
Dance and Dramaturgy: An *Indisciplinary* Artistic Gesture

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Abstract

A dramaturgy that emanates from dance seems inevitable to us. Joseph Danan argues that, in art, as soon as there is an action that creates movement, a stage and a thought, there will be dramaturgy. In fact, we know that these three elements are present in dance and that in recent decades its dramaturgs have attempted, using different words and methods, to find a dramaturgical *modus operandi* specific for their discipline. In this article, I introduce a brief panorama of the exercise of contemporary dramaturgy in theatre and dance. I analyse the definitions of *dramaturgy* produced by theorists, as well as those from the discourses of contemporary artists in order to highlight one of their common points. As can be seen in the examples, the notions of dramaturgy would share their *indisciplinary* state and meet in a poetics that focuses more on sensations than on discourse.

Keywords: dramaturgy, theatre and dance, artistic gesture, Joseph Danan

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This article shares some ideas that make up my doctoral thesis entitled *The Danced Gesture in the Contemporary Theatre Scene*, completed and submitted in the Institut d'Études Théâtrales Studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle. My subject of study concerned plays that, in a very organic way, stage dance. In this research I do not speak of choreographers but of theatre people who have a stage approach that is open to the interaction between disciplines. As it is a hybrid subject between dance and theatre, one of my endeavours was to understand how dramaturgy was presented in each of these two universes.

The article will, on the one hand, raise questions about the way artists and researchers related to dance understand and work on dramaturgy and, on the other, the debates around the concept itself of dramaturgy discussed in theatre theory. This comparative exercise will allow me to question whether the practice of dance dramaturgy does not perhaps tend towards what is presented in today's theatre studies.

I.

In dance it is interesting to stress that, in recent years, the activity of dramaturgs has been subject to an expanding nomenclature. In 2009 the Belgian artist Antoine Pickels mentioned that he had found the following names to describe the function of the dance dramaturg: “creator of puzzles”, “botanic tutor”, “ball boy”, “machine gun” (Pickels, 2009: 11). Moreover, I found three other ways of naming the dramaturg in the book *De quoi la dramaturgie est-elle le nom ?* (Boudier, 2014): “creator of turbulences”, “translator”, “transporter”. The latter, *passeur* in French, describes someone who transports people or goods.

The varied conceptions concerning the dramaturg and the plurality of methodologies used mean that artists and dramaturgs themselves see their profession in sometimes very different ways. This shows that the work of dance dramaturgs is very experimental and that they adapt to the language, characteristics of the piece and needs of the creative group. Moreover, its

metaphorical character shows us to what extent this task is versatile and subordinated to the sensitivity of each dramaturg. Analysing such terms, in their richness and variety, could be the exclusive theme of a research project.

The Belgian dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven explains that while “the idea of a dance dramaturgy has always existed, (it is) only in the most recent periods of the History of Dance that it has become a conscious thing”¹ (Van Kerkhoven, 1997: 20). On the one hand, in the process of dance creation, dramaturgical aspects had always been included through the information provided by the plot of ballets, the choreographic notation and the coded dance gestures. But the most recent “conscious practice” of dance dramaturgy emerged out of specific demands of modern and contemporary dance. For instance, Rudolf Laban, a Hungarian choreographer known for his choreographic notation system, stated in the early 1920s that there was “a dramaturgy that has to be invented for dance” (Aslan, 2010: 19) independently of the dramatic text, music or libretto. The dramaturgy that Laban sought should be based on the dynamic characteristic of dance and, as we will see next, he managed this thanks to the historical effort of dance to free itself from the arts that had given it a meaning and context. As Estelle Jacoby (2003: 69) writes:

[Until the late 19th century] it seemed that, in a material sense, dance could not exist as an isolated practice, to confront by itself the challenge of the stage. To some extent, it existed thanks to the other arts, which offered it, precisely, a *context*. In other words, they offered dance the support of a significance, a complementary text, a clarification of meaning. [...] All these elements gradually collapsed, one after the other, and dance moved towards the denouement – even abandoning music – to assert itself as relatively independent of the other arts. But, once this independence was proven, choreographers later resorted again to the other arts.

The evolution of dance entails a change in the uses of dramaturgy. This transformation is clearly seen in the following reflection by Mathilde Monnier (2018), a French contemporary dance choreographer and director of the Centre National de la Danse in Paris:² in coded dances such as ballet, flamenco and kabuki, for instance, creativity would develop within a pre-defined framework. They are dances that are “highly constructed in which eventually everyone recognises the dramaturgy, including the audience.” In this type of dance, “conventions” or “rules” “prevail over creativity within a stable framework.” However, contemporary dance does not follow the same pattern. Citing Monnier again:

The difficulty underlying contemporary dance is that it is necessary to both delimit a framework and bring about variation. [...] Dance has that aspect of density because the dramaturgical medium of narration and text is not present and,

1. A Belgian dramaturg, she worked, among others, with Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker between 1985 and 1990.

2. Sound recording of the closing roundtable with Maguy Marin and Mathilde Monnier, “La dramaturgie en danse” (2018). The four following quotations come from the same recording.

therefore [the dramaturgy] unfolds everywhere. We speak of body dramaturgy because the starting point does not exist for the purpose of a theatre actor with the text, who will gradually structure it in depth or open holes in the dramaturgy. In the case of ballet, the libretto or the music are materials that you can deconstruct, break, change, distort...

As it does not have anything to distort, break or deconstruct, contemporary dance has the overwhelming task — or liberating task — of building its own dramaturgy through its basic medium — the body — and to turn it into a conscious practice. To make a first parallel with theatre, the body would be the “scenic event”³ (Dort, 1986: 9), from which the stage design and dramaturgy should start to seek the balance between the elements of the piece. As soon as dance saw itself as an autonomous discipline it was able to establish new connections. In other words, after showing that it did not need the support of another discipline to fully exist, dance could and wanted to make exchanges with other artistic practices during the final years of the 20th century.⁴ A proof of this is the recovery of *tanztheater* by Pina Bausch. Later, other choreographers such as Maguy Marin, J-C Gallota, Keersmaeker and Jan Fabre surprised spectators in the 1990s and 2000s with a multidisciplinary approach. These experiences precisely encouraged more “decolonial” reflections on dance dramaturgy and can tell us, more consciously, what the exercise of dramaturgy is about.

The reason dance used dramaturgy may be explained because dramaturgy itself has also transformed itself, as discussed in section II of this article. That is to say, dramaturgy has shown that it can act on non-dramatic forms even within theatre itself. Joseph Danan addressed this issue in his essay *Entre théâtre et performance : la question du texte*. The example of non-dramatic theatre — like Romeo Castellucci’s, for example, but also what we see in *La posibilidad que desaparece frente al paisaje*, by the company Conde de Torrefiel —, tells us that dramaturgy does not come only from drama but is reflected elsewhere. Faced with the theatrical possibility of displacing the dramaturgy towards other scenic phenomena (body, stage design, sound, etc.), dance can find inspiration in this displacement to bring about its own dramaturgy.⁵

3. “Not to start from the text and reach the scenic realisation, but to reverse the terms. Prioritise the scenic event and from there go back to the text.”

4. In this reflection, I am referring to the introduction by Phillippe Ivernel and Anne Longuet Marx, particularly to the first volume of the dossier “Théâtre et danse” in the journal *Études théâtrales*, art. cit. p. 12. This text features a brief description of the three main revolutions experienced by dance in the 20th century: the first, marked by absolute dance and the new body (Wigman and Duncan), the second by Cunningham and his fight against psychologism leading to abstraction (Martha Graham, Trisha Brown), and the third and last, the revolution caused by Pina Bausch with the reintroduction of “the subject and the meaning in movement”, which has meant a return to theatricality.

We think of pieces such as *May b* by Maguy Marin, the so-called DTM shows of J-C Gallotta, Keersmaeker and her collaborations with tg Stan, such as *Quartett*, and all Jan Fabre’s work.

5. “Hans-Thies Lehmann has brought together all these processes and some others under the banner ‘*postdramatic*’, which for more than one decade has become an overly comfortable label concealing the fact that it could be, in many cases, a dramatic quality that is produced and operates differently” (Joseph Danan, 2013: 29). That is why Joseph Danan prefers to speak of non-dramatic theatre to refer to creative processes that do not start from the staging of a pre-existing dramatic work.

II.

It is quite difficult to speak of dramaturgy from an analytical and terminological prism without mentioning theatre, the discipline from which dramaturgy comes and considered as such according to Aristotle's *Poetics*. The term, which in the past presupposed "a set of specifically theatrical rules that must be known in order to write a play and analyze it properly" (Pavis, 1999: 124), started undergoing changes when Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy* appeared between 1767 and 1768. The theatrical understanding of the concept becomes complex, because Lessing understands dramaturgy as a *practice* that must be put into operation, not as a set of rules that must be respected (Danan, 2010b). And, thus, dramaturgy, considered for its *achievements* in writing and criticism and, later, on the stage, continued its process of transformation throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in theatre studies.

What we must bear in mind, based on the essay *Qu'est-ce que la dramaturgie ?* (Danan, 2017), is that dramaturgy, like dance, has gone through moments of crisis and search for identity as against, for example, non-dramatic theatre and the challenges of contemporaneity. In summary, dramaturgy in theatre is today a discipline that is nourished by several practices that can coexist, from textual composition (element 1) to thought on the passage of the text to the stage (element 2) and a mixture of elements 1 and 2, which almost confuses the practice of dramaturgy with that of staging (Danan, 2018).

With the most recent transformations, we think it is important to focus on two definitions of the term. The first, which Joseph Danan sets out in the article "Tentative de cadrage (ou de décadrage)", is as follows:

[...] dramaturgy may not be more than the thought of theatre in progress, thought always in the process of being done. [...] I believe that dramaturgy occurs when three terms, or three forces, or three poles, converge: *action* (whatever the meaning we give to this notion of action, until it transforms into movement, as I have tried to explain), *theatre* (although, otherwise, I argue that we face a metaphorical or derivative use of the word) and *thought*. Dramaturgy would result from the energy that emanates from these three poles (Danan, 2010a).

So, the action that creates movement, theatre (seen as the location of the stage) and thought: a triangle formed by three ingredients that, when dialoguing, set the dramaturgy in motion. We also know that stage, action and thought are present in dance and that the exercise of its dramaturgy has always endeavoured, using different words and different methods, to find the button that would activate this dramaturgical "circulation of energy".

A few years later Joseph Danan also questioned his own definition of dramaturgy from 2010 in view of the characteristic transformations of the "postdramatic" era. In relation to these transformations, it is the questioning of the place of the text and the drama that leads Joseph Danan to end up wondering if dramaturgy was going to disappear. The answer, negative, can be found in the article "Fin de la dramaturgie ?":

Returning to a conversation between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy, [dramaturgy] is the inscription of a responsibility that appeals to us, not related to the meaning, which is unforeseen, but to those conditions that make the event possible and that take the form of a thought always under construction. A responsibility that accepts the loss of control, but assigns dramaturgy the task of creating levers, springboards for thought. Stations, traffic signals or points of support against the confusion of what is moving, points of reference to temporarily orientate the disorder of the flows (Danan, 2006: 51).

This disruption of movement can make us think of a dancing body playing with its (corporal, textual...) points of support and surrendering itself to the space and time of the stage, a body that allows itself to be carried by a flow of energy more or less oriented by canalisations built *on* and *for* the stage, which we could define as “islands of meaning” (Danan, 2018) that respond to a responsibility of thought. The definition itself seems to me to dance, and the force that moves this dramaturgy, as well as the features it produces in its evolution, are based on material conditions of stage creation that can occur both in dance and theatre.

Thus, while dance attempts to shape its own dramaturgy, theatre studies, at the same time, seem to go in the opposite direction, since its dramaturgy is becoming even more diluted in all aspects of theatre creation. We can see this dissemination in two examples: the first is the publication of the book *De quoi la dramaturgie est-elle le nom ?*, which features 35 meanings of the “imaginary of dramaturgical activity” (Boudier, 2014: 14). This publication shows us three things: 1) the impossibility of defining dramaturgy with a single term, 2) its presence in many aspects of artistic work, and 3) its performance in areas other than theatre, which means that all the meanings feed off theatre studies, dance, circus, performance and puppets.

If dramaturgy is a “cohesive movement” (Tackels, 2009: 15), it forms the basis of any dialogue between the elements of theatre: scenography with play, play with costumes, costumes with text, text with staging, etc. Considered as a movement of thought, dramaturgy would therefore be omnipresent in all the performing arts.

Perhaps this “atomization” of dramaturgy in theatre is due to the fact that its practice today has disassociated itself from the limits of the discipline to expand and become an artistic gesture. Hence the neologism *indisciplinary* to refer to something that goes beyond discipline, but that also evokes an undisciplined act, that is to say, rebellious; in this case, one that does not fit into any classification. This is what Joseph Danan shows us in his latest article: dramaturgy has passed from a disciplinary stage to an inventive stage. More than a trade of the performing arts that can bring together the knowledge of several disciplines, dramaturgy has become a movement that animates the stage and that lasts in the audience, even after the show has ended. Thanks to this evolution from the disciplinary to the artistic, Joseph Danan can say that “dramaturgy and staging go hand in hand here.” And he adds: “Today more than ever I tend to insist on their inseparability” (Danan, 2018). They are artistic gestures, manifestations in motion that go beyond brief attempts at definition and are repeatedly confused.

Thus, dramaturgy persists, even scattered, because every piece has a responsibility towards its audience, towards its spectators, even though it has somehow transformed, since the important publication of Bernard Dort's article, into a "state of the spirit" and, in certain cases, it has run the risk of losing coherence and disappearing. That "responsibility in the sense of what is going to happen" (Danan, 2018), as Joseph Danan explains, alluding to Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, would be constructing a coherence in the widest sense. Once again, we talk about "islands of meaning" that the spectator could appropriate by giving them the meaning they want. Perhaps due to this responsibility, the place of dramaturgy does not run the risk of disappearing before the expansion of its spectrum in theatre creation. If dramaturgy is responsible for anything, in theatre and according to Danan's vision, it would be thought. It is this nodal point that causes dramaturgy to be evoked in discussions that concern the attribution of meaning, whether in theatre, dance or any other artistic expression.

Meaning, therefore identified as a question of art, according to the artist and/or theoretician, will more or less evoke the place of sensation and sensitivity. This is what we can see in Antoine Pickels' speech that we have quoted, as well as in the work of the Serbian dramaturg Bojana Cvejić, who talks about the need for complicity between the dramaturg and the choreographer to build a work methodology, something we also see in Danan's words when he talks about a "coherence that comes from sensitivity" and "the intuition of the dramaturg" (Danan, 2018). These quotes tell us that the search for a balance between wanting to say and making feel condenses the efforts of dramaturgy in both areas, as finally confirmed by the next quote: "[...] certainly, the dramaturgical work embraces different states of meaning that belong to the *direction* and the *significance* and the *sensation*. Hence dramaturgy can be compared to the sense of direction: a sense as close to knowledge as to feeling" (Boudier et al., 2014: 135).

We can conclude that current dramaturgy opens up the range of meanings to other states of perception that evoke both thought and sensitivity. This state of dramaturgical openness means that any work of art can arise from a dramaturgical process to the extent that it serves as support for thought.⁶ Guy Cools takes the multidisciplinary condition of the dramaturgical exercise to the extreme when he says that "dramaturgy can be applied to all disciplines" (Cools, 2005: 91). The reflections I propose concur with Danan's approach when he shows us that current dramaturgy is not only the place par excellence for the crossover of disciplines and the transmission of knowledge, following a post-Brechtian model, but is a truly *indisciplinary* artistic practice. Dramaturgy, according to the most recent definition by Joseph Danan,

[...] becomes an act of creation, an artistic gesture that combines at the same time or in the same time sequence, intellectual development, writing or re-writing and invention on stage, thus erasing, almost completely, all the borders

6. This reflection could explain the appearance of the many metaphorical nomenclatures of the exercise of the dance dramaturg noted at the beginning of the article.

between areas of knowledge, and between these and stage creation. Dramaturgy would then be an artistic practice in its own right, essentially *indisciplinary* (Danan: 2018).

To focus on dance, this type of dramaturgy opens up not only to the reception of dance within its action in time and space, but also to the act of dancing as a means of creation. The “dramaturgy that has to be invented for dance” (Aslan, 2010: 19), the one that Laban sought in the early 1920s, can be found in this reasoning. Firstly, in the fact that dramaturgy acts on non-dramatic forms – such as the meaning of movement; secondly, in that which, at the limit of the body, makes us think and feel. And if the body and dramaturgy meet, in our case, it is because there is a gesture that unites and crosses them. This broader gesture is an essentially *indisciplinary* artistic gesture, open both to thought and to sensitivity. As it is *indisciplinary* in its creative movement, this gesture passes through dance and theatre without making major distinctions.



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