

Sure Lines? Reflections on dramaturgy in participatory dance and performance

After a galvanising conversation with emerging dance dramaturge Miranda Laurence, Dance Artist and Lecturer **Ruth Pethybridge** reflects on her own new role as dramaturge with Simon Birch Dance, what this means for her evolving practice and how the role raises particular questions and opportunities for the participatory dance sector

Last year I was invited on board as a 'dramaturge' to an ambitious and exciting project with Simon Birch Dance called *Shoreline (1)* set on the coast of Cornwall. Having worked before under titles such as 'Dance Artist', 'Community Dance Artist', 'Choreographer', 'Facilitator' and 'Rehearsal Director' I was intrigued by what this title might mean; how it was distinct from other roles I had previously inhabited and therefore inform a development of my artistic practice. This article is an attempt to situate and explore some of those

reflections and in conversation with Miranda Laurence, to ask important questions about how dramaturgy might function in the participatory dance sector.

My role with Rosemary Lee on her site specific work *Square Dances*(2) in 2011, as one of four rehearsal directors, had already piqued my interest in being in a supporting role. There is a space between this title and that of the choreographer with overall artistic responsibility for a piece of choreographic work that was interesting to explore. I found

there was something liberating about being part of a creative process that I respected and enjoyed but was not, ultimately, the author of. Lee has spoken before about 'stewardship'(3) as a way in which she works with her participants. In this role I felt I was a steward of the work, a gatekeeper of the ideas and of the particular movement qualities that we had worked carefully to draw out of the children involved in *Square Dances*.

'Dramaturgy' is a term originally coined by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, an art critic cited as the

Anthony Middleton, Simon Birch Dance, *Shoreline*. Photo: Steve Tanner



first dramaturge for his work with Hamburg National Theatre in the 1700s. So while it may be new to me as a way of thinking about my practice, it is a term that has been in circulation for some time. According to Bert Cardullo(4) there was an explosion in dramaturgical practice in the 1970s and 80s in theatre. However there nonetheless remain many different perspectives about this role - what it means and can be. Dramaturgical practice in dance too has its own concerns and is now an established field in its own right, albeit an ambiguous one. It appears to be currently gaining currency in the dance sector as not only the preserve of high profile artists and choreographers. Lou Cope(5) for example is taking up residence at South East Dance, offering training and mentoring to emerging dramaturges and choreographers alike in order to facilitate this specific relationship. She sees dramaturgy not only as a process which evolves alongside the through line of a piece of work - 'a practice of process' as she puts it - but also as bigger than the work, 'the world around the work'. It is also how the artist themselves develops over the course of a project(6).

When Gotthold originally referred to it, dramaturgy dealt with the theory and practice of dramatic composition relying on written plays and the interpretive possibilities of such texts. Rather than a text however dance dramaturgy relies on a much broader and perhaps tacit understanding of choreographic thinking and bodily practice. It is not surprising then that in 1997 Heidi Gilpin (William Forsythe's dramaturge) identified that dance dramaturgy and its processes had been largely overlooked by literary and theatrical critics(7). This is despite the expansive perceptual possibilities of dance. Dance opens up the way composition, staging and presence are all thought of and blurs the lines between dance and theatre and choreographer and performer. Particularly in contemporary devised performance and community practice these lines are no longer sure.

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According to Synne Behrndt, the debates about the role of the dramaturge have been productive. They have allowed a shift in focus from 'from the static notion of 'the dramaturgical role' and the dramaturge as a figure of intellectual authority towards inclusive and democratic models, with the dramaturge as a facilitator of dramaturgical thinking' (2010, 186). This is a helpful shift for me too in approaching my role on Shoreline. I can see parallels in how my skills as someone who has worked extensively in the participatory dance sector come into play. Dramaturgical thinking means facilitating this very thing in others through asking the right questions, proposing choreographic strategies and approaches and working with concepts and themes rather than necessarily techniques and forms. It is therefore not the sole preserve of 'the dramaturge' as such but a way of being open to an evolving process in relation to other collaborators and an overall artistic vision.

Dramaturgical practice also addresses the hierarchies and power relations of a collaborative process through explicitly disrupting the notion of a singular authorial voice - as Andre Lepecki puts, it the very presence of a dramaturge calls into question 'the authorial stability of those who are supposed to know the work to come'(8) (190). This disruption of authorial and authority positions is also important in participatory dance practice. For example, in making work in particular inclusive settings my creative decisions are less to do with my own perspective or aesthetic sensibilities and lie instead with the creation of an inclusive and democratic process. Laurence identifies this as the crux of

the issue of the dramaturgical role in participatory performance: 'finding a balance between participants as performers serving the work and the work made enabling participants to have the best individual journey they can have as artists'(9). These concerns overlap with well rehearsed debates in the sector about whether aesthetic quality and participant experience are necessarily mutually exclusive or process versus product and the very role of performance or aspiring to excellence. Not debates I will reiterate here therefore but ones that the role of the dramaturge in a participatory setting brings into relief.

In the context of Shoreline, choreographer Simon Birch has identified my role as being 'to help research themes, provoke, challenge and be an outside eye throughout the creative process'. In this case being a dramaturge is not only about the supporting role I had in Square Dances, but involves willingness to challenge and interrogate the creative processes. It is the opportunity to become a dramaturge in the sense that Hans-Theis Lehmann and Patrick Primavesi refer to it as 'a negotiator for the freedom of theatrical experimentation and risk'(10). Taking artistic risks means being open to failure, something that at times the participatory dance sector has found hard to acknowledge in a bid to celebrate successes and justify government spending. However engaging with mistakes as part of the making process can be an important part of evaluation and progression in artistic practice. Bojana Cvejick(11) takes it a step further and puts it that the dramaturge is a very special collaborator who is the 'friend of a problem' - or even the producer of said problem. Cvejick is also careful to place dramaturge and >>

Dramaturgy

Below and far right Emily Dobson and Anthony Middleton, fourth image Emily Dobson, second, third and fifth image Anthony Middleton. All from Simon Birch Dance, Shoreline. Photos: Steve Tanner



choreographer on an equal footing in their ignorance of how any creative process will unfold; I enjoy how she refers to Dutch theater maker Jan Ritsema's articulation of the role as a 'co-thinker in process' with and alongside the choreographer. This is a position that is distinct from the participants or performers but equally distinct from the position of choreographer, therefore creating a kind of triangulation – an extra facet for reflection that could be extremely useful when engaging with the multiple agendas in participatory dance practice (often striving for both positive empowerment and artistic excellence).

Indeed there are many situations as a community dance artist, faced with a village hall full of people and the organised chaos of dance making unfolding, that I would have welcomed such a collaborative presence – 'a second brain' as Laurence calls it. This would be whether or not 'the work' was seen as residing in a final piece or in the shaping of an evolving process and the tasks and activities that form it. Dramaturgical thinking can and does function in both.

The interrogative aspect of dramaturgical thinking however could also prove problematic in the community dance sector. Projects or performances may involve vulnerable members of society, those seeking safety from difficult questions, or simply where the aims are to empower participants by confirming their individual movement vocabulary and choices. However as a researcher in the community dance sector I have long been arguing for the use of stronger critique without fear that this undermines our practice. Instead interrogation and provocation – carefully directed and articulated – as aspects of dramaturgical thinking can surely move the sector forward to embrace new ways of composing our working processes.

Similarly, the Shoreline public engagement programme seeks not only the Cornwall of postcard beauty but explores the borders and thresholds that exist in the poverty stricken areas of the country and the issues faced by immigrants in an area that has little racial diversity. What is more, bodies on beaches can no longer be thought of neutrally

in light of the current migration crisis that forces us to rethink the shoreline as another border. So in addition to drawing material from the environment itself, the rocks, the water, the sand, the stories of family holidays; Birch also sees the shoreline as a metaphor for our deep-seated fears, especially in relation to notions of territory and borders. Working with Birch I will be considering the broader aspects of the project's site specificity. Participants in the social engagement programme will be invited to consider this also, sharing their experiences of significant events and places through activities including mark-making, mapping, visual art, movement and moving image activities/workshops. As dramaturge I hope to be facilitating the conceptual consistency of such activities so that they serve the vision for the project as a whole in a cohesive way.

Another common conception of the dramaturge in an interpretational role is that they function as Laurence points out as a 'first audience' or hold some responsibility for the audience perspective as someone outside the work. However in works like Shoreline



and many other site specific pieces audiences are no longer static and passive but have their own agency. As a result this conception of the dramaturge is not so easily applied, given that the 'outside' may in fact be inside, around and within the work, viewed from multiple and changing perspectives. In the same way the idea of the 'outside eye' can be problematic in participatory projects in that much community based work relies on the non-hierarchical values that put dancers and choreographers as equals in an inclusive collaborative process. In settings that require this inclusivity, the role of the dramaturge may need to be qualified, carefully managed and perhaps re-negotiated, particularly in terms of what point they enter the creative process. Instead of thinking of being on the outside looking in, it is useful to consider Lepecki's proposition that the dramaturge is 'an implicated witness who is very close to the process in order to ask the right questions and find solutions from within.'⁽¹²⁾

Finally, as Cvejick points out, there is no 'success formula' to the work of dramaturgy. In the same way that

a dance artist working in community settings must be responsive, the role and practice of the dramaturge will be different in every project/s she undertakes and is contingent on many different factors. It is the dialogic and relational aspects of the role that lends itself to my background in participatory dance where being open and responsive to others and their feelings and values is as important as any knowledge of pedagogical techniques or methods.

I look forward to continuing my own dialogue with Laurence, with choreographer Simon Birch, and with the wider sector on whether and how the participatory dance sector can usefully embrace dramaturgical practice; and whether or not the lines are sure, I am looking forward to setting sail on Shoreline as I explore this personal evolution in my choreographic practice and thinking.

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References

1. Shoreline is a live site-specific dance and choral directed by Simon Birch which will be performed as part of SALT Festival in Cornwall from 9th July in stunning coastal locations whilst also undertaking public engagement activities and a primary school education program. Visit www.simonbirchdance.com
2. Rosemary Lee's Square Dances, commissioned by Dance Umbrella festival 2011, took place in four public squares in London
3. Rosemary Lee (2008) Aiming for Stewardship not Ownership in Diane Amans 'Introduction to Community Dance'
4. Cited in Synne K. Behrndt (2010) Dance, Dramaturgy and Dramaturgical Thinking, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20:2, 185-196
5. Cope began her work as a dramaturge after researching devised collaborative processes in theatre working alongside choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui before becoming his dramaturge
6. Cope in conversation with Becky Edmunds for South East Dance
7. See (4)
8. Andre Lepecki 'We're not ready for the dramaturge: some notes for dance dramaturgy'
9. Personal correspondence January 2016
10. Hans-Theis Lehmann and Patrick Primavesi (2010) Dramaturgy on shifting grounds in *Performance Research: A journal of the Performing*, issue 14 *On Dramaturgy*
11. Bojana Cevick (2010) The Ignorant Dramaturg, vol. 16 no. 131-132 (Summer 2010), pages 40-53 accessed on sarma.be Jan 10 2016
12. Turner and Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, in Behrndt 2010, p195.