

Dramaturgy in Community-Based Theatre

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“The real job of all good dramaturgs is to extend and explore territory that the theater has not yet made its own,” writes Anne Cattaneo, dramaturg of New York’s Lincoln Center Theatre.¹ Dramaturgy at community-based theatres does just that as the words, the lives, the dreams, and the history of forgotten communities take shape on stages, in community centers, or on the streets. This new “territory,” in turn, requires new ways of working that stretch even the very flexible methodologies of traditional dramaturgy. Community-based dramaturgy initiates unique script development strategies and often redefines “text.” Community-based dramaturgy places the authority for the artistic process primarily in the hands of the audience community. Community-based dramaturgy, closely interwoven with community development, often represents a form of social activism. Thus when looking at dramaturgy in community-based theatres, it is important to examine how it functions not only within the production process, but also in its relationship to the audience community and to the larger social system.

As a “creative and critical activity,”² dramaturgy existed as an essential part of the production process long before the term came into use, and that role remains the same today. Over the years, it has been defined as a profession, a set of tasks, or a theory. The editors of *Dramaturgy in the American Theater: A Source Book* suggest that dramaturgy “is not so much a matter of how to do it as it is about the development of an interconnected set of ideas, attitudes, feelings, skills, and behaviors: in short, an education.”³ And Michael Lupu, Senior Dramaturg at the Guthrie Theatre, asserts that “dramaturgy functions as a sort of monitoring device meant to keep the process on course... it forms the underpinning of all intuitive or deliberate choices, thoughts, debates and nurtures the passionate search for artistic truth on stage.”⁴ The notions of dramaturgy as an education and

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as a monitoring device are important in community-based theatres; however, it is imperative to expand our understanding of *who* receives the education and *who* acts as the monitor. A dramaturg rarely appears on the staff at community-based theatres. Here the audience community acts as the “dramaturg.”

The activity of dramaturgy varies widely from one community-based theatre to another, changing with the role that the theatre plays in the community it serves, yet certain characteristics do recur. While these characteristics are certainly recognizable within the parameters of traditional dramaturgy, they differ, at least in emphasis if not in form, from dramaturgical activities at mainstream theatres. Key among these characteristics are unique script development strategies, the role of the script in the production process, the role of the audience in the artistic process, and the political activism that is inseparable from this type of theatrical activity.

The spectrum of community-based performances ranges from scripted, rehearsed, and quite professional plays produced for a paying audience to one-time only, improvised, and sometimes wordless, scenes created by and for those involved. Thus the “texts” can vary from a written play to an ephemeral theatrical moment. The link that all these texts share is the reliance on the audience community for content and sometimes dramatic structure of the script. Thus in community-based theatres, one of the essential tasks of dramaturgy is script development since the performance text is developed by and grows out of the community. This text documents the struggles, goals, triumphs, stories, and myths—the culture—of a particular community that has been marginalized or silenced by the dominant culture. Here the text is the community. These performance texts give the community a voice and help establish bonds that create “community” largely because the “text” is not just the finished product, but also the process. It is a process that enables a community to look at its history, its contributions, its successes, and its failures. It is a process that allows the community to experiment with strategies to solve their particular problems. It is a process that encourages a sense of identity and fosters pride.

At the 1996 Performance Studies conference, in a presentation entitled “Directing Out of (My Own) Culture: Taiwan, China, South Africa, India,” Richard Schechner offered four models for working outside one’s own culture or community. Two of them suggest interesting paradigms for script development in community-based theatre work. Schechner labeled one of these models, “community-to-theatre.” Here theatre practitioners work with a community, usually identified by locality, to develop a text based on their own stories for public performance. Sometimes the final text is performed by professional actors, sometimes by community members, but it is the community that finds the theatrical means of expression to entertain and instruct both themselves and those

outside the community and to re-form themselves through that knowledge. The text is local or “site-specific” since it grows out of the words and actions of a particular community. Although the scripts document the lives of the community members and explore issues important to that community, specific script development strategies vary. Sometimes, theatre practitioners collect stories from the community members. These stories, in the exact words of the teller, are then woven together by a playwright/dramaturg or by the community itself, to narrate the life of the community. Or the stories can act as a source of inspiration for a playwright/dramaturg who creates a script detailing certain incidents but changing “character” identities. Other times, community members work with theatre practitioners using improvisation and other theatre games to create a text which explores ideas and issues of significance to that particular group. Of course, other script development strategies are practiced, but the goal of all these variations used by theatres identified with the community-to-theatre model is a public performance of the script.

For over a decade and in several different productions, ToBakYi, a professional theatre company in Kwangju, South Korea has explored the causes, the actual events, and the consequences of the Kwangju May Uprising of 1980 and the subsequent government crackdown and massacre. The company creates performances with some of the scenes scripted and others improvised, and they frequently follow these shows with workshops that help audience members deal with some of the issues raised. This model is also used by John Binnie’s Clyde Unity in Glasgow, Scotland, a company which often works in the urban housing projects and develops scripts on issues of particular importance to the people who live there. Both these groups write texts that reflect the lives of the targeted community and then involve the audience through post-show workshops. A different model was used in *Swamp Gravy*, under the direction of Richard Geer. For this production, the inhabitants of Colquitt, Georgia explored their past, both the triumphs and the tensions. For more than a year, Geer and his team collected the stories from members of the small town. These stories were then woven together by a professional playwright and performed by the townspeople themselves. Even further away from traditional playwriting is Sally Gordon’s work with the Latino migrant workers at Teatro de la Realidad in Los Angeles. Here the community members work together to collect stories and create the script which they then perform primarily for members of their own community.

The second model for script development which is applicable to community-based theatre, Schechner calls “community-to-community.” Popularized by Brazilian director and political activist, Augusto Boal, this form stretches the boundaries of traditional expectations of theatre.⁵ Here actors working with the community help all involved in the theatrical event, directly and

indirectly, to understand and empower that community. In forum theatre, Boal and his actors create an improvisation based on an incident or problem described by one of the workshop participants. At a pivotal moment, Boal stops the action and asks the audience to explore various endings. Audience members then take over some of the roles and “try out” possible solutions. The “spect-actors,” as Boal calls the audience participants, assume positions of authority as they *rehearse* actions which they can then use in their actual lives. The desired end result of this form of community-based theatre is not a public performance, but a new community. Here process supersedes product, improvisation supplants a written play text, and community re-formation and empowerment are the primary goals. Except for Boal, these theatrical activities, though widespread, are little known because of the lack of public performances and the ephemeral nature of the work. The “script” responds immediately to the needs of the audience/participants—changing direction in content or performance style, transforming into something completely different, and offering a way to experiment with a variety of solutions to a particular problem. It is rarely linear, and fully developed three-dimensional characters are scarce. These examples show how script development strategies in community-based theatre, whether they follow the community-to-theatre or the community-to-community model, emphasize the production process within the community, regardless of whether that process results in a public performance or not.

The script development strategies also make it clear that community-based dramaturgy is audience-based, but that audience participation goes beyond the development of the performance text. Community-based performance, whether public or not, disrupts the traditional actor-audience relationship. In an interview on National Public Radio, Jennifer Nelson, former actress at Living Stage Theatre Company, one of the pioneers in community-based theatre in the United States, explains the differences. In a traditional theatre, she says, “it’s like going into a church, . . . you’re ushered in, and there’s this atmosphere of ‘we have to whisper,’ and there’s this great sacred act that’s going to take place up on the stage that you really don’t have anything to do with, you’re only there to observe it.” At Living Stage, and many other community-based theatres, the opposite effect is created. She continues, “the lights are up in the whole room, and the performers are right on the same level as the audience, and they’re invited to participate. It’s like coming into somebody’s house instead of coming into somebody’s sanctuary.”⁶ In other words, community-based theatres tend to break down the distinctions between audience members and theatre practitioners and thus to equalize access to art-making.

In community-based theatre, the dramaturgy and, in fact, the whole theatrical event belong to the audience community; nevertheless, the theatre

practitioners do begin in the leadership role acting as guides through the artistic process. As Steve Gooch, who worked in British community-based theatre for many years, admits, "Neither community nor theatre will achieve a dialogue based on mutual interest simply by wishing it. The experience or hopes of a community cannot be transformed overnight into a satisfactory aesthetic event simply by being voiced."⁷ Community-based theatre artists seek to discover with the community its history, its needs, and the possible solutions to its problems and to form these discoveries into a theatrical event, sometimes for the general public, sometimes for the participants alone. However, the aim of the theatre practitioners must not be to awe the community with their talent or expertise, but instead to awaken the community to its own creativity and power. In the same way, the theatre practitioners act as community organizers. But, like the new community leaders envisioned by social activist Paulo Freire, "leaders" in community-based theatre companies must not invade the community imposing predetermined ideals, models, and solutions: "they do not come to *teach* or to *transmit* or to *give* anything, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world."⁸ And these leaders from the theatre must relinquish the leadership role as new leaders rise from the community. An excellent example of this process occurred in the work of the Living Stage with the inmates of Lorton Prison who developed their own theatre company, Lorton Voices, that used and expanded upon the theatrical techniques learned in the Living Stage theatre workshops. A somewhat different example is Jodrikdrik ñan Jodrikdrik ilo Ejmour, a community-based youth theatre in the Marshall Islands, which uses theatre to provide young people with the information and support they need to combat the social ills caused by alcoholism, poor health care, suicide, and cultural deterioration. The youth begin as workshop participants and quickly move into the role of workshop leaders training other youth to create theatrical productions which inspire and educate even more young people. What began as a small theatre company now, through this process of developing new leaders, has many branches on the scattered islands so youth even in remote areas have access to the theatre workshops.

When this process works, it resembles a model of society envisioned by Freire: a "cultural synthesis" where "there are no invaders; hence, there are no imposed models. In their stead, there are actors who critically analyze reality (never separating analysis from action) and intervene as Subjects in the historical process. Instead of following predetermined plans, leaders and people, mutually identified, together create the guidelines of their action. In this synthesis, leaders and people are somehow reborn in new knowledge and new action."⁹ When applied to theatre, Freire's words imply that the position of dramaturg is not limited to one person, but instead the tasks of the dramaturg are shared among those involved in the theatrical event whether theatre practitioner or audience

member. The dramaturgical process becomes part of a longer process of knowledge construction, empowerment, and development of new community leaders who can speak out against oppressions and injustices that have kept them marginalized, and creating a space in which these words can be said *and* heard becomes an important dramaturgical task.

To accomplish that task, community-based dramaturgy helps transform the passive spectator into the active subject of the situation: the individual who can change the course of the action. Thus this form of dramaturgy is inseparable from cultural politicization and community activism: what Boal calls “a rehearsal for revolution.” Baz Kershaw, theatre practitioner and scholar of British community-based theatre, defines this shift to audience involvement as a move from *democratization of culture* where high art is brought to the masses—“a hegemonic procedure that aims to cheat the mass of people of their right to create their own culture, and that conspires to hold them in thrall to their own uncreative subjugation”¹⁰—to *cultural democracy* where the people participate in and even control cultural production and distribution. Freire insists that every form of “Cultural action is always a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of preserving that structure or of transforming it. As a form of deliberate and systematic action, all cultural action has its theory which determines its ends and thereby defines its methods. Cultural action either serves domination (consciously or unconsciously) or it serves liberation.”¹¹ Community-based theatre serves liberation, and the dramaturgy practiced at these “theatre[s] of social engagement,” must be “considered as a form of *cultural intervention*,” that creates performances “committed to bringing about actual change in specific communities.”¹²

Community-based dramaturgy becomes community activism in a variety of ways. It provides the audience community with a way to achieve a sense of identity and a place in the world as it encourages that community to explore, to understand, and to come to terms with its past. That activity, in turn, helps to create an idealized image of “what it [the community] was” which can serve as an exemplar to “what it can become.”¹³ This knowledge discloses to the community its true nature, its authentic experience, and its hidden destiny.

In addition, the dramaturgy becomes activism because, as the audience community creates the theatrical event, the process of art production is demystified. The creation of art encourages the audience to observe the world more carefully which, in turn, makes them *see* it differently: they begin to understand that *what* is seen and *how* it is seen is determined more by expectations than by observations. They begin to see that art can create realities and worlds rather than just reflect them. Thus community-based dramaturgy moves into the realm of cultural politicization and community action by making participants

aware of social constructions, and it encourages them to question what they had before accepted as “the way things are.” As audiences begin to see that reality is not (in Freire’s words) *static*, but is changeable, they begin to imagine alternative solutions to daily problems. And, as they participate in the script development, they develop and practice these alternatives as they create characters facing drug abuse, domestic violence, teen pregnancy, dysfunctional families, or a myriad of other social ills. Thus they develop real life skills and gain the tools to achieve personal improvement and subsequently to begin to ameliorate society. Several years ago, a teacher at Frank W. Ballou High School, an inner city school in the Washington D.C., wrote to congratulate Living Stage on their part in the transformation of a student from juvenile delinquent to graduating senior. The Living Stage staff shared this letter with me:

I want to tell you about Mac. Last year he was assigned both to my 11th grade English class and Drama class. Before a week had elapsed, he had managed to totally alienate most of the students in both classes by his swaggering arrogance, defensiveness and snide put-downs of those around him. He refused to participate in any of the class assignments in either of the classes. At the time he was awaiting trial in a shooting he had been involved in. Gradually, however, he began to let his defenses down and to participate more and more. By the end of the year he had become the undisputed “star” of the drama class, took his work in that class very seriously, and won the admiration and respect of his classmates and no longer found it necessary to play his “tough dude” act for the world around him. Mac was “transformed” last year in a really rare, startling and miraculous way. . . His experiences with the Living Stage. . . gave him the opportunity to take a good look at who he really was and what he was feeling and enabled him to see the great reservoirs of talent inside himself. I believe that those workshops with you and your staff played a decisive role in that transformation.

A few years later, this student returned to visit his former teacher, and she again wrote to Living Stage: “He told me it [his work with Living Stage] was one of the most important experiences of his life. He has been transformed and what happened within him that year has stuck. He spoke of his work with enthusiasm and of his efforts to help a close friend get through a painful loss. He has become a caring, productive person and is now reaching out to help others.”

Community-based dramaturgy is an activist form of dramaturgy which aims to influence and alter the actual world, not just reflect it. It provides an avenue to individual empowerment and community development as it moves the audience into a new role: an artist, a maker of culture who can create a new community. Here boundaries of dramaturgy are so stretched that the focus shifts from the quality of the final product to the efficacy of the event—its ability to affect social change—and to the relationship between actor and audience, among audience members themselves, and between the audience and the greater society in which they live, work, and play—its institutions, its authority figures, its symbols.

Notes

1. Anne Cattaneo, "Dramaturgy: An Overview," *Dramaturgy in American Theatre: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997) 14.
2. Michael Lupu, "There is a Clamor in the Air," *Dramaturgy in American Theatre: A Source Book*, eds. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997) 111.
3. Susan Jonas, Geoffrey S. Proehl, and Michael Lupu, eds., *Dramaturgy in American Theatre: A Source Book*, (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997) 39.
4. Michael Lupu 114.
5. See Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985) and Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* (London: Routledge, 1995).
6. Jennifer Nelson, interview, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, Washington D.C., 28 May 1986.
7. Steve Gooch, *All Together Now: An Alternative View of Theatre and the Community* (London: Methuen, 1984) 65.
8. Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1989) 181.
9. Friere 183.
10. Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 184.
11. Friere 180.
12. Kershaw 5–6.
13. Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991) 140.