

The Diversity of Dramaturgy

Three dramaturges, three different career tracks

By Lisa Mulcahy

When you think about the typical career of a dramaturge, what comes to mind? The traditional perception is that you toil away in anonymity at a regional theatre, buried up to your neck in obscure historical research, churning out notes that the playwright may or may not use. But today dramaturges are taking complete control of their careers, applying their unique personal talents and interests to a variety of theatrical genres and having a major impact on the development of fresh, thrilling stagework. Here's an inside look at three dramaturges who ply their trade in three very disparate ways — but are each making a major mark.

"That was great — I was young and working with the best. It really built up my faith in my own ability — I had some things to say, and those things were listened to," he says.

Cerniglia next got a PhD from the University of Washington, taught for a time and got a taste of creative corporate work at Microsoft Cofounder Paul Allen's company Vulcan. While attending the annual Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas conference in Chicago in 2003 (www.lmda.org), Cerniglia caught up with Greg Gunter, the literary manager he'd known at La Jolla Playhouse.

"Greg had since gone to work for Disney in their New York office and was developing shows for Broadway," Cerniglia recalls. "Disney seemed like a good, successful mix of art and commerce. They offered me a job, I took it, and in the fall of 2003, hit the ground running."

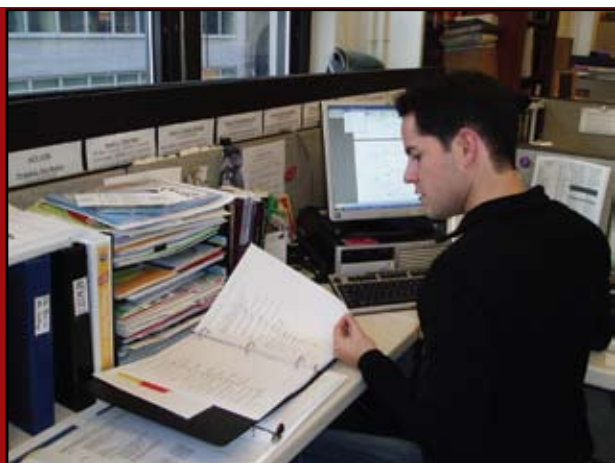
"Our writing teams are genius, and I'm their sounding board — I try to know where we need to arrive ultimately, although I may not know how we're going to get there." — Ken Cerniglia

The touchstone of Cerniglia's work process? "Get the right team for the right project! For *High School Musical's* stage adaptation, it was about, 'These are pop songs — how do we make them musical theatre songs?' Our writing teams are genius, and I'm their sounding board — I try to know where we need to arrive ultimately, although I may not know how we're going to get there. I float ideas past writers, try to nurture their process."

Pushing the envelope in a positive direction is what Cerniglia thrives on. "Our new frontier is to diversify what people expect from Disney Theatrical Productions — we can put on small shows as well as big shows. We put stuff out there that is often people's first experience in the theatre," he explains. "I'm very proud of our adaptation *Aladdin, Jr.* — we went down to a high school in Texas to work on a dual language version and integrated a language barrier into the story, which is a real social/generational problem in that area. Local students were in the show's cast, and the community could celebrate both English and Spanish living side by side."

A Beautiful Mind

Carolyn Balducci's journey to a dramatic literature career began via a very unique route: by studying art. "I was a bookworm and an artist as well, so it was a tossup between majoring in English or majoring in studio art," she recalls, explaining



Ken Cerniglia at his desk



"Breaking Free" in Disney's *High School Musical* National Tour.

The Perfectioner of Pop Culture

It's 11 a.m., and Ken Cerniglia, dramaturge for Disney Theatrical Productions, arrives at the company's New York City office. He starts the day off with a round of meetings, consulting the marketing, legal and production departments, plus company management.

Next, he works with a number of Disney writers, such as the translator in Mexico who's doing subtitles for an international production of *The Lion King*. He evaluates a script treatment, attends a table read, gives notes on a licensed adaptation and edits the liner notes for a Broadway show CD, before rushing off in the evening to scout material at a play reading. His day ends around 11 p.m. — and he's loved every minute of it.

Cerniglia trained as an actor and dancer during his undergrad years at U.C. San Diego, which is affiliated with La Jolla Playhouse. Cerniglia then went on to receive an MA from Catholic University in theatre history and criticism. While there, he interned with the literary department at Arena Stage.

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Carolyn Balducci

her undergrad choices at Manhattanville College. While she went with art, she stayed attached to the written word. "As electives, I took a couple of creative writing courses. My best marks were in The History of the English Language — go figure!"

Post-graduation, Balducci was invited to teach creative writing at the University of Michigan. She grew interested in expanding her work into a theatrical medium while she taught there, and began translating dramatic works, plus writing and producing original plays for university productions. After a number of years in academia, though, Balducci felt the desire to spend more time in her home community, Montauk, N. Y., and became program director for the Montauk Library. There, Balducci began to really immerse in theatre. "I became sort of a literary manager, coordinating staged readings with a group of actors who perform in a collective," she recalls. "Together with Dramatist Peter Zablotsky, I wore the hat of 'dramaturge' —

sorting out which plays were most likely to work with the community, and also capitalizing on the strengths of the acting company. This was not a simple task, but the results seem to make a lot of people happy." Among the fruits of her labor: *In Times of War* by David Alan Moore, which was produced at Stage Left in Chicago.

Balducci has her dramaturgy technique as smartly planned out as the rest of her life. Her precise routine fluctuates depending on the play or musical she's working on, but she applies these strategies during every workday:

Think technically — and emotionally:

"The model I use for working with other writers is an editorial process — lots of marginalia and revisions — combined with positive feedback. And I suspect quite a bit of ESP and gut reaction goes into this, something I must have by nature. I also apply what I know from my own writing process: revisions are necessary."

Foresee what the reader will see:

"My draft of *Asylum* looked professionally formatted, and I'd taken out a lot of awkward stage directions, or rewritten them to be more readily visualized. Visualization is critical to evaluating a screenplay or theatrical script."

Respect the writer's vision above all:

"I take the author's intent seriously, and push toward making the author reach their artistic goal — while trying to restrain my impulse to rewrite their work for them."

The Independent Spirit

Anne Hamilton jettisoned a public relations career at age 28 to study dramaturgy, and has since become one of the field's trailblazers, working with luminaries such as Andrei Serban, Michael Mayer and James Lipton. The principal of Hamilton Dramaturgy, a nationwide con-

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sulting business based in Pennsylvania, she publishes the industry newsletter *ScriptForward!*, consults with playwrighting and directing clients on both material and career concerns and continues to work on many acclaimed New York productions.

Hamilton credits a choice made during her time at Columbia University as a major career boost. "I fell in love with dramaturgy — in class, it was about developing new plays, working with the playwright and director to make whatever he or she had better, according to his or her terms. There was collaborative enjoyment involved, and you got to put up a show!"

Hamilton also showed major professional initiative while she was still in school. "At Columbia, we had a connection with the Shubert Organization, and I asked if I could have a position on *Passion*, which was rehearsing at the time. I was sent to see James Lapine, who said no, but offered to send my resumé around the city. Fabulous! I interviewed at the Public Theater, and was referred to the Classic Stage Company. I became production dramaturge on *The Triumph Of Love*, directed by Michael Mayer. It was a brilliant translation — bright, bubbly, smart, clever. And Michael is a brilliant and generous man, so kind, so good at what he does."


A typical workday for Hamilton involves serving each of her clients quite specifically. "When I wake up every morning, I think about each of my writers — who needs what from me? Generally, I have a script to review; I'll sit and write comments. Another thing I always do is think about opportunities for the playwrights and directors I work with, so I read through newsletters and lists for submission opportunities, I read *Variety*, I read *Backstage*. If I see something of interest, I pass it on. I go to meetings for networking purposes."

She also works on background information — judiciously. "One-hundred percent of the time, a writer or director knows what they need from you. Writers need to be supported and told the truth. I don't shy away from delivering hard facts, if something's not working. How can writers trust you if you don't express the good and the bad?" **S**





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Anne Hamilton (left) and Playwright Alex Beech



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