American Dramaturgies

For the 21st Century

Julie Vatain-Corfdir (ed.)

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If all the world is a stage (as the title of this series supposes), the stage of the 21st century must be a site of remarkable anxiety—at once global and splintered, intensely up-front and relentlessly mediatized, ever fragmenting the collective and seeking to build it anew. How can theater, an art of intimate presence, rethink its aesthetics and reassert its mission on such a stage? More specifically, how have American dramaturgies chosen to engage with our new millennium? Relying on a broad understanding of "dramaturgy" as a dynamic process, this book explores some of the inspiring trends and arresting innovations of contemporary theater in the US, investigating both playwriting and performance-making in order to delineate formal experiments, the imprint of socio-political themes, and new configurations in spectatorship.

The chapters of the present volume delve into various aspects of theater-making, from courses in playwriting to controversies in casting or discussions about the democratic function of theater. The wide range of examples studied include development practices at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, the work of experimental companies (Ping Chong + Company, The Industry, New York City Players), and many plays by contemporary authors (Clare Barron, Jackie Sibblies Drury, David Levine, Charles Mee, Dominique Morisseau, Sarah Ruhl, Andrew Schneider, Paula Vogel, Mac Wellman). Conversations with Young Jean Lee and Richard Maxwell add the playwright's viewpoint to the prismatic perspective of the volume, which is dedicated to performances in the US but written from a decidedly international angle, thus implicitly querying what makes up the American identity of this rich body of work.

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SUP
Maison de la Recherche
Sorbonne Université
28, rue Serpente
75006 Paris

tél. : (33) (0)1 53 10 57 60

sup@sorbonne-universite.fr

https://sup.sorbonne-universite.fr

PART II

Page, Stage and Gaze Reconfigured

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF THE DRAMATURG AT THE NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE, EUGENE O'NEILL THEATER CENTER[1]

Mary Davies
Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham

The Eugene O'Neill Theater Center has a rich legacy of developing over a thousand new works for the stage and is known as "The Launchpad of American Theater"[2] (**fig. 1**). Founded in 1964, it is a short distance away from the childhood home of Eugene O'Neill. The O'Neill is famous for its annual National Playwrights Conference, where up to eight playwrights are selected for a month-long residency and are offered the opportunity to develop their play. Located in Waterford, Connecticut, the O'Neill offers an artist's retreat away from the city where writers can work with a team of professional actors, designers, a director and a dramaturg to explore their work. The place was "founded upon the concept that critically important work exists between (1) when a work is written and (2) when it advances into production" and they call this step "The O'Neill process."[3]

The O'Neill has many desirable qualities, such as the dream design meeting, an open submission policy for new plays, and a campus that includes different artists all sharing the same facilities and creating new work together away from the city. Many new drama development organizations, such as the Scottish Society of Playwrights and the Sundance Theatre Lab, have adopted approaches over the years that were

1 This article has emerged out of a Masters thesis by the author (originally titled "Doing Dramaturgy: Investigating the Role of the Dramaturg at the National Playwrights Conference, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center") conducted at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and Birkbeck College, University of London in 2017.

2 "About" section, The O'Neill website. Famous new works include Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) and *Fences* (1983), and *In the Heights* (2005) by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes. Notable dramaturgs that have worked at the National Playwrights Conference are Edith Oliver, Martin Esslin and John Lahr, to name a few. See Joel Schechter, "American Dramaturgs," *TDR*, vol. 20, no. 2, June 1976, p. 90.

3 "New Work by Decade: 55 Years of Plays and Musicals," The O'Neill website.

first practiced at the O'Neill.[4] For these reasons, the O'Neill process of generating new plays is worth investigating.

1. Aerial view of Eugene O'Neill Theater Center © Flying Fox Photography

The O'Neill was instrumental in placing the dramaturg within the new drama development process in America, yet few books on dramaturgy provide details about the Center.[5] The main source of literature on the O'Neill is Jeffrey Sweet's book, *The O'Neill: The Transformation of Modern American Theater* (2014), which is an anniversary edition celebrating fifty years of work. Ian Brown has written an article (2011) arguing that the O'Neill has inspired play development in the United Kingdom, yet Brown discusses elements that no longer occur in the Conference, such as the pre-Conference weekend. Another significant article on the O'Neill is

4 Ian Brown, "Playwrights' Workshops of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and their Long Term Impact in the UK," *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2011, p. 35; Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, London, Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 96.

5 For books that mention the O'Neill, see Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70 and p. 96; and Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt, *Dramaturgy and Performance*, London, Palgrave, 2016, p. 9.

Dan Isaac's "The O'Neill Memorial Theater Center: A Place for Playwrights" (1972) which provides a first-hand account of the early years of the O'Neill.[6]

This article provides a new perspective on the National Playwrights Conference by analyzing the role that dramaturgs play at the O'Neill. The research is informed by my experience as a literary intern at the O'Neill during the summer of 2017. I also interviewed staff and playwrights to gain insight into their experiences of the National Playwrights Conference. Marianne Van Kerkhoven's concepts of "macro" and "micro dramaturgy" will inform the analysis of the work conducted by dramaturgs at the O'Neill. This article argues that institutional pressures are removed from the work of the dramaturg at the National Playwrights Conference and utilizes Henri Lefebvre's concept of space as a social product to support these claims. The article then proceeds to argue the importance of creative freedom upon the dramaturgs at the O'Neill, before offering concluding thoughts on the overall process.

THE EUGENE O'NEILL THEATER CENTER

During the summer of 1962, George C. White, an alumnus of the Yale School of Drama, was sailing with his wife and his father along the coast of his hometown, Waterford, Connecticut. He asked what would become of the former Hammond Mansion; a large, dilapidated building on the coast that had recently been given to the town. It was planned that the fire department would acquire the land for training, but White felt that the area could be used for theatrical purposes. After a failed attempt to partner with the Yale School of Drama on an adjunct summer venue, combined with insufficient funds to build a theatre, a young playwright named Marc Smith suggested to White that he should hold a playwrights conference on this land.[7] At the time, structures or grants helping emerging writers were scarce in the U.S. As playwright and theater historian Jeffrey Sweet underscores, despite development programs such as New Dramatists being founded, young writers "yearned to find opportunities to

6 Similarly to Brown's article, some of the details that Isaac describes at the O'Neill are outdated. For example, playwrights are now very much a part of the rehearsal room and can talk freely with actors, as opposed to "the alienation of the playwright" that Isaac argued occurred at the O'Neill. See Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theater Center: A Place for Playwrights," *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, March 1972, pp. 24-25.

7 Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill: The Transformation of Modern American Theater*, New Haven, Yale UP, 2014, pp. 11-15; George C. White, "The First Five Years: 1964-69," The O'Neill website.

develop their skills."[8] A playwrights conference was seen as a cheaper alternative to building a new theatre, and would provide opportunities to engage with writers and offer them advice from established theatre professionals.[9]

During the first week of August 1965, White gathered a group of twenty writers to meet with professional directors, designers, critics, producers and actors to "discuss their needs and relationships to these various theatrical disciplines." However, the meeting "became a forum for the outpouring of the anger and frustration" from the young writers who felt "artistically restricted" and the result of that week was to hold a conference on the Conference itself.[10] There needed to be a call for action and playwrights felt the desire not only to develop plays, but to collaborate with professionals in the industry whilst doing so. White agreed to select two plays and hire a company of actors and designers, a director, and a producer to present them the following summer.

The autumn of 1965 and early 1966 were spent raising $350,000 to build an amphitheater and renovate the Mansion and the Barn on the former Hammond Estate.[11] White selected John Glennon's *The Bird, the Bear, and the Actress* and Joel Oliansky's *Bedford Forrest* as the two plays for the 1966 Conference. He was able to secure the funds for the necessary renovations and support for the productions from various loans and gifts, and the Amphitheatre was completed on the afternoon of the opening for *Bedford Forrest*. In order "to complete the mirror of the Broadway experience," White had enlisted prominent critics to come onto the stage after the performance and discuss the play, which, he recalls, was "extremely positive, entertaining for the audience, and possibly instructive for the playwright."[12] While this example was a seeming success of a post-show discussion at the O'Neill, problems began to arise.

The deployment of dramaturgs came as a result of the difficulties encountered by critics engaging with playwrights at the conferences. White was keen to offer professional

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8 Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

9 Isaac explains "the term Playwrights Conference does *not* mean lectures, eulogies, and textual interpretations in tribute to the memory of a dead playwright. Rather, the Conference consists of the reading and performance of new plays in an atmosphere that permits maximum benefit to young writers who are in the process of learning their craft." Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theater Center," art. cit., p. 18.

10 George C. White, "The First Five Years," art. cit.

11 *Ibid.* Additionally, support from the federal government was sought to fund a National Theater of the Deaf with designer David Hays, who had attended the 1965 Playwrights Conference. For further information on the National Theater of the Deaf, see Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-72.

12 George C. White, "The First Five Years," art. cit.

criticism to playwrights, however, in 1967 a post-performance discussion "exploded" when critic Martin Gottfried, "totally disgusted with the work under consideration, angrily told the playwright to quit the theatre and try something else."[13] The play was *Summertree* by Ron Cowan. A solution to the 1967 post-performance critique was that these discussions became optional as well as private. However, problems still arose and, as a result of playwrights' complaints, the newly formed Critics Institute was re-located to New London in 1969. Only two playwrights chose to meet with them.[14] The challenge that the O'Neill faced was how to offer playwrights constructive advice about their work without shattering their ideas. Lloyd Richards, then Artistic Director of the National Playwrights Conference, did not want to lose the "excellent" theatre minds of the critics, and wondered whether they could help the playwrights in their development process in another way.[15] White mentioned to Richards how Bertolt Brecht was using the term "dramaturg" and, after some research, Richards decided that dramaturgs would be the solution.[16] Katalin Trencsényi notes that one of Brecht's "strongest legacies" was the "affirmation of the role of the production dramaturg, and their legitimacy in the rehearsal room." During the 1960s, the production dramaturg was understood as "a script-based creative consultant," an "artistic collaborator" who worked with the director to interpret and analyze a play.[17] In the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, the Dramaturg is away from his cold office where scripts lie in wait of being read and facilitates the conversation taking place on stage.[18] A person that could offer critical insights into playwriting and could also act as a mediator and creative collaborator amongst artists must have sounded ideal to Richards and White as they began to appoint dramaturgs at the National Playwrights Conference.

13 Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theater Center," art. cit., p. 20.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22. The National Critics Institute was founded in 1968 at the O'Neill and runs alongside the National Playwrights Conference. The Institute aims to provide critics with an insight into the theatre-making process and from its outset, anything that the critics write during their time at the O'Neill is not intended for other members of the summer conferences. For further information, see Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, pp. 73-90.

15 Lloyd Richards, quoted in Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

16 George C. White, quoted in Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

17 Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

18 Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, London, Bloomsbury, 2002, p. 1. A single paragraph alone does not begin to cover Brecht's dramaturgical practice, which continued to evolve throughout his lifetime. In addition to reading Brecht's own writings, see also Mary Luckhurst "Revolutionising Theatre: Brecht's Reinvention of the Dramaturg," in Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, Cambridge UP, 2007, pp. 193-208.

In 1969, critics Sam Hirsch, Henry Hewes and John Lahr were invited as dramaturgs to work with playwrights. Initially, Isaac reports that working with a dramaturg was unfavorable at the O'Neill because, at the time, dramaturgy was a vague and unclear phrase. Out of the three dramaturgs that worked on the 1970 National Playwrights Conference, only one attended rehearsals, but in 1971, Edith Oliver, Dale Wasserman and Martin Esslin attended all rehearsals for the plays and also met independently with their playwrights.[19] I suggest that the reason for the dramaturgs' success in relation to the critics at the O'Neill is because they would approach the play from the perspective of the playwright. The dramaturg can still have an outside eye whilst working on a play, but by attending rehearsals and talking to the playwright privately, they both established a relationship of trust.

2. A full house in the Amphitheater for Jeremy O Harris' *Slave Play* at the 2018 National Playwrights Conference © Isaak Berliner – Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

The idea of a dramaturg working closely with a playwright may contrast other forms of dramaturgical practice depending on the institution or collaborative relationship between artists. Whilst some dramaturgs may work predominantly with directors

19 Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center," art. cit., p. 22; Jay Ranelli, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 31.

(a notable example being dramaturg Mira Rafalowicz and her work with Joseph Chaikin), it is common for the ones working in new drama development in America to work with playwrights.[20] Various organizations of new drama development may differ in their operation (brief examples of which will be later mentioned), but the O'Neill focuses on the playwrights and enables them to revise their scripts. Director and dramaturg then center their work around how they can serve the playwright's needs through the rehearsal process and the public readings.

The O'Neill has continued to expand over the past five decades, and other conferences have emerged alongside its National Playwrights Conference. These include the National Music Theater Conference, National Puppetry Conference, National Critics Institute and the Cabaret and Performance Conference. The O'Neill currently includes indoor theatrical spaces such as the Rufus and Margo Rose Barn Theater and the Dina Merrill Theater, and outdoor spaces such as the Amphitheater and the Edith Oliver Theater (**fig. 2**). The O'Neill also established the National Theater Institute, a training program for students which offers a range of courses including the Theatermakers Summer Intensive.

THE NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE

The method of selecting plays for the National Playwrights Conference reflects the vision of the O'Neill to "discover and launch new work and artists."[21] In order to find new voices, the Conference has an open submission policy which ensures that early career playwrights have an opportunity to be considered alongside more established writers. As a result of this policy and the impressive reputation of the O'Neill, the selection process is competitive. Applications open in September for places the following summer, and Anne G. Morgan, former Literary Manager and Dramaturg at the O'Neill, stated that between "thirteen-hundred and fifteen-hundred plays" are received every year for consideration.[22] To tackle this enormous amount of script reading and assessing, the literary office rely on various pools of reader which, as Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood, former Literary Associate at the O'Neill, explains,

20 See Mira Rafalowicz, "Dramaturgs in America: Eleven Statements," *Theater*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1978, pp. 27-29; Joel Schechter, "American Dramaturgs," art. cit., pp. 91-92.

21 "About" section, The O'Neill website.

22 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, July 1, 2017.

are composed of former playwrights, interns, and people who have previously been involved with the National Playwrights Conference.[23]

To guarantee fair judgment, anonymized scripts must be thoroughly read along with their playwrights' statement of objectives. The review panel then submit reader reports that assess whether the play should move forward to the next round of reading. The readers' reports allow space for both personal responses to the play (i.e. if readers were excited by the play and why) and more objective commentary, such as how the play functions in terms of plot and structure. While the first round of readers may include O'Neill staff or interns who are not necessarily specialized in dramaturgy, the next round is read by an artistic council comprised of literary managers, dramaturgs and professionals who have experience in new play development. As Bergeron-Clearwood explained, around ninety plays get shortlisted following their recommendations; then the literary manager and associate will review the final plays. At this point, the manager and associate remove the anonymity of the applications to ensure a diversity of finalists are selected, not only in terms of gender and race, but also in terms of where the playwrights are in their career. They consider the objectives of each playwright, shortlist sixty plays and create dossiers for the artistic director, who will select eight plays for the Conference. The finalist plays are "chosen for their artistic excellence, originality of voice, singularity of perspective, and developmental potential."[24] The "originality of voice" and "singularity of perspective" apply both to the content of the play and to the way in which the writer narrates the story in terms of language and style. Further, Bergeron-Clearwood acknowledged that the O'Neill searches for "plays that particularly need to be told right now."[25] This observation suggests that the O'Neill is aiming to provide a platform for new works that feel urgent and important to share with contemporary audiences. The O'Neill seeks to maintain relevance by showcasing new work that is able to speak directly to the outside world, thus keeping the Center at the forefront of launching new plays for the American stage.

The terms "artistic excellence" and "developmental potential" may seem contradictory, yet this brief description highlights the high standard at which O'Neill plays are assessed. There is a clear emphasis on "developmental potential" however, as the O'Neill will only select plays that are not ready for production and will benefit from being worked on at the Conference. The statement of objectives becomes

23 Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood, personal interview with author, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, August 3, 2017.

24 Wendy C. Goldberg, "National Playwrights Conference," The O'Neill website.

25 Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood, personal interview with author.

important as this document specifically outlines why playwrights want to come to the O'Neill to develop their plays and suggests the support that they need. Along with an assessment of the play itself, the O'Neill can then deduce whether the National Playwrights Conference is the best place for this play and playwright.

The format of the National Playwrights Conference may raise questions as to whether the O'Neill risks running a "one-size-fits-all" method for their plays and playwrights. Carrie Chapter, a free-lance dramaturg who sits on the artistic council, suggests that the plays selected at the National Playwrights Conference "run an entire spectrum of representation of thought and theatricality." She confesses: "I never think that style is impeding any one work that gets chosen."[26] Not only is it important that the O'Neill remain as open and flexible as possible in not prescribing a certain style of playwriting, but Morgan reinforces the sense that the range in style and diversity of voices is an important aspect.[27] By placing writers of varying styles (from kitchen sink realism to more poetic forms) in community with one another, a rich learning experience can take place, in addition to ensuring that the repertory of plays remains reflective of diverse new innovations in American theater.

The emphasis on selecting plays that feel resonant in the contemporary moment does allow for certain thematic or formal trends to emerge, however. Morgan shares that when she started her role at the O'Neill in 2012, she read several plays about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then more recently (as of 2017), plays about gun violence. Formal trends that Morgan also noticed were plays that began with a monologue and / or a form of direct address to the audience, and plays that experimented with jumping backwards and forwards in time.[28] These trends may not however be specific to the O'Neill.

The development process begins with the dream design meeting, where the writer will meet with designers to talk about their play and how they would like to see their work staged without having to consider a budget. The director, dramaturg, and other campus members are present but are not allowed to say anything. The dream design gives the designers—scenic, sound and lighting—an opportunity to ask the playwright any questions they may have about the play. Set designer Rachel Hauck discussed the benefits of the dream design: "The writer is so used to looking at the play from the intense focus of character, motive, moment to moment. Designers look at the script from the back and the side, largely in terms of texture and color and mood

26 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author, April 22, 2020.
27 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author, April 23, 2020.
28 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author, July 1, 2017.

and emotion."[29] Raquel Davis, a lighting designer who has worked several summers at the O'Neill, describes the main role for all designers working on campus as "visual dramaturgs."[30] While the writer, dramaturg and director focus predominantly on the page at the O'Neill, the designer investigates the play's concepts and envisions what its world may look like in a theatrical space. In an article entitled "The Designer: Decorator or Dramaturg?," Stephen Curtis argues that the designer "*can* be both, and I believe has long been so, making meaning in the production *by* exploring and exploiting the visual value of every element onstage."[31] Curtis reminds readers that meaning is not only created from the spoken word of the play but by the scenography of the world onstage, so that everything the audience sees contributes to the storytelling. While designers at the O'Neill work with minimal staging and production features, they present their visual conceptions on billboards at the public readings. The dream design is an invaluable addition to the National Playwrights Conference as it offers a rare opportunity to fully discuss the intentions of the playwright without any restrictions (**fig. 3**).

After the dream design comes a practical design meeting, where the artistic director and the creative team discuss staging options for the public readings. The creative team consists of the writer, director, assistant director, dramaturg, literary representative, stage managers and designers. Negotiations are made over what props or furniture can be acquired, or whether the playwright simply wants the actors to have music stands and stools in order to read the play. The next day, a first reading of the script is conducted and rehearsals follow. The play will receive around five days of rehearsal before the first public reading, and the writer is present in the rehearsal room with the cast and creative team. The writer can make as many or as little re-writes as they desire, and the literary representative will take responsibility for printing, formatting, and distributing them. There is no time limit, so the writers can continue to hone their plays up until the public readings. Following the first public reading, the company have another short rehearsal the next day, before the second reading, in case the writer wants to rehearse or add new material. Each playwright will have two public readings of their play over the course of the National Playwrights Conference. The audiences that attend the public readings are a mixture of people who are already present on site—staff, interns, theatre-makers, playwrights and actors who are working on different shows.

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29 Rachel Hauck interviewed in Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

30 Raquel Davis in "Humans of the O'Neill," Eugene O'Neill Theater Center (accessed via the O'Neill's social media channel).

31 Stephen Curtis, "The Designer: Decorator or Dramaturg?," *Platform Papers: Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts from Currency House*, no. 46, February 2016.

The audience is also composed of people, typically from New York, who travel up to see a family member or a friend in a particular play, as well as local members of the community, from Waterford and New London, who are familiar with the O'Neill process and are excited to see the new work first. Selected industry contacts may be invited by the O'Neill, if appropriate, or by the artists. That said, contract negotiations are discouraged on the grounds of the O'Neill.[32]

3. Dream Design of Beth Henley's *Lightning* at the Edith Oliver Theater for the 2018 National Playwrights Conference © Isaak Berliner – Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

Aside from their week of rehearsals and public readings, playwrights are free to choose how they spend their time at the O'Neill. Their activity varies depending on their focus and on the timing of said week. Some writers choose to work on other plays, get involved in reading, and many playwrights choose to utilize the support of the literary office to conduct research for a new project. Depending on the relationships between the writers each year, communal activities may emerge. Chapter recollects that one summer, the writers would gather every week for impromptu readings of each other's work, using interns and students as actors.[33] Morgan also remembers one group

32 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author.
33 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.

of playwrights gathering weekly to drink whisky and read Eugene O'Neill's plays.[34] Reflecting on his own personal experience, playwright Adam Esquenazi Douglas (National Playwrights Conference 2017), describes the initial pressure he felt when he arrived at the O'Neill and saw the other playwrights working on their plays. His play was being rehearsed towards the end of the month, and he confessed that until that rehearsal week, he only changed one line. Douglas knew that he needed to hear the play aloud in order to be able to make any further revisions.[35]

THE ROLE OF THE DRAMATURG AT THE NATIONAL PLAYWRIGHTS CONFERENCE

Dramaturgs, who may work on more than one play over the course of the Conference but will not be assigned to work on two at the same time, are selected by Wendy C. Goldberg, Artistic Director of the National Playwrights Conference. Morgan explains that the O'Neill has "a list of usual suspects:" dramaturgs who have previously worked at the Center or have emerged from Goldberg's connections.[36] Or sometimes, a dramaturg may already be attached to a certain play, in which case that particular dramaturg will come to the O'Neill to work on the play. As of 2017, there was a mixture of free-lance and institutional dramaturgs operating at the National Playwrights Conference. There is no strict rule about the hiring of dramaturgs at the O'Neill (they do not require advanced degrees for example) but the ones that are asked to work there are selected mainly due to their length of experience in the field.[37]

The dramaturg attends both dream and practical design meetings, as well as every reading and rehearsal of the play. Morgan states that the responsibilities of the dramaturg at the O'Neill "are primarily to work with the director and the playwright to offer feedback and advise on re-writes."[38] The relationship between the director, the playwright and the dramaturg varies with each project, depending on the collaborators' personalities and on how the role of the dramaturg is perceived. According to Chapter, who has worked at the National Playwrights Conference for many years, the "best case scenario" is when all three work collaboratively and have meetings together after every rehearsal, though a dramaturg cannot expect this type of immediate connection with each new working relationship. Sometimes Chapter

34 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author.
35 Adam Esquenazi Douglas, Skype interview with author, August 6, 2017.
36 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author.
37 *Ibid.*
38 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author.

will establish a rapport with the individual playwright and / or director, respectively, and on other occasions the writer and the director may prefer to work closely together instead.[39] This requires a sense of diplomacy and humility on the part of the dramaturg, to know when they are needed and how they can best serve the project. The dramaturg must avoid impinging on the director / playwright relationship and equally ensure that their creative input is received.

As a result, the dramaturg's involvement in the rehearsal room depends on the relationship between the artists. For example, during the 2019 National Playwrights Conference, Chapter would sit with playwright George Brant and discuss the play while the rehearsal was taking place. Brant was happy to receive notes and advice from Chapter while watching the actor and the director work on the text, and Brant was then able to share any new revisions with the company on the spot. Chapter also worked with playwright Tearrance Arvelle Chisholm during the same Conference, although on separate rehearsal weeks, so that Chapter did not have to split her time. In this instance, Chapter and Chisholm would find each other and work on material during breaks.[40] Each example is influenced by the playwright's preference and the atmosphere in the rehearsal room, and demonstrates the flexibility of the dramaturg in finding the appropriate moments to offer playwrights advice.

In terms of advice and support, Morgan states that the dramaturg at the O'Neill should have "really good listening skills" and "immense curiosity about how plays work and why plays work."[41] The term "curiosity" is important, because it denotes a "[c]areful attention to detail."[42] When "curiosity" is applied to the role of the dramaturgs, it implies that the latter are very meticulous with regards to identifying the form and structure of plays. Trencsényi similarly states that they should have a sound knowledge "of the processes of 'classical', text-based work" in order to either work against it, dismiss it or develop it "into a different type of dramaturgy."[43] If there are any problems or uncertainties about specific points in the play, the dramaturg may be able to offer suggestions by explaining how the play is operating structurally. Chapter pays attention to the story beat by beat when working on a play or musical.[44] Morgan sometimes makes lists or charts to deduce any patterns or trends. For example, one play that she worked on consisted of two different worlds, so she mapped out the play to

39 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.
40 *Ibid.*
41 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author.
42 "curiosity, n.," *OED Online*, Oxford UP, May 2021.
43 Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, p. xxii.
44 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.

acknowledge the different settings in order to gain a sense of the balance between these two worlds. This particular playwright then had a visual guide which outlined how their play was functioning as they progressed with rewrites.[45] Having a detailed understanding of the unique rules of the world of a play allows the writer to remain consistent with and faithful to their initial ideas. By working with a dramaturg and seeing how their play functions structurally, the playwright can deduce whether the current draft reflects their intentions in terms of how they want to tell their story.

Anne G. Morgan describes the role of the dramaturg as "working with the creative artists to clarify and refine whatever it is that they are working on," and explains how she tries not to impose her own judgments on what she feels the piece should be, but aims to understand what the artists want.[46] Other dramaturgs at the O'Neill may work differently, but Morgan tries not to offer advice for her own benefit of how she wants the play to develop. She actively listens to the playwrights and then quotes their language back to them, as a way of helping the writers solve problems, whilst also avoiding adding her own voice. She frequently references the playwright's statement of objectives in order to keep their aims at the center of the dramaturgical process. For example, Morgan would talk with a certain playwright about how they wanted their play to focus on generational conflict. Morgan can then point out that a particular scene she read felt as if climate change was driving the narrative, and she would ask the playwright which of these two themes they would want to pursue, and what changes they might want to make to support their decision.[47] In this way, Morgan does not state her preference, but questions the writer in order to allow them to identify for themselves the ways in which they want to refine their ideas. Douglas shares his experience of working with Morgan: "She was very patient and she invited me to come to her [...]. It was not a system of 'here's what's wrong with your play' which was very refreshing and helpful."[48] Morgan, as a dramaturg, allows the playwright freedom to talk their ideas aloud and find out what their play needs.

The above description of Morgan's dramaturgical practice is similar to Chapter's approach. Since Chapter also works on the National Music Theater Conference, she is present when the playwrights arrive at the launch of the National Playwrights Conference.[49] Chapter introduces herself stating that: "The playwrights know that

45 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author.
46 *Id.*, personal interview with author.
47 *Id.*, Skype interview with author.
48 Adam Esquenazi Douglas, Skype interview with author.
49 Dramaturgs who are working on plays that get workshopped later in the Conference are not usually present at this point.

if they want to meet with me, then they can. I don't force myself on any artist; this is their time, their retreat."[50] Some writers will either wait until the day of rehearsals to meet with her, others will seek to meet with her beforehand. During the summer of 2019 for example, Brant would meet with Chapter with his notepad ready weeks ahead of his rehearsal process, as he was keen to discuss his play with his dramaturg.[51] Such flexibility offers freedom to the writer to use their time and work with their dramaturg as they wish.

CREATIVE FREEDOM AND THE ECOLOGY OF THE O'NEILL

The O'Neill is an experimental environment where playwrights can try ideas and work on their plays free from production and commercial concerns. The space of the O'Neill can be investigated in terms of how theatrical space, both physically and conceptually, influences the work produced there, thus exemplifying Henri Lefebvre's concept of space as a social product.[52] Lefebvre writes that space is "an essential precondition for the reproduction of social relations."[53] It is important to highlight that space exists prior to specific social practice, but human activity reproduces and redefines it as a social product. Lefebvre was interested in "the multiplicity of dimensions that space holds."[54] Quite apart from its physical or geographical location, space is a "political instrument, part of the relations of production and property ownership, and a means of creative and aesthetic expression."[55] Space is not passive, but is utilized artistically, and the space at the O'Neill influences and contributes to the creative freedom felt by artists working there. Lefebvre continues:

> (Social) space is not a thing among other things; nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships. [...] It would be more accurate to say that it is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures.[56]

50 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.
51 *Ibid.*
52 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Malden, Blackwell, 1974.
53 Quoted in Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre: Spatial Politics, Everyday Life and the Right to the City*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p. 42.
54 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
55 Henri Lefebvre and Mark Gottdiener, quoted in Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
56 Henri Lefebvre, quoted in Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

The term "social superstructures" points towards the hierarchical or political structures that govern and maintain the organization of a particular social space. A theatrical institution—and the space it occupies—is structured by a framework wherein its activity operates. At the O'Neill, one can experience what happens when the framework of an institutional or commercial theatre establishment is removed from the creative work of the dramaturg.

Dramaturgs at the O'Neill are relieved from institutional duties such as curating, programming, selecting plays and mediating between an institution and a creative team. Further, the O'Neill removes the pressure of considering how a singular creative project links to the wider aims of a theatre. Marianne Van Kerkhoven uses the terms "micro dramaturgy" to describe "the dramaturgical labour situated around an artistic production itself" and "macro dramaturgy" as "the dramaturgical labour through which theatre fulfills its role in society."[57] A symbiotic relationship exists between the "micro dramaturgy" and "macro dramaturgy" because the dramaturg, while working on the "micro" is always considering the larger factors such as how the performance will resonate with audiences and the community. With the exception of Morgan's former role as Literary Manager and Dramaturg (a permanent position at the O'Neill, which includes other responsibilities year-round), dramaturgs can focus on "micro dramaturgy" by concentrating on one play at a time, which Chapter describes as "the most desirable detail" of working at the O'Neill.[58] The dramaturg is supported by the literary office—whether the dramaturg needs any printing, research, or faces any problems. A literary representative (an intern responsible for tracking script revisions) is also assigned to each play.

As previously mentioned, the physical environment of the O'Neill interacts with and influences the sense of creative freedom that artists, including dramaturgs, feel when they work on the campus. Lefebvre pointed out that space is an "object of consumption," which the O'Neill perfectly illustrates as artists absorb the beauty of the natural environment, such as the beach and the long acres of grass, only adding to their sense of freedom (**fig. 4**).[59] Reflecting on the O'Neill, James Bundy states that no substitute exists "for the impact of beauty on the artist. The transformational

57 Marianne Van Kerkhoven, "Van de kleine en de grote dramaturgie" (On Micro and Macro Dramaturgy), *Etcetera*, vol. 17, no. 68, 1999. I am grateful to Dr Lise Uytterhoeven for her help with the translation.

58 Carrie Chapter, Skype interview with author.

59 Henri Lefebvre, quoted in Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

experience of being in the setting has incalculable power."[60] A spiritual experience seems to occur and influence the work of the artist in an empowering way. A similar feeling is observed at the Sundance Theatre Lab set in the Utah mountains, as Robert Blacker, its former Artistic Director notes: "We usually make theatre in cities, but these rural retreats offered the opportunity to reflect on the immensity of the world and to ponder something outside of yourself. And that informed the breadth and depth of the work."[61] The idea that the environment can inform the perplexity and scope of the artist's creative practice, I argue, happens at the O'Neill, as artists are given space to breathe, pause, and reflect on their work and its connection with the world around them.

4. The National Theater Institute starts their morning with a warm up on the beach
© Isaak Berliner – Eugene O'Neill Theater Center

Both the O'Neill and the Sundance Theatre Lab can be linked with a wider Northern American trend of artist retreats away from urban life. As mentioned, there are obvious benefits to temporarily re-locating away from home, for artists are unhindered from

60 James Bundy interviewed in Jeffrey Sweet, *The O'Neill*, *op. cit.*, p. 304.

61 Robert Blacker in Jacob Gallagher-Ross and Robert Blacker, "Robert Blacker Looks at the Past and Future of American Dramaturgy," in Magda Romanska (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, New York, Peter Lang, 1995, p. 22.

distractions, but the importance of being in a beautiful natural setting is also clearly significant for the emergence of new work. The MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, for example, was originally founded in the early 1900s by composer Edward MacDowell and his wife Marian because he was convinced that he created better music in this peaceful surrounding. The Colony was set up and led by Marian MacDowell as she fulfilled her dying husband's wish "to give other artists the same creative experience under which he had thrived."[62] Similar sentiments are also expressed by the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity based in the Canadian Rocky Mountains, since their aim is "to inspire everyone who attends our campus—artists, leaders, and thinkers—to unleash their creative potential."[63]

Whilst the above organizations share parallels with the O'Neill, their models of operation are different. The MacDowell Colony offers three hundred fellowships or residencies per year and is open for artists from various disciplines such as architecture, literature, theatre, visual arts and music composition. Artists are provided exclusive use of a private studio, accommodation and meals, but the program does not include classes or instruction.[64] Sundance Theatre Lab—established in 1984 in place of the Utah Playwrights Conference—was modeled on the O'Neill process and its founder, George C. White, sat on the board of the Theatre program. Initially, the Lab was known as Sundance Playwrights Lab, but when Blacker arrived in 1997 to become its Artistic Director, he modified this so that the Lab could accommodate a wider range of theatre artists. The original program consisted of up to eight plays being developed over a two-week residency that took place in the Utah mountains.[65] The results would traditionally be presented in a vein similar to the O'Neill's public rehearsed readings. Aware of the pressure of presenting new work, Blacker decided that presentations were private and optional—only staff and artists in residence were allowed to attend.[66] Dramaturgical support at the Theatre Lab has also evolved over the years—dramaturgs are no longer systematically assigned to a specific project, and there are opportunities for dramaturgical support before and after the residency in order to offer the best care for the projects at hand.[67]

62 "About" section, The MacDowell Colony website.

63 "About" section, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity website.

64 "Frequently Asked Questions" section, The MacDowell Colony website.

65 Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, pp. 96-97; Robert Blacker in Jacob Gallagher-Ross and Robert Blacker, "Robert Blacker Looks at the Past and Future of American Dramaturgy," art. cit., pp. 20-21.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 21. The one exception to this rule is if there was a producer already committed to a project at the lab then they were also allowed to attend.

67 Philip Himberg, quoted in Katalin Trencsényi, *Dramaturgy in the Making*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

All institutions mentioned above (the MacDowell Colony, Sundance Theatre Lab, and the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity) are just a few examples similar to the O'Neill that provide artists with some space and support for their ideas in an area of natural beauty. While each organization operates differently, they share a common aim of offering artists freedom to pursue their creative ideas in a relaxing setting, away from any external pressure. As already mentioned, natural environment plays its part in the transforming and empowering of the artists' minds when creating new work.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATIVE FREEDOM

I have established that, at the O'Neill, dramaturgs have the freedom to concentrate on the play they have been assigned to, but I have yet to argue why this is so important. Morgan admits that a challenge she faces working as a dramaturg at the O'Neill is its short time frame. The National Playwrights Conference lasts a month while each play is given around five days of rehearsal altogether. Morgan explains how "you're trying to build a relationship very quickly" with the playwright in order to grow familiar with each other as artists.[68] Given that they are not overloaded with additional tasks in relation to productions, dramaturgs at the O'Neill have more time to spend with the playwright, should they both desire to do so.

The advantage of having a dramaturg focusing on one play at a time, particularly given during the short timeframe of the O'Neill, is that they can constantly be at the playwright's service. Mark Bly supports the dramaturgs' presence in the rehearsal room: to him, they should regularly attend rehearsals in order to appreciate the source behind creative choices. Bly further suggests that such knowledge "will inspire 'doable' notes or staging solutions and not merely obvious diagnostic commentary."[69] What Bly implies is that the quality and practicability of the feedback they give is improved if they understand the decisions behind the creative choices that were made. Because the dramaturg is present at all times during rehearsals, the feedback provided is informed by watching the entire creative process.

Anne G. Morgan provides a perfect example to demonstrate the benefit of having a dramaturg present throughout the whole rehearsal process. She explains that when she was working on a particular musical at the O'Neill, she once gave a specific note to the creative team that "xyz" was not quite working. Morgan could tell immediately by

68 Anne G. Morgan, personal interview with author, July 1, 2017.

69 Mark Bly (ed.), *The Production Notebooks: Theatre in Process*, Tome 1, New York, Theatre Communications Group, 1996, p. xxiv.

their facial expressions that the team did not fully comprehend the note. As a result, the note was dropped, and the team began talking about another topic. The next day in rehearsal, an actor raised their hand to ask a question about why "xyz" was carrying out this particular action, and Morgan acknowledges that "there was something about the way in which the actor phrased this question, because it was a lightbulb for the writers."[70] She was then able to reiterate her note and asked the team whether they wanted to act on it, which they did. Morgan's example highlights the attention the dramaturg can pay, not only to the playwright, but also to the ways in which other collaborators in the rehearsal room are responding to the text. In that particular instance, it both informed the dramaturg's perspective of the play and the potential problems that may occur for the actors.

Importantly, the enjoyment and creativity of the art of dramaturgy can be fully realized at the O'Neill. Life pressures are removed, because the dramaturgs live on campus with other theatre artists. At the National Playwrights Conference, the playwright and the dramaturg are not pushed to be ready for production or to even finish the play. For example, during the 2017 Conference, only acts one and two of Martyna Majok's play, *queens*, were presented in the public readings. Majok then continued to work on the third act following the readings. When not in rehearsals, dramaturgs are free to reflect and have time to relax during their stay at the O'Neill.

The O'Neill provides a unique framework for the dramaturgs that work there over the summer. Institutional pressures are subtracted from their responsibilities, giving them creative freedom to pursue the "micro dramaturgy" of the play that they have been appointed to work on. The significance of the freedom the O'Neill provides means that dramaturgs have more time to build a relationship with the playwright, and importantly, increased allowance to discover the dramaturgy of the play. Dramaturgs can entirely focus on their current play, meaning they are able to give fully informed and constructive feedback.

While the O'Neill has an indisputable reputation for play development, it is apparent that dramaturgy at the National Playwrights Conference remains profoundly text-based. The requirement that artists must submit a written text in order to be selected for the Conference, and the format of rehearsed readings favors a text-led process focused on giving the playwright opportunities for re-writing their play. Staging or movement is not a priority for the rehearsed readings, and minimal props or choreography are employed. The O'Neill is limited in terms of what sort of play it can develop. Bergeron-Clearwood stated that unfortunately, the O'Neill

70 Anne G. Morgan, Skype interview with author, April 23, 2020.

could not provide support for devised works and plays that involve a substantial use of technology. She explains, "I've read some plays that rely so heavily on production value like projections or sound that we wouldn't be the best place for it." [71] The O'Neill is beneficial for playwrights looking to develop a better script, if the plays do not rely too largely on using other mediums such as film, technology or non-verbal methods to narrate the story.

The format of rehearsed readings and the text-centered approach of the O'Neill excludes writers and creative artists that are developing plays from movement or non-literary bases. Isaac, writing about the O'Neill in the seventies, criticizes the Center for its commitment to what is "very distinctly [...] a verbal tradition": "As Grotowski, Chaikin, and Schechner among others have demonstrated with their own work, the literary playwright is no longer a necessary factor in the process of performance." [72] He reflects on the evolution and emergence of various kinds of performance art that demonstrated new ways of theatre-making. It is striking that since Isaac's time of writing, the O'Neill has not changed its approach to plays at the National Playwrights Conference. Perhaps, if the institution opens up its submission policy and allows further flexibility to the rehearsed readings, new plays with new forms will be supported at the Conference. This could allow for a new variety of theatre-makers to work at the O'Neill during the National Playwrights Conference, and for the expansion of its approach to developing new plays. By adjusting the program in this way, the O'Neill would minimize any sense that new plays at the O'Neill are all developed in the same way and would refute any concern of a standard format to O'Neill plays. With such expansion, new dramaturgies could be adopted at the O'Neill, in keeping with its rich legacy of new play development.

71 Maegan Bergeron-Clearwood, personal interview with author.

72 Dan Isaac, "The O'Neill Memorial Theatre Center," art. cit., p. 29 and p. 32.

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Notice

Mary Davies is a PhD student at the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham. In 2017 she was awarded The Other Place PhD scholarship and is supported by the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC). Her research focuses on the intentions behind re-opening The Other Place, a studio theatre where new work is presented by the RSC. Prior to her PhD she completed an MA in Text and Performance at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and Birkbeck College, University of London. Her dissertation was based around her literary internship at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Connecticut.

Abstract

This article investigates the role of the dramaturg at the National Playwrights Conference, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. The O'Neill is renowned for placing the dramaturg within the new drama development process in America, yet little is written about the Center. Henri Lefebvre and *The Production of Space* is consulted to discuss how the operational framework of other theatres is lightened at the O'Neill. Institutional pressures are removed from the dramaturgs working at the Conference, giving them a sense of creative freedom. An exploration on the significance of this freedom follows, and its benefit within new play development. The limitations of the National Playwrights Conference are reflected upon, and how their focus on text-based work is restrictive to certain writers. By adapting its model to accommodate the changing nature of theatrical presentation, the O'Neill can continue its rich legacy of working on new plays.

Key words

Dramaturgy; Dramaturg; Eugene O'Neill Theater Center; National Playwrights Conference; Regional Theatre Movement; Micro dramaturgy; Macro dramaturgy

Résumé

Cet article a pour objectif d'éclairer le rôle du dramaturge dans la « National Playwrights Conference » tenue annuellement par le Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. Quoique le O'Neill soit pionnier dans le rôle qu'il donne aux dramaturges au sein de la création théâtrale, peu de recherches ont été menées sur le centre lui-même. Cet article invoque *La Production de l'espace* d'Henri Lefebvre pour examiner la façon dont le O'Neill supprime le cadre mis en place dans d'autres théâtres. Ainsi, le dramaturge intervenant à la « NPC », non contraint par des pressions institutionnelles, jouit d'une certaine liberté créative, dont j'explore ici l'importance, et les bienfaits sur le développement de nouvelles œuvres. J'examine également les limites de ce modèle de fonctionnement, tout comme la restriction créée par l'accent mis sur le théâtre « à texte ». Je conclus que le centre O'Neill doit s'adapter à la nature changeante des représentations théâtrales pour poursuivre sa riche tradition de création théâtrale.

Mots-Clés

dramaturgie ; dramaturge; Eugene O'Neill Theater Center; National Playwrights Conference; théâtre régional américain ; micro dramaturgie; macro dramaturgie

CRÉDITS PHOTO

Visuels de couverture : *YOUARENOWHERE*, créé et interprété par Andrew Schneider, 2015 (photographie de Maria Baranova) ; Adina Verson dans *Indecent*, créé et mis en scène par Paula Vogel et Rebecca Taichman, 2015 (photographie de Carol Rosegg) ; Elizabeth Jensen dans *Eurydice* de Sarah Ruhl, mise en scène de Helen Kvale, 2017 (photographie de Jasmine Jones) ; Quayla Bramble dans *Hopscotch* créé par Yuval Sharon pour The Industry, 2015 (photographie de Anne Cusak / *LA Times*, droits réservés). Avec nos remerciements aux artistes et photographes.

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