The Politics of Dramaturgy

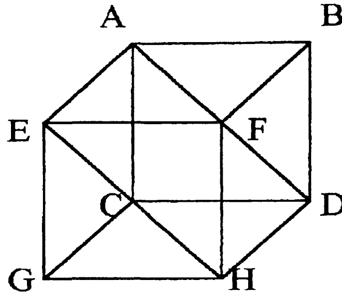
John Lutterbie

The Dramaturg in mainstream American theatre is perceived, in perhaps the most positive light, as a facilitator. That is someone who moves among playwrights, directors, producers, designers, actors and spectators providing information, opinion and making sure that the lines of communication remain open and constructive. There seems little room for politics in this structure; gone are the days when Martin Esslin could proclaim with confidence that the dramaturg was "the conscience of the theatre." Indeed I suspect that the dramaturg is thought to be the most apolitical of people, needing to maintain an uncommitted position in order to insure the confidence of the production team, even to the extent of staying aloof of office politics. This is not surprising, particularly in a country where politics are associated primarily with elected officials, political correctness and identity politics. Besides to acknowledge being political would immediately compromise the objectivity the Dramaturg is expected to maintain in working on a production, and return to the mouth a distaste often associated with didacticism and the political theatre of the 1960s.

While claims about being objective and apolitical are comfortable and self-validating, it is a position that is difficult to maintain in the face of more recent and complicated concepts of the political. I want to discuss these expanded definitions of politics, to show how they force us to re-evaluate the traditional idea of the dramaturg, and to suggest how this revision of the dramaturg's role relates to the social and cultural politics of our time. But I am going to take an indirect route to the subject by using an aspect of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discourse on space to establish how the context in which dramaturgs work necessarily influences the production.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty discusses the perception of space using the image of two squares linked by diagonal lines (see figure 1). In this figure there are two squares ABCD and EFGH with lines connecting the corners of the two squares, and additional diagonals AD and EH. Merleau-Ponty observes that if you focus on the square ABCD you see a cube

John Lutterbie is the Chair of the Theatre Arts Department at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His book *Hearing Voices: Modern Drama and the Problem of Subjectivity* is published by the University of Michigan Press. Owing to *errata* in its first publication, this essay is here being republished.



(Figure 1)[1]

from underneath, while if you shift focus to the square EFGH you see a cube from above. He argues that neither is preferable or natural, that it depends on where your gaze comes to rest. Furthermore, should you focus first on the small square defined by corners C and F, you do not get a cube at all, but a mosaic made of squares and triangles. The point being that although the image remains the same, the order in which we perceive it alters what we see.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to argue that the ability to perceive depth is determined by the context in which we see the object: "so the perception of distance can be understood only as a *being in the distance* which links up with being where it appears."[2] In this essay Figure 1 appears in a two dimensional world of paper and ink, which in turn is set against your peripheral awareness of the space in which you are presently reading. This combined experience allows you to imagine depth in the drawing, which is in reality as two-dimensional as the words printed on the paper. If the drawing were to be seen outdoors, say in a field or in the woods without the surrounding text, it would appear very different and require an effort to see it as representing a three-dimensional object. Patrick Heelan discusses an experiment using Van Gogh's famous painting of the bedroom at Arles.[3] In the picture the shutters on the window are closed causing us to read the relation of the chair, the bed, the painting on the wall and floor in a particular way. A copy of the painting was made but in this instance the shutters were open and the landscape outside the window visible. The additional information completely altered the experience of the painting, requiring a re-evaluation of how the objects relate and making the viewer more aware of the ways in which the perspective has been distorted in the original painting. Our experience is altered by the context in which objects appear.

The radical shift in context in this example makes us conscious of how we construct images and that what we see to be the truth of the object is the effect of the perspective and the distortions in Van Gogh's painting. Similarly with the drawing in Figure 1, the appearance of depth on the page compared to its flatness

when seen outdoors indicates that where we see the drawing effects our interpretation of it. When perceived without comparison, what we see appears to be how the drawing is in reality and leads us to believe that there is only one way to look at it. Attributes that define an object and make it appear natural are, for Merleau-Ponty, the result of activity on the part of the perceiver. There is in the perceiving mechanism a process that allows us to see depth in the drawing, to give in to an illusion. "Depth is born beneath my gaze *because the latter tries to see something*."[4] What we see in the realm of objects is not the objects as they are but the effect of what we are trying to see. What we see when we look at the drawing or the painting are our attempts to make sense of the perceptual experience in a particular context. To find ourselves looking up at a cube, looking down on it, or seeing a mosaic rather than a cube tells us something about how we organize the world and ourselves in relation to it. I am not trying to assign a deep psychological significance to the experience, rather quite simply to suggest that when we look at the world we organize it based on our experiences, and that people who have had different experiences will organize it differently. "To experience a structure is not to receive it into oneself passively; it is to live it, to take it up, assume it and discover its immanent significance."[5] However, as the optical illusion implies, the "immanent significance" is determined by the perceiver in the process of taking up the structure rather than the unveiling of an inherent meaning.

Merleau-Ponty's description of the perception of depth seems to me an apt metaphor for the experience of working in the theatre. For example, when reading a play we do not locate meaning in the text, rather we seek out coordinates and use them to construct an interpretation of the text. The more familiar the coordinates supplied by the playwright, the more confident we feel about our understanding of the play. On the other hand, if the playwright uses conventions that are unfamiliar, we are more likely to find the play inaccessible or irritating because it appears to be meaningless. Anyone of a certain age will remember how opaque Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* seemed to be or, more recently, Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*. This is not because these plays are any more or less meaningful, but because the coordinates in the text do not allow us to construct the play in the usual way. It is only when we are able to identify the new points of reference that we can navigate the complexities of these texts to arrive at an understanding. The fact that these two scripts are now more or less accessible indicates the degree to which we have become familiar with the conventions of Beckett's existentialism or Müller's post-structuralist aesthetics. Qualities in the plays that used to be obscure have now become identifiable coordinates.

Of equal significance however is the fact that there is a "usual" way of reading plays. Every period has sets of conventions that determine a dominant mode of interpreting texts. There can be little doubt that in this country realism is

the predominate form of playwriting. We are all capable of reading realism quickly and accurately, perhaps not for the details and subtleties of the play, but for the overall sense and the uniqueness of the author's voice. That this was not always the case is evident in the initial response of Stanislavski to Chekov's *The Seagull.* His initial lack of faith in the play and the ongoing discussions between Chekhov and Stanislavski about whether the play was a drama or a comedy indicate the difficulties encountered. Similarly the cast's uncertainty about how the audience would respond—their bated breaths backstage while they waited to learn the fate of their performance—suggests that there was grave concern over the accessibility of the text. While Chekhov's plays remain a challenge today it is less because they cannot be understood rather than our ability to bring the characters to life and the audience's willingness to encounter the texts, which have garnered a certain negative reputation for heaviness.

The issue of context and its effect on the work of the dramaturg extends further than the conventions surrounding interpretation. In every period there develops a certain "theatre culture" that determines, in part, which plays are more likely to be performed, and the risks taken when the boundaries of the envelope of convention are pushed. By "theatre culture" I mean a complex system of relationships defined by audience expectations, aesthetics, conventions, modes of theatre training, institutional structures, economic factors, promotional and reviewing strategies, and the position of theatre as part of a larger socio-cultural matrix. Attempts to grasp the theatre culture at any time are further complicated by the simultaneous existence of multiple types of theatres. There will be certain forms that are dominant and others that assume a marginal position. Today, for instance, it is possible to differentiate between mainstream and avant-garde, between theatre and various forms of performance art, between profit and non-profit theatres, between regional houses and theatres for communities. Each of these lay claim to a certain position in the theatre culture and are patronized by a certain portion of the theatre going population. Regional theatres, for instance, appeal to a broad range of the educated, upper and middle class people, who are interested in attending and supporting a particular building that offers a specific type of theatre. The theatre is usually a proscenium house seating between five hundred and a thousand patrons, who expect to see shows that are accessible, entertaining while moderately challenging intellectually and emotionally, and that do not seriously question fundamental humanist beliefs. The aesthetics are typically based in psychological realism, whether it is Shakespeare, Molière, Brecht, Williams or Shepard. A certain degree of technological sophistication is desirable as an enhancement of the experience, whether it is hydraulic scenery, multi-media, or hyperrealism. The production team that makes up the company consists of people who support this type of endeavor.

Theatres-for-communities will generally work with more specific audiences located in a particular neighborhood and appeal to a very different population. The building will be considerably more modest, and will often serve as a headquarters for a more nomadic type of existence. The production values will be considerably lower in terms of technology, while the acting will focus more on fulfilling tasks rather than creating fully developed psychological characters. Generally the company creates the plays, or when previously produced texts are used they will be adapted to relate to the concerns of the audience. The audience is either uncertain what to expect or expect to be entertained by a performance about issues that are central to the concerns of the community. Indeed, in these theatres members of the community will frequently have a say in what is performed, an option seldom available to patrons of regional theatres.

Clearly a dramaturg working in these two venues undertakes different responsibilities, requiring different kinds of commitment. Although many of the tasks will be identical and the end of each is the same, which is to produce quality theatre for the audience, the objective in undertaking work in these two theatres varies (although this is true for all forms). Without privileging one over the other, it is clear that the two types of theatre are based on a different set of values, indeed that what separates any two theatres is the system of beliefs about what constitutes the function and quality of theatre.

It is precisely at this point, where the context of the theatre defines both its purpose and aesthetics, that the question of politics needs to be raised. In thinking through the example discussed above there is a tendency to assume that doing theatre in and for a community is political, while working in regional theatre is not. Similarly, it is generally presumed that if you are doing Brecht you are engaged in political theatre, and that if you are working on Chekov you are not. Recent theories of politics and ideology, particularly those of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, call these assumptions into question. Thinking about the question of politics in contemporary society has led away from black and white distinctions to claim that virtually all activity is implicated in the realm of the political.

Louis Althusser bases his approach to politics and ideology in Karl Marx. For Marx ideology is false consciousness, or a set of beliefs that conceal what he called the "real" conditions of existence. These beliefs and values veil the "true" relations of production, naturalize the ownership of the means of production by a few, and mystify the working class as to the cause of their "oppression." Marx's concept had a certain validity in the early stages of capitalism. However, this definition seems somewhat outdated when attempting to apply it to late capitalism where the owners of the means of production are as likely to be working class shareholders whose investments guarantee an easier life after retirement as the "big bosses." Althusser began to rethink the problem of ideology and how it works in

a society where classes can be defined vertically, as well as horizontally.[6] For example, the educated class cuts through all strata of society in a way that economics does not. The question Althusser posed himself was: how do we account for the production and reproduction of "false consciousness" in a society where economic differences are no longer adequate to account for the adoption of values that justify inequalities? He noted that in any society there are two forms of coercion. One is direct repression, typified by state police forces, while the other operates subliminally, such as education. It was the latter that interested him.

To explain the process of indirect coercion, Althusser borrowed a key concept from another Frenchman, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.[7] Working out of a Freudian context, Lacan was interested in the development of subjectivity particularly, in this instance, in the infant. His work suggested that there is a moment in the life of children when they recognize themselves as separate beings. He called this moment the "mirror stage" because becoming aware of a distinct self necessitates the development of an image of oneself as different from the world. Lacan believed that this process occurs when the child sees an image of him/herself reflected back by the world, as if in a mirror. This act of recognizing the self as separate from others gives the child the first inklings of a self-identity, which becomes in the words of Lacan an *imago*. The *imago* is both an image of the self and a representation of how society perceives the child. While it separates us from the world, it also connects us to it because the image becomes our key to understanding the proximity of our self-image to the ways in which we are perceived in the outside world. The strength of our self-esteem is, in some ways, based on our confidence that the way see ourselves is identical to the way we are seen by others. For Lacan, this image is never a "true" representation, but a likeness that provides a sense of wholeness quite different from the frequent experience of the self as a fragmented being. Furthermore, the experience of the self is never completely identical to the *imago,* because the image continually changes throughout life as we have new experiences and see ourselves reflected back in different circumstances. Therefore the distance between the *imago* and experience of the self never disappears but remains a haunting measure of difference. The image is nevertheless seductive, holding out a promise that we may become the person we would like to be.

For Althusser, ideology works in much the same way. When we come into contact with an institution it "hails" us. When hailed, or interpellated as Althusser calls it, we see ourselves reflected in the institution and, depending on the degree to which what we see approximates or offers a positive image of ourselves, we align ourselves with that institution or not. When we answer the "hailing," that is say "yes" to the invitation to join, we also accept and adopt the values and beliefs, the structures and organizing principles, of that institution

because they are part of what guarantees the image. If we want to continue to see ourselves reflected in a way that is pleasurable, we must behave in ways that keep a positive relationship with the institution, despite the fact that it is not always in our best self-interest.

The process outlined by Althusser says several things about ideology. First, ideology is "invisible" in that it becomes incorporated as part of our subjectivity through interactions with others. In establishing relations with others we privilege certain beliefs and values as by-products of making that connection. Peer pressure is an example of this. Second, we can reject certain ideologies when they come into conflict with our self-image, even turn away from institutions with which we have had enduring relationships. Three, we may resist certain modes of being because we reject the values and beliefs associated with that position. Four, turning away from one ideology does not mean that we are ideologically independent or free. Every turning away from one system of values is turning towards another. The implication of the latter is that we are limited by the ideologies available to us, and we are never outside of ideology. There is always a system of institutional beliefs in which we are implicated.

We can never know completely what our ideology is, but we can get a glimpse of its outlines by taking the time to analyze our place in the theatre culture. The theatres we work for, the kind of plays we prefer, our relationships with other members of the theatre community and our attitudes to the audience are some of the areas that can help us to understand the parameters of our personal politics. The value of this investigation is that it provides clarity. An understanding of our personal ideologies helps us become aware of our preferences. Preferences are both inevitable and necessary because they define who we are and provide a position that allows us to interact with the world in a coherent way. However they also define limits by acting as filters that cause us to accept or reject that which does not fit the profiles of our ideological positions. Knowledge of how we position ourselves in the theatre culture can help us to understand why we like or dislike certain plays, and how we relate to the organizations where we work. It can increase our sensitivity to those with whom we work, permitting us to construct more positive relationships, or at least helping us to understand why tensions exist. It can give us a new language for resolving conflicts and enhancing communications, new ways of reading plays, of interacting with actors and directors in rehearsal.

Pragmatically, dramaturgs do not always have a choice about where to work. It is certainly a small job market and keeping food on the table is not insignificant. We are frequently put in the position of supporting work with which we find ourselves at odds. Being overtly aware of the differences in ideological positions may seem to make our work less bearable. But we may ask whether it is

preferable to know why we are discontent or to endure the subliminal unhappiness that attends unconscious conflicts. Moreover, knowing the differences between our politics and those of the workplace gives us a vantage point from which to work for change and to know better the degree to which we can argue for new ways of doing things. Knowledge of the political differences between ourselves and the institution allows us to see the situation more clearly and to define more sophisticated strategies for addressing what we perceive to be untenable positions.

Theatre is a way of coming to a better understanding of the human condition, of confronting our humanity. This act is inevitably political because through the rhetoric of the theatre we are encouraging others to accept the values set forth in performance. If we are interpellated into institutions, then the public acts in which we engage are "hailing" others, encouraging them to accept the system of beliefs implicit in the theatre we make. Should we not be aware of what those values are? Dramaturgs are not the conscience of the theatre. But that does not mean we should not ask questions, rather it is our responsibility to define and grapple with the implications of the values we communicate. Like all efforts at self-analysis, the process can be painful and difficult, because we will inevitably come to the point at which we encounter contradiction—that moment when we realize we hold values that are incompatible with each other. This is a humbling experience that has the salutary effect of compelling us to resist dogmatic positions and to listen with greater care to the positions of others. This, in turn, opens us to new possibilities that may just allow us to act for change when we perceive it to be necessary, to be more creative through opening alternative perspectives and help us to facilitate communication between others more effectively. In short, it may help us to be better advocates for good theatre and more effective dramaturgs.

Notes

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenolgy of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1979) 263.

2. Merleau-Ponty 265.

3. See Patrick Heelan, "Space Perception and the Philosophy of Science" (Berkely: U of California P, 1983) 114-28.

4. Merleau-Ponty 262, emphasis added.

5. Merleau-Ponty 258.

6. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward and Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 127-186.

7. See Jacques Lacan, "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1977) 1-7.