



Friendship Is No Day Job—and Other Thoughts of a Resident Dance Dramaturg

by Jacob Zimmer

First, thank you to everyone whose collaboration and friendship brought me to this place.¹

Dramaturgy Was My Day Job

From February 2008 to June 2011 I was the resident dramaturg and animateur at Dancemakers and the Centre for Creation. It was a three-year special initiative funded through the Metcalf Foundation.

I entered into the job through a personal and working relationship with choreographer Ame Henderson, whom Dancemakers' Artistic Director Michael Trent had brought in to work on *Double Bill #1*. This connection and a relationship with Trent, which evolved through our common interests in Viewpoints and collaborative processes and our curiosity about what the contemporary might mean, inspired us to apply for the funding.

As far as we could tell, this was the first resident dramaturg position for a dance company in Canada.

Writing toward My Questions and Possibilities

In this article I want to share some of my approaches to dance dramaturgy and some of the things that happened, as well as reflect on my experience of the ongoing relationships between dramaturgs, choreographers (and other creators), and company structures.

Activity not Occupation

Being a dance dramaturg leads to a lot of explaining and talking (or in this case, a whole journal issue.)

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For me, dramaturgy is a way of looking and understanding, of moving toward meaning for the artists and the audience through contributions to working methods, structures, styles, and subject matter (among other things). It is about making metaphorical, historical, and allegorical associations. It is a process of pulling things apart and making connections to the past, to current thinking, to the everyday experience of gender, class, race, language, power, and representation, and also connecting to the pleasure and proposals of the work.

I am a fan of the activity of dramaturgy but not necessarily the occupation. Dramaturgy is a sensibility, not a job description. It is something I bring myself to fully, with all my past and quirks and strengths and hang-ups. It is an emotional service that I relearn with every iteration.²

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Dramaturgy's constant definition is the running joke of conferences and also the strength of the field. The constant reflection and deeply personal formulations is the feature, not a fault.

What This Actually Looks Like for Me

I work with choreographers and collaborators to clarify and deepen the impulses in the work through writing, talking, and other project-conditional methods that articulate values, ideas, and processes in helpful ways to multiple audiences (artists, partners, publics).

Early, before rehearsals, the most important work happens: conversations that clarify the questions and curiosities that lead to making a piece. We talk about how to work, how to create vocabulary, structure, and meaning. We talk about where to work since different rehearsal spaces produce different shows. We talk about when to work since different schedules produce different shows. We talk about what to do in the rehearsal—what kind of training, how much talking, how much doing; should there be field trips, improvisation? Will we work through montage or start at the beginning and work through to the end?

Outside of conversations, I read and daydream on topical, theoretical, and conceptual subjects, finding out what some other people think and allowing tangential lines of thought and inspiration to influence me, since everything is about the show.

This has meant looking up medieval medical practices for Tony Chong and English handbell patterns for Antonia Livingstone; it has meant thinking about the relationship of the group to a solo with Ame Henderson and imagining what could be done in a minute for Michael Trent. Along the way, I have



Jacob Zimmer at Dancemakers.
Photo by Ömer Yükeker



Creation of *It's About Time* at Dancemakers. Dancers L to R: Steeve Paquet, Benjamin Kamino, Kate Holden.
Photo by Ömer Yükeker

brought video, links, and quotes into the room from books or websites I stumbled across and gone off into a corner to write out the "stupid story" (Burrows 47) that I imagine writing.

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Things that Happened #1—Initiation of Study Group

Thinking Out Loud: A Study Group was a regular open get together to read philosophic, theoretical, or critical articles. The study group was initiated in response to a need for more discussion and rigour that could make connections between contemporary thought and contemporary dance artists. This need was identified through conversations with many people

in the Toronto dance community, especially Megan Andrews from *The Dance Current*. Now in its fourth year, the study group includes guest speakers as well as article readings. For Dancemakers, this hosting contribution to the field feeds the company's work and dramaturgy while developing artists and friends whose questions will carry us forward. Ellen Furey attended the first year as a graduating student of the School of Toronto Dance Theatre, and in 2012 she joined the company. These facts are of course not causally connected, but they are rewarding.

I am a *first audience*, someone with great sympathy but a little distance, which can be helpful. I am a step back from the choreographer in the room, able to watch without the involvement, vision, or anxiety that can come with creation. I have the space to make connections and follow wandering thoughts without the responsibility of running the room or deciding what to do immediately. I can try to imagine myself anew as the curious stranger—a character much like me but with less contextual knowledge and no relationship with the performers. This is, of course, an impossible fiction, but it is also a very helpful framework for approaching new creation.

In rehearsal I watch for those metaphorical, historical, and allegorical associations. I watch for connections between concept and what is being done with physicality, language, and space. I look for emergent logic that might be outside of our predictions. I try to evaluate how what we talked about is actually working.

I am a sounding board, someone to talk to after runs and rehearsals—sometimes a therapist or confidant. Who we are and how we deal with others affect and are affected by how we work and what we work on. It is impossible for me to imagine the collaboration without this reality.

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I am also a first writer, scribbling private notes for the choreographer that can offer encouragement and deep questions. I can express to the dancers what I see and feel, how what they are doing is affecting me. I can write paragraphs of inspiration and reflection that help create a shared understanding, to keep the faith.

Addressing the public, I can write blog postings, status updates, program notes, and lead pre- and post-show talks. None of this explains away the work; it provides context, the story so far, and space to share some of my metaphoric wanderings.

When writing and speaking I am aware of different public groups that require different language. I seek to find text to speak to most, text that can excite, help, and add connections, not obscurity, between the world as experienced and the work. We made the formulation of “never underestimate the audience's intelligence, and do not overestimate their knowledge”; doing either can lead to wasteful alienation.

Dance and other more abstract or critical forms are not discussed in broader public fields and as a company with a public mandate, we cannot retreat into closed arenas or expect others (governments, newspapers) to save us. Part then of my work with Dancemakers is to go into the public spheres—on the Internet, face-to-face in classrooms, social settings, and meeting rooms and be a voice that excites and helps bring people toward the work.

Things that Happened #2—The Lounge

If we create a welcoming and generous space for our guests, then they will be more receptive and generous with us. (Cf. Zimmer, “When doing something strange, it's best to be relaxed.”) The Distillery District of Toronto, where Dancemakers is located, lacks affordable and welcoming social space for our audience before and after a performance. Historically, this meant hanging out in fluorescent-lit hallways, late arrivals, quick departures, and less engagement. For the Dancemakers Presents Festival, we pulled the couches from the office into the Michael J. Baker Studio (the smaller of Dancemakers' two studios), put down red carpets from a past work, and brought in standing and table lamps. We made big playful signs and offered shot glasses full of pistachios' and chocolate. We put a coatrack next to the bar. Contemporary dance is full of newness, which can be challenging and even alienating to the unfamiliar. By creating the lounge, I think we helped change that—not by changing the work but by making us as a company and a place less unfamiliar.



Creation of *Adaptation Project* at Dancemakers. Dancers L to R: Robert Abubo, Simon Renaud, Amanda Acorn, Benjamin Kamino, Kate Holden. Photo by Ömer Yükeker

Things that Happened #3—Investigation of “Repertory”

Dancemakers is a repertory company. Michael and I wondered—through conversations—what that means in the context of contemporary, collaborative, and cross-disciplinary work. Stated in broad strokes, a repertory company implies a company of dancers that has access to a body of work that can be performed at any time. New dancers learn the rep—taking on the roles created by previous generations. It hints at shared programs of shorter works that can be mixed and matched. Yet contemporary dance has become a mostly project-based practice, with bands of artists gathering in different arrangements each time, dependant on the project. If Dancemakers is different from that, then how? What does that look like? The questions had started with the Double Bill Series, Trent’s invitation to share an evening with another artist while they were influencing and contaminating each other’s work—moving beyond the traditional distance of the shared program. The question led us to supercharge the interchangeability of performers in *Project 3/2/1*. Three of Canada’s strongest voices in contemporary dance, Ame Henderson, Martin Belanger, and Antonija Livingstone, agreed to make a mixed evening with a trio (Livingstone), a duet (Belanger), and a solo (Henderson) in which the performers rotated through all of the roles each night. Next we approached the Dancemakers archive of work with the *Adaptation Project* in which Trent and the company reimagined a work from the company’s early years: *Following Station Identification* from 1974 by American choreographer Mitchell Rose. These works have not provided answers, but they have explored the edges of the questions of repertory and are examples of the long game of the dramaturgy of a dance company.

Long-Term Relationship

As a resident, I had the rare opportunity to keep working between the shows, applying the strategies and dynamics of dramaturgy to the company itself—looking for the ways one show speaks to the next in a similar way to how I might look at moments in a work. With Trent and, in turn, Richard Van Dusen and Jeanne Holmes, I contributed to the discussions of planning, long-term continuity, and difference in the company’s work. I applied the same sympathetic distance to discussions about the mission of the company as I might when working on the concept of an individual work. As described above, there is a chance to think big and long, a chance that is less a part of the project-based work, which generally is more common in the field.

Long-Term Questions

It is good to have all these things. It would be a good thing to have more than one person doing them. We all have strengths and weaknesses and the same person will not have equal capacity in all these areas. I certainly do not. Contemporary dance is a field that faces a paralyzing scarcity of resources and very real struggles with attendance and connection. Someone concerned and occupied with making connections and advocating for the curious stranger might be able to help. And it is good to have a trusted confidant, someone to talk to. Much of my work happens outside the studio hours: evening conversations in the office, hallway chats, and words over drinks. Listening and sharing perspectives makes us better, no doubt.

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Dramaturgy should (for me) be like friendship: delightful and messy, emerging and distinct. It should be full of coming and going with faith. It can involve fights and falling out and weekends away that heal the wounds without erasing difference.

So I am left wondering what that means for the occupation: resident dramaturg. To be employed as a “friend” is different—maybe not unhelpful but always positioned in quotation marks. What are the variations of the occupation? What kind of person is suited to them? I know without doubt that I am not the dramaturg for most people; I do not think every project needs a dramaturg; I am pretty sure that not every choreographer needs an ongoing dramaturgical relationship; and I do not know that every dance company needs a dramaturg. I am less an advocate for the position than I want to be (or feel pressure to be). Coming from theatre, I am well aware (of the threat, the rumour) of the normalizing effect of company dramaturgs. The notion that new plays are subjected to over-dramaturging is commonly heard and (anecdotally) held by leaders of some of our largest institutions. The practice of pairing up writers with the house dramaturg, who will then, consciously or not, install the house style and concerns, is well deserving of anxiety and inspection.

I am also aware of the danger articulated by Jonathan Burrows: “Sometimes a too sure dramaturgy approximates so strongly to the idea that a consequent piece is being made, that everyone gets fooled—except of course the audience, who are harder to fool” (47).

I do not have answers to these problems.

This is where I write from. It is provisional and personal. Any time I write as the dramaturg, I have questions about voice, rights, and confidentiality. Who do I speak for and with what authority? Am I breaking implicit confidences? There is a tendency to talk in the abstract to avoid crossing lines. I take so much care to avoid hurting the people I love through misrepresentation. And so what does that love mean? Does my day job help or hinder?



Jacob Zimmer at Dancemakers.
Photo by Ömer Yükker

I honestly do not know. An honest not knowing might be a very important part of the job.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the incredible contribution to my life at Dancemakers of Ame Henderson and every choreographer I have had the honour of working with, of former Associate Director Bonnie Kim who taught me so much, and of the inspiring and remarkable company dancers I have had the privilege of working with: Robert Abubo, Amanda Acorn, Ellen Furey, Simon Portigal, Simon Renaud, Kate Holden, Ben Kamino, Pierre-Marc Ouellette, Steeve Paquet, Kate Hilliard, Lori Duncan, Alanna Kraaijeveld, and Clinton Draper. Leora Morris, Kari Pederson, and Christopher Willes contributed to making any of my ideas possible. And, of course, to Michael Trent whose curiosity and commitment lead the way and whose friendship makes it all possible.
2. This paragraph owes everything to DD Kugler and to Geoff Proehl who wrote the book *Towards a Dramaturgical Sensibility*.

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