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**RelationCRIPs with Dramaturgy:
The Intervention of the Dramaturge in Devised CRIP Theatre**

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Abstract

Disability theatre has a complex Canadian history according to disability studies scholar Kirsty Johnson, and "Canadian artists with disabilities have found many and provocative ways to 'get on stage'" (Johnson 4). The formation of disability art and theatre is as multifaceted and diverse as disability itself, but there will always remain a part of the process that must confront the ableism and exclusion perpetuated by the social models of oppression both on and offstage. As disability theatre seeks to challenge dominant narratives, relocate the status of the disabled body, and positively re-imagine the value of disability, one of the important components is the role that dramaturgy can play in the formation of disability theatre, particularly in the case of devised CRIP theatre. This paper will explore some of the interventions and approaches dramaturgy may subsume to support the creation of experiential theatre that expresses the lives and narratives of disabled and mixed communities. The arguments explored in this paper will be supplemented with material taken from the collaborative production of *Love in the Margins* that was part of the 2016 Chinook Series in Edmonton, Alberta, becoming the first professional presentation of disability theatre in Edmonton. This paper will also explore topics such as the role of playwriting and dramaturgy in devised, experiential, and social-justice theatre, how the word "professional" can be inclusively re-defined, and the problems, processes, and ethical questions of journeying from devised community theatre to professional theatre.

Keywords

CRIP, theatre, disability, dramaturgy, intervention, love, sex, margins

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"As a branch of disability art, disability theatre is most often described as a specific kind of artistic practice connected to the disability arts and culture movement. As such, it involves artists with disabilities who pursue an activist perspective, dismantling stereotypes, challenging stigma, and re-imagining disability as a valued human condition" (Johnson 2012).

"To CRIP is to open up desire for what disability disrupts" (Fritsch 2013).

"What does a dramaturge do?" is a question that can take all day to answer, attempting to grasp the immaterial fluidity and constant shape shifting the title requires. The dramaturge crosses many territories as per tradition - play-reader, play-doctor, literary advisor, and critical thinker - to create the literary conscience of a theatre and help theatre artists achieve their intentions. "The best dramaturges are careful listeners and observers. They are also curious and efficient researchers, able to identify and pursue information that is most useful to a process or to a particular question" (Stroich 237). The dramaturge is a type of functionary in theatrical culture, albeit one whose duties are sometimes hotly and bitterly contested, with the understated ability to alter the conventional power structures in the theatre. To this day the theatrical world still grapples over the spelling. Search the word "dramaturge" in the OED and the answer will be disappointingly vague. Ask a regular theatre-goer who and what is a dramaturge and the resultant stare will most likely be blank. Yet when it comes to defining the term "dramaturge," there is solid footing to be had as the Oxford Encyclopedia to Theatre and

the Performing Arts has attempted the task with thoughtful and careful detail, offering the definition of dramaturge as:

... a person with knowledge of the history, theory, and practice of theatre, who helps a director, designer, playwright or actor realize their intentions in a production. The dramaturg, sometimes called a literary manager, is an in-house artistic consultant cognizant of an institution's mission, a playwright's passion, or a director's vision, and who helps bring them to life in a theatrically compelling manner. This goal can be accomplished in myriad ways and the dramaturg's rôle often shifts according to context and is always fluid. As there is no one way to create theatre, there is no single model of dramaturgy (Kennedy 387);

This seems like a good place to start.

However, dramaturgy's history and presence is typically framed within a normative standard of practice and professionalism in artistic processes, even in the face of the inherent negotiability, sensitivity, and flexibility of the dramaturge. These standard artistic processes and *modus operandi* such as top-down directorial hegemonies, non-accessible rehearsal halls and theatres, inherently ableist temporalities, rhythms, and language, over-demanding rehearsal "crunches," and a hyper-emphasis on ableist embodiment, often demand capacities that exclude disabled and CRIP performers who seek to make experiential theatre. Therefore, in the face of social justice and disability theatre the dramaturge becomes an interventionist, using dramaturgy to interrupt and CRIP all facets of theatre, including process, embodiment, and staging.

In the English-speaking West, the history of dramaturgy exposes persistent struggles over the control of creative territories and profound cultural resistances to the idea that play-making processes, dramatic literature and repertoire can be objects of intellectual inquiry; it also highlights a deep-rooted suspicion of working models that

insist on a dynamic relationship between critical reflection and artistic practice
(Luckhurst 2).

In CRIP theatre, the dramaturge must invest in a theatre that challenges the dominant social narratives by deconstructing traditional, top-down creative processes, by propagating community language, by adopting non-linear and non-normative temporalities, and by integrating the lived, biographical experiences of CRIP community members to manifest theatre that is radically integrated, intuitive, and speaks back to institutional oppressions surrounding disability; "[...] the dominant impetus behind the drive to reimagine dramaturgical process relates to the transition from hierarchically organized theatre-making to collaborative performance creation – what is generally referred to as “devising” – with the attendant emphases on physicality and multiplicity (of source material, of form, of discipline, of medium) that accompanies this shift” (Barton 179). The dramaturge has the capacity to separate herself or himself from the possessive or hegemonic authority of the director in an artistic process, arriving not with an ultimate vision of the show, but rather with a goal of discovering and staging the offered experiences of disability and justice. The position of the director recedes, turning towards discovery guided by dramaturgy; “directors are no longer necessarily primary artists, at least in the non-traditional sectors of the theatre and performance worlds” (Lester 227).

Even in the experience of “now and here,” the media, the structure of the double, the *différance* have always already intervened. Dramaturgy from this perspective does require a particular sensibility not only for social, cultural, and political contexts “outside” but also for the power relations within theatre institutions. Therefore the dramaturge should no longer be defined as the controlling power of the theatre. The dramaturge may instead become a negotiator for the freedom of theatrical experimentation and risk (Lehmann and Primavesi 170)

In the above quotation, post-dramatic dramaturges Lehmann and Primavesi identify the false dichotomy of isolating outside socio-political forces from the authoritative structures permeated throughout the world of theatre, saying that the dramaturge must be aware of the relationship and mutual influence these structures have on each other. Additionally, Lehmann and Primavesi identify the value of dislodging dramaturgy from hegemonic authority to instead become a negotiator for "experimentation and risk," opening an immense space for disability to come to the theatre through dramaturgy. Furthermore, as Lester demonstrates below, in addition to dislodging hegemony in the theatre the dramaturge is able to identify the activation of institutional oppressions as they correlate with the history of the theatre, making dramaturgy an alternative to hegemonic power but also a means to re-imagine a theatre that is predicated on separation from historical patterns of oppression and representation.

North American dramaturgs are, indeed, already trained to consider institutional structure from multiple perspectives. They work directly with many kinds of artists and therefore understand the artistic process flexibly; they are taught to communicate that process effectively to audiences, press, funding bodies, and administrators. They acquire a deep knowledge of theatrical history from which they could, potentially, imagine a theatre of the future. From their own production practice they know what works in our contemporary system and what might be improved (Lester 228).

The dramaturge propagates a disabled community's expression by facilitating both structured and free explorations surrounding personal experiences, narratives, and histories; the resulting material is then sculpted by encouraging consistent logic within the created world, exploring and integrating adaptive staging strategies, and by propagating self-care and inclusive community practices to support the creation of necessary community work as it transitions into the professional world. This paper will

explore these concepts and arguments with examples taken from CRIPSiE¹ and Mindhive Collective's² *Love in the Margins*, for which I served as dramaturge and primary facilitator, not to develop a universal formula of creation, but to explore strategies for radically integrated and devised CRIP theatre through dramaturgy.

Love in the Margins was an original collaborative work devised by a group of artists with and without disabilities as a special presentation for Theatre Network's Nextfest 2015 theatre festival in Edmonton, Alberta. Initially presented at the Robertson Wesley United Church of Canada on June 5th, 2015, *Love* debuted to a sold-out house, demonstrating a veritable desire for accessible theatre that presents a diversity of bodies and lives in the Albertan arts ecology; "various dramaturgical methods and strategies are needed for the different questions raised by dance and choreography, but all of these questions share the awareness of an increasing desire for new corporealities and for unusual experiences of the body" (Lehmann and Primavesi 170-171). Following its initial presentation at Nextfest 2015, *Love* was curated by Workshop West Playwright's Theatre to be part of the 2016 Chinook Series at the Westbury Theatre in Edmonton, Alberta for three performances between January 31st and February 2nd, 2016, presenting the collective with the unprecedented challenge of journeying from community art into professional production. It is this second genesis of *Love*, featuring the performing talents of Kaylee Borgstom, Kelsie Acton, Ian "Heath" Gordon, Sara Campos-Silvius, Julie Heffel, Alex Sutherland, Andrew Morrison, Andrea Ruschin, Therese Couture, and

¹ The Collaborative Radically Integrated Performers' Society in Edmonton [CRIPSiE] is an Edmonton-based collective of artists that include people who experience disability and their allies. CRIPSiE challenges dominant stories of disability and other forms of oppression through high-quality CRIP and Mad art. www.cripsie.ca

² Mindhive Collective is an Edmonton-based theatre collective that creates collaborative, experimental theatre that is radical and intuitive. www.mindhivecollective.com

myself, on which this dramaturgical research will focus as this performance became the first presentation of professional CRIP theatre in Edmonton and was created primarily through dramaturgical approaches and interventions with the support of the Canada Council of the Arts' Cultivate grant.

Love's main narrative focused on the intersection of disability with love, sex, and marriage, challenging compulsory heterosexuality, the stigma surrounding disabled sex, the ableisms of Western nuptial pageantry, and the generalized romantic and ableist platitudes often encountered where love and sex are concerned. *Love* adopted the format and structure of an immersive wedding reception, complete with all the bells and whistles of seating plans, dancing, couples' games, bouquet tossing, speeches, toasts, slide shows, decorations, table settings, food and wine, but it was a wedding reception that turned these traditions on their head, exposing the inherent ableism and exclusion that is often buried in the proceedings of a traditional wedding. *Love* was an interdisciplinary, experiential hybrid of spoken word, monologue, wheelchair dance, bouffon, and immersive art based on the lived experiences of disability. At the heart of this work was community, inviting the audience into the world of the ensemble and the experiences of exclusion, finding love and joy while building life-giving relationships at the margins of society.

The first dramaturgical task in approaching the creation of devised CRIP theatre is the re-structuring of the creative process and the production timeline, as well as the decision of where, when, and how frequently to rehearse in a way that reflects the group's capacities; "ensemble-based and 'devised' theatre have muddied the categories of playwright, director, and actor and replaced the three-week rehearsal process with

development and research periods of several months, even years" (Lester 227). It may seem curious for the dramaturge to be involved in the decisions surrounding rehearsal space and the execution of production tasks, but this is the first encounter with ableist precedents and the social model of disability that an integrated cast will experience in the creation of disability theatre; the push must always be for radical inclusivity against structural and spatial forms of oppression. The role of the dramaturge becomes to identify and question the hidden exclusions present in any inherited procedural precedents that inform how theatre is created. In order to achieve radical integration and interruption of dominant narratives the creative process must also be CRIPPED as disability art cannot emerge from untouched ableist traditions; the integrity of what it means 'to CRIP' must be maintained. As a dramaturge the task is to question "*why must something be done in this way? Who does it exclude?*" As Sarah Sigal reminds us that "in collaborative theatre-making [...], the role of the dramaturg is a flexible one, often emerging as a necessary task that falls to someone present in the rehearsal room. The UK-based Dramaturgs' Network defines the dramaturg as 'a member of the creative team dedicated to help[ing] the makers find their own artistic journey through the process to fulfil their artistic vision'" (Sigal 186), making the presence of dramaturgy a potential armature on which artistic vision may be sculpted and supported.

It is imperative that a space be located to which all members of the group have physical and psychic access. Traditional theatres and rehearsal spaces notoriously reflect the capacity of the able and hyper-able body with narrow doorways, stairways, inaccessible toilets, far vantage points from accessible public transit, unkempt sidewalks and uneven concrete, or the expectation for mobility tool users to make use of a

decommissioned freight elevator, back alley entrance, or both – and that’s just getting into the building. Accessibility audits are highly recommended in approaching spatial awareness. The final choice and use of space must reflect the solidarity of the collective and no one member can be relegated to an inconvenient situation or requested to take on the labour of adaptation for the sake of the group. Instead, the labour of adaptation and transformation is best shared amongst the collective even if that means the back-alley entrance becomes the main entrance, or a ramp is installed that every body entering the space is required to use, including the audience, including the abled. During the first genesis of *Love* the main stairway was blocked by the cast members as they performed the wedding photos, forcing audience members to wait, or alternatively, to use an elevator on the sidelines specifically designed for mobility device users and those who cannot use stairs, giving all audience members the experience of not having free access to a space. The use of the elevator and the blocking of the stairs caused a backlog of audience members and resulted in a delayed start time, interrupting an often unrealistic and ableist demand of punctuality in the theatre despite the architectural realities and lack of access to a space.

The approach and use of the space becomes an intervention in the preference for spatialities that reflect the normative ambulatory body as there must be contiguity between abled and disabled bodies when it comes to territorial navigation in the process and experience of disabled theatre. For *Love* our primary rehearsal space became the gymnasium at the Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital, the use of which was donated to the collective in-kind. This gymnasium was reflective of the collective’s rigorous demands for accessibility in terms of building infrastructure and access, but the gym also held a

recognizable familiarity as a recreational and creative territory amongst the collective, maintaining a distance from the medicalized and therapeutic spaces of the hospital. For the performance at the Westbury Theatre the entire audience space was rendered barrier-free and accessible, including live ASL interpretation integrated into the performance and projected surtitles onto an upstage screen, challenging the limited visibility and typical segregation of able and disabled bodies. Telory Davis makes a poignant observation on a similar experience of integration during a performance of the AXIS Dance Company that closely reflects the integrated spatiality of *Love* and is worthy to be quoted at length:

I watched these dancers from a distance that took a row of wheelchair-audience members into account. The presence of disabled wheelchair spectators literally altered my vision. Disability was no longer in its usual marginalized spaces along the fringes of the auditorium; it was stationed in a heavily trafficked middle section of the viewing space, and it was also on the stage. I needed to rethink both my definition of dancing bodies and my assumptions about disability access to stage auditoriums. I was, in effect, looking through impairment at disability: a row of wheelchair users in the audience enforced the agency of the wheelchair dancers on stage and challenged the minority/majority ratio of disabled/non-disabled spectators (Davis 47).

Another concern as dramaturge for a collective's process regards the rehearsal schedules and production timelines. Again it may seem strange for these decisions to be considered part of the mandate of dramaturgy, but in a CRIP process that is aimed at experiential expression the relationship between process, product, and meaning must be fully imbricated. As this paper has argued, it is a false dichotomy to divide social forces outside the theatre and the lived experience of disability from the affect of meaning onstage. Therefore, as a dramaturge in a devised CRIP process the logistical structure of the process itself must reflect the capacities and needs of the entire group if non-hegemonic expressions are to be obtained, balancing the time commitment required to

present a professional theatre production with the physic and physical capacity of the group to rehearse; it goes without saying that all decisions must be made through consultation and consensus of the collective as there is no pre-determined standard, the standard must be revealed by the group. In the case of *Love* it was determined to rehearse two days per week with a consistent time and location over a period of six months, fully dismantling the industry standard of fulltime rehearsal hours for the three weeks leading into the run of the show. The adoption of an alternate timeline gave way into the adoption of further alternate temporalities and rhythms, such as the timing of onstage conversations, or the time it takes to move from one blocking position to another, challenging the normative construction and usage of time where the able body and the able mind dictate the amount of time something should take. The dramaturge becomes an intricate weaver balancing the alterity of an integrated cast with the demands of industry professionalism, opening space for absence, repetition, and self-care as needed. "In a healthy system, artistic creativity will shape the institutional structure, and not vice versa. In such a time of innovation, where theatres are being called upon to experiment artistically, administratively, and financially, it is wise to consider the 'dramaturgy' of leadership and to conceive of dramaturgs as possible leaders, whether or not they retain that job description" (Lester 228).

Once an inclusive process, space, and rehearsal structure has been established the next negotiation to enter is the power structure within the group itself – *who will have power? How will power and labour be distributed?* These are questions that require frequent visitation and fluctuation. In today's devised theatre there is already a tendency for the authoritative hegemony of the director to recede, replacing the director's role with

discussion, collaboration, and division of labour amongst all the devisors into equitable shares based on interest, experience, and necessity. However, this process and understanding is still based upon previous experiences of mostly homogenous groups in terms of ability. The diversity of abilities and experiences in an integrated cast calls for the equitable division of power and labour, as well as the definition of 'devising,' to be flexible, making the dramaturge a site of both negotiation and expertise, as Jessica Kaplow Applebaum argues regarding the hybridity of the dramaturge that "together with her co-hyphenates, the hyphenate-dramaturg interrogates the process of creation, defines the rules and conditions at work in the room, determines how the collective will make decisions for the final piece, *and also plays with her colleagues*" (Kaplow Applebaum 198-199, emphasis the author's). Play and interplay are of the essence, as is the role of witness and active listener, as Stroich argues:

in leadership there is a lot of information and a great many perspectives to balance. One must weigh what happened in the past with what is needed in the present and consider how it affects the future. Leaders need to have a full view of the situation in order to determine a course of action. By taking on the role of witness in the room and actively listening to our collaborators, helping them articulate their goals for a project and their fears, we are very powerful because we hold a space for those varied perspectives. We then combine those present voices with an understanding of theatre history and the advances in performance studies to place the work we are doing on a continuum (Stroich 237).

It is no exception in devised CRIP theatre that all labour must be divided and completed, but the traditional defined roles of theatrical production will interchange, blend, or dissipate altogether. At the first production meeting for *Love* a list was generated of all production tasks to be completed so that those new to the process of professional theatre understood the amount of administrative, physical, and mental labour that went on behind the scenes; this was structural expertise that I, as a dramaturge and

practicing artist, was able to provide. Each task was explained in detail along with the skills required to complete it. The next step as a collective was to create specialized groups of media, design, construction, logistics, front of house, etc., that each consisted of diverse, integrated abilities; going forward into the process these groups were held accountable as groups, not individuals, and functioned as smaller collectives within the overall larger cast. Additionally, members of the collective who could provide mentorship support to a certain production task force were identified, listed, and engaged. This process continued with the mentality that no person in the collective would have the privilege of only performing, while no one person would be left excluded or alienated by being asked to do something which they did not have the experience or capacity to succeed at unsupported; this gave permission for traditional production roles to be fractured, amalgamated, or transformed. The dramaturge moves in and out of the central position of power as the nebulous nature of the dramaturge's location permits central occupancies to fluctuate and alternate while at the same time identifying labour that must be completed or inconsistencies that must be addressed.

The dramaturge holds, shares, and relinquishes the space of power in a constant interchange with the multifarious abilities of the collective combined with the demands of the present moment in question; dramaturgical needs will not always speak last and will at times be relinquished for personal truths or expressions. To propagate the voices of the community the dramaturge first has to learn the language of the community and actively engage in using it, asking the questions "*which linguistic hegemonies are being interrupted?*" and "*how does language perpetuate the psychic experience of justice?*" The focus is always placed on collecting the community's *logos*, voices, and narratives to

be expressed on their own terms in the final production, not to achieve a director's totalizing vision. There must be a conscious value placed on the inclusion and visibility of every person involved that reflects their desire to be seen and heard, supporting their presence without hindering the presence of others. Dramaturgy then becomes the lucid and intentional effort to include everyone's voice because the community must have the majority share of power in the generation of material and content without completely discounting the contiguity of the final product. Teresa Stankiewicz explores this complex dramaturgical function and relationship to power in her argument:

this is where the deliberate application of new play dramaturgy can assist; documenting the process with the idea that a performance-ready piece is essential may circumvent failure. Conversely, perhaps the dramaturgical work is to gather the results of the process to be used later in a different performance that is successful. Either way, dramaturgy is an essential part of devising, and it is not important whether the role of dramaturg is delegated or combined; what is vital is that dramaturgy be acknowledged and specifically applied to the process (Stankiewicz 195).

I had a unique position in the process of *Love* in that I arrived from outside the community with knowledge and experience of creating theatre that served as the skeletal structure through which the community's experiences of disability could be expressed and polished for performance. I held authority as a facilitator and I would often open rehearsals by leading the community's ritual of 'checking-in,' playing the warm-up songs by request, and then presenting the to-do list and scheduled work plan for the remaining rehearsal time, but all activities and engagements were always approached with consent and permission, making my authority granted rather than assumed. Brooke Leifso joined the second process of *Love* in the last 30 days of the process, assuming a role that was more reflective of the traditional director's role since a single logistical voice is still

required for technical rehearsals, cue-to-cues, and limited runs in the space; again, Brooke directly requested permission from the collective to provide this function before assuming her role as an authoritative facilitator.

Furthermore, the collective represented a diverse spectrum of reading, writing, and speaking capacities, so it became my role as dramaturge to provide the support required for each individual creator to arrive with content that reflected their experiences and views on love, sex, and weddings, discovering how it could fit the world of the play without subsuming power over its integrity as a narrative. At times this supportive role took on the form of a 1-on-1 editing session, while at other times it took on the form of an interview-style writing session, or a group writing activity that was prompted in the form of "Dear Emily Post" letters. All forms of text - written, performed, and embodied - were embraced and considered, content was never an original creation of my own, but always based upon a previous offering or collective exploration making the authoritative voice in the room a fluctuating presence as devising becomes

a collective and present interrogation of a form, theme, question, subject, object, design element, or combination thereof, unfolding over place and time. Whatever stumbles forth first, be it architecture of the space, the choreography of bodies, or a soundtrack of noise, every other element engaged in creation performs a response to the material being offered. The very interrogative weave of material and engagement demonstrates that devised performance is, in and of itself, an active dramaturgical process (Kaplow Applebaum 197).

The notion of dislodging power further extended to the discipline and theatrical form itself as *Love* was a true interdisciplinary performance without any adherence to genre or consistency of theatrical styles, only the form of a wedding reception prevailed, giving space for otherness and accommodation. For example, there were collective members that do not integrate speech, movement, and voice projection, so strategies that

included pre-recorded text or voice augmentation with microphones were adopted. One dancer performed an incredibly affecting and personal wheelchair dance to her own recorded voice, challenging the emphasis on verticality often seen in traditional dance while highlighting that fact that not everyone must stand to welcome the newly wed couple, and not every relationship follows a traditional path. Another example included the integration of cue cards as confetti for collective members who do not memorize text, while the Master of Ceremonies hailed from the world of the bouffon as she was both the target and the usurper of institutionalized marriage presented in excess. Taken together, this amalgamation of theatrical styles that best serve a disabled artist's chosen form of embodiment and expression destabilize the notion of linear theatre as Kaplow Applebaum further expresses:

The juxtaposition of different media (dance, video installation, poetry, light) often seen within devised performance decentralizes the traditional 'linear notion of theater.' Not only do language, image, environment, and movement all act upon each other, they act upon the very creation of each other. Shifting from a singular written text to the work of multiple performance texts, devised work prompts the dramaturg to participate and focus on what performance studies scholar, editor, and dramaturg Marin Blažević recognizes as 'the changing potential of an act or event.' This space of potential (or creative chaos) moves the dramaturg to a productive fault line. Not only are we now looking at the potential of an action or an event, we are also aware that our responses and conversations about process dramatically influence that potential (Kaplow Applebaum 197-198).

In conclusion, the flexible and adaptive nature of dramaturgy lends itself to the creation of devised CRIP theatre because it perpetuates the dissolution of hegemonic approaches to theatrical creation not only through the nature of devising, but also through the process of CRIPPING, or interrupting dominant experiences of space, movement, and temporality. The dramaturge collects the stories and language of the community, supporting and preparing them to reach the stage by imbricating process, production, and

final product with inclusivity and interrogation, always questioning the relationship between outside socio-political forces and the forces of creation within the theatre. The dramaturge in a devised CRIP process plays and interplays with the content and explorations of the cast to encourage contiguity and cohesion, but always gives space to the expression of personal truths and the integrity of personal narratives. Dramaturgy becomes the act of adaptation and interruption, abandoning industry conventions and theatrical genres where desired, emerging with a new form generated through a process of exploration, self-care, defence, and positive re-imagining, building a community of love, in the margins.

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