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LMDA NEW & NOTEWORTHY

January 2017

Issue 2.4

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING!



Every year, LMDA celebrates the January 22 birthday of the man considered the father of dramaturgy. That date kicks off a week of fundraisers for our Early-Career Dramaturgy initiatives.

For more information, check out our [listserv](#) and [ECD Facebook page](#).

dramaturgy/publication | MELISSA HILLMAN (PART 2 OF 2)

In part two of this interview, Melissa Hillman, creator of the blog [Bitter Gertrude](#), talks about issues of equity and diversity in the theatre industry.

What social justice issues do you think we're not talking enough about as



theatermakers right now?

We're just at the beginning baby steps of dealing with diversity and equity. One aspect of that we rarely discuss is class—there are multiple class barriers to participation, some that stem from larger cultural issues (like income inequality) and some of our own making, like confining hires to people who have MFAs, or hiring people based in NYC or LA when the company is based elsewhere. There are serious class divides in our industry both for individuals and for companies. We rarely discuss the great divide between indie theatre and AEA theatre. Larger theatres and service orgs fret constantly about how few young people and people of color come to “the theatre,” and allocate a bunch of money and time

producing studies about it, but the indie theatre scene, which is jam packed with young people and people of color, is completely ignored. The problem isn't that “the theatre” can't attract diverse young audiences; the problem is that diverse young audiences aren't coming to LORTs. That's a very different problem.

Also, as an industry, we need to come to terms with the fact that we just don't fund indie theatres or theatres run by people of color anywhere near the way we fund wealthy white theatre, and I just mean proportionally, as percentage of budget. Massive grants go to huge, established theatres to create diversity initiatives while ignoring the struggling small theatres that have been serving that audience for years. Grantors greatly prefer to fund a white theatre's “ethnic” play than a Black, Asian, or Latinx theatre, and that's a problem.

What is our responsibility as theatermakers to address these issues on and off stage?

We have a responsibility to create conversations with our art. I have a lot of questions about “community engagement initiatives,” since so many of them are paternalistic. Too often, it's a white theatre given a grant to “create conversations” in an “underserved” community of color, as if that community has no art of its own.

During the big “audience engagement” thing, we turned our attention away from the stage, and that was a mistake. Our responsibility is to the art, and that's an enormous responsibility. Are we telling the stories we should be telling to truthfully represent our diverse community, its hopes, its dreams, its fears, its imagination, its history, its future? Are we adequately taking care of the people in our industry? Are we working to break out of the insular hiring practices that roadblock diversity, equity, and gender parity? Are we

seeking to include indie theatre and indie theatremakers? Are we challenging the oppressive norms of our culture in our art—both in the art itself and the way it’s made—or are we reinscribing them?

Art creates dialogue, conversation, empathy, and change, much, much more powerfully than any other human activity. We can write 1000 blog posts about diversity in casting, and not even come close to matching the power of 10 minutes of Hamilton. I have no illusions about that. I write about diversity in theatre because I want theatremakers to think more deeply about their art, both the art itself and how it’s made.

Interview by Megan McClain

academia, practice, criticism | JOSEPH CERMATORI

Joseph occupies several roles that are increasingly rare: he recently began a tenure-track position as assistant professor of English at Skidmore College, and he writes theater criticism for such publications as Village Voice. In this interview, he talks about his current projects, and his career path.



Living and working in upstate New York, you're in close proximity to a lot of arts and culture (not to mention some spectacular outdoor activities). Is the way you read, write, or enjoy art much different since moving there?

It was an adjustment to leave New York City last summer, since I'd moved there in 2008, but I'm glad to have made the escape. Even with the pressures of a new job, there's been more time for reading, writing, conversation, and exploring the region. Saratoga always has a lot going on culturally, but there's also EMPAC, Glimmerglass, The Berkshires, Beacon, Hudson, and lots else nearby. And being close to the city means I can spend one or two weekends a month there to binge on performance and art. I'm not sure yet how all of this will change my work, but it's been very good to have a new, more leisurely, more regional perspective.

What courses have been the most engaging or challenging to teach? What pieces of art/literature have inspired particularly vibrant discussions?

This fall I taught an introductory course on dramatic literature that generated some wonderful discussions. One in particular came about in response to Sarah Kane's 1995 play *Blasted*, which has long been a favorite of mine. It's a disturbing play, to say the least, but where others might have turned away from it instinctively, these students were eager to dive in. We had a vigorous and wide-ranging conversation about war, patriarchy, chauvinism, sexual assault, realism, dramatic language, and violence onstage, topics which all seem as timely as ever. That class created some strong bonds: those students are now planning a reading of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* in response to this month's inauguration.

The announcement of your Skidmore position mentioned a forthcoming book about baroque avant-gardes in the European and American theatre from 1880-1940. Where did that interest begin?

My book project grows out of my recent dissertation, and before that, my years as an MFA dramaturgy student. Early on, I began noticing that a number of contemporary theatre artists were making work that exhibited debts of some kind to the baroque past. (For example: Robert Wilson, *The Wooster Group*, and *My Barbarian* could all be named in this regard.) There seemed to be a pervasive contemporary interest in baroque style. The book seeks to locate a pre-history for that interest by looking at the historical avant-gardes, taking up writings by Friedrich Nietzsche, Stéphane Mallarmé, Walter Benjamin, Gertrude Stein, and others, using the concept of baroque to constellate them together and reframe how we understand modernism in the theatre.

You're publishing intelligent and savvy performance reviews in major publications at a time when the opportunities to do so are limited. What led you to this sort of writing? What are your thoughts on how theatre criticism might sustain or evolve in ways that continue serve artists and audiences?

I began working as a critic during my time at Yale, studying under writers like Jonathan Kalb and Hilton Als and writing for journals like *Theater* and *PAJ*. For theatre criticism to flourish, we as a community need to support the efforts of a free press, along with independent book and journal publishers, with our voices and patronage. How can the theatre itself survive in a vacuum with no professional commentary or context? Certainly we shouldn't discourage blogger critics, but it would be a catastrophe if professional theatre criticism were to disappear from the news, while film, music, and restaurant critics continue to thrive.

Many of our members are student and early-career dramaturgs, for whom questions about pursuing advanced degrees or teaching positions are particularly relevant. Can you share some background on your decisions to pursue those paths? And any advice you offer students considering a similar trajectory?

Getting an advanced degree was probably inevitable for me, since I've always had interests in teaching and research alongside my interests in journalistic writing and creative practice. And in general, the work of a dramaturg greatly benefits from some advanced study. That doesn't have to mean a traditional conservatory MFA program or PhD program like the ones I went through, though the benefits of those are many. There are lots of pathways and programs and fields, and the most important thing when you're young is to begin imagining the sort of work you'd like to do and start doing it somehow, carving your pathway forward. It may ultimately change direction, but take guidance from John Cage's rules for artists: "Nothing is a mistake. There is no win and no fail. There is only make."

Interview by Jeremy Stoller

events

- **NOW thru Jan 29 - Lessing Week fundraising drive for ECD conference travel grants**
- Jan 23 - Conference proposals due
- Feb 6 - Dramaturg Driven grant applications open
- Feb 25 - Board meets in Denver at New Play Summit
- Mar 15 - Conference registration opens
- Mar 17 - Dramaturg Driven grant applications close
- June 22-24 - "Access, Art & Activism" conference in Berkeley, CA

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