1 Introduction

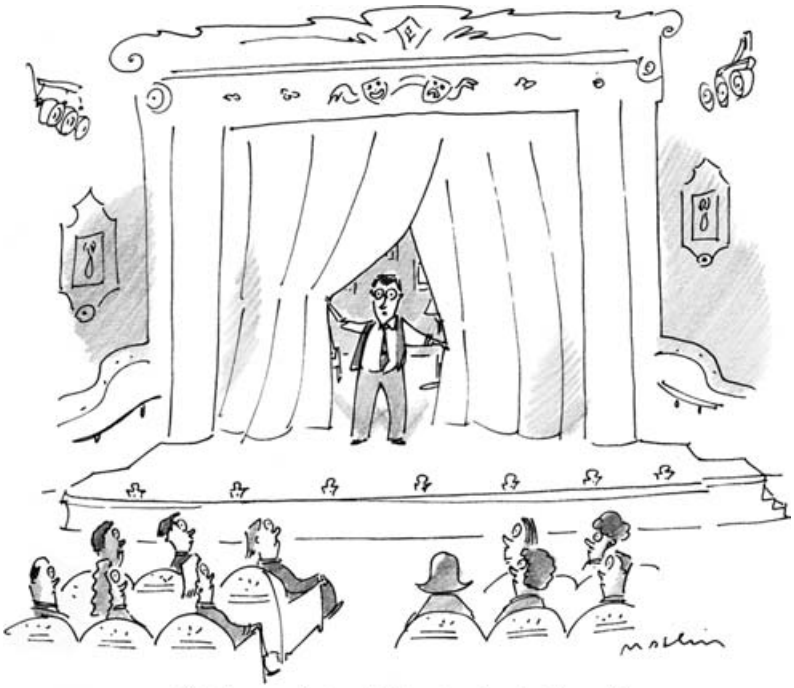
In Germany, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and the Netherlands dramaturgs and literary managers are a lynchpin of mainstream, state-funded theatre, and have been officially employed for well over two centuries. Playreaders, advisers on repertoire and textual, critical and practical experts working in partnerships with directors and/or writers are accepted as an integral part of theatre-making. Similarly, though the history is much more recent, advances in American theory and practice since the 1960s mean that dramaturgy and literary management are now embedded both in subsidised theatre and as recognised disciplines in academic curricula at over forty universities.[1] The latest edition of Brockett's standard theatre history contains significant new sections on both fields, seeking to define differences while acknowledging that the concept of the dramaturg is still not widely understood.[2] England is now belatedly following in the wake of continental and US practice, and its dramaturgical cultures have undergone an extraordinary transformation, particularly in the last decade – a pace of change still so great that it is difficult to keep abreast of developments. Though literary managers became official only in 1963 with the arrival of Tynan at the National Theatre, and professionalisation was at first slow, it quickened exponentially in the 1990s and the number of appointments continues to rise. Literary managers are now key figures in the artistic running of many theatres, and the deployment of dramaturgs, who in England most commonly develop new plays, has become widespread.

This book explores the origins and causes of this recent and revolutionary sea change in English theatre culture: the professionalisation of literary management and dramaturgy. It is a grand narrative

that traces and analyses the transmission of a set of ideas and practices from eighteenth-century Germany to twenty-first-century England, setting English reception history against the larger map of dramaturgical proliferation in continental Europe and the English-speaking West. Historically, the major intellects are Gotthold Lessing, the world's first officially appointed dramaturg, Harley Granville Barker, Bertolt Brecht and Kenneth Tynan – all of whom get chapters to themselves earned by their radical contributions to the troublesome theory and painful practice of dramaturgy, and all of whom have been under-appreciated.

Dramaturgs have traditionally brought contention and the general history of dramaturgy is fraught, full of local battles, accidents of circumstance, and sometimes deliberate attempts to ensure the continued invisibility of the numerous unofficial but vital figures in theatres who acted as playreaders, play-doctors, literary advisers and critical thinkers. Theatrical cultures would have been much impoverished without these functionaries, yet their working lives were conducted out of the limelight and their significance has been overlooked. In many ways, therefore, this book reveals secret histories and seeks to make visible what has been rendered invisible. In the English-speaking West the history of dramaturgy exposes persistent struggles over the control of creative territories and profound cultural resistances to the idea that play-making processes, dramatic literature and repertoire can be objects of intellectual enquiry; it also highlights a deep-rooted suspicion of working models that insist on a dynamic relationship between critical reflection and artistic practice. Even so, the invisibility of playreaders, literary advisers and literary managers in English theatre history is a real curiosity. If the dramatic canon is formed largely on the basis of who and what gets performed (as opposed to published), as it certainly seems to be, then there can be little that is more political than the selection of plays for a repertoire. But who is involved in the selection? Why do they choose certain plays and not others? What is the agenda of the theatre concerned? What underlying state agenda might affect the choices made?

In 1990 an issue of *New Theatre Quarterly* tellingly led with Jan Kott's 'The Dramaturg', an idiosyncratic two-page piece on his experience at the Burgtheater in Vienna: it played perfectly into common



"Is there a doctor of literature in the house?"

Figure 1.1 Michael Maslin, *New Yorker*, 21–8 June 1999 and 9 November 1992.

English prejudices about the dramaturg's essential foreignness and redundancy.[3] Even more revealingly, there was no serious attempt to balance this Kafkaesque account with any description of the tasks of any other working dramaturgs, but merely an assumption that the dramaturg was self-evidently a 'mysterious creature'.[4] Fifteen years later the situation has changed, though not beyond recognition. There is continuing and powerful resistance to the very word *dramaturg*, which can still be met by English theatre practitioners with incomprehension and a belief that self-reflexive dramaturgical processes and the dramaturg's functions must be 'other' to indigenous theatre practices. Nevertheless, dramaturgs have gained greater public attention in the US and England. Their representation in cartoons is a clear sign that they have become part of a popular consciousness in the US (see figures 1.1 and 1.2), and in both countries it is increasingly common to see dramaturgs named in the credits of

Figure 1.2 Joseph Farris, *New Yorker*, 21–8 June 1999 and 9 November 1992.

new plays (a rare occurrence even five years ago in England) – publicity that highlights their rising visibility and the nature of the changes taking place in new play-making cultures.[5]

More controversially, dramaturgy has been the subject of a high-profile litigation case. In 2003 a US court ruled against dramaturg Lynn Thomson, who had filed a claim for a share of the royalties due to the late Jonathan Larsen, author of the smash-hit musical *Rent*. The prosecution was overturned on the basis that no contract between author and dramaturg had been drawn up, though the judge found that Thomson had played a part in 'the radical transformation of *Rent* from an unproducible work in development into a critically and commercially viable play'.[6] Thomson pursued an appeal and the case was eventually settled out of court.[7] In another very public incident, writer, director and RSC veteran John Barton and director Peter Hall

fell out rancorously over Hall's decision to appoint a dramaturg to make substantial cuts in Barton's epic cycle of plays *Tantalus*. Barton eventually dissociated himself from the production, refusing to recognise the script as his own.[8] These examples attest to the ways in which dramaturgs both challenge traditional play-making processes and alter the balance of conventional power structures in theatre. Thomson's willingness to take the Larsen estate to court also indicates a new assertiveness in demanding financial recognition for her pains, and in her desire to be named as an author. Debates about collaboration and credit are likely to intensify as the status of the dramaturg rises in the US and in England, but they also underline the contested ambiguity of the rôle in these cultures.

Definitions and functions

The meanings of the words *dramaturg* and *dramaturgy* are unstable, sometimes bitterly so – 'Few terms in contemporary theater practice have consistently occasioned more perplexity'[9] – yet both words can be traced back to classical antiquity. In Liddell and Scott's *Greek Lexicon* the noun δραματουργια, *dramatourgia* , is a subentry under *dramatourg-eo*, a verb meaning 'to write a text in dramatic form', used by Josephus in his *Jewish War* (75–9 CE).[10] *Dramatourg-eo* is related to *dramatopoi-eo*, 'to put into dramatic form'; *dramatopoia*, 'dramatic composition'; and *dramato-poios*, 'dramatic poet'. Both verbs are active, *dramatourg-eo* containing the idea of working on drama, and *dramatopoi-eo* the idea of 'making' or 'doing', from *poien*. A work attributed to the Pseudo-Lucian *dramatopoiou* literally invokes a 'drama-maker',[11] a creator of plays who can imaginatively compose a drama and realise it on stage.

The earliest reference to *dramatourgia* cited by Liddell and Scott is *The Geography of Strabo*. *Dramatourgia* is translated in the Loeb edition as 'structure of the play', and in this sense describes the organisation of formal elements in a tragedy, the structural composition of action into a dramatically cohesive work.[12] Lucian (*c.* 120–*c.* 180 CE) used *dramatourgia* in *De Saltatione*, 'The Dance', written *c.* 162–5 CE, denoting the 'doing' or 'practice of tragedy'.[13] In this sense, *dramatourgia* is external, the activity of a performance, specifically tragic, in contrast with Strabo's

use of the word to denote inner dramatic action. For *dramatourgos* Liddell and Scott give one reference, again to Josephus's *Jewish War*: Eurycles is the *dramatourgos* of a deplorable plot to betray King Alexander. Loeb renders the word as 'stage-manager';[14] Liddell and Scott prefer 'contriver'. While the subject matter is not directly connected with theatre the passage stresses Eurycles as a worker of drama in the context of his treacherous planning and orchestration of a plot, as well as his own duplicitous rôle-play within it: like the dramatist he has fabricated his story, like the actor he realises it, like the director he manipulates those around him to play their part in his invented world. The *dramatourgos* Eurycles was a man of considerable skills, though it is interesting to note that the word is used in a derogatory sense.

Definitions of dramaturgy as a collection of writings that theorise drama, and as the activity of the dramaturg in the staging of a play, common today, are conceptually linked to another word, *διδασκαλια*, *didascalia* (Gotthold Lessing's working title for the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*). The *OED*, citing the Latin *didascalicus* and the Greek *διδασκαλικοσ*, *didaskalikos*, records *didascalic* as 'Of the nature of a teacher or of instruction; didactic; pertaining to a teacher', mentioning *διδασκαλοσ*, *didaskalos*, 'teacher', and *διδασκειν*, *didaskein*, 'to teach'. In the twentieth century Brecht certainly emphasised the pedagogical import of his redefinition of the dramaturg, and the association of dramaturgs with pedagogy is still powerful: Shannon Jackson opens her book *Professing Performance* with an intellectually unflattering representation of a dramaturg, described as 'the in-house academic of the theatre profession'.[15] An *OED* entry for *didascaly* cites *διδασκαλια*, *didascalia*, in the singular 'instruction, teaching' and in the plural 'The Catalogues of the ancient Greek Dramas, with their writers, dates, etc., such as were compiled by Aristotle and others.'[16] This allusion refers to Aristotle's lost *Didascaliai*, on which he worked from *c.* 334 BCE until his death and in which he seems to have recorded details of dithyrambic, tragic and comic performances.[17] Aristotle's lost but reported work and the whole notion of cataloguing performances and recording the author, actors and time and place of performance greatly influenced theatre chroniclers, particularly Leone Allacci, who titled his eighteenth-century catalogue of

Italian productions in Europe *La Drammaturgia*. Allacci, in turn, was an influence on Lessing's dramaturgical writings.

The *OED* records *dramaturge*, a 'composer of drama', as derived proximately from French (in 1787) and radically from Greek *drama*, 'deed' plus *ergon*, 'work'. Parallels with *thaumaturge* and *thaumaturgy*, respectively 'A conjuror; worker of wonders or marvels' and 'the art of working miracles', suggest a dramaturg as a conjuror of drama; one practised in 'secret' arts of theatre. An 1859 entry from *The Times* is the earliest citation: 'Schiller was starving on a salary of 200 dollars per annum, which he received ... for his services as "dramaturg" or literary manager.' The supposed equivalence with 'literary manager' occurs in many German–English dictionaries, contributing to the confusion. The adjective *dramaturgic* (subhead *dramaturgical*) is defined as 'Pertaining to dramaturgy; dramatic, histrionic, theatrical'; while *dramaturgy* is a separate headword defined as '1. Dramatic composition; the dramatic art ... 2. Dramatic or theatrical acting.' Again the proximate etymology is deemed French, this time with a seventeenth-century tag; but the earliest quotations (supporting sense 1), from the *Monthly Magazine* in 1801 and 1805, name Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*. A French connection is borne out only by an 1837 quotation from Carlyle. Thus indications are that *dramaturgy* and *dramaturg(e)* entered English between 1755 (Johnson records neither) and 1801 from Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*.

Yet until very recently *dramaturgy* and *dramaturg(e)* have been notable absentees in most specialist English dictionaries. In 1966 the *Penguin Dictionary of the Theatre* offered a rare entry:

> *Dramaturg*: German term which resists determined attempts at acclimatisation, despite its usefulness. A dramaturg is a sort of reader-cum-literary editor to a permanent theatrical company; his primary responsibility is the selection of plays for production, working with authors (where necessary) on the revision and adaptation of their texts, and writing programme notes, etc., for the company. The National Theatre appointed Kenneth Tynan to just such a position in 1963, giving him the title 'Literary Manager'.[18]

The term is identified as German, but equivalence with 'literary manager' is preserved, and though more helpful than the *OED* this remained a limited definition, pointing as much to difficulties as to positive senses. Dictionaries in French, German and Italian commonly included both dramaturg and dramaturgy,[19] and comparison with American dictionaries was also unfavourable to English lexicography: *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1971) offered a far more specific sequence of definitions:

> *dramaturge*: a person skilled in the writing or revision of plays; also a functionary of certain European theatres who is resp. esp. for selecting and arranging the repertoire and often cooperates with and advises the producer in the course of rehearsal.
>
> *dramaturgic, – al*: relating to dramaturgy esp. to the technical aspects of play construction.
>
> *dramaturgy*: Gk. *dramatourgia*, dramatic composition, action of the play. See G. E. Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*.
>
> 1. The art or technique of writing drama.
> 2. The technical devices that are used in writing drama and that tend to distinguish it from other literary forms.

The *OED*'s generalising is replaced by attention to process ('writing or revision') and a distinction between a general meaning and specific contemporary European use. Specialist theatre dictionaries published since 2000 now include the term 'dramaturg': the *Continuum Companion to Twentieth-Century Theatre* suggests that many English companies use the 'alternative term "literary manager"'.[20] The *Drama Handbook* contains a brief historical overview of dramaturgy in Europe and gives recent terminology.[21] The *Oxford Encyclopaedia to Theatre and the Performing Arts* goes into welcome detail and again suggests that labels overlap:

> A dramaturg is a person with a knowledge of the history, theory, and practice of theatre, who helps a director, designer, playwright, or actor realise their intentions in a production. The dramaturg – sometimes called a literary manager, is an in-house artistic consultant cognisant of an institution's mission,

> a playwright's passion, or a director's vision, and who helps bring them all to life in a theatrically compelling manner. This goal can be accomplished in myriad ways and the dramaturg's rôle often shifts according to context and is always fluid. As there is no one way to create theatre, there is no single model of the dramaturg.[22]

Overall, the entry is carefully composed, but while the functions of the dramaturg are context-specific, there are theoretical and practical models that have been drawn on – namely, Lessing and Brecht.

Since Lessing, German theatre has dominated critical thinking about dramaturgy and strategically positioned different functions of the dramaturg at the centre of mainstream theatre. The two most prominent German playwrights of the twentieth century, Brecht and Heiner Müller, worked and in part identified themselves as dramaturgs; and it is common German practice to employ at least one dramaturg in a theatre building. In larger theatres the *Chef* or head *dramaturg* reads new plays, assumes a prominent advisory rôle in selecting the repertoire and acts as primary thinker about the political and social objectives of the theatre – what John Rouse calls the 'literary conscience' of the theatre.[23] The *Chefdramaturg* and the rest of the team also work on individual productions as researchers, sounding boards and textual consultants to the director. In the Brechtian model the dramaturg has principal responsibility for research and philological work on the text and historical context, as well as its author; he or she has additional responsibility for editorial work on the text, any necessary translation or retranslation, rewriting or restructuring. Often the dramaturg for a production takes responsibilty for the programme, a task deemed central to educating the public about the play and its directorial concept. In this way the dramaturg is part of an interpretational team that includes the director, designer and actors, *and* is a bridging mechanism to the audience. Volker Canaris has stated:

> The dramaturg became the director's most important theoretical collaborator. Dramaturgy in Brecht's sense comprises the

> entire conceptual preparation of a production from its inception to its realisation. Accordingly it is the task of dramaturgy to clarify the political and historical, as well as the aesthetic and formal aspects of a play.[24]

This model of what is known as the 'production dramaturg' has spread, with variations, across Middle and Eastern Europe and North America, whilst director–dramaturg partnerships, if not always the norm in all continental countries, are visible and articulated.

The search for viable definitions of dramaturgical praxis and a dramaturg's functions have been a particular preoccupation with continental theoreticians and practitioners since Brecht, and have been of increasing concern to North Americans since the 1960s. Recent work targeted at students on dramaturgy courses in the US, such as *Dramaturgy in American Theater: A Source Book*, offers a plethora of contrary positions, and rightly argues that only individual case histories can be taken into account because a dramaturg's or literary manager's functions vary according to the economic and political conditions of production. The vested ideologies, both right-wing and left-wing, behind many of those positions are sometimes overt, sometimes obscured, and the desire of many of the contributors for a rigid definition is striking, but the book does not seek to eliminate contradictions in subject matter, nor proffer sound-bite interpretations.[25] If anything, the over-enthusiasm of some of the contributors to define themselves as dramaturgs and jump on the bandwagon is something of a drawback and blurs an already very complicated picture. Thus *dramaturgy* has acquired a wide range of meanings, from theorisation of the dramatic structure and internal logic of play or performance (it 'is frequently used as a synonym for the theory of drama and theatre'),[26] to the work of a dramaturg who (on the Continent) is usually based in a theatre but (in England) may work freelance. To summarise, one of the two common senses of *dramaturgy* relates to the internal structures of a play text and is concerned with the arrangement of formal elements by the playwright – plot, construction of narrative, character, time-frame and stage action. Conversely, dramaturgy can also refer to external elements relating to staging, the overall artistic concept behind the staging, the politics of performance,