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Introduction

For the past decade or so, dramaturgy has attracted a lot of attention: as a process; as a profession; and as a focus of academic research. This holds particularly true for the Anglo-Saxon part of the world. The emergence of numerous publications on the subject indicates an increasing awareness of dramaturgy in these countries, both in the academic and in the professional field of theatre and performance. However, in the theatre of continental Europe, including Dutch and Flemish theatre, dramaturgy and the profession of the dramaturg have been widely accepted for some time. As teachers within the Theatre Studies department of the University of Amsterdam, and particularly as teachers of the International Dramaturgy Master's programme, we find it important to share our knowledge on this topic, with a special focus on Dutch and Flemish theatre. The field of Dutch and Flemish theatre may not be very large in comparison to that of their surrounding countries, but it is extremely diverse, has an international reputation, and dramaturgy is an intrinsic part of it. Over the past fifteen years, dozens of students have graduated from our (International) Dramaturgy Master's programme, which teaches the subject from both a professional and an academic perspective. Many of these graduates work in the field as professional dramaturgs; in text-based theatre as well as music theatre, mime, youth theatre, and dance. In this book, we bring together the insights that we have assembled during our time teaching Bachelor's and Master's students.

Dramaturgy, understood as the intellectual labour performed while producing theatre performances, has a long history, particularly in German-speaking countries and the German-speaking academic world. Originally, dramaturgy involved focusing on the meaning of the drama text and therefore the dramaturg was both a literary advisor and someone who was able to determine and explain the meaning of the text. But in contemporary theatre, the role of text has changed significantly. It is no longer the all-important layer of meaning, the starting point and guiding principle that determines every part of the performance. Theatre makers nowadays use all kinds of other texts that were not necessarily written to be performed in the theatre. Images, sounds, music, and bodily expressions have become increasingly important. In this process, the rational composition of performance gave way to a more associative approach, which facilitates the composition of a performance from the different elements that theatre has to offer, and that the theatre maker may use. For the spectator, these combined elements generate a theatre event in which the sensory experience
Dramaturgy has become more important than merely an understanding of what is shown. Therefore, although most dramaturgs are very good at selecting, adapting, and analysing texts, text is no longer the self-evident layer of meaning that they work from.

Because of this development, the meaning of the term dramaturgy has also changed. It has become broader, pushing forward the boundaries of what dramaturgy entails. Consequently, it is not possible to define and exact meaning of the term in this introduction. To put it more strongly, it is neither our goal, nor our ambition to come to an exact definition in this book. Since dramaturgy today may be, perhaps even has to be, concerned with all aspects of performance, trying to define the term would be a non-committal and meaningless endeavour. Hence we have given this book the somewhat unambitious title *Dramaturgy. An Introduction*. It is not our intention to explain precisely what dramaturgy entails, but rather to point out how broad the term actually is, focusing on the consequences of this infiniteness for dramaturgs and theatre makers. We make use of alternating perspectives to do so.

Although, at the beginning of our endeavours, we spoke about the possibility of a ‘handbook’, after some time we realised that it is impossible to write a handbook on dramaturgy nowadays. Authors writing a handbook try to capture, establish, and preserve something for the long term. The dramaturgy of today is too comprehensive to be defined in such a way; it is also highly dependent on the particular approach of individual theatre makers. Moreover, to write a handbook on dramaturgy would necessarily entail not only all kinds of methodological tools, but also the inclusion of the whole history of theatre and highlights from dramatic literature, not to mention the history of music, visual arts, film, and philosophy. This book is neither a handbook on dramaturgy, nor a manual for future dramaturgs. Surely, each dramaturg will fill their role in a different manner, depending on ambitions, personality, strengths, weaknesses, and, above all, the theatre makers that they work with. Therefore, the question of whether a dramaturg is a theatre maker, cannot be answered. This also depends on the dramaturg themself and the production team that they are part of.

Instead of trying to define and establish the term, we want to raise questions and emphasise the diverse, fluid, and process-oriented nature of dramaturgy. In Chapter 1, we will further investigate the scope and historical roots of dramaturgy; in Chapter 2, we focus on the material, texts, and other sources that theatre makers work with; Chapter 3 is dedicated to process, including the performance itself; finally, Chapter 4 looks at theatre and dramaturgy from the spectator’s perspective. Under the headings of
scope, material, process, and spectatorship, we assemble different aspects of

dramaturgy, but these can never be exhaustive. In a way, this book reflects

the expertise of its four authors. Fortunately, these are supplementary to one

another. They are not only academic, but also reflect practical experiences in
different aspects of dramaturgy, such as auditive dramaturgy, scenography,
and theatre education. With this supplementary expertise and experience
as a starting point we had lengthy discussions on the essence and scope of
dramaturgy, on the different ways to teach dramaturgy to students, and
on the possible content of this book. This ultimately led to the current
publication, the content of which we all endorse, but in which the reader,
from time to time, may still detect our separate voices.

As previously mentioned, the University of Amsterdam offers a profes-
sional and academic Master’s programme on International Dramaturgy, but
already in the Theatre Studies Bachelor’s programme, dramaturgy is one of
the learning trajectories, combining theory with practice. In that trajectory,
we emphasise that dramaturgy is essentially different from academia, but
also that the two are closely related. If academia is dedicated to collecting
and organising knowledge, dramaturgy is directed towards applying this
knowledge in theatre practice. Therefore, for a dramaturg, knowledge, not
only of theatre, but also of philosophy, literature, visual arts, film, and
music is imperative. A dramaturg should also have developed the skills to
analyse and examine texts, images, sounds, and music. On the other hand,
dramaturgy is not exclusive to the dramaturg. All theatre makers think
about the composition and meaning of the performance and therefore all
theatre makers are involved in the process of dramaturgy, although they
may not recognise and define their work as such and often lack the input
of a dramaturg as a central role in the process. One of the main reasons for
writing this book is to make more people familiar with the meaning and
the process of dramaturgy. It is intended for theatre students in secondary
and higher education, but also for directors, scenographers, actors, and
even people who are not professionally involved but merely interested in
the world of theatre.

Most books on dramaturgy presume a certain knowledge of the current
field of theatre, of the history of theatre, and of a canon of drama texts. We
do not. We presume no knowledge of Shakespeare’s*Hamlet* or Chekhov’s
*Cherry Orchard*. When we use historic examples or current case studies we
always try to explain content and context. We only refer to and elaborate on
aspects of theatre history if knowledge thereof is essential for understanding
certain aspects of current dramaturgical practices. We assume that our
readers are not only future dramaturgs and theatre makers, but also people
that are more generally interested in current developments in theatre and performance. This perspective of the curious reader is very important to us. It is not our intention to deliver a package of knowledge, understandings, and beliefs. On the contrary, we always try to place ourselves in the position of the curious reader. Each year, new Bachelor’s students arrive, and Dramaturgy is one of the first courses they study. We know their enthusiasm and their yearning for knowledge and experience, and kept this in mind when writing this book. Our starting point was a desire to feed this enthusiasm, rather than delivering certain convictions or (political) messages. In saying this, we also recognise that no text on theatre and dramaturgy can be neutral, objective, and value-free.

That we do not presume any prior knowledge from our readers, does not mean that our book takes place in a void. We have read recent books and articles on dramaturgy and used them as material, as sources, not unlike current dramaturgs use existing texts and other sources to develop something new. As previously mentioned, in the last couple of years, much has been written on dramaturgy, predominantly in English. In the Netherlands and Flanders, dramaturgy has also been the topic of numerous articles and books. We, of course, feel indebted to the work of the Flemish dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven. Since the 1990s, she has put dramaturgy as a topic and as a profession on the map of Dutch and Flemish theatre. Her main articles are collected in Van het kijken en van het schrijven (‘About Looking and Writing’, 2002), which continues to be an important source of inspiration to us. Partly because of her work, dramaturgs in the Netherlands and Flanders are no longer considered ‘fallen bookcases’, a Dutch expression referring to bigmouths that get their knowledge solely from books without any practical experience, and therefore lack a sense of reality.

In Chapter 1, we deal with the question of what dramaturgy entails, especially in the Netherlands and Flanders. We look at the historical roots of dramaturgy and the relationship between dramaturgy and academia. In Chapter 2, we focus on what we call ‘material’; that is, the content but also the tangibility of the sources that dramaturgs use, and how research and analysis allows us to better understand and work with different kinds of material. This chapter emphasises text as a form of material, because text can be preserved as a medium by itself and may be analysed and interpreted over and over again. Moreover, drama texts and their interpretation have long determined reflection on theatre and dramaturgy, well into the latter part of the twentieth century. Chapter 3 is about the process; namely, how material is transformed into a performance. We zoom in on research and interpretation, on manners of translation, on visual aspects of dramaturgy,
and on auditive aspects of dramaturgy. Finally, Chapter 4 is about audience and spectatorship. For whom do we produce theatre performances, how do we involve and include the audience in the performance, and what is the role of dramaturgy and the dramaturg in this process?

Throughout this book, we use text boxes to highlight certain drama texts and performances as explanatory examples. The highlighted performances also form a good and faithful reflection of different genres and trends in Dutch and Flemish theatre.

With special thanks to: Fanne Boland; Ludo Costongs; Luuk van den Dries; Peter Eversmann; Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink; Lucia van Heteren; Joy Jeunink; Peter van Kraaij; Erik Lint; Hubertus Mayr; Ellen McGrath; Jeroen de Nooijer; Berthe Spoelstra; Klaas Tindemans; Jesse Vanhoeck; and all the colleagues and students with whom we have exchanged thoughts and visions, and who have inspired us to write this book.

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