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Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America Newsletter, volume 1, issue 1

Des McAnuff

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Literary Managers *and*
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Newsletter

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LMDA Co-sponsors National Conference

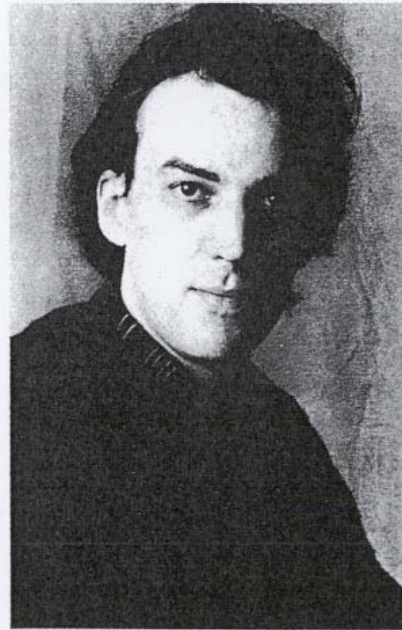
On November 2, 1985, Hunter College and Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of America co-sponsored a national symposium at Hunter College in New York City called THE AMERICAN DRAMATURG: STAGE TWO. Over 150 people--ranging from professional literary managers to university professors to students--participated in the day-long event.

The object of the conference was to see if, for the first time during a conference of this sort, there could be a demonstration of what a dramaturg does, rather than once again conduct a series of unending panels during which panelists tried to define a term which--as this afternoon demonstrated--may be largely undefinable.

Working with Hunter College, LMDA actively recruited the panel participants and suggested the over-all shape of the conference. (Hunter's primary in-put was on the translation panel). To set the right tone, Des McAnuff, Artistic Director of the La Jolla Playhouse in California, was selected to deliver the keynote address. The program committee chose Mr. McAnuff because, in addition to his national reputation, the committee knew his theatre believed in dramaturgs and had consistently shown they knew how to use them effectively. Selections from Mr. McAnuff's address appear elsewhere in the Newsletter.

Following the address was the panel, DRAMATURGY/ADAPTATION/TRANSLATION: The Dramaturg as Cultural Interpreter, chaired by Vera Mowry Roberts, Professor of Theater at Hunter. The panelists were Barbara Field, adaptor of, among other works, *Camille* and *Great Expectations* for the Guthrie Theater; Alisa Solomon, freelance dramaturg and critic for *The Village Voice*; and Alex Szogyi, Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Hunter, and frequent translator of Moliere, Chekhov and Anouilh.

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Keynote Address: Des McAnuff

Mr. McAnuff's address to the symposium has been excerpted here. A fuller version of the address will appear in Theatre Profiles later in the year.

...So now let's talk about dramaturgy. If I was asked to speak to you this morning in order to pump you up and tell you how important you are to some new system of

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LMDA Conference

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The goal of this panel was to present a dramaturg, a translator, and an adaptor to discuss actual situations where they felt they were required to be literary and dramaturgical liaisons between one culture and another.

Ms. Solomon discussed her work on Calderon's *Life is a Dream* for the Ark Theatre, and on *St. Joan of Avenue C* for Split Britches. The latter project was an ensemble effort to bring together the St. Joan story with the problems of Manhattan's Lower East Side. This required more direct adaptation and in-put on the part of the dramaturg, as she contributed to the creation of the text from the very start, with a specific goal in mind.

Dr. Szogyi found that, in being asked by Ellis Rabb to re-set *The Seagull* in the American South for his APA-Phoenix production in the sixties, he, as translator, was making the kinds of connections between Chekhov and the present which, for all intents and purposes, qualified him as a production dramaturg.

Ms. Field, besides having to make the same kinds of connections, had to write a play as well. She found that by carefully examining the novels she adapted and their social context--especially in the case of Dumas' *Camille*--she was able to bring forth themes and ideas previously unexplored in other adaptations and shape them for her play. It seemed that by virtue of the nature of translation or adaptation, the three panelists had been required to edit, and therefore make their own textual interpretations and function as dramaturgs.

The core of the conference was to be CASE STUDY: THE DRAMATURGIC PROCESS. There had been a great deal of debate as to whether an honest demonstration of how dramaturgy operates could be publicly presented. It was important not to lay the playwright open to a dramaturgical onslaught. The first idea was to seek out one-acts that already needed work, and then to make a selection from among them, but that was deemed artificial and somewhat unfair. Happily, the Arthur Foundation agreed to donate \$1000 to a playwright who would be commissioned specifically to write a new one-act for the purpose of this case-study.

The committee selected Sheldon Rosen, author of *Ned and Jack and Souvenirs*, in July of 1985, and he accepted the provisions of the commission. He was asked to write a draft of a one-act play by a particular date, at which time, he and a dramaturg and director of his choice would work on the script with him. He chose Lynn Holst

and John Pynchon Holms, both of New Dramatists, to serve as his dramaturg and director respectively, and they worked with him on both drafts. At the symposium, the first, and then the second drafts would be presented in rehearsed readings, after which Mr. Rosen and his dramaturg and director would discuss their process. Mr. Rosen could write any kind of play he wanted; his only directive was to limit the play's length to about 40 minutes running time.

With a cast of four, *New Order*, by Sheldon Rosen was presented publicly for the first time at the afternoon session. The first draft was read, and then, immediately, the second draft, so that comparisons could be made. The reading elicited quite a bit of response, the onslaught of dramaturgs being somehow inevitable. There were several interesting suggestions, such as reading the second draft first, and then the first draft. At one point, someone suggested taking a vote on which draft was better--this idea did not meet with enthusiasm.

Mr. Rosen felt that his work was more spontaneous while doing the first draft, but it was clear that panel was an exciting one with potential. More time for the panel discussion--especially between drafts--would have helped to satisfy both the panelists and the audience.

The last event of the day was to be a panel entitled DRAMATURGY: THE CUTTING EDGE. Here, a group of participants was to discuss dramaturgy in fields other than the theatre--dance, film, television-- and in areas such as music/theatre, performance art, and the work of "young" playwrights, where dramaturgy tends to be an unusual occurrence.

The panel chair was James Leverett, Director of Literary Services for TCG, who assembled a varied and interesting group of panel members: Jacques Chwat, Director of Performance Project; Peter Maeck, ballet librettists; Robert Marx, critic and essayist; Roger W. Oliver, Humanities Director for the Brooklyn Academy of Music NEXT WAVE Festival; Marcia B. Siegel, Dance Critic for *Hudson Review*; Max Wilk, writer for film, theatre and television; and Arthur Wilson, teacher and a founder of the New Jersey Young Playwrights Festival.

The various comments and backgrounds of the panelists suggested that, once again, the term dramaturg was a difficult one to define. But, the consensus was that this was not such a bad thing. As in the translation panel, members found themselves functioning as dramaturgs--editing, commenting, supporting the text, finding context for the performance, doing research, doing writing, doing creating.

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The final panel concluded with a question-and-answer session that had members of the audience questioning not only the panelists but themselves as well. It may seem fitting that a profession which involves discourse and criticism finished its day on a critical note. Among the audience, one group seemed to stand out: the students of various graduate programs in dramaturgy in the New York area. There were frequent questions from students about the nature of dramaturgy and whether there would be a future for them in the profession when they graduated.

The answers--or answers that contained complete surety--were less forthcoming. It seemed clear that the profession--if not the term--of dramaturgy had to reassert and redefine its identity. Is there a real need for dramaturgy? How can it function within and without the theatre? How can it successfully complement an Artistic Directorship? These are questions which should--and may well be--answered at THE AMERICAN DRAMATURG: STAGE THREE.

Des McAnuff

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leadership, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint. I've collaborated quite successfully with a dramaturg named Robert Blacker for five years, but would hate to think of our relationship as a model for anyone else as we're both strange people. I will say that in certain situations I've found dramaturgs to be critically important and I've worked with some good ones--Mark Bly at the Guthrie, Gail Merrifield and Lynn Holst at the New York Shakespeare Festival, and Michael Schonberg at the Stratford Festival in Canada to name a few.

As much as I've enjoyed working with these people, I would hate to pretend that some miracle system for making theatre had emerged out of my relationships with them. Each relationship has been very different and I find it hard to identify trends in my work with them. You will not hear me propose that dramaturgs pick all of the plays that theatres do because they are "less prejudiced" than artistic directors, as I believe that whenever possible theatre projects should be initiated by the artists who take direct responsibility for writing and production. I would not want to replace one political theatrical system for another. Rigidity is to be avoided at all cost, for it stifles individual creativity and assassinates talent. . . .

. . . a new role is emerging in European and American theatre in the 20th century for a strange being that sounds like a polish sausage--the dramaturg.

In America, the dramaturg's emergence is due to a lot of factors--for starters, Yale trained a bunch of them and we need to find jobs for them. Truthfully, dramaturgs are becoming one of the components that makes up the new potential producing team, which is replacing the former producer-director. As we accumulate dramatic literature, it makes perfect sense for a talented individual to stake out territory in this area. It makes even more sense to have an individual who is concerned about the artistic side of producing who is talented, well informed, and not responsible for staging. If a theatre was a political party, one might call this person a party philosopher--someone who reminds everyone else, when they're up to their asses in crocodiles, that their original intention was to drain the swamp. It is clearly a job for a professional--not an academic. While it is obvious that an academic background can be useful, it is by no means the only qualification for the job. . . .

The dramaturg has to apply knowledge to a particular creative situation. He or she has to understand and be sensitive to the entire creative theatrical process. A dramaturg who tosses in information, critical opinions and knowledge that don't apply is no more useful than a director who gives an actor a mindless direction. I see the dramaturg more as part of the creative producing team than as the in-house critic. Why anyone would believe that having work criticized in the formal sense while it's being created should be a good thing, I have no idea. Creative inspiration is not always helped by self-consciousness. Can you imagine what would have happened to Ibsen's plays if the Norwegian critics attended his rehearsals? Walter Kerr would not have necessarily been a positive influence on Beckett if he'd been around during the writing of *Waiting for Godot*.

I don't see the dramaturg as the professional devil's advocate. No man has the monopoly on playing devil's advocate in the creative theatre making process. Designers, directors and actors all serve as devil's advocate for each other at various points along the road to performance. It has been my experience that in the healthiest situations, the best idea in the room prevails. Ideas are what contribute most to making a production significant. The dramaturg, along with the rest of the professionals, must share a common goal, or the dramaturg has no place in the room. If dramaturgs are to make a significant contribution to the theatre, they must become part of the new producing partnership. Producing is not dictating--it is providing support for a common vision. . . .

Any dramaturg who feels that their role on a classic is limited to doing research is brick ignorant about what a meaningful production of a classic entails. When I'm directing a classic I need to do research, but I'm much more inclined to turn to an expert on that particular area of literature, perhaps a graduate student or a professor, than to a dramaturg. . . .

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McAnuff

Robert Blacker and I have spent months on Shakespeare's texts. Every time we've attempted to produce his plays, we've analyzed these texts not simply on a line-by-line basis, but on a word-by-word basis, and we've made discoveries that have been tremendously exciting to us and extremely useful to the actors and designers. . .

I expect a dramaturg to be involved in the rehearsal process on a day-to-day basis, applying creative thought, keeping track of themes, remembering the world in which we presently live and reminding us of it, and helping to lift the language into life and to give that language a contemporary context. If you don't think that's creative--you've simply never had to do it.

There is no recipe for dramaturgical work with a living playwright. Each playwright will respond to help and advice in a completely different way. Being effective is what's important. It takes wisdom and sensitivity to deal with any playwright--particularly a good one. The dramaturgical process that goes into any new play is frequently a collective experience involving designers and actors as well as dramaturgs and directors.

Knowledge about playwriting is attainable, but the talent it takes to convey that knowledge cannot be taught. The new play is, in my opinion, wrongly considered to be the jewel in the dramaturg's crown. Many playwrights prefer to serve as their own dramaturgs and deal directly with the actors and people responsible for staging. This is not necessarily wrong and we should avoid trying to jam all new plays into playwright's workshops and staged readings. The system that supports the play must be invented around the playwright, not around what's convenient for directors, dramaturgs, or theatres. . .

DES McANUFF is Artistic Director of the La Jolla Playhouse in California, where he has directed award-winning productions of A Mad World, My Masters, Romeo and Juliet, As You Like It, The Sea Gull, and Big River which moved to Broadway and received seven Tony awards, including Best Musical and Best Director. Mr. McAnuff also directed the Obie winning production of The Crazy Locomotive for the Chelsea Theater, and several plays for the New York Shakespeare Festival, including his own work, The Death of Von Richtofen as Witnessed from Earth.

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Dramaturgs of
America 424 West 44th Street
New York, NY 10036

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