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Program Notes: The Newsletter of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America, volume 2, number 2

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PROGRAM NOTES

VOLUME II
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The Newsletter of LITERARY MANAGERS AND DRAMATURGS OF AMERICA

LMDA Columbia Conference

By Felicia Londre

About 150 LMDA members and distinguished guests attended the February 7 symposium on dramaturgy as a bridge between the arts and the humanities, which was jointly sponsored by LMDA and Columbia University's Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Studies. A clearly defined topic, a brilliant assemblage of knowledgeable and entertaining panelists, an illustrative videotape, and a 15-page program complete with bibliography distributed to all registrants gave evidence of thoughtful planning for the successful event that it was.

Officially entitled "The Past as Prologue, an Arts & Humanities Seminar in Historical and Classical Frontiers in Dramaturgy: Construction, Deconstruction, Reconstruction," the seminar focussed on some of the processes by which theoretical events drawing upon historical material are reaching the stage. The first panel, on construction, examined productions created from scratch with the dramaturg functioning as an editor whose job is to find a structure for the collage of assembled elements. Deconstruction, defined as "radical reinventions of traditional plays in order to break them open so that they speak to our time anew," is a process that calls upon the dramaturg's skills as a critic.

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CONSTRUCTION PANEL (L to R): George Bass, Elizabeth LeCompte, Glenda Dickerson (chair), James DeJongh, C. Lee Jenner

Performaturgy

by Richard Schechner

This past month I have been working at Florida State University's School of Theatre rehearsing my version of Moliere's Don Juan. This version brings together several if not contradictory then at least mutually contentious texts: the Moliere drama in my translation, Mozart's Don Giovanni as performed by a six-piece orchestra and five singers, a feminist countertext authored by

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Conference Set for Summer

"Dramaturgy and the New American Play" is the title of LMDA's 1987 Annual Conference, the organization's first major event beyond its New York home base. The conference will take place August 13-16 in Minneapolis.

Conference coordinators include Edward M. Cohen, Literary Manager of the Jewish Repertory Theatre; Michael Lupu and Mark Bly, Dramaturgs of the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis; Barbara Reid, Chair of the Theatre Department of the University of Minnesota; Leslie Denny, Director of the University's Department of Professional Development and Conference Services; and Joan Patchen, Executive Director of the Playwrights' Center.

Cosponsored with the Midwest Play Labs of the Playwrights Center and the University of Minnesota, the Conference will take place at the Rarig Center on the Minneapolis campus of the Univer-

sity. This conference is made possible by grants from the University of Minnesota and the Dayton Hudson Foundation of the Dayton Hudson Department Store Company. Stephen Watson, Chairman and Chief Operating Officer, and Target Stores, Bruce G. Allbright, Chairman and Chief Operating Officer. A request for funding from the Jerome Foundation is still pending.

Conference panels will address the ways and means of new-play development. Participants will also attend performances at the Midwest Play Labs and other area theatres. Possible panel topics include "Alternative Approaches," an examination of unconventional processes by which new theatrical events reach the stage; "Case Study," an analysis of the dramaturgical process at the Midwest Play Labs featuring participant dramaturgs, playwrights and directors; "He Who Pays the Piper: Funding Play Development"; "The Fate of the First Script: Playwrights' Recollections"; and "The Press and Developmental Theater."

Confirmed speakers and panelists include Robert Marx, Director of the Theater Program of the National Endowment for the Arts; Arthur Ballet, founder of the Office of Advanced Drama Research and a former NEA Theater Program director; Thomas G. Dunn, Executive Director of New Dramatists; Joan Patchen, Director of the Playwrights Center; Mike Steele, drama critic of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, and David Krane, Artistic Director of the Sundance Institute Playwrights Laboratory. Lloyd Richards, Artistic Director of the Yale Repertory Theatre and the O'Neill Theater Center, has been invited and is expected to confirm.

Registration, housing and more detailed program information will be mailed shortly. Anyone who does not receive forms and information in the next few weeks should contact Leslie Denny, Department of Professional Development and Conference Services, 220 Nolte Center, University of Minnesota, 315 Pillsbury Drive S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455; (612) 625-0727.

PROGRAM NOTES

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BOOKS BY MEMBERS

Two recently released books by LMDA members reconstruct past productions to different ends.

In Great Directors at Work (University of California Press, 1986, \$25), David Richard Jones, Dramaturg of the New Mexico Repertory Theatre, asks, What do directors do? Are they artists? Who should get credit for what? Concentrating on Stanislavsky's The Seagull, Brecht's Mother Courage, Kazan's A Streetcar Named Desire and Brook's Marat/Sade his comprehensive essays are help us understand how and why these productions came about.

The American Shakespeare Theatre (Folger Books, 1987, \$42.50) by Roberta Krensky Cooper, director of special projects at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, reconstructs in detail productions of the now all-but-defunct theater in Stratford, Conn. Through a study of its productions, company members and administration, Cooper places the work and events surrounding the theater in a larger context, examining what they suggest about Shakespearean production in the mid-twentieth century.

ADVERTISEMENT

Fourth Friday Playwrights invites all Literary Managers and Dramaturgs to attend our meetings held twice each month on the 3rd and 4th Fridays at 8:00 p.m. to hear cold readings of works-in-progress and to participate afterwards in the script critiques. 249 E. 48th Street, #4D, New York, NY: (212) 421-0013.



[Dr. Howard Stein, Chairman of Columbia's Hammerstein Center, delivered the keynote at the LMDA Symposium. Selections from his remarks are printed throughout PROGRAM NOTES.]

. . . When Stella Adler was [at the Yale School of Drama], . . . she mentioned that the intellectuals were the enemies of the theater. Joel Schechter stood up and walked out of the room. . . . He couldn't bear that attitude which couldn't tolerate minds

. . . Don't confuse function . . . with what is really crucial to your life . . . your own reading and writing, and reflecting and remembering. That's what dramaturgy . . . ultimately is all about.

. . . [The] resident theater . . . needs something . . . more than just a play reader--or a literary manager--or a literary advisor. They need a force.

The question remains, Do you think you need . . . a person in your company who's going to do some thing for you? Who's going to be your inside critic? Who's going to be that force? . . . It really has to do with . . . the intellectual stamina, the intellectual health of that organization. If we could rain people and help people in that direction, we could make something happen.

Response to McNally Article

[In "From Page to Stage: How a Playwright Guards His Vision" (New York Times, 7 December 1986), Terrence McNally related his experiences as a playwright during the development of Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune. Many of his remarks disparaged the dramaturgs with whom he had worked, accusing us of wresting his play away from him. LMDA has asked several members around the country to respond to Mr. McNally's comments, and here publishes three of those responses; others will be published in the next issue of PROGRAM NOTES.]

VIRGINIA SCOTT
Theatre In The Works
University of Massachusetts

I have little sympathy for Terrence McNally's embattled playwright, verbal sword flashing in defense of his vision. But I do agree that our present way of encouraging playwrights and "developing" their plays is not very successful, the proof of the pudding being only too obvious.

Our developmental process, born of economic exigencies, limits rather than liberates the playwright it means to serve. The book-in-hand staged reading, the principal form of production which most developmental theaters and programs offer, is unable to attend to the visual and aural. It confirms the text as a verbal structure, a thing in itself, extratheatrical, something to be "realized" after the fact by a director, actors and designers. In this age of the eye, the playwright who truly has a "vision" will find his work turned down by developmental programs in favor of plays which use the standard conventions of psychological realism, plays suited to actor-centered readings.

I say this after ten years of selecting plays for such a program, ten years of rejecting--almost without thinking about it--interesting work not suited to the form of production our program has to offer. I don't apologize. I think we have been useful to some playwrights. But I have come to believe that what we do is essentially conservative and too restrictive to achieve what we say we are after: the development not of plays but of playwrights.

Here the world and the theater mine to dispose of. I would not begot more development. I would give every LORT theater in the country a playwright and every playwright an annual slot in the season. I would make sure there was enough money in the budget for that playwright to envision a play with seven full sets and 30 characters, and no pretending that four actors could play all the roles. If there were someone the playwright found useful as an ally and a sounding board, I would give that person a decent wage (and maybe even the title of "dramaturg"). I would get the playwright involved in the important production choices and I would let the playwright win a reasonable percentage of the arguments about them. If, after five years, the playwright had made no money for the theater, I would throw that one out and get another.

Terrence McNally wants plays to have a perfect first hearing: I want them to have a "sesing." And I want playwrights to spend their professional lives not defending their vision from such chimerical enemies as miscast actors and German-speaking dramaturgs, but busily at work in the thrust and parry of the daily making of theater.



ON SAMURAI DRAMTURGY
DAVID COPELIN

Last Pearl Harbor Day, Terrence McNally asserted in the New York Times that, for playwrights, "a dramaturg can do more harm than good." In his view,

the dramaturg's highest function is to "find a script he believes in, recommend it to his theater, fight for it and then buzz off." In his reply on February 8, Peter Hay suggested that dramaturgs are often scapegoats for actions taken by others. He also deplored McNally's chauvinism, anti-intellectualism and ignorance of history. Nevertheless, McNally is not the only playwright who considers us adversaries instead of allies. He spoke for many victims of what Rick Foster calls samurai drama turgy.

Clearly, dramaturgs are most helpful to playwrights when the parties trust each other. Just as clearly, there are many obstacles to this trust. European practice notwithstanding, we are the new kids on the block in America, and a lot of theater people are still suspicious of us. Fortunately, some playwrights have learned to appreciate our skills; may their tribe increase.

How can we help this happen? We can remember how long it takes to get a script to the point where we usually become involved, and how deep the author's emotional attachment to that text is. We can respect the writer's vision, making sure that a play's idiosyncracies are not sacrificed to audience expectations or a theater's loss of nerve. We can't always save playwrights from themselves, but we can spare them the arrogant assumption that they need saving. We can respect copyright, allowing no changes in a script without the playwright's uncoerced agreement.

We can ask questions, make suggestions and point out results without usurping playwrights' prerogatives. We can even keep our mouths shut sometimes. Above all, we can realize that by subjecting every element of a script to conscious analysis, we may sabotage the unconscious processes that make each good play a unique imaginative venture. Our job is to help the playwright express the play's logic, not ours, and not the world's.

Is this easy? No. Even Lessing ran afoul of both the hams and the burghers. But if samurai dramaturgy disappears, so may writers' fear of it, and of us. Both playwrights and dramaturgs can be

defensive, but we do our best work when those defenses are disarmed.



AN OPEN LETTER TO TERRENCE McNALLY
MICHAEL BIGELON DIXON
Actors Theatre of Louisville

Dear Mr. McNally,

I'm sure everyone working in the professional theater agrees with your thesis: new plays can be spoiled by mis-casting, unwarranted meddling and misguided attempts to please the audience or others. Furthermore, the bottom line--it's tough to be a playwright--finds a sympathetic ear in Louisville. So, on the major points of "From Page To Stage: How A Playwright Guards His Vision" you and I agree.

As to the role of dramaturgs in the play development process, we know what we're about, as do Jon Jory, Joe Papp, Garland Wright, Gordon Davidson, Lynne Meadow, David Emmes, Martin Benson, Tom Haas, Sharon Ott, Robert Brustein, Burke Walker, Lloyd Richards and most other producers of new work in America, England and Europe.

What I do find disturbing in your article, however, is the implication that your preferences for no dramaturg or director participation in script revisions and no one with any theater expertise in the audience during readings be applied to all playwrights. Despite your aversion to dramaturgs, I know plenty of playwrights who appreciate and benefit from a dramaturg's input during the developmental process, as well as from the intelligent comments of theater professionals following readings and workshop productions.

So where does that leave us? I think where it all begins--with the relativity of the creative process. No two playwrights work exactly alike and, in turn, no particular developmental system should be imposed in all playwrights. As far as I know, the readings and workshops to which you refer vary tremendously and are voluntary. You managed,

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Columbia Conference

The third panel discussed the dramaturg's role as historian in the reconstruction of theatrical forms of the past.

Howard Stein, chairman of the Hammerstein Center, opened the proceedings with a survey of dramaturgs and their contributions going back as far as Konrad Ackermann in the 18th Century. In every instance, he showed that the dramaturg was an individual of intellectual stamina, and he stressed the need for such people on the staff of every theater in our own time.

The examples of Construction--which panelist George Bass called "playmaking rather than playwriting"--were all drawn from the Afro-American tradition. Bass described the creation of Adrienne Kennedy's Black Children's Day at Brown University, reinforcing the view of panel chairman Glenda Dickerson that this collage form of theater is heavily influenced by black musical rhythms. Elizabeth LeCompte recalled the creative process that resulted in the Wooster Group's The Road to Immortality, Part I (Route 1 & 9). Playwright James DeJongh talked about his approach to putting

together the script for his Do Lord Remember Me, which dramaturg C. Lee Jenner helped to shape further when she brought it to the American Place Theatre.

Elinor Fuchs chaired the panel on Deconstruction, which focussed on Chekhov and postmodernism. Six Chekhov productions were specifically cited as having overturned the traditional realistic approach to Chekhov. Those most fully covered were Lucien Pintillie's The Seagull, reported by critic Don Shewey, and three productions of The Three Sisters: the Squat Theatre's, discussed by Stefan Balint; Andrei Serban's, described by American Repertory Theatre dramaturg Jonathan Marks; Yuri Lyubimov's, analyzed by Elinor Fuchs. The ensuing discussion period was devoted largely to defining "post-modernism."

RECONSTRUCTION PANEL (L to R): Brooks McNamara, Alma Law, Laurence Senelick (chair), Hynn Handman, Ralph Allen



Popular entertainment was the focus of the panel on reconstruction. As chair, Laurence Senelick set an example of "scholar as entertainer" that was picked up by his panelists. Brooks McNamara used slides to illustrate the development of the Vi-Ton-Ka Medicine Show, which Hynn Handman brought to the American Place Theatre. Both spoke of their satisfaction in capturing a traditional form at the last moment before it really did disappear and giving one final opportunity to those old-time performers. Alma Law spoke of her collaboration with Mel Gordon in the reconstruction of several Soviet golden age productions, including Foregger's Mastfor cabaret. Ralph Allen recaptured the spirit of burlesque as he spoke of his Broadway show Sugar Babies. A lively discussion session brought debate over the value of authentic resuscitation of old forms

versus adaptation as a concession to modern audience sensibilities.

The day's events also included LMDA President C. Lee Jenner's reading of a letter from Richard Schechner on "performaturgy" (published in this issue of PROGRAM NOTES), my brief closing remarks and a post-symposium reception. Among a number of distinguished theater people attending the seminar were dance critic Sally Banes, Business Volunteers for the Arts Director Joan Cami-Clark, playwright Charles Gordone, Henry Street Settlement's New Federal Theatre Artistic Director Woodie King, Theatre Times Editor Mindy Levine, Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York Associate Director (and CSC Literary Manager) Todd London, critic Marilyn Stasio, Village Voice critic Robert Morse and Theatre Three Editor Brian Johnson.

Felicia Hardison Londré is on the theater faculty at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, and is dramaturg of the Missouri Repertory Theatre.

DECONSTRUCTION PANEL (L to R): Stefan Balint, Jonathan Marks, Elinor Fuchs (chair), Don Shewey





A LETTER TO THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE
AMERICAN LABORATORY THEATRE
FROM FRANCIS FERGUSSON, 1928



[Francis Fergusson, America's second dramaturg, died December 19, 1986. In honor of Mr. Fergusson, the following is excerpted from a 1928 letter to his colleagues at the American Laboratory Theatre, the first part of which was published for the first

time in the Winter 1987 Issue of PROGRAM NOTES. We thank Mr. Fergusson's daughter, Mrs. Honora Fergusson Neumann, for permission to reprint the letter and for the loan of the photograph of her father. We also apologize to Mrs. Neumann for mistating her name in the last issue.

[A copy of the letter was supplied to LMDA by Dr. Howard Stein of Columbia University. He, in turn, received the letter from its discoverer, Ron Willis, now at the University of Kansas at Lawrence.]

Nevertheless, one does seem able to deduce a certain positive credo, which I outline below, and which I try to relate to more immediate questions of policy.

The dramatist, as the mouthpiece of the best thought and taste of the time, should rule the theatre.

- a. There are no such dramatists. This is almost true, but there are two or three men . . . who, if he produced their plays, would render us two kinds of service. In the first place, they would help to make us aware of subjects which are objectively American. In the second place, they would, partly by the ideas in their plays, partly by writing about us, if they became interested, help to surround us by a kind of critical self-consciousness which is indispensable to such a theatre as I want.

- b. Such dramatists as we have are without the sense of stage form. This is their fundamental lack, and is due to a lack of adequate tradition, the same failing which makes Mr. Boleslavsky impotent. To remedy this fault, I see two possible lines. One, for Mr. Boleslavsky and the dramatists to become interested in each other . . . : two, for us to produce plays by authors who had an important and vital subject matter completely disciplined to a stage form. Such authors lived in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, and became extinct in the 19th, due to the failure of the artist to afford a liveable ethic.

This is an outline of my proposed policy. It involves, as will be seen, two kinds of plays, classical from the 16th to the 18th centuries, and contemporary American plays of importance for their subject matter. I will try to explain at a little more length my interest in the 17th century.

While it is true that our conscious tradition is one of miscellaneous acceptance, . . . still it is true that, explicitly or not, we are a product of a certain phase of European development, precisely the 17th century. That was the period of the ascendancy of the French humanistic culture. Then law and order were believed in. Then Protestantism started. Then it was proclaimed that "Man is the measure of all things." Then democracy began and feudalism ended. Most of these ideas which together make a complete and very great Weltanschauung are in our bones: yet they have never received expression in a great art . . . Yet there are signs that this generation will explore more deeply than before our spiritual foundations (such at least must be our faith). It is no accident that (e. e.) Cummings read the 17th-Century poets, that Babbitt proclaims a return to humanism and that the French critics, always the most sensitive indicators of the spirit of the times, should be going back, for help, to just that period in their own past, using the consciousness of that time to outgrow the slough of despond in

which the wicked and esthetic nineties landed them. . . .

Our publicity should unashamedly proclaim what we are trying to do. . . . What I have tried to indicate is really an Idea for a Theatre, which goes far beyond my legitimate concern as play-reader. . . . For, to tell you the truth, my whole interest is in the dramatic product. My belief is that our main concern should be to produce that. Keeping our feet on the ground does not seem to me to mean persuading millionaires by word of mouth that we are good. It seems to mean evolving drama which shall be vital and comprehensive to a public large enough and rich enough to support a small theatre full of frugal artists. I am thus constitutionally incapable of selecting plays that will support the box office. I haven't time to pursue bad plays and debate whether we had better revive some former Broadway hit. I assure you that I shall never find time for that, and that if I remain as playreader, you can confidently expect me to look for and bring plays which seem to me significant according to the criteria outlined above, and only such plays.



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Performaturgy

Karen Laughlin and Catherine Schuler, and my own performance text: the way it all fits together in an environmental theatre production.

For several months prior to rehearsal a group of graduate students did "dramaturgical research" on Don Juan. When I arrived in Tallahassee they presented me with the fruits of their digging. I found out that there have been more than 400 plays written on "Don Juan" themes, and I was given summaries of some of the best-known of these. I was also presented with an annotated analysis of Moliere's script. This analysis told me possible motives for certain actions, it gave me some insight into the manners of Moliere's day, etc. But the single most important item was something I stumbled

on myself while reading the Berliner Ensemble's notes on its Don Juan. Namely, that in their production the argument between Charlotte and Mathurine--the two peasant women Don Juan has simultaneously promised to marry--Mathurine, in anger, takes off one of her shoes and threatens Charlotte with it.

This little detail, and the picture it gave: a tough-minded peasant girl threatened by her more sophisticated friend, resorting to what she knows she can do well, street-fight--that image is in my play.

Why hadn't my dramaturgs uncovered more actions like that? And I wondered, why "dramaturgy"? Why not "performaturgy"? For all I know, performaturgy is already being widely practiced. But at the risk of bringing coals to Newcastle, let me sketch the outline of performaturgy.

It is concerned with performance possibilities more than with literary history.

It seeks specific actions that express in the most concrete way possible the intent of various scenes.

It gives directors actions that they can "quote" or use in any way they want.

The performaturg's research focuses on production rather than interpretation. It seeks to find out as precisely as possible how things were staged. And it seeks in non-theatrical materials specific scenographic details that might contribute to a current staging.

Such an approach is relatively easy when one is dealing with modern drama. Photographs, films, modelbooks and lots of other visual and aural material exist. But what about the 18th century, or the Renaissance, or earlier periods? Here the traditional tools of the theatre historian can be of use. But in ransacking museums and libraries for items that give the "feel" for a bygone age, the performaturg is seeking "theatrical actions." That is, the performaturge looks for scenes not scenery. For example, when I was doing Mother Courage with the Performance Group, I looked at paintings from the Flemish School of the 17th century. There was one picture called Ma Gritte which

Performaturgy

showed a woman very much like Courage striding across a bloody battlefield. She was determined to get through--and in order to get through she was ignoring just about everything going on around her. Her striding combined stubbornness, single-mindedness, and insensitivity. What that picture gave me--as indeed it may have given Brecht--was a sense of the orchestrated chaos of slaughter through which a very determined person was taking large strides. I don't mean political or metaphysical strides. I mean the woman was covering a nice distance each step she took. The force of Ma Gritte's walking became a key part of my production.

The performaturgy suggests scenes and actions, the whole kinesthetic and aural tone of a possible production. The research, then, is not only into the specific history of dramatic text--who did it, when, and how--but into the scenic matrix out of which that text was

precipitated. And a scenic matrix carefully examined is also a social and political matrix.

The purpose of performaturgy is not to offer "background information" or write program notes--though sometimes these are useful enough--but to get hold of concrete scenic actions that the director may appropriate, transform, or discard.

Now, as I said at the outset, performaturgy may be precisely what dramaturgs now do. If so, take my note as a congratulatory epistle. If not, consider performaturgy as a somewhat different tack: the investigation of the praxis, the action, of specific scenes. As a director, I can assure you these concrete items of performance from previous productions and from historical material are extremely useful stuff to work with in rehearsals.

Richard Schechner is a director, theorist, teacher and writer. He is a Performance Studies faculty member at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and Editor of The Drama Review.



Life After Literary Management

By Peregrine Whittlesey



Is there life after literary management? of course. And for many, this may be altogether the wrong question. There are multiple aspects of literary management which are nourishing, but if you are like me, you may at some point want to be more responsible, more accountable, than a literary manager is generally asked to be. Some dramaturgs have a perfect marriage with their artistic directors, are truly their alter-egos, providing advice, knowledge and skill. While we may carve out niches for ourselves as respected citizens in our theaters, all too often we are only marginally influential, and since we are not artistic directors, the buck doesn't stop at our desks.

I believe in the theater and in the process of working with writers. There is, of course, a certain arrogance to thinking you can read a play, see what is there and help a writer to do a bit better. But if you are convinced, as I am, that there is often a possibility of being helpful to a writer, it is a process you are loathe to give up in your "after life."

My three seasons as Gregory Mosher's literary manager at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago provided me with the opportunity both for observation and experimentation. The Goodman was a very exciting place to be between 1980 and 1983. Chicago theater was in a period of great energy and expansion, so anything seemed possible.

The most compelling part of my work was opening the theater's doors to Chicago writers and encouraging them to submit their plays to us. I was able to promise them ongoing collaboration and readings as needed. Since I developed strong relationships with some of those

writers, they continued to send me their plays after I left Chicago and returned to New York. I continued to coach long distance.

Upon leaving the Goodman, I had ambiguous feelings about trying to find a job elsewhere as a literary manager. Though I had been very happy in many ways, I wanted to be held answerable for the work I thought worth promoting. While I reattached myself in a tangential way to the New York Shakespeare Festival, where I had worked before going to Chicago, I decided to make my first "life" after literary management that of a producer.

The play I picked to produce was one I had worked on from its inception. The producing partners I selected agreed that it was a compelling piece of writing. . . . Two years later, with Jack Hofsis directing and Bianca Jagger and John Shea in the leads, we did a version of the play in the small theater at Williamstown. When some interest stirred in England, the writer decided to reclaim his play. After two years of paying myself nothing, going back and forth between an upset playwright and a demanding star, after doing my best with partners who had too little time for the project and difficulty raising money for it, after losing the project just when I thought I had an English production with a Tony-winning actress in the lead, I decided I might have picked the wrong "after life" for myself.

But if not producing, then what? I had begun doing interviews for French television, and toyed with the idea of making films which used the interview technique, but, once again, that involved raising money. I didn't want my energy directed primarily at that. My ongoing work at the Shakespeare Festival was what I continued to enjoy most--I wanted to work with playwrights.

So, I finally succumbed to the suasion of a particular writer. For years, writers with whom I have worked have been trying to persuade me to be their agent. They questioned why I should work so diligently to place their work

After Life

at theaters around the country but not take a penny for that service. For a while I answered that since I was employed by a theater, this was part of my job. Then, I protested that I didn't want to become one of "them," that agents didn't work with writers, they simply marketed their plays. Further, agents negotiated contracts, a process that invariably made nice people into curmudgeons. I saw myself (an equally exaggerated and stupid image) as pure and good: friend of theater and playwright alike. That I placed plays and had no financial involvement with that process proved my belief in the play, my disinterest in all but its artistic success.

What finally convinced me to make the leap was the challenge of one writer who, hearing all the above arguments, said he thought I was romantically bearing the mantle of the 'sixties with this apparent generosity and I should grow up. Incidentally, I should also represent him. Twenty-four hours later, I decided he was right. But if I was going to be an agent, I wanted to try and do it in a way that suited me.

First of all, knowing that writers need multiple productions of plays in order to develop what they have written, I decided to travel to cities with active theatrical communities, meeting with artistic directors and literary managers in theaters interested in new work. My first trips were to Los Angeles and San Francisco. I then went to Chicago (where a lot has happened since 1983), Minneapolis and Seattle. I still plan to head South and Southwest and to return to places where I only briefly touched base. Since theater, like most things, operates on the basis of trust and personal acquaintance, I want to meet and know as many people in theaters around the country as I can: I want people to read plays I send them; I want to send them only the plays I think should interest them--not waste their time with plays inappropriate for their theaters.

Secondly, I do not want to represent any writer, no matter how successful, unless I feel a strong connection to the work and to the writer. I am loathe to give up my involvement with the development of work. I only want to circulate plays which I feel are ready to produce. As literary manager, too often agents sent me plays which I thought unready for distribution. Though there may be a proper logic to this early exposure, I am unconvinced it is in any writer's interest.

I decided that being a part of an agency (and who knows if any of them would have had me) might not afford me the freedom to maneuver as I choose. But having made that decision, I needed to find a way to pay the rent. The majority of my clients are beginners, and it takes time for even the most talented writers to become attractive to theaters. I realized it would be a while before I could rely on an agent's percentage to keep me afloat. I therefore charge outside writers to do critiques of their plays, refunding the fee if I decide to accept the writer as a client. And, although this happens infrequently, I also return the fee if a submission is very well written, but I feel I am not the best person to represent that writer.

I've only been doing this since July of 1986. I have a lot to learn, but I don't seem to be a total failure at negotiating contracts. It is, I find, possible for everyone to be pleasant during these negotiations. I have formed some good associations with prestigious agencies in Los Angeles. One of my writers, after a production at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, has sold the option to that play to Universal Pictures.

Also, my travels seem to be paying off as theaters start to express their interest in the work I have shown them. I very much enjoy thinking of ways to make a play attractive to producers: pairing actors and directors with the play, helping producers to think of ways to attract their audiences to the project. In fact, being an agent seems to encom-

pass much of the interesting side of producing without all of the accompanying complications.

And I am still, though marginally, a part of the New York Shakespeare Festival's literary department. That is very important to me because I want to continue to work in the not-for-profit world.

So, have I found life after literary management? Almost despite myself. I seem to have done so and, at least for the moment, feel as though I have landed on my feet. Perhaps some of you will decide to join me on this side of the equation.

Reegrine Whittlesey, an Associate Member of LMDA, operates her own literary agency in New York.

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McNally Article

after all, to find a situation where you could avoid directors, and dramaturgs entirely. But why place restrictions on Emily Mann, who worked with dramaturgs throughout the evolution of Execution of Justice; or Amlin Gray, who is a terrific playwright as well as a dramaturg; or August Wilson and Lee Blessing, who are also successful playwrights and regulars at the National Playwrights Conference; or all the established and emerging playwrights who are taking advantage of the various resources the contemporary theater has to offer?

You're certainly welcome to your opinion of dramaturgs, which, I suspect from your generalizations, is based on limited experience. But, at the same time, let's admit that not everyone wants to enroll in a school of playwriting that warns directors, dramaturgs and other theater professionals to keep out. The trick is to keep the system flexible--to respect the individuality of the crea-

tive process as much as the integrity of the playwright's script.

Instead of arguing to limit the possibilities, we should be looking to increase all playwrights' options--not only for script development, but for productions and financial support. It would be time much better spent by those in a position to help playwrights--dramaturgs and vice presidents of the Dramatists Guild.

Sincerely,
Michael Bigelow Dixon
Literary Manager
Actors Theatre of
Louisville

P.S. Best of luck with Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune. I look forward to its successful opening and long run. That, after all, is what we're all pulling for.



. . . Many of you . . . will . . . want to bring in minds. You want to bring in people of consequence--people who can do something--who might illuminate instead of just reflect. That may very well be the essential task of . . . the dramaturg who is that kind of Socratic gadfly . . . able to keep things . . . jumping.

HOWARD STEIN

