No rehearsal is necessary: The politics of guest performers in The man who flew into space from his apartment
Michael Pinchbeck

Abstract

I will explore the politics and the ethics of the guest performer in The man who flew into space from his apartment (2015) and other work that uses a guest performer e.g. Tim Crouch's An Oak Tree (2005), Nassim Soleimanpour’s White Rabbit, Red Rabbit. I propose that this enacts a dramaturgy of not knowing, a curating of the unknown. For this article, I explore the politics of the guest performer and how they become an inside eye or internal dramaturg in the process of making a performance. In doing so, I propose a new dramaturgical paradigm for the guest performer involved and reflect on the way practice as research is an inherently dramaturgical and curatorial process. The performance takes place in liminal space between composition and dissemination and sees dramaturgy as process and product. The text is the seed but it grows in different ways depending on how it is interpreted by the performer. It is germinated in performance in front of an audience not the usual incubation in the rehearsal room. The piece explores the process of raveling the work from its own devising, of making something wide open and making something narrow, of opening and closing a weave. I relate the role of dramaturg to that of curator and argue that it is a catalysing role that enables intersubjective relation with a number of texts authorised by an audience.

Biography

Dr Michael Pinchbeck is a Nottingham-based writer and theatre maker. He lectures in drama at the University of Lincoln’s School of Fine and Performing Arts. He co-founded Metro-Boulot-Dodo in 1997 after studying Theatre and Creative Writing at Lancaster University. He was commissioned by Nottingham Playhouse to write The White Album (2006) and The Ashes (2011), and to write and direct Bolero (2014), which premiered at Nottingham Playhouse before touring to Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo. He has a Masters in Performance and Live Art from Nottingham Trent University and recently completed a practice as research PhD at Loughborough University exploring the role of the dramaturg in contemporary performance.
Every time I look out of my window.
I etch his face upon the sky.
Whether moulding clouds into his likeness.
Or tracing stars with half-closed eyes.
Every time I listen to the wind I score his voice upon its staves.
Longing to hear a loving whisper.
Though the voice is not the same.
Every time I feel the rain I sense him falling down.
He permeates the concrete.
He penetrates the ground.
Every time I see the picture of the room he left behind.
The hole still serves to haunt me.
More than it reminds.
He is the sky, the earth, the stars, the sea.
His face, his voice, his history.
But I know he’s standing next to me.
Every time I look out of my window.

The poem above forms part of the text for *The man who flew into space from his apartment*, a devised performance I made in 2015, and serves as a cipher for both its aesthetic and thematic. For this article, I explore the politics of the guest performer and how they become an internal dramaturg in the process of making the piece. In doing so, I propose a new dramaturgical paradigm for the guest performer involved and reflect on the way practice as research is an inherently dramaturgical process. *The man who flew into space from his apartment* is inspired by an installation of the same name by the Russian artist Ilya Kabakov. The performance draws on notions of escape and makes a journey, like Kabakov, between east and west, flying and falling, attempt and failure. Using found slides and an old slide projector, I present an immersive slideshow for an empty space to be performed by a guest performer in front of an audience of 10. The original installation Kabakov made in 1984, formed part of an exhibition comprising 10 rooms along a corridor entitled *Ten Characters.*
The audience in my work unknowingly becomes the Ten Characters in Kabakov’s work. The guest performer follows my pre-recorded audio instructions on headphones that take him or her on a journey into the unknown like the man who flew into space. I was interested in exploring how an unrehearsed performance mirrors the unplanned and unpredictable fate of The man who flew into space from his apartment. I propose that this enacts a dramaturgy of not knowing, a curating of the unknown. I will explore the politics of the guest performer in this context as part of this article. The performance cuts across art forms, involves audience participation, explores site and immersive experience and questions notions of rehearsal and authorship through the use of guest performers. It has been performed in gallery spaces, theatre spaces, foyer spaces, a former Victorian School building in Nottingham and on the 15th floor of an unfinished tower block in Salford. I see the guest performer as ‘colouring in’ the piece and it evolves with every iteration. I change the text and soundtrack depending on the different nuances and notes the guest performers find within it. This has included shifting the tense from present to past or the narration from third person to first person. Their feedback is essential to its future and they are inside eyes, internal dramaturgs, working a drama from within. As Mary Luckhurst writes, if metallurgy is the working of metal, then we might consider dramaturgy to be a working of drama.²

With this performance, the guest performer is always working, thinking, listening and speaking simultaneously, performing something for the first time that they have never seen or heard before. More than any I have made this piece will never be finished. It is completed by a guest performer who embodies the text without my direction. The text insists that they make it their own work and the architecture of the piece remains the same but the dramaturgy of events is constantly in flux, as Heraclitus says, cited by Schechner in Performance Studies: An Introduction (2013), ‘you can’t step into the same river twice’.³ My role has been more of a dramaturg of my own work than a director, designing an architectural blueprint for the performance and inviting a guest performer to build it, to inhabit it and to furnish it with their own interpretation. As Turner and Behrndt propose, if architecture is the dramaturgy of events, enabling narratives to take place in space, then dramaturgy is the architecture of performance.⁴ The man who… is a performance for non-theatre spaces that takes the audience on a journey from slideshow to show, artist’s talk to artwork. It draws connections between theatre space and outer space, fine art and performance.
The performance ends with the guest performer inviting the audience members to leave their shoes on a pallet tied to the corners of the room to look like a catapult. He or she then leaves the space. The final image of the performance mirrors that of the installation that inspired it. An empty space, where all that is left is a pair of shoes. In this way, like the installation, the performance engages and enacts a dramaturgy of absence. The absent protagonist in the poem that the audience read as part of the show, written in fragments and left under their chairs, *Every time I look out of my window*, was always describing the absent protagonist of the installation when I wrote it originally. But now it seems to describe the guest performer. Ghosting their physical presence into the piece. Perhaps, on second reading it speaks of the dramaturgs or curators who worked with me discreetly, sensitively, intuitively, leaving their marks upon the piece. As Walter Benjamin describes, ‘the traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel’. The work bears the traces of everyone who has constructed, attended or inhabited it. It is covered in handprints.

For this publication, I consider what it means to curate the unrehearsed and the different and complex politics implicit in sending someone on a journey into the unknown without any rehearsal, the usual protocol for performance. I ask what it means to embrace chance. As Allan Kaprow says: ‘… it frees one from customary relationships’. He writes that ‘chance methodology is extremely useful in dispersing and breaking up knots of ‘knowables’. Everything, the stuff of art, of daily life, the working of one’s mind, gets thrown into sudden and startling patterns, so that if old values are destroyed, new experiences are revealed’. For this piece, I am working with ‘unknowables’ to destroy the old values of rehearsing and knowing to reveal a new experience. These ‘unknowables’, such as how the guest performer will interpret the stage directions and respond to my recorded voice decide how the performance unfolds and we as performer, audience and author alike share this new experience. Chance methodology has also influenced the aesthetic of the piece, found slides accompany a cut-up text, and the audience interactions are also difficult to predict.

The installation that inspired the performance explores the ontology and politics of absence. We imagine the DIY cosmonaut that launched himself into space. We colour him and his motives in. We join the dots to trace his fate and follow the trajectory of
the question mark that surrounds his destiny. We piece together the evidence of what might have been. We read the ruins of an event that took place here. Much like how the dramaturg practises both a semiotic and a phenomenological response to piece together the fragments of a performance. Pearson and Shanks suggest, ‘What begins as a series of fragments is arranged in performance. Dramaturgy is an act of assemblage’. However, Tim Etchells is more pragmatic about what is left behind after the event. He writes: ‘Fragments in and of themselves are meaningless. Only by piecing them together can we begin to form a picture of what a performance may have been. The creation of a history is a manipulation of fragments’. We could argue that, somewhere between architects and archaeologists, dramaturgs both assemble futures and create histories. They operate in a liminal space between process and product, both reading the ruins and witnessing the catastrophe that caused them.

Rachael Walton of Third Angel says ‘I think the role of the dramaturg is to ask the right questions’. When asked to define his work as dramaturg in the US, Mark Bly simply writes: ‘I question’. My question for this piece was how to explore a sense of not knowing. I had seen guest performers before in other work, for example Tim Crouch’s An Oak Tree (2005) and Nassim Soleimanpour’s White Rabbit, Red Rabbit both exploring notions of surrogacy and what Stephen Bottoms calls ‘authorizing the audience’, making them a part of the process as well as the product. I wanted to find a way of making the form intrinsically linked to the story. I wanted that guest performer to imprint their personality upon it, to become agents of its narrative and inform its future development. By not rehearsing, I embrace the methodology of chance, the curation of unknowables and the notion of the internal dramaturg. But what do I mean by ‘dramaturg’? And how might one work from the inside instead of outside? The dramaturg has a fluid role that moves from one context to another. It has been likened to a curator by Claire MacDonald who writes about the dramaturgy of an exhibition as the curating of a narrative experience in a gallery. She writes: ‘Dramaturgs engage space between composition and the unfolding of a performance in the presence of viewers’. The man who... takes place in a liminal space between composition and performance and sees dramaturgy as both a process and a product.

In Richard Schechner’s Performance Studies: An Introduction (2013) there is only one mention of the dramaturg as: ‘A person who works with the director in a wide
variety of ways’. He suggests that: ‘Dramaturgical work includes researching the historical and cultural contexts and past production history of the dramatic text working closely with the director in interpreting the dramatic text and writing program notes.’ He adds: ‘During rehearsals, the dramaturge may offer detailed criticism of the ongoing production process’.¹³ This is literally a textbook reading of the role that precludes and therefore limits a wider understanding of its potential. Though he suggests that the dramaturg works in a ‘wide variety of ways’, Schechner here insists that a dramaturg always works with a text and a director. What he ignores, perhaps out of economy, perhaps out of tradition, is the fact that dramaturgy is a slippery practice that operates across different contexts that overlap and coalesce.

In the 21st century, the dramaturg has a fluid role that moves from one context to another, entering and exiting artform, discipline and research territory like a critical cosmonaut orbiting the world of the work. Cathy Turner suggests we might use the phrase ‘porous dramaturgies’ to describe the way the composition of contemporary performance is becoming less easy to define.¹⁴ David Williams suggests we should turn to other disciplines for answers, such as the novelist Paul Auster.¹⁵ In The New York Trilogy (1987), Auster describes the role of detective as ‘the one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them’.¹⁶ Auster here could be describing the role of the internal dramaturg, in search of the central thought.

The dramaturg works with both playwrights and choreographers and sometimes with neither a text nor a director. They may write programme notes but it is perhaps more likely now that the dramaturg will write texts from, for, around and about the creative process, which are then folded back into the narrative of the piece, become part of its wider publicity material or increasingly appear online in the form of rehearsal blogs or embedded criticism. For The man who... I invited critic Wayne Burrows to write a creative response to a work-in-progress in the form of a blog. His knowledge of Soviet artwork informed both the aesthetic and the content of the piece. He writes: ‘None of us, neither audience or performer, knows where this is leading. We are asked to deliver lines and perform actions that have been handed to us in envelopes like instructions passed between Cold War spies. We find ourselves becoming co-conspirators in the reconstruction of a history of news bulletins, propaganda posters,
photographs of lunar landings and earthly commemorations’. Burrows post-show reflections chime with Claire Bishop’s summation of relational art and performance, and how it ‘privileges intersubjective relations over detached opticality’.

I invited screenwriter Jonathan Wakeham to contribute programme notes to the show from a film perspective. He wrote: ‘This is the story of Ilya Kabakov inside the story of Yuri Gagarin inside the story of the space race inside the story of the Cold War inside the story of all of us inside a room with a projector, a performer, ten postcards, some boots and a balloon. A set of Russian dolls. A multiverse. An intimate epic. A show’. We could argue that both Burrows and Wakeham are embedded critics of the devising and rehearsal process. The phrase ‘embedded criticism’ stems from a question set by writer Maddy Costa at a Devoted and Disgruntled Roadshow in 2012. Costa asked: ‘When embedded in rehearsals, is there a potential model in critic as dramaturg?’.

Costa’s model is at odds with the traditional paradigm in the time of the dramaturg sitting on the row behind Brecht in the Berliner Ensemble. Even Robert Wilson’s assistant director, Maria Da Nascemi sits: ‘behind him, slightly to the left, and tries to see things as he sees them’. The dramaturg is always trying to see things like someone else might see them, to look through someone else’s eyes at the work.

I am writing this article from the perspective of someone with no one to sit next to, with no one else’s eyes to see the work through. The only other eyes in the room are those of the guest performer and the ten audience members wondering what will happen next. I want to make work free from this traditional hierarchy of the director as auteur and the dramaturg as a mediator of their vision. I want to make work free from the traditional paradigms of text. I want to write freely about how the dramaturg can be an auteur too, who knows how to make theatre and how to inspire others to do so. There is a story about when Jean Luc Godard went to the cinema to see a film with a friend. On leaving the cinema the friend turned to Godard and said ‘That was terrible’ to which Godard replied ‘What did you do to make it better?’ The dramaturg’s role is to make it better. The dramaturg asks ‘What can we do to make this better?’ One of the reasons for working with a guest performer was so that I could sit out of the work and watch how it evolves. The text is the seed but it grows in different ways depending on how it is interpreted by the performer. It is germinated in performance in front of an audience not the usual incubation in the rehearsal room.
Theatre maker, Andy Smith, says that a dramaturg represents the audience in the rehearsal room. I want the guest performer to represent the audience in a way too and go on a journey of discovery into the unknown together. Not knowing whether they will live or die. Fly or fall. Succeed or fail. As they say in the piece. The only instruction I give the performer is an email before the performance. It serves as a kind of contract with them. However, contract means to make narrow as well as to make an agreement and it is this process of making narrow which is a potential obstacle when it comes to working as a dramaturg. A dramaturg makes wide, a dramaturg opens, a dramaturg expands, a dramaturg sees a work and reads it many ways. Contracts are at odds with this and therefore do not function on the same terms, in the same territory.

When you attempt to define the role of dramaturg before it has begun, you define it as something else entirely. The contract resides in the relationship between the artist and the outside eye, and it writes itself as the project evolves as the artist and audience are authorized. This relationship is built on a process of drafting and redrafting texts; each draft is an attempt at layering material, each draft represents a change of mind, much like the phenomenon of *pentimento*. In oil painting, as the paint ages, it becomes translucent and layers of paint begin to reveal revisions or amendments made by the artist in the form of *pentimento*. The layering of the devising process is equally open to making amendments visible. John Freeman argues that practice as research exhibits *pentimento*, as you can see through the finished work, the layers of previous drafts and alterations, ‘a change of mind’. There is an element of *pentimento* involved in the role of working as a dramaturg in contemporary performance, as the process of writing the text for performance is often made visible through the performance itself. The text says: ‘As I write this and the music gets louder I feel my heart beat faster’.²³

With the nature of practice as research comes a certain caveat that the doing is the thinking. As Smith and Dean propose: ‘To be process-driven is to have no particular starting point in mind and no pre-conceived end. Such an approach can be directed towards emergence, that is the generation of ideas, which were unforeseen at the beginning of the project’.²⁴ This view of Practice as Research echoes Turner and Behrdnt’s description of the dramaturgs they interviewed as ‘… having discovered, through practice, the particularities of their own function within the process’.²⁵ We can then argue that the act of working as a dramaturg, or the Act of Dramaturgy itself,
is practice as research. As Freeman implies in his introduction to Blood, Sweat and Theory, demonstration becomes more than illustration: it becomes the thesis itself.  

In ‘The Stay of Illusion’ (2009), Andrew Quick writes: ‘Theatre… always involves placing. Derived from the Greek thea, it has (at least) two interconnected meanings, the activity of putting into place, placing, and secondly, the creation of a place from which to see’. We could argue that a dramaturg is both putting the work into a place and creating a place from which to see it. Certainly they are active in terms of contextualising and framing the work critically and seeing it take place physically. Synne Behrndt writes that a dramaturg’s role is ‘to help recognise and unfold the place or the moment where the work becomes hot, when it starts to move as if by itself, inviting a feeling of a world to discover there, a sense of pushing the limits of what we can perceive, imagine or articulate’. The dramaturg’s work resides in the seam between semiotic and phenomenological, reading and feeling. Barba states that dramaturgy is both the ‘weave and the process of weaving’, so The man who... explores the process of raveling the work from its own devising, of making something wide open and making something narrow, of opening and closing a weave.

This is the crux of the unspoken and often unwritten contract between an artist and an outside eye; how do you open without closing, make visible something that is not tangible, tell a story without making it too easy to read or too difficult to understand? How do you move from inside to outside? For the eye is both internal and external, looking out and projecting images within. As States suggests: ‘… the mission of any form of phenomenological critique is to describe what Cezanne called ‘The world’s instant’, not simply a paintable instant, but also any instant that is perpetually apprehended as carrying or leading to an intuition about what it is and what it is doing before our eyes’. ‘What is it?’ and ‘What is it doing?’ are the two questions a dramaturg asks of anything they see. Let us compare this reading to the analysis of Lessing, the first dramaturg, who wrote in 1769, ‘The dramaturg bridges the gap between theory and practice… like a poet, (he or she) thinks in our presence.’ As Turner and Behrndt write, ‘We might consider the dramaturg as a builder of bridges’. The dramaturg both bridges places and places bridges, they think by doing and do by thinking, and in doing so enable a number of texts to be written and read.
I want to end with feedback sent by Forced Entertainment’s Terry O’Connor who performed in both Tim Crouch’s An Oak Tree and The man who... She writes: ‘It was difficult to pull out of the immediate demands of the task in order to think about how the piece was going or what it was. I found that really interesting as a performer. It meant that I had really intense eye contact with the audience but no ability to theorise or steer it whilst in the act. No directorial focus pull. No chance to dwell or milk. This was a really rare experience, perhaps not even the Tim Crouch piece came close to the exacting nature of the task. I imagine that the gap opened up between me and the text was additionally foregrounded by this 'racing after' the words. It meant that sometimes sentences changed shape and meaning as additional clauses were added. I met a student today who loved it. She said she couldn't take in the whole text, perhaps our faltering relation with its sense creates another level of mismatch in the audience. For her this was a rich grasping for sense, for another's experience, yet it's clear there are very poignant metaphors and images to keep an anchoring in place. So words to objects are nicely re-balanced, where words more often too easily win out.’

The man who flew into space from his apartment challenges the way a writer abdicates responsibility for what the actors say. The way a writer sits in the dark in the audience, anonymous, trying to imagine what everyone is thinking. The way a writer has to let a text go, like a balloon drifting from a child’s hand, and trust that it will find the sky eventually. There is an old, Russian proverb: ‘If you go out to your porch, look at the sky and jump to the stars, you will just land in the mud’. The man who... sits somewhere between living and dying, knowing and not knowing, jumping and landing, the stars and the mud. Perhaps like the protagonist in the installation that inspired it, he will never fall to earth and continue to orbit these research questions. I ask how the dramaturg might play a similar role to that of a curator and argue that it is a catalysing role that enables intersubjective relation with a number of texts that are authorised by an audience. I seek to explore what happens when an artistic process embraces ‘unknowables’ and how we might be able to ‘curate the unknown’. I propose that practice as research as a field, or mode of enquiry, is implicitly an ‘act of dramaturgy’ and by definition the researcher becomes a dramaturg. I ask how it will ever be finished. As Boris Groys explores in his biography of the Kabakov artwork:
‘… It is finished. The flight was successful; our hero’s body has disappeared. Admittedly, this does not answer the question as to whether he has flown off into cosmic weightlessness or has plunged to his death. And this is actually the question – as to what it means when people say a story has come to an end, that a project has finished, or has been completed… Whatever the case, it is certainly easier to disappear from reality than to be released from utopia’.

1 Michael Pinchbeck, The man who flew into space from his apartment, dir. by Michael Pinchbeck (first performance Manchester: Zion Arts Centre, 28 November 2014).
20 Maddy Costa, ‘What new dialogue can we set up between people who write about theatre and people who make it?’, Devoted and Disgruntled 7 blog [online] (29 April 2012). <http://www.devotedanddisgruntled7.blogspot.co.uk/2012/02/what-new-dialogue-can-we-set-up-between.html> [accessed 28 February 2016].
23 Michael Pinchbeck, *The man who flew into space from his apartment*, dir. by Michael Pinchbeck (first performance Manchester: Zion Arts Centre, 28 November 2014).
33 Terry O’Connor, Personal Correspondence, 19 April 2016.