



Introduction

Confessions of an Interferer

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by Barbara Simonsen

Many years ago, at a reception for a cultural event, I was introduced by an acquaintance to a grim-looking British guy. 'This is Barbara, she is a dramaturg - and this is so and so, he is a playwright' - and the first thing the guy said to me was, 'Ah, I hate dramaturgs.' Now, I thought of answering, 'Ah, I hate grim-looking British playwrights', or maybe take the cheerful approach and say, 'Ah, that's because you haven't worked with me yet' - but after those two thoughts had quickly passed through my head I just laughed politely (and probably slightly sourly) and sipped my drink and decided it wasn't worth it either way. We talked for a bit, and he wasn't joking; he really did hate working with dramaturgs. And why? Because they would interfere with his writing, of course.

Once I was hired as a dramaturg for a reading of a new play, and it took three or four out of I think six rehearsal days before the director would talk to me or even look me in the eyes. I managed to ease my way into a constructive dialogue with him, and at the end of the process he told everyone how happy he was with our collaboration and confided to me after a couple of beers that he normally really didn't like working with dramaturgs. Well...

During my first years after graduating as a dramaturg I met quite a few of those. Playwrights who hated dramaturgs, directors who hated dramaturgs, or at least had very little inclination to work with them, either from prejudice or bad experiences. And during my studies, as an intern at a couple of productions I had seen very obvious reasons why a director might resent the dramaturg's interference, arising from the way the work, the power channels and the communication were structured. As a member of the theatre's staff and the artistic right hand of the theatre director the dramaturg could literally be 'sent down' from the office to watch a run-through and then proceed to tell the (freelance-employed) director everything that was wrong with the performance, now in its final week of rehearsal, adding that it would have to be cut by 20 minutes so that the audience would be able to catch the last bus home at eleven after the show. Of course, the communication could and would often be a lot better than in that particular case, but my point is that the big-theatre house production structure in itself would cause dramaturgical work to be seen an interference instead of a collaboration.

But I had learnt the practical process of working as a dramaturg in close collaboration with the playwright, while I was still a student, in an innovative collaboration project between Dept. of Dramaturgy and the new playwrights' programme at the theatre school in Aarhus, way back in the 1990es. Per Brask, a Danish-Canadian professor of creative writing, was teaching the introduction course for playwrights and dramaturgs, and it had given me a solid idea of how the dynamics between these two and the process of creation and feedback could be useful and effective, how it could make the writing better, and even make the playwright happy!

And luckily for me, the dramaturg's role was changing; a lot more collaborations between playwrights/directors and dramaturgs were starting to establish, and it became possible for me to develop methods and ideas about how to give dramaturgical advice through practical experience working with writers, directors, choreographers on productions, readings, manuscript developments etc. during the following decade and more. I think it is safe to say that in the Danish theatre community, both inside and outside the big institutions, the dramaturg has by now become a natural collaborator for artists and a role that they will trust and even insist on having as part of

their creative process and production. And they will bring their own instead of having one thrown at them, so to speak.

But perhaps partly as a result of these early experiences I have always, when I have had the role of the dramaturg, worked very hard not to be an interference. And partly also, because I have always worked as a director/writer as well and knew exactly how stressful and disturbing it could be to have an advisor who didn't 'get' you or your idea, or understand the process, the right time for the right kind of feedback, or the enormous pressure of the director's work. Or in short, someone with whom you did not *resonate*. From the course with Per Brask I had the understanding of the dramaturg's role as being a 'midwife' to the work that the artist was giving birth to. And in a way, for me that meant taking the 'path of least interference', to ask questions and to point and to nudge and help the process evolve naturally. It became a sport for me to be as immersed in the idea as possible, almost invisible, a kind of extra voice inside the head of the writer or director. Trying to understand what the essence of this particular idea is and how its potential is best realised. Which form does this material ask for - or which narrative does this form incorporate? When I collaborate on a work, whether it is a text or a performance, I try to understand the original intention, the ideal outcome of this idea, and then I look at the work/draft/rehearsal etc. depending on where we are in the process - and between those two things there is a gap. And the principle for me as a dramaturg has always been that my *only* function is to try to bridge that gap.

Of course, I won't be very good at this unless I am able to read and understand the artist that I am collaborating with. That is the other crucial skill for a dramaturg; one that I won't go deeper into here, except to say that to build a collaboration is also to get to know a person, their strengths and weaknesses, approaches, and idiosyncrasies. And only after many years of fruitful collaboration and fun and trust a counselling session can go like this:

Me: 'This scene is just not credible.'

Playwright: 'What do you mean? Of course it is!'

Me: 'I just don't believe what she is saying.'

Playwright (frustrated): 'Well, what should she say instead?'

Me: 'I don't know. You're the playwright!'

That conversation went well, and produced a laugh and a good result, but could *only* have happened with that particular writer. Over the years, I went from learning a set of very strict principles about dramaturgical feedback and practicing them very strictly, like a craft, until I felt that I was beginning to know when I could choose to break them. I also found that all this passionate discretion that I practiced as a dramaturg had to be counterbalanced with direct creative work as a director where everything was done *my* way, otherwise it drove me a bit crazy.

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When I began the task of collecting and editing the documentation material from an Aarhus residency programme called Connections I had no idea that it would give me an entirely new angle on dramaturgical work, including my own. From the beginning, what struck me very strongly about the way Connections was conceived, structured and realised, and what was unique about it as a residency, was that project manager Anne Hübertz Brekne was so obviously acting and thinking as a dramaturg. She contributed to the development of the artists and their projects through a gentle

and very precise kind of structuring and nudging, offering inspiration, modification, and potential new pathways through the connections that she chose for them - all based on a solid analysis and 'feel' for where they were and where they wanted to go. And I was struck by this new angle on a practice that I knew so well: Anne wasn't acting like a midwife. She was subtly, elegantly, kindly and intelligently *interfering*. Of course she was. So have I always been, and so is every dramaturg at work.

Working on the Connections material I suddenly began to look at dramaturgical practice from the exact opposite perspective than my usual one. Into the spotlight glided the aspect that I have always tried to erase or downplay as a dramaturg - the interference. And of course, it is so obviously there, side by side with the 'invisibility' or 'passionate discretion', together with all the other paradoxes; impersonal - personal, neutral - aesthetic, outside - integrated etc. I wanted to direct this spotlight towards dramaturgy to look at it all over again, and to explore the concept of interference in a broader perspective. Where art forms collaborate, where art and research practice together, there will be interference. And that is why this special issue of *Peripeti* is about 'dramaturgical interference' as a tool in processes of artistic development and artistic creation, seen through various viewpoints on specific cases. The issue falls into two parts:

Part 1 is the presentation of a series of cases from the artistic residency programme Connections, 2017-2020, organised by Performing Arts Platform in Aarhus. In the structuring and facilitating of these residencies, dramaturgical interference - understood as the (dramaturgical analysis-based) act of supplying the artists with partners, actions, meetings, and tasks that have the potential to extend, qualify, nudge, or disturb their particular process - played an important part. The other essential component of the residencies was, interestingly, the opposite: a very extensive freedom from 'duties' and obligations during the residency, especially the freedom from production demands. Through essays and interviews, the ten Connections residencies are seen through the eyes of the artist, the mentor, and the head dramaturg/facilitator, with a view to examining and analysing interference as a dramaturgical and artistic tool. Part 2 presents four very different viewpoints and cases of artistic creation, artistic processes, and artistic research, where different connections create interference - through director-dramaturg collaboration; interdisciplinary collaboration; artist-expert collaboration a.o. Whether the goal of the connection is to co-create, qualify, sharpen, expand, nurture, or challenge, there is a form of interference happening, in the basic sense of the word - and the many-faceted, multiple forms of this interference, and what they do to artistic processes, is the curiosity of this special issue of *Peripeti*.

Barbara Simonsen is director, dramaturg and artistic director and founder of Teater Seachange and Seachange Lab in Aarhus, Denmark: an independent theatre company, and an international centre for practical artistic research and performing arts experiments. Simonsen holds a Master of Comparative Literature and Dramaturgy from Aarhus University and has taught in the Aarhus University departments of Dramaturgy, Comparative Literature and Aesthetics and Culture. Her experimental productions range from audio plays in cinemas to international music theatre and interactive installations. Simonsen has worked for many years as consultant and facilitator for directors, playwrights, choreographers and companies, specialising in the analysis and development of process, tools and methods. In 2017, she edited the interview collection *The Art of Rehearsal - Conversations with Contemporary Theatre Makers* at Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
