Creating Connection: Utilizing Dramaturgical Collaboration to Engage Young People in Theatre Making in a Post-Pandemic World

Gabrielle Lawlor

University of Central Florida

Part of the Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons

Find similar works at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd2023

University of Central Florida Libraries http://library.ucf.edu

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Thesis and Dissertation 2023-2024 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation

CREATING CONNECTION: UTILIZING DRAMATURGICAL COLLABORATION TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEATRE MAKING IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

by

GABRIELLE LAWLOR
B.A. Florida State University, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Theatre in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2024

Major Professor: Chloë Rae Edmonson
ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the theatrical landscape, prompting theatre artists to reinvent how they connect with audiences and each other in physical spaces. While research has delved into post-pandemic theatre making, much of this area remains unexplored, particularly concerning young people, how the loss of community has impacted them, and what society can do to help. This thesis investigates how professional directors and dramaturgs can effectively engage young people in theatre making post-pandemic by drawing on three specific productions — Camelot and Camelittle, WROL (Without Rule of Law), and Alice and the Wonderland Parties. Utilizing theories drawn from The Art of Active Dramaturgy by Lenora Inez Brown and Directing Young People in Theatre by Samantha Lane — this thesis examines how dramaturgical collaboration can be implemented to foster community and positive relationships among young participants in the theatre-making process. The research in this thesis argues that by employing dramaturgical collaboration in the production process, young people can form meaningful connections with their peers, combating the isolation experienced during the pandemic. Beyond the pandemic context, this type of collaboration offers young people avenues for deeper engagement with the theatrical text itself. This thesis contributes to the discourse on post-pandemic theatre-making by providing practical insights into cultivating connection and community among young participants. It highlights the importance of dramaturgical collaboration as an enrichment tool in theatre making and fostering meaningful relationships in a post-pandemic world.
Dedicated to the best teacher I know, my mom.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Dear Reader. Welcome! I thank you for taking the time out of your day to read this. I am grateful that you have made your way to this labor of love that I have spent many months pondering and pouring over. It was no easy feat, but it is out there for the world and in your hands. And with that I say, happy reading.

I would now like to thank some of those that helped me get this thesis into the hands of people like you. To my mom and dad, Francine and Michael, who have been my biggest champions since day one. To my brilliant sister, Jackie, who is my inspiration for everything I do. Thank you for being the foundation on which I stand. I love you all. To the friends I made along the journey to this moment. Aisling, Aliya, Jenny, and Natalie. As Dorothy would say, “You’re the best friends anybody could ever have.” Thank you for singing, laughing, and dancing with me down The Yellow Brick Road. To my thesis committee, Chloë, Julia, and Emily. Thank you for your guidance and mentorship over the past three years and through this writing journey. I deeply admire each of you for your brilliance and artistry. To the Education team at Orlando Family Stage and Elizabeth Brendel Horn. Thank you for entrusting me with the projects that inspired this thesis. To my fellow TYA cohort, Julia, Christian, Chandler, Bethany, Cory, and Chanel. You are all magnificent. I am lucky to know every single one of you.

Finally, I want to thank two of my favorite people in the whole world, one of which has four paws. The best faces to come home to after a long day of writing. Matt, thank you for tackling life with me. The best thing in the world is to be loved by you. Finn, everything I do is so you can have all the treats and toys you have ever wanted. Thank you for being the best little pal a girl could ask for.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF TABLES</th>
<th>viii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramaturgical Collaboration</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: CAMELOT AND CAMELITTLE</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Rehearsal Work: Director’s Vision and Securing Buy-In</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditions and Callbacks</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read-Throughs and Rehearsals</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementing Design Elements</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Performances</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: WITHOUT RULE OF LAW</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Rehearsal Work: Reading Like a Dramaturg</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Callbacks</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read-Throughs and Post Discussions</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsals: Character Analysis and Cast Packets</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobby Displays</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: ALICE AND THE WONDERLAND PARTIES</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Background</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Rehearsal Work: Meetings and Timelines</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World-Building</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touring Theatre and Casting</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehearsals: Open Questions and Audience Participation</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performances and Talkbacks</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX A: CHARACTER EXPLORATION DIRECTIONS AND TEMPLATE .................. 76
APPENDIX B: ALICE AND THE WONDERLAND PARTIES LESSON PLAN.................. 78
APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS FOR DIRECTORS.................................................................. 80
APPENDIX D: ALICE AND THE WONDERLAND PARTIES AUDITION FORM.................. 82
APPENDIX E: IRB APPROVAL LETTER....................................................................... 84
LIST OF REFERENCES................................................................................................ 86
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1; Character Exploration Circle Template ............................................................ 77
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“I dream sentimentally and ridiculously that theatres can become these vital spaces for people to return to, from isolation, and become physical communities again.”

- James Graham, Toward a Future Theatre

The COVID-19 pandemic had a largely profound impact on people’s overall mental health, productivity, and access to in-person connection. The latter being caused by the inability to physically come together in our usual spaces, such as the workplace (for adults) and school settings (for young people). More specifically, theatre — an art form that functions through “physical communities” — ceased to exist in March 2020. As a result, the people working in theatre were out of work and were met with uncertainty about their future and the return of theatre.

I want to rewind to a month prior, about mid-February to be exact when I was at a crossroads in my career as a theatre artist, which numbed me to the immediate disruptiveness of the COVID-19 pandemic. At this point, I was in a transition period filled with pivots and game-time decisions about what to do next with my life as I found myself back in my sunny Florida hometown after semi-spontaneously making my way to New York City for a six-month trial run; note that it was not a “trial run” when I initially went. I had moved to New York to make a life and career for myself as a theatre practitioner working primarily with young people. I quickly discovered that New York was not the place I wanted to do that. As I transitioned to living back at home (literally at home, with my parents), I began experiencing an extreme disconnect from myself, my creativity, and the world around me. The feeling of failure and uncertainty in my own life completely washed over me. And then March 2020 came and saw the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic that, of course, altered the world. My building uncertainty about my own
life put the collective uncertainty of the world in my blind spot. However, this did not last very long, and my personal feelings quickly turned into sadness and frustration for everything going on around me. How could it not? The whole world was deeply affected by the life-altering shutdown. And then there was the state of the performing arts, specifically theatre. There was no sense of in-person theatre coming back safely anytime soon and no one had any solutions. However, as online platforms — such as Zoom, FaceTime, TikTok, Instagram — quickly became the place to connect with each other for school, work, and special gatherings such as birthdays and weddings, artists somehow found a way to utilize these platforms to their advantage. If creating and connecting in person was not an option, the solution was to use the resources at our literal fingertips. Although it was a temporary solution, it worked for the most part. What I most gleaned from this temporary solution was the spark of hope and possibility. I watched as theatre companies collaborated with their artists to continue engaging audiences in new and exciting ways. Through the creation of new work, multi-disciplinary panels, and integrated workshops, artists were making theatre happen. There was a desire to return to in-person creation and that we would eventually get there, but no one knew how long from this point that would be.

The hope that in-person theatre would return was enough to keep everyone going, including the artists, like James Graham, whom Caridad Svich interviewed for her book *Toward a Future Theatre: Conversations During a Pandemic*. Conducted over the course of the pandemic’s first year, Svich engages artists in questions about COVID-19’s impact on their work, what they learned or spent their isolation time doing, any advice for early career theatre artists who are navigating the new normal, as well as other specific questions that may pertain to their lane of work. In his interview, Graham – “Olivier Award-winning British playwright,
screenwriter and librettist” – often mentions the idea of “physical community” and how the pandemic has, of course, disrupted its presence and its impact on people everywhere, especially in the theatre industry (Svich 27). He discusses his personal desire for its presence again and how it is something many have come to appreciate through their period of isolation, a statement I could not agree with more. I begin with Toward a Future to highlight its large contribution to discourse surrounding the major effects COVID-19 has had on the theatre industry. But I also begin with it, as well as my own personal anecdote, to present the idea of disruption to physical communities and how “our artform is one that relies on relationships and community” to thrive and flourish (Svich 62). Graham and the other artists featured in this book address their own personal experiences rather than give concrete solutions on how theatre spaces can bounce back. The thesis explores how physical communities in theatre can be reshaped using dramaturgical collaboration, a format of collaboration that utilizes the properties of dramaturgy (question-making, idea-shaping, and world-building) and centers itself around the dramatic text throughout each step of the process. This thesis works to answer the following questions: 1. How can dramaturgical collaboration be utilized to build community in TYA spaces in a post-pandemic world; 2. How can we use dramaturgical collaboration to establish that disrupted connection between young people and their peers to offer a sense of belonging; and 3. How can we implement dramaturgical collaboration into TYA spaces in ways that are active and engaging?

For the purposes of this thesis and my exploration of new ways to approach theatre-making, I want to consider a population that I primarily work with in theatre and the one that has been deeply affected in terms of their education and developing social skills. Young people, specifically those within the typical schooling ages of 6 to 18, endured the unexpected disappearance of their in-person community of peers at the rise of the pandemic. With this
sudden loss of exposure to school and extracurricular activities, their experiences defaulted to similar online spaces as the ones artists used to maintain normalcy and connection. This monumental change greatly affected young people’s ability to interact with the people around them. In their article “The impact of COVID-19 on young people” for Generation Unlimited, Urmila Sarkar, Hana Sahatqija, and Mami Kyo discuss how, since their inception, Generation Unlimited as a youth-centered organization has responded to young people’s needs since their inception in 2018 as well as in response to the global pandemic. According to their citation of a statistic by UNESCO, “over 1 billion students globally were affected” by the expansive closure of schools (Sarkar et al.). They state that “this global pandemic is poised to deepen a learning crisis that already existed, with millions of young people not developing the skills that will enable them to get a good job, start a business, and engage in their community” (Sarkar et al.). In other words, the loss of in-person connection resulted in severe and long-lasting effects for students. When thinking about working with young people in a space such as theatre, a form that thrives through physical, in-person community, what are tools that theatre artists can utilize to combat these severe effects that still linger? How can young people be inspired to engage creatively alongside their peers? I offer dramaturgical collaboration as a way to approach making theatre with young people in a post-pandemic world.

The collaboration and communication skills of young people experienced major setbacks since March 2020. In the study “Beyond Isolation: Benefits and Challenges as perceived by students throughout online collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic,” the authors explore student collaboration in the thick of online learning in 2020 and student perceptions of its benefits and challenges. Of particular interest is the section of the study where they discuss “affective benefits and challenges,” which are “perceived from feelings and emotions” (Xue
197). According to the study, while the students felt encouraged and supported during their online learning, the biggest challenge they expressed was “that they felt ‘stressed to communicate with others online’ and that it was ‘hard to get a sense of belonging throughout online collaboration’” (Xue 196). Due to this extreme loss, young people have experienced a lack of community; additionally, coming back into social settings can be jarring and pose several challenges. Dramaturgical collaboration gives young people the tools needed to easily communicate with one another in collaborative spaces. The research in this thesis specifically engages with specific ways we as theatre artists who work with young people can assist with the social challenges they may experience and give them that sense of community again using dramaturgical collaboration.

**Dramaturgical Collaboration**

What is dramaturgical collaboration? To understand how the two forms merge, I want to define them separately. Dramaturgy is an often-misunderstood practice and has long been subject to speculation and curiosity by theatre artists conflation with playwriting. In the introduction of *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, editor Magda Romanska explores the roots of dramaturgy and how it has evolved. She states, “In its broader and earliest definition, dramaturgy means a comprehensive theory of ‘play making’... To this day, in many modern languages, including French, Spanish, and Polish, the word dramaturg also can mean playwright” (Romanska 1). She continues to say that the etymology of the word can help discern the two from each other: “Dramaturgy requires the analytical skill of discerning and deconstructing all elements of dramatic structure” (Romanska 1). This claim by Romanska can be connected to the earliest definition of dramaturgy because being able to dissect dramatic elements and understand how they fit together is necessary when participating in the construction of a play. It boils down
to fully understanding what the playwright is trying to say by asking questions and conducting research. When I think of dramaturgy, I think of it as a dissection of the dramatic form in which dramaturgs pull the creative piece apart to make deeper meaning of it. Dramaturgy can often be an isolating practice as the one in the “dramaturg” role is often doing the research and question-making work on their own and then having to find ways to communicate it to the rest of the people on the creative process. Just as young people have found it challenging to communicate with their peers in online spaces during the pandemic, dramaturgs often struggle to get their collaborators to buy into their practice, which ultimately contributes to the overall mystery of dramaturgy.

When theatre artists welcome the practice of dramaturgy and the perspectives it offers, it becomes easier for the dramaturg to contribute their thoughts to the creative process and ultimately strengthens the collaborative nature of theatre. In “An Exploration of the Collaborative Processes of Making Theatre Inspired by Science,” Ellen Dowell and Emma Weitkamp explore how science has been and can become a direct contributor to theatre making. They focus heavily on collaboration, stating that “theatre is an inherently collaborative art form demanding the cooperation of large teams of performers, directors, designers, writers, musicians, technicians, and many other possible practitioners” (Dowell and Weitkamp 892). What an audience sees when they watch a theatrical performance has been meticulously created by several people weaving their own skill sets together as a cohesive group.

Now think of dramaturgical collaboration as a branch of standard “collaboration.” It is a form that takes the qualities of what we know about collaboration – communication, teamwork, diverse skill sets – and brings the properties of dramaturgy to the forefront. Utilizing dramaturgical collaboration with young people in a post-pandemic world allows them to come
together and practice the collaboration skills they missed out on by learning in a creative and informative way. In addition, allowing young people to take part in developing dramaturgical skills can go on to inform the ways they interact with material introduced in school, as dramaturgy engages with elements indicative of language arts and literature.

In the few years since the COVID-19 pandemic, much research has been conducted about what creating theatre now looks like in the wake of this traumatic period. A recent study done by University of Malaya Creative Arts Faculty members Lulu Jiang and Farideh Alizadeh focuses on the ways community-based theatre “is an innovative strategy for promoting social connectedness while supporting post-pandemic responses” (Jiang and Alizadeh 1). This specific study takes a “critical pedagogy” approach to ask how community-based theatres operating with this pedagogical lens can inspire participants to combat oppression. The study was conducted with participants from 18 to 50 years old. My research focuses specifically on young people (beginning at 8 years old) and asks how community can be built rather than being an assumed or preexisting principle.

As an extension of thinking about theatre in a post-pandemic world, Heidi Schoenenberger considers the young people affected in the wake of COVID-19 and the steps Theatre for Young Audiences practitioners can take to establish positive experiences for them. Schoenenberger’s research specifically exists in the digital space and in her article “Stay at Home, Engage at Home: Extended Performance in the Time of COVID-19”. Her research asks TYA practitioners to consider the value of utilizing “extended performance engagement,” which is how she defines pre- and post-performance content for young audiences to meaningfully connect them to the performance. My research expands on what Schoenenberger has presented, in terms of where the theatre making takes place and who the performers are. I first explore theatre
with and for young people in the physical space, rather than the digital one. This is due to the historical and cultural context my research exists within and how we can safely return to physical spaces to create theatre. The second aspect is that my research asks how this engagement can be made when young people are the ones doing theatre, rather than just as spectators of it.

Collective dramaturgy is most often the term utilized for the practice of conducting dramaturgy as a group rather than as a sole person. Kirk Lynn and Shawn Sides, co-producing artistic directors of Rude Mechanicals (and long-time collaborators) discussed their process in “Collective Dramaturgy: A Co-Consideration of the Dramaturgical Role.” They particularly focus on when writing a new piece of theatre at Rude Mechanicals the role of the dramaturg is shared collaboratively, but specifically “orbits most closely… around the director and playwright” (Lynn and Sides 111). They refer to their adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* and how the collective dramaturgy of the piece expanded from the director and playwright to include the actors in the process to expand the smaller characters. My research flips the switch on this version of collective dramaturgy and asks how we can take an already written script and collaborate with each other dramaturgically to achieve a final product. Making the collaborative process dramaturgical is important because it allows the artists in the room to maintain a relationship with the dramatic text and each other throughout each step of the process to transform the production.

This thesis will explore how the specific dramaturgical properties, such as question-making, understanding of dramatic structure, and research are utilized in a collaborative way through a series of three case studies that focus on three distinct theatrical productions that took place in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Chapter Two focuses on my work as the director for *Camelot and Camelittle*, Chapter Three covers the production of *Without Rule of Law* and my
role as the dramaturg, and finally Chapter Four switches back to my director perspective and focuses on the production of *Alice and the Wonderland Parties*. This organizational style showcases the various age groups, beginning with the youngest and ending with the oldest. All these productions took place in Orlando, Florida at two different organizations: Orlando Family Stage (Family Stage), formerly Orlando Repertory Theatre, and the University of Central Florida (UCF). Orlando Family Stage is a theatre company that caters to families and young audiences with shows the whole family can enjoy and classes and other opportunities for young people to participate in. The first two projects I will discuss in this thesis focus on programming as part of Family Stage’s “Youth Academy,” which is a facet of the company offering a wide range of theatre-focused classes year-round, as well as several production opportunities for youth participation. Young people who come into the Youth Academy programming may be there for several reasons: as an after school/extra-curricular selected for them by interested parents, an already established interest in theatre from previous experience, or to spend time with friends. *Camelot and Camelittle* was for young people in mid-elementary to middle school ages (3 to 8) and *Without Rule of Law* was with young people specifically ages 13 to 18. The students were required to audition for the production, and most of them had participated in a previous Youth Academy experience.

The other research location that I will focus on for the production of *Alice and the Wonderland Parties* is the University of Central Florida (UCF), more specifically within Theatre UCF. This location drastically differs from Family Stage in terms of its goals and demographics. UCF is a public higher-education institution meant to educate students beyond the schooling ages mentioned previously (ages 6-18). Theatre UCF students have chosen to pursue extended education as a path to careers in the arts via various specialized program tracks such as Musical
Theatre, Acting, and Theatre Studies. More importantly, the students involved in the specific production in Chapter Four have an interest in Theatre for Young Audiences and community partnerships. Now that I have discussed what dramaturgical collaboration is and the specific projects in this thesis, I want to explore the internal structure of each chapter, the theories I utilize within each chapter, and how those theories shaped the process of dramaturgical collaboration.

**Methodology**

Throughout this I utilize a process-based, product-impact research design in each chapter. In other words, I methodically explore the ways dramaturgical collaboration works throughout the rehearsal process in each project. I focus on how dramaturgical collaboration was employed to influence the full product through each step of the process, from my initial start in my specific role on the project through the opening of the production. Through this methodology, I can see, as the researcher, how dramaturgical collaboration evolved within each project and how each process relates and differs from each other. Additionally, each chapter utilizes my role in the project as a practical lens: Chapters One and Three are from my perspective as a director, while Chapter Two takes the stance of a dramaturg. While I employ skills from both roles on all three projects, the director and dramaturg lens are important in understanding the ways in which I existed and contributed to each project. My perspective as a director is crucial to the questions asked in this thesis because, across the board, directors are responsible for leading the cast and creative/production team through the collaborative process. On the other hand, my perspective as a dramaturg is essential because dramaturgs understand how to effectively communicate their dramaturgical ideas and knowledge with the people on the project. I find that these two perspectives go hand in hand because a dramaturgical perspective can support a director. It is
crucial that a director understands the play’s dramatic structure and background to lead the players involved in a theatrical project.

The version of dramaturgical collaboration that was employed in each project is heavily influenced by three major facets: active dramaturgy, directing young people, and working in collaborative spaces, all of which collectively function together throughout each chapter. These facets stem from the two foundational theories utilized in this thesis — *The Art of Active Dramaturgy* by Lenora Inez Brown and *Directing Young People in Theatre* by Samantha Lane. Brown’s theory explores tangible and effective ways to conduct her theory of active dramaturgy in theatrical work. She defines active dramaturgy as “...goes beyond basic critical questions to include analysis designed to facilitate immediate or eventual artistic/creative application” (Brown xii). My version of dramaturgical collaboration is largely inspired by Brown’s focus on critical question-making as a pillar of active dramaturgy and how active dramaturgs can frame questions to transform artistic analysis and understanding. On the other hand, Lane’s basis for directing young people takes a similar tactic to Brown’s – she provides various ways to explore this medium that are influenced by her experiences as a director. I explore Lane’s theory of working with young people in theatre by similarly applying it to distinct age groups within the larger category of “young people.” While Lane defines young people as “Junior High, grade 6 to 8, and High School, grade 9 to 12,” my research expands to include young people in grades 3 to 5 as well (2). Together, these theories had a large influence on the way I define and employ dramaturgical collaboration as I have found Brown and Lane’s respective ways of conducting their practice intersect with one another. As I said previously, the research in this thesis is presented in a chronological, process-centered format. This style reflects the way Brown and
Lane structure their theories in their respective texts. Through this chronological aesthetic, these theories are focused on the ways each step of the process has an impact on the next.

While I position dramaturgical collaboration as a methodology intended to counter the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, I believe the benefits of the practice go well beyond. If all theatre artists, regardless of age, are collectively committed to rethinking how our relationship with the dramatic text can remain consistent throughout the production process, it creates room for a deeper curiosity for the world of the play. Although there is a goal to achieve a final product, the practice of dramaturgical collaboration allows us to live within the moment and brings focus back into the process.
CHAPTER TWO: CAMELOT AND CAMELITTLE

“I should have cared less about what they thought and more about what you thought because you liked me even when I was nothing special.”

- Ruth, Camelot and Camelittle

The director of a theatrical production takes on the responsibility of establishing what strategies are carried out to get a show on its feet. They set the tone with casting, stage managers, design team, and anyone else who has a hand in bringing the production to life. They are leading the charge through rehearsals all the way until opening night. In this chapter I will utilize a director’s perspective to observe the ways dramaturgical collaboration can take form by analyzing a recent production. My specific show was Camelot and Camelittle by Stacey Lane and premiered at Orlando Family Stage as part of their Youth Academy program on April 28, 2023, and ran for ten performances. This production was for young people in grades 3-8 and was cast by audition prior to the start of rehearsals with callbacks for specific roles occurring over the course of the first 2-3 days of rehearsals. Camelot follows the story of Ruth, a young person who is determined to prove herself worthy to become a Knight of the Roundtable. After being laughed at by the people of Camelot, she goes on a quest (friends in tow) to find her own perfect kingdom.

This chapter will follow a chronological format as I begin with my own pre-rehearsal introduction to the Camelot script and the creation of my directorial vision. This will then be followed by accounts of meetings with my design team, where we discussed this vision and collaborated on how to make it come to life. Then, I explore our initial introductions and early rehearsals with the cast, and finally conclude with an analysis of our technical rehearsals and performances. Each of these steps in the process remained committed to centering the dramatic
text, thinking about the overall world of the play to achieve the final product. This format gives a comprehensive view into how dramaturgical collaboration started in Camelot and the ways it evolved throughout the process. For context, the production process for OFS’s production of Camelot lasted for a 3-month period, beginning in early February and consisted of two rehearsals per week until daily technical rehearsals began in the latter half of April. Overall, our dramaturgical collaboration involved working together as an ensemble to conduct analysis of story structure, characters, and themes throughout each step of the process. I will specifically explore how I implemented dramaturgical question-making and world-building specifically using Brown’s active dramaturg script reading, the Character Exploration Circle, and Lane’s Triple-Circle read-through style. I will also focus on how these tactics affected the collaboration between myself, the actors, and the rest of the team. I do this by specifically looking at dramaturgical collaboration through callbacks, read-throughs, tech rehearsals, and performances. I propose that utilizing dramaturgical collaboration with young people in theatre empowers them to employ critical thinking skills as a collective group to uncover deeper meaning and connection to the theatrical text. Ultimately, this collaborative work serves to benefit their final performance product and the relationships they create as an ensemble.

Pre-Rehearsal Work: Director’s Vision and Securing Buy-In

As the director of this production, my work began many months prior to rehearsals beginning. I focused on bridging my dramaturgical skills with my director skills into the preshow work to set the production up for success. For example, pre-rehearsal work is crucial for any member of the creative and production team, especially the director. In Directing Young People in Theatre, Lane states “that one of the most important things to do is make sure you know your play inside out and back to front” (21). This means that, as the director, you should have studied
the play’s structure, characters, themes. Lane’s rationale is that we cannot know the amount of preparation young people will have taken once rehearsals begin. It can be a very little amount (a skim-through of the script) or as much as any professional actor would do. Considering the young actors I was working with were younger (grades 3 to 8) and in order to be ready for all levels of preparation they had done, my goal as the director was to have a strong sense of the play’s structure, world, and characters so I would be able to confidently lead and collaborate with my team and our group of young people from start to finish. To do this, I used Brown’s process of active dramaturgy as my way into the script. In *The Art of Active Dramaturgy*, Brown discusses how the framework of active dramaturgy is steeped in the process of reflection (11). She argues that an active dramaturg’s way into the inner workings of a script is through a series of reflective steps that focus on specific aspects: plot, story, time, character, language, metaphor and imagery, active themes, and form/pattern. Taking on Brown’s framework for my own script work would give me the tools I needed to guide the cast of young people through their own questions and curiosities throughout the rehearsal process.

With the active dramaturg framework in mind, my ultimate question was: how do I get young actors to find their personal and individual way into the script? The actors I would ultimately work with throughout the process were all in grades 3 to 8; a wide range of ages meant a wide range of experience working in a rehearsal environment. This overarching goal led me to Lane’s idea of “securing their buy-in” where she states that young people “must own the text. And in order to own it, they must understand it and love it” (Lane 40). For me, this began with forming a directorial vision and aesthetic to base our production on. In past productions I have been involved with, I have seen other directors choose to work with things, such as a specific research image or style of art that can inspire artistic choices amongst the cast and
design team. I wanted to utilize this same tactic as I felt it was an effective choice on those past productions. It was necessary for me to stay true to the world of Camelot and its medieval connotations. I took the pre-rehearsal work I had already done on the script and below is a portion of the speech I gave on our first day of rehearsal. Upon being asked to give this “first day speech” by OFS Education Director Jennifer Adams-Carrasquillo (she/her), I was inspired by her advice to utilize a personal experience as an incentive for young actors. Taking this approach would allow me to meet them at a level where they could catch onto the vision I had for this production. I achieved this by sharing a glimpse into how I felt and what I was interested in when I was their age. Through sharing my personal investment in the story, I felt as though I could grab the attention of my young actors and inspire them to start seeing the world of Camelot in new and exciting ways. Overall, this tactic felt essential for this specific age group because I was opening up the world of the play and allowing them to make a personal connection to the story itself, if they had not found it already. I have featured a portion of this speech below for context:

From beginning to end, the world and these characters jumped right off the page. As a kid, I was deeply invested in fantasy books. They were a place I could find comfort in and this story felt like I was living that all over again. And mostly, I related to Ruth and her fiery, determined spirit. Ruth feels a little like a reincarnation of a smaller me and she's finding comfort in this world of Camelot, just like I did with those fantasy books. It feels as if she’s playing pretend in her bedroom and we’re seeing it all come to life through her imagination. (Lawlor)

In addition, prior to rehearsals beginning, I shared this specific vision (a kid playing pretend in their bedroom) with my design team. Communicating this idea with all my collaborators was
crucial to getting everyone to work towards the same goal. This included my stage management team and each design team member, all of whom were working professionals in the theatre industry. In the initial design meetings, we also discussed an extension of the “playing pretend” aesthetic. We decided that each design area should immerse the audience into the world of Camelot to reflect that imaginative style, in terms of the set design, while also feeling childlike, in terms of the costume design. These decisions would ultimately convey a strong sense of how Ruth sees the world around her, which in turn affects the people and experiences she encounters along the way. I was confident that this clear vision would benefit the overall dramaturgical collaboration process because it was a world-building idea that everyone could invest in as artists. Brown is quick to indicate that “an active dramaturg seeks ways to articulate heady ideas into active language — that is, language that a performer can easily shape into an acting choice or a designer, a design choice” (xii). When I initially shared my vision, “a kid playing pretend in their bedroom” and “her imagination coming to life” accompanied with visual pictures, there was an immediate understanding of what that meant because it was an active idea that many have a visceral connection to, specifically when it comes to the professional designers who have memory of “playing pretend” as children. While this specific idea is not explicitly said in the script and would not blatantly come across to our audiences, it gave us as the creators something concrete to consistently come back to that would be subtly reflected in the design and direction. In this chapter, and the rest of this thesis, I will utilize the collective “we” when discussing decisions made in the rehearsal process. This is partly due to my individual script work merging with the rest of my creative team at this point in the process, specifically with my Associate Director Bethany Post (she/her), another member of my MFA cohort. As I begin my analysis
with auditions and callbacks and move through the production process, you will see how the relationships with my creative and design teams are informed by dramaturgical collaboration.

Auditions and Callbacks

It is important to establish how the Youth Academy audition and callback process works at OFS because it is untraditional compared to how most directors and theatre artists know this process. Usually, auditions lead to callbacks, which leads to casting the show and beginning rehearsals. The Youth Academy auditions, on the other hand, are conducted like a general audition to get a spot in a semester’s production (Fall, Spring, or Summer). Prospective students sign up for audition slots over two days and are asked to perform a monologue or song (or both, depending on if the show they are auditioning for is a musical or not). Based on the auditions and number of spots available for that production, students receive either an acceptance or rejection along with audition feedback prior to the start of rehearsals. Then, when rehearsals begin for individual productions, the first two days are dedicated to callbacks to determine specific roles. The structure of callbacks is up to the directing team and can vary based on the demands of the production (for example: Does the show have music? Does the show have large musical numbers or require choreography? Does the show have a large cast?). Overall, the OFS audition process allows us as the directing/creative team to approach callbacks and specific role placement with an already established ensemble. Because this callback format gives the creative team the advantage of having all the actors in the room, I wanted to implement dramaturgical collaboration immediately to begin exploring the world of *Camelot*, its characters, and begin building our creative community. Utilizing dramaturgical collaboration from the beginning would set a precedent for the overall process and allow it to evolve throughout.
After securing our cast of young people, Bethany and I needed to address how callbacks would be structured and how to weave in dramaturgical collaboration. Overall, we wanted to think in terms of Lane’s idea of “securing their buy-in.” We understood that the demands of *Camelot* were not as extensive as the past few Youth Academy shows due to it not being a musical, which meant it would not require music and dance rehearsals in addition to working through scenes. Despite this, we wanted to give the young people a callback experience that included various opportunities to showcase themselves beyond traditional scene readings, just as they would be able to in music and dance specific callbacks. We were curious to see how we could begin exploring the world and characters immediately. How could we cast the show while getting young people to start thinking about how these characters walked, talked, existed and how the environment of the play shaped that? To accomplish this, we decided to utilize an exercise that I have deemed our “Character Exploration Circle” (See Appendix A and Table 1). The character breakdown in the *Camelot* script uses specific adjectives to describe each character. For example, playwright Stacey Lane describes Sir Lancelot, one of the Knights of the Round Table, as “a suave and strong knight” (9). We decided to take each of these descriptions and use that as a jumping off point for a full group embodiment exercise based in improvisation. The exercise began with simple movements, which progressed into using their voices, finally guiding them with simple instructions and excerpts from the character descriptions. Bethany and I felt this structure would give them agency as performers and challenge their creativity. The show itself employs themes of imagination and dreaming big, so this exercise also aligned with our creative direction. As a result of this exercise, we were able to gain insight into the group’s ability to take risks and make big choices. One of the most notable choices we witnessed was when actors decided to utilize different voices in their explorations of
the “Troll” characters. Some used high-pitched inflection or deepened their voices to create a booming presence. The exercise also seemed to coax some of the quieter participants out of their shell. This was our own form of active dramaturgy because it allowed the young actors to think critically about the characters, take their own perceptions of the adjectives we gave them and embody their interpretation of it. This also gave us a full range of character possibilities to hold onto once we started staging the show. The Character Exploration Circle felt like an appropriate tool to utilize with this age group because although it was callbacks, which can be a daunting time for young people, it allowed them to live within the world of playing pretend and forget about any nerves they had in the moment.

To employ dramaturgical collaboration in a consistent way throughout callbacks, I was interested in utilizing Brown’s idea of posing open questions as an active dramaturg. She states that “an open question raises an idea, issue, or observation in a way that avoids prescribing the solution or revealing an agenda/personal bias” (Brown 35). The idea is to quite literally open up the world of the play to the dramaturg, actors, and director and enable thought-provoking discussions that benefit their understanding and telling of the story. I employed open questions rather than prescribing my young actors with the answer or my thoughts as the director. I wanted to ask them open questions that would spark curiosity about their character in that specific moment that may also generate deeper questions about the character overall. This would allow these curiosities to start forming and spill over into the eventual staging process once the cast received their specific roles. In addition, framing the questions in a way that was not extremely advanced for this age group but still challenged them was essential, as the Youth Academy process is educational. Throughout our callback process, we would pepper in questions for them to consider as they would explore different characters through the “Character Exploration Circle”
and scene readings. The questions regarding character personality, objectives, and relationships evolved once we cast the show because the young actors were able to take what they discovered in callbacks into their individual and collective understanding of their characters. Establishing a space to begin this analysis and question-making even before they were placed in a specific role reinforces the dramaturgical collaboration process.

Read-Throughs and Rehearsals

Now that specific roles were given out and regular rehearsals were underway, the established precedent for dramaturgical collaboration needed to continue. One of the most common ways to either begin or proceed with rehearsals once a show is cast is with a read-through of the script. Lane states that, “some directors believe that reading the play out loud with their cast is crucial - it is a communal experience that allows the play to be heard” (38). Rather than conducting a standard read-through with our young actors - sitting at tables in a rounded formation, pencils in hand, and reading through scene by scene - we were eager to try something new. While allowing them to take on the challenge of a standard read-through would be a valuable experience, this is something Lane provides alternative ways of doing read-throughs that break the traditional mold that may very well be confining to many young actors, in terms of their attention span and energy. She suggests to “make it as active an experience as possible” (Lane 40). As a theatre practitioner who has been working with young people in this capacity for several years, I understand that young people are quick to lose focus (and thereby collaboration) when there is no end goal. Gamifying the read-through adds an active component that traditional read-throughs are often missing. It gives the actors an incentive to stay focused and makes an otherwise tedious process more exhilarating. Taking this into consideration, we decided to engage with Lane’s second read-through option, known as “‘Triple Circle (version 2),’” Instead
of a traditional read-through set-up (actors and directing team sitting in chairs at tables), Lane’s Triple Circle disrupts the traditional structure and suggests that young actors sit in literal circles on the floor. This method is composed of three different circles and are structured as follows:

1. An inner circle - this includes all characters who appear in the scene, even if they don’t speak.
2. A middle circle - the fact gatherers
3. An outer circle - the questioners (Lane 42).

The important aspects of this structure are that first, the configuration of the circles the actors are sitting in will change when you get to a new scene; and secondly, that you will pause after each scene to discuss each group’s experience and discoveries. Lane expresses that, while the process is time-consuming, it is effective in securing buy-in because they are given the opportunity to hear the play aloud, like a standard read-through, but also begin to actively understand how the play moves because they get to move with it. Allowing the young actors the chance to visually see which characters are in what scenes through this physical movement gives them an initial understanding about their specific character’s journey. This read-through style is also an example of active dramaturgy due to its specific way of having the young actors engage with the script. They are meant to read along to gain new insight about the story, characters, and world — like detectives looking for clues. Thinking about the read-through as an essential communal experience, one that allows the actors to establish a community they can rely on for the rest of the production process, I will discuss in the next paragraph how the actors also become collaborative detectives working as a collective unit to figure out who needs to be in which circle and uncovering the aforementioned clues.
When we employed Lane’s read-through style, we found it to be incredibly effective in the overall understanding of the play. For example, the young actors were intrigued by the structure and were excited to take on new roles in the process (“fact gatherers or questioners”) as each scene came along (Lane 42). Overall, they were a deeply inquisitive group and already had questions about the play prior to this exercise, specifically regarding the whereabouts of Ruth’s parents. As we went through the script, we found that even more questions about the characters and the world came to the surface for them, specifically how were these characters all related to one another? The young actors excitedly took to the idea I had previously presented in my welcome speech regarding this story being a live representation of Ruth’s imagination. They collectively began to see this whole world as something of her creation and were curious as to who these people were to her in real life. This type of dramaturgical collaboration diverges from a traditional approach to beginning the rehearsal process because it merges the read-through with discussions that would normally take place immediately after the read-through. It gave the young actors the chance to focus on both the text and any questions they had at the same time versus having to wait till after and risk forgetting their questions, which is crucial for actors of this age. Utilizing this method allowed the questions and ideas they had in the moment to influence the rest of the reading and, overall, elevated our collective understanding of the text to a level we might normally not reach until deeper into our staging process.

While the Triple Circle read through was effective in terms of generating rich analysis and deeper thinking, the format did come with its challenges – all of which Lane mentions as general hindrances when it comes to doing read-throughs with young people. Our biggest struggle as a team was the amount of time it took to get through the process. When approaching a read-through traditionally, Lane suggests that “it would be wise to have plenty of breaks or
even intersperse the read-through with some physical activity” (40). This is also the case for the “Triple Circle” approach as it is necessary to hold young people’s interest throughout this lengthy process. But why were the breaks necessary to maintain interest? In her article, “Active Bodies/Active Brains: Practical Applications Using Physical Engagement to Enhance Brain Development,” educator Deborah A. Stevens-Smith establishes the research supporting how physical activity has major positive influences on the brain, specifically in students. Considering studies conducted by play theorist Brian Sutton Smith and various other researchers, she states that “while children are physically moving, they are developing neurological foundations that assist with problem solving, language development, and creativity” (Stevens-Smith 4). This means physical activity creates the neurological bonds needed for learning. Stevens-Smith specifically indicates the science of it all and indicates that “the brain requires more oxygen than any other organ in the body” and because oxygen is created through physical activity and movement “oxygen is essential for learning” (4). In this case, we have a required lunch break on rehearsal days, and we were able to make it halfway through the script just in time for this break. While as a directing team we found that the read-through would consume the rest of our rehearsal (once we returned from the break), we felt it necessary to finish it all the way through for several reasons. First, because the process was generating excitement by trying something new that allowed for rich discussion, question-making, and fact-finding to occur. Second, because it challenged the actors’ initial understanding of the script by utilizing a dramaturgical collaborative perspective. It felt important to devote this large chunk of time to the process because it allowed us to reflect on the story of Camelot, an essential property of active dramaturgy according to Brown. She states that “reflection allows images, questions, and ideas to surface without needing to articulate ideas logically” (Brown 11). Employing Lane’s “Triple-
Circle” acted as a catalyst for this kind of reflection which would inform our development process moving forward. Utilizing this read-through style with this specific age group felt crucial to do as it leaned into their interest in games while also remaining focused on the production process.

Now that we had completed our initial fact-finding mission, it was time to get the text on its feet. Each rehearsal from this point forward was still dedicated to building our world of Camelot, but in different ways. The mechanisms of this specific script were somewhat complicated. Each scene (up until a certain point) adds new characters, which requires meticulous attention to blocking and use of space on stage. The next challenge was that the story structure of Camelot never stops moving; the pace of the show is quick due to the nature of its comedic moments. This textual element poses a challenge to young actors who may not be used to this theatrical style. As the director, many questions arise such as: How do you teach the young actors comedic timing? What is best practice to get this style in their minds and physicality? For me, this began with the rehearsal schedule: what scenes should we stage, and in what order? I was devoted to a linear staging method, meaning staging the scenes completely in order, for various reasons. Staging linearly felt essential for this specific age group and their comprehension skills. I felt that this method would contribute to the cast memorizing the show and each of their individual tracks easily, which in turn would allow them to visualize the story structure and flow and would ultimately benefit their performance. In addition, I believe that by utilizing a linear method, the young actors would be able to dramaturgically connect each moment of the play to the next in a much easier way than if the staging were done out of order. By extension, staging in a linear method would reinforce each comedic moment as it allows the young actors to comprehend how the comedy informs the next bit of dialogue, the
scene overall, the following sequence of events, and the world of the play on a larger scale. This comprehension would only strengthen with repetition week to week as we got closer to working in design elements.

**Implementing Design Elements**

Throughout the audition, callback, and read-through process, dramaturgical collaboration consistently helped to establish a strong community amongst myself, the creative and production team, and the young actors in the room. It strongly contributed to our collective understanding of the world of *Camelot* because we were working together to ask questions about the world to benefit the production execution. But a new set of challenges arose during the transition from the rehearsal room to the stage. There are many massive changes that occur as you leave the rehearsal room and enter the designated performance space and specifically for *Camelot*, the only design elements we were able utilize in rehearsal were specific props to allow the actors to get used to its function. Although the young actors were aware of what certain elements looked like from design renderings and costume fittings, we had not rehearsed with any elements of the set, sound, lighting, or costumes. Until the new elements were added, we had to use imagination and improvisation. After the addition of the new elements, the young actors would need to quickly adapt, which can be overwhelming and pose challenges to their collective understanding of the show. Some challenges this specific age group may face at this point in the process could be forgetting specific blocking moments or trouble focusing and staying present in the moment due to feeling overwhelmed. Having to work through already solidified moments after adding design elements can feel like a regression in the work achieved in the rehearsal room. Much like dramaturgy is a dissection of the dramatic structure, the tech process is a dissection of the work
done on the production up until that point. The tech process involves many points of stopping, starting, and restructuring blocking to better fit the performance space.

While it may pose challenges to young actors’ focus and retention of lines/blocking, the addition of design elements can also be a positive experience for the overall trajectory of the production. The incorporation of design elements is just as important to dramaturgical collaboration as the integral question-making during rehearsals. For the young actors in Camelot, coming into our performance space on that first tech day was accompanied by gasps and expressions of awe as the space was clearly transformed into the world we had all been imagining for weeks. This is because the design elements also further inform the world of the play by establishing a visual picture for the story to exist in. Adding these elements together allow what was already created in the rehearsal room to come to life in new and exciting ways by giving young people a tangible thing to see, use, and wear instead of having to use their imagination. Specifically, one of the central pieces of the set design was a large map of Camelot that acted as the backdrop for the stage and served as a way for the audience to contextualize the setting. Although the map was a stationary set piece the actors did not necessarily interact with, it still allowed them to make sense of the world their characters were living in as well as immersing themselves as actors in that world. As the tech process began and we worked through adding the design elements, I specifically noticed the young actor's enthusiasm for collaborating to achieve our collective goal. For example, one of the toughest moments in the show involved the actors having to unpack and repack items into bags. To give context, Scenes 3 to 5 in Camelot involve Ruth and her friends traveling through Camelot to find the perfect place to start a new kingdom and when they approach spots Ruth decides are perfect, they begin to set up camp with blankets (Lane 20-38). The repacking of the blankets and deciding who would do this
action proved to be the most challenging because, as I stated previously, the story never stops moving. It was crucial the repacking not distract from the action onstage but also not feel too rushed or out of place. To work through these moments with ease, I had the actors tell me what they felt would work the best. As the director, I wanted their input because they were the ones who would be onstage each night performing the action. By posing this question to the collective group, they used their understanding of the moment in the play to collaborate on a solution that made sense mechanically and dramaturgically. This similar interaction would occur several times throughout the tech process and each one was marked by solution-seeking collaboration between the young actors. Their ability to successfully collaborate and rely on each other is a direct result from implementing dramaturgical collaboration throughout each step of the process. Overall, this showcases the community that can be built by utilizing dramaturgical collaboration.

More importantly, having the adult professional designers in the room working through the addition of these elements is crucial to our dramaturgical collaboration. Prior to beginning technical rehearsals with the designers, I was adamant to assure the young actors it was okay to feel nervous to have them in the room, but they were encouraged to ask questions and understand this was a collaborative team effort. I wanted to make this clear to them, specifically for this age group, because for many of them it was their first time working with adult professionals in this capacity. Despite this, having them in the room not only eases the transition for the young actors to clarify questions they have but also allows for immediate collaboration when an element may need reworking based on the way it is functioning. For example, our sound designer, Lance LaBonte, approached his design with a comedic lens, meaning he was focused on leaning into the comedic and silly nature of the show itself. This was a direction that he decided to take based on my vision of “childhood play” established in our first design meeting. Specifically, the first
scene of the play introduces one of the comedic characters, Lizard. There is a moment in the scene where Lizard “enacts a dramatic death” that continues to drag on for longer than expected (Lane 14). Our sound designer wanted to emphasize this moment with sound effects that accompanied Lizard’s actions in the “dramatic death” to play into the comedy of it. He specifically utilized sounds made by instruments, specifically cymbals, to establish this effect. His sound design influenced the actor’s understanding of Lizard and gave her ways to play into the childlike silliness even further. The quality of childlike silliness in the sound design exaggerating this specific comedic moment and others like it is a direct reflection of Lance’s understanding of my directorial vision and the world Stacey Lane created in Camelot. It represents the idea of playing pretend and make believe, which is something I presented to the design team very early on in the design process. All the design elements displayed a level of collective understanding for the story itself as well as my directorial vision. This in turn strengthened the young actors’ understanding of the story elements and their characters, which gave them even more confidence in their storytelling as the process continued and as we approached performances.

**Final Performances**

Our dramaturgical collaboration established a strong and positive community amongst the young actors in a series of moments during the run of Camelot and Camelittle. In the final weekend of performances, my team and I were informed that one of the young actors, who played Frog, one of the larger roles in the show, fell ill and would not be able to be at the two scheduled performances that day. As the director, I had the responsibility of deciding what to do. Because understudies were not a staple of Youth Academy productions, there was no one specific person to move into the role. The options provided by my supervisors were: have
another young actor or my assistant director step in with script in hand. To make this decision I relied heavily on several factors. My associate director assured me she could take this on if necessary but collaborated with me to figure out if there was an actor we felt could take on this responsibility. We ultimately decided to ask a Knights ensemble member if he would feel comfortable covering the role because of his continued leadership and confidence throughout the whole rehearsal and production process. Although I knew this would be a challenge for him having never done this track before, I was confident in his abilities based on his journey throughout this process and that it would be a beneficial educational opportunity at his age. Fortunately, this young actor and his guardians agreed, and performances went forward as planned. Our other young actors took this sudden change seriously and did not let it phase them as performers. Their support of a “new” face taking over the role was continuous throughout both performances and their strong understanding of the play’s structure and story allowed them to guide him through moments of confusion when it came to blocking. This is a direct result of the dramaturgical collaboration we utilized as the young actors were able to take their deeply ingrained knowledge of the show’s structure to come together as a community and allow this change to be successful. This was successful because this young actor had to step into this role twice, as it was a two-show day, and once he did the first show with the script with blocking notes and major assistance from his castmates, he was confident enough to tackle the second show without the script. Overall, I believe the collective passion for the production to succeed amongst the young actors contributed to this success. The passion for the production (the story, characters, and performances) goes with the connections they built with each other over this process.
The collective commitment to dramaturgical collaboration from the beginning of rehearsals all the way through performances took this production of *Camelot and Camellltle* to the next level. Our journey towards a deep understanding of the show’s theatrical elements through active exercises made way for a cohesive production connected by design, performance, and community. Our dramaturgical collaboration was unique in that the young people involved were challenged in ways that fit best for their age demographic. Meeting their needs in terms of comprehension, attention span, and engagement ensures success in utilizing dramaturgical collaboration from start to finish. Overall, the continued weaving of this practice throughout the production process led to a strengthened connection between the young actors, which can be seen in their collective overcoming of challenges (specifically in final performances). This strengthened connection allowed them to rely on each other for support and friendship, which is something they may have lacked during the isolation period of COVID-19.
CHAPTER THREE: WITHOUT RULE OF LAW

“Behave. You don’t think I’ve tried that!? For years and years. Waited my turn and raised my hand and it doesn’t change anything! Behaving just makes me easier to ignore.”

- Jo, WROL

In the previous chapter I discussed the ways a director can implement dramaturgical collaboration into the creative process. I am also interested in what it looks like when a dramaturg brings the ideas of dramaturgical collaboration into the room and how this differs from a director. To evaluate these questions, I will specifically focus on the Teen Perspectives Lab process at Orlando Family Stage in Fall 2022, where I acted as the dramaturg. For further context, the Teen Perspectives Lab program at Orlando Family Stage is a part of their overall Youth Academy programming and its purpose is to give teenagers a space to creatively work on pieces of theatre that resonate with them and others around their age. Typically, the plays that are chosen for this process end up being “staged readings,” which means that the final performance does not involve design and production elements (such as light, sound, costumes, and set). If there is an element vital to the storytelling, such as a specific prop used consistently throughout the play, the director will often choose to include it in the final performance to the best of their ability. However, most often, any kind of design element is minimal. This specific Teen Perspectives process was especially exciting because it would be the first fully staged production since the program’s inception and the play chosen by the artistic staff at Orlando Family Stage for this specific process was WROL (Without Rule of Law), written in 2018 by Canadian playwright Michaela Jeffrey.

Similarly with Chapter One, I will chronologically explore the ways dramaturgical collaboration was a consistent through-line for the WROL production process. I will start by
exploring my initial introduction to the play and my pre-rehearsal work. Then I will discuss the callback and casting process in collaboration with the director. Next, I will dive into our first read-through and further rehearsals and how dramaturgical collaboration evolved. Then finally I will discuss audience impact by examining the tools implemented to bring our audiences into the world and themes. Overall, I will examine the ways dramaturgs can specifically bring dramaturgical collaboration into the room and how to sustain it throughout. I do this by specifically looking at dramaturgical collaboration in actor packets, callbacks, read-throughs and post-discussions, character analysis resources, and lobby displays. While I explore dramaturgical collaboration through similar tools as Camelot and Camelittle, this chapter considers how these tools can translate to working with an older group of young people. In the last chapter I discussed how it was necessary for the young people in Camelot to be active during our read-through so as to not lose interest. In this chapter, I will consider how a more traditional read-through can work well with older groups to secure their buy-in.

WROL is a coming-of-age story that centers around a group of five friends as they discover the mysteries of an underground bunker as well as each other. The play focuses on themes such as girlhood, youth, and societal expectations and takes inspiration from films like The Goonies, Stand By Me, and Judy Bloom novels. The importance of this play in today’s theatrical canon is in part due to its themes, which are still relevant even five years after its publication. In 2024, the rights of young people are currently being attacked daily by certain lawmakers, specifically the rights of girls and anyone part of the LGBTQ+ community: in the state of Florida, there were ten anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced in May 2023 alone (ACLU). These bills are intended to target rights like free speech, healthcare, and education. For girls, women, and people who can get pregnant, the 2022 overturn of Roe v. Wade by The United States
Supreme Court has seen “an alarming deterioration in access to sexual and reproductive healthcare” (United Nations). Other threats to young people include the government’s dismissal of gun violence in schools, harsh restrictions on content that can be taught in schools, impending irreversible change on the climate, and social media’s role in online bullying. This play takes the fears of all kinds of threats toward young people and uses a doomsday preparation lens to view them.

Pre-Rehearsal Work: Reading Like a Dramaturg

As I previously stated, I was attached to this production as the dramaturg, meaning I would explore the play’s themes, characters, and structure and provide that information to the director and cast in ways that would support the production. The Teen Perspectives Lab never utilized a dramaturg prior to this specific production. I was brought onto the project at the request of the director (and my fellow graduate cohort member), Chanel Gomaa (she/they). She had expressed to the Education department at Orlando Family Stage that she wanted a dramaturg (and me specifically). The desire for a dramaturg on this piece was due in part to Chanel’s knowledge of my previous dramaturgical work, our familiarity with each other as peers and artists, and their interest in how dramaturgy could play a vital role in putting on this play.

Chanel was quick to establish that this would be a truly collaborative process and that the collaboration really began from the moment callbacks occurred and all the way through rehearsals to opening night. As a dramaturg, your team makes a huge difference. According to Brown, most of the time, “if the artistic team includes a dramaturg, the team is often unaware how to best collaborate with dramaturgs because few know what a dramaturg actually is or what dramaturgs do” (Brown xiii). This is despite dramaturgical thinking being an integral part of every single person on the creative team’s process. I was fortunate in this situation to be working
with someone who was incredibly familiar with dramaturgy, what it entails, and was already putting it into practice in their own work. My partnership with Chanel was fostered by the desire to have dramaturgical influence and an openness to what it could bring into the room. The welcoming of that dramaturgical perspective that Chanel displayed as the director is essential to the existence of dramaturgical collaboration in the rehearsal space because it indicated that Chanel was immediately interested in establishing a strong sense of community.

My work as the dramaturg began by reading the play, just as I began my work as the director for *Camelot and Camelittle* (see Chapter Two). Again, I designed my script reading process based on Brown’s *The Art of Active Dramaturgy*, in which she discusses how and where to begin the dramaturgical process. When approaching reading a play, she claims that active dramaturgs must read “with the clean slate or open mind” which “encourages reading without an agenda” (Brown 2). As an active dramaturg, you want your first read of the play to be stripped of bias to ensure open-mindedness as you conduct the necessary dramaturgical research, talks with your director, and eventual rehearsal process. But how can we manage to do this? As theatre artists, there is inevitably some bias when it comes to approaching a play based on how you relate to a play’s content on a personal level. What kinds of themes and topics are being discussed in the play that you may not have any relation to or feel entirely comfortable discussing? Biases are extremely difficult to overcome, and it is okay to acknowledge that going into any creative process. However, the exciting thing about art, and theatre in particular, is that there are always new things to discover. Recognizing that you have different experiences and identity markers than the content or characters in the play gives you, the artist, room to learn, grow, and offer a unique perspective. Dramaturgical collaboration allows for various artists with differing ideas to come together and work towards a common goal.
Brown presents specific steps that are important to follow for the first read of a play.

Brown says “to facilitate an uninterrupted read, avoid stopping to take notes… Now is the time to get a sense of the play, its movement and flow” (3). This was a rule I followed diligently for my first read of *WROL*. The intention of this put me in the head space to read the play with an open mind and see it for what it was. Along with this, I was also committed to the goal of discovering something new during this first read-through. For me, this looked like uncovering one thing that I found interesting about this play. It could be one of the characters, a specific scene, a piece of dialogue, or an overall theme. Finding that one thing would then urge me to learn more about the play in my next read and so forth. Intentionally focusing on finding an element of the play that intrigues you as the reader can also be applied when coming back to a play after a previous experience with it or even as a reader who does not identify with any elements of the play. Ask yourself: What about this play sparks my imagination, artistry, and creativity? This begins the dramaturgical process that will ultimately merge with the collaborative aspect of the rehearsal room.

This is all to say that, upon my first read of *WROL*, I was immediately hooked. Each of the characters (Jo, Sarah, Maureen, Vic, and Robbie) felt as though they were written from an extremely personal place. And, according to the dramaturg’s note in the published play, they were. The script features dramaturg Laurel Green’s short essay titled “Radical Friends,” where she discusses her collaboration with Jeffrey: “We swapped stories of our memories of grade eight… Looking back, we were creative, fearless, determined, and undeniably ourselves. I wonder how those girls would navigate the increasingly complex and precarious world we’re living in now. What is the future they would want us to fight for today…?” (vii). Jeffrey herself states that “*WROL (Without Rule of Law)* is a love letter” to her younger self and all the
influential women in her life who have been made to feel small or like they should not speak their mind (Jeffrey). This became the “one thing” I found interesting about the play that made me want to know more. The sentiments of the dramaturg and playwright spoke to me not only as someone who identifies as a woman but as a human being; I discovered an extreme desire to tell this story along with Chanel and our eventual actors.

After deciding to officially be the dramaturg for WROL, I continued to work my way through Brown’s suggested steps for active dramaturgy. Specifically, Step 6 discusses “the play’s voice” and how active dramaturgs read the play to uncover what this voice sounds like. Brown describes voice in a more metaphorical way, comparing it to “a piano chord” (8). What she means by this is that “the play’s voice” is a combination of various “critical elements” that work together to create one cohesive sound (or voice) just like notes combine to create a chord. The critical elements that create a play’s voice are “story, time, character, language, image/metaphor, theme, and form or pattern” (Brown 7). In terms of finding the voice of WROL, I began my reflection by taking note of things I saw within my reading that aligned with those critical elements. Jeffrey utilizes “doomsday preparation” as a mode for discussing the fears young girls (and young people in general) worry about from day to day — doing well in school, appeasing your parents, being a good friend, fitting into what society expects you to be. She utilizes this niche field in a way that does not shove the things she is trying to say in the faces of anyone interacting with the play, but rather slowly uncovers them throughout the play’s exposition. One specific thing I noticed was that time was linear in the bunker scenes, but the character’s monologues were non-linear (they each took place prior to the events in the bunker). This was an indication to me that the monologues were there to help the audience understand the characters in the bunker on a deeper level. Some of the themes I uncovered were: “girlhood,
youth, societal expectations… friendship” (Lawlor 2). While I conducted this pre-rehearsal work on my own, I was truly focused on making it a dramaturgically collaborative process with the information Jeffrey and Green present within the dramatic text. Utilizing Brown’s active dramaturgy approach for initial readings allowed me to pose curiosities and think about how I can frame these curiosities to Chanel and the young people we would cast to continue the cycle of dramaturgical collaboration. The next step in the process was callbacks and this is where I began to connect my initial dramaturgical ideas with Chanel’s directorial perspective and the young actors’ character interpretations.

Callbacks

Our callback process was all about getting to know the young actors we were in the room with, getting them comfortable with each other, and of course casting the show. We began callbacks with a group icebreaker to introduce each other’s names and pronouns rather than immediately jumping into reading scenes. We only had a small group of actors at callbacks, so we felt there was enough time to do this. Beginning with an icebreaker allows the young actors to feel more comfortable in the space when their nerves are most likely at an all-time high, contributes to creating a sense of belonging amongst the whole group, and establishes our intentional focus on this process being as collaborative as possible. Understanding callbacks are a nerve-wracking experience for all age groups (even adults) and intentionally creating a space which is focused on easing nerves is crucial to make room for forming connections between participants. From this point, we distributed scenes and gave the actors time to explore them before reading them for us. We started with the partner and large group scenes because we wanted to see how they worked with each other and to see what pairings could be exciting. Much of WROL’s story happens in these larger group scenes so we were keen on finding the actors
that would work well in that structure. We also made sure to have a few of them do individual monologues, which is the other big part of the play that gives insight into the characters and who they are as people.

Overall, our casting discussion post-callbacks lived within that dramaturgically collaborative world. Chanel and I leaned into who we felt each character was in the context of the play and what actor we could see succeed in each role based on what they brought into the room. As an active dramaturg, it was crucial to consider Chanel’s thoughts and desires as the director while also offering up my own thoughts when she wanted to hear them. Brown does not specifically cover a dramaturg’s role in callbacks, but she states that “active dramaturgs help root the production in the text… and the director conducts everyone while rooting the play’s emotional life in action” (56). In addition to their research, it is important that an active dramaturg acts as another pair of eyes in service of the play and the playwright’s intentions. The director may not always see everything, and a dramaturg can offer a different perspective. Chanel was eager to pick my brain about what I saw in each of the audition readings and who I felt would work well together. Working with a director who was adamant about having a dramaturgical perspective to inform the production strongly influenced the ways we, as director and dramaturg, collaborated as it made room for us to equally bounce ideas off one another. Specifically, I knew I was able to present Chanel with an idea I had for possible character development without feeling like I was overstepping because, while she was secure in her directorial vision, she welcomed collaboration to make the vision stronger. This would be an important factor as we began rehearsals because I could consistently have an active voice in the room.
For us, the characters of Jo and Maureen were the most difficult to cast because we had two actors who we could see succeeding in either role. They both had unique interpretations of each character that were dynamic to watch. When making our decision, this is where I came in with my dramaturg hat on and offered my perspective on why the actor that we ultimately cast as Jo would be the best fit. I went back to the script and what I knew about Jo as a character and advocated for those things. Jo is outspoken, unapologetic, funny, loyal, and determined. The actor I advocated for brought an understanding of Jo that I became excited about. While they were timid at first, I felt they had all the characteristics of Jo and more. I strongly believed in their ability to grow throughout the process and that this character would challenge them in that, which is the overall goal of educational theatre experiences. Chanel became excited about what I saw in that actor, and we made the decision to cast them as Jo and our other actor as Maureen. We left our casting discussion with excitement to start rehearsals and everything we would discover along the way. As a team, we utilized dramaturgical collaboration to combine our individual understanding of these two characters to make the accurate casting decision for our production. Thinking about this partnership we have established, next I will discuss how that expanded to include the cast as we began rehearsals with a traditional read-through.

**Read-Throughs and Post Discussions**

The first rehearsal consisted of brief introductions, an initial read-through, and discussion. Coming into this first rehearsal I had already completed several read-throughs of the play on my own time as I developed my dramaturgical packet and compiled questions and thoughts I had. In this first rehearsal, I wanted to focus on what discoveries the actors were making along the way. The first read-through as a team is crucial. In the previous chapter, I focused on how our first read-through was important in securing the buy-in of the young actors.
and making it an active experience for their specific age group versus a standard table read-through allowed them to stay focused and physically engage with the story. When thinking about the first read-through as a dramaturg, Brown says that “the true purpose of the first rehearsal is to hear the play” (101). The idea of “hearing the play” is essential when working with young people. Just like any actor, they are going to have their own interpretation of the character and play. This means that they might be quick to solidify their interpretations and live within a “performance” during the read-through. Theatre practitioners often find that this hinders the process as it can get in the way of character work throughout rehearsals because it puts the actors in a box, not allowing them to try new things in terms of their characters. In the previous chapter, I discussed Lane’s process on conducting read-throughs with young people and what she and other directors think of them overall. She specifically discusses her conversations with Matthew Dunster and Michael Attenborough where they both agree that the read-through is “the only time that we hear the play for the first time; and you can never hear it for the first time again” (Lane 38-39). Both directors are quick to dismiss their actors from making brave and bold choices during the read-through. Attenborough says to his actors “above all else do not worry. You are not performing. Let us hear the play” and “Dunster tells his actors not to feel any necessity to act” (Lane 39). In terms of working with young people in theatre, I believe it is important to welcome their urge to “perform” and at the same time reassure them that their initial ideas of the play and characters will evolve throughout the process. This is exactly what dramaturgical collaboration looks like. Allowing them the chance to visualize and vocalize their initial take on the character while simultaneously encouraging them to keep an open mind as you collectively make discoveries. Overall, utilizing a traditional read-through style for this age group felt like the appropriate choice for many reasons. First, it was the best use of our time as this rehearsal
process had a much shorter window than *Camelot* and this approach takes less time. Second, we knew this age group (most of them being 15 to 18) would be able to handle sitting at a table for an hour plus to achieve this goal, rather than an active approach, as they are used to sitting for longer periods of time in high school.

In our post-read through discussion, Chanel and I were keen on letting the actors speak their mind about what they just read. We were curious to know their feelings, questions, and curiosities. The goal of the post read-through discussion “is to clarify the questions for the rehearsal process” as well as to gauge cast perceptions of their characters and the story itself (Brown 104). The post read-through discussion is a dramaturgically collaborative process because the team is working together to discover specific themes and questions that will ultimately inform the production. In our specific discussion the two biggest things that we discussed were: “The end of the play” and “Robbie’s purpose” (Lawlor 3). For context, the ending of the play is two-fold. The part of the story that takes place in the bunker ends with Jo, Maureen, Sarah, and Vic deciding to go down the mysterious hole and Robbie staying behind to “keep watch” (Jeffrey 83). This transitions into another “YouTube video” of Jo, which is a motif that is utilized throughout the play as Jo’s format of storytelling. The video consists of Jo, Maureen, and Sarah defining doomsday preparation terms for their “viewers” and culminates in “SOS” (Jeffrey 85). The specific video indicates to the audience that it was filmed prior to the events of the bunker, which connects it with the rest of the videos of Jo that occur throughout the play. The actors brought up things like it being “very unknown,” it “makes you think,” and they are “asking for a better world” (Lawlor 3). The initial curiosities surrounding the end of the play were brought up to question how we, as the artists, understood it and how we would stage it. What would our ending look like and how can we tell it to the best of our ability, so our
audiences are not confused? Although this is something we would not stage until further into our rehearsal process, the initial discussion reinforced our dramaturgical collaboration as it created a place for us to begin when understanding and staging the other “YouTube video” moments that occurred prior to the ending. They needed to all have a similar aesthetic to keep the audience on board, as it was a repeated motif. Collectively knowing our ending looked like our beginning would deeply inform the way we collaborated to dramaturgically connect these moments.

Overall, this active post-read through discussion began to establish relationships amongst the young actors by allowing them to collaborate through their questions, thoughts, and skepticisms. Giving the young actors a space to freely pose questions and allow their ideas to be heard by each other established a community we could continue to build and strengthen throughout the process. We could also use this space to have challenging discussions about the world of the play as it fits the goal of the Teen Perspectives Lab to engage this age group in conversations about topics they relate to.

The other portion of our discussion was identifying “Robbie’s purpose” and we focused on his connection to the others and why he happened to be the only male-identifying character. After going back and forth discussing Robbie’s place and his role within the story, as a group we decided that his “connection to everyone else (Jo, Sarah, and Vic) was Maureen” (Lawlor 3). We identified several instances in the script where Maureen brought up things about Robbie that no one else knew or were shared between the two of them. Specifically, in the beginning of the play Maureen responds to something he says with “You sound like your dad” (Jeffrey 18). This comment feels personal and something only Maureen would know if she were connected to Robbie and his family. The relationship between Robbie and Maureen and the rest of the characters is something that we would eventually expand upon in later rehearsals when we
conducted deeper character work. The post-read through discussion was incredibly collaborative as we explored these initial thoughts. I noticed the students were consistently eager to share their ideas with the group and intently engaged in the other thoughts presented throughout the discussion. They would also express enthusiasm when someone would connect their idea to theirs or answer a specifically challenging question. The overall desire for this part of the process would directly contribute to a continued interest in investigating the play further. By the end of the post-read through discussion we all felt excited about the deeper thinking that would occur and how we could develop the initial questions into actionable ideas on stage.

Rehearsals: Character Analysis and Cast Packets

For the WROL rehearsal process, we encouraged critical thinking and question-making, maintained a check in with each other at the beginning of each rehearsal, and supported thinking out loud during the staging process. This ensured strong collaboration and support in the room as we explored the story on a deeper level. Two specific things I introduced into the room as the dramaturg that were extremely beneficial to the actors and the storytelling were the actor packet and the character analysis worksheet. For context, “The Actor Packet is a document – paper or digital – that includes articles, images, and other relevant materials compiled to help the actor better understand the play’s world, characters, images, and themes” (Brown 90). I was influenced by Brown’s theory to structure my actor packet to be more “theme-focused” and topic driven, as opposed to utilizing a “character-focused” approach (Brown 100). While I could have gone with the latter approach, the theme-focused packet felt a bit more tangible to understand for the young actors who may not have worked with a dramaturg previously. In addition, I felt as though working from these bigger concept ideas and then collaborating with them to discover the ins and outs of their characters throughout the rehearsal process was a more productive route. It
gave them a starting off point while also allowing the freedom to make discoveries. Brown states that “active dramaturgs gather information guided by a single question: *How will this information enhance what the actors do on stage and how the artistic team shapes the production?*” (90). Rather than giving direct answers and overloading the packet with unnecessary information, it is crucial to provide information and resources that give guidance. By utilizing this approach, the young actors can use the packet on their own time to make their own meaning of the world of the play through the context the packet provides. Then in turn they can ask questions of the world that may come up for them as they are making these connections, which we can collaboratively answer together in the rehearsal room. To reinforce the idea of dramaturgical collaboration along with this element of Brown’s theory, I sought to curate this actor packet in a way that would spark collaborative conversation amongst the whole group. One element I was keen to include was a section on the play’s title (Lawlor 3). I decided to give the actors the origins of the play’s title, which is most notably linked to a survival guide written by Joe Nobody titled *Without Rule of Law* and offers instruction on how to prepare in the event of the fall of our government (Lawlor 3). I felt knowing the specifics was crucial in where it came from or what might have served as inspiration for the playwright. This also served as a jumping-off point to discuss what the title means within the play's context. Overall, I wanted to introduce an actor packet to this specific age group because it felt essential to their education as young artists to introduce them on the role of the dramaturg and how to utilize contextual research in an informative way, something they may have to do in school.

In addition to the cast packet, I felt that a character analysis worksheet would give the ensemble a foundation upon which they could build our collaborative space. Courtesy of fellow dramaturg and Theatre UCF student Caroline Hull, I provided the actors with a character
analysis packet that she had put together for a previous production process. The worksheet consisted of the “Nine Questions” from renowned actor and theatre artist Uta Hagen’s book *Respect for Acting*. The questions focus on things such as character’s relationships to themselves and others, prior events to the action of the play, objectives, goals, obstacles, and tactics. The worksheet continues to ask questions that are more abstract and not necessarily detailed in the script, for example: “Vocally, is your character generally quiet and demure or loud and flamboyant?” (Hull 2). This specific question presents the actors with the opportunity to think outside the box and dig even deeper into their characters. The actors would complete the worksheet on their own time and then I would break out with the whole group during rehearsal time to discuss their findings. The decision to have them complete the worksheet on their own time, and not as a group, felt appropriate for this age demographic because it allowed them to have individual agency (something they crave as teenagers) and educated them on how a standard professional process might look. From there, our group breakout discussion was fruitful for the actors and me because they were able to make decisions about their characters that they felt to be true, according to their analysis and work thus far. The discussion began by opening the space for whoever wanted to share their character-based discoveries first. From there, the discussion built to include making connections between characters and discussing each in tandem with one another rather than separate. The biggest revelations to come out of this discussion were: 1) The parental presence/absence amongst the characters; and 2) Maureen’s desire to protect everyone around her from harm. As a collaborative team, we concluded that each character showed behaviors throughout the play that were a direct result of their unique relationships to their parents. Specifically, we recognized that Robbie is entitled and privileged due to his family’s wealth – “but hey, your dad has money, you’ll land on your feet” – and he is oblivious to how
that privilege allows him to function in the world (Jeffrey 62). We concluded that despite the obliviousness, there was some sort of absence in his life and decided as a group that it is his parents’ lack of interest in being actual parents to him. This conclusion correlates with the given information in the script that portrays Robbie as someone who still cares deeply about his friends (for example, Maureen gives him several chances to leave the bunker, but he refuses and ignores her wishes every time). Overall, the discussion had a major influence on the young actors’ understanding of their characters’ backstory and how each character was connected, which would end up contributing to their interpretation and performance. In addition, the young actors were given another space to freely share their ideas with one another, which further strengthened the relationships and community we were building together. This step in the process reinforced dramaturgical collaboration as we were asking questions about the world of the play as a collective group to benefit the production. Thinking about the world of the play and how we could then open it up to our eventual audiences is what I will focus on in the next section as I discuss the collective creation of our lobby display.

**Lobby Displays**

The final tool in our process we used to widen the collective community already created throughout it was our collaborative decision to create a lobby display for the show's run. A lobby display, in theatre, is created to allow audience members to “directly engage with themes and ideas relating to the piece they’ve come to see” (Dembin). Lobby displays can look different depending on the show and its intended depiction. Sometimes they are simply informative, utilizing curated slideshows or displayed readings. They also sometimes offer a kind of thematic activity or call to action. For *WROL*, Chanel approached me with the idea of a lobby display and I was immediately on board to guide the concepts and ideas and make them come to life. The
focus of our lobby display would be to engage our audience members in ideas of resistance and empowerment, themes that embody the spirit of the play. The main collaborative piece of the display was our “Inspiration Wall.” It was important that this wall reflect artists, activists, leaders who we as a group found inspiring in our lives. I decided the best way to reflect these inspirations was to find a photograph for each person and curate a description of who they are and what they do or contribute to their field. I felt that this aesthetic would be informative and visually eye-catching for our audiences. Providing a description of each person would allow audiences to understand why they were chosen and how each connects to the play's themes.

Allowing this specific age group of young actors to participate in the creation of a lobby display provided another level of education in understanding the process of dramaturgy. It also allowed them to utilize their creative brains, something that may be stifled by the constant focus in schools on test scores and college admissions.

We were also collectively intrigued by the idea of including a purely interactive element in the lobby display as well. Because of their love for poetry, Chanel suggested we activate a specific moment in the script. I stated earlier that the four girls in WROL have monologues that take place outside of the main action of the play in the bunker. Vic’s monologue occurs at a heightened point of emotion and depicts her presenting an assignment to her “language arts class” (Jeffrey 65). The poem Vic reads is titled “Things I Know to Be True” and she lists off things in her life that are memorable to her. We decided to take this concept and have audience members offer what they “know to be true” on sticky-notes and share them by placing them on the wall. From there, I visualized connecting the two larger components through photographs, books, and music. By engaging our audiences in the themes through different formats in the lobby display, we were able actively to bring them into the world and voice of the play. In turn,
the audiences became a part of our artistic community by giving them a free space to collaborate with each other in. The lobby display is indicative of our overall dramaturgical collaboration because it allows us to take what we understand the play to be about and expand it to include our audience’s perspective.

Dramaturgical collaboration throughout this process was shaped by the abilities of the young people involved in the process. While Camelot focused on how to keep the young people engaged throughout each step, the young people involved in WROL could take part in more intellectually challenging exercises. Specifically, our collective question-making about the play’s characters and themes took on a more mature perspective because the play itself deals with more mature content and the actors themselves are within an older age demographic. In this chapter, I have showcased how the perspectives of a dramaturg and director can effectively work in tandem to influence how dramaturgical collaboration is implemented. The overall process allowed this age group to take part in a truly communal experience which was essential at this moment in time (Fall 2022), only a year since in-person theatre returned and possibly one of the first without us wearing masks. Most of these students were either in the early years of high school or in middle school when COVID-19 struck and participating in extra-curricular activities remains an integral part of those years. WROL gave them a space to come back to the kind of community extracurricular activities provide outside the classroom space.
CHAPTER FOUR: ALICE AND THE WONDERLAND PARTIES

“It’s very confusing to be different sizes in different places with different people.”

- Alice, Alice and the Wonderland Parties

Throughout this thesis I have discussed TYA projects that were performed in traditional spaces built for theatre and other forms of live performance. They are equipped with all the necessary technical mechanisms to put on a show. In this next chapter I pivot to ponder how dramaturgical collaboration manifests when you take theatre out of the typical space and bring it somewhere non-traditional. I will explore this through my work as the director for Alice and the Wonderland Parties (Alice), a new work commissioned by The Jeanette M. Gould Traveling Theater Fund (JMG Fund) in partnership with the University of Central Florida (UCF) theatre and nursing programs. The play is a contemporary adaptation of the classic Alice in Wonderland story following Alice as she frantically heads to her best friend’s birthday party. On the way there, Alice falls down the rabbit hole and finds herself in Wonderland. Her only way out is to attend several different parties to find the one she is looking for. The play includes familiar characters, such as the Cheshire Cat and The Mad Hatter, but introduces some new faces never seen before. While this chapter will utilize a director’s perspective just as in Chapter One, I carried out different tactics to collaborate with the students in this project to get the show on its feet due to the unique nature of this production as well as the student performers and designers (ages 18 to 22) being the oldest out of all three.

As in previous chapters, I will follow a chronological timeline following the process from start to finish. I will begin by exploring the creation and mission of The Jeanette M. Gould Traveling Theater and how this specific partnership began. I will then discuss how I got involved in the project and what steps I took pre-rehearsals to familiarize myself with the script and
project logistics. Then I will focus on meeting the students, the casting process, and division of production roles. This will be followed by the staging process, specifically focusing on the interactive qualities of the script. Finally, I will explore audience and student impact. This chapter’s chronological structure reflects the evolution of how this process was impacted by dramaturgical collaboration due to its continual use. In this chapter, I will specifically look at dramaturgical collaboration through open questions, touring production design, audience participation, and talkbacks. The analysis of dramaturgical collaboration in this chapter differs from the previous in two major ways. First, the inclusion of audiences in this chapter is on an even bigger scale as they inform several of the script, production, and design choices that were made over the course of the process. Second, this play was specifically developed to tour to various Orlando-based facilities, which would majorly affect how each performance looked. While I employ similar tools in this process as I did with the previous two, the students who I worked with to build this production wore multiple hats as opposed to strictly being just performers or designers. This required our dramaturgical collaboration to multitask as we would address multiple things at once.

**Project Background**

For context, I want to explore the JMG Fund and the goals of the partnership. The Jeanette M. Gould Traveling Theater Fund is run by brothers and philanthropists Bruce and Jeffrey Gould to honor “their mother’s love of the theater and her longtime support of the nursing profession” (Dolan). The partnership between the JMG Fund, Theatre UCF, and the UCF nursing program began just last year in 2022 and its overall goal is to bring theatre to children in the Orlando community who normally would not have access to it otherwise because of their current situation, specifically young long-term patients in hospitals. The partnership intentionally
connects undergraduate theatre and nursing students to align itself with the mission of the JMG Fund. This is the first instance of dramaturgical collaboration as this partnership required specific groups (Theatre UCF and UCF Nursing) to be involved for it to meet the needs of the community that was intentionally being served. Theatre UCF professor and TYA artist Elizabeth Horn oversees the entire partnership and is the one who first brought me on board. The overall structure of the partnership’s first year would begin with a creative drama course in the Fall semester titled “Creative Space in Drama,” taught by Elizabeth, that focused on exploring the characters in the original Alice in Wonderland story as well as the world of Wonderland through guided lessons and drama-based activities. Creative drama is an “improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-oriented form of drama, in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect on experiences real and imagined” (Drama-Based Instruction). In Elizabeth’s Fall course, the young patients at Nemours Children’s Health who interacted with the creative drama lessons (led by the undergraduate students), curated ideas and concepts that were intended to inspire a new play, which would be written by MFA Theatre for Young Audiences alum Sage Tokach. Then in the Spring semester, this script would be staged by Elizabeth’s “TYA and Communities” class and would travel around to various spaces in the Orlando area to be performed for several young audiences. In addition to the performances, some of the students in the “TYA and Communities” class would also facilitate bedside lessons with the patients as a post-show educational component. This would allow the patients to interact with the themes and characters of Alice they were exposed to in the performance. Due to this partnership being in its first year and figuring out what community partners we could potentially work with, Elizabeth was not closed off to the idea of bringing the production to other populations of young people besides long-term patients. In addition to the hospitals that would have access to this production,
we would also have one performance at a local Orlando school, UCP (Unlocking Children’s Potential) Bailes Community Academy Charter School, with our audience composed of students with varying abilities. This contributed to this project’s mission of access to theatre for all populations.

While the Fall semester saw the concept for the play and the script come to life, the Spring semester portion of the partnership is where my directorial work would begin. Elizabeth first approached me about being involved in the project prior to the Spring semester and informed me about the structure, the focused themes of this year’s creative drama work and play, and why *Alice and Wonderland* was the chosen story. Her goal was to include current MFA Theatre for Young Audiences students in various roles, such as producer, director, and education coordinator. Elizabeth’s inclusion of our knowledge as students, teaching artists, and TYA professionals was important to the success of the partnership because we could implement our learning and practice throughout the process and collaborate with the undergraduate students in an effective way. It is also worth noting that by including myself and other graduate students, the commitment to building and sustaining a community was at the forefront because Elizabeth was keen on including voices and perspectives outside of hers and her students. For this project I was signed on to direct the traveling new play (written by Sage Tokach) and work with the undergraduate students to develop the production utilizing minimal set, props, costumes, and other design elements.

**Pre-Rehearsal Work: Meetings and Timelines**

As the director, I needed to consider several things: 1. an overall vision of the process, 2. an aesthetic for the production, and 3. the rehearsal/production timeline. The rehearsal and production timeline were particularly significant in this case because we had a very limited
window. Elizabeth indicated in our initial meetings at the start of Spring semester that the rehearsal process would be 9 weeks long, each week split into two 75-minute rehearsal periods corresponding to the “TYA and Communities” course schedule. My directorial vision and aesthetic developed from my meetings with Elizabeth’s and the rehearsals themselves. Our meetings were rooted in dramaturgical collaboration because they established our working and professional relationship and allowed us to have thought-provoking discussions regarding the development of the production. In addition, these meetings felt essential and productive as continuous communication between the two of us would set us up for success in this process. Our meetings were originally focused on asking questions of the text, specifically: “what was the goal of the moments of audience participation?” There are several moments of audience participation throughout Sage’s original script, and we wanted to solidify whether these moments made sense dramaturgically and if they positively contributed to the story. Another one of our central questions was “what was the effect of including specific lines pulled straight from the original Alice in Wonderland story?” Both lines of inquiry reflected Brown’s theorization of open questions. At this point, Sage’s play was still in its draft stages, so asking open questions and relaying them to her would foster development. The hope was this early collaboration would lead to an even more defined draft of the script that could then be the staged version for our project. This part of the process is dramaturgical collaboration because Elizabeth and I collectively curated questions to relay to Sage that we had about the play’s dramatic structure. While thinking about the dramatic structure of Alice, I was simultaneously devising ways to implement world-building as we approached the start of rehearsals. I was focused on exercises that would be the most effective and beneficial to our timeline, which I will discuss in the next section.
World-Building

When approaching the rehearsal plan, casting process, and collaborative partnership with undergraduate students in the “TYA and Communities” class, I went back to Lane’s process of directing young people. I previously discussed that one of the most important things for Lane is, when working with young people in theatre, it is all about “securing their buy-in” (40). When I referenced this previously, I was discussing my process of directing young people in grades 3 to 8. But what does it mean to secure the buy-in of students in their early college years? As the director for this project and a teaching artist, I wanted to explore the world and themes of the play through a detailed lesson I would facilitate that utilized theatre games and activities. The goal of this was to establish an energized and comfortable environment that would continue throughout our process. Utilizing a proper lesson structure felt appropriate for this age group of students as they are used to it in an academic setting, but it also took on a more hands-on approach as this was not a lecture-based class environment. Establishing a hands-on, energized, and comfortable environment will allow the dramaturgical collaboration process to be more productive as everyone in the room feels connected. For this part of the process, I wanted to put my teaching artist hat on because another element would focus on the students facilitating their own bedside lessons in the hospitals we would travel to. I wanted to show them an example of how the themes and content of the play could inspire an engaging lesson (See Appendix B). The different parts of the lesson I created to facilitate with the students were based on moments and themes from *Alice* but were structured to let them devise their own perceptions. Specifically, one exercise was to create a soundscape of a specific environment as an ensemble. This exercise was inspired by Scene 2 in Sage’s adaptation of *Alice* (“The Rabbit Hole”) which takes place in a neighborhood as it quickly becomes busy and overwhelming (5-9). I wanted the outcome of this exercise to be two-fold: first I wanted the students to collectively listen to each other to build
these sounds and allow them to complement each other; second, I wanted the soundscape they created to inspire the eventual final production sound design for this specific moment in the script. By exposing the students to a lesson based on the theatrical elements of the play, we could begin to dramaturgically collaborate on what this story means, looks, and feels to us as the ensemble putting it together and in turn create a collective understanding.

In addition to creating the soundscape, I wanted to engage students in games and activities that most would be familiar with to root our collaborations in play, which is a unique pillar of the TYA format. The overall goals of this lesson can be tied to the essential properties of play theory, which is most intrinsically linked to psychologists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. In the article “Play and Cognitive Development: Formal Operational Perspective of Piaget’s Theory,” Saghir Ahmad and collaborators discuss the importance of play in children’s cognitive development and utilize quantitative survey data to explore the effects of play. They explicitly state, “Play can have a significant role in the development of a child’s creative abilities. The development of creativity is also related to cognitive development because creative thinking contributes to problem solving” (Ahmad et al. 73). In this lesson, I included the game “Bippity Bippity Bop” which is a popular theatre game that utilizes skills such as concentration, collaboration, and adaptability. The Drama Based Instruction Network, based out of The University of Texas at Austin, describes “Bippity Bippity Bop” as “a fast-paced game that asks students to work together to recall and create specific three-person images within a given time limit. This is a playful way to work on focus and collaboration and to make and practice non-linguistic representations of vocabulary words” (Dawson). By including this game in my lesson, I encouraged the use of these skills and explored ensemble-building while staying on theme with the content of the play by using characters and images from the play in the game. While the
researchers in the article focus on the final stage of Piaget’s theory, “Formal Operational 11-15 years” I argue the use of play amongst young people past the age of 15 still contributes to the development of creative abilities, which may become more complex as they continue to get older. By implementing collaborative play with the students (ages 18 to 22) involved in this project, they are inspired to use their abilities to creatively engage with the play's themes and develop their own Alice-inspired lessons.

Ensemble-building is an aspect of collaboration that spills out beyond the inner workings of the play being performed. This is the case for any piece of theatre. It is crucial to extend the idea of the ensemble to all teams working on the production, not just the actors. This was especially necessary for this specific project because of all its moving parts. I was working with a class of students who would eventually hold specific roles (actor, designer, choreographer, and teaching artist). Whatever their role, each student would be required to work with others to focus on different aspects of the project and would even hold multiple roles when necessary. For instance, many students who ended up as actors were also teaching artists for the project's education component. This was not about the individual but about the collective. Educating this age group on how to work within a creative and production team would set them up for success in their careers as theatre artists.

**Touring Theatre and Casting**

I previously acknowledged that a stark difference of this process from the previous ones in Chapter Two and Three was that it was a production designed to tour to various facilities in the Orlando area. This is a unique characteristic of this process because it specifically shaped the way rehearsals were structured and the lengths we could go to in terms of design elements. Touring theatre looks different depending on the scale of the production. Touring theatre can
happen on a grand scale — think Broadway shows that tour across the country to large performing arts centers. These shows typically have a large cast, extravagant set design, and will perform in that space for a few weeks. But touring theatre can also happen on a much smaller scale. For example, Bright Star Touring Theatre is an active children’s touring theatre company that has toured all over the world, claiming that “from 2000 seat theatres overlooking Manhattan’s skyline to school cafeterias and libraries, no audience is too large or small” (Bright Star Touring Theatre). While they may tour to larger theatre spaces sometimes, their production is done on a much smaller scale, with smaller cast sizes, easily constructed set design — typically one that can be put together and broken down in a short time frame. The spaces that Bright Star and similar companies travel to are often not built for theatre, which is why the set, sound, or lighting design must be minimal and require the companies to come prepared with their equipment. Despite the scale of the touring theatre, the goal is still to serve their specific audience, whether it be children, adults, or audiences of all ages.

*Alice and the Wonderland Parties* falls under the smaller scale touring theatre category. With our specific audience being children in hospitals and school-age students in the community, our performance spaces were non-traditional. Each space we would tour the production to would vary based on size, playing and backstage areas, and technology setup capabilities. The goal was to bring our piece of theatre to these children and our production needed to fit the needs of a variety of spaces. As an ensemble, it was crucial that we designed and staged our production with that in mind. This would require the use of dramaturgical collaboration to still convey the story of the play within the given parameters. The 1951 adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* by Walt Disney Animation is a well-known story, specifically in terms of the design and aesthetic of the characters. For instance, we might recall the Mad Hatter’s top hat, the pink and purple stripes
on the Cheshire Cat, or Alice’s iconic blue dress. In many ways, these aesthetic cues have become synonymous with the characters. As the team bringing a new adaptation to life for young audiences, it felt imperative that we stay true to those cues in our design because our audiences would be able to recognize those characters even if they looked a little different. But how do we do this on a minimal scale in terms of our limited timeline and needing to easily transport these design elements for the eventual tour? The students involved in each design team (sounds, lighting, costumes, and props) answered this question almost immediately. To convey these iconic characters and their specific aesthetics we needed to utilize the associated colors to our benefit. It is crucial to mention that our adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* was specifically set in a contemporary setting and featured several new characters. Considering this, our design would stray away from the 1951 film, mostly regarding Alice, but would still capture the well-known aspects of her and other original characters, like the Queen of Hearts, Mad Hatter, and Cheshire Cat. This was rooted in dramaturgical collaboration because we wanted to serve the story’s setting and time period while also incorporating some of the nostalgia and recognition our young audiences may already have around these classic characters. Allowing the overall cohesiveness of the design to blend these two ideas together would allow our adaptation to be fresh but still familiar. *Alice and the Wonderland Parties* navigated a specific overlap that is often seen in TYA — adaptations of classic books/stories for the stage. In addition to Lewis Carroll’s original story, there is also a beloved film adaptation. It was crucial to understand that while each of these stories are dramaturgically unique, in terms of story structure and time period, they overlap with one another when it comes to characters, location, and plot devices.

Elizabeth’s pre-established structure for the class was instrumental in deciding what roles the students would take on for the production. In the first few weeks of the spring semester,
Elizabeth had one-on-one meetings with each student to discuss their specific interests and if they had a particular desire to serve any specific role, such as actor, teaching artist, designer, assistant director, or choreographer. Having the students attached to the production in roles they were interested in is a unique aspect of dramaturgical collaboration because it ensures that we are engaging their strengths as artists and allowing their investment in the process to be truthful rather than forced.

With the knowledge of our ensemble’s specific interests, I was able to cast the show. The best course of action for this, considering time and continued dramaturgical collaboration, was to engage anyone interested in being cast with monologue options from the script. My selected excerpts gave actors a wide variety of characters to choose from and explore. This would allow the students to become familiar with the text and prevent them from having to acquire their own audition pieces. I planned to conduct auditions through a Google Form (see Appendix D), which asked specific questions along with a self-tape submission of the students performing their chosen monologue. The questions I asked on the audition form focused on roles they were interested in, multi-role casting (potential to play more than one character), and special skills. In addition, the form included a place to submit the link to their self-tape. The form was beneficial for me as the director as well as the interested students. It made the “audition process” feel organized, less daunting than a typical audition, and gave the students creative agency over what role they received. This format also allowed the interested students to gain experience in completing a self-tape, which has become a standard in professional auditions post-pandemic. Providing them with an opportunity to engage with the self-tape format allows this age group (who is approaching the professional world) to practice an element they will encounter often. Giving them this creative agency would allow me as the director to gain insight into their
specific understanding of the characters and overall story. Their interpretations of the characters (through their delivery and expressions) in these audition videos would hopefully provide unseen perspectives I had not initially thought about when conducting my initial pre-rehearsal work, which could then enhance my overall direction from this point moving forward.

Casting ultimately came down to student interest and the demands of the script. I needed to be aware of what roles would be doubled-up and how that translated to how many actors I had. I also made sure to lean into my directorial vision for each role. I knew that I wanted to do my best to cast based on interest, but I also wanted to challenge students and experiment with how different personalities resonated with different characters. Approaching the casting process this way allowed me to focus on the script’s important dramaturgical aspects in terms of character and collaboratively working with each student’s self-tape and specific interests. In addition to the cast, other creative and production roles were the stage manager, assistant director, choreographer, sound, costume, and props designer, and a puppet master and projection coordinator. As the director, it was crucial moving forward that each group was consistently on the same page and working in service of the text of the play along with the needs of the performance spaces and participants. Making this apparent to the students at the top of our first rehearsal by establishing our rehearsal room would be a true collaborative space where I was eager to hear ideas from them and work together to problem solve would allow us to stay true to dramaturgical collaboration throughout the process.

Rehearsals: Open Questions and Audience Participation

I implemented ideas from Brown’s Active Dramaturgy into our development process, specifically her idea of “open questions,” which I focused on previously in my initial readings of the play and discussions with Elizabeth. Implementing open questions into our collaborative
tackling of the script allowed the actors and others in the room to actively think about the script in a way a dramaturg would. This would allow for deeper thinking, performances, and design ideas despite the short rehearsal process. One way we utilized open questions was at the beginning of each rehearsal. Due to our time constraints, a traditional read-through was not possible. However, I knew this age group could handle bypassing a traditional read-through as they were expected to have read the script prior as part of their classwork. I felt starting each rehearsal with a round-table style read-through of the specific scene(s) we would focus on that day was necessary and that the readings of the scenes would follow with open questions. An open question either “who, what, when, where, and how” to begin with and “sets the stage for a discussion to explore ideas raised by the text, and inspires expansive, creative thinking by framing the artists’ conversation within firm yet flexible parameters” (Brown 35-37). One of the open questions I asked in our first rehearsal was “how did your character end up in this neighborhood?” This was specifically a question for the actors playing Alice’s neighbors and utilized one of the “five words” as well as presenting ideas raised in the text — they are residents of this neighborhood and know Alice (Tokach 5). It also does not give them a solution, but a creative direction. Giving the actors the space to think about and answer these questions alongside each other contributed to our dramaturgical collaboration as it dedicated time to collectively thinking about the text and how that would translate in the performance. Other types of questions (open, closed, or neutral) directors can explore in the rehearsal room can be found in Appendix C.

The element in the script that was the biggest collaborative feat were the moments of audience participation sprinkled throughout. Participatory theatre scholar Gareth White defines audience participation as “the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action
of performance” (4). Simply put, this means that audience participation is participation that drives the story along. For Alice, utilizing audience participation gives this specific group of young people (kids in hospitals) agency in how they engage with the performance and the world of the play. When thinking about our dramaturgical collaboration in terms of audience participation, we collectively asked two questions: what would these moments look like, translated from page to stage; and what would the alternative be if our audiences did not express interest in participating? Answering these questions meant putting these moments on their feet and thinking aloud instead of inwardly as a collective. Specifically, one of the moments of audience participation is in Scene 4 of the script, or “Door A: The Tea Party.” This scene includes familiar characters such as Alice and The Mad Hatter, but also features two new characters, Talami and Spaghelephant, who are “... half food, half animal” (Tokach 15). These new characters were creations from the Fall semester’s creative drama lessons that were facilitated by the “Creative Drama in Spaces” students with the young patients at Nemours. The inclusion of these devised characters contributed to the “newness” of this adaptation of the familiar Wonderland characters. In scene 4’s moment of audience participation, Alice has met Talami and Spaghelephant and is surprised that they are animals made of food. The two characters state that Wonderland is full of these types of animals and start describing other animal/food creatures they are friends with. The audience is then brought into this conversation by Talami as he says “Oh wow look! Everybody’s here! I’ll let some of them introduce themselves to you” as if they are the animal/food friends he and Spaghelephant were talking about. Talami then approaches volunteers in the audience and asks what their animal is and then what their food is. Utilizing these answers and improvisation, Talami and Spaghelephant come
up with a unique name that combines the two elements. This specific moment of participation invites the audience into the world in a way that lets them “become” a character in the story.

There were back-and-forth conversations in rehearsals about whether to include the audience participation. The participatory moments are written with a clear vision and bring in some of those elements of creative drama, where this piece was born from. As a group, we believed that removing any of these moments would take away from why this piece was written in the first place. We discussed logistics of how many people would be in the audience depending on the performance and if the kids who would be there would be excited enough to engage in the moment. While the text was written with the intention of being a heavily interactive piece, it was also important to consider the challenges we would be met with in terms of engagement, such as audience members with limited abilities, short attention spans, and possible disinterest in the story. Our decision to keep the participatory moments came down to staying true to the voice of the play and knowing these moments added a unique collaborative characteristic to the of storytelling. I decided to devise alternative routes to take with the actors if they faced any of the contingent challenges listed above. Their options included improvisation to skip participation and move into the next piece of dialogue, assisting kids who may struggle to come up with answers to participatory prompts, and brainstorming different language to enable those with limited abilities to participate. The latter was particularly inspired by the participation prompt in Scene 6 or “Door C: The Pity Party,” which includes the audience participating in a dance taught to them by one of the characters. The language the character uses to teach the dance included words like “walk,” “step,” and “turn.” In place of those words, we collectively decided to utilize the word “move” to be more inclusive of all kinds of mobilities amongst the young audience members. I knew this group of actors could memorize the original moments and
alternative routes because their age group can retain information on a larger scale. Overall, as the director, I was able to collaborate with students to mine the script for participation moments and transform them in a way that responded to a wide range of circumstances. I want to attribute my adaptability to meet this challenge, as well as others that arose, to the working relationship Elizabeth and I established with each other. While she was the overall instructor of the course and was present during all rehearsals, she allowed me to take the reins on production development with the student actors/designers. This meant living in a space resembling a traditional director role and making the final decisions regarding staging and design. Despite this, I still relied on her input and perspective as an instructor, TYA professional, and the leader of the project. While I was able to wear my director and educator hat, I appreciated learning from her specific knowledge and letting that influence the process, and how dramaturgical collaboration was used. Our particular relationship diverged from a typical classroom hierarchy because I was an outside entity coming into the space and leading the overall purpose of the course. What became important was continuous communication between me, Elizabeth, and the students in the course. Adhering to regular check-ins, asking questions, and expressing concerns enabled the process to move forward in a positive direction.

Performances and Talkbacks

Throughout this chapter I have focused on dramaturgical collaboration through open questions, production design, and audience participation throughout the rehearsal and development process. I will now discuss the performance process and how dramaturgical collaboration carried over and connected the student performers and designers with audiences. To begin, I will discuss the first performance of Alice and the Wonderland Parties at UCP Bailes Community Charter Academy on March 7, 2023. UCP Bailes is a school that specializes in
creating an inclusive environment for their diverse body of students by engaging them in personalized learning environments. This is the first live performance of this production and the first time the actors could see how an audience of young children reacted and engaged with the story. It is also important to note that in my experience as a theatre artist, when a production reaches its first performance for an audience, the director’s job is complete. Lane states, regarding opening night, “...try not to worry. Most of your work here is done, and it is now over to the young cast to share this play with an audience” (110). Despite this being the standard and because this production would see several phases of performances, Elizabeth and I had agreed to my staying on to assist with each phase. This would allow my directorial knowledge and understanding of the production we put together to continue to contribute to our dramaturgical collaboration.

I previously mentioned the aspects of touring theatre, which include performing in non-traditional theatre spaces, minimal design, and production elements, and an “all hands-on deck” framework in terms of set-up and breakdown. This first performance, in addition to being our first with an audience, also expanded the ways we collaborated with the given space and communicated with each other every step of the way. There were extreme benefits to doing a “test run,” as we were able to make certain discoveries that would inform future performances. For this specific performance, the UCP Bailes allowed us to come into the space 45-minutes prior to the performance to set up, work out logistics, and begin understanding and collaborating with the mechanics of the space. We needed to go into the space at UCP Bailes and assess its mechanics to figure out what would allow the production we created to be successful. One of the biggest decisions that needed to be made was where would the playing space for the actors be and what kind of room remained for the audience configuration. UCP Bailes offered their
cafeteria, which is a rather large space that luckily gave us multiple options for the specific placement of the playing space. Things we had to consider: where could we easily set up our sound and other technology equipment; what area would be the easiest to use for “backstage” to house props and costumes; and how would entrances and exits work? Our decision ultimately came down to how each of these elements could easily work with each other for the sake of the storytelling. One of the biggest aspects of Alice’s dramatic structure is the transition between scenes, or the transitions for Alice out of one party and picking the next door to go into. This required our actor playing Alice to exit and then re-enter the scene almost immediately. The playing space needed to allow for a seamless transition to keep the story moving for the audience. Considering this and the limits of the space, we collectively decided to set up our main technology equipment (a projector screen) slightly in front of one of the walls in the cafeteria and the space behind this screen would be utilized as Alice’s main entrance/exit point as well as a crossover for other actors. This choice would mostly reflect the blocking decisions made in the rehearsal room and restore flexibility for the actors.

Like all live performances of theatre, small mistakes are bound to occur. Despite repeatedly rehearsing and having a comprehensive knowledge of all elements of the production, we were in a brand-new space with an audience for the first time. The conventions of our location deeply affected how the performance turned out. For example, the entrances and exits of characters were impacted based on the space configuration. While our 45-minute set-up time block allowed us to work through some moments, it did not give us enough time to explicitly focus on each entrance, exit, and spacing of the scenes. This meant the actors had to work through these moments while simultaneously performing, which resulted in them utilizing improvisation. One scene we were not able to explicitly focus on was Scene 2 (“The Rabbit
Hole”). This scene involves Alice running into several of her neighbors one right after the other. Stylistically, the scene is supposed to reflect Alice’s lack of time and her nervous energy and moves at a fast pace, almost like a moving sidewalk. Due to the playing space being much smaller than they were used to, the actors playing Alice’s neighbors recognized they needed to adjust the timing of their entrances in the moment to create the moving sidewalk feeling. They understood they could not enter when they typically did for the sake of the stage picture looking awkward to the audience. However, the integrity of the story was not lost despite having to alter certain aspects. The actors were able to improvise successfully because of their collective understanding of the story structure and blocking as well as their ability to work together as an ensemble, which was formed and strengthened through the continued use of dramaturgical collaboration. This also reflects their age and experience as performers and not something I had to teach them during rehearsals.

This specific performance at UCP Bailes also included a short talkback with the audience and cast. Elizabeth had approached me prior to the performance to inquire what I thought about including and leading a short talkback which would give students the chance to share their feelings and opinions on specific moments and characters in the show. In turn, this would allow us as the creative and production team to obtain actionable feedback. By engaging the students in this format, we were directly engaging with dramaturgical collaboration because the young audiences’ insight into the production would inform the actors’ performances moving forward as well as future productions produced under JMG. Giving the young audience members the chance to engage with questions about what they just saw through a talkback aligns with the educational and interactive goals of the project.
Due to the time block we had for set up, performance, and breakdown, the talk-back needed to be succinct and include questions students would easily be able to answer. Brown discusses talkbacks thoroughly and various ways to structure them (in terms of set-text productions versus new play development). The script for Alice was an interesting case because while it was a “new play,” it was already past the script development stage for the purposes of our process. For set-texts, Brown states that “the hope is to elevate the conversation and encourage the audience to contemplate the play’s ideas, voice, and rules” (158). It was also a story that included familiar characters, which would be an appealing factor to the audiences we would perform for. The decision to have the questions focus on moments and characters would allow us to understand what audiences were most interested in and see if the qualities of this adaptation that are brand new were exciting to them. The following are the two questions I crafted as the talk-back moderator:

“What moments in the show stuck out to you”

“Did you have a favorite character?”

These questions would allow the students to use their critical thinking skills and memory to look back on their experience. In addition to this talkback, the students would also engage with the themes and story through drama-based activities later in their classroom settings. These were elements put together by the program’s Education Coordinator, Julia Veiga, in collaboration with Elizabeth and several of the undergraduate students. For example, one of the main aspects of Alice is that the character Alice travels to several different types of parties throughout the story (Tokach). These activities would give the students the chance to think about the parties from the story and then create their own. Acquiring audience feedback through a talkback as well as giving them a chance to further explore the content of the show in a more creative way allowed
us to continue dramaturgical collaboration into performances while engaging with the overall mission of this project. Giving this specific audience, students with varying abilities who may often feel different, disconnected from other young people, and like they are not being heard, a space to creatively collaborate with like-minded peers and share their ideas allows them to feel valued and seen.

Our final challenge was to prepare our production of *Alice* for performances in the hospital setting. Due to logistics and to protect the safety of the patients, only two out of three of our partner hospitals would allow a live performance on site. I previously discussed how touring theatre requires collaboration with the given performance space in each particular location. The hospitals our actors would perform live in would be Advent Health and Arnold Palmer Hospital for Children (as part of Orlando Health). The performance space at Arnold Palmer was a unique case as it was more of a small filming area, with cameras and a green screen rather than a stage or playing space. The area also had limited offstage space for entrances, exits, and storage of props and costume pieces. To prepare the actors for this performance, we needed to dedicate time to scale back the whole production. This required me to work with the actor's moment to moment to figure out what original blocking we could still utilize and what props and costumes were essential to the story. These alterations engaged in elements of dramaturgical collaboration because we needed to collectively decide how to scale the production back in a way that would still stay true to the story, allow for audience comprehension, and feel comfortable for the actors. As the director, I wanted to lean into what felt best for the actors, to ensure they felt comfortable with the changes being made, and to obtain their input as an ensemble. This brush-up rehearsal allowed us to exercise our collective understanding of the story of *Alice* and how this altered version could still engage the audiences in its thematic elements and characters. What I observed
as the director in this rehearsal was the strong ensemble and community amongst the actors built throughout this process. This was apparent in the way actors positively communicated with one another throughout this specific rehearsal. Having to alter a production for whatever reason can be stressful for all players involved. Our team of actors, however, already understood the uniqueness of this production and were prepared for things to alter over the course of the process, which they knew would require them to work together to make alterations. Rather than looking at this part of the process as a daunting task, I noticed the actors took great care in making sure each alteration worked for everyone. In addition, the actors had a well-sculpted understanding of the world of the play, enabling them to make alterations they felt dramaturgically made sense for the eventual audience. Despite this being a limited rehearsal with only a short amount of time to rework certain things, I knew the actors did not need additional time to rehearse this updated version. Being in this age demographic (18 to 22) in this specific setting (a university) instills the concept of self-motivation. I felt the actors would be able to take what we fixed, practice it on their own time, and come to the performance ready to go. Overall, the dedication to utilizing dramaturgical collaboration from the beginning and their capacity to work in an accelerated format allowed the actors to come together in this moment and create a performance that was still just as engaging and rewarding.

The mounting of the production of *Alice and the Wonderland Parties* allowed me to explore what dramaturgical collaboration looks like within the world of touring theatre and how that differs from a production that has a set run in one location. Overall, this production process offered insight on how to expand dramaturgical collaboration to include audiences all the way from the initial script development, to rehearsals, and finally into performances. This allowed me, as the director, and the student actors and designers to continuously collaborate with the
audiences we would eventually perform for, even though they were not physically in the room with us. In addition to this, the process itself involved several moving parts and required consistent communication between me and the student actors and designers. I want to recognize the success of this production was largely due to the collective commitment and age demographic of the students. I argue that this specific population of young people, being 18 to 22 years old, allowed them to be able to take on the massiveness of the process and the challenges that came along the way. In addition, this process was uniquely positioned to counter the effects of COVID-19, as they were able to build community with one another to then also build community with young patients in hospitals, an environment that is still recovering from the pandemic. While some of our hospital locations would not allow us to be in-person to perform, we still found a way to bring theatre into their community. I believe that using dramaturgical collaboration within this specific process enabled the young students to develop a deeply personal connection with the story they were telling and how it affected their audience members.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I have explored how dramaturgical collaboration can be utilized to create a positive community amongst young people in theatre. I have uncovered the ways this framework can be implemented through each step of the theatrical process by utilizing an active dramaturg mindset combined with principles of directing young people in theatre and working in collaborative spaces. By keeping dramaturgical collaboration consistent through each step (from reading the script to casting the show to read-throughs as an ensemble to rehearsals), the young people are continuously practicing community-building skills. As directors, dramaturgs, and theatre artists who work with young people, it is essential that we dedicate time to implementing best practices. This dedication can contribute to their artistic skills and foster deep personal connections with each other. As these young people are still recovering from the lasting effects of isolation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, connection and community are needed now more than ever.

I offer dramaturgical collaboration to create community-known theatre is an ever-changing artform, so this framework will evolve over time. This begs the question, where do we go from here? How can the tools examined in this thesis be implemented into your own theatre making? Understanding that all groups of young people you will work with are different from each other and that all theatrical projects are unique on their own is the first step. It is crucial to understand the skillsets of young people vary by age and experience and we, as the artists leading them, must devise challenging yet practical way to engage them in the theatre-making process. Treating each ensemble and piece as their own entity and then assessing what the needs are for each will allow dramaturgical collaboration to take form in the way that works best for
Specific exercises that were mentioned in this thesis can be found in the Appendix for you to utilize and explore in your own practice.

Implementing dramaturgical collaboration into my artistic practice has thoroughly shaped the way I approach theatre making and working with young people. Being able to form community and positive relationships with the young people on each project solidified the importance of committing to a collaborative mindset in the theatre making process. Up until this point I viewed these two entities, dramaturgy, and collaboration, as separate from each other. Uncovering the ways they intersect, and benefit the process, has opened my mind to the possibilities of this methodology in spaces beyond TYA. I am interested in exploring this concept further and revisiting the idea of “collective dramaturgy” and uncovering the ways dramaturgical collaboration and collective dramaturgy intersect.

I also seek to expand the populations I utilize this method it with. I am curious to know how adults in theatrical spaces would benefit from the elements of dramaturgical collaboration and how fostering positive communities amongst them would contribute to their overall success. The elements of dramaturgical collaboration offer unique benefits and skills, specifically for continuous productive communication. This is a skill that all artists (and people) should obtain to build and maintain positive relationships. I am curious how I can collaborate with current directors and dramaturgs to envision how this methodology can be shaped to utilize across various theatrical forms. Ultimately, I wonder how the practice of dramaturgical collaboration can also be implemented into accessible community spaces and not just in spaces that require auditions or students to pay tuition.

My biggest question at this point is: will we always be recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic? At this point in my research, I do not know if I have a specific answer. However, I do
know that connection in theatre making is essential, regardless of if we are recovering from a global pandemic or not. As I stated in my introduction, theatre artists interviewed for Caridad Svich’s *Toward a Future Theatre* are adamant that “our artform is one that relies on relationships and community” (62). I claim that theatre is an artform that also relies on communication between all players to be successful. Theatre cannot function well if all involved are not checking in with each other and staying on the same page at each step of the process. Dramaturgical collaboration helps us to avoid creative siloes. It encourages us to remain connected through collective curiosity and produce a stronger theatrical creation.
APPENDIX A: CHARACTER EXPLORATION DIRECTIONS AND TEMPLATE
Directions:

1. Compile a list of characters into a table, or other format that works for you (See below).

2. Curate personality traits/qualities for each character. These may be explicitly stated in the script’s character breakdown or will be uncovered in your reading of the script.

3. Then, pick a few short lines of dialogue for each character.

4. Make a large circle with actors in your callback/rehearsal space.

5. As the facilitator, introduce the first character to the group and have everyone embody that character through physicality. You can describe the character by stating the qualities you have compiled or reading the character description from the script. Practice this physicality a few times, encouraging the actors to make different choices each time.

6. Then introduce one of the lines of dialogue you have compiled for that character. Have the actors add this line to their physical embodiment. Practice this a few times as a collective group. You can have a few volunteers share their interpretation.

7. Repeat steps 5-6 with each character. This may be all the characters in the script or a few that you as the director/creative team want to see.

Table 1; Character Exploration Circle Template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of character</th>
<th>Personality Traits</th>
<th>Lines from script</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character E</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Created by: Gabrielle Lawlor
APPENDIX B: ALICE AND THE WONDERLAND PARTIES LESSON PLAN
• Activity #1: Bippity Bippity Bop
  o Spaghelephant
  o Rabbit Hole
  o Queen of Hearts

• Activity #2: Exploration of script/world of the play:
  o Soundscapes (Scene 2: The Rabbit Hole)
    ▪ What does a busy street sound like?
    ▪ What kinds of noises do we hear on a busy street?
    ▪ Recreating the voices in Alice’s head/that overwhelming feeling

• Activity #3: Sculpting (Themes)
  o Words:
    ▪ Time
    ▪ Curious
    ▪ Friendship
    ▪ Dream

• Activity #4: Tableau/Activating (Arc of the Play)
  o Beginning
  o Middle
  o End
-Initial Questions (during callbacks):
  
  • How do you think this character would stand?
  
  • How would this character move through their environment?
  
  • How does this character speak?

-Deeper Questions (during rehearsals):
  
  • What is your relationship to the other characters in this scene?
  
  • What is your motivation in this scene?
  
  • What is your overall goal?
  
  • How do you achieve this goal? Do you ever achieve this goal?
  
  • What tactics do you use?
  
  • How did your character end up here (in this situation, location, environment)?
APPENDIX D: ALICE AND THE WONDERLAND PARTIES AUDITION FORM
*Note: These questions were compiled into a Google Form to distribute to the actors.

1. Name:

2. Pronouns:

3. Year in School:

4. Major:

5. Please list the characters you are interested in playing: (*disregard what the script calls for in terms of gender, this can and should change)

6. Due to the nature of the script/spaces we will be traveling to, many of these characters will be doubled up (you may play more than one character). Is this something you are comfortable taking on?

7. Please list any special skills (ex. puppetry, movement/dance experience, devising, etc.)

8. Please provide the link to your audition video here:
APPENDIX E: IRB APPROVAL LETTER
October 23, 2023

Dear Gabrielle Lawlor:

On 10/23/2023, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of Study:</td>
<td>Creative Connection: Utilizing Dramaturgical Collaboration to Build Community in Theatre for Young Audiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Gabrielle Lawlor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00006084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents Reviewed:</td>
<td>• Gabrielle Lawlor - Faculty Advisor Form, Category: Faculty Research Approval; • IRB Lawlor 6084 HRP-250 - FORM (2).docx, Category: IRB Protocol;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should changes outside of administrative ones (study personnel, timelines, etc.) be made. If non-administrative changes are made (design, information collected, instrumentation, funding, etc.) and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination by clicking Create Modification / CR within the study.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Kamille Birkbeck
UCF IRB
LIST OF REFERENCES

“Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ+ Rights in U.S. State Legislatures in 2023.” ACLU, 


Dembin, Russell M. “Where the Show Begins in the Lobby” American Theatre, 02 Jan. 2015, 
https://www.americantheatre.org/2015/01/02/where-the-show-begins-in-the-lobby/.


Green, Laurel. Radical Friends. WROL (Without Rule of Law), by Jeffrey, Playwrights Canada Press, pp. vii-ix.


Stevens-Smith, Deborah A. “Active Bodies/Active Brains: Practical Applications Using Physical Engagement to Enhance Brain Development.” Strategies, vol. 29, no. 6, 2016. Taylor and


