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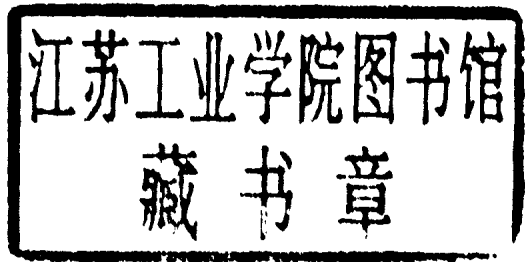
WHAT IS DRAMATURGY?

Edited by

Bert Cardullo

Bert Cardullo, Editor

What Is Dramaturgy?



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • San Francisco
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What Is Dramaturgy?

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PETER LANG

**New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • San Francisco
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Introduction

It has often been charged that a dramaturg is really a director or dramatist *manqué*. Perhaps the blame lies with the first official dramaturg, Lessing, a talented man who probably could have assumed any role in the theatre and performed it superbly. Today's dramaturg finds himself in the position of defining his role—one that is either expanding or shrinking, depending upon your point of view (and your theatre!).

The problem of definition is not merely academic or theoretical but one that goes to the heart of the creative process of theatre both in Europe and the United States. The dramaturg, many people in the theatre agree, can play a vital role, but what that role is, what it should be, and whether in fact the dramaturg alone should perform it, have yet to be clearly established. These were the considerations that led me to reprint or commission essays, interviews, and statements that explore the state of dramaturgy from the late 1970s to the present day. My rationale for reprinting pieces from the 1970s and 1980s, as opposed to publishing a volume consisting entirely of new material, is simple: the dramaturgical "explosion" in the United States, if not on the Continent, occurred at this time, and these documents from the period capture the excitement and profundity of Americans' discovery/Europeans' rediscovery of the idea of a dramaturgical theatre. In addition, these articles provide a valuable glimpse into the birth of a "new" theatrical profession and, what is more important, the concomitant rebirth or reimagining of much contemporary theatre.

The contributors to *What Is Dramaturgy?* take one or more of the following into account: (1) the role of the dramaturg in the theatrical life of the writer's country; (2) the dramaturg's function in his own theatre; (3) the differences and similarities between the functions of the dramaturg and the literary advisor; (4) the ideal qualifications for a dramaturg, including edu-

cation and background; and (5) the future as well as the history of the dramaturg and dramaturgy. Part I attempts to answer the question "What is dramaturgy?" from a historical, theoretical, and practical standpoint, as does Joel Schechter's essay on Lessing in Part II, "Dramaturgy in Germany," the country where the practice began. Part II also includes an interview with a practicing dramaturg, a descriptive analysis of the dramaturg's role in European theatre in general, and an account of the work of the eminent dramaturg/dramatist Bertolt Brecht. This pattern—of analysis, interview, and documentation—is repeated in Parts III and IV of *What Is Dramaturgy?*, which are concerned with dramaturgy in America and Eastern Europe respectively. Part IV is limited to, but not limited by, interviews with the two best known literary managers in the history of the English theatre, Kenneth Tynan and John Russell Brown, while Part VI consists of an exhaustive bibliography of dramaturgical studies in English. Throughout the book, the reader will note an alternating, and sometimes dual, emphasis on new-play dramaturgy and classical-play dramaturgy: Art Borreca's essay, for instance, is concerned with the former kind, Richard Pettengill's with the latter, and C. J. Gianakaris' with both kinds of dramaturgy.

As the idea of dramaturgy grows, so too does the dramaturg's potential sphere of influence. Once relegated to the back of the rehearsal hall, he can now be in the forefront of almost all the activities of the theatre: including selection of the repertory, translation and editing of texts, explication of the social, cultural, and political connotations of a given play, design of programs and posters, collaboration with the director in selecting a cast as well as with the scenic, costume, and lighting designers in creating a visual metaphor for the drama in question. In fact, the dramaturg remains only a step away from becoming a dramatist—or from being expelled from our overspecialized theatre precisely because he combines so many functions in one person. His is a creative situation to be envied or deplored, again depending on your perspective. Certainly the dramaturg's dilemma is one that Lessing would have understood, and even applauded.

Bert Cardullo

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B.C.

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I

WHAT IS DRAMATURGY?

“The goal of dramaturgy is to resolve the antipathy between the intellectual and the practical in the theatre, fusing the two into an organic whole.”

—Leon Katz

Enter Dramaturgs

Bert Cardullo

If you consult a dictionary, the meaning of the word “dramaturgy” you find there is “the craft or the techniques of dramatic composition considered collectively,” and a “dramaturg” is defined simply as “a dramatist or playwright.” Now we know that a playwright is a “maker” or “worker” of plays, not merely a writer of them (as a shipwright is a maker of ships and a wainwright a maker of wagons). This meaning of “playwright” is reinforced by the Greek word *dramaturgy* (and its back formation, *dramaturg*), which is made up of the root for “action or doing” (*drame*) and the suffix for “process or working” (*-urgy*). Here we may helpfully think of the words “metallurgy”—the working of metal—and “thaumaturgy”—the working of miracles.

But let us venture on another meaning of the word “dramaturgy,” which has come into usage in the American theatre fairly recently. As a result of our belated acknowledgement of European theatre practice, “dramaturgy” today denotes the multi-faceted study of a given play: its author, content, style, and interpretive possibilities, together with its historical, theatrical, and intellectual background. This study is conducted by people called “dramaturgs” in the European repertory theatre, most conspicuously in Germany, where each of the approximately 120 municipal theatres has a dramaturgical department. The dramaturg’s profession was instituted in the United States during the rise of the regional theatre movement and continues to be important in ensemble theatres as well as in those regional theatres that have remained non-commercial. As critics-in-residence (also known as literary managers or literary advisors), dramaturgs perform a variety of tasks. Broadly speaking, the dramaturg’s duties are (1) to select and prepare playtexts for performance; (2) to advise directors and actors; and (3)

to educate the audience. To fulfill these duties, dramaturgs serve as script readers, translators, theatre historians, play adaptors or even playwrights, directorial assistants or sometimes apprentice directors, critics of works-in-progress, and talent scouts.

After selecting a play for production in collaboration with his theatre's artistic director, the resident dramaturg prepares the text for performance by translating or editing it, researching the play's production history if it has one, and collaborating with its director on textual interpretation. If a play is new and the playwright is present at rehearsals, the dramaturg discusses cuts, rewrites, and the reordering of scenes with the author. Dramaturgical preparation of a classic need not be entirely different from collaboration on a new play. Research into the production history, textual variants, and sociopolitical background of a classic can increase the accuracy with which a past playwright's language, stage conventions, and world view are realized on stage, if the director wants his work to be true to the original text. However, an old text can also be turned into a "new" one—that is, invested with a contemporaneity of language (through a new translation or adaptation), a topical "concept" (more on this later), and/or a novel staging.

Dramaturgs assist as well in the casting of a play, and during rehearsals they offer in-house criticism of productions-in-progress for the benefit of cast, director, and dramatist. To inform the director, the cast, and the audience about a play's past history and its current importance, dramaturgs assemble "protocols" (or casebooks consisting of written and found materials toward a theatrical production), prepare program notes, lead post-performance discussions, write study guides for schools and groups, lecture in the community as well as the academy, and publish scholarly essays and books. Through collaboration with a resident dramaturg/in-house critic, then, the director is able to integrate textual and acting criticism, performance theory, and historical research into a production *before* it opens, instead of simply receiving post-mortems afterwards from journalists and avid theatregoers.

Arthur Ballet, former dramaturg at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, once said that dramaturgs must constantly ask

themselves and the people with whom they work, "Why are we doing plays at all and why are we doing *this* play, *here*, *now*?" Although it is not an easy role to play, 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.

To return the discussion to a practical level, John Lahr, now the theatre critic for *The New Yorker*, reports that *his* job at the Guthrie in the 1950s and early 1960s was primarily to bring new plays to the theatre and do the program notes. Later, however, when he was literary manager under Jules Irving at Lincoln Center, he did what he calls the "more satisfactory work" of collaborating with directors in rehearsal, writing lyrics for new songs in some plays, adapting such classics as Molière's *The Misanthrope*, and performing general advisory work, in addition to writing program notes and bringing new plays like Pinter's *Landscape* and *Silence* to the theatre. Says Lahr:

It's very important that theaters have a dramaturg, preferably who can combine his critical intelligence with practical theater work. . . . Critics have something to give the theatre. They need not be enemies. . . . If theaters want better critics, they must open their doors. . . . I think that critics must . . . learn about the craft from the inside so they can serve the art they purport to love.

As defined thus far, dramaturgy has two dimensions: organization of the many facets of repertory theatre activity, and specific production research. In addition to the functions described above, German dramaturgy departments, writes Martin Esslin, have the job of planning the performance schedule:

Not only do the plays have to be selected, but they have to be selected to suit the character of the particular company, providing a fair share of good parts for all the principal actors. . . . The working out of the very complex casting rosters in companies that may be playing in two different houses at the same time, while often keeping a road company touring in neighboring, smaller cities, demands great ingenuity in adjusting the repertoire, planning rehearsals for understudies, etc. . . . [In the dramaturgy department also] the repertoire is carefully planned to provide a balanced diet [of classics and new plays, both foreign and domestic] for the requirements of the public of the city served by the theater in question.

Esslin concludes that "in most German theaters the chief Dramaturg holds a position of considerable power and often dominates even the top man, the artistic director."

But none of these definitions or job descriptions has yet revealed the root importance of dramaturgy. To do so, we must ask ourselves two questions: (1) in what sense is the practice of dramaturgy by resident theatrical "critics" similar to its practice by the dictionary-defined "dramaturg," the playwright or maker of plays?; and (2) where did the idea of dramaturgy, in its multiple meaning of making, studying, and explaining the play-in-production, come from?

The second question is easier to answer, so let's start with it: the modern sense of dramaturgy comes from the time of the German Enlightenment, after about 1765, particularly from the writing and work of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. A leading intellectual figure in Germany's growth into national-literary prominence during the last forty years of the eighteenth century, Lessing was the first dramaturg of modern Western theatre. After studying theology early in life, he turned to literary and dramatic studies, wrote plays, traveled extensively, served in the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), and worked as resident critic (or dramaturg) between 1767 and 1769 for the Hamburg National Theatre, Germany's first permanent, subsidized repertory company. As dramaturg for the Hamburg theatre, Lessing supervised the selection of plays, advised in their staging, and translated some French and English works, in addition to writing criticism of each play performed. Though the permanence of the Hamburg National Theatre is questionable, since it lasted only about two years, its plan to develop a repertory of new plays led the theatre to hire Lessing, a playwright-critic who both carefully evaluated new scripts and wrote them himself. This commitment to new plays, and to theatre freed from commercial pressures, is shared by a number of theatres in America that employ dramaturgical advisors: the O'Neill Theater Center, the Mark Taper Forum, the Yale Repertory Theatre, the Guthrie Theater, and the Manhattan Theatre Club, among others.

Lessing's essays on productions staged at his own theatre were collected in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767-1769), a highly

influential document that laid the groundwork for the German theatre's break from the rigid prescriptions of French neoclassical theory, with its concern for "rules" and "decorum." In the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* Lessing articulated his own important theory of drama based on his reading of Aristotle, Plato, Horace, Quintilian, and other classical authors. He championed Shakespeare in particular and English literature in general against the French, thus paving the way for the revolt of the Storm-and-Stress writers against the past, as well as for the monumental translations of Shakespeare's plays by A. W. Schlegel, Ludwig Tieck, and his daughter Dorothea in the early 1800s. The achievements of Lessing, a multiple-threat man of letters, scholar, dramatic theorist, and playwright, can instruct every modern theatre. His tradition continues into twentieth-century European theatre, where we find illustrious figures making theatre history through a combination of radical creativity and critical intelligence.

In the German theatre, Brecht is preeminent. His Berliner Ensemble, from 1949 to the present day, offers one of the best illustrations of collaborative learning and criticism at work on theatrical production. And we must not forget that Brecht's early career as a playwright and theorist included a good deal of dramaturgical work—first for his own Munich production of *The Life of Edward II of England* (which he co-wrote with Lion Feuchtwanger), then continuing in Berlin during the mid-twenties when he was dramaturg for Max Reinhardt and subsequently Erwin Piscator. Two of the leading theatres of Europe today—West Berlin's Theater am Halleschen Ufer (under Peter Stein) and Milan's Piccolo Teatro (under Giorgio Strehler)—include an elaborate dramaturgical dimension. As previously stated, most municipal theatres in Germany boast dramaturgical staffs. And in England the formidable National Theatre has had the first-rate critical collaboration of Kenneth Tynan and later John Russell Brown.

Lessing was not only the first important dramaturg but also, to repeat, the first to be critical of his own theatre and its role in society. From Lessing to Brecht a tradition of "oppositional" dramaturgy can be traced: beginning with Lessing's advocacy of middle-class drama over decadent, aristocratic plays, and culmi-