

Dramaturgs on the Barricades

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Philippa KELLY, ed., *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2020. 158 p.

I am an Eastern European cis-hetero white male who works as an actor. I considered this brief introduction important because the authors of the studies are representatives of minority groups or work for the equality of a minority group. As a member of the majority society, I act as an active ally. I support movements and efforts aimed at dismantling current systems based on inequality (heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy). My goal is to build a more inclusive environment for everyone.

And I work mainly as an actor, therefore I only have external knowledge of the work of dramaturgs. However, I find it very inspiring in my work to read about the experiences of practising theatre people. As an actor, I strive to regularly articulate my practical experiences in my work. As an actor-viewer, I strive to be able to describe the performance or working method that I see. So in this case, I read the book from the perspective of theatre practice.

In this review, I will first briefly introduce the concept of EDI in relation to the title of the volume. Then I will systematically describe the structure of the volume and the brief content, main ideas, and findings of the case studies. At the end of the review, I describe my personal experiences related to reading this book. I also examine from my own perspective, as a practising actor, how the knowledge accumulated in the volume can be applied in Hungarian theatre practice.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The title of the book is based on a conceptual framework that has been in use in the US since 2015. EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) as a conceptual framework promotes the fair treatment and full participation of all people, especially in the workplace, including populations who have historically been underrepresented or subject to discrimination because of their background, identity, disability, etc.¹ As we can see, the definition of the EDI also includes the expression “underrepresented.” Just as the concept of representation appears in the title of the book. The book examines this ensemble through the lens of contemporary dramaturgy. In this review, I will not attempt to define what contemporary dramaturgy means. As we will see, the authors of the sixteen studies in this book have also sought to continually reframe and define it as an open concept with an ever-expanding range of meanings.

Diversity, Inclusion and Representation

The fact that dramaturgs formulate questions, insights, and experiences that arise during their own dramaturgical practice in case studies is nothing new in the US. As Mark Bly reveals to the reader in his study that *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy* was inspired by Bly's *Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process*, published in the 1990s, in which eight major dramaturgs in the US and Canada documented their work through a diary or casebook before and

¹ This concept was later supplemented in usage with the term „belongings“ (EDIB).

throughout the rehearsal process as they worked on significant productions.²

Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy is divided into four sections: *Permission to speak; Taking up Positions – Playwright/Dramaturg; Who’s “at the table”?*; *Cultural landscapes, Past, Present and Future*. The organisational principle behind the division of the studies into four sections is not entirely clear, nor is the connection between the studies and the section titles always obvious. In the Introduction, Philippa Kelly summarises and interprets the studies in chronological order. The selection process for the authors of the studies is unknown. But the volume’s commitment to diversity is also reflected in the diversity of the race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and disability of the authors, and in the diversity of the dramaturgical approaches to the studies. I assume that the studies have been written directly for the volume, but there is no clear indication of this.

The sixteen authors of the volume reflect on their own dramaturgical practice and its role in the work in progress. They organise their artistic experiences into conceptual frameworks so that they can share them as artistic knowledge in the form of case studies. In these, the authors express their artistic experiences and knowledge with scientific precision, but they do so in an easily understandable, direct tone and language. This knowledge, in Julian Klein’s words, “is sensual and physical, ‘embodied knowledge’”. The knowledge that artistic research strives for, is a felt

knowledge.³ And although this “felt knowledge” is personal, as theatre creators we can recognise similarities in it through the studies. Most of the studies are related to specific rehearsal processes or workshops. An exception to this is Annalisa Dias’s study, which suggests strategies on how to disentangle the term EDI (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion) from white supremacy, doing this through a scholarly register. Mark Bly’s and Philippa Kelly’s also differ from the other studies in that they take a more comprehensive approach to contemporary dramaturgy through various analogies.

In the first section, *Permission to speak*, two studies deal with the role of theatre in education. Awela Makera in her study, “The dramaturgy of the classroom”, through her own dramaturgical practice offers opportunities to teach drama and theatre-making to students who are historically underserved and who have never seen professional theatre.

In “Dramaturgy as prophecy”, Scott Horstein describes one form of community trauma processing implemented in educational practice through theatre. Understanding Horstein’s study without knowledge of the crime, which was the subject of the performance they gave, is not easy.⁴

In Faedra Chatard Carpenter’s study “Deconstructing our perspectives on casting”, which is much more of an inter-article, Carpenter and Hana S. Sharif, who worked together on *Pride and Prejudice*, introduced us to a situation of “confused cultural approp-

student campus. The performance is based on a real crime. George Zimmerman became suspicious of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African-American, in Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012 and called police. Martin then attacked Zimmerman and Zimmerman shot him with a pistol he was licensed to carry. In a widely reported trial, Zimmerman was charged with second-degree murder for Martin’s death. He was later acquitted by a jury after saying he acted in self defense.

² Mark BLY, *The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process*, vols. I and II (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996).

³ Julian KLEIN, „What is Artistic Research” in *Gegenworte* 23 (Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin, 2010): 25–29. <https://doi.org/10.22501/jar-net.0004>

⁴ *The Facing Our Truth: Ten-Minute Plays on Trayvon, Race and Privilege* was staged by Scott Horstein in 2015 at the Sonoma State

riation". During a meeting with one of the donors, Sharif was confronted with a remark that essentially conveyed the message: "Stage what you know. Authentic Austin is not your history". All this happened because Sharif wanted to stage the play in an authentic setting with only white actors.

In the second section, *Taking up positions – playwright/dramaturg* two studies deal with the physical sensations and kinaesthetic experiences. In "The dramaturgy of Black culture", Martine Kei Green-Rogers examines the necessity and possibilities of breaking with traditional expectations of Black culture. Green-Rogers and the director Robert OJ Parson found a way to express the joy of the Black community through authentic songs and dances. It responds to the phenomenon that in one theatre season there are two performances in which Black men are killed (on-stage or not) as part of the historical legacy.

"Embodied dramaturgy", written by Izumi Ashizawa with Ajuawak Kapashesit, offers an unconventional dramaturgical practice. In her study, Ashizawa proposes a creative method that she herself has experienced, "embodied dramaturgy," premised on the idea that the dramaturg's role is not limited to intellectual activity; rather, they also function as a physical dramaturg within the creative process.

In "The name (isn't a) game" Finn Lefevre, as a genderqueer person, shares how given names limit us and mark boundaries that seem impenetrable. As Lefevre describes, various theatre workshops, classes, or training sessions often begin with name games. They created their own practice based on the experiences of these games. Lefevre created a workshop where we can let go of the given names and have the opportunity to find, embrace, and accept our new personally chosen names.

In "Translation and form" Julie Felise Dubiner does not just explore why she feels that

translation is an act of violence, she also argues that we have to accept plays in their own place without compulsively trying to make them fit our own image. Dubiner calls on us to give up judging a play for what it isn't and to meet what it is. Let's receive the play in its own words, images, and unique forms of communication.

In the third section, *Who's "at the table"?*, two studies deal with the accessibility of theatre for everyone. In "Crossing the Line", Jonathan Meth introduces an international project he constructed, featuring learning-disabled artists in partnership between Moomsteatern (Malmo, Sweden), Compagnie de l'Oiseau-Mouche (Roubaix, France), and Mind The Gap (Bradford, UK).

In the "Depth Perception", Tim Collingwood describes what thoughts and feelings drove him to write a play about his relationship with his own Asperger's syndrome, and how he came to the conclusion that he did not want a neurotypical actor to shape his character. This approach would alienate him further from the neurotypical standards of normalcy, and it would not expand "normal" at all.

In "Dramaturging revolution", Mei Ann Teo, through the creative process of *My Lingerie Play* (her collaboration with Diane Oh), explores the revolutionary tasks of dramaturgy. At the centre of the dramaturgy of revolution is the understanding and value of interconnectedness. Diane Oh, as Teo describes, was a "queer Korean American performance artist/writer/actor/singer-songwriter/theatre-maker".⁵ In Diane Oh's works, a more accepting, non-white-centred, anti-rape culture played an important role. In Teo's case study, we can see examples of how a performance gives artists and audiences a way to play and to battle with social shaming and exclusion that still prevail in far too many places.

In the last section, *Cultural landscapes, past, present, and future* the first two studies

⁵ Philippa KELLY, ed., *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 165.

describe the experiences of a rehearsal process in which different cultures encounter and enter into dialogue. In "The stakes of expanding a cultural landscape", Walter Byongsok Chon considers how Gao Xingjian's *The Other Shore* was staged for the Yale Cabaret, in a completely foreign cultural environment. *The Other Shore's* originally scheduled premiere at the Beijing People's Art Theatre in 1986 was cancelled, fearing that the theme of the individual versus the collective might upset the Communist government and invite official sanctions. In 2015 Chon was the dramaturg of *The Other Shore* and also one of the performers of the play. As both an external and internal creator, he describes how a form of storytelling that was originally completely foreign to Western culture was successfully conveyed to the audience of Yale Cabaret.

Michael M. Chemers, in his case study "Visit to a zoot planet", describes the historical context, staging, and reception of the *Zoot Suit*, which represents Pachuco culture on stage.⁶ Wearing the zoot suit was a symbol of cultural transgression for pachucos. As Chemers explains in his study: "Pachuquismo complicates a notion of America as a homogeneous society, with a single language and culture, and exposes that notion as fundamentally racist and exclusionary."⁷

In "The Dramaturgical Impulse", Mark Bly takes a broader view of the role of the dramaturg. Using analogies drawn from historical perspectives, he illustrates how one of the most fundamental tasks of dramaturgy, interpretation and the transfer of information, played a role in understanding how the world works. The author of the study calls on us to always be open-minded, receptive, and to dare to reframe our acquired knowledge. As indicated in the subtitle of his study, Mark Bly asks us the question based on the discoveries

⁶ The pachuco culture in Los Angeles originated among Mexican descendants living in El Paso, Texas, in which the zoot suit, with its long finger-tip jacket, wide lapels, high-waisted, full-cut trousers, elaborate vests,

made by spacecraft Voyager 1 and Voyager 2: "How big is your theatrical world? How big is your universe?"⁸

In the last case study of this volume Philippa Kelly, the editor of the volume, uses the analogy of *King Lear* to illustrate why it is important to "dethrone ourselves from the centre." In order to change, to reconstruct the world and make it a more diverse, equal, and inclusive place, we need to surrender. And as Philippa Kelly puts it, "surrender doesn't have to be 'giving in' – it can also reflect the capacity to slough off what we've had, who we've assumed we were."⁹

Through experiences gained in their own artistic practice, the studies deal extensively with how reactions to race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, disability, and other social situations influence the functioning and reception of contemporary theatre. Since the studies reflect on cultural and social issues from the period between 2010 and 2020, they address topics that are certainly familiar to readers. None of the studies in the volume address the social and cultural changes brought about by climate change and artificial intelligence and their relationship with contemporary theatre. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that these two phenomena have only become a pressing issue in recent years, after the volume was published. The authors strive for greater social awareness. Based on the studies, contemporary theatre has a role to play in changing the way the world works, moving towards a more diverse and inclusive world where everyone can represent themselves and their community equally. A dramaturg, as Stephen Greenblatt writes in his recommendation for the volume on the cover, alternately plays the roles of "innovator, instigator, cultural historian, interpreter, provocateur, and visionary" and "shapes

wide-collared shirt, and wide-brimmed hat was a symbol of cultural transgression.

⁷ KELLY, ed., *Diversity...*, 123.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

the lived experience of actors and audiences alike.” Dramaturgy, which seeks to change the world by reframing outdated thinking about how the world works, is therefore a political act.

Dramaturgs Leading the People

In Delacroix’s famous painting, the allegorical figure of Liberty leads the people to the barricades. Although the fundamental concepts of one of the most important events in intellectual history, the French Revolution, have been subject to much criticism and rethinking over the past 195 years, this volume proves that these principles (Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité) still serve as guidelines for humanity today. In this volume dramaturgs lead the people toward a more diverse, equal, and inclusive world.

The volume does not offer practical solutions to problems related to EDI, like a handbook or textbook. It addresses global social issues that may also be familiar locally. It also presents situations in which contemporary theatre responds to these global problems. One of the political acts of the studies is to point out the problems and introduce us to personal coping strategies that we don’t have to adapt literally. The aim of the volume is rather to invite us to think together about what contemporary theatre can do for a more accepting, diverse, and equal world. And dramaturgs have an indispensable role to play in this mission.

The applicability of the knowledge gained from the case studies is not straightforward in all cases in the Hungarian theatre environment. The reasons for this are undoubtedly to be found in the different social structures, cultural differences, and various historical factors. From the perspective of Central-Eastern European cynicism, studies expressing the

commitment of American optimism sometimes seem naive. At the same time, it cannot be said that the studies paint only a positive picture of the world; in fact, each study carries within it a difficult conflict. Diversity in the Hungarian theatre system is most evident in the independent performing arts scene. The main reason for this is that people of colour are very underrepresented in institutionalised actor education. As a result, Roma, Asians, Black and other ethnic minorities are underrepresented in Hungarian state theatre productions. There are attempts from state theatres to create community theatre performances or drama pedagogical projects whose main theme relates to EDI. But in most of the state theatres, social awareness is only reflected in one or two side projects in a season.

While reading, the book really excited me personally. As a practising actor, it inspired me to think about theatre projects that are not about social awareness, but are born in the spirit of social awareness. I began to think about the extent to which the expectations expressed by the concept of EDI apply in my work environment. I started researching which Hungarian theatre companies deal with underrepresented social groups, and who are the ones who don’t get enough attention.

I recommend *Diversity, Inclusion and Representation in Contemporary Dramaturgy* primarily to dramaturgs and all theatre creators who feel committed to approaching theatre through the filter of social awareness. I recommend it to those who enjoy reading about the artistic experiences of other artists. And finally, I recommend it to those who are keen to engage in dialogue about how contemporary theatre responds to global social phenomena and what role dramaturgs play in this.