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The Virtues of Virtual Dramaturgy:
Collaboration, Engagement, Access

A Thesis in Theatre Arts

by

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Abstract

Throughout the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, theatre artists have been creating and distributing theatrical content on virtual platforms. As members of production teams, dramaturgs have been charged to support in-depth development of performance and audience engagement in a new terrain. This thesis uses the Performance as Research method to explore the adaptations dramaturgs adopt to successfully carry out their responsibilities inside virtual rehearsal rooms and during virtual productions. In particular, this research zeroes in on devised works of theatre, and how I and other professional dramaturgs have utilized technology and modified facilitation techniques in our virtual productions, in comparison to in-person projects. While the challenge of the learning curve of technology use exists, there are many benefits from the shift from stage to screen that may inspire dramaturgs to continue embracing digital solutions even as theatre re-opens in the future post-pandemic world. Cloud-based and video chat platforms allow creative teams and audiences from distant locations and timezones to form, effectively removing many barriers that in-person collaboration implicates, like inaccessibility of public places, costs of transportation, and the lack of physical proximity to a theatre. With the possibility of more collaborative partners and audience members from more locations and life experiences, the dramaturg has a potentially better opportunity to fulfill the responsibilities of facilitating the understanding of context and connection of the play to the world at large.

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Thesis Introduction

Research introductions and context

The World Health Organization announced on March 11, 2020 that COVID-19 was a pandemic. Stay-at-home orders were issued in countries around the world as businesses, schools, and institutions—including theatres—closed their doors to “flatten the curve,” or halt the spread of the virus (Katella). As of this writing in April 2022, which marks more than two years into this pandemic, theatre artists have been flattening the curve while still making plays: by creating and distributing theatrical content on virtual platforms. Professional, amateur, commercial, non-profit, and educational theatre organizations swapped the stage for a screen, to continue generating revenue, mount passion projects, and gather audiences without risking COVID-19 exposures (Dorbian). In September 2021, Broadway reopened, signaling a return to the stage for global theatres, particularly in the USA. But in December 2021, due to a dramatic spike in infections from the Covid-19 variant called Omicron, “18 productions canceled performances,” and “five shows closed permanently” (Waterman Aldana). The waves of COVID-19 have demonstrated that virtual theatre will not fade as the virus fades, as these artists note the international collaboration, cost saving, and convenience that the digital/virtual theatre makes more possible, more quickly (Dorbian). While the online shift makes for a learning curve for both artists and audiences alike, this modification has also made way for innovation and redefinition of what theatre is and could be.

As members of production teams, dramaturgs have been charged to support in-depth development of performance and audience engagement in a new terrain. This moment begs the question of what virtual theatre has to offer practices of dramaturgy. What does the virtual medium compel dramaturgs to accomplish in innovative and effective ways? What about the

virtual medium offers objectionable challenges in dramaturgy? What does digital theatre-making teach dramaturgs about their roles, responsibilities, theatre industry, and the collective definition of theatre?

This thesis will explore the pivots that production dramaturgs have had to make during this period of online theatre-making and the potentialities for these lessons learned to improve our capacity to fulfill dramaturgical goals of collaboration, engagement, and accessibility.

Dramaturgy: definitions and history

To tackle this thesis's questions, one must understand dramaturgy, which is the study of theatrical content. Dramaturgs apply their discernments of the functions of drama in order to guide production teams as they mount theatrical works, both old and new. According to the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of Americas, the specific roles of the dramaturg within a production process is to “contextualize the world of a play; establish connections among the text, actors, and audience; offer opportunities for playwrights; generate projects and programs; and create conversations about plays in their communities” (LMDA). There is another summary I have created and use often to differentiate dramaturgical responsibilities as it concerns the two groups that dramaturgs engage with over the course of a production. For the creative team, dramaturgs are the liaison between the interplay of the play's meaning and the artists' vision, making sure the text and the production concepts support each other. For the audience members, dramaturgs metaphorically “hold the door” as they enter and exit the experience, to ensure viewers have been presented with the necessary context to have the most in-depth, productive, communal *and* personal viewing as possible.

The evolution of the dramaturg's role and function in the Western theatre scene is hand-in-hand with the evolution of American performing arts. Anne Cattaneo, the dramaturg of New York's Lincoln Center Theatre, provides a historical overview of the field in *Dramaturgy in American Theater*. She articulates that "production dramaturgy is a set of tasks" that have only been carried out by a singular specialist (or team of specialists) in a production and as staff members of arts organizations since the late 1960s and early 1970s (5). Before this emergence of the dedicated dramaturg, in Western theatre, the dramaturgical tasks of setting a play's performance and a theatre's repertory in the context of the times—by way of translation, adaptation, and season planning—were co-shouldered by the directors, playwrights, and acting companies of Germany, England, and France since the era of Shakespeare (3). The dramaturgical work of artists in 1900's German theatre included keeping production logs and notes, translating and adapting plays, and "interpret[ing] and respond[ing] to the events of the day through the choice of repertory" (5). The late nineteenth-century marked the establishment of American regional professional theatres that re-envisioned classic works for modern times as well as developed new works; dramaturgs were enlisted to "develop repertory material that [expresses] the theater's artistic purpose" (6).

The journey of dramaturgy throughout the ages demonstrates how artists in this role are trusted with shaping the theatrical interpretation of context and are critical players in theatre's evolution in society. Cattaneo affirms that "Theatre in every age has had to reinvent itself...It will be the dramaturg's challenge to keep the artists center stage in the mainstream of American culture" (15). The boom of virtual theatre-making necessitated by the pandemic's stay-at-home order is a critical moment of dramaturgical history. Dramaturgy students of this age are particularly apt to contribute to this transformation of American theatre.

I became interested in dramaturgy as a high school junior, when I started advocacy projects inspired by our class's productions. For years, I have been passionate about how theatre performances can be community-based learning opportunities that platform critical narratives and jumpstart conversations about social justice. When my high school produced *The Laramie Project*, an interview-based play chronicling the town's response after the murder of Matthew Shepard, I organized a network of performances to dedicate their productions to those lost in the 2016 Pulse Massacre and to collect donations for LGBTQ+ causes. When we performed *Urinetown*, a musical exploring a dystopian community in which people must "pay to pee" to survive a water shortage, I mobilized our cast and audience to raise money for the real-life community of Flint, Michigan. As of this writing, this town is still living through a poisoned water supply that emerged in 2014 (Michigan Radio). Once my high school drama teachers enlightened me that there was a whole field of study and practice dedicated to informed understanding of theatrical works and community-based outreach, I was ready to call myself a dramaturg.

In my first two years as student taking the core theatre major coursework, I was fascinated by the ways in which playwrights processed global events and movements, and I got a taste of dramaturgical tasks like research, play analysis, and audience engagement during my introductory dramaturgy class. It would not be until the summer of 2020, however, in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic and quarantine, that I would begin working as a dramaturg for Drew University's *Snapshot* (for September 2020) and *Monstress* (for March 2021). My first times fulfilling the dramaturg's role were for renditions of the newest kind of theatre: virtual performances. Around the same time, my advisor Dr. Lisa Brenner suggested that studying my virtual dramaturgical processes would be a timely research endeavor for my thesis.

I have since devoted my time at Drew to understanding the dramaturgical role in virtual theatre practice and performance. As an educator, organizer, and theatre artist, the dramaturg faces the challenges of developing thought-provoking engagement with the text. The screen has also become a stage, out of necessity for global health and safety. Actors and designers gather from all different places, and audiences “log on” from their various locations as well. Therefore, it is crucial that as a dramaturg, I work to understand the virtual arts terrain that has flourished during the quarantine.

I came to understand this topography through dramaturging the two aforementioned virtual projects at Drew University, serving as a remote project associate for an in-person devised piece in the summer of 2021, and having discussions about my discipline in this time of history with fellow working dramaturgs. This period has helped me develop my values in dramaturgy and theatre as a whole; that is to say, the characteristics of the sorts of projects I wish to contribute to, or the thought processes I wish to introduce to projects. My dramaturgical values are as follows: generative collaboration; thoughtful and widespread audience engagement, and accessible theatre for all artists and audiences, especially those who are historically and currently marginalized.

Reflecting on my experiences, I believe there are lessons the dramaturgy field can take away from the online playspace to successfully achieve these widely-shared aspirations of forwarding innovative collaboration, creating worthwhile audience engagement, and being access-centered artmakers. In my thesis research, I ask the questions: What are the practices that virtual theatre necessitates that virtual dramaturgs carry out? How can dramaturgs implement these practices, as they are related to goals of a more in-depth theatre, and continually assess their efficacy? A collective perception of what makes the theatre arts distinct from other

mediums is its nature of liveness, the corporal communion of audience and performers, and the ephemeral nature of the performance event, unrecorded and only tangible in text and memory (Kim). But since the pandemic came and artists were and still are called to create online, as creating is their livelihoods, how can dramaturgs embrace technology and perhaps use it to help improve the art and foster a widespread reach to audiences?

Methodology

The Performance as Research method, or PaR, informs my thesis. PaR explores “the theory and application of performance in practice, and the research outputs created through these processes... [It is] “an investigation into the material, epistemological, and ontological fundamentals of all forms of performance, intended or otherwise.” This methodology emphasizes the relationship between theory and practice, how research can be carried out through acts of embodiment, as well as develops a kaleidoscope of ways to assess the result of practice that is a performance (University of Colorado - Boulder). As a dramaturg, I report and analyze both the dynamics of digital theatre-art-making within rehearsal rooms for performances of new or revived works, as well as dynamics between the performance content and the audience, namely to measure the results of social justice consciousness-raising of the work at hand. My work lends itself to the research strategy of participant-observation, which is “to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a given group of individuals...and their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their natural environment, usually over an extended period of time” (University of California San Francisco). At the start of my research, I may have opted for a quantitative research approach that monitored trends like use and disuse of technological tools, trends in digital performance, etc. However, I selected this qualitative methodology in which, in

a paraphrase from my advisor Dr. Brenner, the personal journey is centered and the creative project is regarded as research, because virtual dramaturgy is a current emerging practice (personal comm.). To paraphrase another one of my advisors, Dr. Amy Koritz, this period of transference from stage to screen, as all other processes of technological advancement, includes a morphing and shaping of the digital realm into its own identity. Like how the first cars looked like carriages, virtual theatre may look like film, but as I have found over the course of my research and the pandemic, virtual theatre is still being defined as a unique form (Koritz personal comm.). This is especially relevant considering virtual theatre itself has many modes of presentation. Sometimes virtual plays are performed live on a video conferencing platform with an audience that joins virtually. Other times, virtual plays are disseminated to audience members or live streamed as a pre-recorded video, whether compiled from segments of smaller videos, or filmed on a stage with or without an audience present. There are a variety of ways to combine and expand upon these formats too. As this is an emerging field, the definition of virtual theatre, and especially what defines virtual theatre from film, is still debatable (see for example, the disputes between Equity and SAG) (Meyer). PaR helps me, then, track these transformational nuances. I can highlight the practices carried out by the dramaturgical projects of myself and document the cutting edge activity happening within our field, by virtue of the waves of the pandemic and the continuous evolution of technology that defines our modern age.

In my thesis, I also focus on dramaturgy for new works created by living playwrights as opposed to the revivals or restagings of plays. On a personal level, new play dramaturgy interests me because dramaturgs play a very important role in ushering the articulation of the playwright's vision. Cattaneo puts it this way: "The ability to recognize work that stretches the definition of theater can help establish a whole new generation of writers" (11). In this way, dramaturgs are

shepherds of a new playwright's emergence into the canon. Even more specifically, since the majority of my dramaturgical experience is with devised theatre, I focus on dramaturgy for this specific kind of new play development. Devised theatre creates new work that comprises a series of forms, or theatrical units, scenes, or creative strategies. Moisés Kaufman of the Tectonic Theater Project, one of the American theatre scene's leading devising companies, delineates devised theatre from "traditional" theatre as a process of "writing performance as opposed to writing text" (qtd. in Brenner et al). Devised theatre can be adaptations of found texts like literature, media, and interviews (also called verbatim theatre). My research is rooted in reflection's upon my roles as a digital dramaturg, and therefore participant-observer, for *Monstress* at Drew University and *#HereToo* at Columbia College Chicago, as well as interviews with contemporary dramaturgs. These artistic professionals provided me perspective about what it has been like to jump from dramaturging in-person to dramaturging online.

I will now provide more context around two of the new devised virtual plays that I dramaturged. *Monstress* was unique in that I was responsible for assisting development of the play's text, as well as creating audience engagement opportunities that connected to this play's consciousness-raising elements. In this virtual development, rehearsal, and production process, I supported a team of five student authors and the larger ensemble of student devisers within Drew's New York Semester on Theatre courses. Directed by faculty member Jolie Tong and advised by Tectonic Theater Project's Moment Work Institute, *Monstress* was three adaptations of canonical works from around the globe: *The White Snake* of 7th century China, *Medusa* of 8th century Greece, and *The Sandman* of 19th century Germany. These stories include transformations of the woman protagonist between human and a monstrous form. Our ensemble sought to answer the question: "What makes a woman a monster?" I looked forward to working

alongside student playwrights in their process and uplifting an restorative¹ and transformative² justice (or RJ/TJ) framework to contextualize both surviving and perpetrating the patriarchal violence that our protagonists faced. Some of *Monstress*'s filming was completed on campus with actors and assistance from production team members, while other filming took place remotely. The recorded play was then streamable on YouTube and BroadwayOnDemand.

My dramaturgical experience with *#HereToo* (co-founded by Barbara Pitts McAdams and Jimmy Maize) differs from *Monstress* in that I was tasked to create shared context and archive/document the materials for this play that took a more direct activist approach to audience engagement. I contributed to one production of this ongoing theatre project, which raises awareness about young activists organizing to prevent gun violence, as a remote dramaturg during the May virtual workshop and the in-person rehearsals for the production in the fall. As well as educating student artists on the devised theatre-making process and Tectonic Theatre Project's technique of Moment Work, Barbara and Jimmy's residencies, where *#HereToo* is redevise, endeavor to provide "relatable and aspirational role models for [artists' and audience members'] own engagement" (Pitts McAdams 233). I supported this aim by zooming into the virtual and in-person rehearsals and providing education and RJ/TJ analysis to the script. ("Zooming in" is a phrase popularized in the first two years of the pandemic, meaning to call in on a video chat platform.) I also developed an online database/archive, a home for past, current, and future *#HereToo* material, so that the future re-devisings of the play in any location can pull forms and content from a single archive. *#HereToo* was performed in-person at Columbia College Chicago in October 2021, encapsulating a true hybrid process reflective of the Fall 2021 re-emergence of in-person theatre with continued inclusion of remote team members.

In this thesis, I also include stories from dramaturgs like Emily Dzioba, an associate of New Jersey Play Lab and dramaturg of the 2018 Drew Production of *4320p*, a devised piece tackling the societal ramifications of virtual reality's popularization. Her reflections on documenting the script development process are the context from which I explore this task in the digital realm. Kaitlin Stilwell, a dramaturgy professor and co-founder of New Jersey Play Lab, supplied her reflections on new play dramaturgy for both in-person and virtual processes. Dramaturg and community engagement artist Erica Nagel's recounts of working with various in-person projects, like *Lost Boy in Whole Foods*, a story of a young Sudanese refugee, helped me provide comparisons to consciousness-raising dramaturgy while online. Claro de los Reyes, an actor, playwright, educator, and "social practice theatre artist," shared about his experiences with the productions *DO, WAGER* and *Black Henry*, two pieces exploring historical moments of the Philippines, to give insight on priming the audience on historical context as well as ensuring widespread engagement ("About"). These were dramaturgs with whom I had a personal connection, and they responded to my queries with generous insight and reflections.

My and these other dramaturgs' reflections are included in the two sections of this thesis, divided by the two periods of a play-making process: rehearsal and production. Chapter One: Collaboration focuses on how dramaturgs work inside the digital rehearsal room, and Chapter Two: Engagement explores the dramaturgical interactions with the audience in a virtual space. As an arts access advocate, I include digital dramaturgy's ramifications on accessibility for audience members and artists with disabilities throughout my research. I reflect upon how my and my fellow artists' virtual dramaturgy effectively or ineffectively adapted to the digital form, as we each endeavored to fulfill responsibilities to create in-depth, memorable, and meaningful performances of new plays.

What I hope to gain from this thesis research is the identification of which skills and sensibilities dramaturgs from virtual projects are useful for future collaborative, engaging, and accessible new works of theatre, whether they are in-person, online, or hybrid projects.

Chapter One: Collaboration with the creative team in the rehearsal room

Chapter One Introduction

Theatre is a collaborative art form. Each new performance is born from an amalgamation of ideas, expertises, efforts, and exploration of the contributing artists. As theatre professor Jimmy Bickerstaff notes, theatrical collaboration “draws on a multiplicity of sources, a multiplicity of contributors who interact, either directly or indirectly, with both the creator(s) and the creative work itself” (1). One of the most central parts of theatrical collaboration for a new work is the gathering of artists inside a rehearsal room. The importance of a “contained” zone for a convening is highlighted by Priya Parker, an expert facilitator and strategic advisor, in *The Art of Gathering*: “[it makes it] easier for us to talk, to share—to come together...it helps create the alternative world that a gathering can, at its best, achieve” (65). In theatre, rehearsals function as the gatherings where an alternative world is literally created. Artists step out of their own lives and step into a process of crafting an imagined time and space. The rehearsal room is the space where this process is set into motion, and their inventions for the brand new work start taking shape and blinking into existence.

Theatre artists have long explored the relationship between the alchemy of playmaking and the places in which playmaking occurs. The director Peter Brook names the metamorphosis this way: “A man walks across [an] empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre.” (7). The space and action mutually become theatrical, or in other words, the space and action existing together in the same time and location permit the other to maintain meaning as an aesthetic experience. The late Augusto Boal, a playwright, politician, and activist, speaks of sites of performance as aesthetic spaces, which are “plastic and malleable, like dreams. This is what gives it creative power. It allows the creation of concrete

dreams” (qtd. in McLaverty-Robinson). The collaboration between creative team members activates the power of this shared space and transforms the emptiness of the room into fullness with a unique aesthetic, as the artists experiment and refine a work of theatre. This rehearsal room is where the work is incubated by the artists, until it is ready to be shared out in the open with audience members who witness the story as new.

In new play development processes, dramaturgs collaborate with a creative team within this shared rehearsal room to “ensure the integrity of the production” (Romanska 9). Dramaturgs formulate shared understandings of relevant contexts, and document the playmaking process. These artists also safeguard the clarity and alignment of the narrative’s text and its onstage manifestations. Throughout all of these responsibilities, dramaturgs liaise between creative team members, namely the playwright of the developing work and the director. They also propose suggestions that strengthen the cohesion of the work. The core of this dramaturgical responsibility thus stems from maintaining a physical presence inside the rehearsal room where dramaturgs engage with the team’s experiments with the elements of the stage and their ability to create a narrative.

How can dramaturgs collaborate when this shared space of the rehearsal room is not a part of the play-making process, because the ensemble is making theatre in a digital space? How do production dramaturgs activate the creative power of a shared space to obtain dramaturgical goals when each creative team member arrives separately to a virtual rehearsal?

This chapter explores how dramaturgs can alter their facilitation processes and utilize digital tools to revive the sense of shared space in a virtual rehearsal process, the strategies of which can propel digital artistic collaboration and accomplish the dramaturgical goal of generating a comprehensible work of theatre. I will begin each section by illustrating how

dramaturgy ideally works during in-person processes, utilizing the examples of working dramaturgs and theatre makers garnered from interviews. I will then turn to how this dramaturgy might work digitally by expounding upon personal experiences with virtual projects, namely beginning with *#HereToo* and then turning to *Monstress*. I will also highlight opportunities to learn from other disciplines and fields that have cultivated online gathering skills before and throughout the Coronavirus pandemic. Throughout these case studies, I will point out the results of these digital tools: where there were successes and where I found room for improvement and future exploration.

Dramaturgical responsibility #1: Creating shared context

In the in-person rehearsal room

Dramaturgs are charged with the task of facilitating comprehension of the historical, cultural, and social context of a play for the creative team members. As Terry McCabe notes in a citation inside the *Handbook for Student Dramaturgs*, “The dramaturg is the resident expert on the physical, social, political, and economic milieus in which the action takes place” (Qtd. in Romanska 5). Creating shared context within new play development processes ensures the work contains accurate representations of this theatrically constructed world, including relevant topics, time periods, or historical figures. An established and understood context within the creative team supports consistency and believability within the developing script. Dramaturgs bring in materials and activities that engage the senses of the creative team and help this theatrical work, as I put it earlier, blink into existence.

The shared context that the dramaturg creates often manifests as visual tools like maps, timelines, and photographs that are hung on the walls of the space. Dramaturgs also engage

visually by presenting powerpoints and videos, facilitating group discussions about the context's connection to the play, and curating a casebook, or a collection of texts and research. Team members reference these visual tools and the curated texts to gain clarity about the context of the show and fact-check their artistic choices.

However, visual tools are not the only ways by which dramaturgs communicate information in the rehearsal room to the cast; there are multiple creative strategies for generating shared engagements that utilize multiple senses, which gets at the heart of theatrical embodiment. The author of *Understanding Facilitation*, Christine Hogan, highlights that an effective facilitator “employs multi-sensory processes” and “selects from a wide variety of sensory needs and abilities” to successfully communicate and impart content into the group (69). Dr. Lisa Brenner, a dramaturg and scholar, co-authored *Katrina: The K Word*, which premiered at Montclair State University in 2007. She recounted that the production dramaturg hosted a dramaturgical experience that engaged the sense of taste: the cast ate traditional New Orleans dishes together, to immerse themselves in the culture of the play. The dramaturg also invited the cast to learn Creole dances (personal comm). Both of these experiential dramaturgical activities served to expand cast members' relationships to the context and elevate their understanding from purely intellectual and consisting of facts and figures to a multi-sensory, embodied, nuanced, holistic knowledge of the lived experiences of these characters.

To summarize, dramaturgs create communal experiences of understanding context, enjoyed by the whole group in the same place and at the same time. The creative team members collaborate intellectually and physically to develop a shared vocabulary concerning both the developing script and the historical/cultural context of the world of the play. These endeavors are

carried out to collaboratively clarify the manifestation of the shared artistic vision of the new work.

What happens then to these mutual experiences when they are presented virtually? How can these be unifying memories and efforts if each person joins from several different rooms and from several different time zones?

In the digital rehearsal room

Virtual facilitation: fostering individual and communal sensory experiences and context-making

One creative strategy to facilitate shared experiences through the screen is prompting personal multi-sensory experiences for individual theatre makers and dedicating rehearsal time to the “share out” process of everyone’s discoveries. I will expound upon this facilitation structure by relaying my experience in a virtual workshop held by artist, educator, and Performance Studies scholar Dr. Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren: “Hearing Along Edges: Community Performances for the Other Than Human.”

In the event description, Dr. Kochhar-Lindgren asked the participants to bring a rock. She asked “What does it mean to “hear” an Earth that speaks in immensely different scales and styles of expressivities? We will start small. How does a rock speak?” Her identity as a hard-of-hearing artist was incorporated into her framing of the exploration in the description:

Our medium itself, as always, sets the stage for “normative” hearing practices that are typically connected with a “normative” image of sound. Zoom assumes a “normative” speaking-hearing apparatus, while Zoom-With-Captioning shifts the “hearing” modality

to an auditory-visual one. How can we explore/expand forms of hearing differently that are available to us through Zoom and what bearing does that have on creating community performance work around the other than human? (Kochhar-Lindgren).

Dr. Kochhar-Lindgren introduced the workshop as a “cross sensory approach to exercises,” and posed this question: “How much stitching of meaning together can we actually do” while on Zoom? She then encouraged us to create a cycle of engagements and expressions, inspired by the rock: Create a dance with the rock in your hand, make a drawing of the rock, write/speak aloud three words that come to mind while handling the rock. After we engaged with a variety of senses, which were all selected by personal preference and ability, the group created a performance sequence with these expressions: sounds, movements, words, showing our drawings. We reflected back to each other what new things we discovered about the rock by our prompts to express our artistic responses in a variety of ways (Kochhar-Lindgren).

Dr. Kochhar-Lindgren’s exercises speak to what dramaturgs can accomplish in virtual collaborative context-making. In-person dramaturgical sensory experiences rely on the contained time frame of the session—the one-hour cast meal in the rehearsal room or the one-hour dance lesson in the dance studio, in the case of *Katrina: The K Word*’s dramaturgy. Virtual dramaturgical sensory experiences, however, require dramaturgs to think about how they prepare for the event, facilitate individual and sensorial engagement with the context, and craft a share-out segment that reaffirms the artistic vision and builds relationships between context and the creative project at hand. Virtual conferencing platforms and remote collaboration make for divisions between time and physical space. But this lack of shared space charges the dramaturg to embrace the individual parts of virtual engagement and utilize every opportunity to illuminate

the shared purpose becomes most visible. So, dramaturg is compelled to encourage individual and communal sensory participation to cultivate and strengthen a shared vision for the work.

When it comes to pre-session prep, dramaturgs can learn from virtual conference planners and corporate team builders who rose to the challenge of organizing convenings on a digital platform throughout the pandemic to still create shared and meaningful experiences for participants. At the end of 2020, Packhelp, a design and custom packing brand, “sent out branded sweaters to participants in an end-of-year webinar about Christmas marketing.” The pre-session effort resulted in higher buy-in to the event: “Not only was the no-show rate down to a mere 2% from an industry average of 38%, but feedback from participants said that they felt much more connected to the brand compared to other virtual events” (Davey). The facilitator Priya Parker makes a case for utilizing pre-gathering experiences (or “priming” in her words), since it streamlines the process from invitation to arrival. “It is a chance to shape their journey into your gathering...90 percent of what makes a gathering successful is put in place beforehand” (Parker 146, 149). It may be challenging to organize goodie bags or packages on both cost and logistical standpoints, considering the tight budget most projects have to begin with. That aside, pre-gathering experiences that engage the senses connect the participants who join from different locations by sparking a conversation about personal engagements with the shared element. This also increases focus and curiosity on part of the team members, which is crucial to ensure a positive and productive impact of the dramaturgy experience.

During the virtual dramaturgical session, the dramaturg can use digital solutions that both prompt a multitude of sensory experiences, expressions and reflection from team members on both the developing story and the world of the play, but also increase accessibility. For example, if the dramaturg shares their screen and shows a video about a historical figure in the play, they

can also display an auto-generated transcript of the video. This use of multiple levels of processing has a benefit regarding the importance of including artists with disabilities and prioritizing their contributions. The creative team members have a choice to flip between senses of sound and sight, or to utilize a particular sense according to their preference or ability. If the dramaturg asked the team to bring a prop from their own homes that was relevant to the story, the creative team members can be asked to observe and engage with how the item smells, feels, sounds, looks (or tastes, if it is edible). While this sort of multi-sensory facilitation may be challenging for dramaturgs who are unfamiliar with technology, or whose access to assistive technology is limited, it is worth trying to increase the chance of multi-sensory expression on part of each creative team member.

After the members construct their individual response, the dramaturg can facilitate a sharing out. This accomplishes two purposes: team members reflect back their understanding of the content and be introduced to new ways of thinking about the content from their team members. The team members may then be invited to create a unified piece, definition, response, etc. with each of their individual parts. This synthesis segment of the event is the heart of the shared experience—where the goal of identifying connections between context, text, and the team’s understanding can be accomplished.

I have facilitated shared familiarity of RJ/TJ for both classmates in an applied theatre course as well as the cast of *#HereToo* during their virtual May workshop. In both instances, I incorporated personal and communal reflection moments in order to support a sense of community learning around a shared idea. For the applied theatre course’s workshop, I opened up the presentation with an invitation for the cast to do an exercise that demonstrated the somatic concept of blending, or a strategy to approach bodily contractions with validation and

affirmation, in order to understand the source of a habit. In my research, I drew a connection between blending and RJ/TJ's ideology of approaching conflict with sensitivity rather than harshness. Adapting an exercise from the book *Politics of Trauma*, I asked the creative team to make a fist with one hand and use the other hand to undo the fist by pulling it apart forcefully. My classmates reflected that it was hard to un-fist their one hand. Then, I invited the team to recreate the fist, but this time, place a relaxed hand on top. Many classmates noted that their fist relaxed (Haines 236). In the case of the teach-in for the *#HereToo*, I incorporated an activity inspired by one that Mariame Kaba conducted in a spring workshop for Showing Up for Racial Justice. I asked the cast and crew members to "imagine a time where you felt safe" and to "recall the senses associated with that memory" (Kaba). The cast and crew shared their reflections in the chat as I read them aloud and compiled their contributed text onto a slide for all to see.

As lead deviser of *#HereToo*, Barbara Pitts McAdams reflected that the main benefit of conducting this personal and communal context creation on a virtual platform was that Zoom allows for low cost and specific collaboration between colleagues. Costs for rehearsal space and transportation goes away when Zoom is the teaching platform. I could Zoom in from New Jersey, Pitts McAdams could Zoom in from New York, and the cast could join from Chicago or wherever they lived during the college's summer break. While the virtual format is lacking face-to-face interaction, it allows for ideal collaborations between artists who live in distant cities (Pitts McAdams personal comm.).

During these remote collaborations, Dramaturgs may face the challenge of soliciting responses from the session's participants. This is due to the unique challenges of convening online, as well as the barriers of cameras and microphones that stand between what would typically be open conversations in-person. A study released a year after the start of the pandemic

highlights a variety of reasons why students attending virtual school do not turn on their camera or otherwise engage in meetings, including “being concerned about personal appearance...being concerned about other people and the physical location being seen in the background and having a weak internet connection, all of which our exploratory analyses suggest may disproportionately influence underrepresented minorities” (Castelli and Sarvary). Dramaturgs must experiment with establishing multiple lines of communication, like both the conferencing platforms public and direct messaging systems, as obtaining a contribution from everyone in the room is important. A further exploration on how to engage with a non-participatory audience is included later in this chapter.

The hidden benefits of this sort of virtual facilitation that embraces both individual and communal experience consist of reminders to dramaturgs about the importance of accessibility within sensory experiences. Embracing the personal experience that comes with zooming in and prompting a variety of ways to engage with the content is an effective way to respect and value the multiplicity of ways the artists process information, which is not always the same for each member of the creative team. This method of facilitation is also beneficial for projects that have remote collaborators, as the rehearsal can still proceed if one or more artists cannot attend an in-person convening. There are a number of reasons why one must stay home, including illness, childcare, inclement weather, or accessible transportation not being available. In the case of the American hub of the arts, New York City, “only a quarter of [the city’s] subway stations are accessible,” meaning many rehearsal halls are simply inaccessible to people who use wheelchairs (Alderton). These stations and buildings must be made accessible to ensure equal access to public places; in the interim, virtual rehearsal and dramaturgy sessions create a space that can be shared by all artists who can log online.

To summarize, virtual facilitation of shared context inspires the dramaturg to think about multi-sensory engagement in both the pre-, during, and post periods, to promulgate opportunities of comprehending the context. Virtual facilitation has a wide range of ramifications, both positive and potentially challenging, on the accessibility and productivity of the event.

Dramaturgical responsibility #2: Archiving and documenting the script development process

In the in-person rehearsal room

Another one of the dramaturg's responsibilities during the rehearsal period is to archive and document the process of the creative team's script formulation. In an endeavor of making devised theatre, the dramaturg assesses performance experiments, or the embodied creations that are the groundwork of the growing piece. The dramaturg reflects back to the collective the storytelling choices, or in other words, creates "reflections" of the rehearsal, so that the work can be made visible and weighed alongside the goals of the production. In other words, while the production stage managers disseminate technical and directorial updates in the rehearsal report, dramaturgs disseminate story information about the developing play, in a variety of manners.

Often, the dramaturg's documentation of the process includes visual representations—graphs, timelines, and structural analyses—and they become part of the architecture of the rehearsal room. Oftentimes, giant post-it with lists of new forms notes line the walls, ready to be drawn on or added to in a moment's notice. In non-devised theatre development, these binders and spreadsheets that track the changes in the script grow and are available for quick references. Erica Nagel, the dramaturg of *Grounded* at The New Harmony Project which premiered in 2018, described how dramaturgs support the transformation of a

script—the dramaturg’s binder becomes a “monster” so that the director’s and performers’ binders can become “missiles” (personal int.). These documents’ presences in the rehearsal room are critical in the developing cohesion of not only the work at hand but the collective of artists. The ability to refer quickly to the shaping work, by way of these visual representations, makes for effective productivity.

In Tectonic Theater Project playmaking processes, dramaturgs take a particular responsibility as the devising technique of Moment Work, or creating brief theatrical units using the elements of the stage, is employed (Pitts McAdams et al. 29). The ensemble’s dramaturg tracks the Moments, most often on the aforementioned large post-it notes, so that these forms can be recreated, enhanced, and folded into the developing narrative (30). At Drew University, Tectonic Theater Project artists create a play from this Moment Work technique with student artists. Emily Dzioba, the student dramaturg for Tectonic’s residency at Drew in the 2017-2018 academic year, tracked the Moment Work processes that lead to the play *4320p*, an exploration of virtual reality and identity. I spoke with her to learn more about her process and how the rehearsal room was integral to the documenting of the work.

Dzioba emphasized the importance of the ensemble’s presence in the rehearsal as it relates to documenting the script development. She found that the shared space and the visual and relational “rituals” inside of it made for a unified process—between cast and the story, between the story and the created forms. Dzioba used the quintessential large Post-it (sticky) notes to capture the Moments, as well as chalkboards, whiteboards, and projectors as the process developed and Moment Work techniques were activated even after the script was complete. These handwritten notes were eventually transferred to a shared Google Drive. Dzioba mentioned that the ensemble primarily worked from a verbal and written shorthand to remount

and recreate Moments that they titled as a group, meaning that there was an embodied and mutual memory of these theatrical units. The ensemble often worked in different spaces—in rehearsal rooms in New York City like ART NY and Manhattan Theatre Club, and even within different rooms of Drew’s Dorothy Young Center for the Arts. However, the cast always returned from their corners of the room/building to circle up and share out the progress with each other. According to Dzioba, engaging in this ritual meant there was “emotional energy of sitting shoulder to shoulder...talking about the same things, working through the same outcome, being in the thick of it together...I truly [believe this ritual] propelled us toward making a product...that was truthful to what we wanted to discuss.” Dzioba identified this documentation task as not only integral with worldbuilding and ensuring effective reflections of the process, but also going hand-in-hand with ensemble building. Dzioba further noted that the technology used for documentation, like the Google Drive, was “referential” and not a primary mode of communication. Computers were only brought into the room and used by the whole cast during cold reads of the script. This case study speaks to the experience of how the physical presence of the ensemble and the role of the dramaturg in-person as a mirror to the ensemble worked hand-in-hand (Dzioba personal int.).

So, how does the dramaturg fulfill their role of the documentarian in the digital playspace? How do they rise above the lack of physical presence and create new strategies to make shared and accurate mirrors of the process?

In the digital rehearsal room

The shared digital archive: the “room” for the process, and increased digital skills

As the project associate for the national *#HereToo* Project, I created a cloud-based, open source database on Google Drive—The *#HereToo* Uber Folder—that archives past production material, houses current production research and developing scripts, and is poised to house future production documents. This *#HereToo* Uber Folder became an example of a shared digital archive—a “landing strip” for a developing play’s materials.

I had never created a digital database of this scale before, so my mission was to understand what it takes to make a database that is transferable between production teams, as *#HereToo* is constantly recreated in different residencies. To gain inspiration for the structure of this folder, I consulted with Amy Marie Seidel, Company Dramaturg of the Tectonic Theater Project and the Associate Director and Dramaturg of the developing work *Here There Are Blueberries*, which “centers on a mysterious album of photographs of the concentration camp Auschwitz that was donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 2007” (Tectonic Theater Project). Seidel had created a Google Drive that used folders to house the developing script, research texts, and different forms of media that the company referenced during their virtual rehearsals throughout the pandemic (personal comm).

I found that this shared digital archive model is a strategy dramaturgs can use to comprehensively document the process for digital projects. This period of making digital theatre made for an opportunity for dramaturgs to increase our technology skills. Figure 1.1 is a screenshot of the *#HereToo* Uber Folder landing page, which shows color-coded sub-folders: “Current Workshops/Scripts,” “Main Interviews,” “Media,” “Past Workshops/Scripts,” and so on. Figure 1.2 is a screenshot of a spreadsheet that describes the contents of the subfolders, including hyperlinks to those documents.

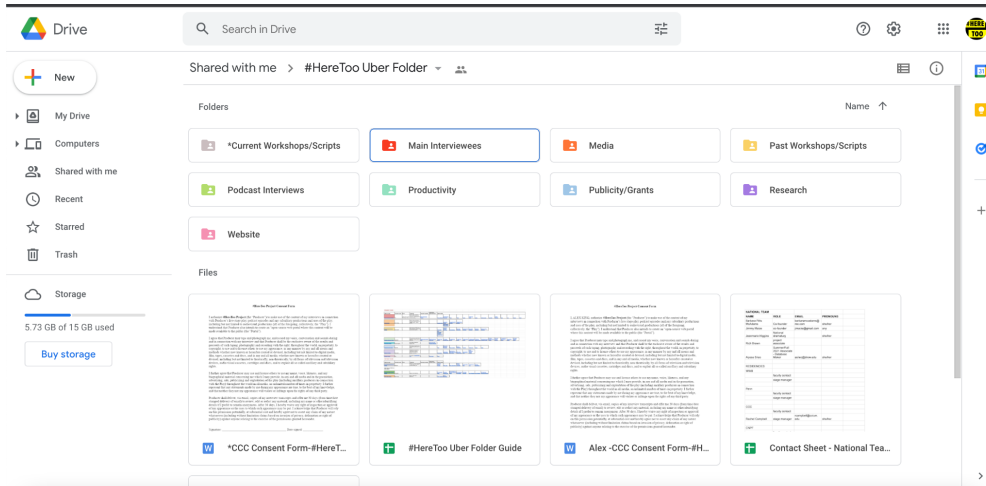


Fig. 1.1: A screenshot of the landing page of the *#HereToo* Uber Folder on Google Drive.

Screenshot taken October 2021.

PERMANENT FOLDERS	FOLDER COLOR	NOTE	PURPOSE	FOLDER TRACKER	ADDITIONAL SUPPORT DOCS	SUBFOLDERS
Main Interviews (Folder)	red	living in the Current Workshops Folder	Audio, video, and text of main interviews for uber narrative / workshoping and moment making	Main Interviews Tracker	Group Moments	Miscellaneous Interviews, Adan, Alexis, Annika, Annika and Sarah, Avalon, Freddy Punell, Joe W.
Media (Folder)	dark orange	x	Audio, video, and photos from gun violence prevention related events / techonic events	x	x	Associated Videos, Production Photos, Protest/Rally/MFO Photos, Photo Photos, WOO Photos
Past Workshops/Scripts (Folder)	bright yellow	x	past scripts and folders from past workshops (material that is production-specific)	x	x	Past scripts, Columbia College Workshop, JCC Workshop, Mac Past documents, Orchard Project Workshop, Penn State Workshop, Sundance Workshop, Western Wash U Workshop
Podcast Interviews (Folder)	light green		Transcripts and audio links of #HereToo Podcast interview episodes	Podcast Interviews - #HereToo Podcast Audio Links	1. Kyra Gines (S1E1), 2. Freddie Punell (S1E2), 3. Maddie King (S1E3), 4. Yuhui Choi (S1E4), 5. Nyla Holland (S1E5), 6. Miranda Julia Marks (S1E6), 7. McKayla Mckay (S1E7), 8. Anushka S. L. (S1E8), 9. Tiana Williams (S1E9)	
Productivity (Folder)	sea foam green		to do lists for #HereToo support team	Things that need doing for #HereToo		
Publicity/Grants (Folder)	light blue		Summaries, proposals, and excerpts for grants past and future		ACR	Basic info / brochures / proposals, Drama League, Events / Workshops, Excerpt, Howard Fdn, Kaplan, Media

Fig. 1.2: A screenshot of the *#HereToo* Uber Folder Guide on Google Sheets. Screenshot taken in October 2021.

When gathering in the physical rehearsal room is not an option, the shared digital archive becomes the “place” that the creative team convenes. Like the rehearsal room, it is the platform that is solely dedicated to the creation of the work. Digital theatre-making did not introduce cloud-based platforms to the dramaturgical toolbox; these platforms had been utilized for years

before this period, as demonstrated by Emily Dzioba’s digital dramaturgical strategies for the in-person 4320p. Rather, the shift to virtual playmaking, necessitated by the pandemic, is giving dramaturgs the opportunities to hone organizational digital skills, and to increase comfort with the use of technology.

One specific cloud-based platform that *Monstress*’s director, Professor Jolie Tong, called a “game-changer” for collaborative writing and for script development meetings, is the word processor Google Docs. While working in teams as playwrights (or in *Medusa*’s singular playwright Jasmine Casiano’s case, being in close collaboration between me as the dramaturg), Google Docs allowed for edits to be made before, during, and after script meetings while the writer was in any location or time zone. As I served the dramaturgical role as a source between the source material and the devising, I could create hyperlinks, copy and paste text, and work with playwrights to reshape scenes without compromising the integrity of the document, thanks to the platform’s feature of saving previous versions. While using cloud-based technology, no one creative team member held one “main” physical script with edits that must be transferred to all physical copies. Rather, all creative team members were able to stay abreast of text and form changes, and create visible changes in the moment of their suggestions during script meetings. Our video conferencing platform of Zoom allowed for, as Professor Tong put it, “the live and human” and “talking face-to-face” component that makes script meetings personable and collaborative. Our group attention on the screenshared document also gave us opportunities to test-run edited scenes without prompting the on-the-physical-page pencil edits or line-feeding that in-person script meetings or rehearsals may necessitate (Tong personal comm.).

There are multiple benefits to the utilization of this shared digital archive, as well as potential areas of challenge. The process documentation material (as well as any research that

lives in this archive) becoming solely digital means it is portable. Rather than only accessing a timeline poster that is hanging up in the rehearsal room during the rehearsal times, the virtual versions of this information can be referenced and added to before, during, and after rehearsal (including those random bouts of inspiration at midnight.) A digital archive may also prove more accessible for artists and dramaturgs with certain accessibility needs, since universal design is oftentimes already baked into digital software and cloud-based platforms. For example, most textual information can be made audible by way of assistive technologies available online for free or are included with operating systems, like screen readers. In-person access measures, like braille machines for translating dramaturgical posters, are crucial for theatres to provide, but are unfortunately expensive and oftentimes unattainable for the rehearsal process. Digital archive of the dramaturgical material, then, may be the most accessible way to present information for processors of all types, at this stage in the game of our field's state to accessibility.

Another added benefit of investing time and energy into a digital archive is that the documents are not easily misplaceable as a physical binder or paper poster is. The materials within and structures of this digital archive can be repurposed for revivals, touring productions, parallel premieres in different locations, and installations in the series of a work—like the re-creations of *#HereToo* Project. This digital archive allows the dramaturg to think about both the immediacy and longevity/future possibilities of the work, and is an effective tool for reflecting on the process both inside and outside of the rehearsal. A shared digital archive may become tricky to navigate for folks with low levels of tech skills, as well as folks who learn better with paper or tactile materials, which science suggests might be a majority of the population. “Navigational difficulties may subtly inhibit reading comprehension. Compared with paper, screens may also drain more of our mental resources while we are reading and make it a

little harder to remember what we read when we are done.” However, this decrease in effectiveness may not be a matter of characteristics of the digital, but rather, a result of perceptions about virtual learning. “Whether they realize it or not, many people approach computers and tablets with a state of mind less conducive to learning than the one they bring to paper” (Jabr). When theatre makers increase their online skills, so increases their adaptability with online tools.

To conclude, digital dramaturgy drives the effective organization of a shared archive of materials that, while initially tricky to navigate, may prove more accessible, sustainable, and effective for developing and devised works.

Dramaturgical responsibility #3: Safeguarding the narrative

In the in-person rehearsal room

As well as a researcher and a documentarian, a dramaturg is also a protector of the play’s narrative. Dramaturgs observe the rehearsal process and theatrical renditions of the text, and probe for the theatre artists’ motivations, to make sure that the heart of the story “reaches the audience instead of remaining only in the creators’ minds” (Romaldi). In new play development processes, this responsibility is central, as the text is constantly improving upon itself. From a presence in the rehearsal room, dramaturgs experience the mixture of the elements of the stage that constitute the collective’s attempts to manifest the narrative. The unified space creates a lab environment for the new creations birthed from the layers of text, performance, and technical theatre, like sound and lights. Dramaturgs conduct public and private conversations at opportune times and with relevant parties about the success or growth edges of the developing work. New

play development requires dramaturgs to treat readings of the play like rehearsal rooms; they invite new witnesses into the process to receive feedback about how to proceed with the work.

I interviewed Kaitlin Stilwell, a professional dramaturg and professor of theatre at Montclair State University, on how she has found the shared space of the rehearsal room to be vital to world-building in past in-person new play dramaturg processes. She identified that sharing physical space with the fellow dramaturgs, director, playwright, workshop actors, and invited audience members allows a dramaturg to gauge response to the developing text through people's real-time and unfiltered reactions to it. During script meetings at the beginning of the process, in which the play's structure is being shaped to support a strong narrative, the dramaturgs can communicate one-on-one with the playwright and guide them through the vulnerable process of rediscovering and redefining their story multiple times. Stilwell and I compared this dramaturgical responsibility as having x-ray vision—being able to view the places of strength and places of improvement of the script. However, the only person who can put their pen to paper and activate these suggestions is the playwright. So, in Stilwell's words, dramaturgs must "create a sense of safety and comfort" in these script meetings, and mind the body language and reactions of the playwright, to ensure their communications are getting across and all of the creatives are speaking the same "language of the piece and the collaboration" (Stilwell personal int.).

Additionally, real-time reactions play a role before, during, and after the play reading in front of an audience. One can hear the voices and view the visceral responses of the creative team that guided the reading, the actors embodying the characters, and the audience intaking the story for the first time. Sometimes, dramaturgs can formalize this endeavor of gauging response by literally tracking the reactions as an act of gathering data on the stage manager's show report.

This is what dramaturg Grace Kessler Overbeke did for the play *Digging Up Dessa*, an exploration of “Gen-Z Girlhood.” “In addition to charting each performance’s run time and house count, these [show] reports noted moments when audience members gave audible feedback, such as applause, laughter, or exclamations” (Overbeke). A dramaturg can also use the physical space to view the reading for multiple distances—far away, close up, from the side, etc. This means you can begin understanding how this narrative manifests onstage and how the conflict and power dynamics within the story are clarified. Stilwell listed one other crucial element during this exciting moment of the first read is the physical relationship and energetic support of the playwright—“they need to know that you got them” and that they will continually be encouraged as the play is constructively appraised (Stilwell personal int.).

How does the dramaturg safeguard the narrative of the developing play when the worldbuilding does not happen in one space—but in multiple spaces, and shown on one flat screen? How does the dramaturg gauge the response of the writers and audience members when there is so much physical distance between parties, due everyone zooming in from different places? What can dramaturgs do when the chance to read body language is removed by muted microphones and turned-off cameras, and when, as Stilwell said, “everyone has the same forced perspective?” (Stilwell personal int.).

In the digital rehearsal room

Digital storytelling: world-building tools, and crafting your script meeting/talkback

Stilwell and I summarized the implications of the transition from stage to screen in two ways—it affects the creative team and audience member’s participation and perspective. In this section, I will highlight two areas of exploration when it comes to virtual new play

development—first how dramaturgs can learn from video game makers, creators of which have been digitally worldbuilding as the heart of their process for decades. Secondly, I will reflect on how dramaturgs can strategize to gauge responses to the work from creative team and audience members when their reactions are “filtered” and limited by the zoom screen and lack of physical proximity.

To discuss worldbuilding, I will first identify challenges the production team of *Monstress* faced on our mission to harmonize the story and technical elements as well as tie together our three canonical narratives from three different eras, in our fully virtual production process. *Monstress* had one tech designer for all three shows—as in, one sound designer, one costume designer, one prop designer, etc. All of these individuals collaborated remotely (while some were on campus and using campus resources), and many individuals joined from drastically different time zones. *Monstress* was created from a series of shorter videos of each scene in the play and other record “moments.”

We were massively proud of the work we accomplished within such a short time and as a first-time exploration into virtual devised theatre. However, it is important to note that, in post-show reflections with the production advisors, we saw room for improvement in how our elements gelled together. *Medusa*, in particular, had compelling contributions from each of the designers, including an original score by the sound designer Cricket Dean, and digitally painted virtual backdrops by Tobey Su, but each was connected to a different genre. As described by one of the faculty production advisors, Dr. Brenner, “The lighting and sound design suggested a steampunk dystopian world with its use of dark colors and electronic music, while the costumes were an eclectic mix of ancient Greek and modern styles, and the set design featured a nondescript time with bright red and purple coloring” (personal comm.). Dr. Brenner and I

identified the source of this challenge as a lack of strategy to deal with the lack of shared space that we were all used to having for in-person productions.

During in-person tech weeks, directors and dramaturgs can view and hear the combination of the theatrical elements onstage, and assess if the costumes belong in the same world as the props, and if the props belong in the same world as the set. In the virtual process of *Monstress*, most of these technical elements were integrated during post-production. Therefore, the dramaturgs did not have the time to suggest edits, since reshooting the play was not an option. In the weeks leading up to the filming and post-production, the test-run of the combination of the elements was hard to achieve. Sometimes files were inside Google Drive folders that folks did not have access to because the email granting access to the link was buried in their inbox. Sometimes documents were shared while everyone else was sleeping, since the time zone of the designers were flipped. These are all expectable challenges of remote collaboration, especially a first-time process. So, what strategies can dramaturgs and virtual theatre makers embrace as they engage in these sorts of projects in the future? How can dramaturgs use digital tools to foster collaboration, harmonize the elements of the stage, and support the development of a consistent playworld?

One of the things dramaturgs can turn to is digital worldbuilding tools created by video game makers. These means have already been developed to support a world that is supposed to be digital, so therefore it is built to overcome the challenges of remote collaboration between participants, and to support the development of a consistent world. One of these platforms is called WorldAnvil, which “is a set of worldbuilding tools that helps you create, organize and store your worldsetting. With wiki-like articles, interactive maps, historical timelines, an RPG [role-playing game] Campaign Manager and a full novel-writing software” (WorldAnvil.) These

editable pages can help dramaturgs guide playwrights and designers evaluate the effectiveness of the theming, atmosphere, and physical/virtual/audio manifestations of their play world. Building a new story world is enough of a challenge, so when artists who are only used to creating onstage must do this in a virtual terrain, it is a good idea for dramaturgs to encourage their teams to budget more time than they think they need into their devising process. This ensures that folks can traverse their technological learning curve without taking up a huge chunk of rehearsal time. It is important to note, though, that extra time might be hard to come by, as many production processes already are down to the wire with the schedule allotted. It is also important to point out that not all virtual story building platforms are accessible to people who use captions for audio or screen readers for visual and textual information. Using these features in a collaborative effort in a team with multiple abilities and disabilities is a way to get everyone's contributions on the page. Figures 1.3 and 1.4 display two features of WorldAnvil: designing an interactive map and creating a historical timeline for the story world.

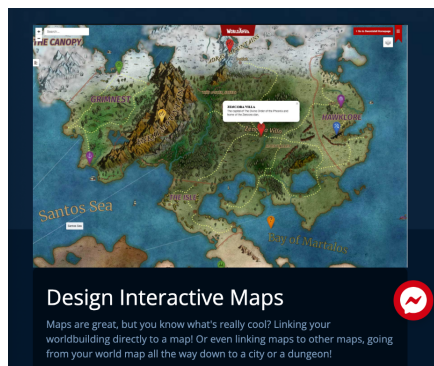


Figure 1.3: A screenshot of a map on WorldAnvil with a textbox explaining the feature.

Screenshot taken October 2021.

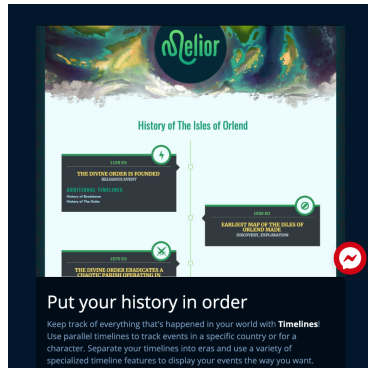


Figure 1.4: A screenshot of a historical timeline on WorldAnvil with a textbox explaining the feature. Screenshot taken October 2021.

The second challenge the dramaturg faces in virtual play development is fulfilling the charge to receive responses to the play from all involved parties, in order to determine if the dramaturgs', cast's, and audience's experience of the script lines up with the playwright's intention for the work. In virtual script meetings, dramaturgs can only view and hear so much of the playwright's interested or confused reactions to suggestions, as the camera and the microphone only gives us so much of the playwright's world. In readings and premiere productions, dramaturgs cannot hear the laughter of the audience and or view their faces of surprise, terror, relief, or excitement. If the virtual production is distributed as a recording, the creative team members can read reactions in the Zoom or YouTube chat, but that is only if the chat is enabled, or is utilized. Also, by that point, the production is completed; actors cannot change their performance for future runs of the show based on the feedback. If the virtual production is performed live, the cast members have no way to tell the audible or chat reactions as they focus on the scene. The dramaturg receives this information, but it stays with them as the show continues. How do dramaturgs obtain the precious and ephemeral information that is the response to the work?

My research suggests that the solution to this comes from intentional planning of what goes into prompts for reflection on part of all parties. In script meetings, dramaturgs can integrate reflection and check-ins into their process at a higher frequency, to mitigate the separation caused by the “filters” of zoom. The dramaturg Percival Hornak shared with me in a survey response that he found one of the most effective practices of virtual dramaturg to be “prioritizing checking in and taking care of each other because we have to communicate more openly about how we're doing when we aren't in the same room” (Sileo, Alyssa “The Virtues of Virtual Dramaturgy...”) In other words, if dramaturgs acknowledge the challenge they are facing and openly endeavor to reach across the barrier, they can foster an open and productive playwright-dramaturg collaboration. There are not only challenges dramaturgs interface with, though, fortunately. There is a hidden benefit to virtual meetings that can smooth facilitations between dramaturgs—it is what Stilwell called “the sidebar” or the private online message. Dramaturgs can use this to check in with each other to see if certain topics are right to bring up at the moment. If they were not meeting virtually, dramaturgs would have to either gauge if it is the right time by stepping out of the room and discussing, speaking in some sort of code, or hope to “achieve mind meld” as Stilwell said to me (personal int.). These activities could potentially foster a sense of secrecy, which is not a dynamic that belongs in a generative collaboration. Therefore, using private DMs is a swift and direct way to identify the navigation of the meeting. There is one more hidden benefit to highlight of virtual meetings—some playwrights may find it helpful to call into their meeting from a location of their choice, and may feel some safety and comfort in being physically alone as they process the next action items to improve their script. As a dramaturg of new work with the New Jersey Play Lab, Emily Dzioba shared in the survey that she believes “99% of play development meetings can be at least started, if not done, online. I

will be using online meeting software well into the future!” (Sileo, Alyssa “The Virtues of Virtual Dramaturgy...”). Embracing these two hidden benefits are contributions to the mission of gauging honest and helpful responses to the world, as they make space for open interactions.

When it comes to readings and premiere productions, the dramaturgs can frame the experience by asking the audience to take note of their reactions to the script while it is being read. After the performance, in the talkback, you can ask for a recall of these moments. While the playwright can not hear the laughter during the show, they can hear from the audience members afterwards what made them laugh the most. In the absence of real time reactions during the play, the playwright has an opportunity to truly understand what sticks with an audience member of the play after it is done, or what were the most impactful parts of it. Therefore, investing thoughtful and creative questions into the talkback in the new play development process is an effective way to compensate for the inability to witness real-time reactions to the play.

To summarize, dramaturgs can rise to the challenge of safeguarding the narrative in a digital terrain by embracing digital worldbuilding platforms, prioritizing frequent check ins between team members and utilizing private and public conversation channels as appropriate, and focusing talk-back experiences on reflecting back personal and visceral journeys throughout the play.

Chapter One Conclusion

Virtual dramaturgs successfully serve as collaborators of a new play development project’s creative team when they alter their facilitation and use digital tools to create shared context, document the process, and safeguard the narrative. By facilitating multi-sensory

experiences, embracing cloud-based technology, and ensuring open channels of communication between creative team members, what is lost from the lack of shared space is regained and revitalized. Many challenges are introduced: the learning curve of technology, the struggle to ensure participation of remote collaborations and audience members, among others. However, dramaturgs can learn about virtual gathering from disciplines adjacent to and outside of the dramaturgy, once again reaffirming the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

In the next chapter, I will explore the next dramaturgical responsibility of creating engagement opportunities when it comes time for the new play to be shared with an audience. Dramaturgs prime spectators on relevant context and generate civic engagement and social justice connections to the work—but how do dramaturgs fulfill these goals when an audience gathers in the virtual theatre of a screen?

Chapter Two: Engagement with the audience during the reading/production

Chapter Two Introduction

Theatre is an engaging art form. Once a production team deems that a piece is ready to be presented to the public, an audience is welcomed into a theatre space. These audience members engage with the new work by witnessing it, providing real-time reactions, generating their own interpretations of the play, and reflecting them back to the production team and other audience members. This process is a part of the wider kaleidoscope of community engagement, described in *American Theatre* magazine this way: “a theatre can be compared to a community center—both are public places to gather, to socialize, to learn, to be entertained” (Considine).

Many theatre artists acknowledge that the meaning of any play does not come directly from the text or even the cast’s performance of the text, but rather, from a “third space” that represents the collision between the presentation of the work and audience’s interpretation. The Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Paula Vogel mentioned this point during a playwriting workshop at McCarter Theatre in 2021: “The audience writes their own play” (Vogel). The creative team’s invitation to an audience to make their own unique meaning of the performance and its story is crucial in new play development processes. To thoughtfully engage with a piece, audience members must be provided the context of the world of the story. Audience members must also have a chance to connect the piece to the world around them, whether these are local/global or personal/unfamiliar issues. When provided these opportunities to deepen a relationship to a new work, audience members can, in turn, provide mirrors to the creative team members in the form of reflections. These inform the creative team if what they think the play is about is in fact what the audience thinks the play is about. Dramaturgs are tasked to deliver this context, as well as create civic engagement, social impact, and advocacy programs.

Expert facilitator Priya Parker identifies the most impactful and memorable gatherings as ones that take place in a “world that will exist only once” (112). Dramaturgs use the powers of not only shared space, but also shared time, as they engage with the audience in the hopes of contextualizing the performance as timely to the community’s reality. Dramaturgs must be strategic and determine what information should be shared, when it should be shared, and how it should be shared—through a physical display outside the lobby before and after the show? Through a post-show talkback in the theatre? Dramaturgs deliberate these choices with their production teams so that the audience members are not overloaded with information and considerations but that they are also provided the right amount of context. Dramaturgs must also take care to make these experiences consistent with the show’s aesthetic and guarantee they are as singular and engaging as the main event of the play. The display boards, pre- and post-show talkbacks and advocacy projects weave the new play into the fabric of a larger community’s story and daily life. The shared space and time aids the audience in committing to a purpose with both people familiar and new to us.

So, how do dramaturgs engage with their audience members when the third space between the house and the stage is a computer screen? How do dramaturgs gather with audiences to enter and exit the world of the play with the context and connections necessary to make it relatable when both parties zoom in from different spaces and time zones?

Dramaturgical responsibility #4: Priming the audience members on the play’s content

In the in-person theatre

Dramaturgs “contextualize the world of a play” for the audience by providing the necessary historical and cultural information before the curtain goes up, whether the play’s

universe is rooted in history or a created by the playwright (“What is Dramaturgy?”). Dramaturgs install boards on the walls of the theatre’s lobby that feature timelines, biographies, definitions, translations, photos, and many other visual representations of the world of the play. Dramaturgs also create handouts and research packets that the audience can read before the performance. They prime the audience to enter the world of the play by ensuring these visual and tactile experiences are harmonious with the work’s aesthetic. For example, Erica Nagel dramaturged *Lost Boy in Whole Foods* which debuted at Premiere Stages in 2010, a play about a young Sudanese refugee named Gabriel. Her “priming” dramaturgy included a display with timelines and historical context about the Second Sudanese War. There was also a section of the lobby dedicated to glass containers of rice, which had specific amounts that each represented the amount of people lost, displaced, or survived from the war. The production’s community partner, the Darfur Rehabilitation Center, also provided handouts about their advocacy (Nagel personal int.). These dramaturgical strategies educated the audience about the lived experience of Gabriel, which included a lot of information that may have been new information to American audiences; therefore, the play’s content was hopefully more relevant to the spectators following these pre-show dramaturgical experiences.

There are multiple projects that take traditional priming dramaturgy to a next level and turn it into theatrical experiences. In conversation with the founder of the Atlantic Pacific Theatre, Claro de los Reyes, I was introduced to one of these priming strategies. When creating the play *DO, WAGER: A performance diptych on the vestiges of the Philippine American War*, the creative team recognized that non-Filipino audiences are likely unaware of the United States’ history of imperialism in the archipelago. Grounded in Atlantic Pacific Theatre’s values of “cross cultural exchange and...polycultural experiences that reach across geographical and socially

constructed borders,” the team aimed to find a dramaturgical solution to address how the non-Filipino audience’s baseline historical understanding are, in de los Reyes’s words, “shackled by biases of the past.” They wanted to maintain *DO, WAGER*’s cultural specificity in the form of language and references as well as invite audiences of all identities to engage in the work about a crucial part of both global and Filipino history. (“About”). The team’s educational and dramaturgical strategy was making the first part of the performance a process drama, or an “interactive history lesson” that immersed the audience members in the world of the play. This was a multi-sensory experience that generated an embodied understanding of the challenges that the play’s characters would face. By “catching everyone up creatively,” de los Reyes and his team made their dramaturgy theatrical and experiential. He also fortunately served the creative team by “liberating” the playwriting to contain as many cultural references as they felt fit, without the need to over-explain for audiences uneducated on the topic. Therefore, the world of the play was more accurate, as the characters engaged in their lived experiences and embraced cultural specificity. This made for a chance for the audience to authentically engage with a world that was not their own, achieving the polycultural experience that Atlantic Pacific Theatre strives to create (de los Reyes personal int.).

What new strategies must dramaturgs employ to prime the audience members on content of digital works before the digital curtain goes up? How can dramaturgs use shared space and time to virtually connect with audiences and deliver crucial information that activates the power of a new play?

In the digital theatre

Digital priming: using virtual tools and social media

In my research, I have found that dramaturgs of virtual projects are taking advantage of digital tools to create priming experiences that educate the audience on the relevant context of new plays. Multi-media storytellers, writ large, are no stranger to the digital realm—in fact, interactive fiction, the narrative-based video game genre, has been developing within the United States since the mid-70s, and in the modern era has exploded with popularity (Alexander). There are other ways of storytelling online that are perhaps less intricate than video games but accomplishing similar goals, namely presentation technology like Prezi and other powerpoint-based platforms. Virtual gathering spaces are not new terrain, either: in the last twenty years, social media use has blossomed; a 2019 study declared that 72% of Americans “use some form of social media” (“The Evolution of Social Media”). Dramaturgs can put these virtual storytelling and gathering platforms to use in their endeavors to prime the audience members on the content and context of new works.

There are a plethora of digital platforms that are conducive to priming dramaturgy that create a memorable and engaging learning experience for the audience. My co-dramaturg for the 2021 virtual production *Monstress*, Erin Groudis-Gimbel, created a virtual art gallery on ArtSteps that contained pieces of artistic depictions from throughout the ages of the iconic women-turned-monsters in *The White Snake*, *Medusa*, and *The Sandman*. This was an effective way to create a digital lobby display—and in a potentially more feasible form than an in-person art gallery, which may have taken a lot of printing, as well as the steps that go into installing and displaying a physical art piece. This was an experiential preparation that familiarized our audience with the history behind not only these stories but also how these stories have transformed through the ages, which provided context for our own modern renditions. Figures 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 are screenshots of the *Monstress* Virtual Gallery on ArtSteps.

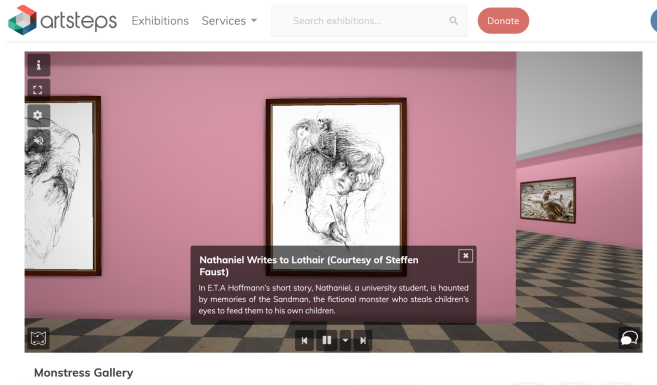


Fig. 2.1: A screenshot of the *Monstress* virtual gallery on ArtSteps with the sketch “Nathaniel Writes to Lothair” by Steffen Faust hanging in a frame on a pink wall. A textbox contains information about the sketch. Screenshot taken Jan 2022.

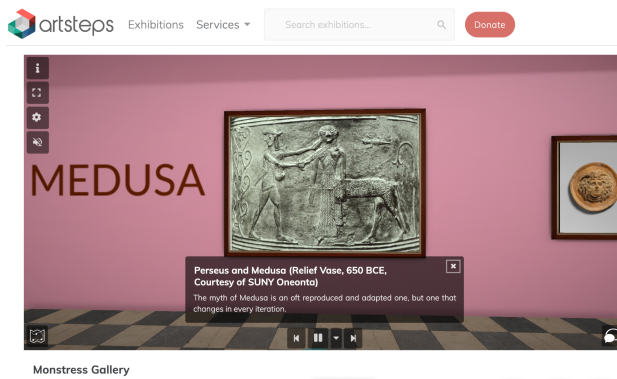


Fig. 2.2: A screenshot of the *Monstress* virtual gallery with the ancient Greek vase art “Perseus and Medusa” by hanging in a frame on a pink wall and a textbox beneath. Screenshot taken Jan 2022.

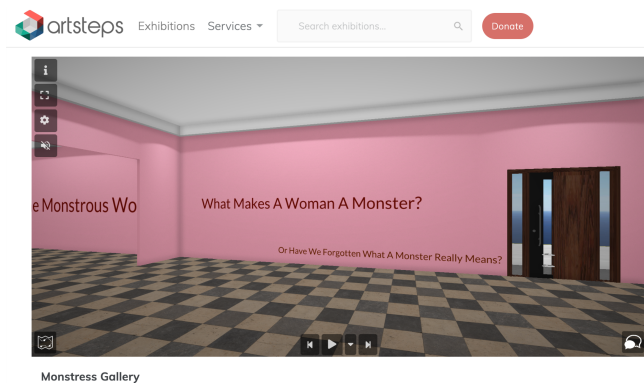


Fig. 2.3: A screenshot of the “exit” of the *Monstress* virtual gallery with the red words “What Makes a Woman a Monster? Or Have We Forgotten What A Monster Really Means?” displayed next to a brown door. Screenshot taken Jan 2022.

There are a variety of similar and different online tools that allows the dramaturg to create a digital and educational story. One platform is Shorthand, which houses interactive presentations with animation, hyperlink, and many more capabilities. Another is Twine: a digital “choose your own adventure” platform that could assist a dramaturg in creating something like *DO, WAGER*’s process drama. These virtual storytelling means provide an engaging experience for the audience members that help them begin creating connections between the story of the play and their own lives. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 are two examples of the scrollable story on Shorthand—which includes videos, biographies, videos, etc. Figure 3.3 is an example of a page of a choose-your-own adventure story on Twine, where one can click hyperlinks to go deeper into the story and select options that, altogether, build a unique protagonist’s journey.

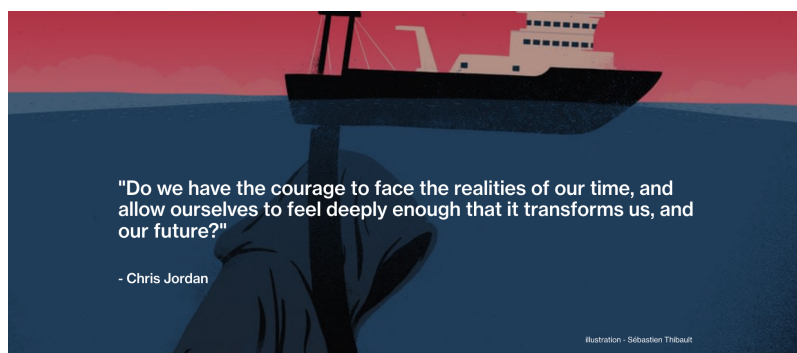


Fig. 3.1: A screenshot from the “Fishers’ Manifesto” by Protect Blue, showing a quote overlaying a cartoon style blue sea, hooded figure, and boat in a red horizon. Screenshot taken December 2021.

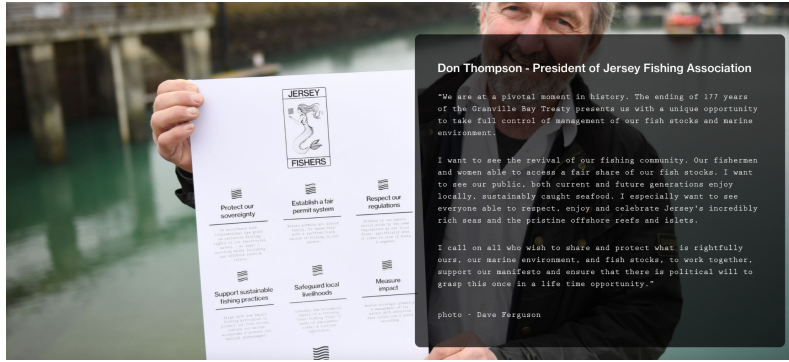


Fig. 3.2: A screenshot from the “Fishers’ Manifesto” by Protect Blue depicting a man holding a white poster and standing by the sea with paragraphs of white text on a black transparent overlapping over his person. Screenshot taken December 2021.

10 LØST BØYS

There are 10 lost boys:

1. Caleb
2. Scott
3. Dakota
4. Devin
5. Cade
6. Zachary
7. James
8. Louis
9. Patrick
10. Jonah

(There are others of course. Jonathan, Raymond, Timothy, Jack, Eric, Cameron, Emmanuel, Zackary, Peter, Bryan, and more.)

Fig. 3.3: A screenshot of a page of “10 Lost Boys” on Twine by Twine user samplereality, which shows a list of names in red text. Screenshot taken December 2021.

In the endeavor to digitally prime the audience, dramaturgs can also embrace the power and presence of social media by incorporating dramaturgical material into the theatre’s marketing efforts. Sharing the historical and cultural context of an upcoming new play on social media has the potential to not only successfully educate the audience, but it also helps generate buzz for new, non-local audiences, since the content can reach affiliated communities through hashtags and affinity pages. One example of social media use for a new play is *Monstress*’s daily spotlight

posts on our university's dramatic society's Instagram that highlighted our creative team members and our roles. While this was used for promotional purposes, the daily spotlight technique could just as easily be used for educational aims by posting fun facts or trivia questions. Figure 4 shows one of these daily spotlights about my dramaturgy for *Monstress*.

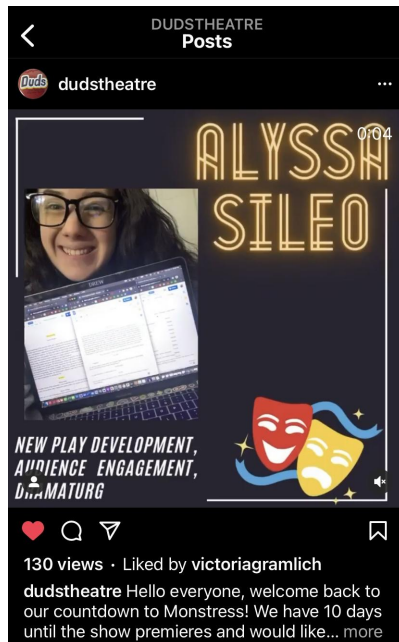


Fig. 4: A screenshot of an Instagram post by @dudstheatre depicting a selfie of me with a laptop on a purple background with my name, the Tragedy and Comedy masks, and the title “New Play Development, Audience Engagement, Dramaturg.” Screenshot taken January 2022.

The hidden benefits sprouting from digital “priming” dramaturgy include the far reach and flexibility of virtual platforms. Online dramaturgical pre-show experiences, both synchronous and asynchronous, are not tied to the hour before the show; they can be shared and experienced even days before opening, as the audience does not have to gather in the same place or even at the same time. When the dramaturgy is not siloed in the few square feet of the lobby

or the few precious moments before the curtain goes up, the audience members have time to engage with the content and even share it with friends, which further generates buzz for the play. Additionally, depending on the platform, the virtual priming dramaturgy may be more accessible than in-person dramaturgy experiences, due to inaccessibility of public places for audience members with certain accessibility needs and folks who have financial and transportation needs to consider. Virtual, and therefore portable information, grants an audience member agency in how and when they wish to engage with it. It extends the amount of time someone can dedicate to processing new information, preparing for a performance with a heavy topic, or even translating the information into another language. Virtual dramaturgy can be experienced with assistive technology like automatic translation or captioning software, while in-person versions of these programs may require manual performance of the accessibility practices. As aforementioned, accessibility in public places are crucial for equal access to the theatre, but the dramaturgical or creative team do not always have these skills. So, using virtual tools may ensure more access in a more consistent and swift way, before these individuals are trained.

One challenge of digital priming dramaturgy is a similar problem that dramaturgs face for in-person experiences: gathering the audience members and directing them to engage with the content. Sometimes audience members are not aware that there is dramaturgy material to check out, or they are not sure what the words “dramaturgy” or “historical context” mean and therefore, gloss over the invitation. One solution dramaturgs can employ to generate an audience for their dramaturgy is to include such content in the ticketing process. When ticket-buyers receive a confirmation email, this email can include hyperlinks and pictures of the dramaturgical content and invite the audience member to check it out online. The remote Kean Box Office at Drew included hyperlinks and information about *Monstress*’s dramaturgy opportunities in their

link-sharing email. The digital platforms where the recording of *Monstress* lived—YouTube and Broadway on Demand—also included these links.

One other challenge dramaturgs may face while creating digital priming is that these platforms may be new to them, and therefore, there is a learning curve in both utilizing and sharing these pages with audiences. While the principles of good storytelling apply in both in-person and digital settings, virtual storytelling requires special skill sets that take into account the features of a platform and the parameters of audience attention spans. Luckily, dramaturgs across the globe are already compiling resources that address this gap in knowledge. The Digital Dramaturgy Initiative, co-created by Playwrights’ Workshop Montreal, Playwrights Theatre Centre, Manitoba Association of Playwrights, and the Blythe Festival, is a group of dramaturgs who hosted workshops in 2021 dedicated to “the expansion of digital literacy for those who work in the field of new play development” (“Digital Dramaturgy Initiative”). At the virtual forum “LMDA Canada and Digital Dramaturgy” for Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the America, Emma Tibaldo, one of the Initiative’s leaders, expressed that this project was created so that effective digital storytelling doesn’t “become for the few that have the money or have access to equipment” (14:23-14:33). Dramaturgs can address the learning curve of digital platforms and storytelling by skill-sharing and banding with each other, since the dramaturg community’s knowledge is stronger when curated and disseminated, rather than siloed in each artist’s own portfolio.

Dramaturgical responsibility #5: Connecting the content of the play to global/local social issues

In the in-person theatre

As well as educating the spectators, audience engagement dramaturgy also uses the play's content and context as a springboard for civic engagement and activism. Dramaturgs create consciousness-raising initiatives that provide pathways for their audiences to become more involved in advocacy. Dramaturgs also host events and programs that are direct activism. This sort of audience engagement plays a part in the new play development process, as it helps a creative team identify the community impact of the work and the play's connection to global and local social issues.

Dramaturgs have commonly created consciousness-raising engagement events in the form of pre- and post-show talkbacks that feature both creative team members and experts on a societal issue. For *Lost Boy in Whole Foods*, Erica Nagel's dramaturgy team organized a variety of open discussions and panels, two of which featuring representatives from the Darfur Rehabilitation Project and an immigrant from North Sudan, and another including academics from Kean University's Human Rights Center (Nagel personal int.). Events like these are valuable opportunities to introduce the audience members to current initiatives and people with expertise in the play's topic.

Other shows aim for direct action; in this case, dramaturgs also create initiatives that aim to channel the audience's energy into dedicated time and talent for social justice. At *Katrina: The K-Word*, there was a table in the lobby with representatives from Habitat for Humanity. Audience members could gain further information and sign up to volunteer to help rebuild New Orleans after the devastating hurricane (Brenner personal comm.). Another example of dramaturgically-minded activism is the post-show engagement that viBe Theatre Experience, an organization dedicated to self expression of "girls, gender expansive, and nonbinary youth of

color in New York City,” includes as an integral part of their performances (Edell, Duran, and Allicock 108).

Before the show, we had placed small sparkle-covered notebooks and pens under each seat for audience members to keep for writing their own personal reflection... We hoped to spread what we had learned about creative expression as a healing action. More than just a ‘post show talkback,’ we wanted to engage our audience in finding creative approaches for challenging everyday racism. We invited the audience to form small groups based on one of four core issues our show addressed. Each group was facilitated by a pair of the performers, who felt prepared to lead the audience members through an arts-based activity such as writing poetry, drawing images, or writing letters. (Edell, Duran, and Allicock 110).

This sort of dramaturgically-mind engagement carried out by the cast encourages audience members to be active citizens that take the lessons of new stories to heart. The spirit of learning generated by the shared space and time between cast and audience inspires and enhances understandings of global and local social issues.

How can dramaturgs create activism and civic engagement opportunities connected to new plays when the community does not gather in the audience or the lobby? How can dramaturgs develop meaningful and heartening projects with a disparate team?

In the digital theatre

Digital engagement across borders: national and international participants

Audience engagement dramaturgy in the digital sphere can recreate shared space, shared time, and shared purpose with the power of video conferencing platforms like Zoom. Even while the power of personal connection and proximity is missing, virtual audience engagement events have many benefits that are hard to come by with in-person activities—each of which include the possibility for more widespread engagement that reaches more people from more places. Thanks to the power of zooming in, dramaturgs can invite experts from various locales to a virtual talkback. With in-person projects, the dramaturg must either work with individuals who are in the local area or fundraise for travel costs for an expert located faraway. Virtual talkbacks remove this problem of proximity. Zooming in speakers and panelists from any location enhances the dramaturgical experience of the new play, especially if the play has to do with a certain location that is not close to the production team; therefore, speakers can speak to a first-person experience of their own locales. Virtual talkbacks can shine a light on organizations that the audience may not know about but are still doing valuable and inspiring work.

For example, for one post-show talkback for the virtual production of *Monstress*, two New York-based speakers zoomed in to speak about their work in the city for survivors of patriarchal violence and for restorative justice: Jessica Chang of Womankind NYC and Vivianne Guevara of Integral Justice. This was a consciousness-raising effort; it was created to introduce audience members to restorative justice and re-contextualize the events of the play through the lens of survivorship and repairing harm. Barbara Pitts McAdam, one of our production's advisors and Moment Work trainers, attended the event and reflected back to me that the virtual format was helpful for a conversation like this that contained sensitive and emotional topics like patriarchal violence. A speaker or a spectator could turn off their mic or camera to take a

breather without missing parts of the conversation. If this was an in-person event, having to leave the room may take one out of the rhythm of the discussion (Pitts McAdams personal comm.).

In looking at my own practice, I notice that most of my digital engagement dramaturgy leaned into endeavors of consciousness-raising and did not necessarily dive into the enterprise of carrying out activist aims. As digital dramaturgy develops, so will opportunities for virtual dramaturgical activism, and the following observations about my experience are transferable to these future projects.

In these digital conversation spaces, the dramaturgs and the speakers can link the audience members to the organization's websites, fundraisers, and projects with the click of a link. This has the power to increase rates of follow-through and involvement on part of the audience with these programs. Plus, you cannot lose a post (unless you lose the link) like how you can lose a physical hand-out with the same information. While reading on paper is sometimes preferred by folks, handouts can be expensive to print and tricky to distribute during or after the talkback. Virtual talkbacks increase the collaboration between organizations, initiatives, and people who may be physically distant from each other but close together in mission and purpose. This potential was fulfilled when Pitts McAdams connected with both Chang and Guevara at the virtual *Monstress* event and brought each of them on board as trauma-informed consultants for her theatre projects in the spring and fall of 2021 (Pitts McAdams personal comm.).

Like how social media priming dramaturgy may be more financially, geographically, and physically more accessible to a wider variety of audience members than in-person priming dramaturgy, virtual talkbacks also invite a wider audience. de los Reyes notes this audience expansion as a benefit to the developing piece and the advocacy and engagement project at hand.

He asks himself this question often as a part of his artistic practice: “How do [theatre-makers] stay true to the values we have of inclusion and collaboration and create audience relationships” that manifest a more equal and participatory community? (personal int.). He saw the power of an expansive and representative audience in action during the audience engagement portions of the virtual production of *Black Henry*, which illustrates the Spanish conquest of the Philippines and the life of an enslaved Malay man from Magellan’s crew. This production included cast members from the Filipino diaspora, as well as the archipelago. *Black Henry*’s live and pre-recorded presentations, by virtue of their virtualness, had audiences zooming in from locales that reflected the cast’s geographic diversity. Atlantic Pacific Theatre’s mission to “to enhance visibility, awareness, and understanding around POC histories and identities in local and transnational contexts” was fulfilled by the virtual platform (“About”).

Speaking of “live” and “pre-recorded” presentations, there is another hidden benefit of virtual audience engagement opportunities: they may be more easily recorded and re-aired for audiences. Many plays only have one or two nights within a whole run that feature a talkback. This means there are multiple potential interested audience members who miss out on the dramaturgical opportunity. Thanks to virtual engagement, these talks can be recorded to the cloud with the click of a button and re-aired either live or featured on a video sharing platform like YouTube. Other hidden benefits of virtual audience engagement include accessibility and affordability. All events that embrace participation from home become more accessible to people who are home for whatever reason: caring for family, sickness, inaccessibility of public places, and even inclement weather. Even though Wifi and technological devices are not automatically free, virtual engagement events have the power to cut costs, since participants do not have to travel to the theatre and pay for transportation.

There are a variety of challenges a dramaturg may face while creating virtual audience engagement. There is the similar predicament that comes up with “priming” dramaturgy: How can dramaturgs make audiences aware of these enrichment opportunities and invite them to participate, before or after viewing a play that runs from anywhere between an hour and a half, two hours, or more? This is where digital talkbacks may become trickier than in-person ones. In-person talkbacks typically happen inside the theatre or the building, either before the show while the audience is gathering or right after the show, before the audience is leaving. These are the moments in which, ideally, the audience members are most captivated by the work at hand and are receptive to engaging with the talkback. While in-person, dramaturgs can use visual cues like posters and audible cues like verbal announcements to inform audience members about the event. How do digital dramaturgs garner audience members’ attention when the event takes place on a separate link or page than the virtual play? How about when the digital event takes place a day after the play, or is pre-recorded and released online with no premiere date, which means folks can view it at any time but can also easily forget about it or put it off? An aforementioned solution for priming dramaturgy—including the information as a part of the virtual ticketing process—is also helpful in the case of these digital advocacy initiatives. These events can be marketed as companions to the piece, with consistent theming and aesthetic to the play’s poster and social media content. Putting the play and its dramaturgical opportunities side by side can get the audience jazzed about not only the content itself but the context—which is the dramaturg’s goal, after all.

Chapter Two Conclusion

Dramaturgs engage with audiences of new plays by providing opportunities to understand the context of the piece as well as to connect it to global and local issues and current events.

While shared space and time is lost in virtual productions, digital dramaturgs recreate valuable gatherings online using virtual tools like social media, digital storytelling platforms, and video conferencing. Thanks to the virtual, the reach of the audience is widened and the chances to engage with this material are extended across time and space, removing barriers when it comes to financial, geographic, and accessibility concerns.

While it is beyond the purview of this study to discuss the wide-reaching implications of digital activism, I hope it encourages more discourse around the dramaturgical possibilities of digital activism and audience engagement. Digital activism is compelling for the same reasons digital theatre is: wider reach of audience across the globe and across physical barriers.

Thesis Conclusion: Future Directions

Digital dramaturgy compels dramaturgs to rethink the way they facilitate, organize, communicate, educate, and platform ideas. When it comes to collaborating in the virtual rehearsal room, dramaturgs can take what is unique about virtual gatherings—the personal and communal levels of connecting, the quickness of sharing information on cloud-based platforms, and use of digital storytelling solutions—to work in harmony with the dynamics at hand rather than attempt to re-create in-person experiences. As leaders of audience engagement, dramaturgs share educational materials online, introduce local communities to geographically-distant organizations over Zoom, and mount online advocacy projects that call for the participation of all audience members no matter where they are located. When faced with a lockdown, dramaturgs may initially perceive their gathering spaces as shrinking from multiple sites of beloved lobbies, houses, stages, and rehearsal rooms to one: the screen. However, when considering the array of communities digital dramaturgy can reach, their gathering sites in fact explode with possibility and multiplicity.

Virtual dramaturgy is not without challenges. The learning curve of amassing digital skills, the expenses of technology, and the lack of in-person connection present obstacles to dramaturgs both new and experienced. However, these digital skills and strategies become advantageous to dramaturgs in all sorts of projects, whether fully digital, in-person, or hybrid. My research supports the notion that future directions of digital dramaturgy include embracing digital solutions with in-person projects, as audience numbers expand with the click of a button. Theatre-makers have expressed interest in valuing the digital for this reason and others. The Obie winning playwright Caridad Svich tweeted: “Instead of endlessly going around in circles about in-person vs remote digital theatre, how about talking about the aspects about the latter and

hybrid too that are thrilling and thought-provoking?” (Svich). Jared Mezzocchi, another Obie winner and director/designer, shared a similar call:

Please, American Theater, allow yourself to consider a world of in-person and digital innovation. Our stories can be told globally, simultaneously... it does not need to be gated to singular venues in a singular time to remain sacred. ...Open yourself up 2 the idea that digital isn't isolation, that digital isn't just prerecord, that digital isn't just zoom. It's an ever expanding space of shared experience, and all it is asking for is a chance to explore with in-person while in-person is challenged by pandemic (Mezzochi).

There is innovation inherent in mixing in-person and digital art. Hybridity of performance is already being embraced by the theatre scene: in summer 2020, a recorded performance of the Broadway Musical *Hamilton* was released on the streaming service Disney Plus, raking in 2.7 viewers in the first ten days of release alone (Frankel). As of this writing almost two years later, the musical at the Richard Rogers Theatre still continues to play to audiences—demonstrating an example that digital platforming of shows do not close in person shows (“Hamilton Musical”). But *Hamilton* is a popular show to begin with, so perhaps once can turn to how regional theatres and educational institutions incorporate digital solutions to continually expand their audiences and experiment with the medium. The performance group Anonymous Ensemble “creates new theater, performance media, and live film” to “foster intimate experiences between local and digitally global communities.” In March 2022, Anonymous Ensemble presented the play *Flightlet* on Zoom (“Anonymous Ensemble”). Live performances are also being live-streamed in many organizations. The Drew University Theatre

& Dance Department regularly livestreams weekly developmental play readings. In Fall 2022, the department livestreamed two one-act productions and one development play reading. This allows family members and friends from long distances, as well as students who could not make it to performances in person, to still enjoy the piece.

Perhaps more importantly than the promise of digital innovation, dramaturgs must also mind an ethical concern of accessibility and inclusion of immunocompromised and disabled artists and audience members, or anyone who faces isolation due to health and safety concerns or other situations of marginalization. Disability justice activists have expressed the necessity for people to continue mounting digital gathering spaces even as the world “reopens,” since this reopening is not equal across the board for all individuals, and in fact prolongs the pandemic crisis for high-risk individuals. “Many of us could have told you a long time ago that ‘grand-reopening’ and ‘normalizing’ indifference would only lead to rolling COVID surges and repeated closures. ...The answer has always been to prioritize collective care” (Comradecloset). As of the writing of this conclusion in April 2022, coronavirus prevention measures have been lifted nationwide. Indoor masking requirements have been removed from many public places and institutions in every state (Hubbard). This remains the case even as a “highly contagious” new Omicron variant, BA.2, has become the “the dominant version of the coronavirus COVID in the US” at the tail end of March 2022 (Money and Lin). Many testimonials from immunocompromised and disabled individuals highlight the public health danger of relaxing precautions, as well as the exclusion that sites of Covid-spread creates. It has the power to “[drive] members of their communities to be even more alone and disconnected from society.” One advocate mentioned how “Masks, after the vaccine, were the final protection that allowed us to participate in certain activities and going out in public” (McCausland).

The exclusion is not only in the design of the in-person events: it's also present in the singular mode of these events being in-person. Digital events may more easily lend themselves to accessibility solutions, like being able to join remotely, and to have automated captioning and translation (in a way that in person events can only with certain expertises and training, which are crucial to invest in, and unfortunately may not be pursued). Karl Knights, a poet who is autistic and has cerebral palsy, tweeted the following: "Last year, thanks to virtual options, I could attend more arts events than I ever had before. Now pretty much every event that I could attend last year, more often than not for the first time, has gone back to being solely in-person. To put it mildly, they went back to exclusion" (Karl Knights). The activist Mia Mingus also illuminates the ableism visible in in-person gatherings that are planned without precautions for safety of immunocompromised and disabled people.. "[Able people] take the luxury of in-person connection for granted and feel entitled to it...If there was ever a time to be in solidarity with disabled people, it is now. ...Now is the time to recalibrate, to get (back) in alignment with your values." (Mingus).

Recognizing the nuance of the complexities of masking and vaccine requirements, including the prevention of lip-reading and facial expression reading that is part of accessibility to hard-of-hearing and neurodivergent people, only further affirms the global necessity to both work fervently to end the spread of Covid-19 as well as create robust in-person, hybrid, virtual event options. It is not about relegating digital options to people who cannot risk in-person exposure and creating in-person events for the rest. It is about continuing to create art on multiple platforms, in this inner-pandemic period, that is welcoming a variety of audiences and prioritizes the inclusion of those who are typically excluded. In this call for more digital accessibility, theatremakers and organizations must also consider the fact of economic access that

devices and wifi require. Similarly to how educational institutions provide loaner laptops to students, theatre institutions may find it a good investment to ensure digital affordable access for all their artists.

As aforementioned in the introduction, Anne Cattaneo writes that dramaturgs play a role in “stretch[ing] the definition of theatre.” Dramaturgs have opportunities to reinvent their practice, and with it, begin to reinvent the field, with every new project and every new terrain. In the emanation of the 21st century, Cattaneo regards dramaturgs as “ensconced for the first time in the new American theatre institution.” My research of the past and present of the field compel me to believe that dramaturgs are ensconced because dramaturgs are foundations of these institutions. During the rise of professional regional theatre, these artists played a crucial role in establishing and executing the functions of theatrical institutions for each region and each age. In this time of reckoning for accessible arts, dramaturgs must once again serve as foundational responders to the call.

Theatre is meant to gather—and gathering happens in more ways than being in the same room. Dramaturgs are tasked to share information and opportunities to fellow artists and audiences that create in-depth, accurate, and hopefully meaningful plays. New, devised play development processes must not be stunted, stopped, or made impossible by inaccessibility. Audience engagement must reject systems of ableism that keep audience members out of theatres. Dramaturgs must embrace the digital to fulfill a promise to be creative liaisons and “holders of the door” that welcome a collaborative, engagement, and accessible theatre, for all who make it as artists and experience it as audience members.

Endnotes

¹Restorative justice (RJ): “a philosophy and set of practices, rooted in Indigenous teachings, that emphasize our interconnection by repairing relationships when harm occurs while proactively building and maintaining relationships to prevent future harm” (Bercega Castro-Harris)

²Transformative justice (TJ): a philosophy and set of practices that “actively cultivate {s} the things we know prevent violence such as healing, accountability, resilience, and safety for all involved” and looking to transform the conditions in which harm happens (Mingus)

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