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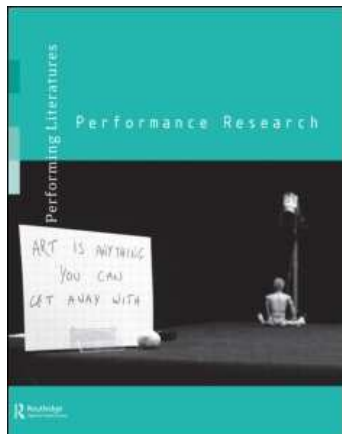
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## The Need to Keep Moving

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# The Need to Keep Moving

## Remarks on the place of a dramaturg in twenty-first century England

DUŠKA RADOSAVLJEVIĆ

Between 2002-5 I carried the professional title of a Dramaturg in the UK. Although I was hired in response to a thus-entitled job advert, I was only one of possibly three or four fully integrated institutional dramaturgs at the time (others included the then outgoing Paul Sirett at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Frauke Franz at Polka Theatre, and later Edward Kemp at Chichester Festival Theatre). While the work itself was often very exciting and in essence quite self-explanatory, most of my time outside of work was spent - in the best case - explaining what it was that I was doing or - in the worst case - having to defend the reasons for the existence of a dramaturg at all.

In this paper I would like to consider ways in which a working space for a dramaturg may or may not be facilitated in English theatre in the twenty-first century. The question of inherent rehearsal-room 'territorialism' will be considered within a larger context of globalization and in conjunction with the trend of 'itineraries' replacing 'locations', in an attempt to define the place of the dramaturg in contemporary theatre and performance. The paper does not purport to add to the already existing and quite excellent surveys of particular histories, theories and practices of dramaturgy in Britain offered by both Turner and Behrndt (2008) and Luckhurst (2006). Instead, it aims to consider the dramaturg as a (moving) body in the theatre-making environment, and his/her practice as a practice that ultimately necessitates a consideration of space.

### ENGLISH THEATRE

In England, and to a lesser extent the US, the dramaturg conjures up deeply entrenched cultural fears, territoriality and prejudice. It goes without saying that the involvement of a production or development dramaturg in a project inherently shifts the manner in which theatre-making processes are organized and cuts across territories that have traditionally been occupied mainly by the writer and director (and also by the actor and designer). The deep-rooted suspicion of the way in which the dramaturg is understood to insinuate himself or herself into decision-making and production processes and thereby to challenge conventional power structures is often articulated as a knee-jerk prejudice against the word itself.

(Luckhurst 2006: 210)

In one of the footnotes to the discussion, elsewhere in the same chapter, Luckhurst cites a particular instance of the director Annie Castledine's 'very public attack, denouncing dramaturgs as unnecessary' (2006: 253), which would subsequently prompt Alison Gagen and Charles Hart from Arts Council England to initiate a series of events investigating the professional standing of dramaturgy and the dramaturgs in the UK.

As one of the lined-up panel members at the Dramaturgy event at Soho Theatre, co-organized between the Dramaturgs' Network and the Directors Guild of Great Britain in November 2003, I happened to be present on the occasion at which Annie Castledine openly and combatively challenged those who were attending in the capacity of a dramaturg - the single most

traumatic event of my professional life. Her spontaneous tirade was so inciting that by the open discussion at the end of the day some of the directors in attendance indignantly lamented: 'They have their network, they have their day, what's next: a dramaturgs' guild?'

Even when confronted with the friendliest of dispositions, being a 'dramaturg' in England<sup>1</sup> inevitably goes hand in hand with having to explain what your job title means. Having continental roots (especially German, Scandinavian or Eastern European) appears to bestow more of a natural entitlement to the D-word; however, this by no means guarantees freedom of access to the English rehearsal room.

I must stress that the only vaguely dramaturgical (though not at all irrelevant) skill I brought with me when I came to the UK at the age of 19 was fortune-telling from a coffee cup - a divination technique and general pastime in Serbia. All of the professional training, education and qualifications I acquired in advance of being officially appointed as the Dramaturg at Northern Stage and Newcastle University in September 2002, was exclusively British. My first degree was in Theatre Studies and Communications Arts and my PhD in Drama. In addition I count the NSDF (especially of the Clive Wolfe era) as one of my key training grounds, and I consider my parallel career as a theatre critic covering Yorkshire and the Edinburgh Festival every year since 1998 as a major source of transferrable skills that I then took to my job of the Dramaturg at Newcastle. All in all, my training for the job was largely itinerant in its nature and characterized by a 'magpie effect' - collecting everything that shone in my path and creating a repository from which to draw in fulfilling the duties of my job description. There is not a slightest bit of mystery behind it. I never aimed to be a dramaturg, but the job was advertised, I applied for it and found myself doing it.

It could perhaps be seen as ironically relevant to the central enquiry of this paper that one of my first projects in my new job was a devised piece that would consist of Romani music and

folk-tales, which would form Northern Stage's own contribution to an international festival the theatre would host in June 2003 called simply The Newcastle/Gateshead Gypsy Festival. The timing of the festival would coincide with Newcastle and Gateshead's ongoing joint bid for the European City of Culture 2008, and Alan Lyddiard's idea to bring together Roma people from Eastern Europe, Spain and the northeast of England quickly grew to become a city-wide event, involving also the music organization Folkworks, the Side Gallery as well as the Tyneside Cinema. In addition to working on the in-house piece itself with Lyddiard as the director and the resident ensemble of actor-musicians, one of my first tasks was to write brochure copy in which I would attempt to explain to our potential audience why this particular topic was relevant and timely. My response was to cite the increased mobility of the contemporary lifestyle as a form of cosmopolitan nomadism, which should bring us closer to understanding the 'gypsy-condition':

[W]e live in a time and place of mobile communications, information highways and space holidays. In the global village of multilingual families, we are all up-rooted. If the place of birth is anything to go by, most of us are displaced too. We are not Gypsies, but our condition is increasingly gypsy-like. And even if we cannot change the world, we can try to let the world change us. Hopefully for the better. (Radosavljevic 2003)

Northern Stage under Alan Lyddiard's leadership was an exciting enterprise. He had been appointed the Artistic Director in 1992, and by 1998 he seized on an opportunity to create a permanent resident ensemble of actors at the Newcastle Playhouse. His initiative had been inspired by a long term admiration for Lev Dodin's model of working with the Maly Theatre in St Petersburg, but also for the community aesthetics of the ensemble works of Pina Bausch and Alain Platel. In the early stages of his career Lyddiard had initially apprenticed himself as an actor, only to find his way to directing through educational and community work. On his website,

<sup>1</sup> I speak of 'England' because England has been the main site of my practice. I am quite aware that the word 'dramaturg' tends to have a bit more currency in Scottish and Northern Irish theatre, for example, while I am not fully acquainted with the status of a dramaturg in Wales.

Lyddiard uses a quote from Lyn Gardner's review of his show *Ballroom of Romance* to help encapsulate his directorial style:

Like so much of director Alan Lyddiard's work, [this show] has a diffuse quality: often, the important things are on the periphery. There are no big statements, only tiny gestures: a woman picking a hair off a man's suit, the men strutting. It takes the lives of ordinary people surviving on the margins and makes them seem special, almost blessed ... The piece has a caged grace but it avoids sentimentality. It has no use for tears. (Gardner 2008)

Preoccupied with visual detail and a constant underlying desire to draw attention to the people from the margins, Lyddiard saw a potential benefit in working with a dramaturg who would help him find a meaningful conceptual framework for not just the individual shows he was creating but also for his company, which was constantly battling the prejudice of funding bodies that ensemble was not the most efficient model for running a theatre. The ensemble model was not the only un-English feature of Lyddiard's theatre. He also commonly privileged the *mise-en-scène* and the actors' bodies over the text. Even though Lyddiard didn't exclude the possibility of working with writers and texts, his most successful and most visible pieces were his ensemble adaptations of Orwell's *Animal Farm* and 1984 and of Burgess/Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*. Meanwhile the new writing development in Newcastle mostly took part at Live Theatre and through the agency work of New Writing North.

In *Staging the UK* (2005), Jen Harvie identifies literariness as the most distinct feature of British theatre. She notes that this literary genealogy inevitably runs back to Shakespeare as the most prominent exponent of British theatre but also points out that the Lord Chamberlain's office, active until 1968, inevitably required theatre to be script-based in order to facilitate censorship prior to performance (Harvie 2005: 116). She uses Aleks Sierz's, Dan Rebellato's and Simon Shepherd's recent British theatre histories to further substantiate this

view and tease out several more particular characteristics - namely, anti-intellectualism and anti-theatricality:

By celebrating individual creativity, seeking isolation, indulging anti-theatricalism, and maintaining a hostility to theory, dominant British theatre culture resists collaborative practices, healthy miscegenation, and a recognition of creativity as labour, material practice and intellectual practice. (Harvie 2005: 119)

Luckhurst, too, recognizes that both British and American theatre features an underlying degree of anti-intellectualism, which she discerns for example in Terry McCabe's attack on dramaturgs as 'creatively bankrupt and destructive forces' confined to not-for-profit theatres (Luckhurst 2006: 211).

Lyddiard's decision, therefore, to appoint a dramaturg in conjunction with the University, in order to work with her on non-literary theatre, was unprecedented and unrepresentative of British theatre trends in every way.

#### PLACE

When I first conceived of the title for this paper, my use of the term 'place' was figurative. I had it in mind to argue that the most constructive place for a dramaturg in English theatre would be in among an ensemble of like-minded people who, having worked together for an extended period of time or on repeated occasions, would have negotiated their territories and methodologies gradually over time. In their book *Dramaturgy and Performance* (2008), Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt discuss a few very successful cases of dramaturgs emerging from or being absorbed organically into particular ensembles (e.g., Steven Canny with *Complicite*, Louise Mari with *Shunt*, David Williams with *Lone Twin*, Frauke Franz with *Primitive Science / Fake Productions*).

However, at the same time I was thinking of the way in which my address at Northern Stage - Barras Bridge - had a particularly symbolic value for me as the bi-lateral dramaturg, especially as the bridge itself was one that physically

<sup>2</sup> 'The bridge is ambiguous everywhere: it alternately welds together and opposes insularities. It distinguishes them and threatens them. It liberates from enclosure and destroys autonomy ... Justifiably, the bridge is the index of the diabolic in the paintings where Bosch invents his modifications of spaces' (Certeau 1984: 128).

<sup>3</sup> 'The theoretical and practical problem of the frontier: to whom does it belong? The river, wall or tree *makes* a frontier. It does not have a character of a nowhere that cartographical representation ultimately presupposes. It has a mediating role' (Certeau 1984: 127).

connected the theatre with the University campus. Later on in 2005, when Alan Lyddiard resigned and I left Northern Stage in order to join the Learning Department at the RSC, my brief would be a bridge-building exercise between the RSC and the UK higher-education sector, through an initial link with the University of Warwick's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, funded by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). On the understanding that my main area of activity would be to bring a kinesthetic approach and the RSC's rehearsal-room methodology to the teaching of Shakespeare at university level, I considered this particular work a form of dramaturgy too - but one that was oriented towards the audience rather than towards the production. As opposed to the work of the literary departments and the idea of 'production dramaturgy' occurring in rehearsal rooms, I would call this kind of dramaturgical activity which includes the work of education departments, marketing departments and theatre critics - 'reception dramaturgy'. What particularly struck me about the way in which some of the RSC rehearsal rooms were arranged - especially in the first stages consisting of lengthy sessions sitting around the table and grappling with the text - was that the sheer number of people (the twenty-odd-member cast would initially be joined by an army of designers, voice coaches, movement directors, stage managers and technical crew) required everyone present to arrange themselves into two concentric circles. The actors, the director and his assistant(s) would be sitting in the inner circle, with everyone else on the margins around them.

Being on the margins, both literally and metaphorically, my practice as a dramaturg has by and large consisted of bridge-building, on the one hand and on the other, a negotiation of frontiers between theory and practice, between writers and directors, between the show and the audience, between theatre and academia and sometimes between different cultures, too.

Thinking about the place of a dramaturg in English theatre one therefore encounters

'bridges'<sup>2</sup> and 'frontiers'<sup>3</sup>, not unlike those discussed by de Certeau (1984: 126-9) the tackling of which eventually may even necessitate a kind of 'delinquency':

If the delinquent exists only by displacing itself, if its specific mark is not to live on the margins but in the interstices of the codes that it undoes and displaces, if it is characterized by the privilege of the tour over the state, then the story is delinquent.

(1984: 130)

My own somewhat delinquent 'tour' of the frontier between British theatre and academia ends for the time being, firmly in academia, where I encounter another set of tensions. In his 2002 reflection on epistemic regimes in Western culture, Dwight Conquergood points out that despite numerous calls for an academic integration of theory and practice - particularly in performance studies - 'universities typically institutionalize a hierarchical division of labour between scholars/researchers and artists/practitioners' (2002: 152). Rather revealingly for someone like myself coming from an ex-socialist country where theatre is often the activity of a specially initiated elite, Conquergood traces the origins of this 'apartheid of knowledges' to an 'entrenched social hierarchy of value based on the fundamental division between intellectual labour and manual labour' (2002: 153). In other words, this division is a class issue, which would rather simplistically imply that practice is a working-class domain, and thinking about practice is a middle-class one.

Interestingly, in a context like the UK one, those seen at the top of the theatres' managerial pyramids are often Oxbridge graduates - and therefore not graduates in drama or theatre or performance studies. Although it is discernable how this might have led to the literariness of British theatre, one wonders how the trend of anti-intellectualism came about? Meanwhile, the literariness of British theatre would also, according to Conquergood's standards, seem to imply a privilege of the textual over the embodied knowledge. This is the very 'apartheid' his paper is trying to address by calling for an elevation of



the experiential and participatory epistemologies to the level traditionally held by the textual and critical-intellectual ones.

Taking inspiration from de Certeau's statement that 'what the map cuts up, the story cuts across', Conquergood acknowledges the changing nature of 'place' at the time of increased mobility. He highlights that nowadays the "location" is imagined as an itinerary instead of a fixed point', that new cultural theory is increasingly concerned with 'tracking the transitive circuits of power' and proposes that 'we now think of "place" as a heavily trafficked intersection, a port of call and exchange, rather than a circumscribed territory' (2002: 145).<sup>4</sup>

This view of the notion of 'place' provides some optimism in relation to my enquiry as to how a dramaturg might inhabit an English rehearsal room. Luckhurst's observation that a dramaturg 'cuts across the territories' formerly inhabited by the writer and the director is reminiscent of de Certeau's story which 'cuts across' the map and for which he advocates a certain 'delinquency' in order for it 'not to live on the margins but in the interstices of the codes that it undoes and displaces'. Meanwhile, England itself is increasingly a 'heavily trafficked intersection', 'a meeting place composed of shifting networks' (Heddon 2007: 48) and a potential 'itinerary' rather than a 'location'. In other words, it is the very 'gypsy-like' condition and increased cosmopolitanism<sup>5</sup> of contemporary life in a place like England that will hopefully enable new ways of working, new kinds of theatre-making and new hierarchies of knowledge to move from the margins towards the mainstream.

#### DRAMATURG

Turner's and Behrndt's 2008 book on dramaturgy departs from an acknowledged position of the term's own instability. Dramaturgy, they suggest, can be understood as composition, architecture, analysis, playwriting, research, producing, interpreting, critique, engagement with the

context; and 'indeed the more precise and concise one tries to be, the more one invites the response: "Yes, but ..."' (2008: 17). Their study is both empirical and historical (devoting a considerable section to the Brechtian model as well as to the political dramaturgies of the UK). In a paper Turner wrote on site-specific theatre in 2004, inspired by de Certeau she proposed that 'space could be viewed as "an aggregation of layered writings - a palimpsest"' (2004: 373). I wonder whether the same metaphor could also serve to represent the position of a British dramaturg?

Conceptually, at least, Turner and Behrndt signal that the 'millennial dramaturgies' as they call them, are marked by a whole set of new approaches to and variations on the theme of 'narrative' - Lehmann's 'postdramatic theatre', Edward Soja's 'spatial turn', Sarrazac's 'rhapsodic' dramaturgy, issues of liveness, presence, interactivity, intermediality and new technologies. I am particularly intrigued by the account of Maike Bleeker's "consideration of the interaction between stage and audience" in terms of movement' (Bleeker in Turner and Behrndt 2008: 92). Instead of emerging from the decoding of signs, meaning is no longer considered as static or fixed but in terms of how the performance 'moves' the audience. 'The implication is that we might look for the politics of work in terms of what it does, rather than what it says' (2008: 93). This of course is not a particularly new phenomenon in itself - even Shakespeare was aware of the theatre's effect on the audience as he 'moved' them through the plot using metatheatrical self-referencing - but it is a useful way of conceptualizing one of the potential functions of the dramaturg in a way that is less threatening to the rest of the creative team. The challenge is contained in the fact that the audience is by and large heterogeneous and will potentially follow a multitude of trajectories in response to any given mechanism - even if seated in a most conventional theatre space all the way through the performance. What the dramaturg can begin to monitor here are the vectors of

<sup>4</sup> This is also reminiscent of the thinking of the human geographer Doreen Massey addressing the notion of space by conflating the local and the global especially by reference to the movement of tectonic plates. This has found some relevance in the site-specific performance work by Deirdre Heddon who sums Massey's concept up as: 'In this understanding, place is a specific meeting place composed of shifting networks' (Heddon 2007: 48).

<sup>5</sup> Dan Rebellato's recent distinction between the terms 'globalization' and 'cosmopolitanism' (2009) is particularly pertinent here, and the latter term is taken in the sense defined by Rebellato as a positive manifestation of the trend.

movement, the force, the intention, the impact and the effect of the 'movement' on the frontiers and boundaries of experience. Or more specifically, for example, as in the case of the Belgian company Ontroerend Goed's production *Internal* - the most talked-about show of the Edinburgh Fringe 2009 - the dramaturg (Joeri Smet) might well be taking part, alongside four performers, in the show featuring probing and questioning of the audience and culminating in a one-to-one dance with a chosen audience member.

However, it seems that amid such a proliferation of potential functions for a dramaturg, the question is certainly not 'what does the dramaturg do?' but 'what is the dramaturg's domain?'

In his consideration of spatial stories, de Certeau offers two modes of description: 'the map' - the official organization of a series of 'facts' about a particular space - and 'the tour' - an account of a journey through the space. He then proposes a binary quoted above 'what the map cuts up, the story cuts across'. In these terms, I would say the domain of a dramaturg is neither solely the map (which I would say belongs to the director) nor the story (which may start with the writer but ultimately belongs to the actor) - but the journey itself (which is an experience and therefore immaterial, speculative, personal as well as potentially shared). Turner and Behrndt even bestow on the dramaturg the potential status of a 'compass-bearer', inspired by a suggestion from Shunt company member Heather Uprichard (2008: 176).<sup>6</sup> In more contemporary terms, this could possibly amount to the notion of the dramaturg as a 'satellite navigator' to the director's 'driver'. Regarding the distinction between the dramaturg and the director further, I would add that at least in a UK context, both of these figures are equipped with the tools of making work and of dramatic composition, although perhaps the director is more the figure who likes finishing the product and putting it in front of the audience, whereas the dramaturg is the figure whose process of reflection and co-creation of meaning continues well after this point.

Incidentally, Anne Bogart raises the question of the dramaturg's ownership within a context where everyone else has a clear domain, and suggests that this must apply to 'archival materials and structural ideas', while Anne Cattaneo seems to reinforce the same view by proposing that dramaturgs are 'good at thinking structurally' and 'sensitive as to how something is shaped and how this shape or structure affects interpretation' (quoted in Turner and Behrndt 2008: 164). I tend to agree and identify with this. During my time at Northern Stage, due to various international collaborations and research trips, I ended up travelling more than usual - to Hungary, Denmark, Russia, Spain, the United States. In addition to my various duties as part of my job description, I also regularly wrote travelogues for the internal newsletter. Often these journeys were related through the narratives that would be familiar to my readers, the travelogues reflected on patterns and leitmotifs that would be shaped to resonate with the particular works we were developing and were therefore intended to be of both professional and personal interest. But most interestingly, when I eventually moved on from Newcastle, my suitcases were full of 'archival materials and structural ideas' - as well as a few maps and stories.

Returning to the 'gypsy-condition', which was the subject of one of my first dramaturgical assignments at Northern Stage, it is perhaps worth noting the following commonly held assumptions: unlike most other cultural minorities, Romanies tend to transcend or at least resist the question of cultural integration, as it is traditionally an inherent part of their culture to stay on the move. Paradoxically however, in studying the musical traditions of Romanies from around the world, Northern Stage's former ensemble actor and musical director Jim Kitson arrived at the conclusion that the Romani musical heritage varies significantly from region to region. Although convincingly and consistently musically gifted as an ethnic group across the board, Romanies have tended simply to absorb, heighten and reinvent the musical

<sup>6</sup> Turner and Behrndt also quote Uprichard's suggestion that it is the director who 'takes snapshots on the ground', while the dramaturg 'holds the map of the process' (Uprichard quoted in Turner and Behrndt 2008: 176). I would, however, like to give the dramaturg a more dynamic role in the process - as elaborated in this paper.



heritage of whatever happened to be their host culture. Although often seen as a delinquent element within the host culture, nevertheless Romanians have historically also generated their own appeal by embodying the values of freedom from societal constraints, deep passions and a spirit of adventure.

In conclusion to his chapter on spatial stories, de Certeau proposes that

in matters concerning space, [the] delinquency begins with the inscription of the body in the order's text. The opacity of the body in movement, gesticulating, walking, taking its pleasure, is what indefinitely organizes a *here* in relation to an *abroad*, a 'familiarity' in relation to a 'foreignness'. (1984: 130)

In short he reiterates his departure point that 'space is a practiced place'. This paper could be seen to result from an implicit understanding that there is no pre-existing defined space for a dramaturg in an English rehearsal room. Those situations where a dramaturg has been seen to have practised their craft under the title of a 'dramaturg' are notable exceptions. There are some directors and companies who choose to invite, appoint and accept the so-called 'outside eye' into their processes. There are also individuals with those particular skills of divination, satellite-navigation and reiteration of the host (culture)'s heritage, who do not wish to leave an authorial stamp on the work, but simply facilitate its connection with an audience in the most effective way possible. And it is particularly worth acknowledging here that those old hierarchies between the text and performance themselves appear to be on the move and subject to change,<sup>7</sup> thus requiring a new way of engagement between the meaning being created and the audience response. It seems therefore that the best 'tactic' for a dramaturg in dealing with the 'strategies' of the English theatre and performance context (whatever that may mean in the climate of globalization) is simply to continue practicing his or her craft, wherever he or she happens to be, and under whatever name seems suitable. As our Gypsy Festival has shown

us, the movement from the margins to the centre can only be achieved through mutual recognition and acceptance.

Perhaps somewhat disappointingly the Arts Council England-initiated symposia on Dramaturgy, which took place in June 2005 at Birmingham Rep, November 2005 at Oval House in London and February 2007 at Northern Stage / Newcastle University, gradually lost their distinct mission to truly engage with the D-word and the work of the dramaturg. By the time of the Newcastle date, the event was simply named 'Making Theatre' and the word dramaturg was not mentioned at all. On the upside, however, if one googles Annie Castledine these days, one will find that she too is now working as a 'dramaturg'.

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<sup>7</sup> In re-examining the changing relationship between the text and performance and the strategies for their creation, Patrice Pavis also concludes that this new trend 'encourages us to go forward, to move our feet and not get stuck in the same position forever' (2008: 125).