

**21ST Century Literary Office:
Exploring the Literary Practice of Tomorrow
Convening Report by Janice Paran**

Though she wasn't actually in attendance at The American Voices New Play Institute (AVNPI) conference *The 21st Century Literary Office: Exploring the Literary Practice of Tomorrow*, held at Arena Stage on February 24-25, 2012, Morgan Jenness may have summarized its thrust in the pre-conference [Friday Phone Call](#) Arena associate artistic director David Dower held with her on the morning of the 24th. Asked to comment on the subject of literary management, uber-dramaturg Jenness, who got her start working for Joe Papp and now dubs herself an "agent for change" at Abrams Artists, said, "I think there's two things wrong: literary and management."

The charge is nothing new to the conference participants, a group of some forty literary managers, dramaturgs, artistic producers and other professionals involved in supporting, developing and/or producing new work for the American theater, all of whom are used to the inadequacies of and misconceptions about a job title that's a scant representation of how they function within the new play sector, but it serves as a reminder of how the cumbersome term still holds sway, seemingly impervious to the varieties of ways new play advocates, in the thirty-plus years since literary managers first set up shop in the American not-for-profit theater, have devised to identify, support and launch work within and across institutional boundaries.

In fact, one of the conference roundtables was called "What's Literary in the 21st Century Literary Office and Do We Need a New Name?" and while few participants took to heart the challenge of re-christening the literary office (because, to steal from the old joke about economists, if you laid all the world's dramaturgs end to end, they wouldn't reach a conclusion), much of the weekend's discussion was taken up with fundamental questions of how and why the literary offices of today—whatever they call themselves—function, what they do and don't provide to their institutions, to the plays and playwrights they hope or claim to serve, to their immediate communities, and to the wider profession. Part self-assessment, part swap meet for innovative practices and suggested reforms, the conference was a largely convivial clearinghouse for shop talk about the policies, procedures and pet peeves of those who toil in literary offices or allied departments within the nation's not-for-profit theaters and play development institutions. A few playwrights, including Amy Freed and Karen Zacarias, two of Arena Stage's writers-in-residence, were also on hand to provide their perspectives on literary office dealings, but as conference co-host P. Carl, Director of AVNPI, explained at the outset, his goal was to give literary managers and dramaturgs, who frequently get "credit for nothing, blamed for everything" when it comes to the care and feeding of new plays, a chance to do the talking.

Carl and David Dower charged the conference attendants with the responsibility of representing larger communities ("you are delegates, not the anointed," Dower cautioned) and of welcoming the input of those seated beyond the conference roundtable. Held in the Mead Center's light-filled Molly Smith Study, a street-level, glass-walled event space energized by the foot traffic of S.W. Washington DC visible beyond its enclosures, the conference roundtables,

moderated by Dower, were literally and figuratively situated to take advantage of this “fishbowl” effect, with a variable inner circle of participants ringed by the rest of the group (who had a chance to be heard in periodic break-out sessions) and by a virtual “3rd circle” of listener/viewers (and sometime contributors, via Twitter) who were following the live-streamed proceedings.

Carl’s opening remarks amplified his reasons for organizing the convening. The field of dramaturgy and literary management has taken the lion’s share of hits on the subject of—on the *existence* of—new play “development,” the oft-maligned process by which, in a best-case scenario, new work makes the journey from page to stage. He cited three particular examples: Douglas Anderson’s 1988 article “The Dream Machine: Thirty Years of New Play Development in America,” which questioned many of the assumptions surrounding new play support programs; Richard Nelson’s 2007 address to A.R.T./NY (the speech heard ‘round the dramaturgical world as a direct attack on the profession), and *Outrageous Fortune: The Life and Times of the New American Play*, the 2009 book-length study by Todd London, Ben Pesner and Zannie Girard Voss that documented a massive disconnect between those who write plays and those who produce them. High time, Carl suggested, for the accused to take the stand.

But before they did, he invited consideration of the history of the literary office in the American theater and how its evolution—hand-in-hand with the emergence of Yale Drama School-educated literary managers—spelled trouble. To wit, he quoted from the 1977 “Dramaturg’s Guide: A Handbook for Student Dramaturgs” (written by Jonathan Marks, literary manager of Yale Rep when the Drama School’s trailblazing graduate program in dramatic criticism and dramaturgy was in its infancy), which identified the lofty ideals of the Yale program: “to resolve the antipathy between the intellectual and the practical, and to fuse the two into an organic whole.” At the same time, the handbook offered this advice to students serving as production dramaturgs:

*You and your critical skill are there as a resource, ready in case the director feels he (sic) needs your opinion. Anything is possible: he may need you, call upon you, and use your advice to stunning effect; he may call upon you and ignore you; he may need you and not know it; or he simply may not need you. . . . He will let you know if wants to hear from you.**

In other words, Carl seemed to suggest, the Yale pedagogy set up its charges to feel simultaneously entitled and devalued, proffering with one hand what it snatched away with the other, thereby seeding a culture of disgruntlement.** It was a theme echoed by Dower, who

* Carl quoted the Handbook as referenced in Art Borreca’s “Dramaturging New Play Dramaturgy” in *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*.

** Full disclosure: I was a student in the Yale program between 1977 and 1980, during the transition from Robert Brustein’s leadership to Lloyd Richard’s. I don’t actually remember such a handbook, though I must have read it; what I do remember is a program still in search of its focus and inconsistent in its pedagogy, but with faculty

enjoined the conference goers to move beyond their alienation, paraphrasing what he was once told by funder Olga Garay at a TCG-sponsored conference where he felt marginalized: “You don’t just get to be bitter, you have to be productive.” Being productive, according to Carl, is not just about brainstorming, but also about expressing dissent. “Friction will wake us right up,” he promised, and if the conversation over the next two days was short on abrasion, its collegiality suggested that literary offices and those who staff them are already beginning to change the way they do business.

Bringing up Baby, or David Dower Interviews Jerry Patch

“Just ask Patch.”

--Mame Hunt

Final Jeopardy answer: “America’s oldest living dramaturg.” If you asked, “Who is Jerry Patch?” you’re either Watson or a dramaturg yourself. Patch, despite his no-worries California vibe, is the Energizer Bunny of the profession, with a career that has spanned both coasts and more than four decades. Now the Director of Artistic Development at New York’s Manhattan Theatre Club, he spent thirty-four years at South Coast Rep in Costa Mesa, CA, beginning in the 1960s, and Dower kicked off the conference by interviewing him about those early years in an effort to trace the lineage of the modern literary office.

Of course, there was no literary office in the itinerant early days of SCR, Patch explained. There were no “institutions” and “everyone had a day job.” With no training in literary management or dramaturgy, Patch, who had studied contemporary American fiction and poetry (“right before my apprenticeship with Lessing”), was brought in to pass judgment on plays being considered for production. As the company’s focus on new work deepened, he became the de facto dramaturg, and John Glore was subsequently hired as literary manager.

Here, as throughout the conference, there was lip service paid to the difference between a literary manager and a dramaturg, but not much more. Few were interested in making a hard-and-fast distinction, as the titles are often interchangeable and the roles overlapping, but the shorthand that seems to have developed consigns the literary manager to the day-to-day operation of an institutional literary office while the dramaturg is more playwright-centered and process-focused. (Dramaturgy can of course also play a significant role in how theaters approach classics and other revivals, but the convening dealt primarily with dramaturgy within the new play sector.)

How did the shift in Patch’s duties at SCR—from script adjudicator to dramaturg—come about? “It just happened,” he insisted, cheerfully resistant to the notion that procedures and protocols for literary office practices or new play development could be gleaned from his experience,

members such as Richard Gilman, Stanley Kauffmann and Jan Kott leading the charge, the life of the mind and a life in the theater seemed like reconcilable ideals.

adding, “one size did not fit all.” Asked to name the “baby” in a “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater” scenario for literary office reform—a recurrent theme of the convening—he said simply, “the baby is dramaturgy.”

In the Patch rulebook, dramaturgy means taking the time to build relationships with writers, figuring out what *they* want, and helping them make their plays better. Period. He conceded that the technological advances of the past couple of decades have been a boon for literary management (i.e., office procedures), but stressed that nothing beats face time with writers, being there to “hit the ball back.”

But what about the goal of bringing intellectual rigor to artistic practice, Dower wondered, referring to the Yale methodology. “I can’t go at it that way,” Patch replied, citing a time he was asked—and refused—to cut Tom Stoppard’s *The Coast of Utopia*.

I’m not going to walk in as the “intellectual rigor guy” with [Stoppard] or anybody else. . . . You start having a conversation with the writer about their play. . . and there are times, not infrequently, when the intellectual rigor is less than it could be, but the conversations can help amplify [it]. You don’t set out to do that, but if it happens, it’s cool.

John Glore, now SCR’s Associate Artistic Director, chimed in to disavow the notion of the dramaturg as “the conscience of the theater,” one of the phrases that often attached to the field in its early days, while he nonetheless asserted the value in having “someone whose primary purpose is to be conscious of the intellectual rigor of the work you’re doing, even though everybody else in the room is trying to be aware of it too.” His larger point, though, was that dramaturgy is a function, not a label, a distinction he and others have been making for years, though the convening gave fresh expression to it. Amrita Ramanan put it this way in a manifesto she presented in the next conference segment: “The term dramaturgy becomes the new hashtag. It is not precious and is owned by everyone.”

Manifestos for the 21st Century Literary Office

“I double dog dare you.”
--Julie Felise Dubiner

“In the future we will . . . have figured out that ‘literature’ is an obsolete term to describe a performance text.”

“For me, this literary office is located in a theater that is big enough to have ambition but small enough to know everyone’s name.”

“In the literary office of the future the focus will shift from new play development to playwright development.”

“There’s color everywhere—on the furniture and décor and the people that inhabit the space.”

“Let us call for the end of the job titles of dramaturg and literary manager.”

* * * * *

No one actually said, “Strike! Strike! Strike!,” but the manifestos delivered by Aaron Carter, Adrien-Alice Hansel, Otis Ramsey-Zöe, Amrita Ramanan and Julie Felise Dubiner lent a (temporary) air of reforming zeal to the proceedings, providing a savvy transition from Patch’s old guard wisdom to the agendas of the profession’s newer recruits.

Aaron Carter, literary manager of Steppenwolf, slyly proposed the term “generative artist talent scout” as a job title for his future self. [His manifesto](#), a performance piece in itself, ranged from tongue-in-cheek imaginings of his later incarnation as a Morgan Freeman-like guru/producer/mogul (scarf and cane optional) to more serious musings on a new play development landscape that is both rigorous and systematic, and where “the things we used to think of as theaters are bubbling cauldrons of creative exploration.”

Adrien-Alice Hansel, literary director of The Studio Theatre in Washington DC, [offered up](#) a holistic vision of literary office functioning, because “everywhere dramaturgy happens is part of the literary office, right?” Dramaturgy could happen in a staff-wide conversation around season planning, especially if

this conversation is a place of curiosity and respect, of fervent passion and honest confusion, disagreement and advocacy and thinking aloud and a constant interrogation of our mission, our purpose, our imagined conversations with our imagined audience alongside our past successes and failures in our actual conversations with our actual community.

Her lit office extends from her dining room table to coffee shops and lobby bars, anywhere she reads a script or colleagues trade hopes and dreams and “heartbreak” plays, but also to those spaces and places borne of “using all your vacation time,” where imagination and insight stand a chance of being refreshed.

In [his manifesto-in-progress](#), Otis Ramsey-Zöe, who coordinates the Future Classics program for The Classical Theatre of Harlem, moved from specific proposals for literary office reinvention (consortia of literary professionals sharing systems and resources, a more relationship-based approach to new writing) to a provocative new poetics of theater whose initial outline looks something like this:

- In the theater of the future, ambivalence will be abolished.
- Comfort and safety will be abolished.
- Love will make as deep an impression as hurt.

Community and collaboration were keynotes sounded by Arena's Amrita Ramanan as well. Her future-perfect literary office, though still operating within an institution, is a "place without walls" where dramaturgy—defined as holding the mission and vision of the art as the ultimate goal—is practiced on an open-plan basis by everyone in the building, from the marketing manager to the casting director, and where "unique methods of interaction and conversation with audiences" are embraced with enthusiasm and creativity.

Julie Felise Dubiner ended the segment [on a rabble-rousing note](#). Having ditched the dramaturg label herself (she is the Associate Director of American Revolutions, the United States History Cycle at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival), she called on the assembled to throw off the shackles of their job titles, to create a national database of new plays (an idea much debated throughout the conference), to resist standard season planning modes (the subscription deadlines, the fixed runs), and to take responsibility for reform. "We must be active and go out and find the plays, make the plays, dream them into being," she exhorted. "We must remember the love of everything that brought us to dramaturgy to begin with, and although we understand structure, I dare us not to be bound by it."

A Day in the Life

"There is a lot of sprawl, but it's by design."
--Ilana Brownstein

If Jerry Patch channeled Literary Office Past and the manifestos conjured Literary Office Future (the happy version, not the one with the playwright's chair sitting empty by the chimney-corner), then the roundtable discussions, held on the second day of the conference, largely lingered—and sometimes stalled—on Literary Office Present (which in some cases is already morphing into Literary Office Future).

The question posed to the first panel, "What's Literary in the Literary Office and Do We Need a New Name?" had already been broached by P. Carl in response to the manifestos, all of which implicitly or explicitly rejected the limitations of the term, both as it applies to work created for the stage and to the scope of a dramaturg's expertise. In a sense, the question is a non-starter. But the quibbling about semantics is really about the larger issue of what constitutes the creative contributions (what Carl called "the skin in the game") made by literary managers and dramaturgs, and the extent to which our institutions recognize and maximize them.

In the meantime, nuts and bolts prevailed. Addressing the problem of "sprawl" in literary offices, Ilana Brownstein, Amrita Ramanan, Jessica Burgess, Jojo Ruf, Madeleine Oldham, Patrick Flick, Liz Frankel, and John Baker led off with a litany of tasks that take up the bulk of their time: script reading, season planning, script development, meetings with writers, scouting, attending readings, and so on. (A subsequent breakout session came up with an extended list that included everything from study guides and grant writing to community outreach and catering.)

From a playwright's perspective, said Lauren Gunderson, a literary office is also "the source of the welcome," the place where visiting writers can get the inside dope they need to get acclimated.

The new kid on the block, in terms of dedicated man-hours from the lit office, is audience engagement, a catch-all term that embraces everything from traditional methods of providing context and contact—program notes and talkbacks—to an array of audience-wooing, audience-wowing initiatives, many of them interactive. Joy Meads was enthusiastic about giving audiences more "ports of entry" to the work onstage. Karen Zacarias spoke warmly about the community-building success of Arena's "Theater 101" audience seminar program, which is literary office-driven. The line between marketing and audience enrichment gets fuzzy here, but in a breakout session, Rachel Chavkin made the point that the goal of both is to "create a person who's going to walk out and talk to people about an authentic experience."

Madeleine Oldham spoke to the "neither here nor there" conundrum that many institutions grapple with: at Berkeley Rep, she explained, members of the marketing department have traditionally been charged with audience enrichment activities, but they haven't been able to "take ownership" of the underlying artistic narrative, which puts the ball back in her court, to some extent. Woolly Mammoth, on the other hand, has created an entirely new department, Connectivity, which works in tandem with the literary office and the marketing staff to facilitate audience enrichment. "We have purposely not drawn lines in the sand" about who does what in any categorical way, said John Baker, acknowledging at the same time that the decision to outsource some tasks meant giving up some things in the dramaturgical arena he was territorial about.

The Woolly Mammoth solution to sprawl—manage it, don't eliminate it—was definitely a bright spot in the exchange. Some degree of sprawl seems not only endemic to the literary office, but also desirable, if by sprawl we mean bringing a dramaturgical eye to bear on a multitude of institutional tasks as a means of maintaining quality control and preserving artistic integrity.

Tales from the Scripts

"How do I get over my guilt?"
--Tanya Palmer

Once upon a time Actors Theatre of Louisville was producing a play by Heather McDonald, and during her visit there, she was invited to stop by for a chat in the literary office, where, she recalled, "I saw 4000 plays, and I thought, I don't want to meet in here, I don't want to think about this."

Turns out, nobody else does either. In practically every session, questions of the "script pile" came up: how did it get there, how soul-sucking is it, and what's to be done? So it was something of a surprise that the topic elicited not a chorus of dismay but a modicum of hopefulness, at least among the panelists at the first roundtable (less so among the breakout

groups). The Public Theater's Liz Frankel, for one, proclaimed her "faith in the pile," adding that she's fortunate enough to work at a theater with a mission attuned to the discovery of new voices and enough staff to handle their cacophony.

There was cautious optimism from other panelists, too, either because they represented theaters that have significantly retooled their submission criteria, making the reading process more focused and fruitful (Woolly Mammoth, for instance, only accepts unsolicited scripts from local writers; Arena has stopped accepting submissions altogether), or because they sought greener pastures: Madeleine Oldham, Julie Dubiner and Illana Brownstein all changed or redefined their jobs in order to find more productive, less burnout-prone working environments. "Soul-sucking," according to Oldham,

comes when the pile is disconnected from the artistic director . . . and the work you're actually doing in the theater. It is about faith in the pile. If you feel like stuff that you read actually has an avenue to go somewhere, then you have that energy.

Besides, Oldham explained, eliminating the pile isn't an option, at least not at Berkeley Rep. "We feel really strongly that [the script submission policy] is a point of access for playwrights, that if we shut it down, we don't know what else to offer them," she said, shedding some light on why the script submission issue is so contentious, and so guilt-inducing.

Within the breakout sessions, most conversations around "the pile" turned sooner or later to the idea of a national database for new plays, a topic that generated more buzz, pro and con, than any other. Though Dubiner's manifesto clearly struck a responsive chord on this point, she's not alone in her proposal—the idea has been [gaining currency](#) (or at least the oxygen of publicity) within the new play sector of late.

The appeal, on the face of it, is obvious: a comprehensive national database, searchable by playwright, cast size, subject matter, etc., could rescue theaters from untold duplication in their script reading efforts ("we're all reading the same plays anyway"), connect playwrights much more efficiently to the theaters who might be interested in their work (especially to those smaller companies without the wherewithal to find it), and model a system based on cooperation instead of competition, allowing theaters the benefit of each other's storehouse of knowledge. (The last ideal was roundly rejected as unrealistic by anyone working in the New York theater, where "getting there first" is a core value of most new play organizations.)

The most controversial element in the proposal was the idea that a database could include reader reports, perhaps even multiple reports on a single script, either from vetted contributors or perhaps in a public wiki way. Many were squeamish about that function, finding it either untrustworthy ("I'd rather read the play than ten reports on it," said John Glore) or potentially damaging to a playwright's self-esteem (which Dubiner rejected as patronizing).

Some skeptics could imagine a "mini-database" operating on a regional basis or through some other affiliation (the National New Play Network, for example), but others shared Miriam

Weisfeld's concern that a national database would inch the repertoires of theaters toward even more homogeneity. Amy Freed expressed a reluctance to embrace a consumer model of supply-and-demand. "Efficiency and ease and facility of information are not conducive to art-making," she said. "Friction, pressure, time and difficulty are our friends."

Gatekeepers or Yes Men?

"It's like a Monty Python sketch—this vision of the gate and all these writers are trying to get in and there's a dramaturg going "No way, I've got to read all these scripts first!"

--Liz Engelman

Remember The Gates, Christo and Jean-Claude's eye-popping installation of thousands of archways festooning the paths of Central Park with their saffron welcome? Now imagine a bouncer with an M.F.A. in dramaturgy standing guard at each of those portals, and you'll have some idea of how the American non-profit theater landscape looks to a passing playwright.

Granted, it's a ridiculous analogy, but the literary manager-as-gatekeeper metaphor is a pervasive one, and Dower prodded panelists Charles Haugland, Christian Parker, Heather McDonald, Ignacia Delgado, John Glore, Liz Engelman, Nan Barnett, Raphael Martin, Tanya Palmer and Martin Kettling to gauge its accuracy. "It depends on the culture of the theater," Liz Engelman said. "If you look at the theater as an artistic home, then the literary office is the living room, not a gate." But as John Glore pointed out, "there are thousands of people in this country who are calling themselves playwrights and my living room isn't big enough for all of them."

Frustration and guilt about the gatekeeping role percolated throughout the conference, with most people struggling to reconcile their desire to say yes to aspiring writers with the necessity of saying no to almost all of them. "I don't take pride in keeping people out," said Tanya Palmer, though in an earlier breakout session, P. Carl wondered if there isn't an element of pride in being a gatekeeper if that's the only agency a literary manager can claim. If so, countered Aaron Carter, that's a default position, one "we've been backed into."

Much of the conversation on this issue circled back to the importance of aligning a theater's mission and practices with its submission guidelines as a way of controlling the flow. Open submissions make sense for those institutions (such as the O'Neill and Sundance) that actively seek out emerging writers, but most everyone else could benefit from a more mission-specific and transparent submission policy. Lee Liebeskind, of Inkwell, a DC based play development organization, complained that most mission statements, especially those of larger institutions, are generic to the point of interchangeability.

Christian Parker called his colleagues to account this way:

We work in an industry . . . where there are tons of people in every discipline who want to be in it but can't be. Is it our job to satisfy what people perceive as what is owed to

them because they've staked out territory as an artist, or is it our job to make sure we're affording opportunity equally? Are organizations mired in these problems because they're trying to be too many things to too many people?

"Why are we afraid to say no to playwrights?" Nan Barnett asked, triggering a lengthy discussion of the need for more honesty in communicating with writers. Parker noted that literary managers are often afraid to own the subjectivity of their "no's," preferring to pass the buck to their artistic directors or to hide behind their institutions, as if the buildings themselves turn down writers. "Being able to take the humane, personal risk of rejecting someone who might get angry . . . is actually the way to build a relationship or to build a reputation as someone who traffics that way."

Tanya Palmer and Martin Kettling agreed, but questioned the limits of giving a frank response to a writer. "When I don't like something, my honesty isn't helpful," said Kettling, prompting Parker to offer his own manifesto bullet point: "Could we please have a moratorium on copious feedback to people that we're rejecting?"

Dower steered the conversation back to the gatekeeper question, and to the impression left by *Outrageous Fortune* and his own experience of the field that literary managers still have "little to no authority" when it comes to the "yes" that writers are waiting for. Several speakers took exception to being characterized that way, conceding that while their artistic directors, appropriately, have the final say in selecting a season, they themselves have a strong voice at the table and an ability to advocate for writers in a variety of ways, whether that means bringing writers into the life of an institution through other channels—residencies, readings, workshops, commissions—or working to hook playwrights up with opportunities at other theaters. Influence, they insisted, is about more than "the slot."

A somewhat nonplussed Dower persisted: then why is there a perception in the outside world about new voices, new forms getting stuck at the gate? Ignacia Delgado had a two-pronged response: some work *is* getting stuck at the gate, particularly work by people of color, but there's also a reluctance on the part of playwrights to self-produce or to seek out small local companies, and when they don't get accepted by the name brands, they blame the system. "It's a Catch-22."

Palmer parsed the issue differently. It's not, she argued, that literary managers are selling playwrights a bill of goods about how the system works—some plays *do* come up through the submission process, while others follow more idiosyncratic, relationship-based routes. The problem is the perception that work is "supposed" to happen that way, when in fact, "that's just *one* of the ways that things get produced."

And if *no* work is getting done that way in a theater that maintains standard lit office procedures, Christian Parker added, pushing hard on the subject of the disconnect between literary office activity and an artistic director's leadership (which came up frequently in the

convening as a cause of lit office malaise but was never explored in detail), “that’s an internal problem.”

“Is nothing actually broken?” asked an incredulous Dower, bringing the session to a close just as it started to get interesting, and tossing out an assignment for the final breakout session: “If we are doing things right, what is the literary office of the 21st century as it relates to the gate?”

But before the group dispersed, Heather McDonald offered this thought:

I wonder if the question is limited. If you’re doing something right for the existing story, isn’t the larger question, is the story shifting? People are being forced to defend something that has worked for what has existed, but I think . . . a seismic shift is affecting how we’re going to create live performance.

In doing so, she put her finger on something that may have hampered the convening from the start: its understandable focus on existing institutional structures. To be sure, an interrogation of prevailing literary office practices is in order—there’s good and bad news to be shared—but even the reform of those practices sidesteps the larger question of whether the institutional model itself, as many would argue, is rapidly courting obsolescence. “Literary management” as we’ve come to know it may be going down with the ship; perhaps the question now is “whither dramaturgy in the 21st century?”

It’s strange to consider that literary management, such a young profession, may already be on the verge of superannuation, and the convening labored, perhaps too mightily, to honor its origins, its mutability, and its best practices, when all the while, purpose, not policy, was breakout-ready.

The Relationship Between the Literary Manager, the Dramaturg and the Rehearsal Room

“What’s love got to do with it?”

--Tina Turner

The final roundtable, ostensibly focused on the conflicting demands of the literary office and the rehearsal room and how the institutional dramaturg navigates them, was springloaded with the unresolved questions of the previous session and the detritus of the intervening breakouts, which ranged widely in subject matter and energy as participants struggled to identify a coherent framework for their responses. Here’s Amy Freed, in one breakout group:

The conversational prompts of the convening subject . . . seem to imply that there’s a need for a shift and I wasn’t sure if that was coming from a sense of the theater generally [being] in crisis, which we know, so are we talking about where literary fits in to pushing toward the trouble zones, which is a big cultural question? Then there seems to be a subsidiary topic of how . . . hordes and hordes of playwrights are served or not. . .

If there was an impulse to expand the paradigm of the discussion at this point in the conference, to face the “seismic shift” problem head-on by asking how we, as a group, can shape the discourse of who we are and what we do, it was kept in check by the rules of engagement (another limited circle of roundtable panelists) and by a topic that continued to tie the debate to the day-to-day functioning of the literary office.

The literary manager/dramaturg/rehearsal room Q & A, taken up conscientiously by the panel (Danielle Amato, Amy Freed, Erik Ramsey, Janine Sobeck, Jerry Patch, Karen Zacarias, Martin Kettling, P. Carl, Rachel Chavkin, Emily Morse and Julie Dubiner), seemed designed to reflect the assumptions that the literary office represents the enervating, clerical side of the profession, the rehearsal room is a stand-in for artistic empowerment, and the dramaturg is liable to be sucked into the first and shut out of the second. But it didn’t quite play out that way, as not everyone was inclined to view the rehearsal room as the holy grail of dramaturgical ambition.

Karen Zacarias advocated for “activating” the dramaturg early in the process when a theater undertakes to produce a new play by a living writer, allowing the dramaturgical voice to be a part of all pre-production planning. For Amy Freed, having a dramaturg in the room “has been a lifeline and saving grace for a lot of productions.” Jerry Patch, on the other hand, argued that a dramaturg’s work is “90-95% done” by the time rehearsals start.

P. Carl made the case that the dramaturg, who often knows the playwright’s history, imagination and style better than anyone else on the creative team, is essential to the process of creating new work, including and especially in the rehearsal room, but that in the institutional theater, “somehow that integral role is not acknowledged as integral,” partly because other workday obligations mitigate against it. The sprawl problem again. At the same time, Carl wondered, would it behoove institutional dramaturgs to shift their energies and expertise to other fronts, rather than obsess about “the room, the room”?

Julie Dubiner, Danielle Amato and Jerry Patch all spoke of setting their priorities as they see fit, and of balancing rehearsal time with other occupations. “One thing that makes dramaturgy so attractive is the variety,” Danielle Amato said. “I think a lot of us are omnivorous.” Janine Sobeck seconded the observation, noting that dramaturgs can, to some extent, follow their own interests and appetites, as long as they’re in line with the missions of their theaters.

For Dower, this line of reasoning was obviously troubling. “This group of people, more than any group of people we’ve had, keeps coming back to what works for you personally,” he said. “But I’m not sure that’s relevant. How is that relevant?”

Sure enough, the friction woke everybody right up. “But in the best of circumstances,” rebutted Rachel Chavkin, “isn’t that what defines the institution? Doesn’t the personal have a place in defining it?”

The ensuing conversation tackled the question of joy, which Liz Engelman had raised as a guiding principle early in the conference. Where, in the intersection of personal fulfillment, professional responsibility and artistic stewardship, is it to be found? Patch cut to the chase with “I hear a lot of ‘what makes me happy.’ They didn’t hire me to be happy. They hired me to do the best I could for a play and the best I could for a playwright. That’s my job.” Amy Freed, meanwhile, painted a compelling picture of a dream theater with dramaturgy as part of its “brain stem,” but Carl resisted this siren call with the reminder that art-making is not at the center of most of our institutions.

At issue, fundamentally, were two very different notions of joy: one that results from artistic well-being at an almost molecular level, emanating from a theater’s core values, and one that is merely opportunistic. Deb Stein articulated it this way:

In a functional working environment, people pursuing what gives them joy can be very, very productive. But if it’s set up that that’s the only way to [find] a ray of light in a soul-crushing environment, then it’s not going to work. The problem doesn’t start with the individual pursuing joy, the problem starts with the economics of the American theater.

Designing the Literary Office of the Future

“I think it’s a lot easier to be brave with concrete action items.”

--Aaron Carter

As the convening drew to a close, Dower invited all of its participants to call out the bright spots in literary office practice—whether aspirational or experiential—that had emerged from the two-day gathering in an effort to crowd-source some energy and forward-thinking on the subject.

Heather McDonald grounded the inquiry with a reminder to “start with why,” citing Simon Sinek’s book of that title, and Christian Parker urged the group to “summon the courage” to help define the “why” within their respective organizations and to push back against calcification.

Defining his own “why” as “advancing the infrastructure for new work and the people who make it,” an avowed policy goal of AVNPI, Dower emceed the brainstorming session informally, more interested in priming the pump than devising prescriptions. He identified three hotspots from the preceding conversations: the ubiquitous script pile vis-à-vis a national database; the problem of sprawl, time management, and artistic focus; and the role of the dramaturg in safeguarding the authenticity of an institution’s “mission, purpose and processes.” Conscience of the theater, anyone?

On the already much-discussed subject of a national script database, Martin Kettling proposed a survey to determine how much duplicate script reading *is* going on. Some continued to express reservations about a national database, preferring smaller-scale script-sharing models,

such as a revival of LMDA's script exchange program, while others preferred to look to their own institutions for help with the pile. More staff-wide script reading and conversation around season planning was held up as a goal, and Amy Freed mentioned that as a playwright-in-residence, she would consider it a "welcome responsibility" to be reading plays on behalf of a theater.

Other widely-supported infrastructure recommendations included building more transparency into script submission policies (with a shout-out to the New Georges website in this regard); following Woolly Mammoth's lead in collaborating with or creating outside departments to manage audience engagement; and creating more lead time in production calendars so writers can have more of a say in how their plays are marketed and produced. Julie Dubiner took exception to the last suggestion, pleading instead for the opposite: finding ways for organizations to do things later, so art-making is less subject to administrative deadlines and their cart-before-the-horse consequences.

Nearly everyone wanted to talk about better ways of serving playwrights, and to think creatively about what institutions have to offer beyond money and a slot, which will always be far outstripped by demand. Aaron Carter's idea of holding "office hours" as a way of meeting local writers was an instant hit. P. Carl, on a similar note, suggested "knowledge sharing sessions" as another means of providing community access to an institution's artistic life. Of course money is nice too: Lauren Gunderson was impressed with Kennedy Center's policy of paying writers to draft a commission idea, rather than asking them to work on spec.

Ideas big and small, pragmatic and pie-in-the-sky, geeky and grand bubbled up before Dower conducted a final chorus of Things to Keep, Things to Toss. Top hits on the baby list: relationships, humor, transparency, stewardship, risk, nimbleness. On the bathwater list: guilt, timidity, one-size-fits-all, fluorescent lights and bad furniture.

Fittingly enough, the convening gave the last word to playwrights. Every dramaturg in the world has a secret stash (aka heartbreak list) of favorite plays that, for one reason or another, have yet to be produced. Scenes from four of those plays (*Bay of Fundy* by Sherry Kramer, *The Etymology of Bird* by Zakiyyah Alexander, *The Further Adventures of Suzanne and Monica* by Alex Lewin and *What to Listen For* by Kathleen Tolan), nominated by smitten dramaturgs Liz Engelman, Ilana Brownstein, Raphael Martin and P. Carl, respectively, were showcased in an hour-long script-in-hand reading featuring DC-area actors and smartly directed by AVNPI intern Jason King Jones. The after-dinner event, collectively titled *Stuck at the Gate*, was a low-key affair, a grace note to a gathering of whatever-they're-called, united at least in their determination to leave the door ajar.