'Work, work, work…' Limits and Potentials of Dramaturgical Labour in Municipal Theatres

By Antonia Tretter

'But what do you actually *do* as a dramaturge?' Working as a dramaturge in municipal theatres in Germany is an often questioned and ambivalent practice. As our labour oscillates between institutional security and artistic freedom, dramaturges frequently notice a contrast between intellectual creative work and administrative or managerial duties (see van Kerkhoven). We navigate within strict hierarchical structures while we simultaneously work on social critique in various productions (see Schmidt). According to Peter M. Boenisch, the professional dramaturge is often associated with the term of the '*Funktionär*' (Boenisch 202). This 'functionary' operates within the institution's 'hegemonic order', pursuing official targets that sometimes restrict artistic visions. For dramaturges *in praxis*, the negotiation of our ambiguous roles within the institution—being 'enmeshed' in a 'process of legitimization, validation and control' (van Imschoot 57)—is a crucial challenge, which now receives more activist and scholarly attention.[1] In this essay, I examine limits and potentials of my own visible and invisible dramaturgical labour.

A municipal theatre in Germany appears like a fortress, stable and secure. It receives public funding. It relies on fixed schedules, long-practiced rituals such as opening night parties, superstitious rules ('Don't whistle backstage!'), and theatre-specific idioms ('Break-a-leg!'). From 2016-2019, I worked as a dramaturge for the Mainfranken

1 Since 2015, alternative unions have been founded to aim for a fundamental reform of the German municipal theatre system (*Art but Fair, ensemble-netzwerk)* and care for the working conditions of professional dramaturges (*dramaturgie-netzwerk*, 2019). For instance, Jan Deck and Sandra Umathum published an anthology on *Postdramaturgien*, acknowledging the new dynamics dramaturgy as a professional practice faces in German speaking theatres.

Theatre Würzburg. Located in a mid-sized city in southern Germany, it is a small four-branch house that employs a philharmonic orchestra, an opera choir, a range of soloists, as well as an acting ensemble and a dance company.[2] I was one of two members in the dramaturgy department; and although the department was connected to the theatre manager, it held no power within the theatre's general management structure. In this essay, I will recapture my experience working on the production *Magnolienzeit (Time of the Magnolias*) (2018). I will analyse how my work as the production's dramaturge involved being a researcher, a co-director, and a production manager at once. Ultimately, I argue that dramaturges need to insist on the intellectual and artistic elements of their work as their core practice in order to responsibly perform their joint-functions within the institution of the municipal theatre.

Project vs. Institution

The historical origins of the municipal theatre dramaturge's professional work in Germany are persistent and hard to deny. In the 18th century, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing developed a strict set of rules for dramaturges. He saw them as responsible for finding the most appropriate theatrical representation of a written play and for curating the season's programs of the newly established *Nationaltheater* (see Deutsch-Schreiner). This precious heritage still leaves some traces in the dramaturges' labour today (ibid.) as it is reflected in colloquial jokes about their rigour: 'What do condoms and dramaturges have in common? With them it is more secure, but without them it's more fun'. Today, the average season of a mid-sized German municipal theatre will contain a mixture of classical drama, contemporary plays, novel adaptations, and projects of devised theatre work. Although devised projects demand more flexible ways of working together on an artistic team, the hierarchical structures and fixed roles within municipal theatres make such flexibility in labour

2 According to the website, the Mainfranken Theater Würzburg welcomes around 138,000 visitors to about 420 performances a year (https://www.mainfrankentheater.de/en/theater/).

practices challenging. For example, as the dramaturge for Sophocles' *Antigone* I would stay rather passive and focus on being an 'outside eye' (van Imshoot 63) for the text. Whilst a research project or documentary theatre production requires a more engaged style of dramaturgical work. Therefore, I will now take a closer look at the only documentary theatre production I worked on during my time in Würzburg in order to show that although dramaturgical practices within the institution have changed, the system has not.

Magnolienzeit was a research project that dealt with a crucial event in the history of Würzburg: on 16 March 1945, Royal Air Force bombs destroyed almost 90% of Würzburg's old town, causing approximately 3550 casualties (Baum 2). Using means of documentary theatre, the team[3] investigated the local culture of remembrance. Our theatre research project analysed both the controversial political discourse of Jewish voices and stories, which had been neglected in that culture of remembrance for too long, and extreme right-winged groups who had been abusing the civil victims of Würzburg for their nationalistic propaganda. *Magnolienzeit* was staged in a site-peculiar venue[4]: the *Max-Stern-Keller*, an old wine cellar beyond Würzburg's old university. This space, now the cafeteria for law students, is named after a Jewish wine merchant who fled Würzburg in 1938. The final script combined historical facts, local legends, and archival material about the event, but did not re-tell a chronological chain of events.

Whilst realising *Magnolienzeit*, we often challenged institutional structures: we needed more time and space for research; we needed a production contact person; we needed specific contracts, etc. And we questioned the distribution of responsibilities: who works on what; how do we integrate our individual interests in a common endeavour?

3 The team consisted of director Tjark Bernau, stage and costume designer Karlotta Matthies, actors Bastian Beyer, Hannes Berg, Helene Blechinger, Maria Brendel, Anton Koelbl and myself as the production's dramaturge.

4 Here and in the following I use the term 'site-peculiar' instead of 'site-specific', as the cellar offers some interesting points of reference to our topic, but we did not originally develop the performance because we knew about this site.

The process of co-writing the script was analogue to our approach of doing research together as a team. The director Tjark Bernau and I—sometimes joined by the actors—interviewed fifteen people. We analysed the transcripts regarding their narrative qualities, potential to be controversial or clarifying, and their specific value in transferring the 'then' to the 'now'.

While directing teams in municipal theatres usually follow a structure that allot individuals on the team to specific roles—such as director, stage design, costume, historical research—we aimed for a more equitable division of tasks. Every single scenic development was discussed democratically and collaborators were encouraged to step out of their pre-set roles. For example, I became more involved in stage design than dramaturges usually are, when I discovered the wine cellar, which became our site-peculiar venue. Our aim to work collaboratively cost time and required the communicative tools to negotiate both the content of the play, as well as structural hierarchies. The 'passive' dramaturge I had been for nine productions before the project was suddenly required to be actively involved, while the institutional frames and limitations remained the same. For example, while I was spending 35 hours a week on archival research, interviews, and collaging the script, I was also expected—amongst other tasks—to continue PR work, hold introductory talks, prepare forthcoming productions and support the daily theatre business. At the same time our attempt to redefine working constellations lead to a more process-orientated way of sharing knowledge within the team, unlike the most common practice in German municipal theatres where directors receive sole credit for the artistic vision of a given production. In our process, the actors, who were later to embody the collected stories on stage, especially gained a more intense connection to the performance's material due to our approach of shared responsibility. Furthermore, Tjark Bernau and I took the actors' interest in specific stories into account in the development of the script. This gave us a greater degree of creative freedom not often employed in all processes of municipal theatre production.

Yet, this approach posed risks of artistic exploitation. As the

working conditions in municipal theatres are already marked by long hours and unpaid overtime, we were aware that asking our team members to commit additional time for tasks outside their expertise was problematic for all of us. The sociologist Lisa Basten shows that the 'self-image' of artists reveals a 'toxic' connection between self-realisation and work, leading to self-exploitation in difficult circumstances of extensive working hours and under low wages (12-13). This was a dilemma I faced during my work on *Magnolienzeit*: the moment that I left my traditional dramaturgical space within the institution to become more active and encourage actors to get more involved in the devising process, I contributed to a more collective working atmosphere, while I also, potentially, encouraged all of us to exceed the terms of our contractual obligations. In order to fulfil the institutional goal to realize a theatre research project dealing with the events of 16 March of 1945 in Würzburg, I needed to change my position and self-image as a dramaturge completely—and I did so enthusiastically.

Through our work, the team was able to see the secure *and* fragile frames within municipal theatres, such as the precarious and often out-dated working conditions. Our wish to work together differently challenged the hierarchical structures, but, ultimately, left them in place. My experience shows that the labour of a dramaturge within municipal theatres is an increasingly contradictory practice because it is both bound by and tries to flee the limits of the institution. The more a dramaturge gets involved in the actual artistic and organizational sphere of a production, the more their dialectical relationship to theatre management becomes apparent. Extraordinary working conditions are repeatedly verified as 'exceptional' and justified by the outstanding requirements a project like *Magnolienzeit* needs.

Research vs. Management

The intense involvement of my dramaturge-self in that production effected my ability to balance between the need of profound research and exceptional administrative and organizational duties. I will now show briefly how *Magnolienzeit* changed my *self*- and the *outer*-conception

of dramaturgical labour within the municipal theatre. As a dramaturge, it is my job to create an awareness for the complexity of the subject we are dealing with. I addressed ethical questions about handling historical facts and testimonies and I scrutinised the politics of memorialisation at play here. Our conceptual focus lay in questions like: How do we avoid retelling what is already well-known about this historic trauma? How do we avoid re-cultivating story lines, such as presenting the people of Würzburg as 'victims' without acknowledging the context of the Shoa and the total war that the NS-regime initiated?

Consequently the complexity of my role as dramaturge involved my interaction with various partners and institutions. For instance, the historian Rotraud Ries, head of the *Johanna Stahl Center for Jewish Culture and History in Lower Franconia*, was one of our most important partners in developing the project. She problematizes the city's culture of remembrance: 'It seems to me as if the city lost its fundament in 1945 and since then has cultivated the 16th March as a new founding myth: establishing the destruction and the experience of loss as the foundation of a civic consciousness and as historical reference' (Ries 4). While connecting with experts like her, I created a network of other perspectives outside of the established culture of remembrance. And so, as I managed these narratives, I confronted another key element of a dramaturge's labour within a municipal theatre, which simultaneously proves its ambiguous dimension. As soon as it is considered one of the main functions of a municipal theatre to critically reflect on the specific city's history and society, it is the dramaturge's mission to pursue this aim. Yet the role of the institution—represented in this case by the dramaturge—holds a complicated position itself since it is funded by the municipality, which is partly responsible for the city's former problematic culture of remembrance. Therefore, as a dramaturge, my contribution to the theatre's outreach in the public sphere involved balancing my critical yet representative function while engaging different cooperative partners (archives, libraries, the city's cultural council, the university, etc). Finally, the responsibility I shouldered for this project was not comparable to the dramaturgical responsibility I have in staging

a classical play. In this peculiar case, my joint function was expanded without any additional compensation. I doubled as a dramaturge and production manager without a discussion about how I was to merge these different responsibilities. Whilst I started the project as researcher, most of the time I ended up negotiating contracts for our site-peculiar venue or ensuring that we had the keys for our rehearsals on site.

Still, by leaving the 'intermediary function' (van Imshoot 61) and the position of an 'outside eye' (63) and becoming a co-writer, a co-director, and a production manager, the profession of the dramaturge gains more public visibility. I found this to be true when my name was mentioned in reviews of *Magnolienzeit*: 'it is the great merit of Bernau and Tretter to have created a multi-voiced and multi-layered performance and to have included all perspectives despite limitations of space and time' (Natter 2). In managerial regards my role increasingly resembled the '*Funktionär*' described by Boenisch, although my first aim was still to support our artistic and conceptual goals. That this comes along with immaterial *outer* merit but is not valued monetarily is the neoliberal trick often served by municipal theatres nowadays.

Responsibility and Visibility

While a research project like *Magnolienzeit* requires a different amount of time, a more flexible schedule, and specific personnel resources compared to a 'regular' production, it also shows the ambiguous dimensions of dramaturgical labour in subsidised institutions. The conflation of administrative and artistic work in the figure of the dramaturge, thus, facilitates a systemic understanding of dramaturgical labour and emphasises the necessity of institutional change. Although the encompassing workflow of *Magnolienzeit* did not suit the structures and artistic practices elaborated before, it still managed to become a successful production. This occurred in part due to the willingness of the team members to invest more resources, in part by arriving at artistic compromises, and in part as we returned to more regulated work flows in the final rehearsals. Despite my heightened awareness,

I did not escape the hierarchical system of the municipal theatre. In accepting all the duties of the manager position this production needed, I gave up time and artistic resources I rather would have invested in devising or accompanying the rehearsals. While I developed more dramaturgical self-confidence, I still operated as the institutional voice of this production. I defended regulations—like the relatively few hours of rehearsal time in the production's actual venue—that I regretted myself. And I was too reluctant to refuse the overload of duties, though I knew better.

To protect the artistic work of a dramaturge, it is crucial to limit an overload of work. If we don't clearly state the limits of our work capacity and just keep taking on whatever duty might benefit the theatre machine, we will lose the potential of the dramaturge's joint position as active part, representative, and critic of the production and reduce them to a stopgap function. Taking seriously the political dimensions of the labour of dramaturgy will aide in disclosing structural problems within the institution as a whole. My experience shows that the question 'what does a dramaturge actually do?' cannot be answered by just enumerating all tasks a dramaturge performs. In order to create more visibility of the labour of a dramaturge, we must stand up for the 'in-between' work concerning conceptual, textual, and discursive practices *and* acknowledge the danger of compensating for institutional failures.

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