

In-between Figure Working in a Precarious Field: Re-engaging with Notions of the Dramaturg

SOLVEIG GADE

ABSTRACT

This essay is preoccupied with a notion that is often embraced in theatre and performance theory: that of the dramaturge as a flexible, *in-between figure*. Taking into consideration, however, the precarious working and living conditions that freelance dramaturgs are typically subjected to as well as the structural parallels between the flexible dramaturg and the ideal of the agile post-Fordist employee, the article sets out to critically investigate the concept of inbetween-ness. Theoretically, the essay draws on theory formations from theatre and performance theory on new dramaturgies as well as theories from political theory and performance theory concerning the precarious working conditions experienced by a majority of cultural workers today. Empirically, the essay builds on two surveys conducted amongst dramaturgs working in the field of Danish theatre and dance with a view to shedding light on their working conditions, particularly with regards to wages and credit policy. The data obtained in the two surveys is analysed and discussed against the background of the two theoretical strands laid out in the first part of the article. In conclusion, the article ventures the claim that if we wish to create sustainable working conditions for dramaturgs, especially those working on a freelance basis, we need to critically address not only their actual working conditions, but also the notions and concepts through which dramaturgs tend to self-identify.

KEYWORDS

Free-lance dramaturges, inbetween-ness, new dramaturgies, precarious working and living conditions, wages, credits, Danish theatre environment.

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“Freelancing has become a global movement. [...] As creative artists, dramaturgs are used to contract-based work. We make our way through the world on a project-by-project basis and work on many projects at the same time. In a fortunate twist of fate, our mindset and professional abilities have placed us at a cutting edge of these new global employment trends. [...] Freelance dramaturgs can lead the field of dramaturgy. And together we can lead the field of theatre. We have more resources than we think”.¹

In this optimistic tone of voice, dramaturg Anne Hamilton comments on the ostensible ability of dramaturgs to adapt to the insecure working conditions characterising neoliberal and post-Fordist societies. Elsewhere in the same text, she celebrates the special talent of dramaturgs: they can move flexibly between different fields, ranging from performance production to curating, new writing development, culture journalism, and the like.

Taking my point of departure from Hamilton’s observations, in this essay I wish to engage critically with a notion that is often presented in the discourse of theatre and performance studies: the idea that the dramaturg is a flexible *in-between* figure. While this notion is often embraced in theatre and performance theory, I want to point out some of the pitfalls embedded in it by drawing attention to the ways in which the idea of the agile dramaturg working in the *in-betweens* comes close to the ideal of the flexible, post-Fordist employee. My line of argumentation will be plotted against the background of the precarious working and living conditions that freelance dramaturgs are subjected to. In order to pursue my argument, I wish to combine a perspective which centres on the role of the dramaturg work-

¹ Hamilton 2016, 119.

ing in production dramaturgy, with a perspective on the concrete working conditions of the dramaturg. To achieve this end, I will draw on two different strands of theory. First, I will discuss theories on the emergence of new dramaturgies in the last part of the 20th century onwards and the altered role of the dramaturg that comes with those dramaturgies. Second, I will present some of the key points made by political scientist Isabell Lorey and performance scholar Bojana Kunst in relation to the precarity which marks the working conditions of cultural workers today. I will then transfer these key points to the profession of the dramaturg by presenting and interpreting the data obtained by two surveys conducted amongst dramaturgs working in the field of Danish theatre and dance.

Even though it would be pertinent and valuable to conduct an investigation which considered the working conditions of people working in theatre and performance in general, I want to focus specifically on the dramaturg here. This is due partly to the limited space of this article, but more importantly to my conviction that we need to critically address the conditions that the dramaturg in particular is subjected to. My interest in the issue is based on my own 18-year-long experience of working as a dramaturg, both on a freelance basis in the Nordic countries and on a permanent contract at the Royal Danish Theatre. So, to be clear: I do not pretend to be purely objective in my approach to the problem under scrutiny here. On the contrary, I am deeply invested in this area and therefore also biased. However, as I hope will become clear in what follows, fellow dramaturgs seem to share the same concern raised in this article: if we wish to create sustainable working conditions for dramaturgs, especially those working on a freelance basis, we need to critically address the working conditions and the myths to which dramaturgs are subjected, including those harboured in the vocabulary we rely on when wanting to define ourselves.

THE DRAMATURG AND THE LIMINAL NORM

The mastering of a broad range of functions and the ability to move seamlessly between these functions has been key to the profession of the dramaturg since the position was officially established towards the end of the 18th century. At the Hamburg National Theatre in the late 1760s, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing functioned as a playwright, an in-house critic, and an adviser on the repertoire of the theatre. Deeply entrenched in the ideas of the Enlightenment, he set out to raise the standards of German theatre and to educate the audience.² Later on, in the 20th-century theatre of Bertolt Brecht, the dramaturg helped develop the conceptual, contextual, and ideological framework of the performance. S/he was also entrusted with the preparation of adaptations, script editing and translations,

² See Luckhurst 2006, 28-29; Trencsényi 2016, 8-14.

the documentation of rehearsal processes, the writing of programme notes, and the facilitation of audience talks.³ Since the late 1960s, the field of the dramaturg has expanded even more as an effect of the emergence of new (post-dramatic) theatre forms and the concomitant rise of new working methods and production processes. In devised theatre or dance performance, for instance, the dramaturg now assumes an increasingly creative and central role in the shaping of the dramaturgy of the piece in question.

Accordingly, previously dominant synonyms for the dramaturg, such as “critic”, “objective observer” or “outside eye”, are gradually being supplanted by terms like “co-creator of a problem”⁴, “close collaborator”⁵, or “embodied mind”.⁶ In other words, the notion of the dramaturg as an objective, strictly intellectual figure is gradually being replaced by the perception that the dramaturg is a co-creating, embodied subject.⁷ However, at the same time as the *co-creative* role of the dramaturg has come to the fore, and s/he no longer needs to legitimise his/her presence in the rehearsal space through *research* prepared for the production beforehand,⁸ it has become increasingly difficult to identify his/her specific contribution to the performance. As once posited by the highly influential dance dramaturg and former house dramaturg at the Kaai Theatre in Brussels, Marianne Van Kerkhoven: “he/she (the dramaturg, ed.) has no fixed abode, he/she does not belong anywhere. The work he/she does dissolves into the production, becomes invisible.”⁹

The difficulty in pinning down the dramaturg’s specific contribution to a production has become even more pronounced with the widespread tendency in contemporary theatre and performance to generate material collectively and to involve the different members of a production in the shaping of the production’s dramaturgy.¹⁰ Eugenio Barba’s seminal definition of dramaturgy as a dynamic weaving of actions, situated beyond the plot and working directly on the spectator, is often mentioned when trying to explain dramaturgy in the expanded sense referred to above.¹¹ According to Barba, dramaturgy means the work of actions (drama-ergon = “the work of the actions in the performance”¹²) in a sense that is not limited to the actions of the figures in the performance:

³ As pointed out by Mary Luckhurst, in reality the many functions of the dramaturg listed by Brecht in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* were not undertaken by one single person. Instead, at the Berliner Ensemble they were assigned to a whole team of specialised dramaturgs (see Luckhurst 2006, 129).

⁴ Cvejic 2010, 40.

⁵ Lepecki 2008, 157.

⁶ Stalpaert 2014, 102.

⁷ See also Bleeker 2003.

⁸ See Proehl 2012, 64.

⁹ Van Kerkhoven 1994, 144.

¹⁰ Trencsényi 2015, 163; Kaplow Applebaum 2016, 198.

¹¹ Lepecki 2015: 57-58; Eckersall 2006: 284; Boenisch 2014: 227-228.

¹² Barba 1985, 75.

*“In a performance, actions (that is, all that which has to do with dramaturgy) are not only what is said and done, but also the sounds, the lights and the changes in space. [...] Everything that works directly on the spectator’s attention, on their understanding, their emotions, their kinaesthesia, is an action.”*¹³

According to this view, dramaturgy involves work *on* and at the same time of multimodal actions in time and space. Therefore, dramaturgy does not constitute the domain of the dramaturg alone; instead, it belongs to everybody involved in the production.¹⁴

The fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to circumscribe the domain of the dramaturg is reflected in the abundance of recent attempts to shed light on the diffuse role of the dramaturg in contemporary theatre. In *Dramaturgy in the Making*, Katalin Trencsényi designates the tasks of the dramaturg in process-based, collaborative productions as “facilitating and/or disrupting processes to enhance creativity; documentation of the work and the ideas [...]; finding connections in the generated material and linking them back to the developing ‘whole’.”¹⁵ In *Dance Dramaturgy*, Pil Hansen emphasises the ability of dramaturgs to subvert or strategically utilise existing models of dramaturgy. She also points to the knowledge of dramaturgs about the ways in which different decisions may influence the dramaturgy of the overall piece and thereby the possible perception of the spectators.¹⁶ Examples of recent terms coined to describe the practice of the dramaturg include “Compass bearer and cartographer of the process”,¹⁷ “Curator”, “Facilitator”,¹⁸ “Moderator”,¹⁹ “Bridge-builder”²⁰ or simply “hyphen.”²¹

Even though all of the authors referred to here make a point out of stressing that no two performances are the same,²² a common denominator can nonetheless be detected in their definitions. They all regard the dramaturg as an *in-between figure* constantly moving and mediating between different contexts and actors. The dramaturg, then, functions as a mediating link between the director, the actors, the set designer, the lighting designer and others. At the same time, s/he moves between the parts and the whole, the now and the future of the per-

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ One could object that dramaturgy was never the business of the dramaturg alone. Even so, I would contend that the fact that everybody involved in a production process contributes in some way or the other to the forming of the dramaturgy is especially emphasised and brought to the fore in post-dramatic and devised theatre projects.

¹⁵ Trencsényi 2015, 191.

¹⁶ Hansen 2015, 8-9.

¹⁷ Turner & Behrndt 2008, 176.

¹⁸ Trencsényi & Cochrane 2014, xiii.

¹⁹ Cools 2014, 183.

²⁰ Turner & Behrndt 2008, 160.

²¹ Kaplow Applebaum 2016, 198.

²² See Geoffrey S. Proehl, who (in an attempt to evade essentialist definitions of the dramaturg’s work) suggests that concepts from the actor’s field should be deployed such as “role”, “action”, and “given circumstances”. (Proehl 2016, xi-xvi).

formance, as well as between theory and practice.²³ The dramaturg and theatre scholar Geoffrey S. Proehl seeks to grasp this position of in-betweenness by resorting to social anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of ritual and his concept of the *limen*:

“Dramaturgs are (at least potentially) creatures of the limen, individuals who function in spaces most notable for their placement between one stable locale and another – places outside of the routines of daily life that invite alternative forms of behaviour. The work of anthropologist Victor Turner suggests the significance of the dramaturg's liminal status. Turner describes activities at the threshold or on the margins as crucial to our understanding of how a society functions and recognizes this position is charged with potential for transformation and innovation.”²⁴

As indicated here, the work of dramaturgs is sometimes associated with a subversive approach, if not a downright transformation of prevailing norms and structures. Indeed, according to performance scholar Marin *Blažević*, the trope of liminality and its implicit promise of resistance has become so dominant in theories of performance that the critical potential of dramaturgy has increasingly come to be connected with its interdisciplinary character and ability to defy stable categories, rather than with an ideological gesture in the Brechtian sense. This observation leads *Blažević* to compare the field of dramaturgy with performance studies: “[T]hey seem to inhabit the same (liminal?) zone, function and strategy of in-betweenness, of resisting disciplinary constraints and operating in the *inter* of aesthetic performance, academic research, and sometimes even activism.”²⁵

However, as *Blažević* reminds us, back in 2001, performance scholar Jon McKenzie levelled a critique against what he perceived to be a fetishisation of the notion of liminality, prevailing both in performance and performance studies. In the face of the ubiquitous spread of the concept of performance, in particular within new management discourses of global, post-Fordist working cultures, he warned against being blind to the regulating and disciplinary aspects that performance *also* contains. “By focusing on liminal activities”, McKenzie writes, “we have overlooked the importance of *other* performances [...] their function is for the most part highly normative, so normative in fact that one might justifiably align them with the Establishment, the System, the Machine – in short, with the very institutions and forces against which cultural performance has directed much of its efficacious efforts over the past half century.”²⁶

Viewed from this perspective, we should be wary of considering the liminal-

²³ On top of this, dramaturgs frequently function as the link both between the artistic team and the theatre institution (the theatre manager, the department for marketing and communication etc.), and between the theatre institution and the audience.

²⁴ Proehl 1997, 134.

²⁵ *Blažević* 2016, 332-333.

²⁶ McKenzie 2001, 53.

ity or the *in-betweenness* of the dramaturg as a practice that is critical *per se*. In light of the precarious working and living conditions that freelance dramaturgs are exposed to in particular, I would contend that it seems even more important to remember the important critical contribution to the concept of liminality outlined by McKenzie.

“SELF CHOSEN” PRECARIZATION AND THE ARTIST AS A ROLE MODEL

In various contexts, political scientist Isabell Lorey has argued that in today’s late-capitalist and neoliberal societies, short-term and precarious employment conditions have become the rule rather than the exception. Indeed, according to Lorey, jobs requiring flexibility and often a high degree of mobility, but which come without a minimum of social security or benefits such as health insurance, paid holidays or pensions, are increasingly becoming “the new normal” across private, cultural, and scientific sectors. In her text, “Governmentality and Self-Precarization”, she nonetheless posits that for many cultural producers the precarious working and living conditions entailed by project-based work are not regarded as a structural problem. On the contrary, they are associated with personal freedom and autonomy.²⁷ In Lorey’s view, this correlation can partly be attributed to the social movements arising from the 1960s onwards. To many of these movements, precarious labour conditions were aligned with alternative conditions of existence, and they were perceived to add deviance and even dissidence to the normal (working) conditions offered by modern, liberal societies. However, as Lorey argues, drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality,²⁸ since the 1960s this ostensibly self-chosen precariousness has developed into a hegemonic neoliberal instrument of governance. And the cultural worker in particular is often regarded as a model for the flexible, hardworking, and always capable post-Fordist employee.

“Perhaps those who work creatively, these precarious cultural workers by design, are subjects that can be exploited so easily because they seem to bear their living and working conditions eternally due to the belief in their own freedom and autonomy, due to self-realization fantasies. In a neoliberal context they are exploitable to such an extreme that the State even presents them as role models.”²⁹

²⁷ Lorey 2006, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lorey/de>.

²⁸ According to Foucault, within the context of Western modern societies, the concept of governmentality implies that the exercise of power by the state has been translated into a bio-political *self-governing* of sorts. However, for Lorey, *self-governing* is not a phenomenon limited to neoliberal societies. On the contrary, it is constitutive for modern, liberal disciplinary societies. But whereas the combination of self-governing and precariousness represented deviance from the norm in neoliberal disciplinary societies, it has itself become the norm in neoliberal societies of governmentality. Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

Along the same lines, in *Artist at Work* performance scholar Bojana Kunst demonstrates the extent to which (performance) artists excelling in flexibility, performativity, innovation and inter-disciplinarity have come to serve as examples for people working in similarly precarious fields. In this connection, she emphasises that the word *project* has become a dominant term for describing what those who pursue an artistic and creative path do: they work on a project basis. According to Bojana Kunst, the excessive use of the term “project” leads to what she terms “projective temporality”.³⁰ That is, a future that is presented as a continuity of the present, as something already foreseen in the project. An illustrative example here is the way in which those applying for funding for artistic projects must provide (in advance) meticulously calculated prognoses about the content of the project and its possible future impact. According to Kunst, the result of this development is that rather than eliciting the contingent, unforeseen or not yet actualized, the project ends up being about administering the future and recognizing future values on the artistic market.³¹ In other words, time, in the sense of Bergson (*duration*), is taken away from the project.

However, rather than abandoning all hope in the critical potential of art, Kunst encourages us to turn our attention towards the material production conditions of immaterial work. In relation to this, she emphasises the ability of artistic practices to bring to the fore the profound materiality of labour by means of gestures of passivity, laziness, errors, and the like. Such practices, she claims, are connected to “visible senseless spending. It reveals the materiality of work, which is closely connected to time and space and is no longer considered project-type headway towards the goal, but can also embrace long periods of passivity, sleep, inactivity etc.”³²

The precarious working conditions described by Lorey and Kunst certainly apply to dramaturgs. As noted by Anne Hamilton, across the globe, an increasing number of dramaturgs now work on a freelance basis. Based on a wide range of short-term projects on which they often work simultaneously, they piece together their income. In this sense, as Hamilton also points out, the ability of dramaturgs to move flexibly between different contexts (theatre production, education, public talks, curating, culture journalism, etc.) thus proves very expedient within a post-Fordist, neoliberal context. Another way of putting this is to say that paradoxically, the figure that has been associated with criticality since the days of Lessing could now be said to feature as a possible role model for the post-Fordist worker.

³⁰ Kunst 2015, 153.

³¹ *Ibid*, 158f.

³² *Ibid*, 183.

FROM THEATRE CENSORS TO ARTISTIC PARTNERS

In Denmark, the dramaturg is often still regarded as a somewhat superfluous luxury in theatre. Quite tellingly, we only have around ten to fifteen full-time dramaturg positions in a country which has about 117 state-subsidised theatres.³³ Likewise, the notion of the production dramaturg is a relatively recent invention in Denmark. For a long time, the figure of the dramaturg was primarily associated with the critical and judging function of the so-called theatre censors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Founded in 1748, the Danish Royal Theatre had its own “house censors” up until 1953. By and large, these theatre censors would assume the role of what we nowadays term repertoire dramaturgs to the extent that they would read and assess plays under consideration to find out if they matched the artistic profile of the theatre. Likewise, they would themselves suggest plays for production to the theatre management. Some of the censors, for instance Peder Rosenstand-Goiske³⁴ or Knud Lyhne Rahbek, had backgrounds as high-profile theatre critics; and during their service at the Danish Royal Theatre they were appointed members of the executive team by the theatre management. However, with the implementation of a national theatre censorship policy between 1853 and 1954, things changed considerably. Within this period, theatre censors were appointed centrally by the Ministry of Justice and Education, and their duties consisted primarily of protecting and ensuring the observance of the moral customs and laws of the country.³⁵

As a designation of occupation, the term *dramaturg* only gained momentum in the 1960s, when it was typically associated with the development of new plays (especially within the context of the Danish Radio Theatre). In general, the rehearsal space was closed territory to the dramaturg, as his/her critical reflections were perceived to be potentially harmful to the intuition of the artists involved in the creative process.³⁶ However, with the emergence of post-dramatic and devised theatre production and theatre forms over the past twenty years or so, the suspicion regarding dramaturgs has gradually given way to acceptance, and even recognition of the profession.³⁷ From the early phase of conceptualising a piece

³³ See Branth 2008, 9-12.

³⁴ Lessing's *The Hamburg Dramaturgy* was an important source of inspiration for Rosenstand-Goiske, who founded the very first Danish theatre journal, *Den dramatiske Journal*, in 1771. In his writings Rosenstand-Goiske presents a very harsh critique not only of the repertoire presented by the Danish Royal Theatre, but also of the performances of the actors employed there. Even so (or perhaps to stop him talking and thereby put an end to his public critique), in 1780 Rosenstand-Goiske was appointed as a theatre censor at the Danish Royal Theatre. In 1786 he was promoted to the position of member of the theatre's executive team, in which position he served until 1792. (See Andersen 1992, 148).

³⁵ Cf. Kvam 1992, 174-184.

³⁶ See Bille 2000, 38.

³⁷ See Hammershøj Nielsen 2008, 18-20; Lund Joensen 2008, 21-23; Holm Thomsen 2008, 36-38.

and on to its premiere, dramaturgs are now increasingly deployed as collaborative partners. However, this development has not resulted in a notable increase in full-time positions for dramaturgs. Instead, a majority of Danish theatres prefer to make use of short-term contracts.³⁸ So it seems that the growing recognition of dramaturgs has not translated into any improvement in their working conditions, either with regard to rights or security, or (as I will attempt to show below) with regard to wages or being mentioned in the credits.

This assumption has been confirmed by two recent surveys conducted among Danish dramaturgs. The first of these (in 2015) was initiated by the *Association for Danish Dramaturgs* (Foreningen af Danske Dramaturger) based upon data retrieved from 34.5% of the association's members.³⁹ The informants of the survey included production dramaturgs, university professors, high-school teachers specialising in drama and editors. Their period of employment ranged from two to forty years. In this study, I will limit myself to investigating the statements concerning wages and working conditions expressed by people working as production dramaturgs (not only on a freelance basis, but also on permanent contracts). They constituted 50% of the informants.

When questioned as to whether their salary corresponded to the amount of time they put into their jobs, 73% of the interviewees answered "no", and one added "Maybe the concept of 'over-performing' would be the most appropriate here. Everybody in this field works way more than they are paid."⁴⁰ The survey also revealed that only half of the informants received the income level recommended by the *Association for Danish Dramaturgs*. Above all, the survey made it clear that "voluntary" (in the sense of unpaid) labour is considered an immanent part of the job, especially at the beginning of a career as a dramaturg (but not only then). When questioned about the ways in which the *Association for Danish Dramaturgs* could be helpful for dramaturgs, 65% responded that efforts to help recognise the work done by dramaturgs and make them visible not only inside the field, but also to a broader public, would be highly appreciated. More specifically, "political visibility" and "a voice in the theatre field" were called for. Likewise, it was emphasised that in a field as precarious and competitive as the theatre, "we are stronger when we stand together".

³⁸ Triggered by the increasing deployment of freelance dramaturgs, in 2009 the *Association for Danish Dramaturgs* (founded in 1990) established a recommended wage scale for dramaturgical work. The purpose was to support dramaturgs working on a freelance basis in wage negotiations.

³⁹ In 2015 the *Association for Danish Dramaturgs* had a total of 87 members. Thirty of them took part in the survey, which was conducted by two students (Signe Nygaard und Lisa Trædholm Mønster) from Aarhus University. The survey was initiated by the *Association for Danish Dramaturgs*, who, at that time, were considering whether they should change into a union for dramaturgs. However, to this date, the association has remained an association.

⁴⁰ This survey has not been published. Upon inquiry, I received it electronically (on 10 February 2017) from the then-chairperson of the association, Louise Frydendahl Ladefoged.

Building on this data, I conducted a second survey in which I posed questions to nine dramaturgs who are renowned for their dramaturgical work in the Danish theatre and dance scene. While some of them were freelancers, others were permanently employed at theatres.⁴¹ As I was particularly interested in issues concerning the general recognition and visibility of dramaturgs, I did not solely address the question of salary. I also asked the informants whether they were normally credited for their work in the programme notes. With regard to their salary, two out of nine reported that it more or less corresponded to the amount of time they invested in their work. The remaining seven replied that they typically worked more – up to one-third more – than they were paid. In general, the interviewees were credited for their work in the programme notes of the performance. But more than half of them reported that they always had to make sure that this was actually done. When I asked them whether they had ever been forced to fight for a mention in the credit list, I received the following replies: “Yes always. In Denmark there is a general tendency to downplay the role of the dramaturg when it comes to credits and recognition.” “Yes, I often had to fight very hard to get my name mentioned”; “Yes, but sometimes I just said ‘whatever’ and refrained from taking the fight.” As reasons for this seeming reluctance to credit dramaturgs, some of the respondents referred to “automated ways of thinking” as well as “a lack of knowledge about our work, especially in the marketing and communication departments of institutional theatres”. Consequently, in Denmark dramaturgs are often not mentioned on the websites of theatres, or in the press material. One dramaturg reported that she had often been told that for one thing, the name of the dramaturg “does not sell”; and secondly that, “it is apparently more ‘practical’ to prepare a credit list containing only a few names, regardless of whether the list represents those who took part in the artistic process or not.” Half of the informants added that in their experience, dramaturgs were credited more fairly in the smaller theatre houses and on the fringe. In these contexts the structures are often less hierarchical than in the big institutions, and people tend to know each other better because there are far fewer employees – a fact which should probably not be under-estimated in this context.

Two of the interviewees who had worked at the same institutional theatre, first on a permanent contract and later on a freelance basis, both posited that big theatre institutions are often more prone to credit dramaturgs as members of the artistic team when they are employed as freelancers. One of them contended: “When I was permanently employed as a dramaturg at the theatre, I hardly ever appeared on the credit list for the artistic team. Not even when I had adapted the

⁴¹ Five of the dramaturgs represented are currently employed in permanent positions. With only one exception, they have all worked previously as freelance dramaturgs. Their period of employment ranges between seven and 30 years.

play being performed.” Instead, her name appeared at the very end of the programme notes, alongside the names of the prompter and the interns. By contrast, when working as a freelance dramaturg at the same theatre, she experienced a far more accommodating attitude in terms of acknowledging – and crediting – her as a fully-fledged member of the artistic team. It may be more common to credit freelance dramaturgs for their work because they have not just been assigned to the director by the theatre. Instead, they have been actively selected by the director or the theatre group directing the piece. Even so, four of the informants claimed that directors who had themselves invited them to join the production had played down the importance of their contribution on several occasions. As one of the informants phrased it: “I guess you could say that in general, directors are not particularly keen on publicly acknowledging the importance of the dramaturg. Unless we actively decide to fight this tendency, we will probably remain the secret sounding boards of the director.”

According to all of the informants, the romantic notion of the autonomous artist genius, critiqued in the statement above, pervades all public discourses on theatre. For the same reason, dramaturgs are hardly ever credited appropriately in theatre reviews, culture journalism or nominations, nor are they acknowledged as creative partners. In an attempt to explain this, one of the informants pointed to the well-known tendency in theatre historiography to focus on the solipsistic figure of the director. Another suggested that the habit of differentiating between artists as creative geniuses on the one hand, and dramaturgs as non-creative, theoretical grey-eminence academics on the other, could be ascribed to the fact that in Denmark, dramaturgs and directors hardly ever encounter each other during their training. Dramaturgs study at the University of Copenhagen or Aarhus University; whereas directors, set designers, lighting and sound designers, actors, producers, and others train at the National School of Performing Arts.

IMMATERIAL WORK AND MATERIAL WORKING CONDITIONS

To sum up, dramaturgs working in Denmark are now invited into and welcomed within the rehearsal space. To the outside world, however, they are frequently still regarded as outsiders to the creative process. This is reflected quite evidently in their wages and the often unsatisfactory ways in which they are credited for their work. Obviously, dramaturgs are not the only ones to suffer an imbalance between their salary and the amount of time they invest in their jobs – this is a common problem for people working in the theatre field in general. But while directors, set designers, or actors are naturally credited for their work, dramaturgs cannot expect the same. This is even more striking because freelance dramaturgs are hired for particular productions because of their specific signature. And

they are just as dependent on having their name mentioned as other cultural producers working on a freelance basis.

The problem of being credited and recognised appropriately does not only apply to Danish dramaturgs. Indeed, it seems to be a fundamental condition for anyone working as a dramaturg.⁴² As Van Kerkhoven once posited in a frequently quoted statement: “He/she (the dramaturg, ed.) always shares the frustrations and yet does not have to appear on the photo. The dramaturg is not (perhaps not quite or not yet) an artist. Anyone that cannot, or can no longer, handle this serving – and yet creative – aspect, is better off out of it.”⁴³

Dramaturgs, in other words, find themselves in a somewhat paradoxical position: on the one hand they serve as role models for the kind of flexible and adaptable employee requested by today’s post-Fordist, neoliberal societies. On the other, their work efforts and contributions to the artistic works in which they are involved are often downplayed due to perceived ways of hypostasising the artist. Which is why the dramaturg does not appear on the photo.

In the face of these facts, it seems to me that we should be wary of fetishising the liminal trope of *in-betweenness* too much. As characteristic as the trope may be for dramaturgical processes, just as diffuse and inexpedient it becomes when the idea is to call attention to issues relating to salaries and credits. As Geoff Proehl once stated: “[I]n-between might make a fine place to visit, but a lousy home.”⁴⁴ Obviously, I am not arguing that we should supplant the liminal trope with an unambiguous and dogmatic definition of dramaturgy and dramaturgical labour. What I am warning against, though, is the perception that dramaturgy and dramaturgical work is a purely immaterial affair, constantly in the process of evading and freeing itself from any kind of definitional constraints. I propose that dramaturgy *also* needs to be understood as a practice that is tied to material conditions, economies, and infrastructures. In turn, these conditions, economies, and infrastructures influence not only production processes, but also the working and living conditions of dramaturgs. To return to Lorey, one could thus say that dramaturgs make themselves exploitable when they regard their precarious working and living conditions (or their absence on the photograph) as self-chosen. Only

⁴² For instance, American dramaturg Mark Bly voiced his frustrations with the hierarchies prevailing in established theatre institutions when back in 1986 he claimed that he and his fellow dramaturgs were not just *researchers*, but indeed *artists* on a par with the other artists involved in the theatre production. In an interview he phrased it as follows: “We are artists. If we aren’t artists, I don’t want to be a dramaturg. Dramaturgy isn’t just about giving good notes or putting together research packets. Through associative research, associative thinking in rehearsal, we can help to release the play, free it from the accumulated detritus of past productions and cobwebby criticism.” (Bly in Thomson 2002, 308).

⁴³ Van Kerkhoven 1994, 140.

⁴⁴ Proehl 1997, 136.

when dramaturgs understand and accept the importance of paying attention to the structural conditions in which they work can we begin to change things.

The idea that dramaturgs are, to a certain degree, complicit in their own working conditions was put forward in a follow-up e-mail correspondence between the author and one of the informants of the second survey: “We dramaturgs are too modest. In our society the artist is still celebrated as the great genius. And we believe that – unlike the artist – we only act as objective and specialised authorities in the artistic process. Therefore, we wrongly assume that any other dramaturg could have said or thought exactly the same as ourselves. [...] It took me a lot of thought to reach the conclusion that as a dramaturg I do indeed play a creative role, and that it is only desirable that I invest myself in the artistic process. Even so, I am still far too modest when it comes to *credits*.”⁴⁵

The question is, if the time is finally ripe to challenge Van Kerkhoven’s famous dictum that “The dramaturg is not (perhaps not quite or not yet) an artist. Anyone that cannot, or can no longer, handle this serving – and yet creative – aspect, is better off out of it.” Or should we perhaps instead regard Kerkhoven’s statement as symptomatic of a specific historical and cultural situation, rather than being a universal truth about the status and the role of the dramaturg? In either case, I believe that the need for dramaturgs to retain a certain amount of modesty about their role can also be used strategically. Modesty can help to veil the fact that at least within the institutional theatre, the figure of the dramaturg (and the concomitant notion of in-betweenness) is related to that of the gate-keeper. In other words, the dramaturg has quite a say in deciding which plays are performed, which actors are hired, and which directors get to direct. Remember British dramaturg Kenneth Tynan’s famous way of phrasing the work of the dramaturg as consisting in “[...] preventing the *wrong* plays from being chosen – as far as possible.”⁴⁶ *In-betweenness* could therefore be said *also* to imply the administration and exercise of power. Accordingly, one could posit that the portrayal of the dramaturg in many dramaturgical discourses as a modest and invisible bridge-builder could represent an attempt to distance oneself from the position of the in-house critic or chief ideologue, figures who are often disliked by the artistic staff within theatre institutions. Nevertheless, I would warn against subscribing too readily to discourses which (rooted in inherited artist-versus-non-artist dichotomies) turn out to contribute to the reproduction of the notion of the dramaturg as a serving, in-between figure.

At the outset of this article I quoted Anne Hamilton, who praised the ability of dramaturgs to adapt to the standards and demands of global, neoliberal working regimes. Instead of agreeing with her unambiguously, I argue that we should *also*

⁴⁵ Excerpt from an e-mail to the author, dated 21 February 2017.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Trencsényi 2016, 35.

pay critical attention to the working and living conditions to which dramaturgs are exposed. Given the heterogeneity of dramaturgical practices, it would of course be both unwise and unproductive to assert an essentialist definition of dramaturgy and dramaturgical work. However, I propose that a certain degree of “strategic essentialism” might be useful if we are to shed at least some light on the working and living conditions of dramaturgs. Put differently, if we wish not only to draw attention to but also to try to change the structural conditions in the precarious and highly competitive field of which we are part, it seems necessary that we identify with and make common cause with each other as dramaturgs. Only from here, from the inside, can we – in solidarity with fellow dramaturgs as well as fellow workers in other precarious fields – begin to re-imagine and challenge the neo-liberal structures to which we are all subjected.

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AUTHOR

Solveig Gade, PhD, is a dramaturge and Professor in Dramaturgy at The Danish National School of Performing Arts. Her work on political engagement and experimental dramaturgies in contemporary theatre and performance has been published in journals such as *TDR*, *Performance Research*, *Peripeti*, *Nordic Theatre Studies*, and *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*.