

# Asking the Right Questions

- An approach to play development.

by

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**Manitoba Association of Playwrights**

## Introduction

*On October 15-16<sup>th</sup> of 2011 Manitoba Association of Playwrights (MAP) in Winnipeg offered a workshop with the title: Exploring and Creation of A Dramaturgical Approach. The workshop was given by Danish director and dramaturge Jens Svane Boutrup. There were 6 participants in the workshop, all members of MAP and all have had shows produced/experience in playwriting. There was also one observing participant, who assisted in taking notes.*

## Background

In the summer of 2008, I participated in the MAP Playwrights Colony as the resident dramaturge. During the colony I had the chance to work with local playwrights and to assist them in developing their plays.

The colony gives playwrights an opportunity to write and rewrite in a quiet and isolated environment, and offers opportunities to have their plays read out loud by actors, in what is described as a “cold reading”, meaning the actors have not read the play beforehand and the reading is not rehearsed or directed. The cold read allows the playwright to hear the play read out loud without any interpretation or choices made, other than the ones the actors make on site. The cold read often discloses odd wordings or scenes that are unclear to the actor/audience. The reading session is followed by a feedback session, where the actors offer observations and advice to the playwright.

The colony also gives the playwright a chance to have one-on-one sessions with the resident dramaturge. In these sessions, the dramaturge gives the playwright advice on how to re-write, cut or edit the play. The nature of the session depends on where the playwright is in his/her writing process.

In the sessions I conducted, I noticed that the majority of the plays had been worked on for a very long time and that the playwright had gone through quite a number of

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drafts. The playwrights had often had several sessions with dramaturges or readings of earlier drafts of their play. In several sessions, it looked to me like the playwright had been confused by all the previous sessions, and that the play in some cases had been “over-dramaturged” –

meaning, that the playwright had gotten so many suggestions on how to write the play, that the playwright would get stuck in the writing process, trying to juggle too many suggestions at the same time. In other cases, the play presented to me had been “edited” by so many dramaturges, actors, directors, etc. that the play was losing its pulse. My job became to help the playwright “open up” the play again, to get back to the original ideas and impulses, that had spurred the playwright to start writing the play in the first place, to take the playwright’s attention away from fixing problems and back to exploring, imagining, developing; back to the thing that only the playwright can do – writing the play.

In 2010 I returned to Winnipeg. This time, I was giving a workshop on the relationship between the playwright and the director. The participants in the workshop were playwrights, actors and directors. In the workshop I suggested an approach to the play that aims to “open up” the play, an approach focused on finding the right questions to ask the playwright/director - questions that would inspire the writing and/or direction of the play, questions that would ignite the imagination of the artists involved. The participants worked in pairs, each taking turns being playwright and director. The workshop led to a top 8 list of questions to ask the playwright and/or director; questions that could be asked: during the writing process; if the playwright is stuck; while preparing a production; or while working on a production. (See appendix)

In 2011 I returned to Winnipeg once again. This time with the agenda to try out an approach to play development that would build on the experiences I had made in Winnipeg during my previous visits, an approach that would empower the playwright, and that would be a supplement to the developmental and dramaturgical approaches already in place at MAP.



## Purpose of the workshop

The purpose of the workshop – Exploring and Creation of A Dramaturgical Approach – was to introduce an approach to playwriting that puts the playwrights' own ideas and development process in focus. During the workshop we would test an interviewing technique which helps the playwright deal with issues within the play, a technique that allows the playwright to dramaturge their own plays with the assistance of a fellow playwright.

## Inspiration/Guiding principles

The approach and technique introduced in this paper draws its inspiration from a number of sources: Rogerian Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, Appreciative Inquiry, different coaching techniques, etc. The basic assumption is that the answers to our questions are within ourselves and that a non-directive approach to counseling empowers us to find our own way.



The ideas put forward in this paper are not scientific, and they are not suggesting that playwrights have to go into therapy! They merely draw inspiration from the above sources.

## The approach

The approach insists that the playwright is the one who knows the play the best, and therefore is the one who is best at writing, developing and editing the play. The approach seeks to empower the playwright in the process of critiquing and developing the play. The approach redefines the role of the dramaturge as one of counseling or coaching the playwright, rather than giving the playwright advice.



## The technique

The technique is based on peer review, where writers help each other dramaturge their own plays. It could, however, also be other theatre people who take on the part of dramaturge. In Winnipeg we based the technique on playwrights helping playwrights, and it became clear that the more experienced the playwrights are, the better the chance of having fruitful sessions.

The technique is applied in dramaturgical sessions, focused on helping the playwright write or rewrite the play.

In the session there are two roles: the playwright and the dramaturge.

### - The Playwright -

knows the play. The playwright has the answers to most of the questions concerning the play, even though the playwright might not know this, or might have a hard time making decisions.



### - The Dramaturge -

assists the playwright. The dramaturge does not have the answers, but has the ability and duty to ask the best possible questions, in order to help the playwright write his or her play. The dramaturge should have some experience with playwriting or dramaturging.



The rules are very strict. You can talk about anything, but the roles are given.

### For the dramaturge this means:

- You are only asking questions!
- You are helping the playwright. Resist giving your opinion or giving advice. Help the playwright find his or her own way.
- *You* are not solving the problems, the playwright is. Resist sentences that contain: "What I would do...", "What concerns me...", "What I normally do...", "It reminds me of when I...".
- The dramaturge keeps time during the session.
- Keep your own opinions and great ideas out of the way!

### For the playwright this means:

- The questions are asked to help you!
- You have the answers and someone who is helping you find them. But it is not a test; don't expect to find all the answers within the session, and some questions don't have to be answered. They can just be an inspiration.
- Take your time. Take notes. Help the dramaturge help you.
- The session is for you!

## Preparing the session

In preparation of a session, the playwright and dramaturge must, of course, have read the same version of the play. The session is about the play, so there has to be a play, meaning text, dialogue, etc. to talk about. Ideally, there should be a finished draft of the play.

The dramaturge should be allowed ample time to read the play and prepare a list of questions they think can help open up the play.

The playwright prepares a list of challenges they have with the script overall, specific moments or scenes that they have trouble with, or other questions about their play or their process they would like to talk about.

In Winnipeg the two sessions were held with a day apart. They could also be held individually, but Session 1 can be useful to determine the subject of Session 2.

The sessions should be held in a place where both participants feel comfortable, and where the session can be held without outside interruptions.

The playwright is running a risk in sharing, and it is important to create an atmosphere of encouragement and empathic listening. The dramaturge must accept the playwrights' explorations and be sensitive to where the playwright wants to go/wants to talk about. The playwright is of course entitled to decide whether a question is helpful or not.

## Session 1 – Exploring the play

Playwright and dramaturge have a one-hour session talking about the play. The goal is:

- To help the playwright examine and unfold his or her own play.
- To help the playwright establish what is on the page.
- To help the playwright identify issues within the play that the playwright wants to work on.

Anything can be discussed – it is up to the playwright and the dramaturge to decide what they will talk about. The discussion can take inspiration from the 8 MAP questions, or they can touch on different aspects of the play: Story, plot, structure, characters, language, rhythm, etc.

Here are a few sample questions to help you get started:

- What is the story you want to tell? How are you doing that? What are the strengths of telling the story this way? What are the weaknesses? How are you overcoming the weaknesses? Etc.
- Which scene works the best? What is it that makes it work? Can this give you inspiration to improve other scenes? Etc.
- Which scene are you the least satisfied with? What is it you're trying to achieve with the scene? Are there other ways of writing the scene in which you could achieve the same? Etc.

Take five minutes at the end of the session to take notes.

## Session 2 – Dealing with specific issues

Playwright and dramaturge have a one-hour session talking about the play. The goal is:

- To help the playwright address specific issues in the play.
- To help the playwright explore possibilities and avenues which present themselves in the play.
- To assist the playwright in formulating the next step, that can move the writing process along.

The playwright sets up the playing field and the playwright and the dramaturge agree upon what will be the subject of the session. At the beginning of the session this is put down in writing, so that the subject of the session is clear.

The goal is to have the discussion about the text, rather than the idea of the text. The session should concentrate on only a few issues.

The playwright is the one who knows the play the best, and therefore is the one who is best at writing, developing and editing the play.

The aim is to keep the discussion as specific as possible. It can be helpful to read out loud the sections of the text you are talking about.

Here are a few sample questions to help you get started. The questions are, of course, totally dependent on the subject(s) you're discussing.

- What is it you're not achieving? Why is it important to achieve this? How does it influence the rest of the play?
- Are there other places in the text where you're achieving this? If so, what is that makes it work in those places?
- Are there other ways you could explore? What would this give you? What would be the strengths/weaknesses of this? How could you overcome the weaknesses?

At the end of the session, the playwright should formulate the next step that he or she will take in the writing process. This is put down in writing.

Take five minutes at the end of the session to take notes.



## Asking the right questions

It takes practice to become a good dramaturge, but the result gets better and better every time you do it. You do not have to be able to answer the questions you're asking yourself. You're not trying to get the playwright to

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answer the questions in a certain way. There are no wrong answers. Just answers that could be more specific and thereby help the playwright understand what is going on in the play.

The point of this approach is to help the playwright get more specific about issues in the play and in the writing process. It is an

attempt to squeeze as much material as possible out the playwright, in the belief that this is what makes the play original. You are helping the playwright to become more specific about the world and the rules that are being set up in the play. Every original play has its own dramaturgy and demands a unique dramaturgical approach dictated by the play. The only rules are the rules of the play.

## Perspective

The approach and technique introduced in this paper is a work in progress and is neither unique nor a universal technique that deals with every aspect of playwriting. But hopefully it can be an inspiration to playwrights, dramaturges and other people concerned with the development of new plays. The challenge in the theatre is not to get people to talk about the new plays they are working on. The challenge is to do it in an organized way, and to perform dramaturgical sessions of a high quality and of more use to the playwright – sessions that help the playwright achieve what he or she is trying to achieve, sessions that will allow playwrights to write truly original plays.

And if you are looking for advice on how to write your play? Don't worry. There are lots of people out there waiting to tell you how to write your play.



## Appendix

**Top 8** – list of questions to ask the playwright and/or director, developed during a MAP workshop in the fall of 2010.

1. What is the play about?
2. What is driving the play?
3. Where does the play begin?
4. What are the rules of the play?
5. What are you curious about in the play?
6. What about the play scares you?
7. What do you hear? - see? – smell? – feel? – taste?
8. If you had to cut/add one scene – what would it be?

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**The Manitoba Association of Playwrights** is an organization dedicated to the development of Manitoba playwrights and their plays. Through a series of programs, workshops, and co-operation with theatres, it works towards the growth of the Manitoba playwriting community. Founded in 1979, MAP makes possible the magic of theatre through the power of the playwright's vision.

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