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Summer 1986

# Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America Newsletter, volume 1, issue 2

Mark Bly

Emily Mann

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## lmda review 1.2 (summer 1986):

This was handed out at the  
3 First LMDA Conference - at  
"New Dramatists" - It represents  
the first time a director talked about the value of a  
Dramaturg in American Theatre in  
"LMDA Newsletter"  
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# VIEWPOINT: Mark Bly talks with Emily Mann:

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*BLY: What does the title "production dramaturg" mean to you? Who is this person?*

MANN: I have had only two: you on *Execution of Justice* at the Guthrie and later on the Broadway production; and Roger Downey on *Through the Leaves* at the Empty Space Theater in Seattle. In addition, Oskar Eustis is a production dramaturg at the Eureka Theatre, but he never worked with me in precisely that capacity. Oskar was my dramaturg on the development of the script of *Execution of Justice*. I have also had good literary managers work with me as a writer and a director.

The role of the dramaturg in the context of a production, it seems to me, depends very much on the type of play, and the relationship between the two individuals, the director or director/writer and the dramaturg. Roger was the adaptor as well as the production dramaturg on the Kroetz play. He was absolutely invaluable in that he knew the play backward and forward, as I did—but Roger knew it in two languages. Most importantly, he knew it in the original language. He knew the culture very well, and I wanted to do in our preproduction work an anthropological study of the time and place Kroetz dramatized: the media, specifically radio and the music played over the airwaves; clothes; furniture; behavior; and the atmosphere and social mores. I wanted every detail. This fascinated Roger, and so he did incredible research. We poured over this material: I was most inspired by Fassbinder's films and stills which reflected the kind of people and places in Kroetz's plays. I never dried up in the rehearsal because Roger kept bringing in material that was constantly inspiring. He only came a few times to rehearsal, loved what he saw, and left. But he would call, bring new materials over for me to absorb, and so I felt constantly nourished. This is a very different method from how you and I worked on *Execution of Justice*. You also brought in a great deal of background material, but you came and spent time in rehearsals. Because I was the playwright, as well as the director

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MARK BLY is Literary Manager and Associate Dramaturg at the Guthrie Theater.

of *Execution*, I had a totally different set of needs to which you responded. The work of the production dramaturg in both situations was invaluable. Clearly, it became the most important artistic support I received in both productions.

*Can you see yourself working with a production dramaturg sometime in the future in the development of a vision or series of approaches to a play?*

Yes. I would like to, but only if it's the right person.

*Who would be the right person?*

It would have to be, for starters, someone who *really knows* my work both the playwriting and the directing. That the dramaturg knows my work is crucial. In that way the trust is there, with the knowledge that I wouldn't need to explain everything, and we can go forward as one unified force. If, let us say, you and I were going to do my production of *A Doll's House* at the Guthrie, I would first talk through my vision of the play with you. If this notion really took hold for you, really made sense, I would listen to your response: you could challenge the concept, expand, refine it, and through this questioning process, the production as a whole could grow, conceptually. In my previous production of *A Doll's House*, what blew the work out of the water was the very simple but radical idea that the story was as much Torvald's tragedy as Nora's. As simple as this sounds, it had a ripple effect on the entire play. For example, in order for the audience to feel the tragedy, the loss, the Helmer marriage to begin with had to be experienced as a joyous one—perfect from the outside. One we loved being with. The first act was played to mine the best in the relationship, rather than for the problems—played with as many laughs as a Neil Simon comedy. Laugh after warm laugh revealed an idealized family: happy beautiful children living in a Carl Lar-

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sen house, all pastels, the kind of home everyone wants to live in. The audience was in love with them all. This broke down all the old clichés about staging Ibsen lugubriously, with a surfeit of mahogany and red velvet. It also shattered the audience by the end, as I think Ibsen intended.

Now if I were to leap into this project with you, I would bring in all of this background and my knowledge of the play as a starting point for us. Then I would ask you to work closely on the text with a native Norwegian to mine the play for all of its nuances, poetry, and comedy, searching for clues to strengthen or challenge what we were working towards conceptually. In working on the play the first time with a native Norwegian myself, I made many important discoveries. So you see, I would want the work of the production dramaturg on the text to be very specific.

*Do you like the idea of having a dramaturg bring in a production history?*

In the early stages, absolutely. I did that for myself for *A Doll's House*, and it informed many critical decisions of mine on the production, and I wish that I had sometimes paid even closer attention. For example, I read that Claire Bloom would not allow the children on stage. She cut the scene. I know why now. I didn't know why at first, and I just said, "Oh silly woman," and brought in the children. Now I understand. It is very hard for an audience to love Nora when she leaves those beautiful children with their perfect little adorable faces. Ibsen knew what he was doing!

*Do you have a preference as to how much time your production dramaturg should spend in rehearsals?*

I like having the dramaturg around a lot, unless he feels he can truly be more honest and clear-eyed coming in at staggered intervals.

*There is a whole school of dramaturgy which maintains that dramaturgs are most valuable if they attend rehearsals only intermittently, in order to maintain an element of objectivity.*

Well, I don't like "objective" dramaturgs--that is a totally annoying concept. The only reason I would want a specific dramaturg to work with me is if he or she were as connected to the work on every level--

intellectually, emotionally, and philosophically--as I am. Now they may not need to watch every boring moment of say, blocking rehearsals. The dramaturg might want to come in after that is done and see how it has evolved. But any dramaturg who would come in talking about his "desire to be objective," I would keep out of rehearsal.

*Would the value of a dramaturg's notes, in your opinion, increase or decrease according to the amount of time he or she spends in rehearsals? Is there a danger that a dramaturg may get so involved in a production that he will fail to see problems because he is too close to the work? Or is the greater danger that in striving to be "fresher" and more "clear-eyed" in his judgements, the dramaturg will not be sufficiently involved with the production to really develop a trusting relationship with the director; give sufficient support and stimulation; and know the production well enough to provide workable solutions to its problems?*

I want the dramaturg to tell me the truth as he or she sees it. That means he or she must have a clear eye and a good head. He must know the theater and himself well enough to know how to keep his critical faculties functioning at peak capacity. That's part of the job. I simply want the truth told in a way I can hear it, use it, and make the work better. I also want to be stretched. It's up to the dramaturg to work in a way that achieves that at the highest of levels.

A dramaturg can be part of a director's method, you see. He can be another set of eyes who knows what the director wants to see and then sees if it's there. If it's right. If it communicates. Now, clearly this takes a great deal of trust on the part of the director. A trust in the dramaturg's knowledge, perception, and even humanity. So I hope I've been clear. I will only embark on this rather dangerous journey with someone I respect and trust: someone who knows himself how to work and someone who knows how to work with me. Same old story. A neophyte who is worrying about dramaturgical theories of objectivity sounds dangerous to me. If management offered him to me, I'd tell them: No, thanks. I'd rather go it alone.

*What notes from a production dramaturg do you find useful?*

You are very good at giving notes. Sometimes you write them out, and I think this makes them more palatable because I can absorb them more slowly. There



is no reason to react to them on the spot. When possible I prefer to give clear, unemotional reactions to notes, so I prefer written notes. I also like questions. If the dramaturg truly understands the source of things, or at least has internalized the basic visual concept, then a question asked by a dramaturg is informed by all that knowledge. Often, in answering the question the director sees the problem.

You did this with me when we worked together. I would think about the question overnight and make a change the next day in rehearsal. You would usually say, "Oh, yes, I think you took care of what I was thinking about." Or if not, you'd tell me and we would discuss possible solutions or new interpretations. But it was always very gently. The best dramaturgs just like the best directors never make the person they are working with feel wrong. This is why many directors do not generally want dramaturgs in the rehearsal. They don't want to have to deal with any "I'm the objective, smart person here" attitude. Fortunately, I have never experienced that with a dramaturg—I've only worked with the best. What you, Oskar, and Roger have in common is that you never make the director or the writer feel "wrong." You don't say things just to score a point.

*What would be an ideal dramaturg for you? What skills would he or she have?*

The first one is language. The production dramaturg should either have access to several languages or understand how language can be used in the theater. Then if the production dramaturg is analyzing the light-dark imagery or humor in a play such as *A Doll's House* he or she can at least talk to a Norwegian and have enough theater and language sense to find out what's useful in the text.

Number two, the production dramaturg should have a strong visual sense: an awareness of and knowledge of art; stage and costume design; the use of light, color, and new materials; and an understanding of how to help the director make challenging use of and take risks with all of these. Very much how you and I worked on *Execution of Justice*: always pushing the envelope; always seeing how far we could take things in terms of what we were trying to say; always seeking the extraordinary image and not settling for what we could get away with. That takes a certain amount of training, of really knowing art and architecture and design, and possibly film and photography.

A production dramaturg should also know music--everything from Patti LaBelle to Wagner. (I'm listing things that a director should also know, you'll notice.)

And then, I think the dramaturg has to know something about acting. He should understand the many processes, what they are. He has to have a sense of the dynamics of a rehearsal room and understand an actor's needs...

*And not be result-oriented immediately.*

Exactly. The dramaturg has to be savvy enough about theater to see when a director is waiting and nurturing a certain process along with one person and working from the opposite direction with another person. If the director and dramaturg are in sync and agree on the desired end product, and the dramaturg is in touch with the different ways a director and an actor can work together, then he can help a director by blowing the whistle when needed and saying, "I know what you're trying for, but my instincts tell me that this guy's not going to get there this way. Have you thought about trying this other way?" What the dramaturg must not do is come in like a producer too early in the process saying, "hey, where's the scene?" A dramaturg coming into a rehearsal room being very judgmental and expecting results too early is worse than having a producer there.

*It's like having the critic in the room.*

It's like having the critic watch your work. Exactly. And I think that's another reason why a lot of directors have been antagonistic--they laugh at the term dramaturg, or they just denounce it, because they are afraid of that really supercilious presence.

*You led right into my next question: Why isn't dramaturgy as a profession taken more seriously among theater professionals?*

The way dramaturgy has been presented to other professionals makes it seem extraordinarily precious, lightly pretentious, and very academic. *At its best!* The practical benefits of dramaturgy haven't been explained very well. A lot of people still take the attitude that if you're any good at what you do as a director or producer, you certainly shouldn't need one of those guys. They still have that image of some bespectacled academic or critic sitting in the room feeling underused and above the sweat of the rehearsal

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room. That's the image I think most people have of a dramaturg. And nothing could be further from the truth with a good one. Nothing. A great production dramaturg is gentle in his criticism but rough and tumble in the overall process--a real theater person, very active, contributing things constantly. He can be both a sounding board and a resource. I think we need this kind of person in the theater right now. But the profession needs to improve its image and visibility. When I mentioned to Lester Osterman, the producer of *Execution of Justice* on Broadway that I wanted a dramaturg to work on the production with me, he laughed in my face. He said, "What does that mean?" I told him that you would be talking to me about the text and cuts and giving me notes about staging and what you were seeing and suddenly it made a lot of sense to him. He said, "Oh. Okay. Good." But he never knew what it meant before. The word "dramaturg" itself is so strange and unfamiliar that I think a lot of people automatically assume that this is a vacuous, trumped-up profession. In fact, what you are doing is augmenting good direction, good playwriting, and good management. In this modern world we need this kind of pillar, to basically hold up the production, because we're now using such high technology, with so much money on the line, with so much going on at once, and with such very short rehearsal periods.

*Especially in the regional theater situation, in which there are always new directors coming into a theater for short periods of time, production dramaturgs can*

*be important liaisons between the director and the organization.*

Absolutely. The dramaturg makes the director feel less vulnerable and isolated... Returning to your question about dramaturgs not being taken seriously, I think it's interesting that the West Coast film industry does seem to have a strong appreciation of dramaturgical skills. A woman in Yale's dramaturgy program was working with me on a new television movie for CBS. It's ironic that I've had some of the most interesting talks about writing in development offices in Hollywood! Some of the development people are very good dramaturgs. They listen to story ideas, or project ideas, and develop their own; they work out structures for a story; they read and read and read until they find the perfect writer for a project.

They go through every step with a writer, from the outline through final draft. The good ones know how to tear apart a script in the right way (I've had good luck there) to help a writer restructure and improve it. Most of them are on the set for shoots of major projects. So even though Hollywood doesn't use the term "dramaturg," there are a lot of people out there doing work very similar to what a production dramaturg does in a theater. Only, in Hollywood, it's recognized that these people have skills that are vital. A similar recognition hasn't yet hit the American theater community.



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