

Katharina Pewny, Johan Callens, Jeroen Coppens (eds.). *Dramaturgies in the New Millennium. Relationality, Performativity and Potentiality*. Tübingen: Narr Verlag 2014, 216 pp.

### **What is Dramaturgy?**

For many years this question interested only a few, presupposing a knowledge of the old texts of the Enlightenment from Lessing to Schiller and referring only to the classical canon of drama in a way, that hardly appeared to animate contemporary performing arts in our time. The work of dramaturgy was, in addition, accessible almost exclusively to ‘insiders’. It was communicated internally as a form of practical knowledge of the field rather than theorized upon or publically discussed.

This situation has fundamentally changed. Over the last decade or more, a number of universities have begun offering degree courses, primarily Master’s programmes, which aim both to teach dramaturgy in all its forms as well as to put the field itself up for discussion. Most of these programmes cooperate closely with artists, theatres, production houses, and festivals while also cultivating partnerships on research projects with theatre, dance, and performance studies. They afford a platform between theory and practice for re-thinking and re-inventing dramaturgy, apart from the everyday operations of the theatre.

### **The Current Climate, with Dark Clouds**

This development is a reaction to a new situation in the performing arts, which has moved away from the classically orientation towards a text or score. Under the banner of performativity and postdramatic theatre, the field of dramaturgy is instead concerned today with reflecting current artistic shifts in the face of economic pressure and upheavals in the media landscape. They correspond with a dissolution of boundaries in the arts, internationalization, and new possibilities and forms of production.

For nearly ten years a new conception of dramaturgy has been developed in theoretical discourse. Along with the British study *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Behrndt and Turner 2008), anthologies appeared on the subject (Gritzner, Primavesi and Roms 2009, Stegemann 2009, Behrndt and Turner 2010, Roeder and Zehelein 2011, Hansen and Callison 2015) as well as examinations of the field’s history (Danan 2011, Deutsch-Schreiner 2016). The present collection *Dramaturgies in the New Millennium*, which originates from a working group of the German Gesellschaft für Theaterwissenschaft (Society for Theatre Studies)

and presents the results of a conference at the University of Ghent, is well-suited to resume this discussion. The book lays out a decidedly trans-European perspective by assembling positions from a variety of theatre traditions. While half of the authors work in Belgium and the Netherlands, the others write from France, Austria, Great Britain, and Germany. The editors therefore stress the plural, *dramaturgies*, at the same time that the book clearly focuses on a re-formulation of the conventional critical function of dramaturgy in view of contemporary theatre. Such erstwhile governing dramatic categories as plot and character are being replaced. Hence dramaturgy (once again) comes into play as part of both the search for new organizational principles of performance as well as the conception of criteria for contemplating and evaluating those principles. A great deal of the dramaturgical discourse is thus related to those current reflections that question social and political aspects of the postdramatic or performative, ultimately trying to establish their critical-emancipatory qualities.

The collection, however, begins with Patrice Pavis, who centers his definition of dramaturgy on formal aspects. He understands classical dramaturgy as the investigation of an underlying structure, a “skeleton of a *mise en scène*, its invisible structure” (19), which can be decoded. He ultimately traces very diverse practices, which he covers in his panorama of new dramaturgies from the 1970s onward (including, for instance, devised theatre, post-narrative, visual, and dance dramaturgy), back to one similar criterion: “the formal structure of the piece, its internal order, the logic of the signifier and of the sensation” (25). This, he writes, is a “dramaturgy of the signifier” (24) and, in contrast to the past, less oriented towards semantics, subject matter, or message. Instead, he explains, with a view to Alain Platel’s *Wolf*, the most varied components are “integrated into a coherent whole, in a fusion of different intensities” (25). Is the resurgence of dramaturgy connected to the desire to relate postdramatic processes that often elude comprehension to a whole; to achieve some form of coherence? (Marianne van Kerkhoven advocates something similar when she describes dramaturgy as “the mastering of structures, the achievement of a global view”, cited on 99). Pavis’ approaches to thinking about dramaturgy as a matter of discovery and testing as well as situational trial and error appear to be more productive than the traditional emphasis on an underlying, detectable narrative, to be unveiled or even translated by the production.

Considering this, it is all the more important to clarify the concept of dramaturgy theoretically as well as historiographically. Evelyn Deutsch-Schreiner shows by way of example how deeply the history of dramaturgy is entangled with

totalitarian politics. She understands the ‘birth of dramaturgy’ as an instrument of the Enlightenment era in Germany, which she invokes with a view to Lessing’s and Schiller’s practical work in theatre. The idea of a ‘moral institution’ was misused under fascism which constructed a Reich’s Department of Dramaturgy and placed it under the control of the propaganda ministry for purposes of censorship and surveillance. Under the Nazis this resulted in every state and city theatre employing dramaturges for the first time. What was contrived on very dubious grounds then remained accepted practice after 1945. Assessing East German dramaturgical work, Deutsch-Schreiner finds it similarly propagandistic to that of Nazi dramaturges, with the exception of Brecht’s work. Here, though, an ambivalence becomes clear: the East German state encouraged production dramaturgy and the public discussion of directorial concepts, even while intending them to serve political directives and closely monitoring them. There may be something to add to this analysis, to differentiate more precisely between the dramaturgical approaches of the Nazis and the GDR. Nevertheless, the “dark side of the labour of the Enlightenment dramaturge” (55) emerges more clearly in retrospect, from the perspective of totalitarian misuse, and shows the necessity of constructing other genealogies.

### **A Social Turn**

Many of the subsequent concepts in New Dramaturgy can be thus understood as attempts to counteract dramaturgy’s legacy of ‘policing’. A central strategy in this strain is to engender an open-ended process with an indeterminate, contingent outcome. Katharina Pewny discusses the main features of just such “relational dramaturgy” by looking at collectively generated work. At the opening event of the Hamburg-based choreography centre Zentrum für Choreographie K3’s *Veronika Blumstein – Moving Heads*, myriad choreographers and performers came together, all of whose works revolved around a fictitious character named Veronika Blumstein: among the pieces were ‘invented choreographies’ that this character herself allegedly created. The theatre collective Wunderbaum from the Netherlands pondered their relationship with Californian artist Paul McCarthy in *Looking for Paul!*. Both productions were developed by a collective, a theme that appears in a number of the contributions to this book. For instance, Franziska Schößler and Hannah Speicher show, in an analysis of dramaturgical methods at the Theaterhaus Jena since 1989, how the dramaturge works as a “field-researcher” (63). Though in essence this kind of dramaturgy depends on how the encounter is conceived, the relational aesthetics of the examples can be qualified,

as Pewny couches it, as treating each respective Other as un-appropriable, “challenging the very possibility of formulating a coherent narrative” (84).

Such an ethical approach also reigns when participation is highlighted as a dramaturgical strategy of encounter. Cathy Turner and Stephen Hodge outline the principles of their work with the British group Wrights & Sites, which produces site-specific *walking art* with a participatory approach. Their notable piece *Exeter Mis-guide* (2003) took participants on ‘performative walks’ through parts of the city that otherwise largely remained hidden. Following that production the artists were invited to design programme formats, through which local inhabitants and artists would be prompted to initiate their own tours of the city along the same lines as *Mis-Guide*. This article examines the subject of participation by way of the authors’ own projects for the Wiener Festwochen, the Belluard Bollwerk international Fribourg, and the Dutch-speaking Belgian Sideways Festival.

While participation is understood here as the result of a dramaturgical-curatorial practice, Synne Behrndt analyses the participatory processes of individual works of art. The core of dramaturgical work for her lies in the creation of “conditions for exploring” that “which one cannot know yet” of conditions “for something to happen” (130). The development of a work in a ‘devising process’ is similar, Behrndt assumes, to the structure of a performance that aims to afford the audience space for association. In general the question is whether dramaturgy is more broadly a matter for the spectator, a prevailing issue in a number of the articles here. With Behrndt’s analysis of new works by Tobias Rehberger, Tino Seghal, and Olaf Eliasson it becomes clear, however, that the task of dramaturgy must be discussed itself; asking how far the openness of the participatory process really reaches; to what extent the participation of the spectator is calculated or truly free.

### **New Critique**

Beside the historiography and the social focus, other authors attempt to revive dramaturgy along these lines as an agent of criticism. Jeroen Coppens analyses the discourse of “visual dramaturgy” that has continued unabated since the 1990s, conceiving it as an intermedial practice of the “in-between”, triggering reflection on visibility itself and at the same time bringing the personal perspective of the spectator into play. Coppens makes this comprehensible with the example of Vincent Dunoyer’s choreography *The Princess Project*. Dramaturgy functions in this and other essays in the book as a theoretical-

normative term, extrapolating on the critical dimension of theatre. Thus Kati Röttger develops a programme for the “Dramaturgy of the Future”, to counteract the widespread economization of art and science. The trans-national dramaturgy she advocates would adhere to its public nature and, through “non-hierarchical sharing and transmitting of knowledge” (186), would work towards a society of equality and diversity. A highlight of her article is her revival of the Aristotelian concept of *peripeteia*, which she describes as the dramaturgical moment of crisis and potentiality where action stagnates and conventional wisdom collapses. At that point there opens up instead the possibility for “multiple stages, perspectives, and distributions of times, spaces, and bodies” (196).

Criticism of the “new spirit of capitalism” is also the central approach for Peter Boenisch, in accounting for the specifics of current processes through his historical analysis. Dramaturgy is thus not to be understood as an analysis of formal architectures. It can only operate as emancipatory if it conceives of its currency and practice newly, restarting from its roots, reviewing the “uncanny dark side of bourgeois enlightenment” (205). Boenisch undertakes exactly this by searching, with Rancière and Lacan, for the ‘other Schiller’, exceeding Schiller’s demand for a moral institution. His conception of the chorus in *The Bride of Messina* confronts the unfamiliar and looks for the experience of an “immanent difference of the thing from itself, where the thing is no longer identical to itself” (209). Dramaturgy has political value by working towards the “partition of the sensible”, which alters our perception and our relationship to reality.

### **Dissolution and Regeneration**

Is it significant that expertise in text, tradition for dramaturgy, has reemerged in this concluding argument based on an analysis of Schiller?

In some of the articles, which understandably refrain from addressing this issue, one finds oneself wishing to see the specifics of dramaturgy more powerfully emphasized and theoretically parsed. The flexibility of the expanded term occasionally results in the reader getting the impression that one could substitute the term “dramaturgy” with “theatre”, “mise-en-scene”, “aesthetics” or the like, without substantially changing the argument. In order to grasp the specificity of it, one could readapt examinations of a work’s reception that were central to dramaturgical consideration from Aristotle to Lessing and on to Brecht. On the one hand, the book repeatedly takes up the topos that the spectator’s free subjective association stands today in place of a prefabricated, recognizable content. Yet how could this objective, with its shift in emphasis away from given

interpretations, be differentiated in such a way that spectators' choices do not appear capricious or do not matter at all?

On the other hand, a number of articles carry on the classical category of reception in reflecting more general political and ethical dimensions of theatre or performance, though eliciting the question whether these are dramaturgical or rather a matter of aesthetics.

The impression that dramaturgy has become so diffuse that everything it should possess in terms of knowledge and expertise also applies to directing, acting, set design etc., is likewise a proof of our times. Nonetheless theatre practice often enough needs the special position of a dramaturge. Looking at it from this angle, the position of the outside-view within theatre (hence the border between in- and external) could be more strongly reflected between theory and practice. Christel Stalpaert's article brings this dissolving-restoring ambivalence to the fore when she reports how dramaturge Myriam Van Imschoot appears as a performer in Meg Stuart's improvisational dance project *Auf den Tisch!*, and all the others (performers, dancers, spectators) create a "dramaturgy in the moment of performing" (97) together with her. By way of example, the dramaturge here abandons her position as "onlooker", "theoretical outsider", or "outside eye" to become instead an "outside-body", "trying to put feeling into knowledge along an aesthetic of intensities" (102). Stalpaert's "ethics of corporeal dramaturgy" steers our gaze to the specific practice of a person sitting (and performing) between chairs, between roles.

Along with theoretical work for understanding dramaturgy, future research will need to include greater knowledge of the rehearsal process, the working structure, the methods. Fanne Boland's article presents an approach on this score, describing practical-experimental workshops with Master's degree students of dramaturgy in Amsterdam, Ghent, and other cities, and contemplating the institutional and economic situation of dramaturges. More case studies could help to connect dramaturgical research and exploration back to the current, much-discussed question of the rehearsal process, which has thus far been oriented almost exclusively toward the field of stage direction. What precisely is meant, for instance, when André Lepecki reports on his dramaturgical work for Meg Stuart, claiming that "dance Dramaturgy implies the reconfiguration of one's own whole anatomy, not just the eyes. [...] I enter to find a (new) body" (24)?

Whether prospective studies will now start from the point of 'fieldwork', proceed along historiographic lines, or analyse contemporary examples, they will not be

able to avoid theoretical reflection on the concept of dramaturgy itself. The volume *Dramaturgies in the New Millennium* is a worthwhile point of departure for such considerations, as it demonstrates how wide the spectrum of current tendencies is and succeeds in rendering theory fertile for a new understanding of dramaturgy in our times.

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