Waiting for the Click: A Dramaturgical Attempt to Connect Research to the Creative Process of *The Winter’s Tale*

By Diane Brewer

As a university dramaturg, I have the distinct pleasure of explaining my job to a captive audience of Introduction to Theatre students every semester, and I always begin with my favorite maxim: Ask ten dramaturgs what a dramaturg does, get twelve different answers. Then I tell them I need their help. I need a definition of my job I can whip out when I don’t have time for a lecture, something I can tell people when I see them try to cover the dreaded double-take: “Did she just say she’s a drama-turd?”

Of course I’m kidding. Sort of. I often think of my dramaturgical work as a new opportunity to not only learn something about a play but also convince myself, my colleagues, and my students that dramaturgy is more than a luxury—that the research I find so energizing actually connects to the creative process of the production.

This desire presented itself with particular force as I worked on a production of *The Winter’s Tale* during the 2009-2010 season at the University of Evansville. With the best of intentions I set out to follow the advice I had given my students in the dramaturgical guide I had developed for a previous production:

Good research is a private and creative affair—an encounter with words and images that wedge themselves into the imagination and collide with each other to open and expand the choices we all make in a production.
No substitute exists for flipping through the pages of such research because the process itself involves the kinds of associations inspired only by accidental discoveries. (Brewer 1)

As I worked through my own scene breakdown and sought answers to questions I had about The Winter’s Tale, I felt like a sober version of Tennessee Williams’s Brick, trying to find the space to lock myself away with the play, the research, and my own imagination: “—I’d better sit right here until I hear that click in my head, it’s just a mechanical thing but it don’t happen except when I’m alone or talking to myself. . .” (Williams 102). Even as I channeled Brick, however, I added Big Daddy’s voice to the conversation:

BIG DADDY. You got a long, long time to sit still, boy, and talk to no one, but now you’re talkin’ to me. At least I’m talking to you. And you set there and listen until I tell you the conversation is over!

BRICK. But this talk is like all the others we’ve had together in our lives! It’s nowhere, nowhere!—it’s—it’s painful, Big Daddy . . .

BIG DADDY. All right, then let it be painful, but don’t you move from that chair!—I’m going to remove that crutch. (Williams 102)
In years past, I had convinced myself I was better than Brick. I had, after all, shared my research with the production team by attending design conferences, prepared a packet of information for the actors, diligently attended rehearsal, taken notes to share with the director, written for the program, and created a lobby display.

And yet.

Plagued by the familiar dramaturgical anxieties, I often spent much of the rehearsal period wondering if anyone really read or found the research inspiring. With disheartening regularity, I heard myself insisting I had already answered questions appearing in rehearsal reports; but my indignant returns to the packet typically forced me to admit that, once again, I had not actually anticipated the precise angle of the rehearsal question.

I had the nagging feeling I was creating the packet to justify my job, and Geoff Proehl’s chapter on research in Toward a Dramaturgical Sensibility heightened my concern. According to Proehl, dramaturgical attitudes toward research in successive generations have been dominated by notions of the dramaturg as (1) fact-finder, (2) creative and associative thinker who rejects the limitations of secondary research, and (3) believer in the power of research to energize and facilitate the creative process as a whole\(^1\). While loudly proclaiming my philosophical sympathy with the third

generation of dramaturgs, I was behaving as a fact-finder. The sting of that realization arrived with the fear that the packet itself undermined everything I believe about the power of collective research to enhance the creative energy of the process. I was turning into the dramaturg no one wanted me to be, shouldering too much of the research and restricting its presence in the rehearsal room. The packet had become my crutch.

Confident as I might feel about my private ability to let the research fire my imagination, I needed another way to pursue “the click” between that research and the other members of the production team. I decided to experiment with *The Winter’s Tale*.

In the first stage of this process, I asked my assistants—Elise LeBreton, Hannah Sullivan, and Megan Sicard, heretofore “Team Dramaturgy”—to engage in a parallel process with me. Rather than simply research answers to my questions, they each created scene breakdowns and asked their own. Then, in a messy interchange of personal impulses and scholarly research, we let ourselves indulge in twice-weekly discussions about the play, voicing reactions, wrestling with textual inconsistencies, and pursuing the words and images that wedged themselves into our imaginations.

Because the timing of these discussions coincided with my customary participation in design conferences, I often felt caught up on the throes of Chance, moderately discomfited by the fact that my lack of true expertise about the play pushed my participation toward the associative thinking embraced by Proehl’s second generation dramaturgs. An observation or question voiced in a design conference might coincide specifically with an observation one of my assistants had reported in a previous Team
Dramaturgy meeting, thus magnifying its presence in the discussion. Yet, despite my private concerns about the quality of my participation in the process, we soldiered on and gathered the information that not only helped generate but also supported the focus of our particular production.

As the process shifted from the messiness of the research phase into the organized presentation of that research, Blackboard emerged as a key component of our efforts. Although previous Team Dramaturgies had used this digital platform to post the packet for the production team on the first day of rehearsal, we began to wonder if we could use the site more dynamically. What if we were to post tidbits of information throughout the process? Could we anticipate the mindsets of the actors and director as they prepared for rehearsal and plant seeds that might materialize as they worked through the staging? Likewise, as questions appeared in rehearsal reports, could Team Dramaturgy adjust the planned focus of the information to reflect unanticipated changes in direction? It was worth a try.

Knowing we would have to make adjustments, we used the rehearsal schedule to chart a plan. For example, on the night the director intended to rehearse 1.1, Team Dramaturgy planned to send out an email letting the cast know we had posted a document about behavioral expectations and relationships at court; as they readied themselves for Hermione’s post-partum trial scene, we would post a document detailing the standard treatment of Elizabethan women after childbirth; and as they prepared to explore the energy of Bohemia, we might send them a “recipe” for throwing a sheep shearing festival.
Once we had mapped the information “roll-out,” we turned our attention to—and I use this term consciously—the marketing of the dramaturgical process. We spent many sessions mimicking “History Channel Voices” to come up with tongue-in-cheek blurbs that we could periodically email the production team to encourage them to check out the dramaturgy section of the Blackboard site for *The Winter’s Tale*. Assuming they’d take the bait, we carefully graduated the complexity of the information in order to inspire the widest possible “audience.” We thought about specific actors and discussed how each might use the research. Some, we knew, would scan for quick answers; others would crave more depth. Thus, we began each entry with a basic question, provided a simple and straightforward answer, and then linked to the source materials we had used to come up with our answer. If the information had come from a book, we offered the bibliographic details and invited everyone to stop by and check out the books (more on the success of that invite later).

Armed with a plan, we had one last step to fill in: what to say at the Dramaturgy/Design Presentation at the first rehearsal. In what felt like the final moments before the presentation, I sat in my office and created a *Cosmo*-style quiz:
Worried about where you fit in at court?

Take this simple quiz (in character) to find out:

Does the King listen to you?
   a. Yes
   b. He should, but he doesn’t
   c. No
   d. Sometimes

Is the King always right?
   a. Yes
   b. I’m a little afraid to tell him what I think; I don’t want him to lash out at me.
   c. No, but I’m going to stay silent.
   d. No, and I don’t care if he gets mad. I have a responsibility to protect him from his bad decisions.

Answers: If you answered (a) to both questions, you are one of the king’s FRIENDS; if you answered (b) you are probably a FOLLOWER; if you answered (c) then you are a cardboard SERVANT with no sense of morals or personality; if you answered (d) then you are a LOYAL SERVANT willing to risk the king’s disfavor and “serve” him by telling him the truth. If your answers weren’t consistent, you’re just confused.

Understanding the Results:

FRIENDS Congratulations! You have influence! The King thinks of you as his friend, and I bet you feel pretty confident about your power. Careful, though. Kings can be fickle.

FOLLOWERS Poor you. You spend all your time looking for ways to please the King and become a Friend. Find that you hate the Friends? Well, they would rather not have you nipping at their heels, so the feeling—buried as it is behind elegantly practiced courtesy—is probably mutual.

SERVANTS What’s your problem? Where’s your mind? Don’t you have a heart? Yes, you’re making money, and, yes, you’ve promised to “serve” the King. But you have other options, and it’s not like you’re planning to be a servant forever. If you haven’t found the moment to speak up, then you’re probably just waiting for the right time. True? If not, then you deserve to wallow in your own emptiness.

LOYAL SERVANTS Surprise! You are the highest of the high, and you are going to end up with more power than all the sniveling idiots who try to anticipate the King’s every whim. You may not be a “paid” servant, but you certainly serve his best interests.

The research that went into the development of this quiz comes from three sources: R.E. Pritchard’s *Shakespeare’s Life in England*, Robert Shephard’s article
“Court Factions in Early Modern England,” and Linda Anderson’s *A Place in the Story: Servants and Service in Shakespeare’s Plays*. Pritchard’s book suggests hard and fast rules for appropriate courtly behavior, and the consequences of breaking them highlight the stakes of decorum. However, such rules did not adequately inspire my imagination about the people faced with following such rules, and so I knew I needed more.

Personally, I found this inspiration in Shephard’s description of Friends and Followers and Anderson’s explanation of Loyal Servants. *Click*. When these three pieces of information collided, I knew I was ready to communicate research to the cast.

As I created this “quiz,” I also heard the distant voice of my students dropping comments about the difference between the “kind” of work they get do in my classes vs. their acting and design classes. Over the years, they have quoted my colleagues telling them to “get out of their heads” and “save their essay writing for Dr. Brewer’s classes.” I know better than to take these second-hand comments at face value; I have heard my colleagues make similar statements, but further discussion with them consistently demonstrates their understanding that the value of research is messier and more complex than these clichés imply. When I ask the students to do research in my classes, I tell them not to turn off their creative energies. Knowing full well they talk about the stakes of a given scene in their acting classes, I encourage them to find the research that helps them understand those stakes. Nonetheless, quizzes like the one above reflect my entirely self-conscious attempt to prove to everyone that I not only speak the language of the rehearsal room but also benefit greatly from research.
These particular concerns stem from my status as a university dramaturg, a position that sometimes complicates my relationship with the members of the production team. As a professor, I’m endowed with the responsibility to teach students about the activating power of research. I have both formal and informal opportunities to do so, but some of the most significant exchanges occur when I simply pass someone in the hall and ask how the research is going. However, as I wear this hat, I also have to remain sensitive to my professional responsibility to the faculty director, making sure my daily interactions with the student actors don’t undermine his or her relationship with them.

Although I have not always negotiated this balance effectively, during the rehearsals for *The Winter’s Tale*, I used one of Blackboard’s secret tools to enhance my ability to connect with both students and faculty colleagues: through the “performance dashboard,” I could see when and where people accessed the site. Admittedly, in moments of weakness driven by the persistent voice trying to convince me of my futility, I regarded the data as a kind of naughty- or nice-list. But knowing which people had—and had not—looked into the research turned out to be quite useful at one of the first rehearsals I attended.

Prior to an early staging rehearsal, Team Dramaturgy had posted a link to the .pdf of Partee’s article, “Fear in Shakespearean Childhood.” In keeping with our desire to provide graduating levels of information, we also added a document titled, “Shakespearean Childhood.docx,” our own summary of the relevant points in Partee’s article. And, to cover all our bases and draw in the widest number of readers, we posted a summary of the summary:
“Shakespearean Childhood” (compiled by DB and EL) pulls some significant ideas from Partee’s article and answers these questions:

1. How did parents relate with their children?
2. Why does Mamillius behave like a little adult?
3. Why does Mamillius’s costume look so much like Leontes’s in our production?

In response to the posting, people could access the link to the article itself or the summary document. From Team Dramaturgy’s covert observations of production members’ access to Blackboard, I knew the actor playing Leontes had at least opened “Shakespearean Childhood” and thus had encountered the following information:

Partee’s article focuses on the negative aspects of Elizabethan childhood as illuminated by Shakespeare, and it helps answer some of the following questions.

**How did parents relate with their children?**

- They certainly didn’t practice “attachment parenting.” (But don’t blame them; they were never sure how long a baby might survive.)
  - High rates of infant mortality in Elizabethan times caused parents to put off bonding with children until later childhood (Partee 72).
  - Given this tendency, it is possible that Mamillius is just reaching the age when his parents (especially his father) would begin bonding with him.
- They loved them but thought of children as inferior and in need of discipline.
  - This attitude toward their children made children prone to a rigid and sometimes severe discipline: “disobedience could instantly convert an apparently deep affection into a more violent rage” (Partee 69).
- Childhood was not a phase of life that required nurturing. It was a phase to be endured.
  - “To Elizabethans, childhood was not a particularly attractive period; it was an unavoidable but trying experience and the sooner done with the better for everyone” (Thompson qtd. in
Why does Mamillius behave like a little adult?

- It’s possible his precocity is a defense mechanism, a way of sheltering himself against “an indifferent or hostile adult environment” (Partee 71).
- The more he behaves like an adult, the more likely the adults around him will treat him with respect.

Why does Mamillius’s costume look so much like Leontes’s in our production?

- Cole [McCarty, Costume Designer] decided to dress Mamillius like a little-Leontes because the design team cottoned to the idea of Sicilia as an “adult” world, intolerant of the youthful energy that flourishes in Bohemia.

And then I got to rehearsal and saw the adults treating Mamillius with contemporary lightheartedness. The first scene opened with Leontes lifting Mamillius adoringly in the air. It was a tender, beautiful moment. Later in the scene, Polixenes jabbed playfully at Mamillius. Okay, I thought. The director hasn’t looked at the information I posted on Blackboard. He’s seen it; we talked about it early in the design process, but he hasn’t staged the scene with the research in mind. Calm down. Very few people in the audience will have read the research about Early Modern English attitudes toward children. I know the director wants us to feel connected to Mamillius so we absorb the visceral horror of his death, and this treatment of him engages our empathy.

How do I negotiate the distance between the past and the present here? I didn’t have an answer to this silent question, and so I just watched. Then, during the next break, the
actor playing Leontes quoted some of the research to me: “Wasn’t ‘childhood . . . a phase to be endured, not enjoyed’?” I don’t know if he was thinking about the contradiction between the research and approach to staging, and I certainly didn’t articulate my own concerns to him. But, click, I knew I had to talk to the director. Not wanting the director to think I valued the letter of research over the audience’s experience in the real world, I phrased my concern carefully: “I am worried,” I said, “that I have posted information that will confuse the actors.” And so began the brief conversation that stimulated a more restrained approach to the scene.

I left that rehearsal exhilarated. The director and I had long ago conferred on this more reserved attitude about children in the play, but it was the freshness of the research in Leontes’s mind that convinced me to revisit the discussion. I felt as if I had found a way to cover the distance between my personal experience with the research and that of my collaborators. True, I had done much more reading than either the director or actors involved, and I didn’t for a minute assume they shared my excitement about the external details, but I had found a way to make that okay.

Not all experiences with The Winter’s Tale were so thrilling. Only two actors stopped by my office or browsed through the books I brought to rehearsal. When I sensed the pressure to find answers to other people’s questions, I felt like a failure, not because I couldn’t always provide a ready answer but rather because I wondered if any of us would ever truly understand the line between their responsibility and mine. In the abstract, I don’t care about such lines. But when I want to convince one particular colleague to
include a place for dramaturgs in his ever-popular Director/Designer Collaboration class, I don’t know how to counter his ongoing objection that people won’t always have a dramaturg to do their research. At the end of the day, I know the problem is bigger than I am.

The tactic of rolling out information on Blackboard has addressed a few of my concerns about my role in connecting the production team to research that, in Geoff Proehl’s words, “will unlock the energy of the play” (67) for as many people as possible. Until I find the avenues that open the entire process to the third generation approach to research, I will continue to experiment. And, as I do so, I will treasure my favorite Introduction to Theatre response to my search for a clear identity: “The dramaturg is a bad ass.”

*Click.*


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