australian setting, which brings external pressures to bear on the relationship by companies and other stakeholders.

Declaration of Originality:

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- i. Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- ii. Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or
- iii. Contain any defamatory material.

..... Pauline Low / /2012

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my supervisor, Dr Maggi Phillips, for listening, for handling all my confusions with good humour and for her constant encouragement.

Thank you to all those unnamed participants who were so willing to give of their time and allow me to question them about their dramaturgical relationships.

Thank you to the two dramaturgs who provided dramaturgical feedback on my first draft script. I promise I'll never again ask you to look at one of my first drafts.

Thank you to May-Brit Akerholt for her unstinting support.

Thank you to all those who so generously responded to my request for comments.

Thank you to my long-suffering partner, Geoff Kelso. You're the best.

## **CONTENTS**

<b>Chapter One</b>	<b>Dramaturgy and the Dramaturg</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Chapter Two</b>	<b>Other Times, Other Places, and Here</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Chapter Three</b>	<b>Devils and Angels</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Chapter Four</b>	<b>Great Expectations</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Chapter Five</b>	<b>The Other Side of the Fence</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Chapter Six</b>	<b>In Good Company</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Chapter Seven</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>		<b>89</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Opal</b>	<b>92</b>
	<b>Notes for Future Development</b>	<b>147</b>

**A NATION WHICH DOES NOT HELP AND DOES NOT ENCOURAGE ITS THEATRE IS, IF NOT DEAD, DYING; JUST AS THE THEATRE WHICH DOES NOT FEEL ITS SOCIAL PULSE, THE HISTORICAL PULSE, THE DRAMA OF ITS PEOPLE, AND CATCH THE GENUINE COLOR OF ITS LANDSCAPE AND OF ITS SPIRIT, WITH LAUGHTER OR WITH TEARS, HAS NO RIGHT TO CALL ITSELF A THEATRE... (Lorca, 1960, p. 59)**



## CHAPTER ONE

### Dramaturgy and the Dramaturg

**THE DIRECTOR SUITS THE WORD TO THE ACTION. THE DRAMATURG FINDS THE STRUCTURE FOR THE WORD. THE PROCESS SUCCEEDS BECAUSE IN MOST FORMS OF ANALYSIS TWO MINDS ARE BETTER THAN ONE. DRAMATURGY IS NO MORE OPTIONAL IN THE THEATER THAN IGNITION IS TO INTERNAL COMBUSTION ENGINES. YOU GOTTA HAVE IT** (Jory in Dixon, 1997, p. 420).

We all know that playwrights write plays. The role of dramaturgs and dramaturgy are not as widely understood, although people have been performing dramaturgical tasks for as long as people have been writing plays.

Difficulty in defining exactly what dramaturgy is and what it does is likely to continue as the term's parameters seem to shift and as its use across art forms widens. Lehmann and Primavesi, for example, claim that:

In postdramatic theatre, performance art and dance, the traditional hierarchy of theatrical elements has almost vanished: as the text is no longer the central and superior factor, all the other elements like space, light, sound, music, movement and gesture tend to have an equal weight in the performance process. Therefore new dramaturgical forms and skills are needed, in terms of a practice that no longer reinforces the subordination of all elements under one (usually the word, the symbolic order of language), but rather a dynamic balance to be obtained anew in each performance (Hans -Thies Lehmann & Primavesi, 2009, p. 3).

I would argue that the elements that make up a performance have always been an important part of a production's dramaturgy. It is part of the dramaturgical process to determine which elements are given more weight in any particular production. I also believe that while performance art and dance do usually balance performance elements differently to theatre, the spoken word largely remains – very successfully - at the centre of a playwright's engagement with an audience. This is certainly my perception

as a performer, script assessor and theatre dramaturg. It is also my belief that it is not a new concept that all who work in the performing arts are aiming for a dynamic balance – one that responds to shifts in physical or emotional temperature of the various elements at any given performance.

What Lehmann and Primavesi do illuminate in the above quote is that the term “dramaturgy” is applied across art forms, and that it is very much a part of the current discussion about shifting theatrical form.

It is worth pursuing a brief examination of postdramatic theatre. If we take postdramatic theatre to mean non-linear, often hybrid arts/performance pieces, that focus on presenting a collection of images or ideas that have a cumulative effect on an audience, there are certainly many striking examples. Falk Richter’s production of *Trust* is a case in point. Lehmann also states that “text theatre” is “a genuine and authentic variant of postdramatic theatre” (Hans-Thies Lehmann, 2006, p. 17) and clarifies his thoughts on what a postdramatic text is, with:

[I]t becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information (Hans-Thies Lehmann, 2006, p. 85)

This allows texts such as Peter Handke’s *Offending the Audience* or Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* under the postdramatic umbrella. It also provides me with the term ‘text theatre’, which I will use to describe my examination of dramaturgy throughout this thesis.

At the outset, I want to make it clear that, throughout this thesis, I am examining dramaturgy as applied to the text work of a playwright. My dramaturgical examination will focus on “text theatre” (Hans-Thies Lehmann, 2006, p. 17) – whether or not that text is perceived to be modernist, post-modernist or postdramatic.

In that context, I am going to begin by laying a definition of dramaturgy on the table.

What are the origins of the word dramaturgy? “[T]he word ‘dramaturgy’ derives from the Greek *dramaturgia* (composition of a play)” (Turner & Behrndt, 2008 p. 19). In an article for the Goethe Institute, Christine Wahl provides a definition for the term as we understand it today: “dramaturgy means the architecture, the internal composition of an action” (Wahl, 2009). Add to this definition the emphasis encapsulated in the suffix “urgy” as “process or working” (Cardullo, 2000, p. 2) and we start to get the idea that dramaturgy involves working with the layers and overall effect of an action.

A play is made up of forward moving actions. Put simply, dramatic actions can be defined as: something happens, and that results in something else happening, which results in something else happening, and so on. Actions are such an important part of any discussion on playwriting that I will include David Edgar’s slightly more complex description:

A dramatic action consists of a project (usually described in the form of a subject, verb and object: someone sets out to do something), followed by a **contradiction** or **reversal** (as like as not a clause beginning with the word ‘but’) (Edgar, 2009, p. 26).

As an example, he gives the overall dramatic action of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, describing how Faustus “seeks everything he wants in this world, but at the price of eternal sacrifice in the next” (Edgar, 2009, p. 25).

When a play is presented in the form for which it was written, the actions of the play are presented in action by actors. So we begin to see, perhaps, that theatre dramaturgy is a process of working on the internal composition of a play, on the progression and make-up of the actions of the play, with the aim of presenting the whole in its most illuminating state. This is the definition of dramaturgy that I will be working from throughout the thesis.

Is this dramaturgy just about the words of the play? No. Dramaturgy is concerned with structure, with design, with interpretation of ideas, with style – and ultimately with how to best make this play speak (as an architectural whole) to an audience.

The journey of a play from an idea to the stage is usually a long one. Once the play has been accepted for production, many individuals begin to contribute to its dramaturgy. Sometimes a dramaturg is one of the collaborators, for “the professional dramaturg specializes in an understanding of dramaturgy and is able to bring analytical and compositional skills to assist in all aspects of the theatre-making process” (Turner & Behrndt, 2008 p. 4). Production dramaturgy and the production dramaturg, which are particular refinements of the dramaturgical concept, will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 6.

There is no set list of tasks that is undertaken by each dramaturg. The role of a professional dramaturg is a bit like a day of Melbourne weather – changeable and wide-ranging. So it is simplest to explore the role’s effect through the various stages of a play’s development. That is an exploration undertaken in this thesis.

Much of this thesis will be concerned with a play’s journey before it reaches production readiness. It will be concerned with a relationship that exists to help the playwright on his or her often lonely script development journey. It is a relationship that is often pivotal, though one of which not all playwrights have the benefit. It is the relationship between playwright and dramaturg. Why is this relationship important? Are there avoidable potential dangers in the relationship? What action can be taken to initiate and maintain a strong playwright/dramaturg relationship?

In part, this thesis pursues a literature review into the role of the dramaturg in Germany, Britain, America and Australia. Dramaturgs are found in many countries. I have chosen to examine the dramaturg in Britain and America because the employment of dramaturgs in those countries has arisen from theatrical practices that are similar to those in Australia. I look at the dramaturg in Germany because that country is widely recognized as the first in which a dedicated dramaturg was appointed. Germany is therefore an important historical touchstone in any examination of the development of the role of the dramaturg. Germany also provides an example of a country

where dramaturgs are such an integral part of the theatre today that they are positioned at the top of the theatre hierarchy.

Additionally, I have interviewed a number of dramaturgs and playwrights in the course of my research, in order to develop an overview of how the playwright/dramaturg relationship is perceived in Australia. I have also obtained two dramaturgical reports on a first draft of a script I wrote as part of this research. The reports were the result of sending a copy of my first draft play to two dramaturgs, with a request for a dramaturgical response. The purpose of writing a script to first draft and then offering it to dramaturgs for a dramaturgical response was to enable me to experience, examine and respond to the relationship from the point of view of a playwright.

When I refer to the playwrights I interviewed, they are identified as P1, P2, P3, P4 or P5. All these playwrights have had plays professionally produced. When I refer to the dramaturgs I have interviewed, they are identified as D1, D2, D3, D4, D5, D6, or D7. All these dramaturgs are experienced professionals. The experienced dramaturgs who supplied dramaturgical reports are identified as A1 and A2. Those people I have identified as having made personal contact have given their permission to be identified. Finally, I have examined my own dramaturgical practice, and have allowed this examination to help shape the thesis.

In Australia, we have a large number of freelance dramaturgs. These people are, on the whole, involved in the nuts-and-bolts work of helping with the development of new work. They may be approached by an organization such as Stages (the Western Australian Playwrights' Consortium), or Playwriting Australia (the revitalized version of the old Australian National Playwrights' Conference) and asked to look at a new play that warrants further development. Or they may be directly approached by a writer or director who knows of their reputation.

So where did these dramaturgs come from?

While there are now many university courses that teach dramaturgy in Australia, on the whole our current dramaturgs have emerged from – and then have often been re-absorbed back into – other areas of the theatre industry. Often they are writers, directors or actors. This would appear to be a fairly traditional movement between theatrical disciplines. It has been noted that some of the best dramaturgs the world has known are actually remembered more as writers or directors (for example: Brecht, Ibsen, Kipphardt) (Cardullo, 2000, pp. 6-8).

This is not to disregard those trained in dramaturgy at various institutions, but I believe much of their training should be grounded in guided professional practice of dramaturgy, for it is through observation of and involvement in professional practice that an understanding of the human dynamics can begin to be understood. A dramaturg must not only be aware of the effect of a script's ideas, structure and plot, but must have an appreciation of the journey undertaken by all creative and interpretive artists in the quest to reach the final goal: the realization of a play's on-stage life. Any opportunity to work as an associate or trainee should be embraced. With the tight budgeting theatre companies need to practice, these opportunities are few.

While the tasks undertaken by dramaturgs are not new, the idea of investing the responsibility for those tasks in a professional known as a dramaturg is relatively new. (I do, incidentally, sometimes see the spelling "dramaturge" and agree with Schechter who says that this is a confusion and that "dramaturge" is actually "the French term for playwright" (Schechter, 1997, p. 19)).

The emergence of the dramaturg from the ranks of theatre professionals can possibly be likened to the emergence of the position of director as a specialized role. As Michael Chemers comments:

A few centuries ago ... directors were unknown, although what we think of as the director's *function* was executed by nonspecialists (sic) (senior actors, the writer, the producer, and the like). But for the past two

hundred or so years we have had directors, and now it's hard to imagine working without one (Chemers, 2010, p. 5).

What, then, does a dramaturg bring to a new script? Let's focus for a moment on the following thought:

A dramaturg is to a play as a mechanic is to an automobile: he may not have built it, but he knows what makes it work, and this enables him to rebuild it as the theatrical occasion warrants. Playwrights – and directors as well as audiences – should be grateful, and should take advantage (Cardullo, 2000, p. 11).

There are a couple of interesting aspects to the analogy. Firstly, Cardullo's framing of a dramaturg's role implies that dramaturgs have studied the structure of master playwrights in detail, and hence know what makes a successful play work and can re-structure new plays in order to make them work. Some dramaturgs may well be experts on the structure of plays by all the masters, and this can certainly be very useful knowledge when engaged in discussions with playwrights about the shape of a play.

Edgar says that the "idea of playwriting as a craft with rules that apply over time is resisted theoretically by postmodern literary critics who believe that nothing cultural applies over time" (Edgar, 2009, p. 6). He contrasts this idea with the hard-and-fast rules of the French neoclassicists, and the formulae applied by some Hollywood screenwriting experts. While understanding how puerile and restricting lists of rules can seem, Edgar goes on to say:

But I think that the neoclassicists, Hollywood gurus and structuralist thinkers all remind us of a basic reality of playwriting, which is that, however much playwrights may choose to ignore them, audiences have certain expectations of what they're going to see in the theatre and they cannot be required to check those expectations in with their coats.

In this sense, the 'rules' are a sediment of all of the expectations of all the plays (and, to an extent, all the stories) which we have ever encountered. This is why the argument that one should know the rules in order to break them is only half the story. Playwrights should know the rules because they are the possession of the audience, their essential partner in the endeavour. They won't be thanked for sticking so closely to the rules

that the play is predictable from start to finish. But nor will audiences readily accept their expectations being willfully ignored (Edgar, 2009, p. 7).

Here, I believe, is where good development dramaturgs in Australia really come into their own. I have found that many of the best dramaturgs in Australia operate largely in the role of an intuitive audience. They do have an excellent general knowledge of traditional structure, (and yes they may well have studied Chekhov extensively), but they look at a script on its own merits – are willing to be taken on the journey, whatever the structure – and are open to new possibilities. As one of the dramaturgs I interviewed put it, “I create a space in my mind’s eye, allow the play to move in that space as I read, then respond to the play as I have experienced it” (D2).

Going back to Cardullo’s idea of a mechanic, I think I would be rather alarmed if I took my car to the mechanic to find out what was wrong with it and he said “I can rebuild this.” If he said he could turn my Mazda into a Jaguar Sports, I might be tempted, - but would it then still be my car?

When I think of a good mechanic, I am reminded of my father. He loved fiddling with all things mechanical. He grew up during the depression and although he acquired, through trial and error – through practicing working on what he loved – an excellent general knowledge of how engines worked, he was never able to train as a mechanic. He gained further mechanical experience that often required thinking outside the square when he was in the RAAF during World War Two. After the war, he ended up working on the land in the middle of nowhere, with nobody to help if something broke down. However he always found ways to make that damned Ford tractor work for yet another season. He was an intuitive mechanic with a good working knowledge, and the neighbours knew who to turn to when something wouldn’t start. When Dad could see the materials he was working with were sound, and therefore that the machine could be made to work, he did his best to coax renewed life out of the machine, and often this required him to ask the right questions and take inventive measures.



For me, this comes closer to describing the care, questioning and encouragement - arising out of a sound practical knowledge - that many dramaturgs employ throughout the dramaturgical process. The difference is that Dad would physically fix machines that someone else had made. In Australia, it is generally recognized that the task of working on the script belongs to the playwright, and the dramaturg's job in the development phase is to question, extend the boundaries of the playwright's thoughts, respond to weaknesses in the script and affirm a script's strengths. While the dramaturg may have a number of questions for the playwright after reading the script, I have not heard anyone in this country say that it is the dramaturg's job to rebuild the play.

Sometimes, however, a dramaturg – particularly a production dramaturg - can be asked to take more hands-on control of a script, and therein lies great potential for conflict:

[W]riter, director and RSC veteran John Barton and director Peter Hall fell out rancorously over Hall's decision to appoint a dramaturg to make substantial cuts in Barton's epic cycle of plays *Tantalus*. Barton eventually dissociated himself from the production, refusing to recognize the script as his own (Luckhurst, 2006a, pp. 4-5).

Luckhurst goes on to state that this – and the well known *Rent* case which she also cites (see chapter 3 for further details of this case) – are “examples (that) attest to the ways in which dramaturgs both challenge traditional play-making processes and alter the balance of conventional power structures in theatre” (Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 5).

They may indeed challenge the traditional play-making process, but I would argue that there is something lacking in the playwright/dramaturg relationship when such a heavy-handed approach is needed.

Perhaps, in the production situation, rapport between playwright and dramaturg has not been established. “The blind-date system, where writer meets dramaturg at the first rehearsal, rarely works” (Cattaneo, 1997, p. 12). In a production process, this lack of prior relationship may be due to a

number of factors. Inadequacy of funding to employ a dramaturg to be on call for the playwright during the development process is one obvious possibility for no relationship having been established. Time pressure for both dramaturg and director in the lead up to rehearsals is another. An unforeseen need for a dramaturgical intervention arising due to a deteriorating director/playwright relationship is yet another. Whatever the circumstances, a playwright walking into the pressure chamber of a rehearsal room and coming face-to-face with a dramaturg for the first time is not likely to be in the best frame of mind to launch into a trusting relationship with someone who seems to be questioning aspects of the play. Rehearsal periods in this country are often short, and the expectation is that the script should be production ready by the time rehearsals start. If the need should arise to make any further changes, those changes should be minor. Unfortunately this is not always the case. I have been involved in a number of productions where rewrites continued into the final week of rehearsal.

I have come to believe in the course of my research that if a company has a play in development which they are hoping will reach production, a dramaturg should be attached to that project from the beginning – even on a part time basis - as a constant point of reference for the playwright and the director. In this way problems can be discussed well ahead of time, the playwright has the opportunity to respond, the dramaturg can champion any need for workshopping and the play has a better chance of arriving in the rehearsal room in a production-ready state.

To return to Bert Cardullo's mechanic for a final time: a mechanic also knows when a car simply can't be fixed. It's somewhat simpler, I think, to tell a car owner that their car belongs in a junk yard than it is for a dramaturg to tell a writer to file away a script in archives. I breathed a sigh of recognition when I came across the following in Leslie Rees' book:

My own lengthy experience of reading and assessing play scripts tells me that a very high proportion indeed of the great plague of unsolicited

submissions are inept, ill-written, worthless, merely smudgy self-indulgences from amateurish scribblers (Rees, 1987, p. 220).

My own experience as a script assessor leads me to understand Rees' outburst, although I disagree with its tone. I think that in general perhaps would-be playwrights' understanding of the medium for which they are writing has grown since the 1980s. But there are still a number of people who submit a script for assessment who would seem to have little understanding of theatre. However I cannot be dismissive of these writers, who have spent an enormous amount of time committing their play to paper. They have chosen the stage as their medium, and although some have a very limited knowledge of the medium to which they have entrusted their opus, they have earned respect and a considered response. I have, at times, been driven almost to despair, trying to clearly and succinctly communicate the basics of playwriting to a writer who has sent 120 pages of script that will never be considered for production by anybody, anywhere. How does one say that to a playwright? Perhaps we need to sacrifice our creative hearts in the interest of saving our creative souls, and tell them outright not to bother? That's a difficult thing to contemplate. Should we encourage any interest in writing plays, simply because encouraging creative activity in this world is a good thing? Is it part of the dramaturg's task, to make theatre as inclusive as possible? I would say "Yes" – but it must be the right sort of encouragement. There is no point in telling someone their play is good when it is not. On the other hand, it is part of a dramaturg's brief to educate where necessary – or at least point those who show an interest in the direction of a source of valuable information. If nothing else, you are encouraging someone to become a well informed audience member. And who knows? Careful nurturance of creativity, enthusiasm and initiative may cause a light to turn on somewhere and the next major Australian playwright might well be born. This, surely, is a dream to which every dramaturg can aspire.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Other Times and Other Places and Here: A historical and international context for dramaturgy.**

**REMEMBER ALWAYS THAT HISTORY, LIKE THE THEATER ITSELF, IS REALLY A GARDEN OF FORKING PATHS; SOMETIMES, WHILE YOU ARE DOGGEDLY PURSUING SOME ELUSIVE IDEA THROUGH THIS MAZE YOU RUN INTO YOURSELF COMING BACK THE OTHER WAY** (Chemers, 2010, p. 12).

It is important in any examination of Australian dramaturgy to not only look at dramaturgical practice in this country, but to embed the discussion within a wider historical framework. "Dramaturgy's roots are as ancient and polymorphous as those of the theater itself" (Chemers, 2010, p. 14). However while dramaturgical writings can be traced back beyond Aristotle and while the dramaturg is now an accepted part of theatre communities around the world, a thorough examination of the history of dramaturgy and the dramaturg is not the focus of this thesis. I will restrict my international overview to relatively recent history, to a few countries that have affected Australian dramaturgy and to selected key influences in those countries. I will also briefly examine aspects of the recent history of dramaturgy in Australia.

I will begin this overview with reference to what is widely accepted as being the first appointment of a dramaturg as we understand the term today.

#### **GERMANY: An overview of the influence of Lessing and Brecht, and the scene today.**

Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) was a German playwright and critic. He was also "the world's first officially appointed dramaturg" (Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 24). When the National Theatre was established in Hamburg in 1767, Lessing was engaged as a dramaturg, to act as a kind of in-house critic and resident playwright. Gotthold Lessing's short tenure as dramaturg at The National Theatre of Hamburg (the Company "was bankrupt by March 1769"

(Schechter, 1997, p. 18)) revealed the possibilities inherent in having an in-house critic to look at the structure of plays, the merit of programmed plays, the historical and social background of the chosen plays, production decisions and the actors' processes and performances. Lessing's observations on the work undertaken at the National were made available to the public in a regular publication. "Lessing wrote *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, a collection of essays on theater which popularized dramaturgy as a word and a practice" (Schechter, 1997, p. 16). The publication was part of "an ambitious educational project, designed to set high literary and production standards and to develop new critical vocabularies to enable actors to appraise their performance and managers their policies" (Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 29). Luckhurst goes on to explain that, unfortunately, Lessing was denied any say on repertoire choice and, consequently, felt his position undermined from the start. Add to this the fact that many of the actors were greatly insulted by his comments and complained until he was driven to no longer critique their performances, and the Hamburg experiment in dramaturgy was doomed.

However, by the time Lessing's tenure ended, the idea of the dramaturg's role and the value of the dramaturg's role had been absorbed by the theatrical community in Germany, which developed a belief "that playwrights and play-makers benefit and develop from a constant interface with a reflective third party" (Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 40). Before long it became de-rigueur to have at least one dramaturg in every theatre and taking on the position of dramaturg helped hone the skills of many young German theatre makers. Bertolt Brecht was one of these. As Brecht is regarded as one of the twentieth century's pre-eminent theatre makers, it is worth examining his long engagement with dramaturgy.

By the time Bertolt Brecht began writing his plays, dramaturgy was seen as a way for budding playwrights to begin to make a living. In 1922, Brecht was employed as a dramaturg at the Munich Kammerspiele. As part of his job working as dramaturg at the Kammerspiele, Brecht was expected to direct. He avoided the suggested Shakespeare, and instead chose to work

on Christopher Marlowe's *Edward the Second*. This, he adapted and re-wrote extensively, "often during the rehearsals" (McDowell, 2001, p. 80). As Joel Schechter notes: "Dramaturgs who rewrite a classic or adapt a novel as Brecht did a number of times may create a virtually new play: the distinctions between playwright and dramaturg then become tenuous" (Schechter, 1997, p. 21). During the rehearsals of the production of *Edward the Second*, the whole cast and crew were constantly present and the rehearsals were open to spectators. "Often Brecht would ask such casual observers for their suggestions, and if they were good ones he would adopt them" (Fuegi, 1987, p. 23). In effect, Brecht was using his future audience as co-dramaturg. Perhaps this even harks back to the fairground of his childhood, where he encountered a one-legged Hamburg singer who quite possibly became a strong influence on his later work. Of the singer, Fuegi says:

He brought with him a wooden stand on which were hung garish horror pictures, and would flip from one picture to another, pointing with his cane at each nightmare scene. Each "history" was introduced in a way that clearly anticipates Brecht's later stage work. Accompanying himself on a barrel organ while his daughter passed the hat, the singer would begin:

People, hear this story

It happened recently.

I'll report it true/

Let's draw a moral from it (Fuegi, 1987, pp. 5-6).

Passers-by could urge the one-legged singer from Hamburg to delve further into different aspects of his storytelling.

It has been said that Brecht's production of *Edward the Second* was "in many ways ... the debut of Brecht's "epic theatre," a production naively sophisticated yet highly stylized" (Esslin, 1974, p. 17).

Following the success of *Edward the Second*, Brecht moved to Berlin, where he took up the position of dramaturg at the Deutsches Theatre, then under the directorship of the famous Max Reinhardt. Russell Brown claims that, at this theatre, Brecht made many impossible demands and really only turned up to collect his paycheck (Brown, 2000, p. 58). However Mary Luckhurst observes that Elisabeth Hauptmann -a dramaturg who later trained under Brecht – “argued that observing Reinhardt and his actors had greatly developed Brecht’s practical understanding of theatre” (Luckhurst, 2006b, p. 194). Luckhurst goes on to point out that “observation of critical reflection on rehearsals became essential elements in Brecht’s training scheme for his own dramaturgs with the Berliner Ensemble, and it is hardly likely (whatever his private opinions) that Brecht watched Reinhardt’s working processes with anything but intellectual engagement” (Luckhurst, 2006b, p. 194).

Brecht’s next and final role as official dramaturg began in 1927, sometime after he became a Marxist and during the time that the heartbeat of the Third Reich was growing ever stronger. Brecht now became part of a collective of dramaturgs gathered together by Erwin Piscator, who was engaged in “radically left-wing Agitprop theatre” and who “regarded the stage as above all an instrument for mobilizing the masses” (Esslin, 1974, p. 26). It would appear that this group developed performances or ‘theatrical happenings’ based on newspaper articles or factual information. “Piscator encouraged his dramaturgs to identify topical issues and to explore forms which permitted an epic historical sweep” (Luckhurst, 2006b, p. 195). According to Esslin, many of the elements of Brecht’s later work were present in these presentations. Piscator used “posters and placards, songs and choruses” (Esslin, 1974, p. 27) to help demonstrate his social, political and moral stance – as, indeed, had the one-legged singer of Brecht’s childhood.

The next significant engagement with dramaturgy for Brecht came on his return to Germany after World War Two, when the Berliner Ensemble was created.

The troupe was generously supported by the state: Brecht had sixty actors and two hundred and fifty staff members in all ... Brecht had his own private theatre to mount productions of his own work and that of others, to put into practice his theory of Epic theatre, and to train a whole generation of theatre people, actors, stage designers, composers and dramaturgs (Brown, 2000, p. 59).

“Two heads are better than one became an established maxim in Brecht’s theatre ... From the start it was in the collective, in working as an ensemble, that the productivity vital to Brecht’s creative method was achieved” (Tenschert, 1990, p. 42). Brecht believed in learning by doing. He had little regard for purely theoretical learning in drama schools. So he worked on the floor with dramaturgs of experience and also with those just beginning, asking all of them to honour his way of working with text and performance.

Brecht extended the involvement of the dramaturg in the theatre development process. He was not happy for a dramaturg to sit in an office reading, notating and translating, for example, but would ask them to work on the floor with actors while translating.

The dramaturg became the director’s most important theatrical collaborator. Dramaturgy in Brecht’s sense comprises the entire conceptual preparation of a production from its inception to its realization. Accordingly it is the task of dramaturgy to clarify the political and historical, as well as the aesthetic and formal aspects of a play (Canaris, 1975, pp. 250-251).

In Brecht’s theatre, the dramaturgs worked with the text, with the actors, with the director and with an understanding of the audience. These expectations of the dramaturg have been passed down to us today. Mary Luckhurst outlines the role even more precisely:

In the Brechtian model the dramaturg has principal responsibility for research and philological work on the text and historical content, as well as its author; he or she has additional responsibility for editorial work on the text, and necessary translation or retranslation, rewriting or restructuring. Often the dramaturg for a production takes responsibility for the programme, a task deemed central to educating the public about the play and its directorial concept. In this way the dramaturg is part of



an inspirational team that includes the director, designer and actors *and* is a bridging mechanism to the audience (Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 9).

Brecht, then, had an enormous influence on the theatre practice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on our understanding of the role of the dramaturg in the theatre. Although I am sure he would avoid the title of teacher, he did in effect educate a large portion of a generation of theatre workers:

Though Brecht hardly intended to create a school, the substantial number of young theatre artists who worked under his guidance as directing, dramaturgy and design assistants ... were all later to exert a pervasive influence on the German theatre during the second half of the century (Weber, 2006).

Today in Germany, it is not unusual for the largest theatre in each town to have many dramaturgs on salary. German dramaturgs employed by a company often have as much – if not more – power than the director. They have ultimate say over programming and are involved in every step of the production process.

One participant in the current research described the modern German model as one where dramaturgs are essentially executive producers.

For example, the top dramaturg may tell another company dramaturg 'You're in charge of youth theatre, ages 16 to 21, you have this space and you are to get three productions up this year'. So then it's up to the dramaturg to choose the projects, get a director on board, talk about casting, organize and run any necessary development workshops, perhaps even write one of the projects, and ensure the director understands what is required of him or her and has everything they need. But it is unusual for a dramaturg to actually sit in on rehearsals and be a production dramaturg in that way (D1).

Another participant, when asked to comment on this view, stated that it was "All true except the last bit, although I could see it to be a tendency in larger companies" (D6). This participant went on to say that all dramaturgs he met in Germany are involved creatively and in the rehearsal room too. "Many are writing / adapting / conceiving their own projects" (D6). The most senior at Kammerspiele, he noted, was certainly spread thin over multiple projects so was rather like an Executive Producer. But this dramaturg still visited

rehearsal rooms, “sticking her oar in” when relevant - especially in the final days of rehearsal. She was happy to make creative comments, even directly to cast members (D6).

A visit to the theatre is, in Germany, an integral part of the day-to-day life of the general public. Cultural awareness and knowledge is highly regarded. The theatre community rises to the challenge of its role as the provider of a valued resource, and the dramaturg is charged with ensuring rich offerings.

These days, dramaturgs have established themselves in other countries around the world – but not often with the same degree of power as the dramaturg in Germany. In places such as America, Britain and Australia, the dramaturg’s role is less clear, often misunderstood, and exists on shifting sands.

#### **BRITAIN: Then and now.**

It is worth beginning an overview of dramaturgy in Britain by mentioning the actor- manager system that existed in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because this was one of the theatre-making systems that also found its way to Australia. There, the actor-manager at the helm took on enormous responsibilities for the running of the companies, the choice of plays, the reading, adaptation and refining of scripts as well as directing and acting. Only occasionally were readers used to sift through submitted scripts – and those readers were usually confined to the larger London theatres. Those few who were officially appointed had an enormous reading load and their opinions held great sway with their respective theatre managers. They therefore could influence repertoire.

In smaller theatres, actor-managers sometimes engaged the help of friends – or even wives – when it came to sifting through all the scripts. There is even a strong suggestion of the dramaturgical influence wielded by Florence Alexander, wife of 19<sup>th</sup> century British actor-manager George Alexander:

I always attended the two last rehearsals before every play because my opinion was worth having just before the play was produced. My remarks were taken down in shorthand and I was always told I was

wrong, but in the end my opinions were always taken and proved all right. When an actor has been rehearsing a play for weeks he becomes blind to its faults. I could say things to Alec about his work that nobody else could, and when I went in to the last rehearsals I was called the sledge-hammer (In Luckhurst, 2006a).

While some actor-managers seemed to relish holding all the strings, others saw great benefits in having official readers of plays attached to their theatres. "Managers frequently dreaded dealings with established and lesser-known authors alike, and the horror that a rejected dramatist could inspire with their persistent harassment was for certain managers the worst aspect of their profession" (Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 48). These managers must have been relieved to think that a playwright's invective could now be directed at a reader. Not a lot has changed in regard to the ire of rejected playwrights from that time until now. I recall a director at a social event who spoke to me of his discomfort at the number of thinly veiled glances of resentment he received from playwrights whose plays he had not produced. This director lacked a literary manager.

Literary managers differ from dramaturgs in that, generally, their tasks are centred in an office: reading plays, keeping the director informed about promising new writing and responding to playwrights. As distinct from literary managers, a dramaturg's work usually also involves reading plays and responding to playwrights, but includes workshopping, developing new plays, and supporting productions on the rehearsal room floor in any way the director deems appropriate. For some companies, the terms 'dramaturg' and 'literary manager' seem synonymous, adding to the general confusion of those who would like to see a clear definition of the roles.

I return now to look at the evolution of 'readers' in the British actor-manager system. Eventually they take on the more complex role of 'literary managers'. Luckhurst explains that from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of a literary manager was posited in Britain, along with the idea of a national theatre. In 1904, William Archer and Harley Granville Barker produced *The Blue Book* – a document detailing how a national theatre could

be set up. This document suggested that the repertoire essentially be chosen by a committee of three – the director, the literary manager and an outside reader not connected to the theatre in any official way (obviously an attempt to get a completely unbiased, outside view) (Luckhurst, 2006a, pp. 78-101). Archer and Barker's "National Theatre" report states that within the company, the literary manager's responsibilities would be:

to weed out new plays before they are submitted to the Reading Committee; to suggest plays for revival and arrange them for the stage; to follow the dramatic movements in foreign countries, and to suggest foreign plays suitable for production; to consult with the scene painter, producers &c., on questions of archaeology, costume and local colour. The Literary Manager would be a member of the Reading Committee, but in all other matters would be subordinate and responsible to the Director (in Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 83).

The list describes a formidable schedule of duties.

It would be a long time before these plans for the employment of a literary manager came to fruition. The first official Literary Manager in Britain, Kenneth Tynan, was appointed to the newly formed National Theatre in 1963. Tynan was a highly regarded critic prior to this eventuality, and respected Brecht's work and the German ideas of dramaturgy. He envisaged his role being one of an important functionary. Nobody on the Board of the National Theatre, however, seemed to have any understanding of the role or the amount of work involved. The director of the company was Laurence Olivier, and Tynan seems to have been very much the hidden intellect behind the Olivier throne. Luckhurst states:

Olivier hid from the Board the extent of his dependence on Tynan as architect of the repertoire and company consultant, and Tynan's significant contribution to the artistic running of the theatre remained 'invisible' (Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 175).

Tynan's clashes with directors and with the Board became increasingly difficult to circumnavigate.

Tynan had a vision of becoming a Brechtian dramaturg, involved in the process of making work, as well as in commenting on it. With this aim in

mind, he sometimes came into rehearsals and wrote up notes, which he sent to the directors. This was not an entirely popular intervention (Turner & Behrndt, 2008 p. 128).

Tynan was fierce in his belief in the power of theatre: “the theatre is an independent force at the heart of the country’s life – a sleeping tiger that can and should be roused whenever the national (or international) conscience needs nudging” (in Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 182). He also was a great supporter of new writing, as was acknowledged in a letter to Tynan from Tom Stoppard, around the time Stoppard’s play, *Jumpers*, was first produced: “I think I am extremely clever to have written it, but it would not have got there I think without your intervention. Thank you for taking up the running when it mattered. You’ll never get the credit, of course, I’m glad to say” (in Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 190). You will have noted that this letter makes an ironic comment on the ‘hidden’ nature of dramaturgical input, and on the idea that writers and directors would prefer to keep that input hidden, for the sake of self-aggrandizement. These days, many writers and directors are very generous in their acknowledgement of a dramaturg’s contribution, although this courtesy is not yet universal.

From 1979, the literary manager flourished in England, and there are now many companies that employ a full time literary manager. Companies that cannot afford a full time literary manager often employ part time or casual readers or advisors. Playwriting organizations, set up to assist the development of plays, have similarly proliferated. Short term appointments of dramaturgs have also grown since the eighties.

### **Dramaturgs today in England:**

In England, as in Australia, it can be difficult to define what dramaturgs actually do, as they fulfill different needs for each company in question. Generally, leading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, literary managers read plays, advise directors, commission, and establish company relationships with writers. Development dramaturgs work one-on-one with writers. Production dramaturgs work with the artistic director from concept to stage, which may involve running workshops, working one-on-one with the writer, editing, and

often being present at rehearsals. The title for the company dramaturg varies, much as it does here in Australia (see chapter 6).

## **AMERICA**

I want to touch briefly on the role of the dramaturg in America, with a passing glance at the role's origins in that country.

Much more than the German dramaturg who operates in a well-established structure, and above all, in a culture in which the theatre performs a well-defined and important social, cultural and political role, the American dramaturg not only has to do the basic job of finding and nurturing scripts, but also has to work hard on helping to create that basic cultural atmosphere in which a healthy theatre can operate (Esslin, 1997, p. 27).

Dramaturgs in America have become established members of the theatrical community to a much greater extent than they have in Australia. However, they have emerged for some of the same reasons: a great increase in the theatre profession's interest in encouraging a national canon, a need for scripts to be of a high standard by the time they arrive at the company, and a paucity of time for artistic directors to see to the multiple tasks of running the company, developing new plays and directing plays for the company.

Anne Cattaneo points out that not-for-profit theatre in America is still very young. "The late sixties were devoted to building the theaters and exploring the classical repertory. By the early seventies, an American playwriting movement began" (Cattaneo, 1997, p. 5). So many new regional theatres meant much more theatre was now being produced.

Increased production also brought a ravenous hunger for new work, but theatres had no system in place to nurture a legion of burgeoning playwrights, nor to administer a deluge of new plays. Developing regional theatres looked to traditional Western and Eastern European theatrical practice, and imported the notion of the dramaturg, refashioning after their own interests (Jonas & Proehl, 1997, p. V111).

In America today, dramaturgs are engaged in wide-ranging duties within companies, as well as in the early development support of plays. Their roles can encompass acting as a researcher, in-house critic, script assessor;

talking through script problems with playwrights and directors; informing and educating the audience. "The dramaturg must, among many other things, be an expert on the problems, demography, prejudices and prides of the community he serves, to have his or her finger on its pulse" (Esslin, 1997, p. 28).

## **AUSTRALIA**

While Australian theatre imported much from Britain, including plays, the idea of the actor-manager, and repertory theatre, the country has always inspired writers of all genres, including playwrights. From large spectacles to less grand projects, the "exoticism of the bush legend appealed to commercial theatre audiences and to the new playwrights working on a new self-consciously Australianist drama" (McCallum, 2009, p. 10).

There were calls for a professional national theatre in which to showcase Australian playwriting throughout the early twentieth century. The lack of a professional showcase meant that scripts often simply disappeared from view and "many prize-winning plays had sunk without a production" (McCallum, 2009, p. 78). In 1955, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust began operating, with a "declared mission to make theatre as vital to Australian life as it was to England in the first Elizabeth's reign when Shakespeare was working" (McCallum, 2009, p. 78).

The first play the Trust produced has become an Australian classic. It was Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. McCallum says that the *Doll* "was given a lot of development work, so much, indeed, that one of the competition judges barely recognized the revised script when he saw it produced" (McCallum, 2009, p. 78). What form this development took is not recorded. However the comment indicates that dramaturgical input was available for playwrights from at least the 1950s.

The gaps in available historical data for Australian theatre were commented on by Jim Sharman in the inaugural Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture:

Historically, we have had little concern with acknowledging and recording the work of our theatre practitioners. Without the patience and tenacity of Philip Parsons and Katharine Brisbane in establishing Currency Press, we wouldn't even have a record of the decades of drama that now constitute the basic literature of our theatre. As for the history of our actors, directors and designers, the written record of their lives, times or ideas is minimal. What does exist tends to be a dry-facts rather than a living document of their thoughts and experience. Mention the roll-call of previous generations of Australian directors who were influential in the creation and shaping of our theatre culture - Robert Quentin, Stefan Haag, Robin Lovejoy, John Sumner, Tom Brown, Peter Summerton, John Tasker - and they would mean next to nothing. Theatre practitioners are like a lost tribe with only an oral tradition handed down erratically from person to person, usually as gossip. Without access to history, the growth of our theatre is inhibited. For while an absence of tradition can be liberating, it can also be wasteful as each new generation earnestly sets about reinventing the wheel (Sharman, 1995).

However, we do, as Jim Sharman says, have many early plays, thanks to organizations such as Currency Press. These plays reveal a lively engagement with the Australian environment and condition:

Australian playwriting in the twentieth century started out as a search for unity and a national identity and eventually came to revel in diversity.

The characters who have peopled the stages are a motley crew: convicts, soldiers and entrepreneurs; Scottish Presbyterians, English Anglicans and Irish Catholics; hard-working ex-prisoners who established pastoral empires and dissolute aristocrats living on remittances from Home; hard-bitten working men with their whores; tough battling women and their weak men addled by the bush struggle, shell-shocked, emasculated or pathologically introverted; loners, bastards, madmen, drifters, larrikins; sentimentalists, socialists, dreamers, immigrants, refugees and aliens. Exiles all, looking to belong ... In recent Aboriginal drama the dancer, the dreamer and the singer/storyteller are powerful figures, ghosts from a much more ancient past (McCallum, 2009, pp. viii-ix).

The burst of new Australian theatre that occurred in the 1970s, particularly in Melbourne and Sydney, resulted in the formation of groups of writers and performers who worked collaboratively to develop ideas. The Australian Performing Group (APG) in Melbourne became particularly prominent. It arose out of the proactive group that formed La Mama Theatre. The APG



“had a kind of cooperative or group control over its programmes and methods” (Rees, 1987, p. 62). Consequently the work that emerged often had input from many people. This generated its own sort of group excitement and suited the way some playwrights worked at that time. Speaking of well known Australian playwright John Romeril, for example, Rees claims that Romeril:

found that his bent was less for creating a world of personae out of his own vision than for dramatising certain social attitudes and situations on behalf of fellow members of the group, with their aid. This was not the whole Romeril story. But it does seem that modification and addition to his scripts by other hands, after group decisions perhaps, was part of his accepted principle of writing (Rees, 1987, p. 62).

This does not mean that a rigorous dramaturgical eye was cast over a script. In fact, Rees comments on a reading he saw of Romeril's *I Don't Know Who to Feel Sorry For*, “that this play could have gained from the attentions of a good editor or cutter” (Rees, 1987, p. 63). And indeed, the main task of those people who were initially called dramaturgs in Australia was often seen to be one of editing and cutting.

The alternative theatre of the 1970s, and particularly the collaborative theatre of writers like Romeril, paved the way for a burst of theatre throughout Australia that became known as Community Theatre, “although many community theatre groups would eschew the anti-establishment approach of much of that earlier work” (Fotheringham, 1992, p. 11).

Community Theatre can be described thus:

‘the community’ is a particular sub-group of people who are assumed to have interests in common. The community is defined by geography (the inhabitants of a small mining town, a rural area, a suburb with a recognisable identity); by work experiences (railway workers, miners, chicken factory workers); by institutionalization (a secondary school, a welfare centre); or by organisation (a migrant centre, a youth centre, a disabled people's group, a trade union action group, a pensioners' club). This community approaches, or is approached by, a group of professional theatre workers. Together the community and the artists devise a performance project with the intention, not only of entertaining, but also of saying something about the community's life experiences, memories of

the past, and hopes and fears for the future. The theatre professionals contribute their skills in co-ordination, artistic direction, writing, design, and sometimes acting, with a major input on as many levels as possible from the amateur community participants ... The resulting play or theatrical event is something which other members of the same community can watch, while the subject matter encourages them to respond differently from someone actually watching it simply as theatre (Fotheringham, 1992, p. 20).

The professional theatre workers who helped the communities develop their theatre pieces were effectively working as dramaturgs.

Community Theatre emerged as a reaction against the perceived elitism of mainstream theatre. Many artists from the alternative theatre movement embraced the aim of Community Theatre to return theatre to the people and became very involved in its development. The Australia Council, a national body that was set up by the Australian Government to administer and allocate funds for the arts, also began to see value in encouraging community theatre. Funding began to be allocated to community theatre productions.

Although community theatre projects do still occasionally happen, the excitement that accompanied the first rush of community theatre projects waned towards the end of the 1980s. This may have been due partly to the appeal of the well made play, partly to do with the enormous energy required to continually create community theatre, and even partly to do with the fact that amateur theatres began to call themselves community theatres. I know of people who worked extensively in community theatre who feel the need to explain that, when they speak of their community theatre experiences, they are talking about the groundswell of creative excitement that took professional theatre makers into the communities in the 1980s. They are not talking about time spent working in amateur theatre.

Also in the early 1980s, the Australia Council was beginning to give writers grants to work with companies as writers or dramaturgs. If, in the 1980s, a company received an Australia Council grant to employ a writer as a

dramaturg, the writer's tasks could read: "helps to put into final shape any other plays at that theatre, provides play ideas and meanwhile trims up his or her own play techniques" (Rees, 1987, p. 220). So it would seem that the true genesis of the dramaturg in this country could lie within the huge swell of theatrical output in the 1970s. It lies, perhaps, in the growing awareness, from both theatre professionals and audiences, that excitement of "the new" can only take you so far. If a play is to survive beyond the initial enthusiasm for new ideas or approaches, it needs to be well constructed as well as exciting. The next step, after learning to walk, is learning how to apply that ability to actually reach somewhere you intend to go.

From the 1980s, the Australian dramaturg begins to play an important role in assisting writers with the development of their plays. A number of highly skilled dramaturgs begin to become visible, like Peter Matheson and May-Brit Akerholt. Matheson is a playwright who became the resident dramaturg at the Melbourne Theatre Company - a position he held from 1989 to 2001. He now works freelance, and is in constant demand. Akerholt, born and educated in Norway, settled in Australia in 1975. Not only has she worked extensively on many new Australian plays as a dramaturg, she has also provided companies with new translations of foreign scripts. Many other highly skilled theatre professionals began to emerge as dramaturgs around the 1980s – far too many to mention here – and today every city has a substantial pool of experienced professionals working freelance on the development of new plays, and also within annually funded and project based companies. Project based companies are those that are required to seek funding for each project as it arises.

I cannot complete this chapter without reference to the important body of indigenous work that has emerged throughout Australia. However, I do not intend to venture into the focus areas of research on indigenous theatre undertaken by the likes of Maryrose Casey (2004), Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo (2009), or Helena Grehan (2001). The focus of this thesis is the relationship between the playwright and the dramaturg. In my experience, the composition of the dramaturg/playwright relationship is

generally fairly similar across cultures within Australia. But there is one cross-cultural production of which I am aware that has taken a different approach. It is a production that brings together many elements of theatrical tradition – both indigenous and non-indigenous. It is a play I have been able to observe since its inception. It is a play for which the lines between actor, director, dramaturg and playwright/creator will forever remain productively blurred. In my examination of text based theatre dramaturgy this play is an anomaly because, while it relies strongly on the word and is now in its eighteenth year, it has never been written down. It is simply 'known'.

*Bindjareb Pinjarra* – billed as a comedy about a massacre – was developed by Noongar theatre artists Kelton Pell and Trevor Parfitt, together with Wadjella (white) theatre artists Geoff Kelso and Phil Thomson. It is of some interest to note that the alternative title *Bidenjarreb Pinjarra* is used in reference to the play by Gilbert and Lo (Gilbert & Lo, 2009, pp. 61-63) and by Casey (Casey, 2004, pp. 244, 245, 247, 281). The original spelling of the play's title was actually *Bindjareb Pinjarra*. In a conversation I had with Geoff Kelso, he said that this spelling was adopted in the early discussions with the Pinjarra mob. Later, it was suggested by one of the men from Pinjarra that the spelling should be *Bidenjarreb Pinjarra*. So the spelling was changed for the first touring production. Later, further discussions resulted in the name reverting to its original spelling. It was simply one of the negotiations inherent in producing a play which includes stories and names from a community with an oral, as opposed to a written, tradition (Kelso, 2011).

Pell, Parfitt, Kelso and Thomson all had extensive theatrical experience when they came together in the early 1990s to examine the idea of putting together a play about the Pinjarra Massacre – a story all were deeply committed to telling. With the permission of the Pinjarra Aboriginal people, they set about creating a play based on wide research throughout both the indigenous and non-indigenous communities. Kelso made the point that one early decision the group made was that the element of comedy must be an aspect of the play. "It had to have comedy to make it work," Kelso said,

“although the play deals with an extremely sad and bloody moment in Australia’s history” (Kelso, 2011). The four created the piece from thorough research, improvisation and rigorous dramaturgical discussion. The play was never written down, in line with indigenous oral tradition, which allowed for a flexible telling of story within a strong framework. It also offered the opportunity for audience members to be an active part of the performance dramaturgy. Suggestions gleaned from the audience could change elements of the play each night.

*Bindjareb Pinjarra* was a very funny, deeply sad, exuberantly physical and enormously affecting production which toured nationally in the 1990s. Around the country, the play connected strongly with audiences, and was a great success. Kelso has recorded in his 1996 diary a comment from Bob Maza – one of the originators of Aboriginal Theatre on the east coast of Australia. After seeing the show, the diary records, Bob stated that the performers should document their methodology, for the play had created “a new paradigm” (Kelso, 2011). The very fact that the play was never written down meant that it was subjected to ongoing dramaturgical scrutiny and that the comedy within the play could move with the times. In general, written comedy can date very quickly. The unwritten nature of the play also meant that new information could be incorporated if further Noongar oral histories became known. Dramaturgical research remained active and discussions resulted in changes to some of the play’s material throughout the production period.

When one of the collaborators, Trevor Parfitt, passed away, it seemed the play had run its course. But then, in 2010 – the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pinjarra Massacre – the remaining three collaborators invited actors Isaac Drandich, Frank Nannup, and Sam Longley to join them in a re-working of the play. The idea of handing down the story had always been part of the original plan, and this extended cast involvement was the first step in the process. The new cast members were encouraged to bring their own ideas and research to the rehearsal room and while the original structure remained, there was a rigorous dramaturgical exploration of tried and

untried material. Fresh elements were introduced to the play. The new collaborators felt free to explore and re-mould the material, knowing they weren't stepping on a writer's toes. They developed a sense of being part of a collaborative creation. The new version of *Bindjareb Pinjarra* hit Perth stages in 2010, and proved to be as deeply affecting as the original. It has retained its flexibility – and that flexibility includes not only the ability to accommodate audience suggestions, but also the ability to adapt the play for performance by anywhere between three and six actors. *Bindjareb Pinjarra* has recently, in late 2012, completed another highly successful national tour. There are further community shows planned, and the cast hopes to begin to incorporate more young performers during this short upcoming production run.

This play can be seen as a modern fusion of traditional indigenous storytelling and traditional Western theatre, combined with elements of stand-up comedy and community theatre (in its original sense). The ability to adapt the material in *Bindjareb Pinjarra*, in order to communicate and engage with each audience, stretches theatrical possibilities. This format has generated excitement. It could even be suggested that the very nature of the handing down of *Binjareb Pinjarra* (and the collaborators hope the play will be handed down for many generations to come) and the subsequent reworking of this unwritten work has given Australia a unique form of dramaturgy. Orally handing down the play immediately puts the new collaborators into the position of dramaturg, needing to ask questions and suggest areas where clarification or an updated approach may be needed. As the new collaborators begin to offer new and re-worked ideas, the original collaborators begin to draw the material out, asking questions and suggesting shape for this material – so the role of the dramaturg shifts again. I can foresee a situation where various generations of performers have input to the way the action of the play proceeds, and where audiences of early versions of the play also become a historical touchstone. Always, however, dramaturgy remains active throughout every production of the play, lending a fluidity and immediacy to the material.

Apart from the fact that *Bindjareb Pinjarra* is 'known' rather than written, it reminds me of the following statement made by playwright Stephen Jeffreys, quoted in an article penned by playwright Hilary Bell:

The best writing is a combination of the intuitive and the ordered. Ideally, writing a play is like jazz: you improvise, but you know the chord changes (In Bell, Unacknowledged. No Date).

Usually the sort of blurring of the dramaturgical role that works so well for *Bindjareb Pinjarra* is the cause of problems within the playwright/dramaturg relationship. I will outline some of those problems over the following chapters.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Devils and Angels: dramaturgs are ... which?

**WHEN A PLAY HAS A POWERFUL EFFECT ON AN AUDIENCE, YOU CAN BE CERTAIN IT WAS SHAPED AND INFORMED BY A POWERFUL VISION OF LIFE** (Farrell, 2001, p. 6).

Someone who has a long history of having a powerful effect on an audience is David Williamson. The formidable Australian playwright was interviewed at a forum for invited guests in Perth in July of 2011. He spoke at length about his craft. At one point he mentioned that he had seen many plays destroyed by dramaturgs trying to force playwrights to write the play the dramaturg wanted to write. He said he does not use dramaturgs. His preferred process is to workshop with actors about five or six weeks out from rehearsals, and then work with the director of the upcoming production - and the director can take on a dramaturgical role where necessary. He does, he said, show his play to his wife first of all – once he has completed the script. According to Williamson, his wife is a good reader of plays and gives him “the thumbs up or thumbs down.”

There are a number of issues worth considering here.

Firstly, the view that dramaturgs destroy plays is not an uncommon one. Stories about relationships that fail make much better telling than stories about relationships that cause few ripples. This is as true for the playwright/dramaturg relationship as it is for Hollywood starlets. And I have certainly heard a couple of stories about dramaturgs pushing writers towards a certain goal with such ferocity that the playwrights have walked away from their scripts. I cited one of those stories in chapter one. However, in the course of conversations with many playwrights over the years, I have generally found that the playwrights who murmur vaguely about ruinous dramaturgs have no direct experience of a destructive playwright/dramaturg relationship, and do not personally know anybody who has gone through



such an experience. But they have heard whispers. They have been told stories. There is certainly some genuine fear in some quarters about this relative newcomer to theatre, this entity called a dramaturg. I am able to confirm that the fear does have some substance. In the course of my investigations, I have witnessed an inexperienced dramaturg drive an equally inexperienced playwright to tears as the script was pushed and pummeled by the dramaturg, who thought he could see what the play needed to be if it was to succeed. The young dramaturg misunderstood his role, and the result could have been disastrous for the playwright and the play if more experienced heads had not intervened. I know the young dramaturg learnt a valuable lesson in the process though I am not sure about the playwright.

Terry McCabe, author of *Mis-directing the Play*, contends – like David Williamson - that dramaturgy is the job of the director. This idea is examined in greater depth in the chapter on Production Dramaturgy. However the following advice to directors offered in McCabe's discussion of Elia Kazan's production of Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is pertinent. Kazan had insisted on particular changes to the third Act, insinuating that he would not direct the play unless those changes were made. McCabe comments:

One of the most valuable services you can offer a playwright is to point out what you think doesn't work about the play. Everyone agrees, for instance, that the version of Maggie the Cat in the revised Act Three is better than she was in the original. But if you can't persuade the playwright by the merits of your observation, you deserve to lose the argument. To manipulate an otherwise unwilling playwright into making changes, as Kazan did, is to cross the line into abuse of power (McCabe, 2001, p. 83).

Forcing a playwright to write their play in a certain way puts the creative artist in a straightjacket. They need to be double-jointed to escape and, unfortunately, not all are. So the restraints can tend to result in less fluid, less explorative, less 'alive' work.

However, what if the playwright *can* be persuaded by the merits of your observation and is willing to make the required changes? The tale of a recent case involving a play that had already received a first production was related to me by a research participant (D8). The play's story was powerful, and while there was a general feeling that the script for the first production had not served the story well, interest in a remount was high. A director was approached, but the director was not willing to direct the play unless a rigorous plot re-think with a dramaturg was undertaken. This, according to my participant (D8), was the first time someone had indicated to the relatively inexperienced playwright that there were major structural and plot problems with the script. The playwright expressed a willingness to re-work the script.

I don't know why the original dramaturg had not taken a more rigorous approach to the script. Perhaps he was overwhelmed by the scale of the story, and was simply the wrong person to dramaturg this style of play? Or perhaps a relationship of trust had not been established prior to the working process?

The re-working process was extensive and demanding on both the playwright and dramaturg. Clear possibilities for the development of the script were discussed by the dramaturg and playwright and the dramaturg offered incisive views on important aspects of the story. The initial script had tried to intertwine so many plot-lines that the story had become confused. Much refining was necessary, along with a shift in focus in order to gain a stronger sense of the central story. The final re-working generated a vastly different and highly praised theatrical experience of epic proportions. The relationship between dramaturg and playwright remained open and harmonious, which suggests they had worked with generosity of spirit and trust in a mutual desire to honour a story that both believed needed to be told, and told well.

Put simply, is it that the difference between a playwright unwillingly making changes and one embracing change touches on the playwright's vision, in

that with the former, a strong personal vision is felt to have been denied the playwright and with the latter, a strong personal vision is felt to have been enhanced?

It is important to make the point that dramaturgs aim to help playwrights produce the best writing for the theatre that they can. That is their passion. Sometimes dramaturgs are also playwrights. But when they are working as a dramaturg, the clear understanding should be that the designated playwright is the writer of the script, and the dramaturg is the dramaturg.

Where dramaturgs see problems with a script, they may also see clear ways to solve those problems, and may offer possible new directions for scenes or characters. Finding the dividing line between the creative and the reactive can be tricky. As a dramaturg, I can get caught up in the excitement of “what if...?”, and throw random thoughts and images around the room if I feel a great idea has not been fully realized. The important thing is to be clear about these suggestions being reactive thoughts and ideas and not prescriptive conclusions. The playwright is perfectly entitled to ignore the advice, although he or she would be wise to note that the very fact the suggestions are made indicates that whatever provoked these suggestions requires further consideration. Both playwright and dramaturg need to be aware that the artistic creator in the dramaturg/playwright relationship is the playwright. Understanding the division of responsibilities is an important factor in keeping the relationship constructive, but this division is sometimes poorly understood by either the playwright or the dramaturg or, indeed, is misunderstood by both. Where there is a lack of understanding, fear, mistrust and resentment can fester. Chemers outlines the importance of the dramaturg’s role:

Remember that the dramaturg’s most important goal in this process is helping the playwright to find his or her voice – that is, to be able to articulate what, why and how. The tight wire that the dramaturg walks in this relationship is balancing the level of input. You don’t take over the process, but on the other hand you do not serve the playwright well by utterly subverting your knowledge, instincts and skills ... The sense of fulfillment and satisfaction will come when you see that you’ve helped

your ally accomplish his or her goal and that you've ghost-lit him or her through uncharted territory, for with that knowledge comes the realization of one more small victory that contributes to your greater mission as a dramaturg: improving the theater culture of your community, as Aristotle demanded (Chemers, 2010, p. 130).

Even though dramaturgs and playwrights may enter into a relationship with their eyes wide open, when caught up in the excitement of the creative process things can sometimes go wrong. There are fairly well documented examples of dramaturgs and playwrights getting the creative division wrong. Possibly the most famous in recent history is the case of the dramaturg and playwright of the musical *Rent*. *Rent* became a huge success in America – and later globally – in the 1990s. When this play was first read, it was seen as an interesting idea that was not in a state whereby it could be considered for production. A dramaturg was called on to work with the writer over an extended period of time, for a fee of \$2000 US. The result was a very producible play. Unfortunately, the writer died after opening night, and the dramaturg subsequently sued the writer's family for a share of the royalties, claiming substantial creative input. The judge in the case ruled that "while Ms Thomson had contributed some copyrightable material to the musical, she could not claim authorship, or by extent, any author's royalties" (McKinley, 1998). What happened here was that a dramaturg - rather than asking questions and sharing associations inspired by the script, and acting to help fire the imagination and focus the mind of the playwright - became a creative collaborator to some extent. A line was crossed and the resultant ramifications not discussed.

It may well have been obvious to the dramaturg exactly what the script of *Rent* needed in order to succeed. Certainly, to counter the claims of dramaturgs destroying scripts, there are just as many claims that dramaturgs have saved scripts. But I think that if a dramaturg is going to cross the line into collaboration, they need to either stop and have a conversation about that with the playwright, or happily give over any artistic input to the playwright. If someone has been employed as a dramaturg, unless a different agreement is arrived at in the course of that work then

he/she is precisely the dramaturg. If the dramaturg's questions and ponderings do not inspire the playwright to move in the direction the dramaturg had envisaged – then that is the playwright's creative prerogative. If a dramaturg offers an idea that is taken up by the playwright, it is the playwright who interprets that idea and incorporates it into the script. If the dramaturg starts offering lines or scenes that are then incorporated into the script, they should do so knowing they will not be credited as a creative writing collaborator unless they reach that agreement with the playwright *at the time of writing*. Both playwright and dramaturg need to be aware of possible disagreements down the track and *both* should take responsibility for ensuring that a discussion is initiated if they perceive that a line is in danger of being crossed.

Dramaturgs and playwrights who get the mix right often form strong bonds. Many playwrights refer to their dramaturg as a "best friend" (P1, P4, P5). So what helps to form the right mix? Two experienced dramaturgs interviewed (D1, D5) noted the fact that they only had to ask questions and be responsive while the playwright had to do all the work, and stated that this was one of the greatest joys of the job. By the same token, playwrights interviewed have said that writing a play is hard and often insular work, "but it's such fun" (P2). An understanding of the quite separate tasks of playwriting and dramaturgy is inherent in these attitudes. As Steve Gooch observes:

If you're lucky, a fresh eye on what you've done will solve that common dilemma of knowing something isn't quite right but not knowing exactly what or how. Someone else is much likelier to be able to identify the problem, though almost certainly not the solution. It's one thing to know something is wrong, even to have that sense confirmed; it's quite another to do something about it.

The latter is entirely the writer's responsibility (Gooch, 1988, p. 85).

I will examine a close playwright/dramaturg relationship shortly, but first I want to return to the order of David Williamson's comments and briefly examine the process of workshopping a script with actors.

I have previously commented that everyone involved in a production adds to the dramaturgy of the production. My own journey toward becoming a dramaturg started when employed as an actor in the early 1980s. At this time, many new plays were workshopped and produced professionally in Perth, quite often before going on to a major season on the east coast. It was while working on these productions that I began to hone my skills, developing my awareness of the play as a whole and of the effect of its cumulative parts on an audience. Actors, as the artists with experience of delivering work to an audience (and this, after all, is what the playwright is ultimately aiming for throughout the whole playwriting process), have valuable insights to offer the playwright. They have lived with poorly conceived characters, implausible plots, hefty or badly written dialogue, cringingly obvious exposition and/or clumsy structure. Try as they might, they cannot always conceal these writing faults in performance, and so have suffered an audience's disappointment as a result. They have also felt the joy of delivering beautifully conceived and written theatre that soars and transports the audience. What a gift those plays are.

Actors want the audience to connect to the work and are happy to work hard to make this happen.

So, as David Williamson has found, listening to the dramaturgical responses of actors to a first reading, watching what happens when they begin to work on the play, being aware of when they are finding delivery difficult and discussing any particularly tricky moments can be of great assistance in the development of a script.

There can, of course, be a danger in workshopping with actors. Terry McCabe records one example where a writer arrived at a five week workshop with a script about two men desiring a woman. He got verbally harangued, pushed and shoved and came out with a play that was about the woman. The actress in the workshop process had a particularly strong voice, and argued hard throughout the workshop process for a more prominent role for her character. At the end of the process, the playwright could not

even bear to stay to watch the culminating public reading. The director who had been interested in the play told him it had lost its unique voice. When he eventually managed to move the play to production he went back to the original script with which he arrived at the workshop process (McCabe, 2001, pp. 95-96).

Generally, however, I have observed great generosity from actors in Australia. There are many with much experience working on new plays. Their aim is to assist the writer to realize his or her vision in the very best way they can, and they will work their socks off to make a scene work before they'll be drawn into any discussion about changes that may need to be considered.

Now we come to David Williamson's final point. He shows his script to his wife before he shows it to anybody else because she is a good reader of plays and gives him valuable feedback. David Williamson is a lucky man, because this is the sort of in-house response from a knowledgeable reader that many would welcome. It is, essentially, a dramaturg's response.

If a playwright happens to find their best dramaturg is also their life partner, then they are very fortunate. One of the participants (P1) is such a playwright and observed that the dramaturg is there:

right through the gestation process, so even at the point when I'm phrasing the questions for myself about what it is that I'm trying to explore - like before I've got anything on the page - I have that relationship, and then right through up until it goes into rehearsal pretty much - to the workshops, at least - and then the dramaturg sort of takes a second place and the director takes over, with the actors, and so that's the process that I've worked with (P1).

Being able to trust someone enough to talk about an undeveloped idea - knowing they won't destroy confidence in a thought that has barely had time to form but will actually encourage its growth - is a gift for a playwright. This early stage of development is usually a very insular time for a writer, so having someone on hand to talk through random thoughts and help clarify

the central idea of a play must quickly focus the writer's mind on the important aspects of the play he/she is about to write.

It has been my contention that this sort of close relationship, this willingness to unselfishly contribute to the conversation that fires a close friend's creative imagination, is often what has helped sustain and nourish playwrights in the past. These days, however, everyone seems to have so little time that it is difficult to think of imposing on friends and asking them to give a thoughtful response, outlining what they think of the latest draft of your most recent play. This is a role that development dramaturgs now fill for many and, if a playwright can establish a good relationship with a dramaturg, they feel they can ring their dramaturg to ask questions such as: "Is the effect strong enough if Darren walks in with his shirt wet or does he need the drowned cat in a bag or something?" (P5).

The positive side of being able to call on your partner for a reasoned response is clear. It's simply having someone "who knows me and understands what I've done and knows the body of work and, you know, you just have an immediate rapport – shorthand and rapport" (P1).

But of course there is a down side:

That's the other thing - you feel like 'oh I know that you always say that about that because that's what you think – you think that always...'. You work with someone and you *know* them. 'You're always pushing me to do this I don't want to do this' and ra-ra. So. it's easy to have fallings out and stuff and I think I'm quite - I'm more niggly with (dramaturg's name) because we're married so I can just say 'fuck off that's a stupid idea'. You have all manner of stupid childish feelings - because it's so deep in you, this stuff, I suppose, it's not just like a working relationship of being two people who work together in the corporate world or anything, it's sort of essentially who you are, as a person (P1).

It is also who you are as a couple. The dramaturg/playwright relationship, which is an intimate one under any circumstances, intensifies when your dramaturg is also your life partner.



When I asked the participant (P1) about the positive features a dramaturg brings to the writing of plays, the response was:

The sort of joyous clarity that someone who can see it from the outside brings to you ... they're so capable of being clear. Sometimes I can also feel 'oh how come you're so clear and so clever all of the time?' - and sometimes feel I couldn't do it without them, so in fact I'm just a fraud - that's the other feeling too. ... My best work has come about because (dramaturg's name) has pushed me into emotional territory which I wouldn't go into otherwise - I would just have people talking about stuff. Rather than really being in the moment and deeply wanting something from the other person and the other person wanting something from you and just, you know, going for it. Because I could tend to be someone who just likes to have people in a room and just ... talking (P1).

It seems that having your life partner as a dramaturg can give a rigorous, positive, inspiring, frustrating and constant encouragement to the creative artist. I had similar responses from playwrights who counted their dramaturgs among their best friends (P4, P5), observing what was almost a sense of owner's pride when they talked about "my dramaturg". All playwrights I interviewed who have this close relationship spoke of it in glowing terms, as did the dramaturgs. Dramaturgs who make a living as freelance dramaturgs and have relationships with many playwrights, however, can find dividing their time between playwrights tiring, because every freelance dramaturg has many playwright/friends, but playwrights usually only have one dramaturg.

What I hope is becoming clear is that dramaturgs are not the maniacal play-haters wielding scissors with which to cut a script to threads that occasionally a playwright seems to envision. They are dedicated, knowledgeable professionals whose aim is to help the playwright be the very best they can be. A growing number of playwrights know this and are embracing the opportunity to develop their scripts in consultation with a dramaturg.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Great Expectations: An examination of personal dramaturgical practice in reacting to a new writer and play.

**PAUSE YOU WHO READ THIS, AND THINK FOR A MOMENT OF THE LONG CHAIN OF IRON OR GOLD, OF THORNS OR FLOWERS, THAT WOULD NEVER HAVE BOUND YOU, BUT FOR THE FORMATION OF THE FIRST LINK ON ONE MEMORABLE DAY** (Dickens, 1968, p. 67).

People sometimes say to me “We didn’t need dramaturgs in the old days, why do we need them now?” Yes, sometimes playwrights did apparently work successfully without communicating any of their ideas to anyone along the way. But often, before there were people known as dramaturgs, playwrights were working in the midst of people who knew and were passionate about the theatre – friends and theatre workers alike – and I’m sure all of those were happy to give their dramaturgical opinion on a piece of writing. In Australia, that is basically how the Pram Factory and La Mama developed their writers and thrived in the early days. Today, there are a number of successful playwrights who use their knowledgeable and willing partners or spouses as their dramaturgs. But this quality of in-house dramaturgical relationship is not always possible, for any number of reasons. It can be very difficult for a writer to find someone with whom they can talk their ideas through, and who will give them honest feedback. For those people, finding a dramaturg with whom they develop a good rapport is gold. This relationship can become one of the most important that a playwright has. Discussing a conversation held with a fellow playwright, one of my interviewees offered an example of the value of a positive playwright/dramaturg relationship:

she said ‘You just can’t imagine how wonderful it was because she KNOWS me and she knows my work and she’s the only one who can be dead critical but make me feel thrilled as anything to go back to the typewriter. Or to the computer’. And you see that’s the trick, you know? - If you can identify the problem and empower the other person so that

they're thrilled by the fact that you've just said this play actually is a piece of poop. You know that's what, at the end of the day, that's what makes a great dramaturg (P1).

I want to examine the concerns and considerations of the dramaturg more closely, and the way the dramaturg approaches a new play by a writer with whom he or she does not currently have a working relationship.

There are heart-in-the-mouth moments for a freelance dramaturg. I recall a phone call I once received from a director that began something like this: "Look, we're a week into rehearsal and we don't have an Act Two. Can you help? Otherwise we're thinking of pulling the play." At the end of that conversation, I immediately rang the writer to get as complete a picture as possible of what was going on.

In this case, the writer did actually have an Act Two, it was just that it was in pieces, and some parts had a number of versions. There had simply been so many interested voices in the development process and rehearsal room, saying so many things, that script direction had become confused and useful communication had temporarily ceased.

Initially, my being called in resulted in an all-night session with the playwright where thoughts were re-examined and re-ordered. An Act Two was ready for the rehearsal table the next morning. Further work was needed, but the writer was now secure about the shape. I was helped in this situation by being a stranger to the process that had shut the writer down in the first place, and consequently the writer and I worked very quickly and productively together towards an urgent common goal. The final version of this play received a national award.

Another time, I received a call asking me to meet with a writer-performer who was due to open a show in three weeks. The director had just walked out on the project because he thought the script could not be produced. And indeed, the script needed a lot of work. But on meeting the writer, I discovered a quick mind and a distinctive voice. I would ask a question of the script, and after a brief discussion the writer would solve the problem on

the spot. Over the following week, the play evolved into a producible script, and a director with experience of working on new plays came on board. The schedule was still very tight, and the script was certainly not perfect by opening night. However the company dramaturgy, under the guidance of a skilled director, knitted over the unsolved problems and the season was a successful one.

Thankfully, these sort of fraught situations are the exception rather than the rule – but they do point to the wisdom of setting up a relationship with a dramaturg early in the playwriting process. However, if your best friend hates theatre and the only thing your lover reads is the Weekend West, where can you turn?

There are organizations (such as Playwriting Australia nationally, Stages in Western Australia, Playlab in Queensland, Inscription in NSW) set up specifically to assist playwrights in the development of their plays. Many of the Writers Centres in each State also offer playwright support services, or else they are certainly able to point writers in the direction of available support. Of course, there are many playwriting courses available in educational institutions, and any writers just beginning to think about writing for theatre would be best advised to seek out one of those playwriting courses initially.

For many, first contact with one of the playwriting development support organizations may well be in order to get assessments of a script. For this service you will pay a fee. It is probable that you will never meet your assessors, but they are likely to be people who have worked as dramaturgs, writers or directors.

The national organization, Playwriting Australia, offers a service which provides contact details for dramaturgs in a writer's area. Playwriting Australia also runs a number of programmes each year, of varying intensity, where new scripts are workshopped. Getting into these programmes is fiercely competitive. They also launch other initiatives at times, and it's always wise to keep an eye on their website.

Apart from offering a year-round assessment service, Stages (as an example of a State organization) invites applications a number of times a year from playwrights seeking assistance with Western Australian dramaturgical services, workshops or readings. These applications are assessed by a panel, and recommendations for support are then made. The Stages' director is also available for any advice for playwrights, and this advice can include suggesting dramaturgs who the director believes would be suitable for specific projects.

Dramaturgs are passionate about good theatre. But not all dramaturgs are the same. The difficulty for both playwright and dramaturg lies in finding the dramaturg/writer FIT that is right. And this may mean a few false starts. Playwrights and dramaturgs need to be pragmatic about that. A playwright should not expect that the dramaturg who is right for their best mate is necessarily going to be the right dramaturg for him or her.

What a playwright should be looking for is a dramaturg who is on the same page as the playwright, but is not a sycophant. Someone who wants the playwright to succeed and so is prepared to tell them when and where and why they believe the playwright's writing is not working as well as it could.

Sometimes you're having the conversation with the dramaturg and you think 'you just don't get what this is about, do you?' and so the conversation gets more and more passionate until you're shouting 'but don't you see? He doesn't want to leave!' and the dramaturg looks at you and says "Well why don't you show that?" and you're like 'ah, light bulb on, I get it. Major issue is too obscure (P4).

Understanding and respect must come from both sides of the relationship. Writers must try to be open to the feedback they get, and not be defensive. Ultimately it is up to the playwright to decide if he or she wants to take any of the dramaturg's feedback on board, and to decide how any new thoughts are to be integrated into the script.

So what happens when a dramaturg first gets hold of a newly written script?

When I first read a play I try to visualize it in action, and to react to it as an audience member. Linear and non linear plays both have advantages and disadvantages, so I try to keep an open mind on structure. What I always hope for is to be carried along on the journey, delighted by the world of the play. This sometimes happens, and when it does, it is thrilling and I want to whoop and dance around the house – and I sometimes do. Oh, for more whooping and dancing!

So my first reaction, on a first reading, is to the play as a whole: what happens in the play? How does it affect me? How well do I think it achieved what I believe to be its overall aim? Then, on a second or third reading, I will begin to note my reaction to specific moments or aspects.

What is it about a play that makes it work? August Strindberg offers the following:

An effective play should contain or make use of:

hints and intimations

a secret made known to the audience either at the beginning or toward the end. If the spectator but not the actors know the secret, the spectator enjoys their game of blindman's bluff. If the spectator is not in on the secret, his curiosity is aroused and his attention is held.

an outburst of emotion, rage, indignation

a discovery

a punishment (nemesis), a humiliation

a careful resolution, either with or without a reconciliation

a quid pro quo

a parallelism

a reversal (*revirement*), an upset, a well-prepared surprise (Strindberg, 1960, p. 183).

There are some fairly standard elements that may need to be considered along the way, some of which I am going to talk about briefly.

**Central Idea:**

The central idea of the script should be strong. At the David Williamson interview that I mentioned in chapter three, Williamson spoke about the central idea, and how, for him, it usually arises out of something that has affected him emotionally. The central idea is what fires the playwright's imagination. If the central idea has driven the playwright into action – into the writing of a play – then energy and forward moving action is likely to drive the script. The central idea may or may not be embedded in a story.

Edward Albee describes his process leading up to the writing of a play as follows:

I discover that I have gotten an idea somewhere. I never *get* an idea – I discover that I *have* one. Then over the next six months or a year or two years, it gradually, slowly develops – I think about it occasionally. The characters are forming at that time, and eventually after a certain period of time when the idea seems both vague enough and clear enough to start working on, and the characters seem three-dimensional enough to carry the burden of work by themselves, then I go to the typewriter (Nardacci & Chura, 1967, p. 30).

Alan Ayckbourn describes a similar experience:

Ideas are never produced to order, they cannot be summoned on demand. They simply arrive and present themselves. Or they don't.

The knack is to recognise them when they do occur, for, very often, they don't come ready formed – behold, here I am, a full-length play complete with first-act curtain. On the contrary, they come as scruffy disjointed fragments, their potential barely visible. Nonetheless, you would do well to welcome them, for they are too precious to ignore, even the most unpromising of them (Ayckbourn, 2004, p. 6).

I have found that ideas can disappear as quickly and mysteriously as they appear, so it's always a good idea to jot them down somewhere when they arrive.

**Plot:**

Plot is different to story. Story can be defined as “the bare, chronological succession of events drawn on in a fiction” (Edgar, 2009, p. 19), or, perhaps

more pertinently for our purposes, "a narrative concept that the playwright uses to frame the plot and make sense of the actions in a larger context" (Chemers, 2010, p. 83). The plot is the way the actions are organized; the sequential actions the playwright has decided best reveal the story - or at least the central idea - of his or her play. Not all plays have strong stories (much excellent absurdist theatre does not have a strong story) but all should have a strong plot. A major question to ask of a script is: does the plot carry the action forward and serve the characters and central idea of the play well? And a core point to remember is that a "play is composed of actions in the same way that a flame is composed of fire; that is, utterly" (Chemers, 2010, p. 73).

### **Characters:**

Michael Chemers says: "Characters, like everything else in the play, are composed entirely of actions. Actors will tell you that characters are composed of traits, but we have to deduce those traits by interpreting their actions" (Chemers, 2010, p. 75).

In the foreword to his play *Miss Julie*, August Strindberg talks about characters in the following way:

My souls (characters) are conglomerations of past and present stages of civilization, bits from books and newspapers, scraps of humanity, rags and tatters of fine clothing, patched together as is the human soul (Strindberg, 1960, p. 175).

The comment from Chemers is the comment of a dramaturg. Strindberg, on the other hand, gives us an insight to the act of creating characters which, if he plies his craft well, will reveal themselves in the way he intends through the actions of the play: "One of the chief difficulties of playwriting is the creation of characters that are at once precisely functional, credibly lifelike, and imaginatively stimulating. Thus, the work of characterizing requires a thorough understanding of the craft plus a penetrating vision into the nature of human life" (Smiley, 2005, p. 146). One of the things I look for in a character, as a dramaturg, is this alchemy of function, believability, and the



undertaking of a journey of which I, as an audience member, am excited to be a part.

There is no secret formula a playwright can follow to achieve this. I mentioned earlier that Edward Albee, like Alan Ayckbourn, conceptualizes his characters before beginning to allow them onto paper. As a variant to this, Harold Pinter says:

I don't know what kind of characters my play will have until they... well, until they *are*. Until they indicate to me what they are. I don't conceptualise (sic) in any way (Bensky, 1966, p. 149).

And Arthur Miller, talking about *Death of a Salesman* says:

The play was begun with only one firm piece of knowledge and this was that Loman was to destroy himself. How it would wander before it got to that point I did not know and resolved not to care. I was convinced only that if I could make him remember enough he would kill himself, and the structure of the play was determined by what was needed to draw up his memories like a mass of tangled roots without end or beginning (Miller, 1960, p. 263).

When whole characters drive the action of the play, the playwright's vision is well on the way to being realized. By 'whole' characters, I mean characters that reveal their humanity throughout the play, and about whom the playwright knows much more than he or she is telling. As Ibsen once said of Nora (from *The Doll's House*): "The things I know about that young woman that aren't in the play would surprise you" (In MacGowan, 1981, p. 65)

The final word for now on character, and the relationship of character and plot, I will give to William Archer: "The difference between a live play and a dead one is that in the former the characters control the plot, while in the latter the plot controls the characters" (In MacGowan, 1981, p. 64)

### **Conflict:**

Here is a major consideration, because:

if plays are machines that are made of actions, they are fueled 100 percent by conflict.

The process by which playwrights create conflict is mechanically simple. Given circumstances give rise to needs; needs incite characters to action. Obstacles appear that block the characters from getting what they want. That generates conflict that is emotionally or intellectually compelling to an audience (but only when the audience cares whether the characters get what they want). The characters develop tactics and strategies to get around those obstacles, and that process puts flesh on the skeleton of the play's actions. How characters act to resolve conflicts reveals their traits ... Conflict, in its many flavors, is the essence of drama (Chemers, 2010, p. 80).

If conflict is missing from a play, then no matter how strong a skeleton we have, the play won't live. It needs its flesh. And in order to have conflict, characters must have opposing desires. So it is important for a play to present "contrasting characters in action" (Smiley, 2005, p. 123) – or in the case of a one person play, to reveal the character's inner conflict.

Perhaps this could be a useful technique suggested to apply:

Test your own play to see if it has enough complications. At the end of each scene or act, ask yourself whether the audience will be worrying and what it will be worrying about. If it will not be worrying at all, or if it will be worrying about something not very important, then you need a new complication, something really worth worrying over (MacGowan, 1981, pp. 120-121).

### **Crisis into Climax:**

We have a crisis when two opposing forces are in conflict, and the battle could go either way. This battle could be a battle for dominance between characters, or it could be a battle of conscience within a character, but whatever the crisis is, the result will be that something changes. That moment of change is the climax. It is the moment that can transport an audience from a sense of heightened empathy to a point where they connect with the heart and soul of the protagonist. If a play is built in such a way that it culminates in a climax, a dramaturg will look at whether it does so in an effective way.

**Dialogue:**

The dialogue spoken by the characters must be carefully chosen. Sometimes I will come across a long scene where much is spoken but little is said. The writer's argument for the scene as written can go along the lines of "But that's the way people usually speak." It may well be, but the playwright's task is to pick through the wild garden of possibilities and select the dialogue that supports the characters' journey through the play. Playwrights craft their dialogue so that it *appears* as if their chosen dialogue is the way people speak.

Alan Ayckbourn says this of dialogue:

Dialogue at its best reveals the soul of your character. Through what it says. Or doesn't say. And because of *how* it says it (Ayckbourn, 2004, p. 68).

There are so many elements to look at in a play, and dramaturgical concerns and considerations will vary, depending on the sort of play that has been written – its form and structure. But there are a few more things I might look for that I will mention briefly.

**Exposition:**

Is the exposition timely, and delivered within the action of the play, or is it delivered poorly? For example, with poorly delivered exposition, a writer may have one character give information to another character that, logically, he or she would already know. Or a character may indulge in one of those one sided telephone conversations you sometimes come across ('Malcolm was on the plane from Melbourne? He got drunk and made improper suggestions? To the air hostess? The police were waiting at the airport and took him away in handcuffs? He's in jail?') This is all about delivering a whack of information to the audience, and there is no action involved. It is so obviously writer's convenience that it becomes funny to an audience. Usually, that is not the writer's intention.

One of the most common questions asked by beginning writers is, "How do I get all the exposition out of the way so that I can get into the play?"

My answer is, “The last thing in the world you want to do is ‘get all the exposition out of the way.’ You want to hold tight to it, hoard it like a pirate with his treasure. Then dole it out as you do candy to children: just enough to make them happy, but not enough to make them sick” (Spencer, 2002, p. 255).

Spencer makes his point clearly here. Exposition should not be greater than what is needed to support the action. Spencer also brings me the next point I will mention.

### **Over-explanation:**

Never underestimate a theatre audience’s intelligence by over-simplification or continual repetition. Theatre audiences are not like television audiences. Television audiences walk in and out of the room, chasing the kids or getting the cat’s dinner or whatever. Their focus is interrupted by advertisements, conversation, and life in general. Theatre audiences have made quite an investment (effort, time and money) in order to attend the theatre. They are looking for an experience that is *not* television. They should be given an experience that makes their investment worthwhile, an experience that takes them on an exhilarating – and, yes, challenging – journey. A play should aim to take the audience on a journey that has an effect on the senses, the intellect, and the emotions - and delivers a heightened experience.

The writer who over-explains can also tend to be unsure, as the play nears its end, that the audience has understood all the implications. So the audience can be subjected to an over-extended finale, while the playwright allows the characters time to explain what they’ve been through, in an attempt to ensure that the audience really understood the play. This is a great way to make your audience grumpy and have them checking their watches and looking for the quickest exit.

### **Chance:**

Do things happen “by chance” and stick out as a writer’s easy solution? This can usually be avoided by pointers (an early small revelation illuminates a later climactic moment) or plants (something established early in the play is

used to climactic effect later in the play). Without some sort of indication of an approaching major event, the playwright may end up with a response like the following:

The death of the actor is awful; it is as though you gave the spectator a sudden box on the ears apropos of nothing without preparing him in any way (Chekhov, 1960, p. 29).

### **Chekhov's Shotgun Rule:**

The above segues quite nicely into the question of Chekhov's shotgun rule: "if you point out the gun on the wall in the first act, the audience will expect it to go off in the third" (Edgar, 2009, p. 8). Edgar goes on to explain that, while structure and structural rules can be played with by the writer, the audience has a certain "structural expectation which can be fulfilled or broken but not ignored" (Edgar, 2009, p. 9).

### **An excess of ideas:**

Is the play about too much? - Where this is a problem, there are so many strands of so many different ideas that none really get explored. That's not to say a play can't have many different strands, but the central idea should be clear.

### **Mr. Omodei's Rule:**

Sometimes the play simply fails the shotgun test of one of my old theatre directors, namely: if half way through a play, someone came onstage and shot all of the characters, would we care? If not, why would we do the play? This is one of the most useful tools I have found when first looking at a script.

### **Axis and Currency:**

Two other worthy considerations on reading a script are clearly defined by David Edgar below. Along with the importance of dramatic action, David Edgar talks about the need to identify a play's 'axis', which he defines as "the line of conflict between opposing principles of the play" (Edgar, 2009, p. 26). He cites examples such as the "conflict between justice and mercy, implying that revenge can be worse than the original crime." Another worthy

example concerns the “trade-off between truth and harm, implying that the exposure of truth can cause more damage than concealment” (Edgar, 2009, p. 26).

He then talks about the ‘currency’ of the play, which supports the axis, and in explaining it says:

most Ibsen plays deal in the currency of exposure (of the past); most Chekhov plays are about coping with the loss of a wished-for future. Shaw’s great subject was disenchantment, though, as he pointed out, you can’t be disenchanted unless you’re enchanted first (Edgar, 2009, p. 27).

So there we have a number of the things I may consider when looking at a new script. My job, if I am working with a writer who has problems within a script, is to question, to make sure the writer has thought through the possibilities, angles, ramifications of actions, the effect of the play, to identify moments where the script flies or flails, to engage in the discussion about the world of the play.

Throughout this playwright/dramaturg discussion, a major consideration should be the audience, the audience and the audience. The biggest rule in playwriting as far as I’m concerned is to aim to carry the audience along on an extraordinary journey.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Other Side of the Fence: The Playwright's experience

**I WRITE, ERASE, REWRITE,**

**ERASE AGAIN, AND THEN**

**A POPPY BLOOMS** (Hokushi, 1667-1718, p. 77).

I recall a conversation I once had with playwright Nick Enright. In the course of the conversation, he described the first draft of a play as "the idiot's draft". He said that you don't show the first draft to anyone, you just knuckle down and write the second draft.

My experience is that many people do show a dramaturg the first draft. This may be because after the insular journey of writing a first draft, a sense of joy and achievement settles on you because you now have the shape of a journey for your characters on paper, and you want to share that with somebody. If your lover is also your usual trusted dramaturg, your problem is solved. Otherwise, what do you do? You "show it to anybody – but not your Mum" (D1). "Your Mum" in this context implies: anyone who will be so proud of you, simply because you've written a whole script, that they will offer no constructive criticism and will allow you to be lulled into thinking you have achieved all you need to achieve with the play.

So, given that showing the script to your Mum is not necessarily a great idea, you need to find somebody who can give an analytical response to your work, who also understands theatre. But "everyone is so busy these days it's hard to find anyone who has the time to invest in reading and responding with the attention to detail you think your play deserves" (P1).

Many people will opt to send their scripts to one of the playwriting agencies (for example Stages or Playwriting Australia) for assessment or dramaturgical response. And this is a good thing because the response you, the playwright, receive will often give you a different slant, pinpoint problem

areas, reveal where there is a lack of clarity, and generally ensure you know your play still has quite a way to go. If you send a play that is too far from its goal, this experience can be very disheartening. Once you pick your heart up off the ground and shove it back in your chest, you find you have been given a good hard nudge back in the direction of your computer, and if you are truly passionate about writing this play, that is exactly where you will go and spend countless more hours working on a new draft.

Many writers tend to over-write on a first draft. I'm one of the writers who tend to under-write. I know this and usually I would follow Enright's dictum and not offer a first draft to a dramaturg for a response. However, in the interest of this thesis, I did so. I found it a very interesting process.

You send your half-baked work off to who knows where, with no idea how it will be viewed or treated. But somewhere deep inside, you hope your vision will somehow shine through and the response you get will be largely positive. In fact, it would be great if the dramaturg was blown away by the play. At the same time, you hope the dramaturg will be tough, so that you get a good idea of what is missing, what does not work and what aspects hold good possibilities that are not being fully realized. After all, you want this play to not just work, but to work so well that it provides an excellent night at the theatre for an audience, and you know – oh, how you know - that it is not there yet. Occasionally you agonize in the thrall of this dichotomy.

Although you try to put the play out of mind while it is out of your hands, you often find yourself fantasizing about how it is being received. It can be many weeks before you find out. In some cases, it can be months. And if you've sent your script to a theatre company that doesn't have a resident dramaturg or literary officer, or does not respond to unsolicited scripts, you'll probably never get a response. I have spoken to a number of playwrights who are frustrated by a lack of response to a script submitted to a company, but when I ask, they usually haven't checked the company's policy on unsolicited scripts.



I sent my script to two dramaturgs (A1 and A2). I was interested in comparing the responses. I think I initially expected they would be quite different. I chose one male and one female – one who has been a dramaturg for over thirty years, and the other who is a playwright first and foremost, but also has a reputation as a very good dramaturg.

“I understand the script but I don’t yet ‘feel’ it” (A1). This was the first feedback comment I read, and pointed to a large failing in the first draft. The realization for me was that the emotional journeys of the play’s characters are not well mapped. This thought was reinforced by the first comment in the response from A2: “I’d be looking at the journeys, and whether there’s any movement in the characters” (A2).

I needed to know if the journeys were simply not there, or if part of the problem was that what *was* there was too obscure. I asked about one particular plot point that revealed much about the relationships and the journey of the play. Neither dramaturg had picked up on the clues I had planted in the script. In the next draft I will need to light the way a little more clearly, while avoiding setting up a flashing beacon.

The second problem these opening comments pointed to was more serious. There is not enough happening at the core of the play that has a deep effect on the characters in the present. There are not enough arising obstacles to be overcome, and not enough personal challenges that can change the outlooks of the characters. Consequently, the characters don’t get a chance to reveal much of their inner selves to the audience – their strengths and weaknesses – the things that make the audience recognize and understand these characters well enough to love them, hate them, empathize with them – care about them.

This, I now realize, is ultimately the result of playwright interference.

To say that stories either have happy or unhappy endings may seem such a commonplace that one almost hesitates to utter it. But it has to be said, simply because it is the most important single thing to be observed about stories (Booker, 2004, p. 18).

There were a number of ways the script could have gone, but at one point I decided I wanted a happy ending, and found the easiest route there. This is not what the play or the play's characters necessarily set out to do. I denied the characters' development simply by refusing to listen to them, refusing to allow them time to explore the possibilities, and instead, forced them to turn onto a bland path. Where is the conflict in the 'present' of my play? Any conflict that exists is under-baked and the stakes are not high enough.

Let me offer an observation from absurdist playwright Eugene Ionesco which should help clarify what I mean when I speak about not listening to my characters:

It is obviously difficult to write a play; it requires considerable physical effort. One has to get up, which is tiresome, one has to sit down, just when one had got used to the idea of standing up, one has to take a pen, which is heavy, one has to get some paper, which one cannot find, one has to sit at a table, which often breaks down under the weight of one's elbows... It is relatively easy on the other hand to compose a play without writing it down. It is easy to imagine it, to dream it, stretched out on the couch between sleep and waking. One only has to let oneself go, without moving, without controlling oneself. A character emerges, one does not know whence; he calls others. The first character starts talking, the first retort is made, the first note has been struck, the rest follows automatically. One remains passive, one listens, one watches what is happening on the inner screen... (In Esslin, 1968, p. 183).

I will need to do more dreaming before embarking on the next draft of my script. I will need to dream the possibilities rather than forcing my characters to be in a certain type of play.

Most of the criticism of the play was about the current lack of crisis within the present time. This was reiterated in a number of ways throughout the two responses.

The message from my dramaturgs was clear. I was skimming the surface of the relationships. Both dramaturgs wanted more. "More stakes raised, more change, more transformation, more complications, more obstacles before the rain, before the end" (A2).

It wasn't all bad news. "The feel, the style, the place, the characterization, the town, the imagery is all fantastic" (A2). "This script indicates a good sense of 'place'. The writing is generally sparse which somehow suits the physical and emotional 'terrain' of the story" (A1). "I got caught up in the story and potential intent" (A2). Both mentioned that the 'bones' of the story were good. To me, this feedback means that both the central idea and the basic storyline have strength. However I need to allow all that is simmering to erupt.

Then there was this about a technique I tried a couple of times, in order to draw a sense of another time into the present: "The blending of some scenes is an interesting device which adds texture to the narrative ... the play could carry more of this" (A1). I was particularly pleased with this comment. I had used a device, one that I thought of as an interesting experiment, to carry sub-story. I haven't seen this device used in exactly this way before. I didn't feel fully confident in it. Not confident enough to see it through, to allow it to fulfill its possibilities. Now I am excited at the thought of exploring the use of this device further, - at least, as far as it benefits the script.

What I have to think about for this script is that it relies on a lot of backstory. If you think of a play's storyline as a straight, physical line, you could pick any point along that line to start telling your story. My play begins late in the overall story – far along the line. And for that to work, I need to return again and again to the lesson in the following:

Oedipus demonstrates, in one of its purest forms, the effect of starting late. This strategy works – it only works in fact – when it involves 'the past coming to life in the present and creating drama' (as Arthur Miller's playwriting tutor Kenneth Rowe taught him) ... The backstory is not something we need to know before the present-tense story can begin; its revelation *is* the drama because it brings about what happens in front of us and what will happen after the curtain falls (Edgar, 2009, p. 30).

The only real difference of opinion from my two dramaturgs appeared to lie in the perception of the characters themselves. One found them "rounded

and full" (A2) but wanted to see these rounded characters reveal more about themselves under pressure. The other found the characters "vague", and without "enough substance to define them uniquely" (A1). I tend to think that perhaps both dramaturgs are correct. The characters are, I think, fully conceived within the story, but they are not currently challenged strongly enough – or where they are challenged, they are not currently allowed to respond fully to the challenge. The pressure is eased too easily. Therefore, they can appear to not be fully engaged in their own concerns. The driving needs and desires of the characters, and the main actions they each take to achieve those desires still need a lot of focus from me. I also need to allow the characters to develop their individual and strong voices further.

It is nearly time to start dreaming a second draft. I will, as soon as I have some dreaming time ... And this time I need to pay more attention to the objectives of each character, and pay more attention to the basics:

Do the characters have a momentum of their own outside your will as a writer? Or have you just put them on stage so that you can spout? Is the dialogue representing their urgency? Are we learning something new from every line, is each line advancing the action, or are you simply letting them ramble? Is there really something at stake? (Gooch, 1988, p. 77).

Every play presents its own unique challenges to the playwright.

you never really learn to write plays. You only learn to write the play you're writing at the moment. With each new play, you start the process all over again (Spencer, 2002, p. 173).

Even though a playwright might know the usual traps, know the common failings found in early drafts, this does not prevent the playwright from falling into the traps or penning the failings in a first draft. I see it as part of the sifting process. There is, for me, an urgency driving me to get a shape onto the page. Once that shape is there, then I can set about re-shaping, pulling and twisting, spreading and compressing, until I have a shape that begins to please me.

YOU MIGHT have seen this recently: the word “playwright” spelled “playwrite.” It may seem sensible to you, modern-looking and unpretentious. Let me suggest, though, that there’s a good argument for staying old-fashioned.

In the dictionary, “wright” is defined as “constructive worker.” In earlier times the term was applied to those people who wrote plays. This was because they not only wrote the script, but also directed, designed, acted, and produced. In short, they constructed the entire event.

But the metaphor holds even today, if for a different reason. A play is wrought more than written. A playwright constructs a play as a wheelwright once constructed a wheel: a general shape is laid out, and then hammered, bent, nailed, re-shaped, hammered again and again, until finally a functional and artful product has emerged.

The writing of a play involves just such a rough, practical, lusty attack on the material. After all, a wheel is only a wheel once it’s a wheel. Until then, it’s something that resembles a wheel (Spencer, 2002, pp. ix-x)

My response to the dramaturgical reports as discussed above is largely practical and considered. One thing I have not talked about is how the individual styles of the report affected me.

A1 took an ordered, academic approach. While I found this a little stiff, the points were clearly made, suggestions were largely practical and the coverage was wide ranging. I felt some of my intentions had been misunderstood and I was slightly offended by the mention of a couple of basic points. For example, the report said it was “better not to dictate stage positions *eg left, right, centre*” (A1). My stage directions are actually very sparse, and the sort of positioning directions indicated are only given rarely, at points where I thought there may be some confusion for the reader about the use of the space. While I found A1’s feedback generally valuable and while I liked the ordered approach, if I was to enter into a dramaturgical relationship with this person I would need to be aware of the potential for me to take offence at blunt criticisms. I would need to develop strategies to deal with my response, so that it did not become an issue. I would also need to remember that it is up to the playwright to decide on which comments he or she will focus. With so many valuable ideas offered by A1, I would not do

myself any favours if I directed my focus onto the few thoughts with which I had an issue. If I resolved these minor but important problems, I can see the potential for developing a positive working relationship with this dramaturg, and I would receive valuable guidance on structure.

A2 provided a response that read like a stream of consciousness response. It was creative, exciting and inspiring. It made negative points but these were interspersed with questions and positive responses. It was probing. It did not focus so strongly on specific moments in the script, but took a fairly general approach, looking at the overall effect of the play. It made me want to tackle the script again, immediately. While I feel I would need to have a strong awareness of where the script was flagging and direct this dramaturg's focus to specific areas of concern, I am confident that I could work constructively with A2.

My responses to the dramaturgical reports are subjective. Both of my dramaturgs are excellent and highly regarded practitioners. Every playwright is different and every playwright must find a dramaturg with whom he or she can develop a way of working effectively. If the playwright can see the value of a particular dramaturg's response to his or her work and can recognize the areas of the playwright/dramaturg relationship that may need to be worked on in order to facilitate the development of a positive working relationship, then the potential for the relationship to be a valuable one is enhanced. Most importantly, the playwright must find the dramaturg who most inspires him or her to keep writing.

In keeping with the previous statement, I will give the final proclamation for this chapter to Chekhov, who gave the following dramaturgical advice in a letter to Maxim Gorky, Feb 15 1900:

Write, write, write! It is necessary. Even should the play fail, don't let that discourage you. A failure will soon be forgotten, but a success, however slight, may be of vast service to the theatre (Chekov, 1960, p. 27).

## CHAPTER SIX

### In Good Company

**“THE COMPOSER LEFT SOME REALLY PRECISE INSTRUCTIONS, BUT THE GREAT THING ABOUT NOTATED MUSIC IS THAT THERE’S ALWAYS THIS WONDERFUL WIGGLE ROOM – AND THAT’S WHERE WE LIVE, IN THE WIGGLE ROOM.”** (Litson, 2010, p. 23)

In the quotation above, David Robertson, an American conductor, is talking about a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. The term “wiggle room” also provides an apt description for the space in which a theatrical production of a play can find its points of difference with another theatrical production of the same play. It is within the “wiggle room” space that a company explores the design and interpretation of a text, seeking in every corner for the best interpretation that the collective expertise of the artists in the room can bring to the production, the best way to make this play speak to an audience. In the “wiggle room” – which can prove to be quite an expansive room – the company becomes involved in the dramaturgy of the play.

Everybody involved in a production - from the writer to the lighting designer to the set designer to the stage manager to the costume designer to the director to the actor – to the audience - contributes to the dramaturgy of a production.

Then why do we need a dedicated dramaturg within a theatre company?

A clue to a partial answer to this question lies in the title of an article by Christine Wahl. The article is entitled: “Dramaturges: The Multitaskers” (Wahl, 2009).

Throughout Europe and America, the dramaturg attached to a professional theatre company can be called upon to handle a range of jobs. They can be involved in play selection, in casting, in researching the background of a writer or a play, or in researching past productions or the social/political

influences which the play reflects. They could be asked to provide program notes, educational packages, facilitate public forums, or help an actor decipher the meaning of a piece of text. They might be called upon to translate a play, to adapt a book for the theatre, to work with a writer on structure or to help a director reinterpret an extant script. They could also be asked to assess scripts sent to the company for consideration, to research current national and international playwrights or to sit in on the rehearsal process to provide any background information required and to act as an in-house critic (Cardullo, 2000, pp. 3-5). The tasks of a dramaturg in America and many parts of Europe are largely ordered according to the company's needs, but the function of dramaturgy is clearly multi-layered. Having a knowledgeable multi-tasker on hand in this time-hungry world must be seen as a boon.

Of course, as discussed in chapter two, in Germany the company dramaturg has a much more powerful position within the company structure, with the main company dramaturg acting effectively as an executive producer. German dramaturgs are also a guiding force within the rehearsal room and sometimes write scripts. In some other parts of Europe, and in America and Australia, the role of company dramaturg is usually created as a support to the artistic director. The sort of support the artistic director requires is often reflected in the title given: dramaturg, literary manager, associate director, literary officer, production dramaturg and so on.

The production dramaturg is one who assists in the rehearsal room. The very fact that all those involved in the production are involved in dramaturgy makes it desirable that a dramaturg is on hand – especially for the production of a new play – to ensure the playwright's intentions and the director's vision work together to jointly illuminate the play. This can be a delicate task. Some re-writing may be called for. The dramaturg needs to facilitate that re-writing, and to ensure that neither the script nor the needs of the producing company are compromised in the process. Cattaneo describes the task thus:



In new play rehearsals, the production dramaturg's job is to keep a protective eye on the script. Working with both writer and director, the dramaturg sees that the demands of production (especially a premiere production) do not push the author to alter the script in harmful ways. Strong or weak performances in key roles, or inappropriate or awkward design elements might tempt an author to rewrite to accommodate them. Such rewrites should be watched carefully. The director, once attached to the play, must know everything the dramaturg intends to communicate to the writer. Directors will often delegate to dramaturgs details to be discussed with the writer, or dramaturgs will suggest ideas of their own, but under no circumstances should the author receive different or mixed messages from the director and dramaturg (Cattaneo, 1997, pp. 12-13).

The politics of the rehearsal room need to be carefully negotiated. I was recently brought in on rehearsals for a new play at the last minute, and the lack of a discussion about what my role would be in the rehearsal room meant that I was feeling my way and felt constrained in my offerings. Apart from the writer and I being caught up in the "blind-date system" (Cattaneo, 1997, p. 12) which I mentioned in chapter one, the working process of the director was relatively unknown to me. This was not an ideal situation, but it taught me that the director and dramaturg should discuss what the dramaturg's role will be in the rehearsal room before rehearsals begin, and re-negotiate throughout the rehearsal process if necessary. It also affirmed the wisdom of having at least one in-depth discussion with the playwright before meeting in the rehearsal room.

There are, for me, always some basics of which the production dramaturg should be aware. Firstly I believe that the dramaturg should encourage discussion between the playwright and director, and not become a middleman for these discussions unless it becomes unavoidable. Also, if the dramaturg is required to supply research material, the dramaturg should be aware that he or she needs to sift and choose that material stringently.

I did so much research about the play and the period, collected everything from Aphra Behn to Dryden to theatre history articles. But I learnt another lesson - I gave the team too much research material. I myself knew less about Wycherley and his period than I did with Ibsen,

so I felt we needed more – but it was *I* who needed more. I had to learn to be discerning, to discard, make better decisions about what was useful to each particular cast in each particular production (Akerholt, 2010, p. 26).

There is also the following useful advice regarding the production dramaturg's role from McCabe:

He or she is also there as an information resource for the other artists working on the play, and to act as a gadfly throughout the process, speaking up to the director (in private) should the production begin to lose sight of the play, or, in the case of a new play, pushing the playwright (also in private) toward script improvements (McCabe, 2001, p. 65).

Even in the case of an extant script, a director can, and sometimes does, step well outside the intentions of the playwright. If the playwright is still alive, it is possible he or she will demand the opportunity to place a prominent disclaimer. The following quotation is from a program note that was required by Samuel Beckett when he heard about a production of his play *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theatre. The production had ignored Beckett's stage directions regarding setting, and Beckett considered that this undermined the play's original intention.

Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theatre production which dismisses my directions is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn't fail to be disgusted by this (In McCabe, 2001, p. 8).

McCabe raises the question of whether the director has the right to re-interpret the play so far outside its original context and intentions that the play essentially becomes about something else. As a parallel example to theatre, if a conductor ignored all of Beethoven's precise instructions and indications for timing throughout a performance of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, and used his own vastly different timing would he then be presenting a performance of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*? Or would he be putting himself in the position of the creative artist, and presenting his own

re-working of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*? Sometimes the walls of "the wiggle room" can be pushed out so far that the landscape of the original work gets compressed and squashed. This is something else for a dramaturg to look out for. There can be a fine line to tread, although McCabe has little time for such fine lines, and suggests "shedding the counterproductive myth of the modern stage director as creative *auteur*, and urging in its place a return to first principles: the idea of the director as the interpretive artist in charge of putting the playwright's play on stage" (McCabe, 2001, p. 23).

McCabe supports this idea with the following observation of a moment in a production of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. In this production, at the funeral Linda lay down in the dirt of Willy's grave, as if to lie with him one more time:

her love for him passes all understanding. Her lying down in the dirt jolts the audience, but – more importantly – it resonates with them. A director can only make this kind of discovery about a character by living through the play with the playwright's mind. It's not that this Linda wasn't Falls's (*the director*) - or Franz's, (*the actor*) for that matter – but that she remained unquestionably Miller's as well (McCabe, 2001, p. 77). (NOTE: clarifications in brackets are mine.)

It is at times like those described above- when playwright, director, actor and production meet to illuminate and magnify a reaction that bursts from the core of our humanity- that theatre transcends the ordinary and becomes extraordinary.

The company dramaturg observes and assists the progression of a theatre company's artistic policy and works to maintain an overall vision of the company's make-up and the company's place in the community. It has been said that "the dramaturg must be the artistic conscience of his theatre; he must help in the formulation of that theatre's aesthetic policy and ensure its faithfulness to its articulated aims" (Cardullo, 2000, p. 5). I have heard the idea of the company dramaturg as artistic conscience repeated a number of times in recent years. But I would suggest that the artistic conscience of a theatre company does not, certainly in Australia, reside in the person of the company dramaturg. Our companies are complex beasts. The task of

prodding the artistic conscience of a company can be taken on by artists, management, and even the community when it believes a line has been crossed. All are more than willing, in my experience, to question any perceived deviation from artistic policy. I believe the dramaturg can become a chief negotiator when an objection to artistic direction of a company is raised, holding as he or she should a strong and relatively objective overview. However, the dramaturg is still finding a place in Australian theatre, and while an acceptance of the usefulness of a dramaturg is growing, each individual must earn respect and carve out their place within the company.

In Australia, the full time company dramaturg is a rare beast. At the time of writing the major theatre companies employ the following: Belvoir Street Theatre has a Literary Manager; Sydney Theatre Company has a Literary Manager; Melbourne Theatre Company has an Associate Director who also has strong experience as a dramaturg; Malthouse Theatre has a Dramaturg-in-Residence; Queensland Theatre Company has an Artistic Development Coordinator who has experience as a dramaturg, and also employs contract dramaturgs for specific programmes; the State Theatre Company of South Australia has an Associate Director who deals with literary management and also serves as dramaturg for specific projects. In WA, Black Swan State Theatre Company has occasionally used a dramaturg, and has just appointed me as part-time literary advisor. Most other smaller companies and project companies in Australia might employ a dramaturg for the development phase of a specific project, if funds allow.

The role of the dramaturg within Australian theatre companies is shaped by the needs of the company. My few hours a week as literary advisor to Black Swan will initially entail reading national and international reviews available online, reading scripts that arrive or that I order based on reviews I read, maintaining relationships with writers and companies, meeting with the artistic director regularly to talk about and recommend scripts, and remaining informed and involved in all the activities to do with writing with which Black Swan is associated. I have no doubt the role will evolve and

shift. Each appointee needs to work to his or her strengths, and mould the role so that it both utilizes those strengths and serves the company's needs. We do currently have a lot of dramaturgs in this country who have a very strong background in theatre, and so can offer a wealth of knowledge and experience. It will be interesting to see if perceptions of the role of dramaturg shift once young graduates who have studied dramaturgy at university but have limited practical theatre experience begin to carve their place in the workforce. Ideally graduates would be able to build on their studies by serving some form of theatre apprenticeship, but unless specific funds are allocated by funding bodies toward this end, tight budgeting makes the possibility unlikely within professional companies.

One of the important tasks of a literary manager or company dramaturg is the identification of promising new scripts that are not yet production-ready.

Graham Whybrow, who was the Literary Manager at The Royal Court Theatre when interviewed by Luckhurst in 1998, made the following comment in that interview:

a reader has to have the imagination to think about what will interest actors, what directors need, how an audience will react emotionally, intellectually and aesthetically, and has to understand dramatic form (In Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 225).

This is not always simply a matter of identifying a new script of excellence that is ready for immediate production. Whybrow goes on to say:

it's rare for a play to arrive in perfect form – new voices are often raw and uncompromising and literary critics might view them as “flawed”, but those are the voices that could challenge the canon and create excitement, and the question ‘What is a play?’ must always remain open (In Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 226).

Identifying those raw voices is one of the joys for a company dramaturg. Encouraging the development of emerging playwrights helps keep the theatre vital.

What will sometimes happen with these new plays is that they will be offered a workshop development with the company. Actors and directors

gather together to focus on the script, try it out on the floor, discuss its strengths and weaknesses, play with new ideas the playwright might suggest. It can be an exciting yet daunting and exhausting experience for the writer. The dramaturg in the room can assist by keeping a reasonably objective overview, looking for the questions that need to be clarified, talking through the possibilities if the writer seems confused, providing some clarity, some prodding, and where necessary some calm. Most importantly, the dramaturg keeps the script – and the reason it was deemed worth all this attention – uppermost in his or her mind, and works to ensure that the essence is not clouded or lost through the exploration, but, rather, sharpened and fine-tuned. Tony Kushner articulates the dangers of re-thinking, reworking and rewriting in an interview with Susan Jonas:

Rewriting, which dramaturgy has a lot to do with, is tricky – to be smart enough to recognize what is in the original impulse that makes the work yours and makes the work good – if it is good. It's difficult to be brave and daring in rewriting, while not being foolhardy, or betraying that original impulse. That's the impossible, terrifying thing. People kill things with rewrites all the time. They also kill things by not being able to rewrite (Jonas, 1997, p. 475).

Sometimes, a writer who has had success in another form of writing or another area of the arts may deliver an exciting script idea and be asked to bring their script to a workshop. The following observation made by T.S. Eliot on moving from writing verse to writing verse plays is then an apt consideration:

The poet cannot afford to write his plays for his admirers, those who know his non-dramatic work and are prepared to receive favorably anything he puts his name to. He must write with an audience in view which knows nothing and cares nothing about any previous success he may have had before he ventured into the theatre. Hence one finds out that many of the things one likes to do, and knows how to do, are out of place; and that every line must be judged by a new law, that of dramatic relevance (Eliot, 1960, p. 251).

The company dramaturg/literary manager/artistic associate/literary advisor is an important participant in the discussion about repertoire. Making a

decision on a new season of plays is a difficult task, no matter how experienced an artistic director may be.

From the many opportunities subsequently afforded me of testing the fallibility of opinion in these cases, the conclusion has been forced upon me that the most experienced judges cannot with certainty predict the effect in representation of plays which they have read or even seen rehearsed. Some latent weakness, some deficient link in the chain of interest, imperceptible till in actual presence, will oftentimes balk hopes apparently based on the firmest principles and baffle judgments respected as oracular (In Mason, 1969, p. 20).

A.E.W. Mason, quoting Macready above, is making the point that a play may resonate strongly with a reader, and even with a company on the rehearsal floor, and then, for no apparent reason, leave an audience cold. Someone with great experience of largely successful play choice may be the best person to whom to refer when choosing a season of plays, but he or she can still choose a play that has a woefully unsuccessful season. Seeking a range of opinions can be helpful when it comes to making as informed a decision as possible, but ultimately the judgment lies with the audience.

The audience is, metaphorically speaking, a sleeping partner in the concern, and if the play be dull, literally one too. It becomes a kind of collaborator whose share neither actor nor author nor producer can foresee; a current passes from neighbor to neighbor in the seats, a fellowship is born, a play damned or made. It is a case of blind men on a road, but the one of them who has travelled the most roads and taken the fewest wrong turns is the best guide (Mason, 1969, p. 21).

There is one job described in the multi-taskers list early in this chapter that I have avoided talking about to this point, because there are so few dramaturgs in Australia capable of doing it. I am speaking of the translation of scripts. But I must mention the work of Australia's premier translation dramaturg, May-Brit Akerholt. Akerholt was the dramaturg/literary manager at the Sydney Theatre Company from 1987 to 1992, and the Artistic Director of the Australian National Playwrights Centre from 1993 to 2002. Since that time she has been much in demand as a freelance dramaturg,

and she has, throughout her career, written numerous articles and translations. Akerholt describes her introduction to dramaturgy as follows:

I learnt being a dramaturg by doing it; or rather, by being a translator. I was unaware of it then, that to be a translator means you also have to be a dramaturg. A translator's word choices should not be based on the lexical meaning of the original, but on dramaturgical readings of how those words will perform or function on stage, their effects on the character/s who receive them, the impetus for action - or lack of - that they engender, their emotional impact - or lack of - in the moment. You have to think about all the dramaturgical elements of a work as you translate it, and I quickly began to listen and look for them in all plays I translated and read and saw; in any piece of dialogue (Akerholt, 2010, pp. 21-22).

Akerholt highlights the need for a dramaturg to have a deep awareness of how people relate, of how words and actions affect and reflect emotion, and an understanding of the human soul. These attributes are essential for all those who create and interpret a theatre script, and the dramaturg's awareness must be of the smallest moments as well as of the overall action. Brecht offers a clarification:

Brecht's ideal Dramaturg is a paradoxical construct of considerable ambiguity, required to negotiate constantly between his synthesizing role (as the critical articulator of process) and analytical role (as a representative member of the audience): the former positing involvement and the latter critical detachment (Luckhurst, 2006a, p. 118).

Akerholt affirms the need for dramaturgs to be flexible in their approach to a script, and to keep an open mind throughout the development process.

I also learnt that you can have rules and guidelines and definitions, but in the final instance you respond to each individual text and its unique possibilities, and you react to what is happening on the floor in front of you, as well as to the text in your hand. Ideally, all new plays scheduled for production should have workshops before rehearsals. Or much longer rehearsals, as they do in societies with a strong theatre culture. All the elements of drama and performance - the actor's voice and idiosyncrasies, and the physical movement in the space they're in - can only come together in the rehearsal room, and I would never consider a translation finished until the end of the rehearsal period. I only know whether I've done a good job when I hear the actors read it. If an actor



fails to bring out the rhythm in a text, it is probably because it isn't there, whether in a new play or a translated text (Akerholt, 2010, p. 22).

Akerholt is speaking here as both dramaturg and playwright (as the writer of the translation). She identifies the need for a text to have a rhythm that resonates on the rehearsal floor. This rhythm should be able to be detected on the page, and affirmed on the floor. At the very least, a script, when it arrives in a theatre company's literary department, needs to have been developed to the point where it fires the imagination of the reader. If it does not grab the imagination of whoever reads it at the company the first time, it is going to be very difficult to get them to read it again at a later stage. Having the input of at least one dramaturg before submission helps the writer to question, refine, rewrite and ensure that they feel the play is in the best possible state for an outsider with eyes on successful productions, to view. Competition is fierce. If you've done the best you can with a particular idea, you're at least giving it its best shot at getting produced.

Dramaturgs are still sometimes eyed with the usual mistrust of the new and strange, whether they are freelance workers or working within companies. American dramaturg/playwright/director David Copelin, discussing the lack of understanding of the role of a dramaturg, sums the situation up thus:

When you consider that many people still don't know what a theatre is for, their ignorance about dramaturgy is scarcely surprising. But this is no cosmic state which we must endure, it's a situation we can help to change. If part of the problem is semiotic, perhaps part of the solution is as well. As Michael Bigelow Dixon, literary manager of Actors Theater of Louisville says, "The word 'dramaturg' is like the word 'fuck'. They'll get used to it." They'll get used to us, too (Copelin, 1997).

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Conclusion

**FOUR FUNDAMENTAL CONDITIONS OF THE DRAMA SEPARATE IT FROM THE OTHER ARTS. EACH OF THESE CONDITIONS HAS ITS ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES, EACH REQUIRES A PARTICULAR APTITUDE FROM THE DRAMATIST, AND FROM EACH THERE ARE A NUMBER OF INSTRUCTIVE CONSEQUENCES TO BE DERIVED. THESE CONDITIONS ARE:**

- 1. THE THEATRE IS AN ART WHICH REPOSES UPON THE WORK OF MANY COLLABORATORS;**
- 2. IT IS ADDRESSED TO THE GROUP-MIND;**
- 3. IT IS BASED UPON PRETENSE AND ITS VERY NATURE CALLS OUT A MULTIPLICATION OF PRETENSES;**
- 4. ITS ACTION TAKES PLACE IN A PERPETUAL PRESENT TIME**

(Wilder, 1960, p. 106).

Theatre does indeed require the input of many collaborators, and this can be confusing for an inexperienced playwright. Part of the dramaturg's job is to clear the confusion as much as possible. That is partly the answer to the question of why dramaturgs are important to playwrights.

It has become apparent throughout the course of this study that, while dramaturgy and dramaturgs are still things of mystery to many in Australia, both the practice and the practitioner are becoming more widely recognized and accepted within the theatre community. Most major theatre companies use dramaturgs as funding allows, and those dramaturgs working within the companies are cutting their own paths effectively. There is still a long road to travel before dramaturgs are regarded as a necessary part of the theatre-making team nationally, but they are now widely seen as a desirable part of that team. The function of the dramaturg within the company structure can include: reader of scripts, company advocate for new scripts and for writers,

workshop dramaturg and rehearsal dramaturg. This is another part of the answer as to why dramaturgs are important to playwrights.

Freelance dramaturgs survive somewhat precariously, and often dramaturgy is one of a number of theatrical skills a practitioner will have. There are a few freelance dramaturgs, like Peter Matheson, who make a living from dramaturgy, but most need to be able to take on other associated work. The up side of this is that dramaturgs continue to grow their skills while working on other aspects of the theatre-making process. When a playwright works with a dramaturg steeped in theatrical knowledge, he or she is tapping into an important resource. The playwright is also availing him or herself of the input of someone whose aim is to see that the script and the writer achieve their greatest potential. This further answers the question as to why dramaturgs are important to playwrights.

One attitude that seems to have decreased since I began this study is the idea among some playwrights that dramaturgs are more concerned with their own vision for a play than with the playwright's vision. This change of attitude may be due to playwrights learning more about how to use dramaturgs well. It may be due to dramaturgs increasing their knowledge of their role in the playmaking process. It may simply be that as I have become more widely recognized as a dramaturg, playwrights have become more careful about what they say to me. I hope it is the former two and not the latter that are at play.

In chapter one, I asked what action could be taken to initiate and maintain a strong playwright/dramaturg relationship. My observations and discussions with colleagues have resulted in the gathering together of a number of ideas that may assist playwrights in using dramaturgs effectively, and also a number of ideas that may assist dramaturgs and playwrights in establishing an effective working relationship together. A précis is below. I also asked a question about potential dangers within the playwright/dramaturg relationship, and if there were any pitfalls that could be guarded against. Research has revealed the wisdom in the playwright and dramaturg drawing

up a contract or agreement before they begin working together on a script. Even if dramaturg and playwright are best friends, it is wise to negotiate a written agreement, with the aim of preventing later misunderstandings or acrimony.

If playwright and dramaturg do not know each other, it would be wise for each to find out as much as possible about previous work the other has done before an initial meeting, and for the playwright to have made a copy of the script available for the dramaturg to read:

If I don't know the playwright and I haven't read the script before the first meeting, I don't know how interested I might be in working with the writer. And if the playwright also doesn't know anything about me and can't ask me any questions about what I think of the play because I haven't read it, then most of the meeting is spent with both of us digging around for gold neither of us is sure we're going to find here (D8).

An initial meeting or communication between playwright and dramaturg could usefully revolve around the playwright's question "Why are you interested in working on this play?" and the dramaturg's question "What do you want?" The answer to the playwright's question should give the playwright an idea of whether the dramaturg has an insight into and interest in the material the playwright is exploring. The answer to the dramaturg's question will give the dramaturg an indication of what the playwright thinks he or she needs to work on in the script, and how much dramaturgical time commitment is initially anticipated. It also gives the dramaturg an opportunity to assess playwright expectations, and, if necessary, to clarify the dramaturgical role. Dramaturg and director Sally Richardson made this point in a personal communication:

What do they want to get out of the relationship? (obviously it is a better script) but often a dialogue like this can diffuse expectations that you will 'write it for them', correct obvious errors etc. It IS our role to support the writer to 'do it for themselves' as much as possible. (Richardson, 2011).

An initial conversation about the script will also give an indication of whether the playwright and dramaturg could form an effective working relationship

and thinking about it overnight after the meeting's immediate impressions can also be a sound investment before making a final decision.

Catherine Fitzgerald, associate director and dramaturg at The State Theatre Company of South Australia supplies the following practical thoughts in a checklist. These are useful considerations for a playwright about to enter an initial meeting with a dramaturg:

- Be clear on how much can you afford to pay and what you will expect to get for that amount of money.
- If you are not paying upfront, then negotiate a royalty fee (always assuming that it will be produced and may make lots of money) – things will only get problematic if and when money becomes involved so best negotiate with this in mind (even if the play never sees the light of day)
- In what form do you want feedback? Written feedback? i.e a series of questions, personal response etc. Tone, story strengths and weaknesses etc.
- Do you require a series of face to face meetings? If so how many?
- Do you require the dramaturg to be at a creative development workshop?
- Are you taking on plot point suggestions, or do you only want a series of questions, and points of clarification? (Fitzgerald, 2011).

This list may seem to emphasize payment, but even today it is not unheard of for playwrights to be unaware that dramaturgy is a job, that dramaturgs need to eat, and that dramaturgs deserve to be properly recompensed for the work they do.

It is always best to be up front about the question of payment. If the playwright is able to pay appropriate rates (and the funding bodies in each State usually offer the opportunity for playwrights to apply for development funding), both the playwright and dramaturg should ensure that they are clear about what work will be expected for the payment. These expectations should be put in writing if the playwright and dramaturg decide to proceed. If the playwright is unable to pay appropriate rates, then an alternative

method of payment could be negotiated. Again this should be put in writing if an agreement is reached. If a royalty fee forms part or all of the payment agreement, make sure both parties are aware of exactly what they are agreeing to. As another payment alternative, Fitzgerald says it is sometimes possible, when you are working for a friend, to work out a quid pro quo payment (Fitzgerald, 2011).

While, at this early stage, the playwright might not be certain exactly what they will require of a dramaturg, it is best to go into an initial meeting with as clear an idea as possible. The playwright should ask themselves if they respond better to being able to sit and quietly read a response or to being able to speak and ask questions face to face. If a playwright is toying with the possibility of a number of alternative uses of the dramaturg's time, then it is best to explain that clearly at the first meeting. The dramaturg may be able to offer an opinion on what might serve the playwright best.

As soon as dramaturg and playwright have agreed to work together, an agreement or contract should be written and signed. Apart from the points mentioned above, the agreement should cover the points below.

Firstly, there is the question of ownership which I raised in chapter three. The script belongs to the playwright. The dramaturg is not the playwright. If there comes a point in the relationship where the dramaturg is in danger of stepping over the line dividing playwright and dramaturg, then work must stop immediately and there must be a conversation that clarifies expectations. If that conversation does not occur, or agreement is not reached, and the dramaturg goes on to offer, for example, sections of dialogue that the playwright then weaves into his or her script, then the dramaturg must be prepared to accept that their role is that of dramaturg only, and must acknowledge that they have no right to claim authorship. Fitzgerald responds to the issue of ownership thus:

This is a slippery area that you are entering into. I guess the issue of ownership is that it always rests with the writer (he or she who actually writes it down) - in the eyes of copyright law. Alas it sometimes gets

more complicated and there is the moral question as opposed to what is law.

I think the best rule is to be fair, polite and treat each other with absolute respect (Fitzgerald, 2011).

Fairness, politeness and respect should be, and in my experience usually are, at the core of every good playwright/dramaturg relationship. The majority of playwrights and dramaturgs who work together on the development of scripts form very strong relationships. As in the case of *Rent*, to which I referred in chapter three, a vibrant collaboration can still have a messy outcome if there is not a clear agreement.

Because the skill sets of dramaturgy and playwriting overlap so often, the professions tend to attract the same kinds of people – passionate, smart, text-oriented people who understand both writing and the translation of writing into performance. If in the past the problem was dramaturgs and playwrights not getting along, the danger now seems to be that dramaturgs and playwrights will get along *too well* (Chemers, 2010, p. 131).

It is important to ensure that if, in the midst of an exciting creative discussion, the line between dramaturg and playwright does become blurred, that this be discussed and, when necessary, noted in an addendum to the initial agreement.

There is the possibility that other unforeseen challenges could arise, or that changes could occur in the relationship. The most important thing is for both dramaturg and playwright to remain aware, and have a conversation if a possible problem is perceived.

Another point to be clarified in the agreement or contract is the type of future acknowledgement there will be of the dramaturg's work in any production programs. If the dramaturg turns up on opening night to find his or her acknowledgement squeezed onto the bottom of the back page among a list of minor contributors, the dramaturg is probably going to feel undervalued.

It's writer and then dramaturg underneath on every program of any of my plays. And I also acknowledge the people I've talked to as well in my writers notes (P1).

The dramaturg is acknowledged in the program along with the director and actors and crew. Plus I always talk about them in my program notes. And I always talk them up too. Some people like to try to minimize the work dramaturgs put in but I like to acknowledge it fully (P5).

An assurance that he or she will always have an acknowledgment within the main body of the program of any production of the play may well be sufficient assurance for a dramaturg, but again, the resolution of this issue is open to negotiation. Fitzgerald suggests:

As a writer, always acknowledge the process - thank the dramaturg/s, director and actors in creative development workshops even if you have three different creative developments with different team - acknowledge them all (Fitzgerald, 2011).

I do not claim that the above considerations cover all possible aspects of disagreement or confusion. It is my hope, however, that this small list will form the basis of a discussion about what is to be included in an agreement between dramaturg and playwright.

Once the agreement has been written, it is time to start work, and Richardson suggests that now the following need to be discussed:

What we both agree needs to be done/developed - strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats (yes a SWOT analysis!)

Key issues and concerns that could be/need to be addressed FIRST  
Ways this might be achieved - exercises, proposed re-writes/exploration of ideas... A schedule- timeline of meetings with an agreed deadline/future objective in mind (Richardson, 2011).

It is part of the dramaturg's job to prod, challenge, explore, discuss, help the playwright in the nurturing of his or her play and champion the playwright in company discussions. Playwrights are involved in the very



adult task of creating embodiment for and imagining life into a collection of ideas and visions. If dramaturgs can help light paths of possibility or warn about dead-end streets that the playwright could take on his/her difficult journey, then dramaturgs are worth their weight in gold.

How do dramaturgs go about this task? Chemers provides the following quotation from John Glore:

The question put to us is “How do you talk to a playwright?” and like any good dramaturg I’ll start by critiquing the question. It’s fraught with potholes. The question implies that there is a methodology that can be codified and then communicated to other people. I don’t know if I believe that’s true. I know that when I work as a dramaturg, it’s a liquid process and it’s at least 50 percent instinct....you don’t talk *to* a playwright. You talk *with* a playwright, or you don’t have a conversation at all (In Chemers, 2010, p. 123).

In my abstract, I asked if the effect of dramaturgical input could be measured accurately. By encapsulating the idea of the instinctual and fluid nature of dramaturgy that has been explored throughout this paper, Glore also clarifies the very reason why quantifying a dramaturg’s effect on a script is impossible. In chapter four, I discussed a number of practical considerations that could form part of a dramaturg-led discussion about a script. The way this discussion is approached, its emphasis, the way ideas are perceived by the playwright and the form the ensuing discussion takes will depend on the very nature of the individual dramaturg/playwright relationship and on the way the dramaturg and playwright each usually communicate ideas. How much the discussion affects the evolution of ideas the playwright is exploring, and the degree to which the discussion helps shape the final draft of the script, cannot be measured quantitatively. Qualitatively dramaturgy has been observed in this study, through discussions with playwrights and dramaturgs, through literature review and through observation of personal practice, to have had a wide-ranging and generally positive effect on the development of scripts for the theatre.

Akerholt offers the following guidelines on a dramaturg’s function:

- to elicit the writer's voice
- to ground the writer
- to open the text out for the writer
- to act as an advocate for the writer in rehearsal (Akerholt, 2011).

A dramaturg aims to encourage a writer to look deeply and widely at what he or she is aiming to achieve in a script, and to help the writer's voice to speak clearly to an audience. A dramaturg helps a writer to remain focused on the task, and to not become swamped by the ideas of others. A company dramaturg seeks out plays of potential and acts as an advocate for those plays. Advocacy extends to the rehearsal room when a new play is accepted for production.

Beyond Akerholt's guidelines, the playwright will be looking for a dramaturg who inspires him or her to be a better writer. That's what we all want for our theatres – the very best writing possible.

Part of my job is to try to keep people interested in their seats for about two and a half hours; it is a very difficult thing to do, and I am proud of having been even fairly successful at it (Osborne, 1960, p. 141).

## Bibliography

- Akerholt, M.-B. (2010). Breaking the Glass. In P. E. M. B. P. Monaghan (Ed.), *Dramaturgies: New Theatres for the 21st Century* (pp. 20-29). Melbourne: Carl Nilsson-Polias on behalf of the Dramaturgies Project.
- Akerholt, M.-B. (2011). My Notes to Polly. In P. Low (Ed.). Perth: unpublished.
- Ayckbourn, A. (2004). *The Crafty Art of Playmaking*. London: Faber and Faber Limited.
- Bell, H. (Unacknowledged. No Date). Stephen Jeffreys. *Inscription* Retrieved 17/08, 2011, from [www.inscription.com.au](http://www.inscription.com.au)
- Bensky, L. M. (1966). Harold Pinter. In W. Wager (Ed.), *The Playwrights Speak*. London and Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd.
- Booker, C. (2004). *The Seven Basic Plots. Why we tell stories*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Brown, R. E. (2000). Bertolt Brecht as Dramaturg. In B. Cardullo (Ed.), *What Is Dramaturgy?* (pp. 57-64). New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Canaris, V. (1975). Style and the Director. In R. Hayman (Ed.), *The German Theatre: a symposium* (pp. 247-274). London: Oswald Wolf.
- Cardullo, B. (2000). *What Is Dramaturgy*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Casey, M. (2004). *Creating Frames: contemporary indigenous theatre*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press.
- Cattaneo, A. (1997). Dramaturgy: An Overview. In S. Jonas, G. Proehl & M. Lupu (Eds.), *Dramaturgy in American Theater A source Book* (pp. 3-15). Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Chekhov, A. (1960). Advice to Playwrights. In T. Cole (Ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting* (pp. 23-29). London: Macgibbon & Kee.
- Chekov, A. (1960). Advice to Playwrights. In T. Cole (Ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting* (pp. 299). London: Macgibbon & Kee.
- Chemers, M. M. (2010). *Ghost Light An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Copelin, D. (1997). Appendix In S. Jonas, G. Proehl & M. Lupu (Eds.), *Dramaturgy in American Theater. A Source Book* (pp. 517-557). Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Dickens, C. (1968). *Great Expectations*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd.
- Dixon, M. B. (1997). The Dramaturgical Dialogue: New Play Dramaturgy At Actors Theatre of Louisville. In S. Jonas, G. Proehl & M. Lupu (Eds.), *Dramaturgy in American Theater A source Book* (pp. 412-420). Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Edgar, D. (2009). *How Plays Work*. London: Nick Hern Books Limited.
- Eliot, T. S. (1960). Poetry and Drama, The First Theodore Spencer Memorial Lecture. Murder in the Cathedral. In T. Cole (Ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting* (pp. 250-260). London: Macgibbon & Kee.
- Esslin, M. (1968). *The Theatre of the Absurd*. London: Pelican Books.
- Esslin, M. (1974). *BRECHT: The Man And His Work*. New York: The Norton Library, W.W.Norton & Company Inc.
- Esslin, M. (1997). Towards an American Dramaturg. Adapting the function of dramaturgy to U.S. conditions. In G. P. Susan Jonas, Michael Lupu (Ed.), *Dramaturgy in American Theater. A Source Book* (pp. 25-30). Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Farrell, G. (2001). *The Power of the Playwright's Vision: Blueprints for the working writer*. Portsmouth: Heineman Drama.
- Fitzgerald, C. (2011). No title. In P. Low (Ed.) (email ed.). Perth.

- Fotheringham, R. (1992). Introduction. In R. Fotheringham (Ed.), *Community Theatre In Australia* (pp. 11-29). Sydney: Currency Press.
- Fuegi, J. (1987). *BERTOLT BRECHT: Chaos, According to Plan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilbert, H., & Lo, J. (2009). *Performance and Cosmopolitics Cross Cultural Transactions in Australasia*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gooch, S. (1988). *Writing A Play*. London: A & C Black.
- Grehan, H. (2001). *Mapping Cultural Identity in Contemporary Australian Performance*. Brussels: P.I.E - Peter Lang.
- Hokushi. (1667-1718). Haiku and Happiness! (02): Zen and Haiku. Retrieved 27/7, 2011, from [haikuandhappiness.blogspot.com](http://haikuandhappiness.blogspot.com)
- Jonas, S. (1997). Tony Kushner's *Angels: An Interview With Tony Kushner Conducted By Susan Jonas*. In G. P. Susan Jonas, Michael Lupu (Ed.), *Dramaturgy in American Theatre: A Source Book* (pp. 590). Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Jonas, S., & Proehl, G. (1997). Preface. In S. Jonas, G. Proehl & M. Lupu (Eds.), *Dramaturgy in American Theater. A Source Book*. Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Kelso, G. (2011). No Title. In P. Low (Ed.) (Interview ed.).
- Lehmann, H.-T. (2006). *Postdramatic Theatre* (K. Jurs-Munby, Trans.). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lehmann, H.-T., & Primavesi, P. (2009). Dramaturgy on Shifting Grounds. *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 14(3), 3-6.
- Litson, J. (2010, August 2010). DA-DA-DA-DUM. *Limelight*, 114.
- Lorca, F. G. (1960). The Authority of the Theatre. In T. Cole (Ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting* (pp. 58-61). London: Macgibbon & Kee.
- Luckhurst, M. (2006a). *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Luckhurst, M. (2006b). Revolutionising Theatre: Brecht's reinvention of the dramaturg. In Peter Thomson & G. Sacks (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (pp. 193-208). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MacGowan, K. (1981). *A Primer of Playwriting*. Westport: Greenwood Press.
- Mason, A. E. W. (1969). *Sir George Alexander and The St James Theatre*. New York and London: Benjamin Blom.
- McCabe, T. (2001). *Mis-directing the Play. An Argument Against Contemporary Theatre*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- McCallum, J. (2009). *Belonging. Australian Playwriting in the 20th Century*. Sydney: Currency Press.
- McDowell, W. S. (2001). Actors On Brecht: The Munich Years. In C. Martin & H. Bial (Eds.), *Brecht Sourcebook* (pp. 71-83). London: Routledge.
- McKinley, J. (1998, Thurs September 10 1998). Family of 'Rent' Creator Settles Suit Over Authorship. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 5/9/2009, from [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)
- Miller, A. (1960). Death of a Salesman. In T. Cole (Ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting* (pp. 261-276). London: Macgibbon & Kee.
- Nardacci, M., & Chura, W. (1967). Edward Albee. In W. Wager (Ed.), *The Playwrights Speak*. London and Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd.
- Osborne, J. (1960). Declaration. In T. Cole (Ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting* (pp. 140-144). London: Macgibbin & Kee.
- Rees, L. (1987). *Australian Drama 1970 - 1985* (Vol. 2): Angus & Robertson.
- Richardson, S. (2011). No title. In P. Low (Ed.) (email ed., pp. 1). Perth.

- Schechter, J. (1997). In The Beginning There Was Lessing ... Then Brecht, Muller, and Other Dramaturgs. In S. Jones, G. S. Proehl & M. Lupu (Eds.), *Dramaturgy in American Theater A Source Book* (pp. 16-24). Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Sharman, J. (1995). In the Realm of the Imagination: The Inaugural Rex Cramphorn Memorial Lecture. Retrieved 5/8, 2011, from [www.currencyhouse.org.au](http://www.currencyhouse.org.au)
- Smiley, S. (2005). *Playwriting. The Structure of Action*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Spencer, S. (2002). *The Playwright's Guidebook*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Strindberg, A. (1960). August Strindberg (1849-1912). In T. Cole (Ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting* (pp. 171-183). London: Macgibbon & Kee.
- Tenschert, J. (1990). The origins, aims and objectives of the Berliner Ensemble (J. Mitchell, Trans.). In P. Kleber & C. Visser (Eds.), *Re-interpreting Brecht: his influence on contemporary drama and film* (pp. 38-49). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, C., & Behrndt, S. K. (2008 ). *Dramaturgy and Performance*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Wahl, C. (2009). Dramaturges: The Multitaskers. *Goethe Institut* Retrieved 6/6, 2009, from [www.goethe.de/enindex.htm](http://www.goethe.de/enindex.htm)
- Weber, C. (2006). Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble. In P.Thomson. & G.Sacks (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (pp. 175-192). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilder, T. (1960). Some Thoughts on Playwriting. In T. Cole (Ed.), *Playwrights on Playwriting* (pp. 106-115). London: Macgibbon & Kee.