



# Essay

## Flashes of Red

Photo: Brian Quirt  
Andrea Nann in Pure Research 15, 2010, "The Uses of Additive Light Blending" led by David Duclos

# Flashes of Red: Dramaturgical Thinking in Action

by Brian Quirt

*Interference* – as experienced in the wonderful world of light waves – is responsible for the extraordinary iridescent plumage displayed by hummingbirds, along with some beetles, butterflies and other bugs. I'd call that a potent example of so-called 'constructive interference', in which the collision of light waves generates something of special, unexpected brilliance and beauty. The flashes of fire-bright red on the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds that visit our home each year continue to be one of the joys of the Canadian summer. And it is a pleasure to think of those remarkable tiny birds and their impossibly bright feathers in terms of theatrical collaboration and the impact of 'interference'.

On the other hand, I need to balance that image with other senses of the word, which in North America is often considered a pejorative – at least outside of the field of physics, and especially in the performing arts where its connotations of unwanted intrusion are very strong when the word is used in collaborative circles.

This friction – between the potential beautiful impact of interference and the potential destructive outcome of interfering – is in part why I wanted to contribute to this volume of *Peripeti*. I wanted to explore my own relationship to a word, and its associated actions, that I normally don't use in my own creative process(es), and to see what might come from doing so. In some ways, perhaps, writing this essay is itself an act of interference, an effort to alter and inform my way of seeing my work through a lens (as it were) provided by the editors of this journal. So, thank you for that. We'll see where it leads me....

Where I started was the thought that rather than 'interference,' I tend to use words such as task, nudge, redirection, misdirection, obstruction, prompt, or impediment that cause the creative impulse (the light wave) to be modified and thus shift into new unexpected undiscovered territories (beautiful plumage). As I look at that list now, it strikes me that many of them also carry potential negative connotations, even as each is designed in my work to shift a creator from a known pathway (or perhaps a pathway that has come to an end) toward an unknown way forward that opens up unanticipated discoveries and new routes into and through the creative project at hand.

Even as I write this I'm aware that I'm resisting the notion of interference, still hobbled by its sense of 'meddling' or 'tampering with'. However, using the lens of 'interference' has contributed to my understanding of my approaches to what I call dramaturgical thinking. I will focus my thoughts below in five areas of my practice, and share examples that foreground ideas of interference in the sense of disruption and amplification – words that I do regularly use in my work: disrupting existing habits or methods of creation to push myself and collaborators into new modes and the discoveries that may arise from them; and amplifying aspects of an existing creative project or process to more fully realize the potential that is present but awaiting full exploration. The landscapes in which I work as a dramaturg (and, at times, as director, administrator, and performance maker), include 1) working with playwrights / creators; 2) with performance researchers; 3) with institutions; 4) with interns / mentees; and finally, 5) within my own creative practice.

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I was working with a playwright several years ago. I realized as I worked through one of the many drafts of the play that I was dramaturging, that the central character (whose name was in fact the title of the play) almost always asked a question when she spoke. The writer and I had been struggling (in a good way) with the character's place in the play; the character was in every scene, but only rarely did she feel central to any of them. When I noticed the preponderance of questions in her lines, I went back to the writer and asked her to undertake a task: to cut every question mark in the character's speeches, allowing the character only one question in each of the play's two acts. Or, to put it another way, I was asking the writer to make virtually all of that character's lines into statements.

The writer graciously pursued the task, and the impact was vivid. The central character had seemed somehow peripheral in her own story; she was always asking other characters to talk, to explain things, to present their story, and as she did so, she disappeared, serving only to illuminate the stories of others. When she was prevented from asking questions, and her lines became statements, the character became inherently more assertive, her presence more immediate, and her status more elevated and more in friction with the powerful characters around her.

And when she did ask a question in each act, the effect was hugely amplified since the writer had to make a very careful and strategic choice about what question was important enough to be the single one. We heard the character anew now; she was a dynamic player in her own drama, rather than a voice tending the needs of others.

Looking back, this approach on my part captures much of what I strive to achieve as a dramaturg. I want to identify a task for the writer that will transform the project (or the part of it we're working on in the moment), without predetermining the outcome, in a process that asks the writer to apply their creativity to the process of enacting the task (instead of simply following my direction to improve or fix it).

I had a sense of what this task might accomplish, and I believed that there would be a ripple effect in that other characters' lines would also have to shift as the questions were eliminated and characters were forced to respond to her statements rather than answer questions. What I didn't know, and didn't want to predict or constrain, was how the play or the scenes would alter. Problems would be raised, as much as opportunities would be revealed. This task didn't solve the challenges of the play, but it had impact throughout the text, and compelled the writer to engage in a new way with almost every interaction involving the central character. While I wouldn't have called this 'interference' at the time, in light of *Peripetis*' interest in this idea, I can clearly see that this process was absolutely interference in the physics sense: a disruption that revealed new possibilities and pathways.

I at times use a similar task-based approach with writer/performers. When developing the final performance version of Carmen Aguirre's *Blue Box*, in which she explores the linkage between desire and revolution through her participation in the Chilean underground movement against the Pinochet regime, I sensed that the audience needed a moment without text. I asked Carmen to find a moment in performance to look every person in the audience right in the eye. The choice of where to place this was entirely up to her. This too was a form of interference...asking her to make the decision in the moment, spontaneously, when it made sense to her as performer. She held off almost to the end (which was nerve wracking for me as I watched the run). She waited until she was describing the failure of the Chilean revolutionary movement. The act of looking us each in the eye

at that moment was so potent, asking the audience to consider the scale of that failure to someone who had risked her life. We immediately integrated it into the text and the production.

I am very curious about the strategies that writers and creators develop to ‘interfere’ in or disrupt their own practice. When I’m leading workshops on writing and dramaturgy, I always use exercises inspired by my collaborations with Canadian playwright Don Druick.

One of these is to ask playwrights to write a scene in the form of an interview. It can be in any form or media (tv, newspaper, podcast, blog, radio, etc.); there must be two or more interviewers, each of whom must be characters in the play being developed; the subject of the interview is the playwright; and the topic of the interview is their play. The virtue of this task is that it offers a lot of creative freedom in terms of the form of the interview (I’ve received interviews of every possible type over the years) and how the interview proceeds; while having quite strict parameters in terms of who is in the scene and the topic.

In addition to being a great exercise in writing scenes for three or more voices in a stressful scenario with a lot at stake, it also offers great scope for ongoing discoveries. The first draft of the scenes are often, though not always, quite general. The interviewers ask relatively easy questions about the plotline of the play and broad queries about the motivation for writing it. Decisions tend to focus on the type of interview and figuring out how to put characters from the play into the role of interviewers. It is in the subsequent drafts that the work becomes truly revealing. I urge the (real) writers to have the interviewers ask tougher questions, and generate heightened friction between the interviewers as they conduct the interview. The results after two or three or four drafts are almost always fascinating investigations by the writer, through their fictional self, of their intentions, agendas, burdens, fears, ambitions, and roadblocks related to the play they are creating...and often as well in larger terms about their work as artists.

The icing on this exercise is that I then reveal that it originated in Don’s play *Wildest Dreams*, which features just such a scene. When I asked Don about what drove him to write it, he responded that at one point he wasn’t sure what should happen next in the play, so he decided to have his characters interview him. At the end Don in the scene kills one of his characters, who dies ‘suddenly and horribly’. More importantly, Don the playwright found in the act of crafting the scene new avenues to explore in this play, and the writing was able to move forward.

I offer the exercise in part because of its tangible value...it interferes in the playwrights’ expectation of what my course will ask them to do, it leads them to write a scene they would never have imagined otherwise, and they find themselves interrogating their play, their motivations, their relationship to theatre, and often much more, through their own writing. Perhaps more vital than all of that, though, is the example of how one writer invented a way to ‘interfere’ in his own process,



Creator/performer Carmen Aguirre in *Blue Box* during its national tour of Canada, 2012-14  
Photo: Brian Quirt

to disrupt and amplify how and what he was writing in order to be able to continue writing, within the context of his play and without requiring an outside voice to intercede.

What I gleaned from Don's example is that I learn much of my dramaturgy from the artists and projects that I'm working on, and that an art of dramaturgy is of course to listen within that process for methods that might have application when adapted to other circumstances.

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Program design can also be explored as a form of interference...in the sense of asking artists to think and work in ways that are different from their accustomed methods.

Nightswimming has operated Pure Research (PR) alongside our commissioning and creation activities since 2003. PR invites artists to conduct performance research with Nightswimming by proposing a theatrical question that they wish to explore within the context of a three-day research period in a theatre space. Nightswimming supplies fees to the researchers, and a budget for collaborators, materials, and documentation, along with dramaturgical support throughout the process.

We identify PR projects by calling for research proposals that identify a question or series of related questions that artists wish to explore. It cannot be a process to develop a new work. We ask them specifically to frame their research question as something that can be examined in a theatre space; it is meant to be practical, on-the-feet experimentation that will be documented and reported on in a way that discoveries can be shared with the larger arts community. These conditions alone are a valuable disruption of the product-driven performing arts world we live within. I know this because many applications cannot resist the temptation to generate product by, for example, actually applying to develop a new show or not being able to frame the research they want to conduct in the form of questions and experiments.

The parameters of PR itself, I now realize, are also a means of interference, in that it asks artists conducting performance research to express their curiosity in an unfamiliar way, drawing on the somewhat different vocabulary of the scientific method. It asks them to design a process in which the product isn't a product but rather some possible answers and a lot more questions. Canadian theatre and dance artists are used to a culture that is very product driven despite the relatively generous levels of government support and a general acceptance of the value of sustained creative development. But we are judged, and tend to judge ourselves, less on the quality of our process and far more on the outcome when the project is ultimately shared with audiences. That's true for me as well, despite creating and running for 25 years a non-producing company like Nightswimming. I still find it almost impossible not to talk about the number of our projects that have been produced or toured successfully. I've tried to interrupt (another interference synonym) that bias in myself every day that I work on Nightswimming projects, with some effectiveness, but it is so built into the North American value system, that it remains a challenge always.

Pure Research is one way that I devised to resist this inclination, for myself and for our company. By placing idea-driven processes at the heart of PR, and PR at the heart of Nightswimming, we remind ourselves that we must always come back to a premise at the core of our company, which is to focus on dramaturgy by expanding the boundaries of theatrical storytelling. PR does this by examining questions of methodology, technology, practice, design, and performance in an exploratory milieu dedicated to expanding knowledge rather than solving issues or producing content.

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When we confirm several short-listed proposals, we invite applicants to write a second proposal that responds to several of our questions. We ask them to be more explicit in terms of what experiments they intend to conduct over the three-day period, and how those will further their research into the topic. Some are not fully able to refine the question or define the experiments; we understand this – our landscape rarely asks us to think in this way. Those that are we then interview in person or by phone/video, so that we can discern their capacity and interest in working within this modified scientific methodology.

Once selected, the researchers then work through a dramaturgical process to design the research experiments with *Nightswimming* (me, our producer and often one or more interns). This process is 3 to 6 months in length, and is in fact the heart of Pure Research. Designing experiments, often to the surprise of the researchers, is the most valuable component of their research. The studio sessions, which we artists tend to value more highly than the act of preparing for those sessions, are of course important, but are only a small part of the whole process. They generate what is perceived to be more tangible information or data, of course, that leads toward a research report that captures the original question(s), the design process, the experiments, and the post-studio reflections that often guide the artists to more questions and further research.

I wanted to include this example because artists often contact us after writing their reports to say that this approach pushed them to work beyond their comfort zone; to not only work with different vocabulary but with different goals and understanding of the purpose of the work. In essence, *Nightswimming* interfered with their expectations of how to create and conduct research, and asked them to ask different questions of themselves and the topic they were researching. I'm happy to acknowledge that this too is a form of interference, just as the colliding light waves rebounding off a hummingbird's throat shine brightly in an unanticipated burst of red.

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Institutional interference is one form of dramaturgical thinking that I rather enjoy. For the simple reason that institutions, particularly large ones, are challenging to change, yet must be challenged to reflect new approaches to creation, to welcome artists (and audiences) that have been historically (and currently) marginalized in their spaces, and here in Canada especially, to acknowledge, understand, support, and collaborate with Indigenous individuals and approaches to land, history, practices and storytelling. Institutional disruption can be an essential tool in order to effect these changes.

Here's a modest example from the beginning of my tenure at the Banff Centre, a very large and established gathering place in the mountains west of Calgary, Alberta, which runs residency programs across the performing, visual and literary arts. When I took over as Director of the Banff Centre Playwrights Lab, I insisted, among other things, that the 200-seat Margaret Greenham Theatre be a core space for the program. I did so in part to better serve the writers participating in the Lab, knowing they would find it inspiring to hold readings and other sessions in a theatre space rather than a studio, classroom or rehearsal hall. I made this a priority because playwrights are rarely invited to work in the spaces in which their works ultimately are performed; theatre venues are perceived to be too expensive, precious and valuable to us to simply work on plays.

My demand was also designed to compel the Centre to think differently about the program that I was now running. I can (and do) talk about the Lab differently than it was once constituted (for example, in terms of a more interdisciplinary approach to the projects we support). By insisting

that a theatre venue live at its heart, I'm asserting very publicly that the Centre acknowledge that the program has redefined itself and therefore the resources it must have to operate effectively must also be reconsidered.

My assertion (among others) interfered with the assumptions and expectations held by the Centre, and some of its staff, about what a playwriting program is. One sign that this is working: there has at times been resistance to us using the theatre, and that has continued to varying degrees throughout my nine years at the Centre. This has been frustrating, naturally, but also suggests to me that we are successfully communicating that the program has changed and that the Centre needs to change in response.

Another sign, a more positive one, is when I describe the necessity of the theatre venue to Banff Centre staff and watch them understand something new about our program: that it is much more than a group of playwrights typing out their plays. That space is important to playwrights; that playwrights are often excluded from theatres; and that Banff can offer playwrights something that no other organization in Canada is able to. And when it does, it is demonstrating through its actions the value of playwrights by ensuring they have access to spaces that are generally considered too valuable and too pricey to devote to mere writers. In turn, if the Centre must reevaluate its understanding of playwrights and playwriting, then it must also listen when the Lab asserts values such as the centrality of incorporating Indigenous artists, artists of colour, Deaf artists, choreographers and musicians into a program that it once understood as more literary than theatrical.

At the other end of the institutional spectrum, is *Nightswimming* itself. Twenty-five years ago, following our first production, we stopped. ('We' was me and our producer, Naomi Campbell.) We didn't want to get stuck on what we perceived to be a theatrical treadmill of spending more time raising money for this small independent, alternative company than we did on creating new works. So we stopped, and I took time to apply a dramaturgical process to the question of what the company might be, or whether it should exist at all.

What I did was redesign how we thought about the company by using statements of premise, rather than by the typical assertion of 'mandates' or 'missions' that conventionally are used to define performing arts organizations in Canada, both of which felt alien and prescriptive to me.

I noted that it doesn't make sense to have a company that does things you don't want to do. Instead, I asked myself, what if it only did things that 1) I loved doing; and 2) I couldn't do anywhere else. That started to establish a creative reason for the company to exist. I loved working on the dramaturgical / creation process with writers, choreographers and musicians. The thing I couldn't generally do was work with artists from the conception of their projects.

So, rather than being a producing company, we reconceived *Nightswimming* as a non-producing company that would commission new works of theatre, dance and music, and devote all our time and resources to the dramaturgical process of developing those new works. And rather than produce those projects, we would partner with theatre companies and festivals and they would premiere the projects we commissioned and developed.

When I talk about how we went through this process with colleagues, mentees or students, I do so to assert the idea that a premise for a company is, to me, stronger than a mandate or mission. A premise is why it exists; a mandate is what it exists to do; and a mission is how it intends to do it. We developed a mandate and mission later (mainly for granting organizations), focused on expanding the boundaries of dramaturgy and theatrical storytelling, but why *Nightswimming* exists and continues to do so is more personal and more immediate. I discuss our origins to generate a form of interference in the assumptions of why companies exist and how they talk about their

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purpose. Doing so, I hope, has impact on artists considering the creation of their own companies and inspires, I hope, more personal, richer, and effective organizations.

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Speaking of interns and mentees – we often host residencies for young in craft artists at Nightswimming, particularly in dramaturgy. One topic that can usefully interfere with their expectations of what a dramaturg does is about talking in meetings and workshop sessions. I often discuss with mentees what I choose *not* to say when I'm working with a playwright or creator or in a workshop room.

I was fortunate early in my career to have influential mentors. One was deeply loquacious, and I learned a lot from what he said and how he spoke about the work at hand. Another was the opposite, an artist who spoke sparingly in comparison, but with precision. The first did almost nothing on paper, and was a great improviser in meetings; the second prepared extensively, often in graphs and charts, and had defined agendas for every conversation. Both approaches have richness and merit depending on the circumstances. From each I learned much about selecting what to say and when to say it...and often the decision that is hardest to make is about the thing you don't say. It's hard to convey what not to say; it's the invisible part of every meeting. Which is why discussing the strategy, whether planned or determined in the moment, about what needn't be articulated, or why it was left out, or when it might better be added to the process, is so key to a mentorship process. Thinking about what not to say demands that you also consider very carefully what you might say in the room and how you phrase it.

This act of interference is to create a context in which the interns don't think about what I think they should say, but about what they think they should or should not say. The prompt largely takes me out of the picture, putting the onus on them and validating their sense of self, and process. They often believe that I've said everything I wanted to after we meet with writers; the idea that holding back, that listening is perhaps more important than talking, that less is more, is often a huge challenge to them. We tend to think only about the impact of what we say on our collaborators. Dramaturgs are often professional talkers, and we must just as much resist our temptation to speak. What we don't say has impact, whether we store it for later or discard the thought because it would really only serve the ego of the speaker, or because it might close off a pathway, or because the collaborator would be better discovering it themselves. If this one piece of interference is all that a mentee takes away from their time at Nightswimming, then that's impact that I know is valuable.

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A dozen years ago one of Nightswimming's major projects was *Blue Note* – a seven-person piece about a singing ensemble gathering for their first rehearsal following the death of their eighth member. Created by me and Martin Julien over several years, the process was one of my favourites, a constantly inspiring and fun engagement with singing, with grief, and with unconventional process.

As Martin and I developed the piece, we had a mantra, which was 'let's not make it a play, unless it wants to be a play.' By that we meant that we did not want to write a text-based, character-based, psychology-based script. Partly, that just seemed boring, and partly it just wasn't the process we wanted to enact, nor did it seem appropriate to the event we were beginning to imagine.

Instead of plot or character, we decided to start with music, and the idea of rehearsal. In other



words, we consciously disrupted our own process. More precisely, we were aware that as theatre artists working in a naturalistic narrative world, our bias is toward story and character and plot. We sensed that *Blue Note* didn't want to live fully, or even much at all, in that world. I'm not sure we knew why; it was a powerful intuition. So we knew we had to resist our bias to shape the project in a naturalistic direction, unless we discovered through the process that it needed a stronger plot or more developed characters or an actual script.

To subvert our own tendencies toward naturalistic drama and existing creation strategies, we decided that all of the workshop sessions we designed would focus on music; and, that rather than a script, we would develop a score. We wanted to explore the dynamics of a singing ensemble; for each session, we invited singers to work with us. We asked each to bring in one or more pieces of music that they would be comfortable teaching to the rest of the group. We worked without a director or musical director. The singers had to teach it themselves. We wanted, through this process, to examine how music is taught to an ensemble, different strategies for learning to sing music from varied repertoires, and to watch musical rehearsals in process without us having to direct or conduct ourselves. We wanted the freedom to watch them work, to then be able to improvise with the music as they learned it by imposing tasks such as, for example, everyone in a Baroque piece by Henry Purcell shifting to the alto part at a certain bar, and then back to their own part at a later bar. We introduced musical interference into the singers' process, in the same way that grief interferes emotionally in our lives, pushing us out of our context, shifting our perspectives, demanding we improvise with those around us, and only later examine the impact.



An image of the art gallery installation created by architectural firm PLANT Architect for Blue Note at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre. Photo: Peter Legris

Our process, I can now see, relied on gentle interference throughout the many creation sessions we set up. We continually worked to prevent our own temptation to 'tell a story'. And in that action, we also found a metaphor for our interrogation of grief and how individuals respond to loss.

At the time, I would never have called this *interference*, but writing this article has offered fresh vocabulary for what we were doing during *Blue Note*. This is timely. Martin and I met recently to discuss returning to this show, a project that has led us to several subsequent works about singers and singing, and in each case to think rigorously about tailoring the process of each to the dynamics of

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our curiosity. For all its love of iconoclasm, the theatre can be a deeply conservative world, structured in Canada on a model largely developed in the United Kingdom a century or more ago; a colonial artifact that lives on powerfully in many of our institutions.

*Interference* – disrupting patterns and processes, and amplifying alternatives – even if I don't generally use the word, has been a tool I've wielded to help make my creative world, my ways of dramaturgical thinking, distinct from that legacy; not entirely separate, and still burdened by it, but perhaps able to create flashes of crimson amidst it.

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**Brian Quirt** is founder and Artistic Director of Nightswimming, a dramaturgical company based in Toronto; Director of the Banff Centre Playwrights Lab; and a member the faculty ensemble of the Banff Cultural Leadership Program. With Nightswimming he has commissioned and developed 35 new works, created nine of his own plays, and directed the premieres and national tours of many Nightswimming projects including, most recently, new works by Carmen Aguirre and Anita Majumdar. Nightswimming's initiatives include Pure Research, dedicated to innovative performance research, and 5x25, a national commissioning project for artists born in 1995, the year of Nightswimming's first production. He's held senior positions at the Great Canadian Theatre Company, Factory Theatre, The Theatre Centre and Canadian Stage Company. His work as dramaturg, director and playwright has been seen at theatres across Canada. Brian was founding Board Chair of SpiderWebShow Performance. He is the past Board Chair and a past-President of the Literary Managers & Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA), established LMDA Canada, and is a two-time recipient of LMDA's Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding Dramaturgy. Read more at [nightswimming.ca](http://nightswimming.ca).

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