

Dramaturgy

An Introduction

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
1. What is dramaturgy?	13
1.1 Dramaturgy with and without a dramaturg	13
1.2 The roots of today's dramaturgy: From <i>Poetics</i> to postdramatic theatre	15
1.3 Theatre as a process of transformation	20
1.4 Dramaturgy in the Netherlands and Flanders	21
1.5 Perspectives on dramaturgy	24
1.6 Dramaturgy and theatre research	27
1.7 Dramaturgy within and across disciplines, styles, and genres	29
2. Material	33
2.1 Text as material	33
2.2 Aristotle: Language as medium of imitation (mimesis)	35
2.3 Theatre landscape until the eighteenth century	44
2.4 Absolute drama	46
2.5 Concepts of drama analysis	47
Primary text / Secondary text	48
Story & plot	49
Dramatic characters	51
Monologue	54
Re-definitions of processes of meaning production	58
2.6 Brecht: Epic theatre	58
2.7 Metatheatricality	62
2.8 Theatre of the Absurd	63
2.9 Textual montage techniques	66
Accumulation as a principle of montage	66
Juxtaposition as a principle of montage	68
Dissipation as a principle of montage	69
2.10 Material and materiality	75
2.11 Theatre as a means of exploration	77
3. Process: From material to performance	79
3.1 The material and the envisioned performance	79
3.2 Translational processes in theatre	81
Context – location	82
Context – time	83

Translation for accessibility	84
Starting point: The source	85
Relevance and inspiration	86
Research and interpretation	86
3.3 Visual aspects of dramaturgy	90
Scenography	92
The space and the audience	94
Writing the space	96
Light	98
The visual experience	100
3.4 Auditory aspects of dramaturgy	104
Voice	105
A few historical examples of voice in theatre	107
Beyond meaning	108
Accents, dialect, play with language, and sound of voice	109
4. Audience	111
4.1 The first spectator	111
4.2 The position and the role of the audience in the performance: the spectator as/is dramaturg	114
The dramaturg as intermediary between performance and audience	117
4.3 Audience reach	119
4.4 Theatre and politics: The heritage of Brecht and Boal	124
4.5 The auditorium and the stage	126
Site-specific and immersive theatre	128
4.6 Youth in/and theatre	129
Dutch Theatre for Young Audiences	131
Theatre education for children and youngsters	136
The last spectator	139
Epilogue	141
Glossary	145
Notes	163
Illustration acknowledgements	173
Bibliography	175
Index	183

Introduction

For the past decade or so, dramaturgy has attracted a lot of attention: as a process; as a profession; and as a focus of academic research. This holds particularly true for the Anglo-Saxon part of the world. The emergence of numerous publications on the subject indicates an increasing awareness of dramaturgy in these countries, both in the academic and in the professional field of theatre and performance. However, in the theatre of continental Europe, including Dutch and Flemish theatre, dramaturgy and the profession of the dramaturg have been widely accepted for some time. As teachers within the Theatre Studies department of the University of Amsterdam, and particularly as teachers of the International Dramaturgy Master's programme, we find it important to share our knowledge on this topic, with a special focus on Dutch and Flemish theatre. The field of Dutch and Flemish theatre may not be very large in comparison to that of their surrounding countries, but it is extremely diverse, has an international reputation, and dramaturgy is an intrinsic part of it. Over the past fifteen years, dozens of students have graduated from our (International) Dramaturgy Master's programme, which teaches the subject from both a professional and an academic perspective. Many of these graduates work in the field as professional dramaturgs; in text-based theatre as well as music theatre, mime, youth theatre, and dance. In this book, we bring together the insights that we have assembled during our time teaching Bachelor's and Master's students.

Dramaturgy, understood as the intellectual labour performed while producing theatre performances, has a long history, particularly in German-speaking countries and the German-speaking academic world. Originally, dramaturgy involved focusing on the meaning of the drama text and therefore the dramaturg was both a literary advisor and someone who was able to determine and explain the meaning of the text. But in contemporary theatre, the role of text has changed significantly. It is no longer the all-important layer of meaning, the starting point and guiding principle that determines every part of the performance. Theatre makers nowadays use all kinds of other texts that were not necessarily written to be performed in the theatre. Images, sounds, music, and bodily expressions have become increasingly important. In this process, the rational composition of performance gave way to a more associative approach, which facilitates the composition of a performance from the different elements that theatre has to offer, and that the theatre maker may use. For the spectator, these combined elements generate a theatre event in which the sensory experience

has become more important than merely an understanding of what is shown. Therefore, although most dramaturgs are very good at selecting, adapting, and analysing texts, text is no longer the self-evident layer of meaning that they work from.

Because of this development, the meaning of the term dramaturgy has also changed. It has become broader, pushing forward the boundaries of what dramaturgy entails. Consequently, it is not possible to define and exact meaning of the term in this introduction. To put it more strongly, it is neither our goal, nor our ambition to come to an exact definition in this book. Since dramaturgy today may be, perhaps even has to be, concerned with all aspects of performance, trying to define the term would be a non-committal and meaningless endeavour. Hence we have given this book the somewhat unambitious title *Dramaturgy. An Introduction*. It is not our intention to explain precisely what dramaturgy entails, but rather to point out how broad the term actually is, focusing on the consequences of this infiniteness for dramaturgs and theatre makers. We make use of alternating perspectives to do so.

Although, at the beginning of our endeavours, we spoke about the possibility of a 'handbook', after some time we realised that it is impossible to write a handbook on dramaturgy nowadays. Authors writing a handbook try to capture, establish, and preserve something for the long term. The dramaturgy of today is too comprehensive to be defined in such a way; it is also highly dependent on the particular approach of individual theatre makers. Moreover, to write a handbook on dramaturgy would necessarily entail not only all kinds of methodological tools, but also the inclusion of the whole history of theatre and highlights from dramatic literature, not to mention the history of music, visual arts, film, and philosophy. This book is neither a handbook on dramaturgy, nor a manual for future dramaturgs. Surely, each dramaturg will fill their role in a different manner, depending on ambitions, personality, strengths, weaknesses, and, above all, the theatre makers that they work with. Therefore, the question of whether a dramaturg is a theatre maker, cannot be answered. This also depends on the dramaturg themselves and the production team that they are part of.

Instead of trying to define and establish the term, we want to raise questions and emphasise the diverse, fluid, and process-oriented nature of dramaturgy. In Chapter 1, we will further investigate the scope and historical roots of dramaturgy; in Chapter 2, we focus on the material, texts, and other sources that theatre makers work with; Chapter 3 is dedicated to process, including the performance itself; finally, Chapter 4 looks at theatre and dramaturgy from the spectator's perspective. Under the headings of

scope, material, process, and spectatorship, we assemble different aspects of dramaturgy, but these can never be exhaustive. In a way, this book reflects the expertise of its four authors. Fortunately, these are supplementary to one another. They are not only academic, but also reflect practical experiences in different aspects of dramaturgy, such as auditive dramaturgy, scenography, and theatre education. With this supplementary expertise and experience as a starting point we had lengthy discussions on the essence and scope of dramaturgy, on the different ways to teach dramaturgy to students, and on the possible content of this book. This ultimately led to the current publication, the content of which we all endorse, but in which the reader, from time to time, may still detect our separate voices.

As previously mentioned, the University of Amsterdam offers a professional and academic Master's programme on International Dramaturgy, but already in the Theatre Studies Bachelor's programme, dramaturgy is one of the learning trajectories, combining theory with practice. In that trajectory, we emphasise that dramaturgy is essentially different from academia, but also that the two are closely related. If academia is dedicated to collecting and organising knowledge, dramaturgy is directed towards applying this knowledge in theatre practice. Therefore, for a dramaturg, knowledge, not only of theatre, but also of philosophy, literature, visual arts, film, and music is imperative. A dramaturg should also have developed the skills to analyse and examine texts, images, sounds, and music. On the other hand, dramaturgy is not exclusive to the dramaturg. All theatre makers think about the composition and meaning of the performance and therefore all theatre makers are involved in the process of dramaturgy, although they may not recognise and define their work as such and often lack the input of a dramaturg as a central role in the process. One of the main reasons for writing this book is to make more people familiar with the meaning and the process of dramaturgy. It is intended for theatre students in secondary and higher education, but also for directors, scenographers, actors, and even people who are not professionally involved but merely interested in the world of theatre.

Most books on dramaturgy presume a certain knowledge of the current field of theatre, of the history of theatre, and of a canon of drama texts. We do not. We presume no knowledge of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*. When we use historic examples or current case studies we always try to explain content and context. We only refer to and elaborate on aspects of theatre history if knowledge thereof is essential for understanding certain aspects of current dramaturgical practices. We assume that our readers are not only future dramaturgs and theatre makers, but also people

that are more generally interested in current developments in theatre and performance. This perspective of the curious reader is very important to us. It is not our intention to deliver a package of knowledge, understandings, and beliefs. On the contrary, we always try to place ourselves in the position of the curious reader. Each year, new Bachelor's students arrive, and Dramaturgy is one of the first courses they study. We know their enthusiasm and their yearning for knowledge and experience, and kept this in mind when writing this book. Our starting point was a desire to feed this enthusiasm, rather than delivering certain convictions or (political) messages. In saying this, we also recognise that no text on theatre and dramaturgy can be neutral, objective, and value-free.

That we do not presume any prior knowledge from our readers, does not mean that our book takes place in a void. We have read recent books and articles on dramaturgy and used them as material, as sources, not unlike current dramaturgs use existing texts and other sources to develop something new. As previously mentioned, in the last couple of years, much has been written on dramaturgy, predominantly in English. In the Netherlands and Flanders, dramaturgy has also been the topic of numerous articles and books. We, of course, feel indebted to the work of the Flemish dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven. Since the 1990s, she has put dramaturgy as a topic and as a profession on the map of Dutch and Flemish theatre. Her main articles are collected in *Van het kijken en van het schrijven* ('About Looking and Writing', 2002), which continues to be an important source of inspiration to us. Partly because of her work, dramaturgs in the Netherlands and Flanders are no longer considered 'fallen bookcases', a Dutch expression referring to bigmouths that get their knowledge solely from books without any practical experience, and therefore lack a sense of reality.

In Chapter 1, we deal with the question of what dramaturgy entails, especially in the Netherlands and Flanders. We look at the historical roots of dramaturgy and the relationship between dramaturgy and academia. In Chapter 2, we focus on what we call 'material'; that is, the content but also the tangibility of the sources that dramaturgs use, and how research and analysis allows us to better understand and work with different kinds of material. This chapter emphasises text as a form of material, because text can be preserved as a medium by itself and may be analysed and interpreted over and over again. Moreover, drama texts and their interpretation have long determined reflection on theatre and dramaturgy, well into the latter part of the twentieth century. Chapter 3 is about the process; namely, how material is transformed into a performance. We zoom in on research and interpretation, on manners of translation, on visual aspects of dramaturgy,

and on auditive aspects of dramaturgy. Finally, Chapter 4 is about audience and spectatorship. For whom do we produce theatre performances, how do we involve and include the audience in the performance, and what is the role of dramaturgy and the dramaturg in this process?

Throughout this book, we use text boxes to highlight certain drama texts and performances as explanatory examples. The highlighted performances also form a good and faithful reflection of different genres and trends in Dutch and Flemish theatre.

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