

Daníčková, Eva

Review of The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy

Theatralia. 2015, vol. 18, iss. 2, pp. 485-489

ISBN 978-80-210-7952-6

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2015-2-19>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/134439>

Access Date: 16. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Eva Daníčková

Review of *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*

The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy. Edited by Magda ROMANSKA. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015. 533pp. ISBN 978-0-415-65849-2.

In this addition to the Routledge Companion series, Romanska attempts to provide a map of contemporary dramaturgical practice and theory, bringing together practising dramaturgs and academics who provide a range of perspectives in their contributions. The book is divided into eight parts, each announcing a common theme for a number of articles in each section. In her introduction, Romanska cannot escape the much-established exercise of dramaturgy publications: defining dramaturgy. With a nod to Aristotle, Lessing, Brecht and others, she provides a cursory overview of the (European) history of dramaturgy before she brings her account to dramaturgy in the USA, citing the establishment of the Yale School of Drama theatre criticism course in 1966 and the MFA in dramaturgy in 1977 as the turning point for American dramaturgy. Romanska skilfully brings together a range of developments parallel to the development of dramaturgy, such as the turn to sociology, acknowledging Goffman's contribution. She then brings her introduction to a conclusion with an overview of postdramatic theatre dramaturgy, which has developed alongside developments in technology. Romanska asserts that the book provides a 'primary survey' of the theoretical and practical aspects of contemporary dramaturgy, expanding beyond theatre into film, video, game design etc. She presents the publi-

cation as one which reflects dramaturgy in a global context and beyond a Western viewpoint; however, the range of authors selected for this volume might suggest otherwise; with contributions from over sixty authors based in the USA and Canada, thirteen in Western Europe (Germany, UK, Belgium, etc.) and only five contributions from authors working in the former Eastern Europe, or one each from Russia, Japan, China and Jordan, the publication cannot escape a Western bias. All the same, it has to be acknowledged that several of the academics and/or practitioners working in the USA have worked and continue to work internationally. Romanska effectively outlines the differences in funding and artistic programming of (most) European theatre and theatre in the USA and acknowledges the changing audiences and advancements in technology, as well as the decline of the 'white male dominance' in the leadership of American theatre, which will have to be reflected in the practice of dramaturgy.

Romanska has set herself a formidable task in editing this volume. Its biggest asset, the inclusion of so many perspectives, is curiously its biggest flaw, as the articles are generally very short and cannot encapsulate the depth and width of dramaturgy theory and practice in the twenty-first century, leaving the reader feeling frustrated with superficial or non-existent arguments. In its defence, this book is a very

02

2015

theatralia

good ‘companion’, and thus, in a way, it does what it says on the cover; however, it is perhaps a companion best suited to students of dramaturgy or early-career dramaturgs, rather than academics or established dramaturgs working in the theatre industry.

PART I / World Dramaturgy in the Twenty-first Century

The articles in Part I vary considerably in writing styles, ranges of subjects and academic inquiry. While Gallagher-Ross and Blacker give us a detailed descriptive account of their Sundance Theatre Lab writer development programme, Brian Quirt provides a very interesting viewpoint from Canada, with his company Nightswimming, placing dramaturgy at the heart of its mission; through this action, the author claims to have encouraged gradual acceptance and the growth of the profession of the dramaturg in English-speaking Canada. Margarita Espada contrasts the Latin American popular theatre aims of audience engagement with European bourgeois theatre forms, and draws attention to the role of the dramaturg in the context of abundant improvisation in theatre process, without the pressure of a product, or a production. Radosavljević has a unique perspective of a practitioner (and academic) with continental roots and years of experience of working as a dramaturg in the UK. She assumes the position of an ‘observer’ of UK dramaturgical practice, reflecting on the trend of anti-intellectualism in UK theatres and the place of a dramaturg in today’s Britain. It is interesting to compare and contrast the remaining articles in this section, from Stegemann’s German

historical perspective to Bredeson’s view of French ‘everybody does’ dramaturgy or Dąbek’s Polish perspective of the position of a dramaturg in a ‘total artist’ director tradition. It is interesting to read about the countries in which dramaturgy is practised but there is no word for a dramaturg, such as in Iran or China. The articles in this section are mostly reflective accounts of the state of play in different parts of the world, some influenced by traditional German dramaturgy, others, such as South Africa, dealing with Western influences in a post-colonial context. Eckersall’s ‘Dramaturgy in Australia’ is worth mentioning, as he reflects on the inherent ambivalence of the practice of dramaturgy in Australia, where dramaturgs are challenged to create something, which is more than just a commercial success.

PART II / Dramaturgy in the Age of Globalization

This section is again an overview of dramaturgy in a global context and contains articles of such different perspectives as Sellar’s claim that dramaturgy is evolving in global contexts through the increase of collaborative, often international, creative practice, and not, as Goethe advocated, through *Weltliteratur*, or dramatic letters. Hamilton focuses on the livelihood of the dramaturg, working largely in a self-employed context in the U.S., which is an interesting perspective, but perhaps not entirely relevant for dramaturgs working in central Europe or elsewhere. Peters effectively argues that the NT Live initiative is designed to strengthen the UK National Theatre’s brand, rather than distribute the art. Peters also takes the regional theatres’

perspective, arguing that the NT Live project could potentially have a negative impact on regional theatres' audiences, as they might find it more convenient to go to a cinema; however, he acknowledges that NT Live is enabling the South Bank monolith to become a truly National Theatre. Yahil-Wax's article provides an interesting lens to theatre made by Russian immigrants to Israel, performed entirely in Russian for this specific audience, and the challenges of acting as dramaturg for a production in which the actors in the company used Hebrew on stage without being fluent in this language. Similarly, Caplan's article focuses on a dramaturg's work on a Yiddish operetta in the USA, working with a cast that had no Yiddish. Another article worth noting in this section is Rudakoff's 'Trans-cultural dramaturgy methods', a case study of dramaturgical practices deployed for the 'Ashley plays', an international new writing collaborative work spanning several continents and involving a number of international playwrights. Even though the project had an inherent Western bias, it is an interesting account – and perhaps a blueprint of an ambitious international project. Marianne van Kerkhoven concludes this section with her perceptive reflection on the place of a dramaturg and theatre in the neoliberal context on twenty-first-century Europe.

PART III / **Dramaturgy in Motion**

This section reflects the changing nature of theatre and dramaturgy following the developments in new media technologies and the increasingly hybrid nature of theatre that incorporates other arts such

as dance, installation, music, digital technologies, social media, etc. Lehmann and Primavesi address these changing cultural landscapes, noting that the dramaturg in this context might become more of a 'negotiator for the freedom of theatrical experimentation and risk' (169). They highlight the importance of collaborative dramaturgy above all. Switzky continues in a similar vein, arguing for dramaturgy as skill, function and verb. Unfortunately, Switzky gets embroiled in the difficulties of defining the term, venturing back to Lessing and Tynan, giving himself little space to develop his argument. The section contains more articles reflecting personal case studies of working in a collaborative or devised theatre; the case studies often being too descriptive to provide a deeper analysis. Worthy of closer inspection is Applebaum's article 'Finding our hyphenates', arguing for an often dual role of the dramaturg in theatre 'shifting from a singular written text to the work of multiple performance texts', requiring the dramaturg to create a bridge to an additional craft, and, by doing so, opening the possibilities of play.

PART IV / **Dramaturgs as Artistic Leaders and Visionaries**

This section is devoted primarily to reflections on the increasing use of dramaturgical approaches in artistic leadership roles. Lester believes the dramaturg is best placed to assume a leadership role because venues in the USA are becoming more multi-artistic and therefore require careful curating. Cerniglia's view of the success of Disney Theatrical, attributed to

the company's core dramaturgical practice is perhaps a little problematic because he perceives success as commercial, box office success, providing evidence of this but little analysis of how dramaturgical practice contributed to it. I found this section of the book most problematic, as it mostly contains articles written from a personal perspective, with authors making assumptions about the skills of a dramaturg being well suited to the job of an artistic leader, but providing little evidence to back up their statements.

PART V / **Dramaturg as Mediator and Context Manager**

This section contains articles reflecting what perhaps Applebaum meant by hyphenate-dramaturg. The first two articles are concerned with the dramaturg's role in theatre translation. Versényi believes that translation is an inherently dramaturgical practice as it is concerned with how meaning is conveyed. His is a well-researched article providing ample evidence and formulating his argument for a dramaturgical treatment of theatre translation very well. Similarly, both Barnette and Wiśniewski find abundant parallels between the practice of adaptation and that of dramaturgy. Corrêa, with a nod to Derrida and Merleau-Ponty, analyses how dramaturgy animates the written text and the intricacies of the multiplicity of interpretations of the same text. In a similar vein, Bly argues for entering the world of a play free of assumptions and provides a well-balanced analysis of such explorations. An interesting addition to this section is Carlson's 'Thinking like an actor,' arguing for production dramaturgs

to 'become fluent in multiple performance pedagogies' (317). He focuses on the Stanislavski System as a tool for collaborative communication between the dramaturg and the actor.

PART VI / **Dramaturgy Among other Arts**

This section is in a way similar to the 'Dramaturgy in motion' section, reflecting on the inherent 'in-betweenness' of dramaturgy, but is more specifically concerned with dramaturgy in different types of theatre, such as puppetry or musical theatre. Blažević opens the section with an excellent and possibly the clearest definition of dramaturgy contained in this volume, reducing it 'to the core concept [of] ... *drama* conceived as *action*, not a play or dramatic text' (330). Thus the author concentrates on the work of the dramaturg, rather than on abstract definitions. Posner draws parallels between the performances of visual dramaturgies in *The Lion King* and *War Horse*, and the audience's participation in the co-creation of meaning; arguing her point well, supported by evidence from the two productions. There are interesting, but perhaps not-so-well argued, perspectives of the work of the dance dramaturg (Warner) and opera dramaturg (Eggert). Potter argues that despite a well-developed dramaturgical practice in film, there are still no dramaturgs appearing in the credits of most Western cinema. Chemers and Jantke are concerned with robots and digital games, the latter arguing that dramaturgy is 'the design of emotional experience'; detailing the dramaturgical work on digital games,

which anticipates the emotional experience of the player. Particularly interesting is the contribution of Odendahl-James, ‘The science of dramaturgy and the dramaturgy of science’, arguing that experimentation is something that artists and scientists have in common, and analysing theatre work based on ecological disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. He asserts that ‘Science cannot provide the data or “facts” and theatre the illustrative dynamic to convey said facts to an audience’ (386). He concludes that communication and collaborative investigation between the two realms (theatre and science) and the audience is essential in this way of working.

PART VII / Dramaturg as Systems Analyst

This section is largely concerned with postdramatic dramaturgy. Kaynar defines postdramatic theatre well in connection with how a dramaturg works with a predominantly performance-oriented, deconstructed and characterless text. Johnson continues in a similar vein, making a parallel between the work of the theatre translator and Plato’s notion of *pharmakon*, meaning both ‘remedy’ and ‘poison’. A very useful and well-presented article is that from Elinor Fuchs, who provides an excellent detailed dramaturgical

tool for working with performance text, away from the normative psychology of character. Haring-Smith presents an excellent argument for employing playfulness in dramaturgical practices for non-realism. There are other helpful ‘tools’ or ‘dramaturgical guides’ contained in this chapter, such as Orr’s bead diagram or Malone’s parallel-text technique. This is overall a very practice-focused section with a wide range of working methods in postdramatic theatre outlined in clear terms.

PART VIII / Dramaturg as Public Relations Manager

This section takes a closer look at the relationship between performance and the audience. Noteworthy is Visky’s account of the barrack-dramaturgy of theatre of imprisonment, arguing that this method is dependent on four elements: space, time, body and text. Two articles are concerned with ‘talkbacks’, or post-show discussions, containing some useful tips on how the dramaturg should deal with curating those. Perhaps slightly redundant is the inclusion of three articles on digital engagement, none of which bring any new perspectives to the discussion of audience participation in theatre through social media.

DOI: 10.5817/TY2015-2-19