Book Review

Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance by Katherine Profeta (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015)

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In Katherine Profeta's monograph on dance and movement dramaturgy, a project 'to unfold how a dance dramaturg may act and think' (211), the author time and again mentions *sparagmos,* the ritual act of dismembering a body, and uses it as a metaphor to explain the collaborative processes she explores. Reflecting on her two decades of experience collaborating as a dramaturg with choreographer Ralph Lemon, and pondering how a moving body might accrue meaning, Profeta explains that in the process of 'falling apart' and 'disassembling' the body, movement and cultural forms, one can 'see motion revealing structure' (158). She concludes that her work with Lemon, which thrived on intercultural collaborations and hybridity, went even further. Once they had deconstructed these forms the destination of their journey became a fruitful location for the elements for 'coming back together', but this time creating a new entity through the act of reassembling (Lemon qtd. in Profeta 158).

This metaphor of respectful disassembling and then reassembling haunted me as I was reading Profeta's monograph, since in it I could discover the overarching dramaturgy of her book: the deconstruction of the theory of conventional practices of Dramaturgy[1] in order to reassemble a new one that would accommodate not only theatre but also performance and dance. The vehicle for this is Profeta's 're-membering'[2] of the creative process between her, Lemon and dancers from a variety of cultures (work which has been meticulously documented in her rehearsal diaries over the years), and her examination of it from multiple angles. Although these working processes with Ralph Lemon are the book's main foci, Profeta's experience in the field of dramaturgy is wide and is nourished from various works as a dramaturg and a lecturer, including being a founding member and movement director of Elevator Repair Service.

Profeta's main departure is from the historical context of dramaturgy as a professional role, and she begins with a quick overview of the development of the role of the dramaturg in her introduction. With bold strokes she swiftly sketches the work of G.E. Lessing, Bertolt Brecht and Raimund Hoghe (dramaturg for Pina Bausch from 1979–1989)

in order to arrive at her definition of the job (based on Marianne Van Kerkhoven's theory) as a fluid role in constant motion. Profeta's analysis of Lessing's work, however, seems to rely purely on a secondary source when dismissing the dramaturg's evaluational role in the process. Additionally, her understanding of Brecht's definition of the dramaturg (by relying on his cast list of the *Messingkauf Dialogues*) is misleading. Her description of the role of the first dance dramaturg, Hoghe, is also problematic: 'His dramaturgy (the activity) was, most explicitly, to take special responsibility for dramaturgy (the structure).' (8) However Bausch, as her earlier choreographies prove, had a very strong sense of form and structure. It was rather *the process of collaboration* that brought the dramaturg into the rehearsal room as a potential but not necessary partner in the work.

However, as the reader progresses, it soon becomes clear that this fast-sketched historical narrative (including valuable contributions regarding the presumed dichotomy of mind and body in the DNA of the job, and examining the role of the dramaturg through the lens of gender) is Profeta's *perceived relationship to the canon of dramaturgy*. So this image is the 'old building' of Dramaturgy that with a radical gesture Profeta sets out to disassemble in her monograph in order to reassemble so that performance dramaturgy may be accommodated in the new construction. Before radical gestures, some rushed generalisation is pardonable, especially in the light of the outcome of Profeta's action.

Apart from the hasty start, the result of Profeta's daring act provides an impressive and interesting new architecture for the theory of Dramaturgy within which contemporary performance and movement dramaturgy can find their dwelling. For this endeavour Profeta relies on her extensive reading in performance theory, supported by and juxtaposed with examples from the rich practical experience developed through her collaboration with Lemon. Throughout the book Profeta successfully demonstrates one of her main arguments: how various processes shape the outcome (which is usually but not necessarily a performance). This is followed by her analysis and description of how a dramaturg may be an agent in this process.

Profeta's definition (or definitional fluidity) of the work of the dramaturg draws on the writings of Marianne Van Kerkhoven and Mark Bly, which characterise it as being a dialogue-relationship, while emphasising its redundancy, flexibility and the fact that it is in constant motion (hence the title): 'Primarily I am set in motion in response to the needs of the particular work, my chemistry with the collaborators, and our location in the work's timeline' (15). Profeta's metaphor is a dramaturg dancing between the 'inside(s)' and 'outside(s)' of the process and the performance, and being a 'collaborative witness' (18) whose role is to support as well as destabilise (to a different degrees during the different phases of the work).

The five chapters of *Dramaturgy in Motion* examine five registers where the dramaturg may engage in the work: Text and Language, Research, Audience, Movement and Interculturalism. The 'Text and Language' chapter takes up the received notion of dramaturgy associated with *logos*, and explores 'how movement and language signify when placed in juxtaposition' (139). First Profeta reflects on language as a tool and a

process in the rehearsal room, and warns of the problems caused by naming things too early. She then approaches language as movement, as 'material' one moulds in the rehearsal room and investigates the dynamic relationship between movements and words. By referring to examples from her collaboration with Lemon on the *Geography Trilogy (Geography, Tree, Come Home Charley Patton)*, Profeta highlights different approaches to the 'spoken material' in movement-based performance. She distinguishes the use of words as: 'evidence' for the piece's creation (29–35); or a 'field for movement' (35–42)—reverberations behind words that movement can then inhabit; or 'moving and dancing' (42–46)—introducing a playful approach when dealing with language in a performance, as well as considering the term 'unreliable narrator' (44–45); or words creating a negative space (46–51). Each approach considers text as movement or texture and shows how playing with it can lead to the augmentation of the possibilities this 'raw material' might offer.

At the end of the chapter, albeit briefly, (building on the theories of Manfred Jahn, Peggy Phelan, Roland Barthes and others) Profeta explores the notion of the narrative in post-mimetic performance, bringing awareness to the 'the storied nature of perception', (Jahn, quoted 52); i.e. that the audience by seeing events over time will create a pattern, which will be read as some sort of narrative (for instance a chain of events can be regarded as progression or recurrence—colouring even abstract movements with emotions). Profeta concludes her investigations by introducing the term of 'soft narrative understanding', acknowledging this activity of the brain that creates backstory from the temporality of actions. This awareness is what she then brings with her into the rehearsal room when thinking about the structure of the piece:

> Because of it I attend carefully to what might come first and what next, what might establish a code or break one, how patterns form, whether causal links between events are suggested, encouraged, or discouraged. I have no particular agenda to create or enhance narratives; my conviction is that they are always already present, as engaged through the act of perception. My agenda, insofar as I have one, is notice them, or their potential, and fold that awareness into our conversations. (55)

The next chapter, 'Research,' tackles another area that is traditionally linked to the dramaturg's work. I would have appreciated here some reference to Geoff Proehl's writing on the subject in *Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility* (Proehl 2008: 58–84). Proehl has investigated this area thoroughly and had come to similar conclusions to Profeta's, i.e. that research has to serve a purpose in the rehearsal room: it should be generative, productive and create dialogues around the work. I also find it problematic that the quote she uses to illustrate the old idea of stifling research comes from Mark Bly, whose approach to research as a creative tool in the 1980s American theatre, and his definition of the dramaturg as a questioning spirit, revolutionised production dramaturgy in the US (68). Not to mention the fact that the challenged Bly quote is concerned with text-based theatre. Nevertheless, Profeta's conclusion is pointing to the same direction as Proehl and Bly, emphasising the aim of research as being a catalyst for the work, and perhaps it is

important to renew this vow in the context of movement based performance. This was a chapter where in this well-researched book I most missed references to other, more recent dramaturgy-related literature, as often I found that Profeta was coming to conclusions that have already been stated before. (For instance, the dramaturg-as-archivist image has been previously explored by Duška Radosavljević, Guy Cools and others.) However, it is praiseworthy that Profeta considers the ethical dilemmas of research.

The third chapter of the monograph, 'Audience', was a particular highlight. Here Profeta examines the dramaturg's role in framing and advocacy. Profeta's analytical skills, dramaturgical sensitivity and ethical considerations reach such depth here that one can only admire and appraise. The chapter departs from the idea of the dramaturg being an advocate for an audience, and examines all the difficulties and paradoxes this notion entails before concluding with how to frame the material as an invitation for the viewers. Profeta's theoretical departure employs Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*, and (with support from Bojana Cvejić, André Lepecki and Walter Benjamin's thoughts) she challenges then further develops Rancière's ideas. Profeta argues that while the notion of 'the audience' is problematic and contested, the future presence of these active agents cannot be completely eliminated from the creative process—they linger as what Lepecki calls 'invisible ghosts'—and she suggests it can be useful to defer or transmute this kind of thinking (99).

Profeta illustrates her statements and conclusions with examples from her work with Lemon and his complex attitude towards an audience. In this chapter the focus is mainly on *Patton,* in which an actual proscenium performance in front of a paying audience was only one episode in a several years long process that included a series of 'para-performances', 'small self-sufficient events' (102) where the notion of audience was not a straightforward issue. For instance: ritualised gestures performed by Lemon at sites of past violence (which were only documented on film by his daughter, Chelsea), or a series of *Living Room Dances*—private improvisations in the living-rooms of the relatives of blues musicians—for an audience of one. Through these examples Profeta also shares the complexity of her work as Lemon's dramaturg: her dilemma as to whose experience they should have in mind during the creative process, how to acknowledge and embrace the artist's ambivalence towards an audience as a consumer of his work, and how to keep this ambivalence 'an interesting place to visit' throughout (Lemon, quoted by Profeta, 112).

Profeta does not shy away from revealing difficulties during the working process, sharing for instance her debate with Lemon on the programme notes of *Patton*, arguing that in order to enable the audience's meaningful experience both the product *and* the process needed to be shared. She details the argument between her and Lemon before revealing:

> However, I … did not really want to 'win' that argument plain and simple. What I wanted instead was to somehow use the pressure between those positions to forge a third alternative, to discover another solution that

> would satisfy both the imperative to share with an audience and the imperative not to fall into the easy categorization of familiar terms. (125)

What is even more fascinating in this chapter, though, is how sensitively Profeta considers the implications of a black artist (another loaded expression she carefully avoids), creating work about traumatic experiences in the black community and confronting with it mainly white American audiences: 'Suddenly the emancipation of the spectator from the tyranny of the artist's intentions seems a lot less urgent than the emancipation of the artist from the tyranny of the spectator's preconceptions' (113).

Further ruminating about the question of sharing the work with an audience, Profeta brings up an extreme example from their experience. The last part of the *Tree* trilogy (*How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere*?) featured a twenty-minute section ("Wall/Hole") in which the dancers attempted to create a dance that had no form. How does one prepare the audience for twenty minutes of experience where there is nothing for them to hold onto? Profeta concludes this chapter with the idea that the performance operated as an, 'act of generosity', where the performance-makers invited the spectators to make their own way through the piece:

> We could not do much to reliably shape their passage through this experience. We could only lead them up to a bridge and try to optimize their ability to cross over. On the other side, each audience member was going to experience something different, more thoroughly diverse than before. And so we should not worry about crafting what that audience experience could be; we should just keep our eye on the rigor and nuance of the experience for the performers. It was that rigor and nuance that would gain audience trust and help construct the bridge. (129–30)

In chapter four, 'Movement', Profeta describes how movement signifies and how the dramaturg thinks about this signification. Here she returns to Van Kerkhoven's thoughts about dramaturgy being in constant motion: 'If I stand still, I understand nothing' – (H.M. Enzensberger quoted by Van Kerkhoven in German, in Profeta's English translation), but she connects it with another important thought: 'movement does not just enable understanding, it describes the very activity of understanding' (139). This obviously has implications to the dramaturg's body in the rehearsal room, her physical presence and embodied knowledge. Already in the previous chapter Profeta noted: 'I understood that I was not going to be asked to speak about our experiments without knowing how it felt to embody it' (129). So Profeta's main question in this chapter, 'how does dramaturgy act and think' (139), is a very relevant one.

Profeta replies by addressing what might amplify the dramaturg's ability to perceive the body in motion, and looks at the various vocabularies that aided her – with the important caveat that these dictionaries or frames of viewing are culturally specific. She is not afraid of revealing how intercultural assignments helped her to discover the 'blindspots' of her own vocabulary. Detailing the development process of *Tree* with dancers from diverse

cultural backgrounds, Profeta muses on 'how different cultural systems of movement offer contrasting answers to the "how" of how movement makes meaning' (150). She even thinks about these contrasts and cultural clashes within one dancer's gestures (when describing the Japanese dancer, Asako Takami, performing an Indian Odissi dance). Again, Profeta's sensitivity shines through in this chapter, this time in the form of her awareness of the cultural divide between herself and the dancers, and her respectful approach to their differences when creating an intercultural performance: 'we looked for an idea of where meaning could take up residence … rather than looking for a meaning fully formed' (157).

It is at this point in the book that Profeta introduces the notions of deskilling and disassembly, preceded by a quote from Lemon about his desire to disintegrate the body and his movement structure, expressed through his dream of *sparagmos*: 'I imagine the body having the choice to come apart at all of its skeletal connections bringing flesh, muscle and blood along with the separation. And then coming back together again. That would make me happy' (158). This deskilling is a tool that Lemon uses in his work in order to 'shift priorities and reveal the values that virtuosity obscures' (159). As a consequence of this, his dramaturg also has to make a shift to another way of watching movement. This constant movement of deskilling and reskilling themselves is also the narrative of Profeta and Lemon's story of two decades of collaboration, constantly unlearning and surrendering previous competencies in order to carry on with their quest: as Lemon puts it 'How we dance beyond what we know' (160).

The final chapter, 'Interculturalism', 'explores the cultural affiliations in the dramaturg's function and her understanding of that function within the intercultural rehearsal room' (168). The key words of this chapter are 'ethics' and 'difference', using the dramaturg's 'otherness' as a checkpoint for the respectful acknowledgement of the various collaborators' cultures in a racially and culturally hybrid project. Profeta discusses questions of identity, hybridity, and the potential pitfalls (rooted deeply in history, politics and economy) that can lead to the exploitation of another culture. She offers 'Eight Points of Focus' (187–209), check-ups to consider for an ethical collaboration.

Throughout the book Profeta's 'questioning spirit' and playful but at the same time bold, 'face the danger' approach to performance-making provide a fascinating read. Her dialogues with others' thoughts invite the reader to further converse with her—keeping dramaturgy in motion and continuing to move the field forward. I recommend Profeta's book to everyone who is interested in theatre, performance and dance, and I look forward to the new discourses that this exciting book will inspire. I am also curious to see how text-based performance dramaturgy would find its dwelling in this newly re-constructed building of the theory of Dramaturgy—I suspect there will be many exciting discoveries.

Notes

1. Throughout this writing, when talking about the theory / the discipline of dramaturgy, I will use it as a proper noun (capitalised: Dramaturgy), in order to distinct it from when I use it referring to the dramaturgy (i.e. the time-space structure) of a piece, or the work of the dramaturg.

2. Here I am referring to Guy Cools' essay (recalling his work as a dance dramaturg of *zero degrees)*, where he establishes that 'the act of re-membering is always one of deconstruction and transformation' (Cools 2014: 180). Profeta's method of remembering of her working process with Lemon sits within Cools' theory, at the same time it is reflecting the overall organisational principle of her monograph—as I will detail it in this essay.

Works Cited

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