LMDA Newsletter, July 1, 2016

Nakissa Etemad
Beth Blickers
Vicki Stroich
Bob White
Walter Bilderback

See next page for additional authors

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Authors
Nakissa Etemad, Beth Blickers, Vicki Stroich, Bob White, Walter Bilderback, Heather Helinsky, Jayne Wegner, Mead Hunter, David Geary, Anna Woodruff, Melis Aker, Elizabeth Bennett, and Liz Engelman

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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the second installment of the LMDA Newsletter, your source for news on the latest trends in dramaturgy and scoop on fellow LMDA members! This edition will highlight freelancing from all walks of LMDA, and people who have had successful transformations in their lives as dramaturgs. Freelancing as a full-fledged career can be a tricky business, but folks are making it work, both here and in Canada.

Features on Freelance Dramaturgs include:

- Vancouver-based dramaturg and renaissance man David Geary, and Heather Helinsky who’s making freelancing her career across America.

Also in this edition, you’ll get to know two dramaturgs for the price of one.... Inspired in part by Conference Keynote “Conversations” during Vicki Stroich’s presidency, this newsletter captures talks between pairs of like-minded, long-term colleagues who have chosen similar career paths, sometimes as a result of their relationships. Here are the dynamic duos we have in store:

- First up, are Vicki Stroich & Bob White, artistic leaders of vital new play
organizations in Canada—word has it that Bob was responsible for Vicki becoming a dramaturg!

- Encompassing the worlds of new play institutions, producing, freelance dramaturgy, and academia, artistic leaders **Jayne Wenger & Mead Hunter** swap stories of their varied careers and friendship over the years plus their impressions of new plays in America today.

- Long-time colleagues and great friends **Elizabeth Bennett & Liz Engelman** spent a large part of their early- to mid-careers as institutional dramaturgs and have since branched out into hugely diverse jobs between them, including advocacy in the arts & culture sector, teaching, journalism, executive & artistic directorships, and Nature-turgy!

- For early career dramaturg **Anna Woodruff**, her work with fellow Columbia grad student **Melis Aker**, a playwright and actress, marks the building of their long-term relationship as collaborators, as they tell us about their current passion projects.

It’s great to introduce you to these fabulous people who are all inspiring, immensely talented, and genuinely wonderful people.

Enjoy!

**Nakissa Etemad**

Guest Editor, LMDA Exec. VP Freelance (through July 9th)

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**A Message from our LMDA President**

As we head into July, I look forward to seeing many of you at the upcoming conference in Portland, OR! We’ll be at the PSU campus July 7-9 and you are all welcome to join. It will be bittersweet saying goodbye to you all as your president when I pass the reins to our incoming **LMDA President Ken Cerniglia**. I thank you all for a wonderful term, and I wish Ken a smooth ascendance to the throne. If you would like to learn a bit more about his journey as a dramaturg, please check out **HowlRound** to read an interview with him.

*(Photo of Beth by Joey Stocks.)*

**Beth Blickers**
Two leaders of Canadian new play organizations talk shop about Canadian dramaturgy while sharing origin stories and their work in new play development. **Vicki** is Executive Director of Alberta Theatre Projects in Calgary, and **Bob** is Director of New Plays at the Stratford Festival in Ontario.

**VICKI:** How did we meet each other? I don't know if I've heard your side of the story.

**BOB:** I don't really remember. I think you first burnt yourself into my memory when you were ASM'ing *Appetite* as part of your internship. Although we must have had some interaction in the office, no?

**VICKI:** We would have had some interaction in the office when I was a University of Calgary intern in 1999-2000, but that was a very interesting year for the company with lots of struggle so I tried to be more of an observer than anything else. Yes, the premiere of *Appetite* would have been the first big interaction we had. I was doing that show and *Motherlode* working on the stage management team and following the
continuity scripts. Both shows had so many changes in rehearsal. It was an exciting crash course in new play development. It was interesting to watch you and playwright Eugene Stickland work together on that show as such a cohesive team but a team that still needed careful communication. I got to work with you two a few times after I returned as Assistant Dramaturg in 2001.

What was so interesting to me was watching how you seemed to be able to distill your dramaturgy down to three notes. "The three-note wonder" is what I would call you to other folks. I am curious how you developed such a lean and potent style as a dramaturg?

**BOB:** I’m sure I stole the notion from somebody else. But the more I talked to playwrights in note sessions the more obvious it became that the stress involved often created a kind of mental block to actually having a conversation. So, by simply stating that "I had three things to share", the stakes automatically lowered and we could have a conversation. I think focusing on the three things makes things seem practical and doable. And isn't three a magical number? I also try and keep the meeting under an hour. Those day long line-by-line things some people engage in boggle my mind.

**VICKI:** What's funny is that Vanessa Porteous, my other dramaturgical mentor at ATP, was a person who could get deep into it for hours with playwrights and directors. I would sit in and watch both of you and worry about my own style. I couldn't quite do it in three notes but I also didn't resonate with the big sessions Vanessa seemed to be able to do. Both styles appealed to me though and you were both really great dramaturgs. For a while, I felt like I should choose between your styles. Then I realized I had my own and it kept developing and adapting the more projects I did.

**BOB:** That's the great thing about this job. It is totally dependent on letting your process reflect who you are as a person...it is the only way to earn trust. How would you describe your style?

**VICKI:** It shifts a bit based on my relationship with the playwright/s, but what has developed is a style that starts with defining the destination and...
then focuses on the areas of the map that will get us there. I always start by asking the playwright why they wrote the play, what they want the audience’s experience to be and what they feel is working or not working in the script to help define the destination and start mapping our journey there. Usually a playwright already has some sense of what is working and what they want to work on. I usually agree with them and that makes it easier to create the plan together. If they don't know or they have different areas of where they want to focus, that is very interesting to know, and I find a way to share how I received the script to open up the different perceptions that might come from the audience about the play.

**BOB:** I think the notion of sharing "how you received the script" is really, really important. And there is no right or wrong here. Unless the writer is very, very, very experienced, they usually don't have a great sense of how the work is being perceived and the dramaturgical encounter is often the first time the work is being shared. Tact, of course, is essential, but I’m finding that more and more playwrights really appreciate the blunt approach. And I can do that.

**VICKI:** There is a perception about Canadians that we aren't blunt. Tactful, yes. Blunt, no. (Except for you, everyone knows you are joyfully blunt.)

Do you think there is a Canadian style of dramaturgy or a way that Canadian playwrights see the world that makes our work here unique?

**BOB:** That's a hard question to answer, of course, since we are in the thick of it on a daily basis.... At the end of the day, I think the best of new writing everywhere is nuanced and open to being completed by an audience as they perceive it in performance. I don't think I can really speculate on what makes Canadian work different. Can you?

**VICKI:** No, I can't really. It is a question that gets asked of me occasionally and I never know how to answer it. I have always felt that Canadians are sensitive to varying points of view and are consensus builders. That curiosity may be built into the way we work or see the world. But so much is changing and I am happy to see Canadian theatre evolve, and my own style and understanding evolve as a dramaturg.
Thanks for seeing something in me and encouraging me to embrace dramaturgy. It continues to be a wonderful journey and you were the one who gave me the opportunity to explore it.

BOB: You're welcome. More importantly, we've become good friends!!!

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FREELANCING ACROSS AMERICA:
On the Road with Heather Helinsky
by Walter Bilderback

Heather’s colleague Walter interviewed her in between gigs this summer. Walter is an LMAD Member and the Dramaturg/Literary Manager for The Wilma Theater in Philadelphia.

(Photo by Tom Grady.)

Heather Helinsky is on the move. As usual. Heather’s career as a freelance dramaturg means she spends much of her time on the road.

This peripatetic life began after she was laid-off from a staff position in Pittsburgh during the last financial crash, but its roots had begun germinating before then. “It actually started when I was meeting some grass-roots activists in the Pittsburgh community who were schooling me in the history of activism in all of Pittsburgh's diverse neighborhoods, that I started thinking of how I could be a grass-roots activist for playwrights in different communities across the country.” Working at Great Plains Theatre Conference (GPTC) introduced her to playwrights from across the country and “see the benefit of regional playwrights supporting and encouraging each other,” giving her a chance to put the idea into action.

Since then she has worked on over 60 new plays by writers both
established and beginning, a number of classics, and has become a major mentor for emerging dramaturgs, with GPTC, The Kennedy Center/American College Theatre Festival, and PlayPenn (in her hometown of Philadelphia) as recurring artistic homes.

As any good dramaturg knows, a challenge in working with new plays is to avoid the temptation of making the plays fit her structural or generic preconceptions. Playwright Toni Press-Coffman praises Heather as “a dramaturg who doesn’t look at my play as something to be ‘fixed.’” Heather credits this to her graduate training in the ART/MXAT program. “I try to bring my understanding of Chekhov from my training at the Moscow Art Theatre into the equation, regardless of the aesthetic. First, new plays are often searching for new forms, so how can you ‘fix it’ if they are making something new—it's not broken, it's just not revealed yet on the page. I tell writers, ‘You know these characters better than I do, I may ask some really stupid questions to figure them out too.’ And it's funny, sometimes the most wildly, experimental play benefits from me just asking some simple questions about the given circumstances.”

(Heather in Workshop on Structure with GTPC Playwrights. Ph: Tom Grady.)

What advice does she have for early career ‘turgs interested in a freelance career? “I think the types of people drawn to dramaturgy at the beginning tend to be over-achiever types.” In order to handle multiple simultaneous projects, you need to let go of perfectionism. “You do need to aim for it, just be good to yourself if you can't always reach for it, and keep moving. You also need to be really good at multi-tasking, not just multi-tasking jobs, but multi-tasking the rest of your life too—making the tough choices
about going to your nephew’s 5th birthday or taking a project that pays well. Being there for an aging grandparent or parent can be just as important as going out to network at an event.”

She takes her own advice seriously. “It’s also important to have a full life, and a family; I have ten nieces and nephews in the Philadelphia area and I’d like to see them grow up, and I have a dog.” Despite the time on the road, a home base is important. “First, people always want to know where you’re from, which sports teams you cheer for,” she says. With that in mind, Heather schedules three weeks of “retreat” with her family every June, although she still does a lot of work “down the shore.” Then, she says, “I hit the reset button for the season,” and it’s back to the road.

FROM PRODUCING TO FREELANCING: Artistic Leaders Jayne Wenger & Mead Hunter

Recently two new play development veterans, Jayne Wenger from the Bay Area and Mead Hunter from Portland, Ore., discussed what’s old and what’s new in the world of dramaturgy.

**Mead:** Jayne, we’ve been kicking around in the new play development universe for a while now! You in the Bay Area Playwrights Foundation, and in New York with the Women’s Ensemble, me with ASK Theater Projects and now with The New Harmony Project. Our acquaintance goes all the way back to the 20th century.
Jayne: Yes! We met when you interviewed me for *Parabasis*. I bet if we could dig up that article we’d be surprised at the ways we’ve changed over the years.

Mead: What do you notice about how things have morphed over the past few decades? How has playwriting changed, and how has your dramaturgy adapted to those changes?

Jayne: Plays are—for lack of a better word—more *plastic* now, because there are more forms available, and people actively seek out those forms. Also there’s a melding of different forms, and we see playwrights and collaborative teams using all the tools available to them. I could mention choreography in particular. We’re using multiple mediums now to amplify a story, whereas 20 years ago we were more interested in exploring psychology.

Mead: So the theater’s more theatrical now?

Jayne: Yes, it’s about activating plays differently. Just yesterday Mame Hunt and I were talking about *Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812*, for example—a different way of telling a story.

Mead: So with these new hybrid forms, does our role as dramaturgs also shift?

Jayne: It has to. Part of our job is to go outside ourselves, what we ourselves bring to the table, to use more resources—whether it’s bringing in a choreographer for some or all of a play, or reaching out to different kinds of artists, such as musicians, video—magicians!

Mead: That changes our traditional emphases in ways that I appreciate. Generally we’re regarded as authorities on performance structures, whereas you seem to be positing the idea of dramaturgs as creative conduits, as connectors who keep an eye on what the play may need. Look at *Hadestown*, for example—that’s not a play that you’d want to impose a standard structure on. That would miss the point. But we’re talking about rehearsal and production processes; what about the writing
itself? Do you detect a 21st-century sensibility underway?

**Jayne:** I think we’re seeing a lot more of several different styles happening within one play. Plays don’t have to be labeled as surrealism, naturalism or whatever. Styles and forms can be exploded within just the one experience.

**Mead:** Yes. *The Humans* comes to mind. If you say it’s about family secrets emerging during a Thanksgiving dinner, it sounds downright old-fashioned, yet the experience of seeing it in performance is in many ways closer to Samuel Beckett than, say, Arthur Miller.

**Jayne:** And if a dramaturg is working on a play like that, which uses several different modes, it’s key that he or she is able to speak to when a moment is drawing on a particular style. For the actors. Because if there’s an agreement about what world we’re in, fine. They’re smart, they can run with it. But when three different actors are in three different worlds, that’s when failure comes. So it’s important that the dramaturg be able to be a guide, a conduit, really.

**Mead:** We have now arrived at that enviable point in our careers where we can pick and choose from available projects. What constitutes an interesting project for you nowadays? What keeps you interested in Dramaturgy?

**Jayne:** This goes back to exploding mediums—I’m working with a Bay Area jazz and blues singer, Pamela Rose, on a music piece called *The Blues Is a Woman*, subtitled “Ma Rainey to Bonnie Raitt.” We’re creating it with a five-member band, all of them women. But the band has never done narrative before, created story within the context of what would ordinarily be a gig. So it’s fascinating, because Pamela Rose is now working as a playwright as well as a musician for the first time. And what about you, what’s a recent project you were excited to be working on?

**Mead:** Well, I’m just back from The New Harmony Project’s conference—its 30th, by the way!—where I served as dramaturg on a new piece written by Dael Orlandersmith for another actor, Antonio Suarez, called *Antonio’s Song / I Was Dreaming of a Son*. So here we have a famed
monologist, co-writing a solo piece for someone else, someone who’s also her co-writer. It was a thrilling process to be in the room with those two and our highly collaborative director, Tlaloc Rivas. A high-wire act. The piece was very well received in its first public presentation.

Jayne: And now?

Mead: LMDA in Portlandia, of course!

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**FREELANCING IN CANADA: David Geary Talks Shop & Indigenous Dramaturgy**

_A one-on-one interview... with himself. David Geary, a dramaturg, writer, director, filmmaker, and educator in Vancouver, dives firsthand into his world of freelance dramaturgy in Canada._

**What is the Dramaturg's Creed?**

*Protect and serve... and provoke.* _Serve_ the playwright any way you can. _Protect_ them in the workshop so that their words and vision get honoured. _Provoke?_ Be the Outside Eye and ask the Hard Questions: Why this play now? Is it really a solo show? Can you combine these characters? Are nine cups of coffee and three red bulls before lunch really good script fuel?

**Your Background?**

My first play was workshopped in New Zealand in 1990. The dramaturg said: "We're not just workshopping a play, we're workshopping a playwright." And I got it - how plays have to be up and in action to realize what beast we're wrangling. I loved workshopping, and the great leaps forward my plays could make there. Then Playmarket NZ asked me to dramaturg other playwrights' work...
You're *Māori* from New Zealand but live in Canada?

I'm a dual citizen. I like working in the mainstream, but I have a particular interest in indigenous work. Prime Minister Trudeau committed to honouring the 94 recommendations in the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Report that acknowledged Canada had committed "cultural genocide". When I was at the LMDA conference in New York 2015, I suggested the Canadian caucus use these recommendations to create "cultural revitalisation". From that, Michael Wheeler #CdnCult commissioned me to write an article for SpiderWebShow. It was distributed throughout Capilano University, where I work in the film department, as an example of reconciliation in action. And that's why every dramaturg should go to LMDA conferences: you'll find your tribe, who speak your language, have new conversations, and maybe even pick up a job.

Advice for Freelancers?

Write plays, write a manifesto, keep case studies of your dramaturgical work. Be nice to everyone, invite people to witness your work, go to the theatre. I've written a guide to dramaturgy and make it my calling card. You want it, just ask via twitter @gearsgeary.

Your Loves - Jazz & TV?

The best days for a dramaturg in a workshop are like being in a jazz ensemble. The playwright has written a script/score, with parts for players and themes; and then the actors, director and dramaturg jam with the writer. But I'm maybe more "invasive" than other dramaturgs. I suggest new scenes, new structures, new characters, new lines. It comes from being in TV Writers' Rooms where everyone breaks story together.

*(Drum-making Workshop – David kneeling on the right.)*
Pet Hates?
Hate first workshops where we schlump in, slump at the table, do quick intros and read the play. Love having a Talking Circle away from the table so we meet as humans first. Māori support our mihi/intro with a song/waiata, so I give everyone the chance to sing. It bonds a team real quick. And I get to subject everyone to my Māori version of "Purple Rain".

Current Dramaturg Projects?

- *Red Patch* for Hardline Productions, *Harlem Hellfighter* for Rooted Theatre
- PTC Block A Emerging Playwrights - Playwrights Theatre Centre, Vancouver
- *DISSECTION OF A MODERN DAY INDIAN, NATIVE, INDIGENOUS, ABORIGINAL, FIRST NATIONS, URBAN/REZ, STATUS/NON STATUS, MÉTIS, MIXED HERITAGE WOMAN* by Nyla Carpentier [*Editor's Note: Play title has strike-through from "INDIAN" through "HERITAGE"]
- "#MYRECONCILIATIONINCLUDES... JUST DANCE" - article in *Performing Indigeneity: New Essays on Canadian Theatre* (Playwrights Canada Press 2016) edited by Yvette Nolan and Ric Knowles
- And I'd love to revive 2015's *The Julius Caesar Project* with
EARLY CAREER PROJECTS:
ANNA WOODRUFF COLLABORATES WITH MELIS AKER

(Melis & Anna. Photo by Ralph Prete.)

Melis Aker and Anna Woodruff are both second year students at Columbia's School of the Arts. Melis is getting her MFA in Playwriting and Anna is getting her MFA in Dramaturgy. Melis is a playwright as well as an actor and musician coming from Turkey. She attended Royal Academy of Dramatic Art for acting, and Tufts University for her BA in Drama and Philosophy. Anna is a dramaturg, specifically interested in new play development. Originally from New Haven, Connecticut, Anna attended the University of Connecticut where she got her BA in Theatre Studies focusing on Dramaturgy. The two are working together on a number of projects both in school and outside their programs.

Melis: When did we meet at school? I only ask because it feels like I’ve known you for much longer!

Anna: We met last fall, but didn’t have a chance to work together until spring 2016. We took a class with Anne Bogart called Collaboration. Some of the disciplines in the MFA program – Directors, Actors,
Playwrights, Dramaturgs, and Stage Managers get split into individualized teams to create six different pieces. So that’s when we got to work on *Manar*. When did you first start writing that piece? Was it specifically written for class?

**Melis:** I had started writing the piece earlier in the year for Lynn Nottage’s American Spectacle class, under the assignment “violence as spectacle.” The piece grew out of my exploration of authentic vs. fabricated memory. At the time I was also grappling with ideas around paranoia, grief and cultural segregation in the digital age.

**Anna:** So, *Manar* follows A Mother, A Father, and friend Najla as they deal with the disappearance of A Son. A Mother is convinced she recognizes her son’s eyes through an ISIS execution video, while A Father denies that possibility. We observe the crux of their dysfunctional marriage, structurally and emotionally interlaced with memory scenes.

**Melis:** Our director Issy Kettle helped propel all these ideas further in the rehearsal room. She utilized Viewpoints techniques to create an exercise where an actor performs an action in the past tense that directly affects a moment in the present. This way, they share both the mental and physical space; there’s always a temporal link.

**Anna:** It’s sort of prime dramaturgical material. Not only are we working with loaded text, beautiful dialogue that you’re writing, we have this physical language created on the stage. It forced me to constantly be asking questions to all the members of the team, including myself. When are we in a memory? When are we in present time? How do we clarify that to the audience, both physically and verbally? There were so many aspects of this play that had to be tracked throughout. Meanwhile, it was essential to keep these physical actions present and fresh each time.

**Melis:** For me personally, at least as a playwright, I am unable to put a stamp of emotional completion, or at least of structural fulfillment on a piece unless my process of writing is shared with and very much influenced by a dramaturg. In this case specifically, it would have been impossible to find the right questions to ask, let alone find appropriate answers that would help me dig deeper into the rabbit hole that is a
“character,” or “narrative world” without your input. It goes without saying here that I strongly believe that the presence of a dramaturg is necessary – you’re my objective set of eyes, and objectivity is purely impossible to achieve with your own work as a playwright.

**Anna:** We will have the time to work further on *Manar* this summer, and luckily, we’re paired together for projects next semester in another Collaboration class.

**Melis:** It’s nice because we have the time before the fall to put our heads together about what kind of play we want to do. I have some smaller pieces that I’m excited to expand. There’s a piece on the shelf that’s inspired by the female military in the northern borders of Syria, which I’m hoping to entwine with the Mesopotamian myth of Shahmaran, the half snake Queen of the Underworld. There’s also a piece following a brother and a sister living in a mosque, waiting for the Imam to free himself from his self-imprisonment, locked up in the minaret of the mosque. And then there’s the mysterious existence of Rumi, who waits with them.

**Anna:** I love this beginning part of the process with a playwright. I think there’s such a bonding experience when we are researching together before or during the writing process. Right now we have been sharing a lot of photographs of Kurdish female fighters, and Melis has been showing me a number of documentaries on these women.

**Melis:** We also have the time to read scenes aloud as I write, which is really helpful for my process. It gives us the time just as playwright and dramaturg to ask questions and dig into why I’m choosing to write this play now.

**Anna:** Lots of late night conversations over french fries! It’s great working with a playwright like you, Melis, because my role in this relationship is more than generating research and contextualizing your written world for the creative team. We have an exchange. An exchange that’s open enough for us to experience both mistakes and realizations, both of which are essential in the creation of art.
Nearly 20 years ago, dramaturgs Elizabeth Bennett and Liz Engelman idled on a bench overlooking Windansea Beach in La Jolla, CA. Their conversation turned from the show that Liz was scouting to matters more profound. They have since shared thoughts while on benches in Austin, Princeton, Central Park, and at Tofte Lake Center (TLC), the artist retreat that Liz founded in Minnesota’s Boundary Waters. Liz also teaches in the Theatre department at University of Texas at Austin (UT). Elizabeth is the Executive Director of Staten Island Arts. They recently discussed life after moving away from full-time institutional staff positions.

Elizabeth Bennett: Do you remember having an epiphany moment of “I’m a dramaturg!” Or “maybe this dramaturgy thing is for me!”

Liz Engelman: Ok, so I was in high school in Baltimore – junior year, I think – I and Ann Ciccolella, who I’m friends with to this day, said “You should be a dramaturg.” I asked the ol’ dramaturgical question back, “Why?” She replied, “you have the ability to look at the big picture and
relate it to the specific, and, conversely, you can look at a small detail, and relate it to the whole.” That resonated with me, and I still refer back to it when people ask me what dramaturgy is.

What drew you to dramaturgy in the first place?

Elizabeth: In my senior year of college, Norman Frisch taught a Dramaturgy class that changed my life. It wasn’t until two years later that I grasped that dramaturgy would combine my love of theater with a grounding in writing and literature. That was confirmed as I talked to dramaturgs at regional theaters, then undertook the Arena Stage internship that put me on my path.

Liz: What about that internship set you on your path?

Elizabeth: The impact of that experience can’t be underestimated. It was about dramaturgy as a far-reaching art and profession. The reach is what has enabled me to make career changes when needed. Larry Maslon was an amazing mentor who later hired me full-time at Arena. So much of my career is based in that experience. Larry incorporated me into writing grant proposals, and forced me out of my shyness by pushing me into donor circles and throwing me to the wolves known as post-show discussion audiences. I still hold onto the awe I felt every time I worked in that sacred theater in the round space.

In hindsight, I feel it was great to not begin my dramaturgy career in NYC. I would have burned out sooner. I always encourage early-career dramaturgs to think outside the Big Apple.

Do you have some delicious moments of dramaturgy that you hang onto, that you think connected the dots to where you are now?

Liz: For me, more than even moments, there were mentors. I consider myself so fortunate to have so many, and at the right times. After Ann, at Brown, Tori Haring-Smith told me I should be a dramaturg, and showed me how; Paula Vogel taught me passionate engagement; Mark Bly and Geoff Proehl welcomed me into the LMDA community and modeled dramaturgy in action. Michael Dixon showed me how dramaturgy is the DNA of an institution; Brian Quirt embodied dramaturgy in generative leadership; Anne Bogart lived making your philosophy your practice, Mame Hunt taught me the importance of honesty and humor. Elizabeth,
you’ve been a huge mentor for me, as I watch you for over two decades forge your own path to your own drum and heartbeat.

So for me, dramaturgy is mentorship; seeing potential, setting a path, making connections, providing resources, guiding and challenging, living by example. I try to be for others what these mentors were for me, particularly now at TLC and at UT.

**Elizabeth**: Was there a specific moment that you realized that being an institutional dramaturg was no longer right for you?

**Liz**: Short answer: Yes. Longer answer: looking back, the pattern was consistent. I loved every regional theatre job I had, and would then stay, on average, three years. I loved beginning something. Then, once it became a program, or systematized, it became less exciting. It also became difficult, in my soul, to have to say “No” to so many writers every year, many of them whose work I loved. After all those years, I was ready to say more yeses.

It really comes down to this: like Maria in *The Sound of Music*, I was meant to be in a tree and not in an abbey.

**Elizabeth**: How did you figure out how to move forward from that?

**Liz**: I moved to Minneapolis which was the perfect city to both work as a dramaturg at places that became homes to me – Mixed Blood Theatre and The Playwrights’ Center – and from which to freelance nationally and internationally. This supported me for many years. Of course, I could only do this because of all the relationships I had made during my time as an institutional dramaturg.

The biggest change occurred when a playwright friend (thank you, Michele Lowe) suggested I talk with Sandy Wade, her good friend who was a life coach, about an idea I’d had for an artist retreat center. I’d been dreaming about it but hadn’t taken it seriously enough to take the next step. After talking to Sandy (who is really a dramaturg for people), I realized that what I valued centered most around these six “themes”: conversation, community, creativity, innovation, sun, and water. My favorite moments in my “life in the theatre” happened *outside* of the theatre: on beaches, on docks, under trees, in the sun. They say the things you love to do as a child are some of the most foundational core things
about you, to return to and/or reclaim in your life as we get older. For me, that was stories and the outdoors. So, now, my home – and my greatest joy – comes from conversations on Tofte Lake or on its shore: on paddleboards (paddleturgy), on a deck, watching the wind flutter the trees or listening to the sound of the loon calls. Or, on a bench with you, my dear friend. *That* inspires me, relaxes me, fills me, and grounds me. It’s home.

Regarding home: we’ve both lived on both coasts, and in the middle, for jobs. Where is home for you?

**Elizabeth:** These days, my mortgage is in Brooklyn but mentally I live on Martha’s Vineyard, which has been home since I was 10. It’s where I most feel like myself. And there are *people* who feel like home to me. Like you.

**Liz:** What amazes me is how much you do outside of the “theater world” and yet you remain so connected to it.

**Elizabeth:** My priorities shifted at a certain point. I no longer felt connected to my work. And, like you, I was frustrated at having to turn down amazing plays and playwrights that I believed in. I’ve found intellectual, artistic, emotional and, yes, financial fulfillment, in different places. Few things make me happier than cooking while listening to the Grateful Dead. For 21 years, I’ve enjoyed an amazing collaboration with my artistic partner-in-crime, Preston Lane at Triad Stage in NC. My value system is aligned with how he runs his theater to impact the community. My recent freelance gig editing *SDC Journal* has brought me back to theatre in a really healthy way.

I view myself as an arts advocate and that advocacy has taken various forms: journalist, dramaturg, teacher, and fundraiser. My most direct advocacy was when I worked for the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, where I managed public funding for cultural organizations and after-school programs. But what motivates me has always been a desire to connect people with great art either by helping them access it or understand it.

What about you? Do you have a personal mission statement?

**Liz:** I guess I’d say: Live life with passion, compassion, and humor – and,
above all, find your joy.

**Elizabeth:** How do you apply dramaturgy in everyday life?

**Liz:** I question.

**Elizabeth:** Good answer. See you on our next bench!

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**UPCOMING EVENTS**

LMDA Conference 2016: Portland, OR  
July 7-9  
Portland State University

**ABOUT LMDA**

**Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas** was founded in 1985 as the volunteer membership organization for the professions of literary management and dramaturgy. **LMDA** has members throughout North America and abroad who hold the belief that theater is a vital art form that has the power to nourish, educate, and transform individuals and their communities, and that dramaturgy is central to the process of theater-making.

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