

Winter 2008

## Review: The Newsletter and Journal of Dramaturgy, volume 18, issue 1

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# Review

The Newsletter and  
Journal of Dramaturgy

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Volume 18, Issue 1  
Winter 2008

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## CELEBRATING A COFFEE KLATCH

I suppose it seems unremarkable: nine dramaturgs gathering over tea and coffee to meet new people and talk about their field. But shortly after people started to arrive at the Clare de Lune coffee shop in San Diego's North Park neighborhood, I asked Scott Horstein if such a gathering of San Diego's dramaturgs might just be unprecedented.

In advance of the 2008 LMDA conference, which will be held in San Diego, a group dramaturgs spanning a full range of career experience settled into a quirky back room to introduce ourselves and talk about our community. Big thanks to Scott for organizing the event! See photos on page 2.

Scott and I both graduated from UC San Diego's MFA program in dramaturgy. Scott has continued to freelance in town, while I've recently returned to take a job at San Diego State. A lot of other dramaturgs have come out of UCSD — including LMDA president-elect Shelley Orr — and continue to move through its PhD program. And over the years several theatres in town have consistently worked with dramaturgs — most notably La Jolla Playhouse. But despite this institutional history, San Diego hasn't felt like, in my opinion, a city with a strong community of dramaturgs. But then there was today's coffee klatch... *[Continued on next page]*



**LITERARY MANAGERS  
& DRAMATURGS  
OF THE AMERICAS**

We talked about translation as a way of encouraging new thinking about the classic texts of foreign languages and disparate theatrical traditions. We talked about San Diego's famous border — thought to be the busiest international border crossing in the world — and the issues it raises for us as artists and as citizens. And we talked about community, how to build one, how to sustain one; and specifically, how to grow our own dramaturgical network in a town inconsistently responsive to the field. My thanks to all who attended — the many ideas that emerged at this discussion will doubtless inform the upcoming conference.

Afterwards, on the way to drop Scott at the train station for his trip back to LA, we talked about what the mission of the next LMDA conference will be. Among many desirable lasting benefits, including

elevating our profile in town among other theatre artists, we concluded that it would be ideal for the conference to have a lasting benefit for SD dramaturgs by cementing a sense of community here. And tonight, after this perfectly innocuous and possibly unprecedented convocation of dramaturgs, the establishment of a community of like-minded theatre workers actually seems possible.

So, in conclusion: **SAVE THE DATE!**

The next LMDA conference will be held right here, **JUNE 26–29**. More info will be on its way soon.

See you in San Diego!



From the top: Deb Salzer and Gabe Green, during the San Diego coffee klatch; Scott Horstein ordering a triple espresso (don't call it "blurry," call it "artistic distortion"; ECDs Jackie Goldfinger and Laura Brueckner, seen through the door of the Clare de Lune coffee shop.

*Bad Photos: D.J. Hopkins*

## **Review**

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*Review no longer does Regional Updates. Regional Update inquiries should be directed to your LMDA Regional VP.*

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# The Toronto Dialogues

A conversation on US Airways Flight 4081  
from Toronto to Philadelphia, June 24th, 2007

by Neena Arndt and Heather Helinsky

*Neena Arndt and Heather Helinsky shared a travel grant to attend the 2007 LMDA Conference in Toronto. Both graduated in June 2007 with an MFA in Dramaturgy from the ART/MXAT Institute for Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard. At the AR., Neena worked on The Onion Cellar, The Keening, Abigail's Party, and Melancholy Play while Heather worked on Britannicus, Three Sisters, Zoya's Apartment, Betty's Summer Vacation, and The Killing Game. Heather and Neena served as teaching fellows at Harvard University, and spent three months studying contemporary Russian theatre at the Moscow Art Theatre School. After the Toronto Conference, Neena went to New Haven to be a script reader for the Long Wharf and then on to adjunct teaching at Boston University, while Heather went back home to Philadelphia to prepare to teach dramaturgy as a Visiting Professor at the University of Arizona.*

Heather: Whew!

Neena: Yeah.

Heather: I know.

Neena: Just shows you what 150 dramaturgs can do in 72 hours.

Heather: It's what happens in the spaces, the cracks of the conference, that I find the most valuable. That's when you can sit back and evaluate all the information presented.

Neena: But the opposite is true too — you wouldn't have anything to ponder if it weren't for all the organized events. Thursday night's performance of *Week 32 of 365 Days/365 Plays* gave us a great opportunity to get a taste of Toronto's theatre scene. What a thrill for us to see our Northern neighbors in action! Then on Friday, Silvia Pelaez's presentation opened up a whole world I've been curious about — women playwrights in Mexico. Silvia talked about how a form called *narraturgia* is very popular among young playwrights

right now. It sounds similar to what we know as reader's theatre: pieces that dramatize a literary text.

Heather: I appreciate that she began her talk with an explanation that Mexico is a “non-linear country” and that there are “many Mexicos.” Mexico, she said, lacks a national story. I think we forget that inherent in American storytelling is the idea of “Manifest Destiny” and “E Pluribus Unum.” I wonder if that is the first element of translation that we dramaturgs should be tackling: how can we present the work of Latina playwrights such as Pelaez (and we should!) but realize that it is not just a problem of “culture” or “vocabulary,” but a play about the national story of how their country is sewn together?

Neena: Which brings up larger issues of the purpose of doing international work: if we were to produce one of Pelaez's plays, should we try to preserve its Mexican-ness, or do whatever we can to make the work more accessible for American audiences? Do we find ways — through staging or audience outreach — to unpack the philosophy of the nation, or do we simply tell the story?

Heather: Different dramaturgs would make different decisions on that one. That is, if they have the luxury of doing international work. At the Cultural Translation session I attended, the German dramaturg Ute Scharfenberg raised the question of why so many American plays are being translated from English to German, yet conversely Americans weren't translating international plays. The room became electric. Some one argued that if a slot becomes available in their season to do new work, it does often go to an American playwright instead of a translation. Each theatre is trying to do its best to accomplish its artistic mission, yet the system of regional theatre is younger and plays by different rules than the Europeans. But that can't be an excuse. We shouldn't settle or be comfortable. Art is hard.



The audience for the opening night event of the Toronto conference, at the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre for Young People.

Photo: Cynthia SoRelle

Neena: Not only is art itself hard, but finding your place in a world of artists is tough too. Remember during the Early Career Dramaturg meeting when Liz Engelman pointed out that nobody thinks of directors as being “cookie-cutter,” but dramaturgs tend to be thought of that way.

Heather: Yes. In fact, it was obvious just looking around the room that there’s no such thing as a cookie-cutter dramaturg. It was a motley squad, in terms of aesthetics and ideals, but also in terms of level of experience. So much so that we spent a good chunk of the meeting trying to define “early career dramaturg.”

Neena: Julie Dubiner’s analogy of different “species within the genus” is a good working definition: some of the ECDs are undergrads exploring the field, others are trying to figure out which graduate school to attend, others have been literary interns.

Heather: I do think Early Career Dramaturgs should include dramaturgs like us, who have worked professionally but are still exploring possibilities. Sessions like the regional breakfast and the lunchtime freelance/institutional meeting at Canadian Stage were valuable for us too. I appreciate what Liz Engelman said at the beginning of the meeting: that we should try to link up with theatres that are not potential employers. It’s easy to go into this conference with the intention of finding opportunities for employment, but then you miss the conversations concerning the art that has been created this season. I enjoy listening. We’re all working under difficult conditions, but the conference is an opportunity to brainstorm with other dramaturgs and bring new ideas back home.

Neena: Also valuable: discussing the pros and cons of “institutional” and “freelance” dramaturgy. At our stage, we’re thinking about molding our artistic identities. But the truth is, many dramaturgs have been freelance at some point in their career, and institutional at other points. The artistic identity remains pliable forever. Growth ceases only as a result of neglect.

Heather: True. And we have to enable not only our own growth, but the growth of the art form.

Neena: Which is why it was refreshing to hear an institutional dramaturg like Steppenwolf’s Ed Sobel throw down the gauntlet when he received his Elliot Hayes Award. Sobel pointed out that the

keepers of opera in this country have allowed it to become an art form that people consider stuffy and inaccessible. Theatre, Sobel argued, plods glumly towards the same fate. Dramaturgs, so often the artistic guardian angels of theatres, should insist on change. I think a possible solution lies in shows such as *The Onion Cellar*, the collaboration between the ART and the Dresden Dolls that I worked on last year. By marrying two genres, we were able to create a production that had both mass appeal and artistic merit. After hearing Sobel speak, I’m more convinced than ever that it’s that kind of show that will save the American theatre.

Heather: Bonnie Metzgar and Suzan-Lori Parks have already mobilized their troops. Their presentation was a fantastic cap for the conference. Parks’s comment on how her project reveals the rigidity of American theatre when it comes to producing new work is something I personally fear as an Early Career Dramaturg. However, I was heartened to hear how some theatres used it as an opportunity to do the kind of experimental work they wish they could do: guerrilla theatre in subways, different uses of space. Or, some theatres used it as an opportunity for their company members to explore other artistic roles: technicians became directors, directors became actors, etc.

Neena: American theatre is rigid, but there are reasons for that. It has evolved to its present state through trial and error — for example, we’ve found it’s more efficient when people specialize in one or two areas, and we’ve found that certain kinds of work sell more tickets. I think most theatre professionals are aware of the rigidity, but fear the repercussions of challenging the system.

Heather: Well, we’re approaching Philly, so I guess we should follow Brian Quirt’s lead and take a moment to thank those who allowed us to travel to Toronto through the ECD grant and Julie and D.J. for asking us to sound off in *Review* about our impressions of the conference. Thanks, Brian, and all the great conference organizers — we appreciate all your work!

Neena: And thanks also to all those who presented at the conference — now we have a year’s worth of food for thought!



Toronto’s skyline, as viewed from the ferry to the Toronto Islands.  
Photo: Cynthia SoRelle



Suzan-Lori Parks, at the closing session of the 2007 conference.  
Photo: Cynthia SoRelle

# The 2008 Elliott Hayes Award

## Edward Sobel's Acceptance Speech

### at the LMDA Annual Conference

#### Toronto, 23 June 2007

Those of you who have attended the conference over the past few years are probably thinking I only show up for it when I'm given some mic time. That is absolutely true. And you've gotten two years off from me, so I'm afraid you only have the judges to blame for what follows.

I'm sure the gracious thing to do would be just to express my gratitude and return to my seat. So I'll at least start there.

Thank you, Vanessa, for that kind presentation. My thanks also to the other members of the judging committee: Adrien-Alice and Allison. I am honored to join the distinguished group of recipients whose contributions in the field I can only hope to emulate.



Ed Sobel, 2007 Elliott Hayes Award winner.

*Photo: Cynthia SoRelle*

While I am the one standing in front of you, there are many people deserving of acknowledgement, beginning with the leadership at Steppenwolf, Artistic Director Martha Lavey and Executive Director David Hawkanson, and also our Trustee Beth Davis. The project would not be possible without the contributions of our entire staff, but I'd be remiss not to mention two by name: Literary Manager Gabriel Greene and Program Assistant Meghan McCarthy. So I share this recognition with them, and with the writers, dramaturgs (particularly Rosie Forrest who nominated me for this award), directors, designers, actors and stage managers who give of their time and creativity.

First Look Rep is a developmental process that culminates not in a staged reading or workshop presentation, but in full production. Each of the last two years we have developed and then presented three plays in rotating rep in the Steppenwolf Garage space. Each play is assigned a director, dramaturg, full complement of actors, stage manager and assistant stage manager. The repertory has a single team of designers. Each play receives approximately four weeks of workshop/rehearsal, under a CAT 2 agreement with AEA. The plays are publicly presented to a paying audience in traditional rotating repertory for four weeks. Steppenwolf does not claim the productions as world premieres.

In addition, we grant access to the entire process to a group of non-practitioners, through First Look 101. The "101-ers" attend a table reading, the first day of rehearsal, an open day of rehearsal, technical rehearsals, and see the play in performance. These are not "staged" events, but rather an opening of the room to this group of people to witness what we are actually doing.

Four of the six plays developed through the Rep thus far have gone on to productions elsewhere, including Jason Wells' *Men of Tortuga* at Asolo, Marisa Wegrzyn's *The Butcher of Baraboo* at Second Stage, and Kate Fodor's *100 Saints You Should Know* at Playwrights Horizons.

I'd be happy to further describe the program, so please find me if you want more information, or better yet, come join us this year in Chicago for our professionals weekend from August 9 through 11. That concludes the gracious part of our program.

I'll freely confess to being enough of an artist, or having sufficient ego, that when someone gives me a platform, I feel a responsibility to say something worthwhile, or at least mildly provocative and not

tranquillizing. Tony Kushner, when someone leveled the accusation that his plays, politically speaking, were simply preaching to the choir replied, "Sometimes the choir needs to be preached to." So forgive me for following his lead, and preaching to you for a moment.

First, to you Canadians. As a proud product of the American educational system, I know next to nothing about things Canadian, even after this weekend. You seem like a nice people. But you may find nothing of resonance in what I'm saying, in which case please feel free to make another trip to the dessert table or resume your drunken flirtations. As to my brothers and sisters from the States...

I am not the first to point out we have to recognize there has been a fundamental change in our culture in the last 15 or 20 years, primarily due to technological and economic forces: the rise of the internet, YouTube, Tivo, DVDs, cell phones, fluctuations in the GNP, competition for sparse dollars and flitting attention for the social good, hurricanes, acts of terrorism and acts of war, the almost complete lack of arts education in schools for the last twenty-five years. Rail against as many of these we wish, they are facts of life. And we ignore them at our peril.

The time of professional regional theaters operating under conditions from the tremendous growth of the 1960s to 1980s is over. We can no longer pretend those conditions are still present. In the United States, we are already the marginal of the marginal. Fewer people attend theater than listen to radio. And no one listens to radio. If we do nothing, soon there will not be professional theater in every major city. Instead there will be only a handful of major regional theaters in the country that support artists with a living wage. Ticket prices will be so high that only the most privileged will attend and they will do so as though viewing an artifact rather than something dynamic and relevant to their lives as citizens. New work will be an aberration in the repertoire. We will throw benefits so the wealthy can pay \$100 per ticket rather than \$110. If you doubt me, just look at our ancestral bones, the opera companies and symphony orchestras.

The path toward that destination is already set. If we do nothing, that is where we will find ourselves. It may be in ten years, or it may be fifteen or thirty. But I assure you, that is where we will be. And the number of people here at these tables who have jobs will be fewer even than now, and of those that do, more will be employed in the study of the thing than the doing of it.

The fact is the very nature of an audience's relationship to a work of art has shifted significantly. Audiences are no longer content to be the passive recipient of a delivered object. Let me be clear: audiences are not saying they don't care about art, although we've given them plenty of reasons to say just that. But those that want to stay with us, those we can still reach, expect a level of interactivity, investment and participation that demands we be responsive and innovative in the ways in which we create, present and market our art.

First Look Rep, for which I am being recognized tonight, was born out of the desire to create an opportunity for artists, and to achieve a level of engagement both for them and for audiences. It was driven by a belief in innovation, for looking at the challenges that face us and creating a force to address them. The extent to which we have been successful is a testament not to my brilliant imagination but to the dedication of the institution within which I work to be oriented

toward the future rather than the past. First Look has been the program right for Steppenwolf – right for our artists, right for our audiences, right for our resources, and our institution. Maybe it's a useful model for you and yours, maybe it's not.

Again, I invite you to come see for yourselves. But if you don't, then I urge you, as Brian Quirt did this morning, to do for yourselves. Dramaturgs are uniquely positioned to enact meaningful change. Dramaturgs can operate without portfolio, ask provocative questions, interrogate assumptions, think holistically, are passionate advocates, are obsessed with communicating and contextualizing the work. We must deploy those skills where they are most needed and can do the most good. Let's have no more conversations on the listserv or in these meetings about how to achieve a role in the room, and instead go be active in the room. Let's not teach our students how to find things to photocopy, but instead instill in them a passion for creativity and the revolutionary idea. Let's have no more conversations about supporting leadership and instead exercise leadership. The people at this gathering are amongst the most bright, committed, sympathetic, synthetic, passionate thinkers anywhere. Let's have no more whining about the lack of money or that no one cares -- there is not enough money and no one cares -- and instead be leaders in proving the value of what live theater has on offer. If we don't do it, who will?

In our first year, we sold all 101 of our First Look passes within 48 hours. This year it took 24. People are hungry. Let's feed them.

I've taken up far more of your time than I'd any right to do. I hope you'll forgive any abuse of the privilege your recognition has afforded me. But I speak as one who cares passionately about what we do, and who senses an emergent need. My heartfelt thanks for your indulgence tonight, and for this award.

*Edward Sobel is Director of New Play Development at Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Copyright Ed Sobel 2007. All rights reserved.*

# NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

## TORONTO, 2007

For the last LMDA conference, I put together a mini-symposium on architecture and performance and urban space, and a couple dozen brave souls joined me for an incompletely successful (ahem) tour of Toronto. (One kind participant thanked me after the symposium, saying: “Thank you. This event was...brilliantly *conceived*.” Well, I have to agree with that faint praise: technical difficulties marred the execution of a good idea. And the good idea was to get Shawn Micallef involved.

Shawn Micallef is a Toronto resident and an Associate Editor at Spacing Magazine. He co-founded the location-based mobile phone documentary project called [murmur] which has been set up around Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, San Jose, Edinburgh and Dublin, Ireland. I first learned about Shawn through [murmur], and only later discovered that he is primarily a writer, one who I’d describe as a first-person narrator of urban space. Shawn gamely agreed to participate in the symposium. He wrote nearly a dozen short essays for the bus tour, and which he then recorded for the tour, along with some tracks from [murmur]. He’s got a brilliant radio voice, and a rapid delivery that’s fun to listen to. I’m eternally grateful to Shawn for his contribution to the event — and funnily enough, we’ve still never met in person.

I’ve transcribed one of my favorite essays that Shawn wrote for the occasion. In the transcription, I try to give you a sense of the fun, breathless, run-on sentences of his delivery. More of Shawn’s Toronto Bus Tour essays will be available on the *Review* page of the LMDA website.

More about Shawn: For fun, he and some friends co-founded the Toronto Psychogeography Society, a group of flâneurs who drift through and explore the city semi-regularly. Shawn recently co-curated a Virtual Museum of Canada/Gallery TWP exhibition called Subversive Cartographies — an exploration of psychogeographic art projects and practices. Shawn’s writing has been found in *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *Maisonneuve*, *Broken Pencil* as well as *Eye Weekly*, where his “Stroll” column explores Toronto on foot. Shawn is also an instructor at the Ontario College of Art and Design.

## Parliament Street

### By Sean Micallef

Hi again. So we’re driving south on Parliament Street right now. Uh, Parliament Street I think is one of the most interesting streets in Toronto, or at least the city centre. Um, because it is, it’s somehow impervious to complete gentrification, despite it having one of the frilliest and prettiest and most gentrified neighborhoods next door to it. To our left, east, is Cabbagetown, probably the best preserved collection of Victorian homes in North America, or at least that’s what they say. Cabbagetown was gentrified in the early 70s, one of the first center city neighborhoods to be gentrified, by what were called then “white-painters,” these kind of middle class couples that would move in to what were rooming houses, just kind of dilapidated Victorians, and paint them up white, and sometimes knock out the boarding house partitions and turn them back into single-family homes. By the late 70s, it was a soundly gentrified neighborhood.

However, the Parliament strip along here is interesting, and if you look there’s dollar stores, there’s kind of downmarket hairdressers,

photo stores, a lot of sketchy-looking bars, next door to organic food stores, and now on the corner of Carleton and Parliament there's a ginger... an Asian... a pan-Asian restaurant that's kind of upscale, and a couple upscale bars along the way. So it's a really neat mix. It's kind of like a microcosm of all the different levels that are in Toronto, existing on this street, probably because there's St. Jamestown to the north and to the south of Cabbagetown there's Regent Park, so a lot of these businesses serve the populations there. As for Cabbagetown, a lot of Cabbagetown people do come out here and shop, but it has this reputation of "Cabbagetown people don't shop on Parliament," which I don't think is actually the case. People seem to enjoy walking down the street to these markets.

I've lived in Cabbagetown now for a year, and it took a while to get used to, because I thought it was going to be an overly frilly, too perfect neighborhood. But the more I live, the more time I spend in the neighborhood, the more I realize that it's not a homogeneous kind of neighborhood, there's a lot of homes in there that somehow... I don't know how the people can afford the taxes and all that, but they do... it's a very diverse group of people that live there. And the more I live there, the more time I spend there, the more I grow to love it. But I really, really do like Parliament.

South. As we move south along Parliament you'll be able to see Regent Park, which was Toronto's biggest public housing project, which happened post-war, in the late 40s. They cleared away what was called "the largest Anglo-Saxon slum in North America, which was... basically, it looked a lot like what Cabbagetown looks like now, but a lot more run down, a lot of places with no plumbing and what not. And they built these, these kind of blocks where they say that people had trouble ordering pizza, to get it delivered to them, because there were no streets that went to their house, and they got rid of the grid pattern and they just plopped these kind of... blocks.

It... it was roundly... it was not a success. So Regent Park is largely called a failure of, you know, modern urban planning. Because again it got rid of the streetscape, the grid pattern. And it kinda sent the people who live there into a kind of purgatory of unurbanness.

But as you can see as we move south along Parliament, one quarter of Regent Park has been completely demolished over the past year. The revitalization of Regent Park has begun. They're re-instating the grid pattern. And it's not going to be just one kind of housing, there's gonna be a mix of retail, geared to income, and some market rents. So it'll be interesting to see what happens. I think people up in Cabbagetown are probably thinking, "my property value will go up as Regent Park, as it is, disappears." But it really, it really was kind of a decrepit place. I'd walk through, often. Again, just like St. Jamestown, people would be playing, kids would be playing, you know, people carrying their groceries in, and all the stuff that happens in a normal part of the city. But the buildings weren't taken care of, there was always weeds growing out of this kind of wind-swept field. The cops would sail through in their cop cars and not really get out, which if I lived in the neighborhood I'd think that's kind of... you know, you'd be a little offended about that. So, it's one of the quickest and most major changes that Toronto is undergoing right now. So we'll see if it's a success, or if it repeats the, you know, the grand plan failures of the immediate post war.



*Shawn Micalleff. Photo poached from the website of Spacing Magazine. No photo credit provided. Visit: <http://spacing.ca/>*

# Provocative Dramaturgy

## The Collaborative Creation of The Re:Actions Project

by Karen Jean Martinson

*Karen Jean Martinson is a dramaturg, director, theatre scholar, and sometimes puppeteer who has staged pieces throughout the US and in Mexico. She is currently co-directing and dramaturging Ruth Margraff's Stadium Devildare: The Battle for G\*dzilla X (a new reality program for the American arena) at Los Angeles' Theatre of NOTE. Through her artistic work, academic research, and teaching, Martinson explores contentious issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality within US American consumer culture, utilizing theatre and performance as the means through which greater social, political, and cultural insight can be perceived, expressed, debated, and enacted. She will be awarded her PhD in Theatre History, Literature, and Critical Theory from the University of Minnesota in Spring 2008 and is an active member Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA), the Dramaturgy Focus Group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), and the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR).*

I'll admit it. I thought about titling this essay "Re:Acting to Re:Actions," or something similarly silly. Such a title not only satisfies those scholarly urges toward clever punctuation and wordplay (however obvious such an attempt may be), but it also lays out an easy course for writing: here's this thing I did, let me tell you what I think about it. But it occurred to me that, as dramaturgs, reacting is only the start of our process. When first faced with a new project, a new script, or a new idea, we harness our initial reactions to expand into that project, script, or idea with increased depth. In short, we build from our reactions collaboratively, in highly creative and intellectual ways, simultaneously seeking to provide a solid foundation for the work while also creating an interface, an access point, for our multiple audiences to gain entry to this foundation. It is this collaborative construction — and the unique organizational and collabora-

tive modalities that emerged through The Re:Actions Project (a project I lived with for the better part of a year) — that I wish to explore. I hope to document some of the challenges to collaboration that we faced in mounting this particular project as well as describe the innovative performative piece that we collectively crafted. Moreover, I hope to posit how the performative response we created together provides a model for an engaged, active, and experientially integrated form of dramaturgy.

As a theatrical undertaking, Re:Actions was at once incredibly vague and stringently organized. One of the early emails, written in October 2006, described The Re:Actions Project as "a multi-disciplinary activity" in which teams "work collaboratively to create a performative reaction;" five teams of three Focus Groups represented by five to seven Focus Group volunteers would descend on New Orleans at the end of July 2007, visit some sites, and then performatively respond to them in front of a Friday night audience. Confused yet? Overwhelmed by the size and scope of the project? Indeed, much of the initial trepidation my co-Focus-Group-Leader Lisa Arnold and I felt stemmed from trying to wrap our heads around just what a performative response to the city of New Orleans might be and how we would coordinate with our co-team-leaders to guide this massive group of 19–25 people in creating this response. Moreover, early on, Lisa and I found ourselves to be resistant to several aspects of the project rationale as it was presented to us by the Re:Actions Curators, who stated:

We conceived of the Re:Actions project as a means of helping ATHE's own community of (mostly) non-New Orleans natives to think through the need to engage and respond to post-crisis New Orleans in terms of our art, our scholarship, and our pedagogy. In contrast to long-term community-based projects that work to, for, and with elements of the New Orleans community to produce artistic work, we see Re:Actions as an event of, by, and for ATHE membership. Why and how do we (should we) react to New Orleans as theatre people? As theorists? As teachers? As (mostly) non-



Photo 1. Marie Laveau you lovely witch gimme little charm that'll make me rich. Dan Smith, Megan Sanborn Jones, Lisa Arnold, and Jayetta Slawson perform at the tomb of Voodoo Priestess Marie Laveau site.

Photo by Glen Jones.

New Orleans folk?

In the best dramaturgical fashion, then, Lisa and I — through a series of email conversations, IM chats, phone calls, and the occasional face-to-face meeting (Lisa lives in Minneapolis and I in Los Angeles) — began to critically interrogate the project mission to clarify our own interpretation of it, which we eventually would discuss with our team. What ethical elisions are made when we only respond to post-crisis New Orleans? And what, for that matter, was the specific moment of crisis? Katrina and its immediate aftermath? The FEMA debacle that followed? The systemic cuts in public services that left the city structurally, economically, and organizationally unprepared to deal with disaster? The short attention span of the American populous who rather quickly moved on to the next great crisis although New Orleans still suffers? Secondly, what are the ethics of bypassing long-term community-based interactions in favor of an event of, by, and for ATHE membership, who would spend less than a week in the city? How could we craft a performative response that engaged deeply with the city and got the ATHE membership thinking?

Through these initial questions, Lisa and I were able to determine a short list of criteria that would guide our Dramaturgy Focus Group volunteers forward through the early stages of the project. Drawing heavily from our dramaturgical training in installation dramaturgy, text development, and production dramaturgy, we would create a performance to both present and respond to our research about the history and culture of New Orleans — research which we would conduct in the months leading up to the conference. We hoped to craft a piece that was evocative and complex, one that would simultaneously draw from and speak to the multiple communities of New Orleans. We sought to engage with the rich history of the city and determined that it would be prudent to avoid overly focusing on Katrina, although we knew from the start that Katrina would factor into our project because it brought certain realities about New Orleans and the United States at large to light. Still, we made it our mission to balance Katrina with the many other facets of New Orleans' vibrant history that were worthy of our attention and examination.

Similarly, we would widen our purview outside of the narrow confines of the ATHE membership, recognizing that ATHE members would comprise our audience, but averring that “ATHEness” would not constrict our artistic response to the city; one of our main concerns was to avoid using New Orleans as either a means to assuage our own guilt for not being able to do more or as an object upon which our brilliance as ATHE scholars could be reflected.

Having determined this loose scope, we got down to the business of research and collaboration. We began within the Focus Group; each of our volunteers — Louise Edwards, Megan Sanborn Jones, Bryan Moore, Kathleen Mountjoy, and Shelley Orr — pursued his or her individual research interests. Since we all live in different areas of the globe, I created a blog as a means of sharing and archiving our research without blowing out our collective email inboxes and losing track of our many fruitful ideas (dramaturgyinnola.blogspot.com). The blog proved to be an incredible resource for us, as we were able to post ideas, images, and links to other valuable websites; comment on the postings; and keep a record of our work. Lisa and I maintained contact with our Co-Team-Leaders until the conference grew near, at which point we began to funnel our eclectic mess of research and shape it into the form of the piece. Not surprisingly, and not without regret, we rather ruthlessly culled through the massive list of ideas and issues we had generated over the past months in order to hone our response into a workable form that reflected our dramaturgical pursuits while also complimenting the research and ideas from our team members from the Theatre History and Musical Theatre and Dance Focus Groups. Many great ideas and research avenues had to be discarded, but such vetting allowed us to create a more focused and cohesive piece that represented the diversity of our larger team make-up.

As Team Leaders, we decided that we would play with ideas of tourism by creating several stops representing geographic/historical/thematic sites in New Orleans. By democratic vote among the entirety of our team volunteers, we elected four stops — the tomb of Voodoo Priestess Marie Laveau, Congo Square, the Corpse on Union Street, and an interactive Visitor's Bureau. We then divided our larger team into three working groups — script, installation, and performance — comprised of members from all three focus groups. These Re:Actions-Team-E-Cross-Focus-Group-Mini-Teams were to focus on their respective tasks as the conference neared. Emails ensued. Hyphenated nominatives flourished. Somehow it all made tentative sense and we arrived in New Orleans with a script, ideas and materials for building an installation at each of the sites to create the scene and showcase our research, and a plan of attack for mounting the performance. When we finally gathered — real people in a real space working collaboratively to create a real performance — the project truly came alive. We yet again divided, this time into Re:Actions-Team-E-Cross-Focus-Group-Cross-Mini-Team-Site-Teams and made our site visits and used our responses to those visits to shape the performances that occurred at each stop. We yet again discarded whatever did not contribute powerfully to the piece.



Photo 2. *Mojo for Money, Gris Gris for Love*. Erin Moss, Susan Russell, Michele Dunleavy, Greg White, and Michael Ellison perform at the Congo Square site.

Photo by Lisa Arnold.

Our piece opened with a prologue (generously adapted

from Shakespeare's *Henry V*) delivered outside of the performance space by a woman holding a "muse of water." As we were the first group to perform, we thought this offered an exciting, transformative experience, where the language would carry the audience members out of the banal, uninspiring hotel corridor into a conference space that, through performance, had been similarly transformed into a magical space. Tour guides split the audience into four groups, and led them through a rotation to each of the four sites. The idea was to impose an order on the audience — only allowing them access to a sliver (five minutes or so) of each performance before moving them along to the next site — that reflects the limited view and restricted access afforded the tourist. Almost immediately this order broke down, suggesting that our audience members wanted to engage with the sites on their own terms — an impulse which we had hoped would arise. Each site was unique in appearance, staging, and language. The Marie Laveau performance took place in front of a sumptuous altar, a visual olio of Voodoo, Catholic, and Womanist tokens that reflected the rich and varied spiritual legacies at work in New Orleans. Through the combination of gestural language, poetry, dance, and scholarly writing, the four performers embodied the multiple Maries of the popular and academic imagination, none of them alone quite capturing the whole of this larger-than-life character, and yet as a group revealing the many facets of her being and her place in history. The Congo Square performance used tap dance, raucous music, and conflicting snippets of text to reflect the historical significance of this site where blacks — both slaves and free — would gather, dance, worship, and commune. Two tap dancers performed intricate steps, the female remaining silent while the male, ogling his partner, yelled out "Mojo for money! Gris gris for love" showing how the dance, like the dancers themselves, could be immediately exoticized and objectified. Other onlookers, both within the scene and circulating among the audience, commented rather lasciviously about the dance, expressing a mix of fear and desire of the unregulated (black) body. Yet at the heart of this site was the dance itself; despite the attempts of the outsiders to force meaning upon it, the dance remained (at least partially) outside of definition. The Corpse on Union Street dealt with the immediate aftermath of Katrina. A body (simulated by garbage bags) lay in the foreground as a professional woman read her report of the scene in the objective, dispassionate language of journalism. This text was juxtaposed with the carnivalesque language of the tourist brochure from which a second performer simultaneously read. Through the recitation of these competing texts, an onlooker (a reporter? a tourist?) snapped photo after photo of the dead body. Finally, at the Visitor's Center, audience members were asked to record their responses to the performance — either publicly by signing a large banner that hung behind the table, or more intimately by writing on a blank postcard and taking a completed card from the pile. As the activity in the space wound down, the woman with the muse returned to finish the piece with excerpts from a second poem, "The Zulu King Will Return," stating:

The city is closed  
 But my heart is open.  
 [...]

New Orleans sleeps.  
 But in us she's alive.  
 Come and turn us into restorers of lives  
 And repairers of all that is broken,  
 For this is what we are called to be.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of this experience was that the collaboration was truly unifying and therefore successful; the end product genuinely reflected the diverse interests of our Focus Groups in general and of the individual volunteers in particular. Given the number of contributors involved, the geographic distance between each participant, the long research time coupled with the quick turnaround necessitated by our short stay in New Orleans, and the ambitious goals we laid out for ourselves, the performance could have failed to coalesce in any number of ways. And yet come together it did, in a way that showcased the copious amount of research that informed the piece as well as the rigor that honed it into a precise and specific performance. Moreover, I believe the piece provides a model for an active and engaged dramaturgical modality. In many ways, our piece served as the dramaturgical framework for the evening's performances as a whole. Like an evocative lobby display or a scintillating piece of installation dramaturgy, our performative response invited the audience to dispense with the fourth wall in order to more honestly assess their own participation with New Orleans, ATHE, and The Re:Actions Project. It provoked a questioning of the voyeurism inherent to tourism that carried through the entire night's performance. It suggested that there is always a gap between an actual, lived experience and our attempts to codify that experience. It offered the fantastic through movement and poetry. Most importantly, however, it expanded dramaturgical possibility. While the traditional tasks of the dramaturg — research, dialogue, and critical interrogation — built the solid foundation of this piece, the activation of those tasks through performance revealed how provocative dramaturgy can be when it is experiential, artistic, creative, and collaborative.



Photo 3: *Marie Laveau you lovely witch gimme little charm that'll make me rich.* Dan Smith, Megan Sanborn Jones, Lisa Arnold, and Jayetta Slawson perform at the tomb of Voodoo Priestess Marie Laveau site.

# ECD SPECIAL: CAREERS IN DRAMATURGY

## The Writer's Advocate: An Interview with Abrams Artists Agency's Beth Bickers

BY DAN RUBIN

*Dan Rubin is an Early Career Dramaturg living and working in the wonderful city of Chicago. A recent recipient of a MA in Drama from Washington University in St. Louis, Dan is currently an intern in Literary Management at the Goodman Theatre under Tanya Palmer. In the winter of 2008, he will be freelance dramaturging with Greasy Joan Theatre Company and New Leaf Theatre. Dan is currently looking for a paying job.*

Let's face facts: we're not dramaturgs for the money. There simply are not enough paying literary manager, dramaturgy, and teaching gigs around town for all of us. But wouldn't it be lovely to find a way to pay our rents without resorting to our seemingly all too inevitable stints as waiters, retailers, and temps, jobs that employ none of our dramaturgical powers?

The following interview will be the first in a series that will explore exciting jobs that we don't always associate with dramaturgy or literary management. These occupations not only encourage their employees to flex their dramaturgical muscles and keep them connected to the theatre community, they also enable their employees to subsist on more than diets of coffee and Ramen.

Beth Bickers is a literary agent at Abrams Artists Agency in New York City where she represents writers, composers, directors and choreographers for theatre, television and film. Prior to AAA, Beth was an agent at Helen Merrill Ltd. and the William Morris Agency where she began working after graduating from NYU. She has been on the jury panel for the Weissberger Award, and she has spoken on panels for organizations such as the Society of Directors and Choreographers Foundation, the Dramatists Guild, Musical Theatre Works, the Lark Theatre, NYU, and the National Alliance for Musical Theatre. She is a former board member of the Association of Authors' Representatives, Inc., a current board member of Theatre By The Blind, and a member of LMDA.

Beth has a passion for demystifying what an agent is and does. Especially for Early Career Dramaturgs who have not necessarily had much (or any) contact with agents, Beth understands that agents can seem "like this mysterious force that can't be touched." She continues, "To a degree, we cultivate that remove. But I like to tear down the moat and invite people to the castle."

DR: Let's start with the basics: What does a literary agent do?

BB: At one end, we have the big picture conversations about the direction a script should go, who might produce it, direct it, star in it,

what the contract should say. We update bios, brush up play proposals, and explain how the theatre world works. Over and over again...

At the other extreme I deal with much more mundane issues: I find people lawyers and doctors and apartments, dispense marital and child rearing advice, and I endlessly radiate both implicitly and explicitly that it matters to me if you write and that the world at large cares if you continue to write. Even when all evidence appears to point to the contrary.

DR: And how does one become an agent?

BB: I don't know of any one path. Some people had parents in the business. Some people go to law school, but I don't really feel that's necessary, although I'm sure it's a nice bonus. I guess some people grow up knowing it's a career choice, but that sure wasn't me. I myself fell into it totally accidentally. I got a job in the human resources department of William Morris, via a temp agency, and then went to work as Peter Franklin's assistant, and then I got promoted. WMA really was my grad school and then going to Helen Merrill Ltd. and working with Patrick Herold was my MBA. And meeting Morgan Jenness there, well she was my PhD in dramaturgy and just general human fabulousness.

DR: How would you define the relationship between the agent and the client?

BB: It's part mother/father, cheerleader, shrink, pastor, big sister, friend, champion, script advisor, casting director, producer, taskmaster... oh dear, the list goes on and on. While my primary concern would appear to be the writing itself, if you are worried about something you most likely aren't writing.

DR: And your relationship with literary managers?

BB: The literary staff is the conduit to everyone else in the theater. I may start out by carrying the torch for a play, but it only works if I can hand it off to someone else and let them run through the halls of their theater screaming "I've found a play!"

The best relationships are symbiotic. Elizabeth Bennett [then at La Jolla Playhouse, now at the Department of Cultural Affairs] and I bonded over an early *Spring Awakening* workshop where she slipped me rehearsal intel every day, and we'd tag team notes to get the authors to make the strongest choices. I may be mother until rehearsals start, but then I largely hand that off. I need someone who can tip me off if a meltdown is imminent, or if I need to delicately place my foot in someone's ass and get them moving. It's all about having a literary ally.

DR: So, do you see a lot of similarities between what you do and what literary managers and dramaturgs do?

BB: You know with the exception of doing contracts, I do believe we have the same job. Each day is focused on making the vision of an artist come to life, first on the page and then on the stage. We live to discover a great play, we live to assemble artists who share our passion, we live to have a writer say on opening night "that's exactly how I saw the play in my head." Part of the reason I joined LMDA and came to the Toronto conference is because I knew I had hundreds of compatriots out there who make my job easier every single day. What I was in pursuit of was information about how I could better serve them in their daily mission. And a number of literary managers have shared their pet peeves and their dreams with me, and it's changed how I do aspects of my job and what I make my clients do as they function in the theater community.

But at the end of the day, I think the jobs are deeply similar and most people doing dramaturgical jobs could be agents in about two weeks, after a crash course in contracts. Whether I have the patience to do their jobs is another story.

DR: Choosing clients. What do you look for in a script and a playwright? Do you primarily work from a text when you are deciding whether or not to sign them, or do you read reviews and go to productions of the playwright's work? Are you primarily concerned with marketability or artistic merit?

BB: There was a day, many moons ago, when I'd see seventeen readings/workshops/productions a week. No more. Now I live by referrals from producers, directors, clients but mostly literary folk. By now my taste is reasonably well known, so if someone I know suggests a writer, I make a point of reading their work or seeing something if it's currently running in NYC. But most of the time it's solely from the page, and frequently the writer has never been produced. That can vary with writers I've known for years looking to change their agent, but that's the easy path when they are a known entity with a body of work. The trickier path is the newbie who has some fans and some plays but no real track record and you have to ask yourself do I love this work, will I still love it in five years if it goes unproduced, do I like the person, do I feel like they are on a journey as a person and a writer where I can be of help? I used to be less concerned about how the work fit into the marketplace, but that's also changing with age. While I'll still take an occasional chance on someone who I believe the marketplace should want, I prefer to read plays and know instinctively who I want to share it with.

In general I'm looking for good people with something to add to the national dialogue. We're living in interesting times and we should be

using that. I have a pin board on my desk and I have something Liz Engleman wrote, that's been up there for so long I don't even remember what it's from, but she wrote, "If your play does not confront the question 'Why now?' why are you writing it now?" That says it all for me.

DR: Working with clients. Do you ever receive a script from a client and tell her that it's not ready to send out? Do you directly help your clients workshop their texts, or do you help your clients get their pieces into new work festivals that usually have workshop time incorporated into the process?

BB: Oh please, I go through and fix typos! If I didn't do this kind of work almost no one on my list would get produced. Most writers think their plays are ready well before they are and what I hear more and more from lit departments is that they are tired of getting half-done plays where the author wants help getting it finished. So I say over and over "if you know what you want to fix, go fix it before you get three dozen rejection letters." I host readings in our conference room, give hours of notes, mail people articles and tv shows of relevance, match them up with directors and developmental programs. And more and more, I try to get really clear about their mission for the play so I can be clear to the place I'm approaching about what work they should expect the writer to do. Not that mental doors can't be flung open, but bad energy arises when a writer is expected to be tearing something apart, and they just want to see it on its feet. If everyone isn't walking into the room with the same expectations, then I get the unhappy phone calls from all concerned.

DR: For Early Career Dramaturgs who are primarily concerned with being directly involved in the artistic side of the theatre, do you feel like there is enough time in a day to balance a job like yours at AAA with involvement in a theatre company?

BB: Well, it can be done. Certainly Morgan has found the time to dramaturg projects while being an agent. Not sleeping has to be one of your hobbies. Nichole Gantshar [Syracuse Stage] has been encouraging me to pursue my curiosity about doing some dance dramaturgy, which she's fit into a day job (making me incredibly jealous). Lynn Hyde and Polly Hubbard are particularly exciting to me, because they are fabulous Early Career Dramaturgs who are working as assistants at agencies. Whether they ultimately pursue one path or continue to do both, I have great faith that they are going to help shape the next fifty years of theater. I think you have to know in your own soul whether you can sit behind a desk and do other things while also working to shape plays over the phone and then sneak off to spend time in the rehearsal room. I've met with some dramaturgs who are specifically meant to be in the rehearsal room all day, they wouldn't be happy in an office. But when I sense that the balance might be possible, I encourage people to consider being hyphenates and pursuing agenting or being a critic or starting a theater company of their own. We writer-oriented people have to take our special skill set and insert ourselves into other areas. Rather than complain about a lack of control, I'd rather see people seizing control. Don't we all believe the world would be a better place if we ran it? I believe that's very, very true. So go forth and conquer! And then call me up for a cup of coffee and tell me all about it.