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# LMDA New & Noteworthy, volume 2, no. 1

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Welcome to *New & Noteworthy*, LMDA's monthly newsletter.

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# LMDA NEW & NOTEWORTHY

## October 2016 Issue 2.1

### A Note from the President



Happy Fall! I hope this finds you enthusiastically pulling out your sweaters, picking apples, hunting for gourds, and settling into the new theatre season or school year.

Since Beth Bickers and her incomparable team passed us the LMDA reins after the terrific Portland conference, your Executive Committee and

#### **Hello, members and friends of LMDA!**

Welcome to the LMDA monthly newsletter *New & Noteworthy*. In the process of performing some standard list maintenance, we reset our "unsubscribed" list. If you don't wish to receive the monthly newsletter from LMDA, you can [update your preferences here](#) or [unsubscribe](#).

### spotlight on: production dramaturgy

*Megan McClain sat down with dramaturg Ken Cerniglia to talk about his work on Hadestown, a folk opera by Anaïs Mitchell recently staged at New York Theatre Workshop. Hadestown presents a new take on an old myth by tracing the idealistic Orpheus on his journey from the land of the living to the industrialized labor-driven underworld of Hadestown to find his love, Eurydice.*

**Megan: How did you join the process?**

I have hit the ground running on many fronts, including making improvements to our website and planning our next conference: “Art, Access & Activism” in Berkeley, CA, on June 22-24, 2017. Please keep your eyes peeled this month for further details.

We sincerely look forward to serving you during the next two years, so please reach out with your questions and suggestions at any time.

*Ken Cerniglia*

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## Odds & Ends

- LMDA held its first monthly Twitter chat on September 20. Check out the Storify summary [here](#). **Join us for our next conversation on Tuesday 10/18 at 3pm ET. #LMDAchat.**
- For our NYC members and friends: Newly-appointed Metro-

Ken: I was asked to come on board by Jim Nicola [Artistic Director of New York Theatre Workshop]. I was interested, but I didn't know the director, Rachel Chavkin, or Anaïs, so I met with them. I think they interviewed a few other people, which was great. One dramaturg does not fit all. Then I spent another full day with Anaïs. We took a walk on the High Line and talked about her work. She's a first-time dramatist and primarily a singer-songwriter. So it was about figuring out what made her tick, where she was confident, and where she was a little unsure about what she was writing. The Workshop hired me for a reading and then the production.

**M: I love the way you describe it. It's almost like a first date when a dramaturg is getting to know a new collaborator for the first time. You have to make sure there's chemistry on both sides.**

K: Absolutely. I think earning that personal rapport and trust, particularly for artists who haven't worked with dramaturgs before and are unsure of their function, is very important. Because the work is primarily based in feedback, it needs to feel supportive and useful and not like a grade or censorship. And that can only come through a personal relationship.

**M: *Hadestown* began as a collection of songs. How did the structure change from playlist to theatrical event?**

K: Ten years ago, Anaïs started writing and developing *Hadestown* with Ben Matchstick. Staged as a kind of pageantry concert, it was theatricalized, though not necessarily fully dramatized from the beginning. Anaïs also recorded the concept album with Ani DiFranco and all these other amazing recording artists. While she

NYC Regional Rep Rachel Abrams is hosting a Town Hall on **Monday, October 17** from 5 to 7pm at the Ça Va Cocktail Lounge, Intercontinental Times Square, 300 West 44th St. And save the date for a discussion on "Dramaturgs as Creative Producers" on **Monday, Nov. 7 at 5pm**. Details forthcoming.

- Looking for a job? Don't forget to check the listings at [Imda.org/jobs](http://Imda.org/jobs).

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## Remembering Iris Turcott



by Matt McGeachy

On September 22, 2016, my friend and mentor Iris Turcott – a giant of our profession – died, leaving

was touring *Hadestown*, a producer, Dale Franzen, saw its theatrical potential and started developing it.

### **M: How did your work as dramaturg support the shaping of the play?**

K: Anaïs and Rachel had already spent two years working on it together, so by the time I came in, it was pretty fleshed out. So much had been workshopped and included storytelling moments that, in their minds, were being told visually. Now, as the new person in there, I was only looking at what was on the page, so I had all of these questions. I think I was useful in the process by just trying to get clarity out of the storytelling and also asking questions about what's fundamentally driving the action. It's great that it's a hybrid theatrical event that's not your traditional book musical. It's about wanting to preserve what's special about this particular artist and bring some sense of structure, and flexibility within that structure, to the project.

### **M: Has your work on this project made an impact on your own dramaturgical process?**

K: Just having more patience for the model. Having seen Rachel Chavkin's work, I dig that kind of trust in a musical and visual sensibility. Work that can have its own coherence and that's not necessarily point A to point B to point C in a conventional sense of dramaturgy and dramatic structure. It's a collaged way of working, a devised way of working.

### **M: What was your favorite part of the process?**

K: I love that Anaïs is so open to feedback. I'm glad that in a short amount of time I was able to gain enough of her trust that she can just bounce things off of me without holding back. If you're a

a prominent hole in my heart, which I imagine is about the size of the small blue ashtray that she used to keep on the blue harvest table in her living room in Toronto, where she helped to shape the Canadian theatrical landscape, and also shape me. Since she died, a lot of tears have been shed, and we held a beautiful memorial service in Toronto where the breadth and depth of her impact in Canadian theatre was apparent in the list of speakers and performers: John Alcorn, Leslie Arden, Ronnie Burkett, Adam Pettie, Anusree Roy, and Judith Thompson, to name just a few. Over these past few weeks a rich portrait has emerged which made clear just how rich, complex, and dynamic Iris's life was and although she's gone now, through her impact and her work, she lives on. [...]

[Read the full version of Matt's tribute to Iris on our website.](#)

dramaturg and you earn your collaborator's trust to hear first passes of things, then you've succeeded.



*Shaina Taub, Amber Gray, Damon Daunno, and Lulu Fall in HADESTOWN at NYTW. Photo by Joan Marcus.*

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## spotlight on: academic dramaturgy



*VP of University Programs Diane Brewer talked with Jeremy Stoller about the play analysis class she teaches using scripts nominated to [The Kilroys List](#), and both the practical challenges and the transformative nature of academic work with in-process texts.*

**What inspired her:** “When the Kilroys List came out, I'd been thinking for a long time about what makes it difficult to get people excited about new work. I think it has a lot to do with familiarity. And because we often develop familiarity when we're in school, that's where we shape our taste. So I

started thinking about how important it is that students are getting exposed not only to new work, but also to the process of reading new work.”

**How this course is different:** Aside from the class featuring only female-identified writers, “What was important with this class was that I go outside my area of familiarity. I wasn't going to read the plays before the students did. They couldn't rely on me to be the “expert” who could tell them how to feel about the play. Instead, we have to wrestle with what it really means to pick up a manuscript of a new play.”

**The curriculum:** “The class wasn't about, 'is the play good? Is the play bad?' it was more like, 'If I could talk to the playwright, this is what I would want to talk about.' So that they're thinking of the work as alive.” Once per semester, the students would actually talk with one of the playwrights on the syllabus.

**Nuts and Bolts:** Students paid \$60 to enroll in the class (approximately the cost of published texts for an equivalent class). The total money collected was divided among the playwrights (this worked out to \$68.57 per playwright most recently).

“The primary concern [among agents and writers] was that a copy of an unfinished play would get out into circulation” and possibly be performed. The letter of agreement she created stipulated “that these plays would not be distributed, in any way performed, that we would just read the plays in class and discuss them. I posted the plays on Blackboard with a very strongly-worded statement about the honor code policy and not redistributing.” There have been no issues of the scripts being improperly shared or performed.

**Challenges:** Diane noted that the work of tracking

down contact information for writers and agents, collecting manuscripts, and getting signed letters of agreement and W-9s, was far greater than for a course using published texts.

**Successes:** “I can say without hesitation that the students took their responsibility with these texts extremely seriously. The current dramaturg for the student production of Sarah Ruhl's *Orlando*, who was not even in the class, sent an e-mail to Sarah Ruhl's agent, saying that there are three words in the text that we suspect are typos but we don't want to say anything that Sarah Ruhl didn't actually write, so we just want to confirm that these are the words that they should be saying. It has radically changed the culture of the students, and the way that they think about the possibility of communicating with agents, and that playwrights are real live people.”

**Next steps:** Diane wants to make it easier for other professors to teach new work. “The majority of my time spent on developing a course like this is about making sure that the agents and playwrights understand how serious I am about treating the work with respect” and dealing with paperwork, tracking down manuscripts, etc. “There's got to be a streamlined process to make it easier. I have this huge idea [for a platform where] agents and playwrights whose plays appear on the Kilroys List could have their plays. And students could pay for access, based on taking a course. And then the money would be distributed through that site. I'm trying to find someone else who's as interested in doing this as I am. I feel like I need a team of people to make this work.”

*If you are interested in discussing this project with Diane, she can be reached at*



## regional spotlight: new york

by Martha Wade Steketee

Two leading names in U.S. dramaturgy from two different generations – LMDA founder Mark Bly and established freelance dramaturg Heather Helinsky – gathered to discuss their professional journeys with Metro New York City LMDA members on May 24, 2016 in the friendly offices of the Disney Theatrical Group, above the New Amsterdam Theatre.

I moderated the conversation, which ranged from training, to reflections on balancing institutional and freelance dramaturgy, new play development strategies, and observations on trends in the field.

When introduced as one of the first dramaturgs educated at the Yale School of Drama, Bly listed many individuals and organizations that predated academic dramaturgy programs in the U.S., including “ghost dramaturgs” of the 1930s such as George Kaufman and Moss Hart, and O'Neill Playwrights Center founder George White. He recalled that the birth of the MFA in dramaturgy at Yale happened in the late 1970s while he was in his MFA studies in dramatic criticism and history. Drama School Dean and Yale Rep Artistic Director Robert Brustein decided to reframe the program to cover dramaturgy, inspired in part by developments in other parts of the country. “Brustein understood we were like these orphans and everybody treated us like we were eggheads. He decided that we were going to function as dramaturgs on the Yale Rep productions.” And they defined the dramaturg

role as they went along.

Brustein left Yale in 1980 to establish the American Repertory Theater at Harvard, where Helinsky did graduate work in the early 2000s, and Brustein was still teaching after he retired in 2002. His vision of dramaturgical training had modulated through the experience of the Yale Rep and ART, Bly and Helinsky reflected. “You are the next artistic leaders that are going to shape and refocus this movement,” Helinsky recalled Brustein telling her class. “I left grad school with this feeling of Brustein’s blessing and his call to action to go out and not just dramaturg a production but be a leader and keep pushing the regional theater movement forward.”

Bly noted that when more institutional titles began to include “Director of New Play Development,” it signaled that “the end is near for dramaturgs,” since it meant that fewer people are functioning as dramaturgs in rehearsal. “What the fuck do you have time to do if it’s not being in the rehearsal working on the play? Nothing is more important than that.” Helinsky agreed. “The reason why I travel so much is so I can be present in the rehearsal room. As a dramaturg, I may have been the first person to read a playwright's new work, but a playwright may not learn what they need until the very end of the rehearsal process. I have to make my job as a production dramaturgy the priority, so I can be there for those moments of discovery.”

Bly returned to Yale under Dean and Artistic Director Stan Wojewodski, to be the Associate Artistic Director and co-chair of the dramaturgy and playwriting program. “I realized in the regional theater the directors had too much control of the

development process and the playwrights needed to be more in the center of it. And so I went to Yale to develop those people at the other end of the tunnel.” Now based in Manhattan, Bly works with the National New Play Network Kennedy Center Program Dramaturgy Intensive and as Co-Director of the Fordham/Primary Stages MFA Playwriting program.

Helinsky is based in Philadelphia, and has a long-term relationship with the Great Plains Theatre Conference, where in the 8-day program she has dramaturged as many as 13 plays at once. “In GPTC's process, the playwrights arrive and the PlayLabs readings happen first. It gets everyone's nervous energy out. The rest of the time, the pressure is off for a public presentation and is dedicated to revisions and conversations. We get to know each other, speed date in rehearsal, and spend the rest of the week sitting on the porch talking about their next play, and that births another year's process.” Helinsky builds her practice by investing in playwrights over time rather than taking single deep dives with individual plays. “I've had the privilege of working with one writer through a sequence of plays, some of them trilogies. You get to collaborate with them through a trajectory of their work and you start talking across plays.”

Bly noted his professional reset came after a health crisis a few years ago. “I stopped being this person that only thought about the future, being the uncle or father or godfather of dramaturgy. I created the Bly Creative Capacity Grants because I decided I now was about investing in other people instead of me.”

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