Navigating Turbulence: The Dramaturg in Physical Theatre

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Navigating Turbulence: 
The Dramaturg in Physical Theatre

Bruce Barton

Certainly, it is a familiar observation that few theatrical terms are more fluidly evocative or problematic than “dramaturgy.” The range of possible definitions of the term is practically as broad as the number of its practitioners is great, and most contemporary discussion on this topic has productively moved beyond attempts to categorically determine and fix its “correct” objectives and/or techniques into a consideration of its effective variety and potential. Yet most understandings of the concept include two basic characteristics of sound practice: 1) an effort to establish and maintain a degree of critical objectivity; and 2) a deep commitment to the creator(s) involved, the project, and the art and craft of theatre. Further, while highly elastic in terms of specific strategies, a central role of dramaturgy is to question habit, to complicate unreflective expediency, and to dig beneath the surface of unearned presumption.

In terms of developmental dramaturgy, while these seemingly simple precepts are considerably more complex in application, the situation becomes even more complicated when the role of writer is fragmented and dispersed among a collaborative body of creator/performers utilizing found, adapted, and invented text within a physically-based devised process of discovery. The role of text in a creative process that foregrounds what Eugenio Barba has described as a “dramaturgy of changing states” is charged with anxiety and ambivalence, as inherently ambiguous and instinctual physical movement wrestles with the conventionally delimiting constraints of symbolic language, generating what Barba effectively calls “turbulence.” Within the context of this increased level of indeterminacy, it is not surprising that the role of developmental dramaturgy is an elusive and mobile target. Is it, in fact, possible to distill a specific aspect or set of activities out of the development of new physical work which can confidently be called dramaturgy? Or is physical theatre creation not, perhaps, itself the most explicit expression of dramaturgy (developmental and production) possible?

My attempt in this article to come to terms with these questions will proceed through a series of related considerations. In the first section I address the general context of inquiry—in this instance, Canadian theatre—through a brief description of common dramaturgical objectives and practices employed in this country. In the second section I consider the specific context of this study: the influences, motivations, and strategies of the Toronto-based devised theatre troupe, Number Eleven, with which I have worked as a dramaturg on multiple occasions. In the third section I narrow the focus further through the depiction of my experience as dramaturg on Number Eleven’s creation/production of *The Prague Visitor*. In the article’s conclusion, I attempt to summarize and gen-
eralize my observations to this point and consider the implications therein for the broader context of developmental dramaturgy—both physical and text-based. Are there lessons to be learned from the experience of physically-based developmental dramaturgy that can be capitalized on generally in a variety of developmental contexts?

A “Developing” Nation

While the strategies employed and objectives pursued by Canadian dramaturges are similar to those practiced within many other nations (particularly the US), the relative amount of developmental as opposed to production dramaturgy is uncommonly disproportionate—to a degree that conspicuously underscores a disconnect between these two spheres. Influenced by a broad cross-section of factors ranging from a historic national inferiority complex to unrealistically truncated contemporary production schedules and budgets, the vast majority of dramaturgical activity in this country concerns itself with new play text development. The effect of this situation has been both positive and negative: while there are currently an unprecedented number of professional productions of Canadian plays (albeit most of them clustered in Toronto and, to a lesser degree, Vancouver), this focus on development has also resulted in what playwright Elliot Hayes described, as early as 1986, as “The Workshop Syndrome.”

A survey of the pages of *Canadian Theatre Review* across the nearly two decades since Hayes proposed his pessimistic definition of “[w]orkshopitis” (36) yields a remarkable (and depressing) consistency of tone and position. Playwrights of highly diverse backgrounds, orientations, and reputation equally lament a near automatic resort, on the part of producing companies large and small, to a standardized workshop format of new play development that is repeatedly characterized as well-intentioned but ill-suited and unresponsive to the individual playwright’s needs and interests. Specifically, in a process that rarely involves the input and priorities of designers and technicians, the playwright whose work is being workshopped regularly experiences a critique of her play as text, and is thus cut off from a discussion of her play as production. Granted, practically all the established theatres that stage new Canadian drama in Toronto have also recently built into their programming the public presentation of scripts as the culmination of a workshop process. However, the value of these developmental processes—ostensibly reserved for the playwright—is fragmented and diffused in this context through a prism of diverging and, at times, conflicting priorities. Factors such as promotion, operational funding requirements, and artist and audience development jockey for pre-eminence, and the practical circumstances of performance—of such potential relevance to an evolving writer and playtext—often take on a separate life outside the developmental context.

Relatively constant within all text-based new play development in this country—and in this Canada is hardly unique—is a matrix of economic, commercial, aesthetic, and organizational constraints that ensure that the playwright’s task is largely finished precisely at the moment when the script shifts from a verbal (if not necessarily literary) document, to the proverbial blueprint for performance. And, in keeping with a relatively neat and generally enforced distinction between developmental dramaturgy and production dramaturgy—again, not unique

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to Canada—the dramaturg of new play development is regularly “excused” from the process at much the same time as the writer, and thus similarly disconnected from the realization of the very theatricality that it has been her job to prompt and prioritize at all times throughout the evolution of the text. What, arguably, distinguishes the Canadian situation is that in a context in which text-based production dramaturgy is practically nonexistent, the dramaturg’s exit from the process is often final and definitive (unlike, for instance, in many American contexts in which the dramaturg switches between developmental and production activities).

Under these conditions, the distinctions between text-based developmental dramaturgy and developmental dramaturgy within a physically-based devised theatre environment are inevitably exacerbated. Admittedly, “physically-based” and “devised” theatre are sufficiently broad categories to incorporate a wide range of very different objectives, techniques, and styles. However, for the purposes of this argument, the terms identify an approach to theatrical performance for which text is a secondary component—in the sense that text is often secondary both chronologically in the development process and in communicative significance. Rather, the elements of visual and aural presentation, as well as the work’s engagement with narrative, emerge out of a set of processes that are based in movement, improvisation, physical discipline, and the set of creative instruments understood and experienced as instinct and intuition. It is, in a sense, an opportunistic form of theatrical creation which, to a sometimes alarming degree, relies upon an engagement with coincidence and the unpredictable through a heightened sensitivity to possibility and a rigorous ability to exploit its gifts. It is a form of theatre which, as Barba contends, “must forge [its] own fortuitousness” (59).

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that the strategies employed in an orientation to text-based developmental dramaturgy that operates, through material necessity, prior to and at a distinct distance from the activities of theatrical production will be ill-suited to a transfer into the arena of devised theatre creation. However, my own experience and that of a small but growing number of Canadian dramaturges working in physically-based theatre suggests that the obstacles are more closely related to the orientation adopted than to the strategies employed.

A Dramaturgy of Changing States: The Theatre of Number Eleven

As a playwright and dramaturg as well as a theatre researcher, my experience of developmental dramaturgy prior to my involvement with Number Eleven Theatre was predominantly text-based. With developmental experience in multiple professional and academic theatre contexts, involving both emerging and established authors, I had acquired, through practice and training, a variety of strategies and approaches to the fostering of new written work. However, in 1998 I attended a theatrical production that altered my understanding of the potential parameters of dramaturgical activity. Staged in the dynamic (if economically desperate) confines of the Khyber Klub in downtown Halifax, Nova Scotia, the work was Number Eleven’s Icaria. Led by director Ker Wells, a founding member of the now defunct but deeply influential Primus Theatre (of Winnipeg, Manitoba), the company included Primus co-member Sondra Haglund, as well as Varrick Grimes, Alex MacLean, and Elizabeth Rucker—the latter three
all alumni of Primus training programs. Having never seen a Primus production, and only minimally familiar with their modes of training and performance, I was not prepared for the level of physical intensity, rigor, and innovation that each member of Number Eleven brought to the execution of the demanding, wildly physical, yet intricate *Icaria*. Incorporating characteristics of mime, commedia dell’arte, acrobatics, martial arts, choreographed dance, orchestrated choral work, and “kitchen sink” naturalism, the production emerged as a stylistic jigsaw puzzle, its many pieces expertly constructed into a complementary, cumulative whole.

Equally remarkable was the irresolvably elusive and eclectic use of diverse textual styles and sources that made up the symbolic mosaic of the play’s narrative. For while a succinct synopsis of the play’s “story” is conceivable, its recounting results in a misrepresentative diminishment of the performance to a degree far exceeding that in the situation of traditional, text-based production. Swirling around a basic scenario depicting a young girl’s recollections of her distracted and disaffected mother, her charismatic and abusive father, and her idealistic and ultimately suicidal brother, *Icaria* unquestionably created a deeply moving sense of context, character, and resolution. Described by *Halifax Daily Mail* reviewer Ron Foley MacDonald as “part circus, part nightmare” (31), the work tapped into primal, intuitive elements of anxiety and aspiration that, for this spectator, were seldom accessed in my regular visits to the theatre.

The most immediate influence on the art and craft of Ker Wells and Number Eleven is the legacy of Primus Theatre and its founding director, Richard Fowler. Yet an understanding of this lineage comes most accessibly through an appreciation of the Odin Teatret of Eugenio Barba, where Fowler had studied extensively and with which he maintained an ongoing professional and developmental relationship. As Lisa Wolford has noted,

> One might suggest that the Odin influence in Primus’s work is most visually discernible in relation to the use of masks and stilt characters in certain productions, yet such an influence can also be traced in the group’s rehearsal methods and process of developing performance text, the rejection of a naturalistic performance style in favour of overt theatricality, and a preference for what Ian Watson describes as a concatenate plot structure over a more conventional, linear narrative. Even more significantly, however, such an influence is reflected in Fowler’s conception of a theatre ensemble as a living entity. (40)

As Fowler himself has asserted, “The members of Primus Theatre are precisely that, members, the articulating limbs of a living organism” (Wolford 40).

Further, while Wells is respectfully uneasy about citing increasingly distant influences, the “idea” of Jerzy Grotowski is also, inevitably, a conscious presence in Number Eleven’s practice and ethos. “Discipline,” “integrity,” and “honesty”—frequent and elusive, yet also deeply resonant terms and concepts throughout Grotowski’s writings—enter into Wells’s discussion of both the company’s process and its objectives, along with a conscious insistence that every idea and every image be entirely “earned” in the moment (Interview). 6

However, it is Barba who has offered an explicit and tantalizingly suggestive, if elusive, incorporation of dramaturgy into the dynamics of physically-based work. There are, according to Barba, three different dramaturgies within
physically-based theatrical performance, and while they occur simultaneously, they can—indeed must—be developed separately. The first is “an organic or dynamic dramaturgy, which is the composition of the rhythms and dynamisms affecting the spectators on a nervous, sensorial and sensual level” (59). The second is a “narrative dramaturgy, which interweaves events and characters, informing the spectators on the meaning of what they are watching” (59). Identifying these first two dramaturgies in a performance like *Icaria* is relatively easy; describing the precise relationship between them is more difficult. To a degree, it is possible to find a basis for the distinctions between text-based production dramaturgy and developmental dramaturgy in the first two categories proposed—the former regularly attending to the “nervous, sensorial, and sensual level” of performance, and the latter traditionally focusing in large part on the narrative “interweav[ing of] events and characters.” Indeed, separated from Barba’s third category, these first two classifications evoke a typology of co-existent yet distinct dramaturgical categories of physically-based devised work, running parallel to that which distinguishes between development and production in text-based work.

Yet it is, perhaps, Barba’s final dramaturgy that provides a bridge, a means and opportunity for exchange between the concepts of composition and realization, thereby opening an avenue toward an understanding of authorship and, by extension, dramaturgy, in physically-based work. The third, most challenging—and, for the purposes of this discussion, most important—category is the “dramaturgy of changing states, when the entirety of what [is shown] manages to evoke something totally different, similar to when a song develops another sound line through the harmonics” (60). Although physically-based devised performance is often tightly choreographed and painstakingly rehearsed, the dramaturgy of changing states operates without “technical rules,” “distill[ing] or captur[ing] hidden significances,” and producing “leaps from one dimension to another [. . .] from one state of consciousness to another with unforeseeable and extremely personal consequences, both sensorial and mental” (60). Connecting, combining, and thereby bypassing the physical and intellectual domains of the first two categories, Barba suggests, the dramaturgy of changing states taps into a spectator’s instinctual interpretive capabilities.

The result or, more accurately, the product of the dramaturgy of changing states, Barba contends, is twofold: on the one hand, “enlightenment,” and on the other, what Barba calls “turbulence.” Intriguingly, turbulence is proposed as the more significant of the two outcomes. Only apparently a “violation of order,” turbulence is, in fact, “order in motion” (61), disrupting “continuity, rhythm, and narrative,” forestalling unity and complicating meaning: “The dramaturgy of changing states [. . .] has nothing to do with the written text, with the dramaturgy of the words, in the way that the vibratory quality of the singing voice has nothing to do with the score” (62). Thus, the dramaturgy of changing states extends beyond the text and indeed, perhaps even the text/performance interface, into a territory in which the communication occurs physically and visually through productive disruption and facilitating interruption.

Drawing on methods acquired while in Primus, further developed through training opportunities with Barba and other associated practitioners, the individual members of Number Eleven begin the development of a project in isolation. Each conducts her own research and creates initial scenes—or, more accurately, patterns of movement and voice, often inspired by found or created text
and songs. Under Wells’s directorial eye and sensibility, and working from the raw material of the individually created sequences, the company begins the long process of establishing connections, resonance, and interpenetrations of meaning. The initial text fragments and physical patternings may be transposed, modified, or discarded through the progress of this work, as the emerging meaning of the piece is developed largely through the evolution of a physical dialogue between the performers, the director, and the shared space through which they move. Thus, while the company is not a collective in the full sense of this term (as the troupe’s director, Wells conspicuously leads the activities of development and rehearsal), its approach is, from the outset, definitively collaborative.

Understandably, the experience is as intimidating as it is liberating, and the company must be able to withstand prolonged periods of uncertainty and abstraction. But the objective is not what, for instance, Erin Hurley has described as the self-consciously postmodern “pastiche of unreconciled movement vocabularies” (29) of Quebec’s Carbon 14. Rather, once again, Barba is an evocative—if ultimately insufficient—filter through which to consider their process:

Confusion, when it is sought after and practiced as an end in itself, is the art of deception. This does not necessarily mean that it is a negative state, one to be avoided. When used as a means, confusion constitutes one of the components of an organic creative process. It is the moment in which material, prospects, contiguous stories, and diverse intentions become con-fused, i.e., fuse together, mixing with one another, each becoming the other face of the other. (62)

This final image provides a potential avenue into the complex issue of composition—and thus developmental dramaturgy—in physically-based work. However, I find the metaphor of “mixing” or “fusing” of elements, “each becoming the face of the other,” inadequate to describe the dramaturgical processes employed in much of this type of physical theatre, in that it evokes a modernist anticipation of ultimate organic unity. Rather, in the work of Number Eleven, it is precisely the turbulence—the productive disruptions and facilitating interruptions—between the multiple physical vocabularies in place, and between the physical and textual channels of communication, that regulate narrative progression.

Instead I propose a metaphor that posits a site of meaning that is, on the one hand, more rowdy and unstable, and on the other, more visceral and substantive. That metaphor is “collision”—the fundamental act and condition identified by Sergei Eisenstein in the creation of montage. Montage, Eisenstein asserts in his mid-twentieth century writings on the formal attributes of film, is conflict—it is “the collision of two given factors [from which] arises a concept” (37). While the “factors” are material, the “concept” is psychological and emotional. Of particular significance is Eisenstein’s insistence that montage is not a linear process. In this, he set himself in opposition to his contemporary Pudovkin, who (Eisenstein contended) defined montage as a “linkage of pieces” into a “chain” of signification (thereby fulfilling, one might conjecture, traditional Aristotelian “inevitability”). Rather, for Eisenstein, montage is explicitly characterized “[by] collision. By collision” (37).

Granted, Eisenstein was attempting to establish a “unified system for methods of cinematographic expressiveness that shall hold good for all its elements”
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(39). In this, he seems to ascribe to filmic processes a degree of symbolic stability approaching that of the Japanese ideogram that provided both his inspiration and his overtly systematic model. But, as Patrice Pavis, among others, has argued, any attempt to restrain theatrical signification within a controllable and fully decipherable process of “communication” represents both an impoverishment and a fundamental misinterpretation of the performance context. Yet, when relieved of such totalizing intentionality, the concept of montage intersects with the conditions of physically-based creation at a number of central points.

Montage’s conceptual proximity to more arbitrarily symbolic systems of expression (i.e., verbal and written language) emphasizes the ways in which it both resembles and deviates from traditional forms of composition (specifically, in this context, theatrical text-based writing). The model in which distinct material units are forced into a collision that produces psychological and emotional concepts accurately describes the physical process employed within Number Eleven’s compositional strategies—albeit in a manner far less contained and predictable than Eisenstein anticipated. The troupe’s ongoing process of creating initially disconnected and unrelated sections of movement and text that are then, in a very real sense, brought into thematic, spatial, and rhythmic collision, parallels—in terms of strategy and objective—Eisenstein’s pursuit of psychological and emotional concepts. And both approaches to meaning effectively embody (and, perhaps, provide welcome concretization to) Barba’s proposed “dramaturgy of changing states, when the entirety of what [is shown] manages to evoke something totally different, similar to when a song develops another sound line through the harmonics.” Montage, literally embodied within physically-based devised theatre, does indeed connect, combine, and bypass the spectator’s physical and intellectual interpretive strategies, tapping into an instinctual—and potentially transformative—model of communication.

A Dramaturg in Devised Theatre: The Prague Visitor

Since my fateful introduction to the work of Number Eleven Theatre, our paths have crossed repeatedly, and Wells and I have developed a strong dramaturgical relationship. It is the nature of Number Eleven’s work that they continuously revisit a project, entering into lengthy periods of refinement and revision, leading to a remount production. As such, Icaria has been recreated four times, with multiple runs in Montreal, Toronto, Halifax, St. John’s (Newfoundland and Labrador), and New York State, in addition to a North Western Canadian tour that included numerous stops in Northern Ontario as well as in Winnipeg. Following the first production of Icaria, Sondra Haglund left Number Eleven; Jane Wells—Ker Wells’s sister and a Primus-trained performer—joined the company at that time and has appeared, along with Grimes, MacLean, and Rucker, in all subsequent company productions. I have seen all five separate versions, and have provided occasional, though minimal, dramaturgical input (restricted largely to issues of textual revision) as the work has matured.

It was not until the summer of 2002, when the company began its next creation, The Prague Visitor, that the challenge of defining a specific dramaturgical role emerged. After approximately six weeks of creative work, a staging of The Prague Visitor was offered as a public workshop at the Festival of New Theatre, hosted by the North American Cultural Laboratory (NaCl) at Highland Lake in the Catskill Mountains of New York State. As a participant in the Festival’s
Internal Exchange—an intense week of physical theatre workshops, discussions, and performances—I was in residence at NaCl in the days leading up to the workshop performance, and I attended three consecutive rehearsal runs, as well as the public staging.

_The Prague Visitor_ tells an elusive and fragmentary tale of a young man who travels (apparently from North America) to Prague to take up a position at the “Central Registry.” The city unfolds and folds back in again, repeatedly, through a series of interactions and exchanges with a wide variety of other characters, some momentary and others deeply embedded in the production’s maze-like weaving of history, fiction, and fantasy. Following each movement through the piece, Wells and I met to discuss its evolution in terms of its structural integrity and thematic evocation, and the dramaturgical input these conversations yielded influenced the development of the production in both conspicuous and implicit ways. In particular, we discussed the mutable relationships between the actual historical figures that each of the performers had chosen to explore and the fluid characterizations that were emerging through the developmental process, as Wells navigated a course at the edge of the gravitational pull of historical “veracity.” Yet our conversations and my contributions appeared to me, in the moment, as unsystematic, even arbitrary, in their focus. While my experience of the work was immediate and visceral, the traditional dramaturgical frameworks of structure, characterization, language, etc., often emerged as awkward and anemic in this robust context. At the same time, those aspects that seemed most evocative of comment—almost all of which related to the physicalization of the work’s intentions—seemed to lie outside the sphere of a traditional developmental dialogue.

Invariably, these debriefing sessions focused as much on our process as on the work itself. Indeed, the paradox of verbally analyzing theatrical processes that are first and foremost physical in their inspiration and intention became a central issue within the entire Internal Exchange event, as practitioners of physically-based performance sought a vocabulary to articulate that which they experienced and expressed as largely intuitive and instinctual. Yet what became clear throughout the multiple intersecting conversations—both organized and informal—was that this general sense of disequilibrium was not the product of a context or process antagonistic to dramaturgical inquiry. In fact, the situation can be understood as precisely the opposite.

After a hiatus of several months, during which the members of the company applied themselves to a variety of other activities, Number Eleven returned to _The Prague Visitor_ in January 2003. Reopening the “package” that they had initially constructed the previous summer, they consciously challenged the patterns and interpretations that had emerged with (according to Wells) unsettling ease during that first period of development. Seeking to scrutinize the existing material for habitual reliance on past accomplishment, the company (unwittingly) engaged the work’s dramaturgy of changing states, critiquing and disrupting its tentative “continuity, rhythm, and narrative.” Meaning was to be challenged at each step in an effort to ensure that the performance’s coherence and meaning were fully earned in the moment, rather than through a resort to habitual or shortcut solutions. It was into this purposefully destabilized environment that I was once again invited as dramaturg. I attended weekly run-throughs for the nearly three-month period of the company’s exploration, with each viewing followed by an extended one-on-one discussion with Wells.
Unlike a more traditional arrangement, my engagement with the production did not begin with a preliminary session with the director in which he laid out his “vision” and aspirations for the piece. Wells is consciously and systematically resistant to such premeditation. While the company had prepared for the initial work on the production through a series of vocal workshops focused on Yiddish folksongs, and had established a variety of thematic source materials (in particular, several actual historical figures and a group of four short stories by Franz Kafka), fundamental issues of narrative and mis-en-scène were to be “imagined physically,” so to speak, through the collective work of the company. Obviously, this approach significantly decreased the amount of front end dramaturgical preparation I could bring into the beginning of a developmental process that resists—indeed, discourages—practically all gestures of prefabrication. From the outset, I was aware that my involvement would require a higher level of active engagement and accelerated response than had been demanded of me in my experiences in text-based developmental dramaturgy.

Nonetheless, Wells’s primary concern, from the very earliest stages of development, is with what he calls “story.” Indeed, the director has asserted that story is the only objective that can justify not only Number Eleven’s creative process, but the act of making theatre itself (Public Forum). Not entirely averse to the level of abstraction attributed to the writings of Barba and Grotowski, Wells suggests that Number Eleven’s compositional approach amounts ultimately to a search for the “best” story to be “discovered” within the particular conditions of a specific creative project. For Wells, however, the range of factors that culminate in a work’s story is broad and variable, beginning with the source materials and extending through the physical space and place of creation, the length of available development and rehearsal opportunities, levels of physical and mental conditioning, clarity of individual and group focus, and the often random contributions and accretions of input that occur throughout the process, to name only the most conspicuous elements at play. In this context, Wells agrees, assertions of a single “correct” story are counterproductive.

Rather, what Wells terms the “best” story would seem more accurately to be a composite understanding of narrative that overlays multiple, explicit, and conspicuously “spectacular” (and, thus, performative) modes of communication: dense, poetic, and disjunctive passages of verbal text; tightly choreographed individual and group spatial negotiations; scale, rhythm, and tempo of semiautonomous physical movement; a cappella aural variation, recitation, and song. Wells is insistent that these elements must ultimately combine to produce an identifiable thematic focus and a progressive development of event and character. Clearly, however, these familiar narrative preoccupations are pursued through a highly unconventional and intensely physical struggle with material that is experienced viscerally as well as understood intellectually, and which is selected and generated in large part with an emphasis on its inherent resistance (physical as well as conceptual) to generally accepted strategies of dramatic storytelling.

Proceeding without the determining foundation of a previously scripted narrative and/or systematic formal characteristics, the coherence and logic of the work evolve largely outside of the signifying momentum of pre-existing thematic or structural conventions. For Wells, issues such as plot structure and characterization are inseparable from the physical, spatial, and aural qualities through which they are expressed—and can only be composed (or discovered)
from within their realization. And while this collaborative process of making meaning shared between story and its delivery is hardly unique to either devised theatre or the work of Number Eleven, an immediate consequence of this approach in terms of dramaturgical input is the impossibility of sustaining distinctions between development and production.

As is the case with most practitioners of physically-based devised theatre, the members of Number Eleven employ a heightened degree of discipline, rigor, self-reflection, and self-evaluation. As a consequence, the function of the dramaturg—to question habit, to complicate unreflective expediency, to dig beneath the surface of unearned presumption—is, in fact, inextricably woven into the company’s understanding of creation. This, of course, brings us back full circle, to the questions posed at the outset of this article. Within such a dense and integrated dramaturgical environment, what does the role (if there is one) of the individual dramaturg (if there is one) look like?

In the effort to describe the necessary reorientation, it is useful to turn to a comparison offered by Wells. As dramaturg, he suggested, my observation of weekly run-throughs was in a sense analogous to viewing video recordings of him “wrestling with a crocodile.” It is fine, he noted, for a dramaturg to watch closely and suggest that “You probably shouldn’t have put your arm in his mouth like that.” This would certainly be useful (if somewhat obvious) advice if the next day the director was to do combat with the same crocodile in precisely the same way. But the nature of Number Eleven’s collaborative, physically-based creation is, as described above, fundamentally determined by a far greater engagement with unpredictability. What would be considerably more useful, Wells continued, would be to have someone standing immediately beside him to advise, “Okay, now, don’t put your arm in the crocodile’s mouth”; or, more immediately effective, “Look out, here comes the crocodile”; or, of perhaps even greater utility, “Wait, it’s not a crocodile at all, it’s an ostrich!”

In this playful analogy, I have come to realize, Wells has neatly (if metaphorically) captured the elusive concept of a dramaturgy of turbulence. Ultimately, truly effective dramaturgy of physically-based work (or, at least, that based upon similar principles as Number Eleven’s activities) must likewise demonstrate that its merit is, like the creative act itself, earned in the moment. “For a process that takes such a long time,” Wells notes, “things happen fast.” Within this context, the potential for deep dramaturgical insight may only be realizable through a surrender of the safety of physical and imaginative distance and by means of a fundamental relocation to within the spatial, rhythmical, and conceptual site of collision. An effective dramaturgical presence in this type of work, then, can be seen as one that bears immediate witness and which, through the commitment of its intimate attendance, embodies the fundamental tenet of communal objectivity within the collaborative unit. Even more problematic, however, dramaturgical input—traditionally the stuff of relative critical remove and reflection—may also need to occur “in the moment” at which the opportunity to distinguish and exploit the difference between a crocodile and an ostrich (figuratively speaking) offers itself. Pregnant with communicative potential, these literally pivotal instances are also likely not to be repeated or recreated.

Having developed the level of mutual trust and respect that Wells suggests is a prerequisite for the type of creation Number Eleven practices, the next stage was to begin exploring a dramaturgical relationship that is invited inside
the deeply personal space of the creative moment. In January 2004, the troupe remounted *The Prague Visitor* for a production at the Glen Morris Studio Theatre of the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama, University of Toronto. The company had continued to develop the project during a month-long residence, again at NaCl in New York State, during the summer of 2003, and this process was continued in Toronto that December. Throughout December and leading up to the staging in January, I returned to my role as dramaturg, although in a significantly modified capacity.

Rather than only attending specially scheduled weekly run-throughs of the show, I was also present on a more frequent basis to observe the far more characteristic and instructive fragmentary process of exploration and discovery. The nuances of creative strategies that invite and enthusiastically capitalize on emergent tangents (which, in more traditional practice, would perhaps be understood as diversions or digressions) revealed a mutable hierarchy of priorities in which precise repetition is punctuated by excursions into the realms of opportunistic experimentation and courted contradiction. Physically and imaginatively relocated into a markedly tighter proximity to the director—and, thus, to the turbulent sites of the project’s generative material collisions—my role became more fluid and multifaceted. In literal terms, my position on the rehearsal hall floor, seated beside Wells, provided us with a shared visual sense of the evolving work, as well as a relatively common experience of its physicality. Equally important, this location facilitated the ease and immediacy of our exchange with a minimum of interruption or distraction for the performers. Combining this level of access with the privilege of moving throughout the rehearsal space allowed me to construct a composite perspective, which could then be shared with Wells as the rehearsal continued. Wells’s method of operation proceeds within a perpetual stream of questions—some to specific actors, but many posed generally to the company: “how about . . . ?”; “what if . . . ?”; “can you . . . ?”. And with a surprising absence of disturbance (attested to by both the director and the performers), I was invited, as dramaturg, into the creative dialogue in what was, for me, an unprecedented level of engagement.

Within such a dynamic, pretensions of distinguishing between developmental and production concerns were largely abandoned, as—even more than in our previous weekly meetings—discussions of character, language, and structure were blended with considerations of design, performer interpretation, and choreography. Depending on the state of the performers’ concentration, Wells and I would either privately or openly discuss choices related to issues such as blocking, timing, and the appropriate dimensions of text (length, pitch, tempo, accessibility). For example: the atmosphere of *The Prague Visitor*, given its thematic preoccupations, is one of increasing enclosure and entrapment. Wells and I discussed multiple avenues to this effect, including a section of the work in which the performers literally bind the playing space through the use of retractable strapping. Similarly, we discussed the progressive creation and collapse of operative space through character placement, in order to emphasize the unpredictable and increasingly constrained access to movement on the part of the central character. A key piece of setting in *The Prague Visitor* is a mobile door, set in a simple frame, which is constantly relocated about the playing space. In direct response to the performers’ evolving, exploratory relationship with this property, Wells and I discussed its critical symbolic qualities, its defining relationship to the production’s spatial registers, and its dominant influence on the piece’s narrative progression and meaning.
Thus, added to the more detached observations that characterized my previous work, was a much more heated and immediate level of interaction, including focused queries and comments inserted into the director's moment-to-moment construction of the play's spatial and aural configurations. While these are not uncommon considerations within the context of production dramaturgy, their centrality within the company's developmental activity once again rendered such categorization beside the point. In a context in which the defining conjunctions of meaning are generated by often sudden and unpredictable collisions of mobile material, the impressions of the dramaturg's second perspective was accessible at the moment of impact (i.e., at the moment of most immediate potential).

Throughout this activity I was constantly reminded of the fundamentally self-critical and reflective nature of Wells's approach, and that of all the members of the company. My presence did not seem to introduce a heretofore absent function into their process, but rather afforded a localization (and thus, perhaps, stabilization) of an element of self-examination operative within each stage of their development process. The collaborative nature of their work accommodates a degree of curiosity and questioning that continually encourages reflection on their own and one another's contributions (director as well as actors). This recognition provides at least a partial explanation as to why my immediate presence did not result in disruption for the performers, whose relationship with Wells during development is deceptively intense (given the degree of levity that characterizes their interaction) and had certainly never before accommodated this kind of outside participation. The dramaturgical role responded to the existing framework of the company's process; all my comments and suggestions were addressed to and filtered through the director, providing both a visible critique and an ultimate reinforcement of his creative authority. Ultimately, it seemed as if my physical presence, while a new and unfamiliar material component of their process, quickly emerged as a pre-existing and entirely familiar conceptual component in their understanding of that process. However, the fact that they are moving so quickly—imaginatively as well as physically—requires that the dramaturg get in close, hang on tight, and be prepared to dance.

Conclusion—And New Questions

Clearly, this experience generates many questions—about both the specifics of these circumstances and the broader issues of dramaturgy in and beyond physically-based theatre. As I suggested at the beginning of this article, my experience suggests that effective dramaturgy in a physically-based devised context is less about radical new strategies than it is about a consciously altered orientation to the work—an orientation that more accurately focuses and accentuates a dramaturgical function that is, arguably, inherent in much physically-based creation.

The first stage in this reorientation involves scrutinizing and problematizing the distinction between developmental and production dramaturgy. This common act of categorization, which capitalizes upon and solidifies a practical, yet limiting and lamented, divide exhibited in most text-based dramaturgy in North America (and to an extreme in much of Canada), quickly reveals itself as untenable within a mode of performance that refuses to recognize such a division of
theatrical spheres. In an approach to performance in which issues of structure and characterization are not “translated” or “embodied” but rather discovered through physicalization, the acts of creation and realization—and, by extension, development and production—are inseparable.

The second stage of this transition calls for a heightened sensitivity to the inherent tension between critical objectivity and personal investment—a tension that must, of course, be perpetually renegotiated in all developmental processes, whether textual or devised, but which becomes exponentially more difficult and insistent in a creative context in which “things happen [so very] fast.” To be fully effective within the type of devised creation practiced by Number Eleven, the dramaturg must relocate herself much closer to the turbulent center of the creative act and to the sites—actual and potential—of the productive collisions of the montage-based process’s raw materials. This tightened proximity is measured in multiple ways—temporally, spatially, in terms of collaborative status—and each represents both a concession to the prerequisite of personal investment and a threat to the traditional expectation of relative dramaturgical distance and objectivity. At the same time, however, the type of interactive, collaborative, query-based practice of devising theatre practiced by Number Eleven is itself defined by a heightened degree of collective and self-examination and reflection—by, in a sense, an internalized dramaturgical objectivity. Certainly, this is not to suggest that objectivity is either easily purchased or a constant given in such practice; the velocity and intensity of the creative process also, ironically, provide fertile soil for habitual behavior and unchecked subjectivity (in the guise of “instinct” and “intuition”). However, the cumulative and unavoidably collaborative nature of Number Eleven’s creative strategies provides a system of checks and balances that, when successful, effectively challenges such unearned solutions and repeatedly reinstates conspicuous self-critique.

Nor, necessarily, is the underlying premise here that physically-based devised theatre practitioners are “naturally” more dramaturgically-minded than practitioners working in more traditional theatrical forms (although this, too, has often been my experience). Rather, the assertion that emerges is that physically-based devised theatre, which is regularly developed without the central plan of a pre-existing playtext, enforces a heightened degree of self-reflection and self-evaluation upon practitioners. And just as the categories of “development” and “production” are thoroughly compromised within this work, so too do rigid role designations weather assault. The engaged dramaturg in physically-based devised work is drawn directly into the site of creative collision, and thus toward the status of “creator.” Such proximity, both physical and conceptual, brings heightened opportunity and increased demands of self-consciousness and respect for the artists’ integrity.

There are, to be sure, multiple implications in these observations for the practice of dramaturgy—developmental and production—in a variety of other contexts, including more traditional text-based work. These merit detailed discussion, and represent the next stage in my own practice and research. However, a number of preliminary observations are possible. As I have noted, the stability of designated roles is necessarily and productively challenged in physically-based devised work, and the inherently collaborative nature of the processes involved allows for, perhaps even demands, a flexibility of self-definition and an evolving exchange of responsibilities and rights. In this, devised practice departs significantly from much text-based developmental dramaturgy—in
theory, if not always in practice. While the level of collaboration between text-based dramaturges and playwrights can be extensive, one only needs to consider the friction between associations such as the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas and the Dramatists’ Guild (or the Playwrights Guild of Canada) to be assured of the investment, personal and institutional, in clearly defined territory. Reconsidering the formalized relationships between playwrights and dramaturges to systematically accommodate more fluid segregation of activity and ownership is thus a subject as volatile as it is potentially productive.

Less controversial is the topic of timing. Experience with physically-based devised development unquestionably argues the benefits of increased presence and engagement on the part of the dramaturg. Granted, “things happen fast[er]” in this context, in terms of the need to quickly observe, analyze, and incorporate the understanding that emerges within the physical and conceptual collisions of physical practice. Playwrights have more time, and are not under the same constraints of physical volatility. Nonetheless, the potential for ideas and assumptions on the part of a dramatist to settle and solidify prior to even having heard his or her writing spoken aloud (let alone enacted) is significant, and more frequent, systematic exposure to the eyes and sensibility of a trusted dramaturg can effectively promote increased levels of self-reflection and self-evaluation.

A related issue—one that returns this discussion full-circle—pertains to the thoroughly discussed distinction between development and production. As noted, the material factors that lead to the demarcation of these areas are substantial and not likely to be significantly altered over a short period of time (even if the institutional will was in place). Most dramaturges know that the divide is artificial and counterproductive. But most dramaturges are also pragmatic, and have learned to work within the systems that house them. A consequence of this is that much professional dramaturgy is too efficient—too well adapted to working conditions that prioritize literary expertise (the domain for which the tools and resources are at hand) and downplay the distant, unpredictable, yet inevitable necessities of production. Developmental dramaturgy in physically-based devised theatre contexts is forcibly confronted with the impossibility of making such distinctions. Ultimately, however, most devised work results in a text—a living, multimodal performance text, but a text nonetheless. Physically-based development is, undeniably, an act of composition. Infusing more traditional text-based developmental dramaturgy with a constant, conspicuous appreciation of—and impatience for—the playtext’s realization can only enhance and emancipate a dramatist’s art and craft. 9

While these ideas for transfer beyond the physically-based devised context are preliminary, the power of this type of theatre practice to challenge and inform our understanding of and approaches to dramaturgical practice is unquestionably significant. The inherent curiosity, self-critique, and creative unrest that characterize much of this type of theatre stand as undeniable reminders to constantly reconsider the normalized activities, categorizations, and institutional structures that define our vocation.

Bruce Barton teaches playwriting and dramaturgy at the University of Toronto. He has articles published and forthcoming in Canadian Theatre Review, Theatre Research in Canada, Essays in Drama, The University of Toronto Quar-
The Dramaturg in Physical Theatre

This article is one of two connected inquiries based on the creative processes of Toronto’s Number Eleven Theatre. The focus of this article is the role and function of the dramaturg in Number Eleven’s creative work and other, related approaches to devised theatre. The second article, entitled “Mining ‘Turbulence’: Authorship Through Direction in Physically-Based Theatre,” is a more narrowly-focused, detailed, and theoretically-based analysis of the relationship between direction and authorship—“direction through authorship”—in the compositional strategies of Number Eleven and its founder-director, Ker Wells. The two articles emerge out of the same developmental experiences and share descriptive material; however, they proceed into distinct areas of study and present separate bodies of analysis and interpretation. The second article is currently in review at Legas Publishing for inclusion in their forthcoming book entitled Directing and Authorship in Western Drama, edited by Anna Migliarisi.

1. For a range of perspectives on this topic, see Filewod, R. Knowles, R. P. Knowles, Rubin, and Salter.

2. See Taylor for a journalistic overview of the current Canadian preoccupation with new play development.

3. For a variety of responses to this situation, see Gilbert, Herst, Lazarus, and Wylie.

4. This list includes, among others, Brian Quirt, Artistic Director of Toronto’s Nightswimming developmental center; Ross Manson, Artistic Director of Toronto’s Volcano Theatre Company; and d. d. kugler, professor of theatre at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, BC.

5. The premiere of Icaria was staged in the Turret Room of the Khyber Klub on Barrington Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, in November 1998.

6. All quotations from Ker Wells come from the interview identified in the Works Cited, unless otherwise indicated.

7. See Pavis, Languages 23–36.

8. This is not to suggest that Number Eleven’s approach to composition and stagecraft is not governed by established values, strategies, and aesthetic priorities. As noted, the company’s influences, ranging from Grotowski through Barba and Fowler, have directly resulted in an extensive and rigorous set of performance competences and vocabulary. Rather, I am suggesting that inherent in this training and skills set is a resistance to traditionally unifying and overarching conceptions of story, as well as to any systematic application of theatrical convention that establishes, a priori, signifying templates and practical guides to performance.
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9. For an intriguing variation on the common workshop model, see the description of Playwrights Workshop Montreal’s “extended workshop” in Smith and Johnson.

Works Cited


