Cutting and Adapting Text for the Virtual Performing Landscape

By Toby Malone and Aili Huber

Cutting is almost inevitable in the process of performing classical texts, for time management; company logistics; sense; structure; or adaptation. Over the last year, as we have written our new book, *Cutting Plays for Performance* (Routledge, early 2022) we have seen a shift in cutting priorities. When we began, we focused on live physical performance and textual interventions necessary for production concepts and contexts.

What we—along with the rest of the world—did not expect was how much changed under the realities of COVID-19. Like so many from our industry, we viewed this shift as an opportunity rather than an impediment, and as companies pivoted to virtual performance, so too did we consider its impact on how plays are cut.
Cutting the work of a playwright like Shakespeare is complex at the best of times: story, character, and structural intricacies mean haphazard slashing is ill-advised. Cuts are usually necessary for logistical and staging purposes, but traditionally presume the physical presence of bodies as tangible communicators of meaning. A meaningful glance or prop handed from one character to another or shift in body position can carry the storytelling load previously borne by excised lines. Moving a cut to ZOOM or Vimeo expecting the same experience is short-sighted. We must adjust to this new medium.

Major considerations emerge in the process of adaptation to virtual spaces, beginning with the directorial concept. In a virtual Macbeth, do actors portray characters who themselves are in a ZOOM call: teleconferencing witches? Do Macbeth and Banquo call in to Duncan’s drop-in room to report the results of their online flamewar? Does Macduff impatiently wait for the Porter to admit him from the ZOOM waiting room? Or do your actors ignore the medium and perform as if they are in a theatre?

Virtual performance adds a complicated, often unwelcome, layer to the dramaturgical mix. Audiences untangle meaning to accept that boxed-in characters speak earnestly into a web-camera, perhaps surrounded by a shimmering, uncanny valley of virtual background. Even as audiences accept this reality, text cuts that assume a physical theatre space miss the medium’s opportunities.

**Possibility**

Virtual performance offers video and visual design which would require significant outlay in the physical theatre space. As we cut, we should consider whether these new tools can help us tell the story. Can Old Hamlet be superimposed on his son’s video feed, giving the idea of him being literally in the prince’s head? Can we use a texting backchannel to manage asides to the audience? As we explore textual cuts for digital spaces, we need to consider what kinds of information can communicate using the tools of our new “spaces.” Since the beginning of the theatre-closing lockdowns, we have seen examples of textual
Focus
Virtual performance attracts easily the most distracted theatre audiences of the last two hundred years. The virtual audience is more prone than ever to be multitasking or half-listening. Distractions are no longer the Elizabethan orange-sellers and pickpockets or the see-and-be-seen Restoration posturing. Online performers vie with the accessible lure of the internet, only an idle click away. If a play is too long, too speechy, too unvaried, the safely anonymous device-addicted can happily Facebook throughout an entire performance without disturbing performers or other patrons. Add the actors’ challenge of speechifying without the life-giving energy of an audience and the proximity of other performers, and virtual theatre can be a slog. Expedient cuts that lean toward dialog and minimize soliloquy help maintain audience focus.

Clarity
Clarity remains of paramount importance. Pronoun-heavy text presents a particular problem; tracking antecedents can be nearly impossible. Script edits may go beyond the typical removal of extraneous detail, and shift toward adding extra repetition of character names for clarity.

Physicality
Plays that depend heavily on physical acting present a special challenge. If your cut of Much Ado fails to communicate the idea of eavesdropping, your audience will be confused and much of the best aspects of the play lost entirely. While cutting a line that simply describes action, like “So angle we for Beatrice; who even now / Is couched in the woodbine coverture” is tempting in a cut for physical performance, it is vital in instructing a virtual audience’s imagination.

In any consideration of virtual dramaturgy, the temptation is to linger on what is lost—the liminal space, the sacred compact between actors and audiences breathing the same air, the thrilling liveness of the event—but there are opportunities too. A virtual cut removes the onus from the corporeal presence and brings focus back to the verbal storytelling, in a manner aligned to radio drama. Experimentation reveals the possibilities in virtual text cuts. Stripping away elements unnecessary to the virtual space foregrounds the medium and presents new opportunities. It’s one that we relish.

Freelancing the Pandemic

By Liesl Lafferty

Things were already bad in China. Prior to the pandemic hitting the west coast of Canada, two of the writing groups I facilitate had already started. Then, as though the women could sense imminent danger on the wind, a strange thing happened; the members of both groups began to individually meltdown. Without knowing what was going on for each other,
every single one hit their own personal wall. In the past, occasionally one person would have an issue, or, sometimes there would be a conflict involving two members, but this was an unprecedented landslide of emotions. Each time I propped one person up, the next one would falter. The personal circumstances were slightly different, but the fear was the same; they could not write. Perhaps the timing was a coincidence, but a new world was already upon us.

I listened to one after the next, until they were finished expressing their concerns. Then, I told them they could quit and have their money back at anytime, but first, they must try. I presented strategies to coax them into carrying on. For example, I encouraged a few to abandon their projects and write a short instead. Shorts are fast and fun to write because they are full of dramatic action, and they are often in demand. They wrote the short pieces and the results were astonishing. There was a turning point and we could all feel it. Suddenly, the widespread trepidation was replaced with confidence and clarity.

Concurrently, at the university where I recently received my MFA, we produce one of the oldest running short play festivals on the west coast. It is a playwright-focused event featuring up to thirty scripts annually for the last thirty-four years. In March 2020, of course, we had to cancel the day before tech, breaking the hearts of our crew of nearly one hundred theatre artists and volunteers. In a flash, we noticed that some theatre companies around the world had started to do readings online. We decided to turn our frown upside down and join the pioneers at the forefront of expressing in a new way. We fearlessly launched our established festival onto the World Wide Web with two unique advantages. The plays had been rehearsed, so they adapted surprisingly well, and we were able to add an enhanced element. We let the audience peek behind the curtain by inviting the playwrights and directors onto the screen to entertain with their favourite stories about rehearsals, the lessons they learned, and the wild ride of this innovative process. Ultimately, everybody rallied together resulting in that unmistakable feeling of creating theatre. Before long, the audience numbers doubled our in-person venue capacity. It was another resounding success.

As our realities transformed into an online realm, I could see that other folks were feeling stagnant in their isolation. Ergo, I presented a strategy to help them as well. I offered dramaturgical and story editing consultations free of charge for one hour every Monday, fifteen to thirty minutes per person. I posted notice on social media and requests poured in. I began to coach writers from Alaska to Los Angeles, Nova Scotia to Vancouver Island, and Paris to Nigeria! We talked about plays, films, television, and web series, everything from the traditional to the wildly experimental. It was exhilarating as people from half way around the world brought forward their ideas to a complete stranger.
unanimously and overwhelmingly positive. These writers were facing our collective adversity and they were still eager to work.

In my playwriting circle for people with disability, adapting to the online world was truly an advantage due to the ease of accessibility. This fall, we were able to accept applicants from across the country, St John’s, Montreal, Toronto, Nanaimo, and Vancouver. The writers were never late, we had record high attendance, and they produced a vast and varied amount of excellent material.

It has been nine months since the pandemic spread globally. We are only guessing as to when we will be able to return to live theatre and how it will look. Some writers are in no mood to create and have dug in their heels, insisting upon waiting until the pandemic is over. But, they do not hang out with me. Between my contract work and freelance gigs, I have facilitated, dramaturged, story edited or consulted on one hundred and fifty five scripts in 2020. I remain committed to my new mantra... make art now!

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**Shakespeare Webcomic Dramaturgy**

Kate Pitt is the pocket dramaturg for the Shakespeare webcomic Good Tickle Brain, written and illustrated by Mya Gosling. The year-long project “Scene by Scene Stick Figure Hamlet” is now available to read for free online.

**Can you explain the term “pocket dramaturg”?**

I think it started with the sheep. I kept texting you random theatrical and Shakespeare-related questions and then you would very helpfully text back with a whole bunch of links to sources and interpretations. It was like having a dramaturg in my pocket, so I just started calling you my “pocket dramaturg.”

**How has dramaturgy supported your work?**

It’s given me another person’s mind to bounce ideas off of and see if I’m heading in the right direction. I discovered in the last six years that I’ve been doing this without a pocket dramaturg, that drawing comics can be an incredibly isolating creative endeavor. It was just me sitting down and writing something and hoping that it worked and hoping it was funny and hoping it was understandable.

Having a dramaturg involved makes my work less isolating, more fulfilling, and just more fun. With longer adaptions like Hamlet, we can actually dig into the text and think about different interpretations of lines and performances. It’s been amazing to have that kind of expertise and knowledge of the text with questions like, “Does Gertrude know about the poison and what are the implications of that?” Having that dialogue has been really helpful.
How is your work theatrical?
I love being in the audience and watching plays, but I don’t want to be onstage and I hate speaking in public so my comics are the way that I get to be in the theater. They are where I get to be a director, I get to be an actor, I get to be a playwright. Comics are theatrical in that they are the marriage of words and graphics — I have to figure out not only how to tell a story in words but also how to draw it. I have to know how all the characters feel about what is going on and then figure out where they are standing. Having a theatrically-minded dramaturg fits perfectly into a situation where I have to block the whole play “onstage”.

How do students use your work?
I’ve had lots of teachers from elementary school through grad school use my comics in the classroom. High school teachers use the comics as a guide, so each time they start reading a new scene, they’ll give their students my comic as a framework for where the plot is going. Same with ESL students who struggle with the language — they can use the comic to give them a first step up to engage with the text and get grounded in the plot and the characters.

With high school students, a lot of the work is trying to show students that Shakespeare is fun. That is a huge barrier to people who are learning Shakespeare for the first time. Everyone is told that Shakespeare is boring, but I’m trying to show that not only are the plots violent and rude but also that you can make fun of Shakespeare. That license to look at Shakespeare and say, “this is really messed up” or “this is really stupid” or “as far as the plot goes, this makes no sense whatsoever” is important. We have to be able to point out his flaws and give ourselves permission not to take him so seriously.

Now that Hamlet is done, what next?
I would love to do all the Histories at some point: just start with Richard II and go all the way through. That’s my dream. I’ve been thinking about As You Like It but the comedies are really hard to do! It’s much easier to poke fun at Hamlet. Twelfth Night was a real struggle to try and find the humor because it is already funny on its own. Since I’m retelling everything in my own voice, if the joke is there and it works, I’m just transposing or paraphrasing the original text and that doesn’t interest me as much as finding something funny that’s not in the text — a subtext or an observation — and bringing it out. That’s much
Without Borders: Dramaturgy in the New Decade
Sin Fronteras: Dramaturgismo en la Nueva Década

JUNE 2021
MEXICO CITY, MX
Junio de 2021
Ciudad de México, México

The Literary Managers & Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) has grown over 30+ years to become a multi-country service organization for artists working as dramaturgs and in many associated fields in the performing arts and beyond.

In 2020, during Crossing Borders Pt. 3: On the (Digital) Threshold, LMDA held its first fully digital and bilingual conference and, in partnership with HowlRound, reached audiences in 38 countries around the world. After crossing the digital threshold, and incorporating all the learned skills and tools, we are pleased to announce LMDA’s conference 2021 theme:

Without Borders: Dramaturgy in the New Decade

LMDA’s 2021 annual international conference will take place in México City, hosted by the newly established LMDA México and with the support of Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura (INBAL).

This in-person gathering will be livestreamed for those who want to attend but cannot join us in Mexico City. Similar to the 2020 event, the 2021 conference will mix online synchronous and asynchronous content with an in-person gathering.

LMDA’s mission with this ground-breaking gathering is to ignite a global conversation about the impact / purpose / process / evolution of dramaturgy in the new decade. This conference will ask participants to examine how dramaturgy lives, breathes, and changes during/after the social, political, and economical adjustments that COVID-19 has brought to our lives.

“Without Borders: Dramaturgy in the New Decade” seeks proposals for conference sessions including panels, roundtables, workshops, and other dynamic conversations about what constitutes the idea of “dramaturgy without borders.” We are interested in engaging with artists from around the globe to explore ways in which dramaturgy is practiced.

Building upon the previous “Crossing Borders” conferences, we invite attendees and
In what ways does dramaturgy continue to…
- reimagine and explore storytelling, creative processes, performance, and the design of theatrical events when borders disappear or are no longer limiting collaboration and creation?
- activate innovative approaches to performance, theatre, and interdisciplinary collaboration in the performing arts and beyond?
- instigate and curate conversations that actively respond to current circumstances within your institutions and communities?
- demand and facilitate inclusion on your stages and throughout our practice?
- disrupt and interrogate programming and decision making about what happens on stage?
- cultivate new audiences and foster new artists?
- pursue political engagement and facilitate direct political actions?
- push against borders as physical and social constructs that negatively impact the way theaters solicit, produce, and commodify art and artists?
- aesthetically, culturally, and/or politically reach across remaining borders?

“Without Borders: Dramaturgy in the New Decade” will feature digital asynchronous content available from June 1st 2021, digital synchronous content on June 17th and 18th, 2021, and an in-person gathering and presentations that will take place from June 26th to 29th, 2021 at Centro Cultural del Bosque in Ciudad de México, México.

Proposals for the synchronous and asynchronous digital content will be accepted from December 1st, 2020, 12:00 AM through January 31st, 2021, 11:59 PM EST. All accepted applicants will be notified of the committee’s decision by March 1st, 2021.

Proposals for the in-person gathering in Mexico City will be accepted from December 1st, 2020, 12:00 AM through March 31st, 2021, 11:59 PM EST. All accepted applicants will be notified of the committee’s decision by April 30th, 2021.

Panels and presentations of the conference 2021 will be available in English and Spanish through simultaneous oral interpretation and/or closed captioning.

If you have any further questions, feel free to contact Brenda Muñoz, conference coordinator, at lmdamexico@lmda.org

If you don’t receive an acknowledgement of your application within 7 days, please contact lmdanyc@gmail.com.

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