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# LMDA New & Noteworthy, volume 3, no. 6

Robert Blacker

Mark Bly

Chava Kokhleffel

L. E. Webster

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# LMDA NEW & NOTEWORTHY

March 2018

Vol. 3, No. 6

Read on for:

- Mark Bly's interview with Robert Blacker about his new book, which analyzes two of Shakespeare's plays as both texts and theatrical works, and
- Leah Webster's interview with Chava Kokhleffel about her political and community-based dramaturgy work in the Minneapolis arts and social justice communities.

## Q+A | Robert Blacker

dramaturg

author, *Shakespeare in Three Dimensions*

*Routledge Press's new Focus on Dramaturgy Series provides a forum for scholars and theatre professionals from across the world of dramaturgical practice to reflect on the discipline's key questions. From Shakespearean dramaturgy to examinations of dramaturgy in contemporary playwriting, opera, film, transmedia and sound, this series is edited by Magda Romanska, an author of the critically-acclaimed Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy.*



*The first book to be published is Robert Blacker's Shakespeare in Three Dimensions. Mark Bly recently sat down with Robert, whose career began at the Public Theatre and continued with leadership positions at La Jolla Playhouse, the Sundance Theatre Labs (where he was Artistic Director), and the Stratford Shakespeare Festival of Canada.*

**Bly:** Robert, the excitement I felt reading your book was like delving into a detective story. In many of your *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth*

chapters I discovered there was so much about class structure and the collision of the public and private realms in these plays. Your book uncovers how critical those elements were for Shakespeare and the sparks that must have been flying between stage and audience that are now lost four hundred years later. One of the great things about your book is it is a four hundred year old cautionary tale with a future. You point out that what is often cut today still remains relevant. But first I have to ask the question: there are so many volumes written on Shakespeare already, why did you feel compelled to write another?

**Blacker:** About two-thirds of the way through writing the book I looked up *Shakespeare* in the British Library online and 30,000 entries came up. That could have been intimidating but, because I have learned about Shakespeare by actually *working* on twenty productions of his plays, I thought, "I have something different to offer. I can be number 30,001."

You can never fully discover Shakespeare's plays by merely reading them. As a book about textual analysis of Shakespeare, I first deal with what we normally think of as text analysis--words on the page. The kind of work you do in preparation for a production. In the second half, I then move on to the dramaturgy that can only become visible in the rehearsal room with actors on their feet and eventually in front of an audience – discoveries that can only be made *in three dimensions*.

**Bly:** So you focus in the book on two plays *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*?

**Blacker:** I chose those two plays because I have had the pleasure of working on six professional productions of them, and use them as examples of textual analysis that can be applied to the whole canon, citing parallel examples from others plays. I chose a play from earlier in his career and one that he wrote later. Shakespeare evolved as a writer. The world he lived in changed as well. What is applicable to an early play may not be entirely relevant to a later one.

**Bly:** We are all aware there can be so many examples of well meaning textual analysis that can have a deadening effect for students and theatre people. But in reading your book textual analysis has just the opposite effect. It's lively: it makes one have a real *hunger* for Shakespeare's works. In your mind what is most important to your approach?

**Blacker:** It is the gradual process of trying to get into the mind of a writer who is no longer around to question. So we must question what we *assume* about Shakespeare and his plays. Forget what you think you know and discover what is actually there in the text. The right scholar can be your best friend, but the weight of the Shakespeare industry can be intimidating. False traditions that began with bowdlerized Restoration adaptations still affect the way we perceive the plays *and* what has been written about them. As I write in my book, these adaptations became the performing editions for many of the plays, with elements of some surviving for hundreds of years.

Don't cut a passage until you know why it is there. Then you can make an informed decision and avoid eliminating an elusive section that may be key to understanding a play. In the effort to make Shakespeare's plays "relevant", don't overlook what is already relevant in them. That makes it important to understand the environment in which they were written, and so why they were written. We who work in contemporary theatre have an advantage. Our work with living playwrights gives us an understanding of how plays and productions are put together, and that can help us understand Shakespeare's plays.

*Interview by Mark Bly*

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## Q+A | Chava Kokhleffel

**Minneapolis-based dramaturg**  
**social justice organizer**  
**producer**  
**performer**

**When did you learn about dramaturgy?**



I was reluctant to study theater in college at first. I questioned the practicality of theater in the fight against oppression and social injustice. I asked “How can performance be a vital site of critical creative engagement? What can it do for social justice?” Fortunately, I was introduced to Augusto Boal and the arsenal of the Theater of the Oppressed, the concept of “rehearsing for the revolution.” It was a turning point in my life. I started studying Theater of Oppressed deeply, as well as other community-based approaches to making theater - groups like El Teatro Campesino, founded on a picket line. They went

out into the fields with their “actos”. They were of that struggle, and using this craft as a tool to move the movement forward.

After college I studied at Cornerstone Theatre, before returning to Minneapolis where I organized workshops about theatre as dialogue for several years. The hierarchical power structure in formalized theatre settings doesn't allow for the kind of work I want to do, so I've done a lot of DIY, grassroots work as an interdisciplinary artist. I gravitate toward generative ensemble-based dramaturgical work. I love to come into a rehearsal process as an outside eye and help the group find a narrative shape and maintain political awareness.

**Minneapolis has a very active theatre community. What do you see happening in this community now?**

Minneapolis has some great big theatres like the Guthrie and the Ordway. But it also has a huge summer fringe festival and many smaller theatres. There's a big puppetry scene, a strong clown/physical theatre scene, and the burlesque/drag scene. There's been a lot of interdisciplinary work between these groups, lots of independent self production.

Unfortunately, due to gentrification, this year we lost three wonderful institutions where this community-based theatre creation occurred. Patrick's Cabaret, Bedlam, and Intermedia Arts have all closed over the past few years after decades of creating spaces for experimental innovation in the arts. These spaces were essential because they really supported emerging artists and produced the work of BIPOC, queer, [and] disabled people. So the Minneapolis theatre community is reeling from these losses, but also rallying.

I'm shifting focus to helping produce fundraisers, as a union organizer with the Industrial Workers of the World. We're raising money for anti-repression work - bail funds, legal fees for protesters, for example. How do we move forward in this tumultuous political environment? Donald Trump got elected, and a week later my mother died. Ever since, I've been contending with some really big questions. Firstly, how to be an anti-fascist artist. Second, how to create art that builds practical community in the face of looming ecological collapse. How do we survive? I am in a research phase now, letting these questions

resonate.

### **How does your work as a theatre artist interact with your work as a social justice activist?**

It affects how I perform my function as a collaborator in arts settings. I try to be transparent, keep an ethical rehearsal space, and avoid colonizing the stories of others. One thing I hope to create with the fundraiser series is a space [for] real cultural exchange between activists and artists. The artist community can be very insular - so often I feel like I go to shows and mostly see other “theater people” in the audience.

I see a lot of shows that end with the big traumatic event. I want to see what happens after the trauma, otherwise it’s just a re-staging of oppression. Witnessing trauma is crucial and healing but we can’t stop there. Theatre should be tool used for problem solving. We’re often using theatre to put ourselves in other’s shoes but not taking steps forward. I used to say, like a lot of theatre artists say, “Don't be didactic, don't tell audience what to do. It should be a conversation, a dialogue.” But the more I understand the political reality we are living in, I realize that you can’t have dialogue with fascists. Maybe we need to think of didactic theatre as a proposal, a call to action.

### **What’s coming up next for you?**

I'm facilitating a workshop as a last act of Patrick's Cabaret. They started this series of Artist Education Events back in March 2017. Mine is titled [Creative Survival: Making Art and Making Life through Chronic Illness](#). We'll practice talking with doctors, saying no, and staying grounded through triggers. This is a model that could be applied to all kinds of skill-share style theatrical events. I'm excited because this feels like a return to my roots.

*Interview by L.E. Webster.*

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*Happy Hour with Boston LMDA and CompanyOne Boot Camp, 2017*

Are you hearing about your regional meetups? If not, visit [lmda.org/map](http://lmda.org/map) to find out who your LMDA Regional Representative is.

If you are working in a region that does not yet have a region-specific group, and you would like one as a way to connect with others, apply for program funding, and other benefits, please reach out to VP Board Member Jacqueline Goldfinger: [regional@lmda.org](mailto:regional@lmda.org).

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