Contemporary new play dramaturgy in Canada

Brian Quirt

Canadian dramaturgy takes many forms depending on the nature of the work, the region, and indeed the language of the artists. I will speak only of dramaturgy in English-Canada, where over the past 25 years the profession has evolved into a significant and central component of the country’s new-play creation movement. A growing number of emerging artists identify themselves as dramaturgs, seek and find work in the field, and are mentored by a generation that carved out, defined, and brought tremendous artistry to the landscape of dramaturgy.

This was not always the case. When I entered the dramaturgical profession in the late 1980s, fresh out of the M.A. Drama program at the University of Toronto, I’m not certain how much I knew about dramaturgy. The then head of the M.A. program, Ronald Bryden, had left Canada in his youth to become a newspaper critic in the UK and ended up as the literary manager of the Royal Shakespeare Company for five years in the 1970s. His tales of discovering Tom Stoppard must have inspired my desire to become a dramaturg; I knew that I wanted to work as one, but was aware at the time of precious few role models in Toronto or anywhere in Canada. So I wrote to local artistic directors asking to be considered for a dramaturgical position. I was invited to a number of interviews, but there were, in fact, no positions to be considered for. I was, fortunately, offered a short-term intern position as the (newly created) assistant to the literary manager of what has since become the Canadian Stage Company, a job that offered me a window into the artistic engine house of that company, though one that involved little actual dramaturgy, at least initially. I quickly became aware of a heated, ongoing debate in the Toronto, and Canadian, theatre community about the value, role, and status of the dramaturg.

In 2009, I attended the regional finals of the Sears Ontario Drama Festival, a gathering of high-school theatre productions, to watch a student version of one of my adaptations. I was surprised and delighted to note that several of the student productions included dramaturgs as part of the creative team. This suggested to me that a sea change had occurred in the understanding and appreciation of the role of the dramaturg in Canadian theatre. If even high-school students are claiming the title for themselves, and are finding creative ways to contribute to the work of their colleagues, then much of the work my generation undertook to promote, inspire, and work as dramaturgs has indeed had a huge impact.
In English-Canadian theatre of the past 40 years, creating and producing new work has been at the core of the majority of our theatre companies (with of course some significant exceptions), as artists, audiences, and arts councils have prioritized a national need to generate a canon of Canadian plays and performance pieces. This has been paralleled in other creative fields such as novels, visual arts, movies, and so on, with varying success, as this small country (at least in terms of population) has striven to assert its creative energies in the face of the overwhelming and often stifling colonial influences of the United Kingdom and the United States. In our field, one result is that dramaturgy in Canada has largely been focused on new work; production dramaturgy certainly occurs in the new-work field, and in some arenas of classical theatre production, but the majority of English-Canadian dramaturgs specialize in collaborating with living playwrights.

The artistic directors that were skeptical about making a living as a dramaturg in 1980s Toronto were largely right. My personal solution to this was, like many freelance theatre artists, to find a community of theatre-makers whose work inspired me, largely through festivals focused on new plays, and who responded to the ideas, analysis, and inspiration I, as an emerging dramaturg, could offer them. Even that network may not have been sufficient to support me, so I created part-time dramaturgical positions at Toronto’s Theatre Centre and then at Factory Theatre. These offered me the stability of (modest) regular fees and expanded my network of collaborators to include, at the Theatre Centre, dancers, choreographers, and an increasingly diverse group of theatre artists, and at Factory, the ability to work with both senior and emerging playwrights from across Canada.

Ultimately, however, my desire to explore dramaturgical issues and ideas led me to establish my own company (founded with producer Naomi Campbell): Nightswimming. Though initially created to develop and produce a show that I was dramaturging, it soon evolved into a non-producing, commissioning company that explicitly placed dramaturgy at the heart of its mission: to advance the field of dramaturgy and play development in Canada through the exploration of theatrical stories and how they are told. Since 1995, Nightswimming has provided a fertile environment in which I have been able, with many colleagues, to explore the boundaries of theatrical storytelling in theatre, dance, and music. We have commissioned adaptations of novels and poetry, contemporary dance, an a cappella musical, a seven-play cycle of classically inspired plays, physical theatre, new works by leading South Asian and Latina writers, and plays by some of the country’s leading playwrights. It has been conceived as a forum for exploration through the making of new performance. We currently place all of our work in three interconnected categories.

The category of Research includes all of our exploratory initiatives, from our Pure Research program to our investigations of form and genre, and soon reaching into an international collaboration with like-minded theatre research organizations in Europe. Creation is at the heart of all that we do, including commissioning artists, developing their work, conducting readings and workshops, hosting residencies, and partnering with companies to ultimately produce the works we create in collaboration with each artist. Performance acknowledges that public presentations of our works-in-progress are crucial to our creation process: our goal has always been to ensure that the plays we commission and develop reach the stage through partnerships with
producers, presenters, festivals, and theatre schools. Through performance we refine our work and tell stories to audiences locally and nationally.

The work I do as a dramaturg – though I also serve as a director on many of the projects we develop – is itself focused on three broadly defined areas: ideas, communication, and process. The first refers to the ideas that underlie any work of performance, both intellectual and emotional, and my search for the core set of ideas at the heart of the work’s inspiration. Understanding and being able to work with those ideas prepares me for the second element, communication. Dramaturgy, to me, is always focused on how a piece is communicated to an audience by whatever means is selected by the artist, and my role is to scrutinize those devices for their effectiveness in communicating the desired ideas to the ultimate spectators. The goal is not to clarify, but to deepen and enrich the expression of the core ideas. The third, and equally critical, role is that of process. Designing, or helping to design, the process by which a new work is created is a vital part of the dramaturgical contribution at Nightswimming. Determining which activities happen and when and with what agenda is a central part of our collaboration with our commissioned artists. Throughout all three components (which, of course, often overlap one another; little in our dramaturgical world is perfectly sequential) I am searching for the core ideas and how they evolve, looking for new ways to inspire the creators to dig deeply into the material they have selected, and exploring the theatrical effectiveness of the work by examining both the challenges and the rewards of the piece for its eventual audience. That Nightswimming has thrived over the past 18 years is a testament to how much the culture of dramaturgy has evolved throughout our theatre community and the degree to which writers and theatre companies have accepted the role and its functions.

Dramaturgy in English-Canada is confident of its place in our theatrical milieu – clearly a substantial change from the situation 20 years ago. Today there are literary managers and staff dramaturgs at a dozen major theatre companies from Vancouver’s Arts Club Theatre to Toronto’s Tarragon Theatre, including the Stratford and Shaw festivals. The role is embraced by students and emerging artists seeking to contribute their voices to the theatrical process, eager to generate creative environments in which storytellers (including playwrights) are provided the tools to make their work and bring it to audiences. Not every play or playwright works with or needs a dramaturg, but the fluid nature of the dramaturgical profession in Canada effectively accommodates the ways in which artists want to create. In general, the days of prescriptive approaches have faded away, replaced by wide acceptance amongst dramaturgs that it is the artist that must define the nature of the process in collaboration with dramaturgs and other colleagues. The role is also increasingly common in new-play festivals (as we’ve seen even at the high-school level). And while many theatres maintain a focus on text-based plays that can seem old-fashioned in this internet-driven age, the flexibility of the dramaturgical community enables many of its members to move between disciplines and media with great ease; it has long been said that dramaturgs can contribute to any form of storytelling, and this is increasingly the reality in English-Canada.

From my perspective, three factors have had significant impact on the field of dramaturgy and play development in Canada over the past decade. The first is the
growth and evolution of new-play festivals such as the Fringe, Summerworks, Rhubarb, Groundswell, Rock.Paper.Sistahz, Panamerican Routes, De Colores, and NextFest, to name some of the major events in Toronto each year; many other cities host similar festivals. These festivals provide not only practical and supportive environments for playwrights to produce or present new work, but they also offer work for freelance dramaturgs and opportunities for actors and other theatre artists to collaborate directly with writers. As well, these festivals give writers (and their creative teams) direct access to audiences, which is always the best and most productive element of any play development process. They also suggest a more expansive approach to collaboration in which the writer is empowered to be a central member of the creative team with responsibility for mounting the production. And they are an increasingly useful training ground for dramaturgs.

The second factor is LMDA Canada (Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas: lmda.org). The Canadian arm of this service organization has, since its founding in 1997, presented five international conferences on dramaturgy, eleven editions of the Toronto Mini-Conference on Dramaturgy, developed a substantial national network of dramaturgs and artists committed to the creation of new work, and brought Canadian dramaturgs into increased contact with our colleagues in the United States and beyond. LMDA Canada has had an active membership of more than 100 for over a decade, demonstrating the growth of practitioners across the country. The impact of this type of network is always difficult to quantify with any precision, but I believe that LMDA Canada has offered a forum for artists to express and explore a multitude of approaches to creating new plays. A more articulate conversation about this work and about dramaturgy itself has resulted.

The third factor is the growth and maturity of our network of play development centres. This national network was formalized under the name Playwright Development Centres of Canada (PDCC). The eleven organizations share a commitment to supporting the work of playwrights through a profusion of services and programs. Some have national mandates, like Vancouver’s Playwrights Theatre Centre, the Banff Centre Playwrights Colony, and Montreal’s Playwrights Workshop Montreal, and they provide essential meeting places for writers and theatre artists from across the country. Several are designed to serve artists in particular regions or cities. Exchanges between companies, festivals run by several centers, and regular meetings of the network have strengthened the bonds between dramaturgs, and between dramaturgs and playwrights. Nightswimming is a member, though it is least like any of the other centers in that it doesn’t have a service or regional mandate. But even here, the flexibility of the dramaturgical scene to include outliers is a hallmark of our community.

Having arrived at this comfortable plateau, I see four priorities ahead of us. The first, and most important, is a continued focus on diversity – cultural and creative. We are in danger of falling far behind the cultural mixture of our cities, our audiences, and other media. There are more stories by a diverse body of artists drawing on more forms and traditions that we must cultivate by offering them access to the resources of theatre companies and festivals. As mainstream theatrical storytelling increasingly embraces other media and conventions, our dramaturgs must change our institutions from within by advocating for the leading edge whenever possible.
To that end, play development programs must continue to develop more theatrical approaches to creating new works by emphasizing on-the-feet workshops, presentations, and productions incorporating design, technology, movement, sound, etc. Choreographers, designers, performance artists, visual and new-media artists must be welcomed into our theatres to remind us of the vitality of other disciplines and how much they can offer to the theatre. We must return play creation and development to our theatres and get it out of rehearsal halls. Working in a theatre space is different: it inspires more imaginative choices and reconnects us to our audience, even when they are not yet in the room. And, when necessary, we must embrace (as many artists have) theatre that is not interested in theatres at all, while also welcoming the bravura of such artists into our theatres whenever possible.

Finally, play development will only ever be as good as the plays and the directors who interpret them. Dramaturgs and new-play development organizations must support director training and internships. This is a vital need. If the imaginative visions of our best playwrights are to truly flourish, we must have inspired, trained, and able directors to bring their works to life. And to return to the insights of that artistic director who challenged my career choice so many years ago, we must foster a more effective collaboration between our theatre-makers, our directors, and our dramaturgs. This communication gap still, at times, exists; it curtails creative impulses and can hold us back from the boundaries that many are challenging.

Dramaturgs are flourishing in Canada today and often taking leadership roles in our theatres and support organizations. But there is much work to do to welcome and inspire the artists that should be making the theatre of the twenty-first century. In my roles at Nightswimming and the Banff Centre I’m proud to be able to help define the need, articulate the way forward, and design the pathway toward a more richly integrated theatrical and dramaturgical landscape.