Birth Planning for Dramaturgs

A Guide to Theatrical Midwifery

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Centre for Dramaturgy and Curation

Manuals for Dramaturgy Series

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Introduction

The birth of a new play is wonderful. Miraculous, even. Not only for the playwright—the parent of the play—but also for you, the dramaturg—the playwright's midwife, partner, counsellor, doctor and friend.

As a dramaturg, you are there for the playwright before, during and after birth. You are their primary support person on a journey that is special, emotional, intimate, ecstatic—but not without its challenges. Your job is to build a fruitful and trusting relationship with the writer and their work so that they can birth their play in a way that is open, illuminating and harmonious.

Achieving this is not just about meticulous text analysis. It is about finding an understanding and connection with what your playwright wants to say. And it is only from that place

of understanding that you will be able to facilitate the birth of the exact play the playwright dreamed of writing.

I should tell you that I myself am also a parent of plays, and this experience has informed my practice to the extent that I think of dramaturgy as closer to empathy than intellect. Empathy is the understanding of a shared experience, to be able to talk about what you're going through to someone who has been through it too, and so has an innate understanding of both the struggle and joy of this process.

If you are a dramaturg but not a playwright, perhaps compassion might be a closer fit for you. Compassion will feel different for the dramaturg than empathy, but by drawing on your extensive experience witnessing how playwrights work, you can find that same sense of connection, respect and emotional appreciation with your playwright.

This is the part you don't learn in textbooks. The bedside manner, if you will.

This approach of empathy (or compassion) is not without rigour, and not without tough decisions. But it is an approach that starts from a place of understanding, in order to follow a writer-led, intuitively-guided process to create the best possible play that is true to the writer's vision.

Recently, after reflecting on a busy period of both dramaturgy and writing projects, and assessing what had or hadn't worked, I wrote the phrase 'process over product' on a post-it note and stuck it to my wall. I had realised that no matter how well a play turned out, if I hadn't enjoyed making it, it did not feel like a success. As a playwright, I know that it is often the guidance, support and sometimes even protection of a

dramaturg that makes a process and working environment safe and enjoyable.

An empathetic dramaturgical approach is one that focuses on the safety and enjoyment of the process. And I believe that if the process is good, the product—the play your playwright dreamed of—will come.

Through this guide, I will share with you some of my experiences and ideas about how to be an empathetic dramaturg. We'll start with the steady process of gestation, through the importance of relationship building and flexibility, working towards the critical moment of going into labour. Plus: what to do in an emergency, pain relief options and how to care for your playwright after the play is born.

So sanitise those forceps and prepare for the messy miracle of modern dramaturgy.

I

Gestation

The play will come in its own time.

Nine months is considered a standard gestation period for a human baby, but there's no reason to assume this play will be human.

Cats gestate for about two months, but the kittens don't even open their eyes for weeks, and are totally dependent on the mother for survival during that time. Giraffes take up to fifteen months and their young are running around within minutes.

Maybe the play is a 12-day opossum. Opossums are so small when they are born that the birth itself has been difficult for zoologists to witness—they simply arrive in the pouch as if by magic. This process can birth fun, radical, maverick work. For you, it will mean quick feedback, a flexible schedule, dynamic

offers and a keen sense of what can or can't be achieved in the timeframe.

Or maybe the play is a 660-day elephant. Elephants' brains are highly developed from birth, allowing them to feed themselves and have an innate understanding of their herd's social structure. These plays are built for longevity and complex interaction. A longer gestation means you and the playwright can allow for trial and error along the way and take more time for research and reflection.

Neither timeline is better than the other, but they each present different challenges for you and your playwright, so be prepared for all eventualities along the time scale. In my experience, the elephant end of things is a little more likely, but the occasional opossum will pop up to keep you on your toes.

If you're feeling impatient, remember that plays are complex, vast things to create and encompassing a world in 90 pages is really difficult. Let it gestate as long as it needs to survive and thrive. There is no rush to reach the birth itself.

Check in regularly during gestation so your playwright knows you're there if and when they need you. In the early stages they may just need encouragement or suggestions of inspirational texts. Later on will be reading drafts, giving feedback and checking how edits are going. Make sure they are feeling positive and lend a hand when the sickness kicks in.

A schedule for these check-ins might help—having a regular day that you talk or a date once a month where you look at the current version of the script. Or your playwright might respond better to a much looser structure and you can wait for them to reach out to you.

II

Flexibility

Meet the play on its own terms.

Often, that means letting go of preconception and judgement. Judgement about what a play is or should be. But also judgement of the characters' actions. It is ok (sometimes it is necessary) to ask why a character is making a certain choice. But that question should come from a place of trying to understand, rather than a place of trying to reverse the choice.

Your playwright has many options as to how they birth their play.

I often find myself saying 'I wonder if…'

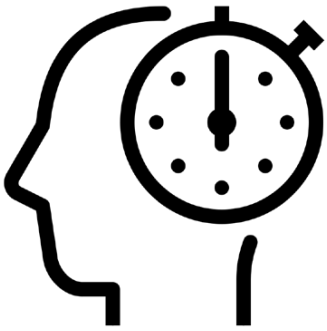
'I wonder if this argument could hit closer to home.'

'I wonder if we need this section.'

'I wonder if we are learning enough about their motives here.'

I do this to always present my thoughts purely as options, not directives. Which is truthfully how I feel about them and it allows the writer to make the ultimate choice about how to proceed. The word 'wonder' also allows for openness in both dramaturg and playwright as to what might be. In this spirit, feedback can be seen not as criticism but as an invitation to possibility.

Sometimes your suggestions or methods won't land with this particular playwright. It's easy to feel discouraged in that moment, or like you've said the wrong thing, particularly early in your career. But remember the spirit of openness and that feedback should be taken seriously, but not personally. This is a vulnerable time for both of you, so it's a good sign that the playwright trusts you enough to be honest. Have other ideas ready, and you can quickly move on together.



III

Timing

Timing your advice right is often as important as the advice itself.

As a general rule of good timing, your advice should start with the macro at the beginning of the process, and work through to the micro. The day of opening generally isn't the right time to suggest a major rewrite. Equally, there's lots the playwright doesn't need to worry about early on, like tiny line edits or scene change logistics.

Help your playwright to focus on what matters when. Too many micro and macro edits right at the start can be discouraging and make the playwright feel that the issues are insurmountable.

Whereas if you start big—

'What themes are they exploring?'

'What's the central question?'

'When is this?'

'Who are these characters?'

—you are laying the foundations on which to tackle the small—

'What if they said this at the bottom of the page?'

'I think they've made this point in the previous line.'

'You could cut the 'very' here.'

You should tell your playwright that this is what you're doing and why. Remember that they are deep inside this world, and have been longer than anyone. You're the one that can pull them back, that can be ensuring the baby has a skeleton before fixating on eye colour.

Reassure them that you will get to everything.

Just maybe not today.

IV

Relationship Building

Any good relationship is built on communication.

I try to speak plainly as often as possible. If I reference a play and the playwright doesn't know it, I don't persist with the comparison. Ditto theories, movements, schools of thought.

I never studied dramaturgy (or writing), so I don't always know the right theatrical or literary terminology, which makes it really easy for me not to use such words. But if you can employ scholarly vocabulary, think carefully about whether that might foster connection and understanding with your playwright, or whether it might feel alienating or confusing.

Sometimes it can be more useful to build your own vocabulary, in a language that reflects the values you and your playwright share together. In one development, the playwright, director and I talked continually about ideas, stories and even structures we considered to be 'snacky'. It suited the tone of the work we were making as well as the close working relationship the three of us had formed.

There are other ways you can put a playwright at ease with your word choice, too. Often that's by focusing on the positive, not the negative:

What is working?

What do you love?

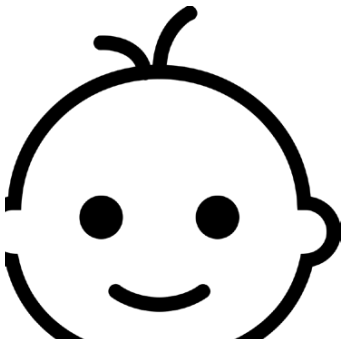
What is strong?

What do you want more of?

And it can be subtler than that.

Once a dramaturg said to me about my own play, I think there's a scene missing here. It struck me. They didn't say, You need a new scene. They said it in a way that made me feel that what I had written was ostensibly whole, with just a part waiting to be written. I had not created an incomplete text – the parts were just not yet fully discovered. Rather than making me feel like I'd failed, or that there was a huge mountain still to climb, it made me keen to simply uncover that missing scene.

I have used that turn of phrase often.



V

Inner Child

Don’t be afraid to be the stupidest person in the room.

Which is to say: ask the basic questions. If you don’t know who someone is or why something has been said—ask. If it’s not clear to you, it’s possible that it won’t be clear to an audience, and that is important information for the writer to have.

Equally, I am always happy to be proven wrong. Maybe the information is in a previous scene and I missed it? Great. Edit averted. Shedding your ego is hard, but I have found it necessary.

Also be prepared for your inner child to be more in touch with their emotions than you are.

Once a person who worked in film told me that in film they talk about what they think, whereas in theatre we just talk about our feelings. It was intended as a slight, and back then I took it as one. Now I see it as a compliment.

Birth is an intense and emotional phenomenon that engages the whole body. Feel your feelings.

An audience will react with feeling. You are this play's first and most attentive audience. Embrace how you feel about the play and express that. The writer needs to hear it.

When you read or watch a play, you put your trust in it. A play might be shocking or unexpected or violent or any other myriad of dramatically-deserved not-nice feelings. But it shouldn't betray that trust. If something happens that is so shocking or unexpected or violent that you feel betrayed, you must speak up.

No parent wants to see their baby inflict harm. By talking to the playwright now, you are ensuring that the play remains safe for its audience, thereby protecting the playwright from pain or judgement down the line.

VI

Birthing Companions

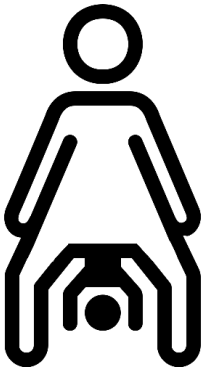
When you look back from the delivery room, the gestation period will seem kind of romantic.

You and the playwright are both swimming in a world of thoughts and ideas. And whilst some tough decisions will have been made and some big conversations had, it's still a really exciting time of limitless possibility where you're in love with the characters and story and the world that's being created.

But much as it would be nice, it can't always be just you and the playwright. Sometimes there are a lot of opinions in the room and it can seem like everyone thinks they're the midwife, or worse, the parent. It's your job to manage how

these newer perspectives affect the playwright and influence their burgeoning play.

Navigating multiple influences can begin at any point during gestation—with a director, designer or key actor joining the conversation—so be ready to lay the groundwork early to help the playwright decide who and what to listen to.



VII

Labour

Labour is the point at which this complex navigation reaches its most critical phase. Without careful, courageous dramaturgy, this is the time when the love bubble well and truly bursts.

Everyone is excited and enthusiastic about the birth of this new play. They've been thinking about it, planning for it and are raring to tell the playwright everything. The more invested your team, the more opinions they will have and the more they think they know exactly how the play should be born and what it will look like.

For the playwright, this can be a terrifying moment, and can lead to complete overwhelm, even upset. Reassure them that their vision for the play is the one that matters most.

Everyone on the birthing team has their own focus in supporting the birth of this play. For example, an actor can invest in their character to a greater depth than the playwright who is looking after everything. This is extremely helpful for play development, but can cause problems too. Look out for the behaviours you yourself are avoiding, like judgement of the story (This is ridiculous!) or characters (They wouldn't say that!). Any behaviour that isn't coming from a place of trying to understand can flatten the playwright's confidence and erode the trust you've built.

You can't control others' behaviour, but you can step in and defend the play and the playwright. If one person has a question, see if others in the room can answer it, instead of making the playwright explain themselves and their work.

Frame the conversation to begin with the positive

'Where did you want to know more?'

—rather than the negative—

'What didn't make sense?'

Shut down any pile-ons of negative feedback—

'I didn't get that.'

'Me neither.'

'Me neither!'

—by jumping straight into ways to solve the query—

'Ok, how could that be clearer for you?'

Steer the conversation towards areas you know the playwright is focusing on so they get what they need from the session.

A workshop or rehearsal will result in a lot of feedback and new information for the playwright. If you've helped guide them through it, hopefully they'll be feeling informed, rather than desperate. But make sure by talking to them afterwards. Start by literally asking them how they are feeling. Once they've processed their emotions, you can get into unpacking the feedback.

They might have had a strong connection to some of it—encourage them to go with their gut. Or they might be feeling totally unsure or panicked by the sheer amount of information. In this case, try to boil down what has been said and highlight what you think it's important for the playwright to listen to and what they can disregard. This is also a good opportunity to reassure them of what is working.

As well as being a time of intense scrutiny, labour is also the point of the process where the play begins to be taken away from the playwright and become the property of the director, or the team as a whole. This can be a fraught and alienating experience.

As a writer, what has helped me the most is remembering that the script and the production are two separate things. The script is mine—created, nurtured and ultimately owned by me—but the production is a collaboration between everyone and belongs to the whole. One does not lessen the other; they exist side by side.

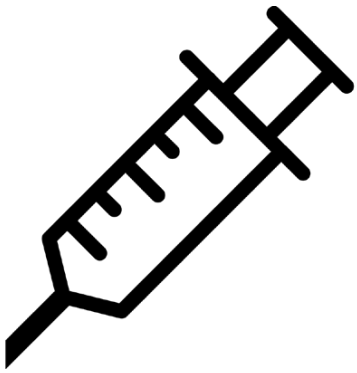
It might help to remind your playwright of this, not only during labour but throughout the process. The earlier they know this split is coming, the easier it will be. Look out for

areas that are open to interpretation and check if this is the playwright's intention or if they have a definite idea of how it should be performed. If you think there are moments where they can clarify their vision within the text—more explicit stage directions, or some additional lines—help them do that.

A dramaturg said to me once:

> *'This is just the first production.'*

Ok, maybe the world tour won't eventuate, but it's so soothing to hear that in the moment.



VIII

Pain Relief

What to do when your playwright is in pain?

First, identify the source.

- Maybe, as discussed, they're overwhelmed by feedback.
- Maybe they've lost the thread of the story.
- Maybe their structure needs an overhaul and they don't know where to begin.
- Maybe a character has an incomplete emotional arc or has shown themselves to be surplus to requirements or is unlikeable when they're meant to be the protagonist.
- Maybe the playwright's done too much research and doesn't know what's interesting.

- Maybe they've lost sight of their vision.
- Maybe they're bored with the play. Or sick of it. Or just plain tired.

This is where your empathy and compassion are needed most. Make sure you acknowledge and validate how they're feeling. Spend some time just listening before jumping into solutions.

When they're ready, ask what you can do to help.

- They might know exactly what they need, but if not, have some pain relief methods up your sleeve.
- They might need some feedback clarifying or simplifying or explaining again.
- They might need post-its with plot points stuck to the wall and moved around and added to or taken away until everything makes sense to them.
- They might need a rundown of three-act structure or some reading suggestions of postdramatic texts to understand the context they're operating in.
- They might need you to read the play out loud with them with the central question written up big on some butcher's paper so they can hear it all align.
- They might need a chat about what excited them about this in the first place.
- They might need a couple days off. Or a couple weeks.
- They might need a coffee or a stretch or a scream.

All are fine.

One of my most successful small notes was the suggestion that a writer put page breaks in the document, so they could

see each scene in isolation. It was basically admin, but it transformed how they felt about the play and how they saw it.

I've also spent a lot of time writing scene titles on flashcards and moving the order around on the floor. This is restructuring made jigsaw puzzle. It is a refreshing zoom out when all the words are far too close.

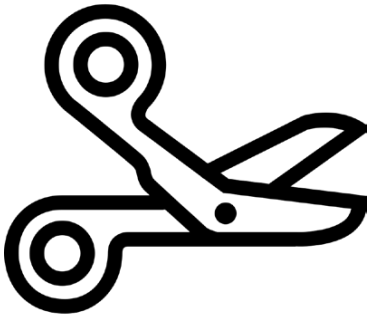
It's hard to know what exactly will clear the fog, but it isn't always a drastic, complicated action. Simplicity and baby steps often win.

Sometimes, just holding your playwright's hand and telling them they are doing well is the best thing you can do. Telling them the play is nearly there. Telling them to breathe.

Once, as a writer, I turned to my dramaturg in a café on Chapel Street and said 'The play is broken.'

They said, 'No, it's not'.

They were right.



IX

Emergencies

Cuts hurt, but sometimes they are necessary. If you think there might be need of a big painful cut down the road, try to flag that as early as possible. It won't hurt less, but the playwright will know it's coming.

Be prepared for things to go awry. A dramaturg once described what they did to me as 'emergency dramaturgy'. It can feel like that sometimes—like you need to just do what you can to save the life of the play. And that might mean having a larger input in the decision-making if you think the playwright needs it.

Maybe a cut is needed. Or maybe a new addition. Maybe they should have started at the end or this one scene doesn't make sense or there's a small gap in the plot or this play is actually a comedy. And it's the last week of rehearsals so this is big. Here's where we must keep a firm hold on one of the

fundamental principles of theatrical midwifery: never forget whose baby it is.

Always ask the playwright before you make any decisions:

'Do you want me to take a look at where you could

cut this?

Do you want to try changing the order here?'

By this point in the process, you have built a strong, trusting relationship with your playwright, so at this time of immense stress, the likelihood is that they will say yes to your offer of help. But if they don't, don't force it. And always make sure that these big changes are still serving what the playwright wants to say. Go back to the original vision. See how you can best facilitate it.

Personally, I have banned the word 'fix' from my vocabulary. I've found it to be a word that suggests a disrespect of the playwright by perpetuating an idea that the playwright does not know what they are doing. It also implies that there is a singular, neutral notion of how a play functions successfully, and that you are in possession of it.

I am uncomfortable with the base mechanics the word 'fix' evokes. The playwright did not throw a spanner into a washing machine and switch it on. And if they did, it was a purposeful action and the machine is now functioning just as they intended. Either way, they certainly do not need you to turn up and 'fix' it.

No one should be made to feel that their play is broken. I helped to birth the play, but I did not fix it.

X

Afterbirth and After Birth

Your playwright's play is out in the world. Congratulations!

But remember that your work does not finish on opening night. A theatrical placenta is waiting to emerge.

Once the play has been in front of an audience, the playwright might have an epiphany about a change they want to make. You'll need to be there to talk it through with them and to help implement it if necessary.

Or, the post-opening work might be more intangible than that. Remember that the playwright is likely to be fragile right now.

They will feel (deservedly) exhausted and overwrought. The separation of play and playwright that began during labour is now complete. For the playwright, this can feel a little like grief, and they may need you now more than ever.

Again: listen, acknowledge and validate how they are feeling. Ask how you can help.

Now is the time to focus on the positive. Reassure them that everything is good. Tell them that their play is healthy and beautiful. Pass on good feedback. Return to the original vision and point out all the ways that they have fulfilled it.

If they are feeling disappointed or unsuccessful, this reassurance should help. But they also need to talk out their concerns and issues so don't dismiss how they're feeling. It might be helpful of you to remind them again of the difference between the script and the production. Or just to tell them all the things you love about their play.

And never underestimate the power of a good cry after first preview. It might be all they need.

Perhaps later – in the weeks or months after this first production – they'll ask for more constructive criticism on what to edit, develop, re-imagine. Perhaps they won't. In any case, now is not the time for that.

For now, just stay close. Let the playwright bond with their play.

Once, in previews I asked a playwright 'What do you need from me?'

They said 'I just need you to be kind to me now.'

XI

Making Your Own Birth Plan

If there's one thing you take away from this guide, I hope it's the principle of empathy, of working from a place of understanding with your playwright.

I also hope you will show this kindness to yourself. This role is wonderful, but as with any creativity, it can be draining. I hope you give yourself the time and space to reflect and heal between projects, and to celebrate the momentous accomplishment of each new birth.

The examples here are personal to me and the playwrights I've worked with. So as with all dramaturgy, some might suit you and others won't. The joy will be in developing your own

ideas and strategies and finding your place in this complex role of facilitator, educator, protector, confidante and champion.

No dramaturg is perfect so you won't get it right all the time, but one of the many advantages of building a trusting relationship with your playwright is that it's ok for you to make mistakes too. And, if you don't know what they want or need, you can just ask them. They'll have lots to teach you too.

About the author

Keziah Warner is a dramaturg and playwright.

She is an alumna of Melbourne Theatre Company's Women in Theatre Program, Malthouse Theatre's Besen Family Artist's Program, Red Stitch's INK Program, Playwriting Australia's Post-Production Program and Soho Theatre's Writer's Lab, UK.

Dramaturgy credits include: Dazza & Keif (Melbourne Fringe & MICF, 2018-19), nomnomnom (Sydney, Melbourne, Shanghai, Iceland, 2018-19), Too Ready Mirror (Darebin Speakeasy, 2017). Writing credits include: Control (Red Stitch, 2019), LuNa (VCA, 2019), Help Yourself (Cybec Electric, 2019).

She was awarded the Patrick White Playwrights Award (2019) and short-listed for the Griffin Award (2020) for her play LuNa.

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About this series

The Manuals for Dramaturgy Series is a set of creative how-to guides exploring the theory and practice of dramaturgy.

The series was conceived and produced by Mark Pritchard with the support of Arie Rain Glorie through the Centre for Dramaturgy and Curation. It was supported by the SBW Foundation through the Rodney Seaborn Playwright Support Fund.

The series aims to find playful frames through which to share the knowledge and ideas of practicing artists, in a way that is imaginative, inspiring, practice-focused and user-friendly.

About the CDC

The Centre for Dramaturgy and Curation is the joint initiative of Mark Pritchard and Arie Rain Glorie. It began as a conversation about what theatre and art can learn from each other.

We're interested in the points of connection between these two fields and what can learn from each other, and the broader applications of dramaturgical and curatorial thinking in the world.

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