



**Visual Dramaturgy:
Problem Solver or Problem Maker in Contemporary Performance Creation**

By Wes D. Pearce, Catherine Gleason, Justin Maxwell, and Martine Kei Green-Rogers

In his seminal book *Looking at Shakespeare*, Dennis Kennedy argues that “there is a clear relationship between what a production looks like and what its spectators accept as its statement and value . . . the visual signs the performance generates are not only the guide to its social and cultural meaning but often constitute the meaning itself.”¹ In the years since Kennedy’s provocative statement, *scenography* has become an increasingly important site for critical discourse involving theories of performance, representation, and reception. Historically, *dramaturgy* has been understood as being primarily concerned with the written text; and like scenography, dramaturgy has become a site of crucial conversations around new play development and the production of plays both new and old. As stated in the introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, “modern dramaturgy sees itself as a field, profession, skill, and verb; as a tool of inquiry, a liberal art, and theatrical practice. The increasingly interdisciplinary nature of theatre-making demands new tools, which, in turn, affect dramaturgical practices.”² Therefore, it should come as no surprise that one of the

¹ Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth Century Performance*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5.

² Magda Romanska, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 7.

developments from the cross-pollination and interdisciplinary nature of these sites of discussion and practice has been the emergence of *visual dramaturgy*.

Visual dramaturgy, a nebulous and problematic term virtually unheard of thirty years ago, has become an increasingly common element of play production and in the curation of nontraditional performance, such as performance art and devised collaborative work. Perhaps most importantly it is becoming a feature in new play development and workshopping.

Therefore, the time has come to wrestle with these questions: **What is visual dramaturgy, and how does it work—especially in production and new play processes?**

In many ways, visual dramaturgy can be thought of thus: If dramaturgy is “the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation,”³ then visual dramaturgy—as defined by the authors of this article—is how one’s way of “seeing” the text (especially from one’s specific lens as an artist) affects the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation. Essentially, how does layering various designers’ interpretations of the text into costumes, props, light, sets, etc. influence a forming theatrical piece? In addition, how may this layering of visual dramaturgy in a new play process help the playwright and all the other artists on the show better understand the world they are building? This paper brings together a playwright, a dramaturg, a scenographer, and a director to respond to this idea and discuss the ways in which visual dramaturgy affects their artistic practices.

³ “Dramaturgy,” Merriam-Webster, accessed February 7, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dramaturgy>.

Justin Maxwell, Playwright
On Being a Language Artist in a Physical Medium

In 2012 I wrote a play called *An Outopia for Pigeons*, in which Martha Washington (the last real passenger pigeon in history) reads Foucault and decides to build an “outopia,” a non-place, where she can hide the rest of her beloved passenger pigeons until the world is safe for them. *An Outopia for Pigeons* represented the development of a simple belief that the physical elements of scripts needed to be inspirational instead of prescriptive. This belief connects the notion of visual dramaturgy with my craft as a playwright. As an artist, I am dependent on my own body of work to talk about visual dramaturgy because I’m the only artist whose subjective vision and personal development I have access to. This is to say that, while many writers offer essays and textbooks that discuss their sense of craft, the only vision I can be certain of from inception to production is my own. In writing a play, I am laying the foundations for a visual dramaturgy, creating text from which a scenographer, director, and dramaturg will build a production. Visual dramaturgy from a playwriting perspective isn’t working to move a new play onto the stage; it is consciously generating a text. Therefore, visual dramaturgy for the playwright becomes making a play on the page to inspire other artists toward their own vision of the material.

This process starts in the front matter, before the narrative even begins, articulated by the setting, notes, and character descriptions. As an example, the script for *Outopia* describes Martha as “The last passenger pigeon. Female, any age.”⁴ In the world premiere by Swandive Theatre in Minneapolis, Martha looked like this (see Figure 1):

⁴ Justin Maxwell, *An Outopia for Pigeons* (unpublished manuscript, 2013), 2.



Figure 1: Martha Washington in *An Outopia for Pigeons*, Swandive Theatre (Photo: Joan Banick)

The production company's interpretation was breathtakingly pitch-perfect, while simultaneously unlike what I imagined. Over the course of the play, Martha's work on the outopia is constantly hampered by a strange creature called The

Gourmand. In the script, The Gourmand is described as "7/8ths omniscient and wearing a cocktail dress."⁵ Only in preparing this essay did I realize the actor onstage isn't wearing a cocktail dress; she is instead costumed in a strange lingerie underdressing, with jacket and shoes. The image onstage was so compelling and so suited to the character that it worked far better than any dress that could be slipped between the jacket



Figure 2: The Gourmand and Martha in *An Outopia for Pigeons*, Swandive Theatre (Photo: Joan Banick)

⁵ Maxwell, *Outopia*, 2.

and the corset. In Figure 2, which represents action at the beginning of the play, *The Gourmand* casually harasses Martha.

In two full productions—and two attempted productions that got to the design stage—no one placed *The Gourmand* in the stage directions' requested cocktail dress. Yet, I never noticed the discrepancy and never felt a twinge of objection or complaint. I wanted her to be powerful and have a deep ownership of her sexuality, and in each staging she did—despite the company's lack of adherence to the stage directions. As Martha builds her non-place, she's interrupted by a hitchhiking sperm whale named Charles Bronson, who introduces himself as “a whale so tough they name the toughest actor of all time after me.”⁶ Charles is hitchhiking to Nantucket to stab all the whale-killing, limerick-loving Nantucketers, but he is down on his luck and panhandling. In the character description, Charles is described as “A sperm whale out for revenge. A sperm whale, for Christ's sake—but with Bronson's sociopathic calm.”⁷ The text of the play further develops that initial description with several fin jokes and a few blowhole double entendres, offset with strange discussions that sexualize the thumb. Shortly after Bronson's arrival, they're joined by Cotton Mather, who is now three hundred years old and having strange nightmares. Cotton is outlined in the script as a “Renowned Puritan minister and witch dealer-with-er; he's half theologian and half Dr. Frank-N-Furter.”⁸ During the course of this play, Cotton Mather and Charles Bronson quickly begin a complex, sexual relationship. The actor playing Cotton could build a character from the straightforward notion that both actor and character are human; however, for the actor playing the whale, the options are broader. At

⁶ Maxwell, 2.

⁷ Maxwell, 2.

⁸ Maxwell, 2.

a developmental reading at The Brick Theatre in New York City, the actor playing the whale wore blue, adult-sized, footed pajamas. This costume made it hard for the actor to hold the script, much less a knife, so we simply gaff-taped a switchblade to his chest. The effect was darkly comic and worked well for the reading. While not a terribly impressive visual, it sufficed in prompting the audience to juxtapose the ridiculousness and impotent violence that drives the character.

In the Minneapolis premiere pictured below, the aggressiveness of the character is illustrated by the biker jacket, and the leather fins on the costume extend—seemingly organically—off the sleeves. It looked like “sociopathic charm” to me, and the little hat is reminiscent of the one the actual Charles Bronson wore in *Death Wish II*. The descriptions in the text inspired the following result on the stage (see Figure 3). For me, this image is complex,



Figure 3: Cotton Mather and Charles Bronson in *An Outopia for Pigeons*, Swandive Theatre (Photo: Joan Banick)

creepy, and intimate; it simultaneously draws me in and makes me want to turn away. Such emotional paradoxes are part of my work, and the image captures that contradictoriness in a satisfying way.

The setting for *Outopia* is simply “The Cincinnati Zoological Society. 1914,” and there’s a brief note about the staging: “The stage is a giant curio cabinet full of 19th Century wonders, the wonders of natural history. However, this particular cabinet is ahistorical. The audience should



Figure 4: The set of *An Outopia for Pigeons*, Swandive Theatre (Photo: Joan Banick)

feel as though they are inside the cabinet; this is an immersive theatrical experience.”⁹ Above is how that description visually manifested within the theatre for the people entering the space (see Figure 4).

The set extended down a short hallway and into the lobby itself, and that progression did something metatheatrical.¹⁰ The complex mess of the mise-en-scène turned into formal, museum-like descriptions of the numerous historical people and events that made up the mélange of the script. These same descriptions turned into a display of cast and design team bios and ended with some early design concepts and renderings. This choice by the production

⁹ Maxwell, 2.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, no pictures of the lobby exist.

team made the entire performance space an extension of the set, serving to both orient and disorient the audience. It fit my work as an artist quite nicely, and it gracefully manifested the “immersive theatrical experience” I desired for the production.

As a playwright, I work in language in the same way a painter works in pigments or a musician works with sounds. The medium I use takes me, the production team, and eventually the audience to a new, unfamiliar, or profound emotional state. The intrinsic abstraction of an emotional state caused by language means that a work succeeds when the audience feels, not

when an actor hits the right mark and the sound and light cues happen perfectly. Therefore, I don't need to manage the artists making those choices; I must inspire them toward a feeling or tone. Unlike a lot of playwrights, when I



Figure 5: Set model for *An Outopia for Pigeons*, Swandive Theatre
(Photo: Joan Banick)

need some variety or a change of pace to recharge, I work in other genres of writing as opposed to other fields in theatre like acting or directing. In fact, I followed *An Outopia for Pigeons* with a series of short memoirs because I needed to hide out in some prose. Being a language artist in a visual medium is a strange thing, but it is the power of the visual, physical reality of theatre

that pulled me into playwriting from my original start as a poet. In grad school, we joked that if we were fiction writers we would have to generate pages of setup before Che Guevara could walk into a room wearing a prom dress and carrying a duck. However, in theatre, as soon as Che Guevara walks onstage wearing a prom dress and carrying a duck, the audience thinks: “What’s he gonna do with that duck?”

My job as a language artist in a visual medium is to inspire a complex creative team. Scripts are mediated art objects. Aside from some simple typesetting, the aforementioned memoir series is fundamentally the same object on my computer screen as it is in the publication. The words are the same; the connection is a direct one between reader and text. While a good play must work as a written object if it’s to ever get past a theatre’s literary manager, the reality of production is that a host of other artists is going to mediate the work to an audience. Throughout the Minneapolis production, the actor playing Cotton wore the blond, curly wig pictured earlier. In a moment of serious Sturm und Drang, he ripped the wig from his head. I gasped. So did the audience. No such action was indicated in the script, but how could such a powerful response be wrong? After all, the feeling the audience needed to have at that moment in the narrative was one of great intensity, and the wig’s sudden and shocking removal produced the perfect tone. Consequently, I need to write scripts that inspire the cadre of other artists that I’m working with, because inspired artists do wonderful things.

I was fortunate to find Swandive Theatre, a company that embraces a commitment to inspiring all the artists on a creative team. They embrace visual dramaturgy by bringing all the designers into the development process at the same point a traditional dramaturg becomes involved. In 2019, Swandive will stage another new work of mine, *The Canopic Jar of My Sins: A*

Medieval Morality Play for Latter Day Postmodernists, a show that starts on the vast island of plastic garbage floating in the North Pacific and then moves to the beach of Easter Island. In act one, there's a Stalinist tribunal that includes a character called The Gooney Revenant. In development, ideas for what this undead bird looks like have ranged from a massive multi-story puppet to a bodybuilder wearing a loincloth and small rubber beak while carrying a sledgehammer. I have no idea what a production will look like, yet the more I inspire the production company, the more impressive their ideas become.

It's important for playwrights to give up control, to inspire instead of attempting to direct or choreograph from the page. The first time this experience really happened for me in practice was in 2009 while writing a show called *Your Lithopedion*. It is the story of a serial killer who becomes the founder of the twelve-step program Serial Killers Anonymous and how that endeavor ruins his marriage. In my early works, I over-choreographed the actors and described staging with draughtsman-like precision. I saw my error after just a few small staged readings, and I quickly learned that I needed to let a director's passions produce the staging and the actors' passions produce the delivery. By inspiring the artists that would mediate my script, I received better onstage results. Their respective senses of visual dramaturgy made productions far more compelling than what was in my imagination. The other artists involved needed me to be a playwright, not a director, choreographer, or designer. Essentially, I took Mac Wellman's advice and stopped writing stage directions from the "north side of the soul." Wellman has repeated this now-famous anecdote in several different interviews, but it generally comes down to a variation of:

[S]tage directions are written from the north side of the human soul—if it says door up right, there should be a door up right, that sort of thing—but my experience with these

sorts of stage directions is that people always get them wrong. Whereas if I write something like “something strange happens,” they always get that right.¹¹

In early drafts of *Your Lithopedion*, I got this element of the craft wrong. For example, in one scene, I built a series of progressively more revolting, slapstick stage directions to increase the tone of the visual world as the dialogue was building the emotional world, with the physical and spoken each working to heighten the other. With each draft of the play, the series of directions became progressively funnier yet more idiosyncratic. The directions worked well on the page. I told myself with just the right performer, a director could pull off what I had written. While focusing on my exact imagination, I quickly reduced my possible casting pool for the role to a thirty-year-old, female-identifying version of John Cleese. Unfortunately, there aren't a lot of people who fit that description auditioning for small-venue, experimental theatre. Essentially, I wrote many artists out of the opportunity to make art. Fortunately, I remembered that *something* strange needed to happen, not that a moment of *particular* strangeness needed to happen. My artistic vision needed a specific progression of intensity. By the next draft, I replaced the progression of actions with a progression of tone. In the final draft, the progression of intensity of tone happened in a sequence of five stage directions: “She does something raunchy;” “She does something raunchier;” “Raunchier still;” “The same level of raunchy;” and “She does the raunchiest thing possible that’s still funny.”¹² When the Old Marquer Theatre in New Orleans produced *Your Lithopedion*, this is how the first, third, and fifth directions were staged, respectively (see Figure 6):

¹¹ Mac Wellman, “Confessions of a Damnable Scribbler,” interview by Justin Maxwell, *Rain Taxi Review of Books*, winter 2005, 28.

¹² Justin Maxwell, *Your Lithopedion* (New York: Indie Theater Now, 2009).



Figure 6: *Your Lithopedion* (Photo: Kris Hoffman)

By giving up specific directions for general emotional effect, the performers were suddenly free to climb into the dark of their hearts, and what they brought back with them was consistently terrifying, hilarious, and amazing. The performers in New York City, Minneapolis, and New Orleans all did very different things and came to those choices through very different methods. I was surprised at how, each time, they found a physical development that served me as an artist far better than my original, over-choreographed directions ever could.

Texts built to inspire the visual arts in our medium produce deep collaboration and lead to stagings that transcend a simple manifestation of text. By describing *The Gourmand* as “7/8ths omniscient and wearing a cocktail dress,”¹³ I created a space for another artist—an expert in their own visual dramaturgy—to physicalize the emotional heart of the character. After all, there is a whisper of the character’s near-omniscience in her dress-less-ness. The audience sees what is above the dress and what is below the dress, and there is the whisper of the dress in our imagination—our subconscious. That experience seems about as close to

¹³ Maxwell, *Outopia*, 2.

omniscience as one can experience. A similar subtlety held true for a sperm whale named Charles Bronson.

As an artist, I end up with productions that surpass my imagination when my scripts inspire my colleagues towards their own artistic expression. As a mercenary writer, I have also found that making space for visual dramaturgy in my process has resulted in some of those colleagues becoming long-term collaborators. Swandive Theatre is currently planning two more world premieres of my work. I don't know what those shows will look like, but whatever they stage will look better than anything I can imagine.

Martine Kei Green-Rogers, Dramaturg
Dramaturgs "See" the Text: Visual Dramaturgy and New Play Development

I am a firm advocate of designers and dramaturgs coming together to work during any play process, but especially in a new play process. The Catholic University of America ingrained this idea into its students from the beginning of its training process. My mentor and advisor, Dr. Patrick Tuite, would always state anecdotally that designers would always understand a dramaturg's work. That idea stuck with me through the years, and I would come to discover the truth embedded in that idea over the process of my dramaturgical career.

Rough theatrical builds have the ability to produce magnificent collaborations. In 2008, as I began my first lead dramaturg assignment at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, I was assigned two shows: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (directed by the late Mark Rucker) and *Fences* (directed by Leah Gardiner). These texts had vastly different storytelling requirements because of their respective genres, time periods, etc., but also because of the production

concept Rucker had for his version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in comparison to Gardiner's very straightforward telling of Wilson's classic play.

Jesse—the assistant lighting designer—and I bonded very quickly over the two very different builds. A series of unfortunate events surrounding the production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* while it was still in rehearsal made for a tense tech period in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's rotating repertory. Changes that affected Jesse and I separately occurred at lightning-fast speeds as the show barreled toward previews. As each costume piece changed, other scenic elements and the story we were telling shifted. As choreography and movement changed in the rehearsal studio, changes to scenes were re-teched on the stage. The director and I spoke at all hours of the day and night about how the tone and story of the play shifted with each change. I treaded in rough waters as I attempted to hold onto as much of the director's vision as possible while also honoring the text and the wishes of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. As those shifts occurred, Jesse and I spoke about how the changes affected the story and the work that the lighting staff needed to accomplish before the show opened.

Jesse and I spent much of our time adjusting to the changes made on the stage and then conferring about those changes after tech. We realized we saw storytelling in very similar ways. Jesse had an innate understanding of dramaturgy and I, coming from a visual arts background, understood aspects of design. As we talked about the story and the process, our late-evening discussions became realized onstage the next day as we incorporated our conclusions about the trajectory of the storytelling into our respective artistry.

A defining moment in the process that was linked to our late-night conversations came as the revelation that, although members of the creative team were using identical *verbal* language to describe the intention or visual needs of a specific scene, the team members had very different *visual* vocabularies. Even though many individuals thought they were working toward the same goal, it became clear that the artistic team was not working in a unified manner amid sudden changes necessitated by the broader needs of the situation. Essentially, the different departments (costumes, props, sets, etc.) working on this production were not telling the same story since we were not always clear how the changes were coming together onstage. Resultantly, as Jesse and I continued to talk about our thoughts on the process with the director, we began serving as direct and indirect channels of communication between varying departments on the production—and for festival administration—in order to facilitate the needs of the production without stepping beyond established professional boundaries.

It was in this moment that I learned the advantages and disadvantages in a play process when everyone is not on the same visual dramaturgical page—and that is how the importance of visual dramaturgy coalesced in my practice. I realized that there were concrete actions I could facilitate as dramaturg to help make this situation easier in any production scenario, such as initiating more frequent conversations with designers about storytelling. Then, as I began venturing into new play dramaturgy, I found myself desiring a connection with the designers as the plays headed toward workshops or productions. I wanted to solicit their opinions about how design elements in a show may work, and I used that information in conversations with the playwright and director as we created the world of that play.

For example, the Great Plains Theatre Conference has a Design Wing in which the mainstage shows are given a design team to create spaces that represent a way of seeing the playwright's text.¹⁴ These designers often talk to the show's playwright and dramaturg to help generate this creative play space. It is in these moments that the thoughts of the dramaturg (who often approach the play as if they are encountering it for the first time in order to simulate the thoughts of an audience), the ideas of the designers, and the playwright's intimate knowledge of intent merge to create something that helps visually represent the world of the play. In the process at the Great Plains Theatre Conference, questions may be generated and verbalized as to how a designer came up with the world they did via the text they read, especially if it differed drastically from the world the playwright imagined or the dramaturg intuited from the text and conversations with the playwright. Also, dramaturgs and designers may prove to have similar questions at this point in a new play development process. For example, a dramaturg often begins *any* play process by asking "why this play, and why this play now?" Designers ask similar questions. As lighting designer Cecelia Durbin asks in a 2016 personal interview, "If I can't tell you why I am turning that light on, why bother with turning it on?"¹⁵ Durbin speaks of how her practice has become so entwined with acts of dramaturgy that established dramaturgs such as Jules Odendahl-James refer to her as a "designaturg." Resultantly, the purpose of visual dramaturgy in these moments of new play development is to ask, "How can we work together to clarify the world of a play in a way that allows for the creative impulses of the designers while also serving the story the playwright intended?"

¹⁴ "Design Wing," Great Plains Theatre Conference, accessed June 28, 2017, <http://www.gptcplays.com/design-wing/>.

¹⁵ Cecelia Durbin, interview by Martine Kei Green-Rogers, June 13, 2016.

Dramaturgs in a stage such as this can be helpful in building the visual languages everyone needs to make this happen. This is because the dramaturg's essential, driving role in the process is determining how the two-dimensional text on the page combines with the three-dimensional world of production in a manner the audience will recognize and understand.

Examples of how this conversation manifests in practice may be seen in the collaboration between myself, Tori Sampson (playwright), and Valerie St. Pierre Smith (designer) on Sampson's play *Cadillac Crew* at the 2017 Great Plains Theatre Conference. *Cadillac Crew* is set in 1963 and the present, and it deals with the proliferation of car coalitions during the Civil Rights Movement (specifically the ones led by women of color) and how that is a predecessor to the types of coalitions we currently see with contemporary civil rights issues such as the Black Lives Matter movement. To create this parallel, the actors playing the 1960s characters eventually embody the characters who represent the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement. As a result, the play brings the struggles of the 1960s back into a contemporary audience's consciousness as it comments on how many of the conversations around civil rights have not changed and—when they have—how they changed. In the workshop process Great Plains Theatre Conference provided, creative team conversations revolved around the story being told and if there was a way to illustrate the themes and ideas of the play without St. Pierre Smith needing to do a rendering for the set and/or costumes. Dramaturgically, how could St. Pierre Smith visually represent the progressing story to unlock some potential for Sampson's storytelling? In the end, St. Pierre Smith's thought process inspired the following installation (see Figure 7).



Figure 7 (Photos: Valerie St. Pierre Smith)

As St. Pierre Smith states,

I fell into a rabbit hole when thinking on the idea of historical legacies, and how it relates to the story of *Cadillac Crew*. What really inspired me were the very emotional conflicts that I saw the characters grappling with: “What is our place in this social revolution? And how does it feel to be ignored by that which is supposed to be my voice for social change? Where do I fit?” That sounds a little clunky but it sparked in me the desire to show pictures and faces of the people that populated these different movements—faces of ordinary citizens fighting with every breath they had, infusing a movement with every fiber of their being, and yet getting lost in the obscurity of mass protest. It also made me . . . want to honor their legacies; so the installation became interactive. Numerous permanent markers and small electric votive candles were positioned along the wood framing connecting the representative ladders. Viewers were asked and encouraged to write the name/s of someone they wanted to memorialize for their contributions to social change. And light a candle in their honor and to invoke their spirit.¹⁶

St. Pierre Smith’s choice to visually represent the journey of the women in the play with an interactive installation opened up immense storytelling possibilities for those of us working on the play. The significance of the ladders framed my conversation with the playwright and the director with analogies such as the ladders representing the four women at the beginning of the play and their connectedness as they attempt to engage with the various issues of the Civil Rights Movement during their travels. By having these ladders sit atop a slightly opaque rendering of the United States and placing pictures from the time underneath, it opened up the

¹⁶ Valerie St. Pierre Smith, email to author, February 6, 2018.

script's storytelling potential for those of us within the process and those who saw the reading. Ultimately, the impact of what the women in the play were doing had a further visceral impact on our developing story because we could see the symbolism of their actions.

One influence on St. Pierre Smith's installation was a presentation she gave at the 2017 United States Institute of Theatre Technology (USITT) national conference entitled "Connective Threads: Inspiration, Appropriation, and Design in a Global Village." In this presentation, she articulated ideas she considers when designing for shows that have a base in a different cultural context from which she identifies. She began with a basic dramaturgical question: "How, in a global world and an age of information, are we affected as creators of visual identity?"¹⁷ All of us in the room found ourselves asking a similar question as we worked on *Cadillac Crew*. We all fought against the temptation to make the "easiest" choice in terms of representing the marriage of the 1960s and 2017 (different clothes, buildings, decorations, etc. and stereotypes of the time period)¹⁸ because part of what makes *Cadillac Crew* compelling is how Sampson compares the work of the women involved with Cadillac Crews and the work of women in the Black Lives Matter movement. In the end, the stories are connected. The work of the Black Lives Matter women built upon strategic community engagement work pioneered by the women of the Cadillac Crews. Therefore, to tell the story truthfully and honestly meant paying homage, separately, to these women while also making clear, calculated, and precise connections from past to present. St. Pierre Smith's visual dramaturgy illustrated that Sampson

¹⁷ Valerie St. Pierre Smith, "Connective Threads: Inspiration, Appropriation, and Design in a Global Village" (presentation, USITT Conference & Stage Expo, St. Louis, MO, March 8-11, 2017).

¹⁸ As St. Pierre Smith states, "Thinking of all of the anthropological information we designers research and incorporate, I've come to view us as stewards of cultural visual histories and traditions. This demands of us to understand more deeply our source communities' emotional histories and self perceptions" ("Connective Threads: Inspiration, Appropriation, and Design in a Global Village," 2017).

was on the correct track in her storytelling since St. Pierre Smith formed this installation through the story she saw in Sampson's text. Ultimately, conversations between the playwright, director, dramaturg, and designer helped highlight some of these important discoveries and kept all of us in the room beholden to the spirit of Sampson's play.

Visual dramaturgy and collaborations between designers and dramaturgs, as stated earlier, are not just limited to new play processes. When institutions such as Chicago's Court Theatre and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival revise their practices to add dramaturgy and visual dramaturgy to their design meeting process, it allows for important discoveries of how the visual elements of the storytelling come together in the formative phases of production development. This type of artistic collaboration early in a process helps curb the potential for any last-minute changes due to discord of meaning, signs, signifiers, etc. in the design process. More importantly, however, it also allows a playwright to discover how artists are unpacking the meaning of their text.

All of this is to affirm that visual dramaturgy is an important aspect of dramaturgy. Asking questions of the playwright, designer, and dramaturg during formative moments in the new play (or any play) process should not be eschewed. It should be viewed as an essential aspect of the process. Why would anyone shun the value of generating ideas that may or may not help a playwright focus the world of their play? What brilliance do we unintentionally dim by pretending that a collaborative art is not at its best when collaboration is allowed to bloom? Visual dramaturgy and the intersection of dramaturgy and design have shaped my way of thinking about play development so much that it is now a standard part of my practice. The next wave of new play development should have designers and dramaturgs in the room as soon

as possible in order to create moments of visual dramaturgy for the playwright during their own process.

Wes D. Pearce, Scenographer

The Problem of Which Tools to Use or Which Hat to Wear: Designer as Visual Dramaturg

Despite Dennis Kennedy's assertion—mentioned at the beginning of this essay—of the “clear relationship between what a production looks like and what its spectators accept as its statement and value” and further suggestion that “the literary bias of theatre history disrupts the critical reading of visual performance,”¹⁹ I would suggest that a similar bias also exists within the world of new play development and in the workshopping of new plays. By necessity, the work is spent on the text without thought to the visual potential of the play, even though—if one accepts Kennedy's argument—it is the visuals that carry most of the meaning. This part of the larger article suggests ways in which a scenographer's involvement in the new play development process can be of benefit to playwrights, directors, actors, and everyone else involved in the workshopping of new plays.

I was trained as a designer (not even as a scenographer) and have cautiously stepped into the area of visual dramaturgy with no formal training and a great deal of trepidation. Over twenty years ago, as I was finishing graduate school, the University of Calgary produced Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*. Dr. Robert Moore, the faculty member who taught dramaturgy in the department, was listed as visual dramaturg for the production. Having never heard the term before, I inquired as to what a visual dramaturg was and what function Dr. Moore served for

¹⁹ Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare*, 5.

the production. I was informed that he provided (to the scenographer, director, and cast) definitions, meanings, and interpretations to many of the visual references in the text and that much of his work was around the literal and visual interpretations of the white horse. In this production (helmed by director Brian Smith and guided by scenographer Douglas McCullough), the white horse occasionally appeared as a flickering shadow, its presence never certain nor illustrative but nonetheless an essential part of *Rosmersholm*. My understanding was that without Dr. Moore's work around the visual perception of the white horse, the central aspect of this particular production would not have been discovered. In this instance, visual dramaturgy was simply one of the jobs that a literary dramaturg chose to do for a specific production; increasingly, however, visual dramaturgy is understood not as an add-on but as a vital component to new play development and play production. In the years that have followed, I've continued to explore the concept of visual dramaturgy, and I've attempted to develop my own understanding of what it is and how I might best function as a visual dramaturg.

To be clear, design and visual dramaturgy are not the same thing. They are related in the same way that playwriting and dramaturgy are related, and yet they are equally as distinct. Scenography is first and foremost about space: "translating and adapting space, creating suggestive space and linking space with dramatic time . . . what we need to create the right space."²⁰ Scenography is more than space; it is, as Pamela Howard suggests, a "holistic method of visual theatre making,"²¹ but it is very much concerned with the pragmatic demands of translating a written, two-dimensional text into the three-dimensional world of the production.

²⁰ Pamela Howard, *What is Scenography?*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1.

²¹ Howard, *What is Scenography?*, xx.

As Stephen Di Benedetto writes, “[a] theatre designer is a person who creates and organizes the visual or aural aspects of a stage production.”²² I would suggest that good theatre design is more than good organization, insofar as the primary purpose of the design team is to create a complete environment in which the play can live and breathe and become.

Visual dramaturgy is none of this. Visual dramaturgy has, more or less, one goal, and that is to help the playwright in the development of a new play. It can be argued that visual dramaturgy might influence how a director or actor might approach a text but, personally, that is of little concern. How one achieves this goal is deeply affected by the venue, the expectations of the workshop/development process, the amount of time one has to devote to a script, and the fact that the process (or at least my process) varies greatly from play to play and from playwright to playwright.

In 2002 and 2003, I was asked to be visual dramaturg for the Saskatchewan Playwrights Centre Spring Festival of New Plays. During the festival, held over the course of a week, five full-length plays were workshopped and given a public reading. At the end of each reading I provided a response to the visual aspects of the play. In many ways, my work at the SPC Spring Festival was not dissimilar to the work I have done over several years for the Playwright’s Lab (formerly the Playwrighting Symposium) at the Mid America Theatre Conference (MATC),²³ although I might also provide visual suggestions for staging the reading, assist in finding a fancy chair, or do something similar. The SPC Spring Festival was a rather brutal boot camp for new play development where I learned (usually the hard way) what visual dramaturgy can be and

²² Stephen Di Benedetto, *An Introduction to Theatre Design* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2

²³ I will discuss my involvement with the Mid America Theatre Conference in more detail later in this essay.

what a visual dramaturg might do. Most importantly, I learned that a visual dramaturg does NOT design a future (or utopic) production, and there is NO end product—just ideas. This approach—to work with the playwright on the possibilities of the text—is often at odds with what the audience at a public reading desires, yet this is the approach that best serves the playwright. (Audiences typically want visual dramaturgs to speak to the utopic production.) Visual dramaturgy opens up a world of possibilities and, at times, challenges the playwright insofar as how a visualist responds to the text; a visual dramaturg supports but also critiques the text in terms of how a scenographer might approach the play.

One of the most important differences between a designer and a visual dramaturg lies in their respective approaches to the script. Scenographers/designers read texts differently; rather, we read the text in a way that is different than how an actor, a director, or a stage manager reads it. Inevitably, we pay more attention to details like “her room . . . is not crowded with furniture and little tables and nicknacks” and “It is between four and five in the afternoon”²⁴ than most other people in a creative process. As Pamela Howard writes, “I think of myself as a visual detective looking for clues to pick up, that eventually, when I have them all, will give a surprising solution to the whole mystery of how to do the play.”²⁵ Such a reading is how a designer reads a completed script, and, if I read all the clues correctly, then Mrs. Higgins will have a very handsome drawing room. Yet approaching the script in the manner of a scenographer is generally not going to help a playwright work through new ideas, write a new script, or even revise a (relatively) new text.

²⁴ George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1988), 66-67.

²⁵ Howard, 33.

As a visual dramaturg, my role is to respond to the visualness of the unfinished text—to reveal what is possible and uncover potentialities. It is the art of thinking and responding in multiple ways. I am not negating my scenographic training; I am still paying attention to the visual clues found in the script, but I approach them simply as a means to further dialogue—to ask questions or provide options. In short, I am not reading for a “solution.”

Since 2014 I have been involved as visual dramaturg at the Mid America Theatre Conference Playwriting Symposium,²⁶ and what follows are brief discussions around some of the plays that I have engaged with. It is my hope that these snapshots provide a sense of the various approaches I have used with these new scripts as well as some of the questions that I was hoping to explore within my visual response to the plays.

MATC 2014

I was part of the workshop for “Hanging On!” by Steve Marsh, and the opening stage direction reads, “This play requires a set to be built that allows the actors to be heard, while revealing only



Figure 8: The trapeze swings, though impractical, raised the stakes for the actors (Illustration: Wes D. Pearce)

²⁶ In 2014 there were two visual dramaturgs that participated in the MATC Playwriting Symposium, each responding to a single play during the same session. Since 2015 I have been the only visual dramaturg who has participated in the Playwriting Symposium, so I have responded to two plays during the same session.

their arms.”²⁷ The designer in me responded to that with a groan, but the visual dramaturg in me responded with a number of whimsical sketches of pas de deux that represented the stage direction without *being* the stage direction.

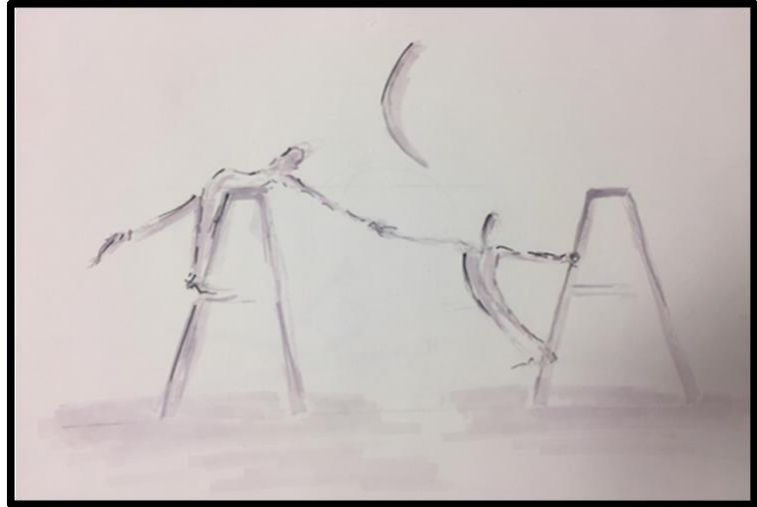


Figure 9: Ladders as a way of creating a space both physically challenging and alien for the actors (Illustrations: Wes D. Pearce)

In short, was there a way of “re-presenting”—instead of representing—what the playwright wanted without necessarily creating the set being described? I wanted to present numerous approaches to this stage

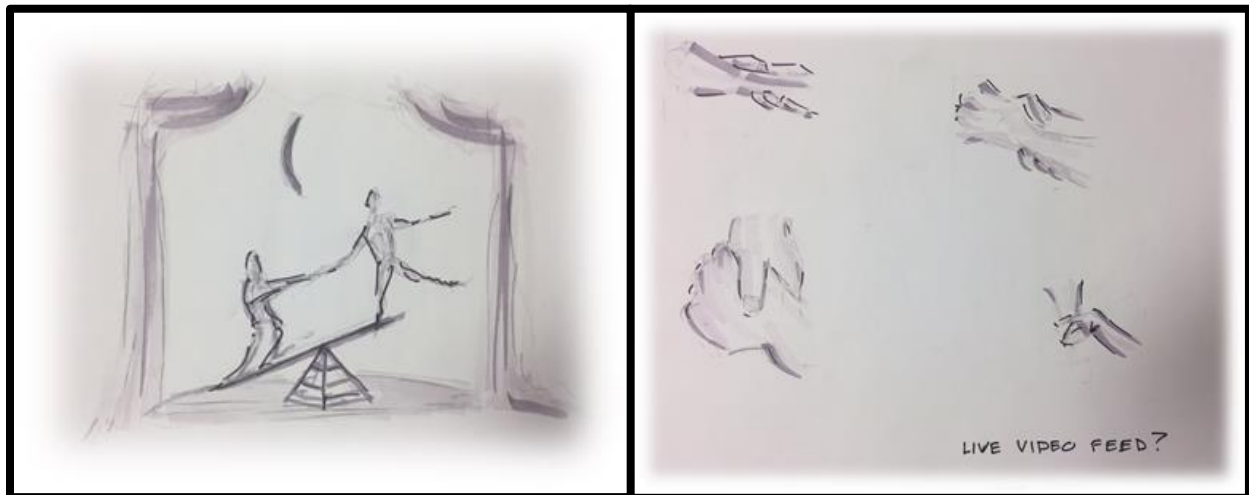


Figure 10 (left): Translating and physicalizing the precarious situation of the two characters.

Figure 11 (right): The potential of live video feed enhancing the production. (Illustrations: Wes D. Pearce)

direction because I was not sure, and am still not sure, that the play could and would be produced as written. I attempted to present ways of seeing the situation more theatrically,

²⁷ Steve Marsh, “Hanging On!” (unpublished manuscript, February 3, 2014), 1.



Figure 12: A more structural approach to the space augmented with live feed (Illustration: Wes D. Pearce)

perhaps even pragmatically, while remaining true to the spirit of the stage direction. During this workshop, opening up the visuality of this script was of primary importance to me.

I will admit that working on this play scared me at first, but reflecting upon the experience has made me realize just how valuable “Hanging On!” was to my development as a visual dramaturg. Marsh’s stage direction inspired me to throw away the role of designer and instead work on the exciting visual possibilities that he presented to me.

I will admit that working on



Figure 13: Time is very fluid, and the series of arches allows space and place to be equally fluid (Illustration: Wes D. Pearce)

MATC 2016

Justin Maxwell, who began this

article, has quickly become one of my favorite playwrights and one of my favorite playwrights

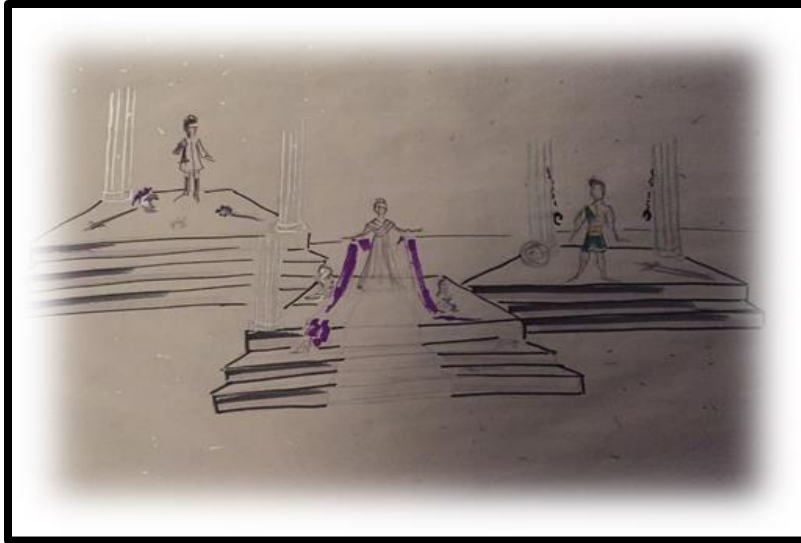


Figure 14: Karen Black, Agrippina Minor, and Steve Reeves in a traditional staging (Illustration: Wes D. Pearce)

to work with as a visual dramaturg. In 2015 I worked on his play “Inspiration Point,”²⁸ and at MATC 2016 I workshopped his new work “The Palimpsests of Agrippina Minor,”²⁹ which—even at 10 minutes in length—is an audacious piece. The play

features B-grade Hollywood stars Karen Black and Steve Reeves sharing the stage with the Roman Empress Agrippina Minor and explores themes of gender, popularity, and fame, culminating in an existential crisis. Like “Inspiration Point,” this piece contains a collage of non-sequitur pop culture references, yet it seemed clear that it wouldn’t be very useful if I responded to this play in the same manner as I responded to “Inspiration Point.” I asked him if there was anything in particular that he wanted from me during the workshop. His response was in the form of a challenge; he suggested that I need not respond to the text as written but, if possible, respond to what the full-length play might be and how I might envision this snippet as something larger. Inevitably, some of my sketches did respond to the written text, but a majority of them are possibilities I dreamt up for a potentially larger play.

²⁸ Justin Maxwell, “Inspiration Point,” *A Blinded Horse Dreams of Hippocampi and Other Plays* (New Orleans: Alligator Pear Publishing, 2016), 13-27.

²⁹ Justin Maxwell, “The Palimpsests of Agrippina Minor” (unpublished manuscript, last modified January 24, 2016).

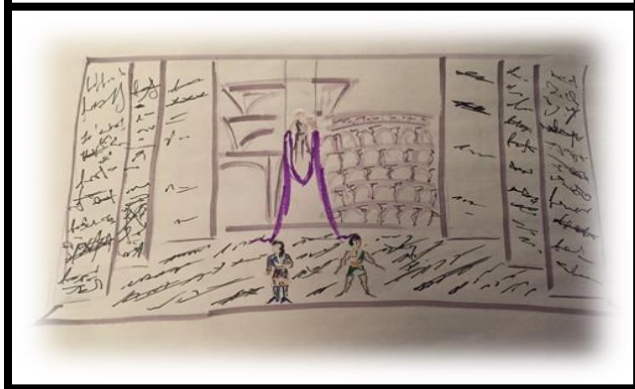


Figure 15 (top): Agrippina Minor moves about and interacts with other great women of history.
Figure 16 (middle): Agrippina Minor forever trapped on a Hollywood sound stage.
Figure 17 (bottom): The written word—play text, history, movie scripts—entrap the play and the environment as Agrippina Minor soars above Karen Black, Steve Reeves, and the Colosseum.
 (Illustrations: Wes D. Pearce)

MATC 2017

These previous experiences have allowed me to slowly define my process for working with playwrights during the MATC Playwright’s Lab. Therefore, well before the 2017 conference, I asked playwrights David Crespy and Macy Jones if there was something specific they wanted from me during the workshop. Almost as soon as I asked the question I realized what a big ask that was. Unless a playwright has worked with a visual dramaturg before or been in the room at MATC or ATHE (Association for Theatre in Higher Education), then I think it is challenging for a playwright to know what they want from a visual dramaturg.

At the time I worked on “My Nona’s Canary,”³⁰ it was a small part of a much larger work focusing on the Jews of Thessaloniki and Crespy’s extended family. “My Nona’s Canary” is set in Philadelphia in

³⁰ David Crespy, “My Nona’s Canary” (unpublished manuscript, last modified December 27, 2016).

the 1970s and focuses on the relationship between Nona and her teenaged granddaughter. Ostensibly about the women and their choice to love “bad” men, the play questions the nature of love, family loyalty, faith, and the destruction of the Jewish communities in Greece. Threaded throughout this “contemporary” play is Nona as a young girl in Salonika, whose beautiful singing comments on both historical moments. This play had been workshopped prior to the conference and so, in many ways, was tighter than some of the other plays I have worked on. I found that my approach to this play and this workshop was more closely aligned with my work as a scenographer insofar as much of what I was doing seemed more pragmatic—both in terms of how I approached the text and the questions I was asking. Months before the conference, Crespy sent the creative team a file that contained dozens of pages of historical family documents, family photos, pictures from various trips to Salonika, as well as images of the family’s crossing of the Atlantic and life in the United States. This research was specific, and I used it as my guide. As a result, the work that I did for “My Nona’s Canary” seems more finished. I spent a great deal of time working with the photographs that Crespy had sent, and I realized that in this instance my job was to theatricalize a very real world of family history—to translate Crespy’s very personal and very real two-dimensional photographs into possibilities for a three-dimensional theatrical environment. The modern, mid-seventies world of this play is simply indicated by “a window.” There are multiple meanings and paths that could affect



Figure 18: Using historical images provided by the playwright, various thoughts on establishing Salonika, Greece, 1917 (Illustration: Wes D. Pearce)

character development in both staging and the text, depending on where the window is. If it is the front window in Nona's house, it creates an understanding of Nona as healthy and vibrant, whereas if the window is a hospital room or a nursing home it creates an understanding of Nona as unhealthy and ailing. In the end, my

work was not at all finished and the questions were just beginning, but it was a different process than I had used before.

Working with playwrights at the MATC Playwright's Lab has become my favorite part of the conference, but at times I do wonder, "So what?" I don't really get enough time with the playwright, I don't really give

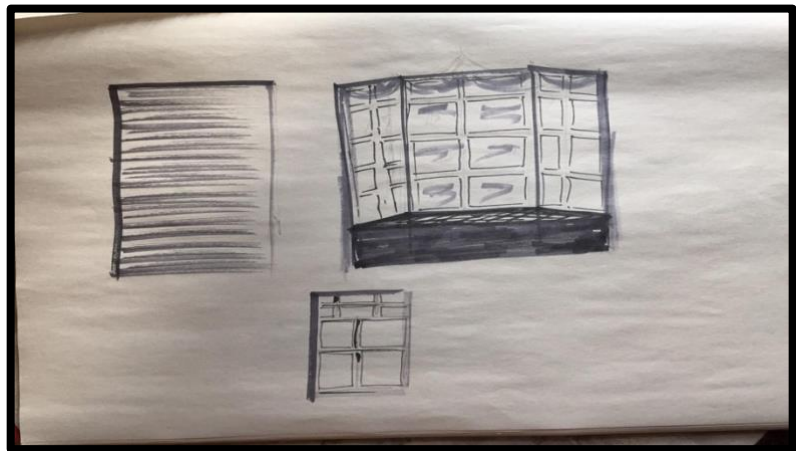


Figure 19: Philadelphia in 1977 is defined by a window, but the location could be Nona's home, a nursing home, a senior community center, or somewhere else entirely (Illustration: Wes D. Pearce)

myself enough time with the texts before the conference, and then I have five minutes to talk and it's over. Have I been effective? Has visual dramaturgy had any impact on the playwrights I have worked with? Similarly, what effect has working as a visual dramaturg had on me?

Honestly, there is no quantifiable way to answer these questions, and I certainly don't expect to

see my work in the finished text or production if the play develops further—but is there value to the process?

After the “Hanging On!” workshop, Steve Marsh wrote, “thank you so much for opening my eyes to some new ways of looking at the piece . . . I was very inspired by the Man and Woman on the ladders, and the one where they are caught in the rubble, so to speak.”³¹ More recently, Marsh wrote again, saying that the experience in 2014 continues to affect his writing, directing, and pedagogy:

I received your email a couple of days ago just after I finished teaching the first class of a freshman seminar in playwriting. I used *Hanging On!* as an example of a ten-minute play, which we read in class. Coincidentally, I talked to my students about your sketches and explained that often joyful process whereby other artists get to interpret a playwright's work. For me, your visual dramaturgy gave me a better understanding of how my play might work on stage by examining the several choices you gave for the set design. While I had my own visual idea that inspired me to write the play, seeing your visual interpretation opened my mind to different ways that I might self direct, or how others might direct the play . . . As a playwright, seeing a designer's rendering of my writing makes me understand the play better. It stimulates my curiosity about what other artists think and see. Your drawings stayed with me all these years and I am extremely grateful.³²

As mentioned, David Crespy is in the process of working on a theatrical epic and wrote that the visual dramaturgy “was indeed very helpful to me . . . [it] not only helped me with *Nona's Canary* . . . but also for a much a larger work that I am working on . . . a trilogy of stage dramas . . . your visualizations of *Nona's Canary* were wonderfully evocative and enormously influential on my development of a cohesive visual statement for the trilogy.”³³ Justin Maxwell spoke in detail about the relationship between the preliminary work I did with “The Palimpsests

³¹ Steve Marsh, email to author, March 10, 2014.

³² Steve Marsh, email to author, February 5, 2018.

³³ David Crespy, email to author, January 30, 2018.

of Agrippina Minor” and its further development. As mentioned, Maxwell was using the ten-minute play as a “proof of concept” for a full-length script:

By seeing multiple iterations of design based on the text, I was able to consider multiple visions as I began the work of expanding the text into a full-length script . . . Moreover, when I met with the production company I was able to bring Wes’s materials with me and we could have his work help shape some early discussions of form and concept. In fact, the ten-minute play is now a seventy-page manuscript on my desk . . . and the manuscript is physically sitting on the images that were generated during that very short workshop.³⁴

Catherine Gleason, also an author of this essay, was the director for “The Palimpsests of Agrippina Minor.” She mentions that when she came to the rehearsal she was already committed to a way of staging and blocking the play for the reading. However:

The images gave me [as director] permission to do more and to make bolder choices in terms of staging (within the limits of the concert reading form) . . . it gave me (and maybe us—though I cannot speak for the actors for sure) a world (or worlds) to imagine ourselves into. The script leaves so much to the imagination that your drawings gave us a set of possibilities. They maybe “enclosed” the work in a productive way that made me feel like I knew what the possibilities were. With these images—even though they were very different—I could build relationships within a space that was not there.³⁵

This freedom to think boldly and the ability to move the words off the page and into the visual world via the director’s interpretation feeds directly back to the playwright, hopefully informing the next draft of the potentialities of the text.

I would like to think that these are not isolated instances. Rather, these testaments are evidence enough of the value of visual dramaturgy; they speak to the importance, possibly even necessity, of visual dramaturgy interventions early in the play development process. The evidence, anecdotal as it is, demonstrates the significant benefit to new play development.

³⁴ Justin Maxwell, email to author, January 30, 2018.

³⁵ Catherine Gleason, email to author, February 2, 2018.

Recently, I was part of a development workshop for *Us: A Coming in Musical* at the Globe Theatre in Regina, Saskatchewan. The musical ran February 28 to March 18, 2018, but for a week in June 2017, I—along with Kelley Jo Burke (book), Jeffery Straker (music), Valerie Ann Pearson (director), and others—gathered with some talented actors to work through another draft of the script. The week was intense; scenes appeared and disappeared, and songs were cut and added. Although I was primarily there because I was designing the premiere production, I truly went to the workshop with my visual dramaturg hat on. Conversations with Burke and Pearson about space, visuals, and what was possible with some of the very literal stage directions opened up entire new theatrical worlds to Burke and Straker, and the final draft of the play reflected many of those conversations. The script, going into rehearsal, very clearly echoed the possibilities that were discovered in June, and that became possible only by having a visual dramaturg in the room.

Inevitably, when I approach a play as a scenographer (for professional theatre or within the university), I am more constrained. Perhaps this is a result of timelines (especially in regional theatre) or budget considerations (especially in the academy), or the fact that the “collaborative” nature of theatre is often about serving the hierarchy, or the fact that—as Howard suggests—scenographers are looking for “the” solution. Whatever the reason, the scenographic process can feel rather static. What is exciting, invigorating, and totally challenging about visual dramaturgy is that it is none of these things. The skills I bring to the workshop are not the skills I use when I’m designing a show such as *It’s a Wonderful Life*, with over fifty costume changes and a dozen locations. As a visual dramaturg, I am there to serve the

play and the playwright at that moment; I don't have to worry about "the overall harmony of the product of collaboration between the different elements of design."³⁶

In order to succeed as a visual dramaturg, I enter the workshop with a sense of curiosity, the recognition that I will probably fall flat on my face at least once, my imagination, years of positive and negative theatrical experiences, a certain fearlessness, and a "damn the torpedoes" attitude. To enter into this process with any other mindset (or wearing any other hat) seems rather counterproductive.

Catherine Gleason, Director

Building Collaborative Vocabularies: Physical Theatres and Visual Dramaturgies

When directing a new play about the brutal Nazi occupation in China during World War II, I moved beyond the narrative line of the text and the quotidian signifiers of the representative scenery by including abstract movement. Margaret Waterstreet, the author of *The Rape of Nanking: According to Minnie* (2002), offered lengthy expositional monologues at the top of many of the scenes,³⁷ so these movement sequences served to illuminate the symbolic and emotive content of the play while supporting the text. This example shows how my work as a director tends to favor the visual. While the work of a director includes many other potential intersections with the idea of visual dramaturgy, my training as a dancer/choreographer and physical theatre practitioner has always led me to favor the communication of bodies in space as a narrative and symbolic tool. Consequently, this narrowing of the directorial point of view is useful for our discussion here; we have

³⁶ Di Benedetto, *An Introduction*, 21.

³⁷ Margaret Waterstreet, *The Rape of Nanking: According to Minnie* (unpublished manuscript, January 2002).

practitioners whose expertise far exceeds my own in the material and the textual facets of theatrical practice. Thus, my approach to the question at hand—“what is visual dramaturgy and how does it work?”—will consider the work of the director as it engages with the body of the actor/performer. Given our earlier definition of visual dramaturgy as a way of seeing the theatrical product as a layering of the multiple visual elements that create meaning, the director’s work in visual dramaturgy can wrestle with the idea of how visual dramaturgy can be an act of translation between ideas and the body.

By rephrasing our initial question about visual dramaturgy, I can explore two ways of thinking about the practice and the director’s work. Wes D. Pearce gestures at these two potential perspectives when he says in his section of this larger essay that “design and visual dramaturgy are not the same thing. They are related in the same way that playwriting and dramaturgy are related—and yet they are as different as playwriting and dramaturgy.” Thus, we could ask what part of a director’s work with an actor is visual dramaturgy? And conversely, how can a director use the work of a dramaturg to shape the visual communication of a piece? In this way, we can reassert a perennial truth about dramaturgy; it is both a role and a function—a person as well as a kind of task. As an artist who has worked as both a dramaturg and a director, I know that I often perform the responsibilities of a dramaturg when I wear the hat of the director, but I also know that when I wear the hat of the dramaturg I do similar things to the director’s dramaturgical responsibilities—but I do them in service of the art we are creating as a team.

In an early usage of the phrase by Norwegian theorist Knut Ove Arntzen, he spoke of a non-hierarchical understanding of theatre in relationship to visual dramaturgy. He called it “a

visual kind of dramaturgy,” which he defines as follows: “It indicates that elements or means of expression, such as space, frontality, textuality and visibility, are no longer arranged in the traditional sense of organic or hierarchic systems, but are equivalent, on an equal footing.”³⁸

Thus, for Arntzen, certain performances are synchronous in their presentation of meaningful substance. Hence, a director using visual dramaturgy as a practice might follow a mode of questioning and probing (both standard tools for a dramaturg) with not only an eye toward the visual, but also an impetus to continually consider switching between visual strategies.

While directing a new adaptation of *Medea* (2012), this sort of probing led to my thoughts about staging circulating through the various visual strategies of the piece. The chorus serves the common functions of commenting on the action and leading the audience through the story, but it is also designed to serve two other functions.³⁹ First, the chorus builds a ritualized



Figure 20: *Medea* by Catherine Gleason and Barbara Salvadori-Heritage. Here the chorus performs their ritualistic function in unison and with a focus on Medea. (Photo: Brad M. Carlson)

context by becoming the agents of Medea’s magic, moving as a unit to raise the magical power and personal conviction to complete her plan and kill her sons, for example. Second, they serve as an alienation

³⁸ K. O. Arntzen, “A Visual Kind of Dramaturgy: Project Theatre in Scandinavia,” in *Small is Beautiful: Small Countries Theatre Conference, Glasgow 1990*, eds. Claude Schumacher and Derek Fogg (Glasgow: Theatre Studies Publications, 1991), 45.

³⁹ Catherine Gleason and Barbara Salvadori-Heritage, *Medea* (unpublished manuscript, September 13, 2012).



Figure 21: *Medea* by Catherine Gleason and Barbara Salvadori-Heritage. The more Brechtian mode is on display here, with each member of the chorus reflecting individual personality through posture and gesture. (Photo: Brad M. Carlson)

device. The chorus stops the forward action of the play to instigate an examination of the political implications of the play. During the climax, the chorus freezes the action and initiates a discussion with the audience in contemporary vernacular about why Medea killing her sons is so shocking. The movement vocabulary that governed these two modes was served by a “visual kind of dramaturgy,” a probing way of seeing that helped to clarify and differentiate the two functions of the chorus.

While visual dramaturgy can offer a leveling of hierarchies in theatrical expression and encourage a set of shifting strategies, it also presses directors to think about how they can move between these strategies and what may be gained and lost in the process. Lighting designer Lucas Krech, in his article “Towards an Understanding of Visual Dramaturgy,” positions the theatre designer as a translator between the non-visual text and the visual theatre

performance. He talks about translation between media (or languages) as an act that can create an excess or, conversely, a dearth of *stuff*—for lack of a better term for the different available media.⁴⁰ Hypothetically, the meaning of the theatrical moment stays the same, but it will take more, or less, of that element to express that idea, mood, or action. This notion allows me to think generatively about the creation of movement and how the translation from one body to another might create a semantic excess or lessening. Because of this line of questioning, we can ask, “How does the act of visual dramaturgy create efficiencies or potentialities of abstraction? Or, conversely, how does it produce an abundance of expression that creates meaning through redundancy and accumulation?” The ensemble approach to staging—where the actors remain onstage throughout the play—is an example of this sort of translation. The multiplication of bodies onstage creates more meaning through the rhythm of visual repetition. In a recent production of *The Laramie Project* (2017), I expanded the cast from eight to ten and kept them all onstage nearly the entire three acts.



Figure 22: *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kauffmann and the members of the Tectonic Theater Project. Here the entire cast is onstage for the final moments of the play. (Photo: Brad M. Carlson)

⁴⁰ Lucas Krech, “Towards an Understanding of Visual Dramaturgy,” *LQ.23: Art and Theory blog*, April 19, 2010, <http://lucaskrech.com/blog/index.php/2010/04/19/towards-an-understanding-of-visual-dramaturgy/>.

This idea of translation inspires a line of questioning that contemplates how the dramaturgy of the body is activated through an act of translation—a journey from the idea to the physical expression of the body. This seems to make sense when one applies the idea to staging for straight plays where stage action is expressive of character thought processes. However, when one creates stage movement that is generated through the impulses of the body rather than from an idea that can be expressed verbally, we get into a territory where interpretation (translation back into thought) happens but the meaning is not inherent in the original gesture or movement.⁴¹ This idea of interpretation speaks to the value of a dramaturg in the room with a physical theatre company/director. Having a person in the room to act as that first audience, as Green-Rogers notes above, is particularly useful when we are considering this translation of physical theatre into the meaning-making which every audience performs. Alyson Germinder, our dramaturg on *Medea*, served in this capacity as we developed the various visual dramaturgies. She was not in every rehearsal, so her notes were especially valuable as she translated the stage movement she had not seen before into thought.

Dance dramaturgy is a potential model for how a visual dramaturg could work with a director. In support of this idea that visual dramaturgy is an act of translation, dance dramaturg Heidi Gilpin responds to the question “what do you do [as a dance dramaturg]?” with the following: “I feel that I help translate ideas that could be linguistic, mathematical, or scientific into another form and try to create a ground with the choreographer where our mutual obsessions can interact.”⁴² Thus, this is a translation back from movement into ideas (or from

⁴¹ Michael Kirby, “Nonsemiotic Performance,” *Modern Drama* 25, no. 1 (March 1982): 145.

⁴² Scott deLahunta, “Dance Dramaturgy: speculations and reflections,” *Dance Theatre Journal* 16, no. 1 (April 2000): 20-25.

the visual to language). Diana Theodores adds to this idea by saying, “the practice of dramaturgy involves seeing and watching, lots of talking and maybe writing—the employment of language and discourse.”⁴³ Again, the idea of excess in translation comes up here. If the goal of all this seeing and writing is to be that first audience, it is important for the dramaturg to express as many of the potential meanings as possible to not only offer a path toward clarity (if possible), but also offer interpretations for the director and actors to build on that they might not have known were there. Potentially, this kind of dramaturgical translation demands repetition and rephrasing to get closer to bridging the gap between the expression of a dramaturg’s understanding of a moment and the director’s and/or actor’s intent regarding a visual expression that resists verbal explanation.

While working on *The Laramie Project*, our student dramaturg had a strong impulse toward engaging the visual in her notes. It was great to have a second set of eyes processing and communicating what the staging in this play meant to her as the first audience. The one stumbling block that we ran into was when she would give blocking notes directly to the actors. I had given her free reign to give notes about the text because her work with the text had proved to be exceptional. However, I found that notes about staging and the actors’ physical choices needed to be discussed and explored further before bringing them to the actors. The dramaturg and I needed this additional discussion because of the difficulty in using language to talk about the meaning derived from human bodies onstage. I found I needed to have her explain what she saw and how she understood it more than once; that way I could approximate

⁴³ deLahunta, “Dance Dramaturgy,” 20-25.

an understanding of what the audience might experience. The visual dramaturgy of the play was indeed slippery when we both tried to put it into language.

As a director, my work lives in the evocative place between text, design, and bodies. The practice of visual dramaturgy provides a way of seeing and thinking about how moves between these semantic realms can act as a translation in the best sense of the word. Perhaps the most productive sense of the idea is to think of it as an active circulation between visual vocabularies with the desired result being creating a theatrical world that can be understood. Thus, given our earlier definition of visual dramaturgy as a way of seeing the theatrical product by layering multiple visual elements to create meaning, the director's work in visual dramaturgy can wrestle with the idea of how it can be an act of translation between ideas and the body.

Conclusion

All of the perspectives found in this essay illustrate the extent to which visual dramaturgy affects the work of theatre artists. We all participate in acts of visual dramaturgy: The playwright uses visual dramaturgy to inspire designers and himself, the dramaturg sees it as a tool in unlocking storytelling potential and as a way to create avenues for artistic collaboration, the designer sees its process as distinct and separate from design and as a supplement to the new play development experience, and the director sees its power through the bodies found in a performance space. As theatres continue to focus on developing new work, it is now essential that they start to think about the potential for visual dramaturgy within their new play development process and how it increases the likelihood of creating a complete story—for the use of visual dramaturgy opens up possibilities for the playwright.

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