

Dramaturgy Opening Statement

You are probably wondering what this dramaturgy stuff is all about, I hope in the next 15 mins to unravel some of it, and why it has a space to be spoken about at a storytelling conference.

I will attempt to shed light on what the term means, what one does, how this relates to storytelling, and how it could be incorporate into our practice as storytellers.

But I will start with why I am talking about this at all.

My first love has always been storytelling. But growing up no one told me being a storyteller was a career option so off I shuffled through the arts and theatrical training, and ended up specialising in dramaturgy in Edinburgh after four years of study. So here I sit, a qualified dramaturg and humble storyteller, and as such a total mystery to the masses.

So the big question is 'What is Dramaturgy'

To be honest the theatrical community are still debating this one, however essentially Dramaturgy is concerned with the process of arts creation, and assisting its development by standing back from the creative team, and supporting them by providing objective feedback and resources. Dramaturgy is the involvement of the entire creative process from inception to reflection without at any stage being the performer.

Since Gotthold Lessing was appointed the first official dramaturg in 1767, the aspects dramaturgy covers has evolved and developed in a multitude of ways. Originally he was given the post to support the creation of 'The National Theatre of Hamburg' to develop German literary figures and language and define cultural traditions, in many ways similar to the Grimms gathering traditionally stories around 50 years later.

Historically the origins of the word mean 'to put into dramatic form' or 'dramatic poet', and the word drama itself refers to 'action'. This creates the idea of an Action Poet, the next big super hero.

It is also related to the word thaumaturge 'a conjuror, a worker of wonders and marvels'. This is where it starts to relate to storytellers, not only the wonder stories we tell, but the conjuring of images in the minds of our listeners.

So what does a dramaturg do?

Well again this is hard to pin down, as a dramaturg usually ends up doing a host of jobs, depending on what its needed but as mention before never the performance role, this is where they differ from a storyteller.

When Lessing started his role as the first dramaturg, it was primarily thought of as an educational project to improve literary standards, public awareness and quality of the

work produced. This was done through the selection of the plays, researching culture and politics pertaining to the plays, working with writers, mentoring them develop their scripts, and to be an in-house critic reporting back to director and actors for the improvement of the performances, and creating a unifying artistic language.

However when Bertolt Brecht started developing the role of dramaturg, especially during his time as head of the Berliner Ensemble after the second world war, dramaturgical knowledge was expected to be extensive. To this day dramaturgs are required to have a solid grounding in history, performance theory and practice, social and cultural influences, mentoring, devising, adaptation, analyses, translating and or editing, as well as producing the publicity and education information such as programs, all whilst supporting the director, writers, designers, actors and producers.

So Just as there is no one way to be a storyteller, so too is there no one way to be a dramaturg, you have to be prepared for everything, incorporating both theory and practice in one discipline which is why the training takes so long and explanation of what one does is so complex.

How does this relate to Storytelling?

If like storytellers, dramaturgs have to remain ever flexible in their approach to the work they do, adapting to the needs of the material, venue and spectators among other things, what other similarities do the storyteller and dramaturg share?

A dramaturg is concerned with issues of story structure, character, strong narrative, the timeframe of both the piece and within the story, the intention being conveyed to the spectator, and the audience response. To do this they go through a process of selecting a play or inspiration to devise a performance piece, adapting that piece to suit the required outcomes, and during the rehearsal or practise record the development, analyse and continually critique the process and report back to the creative team. Following this, or sometimes during this process the dramaturg develops the publicity and education material and often facilitates community workshops and pre/post discussions, and finally the dramaturg organises the gathering of feedback from audiences to reflect upon the process.

Compare this to the Storyteller's process where we usually are the entire creative team, a storytellers role matches more closely than any other the role of dramaturg. There is a parallel through the selecting of stories to tell, adapting it for the storyteller's way of telling, or for particular audiences, critiquing ourselves or asking for feedback through story circles or fellow tellers, creating publicity even if that is just a new event on FB, developing workshops and being respondent in the moment to the feedback we get from our audiences as we tell and the reflection following the telling.

So not all of these might apply to everyone all the time, but like I said, there is no one

way to approach either craft.

So how does knowing about dramaturgy effect storytelling practice?

If dramaturgy and storytelling share many similarities, is it not that fair to speculate that certain dramaturgical training and approaches could aid the storyteller to better do what comes innately.

Certainly, thinking about what you do consciously rather than just being able to do it focuses the mind to the activity in hand, and can help us develop areas which we as artists and creative crafters may wish to improve.

I have always found my dramaturgical training has complimented and supported my work as a storyteller, and even given me the ability to offer a little extra; be it education packs filled with exercises, resources and further research to support my workshop or visit; marketing skills; or devising site specific or fact based commissioned pieces.

Through working with fellow storytellers and mentoring new tellers, such as those in the Surrey Storytellers Guild, 'Waxing Lyrical' program, I have employed a number of dramaturgical techniques, which have proven useful in the development of tellers. Techniques of breaking a story down to its bare elements, looking at the from different perspectives or motivations, playing with levels of status and emotions, learning how to research a story or editing and adapting skills, and of course feedback and in-house critiquing.

None of this will seem like ground breaking stuff to many of you, and this is why I state that dramaturgy and storytelling are so complimentary. We already possess some of the abilities, even if we are not aware that we do. The difference is dramaturgy offers a structured methodology to approach the various elements of storytelling, plus a few other useful tools, such as; workshop facilitation techniques, analytical and reflective including self-reflection approaches to our work which serves to take us and our listeners deeper into the world of the story, and arts admin to create contracts, invoices, quotes and proposals creating a better working structure. By consciously accessing these skills we can better support and mentor each other within the storytelling community to somewhat venture on the territory of the previous panel.

Now I'm not saying that all storytellers should run out and sign up to the nearest dramaturgy course. For a start there are not that many of them and in the UK, where dramaturgy is not recognised as much as other areas of Europe or even American and Canada, and what courses exist are usually dual study, such as directing & dramaturgy, or scrip-writing & dramaturgy. There aren't even that many books on the subject, and even less that would be useful to anyone who has not already had some level of dramaturgical training. However there are many dramaturgs, or as they are sometimes referred to Literary Managers (although this tends to deal with the more academic and theoretical aspects of the dramaturg's job) and they are out there

should you wish to find one to work with.

How the dramaturg can support storytellers.

So why should we be bothered about dramaturgs when even many in UK theatre aren't?

For one thing there seems to be a trend in the UK to shy away from intellectualising the arts, and especially the traditional and/or folk arts. Almost as if by intellectualising it, we learn the magician's secret and the magic is gone, or to share the knowledge will somehow diminish our own abilities that we might lose them. It is also true to say that many in the theatre view the dramaturgs with a high level of suspicion, that creature trained in everybody else's job, able to step in at a moment's notice. It is no wonder that the dramaturg is an unpopular beast.

But in storytelling we welcome unpopular beasts, the dragons and monsters that society fears, and so it should be with the dramaturg, as we are not competing with the director, playwright, actor, producer, stage manager and marketing, because for most of us as modern storytellers in media minded society, we have to be all these things, manage all these roles and this is where a dramaturg can support us.

I know many storytellers who have had a raw deal in the care of directors and all this talk about theatrics will have put them right off their pudding, but dramaturgs are of a different ilk. In very simplified terms a director has a vision of the outcome and will control every aspect in order to work toward that goal; however a dramaturg is trained to support the development of the piece, making the process far more fluid. It is not only that a dramaturg's working practice is instinctively better suited to storytelling's adaptable and shifting nature than a director's ridged approach, but it is the very similar roles both dramaturg and storyteller have to fulfil which means there is an inherent sympathy and understanding to the approach of work.

There are some within the storytelling community who will shudder at the mere mention of anything theatrical, and who will not appreciate my comparisons of storyteller and dramaturg. The debate which covers the stony ground between storytelling and theatre communities is not to be resolved on this day, and is one which I know my colleagues are well versed in too.

The term dramaturg is being used more and more, so if the discipline is to prove useful, then whether we chose to use it or not, we have the obligation to understand it, which actually puts us ahead of majority, including those in the UK theatrical community.

In this brief time I have attempted to dispel the mystery behind the dramaturg, why storytelling should be interested, and why in fact the dramaturgs and their skills could be a useful ally to storytellers as we develop ourselves and our community. Thank you.