

## Arts

## King without a crown

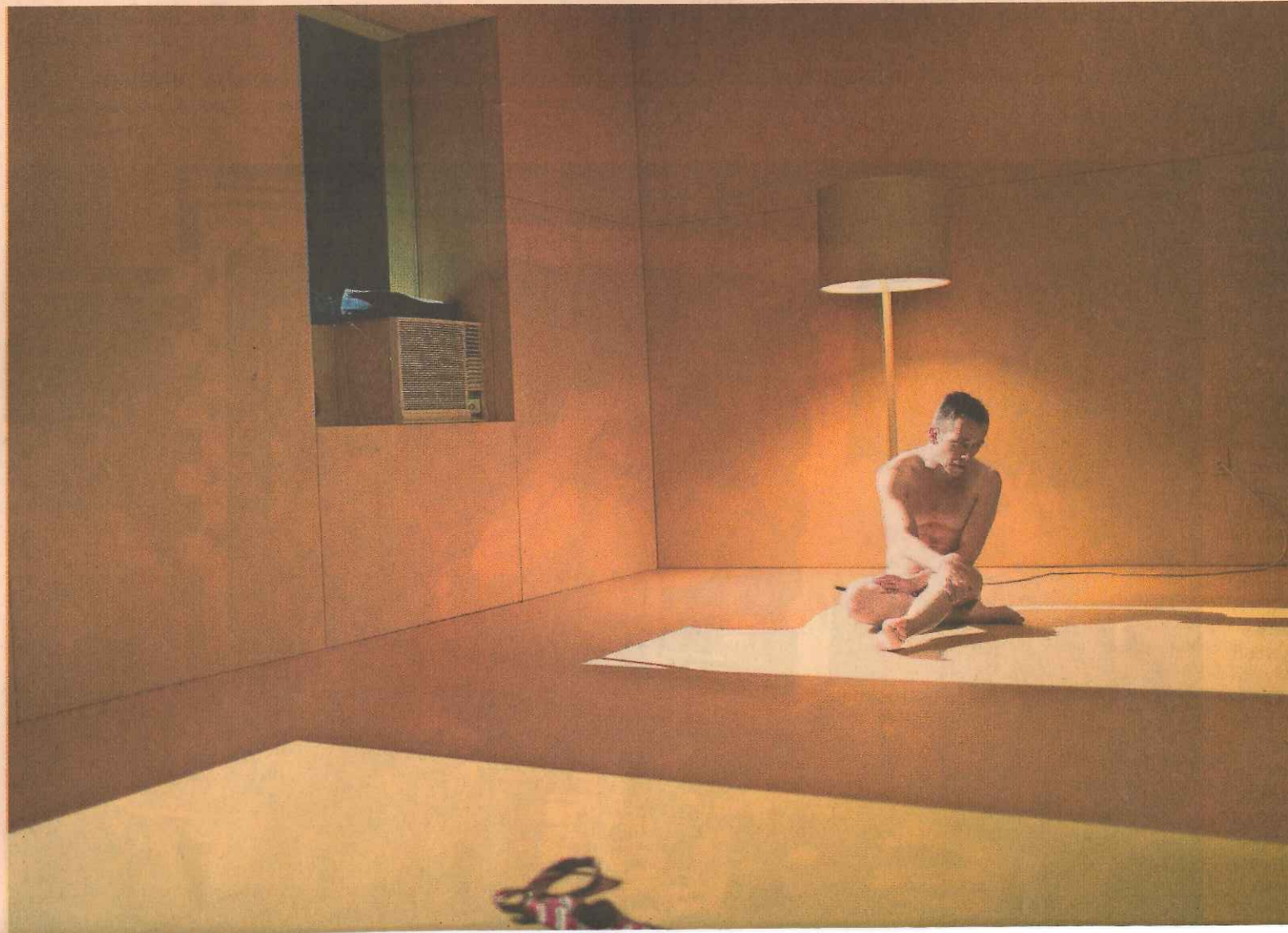
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increasingly enlist the services of a dramaturg, but what does the role actually entail? By Sarah Hemming

The dream would be: you write a first draft, you deliver it to the theatre, the artistic director says it's a work of genius, the director is breathless and everybody is in awe of it," says playwright Simon Stephens. "But I don't think it ever, ever happens like that."

Enter the dramaturg. In the tricky process of getting a play from page to stage, he or she can be key. But who exactly is this shadowy figure? Definitions of the role can be as hazy as smoke. And while every major theatre in Germany has a whole department devoted to the function and a practitioner assigned to every production, in British theatre the dramaturg has been a comparatively rare beast. Until recently.

Stephens' new play, *Song from Far Away*, which is showing at London's Young Vic and is directed by Ivo van



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But how might this process work with a new play? After all, you don't have to research what the playwright might have meant – you can just ask them. van den Eynde is currently the dramaturg for Stephens' *Song from Far Away* and explains that his job is still to ask questions, but in a way that might prompt the writer to clarify, rework and deepen a script. On *Song from Far Away*, a monologue about grief co-produced by Toneelgroep Amsterdam, that process developed the significant role of unseen characters.

So why is the position so much more established in other European countries? Most commentators point to the subtle aesthetic and structural differences in theatre systems. Broadly, in the culture that produced Shakespeare, the writer and the word have tended to be central to the work, and directors have often emerged from a literary, university background. In German theatres, by contrast, a conceptual approach has long been established.

But British theatre is changing. "Increasingly we see cross-pollination between theatre styles," observes Power. "We work on shows at the National Theatre now that have puppetry specialists, aerial specialists, lighting and sound designers, composers, choreographers. And increasingly the director is orchestrating a number of different languages. So to have a specialist who is responsible for the text is

Away, which is showing at London's Young Vic and is directed by Ivo van Hove, has a dramaturg (as did his *Carmen Disruption* at the Almeida). There's one working on *Measure for Measure*, coming up at the same theatre, and another on *Jane Eyre*, about to open at the National Theatre. Meanwhile at Home, the new arts centre in Manchester, Petra Tauscher has become resident dramaturg. So what do they do? Is the role on the increase in the UK? And if so, does it signify a shift in the way of theatre-making?

For Ben Power, deputy artistic director and resident dramaturg at the National Theatre, part of the role is being the playwright's ambassador in the rehearsal room — particularly if the writer, for reasons of mortality, cannot be there in person.

"The dramaturg, for me, stands between the director and the process and the text," he says. "So it's not a typical literary management role which often happens in quite an abstracted way, away from the rehearsal process. It's really about thinking about text for performance and getting under the skin of what a writer wants to do to an audience. So, for instance, with Shaw's *Man and Superman* [at the National Theatre earlier this year], it was about cutting and shaping a text in order to find clarity and serve the specifics of that production."

Wait a minute, you might think: isn't that the job of a director? Mike Akers, dramaturg on *Jane Eyre* at the National Theatre, points out that the director has many tasks to juggle in rehearsals. "I'm able to sit outside all the other pressures and focus solely on the arc of the story and the way it is coming across as a piece of theatre, as opposed to a novel. The dramaturg is the little voice on the director's shoulder."



From top: Eelco Smits in 'Song from Far Away,' taken during a performance in Brazil; Bart van den Eynde (left) and Simon Stephens, the dramaturg and playwright, respectively, for 'Song from Far Away'; dramaturg Mike Akers (far left, in black T-shirt) in rehearsals for 'Jane Eyre' at the National Theatre

Jan Versweyeld; Manuel Harlan



To understand the job you have to understand what dramaturgy is, says Zoë Svendsen, who worked with director Joe Hill-Gibbins on a thrillingly unhinged staging of *The Changeling* at the Young Vic and is currently assisting him with *Measure for Measure*.

"Dramaturgy is the structure of the work," explains Svendsen. "It's basically the scaffolding — everything you don't see but which links everything together. And effectively that scaffolding is how the attention of the audience is held . . . When you dig down into the deep structure of plays from the Renaissance [such as *The Changeling*] you realise that they are differently made from modern work: they are not as interested in cause-and-effect psychology. It takes a different kind of approach to explore how those structures might work on stage."

"With *Measure for Measure* we've done a lot of Bible research," she adds. "And we've discovered that there is a constant shifting pattern of structures of biblical stories [in the play]. It's not about communicating that research to an audience directly, it's much more about using it to understand how the play works and then finding our own way of doing it."

The more experimental the production, the more crucial this painstaking foundation work might be. Belgian dramaturg Bart van den Eynde has worked with director Ivo van Hove of Toneelgroep Amsterdam for 20 years, collaborating on groundbreaking works such as *The Roman Tragedies* and *The Antonioni Project*. He was dramaturg on van Hove's superb London staging of

Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* (transferring to Broadway this autumn). For him, "dramaturgy is all about asking the right questions."

"The first big discussion we had about *A View from the Bridge* was whether Eddie is aware of incestuous feelings for his niece," van den Eynde recalls. "We decided that no, he doesn't know. So what are the consequences of this in the play and how do you show it?"

That might sound quite abstract, but that production's precise psychological underpinning gave it its searing power. "Ivo is the director I know who demands

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the longest and most detailed preparations from his dramaturg," says van den Eynde. "But it's to build a concept which gives him safety to create a kind of freedom in the rehearsal space."

He adds that such groundwork comes into its own during rehearsals. As the show evolves, the dramaturg can act as a sounding board: "Somebody once called the dramaturg 'a king without a crown'. I like that image a lot, because it expresses the fact that you don't have to defend your kingdom: you are not defending one specific element of the production. If you are an actor, you are defending your lines; if you are the lighting man you are defending your lighting.

different languages. So to have a specialist who is responsible for the text is probably a good thing."

The very fact that no one — including the practitioners themselves — finds it easy to define a dramaturg shows just how protean the role is. Stephens, who works both in Britain and continental Europe, suggests that: "It's easier to think of dramaturgy as a function rather than a job."

"The convention in Britain has been that the playwright is responsible for dramaturgy," he adds. "But it's an interesting time because that is shifting. Every playwright I know acknowledges the fact that playwriting is a multi-authored process and the dramaturg sits like an editor or a librarian, monitoring the function of language within that collaboration. What's exciting about British theatre is the possibility of a synthesis of the two [traditions]."

Stephens is a keen advocate of such co-operation. He does, however, recall being taken aback once when a dramaturg arrived with a copy of his play marked up in yellow and red.

"I asked her, 'What are the scenes marked with yellow?' She said, 'They're the scenes where we're going to cut some of the lines.' I said, 'Oh cool, OK. What about the scenes marked with red?' She said, 'Oh they're the scenes we're going to cut altogether.'" He laughs. "But there's an energy to it that is really bracing — it makes you consider what you're doing as a playwright."

*'Song from Far Away,' Sept 2-19, 'Measure for Measure,' Oct 1-Nov 14, both at Young Vic, London, [youngvic.org](http://youngvic.org); 'A View from the Bridge,' Lyceum Theatre, New York, Oct 21-Feb 21, [shubert.nyc/theatres/lyceum](http://shubert.nyc/theatres/lyceum); 'Jane Eyre,' Sept 8-Jan 10, National Theatre, London, [nationaltheatre.org.uk](http://nationaltheatre.org.uk)*