

On the Meaning of and Need for a Dance Dramaturgy

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Abstract

Dance dramaturgy is perhaps one of the most elusive and indefinable disciplines within the field of stage creation. Putting words to the dramaturgies of the body is an oxymoron. For this reason, to name this silent, invisible and incorporeal task, it is common to resort to rhetorical figures: similes, metaphors, metonyms, paradoxes... and oxymorons.

In order to define dance dramaturgy from the field of academic research, in addition to using less ambiguous and volatile terminology, a critical stance must be adopted: what is the meaning of and need for dance dramaturgy? How is it different from other disciplines such as choreography or stage directing?

In order to tackle these questions, this article reviews the bibliography of the main authors who have attempted to answer them, who have dared to put words to silence and make invisible dramaturgies visible.

Keywords: Dramaturgy, dance dramaturgy, dramaturgical practice, *dramaturgista*, Van Kerkhoven, Guy Cools, Katherine Profeta

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The Chilean researcher Marcia Martínez, during a talk she gave to students of MUET¹ in 2018, explained that “researching the performing arts is like researching fish: when you try to catch them with your hands, they slip away and disappear” (Martínez, 2018). This simile, which refers to the ephemeral nature of the theatre event, is perfectly applicable to the idiosyncrasy of dance dramaturgy. Broadly speaking, and without entering into debates or specificities, we can say that, while theatre dramaturgy can be written, can be fixed, can be expressed in words, dance dramaturgy is elusive, it is intangible, it is phantasmagorical (as the master Roberto Fratini often says).

The dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven, in an article that we will discuss later, comments that “the request to talk or write about it (dance dramaturgy) leads time and again to the same awkwardness: the feeling of being asked to reveal someone else’s culinary secrets or recipes” (Van Kerkhoven, 1994: 18). But, in addition to generating awkwardness, putting words to the dramaturgies of the body is an oxymoron. For this reason, to name this silent, invisible and incorporeal task, we almost always resort to the use of figures of speech: similes, metaphors, metonyms, epithets, allegories, synaesthesia, paradoxes... and oxymorons.

Although poetic language is very useful and fertile in the rehearsal room, defining dance dramaturgy from the point of view of academic research requires the use of less ambiguous and volatile terminology. With this in mind, it is necessary to adopt a critical stance on this task: what is the meaning of and need for dance dramaturgy? Why is it needed and what for? Is it necessary? In the field of dance, how is dramaturgy different from other disciplines such as choreography or stage directing? What is its specific field of action?

In order to resolve these questions, we will review the bibliography of some of the authors who have attempted to answer them, who have dared

1. University Master’s Degree in Theatre Studies at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, in collaboration with the Institut del Teatre.

to put words to silence and have undertaken the delicate task of making the invisible visible, measuring the distances in relation to the object of study very carefully, like someone using a lighter to reveal letters written in lemon ink on a blank sheet: getting gradually closer until the words emerge from the blank paper, but not too close, so as not to burn the ethereal pages of movement with the heat of the words. We return again to figures of speech...

In order to map this rhetorical path, we have selected three quotations that summarise the three ideas about dance dramaturgy on which most authors consulted concur:

1. You don't need a dramaturg but any artist, especially in the performing arts, needs a dramaturgical practice or a dramaturgical reflection (Cools, 2017: 113).
2. Quello del dramaturg "non è tanto un lavoro di impaginazione di azioni, ma piuttosto un lavoro di creazione di strumenti per agire" (Meldolesi and Molinari, cited by Pontremoli, 2017: 42).
3. Even when nobody within the process is carrying the label "dramaturg", there is always a conscious or more unconscious, formal or less formal dramaturgy happening: a discussion of the how and what in relation with time and context (Van den Eynde, 2017: 70).

Before examining the possible meanings and interpretations of these quotations, we would like to point out that all three begin with or are articulated from the negation: "you don't need a dramaturg but ..."; "it is not so much a work of composition, but rather..."; "even when nobody within the process is carrying the label 'dramaturg', there is always ...". These contrasts do nothing but highlight the elusive nature of the issue at hand. Indeed, it is easier to define dance dramaturgy by opposition than by affirmation. That is to say, it is easier to name what it is not than to state what it is about.

All stage practice involves or requires a dramaturgical practice

We will not dwell too long on this first idea because we believe that it is an approach that is widely accepted by theatre studies. In addition, despite the fact that the concept of "dance dramaturgy" is relatively young, all the discussions around this topic agree that dramaturgical reflection is inherent to the theatre event. Therefore, we can say that a dance dramaturgy practice has always existed, although it was not defined in these terms until a few years ago.

The American dramaturg Katherine Profeta (who regularly works with choreographer Ralph Lemon) argues that the first person to claim the title of dramaturg in a dance context was Raimund Hoghe, when he began working with Pina Bausch in 1979 to articulate the Tanztheater (Profeta, 2015: 7). However, as Guy Cools (dramaturg of Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi) also notes, "particularly in the history of dance, there were often other artist around, that were not called dramaturgs, but they had that function" (Cools, 2017: 114).

To support this argument, shared by the two authors, both Cools and Profeta remind us of some paradigmatic cases, such as the work carried out by Sergei Diaghilev in the Ballets Russes, the collaborations between Thierry de Mey and Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker or the famous pairing of John Cage and Merce Cunningham. These examples not only reveal the dramaturgical immanence of all stage practice, but also help us understand dramaturgical practice as a dialogical practice. As a task that, in the field of dance, is established and developed from the dialogue between two or more collaborators.

The dramaturgical discussion can address multiple aspects of creation, but there is a theme that is usually central in most cases and that leads us directly to the second idea that we want to dissect: the methodological issue. According to Guy Cools, the dramaturgical influence of John Cage in the work of Merce Cunningham is indisputable “because he offered him tools and methodologies to develop his choreographic practice” (Cools, 2017: 114). From this assertion, we can deduce that the function of a dance dramaturg is closely related to the tools and methodologies used in stage creation.

Dance dramaturgy is not concerned with composing, but with offering tools to those who compose

Almost thirty years ago, the Flemish dramaturg Marianne van Kerkhoven (one of the pioneers of dance dramaturgy) defined the new dramaturgy as one that uses “a process-oriented method of working” (Van Kerkhoven, 1994: 18). This expression focuses on the methodological component of dramaturgical practice in those creations that are forged in the rehearsal room, as is often the case with dance shows.

For Van Kerkhoven, dramaturgy is about the development or selection of specific methodologies for each project. And when she provides this definition, she also argues that “there is no essential difference between theatre and dance dramaturgy” (Van Kerkhoven, 1994: 18). It is clear that, once again, she is referring to the dramaturgies that are articulated from or on the stage. But, precisely, one of the distinctive features of contemporary theatre dramaturgy, as opposed to classical dramatic writing (based on formulas and precepts), is the search for the most appropriate way to convey content, as the master Carles Batlle explains in his essay *El drama intempestiu* (Batlle, 2020). In other words, within the epistemic framework of contemporaneity, each project confronts us with designing in a new way, finding a new formula, and sometimes even developing a new method. A process that shifts between science and alchemy, and to which the Argentinean playwright Mauricio Kartun refers with the gerund “poniento un mundo a vivir / making a world live” (Kartun, 2017: 21).

But let's return to Van Kerkhoven to continue examining this idea, according to which dance dramaturgy deals with the methods of creation. In her foundational article “Looking without pencil in the hand,” written in 1994 in the form of a manifesto, Van Kerkhoven argues that:

In artistic practice there are no fixed laws of behaviour, or task that can be wholly defined in advance, not even for the dramaturge. Every production forms its own method of work. It is precisely through the quality of the method used that the work of important artists gains its clarity, by their intuitively knowing — at every stage in the process — what the next step is. One of the abilities a dramaturg must develop is the flexibility to handle the methods used by artists while at the same time shaping his/her own way of working (Van Kerkhoven, 1994: 18).

Guy Cools also believes that one of our main of a dramaturg should be to combine our own methods with the ways the artists we work with do things. Speaking precisely about this methodological relationship between dramaturg and choreographer, Cools summarises the functions of the dance dramaturg as follows:

Three distinct but interrelated functions (...) The first function is that of being a witness. (...). The second one is being a dialogue partner, just being there to have a dialogue during, before and after rehearsals. The third one is this notion of playing with structures and ways to organize the material where I compare myself to a film editor. Helping the artist edit the work, but in such a way that you are not interfering with the content or the aesthetics because it is the film director's or the choreographer's work and it is her story, her aesthetics (Cools, 2017: 117).

The other authors we have consulted use similar terms when defining the complexity and idiosyncrasies of dramaturgical work. On the one hand, to underline this role of witness and dialogue partner that Cools speaks of; and on the other, to try to put words to the swampy and bordering terrain in which the dramaturg must place himself/herself. An intermediate place of gaze and enunciation that allows us to be, at the same time, sufficiently inside and outside of the creative process.

The Belgian dramaturg Bart van den Eynde describes this delicate position by observing that “dramaturgy could be the practice of finding ways to interrogate your intuition in a careful way as not to destroy it” (Van den Eynde, 2017: 76). Indeed, the work of the dramaturg in dance is so fragile and awkward that the Serbian dramaturg Bojana Cvejic dubbed us “the friend of the problem”, defining the “methodology of problem” as that which poses “questions that will clear the ground and slowly eliminate the known possibilities” (Cvejic, cited by Profeta, 2015: 8). That is, questions to discard, questions to decide, questions to articulate. But also, and above all, questions to broaden the possibilities of meaning and blow away the thresholds of perceptibility.

In the same line, Katherine Profeta notes that the two meanings that dramaturgical activity has for her — “shoring up structure and posing questions” — are not exclusive. For this reason, the dramaturg must learn to live with the dizzying sensation of continually oscillating between the two functions (Profeta, 2015: 8). Hence, entering a field very similar to that formulated by Van den Eynde, she wonders: “does the action of dramaturgy build or

dissect? Construct or deconstruct? Or rather, when should we think of it in which manner? If it is both, how is it both?” (Profeta, 2015: 8).

How can we question without destroying? How to find the right level of involvement in the creative process? Van Kerkhoven responds to these same questions describing the dramaturg as “that slightly bashful friend who cautiously, weighing his words, expresses what he has seen and what traces it has left; he is the ‘outsider eye’ that wants to look ‘purely’ but at the same time has enough knowledge of what goes on the inside to be both moved by and involved in what happens there” (Van Kerkhoven, 1994: 18).

Therefore, we understand that we dramaturgs do not have to attend all the rehearsals or throw ourselves into the creative process in the same way as choreographers, because we must always keep a safe distance from the piece: to be able to fully understand its complexity, but without losing the “clarity” or “objectivity” (or whatever term least offends) of our gaze.

On the issue of the dramaturg as an “outsider’s eye”, we cannot overlook an aspect examined by Katherine Profeta. She points out:

There is another way in which the dance dramaturg’s perceptions can be usefully “outside”, and one that occurs with much greater frequency in movement-based performance than it does in theater-based performance. That is if the primary maker, the choreographer/director, is also in the place as a performer. In this instance “inside” and “outside” do not refer to the rehearsal room door, but rather inside and outside of the smaller, even more charged arena of performance (Profeta, 2015: 16).

The current production contexts lead many choreographers to act as performers of their own works. In many of these cases, the dramaturg in question ends up being “the only trusted, informed, or reliably present person who is both inside the room but outside of the piece” (Profeta, 2015: 16). According to Profeta, only under these circumstances would the dramaturg stop oscillating between his or her multiple roles and focus on a particular task.

All these functions of the dance dramaturg suggest a professional more connected with stage practice than the conventional theatre dramaturg. However, if the stereotype of the classic dramaturg is a solitary, reclusive and taciturn figure, locked in his/her studio until late at night, the dance dramaturg, albeit a dramaturg “without a pencil” who works from the rehearsal room, is also a strange and mysterious figure, a free being that moves between two worlds.

With more desire to provoke than to self-indulge, we can say that, on occasions, we dance dramaturgs are seen by other colleagues as intruders, as threats, as dangerous beings and inspectors. However, as we have been explaining, we are neither controllers of meaning nor inspectors of coherence. Patrice Pavis warned us in the eighties that, “for several years now, the dramaturg has no longer served as an ideological officer, but assisted the director in searching for possible meanings of the play” (Pavis, 1998: 123). Of course, our work should not tether or force those meanings or interpretations, but multiply the possibilities and expand the meanings.

Our position is awkward, for others and for ourselves. But it is precisely this unstable place, bordering and in constant transit that defines the essence of our own practice. It is in this sense that Van Kerkhoven talks about dramaturgy as “a quality of motion, which oscillates, claiming an indeterminate zone between theory and practice, inside and outside word and movement, question and answer.” For her, the dramaturgical function concerns the transformation of feeling into knowledge and vice versa. Therefore, she defines dramaturgy with an image that is both inspiring and precise: “the twilight zone between art and science” (Van Kerkhoven, 2014: 18). This character of a missing link, of an impossible bridge, of an eternal round trip, takes us to the third and final idea.

The dramaturgical task concerns the connection between art and society, between the work and the context

We have already discussed the meaning of dance dramaturgy and the specific functions of the dramaturg in the poetics of movement, but perhaps what most defines and differentiates dramaturgical practice from other disciplines, such as choreography and stage directing, is the idea that dramaturgy deals with the connection between art and society: “the idea that performance in the arts is not happening in a closed sphere but is always in relationship with the world” (Van den Eynde, 2017: 69).

Moving in that border space between the interior and the exterior, between the creator and the audience, between the outside and the inside, is essential in order to connect the work of art with society. That is why dramaturgical work plays an essential role in the construction of discourse and identity of any incipient movement (Van den Eynde, 2017: 69). And that is why, if we want to define, research or develop new poetics that are articulated from the body (both individually and collectively), we cannot ignore the dramaturgical perspective: because we must connect the new aesthetics and the new discourses with the world and the global scene.

We do not want to end this semantic (and political) journey through dance dramaturgy without addressing the debate on the visibility (or invisibility) of dramaturgical work in the field of dance. Van Kerkhoven, in her 1994 manifesto, warned us that “the work he (dramaturg) does dissolves into the production, becomes invisible. He/she always shares the frustrations and yet does not have to appear on the photo” (Van Kerkhoven, 1994: 18). But Guy Cools also noted that “even if you contribute with concrete things to the production, in the end you should stay invisible. As a result of this invisibility there are also a lot of myths about what the dramaturg does or doesn’t do” (Cools, 2017: 114). Once again, dance dramaturgy appears to us as an invisible dramaturgy, but this time from another perspective: precisely because it becomes imperceptible, it is so difficult to name not only the dramaturgical work carried out but also the job performed, that which appears in the credits of the projects.

We often read “dramaturgy assistance”, “dramaturgical advice”, “dramaturgy assistant”, when, on most occasions, the role of the dramaturg in dance

involves the skills we usually attribute to any advisor or assistant in a creative process. Once again, we resort to figures of speech to explain our work. On some occasions, those that accompany our names in theatre programmes are pleonasm or redundancies: saying “dramaturgy advisor” is almost like saying “advice advisor”. On others, euphemisms and oxymorons try to conceal tasks that coincide with absolutely and exclusively dramaturgical practices: “external gaze”, “outside eye” or, as Guy Cools suggests, “outside body” (Cools, 2017: 116).

Katherine Profeta recognises that the dramaturgical function is one that is usually shared by most members of the artistic team. However, the differential factor that means that only one person assumes the specific title of dramaturg is that, in that context, it is “the only one in the room with no reason to be there except to support the dramaturgical” (Profeta, 2015: 12). For this reason, we should not hesitate when giving our work the simple name of “dramaturgy”. But, of course, in this debate we cannot ignore another of the great discussions around dramaturgical practice: the concept of authorship. Once again, the awkwardness of revealing and sharing recipes...

Perhaps because in the theatre field the dramaturg is often the author of the work, in the dance field it seems that granting the label of dramaturg to a collaborator also means handing over the keys to the authorship of the piece. We have already seen that dance dramaturgy is not concerned with composition, nor with directing, but perhaps it would be easier if in Spain instead of *dramaturgo* we used the term *dramaturgista*², a word not widely employed here, but which, in contexts such as Germany (*dramaturgist*) or France (*dramaturgiste*), is applied to this complex figure and his or her multiple functions: energiser of the creative process, dialogue partner of the stage director, coordinator of collective work, etc. (Hormigón, 2011: 63-64).

Returning to the questions we asked at the beginning, we can conclude by summarising that dance dramaturgy is a dialogical and dialectical practice, inseparable from stage practice. It is responsible for offering tools for creation and deals especially with the relationship between work and context, between art and society. Its function is more closely related to that of the dramaturgist than the traditional playwright and concerns advice rather than censorship, expanding possibilities more than an audit of the discourse. Although it is often not labelled as such and on numerous occasions it is a shared endeavour, the dramaturgical task in dance is always present.

Finally, we would like to emphasise that valuing dramaturgical work is closely related to valuing collaborative work. As Katherine Profeta points out, advocating the meaning and necessity of a dance dramaturgy implies making visible the “helpmates” and other collaborators in the shadows as something more than reliable friends. It implies reformulating what Profeta defines as “the model of solo artistic genius” (Profeta, 2015: 21), an obsolete

2. We will not further explore the meanings of the term *dramaturgista* or its genealogy in the history of performing arts, since this would require, at least, another article. In addition, there is sufficient bibliography on this topic. Here we can highlight the volume edited by Juan Antonio Hormigón, *La profesión del dramaturgista* (Hormigón, 2011).

figure. And, above all, it implies conceiving the creative process in a more feminist, inclusive and horizontal way:

And thus dance dramaturgy as a field is in an excellent position to delegitimize power assumptions based on actual or metaphorical gender and to imagine the dialogue between the dramaturg and choreographer, as well as among the rest of the collaborators as a more fluid field of play (Profeta, 2015: 22).



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