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INTERVIEWS

# LMDA Regional Spotlight: Mark Bly and Heather Helinsky in New York

BY MARTHA WADE STEKETEE ON OCTOBER 16, 2016 • ( LEAVE A COMMENT )

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Two leading names in U.S. dramaturgy from two different generations – LMDA founder Mark Bly and established freelance dramaturg Heather Helinsky – gathered to discuss their professional journeys with Metro New York City LMDA members on May 24, 2016 in the friendly offices of the Disney Theatrical Group, above the New Amsterdam Theatre.

I moderated the conversation, which ranged from training, to reflections on balancing institutional and freelance dramaturgy, new play development strategies, and observations on trends in the field.



Mark Bly

When introduced as one of the first dramaturgs educated at the Yale School of Drama, Bly listed many individuals and organizations that predated academic dramaturgy programs in the U.S., including “ghost dramaturgs” of the 1930s such as George Kaufman and Moss Hart, and O’Neill Playwrights Center founder George White. He recalled that the birth of the MFA in dramaturgy at Yale happened in the late 1970s while he was in his MFA studies in dramatic criticism and history. Drama School Dean and Yale Rep Artistic Director Robert Brustein decided to reframe the program to cover dramaturgy, inspired in part by developments in other parts of the country. “Brustein understood we were like these orphans and everybody treated us like we were eggheads. He decided that we were going to function as dramaturgs on the Yale Rep productions.” And they defined the dramaturg role as they went along.

Brustein left Yale in 1980 to establish the American Repertory Theater at Harvard, where Helinsky did graduate work in the early 2000s, and Brustein was still teaching after he

retired in 2002. His vision of dramaturgical training had modulated through the experience of the Yale Rep and ART, Bly and Helinsky reflected. “You are the next artistic leaders that are going to shape and refocus this movement,” Helinsky recalled Brustein telling her class. “I left grad school with this feeling of Brustein’s blessing and his call to action to go out and not just dramaturg a production but be a leader and keep pushing the regional theater movement forward.”

Bly noted that when more institutional titles began to include “Director of New Play Development,” it signaled that “the end is near for dramaturgs,” since it meant that fewer people are functioning as dramaturgs in rehearsal. “What the fuck do you have time to do if it’s not being in the rehearsal working on the play? Nothing is more important than that.” Helinsky agreed. “The reason why I travel so much is so I can be present in the rehearsal room. As a dramaturg, I may have been the first person to read a playwright’s new work, but a playwright may not learn what they need until the very end of the rehearsal process. I have to make my job as a production dramaturgy the priority, so I can be there for those moments of discovery.”

Bly returned to Yale under Dean and Artistic Director Stan Wojewodski, to be the Associate Artistic Director and co-chair of the dramaturgy and playwriting program. “I realized in the regional theater the directors had too much control of the development process and the playwrights needed to be more in the center of it. And so I went to Yale to develop those people at the other end of the tunnel.” Now based in Manhattan, Bly works with the National New Play Network Kennedy Center Program Dramaturgy Intensive and as Co-Director of the Fordham/Primary Stages MFA Playwriting program.



Heather Helinsky

Helinsky is based in Philadelphia, and has a long-term relationship with the Great Plains Theatre Conference, where in the 8-day program she has dramaturged as many as 13 plays at once. “In GPTC’s process, the playwrights arrive and the PlayLabs readings happen first. It gets everyone’s nervous energy out. The rest of the time, the pressure is off for a public presentation and is dedicated to revisions and conversations. We get to know each other, speed date in rehearsal, and spend the rest of the week sitting on the porch talking about their next play, and that births another year’s process.” Helinsky builds her practice by investing in playwrights over time rather than taking single deep dives with individual plays. “I’ve had the privilege of working with one writer through a sequence of plays, some of them trilogies. You get to collaborate with them through a trajectory of their work and you start talking across plays.”

Bly noted his professional reset came after a health crisis a few years ago. “I stopped being this person that only thought about the future, being the uncle or father or godfather of dramaturgy. I created the Bly Creative Capacity Grants because I decided I now was about investing in other people instead of me.”