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Dance, Dramaturgy and Dramaturgical Thinking

Synne K. Behrndt

In her essay ‘Shaping Critical Spaces: Issues in the Dramaturgy of Movement Performance’ (1997), Heidi Gilpin opens a discussion about the relationship between dramaturgy and dance.¹ One presupposition of Gilpin’s proposal is that dance is increasingly moving in a multi-disciplinary field, and more careful consideration needs to be given to the interpretational and perceptual challenges that are embodied by multidisciplinary compositions where movement or the body is the protagonist. She suggests that contemporary dance practices demand ‘an acknowledgement and cognition of movement generally, and of moving bodies specifically’, and that they call upon an understanding of non-hierarchical approaches to composition.² Thus, she argues that where the dramatic theatre places the play, or text, at the centre ‘of interpretational strategies for the audience’, contemporary dance practices often draw on ‘differing disciplinary perspectives – none of which play a hierarchical central role’.³ Gilpin goes on to mobilize ‘dramaturgy’ and the ‘dramaturg’ as helpful terms and processes that can articulate ‘how this multidisciplinary quality functions at the compositional level’.⁴

Gilpin’s essay implicitly and explicitly drives at some of the main themes that continue to permeate and underpin the emerging discourse on dance dramaturgy; for example: dramaturgy as a critical process that lays bare the compositional and narrative drivers in the work; dramaturgy as a process that moves between practice and reflection and finally; the role of the dramaturg as a facilitator of reflective processes. Gilpin’s essay also drives at a broader question about the way in which contemporary movement performances particularly put pressure on classical representational structures and thereby invite their audience to embrace them as

1. Heidi Gilpin, ‘Shaping Critical Spaces: Issues in the Dramaturgy of Movement Performance’, in *Dramaturgy in American Theater*, ed. by Susan Jonas, Geoff Proehl and Michael Lupu (Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1997), pp. 83–87 (p. 86).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 87. It should be said that Gilpin does not create a dichotomy between text and movement; rather, she sees strong parallels between contemporary dance and forms of theatre that seek to undo the notion of the ‘dramatic’ text.

Synne K. Behrndt, The Department of Performing Arts. The University of Winchester, West Hill, SO22 4NR, UK. Email: Synne.Behrndt@winchester.ac.uk

5. Ibid., p. 87.
6. Ibid., p. 85.
7. <http://www.theaterhaus.com/tanzplattform2006> [accessed 22 December 2009].
8. 'Conversations on Choreography' in Amsterdam (March 1999) and Barcelona (November 1999); dramaturgy seminars and coaching sessions at ImpulsTanzWien (2007); Danseværket in Århus (2003); 'The Witness as Dramaturg' (2008), organized by Hancock&KellyLive and Dance4 (UK), to name a few.
9. Myriam Van Imschoot, 'Anxious Dramaturgy', *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 26.13 (2003), 57–68 (p. 58).
10. Van Imschoot writes that throughout the 1980 and 1990s much attention was paid to dramaturgy in Holland and Belgium, with dramaturgs playing an important role in the 'new cultural "field"' and aesthetic paradigm in Belgian performing arts ('Anxious Dramaturgy', p. 57).
11. Email correspondence with Bojana Bauer, 17 November 2008.

proposing 'a new form of perception'.⁵ She goes on to express some surprise that 'the process of dramaturgy for movement performance has been largely overlooked by literary and theater critics',⁶ a sentiment that is also expressed in Tanz Plattform's invitation to the seminar *Dance Lab: Dramaturgy* where it is remarked that 'the field of dance dramaturgy has hardly been touched upon by academic discourse and research'.⁷ However, within the last decade a discourse has started to take shape through symposia, seminars, conference papers, workshops, coaching sessions, case studies, dramaturg-choreographer work stories, labs and PhD or other research projects dedicated to the dissemination of dramaturgical practice in dance.⁸ Moreover, dramaturgy is gradually finding its way into dance courses in the UK, other European countries and North America. We are therefore at a point where a discourse and tradition for dance dramaturgy is beginning to come into sharper focus, and an interesting upshot of dramaturgy's migration into dance is that this new context has presented an opportunity to re-examine classical assumptions as well as inherited working practices around dramaturgy, dramaturgical thinking and the dramaturg in particular. Interestingly, it is the figure of the dramaturg that continues to attract the most controversy and debate. Writer and dramaturg Myriam Van Imschoot's observations are likely to resonate with those who have attended UK and international events on dramaturgy: 'The general discourse on the new dramaturgy (be it theatre or dance related) is mostly structured around a couple of tropes, or to put it another way, anxieties: the generic anxiety (where does the dramaturg come from?), the definition anxiety (what is a dramaturg?)'.⁹ If this anxiety is common within dance and other (theatre and cultural) contexts where the concept of dramaturgy is relatively unfamiliar, one could say that it has also led to constructive debates that have helped shift the focus from the static notion of 'the dramaturgical role' and the dramaturg as a figure of intellectual authority towards inclusive and democratic models with the dramaturg as a *facilitator* of dramaturgical thinking. Hence, the emerging discourse is divided into different concerns: on the one hand, there is an interest in expanding and articulating new definitions and processes, and on the other hand, there is also a more critical discussion of the expectations, values and motives that surround the dramaturg within a wider context of institutions and production hierarchies.

It follows that the difficulty of defining 'the dramaturg' does not have to cause anxiety; rather, the attempts at articulating this role and function could open up new possibilities and further re-articulation. Dramaturgy in dance has rarely been a predicated element – thus, Raimund Hoghe's collaboration with Pina Bausch and Wuppertal Tanztheater between 1980 and 1989 is often cited as one of the first examples of a dramaturg in the field.¹⁰ If a lack of dance-specific historical reference points for dramaturgical practice has sometimes caused confusion, it has also facilitated a re-articulation or re-definition of dramaturgical practice in accordance with the contemporary practical processes of dance production. As dramaturg and dance writer Bojana Bauer suggests, dramaturgy in dance is currently articulated through practical experience, hence the discourse largely consists of 'descriptions of what dramaturgy *becomes* in different working processes or in different pieces'.¹¹ This emphasis on

12. Mogens Rukow proposes that dramaturgy should not be understood in terms of prescribed models, but rather that new dramaturgical models and structures can best be developed by being alert to the rules, energies or dynamics that emerge from the creation process; interview in Danish by Claus Christensen, 'Den skandaløse Fortælling', *Ekko*, 9 (September 2001), <http://www.ekkoilm.dk/interviews&cid=17> [accessed 22 October 2009].
13. Email correspondence with Bojana Bauer, 17 November 2008.
14. Reinhardt Stumm, 'Dramaturgy in Stuttgart: An Interview with Hermann Beil', in *What is Dramaturgy?* by Bert Cardullo (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), pp. 49–55 (p. 51).
15. Niels Lehmann (Institute for Dramaturgy, Århus University) used the expression '[to] deploy dramaturgy as an overarching concept or term' (my translation) in an interview with Synne K. Behrndt, Århus, August 2005.
16. Marianne Van Kerkhoven, 'Looking without Pencil in Hand', *Theaterschrift*, 5–6 (Special Issue: 'On Dramaturgy', 1994), 142–44 (p. 142), my emphasis.

practical concerns, where dramaturgs and collaborators discover the nature of dramaturgical practice through process and dialogue, has challenged the idea that dramaturgy is a rigid model or universal method that one *applies* to the work.¹² Importantly, according to Bojana Bauer, this notion of *becoming through practice* has focused attention on the circumstantial and experimental nature of dramaturgy, in that there are as many different dramaturgies as there are processes.¹³ It should be said that this suggestion that dramaturgy, or dramaturgical practice, should be viewed as flexible, circumstantial and dialogic is not exclusive to dance. Dramaturgs working in theatre have also explored different conceptions of dramaturgy, and have subsequently posited dramaturgy as a flexible notion that is not linked to one particular method or structure, or to a prescribed set of tools. As interviews with contemporary dramaturgs will attest, there are many ways of defining the role and partaking in a process, and today dramaturgs working in theatre (and with plays) can be – and already are – similarly engaged in making new discoveries about the text and its dramaturgy, in and through process. The dramaturg has become an active participant in that process. For example, in an interview in 1977, German dramaturg Hermann Beil gestures towards a more process-led and more open-ended dramaturgical practice when he remarks that the contemporary dramaturg has to adopt 'a method of playing, seeing, hearing and comprehending what the director, designers and actors are thinking, he has to move around within their imaginations [...] He has to learn along with everyone else'.¹⁴ It is, however, interesting that the migration of the term and practice into dance – as well as devising – has brought discussions of the dramaturg in process into even sharper focus.

But if the migration of dramaturgy into dance has invited discussion about how we can begin to re-articulate dramaturgy and the dramaturg, it is, if inadvertently, the changing nature of dance that brings dramaturgy into dance in the first place.

A Critical and Discursive Practice – Dramaturgy's Entrance into Dance

While the notion of a dance dramaturgy that emerges through practice suggests a fluid conception of dramaturgical process, we might also use 'dramaturgy' as a shorthand term for critical, discursive and interpretational processes, as also occurs within the theatre. Therefore, we might also, as Gilpin does, deploy dramaturgy as an overarching concept¹⁵ that pertains to reflective, analytical and discursive processes. Similarly, the suggestion that Marianne Van Kerkhoven offers that dramaturgical practice in dance and theatre does not differ, in that it is about getting a sense of '*how* to deal with the material, whatever its origin may be – visual, musical, textual, filmic, philosophical'.¹⁶

Dramaturgy emerged in dance at a time where the schism between theatre and dance was dissolving and when, as Bauer puts it, dance was undergoing radical 'modification of materials, references and modes of identification'. Her point is echoed by Bettina Milz's observation that a

17. Bettina Milz, “‘Conglomerates’”: Dance Dramaturgy and Dramaturgy of the Body’ (paper presented at the conference ‘International Research Workshop – Dramaturgy as Applied Knowledge’, 27–29 May 2008, Tel Aviv University, p. 2).

18. Marianne Van Kerkhoven, ‘... As Long as We Keep Track of the Law of Our Own Growth: Thoughts on Ten Years of PARTS’, in *P.A.R.T.S. – Documenting Ten Years of Contemporary Dance Education*, ed. by Steven De Belder and Theo Van Rompany (Brussels: PARTS, 2006), pp. 7–13 (p. 11).

19. Email correspondence with Bojana Bauer, 17 November 2008.

20. André Lepecki, ‘Concept and Presence: The Contemporary European Dance Scene’, in *Rethinking Dance History: A Reader*, ed. by Alexandra Carter (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 170–81 (p. 173).

discussion about dramaturgical processes begins to emerge at the point when dance has become a complex art work that calls into question the term ‘dance’ itself.¹⁷ Van Kerkhoven concurs and remarks that dramaturgy and the dramaturg reflect a moment when theoretical and conceptual inquiries within dance become more pronounced and embedded. This engagement with discourse produces a wide range of new approaches to dance that put pressure on classical conceptions of choreography as well as foregrounding content and critical debate in and around the work.

One could say that choreographers and dance artists become increasingly interested in embedding critical readings and interpretations of the body, movement, choreography, dance and the ways in which these are framed and represented within the practice itself. For example, although these choreographers and companies produce vastly different work, what draws together the work of Alain Platel and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Les Ballets C de la B, Wim Vandekeybus and Ultima Vez, Willie Dorner, Vera Mantero, Meg Stuart and Damaged Goods, Jan Lauwers and Needcompany, Jan Fabre and some productions by Rosas and Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker is an engagement with complex multidisciplinary narrative structures, thematic, emotional and conceptual explorations, as well as an often explicit interest in politics and content. Hence, Van Kerkhoven proposes that, to some extent, dramaturgy also marks the distinction, or ‘schism’, between, on the one hand, conceptual and European dance theatre, and on the other hand, so-called pure dance practices,¹⁸ although she goes on to suggest that we need not overstate this schism.

Bauer posits that the interest in dramaturgy also marks a moment where the critical discourse is absorbed into creative processes, and she sees this as a destabilization of the ‘power relation between the sensible creation and discourse (often dance critics’ discourse)’.¹⁹ One interpretation of this would be that choreographers, as well as dancers, have taken ownership of the discourse and have sought to reconfigure traditional processes of production and to engage directly with the politics and dramaturgy of their own art form. Pina Bausch’s decision to involve the dancers in the creation of the performance dramaturgy by asking them to respond to questions rather than choreographing ‘onto’ their bodies marks a crucial dramaturgical decision in that, on the one hand, as André Lepecki points out, it redefined choreographic material in that ‘movement was no longer the compositional point of departure’,²⁰ and on the other, the dancers became the work’s co-creators as well as its dramaturgical content. This meant that the dancers’ and the ensemble’s narratives, dynamics and imaginings informed the shaping of a dramaturgy, and it also marked a distinct shift towards engagement with politics, so that the company’s performance dramaturgies often revolved around explorations of gender, power hierarchies, identity and human relationships. There are residues of this approach in many European dance theatre practices, notably in the Flemish dance collective Les Ballets C de la B’s process and performance dramaturgy, where the content is often informed by the juxtaposition of the dancers’ different bodies, politics, stories and nationalities. For instance, Hildegard de

21. Hildegard de Vuyst, cited in An Van Dienderen, Joris Janssens and Katrien Smits, eds., *Tracks: Artistic Practice in a Diverse Society* (Brussels: Vlaams Theater Instituut, 2007), p. 67, <http://www.en.vti.be/booklet.tracks.pdf> [accessed 21 September 2009].
22. Van Kerkhoven, '... As Long as We Keep Track', p. 11.
23. José A. Sánchez and Isabel de Naverán, 'Body and Photography', *Cairon: Journal of Dance Studies*, 11 (2008), 237–39 (p. 237).
24. Milz, "'Conglomerates'", p. 2.
25. M. Elena Úbeda Fernández, 'Resisting Coercive Policies of the Body: Trans-objects, Prosthesis and other Body-buildings', *Cairon: Journal of Dance Studies*, 12 (Special Issue: 'Body and Architecture', 2009), 209–18 (p. 209).
26. Rui Horta describes his search for a form that embodies his content as follows: 'How can I speak of AIDS and do an arabesque or a développé? How can I speak of lack of communication, loneliness and intolerance – and present endless stereotypes, traditionally technical movements, and a visually entertaining aesthetic? It seems to me that we are saying something with our mind, and the body is saying the opposite'; 'The Critical Distance',

Vuyst remarks of Alain Platel's work that 'the cast is the dramaturgy of the production'.²¹

Van Kerkhoven goes on to suggest that there is a correlation between attention to dramaturgy in dance and the rise of dance as an independent art form, practice and discipline.²² If we pursue this argument, as well as the argument about dance's relationship to discourse, this might prompt a re-evaluation of the association of dramaturgy with text (or textuality). One argument is that this move towards independence happens – somewhat paradoxically – by way of conceiving of the body and choreography as critical text. Thus, José A. Sánchez and Isabel de Naverán remark: 'For many years, dance was a medium of putting the writing of the word and music into images by means of the body. Only when dance started to be conceived in itself as writing, only when the body in movement was granted the potentiality of discourse was it possible to speak not of a medium but of an autonomous art'.²³ As Bettina Milz remarks, the work by Xavier Le Roy, La Ribot and William Forsythe, to name three very different practitioners, posits the body as 'a territory of research',²⁴ a notion which makes it possible to speak of the body as a dramaturgy in itself. For example, in Elena Fernández's application of Michel Foucault, the body is posited as 'a system of meanings constructed socially and culturally'.²⁵ The body is not a neutral container of 'pure' abstract (non-) expression; rather, we need to consider the body as a proposition of *dramaturgical content* that is simultaneously inscribed and performed.²⁶ Similarly, the concepts of choreography and dance can be explored for their dramaturgical content; for example, we may look at the works of Jérôme Bel and Thomas Lehmen as acts of deconstructing, adapting and rearranging the traditional proposition that dance, choreography and movement pertain to organizing steps, 'making dances' or even moving at all. Lepecki argues that Bel's work distils choreography to its most basic elements and that he addresses 'each of these elements by exposing them, exaggerating them, subverting them, destroying them, complicating them'.²⁷ Here, one finds a flat form of dramaturgy that challenges expectations that dance has to do with a body that moves through space and time. Arguably the body often does so in Bel's work, but it is a walking, standing, sitting, witnessing and witnessed body. This manoeuvre could be interpreted as a radical dramaturgical circumscription of the concept of choreography. It is also in this context that one could read Fernández's interpretation of ballet and the body in ballet as a *dramaturgical reading*.²⁸ She writes:

[...] ballet is a sort of disciplinary game that looks to correct incorrect attitudes and through restraint, and decency, to eliminate sensuality from body gesture behaviour. Through the game of dance, which demands strict adherence to its rules, it instills [*sic*] during the repetition of rules the acceptance of corporeal disciplinarity and good manners.²⁹

It should be said that a dramaturgical interpretation need not lead to a deconstructive stance, and the implication is not that dramaturgy has made dance better; rather, the point is that explicit attention to

- Dance Theatre Journal*, 3.3 (1997), 14–15 (p. 15).
27. André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 46–7.
 28. Allsopp and Lepecki offer a similarly critical reading of choreography in the editorial for ‘On Choreography’, *Performance Research*, 13.1 (2008), 1–6 (p. 3).
 29. Úbeda Fernández, ‘Resisting Coercive Policies’, p. 212.
 30. Cited in Sally Richardson, ‘Dramaturgical Dance’, *Dance Australia*, 149 (April/May 2007), 45–49 (p. 47).
 31. Cited in Peter Eckersall, ‘Towards an Expanded Dramaturgical Practice: A Report on the Dramaturgy Cultural Interventional Project’, *Theatre Research International*, 31.3 (2006), 283–97 (p. 291).
 32. Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 165.
 33. Dialogue between Val Bourne, David Gordon and Ain Gordon in ‘Ruthless and Rigorous’: Editing Dance’, in *The Art & Science of Nurturing Dancemakers*, ed. by Jo Butterworth and Sita Popat (Bretton Hall: Centre for

dramaturgy has facilitated a modification of attitudes to process and approach. Commenting on this, Garry Stewart, artistic director of Australian Dance Theatre, remarks: ‘Previously choreographers were potentially more lazy [conceptually]’, a ‘hangover from ballet, where you might listen to the music, look at the image and create from there’.³⁰

One might argue that the engagement with the dramaturgical process therefore reflects (some) choreographers’ and dancers’ interest in reflecting on their own practice and process. From dramaturg Yoni Prior’s point of view it is about prompting choreographers to ‘break out of “choreostructures”’, integrating different processes and coming up ‘with new combinations of material’.³¹ However, to return to Bojana Bauer’s point about dramaturgy as a process where critical discourse is absorbed into the practice, attention to dramaturgical processes is also about facilitating a conceptual engagement on behalf of all collaborators. An example that illustrates the way in which dancers take an active interest in the dramaturgy of the piece is offered by Ruth Ben-Tovim, who was dramaturg on Vincent Dance Theatre’s *Broken Chords*. She remarks that dramaturgical observations gave the dancers an extra layer of meaning and it helped them to understand ‘the world that they were creating on stage’.³² From a choreographer’s point of view, David Gordon remarks that he became interested in a reflective process when he came into contact with working practices in theatre; he comments that it ‘informed the working process in a way I had not experienced as a choreographer in my own studio with my dancers [...] [T]his then re-informed my own process when I got back into the studio with my own dancers’.³³

The Dramaturg and Dramaturgical Thinking

If this goes some way towards explaining dramaturgical processes in dance, the discussions on dance dramaturgy have also animated debate about the dramaturg’s role in the process. The discussions have often sought to differentiate more clearly between ‘dramaturgy’, ‘the dramaturg’ and ‘dramaturgical thinking’, and in doing so they have exposed the problematic nature of conflating these. For example, Jean-Marc Adolphe observes that the common assumption that dramaturgy pertains to authoritarian claims to externally imposed meaning seems founded on the perception that dramaturgy (i.e. the *dramaturg*) is the ‘keeper of the grail’.³⁴ Arguably, this not uncommon perception that the dramaturg is a gatekeeper, or even a form of external authority, finds its genesis in (traditional) working practices that are hierarchical by design and often linked to institutional practices where the dramaturg is an enforcer of a predetermined concept. Moreover, the misunderstanding that the dramaturg ‘does’ the dramaturgy, combined with the suspicion that the process of dramaturgy pertains to the imposition of representational meaning and narrative as well as corrective judgement, has to some extent implicitly underpinned some of the debates about dance and dramaturgy.

- Dance and Theatre Studies, 1999), pp. 254–59 (p. 257).
34. Jean-Marc Adolphe, 'Dramaturgy of Movement: A Plea for a Dramaturgy of Perception', *Ballett International*, 6 (1998), 27–9 (p. 27).
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
 36. 'Conversation with Guy Cools', in *Les Ballets C de la B* ed. by Hildergard De Vuyst, Berty Gaudriaan, Ema Van Akoleyen, Hilde Debuck, Iris Raspoet, Koen Augustijnen, Lieven Thyron (Tilt: Lannoo, 2006), p. 216.
 37. Richardson, 'Dramaturgical Dance', pp. 45–46.
 38. Guy Cools cited in Nicola Roper, 'Dramaturgy in Dance: Part Two', *Juice Magazine*, July/August (2005), 4–9 (p. 4).
 39. Van Imschoot, 'Anxious Dramaturgy', p. 62.
 40. Milz, "'Conglomerates'", p. 3.
 41. Cardullo, *What is Dramaturgy?*, p. 23.
 42. Email correspondence with Bojana Bauer, 17 November 2008.
 43. Milz, "'Conglomerates'", p. 3.

Adolphe does not go into a discussion about the dramaturg per se, and he avoids a discussion about the dramaturg as having a specialized function; instead, he gestures towards the notion of *dramaturgical thinking* as something that can be facilitated in a number of different ways and by different collaborators. He posits a more inclusive notion of the dramaturgical contributor by his remark that John Cage and Jasper Johns were arguably 'dramatic advisers to Merce Cunningham'.³⁵ Likewise, he proposes that we may see visual artist Christian Boltanski's contribution to Dominique Bagouet's *Le Saut de l'ange* as dramaturgical, in that Boltanski's observations and ideas had profound dramaturgical consequences for the piece. Guy Cools remarks that dramaturgy is a natural part of group dynamics and the creative process, and within a group of people there is usually one person who 'acts as a sounding board and gives feedback',³⁶ and Sally Richardson's survey from Australia concludes that the dramaturgical sensibility, if one likes, can be found within a number of different collaborators within the working process.³⁷ It follows that in some processes a composer or a rehearsal director could be said to be the dramaturg,³⁸ and this move towards a democratization of dramaturgy, where it is seen as a *process* that belongs to everybody, permeates many of the debates on dance dramaturgy. If for some, such as Van Imschoot,³⁹ this democratization can (and should?) spell the end of the dramaturg, for others such as Bauer or Milz,⁴⁰ it has helped re-articulate the dramaturgical presence in the process, in that it has helped dismantle the perception that the dramaturg is a fixed 'role' or even a 'function' that applies prescribed tools to the work. The common analogy between the dramaturg and the mechanic who fixes the automobile,⁴¹ or the 'outside eye' who keeps an objective distance from the work, has therefore received timely scrutiny. As mentioned earlier, the dramaturg, or a person with that title, is fairly recent in dance, which has presented an opportunity to discover and explore new conceptions of the dramaturgical presence in the process. Bauer remarks optimistically that dance could be an opportunity to 're-visit the dramaturg's role',⁴² and Milz asks whether dance could be seen as an opportunity to establish new forms of dramaturgical practice that break with the idea of 'the dramaturg' as the sole intellectual in the process.⁴³ It is an interesting proposition that dance may offer an opportunity to shift the perception that the dramaturg fulfils a 'function' that is 'performed', 'executed' or 'carried out' by someone. And one could say that attempts to articulate a 'new' dramaturg are underpinned by an urgency to decentre working hierarchies within the process, as well as by a desire to humanize and circumscribe the notion that the dramaturg is a kind of machine for producing meaning, who imposes externally predetermined decisions and meaning on the work.

One of the reasons for this is that the dramaturg has become much more involved in the actual process of making and devising. Dance processes, like devised performance, often do not have a predicated architecture or structure from the outset, and the dramaturgy is therefore shaped and developed as the process and work unfold. The shaping of the dramaturgy throughout the process makes it necessary for the dramaturg to be more intimately, closely and collaboratively engaged

44. Jedrt Jez, 'Distance "Corrupts" and Establishes Intimacy: An Interview with Meg Stuart', *3xt. Tidsskrift for teori og teater*, 9–10 (2002), 8–13 (p. 12).

45. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, trans. by Helen Zimmern (New York: Dover Publications, 1962).

46. Toby Wilsher, 'Outside Eye', in *Dramaturgy: A User's Guide, Total Theatre*, ed. John Daniel (London: Central School of Speech and Drama, 1999), pp. 30–1 (p. 30).

47. Maaïke Bleeker, 'Dramaturgy as a Mode of Looking', *Women and Performance*, 26.13 (Special Issue: 'On Dramaturgy', 2003), 163–72 (p. 164).

with the process and work. Choreographer Meg Stuart remarks that she insists that the dramaturg is permanently present in order to carry the idea and guide the process and collaborators with constructive questions. Importantly, Stuart remarks that the dramaturg can 'doubt' better than anyone in the process. This notion that the dramaturg can create a space for doubt seems a very exciting proposition in that it gestures towards a non-corrective deepening of exploration, perhaps a deferral of the easy solution whilst, as Stuart remarks, retaining a complex image of events and the whole.⁴⁴ Moreover, one could propose that the often very collaborative and fluid nature of contemporary dance and devising processes, where dancers as well as other collaborators are equally responsible for developing the dramaturgy, requires a dramaturgical presence that is able to facilitate dramaturgical thinking amongst everyone in the process.

The discussion about a 'new' dramaturg becomes clearer when we consider the way in which the (theatre) dramaturg has historically been associated with a peculiar kind of power and authority. This association hinges partly on the dramaturg's supposed claim to objectivity, knowledge, a universal audience perspective and classical working processes where the dramaturg is responsible for ensuring that a pre-planned concept is implemented and followed through. Although the discourse and practices have long moved beyond the notion that the dramaturg is the academic or 'the theorist' in the rehearsal room, it is arguable that historically, dramaturgy has often been mobilized as a kind of 'master concept' that can explain and rationalize the work. And it is interesting that the dramaturg's value, as it were, has often been accredited to their position as an 'outside eye' who can produce an objective reading of the work and come to a conclusion about what works, why, and how. For example, one could read G. E. Lessing's argumentation concerning the interpretation of Shakespeare in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy* as his attempt to create rules about right and wrong interpretation,⁴⁵ or, to give a recent example, we may be a little troubled by director Toby Wilsher's suggestion that dramaturgy can bring objectivity and a 'scientific understanding to a "soft" process'.⁴⁶ This kind of narrative, although perhaps unintended in Wilsher's case, can cast the dramaturg in the role of the articulate intellectual who, in a manner similar to the scholar, deploys knowledge, analysis, theory and insight in order to explain and account for a (coherent) interpretation and argument. This association is not without its problems: Maaïke Bleeker remarks that whereas the notion of dramaturgical practice has on first encounter offered a positive opportunity to bring 'intellectual reflection' into the practice, it has also often become 'associated with intellectualism imposed on theatre or dance'.⁴⁷ As stated earlier, these negative connotations have to do with the way in which the dramaturg historically has come to be seen as 'the protector' of a concept (often based on a written play) that has been worked out prior to rehearsals. According to this, the actual rehearsals are therefore about putting decisions into practice, and the dramaturg's role, for it becomes a role, is to ensure that the process moves towards its goal. Bleeker remarks that this role as a 'protector of the goal' has produced a problematic reputation in that dramaturgy and the dramaturg have

- become ‘associated with pre-given concepts that have to be fulfilled, rules that have to be imposed on the artistic material, prescriptions that have to be carried out – or, to put it simply, with limitations imposed upon artistic freedom’.⁴⁸ Bleeker suggests that this predicament has contributed to the opposition, or perhaps dichotomy, between ‘the artistic and the intellectual’.⁴⁹ This troubling adherence to a rule book is echoed in the Hermann Beil interview cited earlier. Beil implies that ‘in the old days’ his dramaturgical work was about formulating unifying concepts that the director could implement. He goes on to call this process a ‘search for proof that we are following a unifying concept’.⁵⁰ If we take this idea to the end of the line it is fascinating to observe that this old-school dramaturgy and dramaturg posit the latter as simultaneously the creator and the servant of fixed rules: thus, both process and dramaturg are locked into a mechanism where a desired outcome is arrived at by eliminating chance, coincidence and the risk of the unknown. To expand on the idea of a master concept (and mastery of the concept), we could borrow Jacques Rancière’s articulation that the master is someone who breaks with the ‘process of hit-and-miss groping’: the master, he asserts, ‘dismisses all groping, all chance by explaining items in order, from the simplest to the most complex’.⁵¹ To the practitioner’s ear, this amounts to getting rid of the live process’s potential for discoveries. Moreover, the dramaturg is often cast in the role of someone who sees and feels what the audience sees and feels; hence, the dramaturg is often described as the ‘audience in the rehearsal room’; the corrective eye; second pair of eyes; third eye. If it makes practical sense, or is even helpful to talk about someone who can offer a different perspective on the work, one has to wonder if this notion of the ‘outside eye’ reiterates a power relationship where the dramaturg is seen as a gateway to the audience or public perception, and as one whose perspective is therefore more ‘objective’ and carries more authority.
- It is the dramaturg as a possible agent and form of ‘legitimation, validation and even control mechanism within a wider production hierarchy’ that concerns Myriam Van Imschoot in her article ‘Anxious Dramaturgy’. Van Imschoot is a dramaturg herself, and her criticisms are not directed at the dramaturgs’ work or good intentions per se; rather, her concern is to shift the focus from discussions and definitions of dramaturgy that ‘compete in insightfulness and creative phrasing’,⁵² and instead address the issues that arise when the dramaturg is imposed on artists in order to fill a perceived ‘lack’ in the artists’ work.⁵³ Moreover, her concern is with the ways in which the dramaturg can become an instrument of power and control. The prompt for her discussion is the frequently cited example of Portuguese choreographer Vera Mantero, who was told by producers that in order to receive funding she ‘would have to work with a “dramaturgist from the North”’.⁵⁴ The demand for a dramaturg naturally raises the questions as to what it is that the dramaturg is needed to do and whether there are particular agendas that the dramaturg is here expected to be a ‘mouth piece’ for. If we pause to examine the dramaturgy of the producers’ curious caveat, we find a set of troubling hierarchical and divisive socio-cultural values. As Lepecki remarks, ‘this request sets up boundaries, it defines fields and it casts
48. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Reinhardt Stumm, ‘Dramaturgy in Stuttgart: An Interview with Hermann Beil’, in Cardullo, *What is Dramaturgy*, pp. 49–55 (p. 51).
51. Jacques Rancière, ‘The Emancipated Spectator’, *ArtForum*, 45.7 (March 2007), 271–80 (p. 275).
52. Van Imschoot, ‘Anxious Dramaturgy’, p. 58.
53. *Ibid.*
54. André Lepecki, ‘The Body in Difference’, *FAMA*, 1.1 (2000), 6–13 (p. 12).

55. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

bodies with all too familiar contours: the southerner is irresponsible, uncontrollable, dangerous in terms of economic investment, while reason, responsibility and control define the northern part of Europe'.⁵⁵ In this instance, a dramaturg is *imposed* on the artist as a form of rational and responsible quality-control mechanism, which makes for a highly peculiar working situation that casts the dramaturg in the role of a censor, an agent with vested powers who is in service of a particular cultural, political, artistic and aesthetic agenda and who can pass judgement. This situation is extreme, but it highlights the problems that arise when the dramaturg is seen as a role or function, a mediator or go-between that is brought in as a 'tool box' in order to fix and remedy the work.

It is at this point that we can ask whether the dramaturg also has a political role to play by circumscribing mainstream paradigms of interpretation, the assumed role as 'the keeper of the grail' or 'protector of the goal' that watches the work through a predetermined grid and lens that is shaped by a particular agenda and set of values. Van Imschoot's solution – to say that dramaturgs are not needed – perhaps reflects a degree of exhaustion with the discussion, and it is not entirely obvious how abolishing dramaturgs, or the job title of dramaturg, addresses the issues that she is referring to. Her discussion rightly invites dramaturgs to consider the politics of their practice, but as she surmises, this 'process of legitimization, validation and control goes well beyond the close collaboration with the artist in the artistic process',⁵⁶ and it involves 'a much wider range of circuits (organizational, political, discursive, etc)'.⁵⁷ Could we go further and then apply this discussion to artists' agency within the wider production machine? In his discussion about curatorial practices, curator and dramaturg Mårten Spånberg remarks that many decisions about programming seem to come down to convention and/or economy, and he proposes that given the fact that festivals' promotion and marketing often focus on the 'good old bestsellers' and established choreographers, one has to assume that ultimately festivals exist in order to survive, rather than to make a difference. Spånberg does not bemoan this as much as he asks for more honesty about the way in which 'the game is played'.⁵⁸

56. Van Imschoot, 'Anxious Dramaturgy', p. 58.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Mårten Spånberg, 'What is the Meaning of Contemporary?' In *In-Presentable* ed. Juan Dominguez and Isabel de Naverán (Madrid: La Casa Encendida, 2007), pp. 121–55 (pp. 143–45).

59. Seminar, organized by Richard Hancock, Traci Kelly and Martin Del Amo in association with Dance4, Live Art Development Agency, Saturday, 25 October 2008.

The Dramaturgical Body in Process

Some recent events have been less concerned with trying to define or pin down the nature of dramaturgy or the dramaturg; rather, the intention has been to expand these notions and to engage with the politics of dramaturgy on very different terms. The recent event 'The Witness as Dramaturg'⁵⁹ did not see the dramaturg as a prescribed function or role; rather, the organisers sought to explore the creative and critical potential embedded in the presence of 'another', a 'witness', or a 'dramaturgical presence' in the rehearsal studio. This is one example of the way in which dance practices have *interpreted* more broadly the notion of dramaturgical practice, and arguably the event reversed questions concerning 'the body of the dramaturg' in the rehearsal studio to ask what might be a

dramaturgical body, or *presence*, in the space. This event also tried to re-articulate the dramaturg as a presence that could prompt the artist's reflective processes and imagination. One could say that the event was interested in dramaturgical presence in terms of the implicated facilitator, a notion which is also found in André Lepecki's proposal that the dramaturg should not be seen as the outside eye or a distant observer; rather, she/he is a complicit, immersed and implicated witness who is very close to the process in order to ask the right questions and find solutions from within.⁶⁰ Moreover, with no 'template' that can pre-empt dramaturgical decisions, the dramaturg can be thought of as an explorer of possibilities alongside the other collaborators. This suggests a view of dramaturgy as a process (with the dramaturg as its potential facilitator), within which meaning is created simultaneously with and through the creation of the material, rather than preceding and directing it.

As Milz suggests, dramaturgical thinking, theory, reflection and conceptualization is therefore also something that is done by everybody in the process, and not owned by one person.⁶¹ Instead, the specific dramaturgical task is about enabling a collective understanding, to facilitate dramaturgical thinking as well as to risk naming and giving shape to the emerging material. She states:

The dramaturg should be the one who risks [describing] what he or she sees, to stumble, to jump, to jump in at the deep end, putting into words what you could hardly perceive, what is not yet named. How do we translate, describe, not re-present the body, the connections between bodies, between the bodies of the audience? This could be the dramaturg's job, to witness and to risk making an offer and a translation. Should not the dramaturg be prepared to encounter things that she does not understand and help others find the potential?⁶²

Similarly, one could read dramaturg Bojana Cvejić interpretation of Rancière as a proposal for a conception of the dramaturg as someone who creates conditions for the work and process. In 'The Ignorant Mentor' she remarks that the mentor's role is not to teach or know the answers but to help 'recognize and unfold the place or the moment where the work becomes *hot*, where it starts moving as if by itself, inviting a feeling of a world to discover there, a sense of pushing the limits of what one can perceive, imagine and articulate'.⁶³

It would be misleading to claim that dramaturgy and dramaturgical processes belong exclusively to particular kinds of dance practices; however, the evidence is that more formalized attention to dramaturgy (often in the form of the dramaturg) has been linked to dance practices that seek to embed conceptual inquiries or critical discourses in the practice. Attention to dramaturgy in dance therefore also marks a moment where concepts within dance practice are expanding and where the schism between dance and theatre is beginning to dissolve. Although I suggested before that the emergence of the dramaturg in dance occurred as it became an independent discipline, it could also be said that as dance explored its own boundaries and its intersection with theatre, this also encouraged an interest in the dramaturg.

60. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, p. 157.

61. Milz, "'Conglomerates'", p. 3.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

63. Bojana Cvejić, 'The Ignorant Mentor', in De Belder & Theo Van Rompany, eds., *P.A.R.T.S.*, pp. 68–69 (p. 69).

To conclude, it is with the dramaturg's introduction into dance, devising and new cultural contexts (such as the UK theatre) that the discussions about a new dramaturg and that dramaturg's relationship to process are intensified. Yet such discussions are not exclusive to particular contexts, and certainly, as this implies, discussions about a new dramaturg are by no means exclusive to dance; on the contrary, theatre too has moved beyond the notion that the dramaturg is a keeper of a predetermined concept. The development of new forms of dramaturgy and dramaturgical working processes is not discipline-specific; rather, one could say that new approaches to collaboration, process, mode of production and materials have brought dramaturgy's contextual and circumstantial nature into sharp focus.

Finally, Jean-Marc Adolphe ponders the possibility of a 'genuine dance dramaturgy connected with movement'.⁶⁴ If this would seem to be a difficult task, given that movement is itself now a complex concept and has been deconstructed by contemporary practice and discourse, Adolphe's comment reminds us that a discussion of dramaturgy in relation to dance has challenged the notion that dramaturgy pertains exclusively to playwriting, literary management or even Aristotelian dramaturgical structures. It is interesting to consider the way in which dance, alongside other disciplines and contexts, could inspire an alternative or more expansive history of dramaturgy and dramaturgical practice other than a traditional, if still viable, trajectory from Aristotle via Lessing through to Brecht. Thus, Arnold Aronson's suggestion that 'a key factor in dramaturgical developments has been the perception and understanding of time and space'⁶⁵ could, for example, inspire a different kind of 'history' that would liberate dramaturgy and dramaturgical practice from being associated with specific traditions. Dramaturgy's migration into dance is therefore also an invitation to outline a more interdisciplinary trajectory where dramaturgy is not tied to one discipline or ideology.

64. Adolphe, 'Dramaturgy of Movement', p. 27.

65. Arnold Aronson, *Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 72.