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James Monaghan

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Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas

Engagements beyond the numbers: Thoughts from a Dramaturg a year-ish into the pandemic

By James Monaghan



If you're reading this brief article for tips on how to engage your audience, you may find some new ideas but chances are you won't find that ever elusive cure-all. However, to continue the timely metaphor, if you're looking to take the industry's temperature with someone who has been working as an institutional dramaturg throughout the pandemic – and maybe get a shot of collaborative optimism – then roll up your shirt sleeve.

After the pandemic shuttered our doors and furloughed a large portion of our staff, those of us who were left threw every bit of spaghetti at the wall with every ounce of creativity we could. We created a podcast which was broadcast on local radio and hosted on our website; our facebook and Instagram posting frequency went through the roof with corresponding responses. We dug into years of our video capture and shared never before seen footage with contextual interviews; we created excerpts of new musicals recorded remotely and held virtual panel discussions. Each of these endeavors was a new venture for our theatre and each was met with positivity. But the energy of invention, inspired by necessity, begins to wane on both sides of the creative divide. It begins to feel like shouting into a vacuum. What else can we do? What else do our audiences want to engage with?

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measure it and how do we talk about it? The box office numbers obviously won't do it and I'm suspicious that any amount of views or shares or clicks provide the complete story either. It is tempting to depend solely on the numbers, given the removal of geographic barriers to viewership and our general cultural embrace of data, but I'd like to send a missive from the front lines with a different idea. We tell stories, yes, but we also listen to them. Let's lean into that in order to augment our understanding of where our audiences (and our colleagues!) are engaging right now.

A few examples of what I'm talking about. We launched adult education classes for the first time during the pandemic and I'm lucky enough to teach a script study course. While our class size is one potential measure of success, what about the learners who come back for a second course, branch out to a new one, or stick around past the 90 minutes to talk about – not even to directly experience – theatre? The numbers don't catch that. The limited amount of theater we've been able to produce has been well received by the community, but with numbers kept low due to the absolutely necessary health protocols in place, houses look spare. Along some traditional metrics, that would probably be considered insufficient. What it has done, is brought artists, artisans and craftspeople back into the shop and back on stage for work. The pause has allowed us to reinvigorate our archives, including complete digital capture of 60+ years of playbills. The click rate on that material is nonexistent as it isn't public yet, but the amount of joy it has brought to staff members, past actors, directors, designers, and crew as well as the ability it affords us to take possession of our history is invaluable.



We should listen to the joyful engagement these actions inspire without reducing it to numbers. And we should do everything we can to capture it – to sustain us through these dark days and to remind us when we return to “normal” that engagement is more than percentages, people are more than the cost of their ticket, the seconds they watched, or the talkbacks they attend. If we can take the time to listen, I suspect we will find audiences grateful for individual experiences and eagerly awaiting a full return.

James Monaghan is currently in his second season as Asolo Rep's Dramaturg and Literary Manager. Prior to becoming the resident dramaturg at Asolo Rep last season, he wrote about theatrical design as the Tow Foundation Fellow in the Roundabout Theatre Company Archives, created a one-on-one theatrical experience entitled [antidote] for the National Theatre of Croatia in Rijeka, served as the dramaturg for Leaving Eden, which won Best Musical at the 2019 New York Musical Festival, and worked in the literary department of the Play Company in New York. Before completing his MFA in dramaturgy at Columbia University, James worked as an educator and director in his hometown of Houston, Texas. BFA, New York University.

International Dramaturgy Lab Check In

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International Dramaturgy Lab - all three of those words are evocative to me. I can recall that I first learned about this program through LMDA's VP of Programs, Phaedra Scott and that it was early in the pandemic year 2020. When the isolation of stay at home orders began to overwhelm, I among others knocked on the doors of every Zoom room, peeking in to see who else was starved for collaboration. For me, the call was always answered by LMDA, but what I soon learned was that the community of dramaturgs who showed up for each other spanned far outside any one organization. Thankfully, our community had many generous and capable organizers to facilitate the logistics of such a program. As described by the organizers: "The International Dramaturgy Lab (IDL) is an exciting experimental initiative developed in collaboration between an international array of dramaturgical organizations and networks, including The Dramaturgs' Network UK; Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) USA, Canada, and Mexico; The Fence International Network; STOD Finland; and the Danish Dramaturg Network." And they asked the question: What does it mean to work dramaturgically across borders?



Looking back on that question, but without ever asking it directly, I can honestly say that is exactly what we are exploring. In our group, we are building trust as collaborators by sharing experiences of the world today. We share inspirations, share perspectives. We spend a lot of time asking questions. We began contextualizing current events by using accounts that are primary sources, found texts to explore how countries navigate language and policy and the behavior of their citizens; how our culture is creating a narrative for us, around us, and not always with us. Feminism comes up quite a bit. We understand that feminism and equality, both at the level of employment (equal opportunities/rights) and interpersonal relationships, remain as relevant as ever. Consequently, in our discussions, we analyze feminism through different prisms - the effects of male dominance on cultural, social, and political levels, work, culture, etc. Being a feminist artist and those challenges through cultural misogynies and the ways language reinforces that, and the ways language is changing in text, in dramaturgical practices, in policies. Exploring the ways in which we create a disruption to the dominant cultural narratives, to queer the world!

An added benefit of our participation in these small groups, is that we occasionally get an

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expand the way we were functioning as well as deepened our bond; finding each other in the big Zoom room to ground ourselves. We decided to incorporate more diverse ways of dramaturging our current realities by choreographing our discussions, but we shall see how this experiment plays out in our lab. The luxury of time has been beneficial for us to do a lot of unpacking. Dramaturging our society around us. More specifically, we are interested in dealing with works that bridge the 'micro dramaturgy' that situates around a concrete project with the 'macro dramaturgy' of the social, and seeing how our art influences our culture. Process the artmaking but also why we make the art. We are here because we want to learn from each other and contribute more to our global citizenship. The creating is in the ideation, it's in the conversation.

Read more about the International Dramaturgy Lab [HERE](#).

LMDA Announces Grants and Awards Recipients

LMDA is pleased to announce the recipients of The Innovation Grant, The Field Grant, The Early Career Dramaturg (ECD) Residency Grant.



David Clauson



Lindsay A. Jenkins (L.J.)



Merlin Simard

The Innovation Grant

LMDA is pleased to announce the recipient of our inaugural Innovation Grant, which awards \$1500 to support an artist who is pushing the boundaries of dramaturgical work. This year's recipient of The Innovation Grant is David Clauson.

The Alternative Canon is a free online sourcebook to help artists and educators challenge Eurocentric, patriarchal, racist, and other biases in theater history. Originally conceived by Preying Womantis, an ad-hoc, anonymous feminist collective founded in 2016, the project was passed over to its current

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This project is the next phase of The Alternative Canon, which began as a sourcebook of plays from before 1945 from outside the Western canon, or by women or writers of color. Over three panel discussions in 2021, a diverse group of artists and educators will explore new, inclusive approaches to theater history in the classroom and on stage. How do we teach and stage works by writers from under-resourced communities? How do we understand, contextualize, and discuss plays from radically different cultural traditions? How can artists and scholars have difficult conversations with organizations and audiences about decolonizing theater history? By the end of our three sessions, the panels, recorded and available for free online, will form a practical toolkit to answer these difficult questions.

The Field Grant

This grant of \$1000 is given annually to support a dramaturg-led project that fosters an expanded understanding of the dramaturgical field. LMDA is pleased to announce this year's recipient is Lindsay A. Jenkins (L.J.). Lindsay holds an M.A. in Theatre from California State University, Northridge. She is particularly passionate about Black Performance Heritage, connecting past performances to contemporary experiences. L.J. is the founder of [Maroon Arts and Culture](#), an organization dedicated to empowerment through performance, arts education and cultural programming.

Afrocentric theatre is rooted in a long history that decentralizes text in favor of embodied performance practices. Therefore, when developing and devising works that emphasize Black aesthetics, experiences and performance heritages, it is critical that the dramaturgical methods be in alignment. *Sandbranch* is a devised theatre project that seeks to explore and expand on Afrocentric dramaturgical methods that take the research off the page and put it into the body. Developing a more culturally grounded and embodied approach to dramaturgy will hopefully provide a more connected foundation from which Black theatre collaborators can make discoveries in the development process.

The ECD Residency Grant

This grant of \$1500 is given to an Early Career Dramaturg to assist a mentor dramaturg in a professional setting. The grant has been awarded to Merlin Simard.

Merlin Simard (iel/elle/they/she) is an award-winning, disabled, Franco-Ontarian, queer, trans-feminine performer, playwright, dramaturge, and filmmaker originally from Tiohtiá:ke (Montréal) now based in Tkarón:to (Toronto). They wrote FEAR OF MEN (in development at Theatre Passe Muraille), ZADDY ISSUES (In development at Ergo Arts Theatre) and E-TRANSFERS (Buddies In Bad Times/BCurrent/NTS (co-written with Gabe Maharjan)). Merlin currently holds the position of Dramaturgy Intern at Theatre Passe Muraille.

Where the spirit world and the real-world meet, lies a world unapologetically crafted and performed by critically acclaimed trans identified artist, Samson Bonkeabantu Brown. *11:11* explores the other side of fear through the eyes of a young, Black transman struggling to understand the ancestral messages saturating his dreams.

<http://www.lmda.org>.

LMDA CONFERENCE 2021

Without Borders: Dramaturgy in the New Decade

[Digital + In-Person]

Sin Fronteras: Dramaturgismo en la nueva década

[digital + en persona]

June [Junio] 2021

We will kick-off the conference on June 1st with **digital asynchronous content** available on LMDA's Virtual Hub 2021.

We will follow up with **digital synchronous content** on June 17th and 18th.

And we will wrap it up with an **in-person gathering in Ciudad de México**, with regional activities on June 26th and 27th, and panels at Centro Cultural del Bosque* on June 28th and June 29th in Mexico City.

*This in-person gathering is organized by LMDA México with the support of Coordinación Nacional de Teatro of Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (INBAL).

The 2021 Conference will be fully bilingual and will connect dramaturgs, literary managers, and performing arts' creators from México, the United States, Canada, and beyond to share ideas and experiences about what constitutes the idea of "dramaturgy without borders".

Panelists will be able to present in English and/or Spanish, and all content will be accessible in both languages through simultaneous oral interpretation or subtitles.

We are thrilled to finally be able to host the conference in Ciudad de México, but we are also aware that despite increasing COVID-19 vaccination, it might still be difficult for some of our members to travel in June due to ongoing health and economic concerns. If you are located in the United States or in Canada and you are not able to fly to México for the conference, there might be a chance your region can host a local gathering.

The **local gatherings** will unite small groups of conference attendees who want to meet in person and watch together the livestream of the panels that will be taking place in Mexico City; there might also be opportunities for coffee, meals, and local networking events.

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Regional Activities, or your Regional VP.

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

The Conference Committee is seeking proposals for the conference 2021 digital and in-person sessions including panels, roundtables, workshops, and/or other dynamic conversations about what constitutes the idea of “dramaturgy without borders.”

We are specially interested in engaging with artists from México and exploring the ways in which dramaturgy is practiced in different contexts.

If you want to submit a proposal, click [here](#).

The deadline to submit all the proposals for the digital + in person conference has been PUSHED TO MARCH 31st, 2021.

If you have any further questions about the conference, please contact Brenda at imdamexico@lmda.org

HOT TOPICS

The University Caucus of LMDA will continue its tradition of sponsoring a **HOT TOPICS** session during the digital synchronous portion of our annual conference in June 2021. Hot Topics invites all LMDA members (not just academics!) to share a provocative question, assertion, issue, or project with which they are currently passionately engaged, in order to initiate conversations and collaborations, or to address pressing issues for our community. The catch? Each presenter has only 5 minutes! The strict time limit allows for multiple presentations and follow-up conversations. Presenters should prepare their 5-minute speeches carefully to introduce their topic and welcome others to join in discussion following all presentations.

For the very first time in the history of Hot Topics, this year panelists will be able to do their presentations in English and/or Spanish and all the conference attendees will have access to oral simultaneous interpretation in both languages.

To submit a **HOT TOPICS** proposal (or if you have questions about this format), contact Jane Barnette, Vice President for University Relations, at jane@ku.edu. Proposals include your name and any affiliations, your topic title, and a 30-word (maximum) summary of your talk’s content.

PLAYWRIGHTS UNDER THE RADAR

LMDA will present its Playwrights Under the Radar session during the digital synchronous portion of this summer’s annual conference in June 2021, and you are invited to participate. This is a great way

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international radar.

Using the popular Hot Topics format, each presenter will get five minutes to sing the praises of their chosen playwright. Ideally, this playwright has had several successful, but local productions. You believe this playwright deserves a bigger stage and brighter spotlight. Now you can tell us why.

For the very first time in the history of Playwrights Under the Radar, this year panelists will be able to do their presentations in English and/or Spanish and all the conference attendees will have access to oral simultaneous interpretation in both languages.

If you're excited to tell the world about your little-known, but awesomely talented playwright, sign up now. We have only a dozen spots available, and the deadline for signing up is March 31st.

To sign up, or to hear more about Playwrights Under the Radar, please email Bryan Moore orionbcm@yahoo.com

LMDA's Conference Committee 2021

Lindsey R. Barr, Ken Cerniglia, Martine Green-Rogers, Lourdes Guzmán, Bryan Moore, Brian Quirt, and VP of México and conference coordinator, Brenda Muñoz Salazar (:

If you have any further questions about the conference, please contact Brenda at [**imdamexico@lmda.org**](mailto:imdamexico@lmda.org)

Renew Your Membership Today!

Our 2020 memberships expired on January 20th, so now is the time to renew! Please visit [our website](#) to select one of the following memberships, all of which include full [member benefits](#), voting rights, and eligibility for office:

- Institutional: \$200 – for theatres, universities, agencies, and other organizations; includes up to four individual memberships with individual member profiles
- Individual: \$80 – regular ol' professional membership!
- Early Career: \$40 – discounted individual membership for students, interns, and those within five years of graduation
- Introductory: \$25 – a first-year discount for new members (tell your friends and colleagues!)
- Pay What You Can: \$5-\$75 – a new option this year to lower the barrier for becoming a member of LMDA in light of the ongoing financial impact of the pandemic

Please log in to www.lmda.org to renew your membership and update your profile for 2021 now!

Should you have questions or concerns about the renewal process or your membership, please contact LMDA Administrator Lindsey Barr at lmdanyc@gmail.com.

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If you want to get more involved with dramaturgs in your region, please email regional@lmda.org

Metro Philadelphia Regional VP, Alix Rosenfeld

Philly meetups have been offering a space for communal gathering, building shared resources, and creating networking opportunities. Twice per month dramaturgs from the Philadelphia region have been gathering on zoom to develop and foster new channels for dramaturgical connectivity. Some exciting developments include a database of local dramaturgs to share with local producing companies, and a BIPOC affinity space for local folks to 'meet & greet' and share experiences and practices towards the advancement of our field.

Contact metrophilly@lmda.org for more info on future meetups.

Region Facebook Groups

[Canada](#)

[Mountain West](#) (Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado)

[Greater Midwest](#) (IL, IN, IA, western KY, MI, MN, OH, WI)

[Metro Bay Area](#)

[Metro Chicago](#)

[Metro NYC](#)

[Metro Boston](#)

[Central Appalachia](#) (WV, VA, eastern KY, northern TN, and western NC)

[Florida](#)

[Metro Philadelphia](#)

[Mexico](#)

[Mid-Atlantic](#) (DC/Maryland/DE)

[Northeast](#) (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York State, Rhode Island, Vermont, Pennsylvania)

[Northwest](#) (Idaho, Oregon, Washington)

[Southern California](#)

[Plains](#) (Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska)

[Southeast](#) (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, eastern North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, southern Tennessee, western NC)

[Southwest](#) (Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, California)

[Third Coast](#) (Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas)

Your Dramaturgy Ad Here!

We're reserving this high-value newsletter real estate for our Institutional Members. Do you have a job posting you want our readers to see, an M.F.A. program looking for a well-qualified applicant pool, or a festival you want to make sure smart dramaturgs have on their radar? This is the place for it! **Institutional Memberships are only \$200**, and they come with four individual member profiles for your organization to divvy out as you see fit.

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Let your organizational leadership know that we'd love them to [join the LMDA party](#).



[Pandemic Response: Resources for Artist](#)

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E-mail communications@lmda.org.

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