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Digital dramaturgy and digital dramaturgs

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In 1977 Yale established an M.F.A./D.F.A. program in dramaturgy, the first in America. During the same period, beginning around 1974, the first consumer computers came on the market. By the mid 1980s, professional dramaturgs formally founded Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA), a sign that the field was growing in North America and that there was a desire among dramaturgs to share ideas and practices with each other and with the theatre field as a whole. In 1984, Apple released the Macintosh computer, and by 1985 the internet as we know it was becoming available to the general public.

While these events may be coincidental, it is clear that the development of the professional dramaturg in the US and the development of the digital social world and its accompanying technology have been concurrent. Today, dramaturgs use many digital tools in their work on individual productions, in the literary offices of theatre companies across the country, and as part of the national dialogue on theatre and new play development.

As the theatre artist who most conspicuously straddles the divide between the more private interactions of artist and artist and the more public interactions between artist and audience, dramaturgs have taken on these digital tools most enthusiastically and in a wide variety of creative ways, changing the field as they innovate. This interaction between digital technology and dramaturgy is influencing and transforming both. For dramaturgs, our dual role has been symbolized by two locales: the rehearsal hall and the library. Over the past several decades we have added a third location: the virtual space.

Digital tools and production dramaturgy

One of the great satisfactions of the digital age is the ability to find books and conduct dramaturgical research on the internet. While the chance discoveries that can be made when browsing a section of the library's shelves is still valuable, now many dramaturgs' searches begin – and sometimes end – online. In addition to conducting research digitally, a dramaturg can also distribute production research digitally. The

large binders holding the dramaturg's protocol, notes, and endless research have not disappeared, but they are no longer absolutely necessary or proliferate. One physical copy of the protocol might live in the rehearsal room, but a copy may also live, along with supplemental materials such as (digital-friendly) videos and discussion forums, on a Googlegroup created for our work. This software is now so common that it almost seems unnecessary to describe it – a digital space, open only to those with permission, where one can post documents, links, images, and other items, and where the production team can communicate with each other as well as post items for each other. Actors can now download a PDF of the research packet and send it to their e-reader (possibly along with their script).

While basic digital workspaces such as Yahoogroups, Googlegroups, Google Docs, Microsoft SkyDrive, Dropbox, Box.com, and others are examples of online storage and communication sites, there are other, even more interactive programs that can be utilized for production dramaturgy. Jane Barnette, a professor at Kennesaw State University, has championed the use of wikis and software like PBworks to create online collaborative spaces that reach beyond file sharing and allow production teams to edit, comment on, and enhance each other's work. An early example of this can be seen in the University of Puget Sound's Oberon Project,[1] a wiki initially designed in 2006 for use with the university's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In these types of digital spaces, the text can be uploaded and worked on by a team of dramaturgs or by the production team as a whole. The script itself becomes a space for the director, actors, and designers to play with ideas. Set and costume designers can upload their sketches and designs. Dramaturgy packets become collaborative documents that continue to grow and change during the rehearsal process. Dramaturgs become editors of the digital space and process.

This kind of digital space can be especially useful for devised work, for situations where one or more members of the team are working from a remote location, and in educational settings. These digital workspaces allow for many editors and, as such, are good pedagogical tools for university dramaturgy courses. Students can share and comment on work, in both a classroom and production setting. This in turn creates dramaturgs who are comfortable sharing their work and creative ideas for a production; and it creates dramaturgs who are collaborative artists, with a place at both the physical table and the virtual one. And since dramaturgs are often responsible for introducing these kinds of digital tools into the rehearsal space, they are often the ones at the head of the virtual table. These digital tools provide dramaturgs with a stronger voice in the collaborative process, offering opportunities for the growth of the role of dramaturgy within professional theatre production.

Social media and audience outreach

Websites and social media are now used by many theatres to both market productions to potential audience members and give them access to contextual information related to the production. If audience members are interested in a particular production or theatre, one of their activities prior to attending the theatre will probably include visiting the theatre's website or its Facebook page or blog or Twitter feed or Tumblr.

Collaborations between the marketing and literary departments of a theatre come together in these digital spaces. A dramaturg may supply the play synopsis for the show's information page, for example, and the website can be an effective way to let patrons know about any post-show discussions or other activities that are planned around the production. A theatre's website might host an entire set of documents for each show that contextualizes and enhances the audience member's experience with the show.

Janine Sobeck, the former literary manager of Arena Stage, describes just this type of site in her discussion of Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg, the website she created for Arena Stage:[2]

> Based on the model of the Extra Features sections that are common on DVDs, I wanted to create an interactive experience that provided a wide range of information, … while providing the tools for any audience member who wanted to delve more deeply into any of these subjects. Working with the publications director and web designer, we created a subsection of the Arena Stage website that, thanks to our existing web contract, allowed me unlimited space at no cost.[3]

Sobeck notes that Google Analytics showed more than 57,000 hits to the site and that audience members would quote from the site during post-show discussions.[4] Sobeck is now the dramaturgy specialist at Bringham Young University, where she has created a website similar to Sub/Text called 4th Wall Dramaturgy.[5] Meanwhile, Arena Stage's Sub/Text has been rechristened Extras and Insights.[6]

Baltimore's Center Stage also has a wide array of digital dramaturgy resources. A recipient of a Mellon grant for their dramaturgical work, Center Stage uses their digital dramaturgy site to post items such as the production's program, essays from the director or the production's dramaturgy team, links to further reading, images, and so forth. The theatre's Dramaturgy Department also uses Tumblr[7] to post shorter entries, quotations, images, and videos tracing the production process from a variety of angles. For instance, for the most recent production at the time of this writing, *The Raisin Cycle* – two shows, *Clybourne Park* and *Beneatha's Place* running in rep. – there is a link to an obituary for Chinua Achebe, a video montage from the costume designer, and a link to a series of conversations on race by the production company California Newsreel.

Both examples, Sub/Text and Center Stage's Digital Dramaturgy, illustrate how these digital spaces can change quickly, adapting to both the theatre's needs and also to the interests and manpower available to the theatre. What was on a website today may be gone tomorrow, or at least archived in the theatre's pages, further from public view. Or a theatre that relied on an assistant dramaturg for this type of digital work – time consuming and detailed – may suddenly lack the womanpower to keep a blog current if budget cuts eliminate that staff position. Or the theatre's priorities may shift with a new artistic director who does not value these kinds of digital tools.

These digital dramaturgy websites, hosted by individual theatre companies and centered around their production season, are resources for other dramaturgs and theatres as well as for audience members. As these resources become more

detailed and more common, they will in turn affect dramaturgs' production work. What happens when one theatre's dramaturg can find much of what they need from another theatre's website? How might these inevitably shared resources free up dramaturgs' time for other, more individualized work on productions?

Online archives, databases, and new play development

Both the possibility for sharing information and the serendipitous availability of digital dramaturgy affects larger national conversations and collaborations regarding online archives, databases, and new play development. I had the opportunity to encounter the digital humanities and work with digital archives and encoding first-hand thanks to a University of Maryland course titled Technoromanticism. This course, taught by the director of the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH), Professor Neil Fraistat, was an examination of the relationship between founding concepts of Romanticism and the anxieties, hopes, fears, and joys surrounding the way contemporary culture interacts with technology. Students encoded Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, which required downloading and learning special software called GitHub. The software permitted each student to encode her assigned pages while also seeing the rest of the team's pages and making decisions regarding common notation.[8]

Encoding is not just a matter of taking an image of a page of text and uploading it to a website or typing handwritten pages into a computer program. Rather, it involves turning text into code – making a handwritten manuscript digital and searchable and also preserving the marginalia and various edits made by a variety of authors (Mary and Percy Shelley, in this case). Transforming text into code allows scholars and practitioners to ask different questions than they might have previously, or to ask questions in a different way.[9] Encoding text creates digital archives – databases that allow dramaturgs to approach research material and plays differently than they previously could. And whereas most theatre text throughout history would need to be encoded in order to be accessed in this manner, most recent (and future) theatre texts now begin as digital documents – they are "born digital."

Now, dramaturgs, imagine for a moment that you could go to a website, view or download a play script that has just been produced for the first time by X theatre company. Now imagine that you could read not only a clean copy of that script but also a marked up version containing the playwright's rewrites throughout the rehearsal process. And imagine you could also view the stage manager's prompt book, with all of her notes. And the dramaturgy packet and the program and see the designer's sketches, and so on – all in one place. And imagine that the collection of data for this play was just one among thousands. And that they were all searchable, graph-able, and map-able. While this sort of website is still only an idea, existing digital dramaturgy technology allows us to imagine the possibility. For instance, the American Theatre Archive Project (ATAP),[10] created by archivist Susan Brady and dramaturg Ken Cerniglia, is a national push to identify all of the analog and digital theatre archives in the country. 2amtheatre[11] and HowlRound[12] are online forums for national discussions of issues pertinent to the state of American Theatre.

HowlRound has also created the New Play Map,[13] a searchable map of the United States of current productions, presentations, workshops, and readings that is user-sourced. These types of digital dramaturgy efforts are not limited to the United States – Teatr w Polsce, a website dedicated to collecting Polish performance, is a good example of international forays into digital theatre archiving.[14] And, as covered in another article in this volume, the New Play Exchange, a crowdsourced literary management tool, is currently under development (see Chapter 45).

The work of Doug Reside, the New York Public Library's (NYPL) first digital curator for performing arts also deserves mention. Reside is encoding the librettos and additional materials from out-of-copyright musicals in NYPL's collection and posting them to the archive website.[15] Reside has also done work reconstructing and examining Jonathan Larson's digital documents related to the development of *Rent*. These documents were "born digital" but were on outdated floppy discs and needed to be accessed through older computers. As Reside notes in his own writing on the project, there is a "very real possibility that a large portion of our cultural history will be lost unless we solve it quickly."[16] Reside highlights one important question: with technology changing so quickly, how do we ensure that the materials of our work are accessible to those in the future? As Diana Taylor notes, both archive and repertoire are mediated.[17] We must be aware of that mediation now lest we lose the ability to access work in the future and it will become lost to us simply because our technology has advanced beyond the point where such access is possible. Also of concern, since most playwrights' work is now "born digital," is, in what way, if at all, will others have access to rewrites of future playscripts, with handwritten marginalia that indicates the playwright's thought process? How will this alter what we are able to learn about the process of play production in the future?

Digital dramaturgy

These new digital technologies are also influencing the very notion of what dramaturgy (and theatre) is, and the possibilities contained in the two. What changes about theatre when it moves to a digital space, either in part or entirely? Can we still call this type of performance "theatre"? Many theatre companies have a presence as an organization on Facebook or Twitter. But some take individual productions into these platforms, creating Facebook pages for characters from their current productions or staging entire plays on Twitter. While this is also certainly a marketing effort, with the ultimate goal to get audience members to the theatre to see the play, it is also its own performance. For instance, Romeo and Juliet's relationship status: "It's complicated."

Theatre artists are beginning to conceive of stories that cross boundaries between many mediums, and new movements are pushing form and structure. Last year a group of artists from Woolly Mammoth Theatre in DC, along with members of the Black Women's Playwrights Group and the Carnegie Mellon Entertainment Technology Center gathered to explore new ideas in transmedia theatre. They discussed their collaboration on a video game to accompany the production of *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* at Woolly Mammoth and a website created as part of Lynn Nottage's new play, *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*. Or consider the work of German

artist Kris Verdonck, who creates wordless performances involving interactions between human performers, machines, and digital video, often in collaboration with a dramaturg.[18] A dramaturg's work is redefined when encountering a play without a script, or one that relies upon the chance movements of a machine.

These ambitious projects are changing the notion of what dramaturgy and theatre are and can be in the twenty-first century. Dramaturgs are at the forefront of many of these conversations and projects, mapping where we have been and where we are on the digital terrain, and plotting the frontier of where we may be headed.

Notes

1 The Oberon Project, http://oberon.pugetsound.edu/oberonwiki/index.php/Main_Page, accessed May 10, 2013.
2 Janine Sobeck, "Creating Sub/Text," *Review: The Journal of Dramaturgy* 20 (2009/2010): 7–10.
3 Sobeck, 8.
4 Sobeck, 10.
5 4th Wall Dramaturgy, http://4thwalldramaturgy.byu.edu/, accessed May 10, 2013.
6 Extras and Insights, http://www.arenastage.org/artistic-development/extras-insights, accessed 10 May 10, 2013.
7 The Thaumaturgy Project, http://thaumaturgy.tumblr.com, accessed 10 May 10, 2013.
8 See "Team MARKUP: Encoding Frankenstein for the Shelley-Godwin Archive," Technoromanticism, http://mith.umd.edu/eng738T/team-markup-encoding-frankenstein-for-the-shelley-godwin-archive-2, accessed May 10, 2013.
9 See "Data Analysis Group Post," Technoromanticism, http://mith.umd.edu/eng738T/data-analysis-group-post, accessed May 10, 2013. See also Mining the Dispatch, http://dsl.richmond.edu/dispatch, accessed May 10, 2013.
10 American Theatre Archive Project, http://americantheatrearchiveproject.org, accessed May 10, 2013.
11 2amT, http://www.2amtheatre.com, accessed May 10, 2013.
12 HowlRound, http://www.howlround.com, accessed May 10, 2013.
13 New Play Map, http://newplaymap.org, accessed 10 May 10, 2013.
14 Also see, www.e-teatr.pl/pl/index.html, accessed May 10, 2013. For other European websites, see New International Theatre Experience, www.nitecorp.com; and the Information Centre for Drama in Europe (ICDE), http://www.playservice.net. For another US source, see also The Playwrights' Centre, www.pwcenter.org.
15 "Announcing: Musical of the Month," www.nypl.org/blog/2011/05/18/announcing-musical-month, accessed 10 May 10, 2013.
16 Doug Reside, "No Day But Today": A Look at Jonathan Larson's Word Files," www.nypl.org/blog/2011/04/22/no-day-today-look-jonathan-larsons-word-files, accessed May 10, 2013.
17 Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
18 A Two Dogs Company, www.atwodogscompany.org/en, accessed May 10, 2013.