

ADN

Editorial Note

策劃編創

Re/View

Dramaturhiya

Vol. 1

Pengganggu



CENTRE 42



ASIAN  
DRAMATURGS'  
NETWORK

Editorial Note

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# EDITORIAL NOTE

*“I’ve been doing dramaturgical things without being called a dramaturg.”*

– Shintaro Fujii (2016)



The ADN Inaugural Symposium at the Centre 42 Black Box, Singapore, on 23 April 2016.

The Asian Dramaturgs’ Network (ADN) was set up in 2016, and [one of its objectives](#) was to provide a focused platform for making connections, enhancing exchange, developing engagement and generating criticality about the work of dramaturgs and dramaturgical thinking. When ADN had its [first meeting](#) in Singapore on 23 and 24 April 2016, there was a palpable buzz of excitement about what it meant for this event to be taking place, and for diverse individuals to gather and dialogue about the work of dramaturgs across Asia.

The theme chosen by ADN Founding Director, Lim How Ngean, was “Mapping Out, In & About”, to convey an intent to chart ideas about dramaturgy in Asia, and initiate conversations about what dramaturgs were doing in the region. The intention was not to be definitive, but to allow for discussion and questions, to examine what kinds of ‘dramaturgical things’ were happening in the region, and why they mattered. It was about making space to listen to what a dramaturg does and why doing dramaturgical things was gaining interest, even if there were, and still are, relatively few opportunities to interrogate how this work can be deepened.

Twenty-one invited speakers from twelve countries presented papers and participated in closed-door and public dialogues, and approximately two hundred people attended as audience. As the different sessions unfolded, it was as if new territories were being marked out and trekked through – sometimes with confidence and clarity, and at other times, with caution and uncertainty.

Those present encountered ideas and stories about dramaturgy and dramaturgs from all around Asia. Among them were performing arts practitioners formally trained in dramaturgy, as well as others for whom the discourse of dramaturgy was relatively new. They listened to individuals who were eloquent and persuasive about the routes they had taken, and others who struggled to find effective pathways to articulate their practice and philosophy.

In particular, there was a reckoning with what it means to translate dramaturgical thinking from one language

into another, from one context to another, especially for an international gathering. Voices that conveyed the diversity of experience and expertise also communicated a variety

of origins. English was by no means a first language for all, and bridges were built by whatever means necessary to connect and make sense of what it meant to talk with each other.

## It is time to pause and reflect on the work done and ask some questions.

There was much laughter of recognition when people expressed anxiety as to whether they were dramaturgs, or narrated how they had stumbled into becoming dramaturgs, or were still questioning if this label applied to them at all. These concerns seemed to indicate that the dramaturg in Asia was still grappling with clarity of

position, even if dramaturgical thinking in Asia was as old as the many traditional forms of performance that continue to inform what it means to make performance in Asia.

Now that five years have passed since this initial meeting, and ADN has organised seven other events (including dramaturgy workshops, conferences and laboratories), it is time to pause and reflect on the work done and ask some questions, such as:

- What are the significant ideas and provocations related to dramaturgy that have emerged through ADN and remain relevant to the terrain?
- How do we navigate this landscape of diverse languages, cultures and experiences to make



better sense of the work of Asian dramaturgs and dramaturgical thinking in Asia?

- Who determines what is specifically Asian, particularly when such efforts have often been geared towards power-mongering over knowledge-building?
- What does it mean to evolve and sustain a network when the mode of communication (written, spoken and otherwise) is filled with gaps of understanding?
- Where does ADN go from here, and how might we relate the work of dramaturgy with cartography, if we are to continue charting multiple ideas and knowledge across this fertile field?

*ADN Re/View (Vol. 1)*, the first in a series of three E-zines, offers some snapshots of the work of ADN, drawing from presentations and dialogues that occurred at varied ADN events since 2016. All of these sessions have been recorded and transcribed. A few sessions have been selected for specific focus in each volume. The editorial team worked with the transcripts – extracting, annotating and

**The E-zines are an assemblage of ideas about the kinds of thinking and talking that ADN has made happen, and communicates a sense of what dramaturgs in Asia have been doing and thinking.**

condensing ideas for this publication. The original speakers then further refined their words where needed, to clarify and sharpen meaning. Together, the E-zines are an assemblage of ideas about the kinds of thinking and talking that ADN has made happen, and communicates a sense of what dramaturgs in Asia have been doing and thinking.

As we dug into the presentations, responses and critical reflections from the different speakers – all of whom brought a range of ideas, images, stories, descriptions, concepts and questions to the table – it often felt as if we were acting

Rustom Bharucha presenting his keynote address at ADN Lab 2018 at Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, on 7 Sep 2018.



more as dramaturgs than editors. Since contexts were diverse and experiences eclectic, the challenge was to highlight particular ideas that we thought were resonant. We had to read/listen closely and decide on what might be helpful for staging a performance of dramaturgical ideas on the screen (or the page, if you are reading a printout). What would be useful? Who might be interested? How would this help 'Re/View' ADN?

The resultant articles vary in length and intensity, to offer varied routes into and through the ADN sessions and discussions. We hope this will provide access to diverse readers, with varied levels of interest and expertise.

Taking our cue from the very first ADN session titled *Mapping the Terrain*, which began with a discussion of how different Asian languages referred to 'dramaturg', *ADN Re/View (Vol.1)* charts some of the key ideas that emerged and circulated about dramaturgy and dramaturging in Asia.

Each *ADN Re/View* volume will feature a keynote text by an ADN speaker, to make available critical discourses that leading scholars/practitioners have developed at ADN. These texts are annotated with comments and questions from the editorial team to sustain a dialogue through the

What would be useful?  
Who might be interested?  
How would this help 'Re/View' ADN?

ideas. The keynote text presented by Rustom Bharucha at the [ADN Lab in Yogyakarta](#) in 2018 is by far the most extensive articulation of a dramaturg's perspective in this volume, with links to relevant publications and an extended biodata to convey the range of work that Bharucha has done.

The extracts from other sessions, while sometimes overlapping in content, are put together to suggest multiple ways in which dramaturgs consider their role and working relationships. As a process of mapping, this establishes a few nodes on the ground from which to navigate.

The 'inter' runs as a thread throughout this volume – this stems from the pervasiveness of intercultural and intracultural modes of performance making, given the diversity of languages and cultures within and between societies in Asia. As Bharucha points out in his keynote, "[t]he real cultural differences are those embedded within particular regional and local contexts", such that in his journeys as a dramaturg through different kinds of performance projects Bharucha has noticed how "when you are actually working at ground levels, you are opening up all kinds of cultural difference within Asia."

Negotiating these borders and bridging the gaps between them, via processes of interpretation, translation, listening and sensing, have become important capacities for the dramaturg, even if the work of shaping an artwork remains central to the task. In the work of dramaturgs across Asia the interdisciplinary also remains a strong area of expansion, with the intersectoral and intersectional becoming rapidly more prevalent. It is perhaps this expansion of vocabularies of culture that has in turn led to the 'expanded dramaturgies' of performance making – an approach that goes beyond the

arts, to encompass education, politics and leadership.

Mapping what is distinctly 'Asian' within the ADN discussions proved to be elusive as the term raises questions about its relevance and viability in the work of performance-making. More often than not, what is 'Asian' relates to what is local, national and regional, or points to what is 'non-Asian'. At times it raises questions about what is 'designated as Asian' regardless of whether this has real meaning. Nonetheless, as an entry point for thinking about local, national and regional approaches to dramaturgy, we engage with the term 'Asian' through language, culture and history, and attempt to curate these intertwining threads across our excerpted selections by underlining in green some notions that relate to 'Asian'.

As more work on dramaturgy in Asia develops, such as the [For/Lab Dramaturgi programme](#) by Teater Garasi in Indonesia, the [Master of Fine Arts in Drama \(Dramaturgy\)](#) at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts, and [The Dance Dramaturgy website](#) developed by Japanese dance dramaturg Nanako Nakajima, the landscape will change. As it does, we look forward to more ways of engaging dramaturgically with the 'Asian'.

In the same vein, the articles feature the multiplicity of ways in which a dramaturgical sensibility is developed and then articulated in 'Asia', or outside the 'West', even if related to and influenced by Western concepts of dramaturgy. We do not demarcate Asia as a purely geographical location, recognising that what is Asian exceeds continental boundaries. Aware of the inherent limitations of this work, such as the fact that it is monolingual, and in English, as well as the partiality of the editorial team being based only in Singapore, we sought to present the ideas as part of a larger dialogue, and thereby

situate them within an ongoing process of meaning-making.

Thank you for coming on this journey with us to map, and in the next volume to trace, the landscape of Asian dramaturgy. We hope that regardless of your level of familiarity with

## Mapping what is distinctly 'Asian' proved to be elusive as the term raises questions about its relevance and viability in the work of performance-making.

the discourse, there is something in this volume for you. We invite you to wander through and would love to hear your views on the experience, or any other 'dramaturgical things' that interest you. Please consider becoming part of the Ongoing Mapping process that we have initiated at the end of the volume, and place yourself somewhere in relation to

your work and interests. At the end of July 2021 we will host an online dialogue to launch ADN Re/View. Do look out for details and join us then to continue the conversation! In the meantime, you can write to us at [info@asiandramaturgs.com](mailto:info@asiandramaturgs.com) if you have any comments or feedback on this E-zine series.

As we make our way through the Covid-19 pandemic, we wish you good health, safe spaces and inspired moments.

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30 June 2021



# MAPPING THE TERRAIN

***“A lot of times the dramaturg is actually like the mapmaker – they call it a cartographer. Cartography is an art – there’s an artistic process involved.”***

**– Kok Heng Leun (2016)**

The multifarious aspects and evolving nature of a dramaturg’s role provide many entry points into mapping the field of the Asian dramaturg. In beginning to articulate and conceptualise the terrain of dramaturgy in Asia, or the sense of an Asian dramaturgy (if that can be determined), we draw on the range of vocabularies, images and concepts used by diverse dramaturgs, artists and researchers who have been ADN speakers as starting points on this trek.

This section is based on transcripts from a closed-door discussion held at ADN’s first symposium in 2016 entitled [\*Mapping the Terrain\*](#). Led by ADN Co-Directors Lim How Ngean and Robin Loon, they first had the invited speakers to discuss data from a survey administered to them prior to the symposium. To further explore the survey findings, the speakers were broken into smaller discussion groups and findings from these discussions were shared with the speakers and observers.

The following excerpts chart some ideas and approaches, and reveal latent tensions in defining and discerning the scope and practice of dramaturgs across various Asian contexts. These entry points invariably involve a slippery task of defining what a dramaturg does or who a dramaturg is – shifting across different metaphors, considering the ambiguity of the dramaturg’s insider-outsider position, and simply acknowledging the difficulty of arriving at definitions.

Other entry points include the distinctions between the role (dramaturg) and practice (dramaturgy); conscious connections with the German (or Western) lineage; institutional and ‘experiential’ situatedness of dramaturgical practice; and emergent understandings of practitioners from both

*The Mapping the Terrain discussion at the ADN Inaugural Symposium on 23 April 2016.*



theoretical and practical experiences of viewing dramaturgy in various Asian artistic contexts and productions.

Our primary intention is to offer readers a space to reflect on ideas about this varied landscape by considering what has emerged at ADN – those who situate themselves as practising dramaturgs, practitioners who work with dramaturgs, and researchers interested in dramaturgy. We hope these fragments, which work like snapshots taken on a trek, suggest critical and exploratory motifs that help delineate the often elusive definitions and shape-shifting nature of dramaturgical work. We hope you relate and resonate with some of the thinking at work, and consider its value in your turf.

The speakers quoted from the discussion were (in no particular order): Lim How Ngean (Malaysia/Australia), Robin Loon (Singapore), Li Yanan (China), Ken Takiguchi (Singapore/Japan), Nanako Nakajima (Japan), Shintaro Fujii (Japan), David Pledger (Australia), Peter Eckersall (Australia), Kok Heng Leun (Singapore), Ruhanie Perera (Sri Lanka), Alvin Tan (Singapore), Charlene Rajendran (Singapore), Giselle Garcia (Philippines), Alyson Campbell (Australia), Yair Vardi (Israel), and Sankar Venkateswaran (India).

The closed-door discussion took place on 23 April 2016 at Centre 42, as part of the [ADN Inaugural Symposium](#) themed “[Mapping Out, In & About](#)”

***“The rabbit hole of terminology is dangerous to go really deep down into.”***

**– Lim How Ngean (2016)**

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

## Navigating language in defining the (Asian) dramaturg

Peter Eckersall:

*Dramaturgy* is not an English word. It's not a word that is necessarily clearly defined within the English language or the German language or any other language that adopts the term. It's a term that comes from a conjunction of two terms from Classical Greek aesthetics, and according to classical scholars, the term itself is inherently unstable. People are not really sure what it means. And it brings together the concepts of drama and organisation of drama in its etymology.

Beyond that, we have a series of debates around its application, and many people have chosen to dwell in the inherent ambiguity of the term and to use that productively as a way of thinking about creative practice. It's inherently paradoxical because it enables us to think structurally, and to think about the creative process in terms of a system, or, as the artist and director David Pledger calls it, an “operating system”. But that process is no longer linear because we're using an ambiguous concept, so we can then dwell in the full complexity of a creative process.

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

## In Mandarin

Robin Loon:

Now in Mandarin, at the level of translation, and there are a few terms that have been suggested. They always operate on the level of ‘consultant’. So [for example] 策劃編創 [cèhuà biānchuàng] which is on a consultancy level that really doesn't, in my view, encompass what a dramaturg actually does.

Li Yinan:

[I prefer] a direct translation of ‘dramaturgy’ – 戲劇構作 [xìjù gòuzuò]. 戲劇 [xìjù] meaning ‘drama’ is a fixed translation. And 構作 [gòuzuò], 構 [gòu] is kind of ‘-turgy’. Going back to the original meaning, it's kind of a ‘construct’ or ‘to do’. So that's where the Chinese translation character comes from. 構 [gòu] is ‘structure’ and ‘make structure of’, and 作 [zuò] is ‘to do’. I find this direct translation perhaps is the best way to translate it.

In China, almost all my colleagues in [the BA programme in dramaturgy in Central Academy of Drama, Beijing] are against this translation. Because it's hard to recruit students, and people do not know what 戲劇構作 [xìjù gòuzuò] is. It's quite strange. So they prefer to call my programme 戲劇策劃 [xìjù cèhuà] – it's also a consultant, or ‘to make it happen’. But in Shanghai, and in Guangzhou, and in other cities, and in Hong Kong – people use the term “戲劇構作” [xìjù gòuzuò].

Before I coined this term 戲劇構作 [xìjù gòuzuò], there were dramaturgs in China. But they were part of the system. Because in China the Chinese government used to use theatre as a propaganda organ. So there were dramaturgs, people who functioned as dramaturgs in the troupes, in the major big theatre troupes. And they were taking on the leading role of the whole company. They are company leaders, or the major writers, playwrights of the group, or directors. It's quite like East Germany's system, the GDR's system. They just get this pedagogical goal or task from the state and they would lead a whole group to study related theories.



## In Japanese

Ken Takiguchi:

The first time I encountered the word ドラマツルギ ('doramatsurugi' in Katakana, which is a transliteration of *dramaturgy* in Japan) in the 1990s, it didn't have any connection to the theatrical practices. It just meant a kind of a construction of a kind of dramatic dynamics in society. So I saw the word 'dramaturgy' in sociological or quasi-sociological papers. [But] does this [Japanese] transliteration really work?

It was quite interesting to compare this with Yinan's discussion just now. Because if you translate the word into the Chinese characters, Chinese characters have their own meanings. We Japanese have Kanji characters, so I can really sense the meaning of the Chinese characters. In the Kanji, the character and the meaning are really correlated, whereas this Katakana transliteration doesn't mean anything by itself. It's just sound.

Which means that this transliteration makes it quite open to individual interpretation. So you can interpret it as anything. And if this concept is totally alien to you, you can create your own interpretation. So what I observed was that this word 'dramaturgy' was quite conveniently interpreted in many different contexts.

At the end of the day, the meaning of this word 'doramatsurugi' can be different from 'dramaturgy' in English. The problem here is, because of the [similarity] of how the two words sound, it is even more confusing. When you hear doramatsurugi, you almost automatically expect this to mean what 'dramaturgy' means in English. But actually, it may not.

## In Bahasa Indonesia

Lim How Ngean [speaking about Helly Minarti's work]:

Helly Minarti, [dance dramaturg] from Indonesia, pointed out how there is still no term that really equates to the full idea of

the dramaturg. But there were some interesting local terms or colloquialisms that have come up: 'Pendamping', would be this 'companion' or 'the person who sits side-by-side' with the performance-maker.

Lately, there seems to have been an evolution from 'pendamping', to the use of the word 'pengganggu', which is, for those of us who speak Malay, an even more beautiful word because the idea behind 'pengganggu', the root word being 'ganggu', is 'to disturb', 'to interrupt', 'to rupture' even. To provoke.

***“There’s the dramaturgy that is the operating system, and then there’s the dramaturg who contributes to the creation of the operating system, but is not responsible for the dramaturgy.”***

**– David Pledger (2016)**

## Being a Dramaturg and/or Doing Dramaturgy

Robin Loon [in response to a question of why Asia needs dramaturgs now?]

*Why do you have to spend money hiring this person to do essentially what a director is already doing? Well, you're not producing art 40-50 years ago. You're producing art now, and the conditions are different. You're encountering very different intercultural collaborations in which you need another person to help you out.*

Giselle Garcia:

Personally for me, I had difficulty trying to find fellow dramaturgs in Manila because very few of them identify as dramaturgs. And a lot of people, as with most theatre artists, wear different hats or wear multiple hats. So I decided to call it 'slash' identity. Director-slash-Performance-maker-slash-Dramaturg-Marketing person (sometimes, PR), that sort of thing. So because of that, self-identification becomes problematic and part of identification also limits the functions that you can do as a dramaturg because then you think there's a set way of doing it. Like coming up with a production book or all of those things.

David Pledger:

**The space between 'dramaturgy' and 'dramaturg' is blurry.** And I think it would be wise of us to look at that characteristic, that blurriness, as a positive, not as a negative. Not as something that we should try and resolve and fix up. Because actually I think in that way it's much more responsive to the artistic process, to the process of creation.

Through my practice as an artist who has worked with dramaturgs, and then as an artist who has become a dramaturg on other people's projects, **I started to think of dramaturgy as making a structure for doing.** I call it an 'operating system' of the production, in which the system of operation is a series of logics and decisions that have been developed in the alchemy of artistic research and practice. And the dramaturg in relation to this operating system contributes but does not make the dramaturgy.

The dramaturg is a contributor to the creation of the dramaturgy, but one of many contributors. And in this way, the dramaturg is multi-faceted. Their relationship to the artistic process as a matter of function is one which interfaces constantly in relation to the artistic process that the artists are generating on the floor.

And so in my mind there are two things that are going on. There's the dramaturgy that is the operating system, and then there's the dramaturg who contributes to the creation of the operating system, but is not responsible for the dramaturgy.

## No single one is 'in-charge'

Ken Takiguchi:

About the wording that the dramaturg as a person is 'in charge' of dramaturgy. Generally, we agree that this is not a very correct or probably appropriate wording. But when we consider the meaning, we admit that dramaturgy is so fundamental in the creative process, and dramaturgy is ubiquitous. So **no one person can be 'in-charge' of doing dramaturgy.**

What the dramaturg actually does in the creative process really differs from process to process, company to company, country to country. But we still can have some sets of things that dramaturgs can or should do constantly.

## Ambiguous role, consistent responsibilities

Ruhanie Perera:

There is a kind of division between the idea of a role and the idea of a practice.

While we were almost all in agreement that the role is ambiguous and quite diverse, there is something about the practice that happens consistently. We did talk about bringing in the researching perspective, bringing in the social and political contexts and intercultural reflections.

We really loved the idea of the companion, and we talked about sometimes that companion being wanted and not wanted, feeling invited and not feeling completely invited at other times. And also, shaping the way in which the reception of the work is positioned.

With that, we came into the discussion of responsibility. **As much as what 'in-charge' really means for the dramaturg, there is all of this responsibility of tasks. And yet the responsibility is yours and not yours at the same time. And it is in this interestingly complex place that dramaturgy happens.**

## Doing all sorts of things ‘in there’

Alyson Campbell:

I still really resist this idea that the dramaturg has some sort of sole understanding of the dramaturgy. Very very much so. But it is about this person.

What we’re hearing about a lot, is that this person is ‘in there’, and can be conscious, can be documenting, can be archiving, can be articulating, can be doing all of those sorts of things that it’s much easier to do when you’re not right inside, in the middle. So the dramaturg’s position is both in there, and not in there.

## Navigating the In-Betweens

### Intergenerational Intermediary

Kok Heng Leun:

My second experience as a dramaturg was different because it was with a very, very experienced director – Danny Yung from Zuni Icosahedron in Hong Kong. So what was interesting was that most of the actors were from Singapore and some were young people from Hong Kong, I think they didn’t quite understand how he worked. So I had to then try to enter into the world of Danny Yung and how he constructs, and try to translate that to the actors and to the young students.

**And so my service to him was as a dramaturg who communicated his structure, his way of working, to those who did not understand this mode and structure.**

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

MAPPING THE TERRAIN

## Intercultural Translator

Kok Heng Leun:

I was working with a group who were doing a musical based on the story of 孟姜女 [meng jiang nü]. But they were going to do it in English, called The Great Wall Musical. The playwright from Singapore was Jean Tay, but she doesn’t really read a lot of Mandarin. Then the music director, the composer, the librettist, were actually all from, I think, the UK. And they were doing something that comes from China.

And so I became like a translator. I was providing information and actually doing cross-cultural and intercultural kind of work, trying to make them understand that their setup may not work for this story when you want to incorporate these characters. So there were actually cultural nuances that we had to negotiate and try to work around.

And so the whole process really became a huge intercultural discussion. From many aspects, from the way the music was being used for a musical, the lyrics, the metaphors, even the dramatic actions that happened on stage.

## Working through the Dynamics of Artist-Institution Relationships

Kok Heng Leun:

To develop a working relationship we go into lengthy discussions and chat. There’s a getting-to-know-you period. But the first projects that I entered into as a dramaturg, there was always this slippery slope of: where are the alliances here? At the top of my mind is always to serve the work and the art-maker. But at the same time, the engagement was with the support of an institution.



So there were times I would ask, where do I stand in this, because I do see, as a producer with experience, the practicality of certain cost measures in terms of a set design. Do I then agree with the producer? Do I have a discussion with the artist? The way that I'm still learning is that we keep it very separate. I would talk to the artist, and I would also talk to the producer or the institution, and then see where things go.

But I think it's about generating the kinds of relationships we've been talking about, where you have to negotiate and there is a certain amount of grey area that we do have to be aware of.

## Navigating the Inside/Outside Position

Yair Vardi:

I will talk from an artist's point of view and not from a dramaturg's point of view. And really raise for me the thought about the 'expert' or the one with more. Such as when we are talking about mentoring or we are talking about the 'expert' or coming to a process from an experienced point of view. So I'm kind of thinking, well, when I'm creating, I have to have a dramaturg. Even though I have a lot of experience, I've done a lot of things, I've dramaturged a lot of pieces.

**But when I'm creating, I'm this boy who doesn't know what he's doing, and then I need this position of a dramaturg to hold my hand and to explain to me what I'm doing from an outside position.** So then, he's not more experienced than me, or she's not more experienced than me. **She doesn't know more than me – but this is the position, to be from the outside and to try to explain to you what you are doing.**

Kok Heng Leun:

In my first experience as a dramaturg, I was initially meant to be the director. This was for LiXie's [The vaginaLOGUE](#). But I felt slightly uncomfortable because she was doing her own story of the vagina. So I decided to move myself away from the title of

director. But to assist her in the process of how to structure the work, and collaborating with her as the creator.

**So I was always on the outside watching, but I was also inside.** Then the in and out become interesting because you're in, and at the same time you're out. **And you have to be in and out at the same time.**

Because there's the connection between the work and the audience, which is one aspect of being a dramaturg, when you are actually going through the work.

## Formal Dramaturgical Training

Giselle Garcia [reporting on group dialogue]:

Shintaro [Fujii] was saying that, in general, there is no really formal training in dramaturgy in the academe or these departments are small. It's currently growing and we're navigating where we are in terms of education. So there are classes in, for example, theatre history or criticism, or how to look at a performance and write performance analysis. Usually this is where [dramaturgy] education moves around, I suppose. It's also taught in different places, not just in the university setting or a formal school setting. Shintaro even said that he's set up a training programme, which was a pilot idea a few years ago, exploring the idea of how to train dramaturgs.

Nanako [Nakajima] for a while was looking for a dramaturgy class, or how to study it or where to study it, and asked a lot of dramaturgs in Europe. But she said the advice given to her was **there was really no place to learn dramaturgy, but that you had to learn on the job.** You don't sit down and study it formally. So it's actually confusing, because in the conversation within the

group, a lot of us who do teach dramaturgy formally also learnt dramaturgy from a teacher. So what we have are educators who have learned via practice and are teaching formally.

Giselle Garcia:

There was also a discussion on how to document dramaturgy, and this was very interesting, **because the practice is in itself invisible. Nobody really knows, or we don't see it on stage, whatever it is that we [dramaturgs] do.** So one of the ways in which we can contribute to dramaturgy would be to become documenters, writers of analysis, or programme notes as [Kok] Heng Leun explained. Maybe that's where we can contribute, because there's a lack of performance archiving and research in our specific institutions. Or they are not accessible to a wide range of people. So how do we disseminate that kind of knowledge or process of dramaturgy and theatre-making and performance-making?

Robin Loon [reporting on group dialogue]:

Peter [Eckersall] says that once you introduce yourself as an academic, nobody will listen to you in the Australian context.

I think that's really quite interesting – the reverence, that there's a kind of deep-seated divide in one context that says, "You theorists, academics know nothing about production. Just shut up." And here [in Singapore], where we regard highly the idea of: "What does the scholar have to say about my production?"

So, again, the different kinds of operating contexts and how you identify yourself.

Robin Loon [reporting on group dialogue]:

Yinan was saying that in the China context, the dramaturg is usually an academic, a scholar that would go in, and because of the hierarchy, is accorded a lot of respect and power.

## Resisting Hierarchy & Maintaining Agency

Robin Loon [on Peter Eckersall]:

Peter [Eckersall] also said that there's lots of things to deal with. That we must not expect a dramaturg to solve all the problems. **A dramaturg is not a problem-solver.** Not somebody who comes in and solves all the problems. **And again, this resists the neoliberal kind of expectation that it's efficient when you have a dramaturg who will solve all your problems and fix the issues that you have.** The three roles: research, companion and operating on the level of reception and bridging.

Helly Minarti:

Being in dance, then and now, there's a sense of hierarchy in terms of education and transmission. So when we did this [Choreo Lab](#), I invited two senior artists that I employed to accompany these three young choreographers. And these two artists are not from dance. When we tried to break this hierarchy, we set up more informal workshops for four days in one place. And we had discussions that could go until midnight. Because that informality is important, instead of a classroom.

These three young choreographers were overwhelmed and always said, we need your guidance. And the three of us [senior artists] just said, "No, we don't want to guide you or whatever. We just want to 'ganggu'. It is 'to provoke', but in a playful way. There's a playfulness in that. We said, **"No, we really want to hear [from] you. This is your process. We're just here to provoke you, but in a playful way."**

When is the dramaturging really dramaturging, and when is it mentoring? When we suddenly find ourselves as more experienced dramaturgs paired with younger performance-makers, and the younger performance-maker turns to the dramaturg and [asks for guidance] – you feel it especially in this region [of Southeast Asia] where the hierarchy is very strong, paternalism is very strong. What should I do [in that moment]?

David Pledger:

Ideally, the dramaturg and their agency is separate from the financial aspect. We carve out space whereby their practice and the things that they do are able to serve the creation and artistic work. You could just as easily substitute 'artist' for 'dramaturg' in that sentence.

When you're talking about dramaturgy, funding is attached, because dramaturgy invokes the operating system – the system of production – in which art is created. So they're two separate things.

**I'm proposing that the role of the dramaturg is, as much as possible, protected from the culture of financing**, but actually dramaturgy, which operates in institutional, cultural and social circles (as well as the artistic) is necessarily involved in funding.

Again, I'm talking about an ideal situation. The real world is messy. Artists, dramaturgs, all of us involved in the creation of artwork, are implicated in the broader dramaturgy, the operating systems of culture and society. It is simply a reminder that we make art with an acknowledgement of this broader dramaturgy as a way to maintain an independence within it.



# EXPANDING DRAMATURGY

The panel titled *Talking Dramaturgy and the Dramaturg: Looking for an Asian context* at the ADN Inaugural Symposium on 23 April 2016. (L to R) Moderator Lim How Ngean, with speakers Peter Eckersall, Nanako Nakajima and Shintaro Fujii.



***“Dramaturgy – both as a theory and a practice – is always imbricated in a network of relations. It enables and arises from collaboration, contestation and disruption.”***

**– Peter Eckersall (2016)**

The term ‘dramaturg’ can come to mean many things at different points in history and in different contexts. Many performing arts practitioners may even fulfill dramaturgical functions – both individually and collectively – without actually calling themselves ‘dramaturgs’.

In modern contemporary performance, there is a broad consensus that dramaturgical practice goes beyond engaging with text and performance. Dramaturgy can and should engage with the social, political and cultural contexts of the performance, and that engagement can be expressed as a creation of space for contestation and discourse for all those

involved with the performance, from performance makers, to audiences, as well as other stakeholders. To this end, a dramaturgical practice is a collaborative one that necessitates the promotion of critical thinking and an openness to engage with varying and conflicting perspectives.

While this notion isn't necessarily an 'Asian' perspective of dramaturgy, it represents a departure, and perhaps a resistance to, the formal, text-based history of dramaturgy rooted in the German performing arts, with German writer, critic and philosopher G.E. Lessing (1729 - 1781) often named the first 'dramaturg' in histories of theatre and performance. A more organic and situated approach to dramaturgical work, that stems from the particular experiences and interests of a dramaturg, is characteristic of what tends to emerge in the Asian context.

As such the kind of process that evolves is closely related to the project at hand, the context and people involved. It is rarely based on a stipulated methodology that has been named and framed in advance. In one sense it is an 'expanded' dramaturgy that builds on Western modes which inform the training and scholarship of some dramaturgs in the Asian context. In another sense, it is an 'expansive' dramaturgy that incorporates whatever and whoever comes its way and finds connection that affects the performance making process.

The landscape of creation, reflection and critical review is at times well-known and familiar, at times strange and difficult to discern. Even as the work to invent and experiment with dramaturgical processes continues, the discussions about what they reveal are sporadic. At times faltering when the routes are unclear and the exploration overtakes the articulation.

The following edited excerpts were taken from ADN's first public panel entitled [Talking Dramaturgy and the Dramaturg](#):

[Looking for an Asian context](#), moderated by Lim How Ngean. The speakers for the panel were (in order of speaking): Shintaro Fujii (Japan), Peter Eckersall (Australia) and Nanako Nakajima (Japan). The panel took place on 23 April 2016 at Centre 42, as part of the [ADN Inaugural Symposium](#) themed "[Mapping Out, In & About](#)".

## The term 'dramaturgy' has many meanings: Where will it go from here?

Shintaro Fujii:

When you try to think about dramaturgy, everyone agrees, indeed, **that dramaturgy is a very tricky object**, difficult to discern or define because of its polysemy that the term has acquired with history, and because of the quite important differences according to languages, cultures, theatres and artists.

Dramaturgy can be found on different levels and be attributed to different people. First, dramaturgy can be discussed **on the level of a written text**. Dramaturgs in the sense of playwrights, and etymologically, like it was remarked this morning, dramaturg in the Ancient Greek meant 'playwright'. "Dramaturge" in modern French, like in many other European languages, still means both 'playwright' and 'dramaturg'. Second, **on the level of performance**, it is in a sense related to the collective work of a director, a choreographer, a dramaturg, and actors and dancers. And to make things even more complicated, as Patrice Pavis states, **[dramaturgy] also belongs to the spectator**. And then, there was Brecht after the second world war, who disseminated **the idea and the practice of production dramaturgy** all over Europe.

And then, since the 1980s, there was a shift from the Brechtian concept of dramaturgy, or the 'old' dramaturgy, to a more contemporary process-oriented 'new' dramaturgy. The term is taken from Marianne van Kerkhoven, the famous Flemish dramaturg.

Nanako Nakajima (2016):

It's very important to take note of three points in Lessing's Hamburgische Dramaturgie (The Hamburg Dramaturgy), which actually Eiichiro Hirata has written about in his book on dramaturgy, in Japanese. **So the three points in the work of dramaturgs involve the planning of repertoire, production, and education.** These functions still remain central to the dramaturg's role in contemporary German theatre. These three functions are still regarded as the main functions in the German Association of Dramaturgs, Dramaturgische Gesellschaft. I take this kind of definition as a key part of my dance dramaturgy work.

And then I'll go briefly into postdramatic theatre. German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann describes this new form of theatre, which appeared in Europe in the 1980s, as including both dramatic performance and dance. It was eventually reframed as postdramatic theatre, and in the following quotations, Lehmann explains some of the changes. I quote Lehmann, "In postdramatic theatre, performance art and dance, the traditional hierarchy of theatrical elements has almost vanished, as text is no longer the central and superior factor, all the other elements like space, light, sound, music, movement and gesture tend to have an equal weight in the performance process. Therefore, **new dramaturgical forms and skills are needed, in terms of a practice that no longer reinforces the subordination of all elements under one (usually the word, the symbolic order of language), but rather a dynamic balance to be obtained anew in each performance.**"

***"It is possible and sometimes useful to distinguish a dramaturg from a dramaturgical function, which may not necessarily be fulfilled by a dramaturg."***

**– Shintaro Fujii (2016)**

### **Fulfilling dramaturgical functions without the label 'dramaturg': Routes without roots?**

Shintaro Fujii:

I've been doing dramaturgical things without being called a dramaturg.

It is possible and sometimes useful to distinguish a dramaturg from a dramaturgical function, which may not necessarily be fulfilled by a dramaturg. Not only are dramaturgs responsible for dramaturgy. It is very possible that there is dramaturgy where there is no dramaturg, and yes, in some countries, as we discussed this morning, in Indonesia for example, there are people doing, effectuating dramaturgical functions, without being called a dramaturg. There's another dramaturg, a Flemish woman, Myriam Van Imschoot, who was saying that **you do not need a dramaturg to achieve the dramaturgical**, and I totally agree with her. There are many artists who don't work with a specific dramaturg, but their works show very, very interesting dramaturgical points.

## Dramaturgy as a culturally-embedded and culturally-engaged practice: Grounded and grounding?

Nanako Nakajima:

So for the second seminar I invited Japanese thinkers on dramaturgy. One is [Kikuko Toyama](#), and the other one is a theatre director in kabuki, who directs contemporary kabuki productions, [Yuichi Kinoshita](#). He also played the role of dramaturg, from my point of view, in his contemporary kabuki take of *Kurozuka* and other kabuki repertoires. He talked about why we need dramaturgs in Japan, and his thoughts while working on *Kurozuka*. He insisted that the dramaturg needs an area of specialisation in the field of theatre or dance. Kinoshita is a specialist in kabuki theatre, so that strengthens his role in the theatre productions, as he explained in the seminar.

Kikuko Toyama also explained how the social aspect is related to the dramaturgy of the piece. This relates to how the artworks, and the activities within and without the art context, whether in Asia or specifically in Japan, could also be interpreted as part of the art and part of the dance. I also think there is a social dimension to the art work. So how we include the social aspect into the dance is my role as a dramaturg. Especially if I work on those kinds of dance projects which are related to the social context in Japanese societies.

So dance dramaturgy is still an emerging field, and even though this subject has been discussed since the 1980s, when dance dramaturgy was introduced in Asia, it is also inevitable that the developing critical discourse would dissolve into that divide between the traditional and contemporary dance in Asia, rather than adapting existing Euro-American discourse into an Asian context. In that sense, the practical theory that has been absorbed into Japanese theatre and dance in my examples, such as oral histories or communicating with artists, needs to be

reconsidered in relation to practice as performing along with the theory embodied by the dramaturgs at work.

Peter Eckersall:

I want to elaborate on David Pledger's discussion of dramaturgy as an operating system, and think of it as how we think about an operating system existing within a cultural system. **Dramaturgy is about addressing the wider conditions of society and culture and relating those conditions to performance.** I think that's something that we've all acknowledged this morning.

But that also means that there are new possibilities for dramaturgy to operate in this, shall we say, extra-theatrical or extra-performative dimension, and this cultural dimension. I overheard a slightly funny conversation from some curators the other day at an art gallery where they were lamenting the fact that all they seem to do these days is make conferences and symposia. And in a way, I think dramaturgs are moving into this kind of practice as well.

So we can think about the work we do in a production context, but we can also think about the work we do more broadly in a discursive space, in a space of the possibility where performance is being represented as a form of research, as an 'ideas' practice, in relation to the broader cultural space. This, I would argue, is a dramaturgical process, and it should be seen as something that is part of the dramaturgy of performance.

**That then gives us this notion, which I've used in the past, of this being an expanded dramaturgy. Something that expands from the possibility of the theatre and essentially 'zaps' itself into all of these other critical, political, cultural spaces of possibility and transformation. There is this very productive relationship then, that is held within the crucible of dramaturgical practice, between artistic processes - be they performance processes, theatre processes, or dance - and this wider cultural sphere.** And the way that those interactions happen, I think, are explored sometimes by dramaturgs. They're also explored by other artists constantly,



but dramaturgs very often come to a project with a view that they're interested in perhaps writing about those connections, developing those connections and making them not just visible in the critical act of making performance, but perhaps extending the life of that performance into some other critical sphere.

So this aspect of dramaturgy which is about perhaps debating and actually creating conferences and symposia, as the curators were complaining about, perhaps moves into the sphere of creating other kinds of discursive events, bringing people together, and so on and so forth.

***“Dance dramaturgs aim to broaden the possibility of reading a piece in conjunction with its medium and method.”***

**– Nanako Nakajima (2016)**

## **Dramaturgy as bridging and criticality: Crossing between terrains?**

Peter Eckersall:

Dramaturgy, for me and also for my teachers, and for the work that I've always done with people like David [Pledger] in [not yet it's difficult \(NYID\)](#), has always been a bridging process. It's always been about bridging something or other, bringing together people, ideas, critical practices, politics, performance forms, in the context of live performance and sometimes media.

Dramaturgy – both as a theory and a practice – is always imbricated in a network of relations. **It enables and arises from collaboration, contestation and disruption.**

And so what I see dramaturgy doing in this, **is introducing**

**processes of interruption, introducing processes of ways to remove the spectator from this imaginary world of the stage, and also empowering actors with the ability to actually be themselves in performance, and actually present themselves on stage.** But also we see a lot more people in directing and other creative roles. They develop a critical voice and they explore that critical voice over a number of works.

Shintaro Fujii:

My first point concerns the activation of spectatorship, the presence of the audience. **The spectator is part of the performance and the dramaturgy takes the audience more into consideration.** There are more participatory performances that require the physical actions of the audience, and present reflections, asking for reflections from the audience, **seeking a sort of 'emancipation of the spectator'**, with reference to ideas in a book written by Jacques Ranciere.

Nanako Nakajima:

Compared to the dramaturgical practice in theatre, which may seek to distill the narrative meaning of a theatre piece for its intended audience, in one sense, **dance dramaturgs aim to broaden the possibility of reading a piece in conjunction with its medium and method.**

In the field of dramaturgy, dance dramaturgy in particular, is an innovating field. In contrast to classical dramatic theatre, in movement and dance performance productions the audience are confronted with many different vocabularies and disciplinary perspectives, none of which play a hierarchical central role. They generally are not equally well-versed in all of them.

And according to the Flemish dramaturg, Marianne van Kerkhoven, dramaturgy and the dramaturg reflect the moment when theoretical and conceptual enquiries within dance become more pronounced and embedded. **This engagement with discourse has produced a wide range of new approaches to dance that emphasise classical conceptions of choreography, as well as foregrounding content and critical debate in and around the work.”**

# THE LIMINAL ROLE OF A DRAMATURG:

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF DRAMATURGY IN ASIA

Rustom Bharucha

Rustom Bharucha presenting his keynote address at ADN Lab 2018 at Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, on 7 Sep 2018.



This [keynote address](#) was presented by Rustom Bharucha at the [ADN Lab in 2018](#) as part of a one-day conference held at Cemeti Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The session was moderated by Charlene Rajendran. The text below is an edited transcript of the talk with changes, additions and clarifications. There are also annotations from the editorial team to act as thought starters and further interrogation into the issues raised.

**Rustom Bharucha** trained as a dramaturg in the first batch of dramaturgy students at the Yale School of Drama between 1977-1980. In 1981 he received his Doctor of Fine Arts from the Yale School of Drama and proceeded to teach and conduct workshops in different parts of the world, including India, the Philippines, South Africa and Brazil on themes relating to the politics of touch, violence, empowerment and transformation. He is presently in conversation with the radical theatre school and company Os Saytros based in downtown São Paulo on decoloniality in theatre practice and is working as a dramaturg on a production relating to the *Mahabharata* written and directed by Chong Tze Chien at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore.

Rustom was Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics in Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, from 2012-2018. He currently lives in Calcutta and works on diverse cultural and social projects. An independent artist, performance scholar, dramaturg and theatre practitioner, he has been at the forefront of performance studies in Asia, developing ways to imbricate elements of culture and context in an analysis and critical engagement with performance. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Rustom presented a series of recorded talks available online, titled *Theatre and the Coronavirus: A Speech-Act in Nine Episodes*, produced by the International Research Centre/ Interweaving Performance Cultures at the Freie University, Berlin.

Rustom has directed plays at all levels of society, including at grassroots levels. In particular he has worked with a rural cultural organisation and theatre school called Ninasam in the village of Heggodu, Karnataka, India. Here he has worked on a very special project on land and memory with the Siddi community who are people of African descent living in different parts of India. Rustom was also project director of the Arna-Jharna Museum of the Desert at Jodhpur, Rajasthan, devoted to the study of traditional knowledge. He has been a Fellow of the International Research Centre/Interweaving Performance Cultures in Berlin, the co-Festival Director of the Inter-Asia Ramayana Festivals at Adishakti in Puducherry, India, and Advisor to the Prince Claus Foundation of Culture and Development in the Netherlands.

A renowned writer in the fields of interculturalism, secularism and oral history, he has written a number of books which include *Terror and Performance* (Routledge, 2014), *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin* (Oxford University Press, 2006), *Rajasthan: An Oral History* (Penguin, 2003), *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (Wesleyan University Press, 2000), and *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (Routledge, 1993). Most recently, he has completed a new book *Performing the Ramayana Tradition: Enactments, Interpretations, and Arguments*, co-edited with Paula Richman, which was published by Oxford University Press in June 2021.

Firstly, I have to say this is an all-time pleasure for me. It's always a joy to be in Jogja and this is my third or fourth time in this city. I first came to Jogja in 1986. I don't know how many of you were around then, let alone how many of you had been conceived. But I must say that I love this place and I think the scale of this venue for the conference is informal and agreeable. The energy of Jogja as a Creative City is all-pervasive and very grounded. And the food is great. There's a good feeling to this place. I think that the Asian Dramaturgs' Network has really hit the nail on the head with this location. Something exciting can happen here.

I'm particularly excited about this invitation because I have now retired and many people ask me, "What are you going to do in your retirement?" And I say, "You know, I really want to do workshops on dramaturgy in different parts of the world." That has been my desire. So, when this invitation came from the Asian Dramaturgs' Network, it was just fantastic. It is just what I want to do.

Why this desire to do dramaturgy workshops? Two reasons, both of which are somewhat ironic. First, I do not work formally as a dramaturg. I don't have any official designation as dramaturg in any Indian theatre institution because nobody really knows what the word 'dramaturg' means. It sounds a bit like 'hamburger' or something like that. So, I don't always use the word 'dramaturg' for most of my interactions and conversations in theatre. And I don't earn a regular income as a dramaturg.

Informally, however, I operate as a dramaturg. How so? One example is when an actor like Maya Krishna Rao, who is a good friend, calls me up and she's just buzzing with some idea. And I

start brainstorming with her. I start responding to her ideas and I realise, "Oh my god, that's exactly what a dramaturg should be doing. It's nothing more than just an animated conversation between friends about ideas that excite them." So, my dramaturgical intervention is more often than not informal. We need to keep that in mind.

***"We need to seriously grapple with how dramaturgy can be a meaningful intervention in our theatre cultures."***

The other reason why it's a bit ironic to talk about my 'desire' relating to doing dramaturgy workshops is because my first degree, my master's degree, at the Yale School of Drama was in Dramaturgy and Dramatic Criticism. This was way back in 1977. Let me emphasise that nobody knew what the word 'dramaturg' meant at that time. As I often joked, it was a profession in search of a definition. A very Pirandellian condition. So, there I was getting a degree in dramaturgy but nobody really knew who the dramaturg was, or what the dramaturg had to do. Why so? Because at that time there was no context for it in the United States. Its basic concept and *raison d'être* did not exist. Things may have changed since that time – and the Yale School of Drama has now prioritized a new practice-based approach to dramaturgy without the baggage of Dramatic Criticism – but my point is that if there's no context for a dramaturg's work, there's no real reason for a dramaturg to exist.



Why study dramaturgy? We must ask ourselves this question. Do we really need a dramaturg and this form of dramaturgy in our practice of theatre? What are we really inserting into our practice in this big, vast region called Asia? What is the need? How will it help us? How will it help all of us to do our theatre in a more reflexive and dynamic way? Or are we just creating a problem by introducing this role of the dramaturg into our performance ecosystem? We already have pre-conceptions of the role of the director which can be limiting to performance making. And that's bad enough. So, we need to ask if we are going to make things worse by having dramaturgs. We need to seriously grapple with how dramaturgy can be a meaningful intervention in our theatre cultures.

Editorial Team: Rustom prods us to think about the word 'dramaturg' in Asian contexts, and how the meaning of a term changes in relation to the language(s) used and the cultural context(s) within which the work is done - particularly in relation to languages that do not have a designated word that translates as 'dramaturg'. What then is assumed about being a dramaturg that is specific to a particular history and experience? How can this be expanded by mapping the way the word is used across different contexts?

If the terms 'dramaturgy' and 'dramaturg' are linked to traditional Asian performance practice, interdisciplinary collaborations and ensemble performances, what changes the vocabulary for talking about this process? What route does a new dramaturg take in a context that has had little history of working with dramaturgs? Can the reflections and insights of other dramaturgs prove useful? How so? Could it be more fruitful for a dramaturg to invent and discover his/her/their own pathways and practices without the clutter of too many other views?

### Questioning the Wow!: Dramaturgs as Thinkers

In 1977, when I was a student at the Yale School of Drama, our first assignment as a group of students was to edit the first issue of *Theater* magazine, which still continues to be published. That particular issue focused on the most exciting theatre in Europe at that time, the Schaubühne in Berlin. The Schaubühne is still around as one of the most prominent contemporary German theatre companies, but at that time it was particularly strong and cutting-edge. The director was Peter Stein and he was working with a dramaturg called Dieter Sturm. I still remember being struck by photographs of their productions, as I had never seen work like that in my life. There was a production of *The Bacchae* directed by Klaus Michael Gruber that was lit with a hundred thousand watts of neon lights. At that time, it felt spectacular. It was "Wow!" Today I would say, "What a waste of energy! What are you doing with a hundred thousand watts of neon lights for God's sake? Are we going to sit with dark glasses in the auditorium? And what about global warming?" But at the time I was knocked out by that way of working in a spectacular mode with sharp conceptual insights provided by a fully realised dramaturgy.

Needless to say, there is an irony to be confronted here. The Schaubühne in Germany had become my "Orient". Here I was, an Indian from the Oriental East, drawing my inspiration from the Occidental "Orient" of the German theatre. The Orient, as we know, is generally associated with non-western cultures and philosophies. As critics like Edward Said have pointed out, Western philosophers and writers like Goethe, Schlegel, and

Schiller, have turned to countries like India to “locate” the ideals of femininity and beauty and art in figures like Shakuntala and so on. And from these resources they created the image of an Orient that was decontextualized from the actual social, political and economic realities of countries like India. So, there I was, in 1977, coming from India, in the United States, studying something called dramaturgy that nobody understands, and I’m turning to the German theatre and finding my “Orient” out there. Because it was impossible to make theatre that way in India at the time, I said, “Wow! What a way to do theatre.” I had not gone to Germany and had no real grasp of its theatre-making tradition beyond my academic references. Only when I did get to see German theatre in the mid-1980s was I able to thoroughly demystify the “Orient” that I had created for myself.

I bring up this notion of “German theatre” because to talk historically about dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg, you have to reference the German theatre. There’s no way out of it. The first dramaturg was a great playwright called (Gotthold Ephraim) Lessing, who was a dramaturg in the Hamburg National Theatre between 1767 and 1769. Just two years. I always find that very funny. He lasted as a dramaturg only for two years. After that, it was too much for him. Why? Because theatre is messy. Theatre is full of intrigue. Theatre is full of gossip. Theatre is full of love affairs. Theatre is full of complications. And for poor Lessing, who wanted to be a philosopher, this was probably too much to take.

So why do we invoke Lessing? For two reasons. One, Lessing was a playwright in residence. Now, to be a dramaturg you don’t have to be a playwright but you’ve got to know a lot about different strategies of writing for the theatre.

This is important, I think, because it relates directly to what a dramaturg has to do. For example, a dramaturg may have to translate a play. Or a dramaturg may have to adapt a play. A director might say, and this is Peter Stein telling Dieter Sturm, about *Peer Gynt*, “I don’t want the last act. Rewrite it.” Then the dramaturg has to rewrite the entire act using a different conceptual apparatus. Another example that comes from the contemporary repertoire of the Schaubühne is Thomas Ostermeier’s celebrated production of *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is a big play, and a long play. Yet, for Ostermeier’s production, there are only five actors who perform all of *Hamlet*. Just five actors. Now what does that mean? That the dramaturg, or whoever, had to cut the play, chop and paste, put things together and create another text. A dramaturg is responsible for this kind of “rewriting” of a production and this is a technical kind of job. You’ve got to work with the text in all kinds of intricate ways.

Reason two for invoking Lessing: Lessing was not just a playwright in residence, he was also a critic in residence. He was an in-house critical thinker. While he was there he wrote a book called *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, which offered critical perspectives on theatre through notes and observations. Very simply, **a dramaturg’s job is to think**. But not to think in the abstract. **To think in the concrete. To think in the material**. To think with this desk, (the one I am seated at now). To think, “This desk is made out of wood. I am sitting next to a woman here called Charlene from Kuala Lumpur. I’m in a particular space addressing a particular audience in Jogja.”

Thinking concretely: that is what dramaturgy is all about. You have to think on the job. You have to think with your feet on the ground. And **you have to think in process**. If you don’t like

thinking, don't be a dramaturg. That's all you're doing most of the time. You're brainstorming, you're thinking, you're trying things out, etc. If you don't like to think, do something else.

So, these are some things we may learn from Lessing.

### **Dramaturgs, Directors and Collectives: Working through Relationships**

Now just a little bit of history. A hundred years after Lessing becomes dramaturg, in Germany again, you have the institutionalisation of another role in the theatre that we all take for granted now. We take it so much for granted that we think it's always been around. And guess who I'm talking about? The director.

We tend to think directors have always been there because they're such big extraordinary figures. In Indonesia you think of Rendra and Sardono and all these legendary figures and you feel they've been there forever! The eternal classics. But the reality is that the director's role is relatively recent in world theatre. It's a late 19th-century development that occurred in Europe. In contrast, in Asian or Indian traditional theatre, the Guru, or the Asan, plays the role of the director. Sometimes a senior actor plays this role. You might say these figures play roles similar to that of directors, even if they are not called directors. Historically, the formal role of director as it is understood today is a development which emerged in the late nineteenth-century feudal courts of Germany, more specifically, in the court of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen.

There's an image I have of how conventional directors, such as the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, work. There's a table centre-stage and there's a guy sitting at the table with a bell. And he's ringing the bell, and he's ordering crowd scenes from *Julius Caesar*. And he's saying, "There. There. There" [jabbing finger in specific directions], telling people what to do and where to go. Director as dictator. Director as authoritarian figure. Director as Big Daddy, sometimes Big Mommy. They're still around. They're dinosaurs, you know. I have a love-hate relationship with these veterans from the past, I'll be honest with you.

It's very interesting that in preparation for this talk I made this connection for the first time: the dramaturg actually precedes the role of the director. Today the director-dramaturg relationship is basic to the development of dramaturgy as a practice. If, as a dramaturg, you do not have a kind of soulmate in a director, and if you do not get along with the director, such that if he or she is not your talking or sparring partner, you will never be able to develop your work. It'll just be too complicated. So, the director-dramaturg relationship, in which a dramaturg is inextricably linked to a director, is basic to a dramaturg's role. It can be a tense relationship, a love-hate relationship, you can fight with each other, you may yell at each other, but it needs to be a real relationship that goes somewhere in relation to the production. Director-dramaturg. Dramaturg-director. If you don't have that relationship, and you just come in from the outside or you fail to establish a collaboration, the role of the dramaturg gets stultified and can become redundant.

Editorial Team: Rustom highlights how dramaturgs have to negotiate working relationships with other practitioners, particularly the director and/or choreographer. And in contemporary practice there are more instances in which a dramaturg negotiates the working dynamics of a collective or ensemble, often less delineated and hierarchical. What are the expectations that must be clarified for the working relationship to thrive? What is the ethics of care and respect that a dramaturg must work towards in observing and responding to the overall frames and aims of the project?

The question of how a dramaturg supports the work of other artists while developing his/her/their own work is not straightforward. This form of arts leadership, decentred and feminist in its approaches to positionality and power, is largely invisible as the work of sensemaking that a dramaturg focuses on is imbricated in the actions and choices of others in the team, developing a form of emotional labor that can entail mediation and arbitration as well. Is it then necessary to clarify with co-creators the expectations of a dramaturg and set out shared goals that can be modified along the way?

If we then look at what happens a little later in the 20th century, particularly in the first decades of the 20th century, we see something else developing in relation to the dramaturg. Here I'm going to focus on Bertolt Brecht. We tend to think of Brecht as a playwright and director. Yet Brecht was also a dramaturg. He was a dramaturg for Erwin Piscator, who was the founder of political theatre in Germany. And Brecht was just one among 12-15 dramaturgs in Piscator's company. To this day, dramaturgs are deeply integrated in the German theatre system.

And who are these dramaturgs? Now I have a different image that comes to mind. I don't see a man with a bell. I see a table, I see a lot of people, mainly men, but also women, smoking, drinking and arguing. Asking, "Why are we doing this

production? **You tell me why.** Why are we doing Hamlet at this point in time?" So, they're arguing and thrashing out the possible *raison d'être* of a new, more compelling interpretation of *Hamlet*, close to the pulse of the time. You've encountered this I'm sure, in your cafes and informal meeting places, as, for instance, when Theatre Garasi staged a multi-sectoral production of *Peer Gynt*. It happens all the time. You meet as a group of theatre workers, you talk incessantly, and you argue. At ADN, you use words like "provocateur" and "respondent" because you know the value of this ethos of discussion and argument. This is dramaturgy. This is what dramaturgs do: discuss, critique, talk, argue, conceptualise.

Now, **the most important principle here for us to think about is the role of the dramaturg working within the context of a collective.** This is the key point. The reason why dramaturgy made no sense in America in the 1970s is that at the time there was no understanding of a collective in relation to performance making in the established theatre. For the most part it was a hierarchy with producers calling the shots. There was no sense of a collective. And without a collective, there cannot be a dramaturg who works by raising questions and responding to questions in a freewheeling circle of ideas.

So how do we understand the term 'collective'? It can be used in a Marxist sense, as used by Brecht. But it doesn't have to be used only in that sense. It can be used in a more bourgeois sense or more like an ensemble. After all Brecht called his theatre the Berliner Ensemble. A collective could also refer to different modes of collaborative interaction, which occurs a lot in today's performative context, as, for instance, in feminist theatre. Many of the theatre workers in this audience are probably working in frames where collaboration is key to



the process. In this framework no one person calls the shots.

Shifting the focus, I would ask: What would be the collective in a traditional context? Community. It's communities who decide what they need to do and what they don't need to do with all their internal dynamics, which episode from the Mahabharata they wish to focus on, with which touring company and lead actor. This context opens up a different set of questions in which performative choices are to a large extent shaped by a prior consensus. I can't go into its specific contradictions here but what I'm trying to say in relation to the dramaturg is that if you don't have an understanding, or an openness, to the collective, in whatever way you define the word, then this idea of critical dramaturgy that I am trying to articulate will not make sense at all.

***“The dramaturg is in-between.  
The dramaturg is a liminal figure.”***

#### **Dramaturgs in Liminal Roles: Four Kinds of Liminality**

Now let's look at the relationship between these three figures – director, dramaturg, critic. I have worked in all three capacities and there's a lot of overlap between them but their functions are also distinct.

Frankly, most of the time we don't like critics. Because the critic used to be that person who would come to see a play after the rehearsal process had ended. The critic would watch the production on opening night, sitting in the front row taking

notes and looking very stern. And then what does this critic do? He goes home and writes something for a newspaper and it's like a verdict: This play is good, this play is bad, etc. No wonder nobody likes critics. They're judgmental and opinionated. The point is the critic is not involved in the process of a production. Nor is a critic expected to be involved or even aware of how a production came into being. That is the traditional notion of a critic. I would like to challenge that notion but I won't go into that today. But, basically, the critic is somebody who is detached, objective, and who comes up with a verdict, “I'm sorry, this play doesn't really work.” Or maybe, “This was interesting, but what happened to the third act?” Okay, so that's the critic's assumed objectivity which is achieved by remaining distant from the actual working process of a production.

Then there's the director, and I'm going to be nice to directors and say not every director has to be a tyrant or a dictator or a Big Daddy or a Big Mommy. There are good directors, which for me is the following: A good director is somebody who works very intimately with an actor and figure out the individual resources of that particular actor. This director is able to draw those resources out and shape it within the framework of a larger vision of the production. So, **there's an intimacy that exists between director and actor linked to the phenomenology of a particular performance.**

The dramaturg does not necessarily work with actors in that way. Personally, I don't work too closely with actors because it would be intrusive. I want the director to talk to the actor one-on-one, deal with the actor's problems, draw something out from the actor in a dialogical manner. I can observe this director-actor interaction closely but I wouldn't want to interfere with it. I would prefer that the director and

actor work out their own relationship. You could call this a dramaturg's protocol.

In this context, the important thing to keep in mind is that the dramaturg is in-between. **The dramaturg is a liminal figure in between critic and director, in between director and actor.** "Liminal" is a technical word, but I respond to it very much. So, I'm going to indicate four kinds of liminality. Just some points of reference to keep in mind. Don't look upon these points as formulae. I offer these points only to indicate a few things that are important to the work of a dramaturg, as I see it.

**The first liminality: I feel that good dramaturgs are ones who can initiate a production.** They could be traveling on the Metro or on the bus and they'll see something on the street or the platform and then that something becomes like a spark. It's an idea. It could ignite a concept or a fiction. It could bring to mind a play. That something becomes a spark. And the dramaturg is one who, generally, in my view, gets that spark which initiates a production. An idea that sparks. It's nothing more than that to start with. Just an idea, a thought, a sensation. But for the dramaturg it might lead to, "Hey, maybe it's time for us to think about *Shakuntala* again."

In the *Natyasastra*, which is a profound text not just at the level of psychophysical technicalities but also in the creation of forms, the seed for any creative expression is the '*bija*'. The seed contains an essence. It comes into being through desire (*kama*). Hence, this seed is essential; it dilates into a drop (*bindu*) and eventually leads to action.

Returning to the 'seed' as one may have experienced it in everyday life, the important thing, at a dramaturgical level,

is that this 'seed' of an idea is shared with someone. Maybe with a director, because the dramaturg happens to have a good relationship with that person. Or with someone else in a theatre company over a cup of coffee or whatever. **But what matters is that something is shared.**

This is the first kind of liminal relationship that exists between an idea and talking about an idea with someone. And at the end of the talking there is a feeling like, "Yeah, you're right. This is what we have to do. We have to do this play. Now."

**The second liminality is when the concept expands and the dramaturg asks, "What now?"** Let's say we need to do *Hamlet*. Then the circle must widen and more people must get involved. So, you start the brainstorming and the questioning and you begin to ask, "Why? Why are we doing this play?" And this "why" is what fuels what I will call the process of conceptualisation.

Conceptualisation should be differentiated from predetermining a fixed concept. Such fixed concepts can be fatal for dramaturgy because they can freeze the cognitive and creative process. Conceptualisation, I would like to believe, is an active process, it's a free-for-all; it involves moving backwards and forwards, becoming aware of the contradictions that emerge along the way. So conceptualisation is a very important part of any creative process. From asking the crucial question, "Why this play?", the process of conceptualisation opens up another liminal stage of critical inquiry and discussion.

**The third liminality is asking how to realise the concept.** That's what happens during the rehearsal stage of any

production. That's the most creative phase of any process. And, for me, that is where the director becomes all-important as he or she works very closely with the actors. The dramaturg is there, but more like a shadow, watching how the concept is working or not working. If you are brave, you can tell the director, "That concept we had in mind was off the mark. Now we need to go somewhere else with the production. Because the actors are giving us a different energy and we have to go with that". So that's the third stage. It's the "how" stage.

**And the fourth liminality, which we tend to forget, is what happens after the production has been staged and you need to have an interface with the audience and the public in the larger public sphere.** This stage of the production involves an engagement with those who are watching the work closely. They may be die-hard partisans of a particular company or strangers in the larger theatre community or activists. This is a very crucial political stage involving reception and, perhaps, an altogether different way of reading the production from what might have been assumed by the director, dramaturg, and actors. Maybe what you've done is a controversial production. It may be a problematic reading of a classic. It may throw out problems relating to race and gender. At this juncture, the dramaturg has to engage with the public debate. This is the fourth liminality: that which exists between the production and its reception.

So, you see what a range of possibilities there are for what the dramaturg does in the liminal space of theatre. I'm not trying to say these four stages occur in sequence - one, two, three, four - in a linear fashion. It can all be mixed

up. I'm just spelling it out for you to think about. To think about how the dramaturg can initiate a production. And very often, after the production is over, how the dramaturg can be involved not only in engaging with the critical reception of a production but who could also be involved in the archiving of a particular process. This involves documentation, which is yet another activity in which the dramaturg can be involved.

How does one perform the archive in ways that are sensitive to, and yet different, from how a production gets performed in its actual unfolding and practice? This could be regarded as a new dramaturgical challenge.

Editorial Team: Rustom proposes a multiplicity of options for how a dramaturg can initiate and be involved in a project, engaging with a kind of liminality. This opens up a wide scope of roles and responsibilities for a dramaturg to embrace, and perhaps risks to negotiate. Which raises the question of how important it is to respond intuitively and allow for a dynamic of play and spontaneity to take priority. But what is the balance of the intuitive and organic with the structured and planned? Are there particular politics that a dramaturg aligns with in order to shape a niche that is suited to his/her/their beliefs

and interests? Or does he/she/they morph according to the options available in order to gain experience and sharpen his/her/their skills?

If a dramaturg is like a catalyst, sparking options and reshaping ideas to provoke alternative frames and lenses, what are the conflicts and tensions to look out for and navigate when disagreement or resistance occurs? How does a dramaturg deal with divides and discontent within a project, particularly in intercultural and interdisciplinary projects where difference is central yet not always resolvable?

### The Dramaturg in Action: Negotiating Contexts, the Intracultural and Translation

So how do I work as a dramaturg? I think I should give you a few clues about my personal experience, and I go back to the crucial word, namely 'context'.

To begin: Where are you working? With whom are you working? What kind of theatre are you working with? Are you working with a state-sponsored big-budget theatre or are you working with a grassroots theatre collective? Because depending on where you're working, with whom you're working, and with what budget you're working, the role of the dramaturg will have to change. It cannot be a fixed model. Obviously, if I enter a state-funded theatre, there's a different politics of capital that one has to engage with. There's a different hierarchy in its professional system, which could be highly specialized, and I have to behave accordingly, and perhaps, strategically. However, if I'm working with a community theatre group, I have the option to work at a different pace with a different level of informality and energy.

I have done most of my work at an institution called Ninasam, which is located in the village of Heggodu in the southwestern state of Karnataka in India. It's a theatre school. It's also a repertory theatre company. At any one time the company could perform more than a hundred shows in rural areas. It's also identified as a progressive publishing company, and it's got a film society. It's an amazing space. It was co-founded by Sri K.V. Subbanna who won the Magsaysay Award, and who was an extraordinary human being

strongly committed to the idea of community.

I consider myself very fortunate to have worked at Ninasam for many years because if I had limited myself to doing theatre in my home-city of Calcutta, then like many of us in India who tend to get region- and city-bound, I would have just replicated the norms surrounding me. As a city boy who has grown up in the heart of the city of Calcutta, such that if you put your finger in the middle of the map of Calcutta, you're sure to land on my house, I'm right in the centre of it all, with the traffic and processions and crowds of people, and all else. It's crazy. From this context, I had this rare opportunity to work elsewhere at a theatre institution in a village, for long stretches of time with around 15-20 actors from neighbouring villages and towns, in a very concentrated work process. Inevitably, in this environment, I had to change my way of working, I had to change my way of thinking about theatre, and I had to engage with what's there.

So, against this backdrop, I'm going to focus on two concepts, which I think are important for dramaturgical thinking. One is the concept of what I call the **intracultural**, which I think is hugely important in our context in Asia. And the other is **translation**, which I value very much in the multilingual context not just of India but of Asia at large. Our reality wherever we are in Asia is profoundly multilingual.

**The intracultural** – let's start here. In 1986, I returned to India from the United States. I felt I had to be in India and I returned with an intercultural theatre project. Intercultural in this case meant working across borders of different nations. It was a project that some of you may have read



about in my book, *Theatre and The World*. It's a project called the *Request Concert* Project. <sup>[1]</sup>

*Request Concert* is a wordless one-woman play written by a German playwright called Franz Xaver Kroetz. I had just seen a fantastic production of *Request Concert* in New York, enacted by Joan Macintosh and directed by Joanne Akalaitis. A few days later, I met the designer of the production, Manuel Lutgenhorst, a German working in New York, at a friend's house. I didn't know him very well, so I asked a casual question, "Manuel, what are you doing at the moment? What are you planning to do?" And he responded by saying, "You know, I want to do *Request Concert* in Tokyo." I said, "That's very strange. I want to do *Request Concert* in Calcutta." And we looked at each other and he said, "Let's think about this."

Now that's the seed. It's that little chance encounter that I had mentioned earlier.

I go back to my apartment in Manhattan and there's a dramaturgical flash. I can see the next three years and like a seer or something, I pick up the phone and call Manuel. And I find myself saying, "Manuel, I think I have to come over and talk to you." He says, "I'm waiting." I go over to his house and within 10 minutes, we are only too clear over a cup of tea that we have something to work on. We want to do an intercultural theatre project which involves the adaptation of this one-woman wordless play by Franz Xaver Kroetz in six Asian cities.

[1] For a detailed "thick description" of three adaptations of *Request Concert* in the cityscapes and cultural contexts of Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai, see the second part of my book *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

My god, we had no money but we didn't lack dreams. So, we were going to do the production in Kolkata, Mumbai, Chennai, and I'm the local Indian producer. And we were also going to do it in Jakarta and then Seoul and Tokyo. Shoestring budget but, believe me, exciting. Very exciting work. I don't think such projects can happen today because things are too expensive. I mean survival has become expensive. In the 1980s it was still possible to dream and dream with big visions even without a substantial budget.

So, it's an "intercultural" theatre project because Manuel's German, I'm Indian, and we are working on a German play in an Asian context. Therefore intercultural, right? How literal can we get.

And then what happened? What is this *Request Concert*? Let me tell you a little bit about it for those who may not have heard about the play. It's a one-woman play about the life of a working woman. She comes home from work. She switches on the light. She gets into her house clothes. She makes herself a cup of coffee. She smokes a cigarette, watching the television, the news of the day. She switches off the television. She makes some dinner. She sits down. She eats her dinner, listening to a radio programme called *Request Concert*, a music programme. And then she washes the dishes. She goes to the toilet. She comes out. She does some embroidery. Then she switches off the radio. She prepares for the next day's work. She gets up and commits suicide.

So, in a very rough sketch, that's the play. For Kroetz, the suicide was meant to be a protest against the mechanisation and self-regimentation of the woman's life. That was his interpretation. Obviously, for us in India and Asia, in our contexts, suicide is a reality for women which has very different contexts. Women commit suicide (and men as well) for all kinds of

reasons which could be linked to poverty, unemployment, joint family oppression, dowry, a sense of failure or depression, the violence of caste, the impossibility of sustaining a non-binary gender existence. So, at the very start of our journey, it became very clear to Manuel and myself that even though we were not trying to be “politically correct”, that as two men directing women in a play about a woman who commits suicide, we were asking for trouble if we didn’t know how to go about engaging with this very sensitive issue.

So, without much agonizing, and I must say this is what was so heartening about the organic process of the entire project, the women who were playing the roles, including Chandralekha who danced the role in Chennai, Usha Ganguly in Kolkata and Sulabha Deshpande in Mumbai, became the co-directors of the individual productions. Out of a close collaborate process, involving months of work on each production, it was decided whether or not the suicide was a valid action to be shown on stage. Some actors, like the dancer and choreographer Chandralekha, completely rejected the suicide in her minimalist, abstract, Bharatanatyam version of Kroetz’s text. Another actor played it like a question, in a more Brechtian mode. The third one did take her life. I won’t go into all those details.

The point is, while I was working in Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai, in three very different locations, in three very different regions of India, where there are three distinct languages used in everyday life, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, it got me thinking. While I was working with all of these different ways of dealing with cooking, food, fashion, household activity, radio culture, advertising, film music, popular culture, I realised it’s not the intercultural that

interests me at all. It’s not about what happens to a German play in an Indian context. I was now asking, “What is the Indian context? What is the Indonesian context?” And I realised that if you actually open up these words, “Indian” or “Indonesian” or “Malaysian” or “Singaporean”, **there are internal cultural differences that exist within those seemingly homogenised realities and identities determined by the nation-state.** Those internal cultural differences are what we have to be very attentive to as cultural workers. Like, if I look at you now, you all appear to be “Indonesian”. But, if I look at you more carefully and I get to know you through conversation, I will realize that some of you are from Jogja, some of you are not from Jogja. Maybe for some of you, your language at home is different from the way you speak the language here in Jogja. Perhaps, not everyone here is a Muslim. But, on the surface, you are all one and that’s okay at a general level.

But, if you’re working a little more closely with contextual and cultural differences, these differences are not between “Indian” and “Indonesian” or “Malay” or whatever. These distinctions are only too obvious. The real cultural differences are those that are embedded within particular regional and local contexts and which are so internalized, and, at times, invisible, that it takes a great effort of consciousness and critical inquiry to recognize these internal cultural differences.

This **intracultural** dimension is something I feel you need to think about when you call your network the Asian Dramaturgs’ Network. Obviously, “Asia” is being used here for strategic reasons and as a convenient institutional signifier. But when you are actually working at ground levels, you are opening up all kinds of cultural differences **within** Asia as well.

Indonesia is a vast country of many islands with many languages, encompassing a multitude of cultural differences. And these are the differences that I think we have to be very attentive to, beginning with **language**. I think many of you probably know that India has 23 official languages and eight scripts. That means eight different ways of writing. You guys in Indonesia were much more practical because way back during the freedom struggle in the late 1920s and 1930s, your national figures and freedom fighters decided on the formula of “one nation, one language”, and Bahasa Indonesia was created. So that is your link language across a multitude of languages and dialects. In India, our language politics is far more complicated.

What do you do in such a scenario? If you want to work with actors and theatre people from your own country in a context where you don’t know the language, what do you do? You want to work with this group of actors, you have something to work on which is of mutual interest, but you don’t know their language. So how do you work in such a context? Practical question. This is something I’ve had to confront. So, I’m sharing my hands-on experience with you.

There are two ways of answering the question. One, you could adopt the position that “Theatre has its own language.” I would say it’s an evasive answer. It’s not entirely wrong, but it’s a bit evasive. This idea that all theatre has its own independent, specially created, syncretic language, which is made up of music and dance and gesture and expression and silence and rhythm and sound. That is the language of theatre and we can all respond to its multivalence at a nonverbal level. But let’s be honest. Among those components, the spoken word also plays a role. We can’t deny that we speak. I’m speaking to you in English and very conscious of the fact that it may not be reaching everybody in this space.

So how do we work around this challenge? And this is where I would ask us all to think about **translation**. Not as something that is done in a study by some academic who then gives you a text and says, “My work is over.” No, I’m not talking of that kind of “disembodied” translation. I’m talking of translation in theatre practice. Translation in the rehearsal room itself. Translation as a dynamic and interpretive force.

***“I have to become, first and foremost, a listener.”***

And this is something I have found very exciting that I would like to share with you, because I’ve done a lot of work in this area. When I work in a language I know, let’s say English, I’ll be honest with you and tell you I can become a dictator very quickly. I can tell the actors exactly what I want and what to do. And I can even enter what’s going on in their minds, in their political unconscious. That’s the problem: the director can read the unconscious of the actor, but this opportunity does not always become available to the actor because he or she is too busy acting. The director, on the other hand, is observing and, more often than not, controlling what is going on. This is a scenario fraught with power dynamics. In contrast, when I don’t know the language I am directing in, which is Kannada when I am directing in Karnataka, I have to become, first and foremost, a **listener**. When you are working with different languages, you have to listen.

Secondly, you don’t just listen with your ears. You listen with your body. You listen with your entire body. You’re listening

with your eyes. You're listening to see how a particular actor is shaping his or her fingers as he or she is speaking. There, look how she's holding her pen [pointing to a person in the audience] and she's writing a sentence. Look how she was smiling and now she's not smiling anymore. Now she's smiling again. So, I'm listening with my eyes. And sometimes when you don't know the language, everything else gets more sensitized. Remember that. You may not understand the words but, almost by default, almost everything else surrounding you becomes more charged. You're more alert to touch, you're more alert to visual signs, to the atmosphere, to the spaces between you and the other actors. So, listening with your body is crucial.

Editorial Team: To deal with the intricacies of cultural difference and intra/inter-cultural gaps of understanding, Rustom underlines the work of translation as more than moving between one language (as a set of words) and another, in a literal sense. Translation within this frame acknowledges the politics of culture, and questions power structures that determine meaning. Space, time and energy are allocated for the labor involved in bridging the gaps. With this in mind it makes sense for the task of dramaturgy, like the work translation, to be shared across

different persons, including actors, designers, directors, writers, etc. What are the frames within which this can occur, and how can the dialogue be facilitated skillfully? Who are the thought leaders in a project and how do they steer through difficulties when these arise? When concerns emerge about the ethics of choice, who takes responsibility? What are the principles of practice that become critical to the ethos of a project and the politics of respect? How does a dramaturg 'listen with the body' and speak from the soul?

In a scenario where the director may not know the language of the actor, one can encounter the following scenario: "Translator, please intervene. The actor has a problem with this line that

you have translated. What do you make of that problem?" And you start arbitrating. You become an arbitrator in the process. And what happens then is that a different kind of a dialogue begins to emerge. It's no longer a command structure with the director telling the actor what to do and how to read a line. Even a command with a smile is a command. No, this is more of a dialogue involving three persons – the actor, the translator, and the director. It's a three-way process of communication, of give and take, of agreement and disagreement. The director shifts his or her gaze between the actor and the translator. Far from commanding the actor to speak the line in a particular way, the director becomes more of a questioner: "What do you think?" [turning to the translator] "What do you think?" [turning to the actor].

While I don't use the word "democratic" too often to describe the practice of theatre, I do believe that this dialogical process is somewhat more "democratic" when working in the theatre. The crucial reality is that you, as director, cannot assume that you know it all. You cannot assume any omniscience because, in essence, you are ignorant of the linguistic nuances of the communication. Indeed, you may actually find that the actor is the best translator in the search for the best possible synergy between meaning and words. Let's face it: Very often, actors are the best translators.

As I come to the end of this talk, let me just say that dramaturgy, like anything else relating to the theatre, is intuitive, it's organic. Very often the idea for the play comes out of an improvisation, and you see the play coming out of the actors, compelling one to acknowledge, "I now know why I have to do this play, at this point in time." That kind of dramaturgical revelation can be very rewarding. I have discussed this process



at length in my decision to do *Woyzeck* at the Ninasam Theatre Institute, which came out of a violent improvisation involving a collision between a dominant language and the language of the stranger.<sup>[2]</sup> As the improvisation exploded before my eyes, I could see the otherness of *Woyzeck* surfacing with startling intensity and clarity. I have referred to this process in terms of how the “political unconscious” of the actors can be in sync with a particular narrative at a specific point in time.

In contrast to this process, where the unconscious plays a role in the transformation from an improvisation into a conscious decision to stage a play, there can also be a process where you have a great concept at the very start of the rehearsal process. But, as you work on the production, it may be necessary for you to rethink your approach. So, for example, in a production of *Shakuntala* that I staged at the Ninasam Theatre Institute, my concept came out of my need to work with the Siddi community. The Siddi are persons of African origin living in scattered communities across India. They originally came from Africa as soldiers or as sailors or as traders or as slaves. Now there are less than 50,000 Siddi living in India, and I was working with a few of them at Ninasam, where they are identified primarily as agricultural laborers. I had worked with them earlier on a project that dealt with land and memory.

After that rich experience, I thought, “What if I cast a Siddi woman as Shakuntala?” That was my idea. I wanted to highlight the predicament of a black Shakuntala. And you know that’s a critical concept because a black Shakuntala goes against the

[2] I have referred to this improvisation in some of my essays, notably “Somebody’s Other: Disorientations in the Cultural Politics of our Times”, *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis. London and New York: Routledge, 1996. Also, in the larger political context of communalism, I discuss the same exercise in my essay “Phantoms of the Other: Fragments of the Political Unconscious,” *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization*, Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

entire canon of beauty and aesthetics in which Shakuntala is always envisioned as fair and beautiful, in a predominantly brahmanic context. Against this canonical reading, if you put an Adivasi woman, an indigenous woman as the protagonist, at the center of your production, you’re opening up a lot of things. So, in essence, it was a bold concept. But if you ask me, in all honesty, if the production really worked, I would say, “Maybe not.” This is because it was my concept and it was not coming out of the group of people that I was working with. For instance, in the closing moments of my production, Shakuntala did not return to the court with her husband and son; she returned to the earth, rather like Sita in the final moments of the Ramayana. While I was rather committed to this ending because Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* in my view can be read as a rewriting of the Sita myth, I do believe that my company of actors, including the Siddi actor playing Shakuntala, would have preferred a “happy ending.”

Was I wrong, therefore, in imposing my interpretation of the play? I am not entirely sure. However, what I am trying to point out in a self-reflexive critique is that one needs to listen to the group dynamics. Listen to the collective. Listen to those internal cultural differences within a particular group, and open one’s own creative choices to ceaseless questioning. At times big concepts may not work because they have not emerged out of any dialogue. They have not come out of the immediacies of the context in which one is working. This doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t have big concepts, but let’s not get carried away with them. That’s all I’m trying to say.

Ultimately, you have to do theatre with people, individuals, at times communities, in a particular space, in a particular time, at a particular historical moment, and you have to decide together: *What* should we be doing at this point in time? And *why* are we doing it? And *how* do we want to go about it?

# DRAMATURGS

## IN ASIA:

WORKING ROLES  
AND RELATIONSHIPS

***“I’d like to think that dramaturgy would be at its healthiest when you constantly have to negotiate your relationships with people in the room.”***

**– Giselle Garcia (2016)**



The panel *Dramaturgy in Action I: Practical Realities* at THE Centre 42 Black Box during the ADN Inaugural Symposium on 23 April 2016. (L to R) Speakers Peter Eckersall, Giselle Garcia, Li Yinan, Nanako Nakajima, Lim How Ngean, and Sankar Venkateswaran.

**A**cross Asia dramaturgs are developing an evolving understanding of their roles and working relationships that encompass a wide range of cultural contexts and performance projects. As dramaturgs collaborate with multiple directors and choreographers in varied projects that may span a few years, or focus on a particular artist/company and remain attached to one sphere of work, they gain critical intelligence and sensibility that informs their skills and capacities. Some take on a role that is deeply related to the ethos and aims of an ideology, philosophy or aesthetic that shapes their dramaturg identity. Others embrace the role of festival director, educator or researcher to draw on dramaturgical thinking to fulfill responsibilities that rework the terrain as they see fit. Yet much of this work is effective when it connects deeply with context, culture and community. Such that when trying to pin down what it is a dramaturg actually does, the relational capacity of the dramaturg within an arts project, landscape or ecosystem becomes critical.

Varied working relationships and perceptions of the role inform a dramaturg's ability to respond and engage with insight and depth. In particular, the development of conversations, discourses and resources for the project, as well as the capacity to access and discern these literacies,

become key to the contribution of a dramaturg. These are mediated by the approaches that dramaturgs choose to take on, depending on their background, skills and the opportunities afforded to them. Thus in articulating what it means to be a dramaturg in Asia, some have worked out suitable analogies or metaphors to describe and define the work they do. Others emphasise particular skills they bring to the working relationship and reflect on how this contributes to the performance that emerges. The dynamics of language and the words used to map these roles are linked to cultural specificity and the dynamics of translation. Much is lost in the attempt to specify as dramaturgs often do more than is visible or knowable. Yet negotiating what this means in concrete terms is useful in building a critical consciousness, and attending to the ongoing questions that arise about what it means to work as a dramaturg. Especially when the meaning of the term is so fluid and diverse.

The following excerpts were taken from the ADN public panel entitled [\*Dramaturgy in Action I: Practical Realities\*](#) which engaged with the practical realities of dramaturgy in the field. Each speaker presented a specific case study of their dramaturgical work. The panel consisted of a mixture of theatre and dance dramaturgs working in their respective home countries and abroad. These excerpts reflect how some dramaturgs evolve and articulate their working roles and relationships.

The speakers for the panel were Nanako Nakajima (Japan), Peter Eckersall (Australia), Lim How Ngean (Malaysia/Australia), Sankar Venkateswaran (India), Li Yinan (China), and Gisella Garcia (Philippines). The panel took place on 23 April 2016 at Centre 42, as part of the [\*ADN Inaugural Symposium themed "Mapping Out, In & About"\*](#).

*“To me, a dramaturg can explain why you missed or why you hit the target.”*

– Li Yinan (2016)

## A Critical Researcher and Sounding Board

Lim How Ngean [on being dramaturg for dancer-choreographer Pichet Klunchun in Thailand]:

**I essentially acted as a sounding board.** That is perhaps the most “easy” way of summarising what I was doing. And I came to realize that being a sounding board was actually quite an important skill to develop as a dramaturg.

The other thing that I brought to the table was that I was equipping myself with some sort of cultural literacy in Thai classical dance and Southeast Asian contemporary dance forms due to the research I was doing for my PhD. This helped me to then unpack what Pichet was approaching in his development of contemporary choreography that was very entrenched in his *Khon* training.

Not just being able to research, but to watch. The idea of being an observer. The observer is one that is informed and comes in with some experience of performance. While I had an idea of the theatrical frameworks of performance and dance, more importantly **I brought an experience of observing.**

Another key aspect of my work as dramaturg is critical questioning. In the Southeast Asian region, there is more work that needs to be done in developing clarity about criticality, critique and criticism. There seems to be a fine line between being critical and having to critique. People tend to think that when you make a comment or critique something, you are merely being critical. What I valued was being able to engage in healthy debate with Pichet as he was very professional about wanting criticality to improve the work.

## Decentred Dramaturgy and Emergent Discourse

Peter Eckersall [on being dramaturg for theatre company *not yet it's difficult* (NYID) and artistic director David Pledger in Australia]:

I'm much more interested in processes that call for a **decentred dramaturgy. A dramaturgy where those kinds of heroic, masculine ideas of control are actually taken away or withdrawn from the project.** I think in contemporary times those kinds of processes are much more helpful in creating a contemporary theatre aesthetic than a slightly more old-fashioned one of confrontation.

I became more aware of what a dramaturg does as [NYID] evolved. Given that the company came about at a time when there wasn't really a conversation about dramaturgy and the Australian theatre. I think our company was part of an emergent discourse or development of the discussion on dramaturgy. The work that we were doing, the work that David [Pledger] did with the company and with the field, shaping a generation of new artists and working with other artists, created a certain vocabulary for dramaturgy in Australia that we've since taken for granted to some extent.

**Dramaturgs have a commitment to research,** and we have a commitment to bringing ideas from the world to the practice of making performance, and sometimes other forms of artistic productions. I've always thought that one of my important roles was to try and document some of the work and to write about the work. And I've done that to some extent. In addition, I, as an academic, have certain research training that enabled me to do it in a certain kind of way. But in some respects that perhaps limited other kinds of research that other people could bring to the table as well.

I've also thought that part of my work has been, to talk about the work of the company in relation to a broader project of contemporary performance – not only in Australia but also very importantly as a company that operates in relation to other artistic practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region and more broadly – across the globe.



## Negotiating Cultural Politics and Ethical Aesthetics

Nanako Nakajima [on being dramaturg for dancer-choreographer koosil-ja in Japan]:

My work as dance dramaturg in this project was substantially engaged with the negotiation of cultural politics in terms of movement. This involved an internal sensing of the dance experience.

My collaboration with koosil-ja would draw on my years of training in traditional Japanese dance. In addition to my traditional training and background, my work with koosil-ja would also be informed by my scholarly research interest in updating Japanese traditions for a contemporary audience.

**My function as dance dramaturg and movement coach for this project also required my inputs on the aesthetics of the movement, and the ethics of translating** a traditional Noh performer's movement vocabulary into koosil-ja's postmodern dance vocabulary.

During the rehearsal process, I helped koosil-ja by reading and interpreting the original Noh text. I also helped her examine how Noh principles work in practice when I rehearsed movement sequences with her and her musician. In addition I helped to assemble video footage of Noh and juxtaposed them with koosil-ja's past performances, collaborating with media artists to decide on projections for the performance.

And as a traditional dance teacher, I have a sensory memory to recognize which movements – either new or adapted – would 'offend' the traditions of the dance. On some occasions, for example, when koosil-ja would walk on stage while wearing her outdoor shoes, I would feel offended. As a result of my training, my body is also closed to the possibility of differentiating the personal from the sensations of the movement itself. This training affords me the confidence to say "no" to certain choices or attempts at rule-breaking. But it also denies me the clarity of personal freedom that koosil-ja chooses.

## Building a Forum

Li Yinan [on being a dramaturg/educator in Beijing]:

I mainly make theatre pieces with my students, and here I am in the role of concept-maker, tutor and educator. **I function as the theme-maker:** I decide on a scene and set up the concept, and I also frame the whole work. As a tutor and guide I sometimes also put all the pieces together.

What is important for me is, **as a tutor and educator-dramaturg, I make the theatre a forum.** I bring different people together to share their opinions and talk. The talk is between generations, between cultures, and that is the most important aspect for me. Because it makes young people grow.

I use a metaphor from a traditional Chinese fable to explain what a dramaturg does. Imagine that you are learning to shoot an arrow to hit a target. Sometimes you miss and sometimes you hit. To me, a dramaturg can explain why you missed or why you hit the target.

## Negotiating Relationships

Giselle Garcia [on being Co-Dramaturg in the Philippines]:

I'd like to think that dramaturgy would be at its healthiest **when you constantly have to negotiate your relationships with people in the room.** Because then you become more sensitive to the needs of the production rather than working mechanically. Every time we, as co-dramaturgs, stepped into the room it was kind of new and we had to ask 'what are we going to do today?'

I'll go back to the Filipino translation of the word dramaturgy. I've seen it written as *dramaturhiya* in a particular production. I thought that was interesting because the 'g' is such a hard sound in dramaturgy. And it's so German. It's so angry. But the 'h' has such a soft sound. Like a breath almost. It feels organic. And *hiya* in Filipino is to be shy.

But I think the word *hiya* is hard to pin down culturally. It's more of a sense of shame.

And maybe then it is associated with old notions of dramaturgy as 'hidden away', the production's 'shame' – its critic, its secret. I've heard some directors feel ashamed if they used a dramaturg. Maybe it's because they feel inadequate that they even need one? Or that there is a culture of intellectual shaming. The sound of an 'h' then feels like a symbol of a hushed tone, a silent, invisible voice embodying a production's shame. But it's also a sound that encourages breath, a powerful force of life. Maybe that's the cultural tension that exists when adapting a new persona in a new environment. Maybe that's where the dramaturg sits (or used to sit?) in the Philippine context: constantly negotiating between being a new life force and *hiya*.

***“Dramaturgy functions like the skeletal structure hidden in the body, or like steel inside the concrete structure of buildings.”***  
– Sankar Venkateswaran (2016)

## Structure and Architecture

Sankar Venkateswaran [on being Festival Curator in Kerala]:

During early on in my studies at School of Drama in Thrissur, there was this one dreadful text that we had to refer, it is called *Sanskrit Drama and Dramaturgy*. Dreadful, because it was dense with theoretical and literary aspects of playwrighting and dramaturgy, with some parts that were descriptive and others prescriptive, and overall it was taxonomical in nature. The archaic vocabulary also added to the incomprehensibility of the text.

Later, when I had the opportunity to physically immerse myself in Kudiattom as part of my training at TTRP, Singapore, I could see that many ideas mentioned in the text seemed to manifest in the body in the form of actions and expressions. This was insightful. Moreover, the text beautifully uses a metaphor of the body to look at the structural aspects of performance and plays. Just as a body is held together by the skeletal structure, the dramaturgy of a piece holds the performance together as a whole.

Dramaturgy functions like the skeletal structure hidden in the body, or like steel inside the concrete structure of buildings. When we look at a building, we don't see the rebar structures; what is seen is the façade, and hidden beneath it is a structure that holds the load and distributes the weight so that the building can stand. I find these notions of dramaturgy and structure helpful, especially the metaphor of the body, and it is not limited to performance alone, but useful to look at societies, states, organisations etc. This has also been my thinking when creating works or curating festivals. I look for conceptual structures that can resist the various forces and loads acting upon the creation or festival so that the work can stand on its own.

# NAVIGATING LIMINALITY AND DRAMATURGING THE 'INTER-'

***“My work as a dramaturg was  
about finding and filling gaps.”***  
– Ken Takiguchi (2016)

Working on ‘inter-’ productions – the interdisciplinary, the intercultural, and shades in-between and across – is often like trekking into uncharted lands. On a map, these are potentially the parts that might be labeled ‘here lie dragons’, because people don’t quite know what they might find there, especially if it’s their first time venturing into such terrains.

For first-time explorers then, how and what should they prepare before undertaking this adventure? And when they are in these spaces, how might a team find their bearings and navigate without losing anyone along the way? Do people in the group even have shared understandings or expectations about the journey? Do they know how to venture together?

Whatever the assumptions or expectations around dramaturging, or developing dramaturgical frames in such

spaces, the process of figuring out the dynamics and intricacies of doing the work in situ entails careful attention to details that become apparent only when the work begins. It also necessitates reflections on past experiences and previous journeys, to discern possible next steps.

At two ADN panels in consecutive years (2016 and 2017), a range of dramaturgs and people who have worked with dramaturgs in various 'inter-' productions shared openly about their journeys in and through such spaces. Listening to them speak about what it took to make sense of the work done, it becomes apparent that the spaces between, or the liminal realms, offer wide possibilities for what can happen. One might indeed encounter dragons in navigating these terrains, but the speakers also point to the multiple and varied ways of operating between options, ideas, disciplines, persons and perspectives. Spaces where the fires burn but perhaps less ferociously.

The following edited excerpts were taken from two ADN panels – Part I of [\*Dramaturgy in Action II - Collaboration, the Interdisciplinary, and the Intercultural\*](#) and [\*The Intercultural & the Interdisciplinary\*](#).

The speakers for Part I of *Dramaturgy in Action* were (in order of speaking): Charlene Rajendran, Ken Takiguchi and Kok Heng Leun. This panel took place on 24 April 2016 at Centre 42, as part of the [ADN Inaugural Symposium](#) themed “Mapping Out, In & About”.

The speakers for *The Intercultural & the Interdisciplinary* were (in order of speaking): Charlene Rajendran, David Pledger, Ken Takiguchi and Ness Roque. This panel took place on 17 February 2017 at BankART Studio NYK, as part of the [ADN Meeting](#) themed “Tracing Asian Dramaturgy”.



The panel *Dramaturgy in Action II: Collaboration, the Interdisciplinary and the Intercultural* at the Esplanade Theatre Studio, held as part of the ADN Inaugural Symposium on 24 April 2016. (L to R) Moderator Lim How Ngean, with speakers Kok Heng Leun, Alvin Tan, Charlene Rajendran, and Ken Takiguchi.



The panel *The Intercultural & The Interdisciplinary* at BankART Studio NYK, at ADN Meeting 2017 in Yokohama, Japan on 17 February 2017. (L to R) Moderator Sankar Venkateswaran, with speakers Ken Takiguchi, David Pledger, Charlene Rajendran, and Ness Roque.



## Positioning and Orienting as a Dramaturg: Where to Sit and How to Listen

Charlene Rajendran (2016):

As someone who's wandered into becoming a dramaturg rather than setting out to be one, it's been an ongoing process of improvisation and exploration, to find out about what being a dramaturg means, particularly in experimental projects, which are not easy to define or to describe. The truth is, I feel I've responded to some delicious invitations to participate in theatre-making. And my own appetite to keep being part of theatre had made me say 'Yes!' without any hesitation, within the demands of my full-time teaching job. And part of the luxury actually has been to know that I am desirable yet dispensable.

In the projects that I've been a dramaturg for, the directors and writers are themselves skilled dramaturgs. So if I have a role to play, it's as this extra ingredient that hopefully can make a significant and interesting difference. But if not, the production will go on just fine. The meal will still be a good one. Maybe even more so. Who's to say? Too many flavours can sometimes spoil the dish—depends on your taste.

**Two primary questions come up when I think about my experiences as a dramaturg in experimental and highly collaborative work.**

**Firstly, where do I sit?** When I enter the rehearsal space, I'm present. But my presence needs to be minimal. Likewise in a meeting. Immanence matters. I know that sitting in a corner writing notes in my book has an effect on actors and directors. So I try to remain as out of the way as possible. But this changes with each project, and with each phase of the project. It varies with each kind of meeting. Where I sit, how I attend.

NAVIGATING LIMINALITY AND DRAMATURGING THE 'INTER-'

NAVIGATING LIMINALITY AND DRAMATURGING THE 'INTER-'

**Secondly, how do I sit?** The active viewing of the dramaturg as first spectator or critical spectator means my watching is an intervention. I'm there to make comment, to discern concerns with the work, to raise problems, to ask questions. So it's an intense watching, and listening is part of my active presence. How I sit then affects how I see the project. Wherever and however I sit, I need to feel that I can sense and figure out what's going on. And if I'm missing something, should I say something now? Wait? Later? What do I do with this building tension? How do I deal with the exhaustion? Am I showing too much on my face? Am I not showing enough on my face? How much is apparent from where I am sitting? Between the last time I was present, what has changed? Does it matter?

As a practitioner who has been a director, performer, writer etc. and watching through several lenses simultaneously, it's like having a multifocal lens that allows for different kinds of focus and distancing. Sometimes I zone in on the active capacity to connect with text. Sometimes I'm thinking about what the producer is saying to the artistic director and concerns of funding. Sometimes I watch the play of bodies in relation to sound. Sometimes I listen and I try to push against the silence. And on it goes. It shifts. It influences what I'll say later though. And to do it adequately, it matters where I sit and how I sit. It's about how I locate myself in the project as my role is not specified at the start. Negotiation is left open. Sometimes I need to be more absent than present. Sometimes I need to be more visible. It shifts with the needs of the project.

One example: in [Gitanjali \[I feel the earth move\]](#), I used to sit between the writer and the director. The director sat next to the assistant director. Now [2016] in the next phase of the project, [Ghost Writer](#), I sit with the musician on the same side, because now the choreographer sits between the director and the writer. Things have changed. It's not power play that I'm pointing to, but it's just an example of how situations change and where I sit changes, and it's quite a delightful treat.

**Being a dramaturg to me is like attending a social event that I've been invited to in a home.** I'm an invited guest. I need to figure out the dynamics of who's present—friends and strangers. I need to know where to best locate myself, and then to move around and shift places. Working out the dynamics is part of my responsibility when I accept the invitation. I am meant to come with an appetite and a capacity to appreciate the food and the booze, but also to bring something to contribute to the party apart from my presence. So what do I say? Apart from watching with intensity, I'm expected to respond and say something useful. What kind of conversation should I have? What sort of language should I use? Through comment, question, provocation, affirmation, uncertainty, a bit of whimsy, I jump into the fray, I become part of the work. Much more evident than where and how I sit perhaps. But is it really?

I didn't train as a dramaturg, so I don't have a methodology. I improvise. Perhaps I'm a devising dramaturg. I respond to what I see and what I sense. But I do have a politics of theatre. That's implicit and that's explicit. It emerges from my choice of where to sit and what to say. Sometimes I'm not sure if I'm there as a curiosity at the party, to test whether something will work, to figure out if an idea is worth pursuing. After all, I'm meant to be the guest who says the least but makes sure they make sense when they say something.

I feel I'm not just accorded space to speak about the performance, but also to the stories that are emerging, the real life experiences that are shaping the nature of the work. And what I say as dramaturg contributes somehow to this overarching project. I take responsibility for it. But because I'm dispensable, I think my role is to say what nobody else might say, to stir the pot such that I prod the process beyond its realistic and yet perhaps imagined limit.

These experimental works don't have a prescribed outcome that's directing their shape, texture and feeling. Hence, the conversations are about what is coming up in the laboratories

of the artists' minds, in the rehearsal space, in meetings. What's making sense or nonsense? Yet these are also fragile spaces, and they should not be pushed beyond a particular limit. How do I speak to these fragilities and these vulnerabilities, even as I'm aware of the strengths? Have I assessed the situation and read the momentum? Some of these conversations take place over several phases, while some of them are shorter. But they all involve a level of play and purpose.

This dialogue is part of a ludic process, in a very liminal space that I enjoy, in which the possibilities I imagine and entertain help to create more advanced stages of thinking about the work. But where I sit and what I say frame my work on a literal and metaphorical level.

***“Because I’m dispensable, I think my role is to say what nobody else might say, to stir the pot.”***

**– Charlene Rajendran (2016)**

## **Finding and Filling Gaps: The Dramaturg as Translator and Mediator**

Ken Takiguchi (2016):

I'd like to talk about my experience as a dramaturg in a so-called intercultural theatre practice. And of course, the issue of intercultural theatre has been widely debated. I don't want to repeat it anymore. But for me, **intercultural theatre is a theatrical practice which bridges the different cultures. It is a space where practitioners from different cultural backgrounds gather and**

**negotiate their cultures, and then share the results of the process with the audience.** So for me, intercultural theatre has always been a very process-oriented practice.

For most intercultural performances, projects also happen beyond national borders. But I would like to highlight that what is at stake here is not the nation, but the culture. And I believe that a dramaturg in an intercultural performance has to be fully aware of this trap of whether to consider everything based on nationality. The nation state is a huge cultural baggage for us, and we cannot escape from it nor should we. But I also believe that we shouldn't be too trapped within that.

Ken Takiguchi (2017):

What has been striking for me in the creative process of the various intercultural performances I've been involved in is that **my work as a dramaturg is about finding and filling gaps**. During the entire creative process, I found many different gaps at many different levels among the members of the creative team. So I kept filling these gaps all through the rehearsal process.

**For me, the gap-filling is a very mediating act.** In the rehearsal room of an intercultural theatre production, the mediation between different cultures is key to filling in the gaps. This is done in very different ways, and is unpredictable and probably not very theorisable. I nevertheless would like to share some categorisation of my practice of cultural mediation, in the hope that this might lead to a more consolidated understanding of cultural mediation.

**The first category of mediation is about the basic idea of theatre-making and collaboration.** I encountered this when Marion D' Cruz and I co-produced a Malaysia-Japan collaboration work titled *Spring in Kuala Lumpur* (2003). The Malaysian performers complained that the working process was not the kind of collaboration they wished for. What they wanted was a process in which they could improvise and contribute to the collective creation. What the Japanese director intended was to direct them. Despite having had a few prior

workshops together, the idea of collaboration was fundamentally different [between the Malaysian team and the Japanese team]. I learned from this project that we cannot take anything for granted. The very basic concept of theatre-making can be very different between artists and cultures.

**The second category of mediation I want to talk about is from the position of translator.** I call the rehearsal room of intercultural theatre a heteroglossia, borrowing Mikhail Bakhtin's term. Bakhtin's heteroglossia is a microcosm where people interpret others using a great diversity of idioms, with expanded communication and intercultural influences. According to Bakhtin, the languages do not exclude each other but rather intersect with each other in many different ways in this heteroglossia. In the rehearsal room of intercultural theatre, I think the translator will play a critical role to establish such a microcosm.

If this is the case, then I would like to argue that the act of bridging languages, which is usually called translation, should be considered as an important and quite central part of the intercultural exploration in theatre. And the role of the translator as a linguistic/cultural mediator greatly overlaps with the role of the dramaturg, who is expected to be a cultural mediator in intercultural performances. So he or she provides a context in which each participant can absorb the elements that are alien to him or her in the creative process, and thus facilitates the intercultural negotiations.

This kind of conceptualisation of the translator/dramaturg makes very good sense to me, because I started my involvement in theatre-making as a translator, and gradually acquired the role of a dramaturg later, in a very organic way.

**The third kind of mediation happens through research.** In the creative process of *Mobile 2: Flat Cities*, academic research was key to filling two major gaps. The first gap was in the perception of the Japanese Occupation (during World War II) of Singapore among the team. Several scenes of the play were set during that period as a

background of the current events and resonated through the story of an interracial family of a Japanese husband and a Malaysian wife living in contemporary Kuala Lumpur. So I conducted some historical and sociological research on the perceptions of the war in Japan and Singapore, providing various references from primary and secondary sources and my own readings of them. Some of the participating artists had very different or rather opposite readings of them and it was a starting point for our discussion.

The second gap was related to perceptions of the mode of communication. There were clear gaps between different generations rather than nationalities, and we had to deal with this gap. I basically played the role of facilitator for the discussion.

**These three categories of cultural mediation are not exhaustive, but even among these three, they are not exclusive to each other. Rather, they were often entangled and I took several positions at the same time.**

What I wish to underline in all of this is that a good relationship between the collaborating artists really matters in the creative process. In many cases, gaps are discovered as people work together. Once this happens one can fill the gaps as they are revealed only if trust is established across the team, and if collaborators are flexible about their role and accept ideas that they might not have initially expected.

***“We cannot make a performance that asks the audience to be free and to play among themselves if the system of creating the work is not likewise.”***

**– Ness Roque (2017)**

## **Re-imagining Working Together: Negotiating Power through Collective Dramaturgy**

Ness Roque (2017):

In Sipat Lawin Ensemble's piece [gobyerno](#), which means government in Tagalog, we are trying to push the question of audience agency by having the audience as the performers. Our idea is that performance is a 'rehearsal for revolution' and so we are playing around with the idea of performing citizenship.

So in *gobyerno*, the audience will form and perform their own ideal government, and they will create a film documentary of this government. Then, in the last act of the piece, the space becomes a cinema and they will watch themselves in the documentary that they have just made.

Another layer to this is that it's a six-year global project. We want to collect material about all the 'ideal governments' from all of these shows. So we collaborate with artists from a specific place to ground the work in that context. Sometimes when we go to a place, we will actually not perform. For instance, for our performance in Korea, which was one of the first prototypes, we worked with Creative VaQi to develop the work. We stayed there for two weeks, had a lot of conversations, and even attended a protest to have a feel of the community. Their company then facilitated the performance themselves in Korean. As the dramaturg of this work, I believe what we are doing is collective dramaturgy.

We had to create a system of devising for *gobyerno* so that we can make a work that accommodates different voices and negotiates power. **We cannot make a performance that asks the audience to be free and to play among themselves if the system of creating the work is not likewise.** So a key point we have discovered is for everyone to have dual roles. For example



I'm a dramaturg but I'm also a performer. The director is also a performer. Everyone has dual roles, and I think that helps in decentralising power.

In our local context in the Philippines we have tried and failed to mount this production, because we can't just stage it and ask audiences to come in and watch it, because it's so difficult to explain. So what's interesting is that what is now happening is that communities will actually ask us to do the performance in their places. So in that sense, even the mode of production of this performance is based on the communities first asking us to go there.

***“As an art-maker, I enjoy moments of being lost. At the same time, being a dramaturg, you tend to want to create a structure that is neat and where everything can fall into place. I think that tension is always healthy.”***

**– Kok Heng Leun (2016)**

## **Getting Lost and Being Found: The Dramaturg as Compass**

Kok Heng Leun (2016):

I am a director. I am also a dramaturg. And this relationship is actually very complex.

When you direct, you need to see a lot of details, so I use this long-sighted pair of glasses. With this [pointing to a different pair of glasses], I can see close-up how the work is being made. As a dramaturg, I need another pair of glasses. You sort of need to distance yourself in the process.

**To me, the act of creating work is almost like the act of getting lost.** One of my favourite writers, Rebecca Solnit, talked about loss having two disparate meanings. One is about the familiar falling away. The other is when you get lost, and something unfamiliar appears in front of you. In the first meaning, when you lose something, everything is still familiar, except that the items are not there. You feel that sense of loss. In the other meaning of getting lost, the world becomes larger than the knowledge of it. For those who are familiar with [Henry David] Thoreau, he writes in *Walden* about how getting lost opens up a world of actually discovering yourself. So I always imagine that when a director is working, he or she would actually be discovering that world.

A very important dramaturgical question that I ask the directors I work with is the simple question: **why this work now?** It could be the content of the work in terms of its relevance, or it could be why it's important for this particular director or this writer to do this work at this moment - be it a kind of artistic exploration or personal growth. Whatever it is, I find that question highly meaningful, when I work as a director, or as a dramaturg. Dramaturgy is trying to make sense of things. So contextual building becomes important. What is the context and how does it actually have impact and effect? This goes back to dramaturgy being dialectical, which I think is so important in the process.

As artistic director for *Both Sides, Now*, I knew right from the beginning that as a [socially] engaged performance, the sort of structure or the way we want to approach it is what Jan Cohen-Cruz talked about as 'call-and-response'. So the work makes a call, and the audience responds. That response becomes another call in the process. So in the first iteration [of *Both Sides, Now*], we actually focused on that interactiveness of

things, that call-and-response relationship.

However, after doing two iterations, we realised we need another space in-between the call and the response. And we realised that space is about listening - not in terms of just the ears, but listening with the five senses. You can have your call, but if you do not create a listening experience, you actually would not have a response. So our dramaturgy went towards seeking to create that 'listening aesthetic', which I would define as 'creating the time and the space to listen'.

But what does listening mean? A) space for reflection; B) an acknowledgement of the other at that moment; and C) a space to respond, so that deeper listening can happen. It's very iterative. I have to say pedagogically, I'm quite influenced by Paolo Freire, and his critical pedagogy of actions and reflections as part of the praxis in the engaged work that I do.

So the work became about creating the time and space for people to respond. We realised that this is a very complex thing because of the number of people we had to work with, and the different stakeholders we were corresponding with. For instance, the national health agencies were interested in the issues [of aging and end-of-life] but didn't know how to go about [having public dialogue about] it and never had any dialogues with any other stakeholders about this. So there were a lot of presentations that we made to all these national agencies, which in the end became like a performance, whereby we were actually facilitating their response with the needs of the community, and then creating platforms—for me, this is very interesting work—so that they can work together.

At the same time, I started to realise the structure [we needed] was no longer about having a clear base and then building up to a kind of a triangular structure. Instead a very rhizomic structure [was needed]. Or in Mark Teh's words, we needed to do some

'multiplugging' [in which a multiplug adapter is used to connect energy to various things]. We then started to look at how to form that rhizomic system. Because in the end, if an engaged work is supposed to create a kind of space whereby people can communicate, then it is not about creating a unitary utopia. It would be a heterotopia, a space where multiple voices and multiple possibilities can happen.

So in this piece, we had to make time for people to communicate. There was a forum theatre performance. At the same time, there were also very simple platforms like talks [about the legal aspects of end-of-life] by lawyers. We were trying to pitch the whole work at different levels—from really very simple kinds of talks, to complex performances. This has become important, at least in my company, because we realise that it no longer makes sense to do just one work about one topic. It has to engage on multiple levels. Most importantly though, during the project, we needed to create a lot of what I would call 'white space', to allow the public space to sit and not do anything. Not even talk. The call and response requires a lot of time and space, and so from 10am to 10pm, we just had people coming and going.

As a director and a dramaturg, while doing all this work, I find that it's always difficult to navigate such a complex set-up. Many times, having Charlene [Rajendran] as the dramaturg [for this project] who always sits there and listens and has a macro-outsider perspective, became so important because she would point out to me when I am lost. **I think being lost is fine. Actually as an art-maker, I enjoy moments of being lost. At the same time, being a dramaturg, you tend to want to create a structure that is neat and where everything can fall into place. I think that tension is always healthy.** And the interrogation of it with the dramaturg makes it extremely meaningful. You may not know where you are going, but at least you know the journey has started.

## Cultivating a Listening Dramaturgy: Compulsive, Political and Skillful

Charlene Rajendran (2017):

**I want to propose that dramaturgs need to be good listeners if not compulsive ones. That a large part of what dramaturgs do, particularly in interdisciplinary and intercultural work, is skilled listening. And that this is political work that affects the way an artwork is heeded and needed.** Listening is generally underrated and not enough attention is given to being a good listener because it is overpowered by watching. We've become an intensely visual-oriented species and our hearing capacities are impaired, making us overly reliant on consuming what we see outside us. Listening takes time as it does not happen in an instant, and sonic text unlike the visual is always ephemeral, so to listen is to be intensely present, and in Jean-Luc Nancy terms, 'on the edge of meaning'.

As dramaturgs who work with interstitial spaces, we have to listen acutely, openly and receptively. Nancy, the French philosopher who has written on listening, calls for a 'resonant subject' whose capacity to listen enables being affected by the object of listening and thus the resonance occurs in relation to both object and subject. So listening is not about zooming in on a particular interpretation, but perhaps zooming out to feel the vibration, and then perhaps zooming between and around.

Dramaturging the inter- then refers not just to what lies between betwixt and among, but is about being in the midst of different voices, languages, texts, entities. Peter Boenisch writes about a 'reflexive dramaturgy' that draws in the idea of the spectator 'viewing without completion'. He makes reference to Žižek's notion of the parallax or Mobius strip as an unending line that twists and turns on itself. I think this is a movement towards listening for the between sounds that I'm talking about, where the line is continually turning and re-turning without providing an endpoint.

In projects like *Both Sides Now* where the audience is crucial and there is a 'dialogical aesthetic', to use Grant Kester's term, the incompleteness creates an open space for new returns and referrals that depend on audience participation and intervention. So, as artistic director Kok Heng Leun articulated, there is the need to develop what he calls a 'listening aesthetic' for the project. He explains the listening aesthetic as an approach to art making, particularly in relation to community and the topic of mortality. This means being consciously attentive to giving an audience time and space for pause, the kind that initiates reflection and review in order to consider change. Heng Leun draws on the philosopher geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's idea of space and placemaking in which 'pause is pregnant with possibility' and not stagnation or delay. So a listening aesthetic attempts to produce pause that leads to dialogue. This is a politics of making space for a slowed down process, which contests a way of working that is very often rushing and constantly seeking the easiest solution.

**The project demands a listening dramaturg in three main capacities. None of these have priority but need to be engaged in dialogue. Listening to the artists and creative producers, listening to the space and context, listening to audiences and stakeholders.**

In creative team meetings where artists share their ideas, concerns, anxieties, aspirations, and creative producers respond and articulate what stakeholders, community partners and audiences expect or need, I find myself allocated the role of listener. Most of the time I am silent, and as Geoffrey Proehl has observed, the dramaturg must learn the 'discipline of silences'. For Proehl, the value of the dramaturg is to provide 'a living presence that encourages everyone to attend more carefully to what is ever present but often under examined, the inner workings of a play.' In *Both Sides Now*, the inner workings of the project are very hard to pin down as the work is not based on a single text or idea. Although there could be a working frame or theme, the portals are varied and developed by different artists. So the inner workings are not some kind of essentialised

meaning. They are more like a network of associations in an assemblage. Decisions are made through a collaborative process in which everyone involved needs to feel part of a listening presence.

In a recent discussion for phase three of the project, Heng Leun proposed the idea of a school for end-of-life in which learning occurs across multiple disciplines and where the line between teacher and learner is fluid. Listening for what this idea could create is part of my work. I need to feed off the sonority to prod another layer of possibility – how is a school a space of learning as well as resistance? What are the hard walls of a curriculum that curtail rather than open up discovery? Is death and dying a failure that schooling avoids? Perhaps a school for end-of-life is too authority-driven a frame in a context like Singapore, where school rules are held dearly and formal education remains a very high priority. Maybe we need to find another word to open it up to more interaction, less assessment. What if we think about it as a playground or think-tank? Would it make a difference? If so, what sort of difference? This for me is listening to the space, which is not just the site but the context.

**What else does it mean to let resonances from spaces be admitted into our sensing capacity and then work from there? To start, I think it begins with taking myself out of my comfort zones to be in other spaces.** Listening to audiences and getting audiences to listen in response may be the most important aspect of this work. As dramaturg, I need to remind the project, and myself, that what audiences are likely to hear, the resonances they may feel, rely on a combination of elements that create the tone and timbre, which are an assemblage that we must listen to if we are to create work that is valuable for this purpose.

There are multiple directions from which texts emerge and sounds are produced. The dramaturg must choose carefully what to highlight, what to notice, what to dig up, what to leave. A dramaturgy of process and relationality, a dramaturgy on shifting ground, rather than one that is unitary and seeking to be

solidified, dialogical, open, seeking resonance among the many elements and participants. What Milan Zvada might term an 'interactive dramaturgy' rather than a one-way dramaturgy. What Peter Boenisch might term a 'relational dramaturgy' in which the relations matter more than the materials and the audience takes responsibility as acting agents. In Eugenio Barba's terms, this might be called a 'dramaturgy of changing states' in which 'the entirety of what we show manages to evoke something totally different, similar to when a song develops another sound line through the harmonics'.

**For now, I'll call this a listening dramaturgy.**

***“Dramaturging the inter refers not just to what lies between betwixt and among, but is about being in the midst of different voices, languages, texts, and entities.”***

**– Charlene Rajendran (2017)**



# ONGOING MAPPING



To build a stronger sense of a network, we invite you to locate yourself on a map and share vocabularies on dramaturgy. Head to our [Padlet page](#) and let us know what dramaturgy is like where you are.

## INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Click the plus sign on the top-right and drop a pin in your location.
2. Let us know what 'dramaturgy' is called in your local language, with a brief explanation of what it means.
3. (Optional) Write a bit about a dramaturgical practice! (Note: You do not need to call yourself a 'dramaturg' in order to have a dramaturgical practice.)

Feel free to comment on other people's tags as well. (We only ask that you be kind and respectful.)

You can leave us questions or comments on the Padlet page, or write to us at [info@asiandramaturgs.com](mailto:info@asiandramaturgs.com).

# CREDITS & BIOS

## EDITORIAL TEAM

**CHARLENE RAJENDRAN** is Co-Director of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network. As dramaturg she has worked on interdisciplinary and community arts projects including *In the Silence of Your Heart* (Kaylene Tan, 2018), *Both Sides, Now* (Drama Box and ArtsWok, 2013-2018), *Ghost Writer* (The Necessary Stage, 2016), *The Malay Man and His Chinese Father* (Akulah Bimbo Sakti, 2016). Her publications include *Performing Southeast Asia: Performance, Politics and the Contemporary* (co-editor, 2020), and *Excavations, Interrogations, Krishen Jit and Contemporary Malaysian Theatre* (co-editor, 2018), as well as academic articles and creative works. She is currently Assistant Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

**DANIEL TEO** describes himself as an ardent theatre-goer and supporter. He previously worked as a researcher, archivist and documenter at theatre development space Centre 42 for seven years, where he oversaw the development of a Singapore theatre digital archive, and documented theatre-makers and their creation journeys. He has also been an on-and-off theatre critic, writing about theatre for the likes of *ArtsEquator* and his own Instagram page. Daniel will be dipping his toes into theatre-making in his first role as a dramaturg.

**CHONG GUA KHEE / 张月崎** is deeply interested in opening up space and time for emergent, intimate and joyful conversations. In her work, she seeks to invite others to collectively play with and imagine ways of better caring for ourselves, one another, and the worlds we live in. This often manifests in the form of performances or workshops, for which Gua Khee takes on directorial or dramaturgical/ facilitative roles, but can also translate as research/writing or organising work. Her recent projects include: *Tactility Studies: Hold to Reset* (Singapore International Festival of Arts; Co-Director), *HOT POT TALK: The Measure of a Meal* (Director and Co-Producer), *SEEDLINGS* (Esplanade; Co-Lead Facilitator), and *Rethinking Practice and the Practitioner: Pandemic Purpose* (Centre 42; Facilitator). [quakhee.com](http://quakhee.com)

**DOMINIC NAH** is a researcher, dramaturg and educator. Currently a PhD student at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, he is examining student responses to ethically-oriented Literature pedagogies in Singapore schools. He is Company Dramaturg of The Second Breakfast Company, a not-for-profit theatre group, where he worked on the revival of early Singapore theatre plays including *The Singapore Trilogy* (2021) and *The Moon is Less Bright* (2018). Previously, he graduated from the University of Warwick, UK having read World Literature (Masters) and English Literature (Honours). He has worked with ADN as a rapporteur for several events, including ADN Lab 2018 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

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**HUANG SUHUI** is a visual artist and graphic designer based in Singapore. She often explores more conceptual themes in her art practice includes painting, sculpture and performance art works. In 2020, she received the Prize for Excellence of International Takifuji Art Award. Besides, Suhuai is also into literature and theatre. She has written and translated many theatre plays, including plays for young audiences.

[freyahuang.wixsite.com/graphicdesign](http://freyahuang.wixsite.com/graphicdesign)

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Gloria Ho	Tan
Ho Yi Lin	Neo Kim Seng
Ivy Chen	wei
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Jee chan	

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**CHARLENE RAJENDRAN** is Co-Director of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network. As dramaturg she has worked on interdisciplinary and community arts projects including *In the Silence of Your Heart* (Kaylene Tan, 2018), *Both Sides, Now* (Drama Box and ArtsWok, 2013-2018), *Ghost Writer* (The Necessary Stage, 2016), *The Malay Man and His Chinese Father* (Akulah Bimbo Sakti, 2016). Her publications include: *Performing Southeast Asia: Performance, Politics and the Contemporary* (co-editor, 2020), *Excavations, Interrogations, Krishen Jit and Contemporary Malaysian Theatre* (co-editor, 2018), academic articles and creative works. She is currently Assistant Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

**DAVID PLEDGER** is a contemporary artist and curator working within and between the performing, visual and media arts in Australia, Asia and Europe. His live performances, installations, interactive artworks, documentaries, digital art and discursive events have been presented in various locations including theatres, galleries, museums, a car-park, a stables, a cattleyard, a suburban house, a film studio and the Australian Institute of Sport. His work is notable for engaging publics in productive and provocative ways. From his initial practice, live performance, he has developed a cross-disciplinary dramaturgy in which a central platform is engaging with artists across artforms and experts from social, scientific and academic fields. In 1995, he co-founded not yet it's difficult (NYID), one of Australia's leading interdisciplinary arts companies.

**GISELLE GARCIA** is a dramaturg and researcher specialising in contemporary Filipino theatre and performance in the Philippines and in diaspora. She was awarded her PhD at the University of Exeter where she developed a dramaturgical method for interpreting and documenting performance through place and walking. She received her MA in Theatre - Dramaturgy Concentration from Hunter College, City University of New York and her A.B. Literature (English) degree from the Ateneo de Manila University. Her research interests are new dramaturgies, translation, adaptation, walking, phenomenology and creative methodologies for response and criticism. She has taught in higher education in the Philippines and in the UK and previously worked in arts programming, management and advertising.

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**KOK HENG LEUN** is the Artistic Director of Singaporean theatre company Drama Box, and a prominent figure in both the English- and Chinese-language theatres in Singapore. Thus far, he has directed over 60 plays, including Kuo Pao Kun's *Spirit Play*; the Forum Theatre work *Trick or Threat!*; *HERstory* (2011, Singapore Arts Festival); and *Drift* (2008, Singapore Season). He was formerly a Nominated Member of Parliament. Heng Leun strongly believes in engaging the community in his works to promote critical dialogues about the world we live in.

**LI YINAN** is Professor for Dramaturgy and Theatre Studies at the Central Academy of Drama of China, Beijing. Since 2009, she has been making efforts to introduce the German concept and working methods of Dramaturgy into China. At the beginning of 2015, she established the Faculty of Dramaturgy and Applied Theatre at the Central Academy of Drama and took up its Director position.

**LIM HOW NGEAN** is a performance-maker, dramaturg and dance researcher who has been actively involved in the performing arts for over 20 years. He is also the founding director of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network. Earlier in his career, he performed in productions in Singapore and Malaysia as well as wrote reviews and features on dance and theatre for the Malaysian press. In recent years, he has served as dramaturg for dance performances at the Singapore Arts Festival and Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. He was conferred his PhD in 2014 from the National University of Singapore for his research on contemporary dance choreography in Southeast Asia.

**NANAKO NAKAJIMA** is a scholar and dance dramaturg, and a Valeska Gert Visiting Professor 2019/20, at Freie Universität Berlin. Her dramaturgy work includes Mengfan Wang's piece with aging dancers (2019) and *Dance Archive Box Berlin* (2020). Nanako received 2017 Special Commendation of Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding Achievement in Dramaturgy from the LMDA.

**NESS ROQUE** is a theatre and film actor, performance dramaturg and educator. She was a core member of Manila-based contemporary performance company Sipat Lawin Ensemble (2009–2018). She is part of Prodx Artist Community, an interdisciplinary collective integrating participatory art and research practices, community engagement, and education. Ness is a MEXT scholarship recipient and is currently a graduate student at the Tokyo University of the Arts - Graduate School of Global Arts (Department of Arts Studies and Curatorial Practices). She received an Honorable Mention-Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding Dramaturgy 2018 from the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) for an essay on Sipat Lawin's *Gobyerno*. [www.nessroque.com](http://www.nessroque.com)

**PETER ECKERSALL** teaches at The Graduate Center, CUNY. Publications include *Curating Dramaturgies* (ed. with Bertie Ferdman, 2021), *Machine Made Silence* (ed. with Kristof van Baarle, 2020), *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics* (ed. with Helena Grehan, 2019), *New Media Dramaturgy* (author with Helena Grehan and Ed Scheer, 2017), and *Performativity and Event in 1960s Japan* (2013). He was co-founder/dramaturg of Not Yet It's Difficult. Recent dramaturgy includes *Everything Starts from a Dot* (Sachiyo Takahashi, LaMama), *Phantom Sun/Northern Drift* (Alexis Destoop, Beursschouwburg, Riga Biennial).

**ROBIN LOON** is an Associate Professor of Theatre Studies at the National University of Singapore. He is a practicing Dramaturg, Educator and Researcher. His research interests include Singapore Theatre; Theatre and Gender; and Theatre and Media. He is also a co-founder of Centre 42 and a co-director of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network.

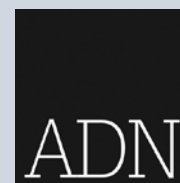
**RUHANIE PERERA** is a performer, performance-maker and lecturer working in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She is a founding director of Floating Space Theatre Company, and is also attached to the Department of English, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka as a visiting lecturer in performance and literature. Ruhanie holds an MA in Performance and Culture: Interdisciplinary Approaches from Goldsmiths, London (2009), and her research has addressed storytelling cultures, performative acts and identities and cultural memory.



**SANKAR VENKATESWARAN** is an Indian theatre director and dramaturg. After graduating from School of Drama and Fine Arts, University of Calicut, he trained at Theatre Training and Research Programme, Singapore. In 2007, he founded Theatre Roots & Wings, and directed *The Water Station*, *Criminal Tribes Act*, and *Indian Rope Trick* among others. His works have been presented at various venues including Zurich Theater Spektakel, Spielart Munich, Kyoto Experiment, Zoukak Sidewalks, Beirut, and Theater Commons Tokyo. He directed Maurice Maeterlinck's *Interior* for Ninasam, India, *Urubhangam* for Shinshu University, Japan, *Tage der Dunkelheit* and *INDIKA* for Munich Volkstheater, and *When We Dead Awaken* for Intercultural Theatre Institute, Singapore. Venkateswaran was the artistic director for International Theatre Festival of Kerala in 2015 and 2016, was a jury member for Zurich Theater Spektakel in 2016. He is a recipient of Ibsen Scholarship, Norway. He lives and works in Attappadi, Kerala, where he built a theatre-dwelling named Sahyande Theatre.

**SHINTARO FUJII** is a professor in theatre studies and currently the chief of the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. He specialises in contemporary performing arts, with a focus on francophone countries (France, Belgium and Canada) and Japan. He works on dramaturgy of the works of prominent artists such as Romeo Castellucci, Alain Platel, Robert Lepage and Dumb Type, as well as on cultural policies concerning performing arts.

**YAIR VARDI** is a curator, theatre-maker, dramaturg, performer and lighting designer, currently living in Tel Aviv. He has a BA in Theatre and Choreography Practice from Dartington College of Arts, UK (2009) and an MA in Solo/Dance/Authorship (SODA) from the Berlin University of the Arts (Universität der Künste Berlin, 2009). His research interests deal with the relationship between dramaturgy, curation and creation as structural and artistic tools for making art.



## ASIAN DRAMATURGS' NETWORK

The Asian Dramaturgs' Network (ADN) is formed with the intent of mapping and networking the region's dramaturgical experience and knowledge. ADN is collaboratively conceptualised with Centre 42 and held its inaugural ADN Symposium in Singapore in 2016. Since then, various gatherings of dramaturgs, performance-makers and arts educators from around the Asia-Pacific region have taken place in Indonesia, Japan and Australia. ADN is part of Centre 42. Learn more about ADN at [asiandramaturgs.com](http://asiandramaturgs.com).



Centre 42 is a theatre development space committed to the creation, documentation and promotion of texts and writings for the Singapore stage. The Centre incubates original writing for production development, provides space for artists and new work creation, and runs a functional archive documenting the histories and processes of Singapore theatre. Importantly, the Centre functions as an independent intermediary amongst makers, enablers and consumers, and strives to be a bridge to connect people by helping and supporting. Centre 42 was developed in collaboration with the National Arts Council (NAC) Singapore, and officially opened in 2014. The Centre is a non-profit organisation with Institute of Public Character (IPC) status, and is supported by the NAC for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2023. Learn more about Centre 42 at [centre42.sg](http://centre42.sg).

Mandarin

## 策劃編創 (cè huà biān chuàng)

This term refers to 'the consultant or planning consultant'  
– Robin Loon (Singapore)

Mandarin

## 戲劇構作 (xì jù gòu zuò)

This term refers to 'the structural making and doing of drama'. The term is recognised by practitioners in Shanghai, Guangzhou and Hong Kong.  
– Li Yinan (China)

Mandarin

## 戲劇策劃 (xì jù cè huà)

This term refers to 'the bringing about and making of drama'. A preferred term in Beijing, at the Central Academy of Drama, and recognised by the BA programme in Dramaturgy.  
– Li Yinan (China)

Japanese

## ドラマツルギー ('Doramatsurugi')

This is a transliteration of the English word 'dramaturgy' as a theatrical metaphor used in sociological contexts to explain issues of identity and social relations.  
– Ken Takiguchi (Japan)

Bahasa Indonesia

## Pendamping

This refers to the person who accompanies or literally sits side-by-side with, the root word being 'damping' (be near to). It can also refer to a companion.  
– Helly Minarti (Indonesia)

Bahasa Indonesia

## Penggangu

This refers to the person who disturbs, interrupts, or even ruptures, the root word being 'ganggu' (disturb). It can also refer to the provocateur. The term is a complementary evolution to 'pendamping'.  
– Helly Minarti (Indonesia)

Filipino

## Dramaturhiya

This is a transliteration of the English word 'dramaturgy' which uses the 'h' sound instead of the 'g' sound.  
– Giselle Garcia (Philippines)