Dramaturg

DR. DENNIS MAHER

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Interviewed by Garrett Hall, Maverick Theatre Company Student Dramaturg

INTERVIEWER:
Dr. Julienne Greer, Director for the Maverick Theatre Company production of BALM IN GILEAD, has been fortunate to have your expertise as Dramaturg for this 1985 Obie Award-winning play. What are some of the contributions a Dramaturg makes to a theatre production?

DR. MAHER:
Dramaturgs establish connections among the text, actors, and audience. There is an international organization of these theatre workers, Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA), of which I am a long-time member. According to LMDA, a necessary function of a Dramaturg is to contextualize the world of a play. As no play is created in a vacuum, the Dramaturg researches the world of the play and the playwright, and places the play within that historical framework. For example, in BALM IN GILEAD, the Dramaturg researches what a New York diner looked like in the mid-sixties, what people wore, what things cost, hair styles of the period, music of the period, and so on. Additionally, actors who play characters in this 1960s era play should understand the psychological pressure of living in a world where a number of nations have the capability of destroying the other—and even of ending the world. Male characters have the added pressure of trying to keep out of the military draft and being sent to Viet Nam, and female characters are living on the edge of the establishment of the Feminist revolution and what that means. The LGBTQ characters must realize what this time period means to them, as the consciousness-raising of the Feminist Movement, the Gay Rights Movement and the Peace Movement was, for the most part, simultaneous. Music is essential to understanding the emotional underpinning of the play, as many songs are emblematic of this revolutionary period, and make statements about the world of the play. This literal musicality mirrors the musical nature of the dialogue that is germane to a Lanford Wilson play.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you feel like you’ve guided the Director’s vision of BALM IN GILEAD?

DR. MAHER:
‘Guided’ is, perhaps, too strong a word for what I do as a Dramaturg. I feel that my job is to act as a source for the director, the cast, and the production crew, to be used at their discretion. The artistic staff of a production is composed of many disparate talents, hopefully all pulling with the same oars toward the shore of a successful production. It’s my task to provide what these talents need when they need it.

INTERVIEWER:
What is some of the research that helps shape this production?

DR. MAHER:
I’ve looked for what that time had (or didn’t have) that we have today, what things cost, how people socially interacted (for example, 42% of U.S. residents SMOKED), hairstyles, even toys (toys are especially important because the boys played with guns and war toys and G.I. Joe, while the girls were given girly versions of ovens, vacuum cleaners, etc., to ‘be like Mom’—it’s not too hard to make the leap to the rise of neo-Feminism based on what the toys for little girls were given to play with). All in all, researching a play for its background is a BLAST, and it constitutes a good deal of going down the rabbit hole to find things you didn’t know.

Dr. Dennis Maher is currently the senior professor in the UT Arlington Department of Theatre Arts (having taught at UTA since 1982). Dr. Maher received his Bachelor’s degree from St. Louis University, his Master’s from the University of Memphis, and his Doctorate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His opinions on theatre, film, baseball and popular culture have been quoted by media from Semana Terra (Colombia) to the Dallas Morning News to ABC.com.