

Polyvocal Playwriting and the Evolution in New Play Development: Examples from the EU Collective Play Project

The EU Collective Plays project is arguably the most ambitious new play project in the history of theatre. Groundbreaking in its scope and mission, the EUCP was funded in 2015 at a robust 1.8 million Euros, the largest arts funded project ever by the EU Arts Consortium—an enormous sum for a project not affiliated with a major national theatre. The scale of the EUCP is staggering: over 50 playwrights from 12 different countries are charged to develop 8 new works for the stage. Furthermore, there is a young playwright’s competition that is promoting the work of playwrights under 30 years of age; plus, a series of collective playwriting workshops taking place in secondary schools across Italy and parts of Europe. Simply put, each international group begins by targeting a theme, subject matter, historical personage, or contemporary issue. A head writer facilitates and coordinates the process and logistics of the play’s development. Central to the head writer’s task is to ensure a dialogic, polyvocal play that resists well-made structure or homogenizing the playwrights’ voices (the opposite of television writing by committee). By definition, the polyvocal play celebrates each individual’s unique voice, allowing a clash of styles, nationalities, genres, and source materials in constructing the playtext. In essence, this opposes the hegemony of American play development where the entire enterprise is established to support the individual playwright and play.

Curiously, EUCP is not based in traditional theatre centers such as London or Berlin, but in the relatively unknown medieval city of Viterbo, Italy, located an hour north of Rome. In 2015, Rome’s esteemed newspaper, *La Repubblica* coined Viterbo “the Silicon Valley of Dramaturgy,” largely based on its highly innovative international Quartieri Dell’Arte Festival

(now in its 21st year). As its reputation grew with invitations to leading international theatre artists and playwrights, the idea of a major collective playwriting project was germinated by QdA's artistic director, Gian Maria Cervo. Notably, Cervo with a cohort of writers across Europe had achieved great success at Residenz Theater (Munich) and Teatro di Roma with the collectively written, postdramatic play, *Call Me God*. This production provided the prototype and the media attention that galvanized EU support for further experimentation in the creation of new work.

My published work in the field of contemporary, experimental playwriting has been influential in defining new ways of creating plays based on various language strategies, mixing genres, and approaches to constructing characters. This work began in the 1990s when I directed the New Playwrights Program at the University of Alabama and invited the most cutting edge playwrights to develop their new works: Len Jenkin, Mac Wellman, Jeffrey Jones, Eric Overmyer, Nena Beeber among others. In numerous articles and the landmark book, *New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting*, I identified how these writers were using various strategies of language as the primary arbiter of the play; thus, coining the term "language playwrights." Luminary dramaturgs like Mark Bly described the book as "new poetics;" Choice said it was "unique in its genre" with its combination of theory and praxis. Not only does *NPS* define an aesthetic it provides practical exercises for the creation of hybrid, polyvocal plays. As such, its methodology has inspired a multicultural array of new playwrights, including the highly renowned Young Jean Lee who wrote in 2011:

When I first decided to try playwriting 10 years ago when I was living in New Haven, I bought every "how-to" playwriting book on the market and pored over them constantly, trying to teach myself how to write a play. There was only one how-to book about "experimental" playwriting (and as far as I know, it's still the only one), which I read and re-read until the pages were falling out. Anyway, the guy just wrote a revised and expanded edition of the book, and I'M IN IT! I don't know why I'm geeking out so much

over this, but it just makes me so happy. I feel like, "I did it! I learned how to write an experimental play! (Lee)

Lee was referring to the just published second edition, called: *New Playwriting Strategies: Language and Media in the 21st Century* (2012) which featured her work and those of other prominent women playwrights that had emerged since the first edition. This second edition has impacted playwriting practices in the EU, has been translated into Persian (Iran), and has provided the basis for a number of dissertations and new plays. In regard to EUCP, the book provided theoretical and practical models for the creation of hybrid plays, and was substantive in establishing the basis for the EU grant.

For these reasons, Cervo invited me to present a lecture on polyvocal playwriting at the Tramedautore Festival held at Piccolo Teatro in Milan as part of World Expo 2015. At the conclusion of the week's production, I was asked to participate in the the kick-off for EUCP held in Viterbo with members of the EU consortium. At that meeting, I was asked to serve as editor/curator of the anthology of the EUCP which is now in development. In the summer of 2016, I participated in developmental workshops for *Narcissus* in Rome and Viterbo, and the summer of 2017 presided at a reading of *Darkness* at Oxford University, while giving workshops and master classes on polyvocal playwriting at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen.

There are five established goals for the EUCP as established on their website; here, explicated with more detail. (<http://www.eucollectiveplays.eu/>):

- 1) Promote international cooperation between playwrights and theatre companies. These include the highly touted Catalan company La Fura del Baus; Prime Cut Theatre in Belfast; National Theatre of Oslo (KHiO); and, Teatro di Roma.

- 2) Test the enlargement of theatre audiences by the diffusion of narratives through internal dialogism. Envision a cubist painting in which the subject is explored from different planes, angles, or materials as in assemblage or collage. The mechanism of internal dialogism is that the component parts (created by playwrights from different countries) collide, clash, juxtapose or intersect as if in dialogue with each other.
- 3) Stimulate the interest of European audiences in new creative works by enlarging the idea of European citizenship through polyphonic plays. The idea of multiple voices speaking through common themes resonates with the very structure of the European Union, echoing the polyglot resulting from immigration and open borders that define the quotidian. These values have been deeply threatened by the isolationist, nationalistic mandate of Brexit, and nascent nationalism in Poland, and were exacerbated during the polarizing French elections in the Spring of 2017. The strident isolationist rhetoric of Trump has galvanized EU resolve, catapulting the project's implications for defining Europe's new identity and relevance in world politics. The EUCP makes a profound statement about the power of globalization in the arts as a needed symbol for cooperation in the world.
- 4) The artistic enterprise challenges playwrights through the testing of new forms within productions by transnational groups. Importantly, the EUCP is revolutionary in establishing how plays can be generated and diverse dramaturgies integrated, in ways that counter the American hegemony of the single playwright as the privileged voice.
- 5) Finally, showcasing EUCP at prominent international venues. The latter is facilitated by the participant EUCP who have affiliations with major European festivals. In 2016, a workshop with La Fura del Baus and the Montenegro group was featured at Quartieri

dell'Arte. Full scale productions begins in 2018. In June 2018, the Nordic group will debut their play, *Darkness*, as part of the Oslo International Festival of Acting, along with three other works featuring cohorts from Russia, Malta, and Northern Ireland.

As part of the mission, each group consists of established playwrights working with emerging writers. Each group meets *in situ* three times, although members within the group may meet digitally at other times—via clouds, Dropbox, Google docs, etc. While initial meetings establish the general direction of the theme or subject matter and head writer; there are cases when the theme or subject and head writer is predetermined. I will discuss in some detail the Nordic group which represents the former and briefly, the Narcissus project which was established prior to the playwrights' selection. While the charge of both is to create polyvocal plays, each process evolves to meet the needs of the particular project. Nevertheless, collective play development mandates priorities differing significantly from ingrained American development dictums, such as: “character-specific dialogue,” “through-line,” “whose play is it?” etc. To reinforce the multiple nationalities represented in collective cohorts, language itself becomes arbiter of characters and the *mise-en-scene*. Moreover, a play development vocabulary must be implemented that differs from traditional play development palaver. Some of the more useful terms follow; these are defined in chapter one of either edition of *New Playwriting Strategies* (Castagno, Chapter One):

Hybrid: Refers to the mixing or clashing of different genres, cultural or historical period styles, and techniques. The hybrid will often resort to various language strategies: found texts grafted into the play, strips of dialogue, multiple levels of language, dialects, slang or different

languages. Structure is created through juxtaposition of genre or mixing dramaturgies; characters interacting from different periods; and diverse performative styles.

Dialogism: Internal dialogism refers to the plays capacity to interact with itself, external dialogism targets its intersection with the world outside of the play, or with other genres or contexts. Dialogism allows for clashing voices within the play, versus monologism in which the play knows where it's going; as in linear, plot-oriented schemes that define the logic of the play. Dialogism shapes the play as an act of discovery. It celebrates juxtaposition and difference. Language systems interact or collide. In 1989, Eric Overmyer's, *On the Verge*, was the first play to exploit the collision of language systems as a means to disrupt a trackable narrative.

Frisson: the tension at the interface of dialogic interactions where the site of meaning can be determined. This is related to the principle of *interruption* as a means to refocus seeing. Sometimes, *frisson* is generated by the tension between the performative and the literary, as in La Fura del Baus movement-oriented approach in collision with text driven scenes from playwrights in the Montenegro group.

Polyvocality resists the notion of the single authorial and character voice in favor of disparate voices and language strategies. Polyvocality breaks down hegemonies that privilege the single playwrights' voice and character hierarchies tags like, "whose play is it."

Multivocal character: resists the idea of "character specific dialogue" in favor of multiple levels of discourse that shift from high to low levels of language, or colloquial to formal. It celebrates the bifurcation of character found in the creation of the "equivocal character" enabling one actor to shift identities across several identities or genders. Multivocal characters target inherent theatricality and foregrounding techniques over dramatic arcs or through-lines.

While the above rubric offers an overall guideline for setting priorities, individual groups determine what is best suited for their work, beginning with a preliminary meeting where ideas can be fomented and solidified. Focusing on their natural proclivities and strengths, playwrights choose their angle on a particular subject. Then for three to five months' writers diverge while the work continues via clouds, Google docs, etc. Before each meeting the head writer determines the key structural components necessary, and tenders to the group a general shape and direction. In the European tradition of dramaturgy, the head also considers socio-political questions that the play will consider; especially important in polyvocal writing where the variety of perspectives often collide. Ultimately, the head's task is to facilitate the overall process. As the play goes through multiple drafts more emphasis is placed on working the transitions, the interface between scenes--the key component in effectuating experimental writing into compelling, stage worthy plays. Finally, there is the crucial matter of translation into English for the publication in the anthology and further dissemination of these works and their processes.

To explore how this is now working in practice I will discuss the Nordic Group as its model is consistent with the tenets above. In June 2017 at Oxford University I presided at a stage reading of their play *Darkness*, where aspects of the translation into English could be tested. Reactions were extremely positive. A summary look at the development of this play is helpful for understanding how the collective play functions; the individual contributions; and steps along the way that ensure its growth and continuity. Finally, there are the ultimate challenges of a translation that ensures the essential qualities of the original are not compromised.

Tale Naess, head writer for the Nordic group writes:

For me as a head writer the biggest task is NOT to harmonize, to not turn this into a well made play. We want to "show" -- or lay open the hybrid forms, the different ways of

using language --maybe even different languages in the composition itself. I ask myself: How can this play "come together" while the differences continue to be present and vibrant? There is a force in the composition. I am looking for tensions and shifts, for the baroque and the theatrical. It is a challenge to think of this as real experimentation. To make something that can only happen with this group of writers, with this theme - at this particular time and space -- in this historical momentum with this project, -- and not think about: will the theatres like it, who would possibly want to play the roles, etc. I think we have a real chance to produce what you call a "hybrid" play. And a real chance to make this something from which we can all learn.

The Nordic Group features five accomplished playwrights from Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Lapland, and Northern Germany who are probing the notion of darkness that is distinctly Scandinavian, yet illuminates a kaleidoscopic range of juxtapositions. The eponymous *Darkness* explores how the seemingly harmonious Scandinavian society, where everything seems to be solved for you, makes the individual acutely aware of his or her inner demons— what the group has coined--“*the enemy inside.*” Having all your dreams fulfilled can lead to existential crises--even dreams of suicide. The contributors demonstrate how this enemy inside manifests itself across the Nordic cultures. Creating the unique Nordic sensibility involves integration of folk tales, Viking legends, archetypes, and tropes. From these sources, characters emerge across the landscape: the loner, the trekker, the guy in the car contemplating suicide, what children talk about when their parents are away.

For Icelandic native, Kristin Eriksdottir, the *enemy within* is directly related to the current socio-political and economic crises that have plagued Iceland, until recently. First, is the *theft of language*, to maintain the Icelandic language by resisting Anglification, a rigorous struggle to maintain its unique identity. In my interview with Kristin in Reykjavik (March 2017) she expressed her need to write in Icelandic although she realizes it limits her opportunities as a playwright to reach a broader audience. Pressures to go bilingual, even as the tourist industry has become the major economic force, have been thwarted, although the realities of a tiny populace

(under 300,000 native inhabitants) inundated with a 7 to 1 ratio of tourists (many from the UK and USA) mandates a widespread dissemination of English, particularly, in Reykjavik, where about two-thirds of the populace resides. Curiously, in my visit to Iceland, I felt begrudgingly accepted as an American; in restaurants, for example, servers were professional but somewhat grim or distant—rendering a kind of opacity to an otherwise remarkable part of the world.

For Kristin, the darker enemy inside is the *theft of believing in society that has stolen from you*—the economy was devastated by a hedge fund scam by country leaders in 2008-9 that collapsed the three major national banks. Kristin presented the image, that “life in Iceland is a membrane, an almost impenetrable membrane keeping us outside of society.” Kristin lamented during our meeting that she had just returned from Berlin, where she often works since it is impossible to make a living simply working in her native country. This dichotomy of wanting to leave but feeling compelled to stay is evidenced in her creation of an equivocal character in *Darkness* who switches between genders.

In translating her use of Icelandic to English, Kristin’s peculiar, strangely humorous way of using her native tongue creates something unique about the country -- capturing this quality is essential in translation. This applies not just in the way she constructs passages and sentences, but in the rhythm and the flow of her speech and writing, whereby her unique style bundles added meanings. Her epigrammatic haiku-like scansion are first written in Icelandic, then translated—structurally, they provide the play’s prologue and conclusion.

Sigbjørn Skåden’s Sami background is marked by the double bond of two cultures -- one, Lapish, the other Norwegian. As indigenous people, Laps were for a period bereft of their Sami language due to stringent political reforms. Norwegian became the state language, religious rituals and practices were forbidden -- *thus, the enemy within* is the shame to be Lapish.

The shame of your elders, their way of life, thinking, and talking. This shame is an enemy inculcated in the Lappish psyche and society. A kind of darkness that has led to loss of identity, suicides among young boys and a strange kind of machismo among people that had a culture where women were as prominent as men. Sami culture historically possessed a strong matriarchal element and a markedly strong feminist movement re-emerged in the 1970s.

Sigbjørn Skåden's text was originally written in a dialect-based northern Norwegian with traits of the Sami, for this occasion. In translation, there has been the desire to preserve some of the original words like "marbakke" (deep sea) and "dauinghode" (dead man's head) – in North Norwegian dialect form. Proper names of places, settings, and create markers for the audience that underpin the action. For example, a character in *Darkness* named Kroken (which means crooked or bent like a hook) reveals a hermetic, mysterious archetype weathered over years of austere Nordic winters. These original descriptors create an extraordinary sense of "otherness" in the play that is transmitted in its English translation—and essentializes the play's Nordic gestalt and world-view.

Gianluca Iumiento, a professor at the Oslo National Academy of Arts (KHiO), has written his text in English but tried to keep the rapidity and the rhythm of his original Italian language through the way he uses punctuation markers, spacers, and hesitant (commas, dashes, etc.) and his manner of dividing sentences and repeats words. The desire in development is to keep the feeling of his hybrid English although it is modulated somewhat so audiences will understand and relate to it. Iumiento, (and most Italian theatre artists) feels the "enemy" as the tension between the love of his Italian homeland and the necessity to move North to make a living. Working with the image of the Scandinavian loner archetype, he created the character

Julian, who in a harrowing scene prevaricates at the moment of decision on whether or not to commit suicide.

The head writer and translator, Tale Naess is from Trømso, the northern most port in western Norway. Tale writes text both in Norwegian and English. In *Darkness*, she saves the word “engangsgrill” in Norwegian – mainly for the charm of it. It means a small dispensable barbeque. Tale works in both Norwegian and English – some words, especially the swear words function differently in each language. They feel more casual and playful in English (the way they are intended) – but are darker and more sinister in Norwegian, in that profanities will signal that the children in the play are more aggressive than the average, or from a lower class. The variety of sociolects in Norway are markers for class, and are very difficult to capture. For example, the taciturn, plainspoken manner of communicating would indicate an individual from an inland farm, yet their plainspoken utterances bulk numerous shades of meaning and intention impossible to capture in translation.

Importantly, there is a text in the mix that is a result of notes written down during a conversation between the five writers, dialogizing between the various languages and English to relate the enemy within into a contemporary setting. As the head writer/dramaturg Ms. Naess took notes and dramatized this conversation, creating a sixth language level. Not a written language, but a kind of modified oral language, heightened into a dialogic move that interpolates sections by individual writers. In developing the collective play there is this need for writers to intersect, interpolate, making connections, and drawing together threads and transitions to make the work as powerful as possible, without compromising the individual voices.

Darkness' setting is a peninsula, with a suburban shoreline connected to a large city with daily ferries, and then a darker interior with forests, lakes. The key to the landscape is the peninsula, surrounded by water, the vision of the play's end is as described in the current draft of *Darkness*: "its breaking from the mainland and floating away in the North Sea." (Naess Interview) In the end what happens when the enemy is not inside – but outside. In nature, when this peninsula – that is the world of the play – tears itself away from the mainland and floats off into the North Sea. I received a completed draft of *Darkness* in December 2017 and will direct it as part of the UNCW mainstage season in April 2019. It will be workshopped in June 2018 at the Oslo International Festival of Acting, where I have been invited to give a weeklong series of workshops on polyvocal playwriting. In the fall, it will be given its first production at KHiO, Oslo in October 2018. The reading in June 2017 for the "Theatre in Translation Conference" at Oxford University demonstrated a revelatory play of inestimable promise.

Conversely, the project *Narcissus* presents a much different approach than *Darkness*. The subject is based around the creation of the gay fantasia cult film, *Pink Narcissus*, created by James Bidgood in his New York apartment in the early 1970s during the heyday of Andy Warhol's influence. (Bidgood) In April 2016, Gian Maria Cervo and Michel Mark Bouchard, an award winning Francophone screenwriter for his Quebecois movies that explore contemporary gay relationships, went to New York to secure Bidgood's approvals and inclusion in the project. Two scenes from Bidgood's forgotten screenplay *Fag* (never produced) are now integrated into the script. Bidgood, in his 80s and reclusive, provided several days of interviews that informed the project.

At the time of the PTRS conference, I had just received a completed draft in Italian. Each

writer took on a particular task. Cervo and Antonio Ianniello, a young Neapolitan playwright, serve as head writers. Ianniello wrote a poetic, minimalist monologue reminiscent of the playwright, Jon Fosse, that was split into prologue and epilogue. Michel Mark Bouchard was involved with fleshing out the key relationship between Bobby Kendal and James Bidgood (Kendal was the star of the film, *Pink Narcissus*). Belgian playwright, Anna Romano, has written poetic songs that provided bridges and transitional elements. Cervo and the London-based playwright, Chris Goode emphasized the collage like chaotic environment that defined making the film *Pink Narcissus*. In the summer of 2016, I was involved with a developmental workshop of the project at *Scuola di Sperimentale Cinematografia* in Rome, the oldest film school in Europe, where graduate students engaged the early drafts of the script. We worked on how actors might handle collisions in the interface between various textual approaches. There was the dilemma of solving how Quebecois idioms might transfer into specific Italian dialects and what performative gestural responses capture the essence of those idioms. Importantly, polyvocal writing mandates different performative approaches across the work-- a naturalistic style must be resisted. After the workshop in Rome, I met with Ianniello and Cervo in Viterbo to hash out a structure for the play that affirms its polyvocal integrity.

While these represent only two examples from the collection, they are indicative of the polyvocal approaches that differ radically from traditional American development practices. Further, in an effort to promote inclusion for young writers in the EUCP, Cervo and I wrote guidelines for the Matteo Latino Playwriting Competition earmarked for playwrights under 30 years of age. This now includes the four selected winners working with 2 professional writers in creating a unique hybrid collective play.

For those interested in developing polyvocal plays collectively there are some general best practices that I have personally gleaned from my work on the above projects, and in conversations with members of the EUCP.

- 1) Resolve the general topic and those parameters by the end of the first meeting or before, in some cases. Each participant's voice must be invested in the project on a personal, artistic level as well as an aesthetic and socio-cultural level.
- 2) Discuss basic tenets of polyvocality, creating hybrids, etc., and how difference versus a striving for homogeneity is important.
- 3) Establish a Google doc or cloud to ensure the work is viewable to participants and for commentary as the work progresses.
- 4) Define each person's role or function within the project at the first meeting. This includes identifying the head writer/facilitator to keep the project on track and ensure parameters are being met. Decide which playwright will handle transitions—the cog in experimental work.
- 5) In workshops, acknowledge that differences and clashes in language, genre, and dramaturgical approaches are encouraged. Not an attempt to smooth it out. Urge everyone to engage the experiment so that it is not the biggest ego or reputation that lords over in the room. Acknowledge the mix of experienced and emerging writers.
- 6) Define a first draft date, after which readings, workshops, and performances are arranged.
- 7) Coordinating the logistics of travel, schedules and venues so that the workshops can take place with full participation. This is daunting on the international level and required managerial support.

Ultimately, as editor and curator one of my roles is to provide commentaries on the works submitted by discussing their differing methodologies, working practices and difficulties faced in the execution of each play (including, its translation) in the anthology. The commentaries on each of the eight processes will hopefully provide the means through which others can pursue collective playwriting and may ultimately, be more important than the individual works. Documenting the discoveries and challenges, and rechanneling them into effective praxis is a major goal in the creation of the anthology. These outcomes have the potential to be groundbreaking, especially in America where playwriting and individualism are the way of the land.

Pragmatically, collective playwriting is ideally suited for the college playwriting class or workshop. Student teams can be assigned and a substantial work can be created in a short time, as each writer is required to complete a section of the whole. The playwrights can choose a topic or theme with each taking a different approach. This solves a key difficulty for young playwrights who generally find committing to, and writing, a longer, full-length play out of reach. Instructors can readily integrate group work in a meaningful way that is attractive to millennials. Collective playwriting brings energy into the workshop as students brainstorm creatively, share memories and backgrounds, and build reliance on one another. This results in an esprit and feeling of accomplishments that can inspire students to try new dramaturgical forms, and continue their development as playwrights.

American play development centers have doggedly focused on developing individual playwrights and plays. (Wright) However, by celebrating multiple voices and perspectives in unique projects as shown by the EUCP, collective playwriting in American could ultimately provide the theatrical path to bridging the intractable divisions that now define us as a nation.

Works Cited

- Bidgood, James. *Pink Narcissus*. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aim7CfbyIrM>).
- Castagno, Paul. *New Playwriting Strategies: A Language-Based Approach to Playwriting* (New York, London: Routledge). 2001.
- Castagno, Paul. *New Playwriting Strategies: Language and Media in the 21st Century* (second ed.) (London: Routledge). 2012.
- EU Collective Plays!* (<http://www.eucollectiveplays.eu/>).
- Eríkisdóttir, Kristin. Interview, Reykjavik, Iceland, March 5, 2017.
- Lee, Young Jean. October 11, 2011.
- Naess, Tale. Interview via Skype, April 5, 2017.
- Wright, Michael. *Playwriting at Work and Play: Developmental Programs and Their Processes*. (New York: Heinemann). 2005.