

Rehearsing Dramaturgy: "Time is passing"¹

Geoff Proehl

There is a place where time stands still.
Raindrops stand motionless in the air.
Pendulums of clocks float mid-swing. Dogs
raise their muzzles in silent howls . . . The
aromas of dates, mangoes, coriander, cumin
are suspended in space.

Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams*²

I'm on a shuttle between Kennedy and the upper west side of Manhattan on my way to a conference for literary managers and dramaturgs at Columbia University. A man and a woman, a husband and wife in their late sixties (I guess), sit in the seat in front of me. The man keeps asking questions of the driver, worrying out loud every step of the way and in each question this kernel of vulnerability often seen in older travelers who know just how dangerous the journey can be, travelers with softer bones and slower reflexes. I saw this in my father at a certain age, this fear-born intensity of process that could be maddening. Relatively younger, I have asked the worrying questions myself, but on this journey I am more smug. I have taken this ride before. I know where I am going.

Question after question from the older man, worry after worry, until finally we turn down the street that is his destination. Happily, with relief, the man recognizes where he is and he announces that this is the street that holds his Holiday Inn. With a castrating scorn the much younger driver tells the older man that he *knows* where the hotel is. In front of the other passengers, this rebuke has a surprising power. The man explains that he was only telling his wife, but this feels like an excuse. The shuttle pulls up in front of the Holiday Inn on the opposite side of a rush hour street that is, of course, filled with yellow cabs going fifty miles an hour. To reach their destination, the couple will have to dodge mid-block traffic with the driver as their guide. They tentatively step into the traffic. They make it to the other side. We travel on in silence. I try to act as if I know

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where I am going, that unlike the older man I am in control, not struggling to maintain it.

This couple reminds me of Chekhov and time and dramaturgy.

Paulina's Moment

In act two of *The Sea Gull*, Paulina says to Dorn, "Time is passing." Arkadina and Shamrayev have just had their brief battle over horses and have left the stage. For a moment these two old lovers are alone. "Yevgeny, my darling, please take me away with you. Time is passing; we're not young anymore. If only before our days end we could stop hiding, stop lying. (*Pause.*)" Dorn answers her from out of the pause, "I'm fifty-five. It's too late for me to change now."³ For four speeches they have the stage to themselves, then Nina reappears picking flowers. The briefness of their time together there, in one place, in a moment in which they can speak to one another, in a moment in which language has at least the potential for some tentative effectiveness, stands for their experience of time in general. Although it has made a place for them to come together, it also works against them. It is finite. It only offers so many opportunities and soon those opportunities will pass. According to Dorn, they already have.

The ivy begins to cover my office window. Soon the groundskeeper will come with an enormous lift from which he will trim it away, but if he did not, eventually it would cover the window entirely. All the incoming light would be filtered green. Time in *Sea Gull* is like the ivy without the groundskeeper: progressive, relentless. In this version of Chekhovian time we might find love or at least longing, but only with the knowledge that the object of our love or longing will one day disappear. If Paulina and Dorn were to run off together, escape from Chekhov's text, they might well become the couple on the shuttle bus, ever more vulnerable to time, worried by it, humbled by it, asking the driver question after question to secure the safety of their journey, hoping they will make it across the busy New York street where time will one day overtake them. For them, time does not stand still at some center as it does in one of Einstein's dreams in Lightman's novel. Stillness is what time is not.

In rehearsing *Sea Gull*, it was the dramaturg who first drew attention to this particular scene and to those three words: "Time is passing." The twenty-year-old actress playing a woman twice her age would soon show us the ferocity that a deep knowledge of those words could provoke, a ferocity that was both a plea to Dorn to act and a moment of anagnorisis that understood action's limits. Now and then in rehearsal or performance we saw in the work of this actor what it meant to be broken by time, a moment filled with anger and sadness and joy. To say we saw this once or twice is, of course, not a criticism but a compliment. A luminous awareness of transience is rare.⁴ How much rarer to embody that awareness.

I want the dramaturg to know what Paulina knows, feel what Paulina feels.

Time and Rehearsal

Time shimmers in the air of rehearsal.⁵ It continually vibrates in and amongst the ensemble of theater makers. The director notices whether or not the actors are on time. If they are not, the stage manager (time, especially mechanical time, personified) will call them. Rehearsals begin on time, even if everyone is not present. If time is ignored, then we fear the group will slowly begin later and later each day: progressive, temporal deterioration. The stage manager will signal when to take a break. For union actors, Equity rules spell out these intervals in detail. We work from one pot of coffee or cup of tea or bottle of water to the next. We compute our lunch or dinner breaks, deciding whether or not we have time to go to this restaurant or another. The director nervously glances at her watch to see how much of the four-hour rehearsal has elapsed, wanting to move on but knowing that the current scene needs more work, more time. The actors on call for that scene have been waiting for twenty minutes. They are bored. Later in the rehearsal the stage manager stands and stretches. His body has been in the chair long enough to grow stiff. An actor sleeps on the couch in the Green Room. Another balances a checkbook or reads, making use of time in waiting. One of the most important actions of rehearsal may simply be to wait in a particular way, in a way not unlike the waiting of a gardener or farmer.⁶ The end of the rehearsal draws near. The director works a scene for five extra minutes. The stage manager is ready to go. The director tells him he can start to close down the theater. The actors are ready to go as well, but give these extra moments beyond their scheduled time. The director does not want to let go of the rehearsal. Even after completing the scene, she holds them there for another minute with a few final words. Everyone departs. If it is late, many will not be able to sleep for a while. Their bodies and minds will need time to unwind. Some go for drinks or, if students in a university production, to study into the night and then drink. Some will find the play in their dreams. Many will have nightmares of the show beginning and of not knowing their lines, of not being ready on time. The director will awake at 4 a.m., unable to keep the play out of her conscious thoughts any longer. The next day time slides toward rehearsal. An actor misses a scheduled costume fitting, perhaps rebelling against the intrusion of rehearsal time into non-rehearsal time or maybe so caught up in rehearsal time that regular time is confused. Up until a certain hour, other work (teaching, errands, studies, administrative duties, laundry, paying the bills) receives attention, but as rehearsal gets closer, it draws the individual into its flow, often hours before the official call.

The worst days are those that allow no transition time, days in which the abruptness of the rehearsal's beginning jars the mind and the body.

Underneath the idea of rehearsal in general is a belief in progress the belief that over time our work will get better. Historically, we read accounts of periods in European theater history prior to Saxe-Meiningen or Stanislavski when rehearsals were limited to a few gatherings and our first reflex is to wonder how anyone could make theater under such shortened circumstances. We read of the extended periods of rehearsal time available in theaters not as subject to commercial pressures and envy the hours available to a Bertolt Brecht or a Peter Stein: Fuegi in writing about the Berliner Ensemble production of *Chalk Circle* tallies the number of hours spent on one aspect of rehearsal or another ("40 rehearsal days with 100 hours of rehearsal for the orchestra and the singers; 70 rehearsal days with 165 hours for the dancers; 30 days with 60 hours for the scenes with children") and we join him in quantitative awe.⁷ We desire the extended, process-oriented rehearsal periods of the Wooster Group or Jeune Lune. We bemoan the economic expediciencies that make three or four week rehearsals a norm for regional theater productions. We want more time because we believe in its efficacy. We need a few more minutes, another hour, another week, a month, a year. Time could save us, if only we had enough of it.

Comedy in rehearsal, however, introduces a counter-notion. For comedy, directors often want less, not more, rehearsal time. Comedy underscores problems of time and repetition. The physical bit was funny the first time, but now, as we try to do it again and again, its humor vanishes into routine. Time had, apparently, killed it. Invention (or an audience) must rescue the work, revitalize it, save it from time, counter its deadening effects. But invention, also, feels time's pressures, wearies under its demands. Comedy stands for this other aspect of rehearsal time, its backward movement. One day we go into rehearsal and the work is, at least to our eyes in the moment, amazing. The next day, we return and cannot find what was there just a few hours before. Time has taken away what we had and left little more than a memory. In reading David Selbourne's journal of the rehearsals for Brook's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a predominant impression is of exhausting transcendence followed by its almost immediate evaporation. One rehearsal soaring; the next rehearsal, flat: flight and then crashing back to ground. It is a cliché to speak of the evanescence of performance, but it is a fundamental cliché. That evanescence, of course, also infects each moment of the rehearsal process. Playscripts happily offer us their materiality and an apparent degree of continuity (one reason we fetishize them), but we only have access to them in and through sensibilities immersed in time.

Time that shimmers and like the heat of an August afternoon carries with it a certain melancholy: summer warmth, days and nights in which the tomato and

zucchini will grow lush in the garden but also the suggestion of fall, of warmth to rotting, of expenditure, of a surfeiting that will take its course, of the slow and wonderful turn from harvest to ground, to the necessary cold barren and dryness of winter. Every other moment (at least potentially) of rehearsal reminds us of our mortality, of departures imminent and not so imminent. Every moment (more or less) reminds us that we will eventually say good-bye to every thing and everyone we love. Time's shimmer is not only the shimmer of expectancy but also the shimmer of loss. In addition to the particular fiction of a given playscript, we perform this sense of time that rehearsal gives us. It is our ever-present subtext.

Time and The Dramaturg

In this article for a collection of pieces on dramaturgy and the dramaturg, I have taken half of my allotted pages to describe a moment from lived experience, a moment from a play, and some of the ways we experience time in rehearsal. I have done so in part because in the conversation around dramaturgy we have said enough for the moment about what a dramaturg is and what a dramaturg does.⁸ I want to understand the work of dramaturgy as an art or as a science: as making or describing. To the extent that it is either, we will not be able to quickly figure it out and then pass on its essence to others. As art or science (as in the art of acting or the science of physics rather than technique) it will, in reflection and conception, have the potential to challenge its practitioners and its theoreticians. It will inspire productivity, not reductive stasis. As a specific role within the rehearsal process (i.e.—a title that appears on a program with a name opposite it) or even as a more ambiguous function within a collaborative production process (i.e.—members of an ensemble do the *dramaturgy* for a particular show), dramaturgy as such in North American theater is in its earliest stages. Its practitioners have made a frame or frames, but even they will change. The structure theater makers in the United States and Canada have conceived in the last thirty years is far from finished or furnished, nor is it in any way monolithic. This sense of incompleteness and consequent ambiguity is one of dramaturgy's particular pleasures: this sense of potentiality unrealized, of the possibility of creating new knowledge, new experience. We do not understand what shape this potential will take. This particular combination of participation, observation, and reflection has important antecedents, but it offers a unique melding, under a title still new enough to produce puzzled looks even from theater makers. The ultimate test of this particular conceit (dramaturgy and the dramaturg) will be its productivity: its ability to attract interesting sensibilities, to inspire new insights, to make better theater.

And so I mean these sentimental images of a couple on a bus, of Chekhov, of time, rehearsal, and the dramaturg as an example of one direction in

which we might continue this conversation. In his novel, Lightman sketches more than two dozen ways of dreaming time, framed as Einstein's dreams in April, May and June of 1905, dreams Lightman imagines Einstein had while conceiving his theory of time. As dramaturgs we might consider how Einstein's dreams relate to our role within the rehearsal process, to rehearsal in general, to the plays we make. In some instances, the dramaturg will be like the person in the dream of 16 April 1905, floating into the past, as in the backward flow of a stream ("time is like a flow of water, occasionally displaced by a bit of debris, a passing breeze . . . birds, soil, people caught in the branching tributary find themselves suddenly carried to the past"⁹): a rehearsal's memory that must carefully move between a knowledge of the present and a knowledge of the past, aware of the power of either to affect the other.¹⁰ At others, the dramaturg will embody a time that "brings increasing order" to the world of the play: in such a world, the "fragrant odor of a passing cinnamon cart intensifies, not dissipates, with time."¹¹ On still others, the dramaturg might resemble the individuals in the dream of 26 April 1905 who live in houses on stilts and on mountaintops where time moves at a more leisurely pace, for in this world "time flows more slowly the farther from the center of the earth": her role will be to counteract the rush of rehearsal.¹² Her questions will slow the director down, just as they will also encourage the actor to pause and reflect. Her involvement in the process will mean a drawing out of time for everyone. She is costly, inefficient, the opposite of an assembly line. She extends the process instead of shortening it. She dreams of seasons of plays long before their rehearsals begin and after the final production is over, she lingers in the theater, chatting with audience members in a post-show session, playing theme and variation on the experience of the play. On still other days, she will live totally in the moment, subject to impulse, bringing not order but disorder to the rehearsal hall: "In this acausal world, scientists are helpless."¹³ Of course, Lightman's novel is only one among many beginning points (literary and theoretical) for a consideration of time, as is the role of time itself in relationship to the work of the dramaturg. Time is here the ingredient the chemist injects into a solution to make more manifest one or more of that solution's particular properties. The relative newness of dramaturgy in contemporary theater practice means that the opportunities for various washes of ingredient across solution are numerous: the body,¹⁴ the limitations of language, space, collaboration, community, the liberal arts, creativity, the natural sciences¹⁵—these and others might be dispersed across the field.

Almost all of these potential topics involve rehearsal in one form or another. Our approaches to dramaturgy will at best be worked out in rehearsal and with its methods. If dramaturgy does not have an ongoing place in rehearsal, even if indirectly through the writing of dramaturgs as critics or scholars, then it may

not have much of a place at all in theater. Our work with and around this concept will at its best be as complex, ambiguous, and unpredictable as the work of rehearsal itself, powerful enough in turn to change the way we rehearse, as in some ways it already has.¹⁶ Dramaturgy should force us to rehearse the way we make theater and in turn we should continually rehearse the idea of the dramaturg, applying to it all of the ways of working we have developed and are still finding to make theatrical performances. In a manuscript for a forthcoming book on representations of rehearsal in modern drama, Robert Baker-White gives an overview of these processes that suggests why we value them:

[W]hat I suggest in these chapters is a general theory of rehearsal as an open but purposefully directed activity, as a form of human and textual interaction that is organized and governed—by individuals, but also by norms of tradition and of communities—but that also allows its participants the opportunity to recreate themselves with a special kind of freedom. In my view, rehearsal provides a model for ethical activity, a paradigm for engaging others in a way that both respects their alterity and allows for serious personal interaction as well.¹⁷

Baker-White positions rehearsal as a way of knowing, a way that values “provisionality, contingency, unsettledness, flexibility and multiplicity . . . dialectically opposed to the stability, predictability, and finalized qualities of performance.”¹⁸ Our experience in this way of knowing is one of our greatest gifts, a gift we need to apply more persistently to all aspects of our work in and around the theater. Eventually we will not have to leave rehearsal at all.

Mark Bly is currently editing volume two of *The Production Notebooks* in which dramaturgs chronicle rehearsals at various theaters in the United States and Canada.¹⁹ One of the major contributions of the discourse on dramaturgy at conferences, in journals and in books like Bly’s has been to encourage more writing about rehearsal. The conversation around dramaturgy should increasingly focus, not only on what the dramaturg does, but also on the experience of rehearsal itself, as do the authors in Bly’s *Notebooks*. In recent years, scholarly attention has shifted from text to performance, to a large extent jumping over the rehearsal experience. Dramaturgy provides a space in which to think carefully and attentively about this space between text and performance. Dramaturgy might take as one of its areas of expertise reflection about rehearsal, beginning with why the experience of rehearsal is often closer to our ideals for performance than performance itself.²⁰

Paulina makes an appearance in this essay, because having met her in rehearsal I have not been able to get her and her three words out of my mind. She is to some extent that irritant, that grain of sand or wound that we both fear and love. She bears testimony to the power of an image, phrase, character, or metaphor from a play, story or poem to lodge itself in our consciousness and slowly work on us over time, accumulating weight and density until it exhausts or transforms itself. Her presence makes her available as a tool for extending the conversation about the dramaturg. In the academy today we regularly turn to explicitly theoretical writings as ways of opening our work, often to good effect, but Paulina's presence asks us to look in other directions as well. In *Dramaturgy in American Theater*, John Lutterbie writes persuasively about the useful role that contemporary theory can play in the work of the dramaturg.²¹ I agree with his thesis, but in our current love affair with theory we may be neglecting the usefulness of literature itself as a way of theorizing, as a way of reflecting upon a discipline as art or science. Dramaturgy, immersed as it is in scripts, playmaking, plays, and the liberal arts, might use specific images from the plays, poems, and stories with which it works as beginning points for its next round of conversations. I understand the fascination theory, have enjoyed it myself, but increasingly the reading of theory feels more like a burden than a delight and so this turn toward Paulina and her friends, this turn toward the useful pleasures of poetry.

I want the dramaturg to know what Paulina knows, to know that time is passing, to be as susceptible to time as the actor who plays Paulina, as the character that we know by this name, as the author whom we credit with conceiving it. I want the idea of the dramaturg to be not above the world of the play, not superior to it, but within it, not a dramaturgy from on high, but a dramaturgy from within,²² a dramaturgy that understands it must struggle to be as alive to the world of the play as the characters that people it, a dramaturgy that feels it must use all its intelligence and passion and physical sensibility to keep up with Paulina and Dorn and even Shamrayev. If the playscripts with which we work don't demand this, then we shouldn't be doing them.

Paulina is in a space with some joy but few good options, a place of brokenness and vulnerability. Her body is growing older. She is jealous of the attentions others receive. And yet, she has some language, some awareness, and she uses it as best she can: honestly and compassionately, even in the face of its failures. She speaks from a difficult place, knowing it is difficult. I think she would make a good dramaturg, and so too, I suppose, would the couple preparing to step out of the uneasy comfort of their airport shuttle to face mid-block Manhattan traffic on a busy weekday afternoon in the middle of June.

Notes

1. For some, this piece will seem more sentimental and journalistic than rigorous and analytical. For my own thoughts on academia and charges of sentimentality, see “Epilogue: The Sentimental Spectator” in *Coming Home Again: American Family Drama and the Figure of the Prodigal* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1997). I am intentionally interested in blurring distinctions between academic and more informal styles of writing. In other words, I plead guilty to both charges.

2. Alan Lightman, *Einstein’s Dreams* (New York: Warner, 1993) 70–71. Mark Bly of the Yale School of Drama recently brought this novel to my attention. He uses it in his teaching there.

3. Anton Chekhov, *The Sea Gull*, trans. Jean-Claude van Itallie (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 37.

4. The dramaturg was Gretchen Haley; the actor playing Paulina, Annie Haser, both then students at the University of Puget Sound.

5. It might be more accurate to talk throughout about temporality and temporalities instead of time and to situate them carefully within specific historical contexts. But temporality is an ugly word, especially when compared to the simplicity of the word *time*. It is a given of this essay and Lightman’s novel that individuals and societies may perceive or construct time differently, although I do not believe historical analysis can account for time any more completely than semiotic analysis can account for performance. Depending on the context, I use the word *time* to refer to temporality in general (times) or to a specific form of temporality (e.g.—time as diminution or loss). I trust the reader to make the distinction.

6. Lee Devin of People’s Light and Theatre Company recently underscored for me this idea of rehearsal as waiting.

7. John Fuegi, *Bertolt Brecht: Chaos, According to Plan* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 161.

8. For individuals who would like a more detailed discussion of these topics (what a dramaturg is and what a dramaturg does) a number of excellent resources are available beginning with two books and their bibliographies: *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Michael Lupu, and Geoff Proehl (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997) and *What is Dramaturgy?* ed. Bert Cardullo (New York: Peter Lang, 1995). Introductions to dramaturgy are also available on the web at “www.ups.edu/professionalorgs/dramaturgy” and “www.dramaturgy.net/dramaturgy.” Prior to these publications, the primary sources were two groundbreaking issues of *Theater* (10.1 and 17.3) published in 1978 and 1986 under the editorships of Joel Schechter and Mark Bly.

9. Lightman 13

10. Michael Lupu of the Guthrie Theater first introduced to me the idea of the dramaturg as memory.

11. Lightman 67–68.

12. Lightman 28.

13. Lightman 40. For more detailed examples of some of these models see, for example, Anne Cattaneo, “Dramaturgy: An Overview” (on dramaturgy as research and development) 3–15; Mark Bly, “Bristling with Multiple Possibilities” (on dramaturgy and the questioning spirit) 48–55; Royston Coppenger and Travis Preston, “The Way We Work” (on dramaturgy and the role of impulse and anarchy) 165–175; Jayme Koszyn, “The Dramaturg and the Irrational” (on the tension between Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies in the work of the dramaturg) 276–82, all in *Dramaturgy in American Theater*.

14. A number of dramaturgs in the United States and Canada have been working with choreographers. See, for example, Heidi Gilpin, “Shaping Critical Spaces: Issues in the Dramaturgy of Movement Performance” *Dramaturgy in American Theater* 83–87.

15. For an example of dramaturgical study engaging the natural sciences see Bly, “Bristling,” *Dramaturgy in American Theater* 48–55.

16. See, for example, Royston Coppenger and Travis Preston, “The Way We Work” 165–175 and other essays in “Section 3: Models of Collaboration” in *Dramaturgy in American Theater* 121–240.

17. Robert Baker-White, *The Text in Play: Representations of Rehearsal in Modern Drama* (Bucknell UP, forthcoming) I:22.

18. Baker-White I: 14.

19. Mark Bly, *The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process, Volume I* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996).

20. Baker-White in conversation.

21. John Lutterbie, "Theory and the Practice of Dramaturgy," *Dramaturgy in American Theater* 220–240.