LMDA New and Noteworthy, October 2020

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Hello LMDAers!

This is a guide written by a non-Black theatre artist and educator for my fellow non-Black theatre artists and educators. I hope it is of use/interest to you!

I believe that words have the power to heal or harm, and I aim to create work that does the former, not the latter. The power of words often depends on their context, and much of that context has changed from when Shakespeare first wrote his plays to when they are performed now.

This guide is intended to be used as a starting point for examining Shakespeare’s words in context; it contains suggestions but is by no means intended to be prescriptive. I am not attempting to “fix” or “sanitize” the text (as claimed by critics of this document). But I do think that, because language changes over time — for example, the term BIPOC wasn’t in use at the beginning of this year — some of Shakespeare’s language needs to be revisited through a contemporary lens in order to both clarify intent as well as avoid doing harm.

I love these plays and I want to continue to celebrate them — alongside other, non-colonial works that should be considered “canon.”

There are many problematic words, phrases, and themes in Shakespeare’s plays, and this guide is specifically focused on dismantling anti-Black language. Because Black lives
As a South Asian femme, I have a relationship to colorism; however, I cannot speak to the experience of a Black person, which is another reason this guide is not prescriptive. I wanted to remove the emotional labor of having to explain why certain words may do harm to the Black community from my Black colleagues, who I have witnessed do this work for free in countless rehearsal rooms across the country. That being said, I own that my perspective is a limited one, which is why I also encourage you to consult and compensate Black theatre artists for their work.

The impetus to write this guide came out of the dual pandemics that America is currently facing — the pandemic of racial violence against Black people in this country fueled my activism and the COVID-19 pandemic that shut down our industry gave me the time to write.

This guide was first published as a Google Doc on July 1, 2020 for two reasons: 1) I wanted this tool to be as accessible as possible and 2) I wanted to be able to update it regularly, as context continues to change. Please feel free to use it and share it and stay in dialogue with me as you see fit.

Thank you!

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**2020 Kennedy Center Dramaturgy Intensive**

This year’s New Play Dramaturgy Intensive organized by the Kennedy Center and hosted by the insightful Mark Bly and the inestimable Gregg Henry has given me an invigorated hope for the future. Completing an undergraduate degree during the Trump Era and preparing for a post-graduate education in an unprecedented pandemic time has led me to reflect on the world around me. I have found myself struggling with questions about my future, what impact I can make, and how I can improve myself. The art of dramaturgy has become the apparatus to solve these questions. The lessons I learned during the Intensive have helped me contextualize these ideas in the world and how to become an empathetic listener while deploying the practical skills to improve my dramaturgical practice. Under the guidance of Mark Bly, I learned how to consider the perspective of others and how to apply those perspectives to my own experience. These lessons are integral to becoming a more effective dramaturg and a well-educated person who can navigate the world around them with a critical mind. I came away from this year’s Intensive with a new found sense of academic and emotional maturity that have helped ready me for the next stage of my life.

The Intensive contained many valuable sessions from such dramaturgs as Martine Kei Green-Rogers and Deanie Vallone offering insights into such skills and their impact on my everyday life. The sessions our dramaturgy cohort had with Guest Artist Gavin Witt taught
Intensive’s Zoom event “Decolonizing New Play Development” reaffirmed for me the importance of listening to different cultural experiences and allowing it to inform the decisions I make. In the last session of the program, Bly shared with our cohort that dramaturgy that actually matters emerges through active collaboration not reactive collaboration, asking questions and having a presence that opens up conversation not closing it down. These ideas have dramatically improved my dramaturgical craft and my personal development. Emotional maturity and empathetic skills transcend the boundaries of theater and are applicable to our everyday interactions. The lessons I learned during the Intensive have become invaluable to me as I prepare to independently maneuver through a world in crisis giving me a renewed hope that I can play a role in creating a better future.

- Sachen Pillay

We began the 2020 Kennedy Center Dramaturgy Intensive by listening. We listened to Mark Bly’s tribute to listening, his sparkling enthusiasm and love of craft transcending the Zoom space. The rhythm of a play, he urged, is the key to that first encounter. “Travel with it,” he proposed, “almost like you’re on a sled.”

We then attended a panel set up by Gregg Henry via Zoom (“Decolonizing New Play Development”) co-produced by the National New Play Network and Calling Up. Here, we listened to stories and recommendations from artists who have personal and ancestral knowledge of the harms perpetrated by colonial systems – the same people who have the experience and insight to help transform the ways we create, rehearse and perform new plays.

Over the seven days that followed, in separate sessions, we met with the eight dramaturgs assigned to the MFA new play projects. They shared – candidly and generously – memorable case studies, formative challenges and successes, along with specific processes employed (and ideals upheld) in their present positions and projects. As we shift to trauma-aware practices, I am particularly grateful to
We observed revelatory rehearsals of the new plays being developed through the Kennedy Center that week (via Zoom) and read the plays. We observed the dramaturgs’ easy, quiet presence in rehearsal. We watched them listening; the encounter, the *bump in the rhythm*, that would offer up the observation…that might birth the question…that could unlock the insight from which playwright, director and actors most stand to benefit.

Prior to attending the Intensive, we were sent an eclectic mix of poems, images and short articles by Mark – early omens of the affable, yet profound, atmosphere that prevailed throughout the week. Along with 98 pages of notes taken during sessions, manifestos, and 7 new books, I now have a soul-fortifying arsenal of archives.

There is lasting sustenance, too, as Mark continues to rally the 2020 dramaturgy cohort. Every few weeks, he arranges for us to attend a Zoom session with another brilliant colleague or former Kennedy Center alumni of his; Rachel Rusch Rich, Molly Winstead, or Michelle Lynch, who are breaking ground in their practice, revealing yet new ways “that a dramaturg can dramaturg.”

I also find myself revisiting the new video recording of Mark interviewing Moisés Kaufman, particularly the section where Kaufman shares his hope for the future. I listen to him position us, theater-makers, as occupying a space previously reserved for religious institutions. On the other side of 2020 – this year that has tested us in ways we could not have predicted – we are going to be hungry, he says. “Hungry for enlightenment, hope, togetherness. For the theatre to point the way.”

Let’s get ready.
- Julie McIsaac, British Columbia

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**New Directions in Dramaturgy@Calshakes**

*Philippa Kelly, Resident Dramaturg, the California Shakespeare Theater*

In recent years, issues of diversity, inclusion and representation have achieved increasing visibility in all aspects of American life. Late last year, Eric Ting and I sought to reflect this multivocality by setting up a site, *New Directions in Dramaturgy*, on the Cal Shakes portal. We wanted to encourage pieces that would present our audiences with challenging dramaturgical perspectives. We published articles by Curt Tofteland, whose work with incarcerated communities is premised on the idea that trauma without language cannot be healed; and by Wendy Staggs, a returned citizen for whom theater, and art-making, is deeply about experiencing and internalizing democracy. An advocate for theater arts in incarcerated communities, Wendy tells the story of her journey outwards by using art to
move inwards. Amy Kossew contributed a piece about the place that theater offers to atypical bodies; and Philippa Kane wrote about the value of dramaturgy in redefining our ecology.

Sadly, at this moment there is little or no capacity to gather in theater spaces because nature, in the form of Covid19, has issued a reminder of the absolute limitations of human agency. As I write this, I am vividly feeling the loss of what can happen when we gather to make and witness theater. Theater is a place of direct communal experience, often complex and even inflammatory, provoking at least as many questions as answers. In 2020 the etymology of “theatre” (“to watch,” “to take a seat”) resonates starkly with the dramas witnessed on streets and screens as, largely isolated from each other by Covid restrictions, we experience our nation in a crisis of leadership and identity. There is a renewed drive to make a break with the white supremacy that has – often with apparently seamless toxicity – for so long imbued every part of social, political and economic scaffolding. Theater has not been exempt from this white supremacy disease – our structures have often perpetuated it.

As we navigate the world (and the world of theater) in unprecedented conditions, the New Directions in Dramaturgy site seeks contributions offering perspectives that can expand and challenge ideas about dramaturgy and society, finding and forging new perspectives and revisiting old ones. We pay $50 for every piece we publish. Submissions should go to learn@calshakes.org, with the subject heading, "Submission for New Directions Site."

Dramaturgy the Phoenix

Dear Dramaturgs:

Shortly after COVID-19 shut down theatres, LMDA challenged its members to imagine what our work and art forms might be like when this forced fallow period ended. Little did we know in April how long the shutdown would last, or the scope of social protest that would emerge and interrogate the institutions that form the fabric of society. This has become a time of raw, naked introspection. The arts, duty-bound to hold the mirror up to nature, and where representation matters most, have been called out and called in to imagine – and enact – a better future for all.

Dramaturgical acumen is more vital now than ever.

During the past six months, our original Dramaturging the Phoenix call, which generated over 50 diverse and engaging essays, has inspired conference sessions at LMDA and
Whether it feels like six minutes or six years, this time since April has changed us irrevocably. So we’re issuing another essay challenge for October.... Dramaturging the Phoenix: Six Months In.

- How has your life and work changed during this extended pandemic disruption?
- Have any temporary accommodations become permanent because they’re… better?
- How have your expectations of vocation evolved, or deepened?

We’ve set ourselves a target of 200 essays by Halloween (but we think we can do far better). If you’ve already written an essay, please consider writing a “Part Two,” or something completely new. And if you’ve been holding off, now is the time to share. Every voice counts! All forms of contributions are welcome: journal entries, manifestos, transcribed conversations, "how to..."s, etc. We just ask that you start from, or bring it back to, the practice of dramaturgy.

And don’t worry about a “finished” piece; this is all about process. Drafts are welcome, and we’re here to give feedback and/or pair you up with a peer editor. LMDA’s greatest strength lies in the relationships among its members. Use this challenge as an opportunity to reach out to a colleague and begin or continue a conversation that can inspire your essay writing – or even collaborate on a joint piece!

Dramaturging the Phoenix was designed to help us survive – and even thrive – during this bizarre time. But it has also become a document of our thinking and existence to turn back to years from now, as we’ll no doubt still be asking, “What the hell happened??”

Engage the present. Shape the future. Write your Dramaturging the Phoenix essay TODAY!

We remain here for you!

With love,

Jess, Anne, Finn, Heather, Lynde & Ken

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**ATHE 2021 // Austin, TX**

Dramaturgy Focus Group (DRFG)
Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE)
August 5-8, 2021
Austin, TX
(hybrid conference with some virtual sessions)

ATHE’s 2021 conference theme is RE: ATHE. A hybrid conference including both in-person sessions in Austin and pre-recorded virtual session, ATHE 2021 will focus on interrogating
The Dramaturgy Focus Group invites proposals responding to these ideas, as well as reflections on the current state of dramaturgy as a field. We envision a series of panels and roundtables, and welcome proposals that would offer innovative structures.

If you have an idea for an individual presentation, please contact DRFG Conference Planner Dan Smith, who will attempt to develop sessions from individual proposals. ATHE only accepts complete panel submissions. If you have an idea for a panel, you will need to assemble participants, probably by circulating a call for proposals for your own session.

For deadlines and details, please see the full CFP.

Contribute to the Newsletter!

Have an idea, process, approach, etc. you'd like to share with the LMDA? Pitch your piece for the next LMDA Newsletter. Our next newsletter will be published September 2020! Email communications@lmda.org.

Upcoming Regional Events

Philadelphia:
Philly Dramaturgs Meetups have been happening and resulting in actions toward justice! Now solely on Zoom, Philly dramaturgs come together for deep conversations around topics such as radical transparency and best practices. One outcome from the past meetups has been the creation of a Philly Dramaturg Community Value System which is hoped to be a resource like that of Not In Our House and We See You, White American Theatre.

Mountain West:
A memorial for Douglas Langworthy will be livestreamed on October 24, 2020 at 2pm MST. Tune in to celebrate the life and work of an exceptional Dramaturg and Literary Director. More information will be shared via LMDA listserv and social media.

LMDA Canada:
Happy Hour with guest, Diane Roberts on Thursday, November 26th, at 5pm EST. She will discuss her practise with The Arrivals Legacy Project and how it is evolving in a post COVID world.

Region Facebook Groups
Greater Midwest (IL, IN, IA, western KY, MI, MN, OH, WI)
Metro Bay Area
Metro Chicago
Metro NYC
Metro Boston
Central Appalachia (WV, VA, eastern KY, northern TN, and western NC)
Florida
Metro Philadelphia
Mexico
Mid-Atlantic (DC/Maryland/DE)
Northeast (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York State, Rhode Island, Vermont, Pennsylvania)
Northwest (Idaho, Oregon, Washington)
Southeast California
Plains (Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska)
Southwest (Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas)
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