

# Thinking about

# Dramaturgy

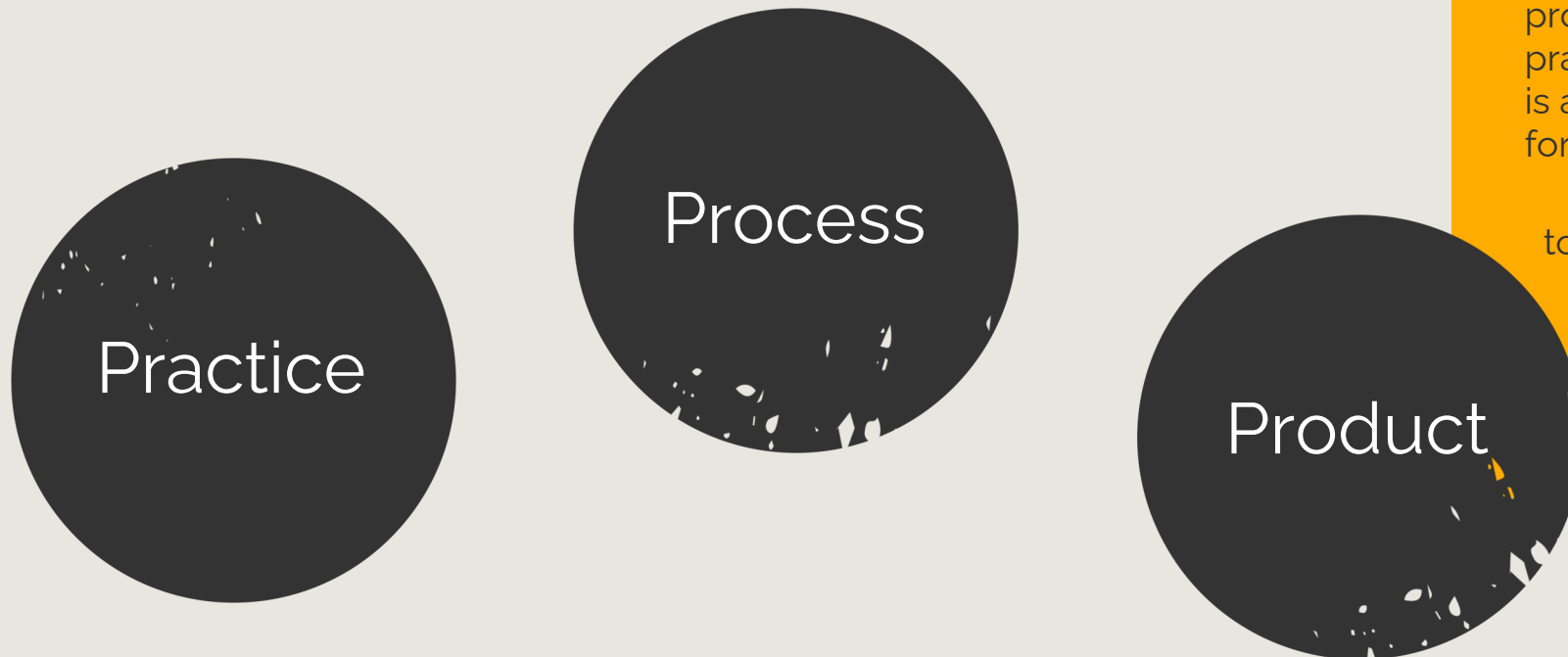


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**COAD** THE CENTRE OF  
APPLIED DRAMATURGY

More and more theatre, dance, circus and outdoor artists are using the term dramaturgy, and even spending precious cash working with an actual dramaturg.

What's all the fuss about? Is it just the next case of 'Emperor's New Clothes'? Or is it actually something that could be useful, meaningful and even pleasurable for you as a performance maker? Let's unpack it a bit....



## What does a dramaturg do?

Key to the practice of a dramaturg is the careful and productive interrogation of practice, process and product. It is about asking questions –not for the hell of it –but to try

to make sure the work and the processes are everything they can be.

Often find a  
dramaturg asking  
things like:  
What? Where?  
When? Who with?  
Who for? How?  
And most importantly  
–WHY???



And they might also  
proposethings.  
So...  
What about.... Might it  
work if.... What would  
it look like if... Have  
you thought about...

They will always be trying to  
help you consider

Shape

How the work  
unfurls , how it is  
composed

How visual, verbal  
and spatial  
thinking and  
movement hold it  
together

Coherence

Resonance

How it lands with  
and has  
meaning(s) for  
people

If it works in terms  
of where, when  
and for whom it is  
being performed

Context

And they might even say things you don't want to hear, like...  
I'm afraid I don't understand.... This feels too long to me... Are you sure that scene is necessary?



Sounds awful! Why would I do it?!  
I'm GOOD at what I do!

Well, it's true that working with a dramaturg isn't for everyone.

But you don't do it because you aren't good at what you do. You are brilliant at what you do and that is why dramaturgs want to work with you. It's not about you having a deficit of skills, knowledge and talent—more likely you have an abundance—and talking things through might be helpful.

Because the thing is, you can sometimes be can be blinded by your own proximity to the work you are making, and a dramaturg can offer distance (not objectivity!) to help you unpack, challenge and expand ideas.



You are still the boss, you are the expert, it is your ball and you can do what you want with it!

But, if you are someone who likes really thinking about your work, enjoys talking about and evolving your thinking, responds well to working collaboratively, and understands the value of being challenged –then it can really open up both the work you make and the way you make it. A dramaturg can work alone with you and also with you and your team. And they can be with you often or occasionally – that's up to you.

Dramaturgs don't ask questions for the sake of it, and they aren't there to trip you up. They don't come with answers either. They want you to make the very best work you can, so they work WITH you, to find the best way forward. They are on YOUR side, and are your own special ally.



Not just an 'outside eye' –a dramaturg is much more invested than that.

Dramaturgs have developed their craft across many years, they work extremely hard with you to do the thinking, and they are there for the detail. In fact a dramaturg may well bring in an outside eye –someone passing briefly through to give a fresh perspective on the work.

Dramaturgs also act as a first spectator/experiencer – working with you to try to understand how an audience might read and respond to your work. They might help you bring test audiences in –and make sure the right questions are asked of them.

What's more –as you no doubt know –making work can be a rather lonely process(whether you work alone or have an enormous team) and your dramaturg can accompany you, listen, help and encourage you –and you will ALWAYS know they are telling you *their* truth.

And remember –it is always YOU that makes the decisions. Dramaturgs won't try to turn your art into theirs. They serve you, your team, your audiences and most of all -the work itself.



A very potted history  
Dramaturgy has its roots in ancient Greek drama and the birth of literary theory in 335 BCE, and also in the Sanskrit treatise Natya Shastra from 200 BCE, but the term itself was developed in the 1760's in Germany by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Originally it explored the structure of a play or body of work on both page and stage. 150 years later Brecht began to develop ideas about production dramaturgs, (Hitler had a dramaturg!), the practice then evolved in dance terms through the work of Pina Bausch and Raimund Hoghe in the 1980's, and then became more visible in Belgium through the work of Marianne van Kerkhoven.

# So what does the term dramaturgy refer to?

This is where things can get a bit complicated, and the blurriness around all of this is perhaps why people get confused. It isn't rocket science but the word can be used to refer to a few linked but distinct things.

1

The fictional world and logic of a piece

'According to the dramaturgy of the piece, in the world of this work, the planet will come to an end if anyone falls off their stilts'

2

The context/frame and architecture of your event, and the practicalities of it

'It makes no sense dramaturgically for this to be performed in the morning in a busy town. The dramaturgy dictates that it needs to be in the dark, and there needs to be a sense of isolation'

3

The evolution and flow of a piece, the 'red line', and the way in which ideas are held together...

'The dramaturgy of the piece, expressed through evolving movement languages, goes from themes of mistrust and fear to feelings of hope, community and celebration' (NB: Lets not confuse narrative with dramaturgy –a narrative is just one way a dramaturgy can unfold, there are endless other ways too)

4

How things change and how are we compelled through time

'Movement languages, text, sound, lighting and the unfurling of 'tricks' all work together to carefully unfold the dramaturgy of the piece, by finding the right structure'

5

The act of trying to consider how all this might be received

'My dramaturg thinks no-one will understand what happens in this scene –what can we do to help with that?'

6

The practice of working with a dramaturg

How a maker might engage a dramaturg to do this thinking together, and to get their critical, professional responses

7

Thinking dramaturgically

The creative act of rigour and attentiveness, holding dramaturgical questions at the heart of the work



I like it! It sounds great! But I make  
Outdoor Arts –so that's a whole different  
ball game.

Well yes... and no.  
Outdoor work requires some  
very specific questions and  
approaches, and the  
challenges are ever-changing  
and unique -but there is also  
overlap with all performance  
work.

# Some questions to think about when making a piece...

Questions such as:

- How does a piece unfold?
- How does it travel (literally and metaphorically)?
- What can you and can you not control, and how can you use that?
- How do you hold the attention of a potentially very diverse audience? How does it read to audiences of different ages/backgrounds?
  - Is there a narrative here or does meaning unfold another way?
- How can different elements (sound, lighting, design, movement, text, tricks, pyro etc) help hold an audience and compel us through the piece?
  - How can you meaningfully incorporate tricks and visuals?
- How can you transition meaningfully from one scene to the next?
- When do you reveal new elements and surprises?
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- Who's who, what's what, where are we and when is now?
- What impact do different locations and scales have on the presentation and reading of the work?
  - How might your audience read the work? How does this depend on their proximity/sightlines?
  - Are there any forms or content that outdoor work is not suitable for?
- Is your conceptual climax the same as your performative climax?
- How can logistical parameters blend into, or take on meaning within, the piece?
- How can we plan for uncertainties of location or audience behaviour?
- How do we test huge participatory events? Or larger-scale work which is harder to try out in public contexts

In fact all of these questions become more important, and potentially more difficult to answer, in outdoor work.

We are looking for a dramaturgy that will hold your audience, give them access to what it is you are exploring and be truthful to your original feelings and intention. And a dramaturg can help you do that. So far from easing off on the 'dramaturgical thinking', it's possible artists working outdoors need to do more!

## Okay, sounds great. What next?

There are a number of dramaturgs working in the UK. You can contact Lou Cope at The Centre of Applied Dramaturgy [www.thecoad.org](http://www.thecoad.org), and find many more via The Dramaturgs' Network [www.dramaturgy.co.uk](http://www.dramaturgy.co.uk)

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## Can I read more?

There is lots of brilliant writing on the subject –here are just a couple of fascinating and accessible texts.

- Behrndt, SynneK. (2010), Dance, Dramaturgy and Dramaturgical Thinking, Contemporary Theatre Review, Vol. 20, No 2: 185-96.
- Profeta, Katherine (2015), Dramaturgy in Motion. At Work on Dance and Movement Performance, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Trencsényi, Katalin -Bernadette Cochrane (eds) (2014), New Dramaturgy. International Perspectives on Theory and Practice, London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Trencsényi, Katalin (2015), Dramaturgy in the Making. A User's Guide for Theatre Practitioners, London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.

