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A Concise Introduction to: Dramaturgy

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INTRODUCTION

The term *dramaturgia* (δραματουργία, literally “drama” + “urgia”, or “making drama”) was first coined in ancient Greece to describe the activities of playwrights and producers of theatrical events. In ancient Egypt, India, and Rome as well as Greece there were notable historians and theorists of drama and performance, but the modern concept of a dramaturg, as an aesthetic philosopher who works to enrich the process of performance for the creative team and the [audience](#), is a far more recent development. In contemporary theatrical practice, “dramaturgy” can refer to either the structure, themes, goals, and conventions of a piece of dramatic literature, or to the aesthetic approach taken by a creative team to transform a script into a live performance. The dramaturg’s task is to consider how the artistic choices made by the creative team in the process of production might enhance the philosophical, political, or aesthetic goals of the event.

HISTORY

The first person to use the term *dramaturg* as a modern concept was the German theologian and playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781). A minister's son from the little town of Kamenz, Lessing was exposed to the burgeoning philosophical tradition of the Enlightenment when he moved to Berlin. Profoundly committed to Enlightenment principles of personal liberation, justice, and social progress, Lessing became interested in theatre after meeting one of the most famous actresses of the day, Karoline Neuber. A skilled translator, reviewer, critic, and editor, Lessing became a philosophical and moral champion of the theatre for its dialectical nature and power to change lives. In 1758 he wrote:

"...the power of tragedy is this: it should broaden our capacity to feel compassion. It should not merely instruct us to feel compassion towards this or that particular unfortunate person, rather it should make us so sensible that an unfortunate person from any time, and in any guise, would move us and make us take their side...The most compassionate person is the best person, he is the one most disposed to all of the social virtues and to all manner of great-spiritedness. Anyone who makes us compassionate makes us better and more virtuous, and the tragedy that achieves the former also achieves the latter, or—it does the latter in order to do the former" (Lessing, 1758).

Because of his growing fame, Lessing was invited to join the Hamburg National Theatre in 1767 as a sort of in-house critic. The owners of this, the first national theatre in Germany, felt that showcasing the talents of the young philosopher, who had previously argued for the creation of a national theatre to foster a native German tradition of playwriting, would bring intellectual gravity to the venture. But in Lessing, the theatre got more than it bargained for. Instead of writing pithy insights in his gazette, Lessing wrote a series of short essays that, taken together, engage deeply with dramatic criticism, acting theory, and the world history of theatre aesthetics. The National Theatre closed in 1769, but Lessing published his gazette as a single book, the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.



This book's importance on the development of Western theatre can hardly be overestimated, and establishes the definition of dramaturgy as we mean it modernly. It calls for a vision of the theatre explicitly as a tool for human self-discovery and the advance of Enlightenment values rather than as escapist entertainment. In it, he demonstrates that theatre is impossible to view outside of the context of its historical production – that therefore making theatre must be a political act, constantly requiring self-criticism and reform as human circumstances change. This understanding was significant for two major reasons. First, it was a direct attack on Neoclassicism, a stultifying and narrow interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BC) that Lessing felt unnecessarily restricted the theatre from its potential; Neoclassicism was the dominant aesthetic of the period. Second, it elevated the stories of ordinary people struggling against powerful social forces to achieve some measure of freedom of thought and action, rather than focusing on the rise and fall of kings and princes as theatre traditionally had done. The latter was dangerous for Lessing, and his lifelong efforts to advance human rights and religious tolerance would put him over the course of his life into direct conflict with some very powerful artistic, ecclesiastic, and political figures.

Lessing's work was influential in the development of a humanistic approach to theatre, one that judges a performance according to its impact on culture in the moment of its production (rather than to its conformity to some abstract aesthetic rules). This approach requires, and more or less created, the official position of dramaturg in the modern theatre. In the centuries that followed, theatre makers all over the world have come to recognize the importance of having at least one person involved in the rehearsal process who is deeply educated in theatre history, aesthetic philosophy, and humanistic thinking whose work in support of the production enriches the theatre experience for the creative team and the audience alike.





THEORY

The dramaturg's task is to consider how the artistic choices made by the creative team in the process of production might enhance the philosophical, political, or aesthetic goals of the event. Dramaturgs have a wide variety of skills to bring to bear in service of this goal, and the actual practice of dramaturgy varies broadly from region to region and company to company, but one quality all dramaturgs seem to share is a prioritisation of *dialectics*.

Dialectics is the primary concern of the writings of Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel (1770-1831) who was likely influenced by Lessing's work. In writings like his *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807), Hegel describes the state of human thought and action as dynamic and adapting to changing conditions, in a constant process of revision of old ideas and adoption of new ones. Hegel believed that every adaptation of mental state or social condition undergoes continual challenges that, while possibly unpleasant in the moment, serve to advance both the individual and society towards a stronger, more adaptive state. Hegelian dialectics is the foundational principle of dramaturgy following Lessing, and was a necessary component of the artistic movement known as Romanticism.

Prior to Romanticism, playwrights generally obeyed an unspoken convention that the universes in which dramas take place are morally "closed." That is to say, moral forces far beyond human intervention largely dictate the destinies of the individual characters of a drama. For the Greek tragedians, this force was Fate (which Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* [429 BC], for instance, heroically tries and fails to escape) or the gods who intervene in the affairs of humans to advance their own goals (as in *Prometheus Bound* [c. 430 BC]) or to help the playwright make observations about the human condition (as in the *Oresteia* [458 BC]). In medieval drama, characters are bound to an explicitly structured moral universe in which good and evil are clearly defined. In Elizabethan drama, villains are typically those who for whatever reason seek to rise above their station, a disruption of the social order that requires a hero to arise and restore that order, often at great personal cost. In Romantic drama, however, the universe is morally "open," and the old social order (depicted as defunct and corrupt) must be disrupted and replaced with a more righteous and harmonious order.





This adherence to the notion of dialectics in Romantic drama illustrates Lessing's vision of plays as cultural products that are immediately connected with their **audiences** and societies. Just as Romantic protagonists are capable of creating their own destinies, so too are the **audiences** engaged in a dialectical relationship with the plays they witness. **Audience** reactions, or non-reactions, can alter the choices actors make on stage, and therefore the **audience** becomes a dialectical participant in the creation of the play's meaning. This recognition revitalised the very ancient understanding that playwrights and dramaturgs are deep thinkers engaged in dynamic exercises in moral philosophy, and the drama itself is a living manifestation of that thought, capable of direct engagement with its **audience**. It is this living, ever-changing dialectical quality that renders performance unique among art forms.

Not all theatre and performance aspires to such lofty goals, of course, resorting instead to be shallow, escapist, vapid, commercial, or "pure entertainment." Although there is (and should be) a place for this kind of art in a free society, such plays are less dramaturgically rich, and can even be dangerous to the social fabric if they overwrite real, immediate concerns with the message that "everything is okay." However, the Romantic Movement would evolve to become an important foundation for the profoundly philosophical, psychologically complex, and socially conscious Realism movement in playwriting that dominated the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. This movement influenced such important authors as **Henrik Ibsen**, George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy, Nikolai Gogol, Arthur Miller, **Tennessee Williams**, and **August Wilson** and cemented Lessing's notion of how powerfully a dramaturgically-rich play can positively impact the societies that produce it. The success of these kinds of complex plays has supported the expansion of dramaturgical practice across the world.





PRACTICE

Worldwide, dramaturgy is practiced in a variety of ways. Indeed, the dynamic and self-reforming nature of theatre production means there can be no uniform way to practice dramaturgy. Dramaturgs describe their experiences on each individual production as unique, even when working with the same director or theatre company. A traditional model for the dramaturg is that of an in-house member of the theatre's artistic team who works year-round (as opposed to most of the other creative team, who are hired for specific productions only) and reports to the artistic director. The dramaturg may work with individual directors accumulating research on particular productions in advance of the first rehearsals, and with designers in the same capacity. In rehearsal, the dramaturg may make research presentations to the actors and will certainly be present for "table work," when the actors are doing their first read-throughs of the script and discussing the meanings, themes, and implications of the lines. The dramaturg acts a second pair of eyes for the director, imagining the reactions of the [audience](#) to come and working with the director to steer the rehearsal process towards the intended goals of the team. The dramaturg may also interact directly with [audiences](#), giving presentations to groups who might be interested in the show, writing notes for programs, curating lobby displays, and moderating talk-backs, formal situations in which the [audience](#) can ask questions of the cast and crew directly.

It is also traditional for individuals with dramaturgical skills to play the role of a "Literary Manager" in the theatre. A Literary Manager's job is to suggest plays that the theatre company might perform, and this means staying current with the work of new or emerging playwrights and often the manager is responsible for reading and reviewing plays that are submitted to the theatre company by aspiring playwrights or their agents. Dramaturgs may also be called upon to work as "Education Directors," when they will advance the outreach work of the theatre for schools or student groups, giving lectures about the theatre's plays and writing study guides.

For companies with very specific aesthetic goals, such as advancing a particular political platform or avant-garde approach, advocating for the civil rights of a particular group, or educating [audiences](#) about a single subject, dramaturgs are even more central and important. In these kinds of companies, the dramaturg is called upon as the custodian of the principles





that brought the company together, and a chief resource in the translation of those ideas into performance (for example, consider [Eugenio Barba's](#) work with the Odin Teatret (Denmark) or [Bertolt Brecht's](#) with the Berliner Ensemble in Germany). Dramaturgs are also crucial when a theatre company's work is tightly grounded in a particular cultural experience and wishes to expand its impact to a wider [audience](#) (as is the case with the work of Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino). In the case of "devised" theatre, when the script for the performance emerges from the rehearsal process rather than being provided by a playwright beforehand, it is the dramaturg's essential task to organize the emerging elements of the performance into a structure that will resonate with the eventual [audience](#) (for example, the work of Jean-Claude Van Itallie for the Open Theatre). In "documentary" theatre, wherein the script is assembled from news stories, interviews, and other documents, the dramaturg works with the rest of the creative team to craft a moving story from this historical evidence (consider Moises Kaufman's groundbreaking work with the Tectonic Theatre Project).

Dramaturgy has a conflicted history, however, which makes some practitioners suspicious of having a dramaturg on the team. Typically, there is a fear that the dramaturg will intrude in the rehearsal process with unwelcome pressure from the artistic director to conform to an artistic or commercial model that might not sit well with the play's director or cast, resulting in unnecessary conflict. Good dramaturgy means establishing good relationships between dramaturgs and directors so that an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect can emerge. However, in repressive societies, particularly authoritarian ones, dramaturgs are often agents of the state who are tasked to monitor the production process to guard against sedition or politically unapproved material. In Napoleonic France, Soviet Russia, Communist China, Nazi Germany, and under the Brazilian military dictatorship some dramaturgs actively worked to advance the interests of their oppressive regimes to the detriment of many great playwrights and actors whose work was seen as radical.





FURTHER READING

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