

## Learning Journey Dramaturgy: Interview with Meri-Maija Näykki

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I had the pleasure to interview Meri-Maija Näykki who is a Finnish performance maker who works as a director-dramaturg. She combines theater, circus, community and site-specific performing arts. At the moment she is working on a new performance called *Synnytystalkoot* (direct translation= Childbirth Bee) which will premiere in February 2024 in Theater Telakka, Tampere. The performance is a multidisciplinary cabaret about reproduction and combines music, contemporary circus, contemporary dance, drag, clownery and spoken word. In this performance Meri-Maija works as a director-dramaturg but also has an outside dramaturg Iira Halttunen. I followed one day of rehearsals and afterwards had a chance to interview Meri-Maija.

I also had the pleasure to attend dramaturg Lou Cope's lectures on dramaturgy in January 2024 in Codarts, Rotterdam. Out of these two experiences I have two avenues into the world of working as a dramaturg.

Interview 10.1.2024 Theater Telakka, Tampere, Finland  
(abbreviated and translated from Finnish into English)

*How do you work together with the outside dramaturg?*

We make phone calls and Iira comes to see the process. Iira has a month of work time, while I have three. Now at this point closer to the premiere, Iira starts visiting more often. We have been working together for a long time, we have been in many projects together. The best thing with Iira is that Iira comes and watches. Iira can see it from the outside. Iira makes qualitative observations.

For example, Iira asked: is this a cabaret? So more towards cabaret, what does that mean? It was more in the qualities of the contemporary show and then we started feeding the qualities of the cabaret.

*What is a dramaturg needed for?*

I'm a dramaturg myself, I do a lot of that work. An external dramaturg is needed to untie the knots. The dramaturg comes with fresh eyes and has tools for structuring. And they know how to ask questions. The dramaturg is not only a substitute for the viewer, but also sees deeper into the structures of the performance. And they can see how things would work if they changed places. It's nice to bounce off these together.

Iira knows how to ask those stupid questions. A dramaturg knows how to question things. Does it need to be done in this way?

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Let us stop for a moment here to reflect. Having had the input from Meri-Maija and Lou Cope two aspects of working as a dramaturg rise to the surface. An essential skill for a dramaturg is the skill of making questions. The dramaturg won't make the decisions, that is the artist's job. It is a real skill to have to find the right questions, to bring new openings for the thinking of the artist. How to challenge them and encourage them and to what extent. How to make them sometimes face the things about their work they want to avoid. How to help them to make the best possible work they can?

The second aspect that emerges for me it is the unique role of proximity and distance the dramaturg has to the work. As Meri-Maija described and Lou emphasized, a dramaturg is not just an outside eye. A dramaturg is at the same time very close to the work and also must have the skill to zoom out and look at the work from a distance. The artist themselves are in such close proximity to the work that it would be impossible for them on their own to distance themselves to that extent. A dramaturg can really help the artist to see the perspective of the spectator.

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*When you do dramaturgy yourself, what are the most important questions for you?*

When I do multidisciplinary stuff and subject-oriented stuff, where the purpose is not to tell a single story, one of the biggest questions is what kind of transition is going on. What's the journey?

I have done a lot of site-specific work. Space and landscape determine a lot in that. In the black box, anything is possible. I set out to solve, what are the limitations and attributes in this space? In this performance, it's the buns and the process of baking them. The buns are dramaturgically involved all the time. The buns dictate the duration and rhythm of the performance. I have brought it as a site-specific element for the performance. It has dictated that the show cannot be 1 hour because it takes longer to bake the buns.

This being a cabaret or rather a varietee, I'm going to ask what different forms or variations are there to express this same thing?

Ideally, thematically I would have something that proceeds. I have used stolen dramaturg a lot. That I steal the form from some other activity. For example, now here it is the bun baking.

I don't want to tell the story; I don't want the performance to end in giving birth. If I wasn't doing cabaret, there would be some kind of outcome that things would lead to.

I'm bad with endings. It is related to making site specific performances. They never end with the final bow. The gaze is positioned to perceive the surrounding world and that gaze remains when you start walking home. That's why ending in the black box is difficult for me. Yeah the blocks are for me: cross-disciplinary elements, transitions and physical frames.

*What methods do you have for building dramaturgy?*

I have used stolen dramaturgy a lot. For example, I have done one in a log driving tunnel, which followed the dramaturgy of a work party. It is often the starting point, but at some point, I have to abandon it.

Discussion and improvisation. Cross-disciplinarity and being open. I have an idea and I'm ready for the idea to be torn to shreds.

Combining things from different directions into one scene and bringing things together. I would never be able to create something so multi-dimensional on my own. Could this sperm, for example, perform standup and this ovum dance with an exercise ball? I would never be able to come up with these alone and put them together.

It is one dramaturgical method for me. Bringing these things together and experimenting and being open to things being bad and wrong. It's been a big learning curve that I don't need to know where we're going. Rather, I work more as a facilitator and bring out the best in people.

*What is the biggest difference between circus and theater dramaturgy?*

The show doesn't have to have a plot.

It's hard for me to go to a big theater to offer anything because I don't know how to work with a finished text. The dramaturgy should be decided in advance.

Circus cannot be decided in advance, it must be tried out in the space. For example, if I do a circus show with two circus artists and one dancer. One circus artist does aerial rope and hair hang and the other the Cyr wheel and together they do partner acrobatics. And then there is a dancer with a street background. I know a little bit about all the disciplines, but I'm not terribly good at any of them. They write that show themselves. I can bring a proposal for choreography, for example, about a horse and a tail. And what is the development of this. It was not solved with pre-written text, but more with improvisation and bodily space.

It is easy and fast to edit text. But in circus, the elements are more already there. They are more aesthetic questions, what kind of images will there be, what is the relationship with the space. The Cyr wheel cannot be done in space in an awful lot of ways, and that is solved there.

For me, the essence is that in theater we ask *why* and in circus *how*. Of course, even in theater we ask how, but why is a big part of the question. The question is more how do I do this Cyr wheel, and not why. The challenge in combining circus and theater is that if you ask why this Cyr wheel is being done, there is no other answer than that this is circus. There's no good reason to do Cyr wheel or hair hang. It's a pointless question dramaturgically.

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Notice to the quality of my questions here: I shifted from asking about the work of a dramaturg into dramaturgy. Before this learning journey I believed it is the dramaturg who makes the dramaturgy. But what I learned from the lectures with Lou Cope is that working as a dramaturg and building dramaturgy are two different things. The dramaturg can

express their views and offer their tools for building the dramaturgy but at the end of the day it is again the artist who makes the choices and builds it.

The more I read and learn about dramaturgy, the more I see it being about questions. One big question with dramaturgy is the *why*. Meri-Maija's reflection about the dispute of the *why* in circus is a very interesting one. I come from a contemporary dance background and for example if I decide to bring any object to the stage it has to have a very strong why behind it. But to create a *why* for a juggling club seems like a curious dilemma indeed.

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*Is there anything else you want to say or add that I didn't realize to ask?*

What is interesting about dance is that what is the difference between overall dramaturgy and overall choreography? You can't do a Cyr wheel for an hour, but you can dance for an hour. Dance choreography is closer to dramaturgy. In circus, it often feels superimposed. In circus, there are so many regulations that derive from the medium itself, tradition, physical strength and even gravity. That's why circus dramaturgy is a very special case.

It's nice to work with dancers, because dancers are somewhere between circus and theater. Choreographic thinking is in the world of the circus, but the dramaturgy of choreography speaks both languages.

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It is an interesting point that Meri-Maija makes, that choreography already has a lot of dramaturgical thinking in it. I was surprised that indeed I actually engage in dramaturgical constantly when I am creating a choreography. Dramaturgical thinking in dance roots to the beginning of dance as a performance art. Structure, expression and relationship with the audience have been of interest ever since performing Greek mythologies and creating narrative classical ballets (Trencsényi, 2015). So, it is a rather likely companion with choreographic thinking.

After this learning journey, as a choreographer why I would like to work with a dramaturg is not only to make my work better but also not to be so alone in the process. A dramaturg can be a companion that supports you and challenges you. The role of a choreographer can sometimes get lonely. You have a lot of responsibility to facilitate the space. It is sometimes a very difficult position to be in when you are lost or don't know where the work is going. Often, I am the only person in the room who is not performing in the piece thus being the only one seeing it from the outside. But I cannot truly see it from the outside, can I? The whole work is made out of my perspective, out of my world, out of my brain and heart. So having a dramaturg releases a bit of the pressure to be an artistic genius. Somebody else helps me with the process, helps me to broaden my perspective more to the point of view of the spectator. Someone who helps me to see my work more in-depth and more objectively at the same time. All in all, one thing I take away from this for sure is: I really want to work with a dramaturg in the future and almost everyone could benefit from working with one.

Source: Trencsényi, K. (2015). *Dramaturgy in the making*. Bloomsbury Publishing.