Noise as Queer Dramaturgy: Towards a Reflexive Dramaturgy-as-Research Praxis in Devised Theatre for Young Audiences

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ABSTRACT

Dramaturgy is often considered the work of the 'neutral outside eye', but in devised theatre, the dramaturg is embedded within. This requires creative solutions for how a devising dramaturg might navigate engagement with the totality of their work—the piece, the devising process, and the context—from their own position within all three. In this article, I will recount and re-examine my work as dramaturg-researcher devising Martha and the Event Horizon. The research inquiry suggests a praxis of dramaturgy-as-research inspired by Home-Cook's model of noise as a function of attention and Sullivan's (2003) poststructuralist analysis of queerness as both being and doing, wherein the devising dramaturg embodies the queer doing to take an external perspective on their work via the critical context. Examinations of the devisor's relationship to spectators by practitioner-researchers Goode (2011) and Reason (2010) respond to the research question and suggest a non-linear model within which the audience

experiences meaning through Boenisch's (2010) reflexive parallax. Placing these research outcomes within Bryon's (2014) 'active aesthetic' and Nelson's (2013) practice as research model, I propose the dramaturgy-as-research praxis as the key to a rigorous, flexible framework for constructing diverse avenues for meaning-making in devised theatre, particularly applicable to audience-driven work.

I am a dramaturg, which means nobody ever seems to know exactly what it is that I do. Historically, dramaturgy is often considered the work of the 'neutral outside eye': an external practice of observing and critiquing structures of meaning in text-based performance. In devised theatre, where artists with or without formal roles create the (non)textual material as an ensemble, dramaturgs are embedded within the creative process, not outside of it. In devising, structures of meaning include performance, production and reception dramaturgy (and textual dramaturgy when text is present)[1] but the dramaturg's role also includes crafting and analyzing structures of meaning in the creative process *itself*. How then might a devising dramaturg find the perspective to do this work without turning to endless navel-gazing? In the foreword to *New Dramaturgy*, Katalin Trencsenyi argues that dramaturgy has become 'process-conscious', "synonymous with the totality of the performance-making process […] the inner flow of a dynamic system" (2014, p. xi). This process-consciousness extends throughout the work's development, requiring creative solutions for how a devising dramaturg might navigate engagement with the totality of their work—the piece, the process, and the context—from their own position within all three.

It becomes useful to break down the devising dramaturg's work into three phases: first, construction of process: did that exercise work for us? If the theme is noise, how can we use noise as a devising tool? Next, dramaturgy of the material and production: is our narrative

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[1] This breakdown of dramaturgical tasks comes from White (1995). This breakdown is not well-suited to the dramaturgy practiced by dramaturgs in today's (often non-textual) performance contexts. It is, however, useful here as this article focuses on the relationship between audience reception and the creative process. It is worth noting that in the United States in particular, dramaturgy is fused with textual theatre to the point that, even in the thorough *What is Dramaturgy?* (Cardullo, 2000), not once does an American dramaturg discuss their work outside the context of plays and text.

carrying tension the way we want? Does the lighting support the theme in this moment? Then, there is a third phase: a reflective practice of deconstructing the relationship between the first two phases and how they create meaning together within the context of the wider field. It is this third phase, which I am calling dramaturgy-as-research, that will be the focus of this paper. I propose dramaturgy-as-research as a solution to the problem of navel-gazing since it uses critical context as a means to shift the dramaturg's perspective so they can observe the work from within and without. First, I will outline how this process of shifting perspectives was derived from Nikki Sullivan's (2003) analysis of queer studies as a poststructuralist *doing*, exemplified by George Home-Cook's (2011) model of noise as a function of attention. Then, to illuminate how this process might work, I will re-examine the dramaturgy-as-research phase of my MA thesis work as devising dramaturg of *Martha and the Event Horizon*[2] at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Deconstructing the interplay of queer/noise structures in one key moment of practice answered an initial research question of how a particular shift in intended audience came about. Further, addressing that discovery suggests a reframing of the dramaturgy-as-research praxis within Bryon's (2014) 'active aesthetic' and Nelson's (2013) model of practice as research to include and prioritize the practitioner-researcher's experience of meaning-making as a key part of the praxis.

THE QUEER 'DOING' OF DRAMATURGICAL NOISE

I began my dramaturgy-as-research phase just after *Martha*'s final performance, looking back at how the work's relationship to audiences shifted over time. *Martha*'s instigating question was "Can we make a single, queer, noise-based performance that is engaging and challenging for adults, teens, and children together?"[3] (Kaufman, 2015). However, *Martha* developed to reflect an earlier proposal, a single performance 'not for children' and a separate performance for

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[2] *Martha and the Event Horizon* was devised by [Alter] (brackets are part of company name) at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and performed at the Camden People's Theatre in August 2015 as part of the Camden Fringe Festival. *Martha* was directed by Roxana Haines and performed by Jess Kaufman and Griffyn Gilligan, devised by all three.

[3] For this project, I defined children as under age 12, teens as 12-19, and adults as 20+.

children which was never realized (Kaufman, 2015). For this posthumous research investigation, my key question was: why did that happen? What key decisions contributed to our shift in audience? Chris Goode, a theatre maker and researcher based in London, states that while creating "we are constantly aware of [the audience] as a present body" (2011, p. 464). In devised theatre, it is the dramaturg's job to maintain this awareness, listening to the various structures in place and how they interact with the audience and the makers. Having just closed the show, I was still feeling very much inside it, so I selected a critical context to offer myself a different perspective from which to listen.

Drawing from our themes—noise and queerness—I turned to Goode's (2011) noise-based devising practice and George Home-Cook's (2011) theory of noise as a structure of attention. Home-Cook considers sound/noise as structures of attention, arguing that "rather than understanding theatre 'noise' as unwanted or unintended sound," noise is best understood by focusing on the signal/noise *relationship,* as "phenomenologically speaking, listening is an act of *attention*", of foregrounding and backgrounding to capture meaning (2011, pp. 107, 103). Thus, noise is defined as sounds that are un-attended and outside the structures of meaning, or meaning-less, and defining noise becomes an act of meaning-making. The meaningful sound and the not-meaningful noise become interdependent structures, reframing noise as a poststructuralist dramaturgical act. Goode applies this theory in devising with "make a mark, make a mess, make amends" (Kaufman, 2014), which I learned in a workshop with him prior to creating *Martha*[4]. Mark-mess-amends uncovers 'meaningful' material by separating it out from 'noisy' material: the 'mess' (a series of tasks), separates the 'mark' (an initial invitation) from the devisor's intentions, generating a large body of material Goode calls noise. The 'amends' filters that material through the artist's 'why axis' to discover and select moments that align with their values, distilling the material down into a 'meaningful' performance (Kaufman, 2014). In the initial devising phase for *Martha,* I interwove mark-mess-amends with my own 'banking' exercise to uncover our instigating question: we

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[4] I attended Goode's "Make a mark, make a mess, make amends" workshop at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in October 2014. Citations referring to mark-mess-amends are taken from my personal notes on the workshop (Kaufman, 2014) including direct quotes from Goode which are marked as such.

generated a bank of values and ideas from each individual artist based on prompts I had prepared such as, "My work is ___", "My audience is___", and "___ is crucial in devising". We then isolated what was meaningful to us as a group from the bank, our field of noise. Words like "challenge" and "questioning" led us to "queerness", and "access" and "self-sufficiency" led us to young audiences; after lengthy discussion, "collage", "constellation", and "post-dramatic theatre" were left off our final list (Kaufman, 2015). We learned what was going to be *part of* our process and work by actively attending what was *outside* it: the noise. Whether aural, linguistic, or dramaturgical, noise reflects and clarifies structures of meaning, as it did for [Alter] when we discovered our initial intersection of noise, queerness and young audiences.

A brief foray into queer studies via Sullivan's (2003) poststructuralist analysis reveals how one might take this approach—defining a structure by examining what was excluded—as a model for meaning-making in the dramaturgy-as-research process. Queer theory, as analyzed by Sullivan, offers a further consideration of noise as not just a dramaturgical *being* but a dramaturgical *doing*, as reflected in Goode's practice and mine. Sullivan analyses queer theory in the context of Foucauldian poststructuralism, arguing that because power and resistance (in queer theory, normalization and queerness) cannot exist except in *relation* to each other, the "queer" is both that which is excluded from a structure (a *being*) and a positionality that can be taken with regard to a structure (a *doing)* (Sullivan, 2003, p. 56). Thus, noise is not just that which is outside the dramaturgical structure, but a queer dramaturgical *action*. For example, in mark-mess-amends, Goode generates 'noise' (a *being*) and then tries on the 'noise' material in order to clarify his values in the work (a *doing*). In my earlier example from my devising process with *Martha*, I noted that "post-dramatic theatre" was intentionally left out: *Martha* was driven by narrative, a decision I was not consciously aware we had made until several weeks after that initial meeting (Kaufman, 2015). The bank of rejected values (i.e. post-dramatic theatre) is noise, *being*. My act of examining that noise and noting how that clarifies our group dramaturgical structures (i.e. practicing dramaturgy-as-research) is a queer *doing* that allows me to challenge and clarify the structures of meaning at hand. Naming the noise and then taking a queer positionality to attend to it deconstructs and clarifies my practice with [Alter] as a dramaturg of devised TYA.

UNCOVERING NOISE IN THE PROJECTED (YOUNG) AUDIENCE

Matthew Reason's (2010) writing on young audiences offered another vantage point from which I could observe and critique the interplay of my process and production structures, revealing a framework I unknowingly built into [Alter]'s dramaturgy. Around two-thirds of the way through development, I decided that, while I felt it was in some ways a failure, we needed to change the age range of our piece from 8+ to 11+, effectively excluding children. My reasoning: "this show demands a high level of theatrical competence. The form and semiotics are just too complex" (Kaufman, 2015). Reason lightly deconstructs theatrical competence, broadly defining it as the ability to recognize and decode the constructs of theatre and their interplay with the text or material (pp. 11-12). Assuming that my imagined audience (children under age 11) would not have sufficient theatrical competence placed them as noise outside *Martha*'s audience structure. My focus on dramaturgical clarity and synthesis echoes through most of my documentation, as I wrestled with what Goode (2011) describes as the 'projected audience'. Goode states that while devising, we rarely

> [give] ourselves the freedom to enter into a genuinely responsive, transformative dialogue with [the audience]; when we talk about 'the audience', we're talking in a kind of generality that precisely matches the generality of our own makings (p. 467).

Rather than entering into a responsive relationship with my audience, I generalized them, accidentally defining a structure (theatrical competence) to support my generalization. This reveals that my concern was less with the audience themselves than with their ability to receive my predetermined synthesis. Had I engaged responsively, as Goode suggests, by inviting children to see *Martha*, I might have tested my structure as I did just now, enabling myself to make more deliberate decisions about form and audience. But I did not see it from within the devising process: it was only by taking the different perspectives on my process offered via Goode's and Reason's (2010) theoretical framework that I was able to observe and critique my attachment to synthesis as part of [Alter]'s dramaturgical structures.

But engagement with one's critical context does not stop outside the library: my experience as an audience member at Goode's

Longwave offered a significant contribution to my research. After learning mark-mess-amends, I saw *Longwave* at Shoreditch Town Hall. While I could not figure out the story or 'point' of the show, which appeared to be a series of vignettes about two male scientists in an arctic shack, I had an acute, abstract experience of loneliness, joy, beauty, and loss reminiscent of the 'constellation' and 'collage' that [Alter] set aside early on (Kaufman, 2014). Months later, speaking with a mutual friend of Goode's and mine, I was surprised to discover the play is a narrative love story and there had been technical challenges at the performance which concealed key elements of the dramaturgy. Yet, I still found the work moving. Goode ended his mark-mess-amends workshop arguing that the work does not have to "make sense": if it is meaningful to the artist, it will be meaningful to the audience (Kaufman, 2014). Significantly, Goode separates meaning from synthesis, leaving space for noise in not only how he makes his work, but in how the audience receives it. In the case of *Longwave*, I did not receive Goode's intended synthesis of the text, but experienced a loose constellation of meaning reflecting it. This highlights synthesis as a normalized structure of understanding in dramatic dramaturgical practice; meaning can derive from synthesis, but is clearly not dependent on it, even in dramatic work. Thus, in dramatic theatre, 'noisy' meaning takes the queer position in opposition to the synthesis structure. Looking more closely at experiences of meaning outside that structure makes space for audience diversity, particularly applicable to TYA.

AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR REFLEXIVE DRAMATURGICAL PRAXIS

While this article has, thus far, presented dramaturgy-as-research as the reflective/analytical phase of a more traditional research process, further examination of audience reception structures in TYA not only answered my research inquiry for *Martha*, but suggests further refinement to the reflexive dramaturgy-as-research model. First, to address my initial question. TYA offers a particularly clear example of the audience reception structure Goode references with 'meaning': when a child acknowledges materiality (the people on stage can hear me) via an audible outburst mid-show, adults usually intervene, despite the fact that applause acknowledges the same materiality in the same

way. Even when it makes perfect sense as an expression of sophisticated theatrical competence, we label children's experiences as (literally and figuratively) noisy when they do not match the behavior of adults. Often, this noisiness is "the very behavior which shows that the individual spectators are engaged" (Maguire, 2013, p. 19). In "There Is No Audience", Maguire argues that children's experiences of theatre frequently involve adults forcing them to behave as an audience, despite their inclination to behave as individuals (2013, p. 11). When I excluded children from *Martha*'s audience, I based my idea of engagement on the reception structures of synthesis for not-young audiences—namely adult audiences who are used to seeing theatre. This normalized and privileged one construct of reception (quiet audience) over another (vocal spectators). This supports Goode's (2011) assertion that the constructs of theatre, (in this case, unified, quiet attention) enforce and amplify the structures that hold them in place (behaving as an audience), which keeps us from "truly meeting" the audience: in my case, my young spectators. When I put an age rating on *Martha*, I reinforced a structure of reception dramaturgy that excluded children as queer/noise. Attending both the 'normalized' structure of quiet attention *and* the noise of children's meaning-making experiences might have better executed our all-ages proposal with a noisy, audience-responsive dramaturgy.

This suggests that not only can a spectator's experience include dramaturgical noise, but it is *enhanced* by it. Peter Boenisch (2010), using Goode's (2011) work as an example, suggests a 'parallax' between traditional deconstructed representation/presentation and the loose 'symbolic cosmos' and focus on materiality from performance studies. Reflexive dramaturgy does not necessarily promise a 'solution' that synthesizes the text, its materiality, and the act of spectating *for* the audience; rather, it trusts that meaning-making occurs in the ricochet among their encounters of each, as it did for me at *Longwave* (Boenisch, 2010, pp. 170-172). Matthew Reason's qualitative research on theatrical competence in children aged 5-9 shows that they do in fact engage with the form—what Reason calls "material reality"—and the content— "theatrical illusion"—and further, children delight in examining their experiences and the way these dramaturgies interplay (2010, pp. 59-84). This suggests that young children have the "fairly sophisticated theatrical competence" needed to engage in reflexive dramaturgy (Reason, 2010, p. 75). Oily Cart exemplifies this with what

Webb calls "jazz structure", where lengthy periods of improvisation ("riffs") that directly respond to the audience's reactions are buffered by scripted, structured passages (2012, p. 22). This approach includes reflexive dramaturgy (simultaneous, responsive production and reception) through improvisation, supporting individual spectators' meaning-making via dedicated space to play with emerging dramaturgical noise. When I wrote that my younger audience members might not be able to synthesize *Martha*'s semiotics, I reinforced *synthesis* as the essential dramaturgical structure, but the age-diverse audience intended in [Alter]'s final proposal implies a diverse experience of meaning.

This reflects a fundamental division in the way I considered what makes dramaturgy 'for' or 'not for' young spectators, and suggests a reflexive inclusion of dramaturgical noise as the key to a dramaturgy-for-all-ages. Reflexivity unlocks the dramaturgy for a more diverse set of spectators, challenging habitual ideas of audience, engagement, and dramaturgy. It moves towards Pavis' (2012) post-dramaturgy: "dramaturgy of the signifier, not of the signified" (p. 41). Post-dramaturgy shifts the focus firmly away from carefully constructed systems of meaning and towards the myriad symbolic potential of each individual element as experienced by each individual spectator, resisting or re-setting traditional links between dramaturgy and semiology (Pavis, 2012). As an artist making audience-driven work, my dramaturgy-as-research praxis is no longer centered on 'Will the audience get it?', but 'What might the audience (or spectators) get?' The goal is no longer to craft a clear synthesis, but to carry out a thorough praxis around the heart of the work, constructing avenues for meaning-making through a constellation of signs and structures.

Most significantly, answering my initial research question and discovering how I might address it through reflexive dramaturgy suggests a further evolution of the praxis of dramaturgy-as-research. I suggest this parallax—diverse experiences of meaning through reflexive dramaturgy—as the key to the devised dramaturgy-as-research model. Using critical context to shift perspective makes space to step in and out of the process to observe the complex interweaving axes of process, product, and critical context through the lens of a key question in every phase of the work, not just postmortem. Via Boenisch's (2010) model, the researcher's meaning-making rests not in clear synthesis discovered in any one perspective, but in the center

of a space among the perspectives of theory, practice, and the dramaturg-researcher's experience of them. Significantly, as Goode (2011) suggests, this occurs not after, but *throughout* the process, adding another layer of reflexivity that feeds back into the company's development. This model places the dramaturg-researcher's experience at the center of the dramaturgy-as-research model, evoking Bryon's (2014) 'active aesthetic'. Distilled from phenomenology, the 'active aesthetic' takes the practitioner-researcher away from the "discipline(s) as abstract schematization and toward practice as a lived experience" (p. 24); asking "not what we do, but what our *way* of doing might be, the doing of our doing, the practice of our practice" (p. 25). While my original model of dramaturgy-as-research was more aligned with traditional research models, a focus on reflexivity moves towards the practice-as-research method as described in detail by Nelson (2013). Nelson's "multi-mode research inquiry" (p. 9) places the praxis –"theory imbricated within practice" (p. 37) – at the center of an epistemological model including 'know how' (experiential knowledge, for example embodied cognition), 'know what' (the outcome of mid-process periods of critical reflection), and 'know-that' (critical and theoretical context) (pp. 37-47)[5]. The devising dramaturg's position within becomes a crucial part of the research methodology. While there is much to address regarding this emerging methodology (a thorough conversation is begun in the collection of chapters comprising Part 2 of Nelson's book), it appears that when placed within Nelson's reflexive practice-as-research model, dramaturgy-as-research thus becomes both a viable method for academic enquiry and the key to rigorous new works development in audience-driven devising.

CONCLUSION

When beginning the analytical phase of my research into the dramaturgy of *Martha and the Event Horizon*'s devising process, I turned to the themes of our piece, noise and queerness, for inspiration. Following Home-Cook's (2011) model where noise and sound are interdependent structures defined by attention, I began to re-examine the structures in *Martha*'s devising process. Then, turning to Sullivan's (2003) analysis of queerness as a poststructuralist *being* and *doing*, I

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[5] See diagram on p. 37, followed by in-depth discussion of the key terms on pp. 40-47.

began to deconstruct key moments in that devising process by *doing* the queer work of attending to the things we excluded, and analyzing what reflection those queer *beings* had to offer. Contextualizing this analysis in the writing and practice of current practitioner-researchers Goode (2011), Reason (2010), and Webb (2012), I uncovered an attachment to synthesis that separated me from my audience, moving towards a reflexive model of reception dramaturgy that includes diverse experiences of meaning. Finally, reflection on this process suggests a dramaturgy-as-research praxis where the dramaturg uses research and critical context as vantage points to examine the work and their experience of it. This allows the dramaturg to remain inside the devising process while maintaining a critical outside eye, feeding back into the work in real time and engaging the entire process and their experience of it reflexively (not just postmortem). Nelson's model of practice as research and Bryon's phenomenological 'active aesthetic' offer opportunities for further exploration and development.

If dramaturgy is the practice of critiquing structures of meaning, dramaturgy as research becomes a practice of simultaneous construction and deconstruction which, when placed *within* the devising process, allows one to construct, deconstruct, experience, and critique frameworks in a dynamic, reflexive cycle. The practice of dramaturgy and the practice of research become interdependent structures, and space around one's experience of the two—that reflexive space—offers an elastic model for dramaturgical praxis that can adapt and contribute to the process and product in question, even when they are not yet fully developed. Practicing dramaturgy-as-research awakens new possibilities for how one might approach the creative process with both rigorous dramaturgical intention and an open-mindedness that welcomes individual spectators' diverse experiences of meaning-making. There are, of course, challenges to navigating this developing praxis, but for a dramaturg-as-researcher, devised theatre offers the perfect staging ground for deep investigations into how our creative processes, intentions, and assumptions work together to craft structures of meaning on stage and in the audience. For audience-driven devising, which demands reflexivity in the creative process, dramaturgy-as-research has exciting implications for the development of new forms and processes and welcomes emerging applications of poststructuralist theory as we investigate the complex, dynamic relationships among audience, artist

and art.

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