# notes on dramaturgy



**a practice journal**
*from Matthew Short*

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# A note on this pamphlet

I have put together this journal of sorts to collect the miscellaneous writings I've made on my personal dramaturgical practice. I've pulled from various places: blog posts, presentations, scribbled notebooks, and poems to give a greater sense of my methods and ideas.

Through this I hope to not only present the inner-workings of my mind, but to inspire and create dialogue, spark new dramaturgies, or irritate already embedded ones. Take this also as an overview of what I can bring to projects within the performing arts.

The structure of this pamphlet is grouped by general themes and the primary lenses through which I work, from the queer to the decolonial, on to ecological and to referenced of heritage models. My practice is rooted in these forms but I've tried to move the texts away from traditionally academic approaches to dramaturgy where possible, giving insight into how the craft becomes applicable in the rehearsal room.

Thanks for flicking through, here's to our next job.

*Matthew Short*



Photo © Hâle Denholm

# QUEER

## part one

# Queer Dramaturgies: Fiction, gayness, history, and inheritance

Dramaturgy is a slippery term: it can mean one thing or another, it is used differently in various contexts and it exists in a flux of tangibility and ethereality. Add queer to that, an equally thorny term caught between a vastness of meaning, and you're left scratching your head trying to figure out what on earth you're doing when you venture into the work of a queer dramaturg.

On the one hand, I can cop out of an explanation or an attempt to untangle the vague term by simply saying that it is impossible for me to not do queer dramaturgy. As a queer body, my phenomenological experience is queer, as such my sense of the world is a queer sense, I cannot help but bring that perspective into what I do because that's all I truly know. It is true that I have enough knowledge of the heteronorm to play along with it, but it doesn't always make sense to me, and I don't want to feel like I'm returning to the symbolic closet to cater to someone else. If anything, that's just boring.

But what's the point in writing about queer dramaturgy if you're not going to attempt to express what it means to you, and what the practice could look like. So below are my musings on the topic, pulling out four key-threads that I feel weave together in my practice. To contextualise that practice, and perhaps explain why these threads are particularly relevant, I should say that my professional explicitly-queer dramaturgical work has been conducted for Teater Dictat, a queer Swedish theatre company. Our primary projects have also predominantly dealt with classic texts: looking at kings, history, and the concept of "the canon". And with that in mind, here come my ABCs of queer dramaturgy… or rather: FGHIs.

## Fiction • Gayness •

# History • Inheritance

To further the image of threads, these four themes are best visualised as knotted in a messy tangle of relation. They co-exist, feed into each other, and often pull one another further into my practice of queer dramaturgy. My practice to date does not have one without the others. Fiction is a tool, gayness is a state of being, history is a perspective, and inheritance is a theme.

Fiction is an important tool that queers reality in a world which values "truth" and "fact". Fact and fiction have been made oppositions in this rhetorical binary and ultimately, our current societal structure has utilised fact to legitimise heteronormativity whilst dismissing anything that goes against it as fiction. As a result of this, queer people have to work twice as hard in order to be validated as legitimate by using those same structures to prove ourselves as fitting into the Western rational world. Whilst certainly an important process in fields such as the sciences and medicine, I question the need to live up to these expectations in drama; a realm that was built on fiction. Especially when working with historical drama.

History is a key subject that perpetuates ideas of accuracy and fact. However, our knowledge of historical events is mostly built up on perception, human biases, and of wider societal assumptions. The heteronorm's adamancy for "fact", and our ever-ongoing prevalence of homophobia, have led to the destruction and invisibility of queer history. Queer people often have to look between the lines, fight for acceptance of our own romantic relationships, and trust their own experiences when interpreting an historic experience which just "feels" eerily similar. And so we use fiction. Fiction liberates us from having to stand up to narrow-mindedness. Fiction gives us the freedom to create our own worlds in which we can proudly and safely exist. Fiction provides us the opportunity to re-write history on our terms, not someone else's. And fiction has a power to affect change; why else are those who benefit from the monarchy and the crippling class system so concerned

with Netflix's The Crown blurring fact and fiction?

When working with the history plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe, it is clear that you are handling works of fiction. Their historical source is typically just one book: Holinshed's Chronicles, which documents history that happened long before Holinshed was writing. Shakespeare and Marlowe also had no qualms about cherry picking key parts of their preferred histories for entertainment's sake. People don't actively look to these writers as sources of historical knowledge, but that doesn't mean that the plays don't inform much of what we think about these historical periods. As such, fiction and history are closely entwined and that gives a dramaturg full freedom to find the moments of queerness without the need to rely on ideas of accuracy or fact.

Within my work so far, my focus is on gayness. Whilst this has also taken on board various feministic perspectives, especially with my development of Margaret de Clare in Den Andre (Edward II), gender-queerness is not something I have particular experience with, so will instead focus on the queerness of sexuality, and as such, on male gayness. Through the tool of fiction and asynchronicity, my dramaturgy has been able to explore the creation of an alternative world in which gayness is a norm, and the cultural signifiers developed alongside gayness form the very fabric of this subversive reality. Whilst this has been a concerted dramaturgical approach within Teater Dictat's artistic direction, this model is how we've all acquired our queer inheritance. This is how queer history has been built, and that becomes our heritage.

**"What's the difference between an essay and a diary? The duality of what is written to be read and what is written to remain secret."**
*- note from diary*

Fiction becomes our inheritance because the normative ways in which non-queer folk gain their heritage isn't always open to us. Our alternative family structures mean that things are passed down

to us via different modls, since our history within wider colonial/ global contexts has been eradicated through active genocidal agendas. Shakespeare's Hamlet ends with him asking for his story to be told, and as such, it is only through our queer stories being told, whether historically "accurate" or not, that we continue to exist and inherit a world that belongs to us too.

To me, a queer dramaturgy is weaving the tapestries of narrative with these threads, repairing what has been actively broken, refusing the power of "fact" to luxuriate in our own realities, and generating a wealth of queer history and 'soon-to-become-history' for the future generations to inherit.

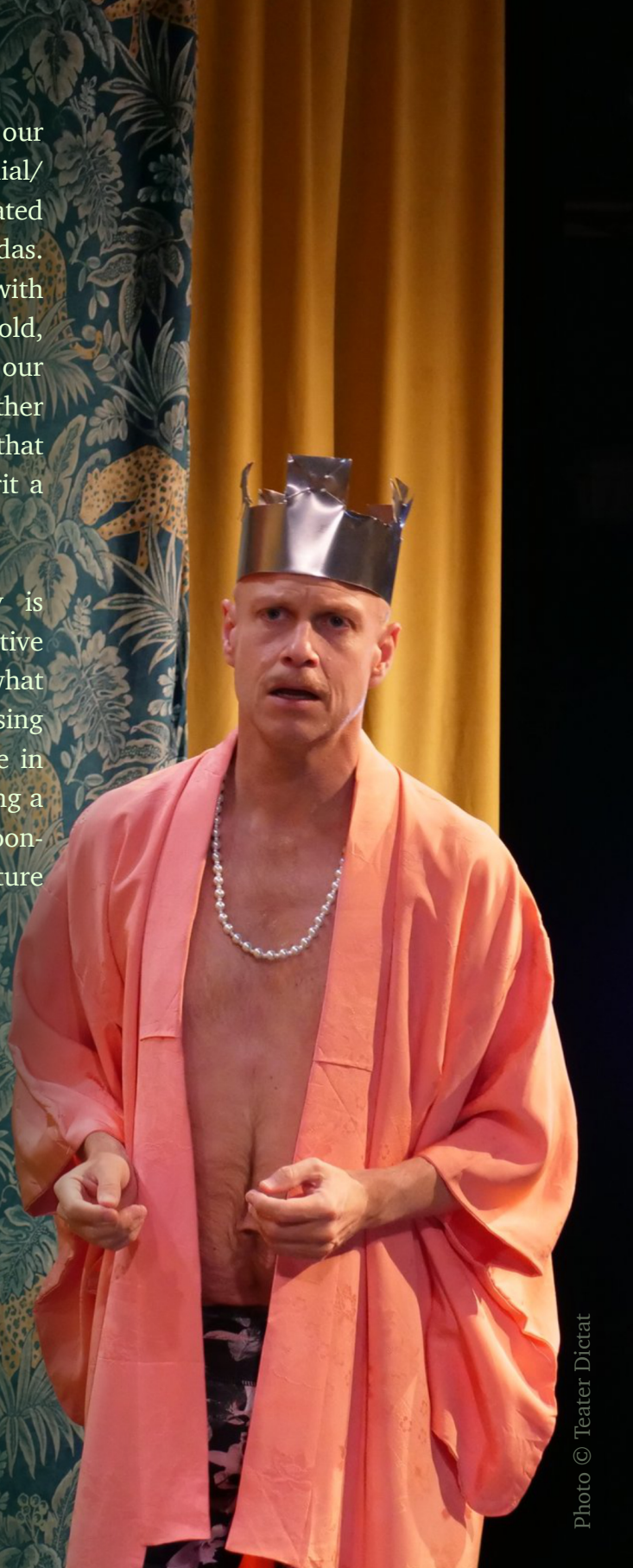


Photo © Teater Dictat



Photo © Teater Dictat

# on why we need queer theatre...

Queer communities should seek out stories in the theatre to remember or be remembered, as a way of knowing, or even a way of understanding ourselves and others around us: making sense of the world. Heritage and memory live within theatres, not just museums. Our lives are in constant motion, in a constant state of evolution that our memories deserve not to be preserved as static objects but as living spirits whose affect and impact derive from their very impermanence. The impermanence we also find with theatre.

As queer culture becomes more globalised, and we all become pawns in culture wars, we are at risk of losing integral localised identities and experiences. Nations tend to focus on their capital city as the place that builds culture and defines what the country is, and so smaller cities and towns end up in a state of dissonance with this idea, wondering where they fit into the national narrative. Often queer stories reflect this by taking the "black sheep" queer figure from their small narrow minded village or town, and having them venture

into the glamorous city where we're made to believe that queerness exists only "there" and not "here".

In these moments we should be able to turn to our local theatre. It is not that the local theatre focuses only on our direct stories, but it balances them with stories from elsewhere, with new and different perspectives. This allows us to constantly redesign what our local looks like, and what kind of community we want to be. It also inspires our community members to reflect about what they want to write, and it hopefully encourages them to find sanctuary for their art in the theatre's walls. If a theatre can do that, then queer artists might stay, rather than venturing off to the capital city or another country to pursue their dreams. When they stay, the community is resilient. Artistic resilience is the commitment to making our stories heard and visible; not allowing our little pocket of the world to be forgotten or disappeared

A community's theatre will also be changing to capture new memories and remember alternative ways of living. It is ever evolving because a community is never just one static thing. Communities are made up of a collection of different kinds of people. These people should have equal access to cultural memory through the theatre, and as such the theatre needs to be made up of a collection of different kinds of stories. As theatre makers, we are carriers of memories and so we must always be sure to listen to the stories as carefully as possible to ensure that we remember and our communities are remembered. And that is why a community needs a theatre. To know themselves, to share themselves. To remember and be remembered.

**If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart**

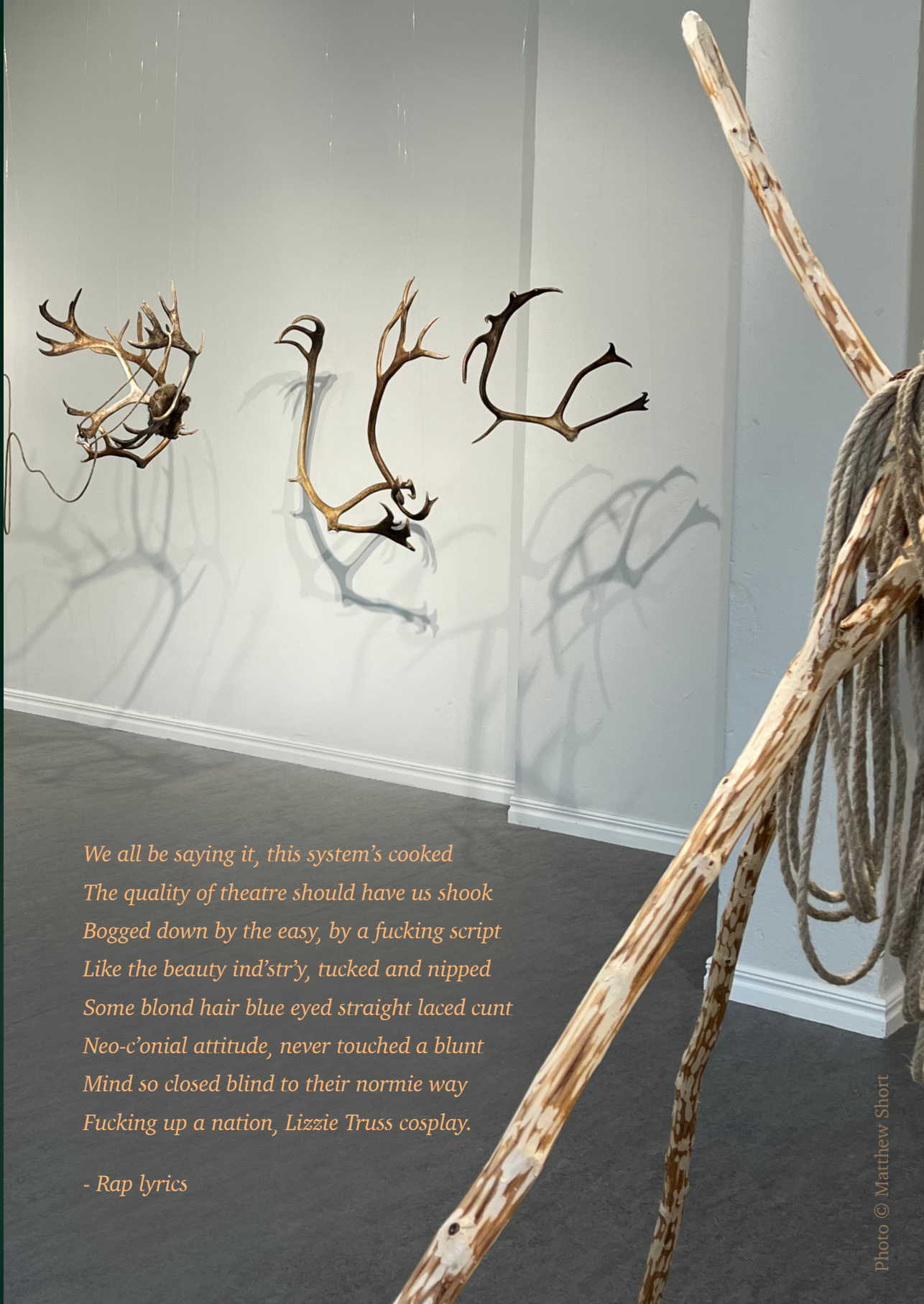
**Absent thee from felicity awhile**

**And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain**

**To tell my story.**
*Hamlet*

# DECOLONIAL

## part two



*We all be saying it, this system's cooked*
*The quality of theatre should have us shook*
*Bogged down by the easy, by a fucking script*
*Like the beauty ind'str'y, tucked and nipped*
*Some blond hair blue eyed straight laced cunt*
*Neo-c'onial attitude, never touched a blunt*
*Mind so closed blind to their normie way*
*Fucking up a nation, Lizzie Truss cosplay.*

*- Rap lyrics*

Photo © Matthew Short

# A Dramaturg in the Rehearsal Room: Landscaping

When speaking to people who want to learn more about dramaturgy, or aspire to start their dramaturgical career, I always recommend they advocate to be in the rehearsal room for the entirety of the project. The reality looks slightly different in my own practice for myriad reasons, but it comes from a genuine belief that a dramaturg should always be present. Given my background in ethnology, I also speak/think of dramaturgy as akin to a curatorial practice. And this still is the perspective I carry in my work. However, Developing Northern Dramaturgies, my dramaturgy-led decolonial project, had me consider the practice, particularly in the context of the rehearsal room, as that of a landscaper.

The context behind this new perspective is based around the conversations that the project's core team had surrounding the nature of urban stories and those from traditional cultures rooted in the natural environment. Aisling Ghéar take a proud stance to tell Belfast-focused urban stories in the Irish language that developed in and around the cityscape. There is a sense of stepping away from the traditions of perceived rural Irish imaginaries to make work that speaks more directly to the experiences of the audiences in their home city. Meanwhile, both in Scotland and Sápmi, there appears to be a sense of being caught between the lived traditional rural experiences of Gaelic (crofting) and Sámi (herding) culture and the more contemporary urban/sub-urban realities of many assimilated members of these communities.

The tension between the urban and the rural/traditional and the modern can also be found in the language. Where so many idioms are shaped by the particular local landscape and environment the culture too is a direct relationship with these spaces. Loan words might be used, or language is

stretched or developed to embrace newly realised urban experiences and environs and then too culture moulds itself around these man-made spaces. A dramaturg thus needs to be able to relate the way that narrative, language, and the cultures that are carried in text are grounded in these tensions, and require a translation to the stage. A different, abstract, or even a reimagined environment is being built in the performance, and the audience need to understand this landscape. This space requires to be imagined by the director, the actors, the designer, and even the stage managers. Here, a dramaturg is primed to maintain and sustain this environment and ensure that all involved are creating the same space. And on top of this, the dramaturg needs to be aware of and help shape the landscape of the rehearsal room. In many ways, they can act as a mediator, or the one person who sets boundaries and supports the needs of the group to ensure roles' borders don't leak into each other.

Giron Sámi Teáhter have found that during the rehearsal process, the actors who are the primary Sámi representation in the rehearsal room have to use a portion of their rehearsal time teaching/sharing the knowledge about the indigenous culture instead of simply being the actor. In many ways, this can be a sound method under a collaborative mutual production, however, as finances and the necessities of modern living can interrupt rehearsal schedules, it is not always optimal for an actor to also be the dramaturg, the teacher, the cultural ambassador.

Thus, a dramaturg might have to rely on the ideas of landscaping. If the practice of landscaping is one that alters, transforms, works to enhance an man-made environment, whether through building, arranging, ornamentalising, then so too must we, as dramaturgs carry such a perspective. A culture is shaped by its direct environment. A language is used to describe that environment and its phenomena. Thus, the performance speaks of people and place, presents it to us in an artistic theatrical manner. A rehearsal room in turn becomes an

environment that needs to be maintained. Whilst all those who are involved in a theatrical project may have a responsibility over these such elements, expectations on an actor, director, designer, maker, stage manager, stage hand, shouldn't exceed the roles they're probably not being paid enough to do. A dramaturg can support in this field, for they are the carriers of the artistic vision, the ones to help keep rehearsals on track, to ensure the team have the knowledge they need

**"ghosts stalking me, making my heart drop and my mind race. Damn it all, I want what was stolen from me"**
*- note from diary*

As a side note, sometimes I do reject this constant describing of dramaturgy as something else (like landscaping or curating) when it should really just be dramaturgy. However, given the nature of the dramaturg's role, it requires a fluidity, an ability to suit the needs of a text, idea, project plan, etc. And as such, sometimes it is easier to describe it to an outsider as something other. Some may feel this devalues the actual craft of dramaturgy, but I'm of the opinion that it's already been devalued to near extinction, so why not rebuild it as something useful and easy for other artists to understand and connect with. This is about the democratisation of dramaturgy.

Whilst I think that this turn towards dramaturgy inspired by and with landscaping was designed by this particular project, I also believe that it feels like a logical next step in my practice. Influenced by concepts relating to ecodramaturgy, a practice situated clearly in the climate crisis and resonant with the natural world, my perspective could be attuned to the process of landscaping. This also feeds into my belief that theatre has a history of modernist detachment to the natural world and that dramaturgy has also played a role in this. Landscaping shares a history, shaping the wild natural world into order, or something manicured, constructed, and illusory. As landscapers too begin to confront the climate crisis, finding common ground could only make the dramaturg's practice stronger.

There is no escaping how many indigenous storytelling devices force us to directly face and relate to the natural environment in some way or other. We should lean into it, embrace it, and nurture it as a practice.

**Matti Aikio**
***Peurakaira*, 2024**

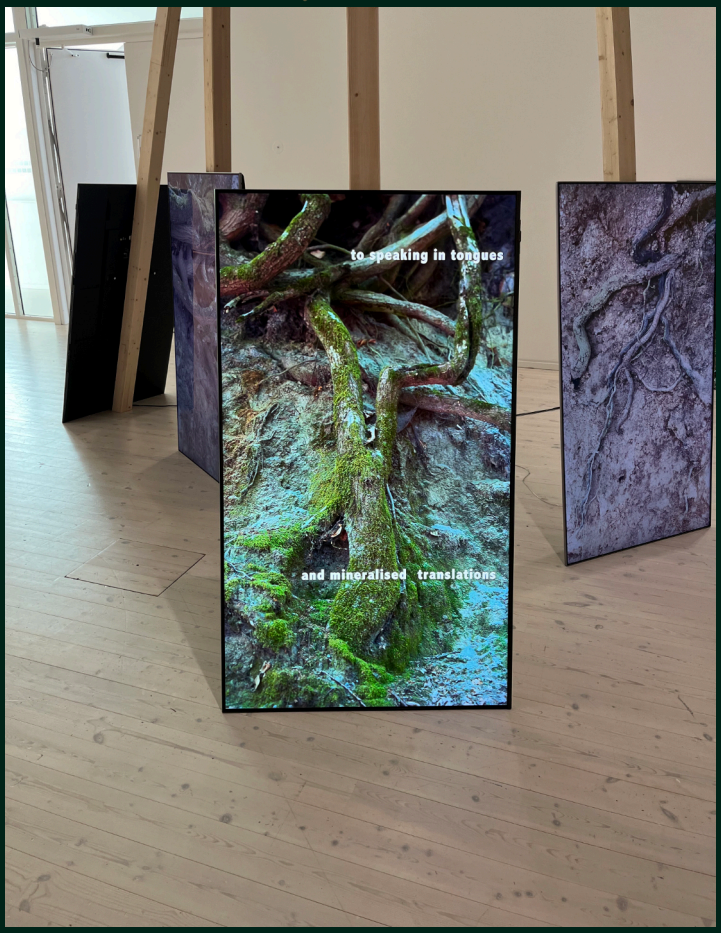



Photo © Matthew Short




still from Cain Culto & Xiuhtezcatl - ¡BASTA YA! (2026)

# DISRUPTING THE FUCKING LITERARY DEPARTMENT

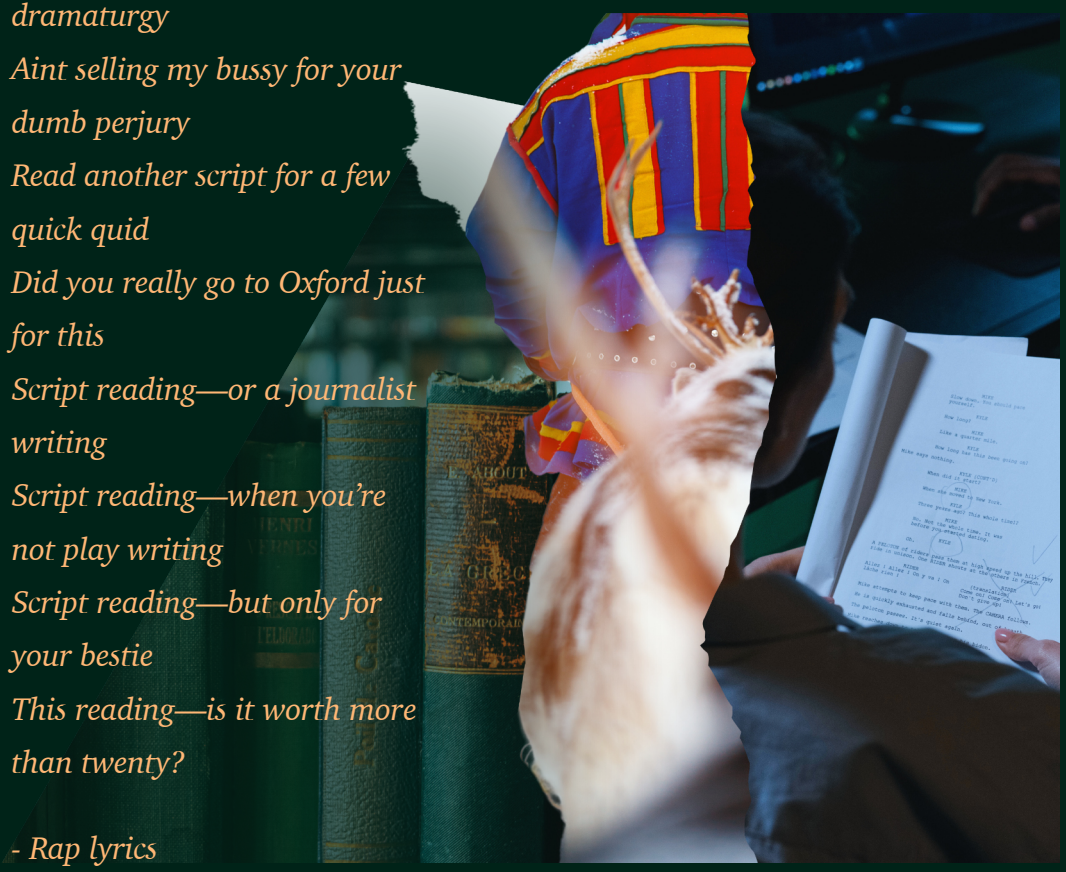
There have always been spaces and arenas for theatre makers to disrupt and to agitate the norms. However, in recent years, these opportunities seem to be depleting, the economic situation is creating risk-aversion, and the audiences aren't finding their way back to this "challenging" form of theatre. Work like this may be deemed avant-garde or fringe, but even these fields are changing under the capitalistic system. And, to consider those theatre makers working in a minority language as fringe is an indication that the decolonial work has not been done. This form of theatre should be a part of the everyday fabric of our national, regional, and local theatre worlds. This form of theatre is the expression of those who have been systematically cleared from the land on which our theatres now

stand. We share the space with them, and should do so as equals.

Ultimately, this work needs to occur in literary departments. It needs to happen at an institutional level with the capacity to set the groundwork for a thriving scene where multiple national languages can shape and determine the landscape of contemporary and future theatre. The disruption needs to be happening inside buildings, and dramaturgs need to be able to have the skills to work with narrative disruption instead of relying on narrative norms. We need to see and understand the world differently to how we are used to, and whilst it may be uncomfortable or difficult, it truly is necessary to ensure that we aren't just regurgitating the same hegemonic heritage over and over across our nation's stages.

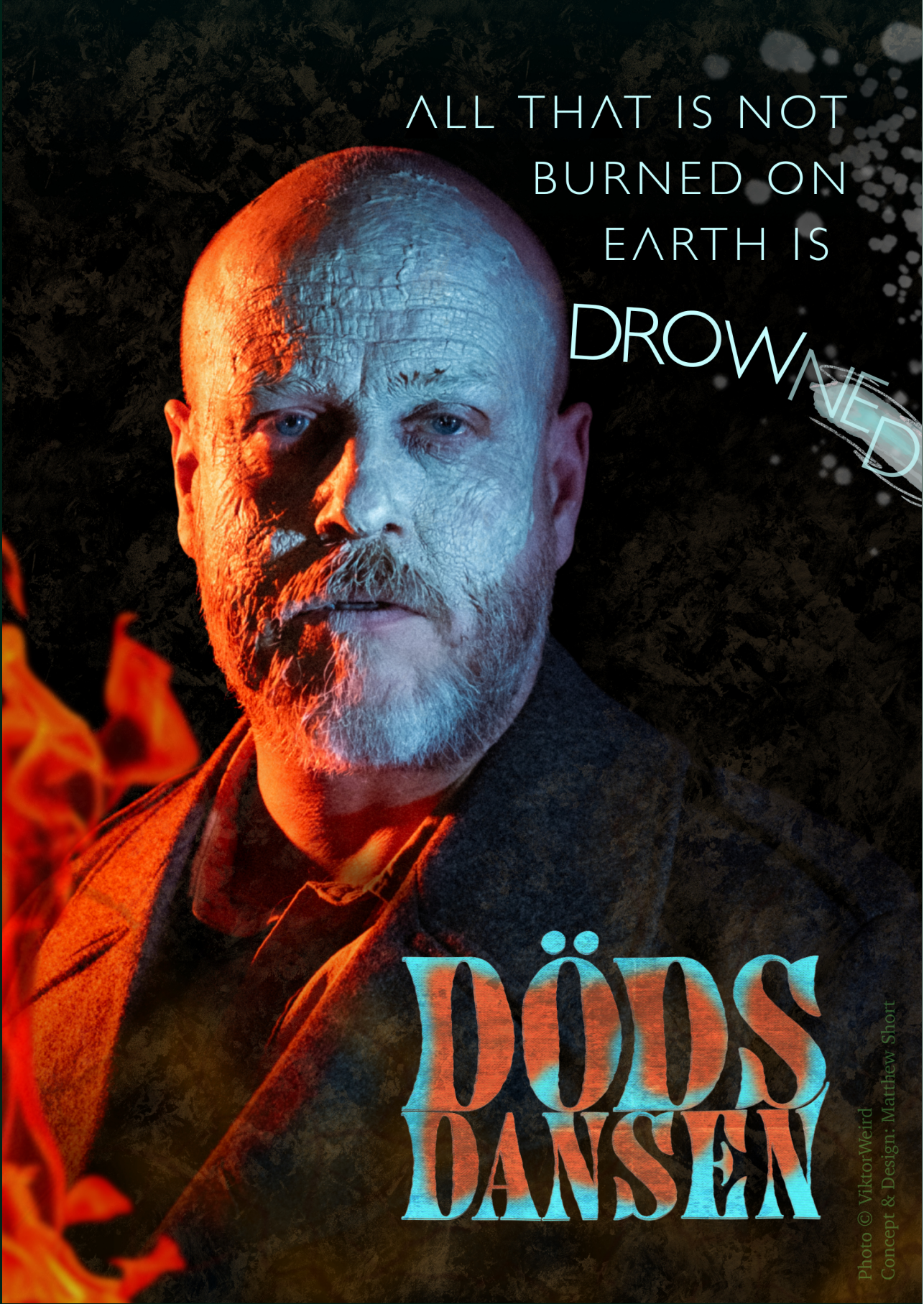
*Cock-tease bitch wanting dramaturgy*
*Aint selling my bussy for your dumb perjury*
*Read another script for a few quick quid*
*Did you really go to Oxford just for this*
*Script reading—or a journalist writing*
*Script reading—when you're not play writing*
*Script reading—but only for your bestie*
*This reading—is it worth more than twenty?*

*- Rap lyrics*



# ECOLOGICAL

## part three


ALL THAT IS NOT
BURNED ON
EARTH IS
DROWNED
DÖDS
DANSEN
Photo © ViktorWeird
Concept & Design: Matthew Short

# Ecodramaturgy and Narrative: *Radicalising what we structure*

A significant part of dramaturgical work, in my experience, is the management of narrative: what a piece is saying and how it is saying it. In terms of ecodramaturgy, I had previously summarised it very simply as "curat[ing] theatre arts that are ecologically focused, driven by narratives of connection beyond the anthropocene, and seek[ing] to deal with our world in crisis." I think this still holds true in its distilled form, however, of course, does not fully describe or address the wider practices involved in dramaturgy and text.

I would like to linger a while with the idea of ecodramaturgy being an action that is supported by, and reaching for, stories of entanglement that go beyond the anthropocene. What I mean here is that ecodramaturgical endeavours are, at their core, a disruption to the Western norm of human action/story happening externally from or in ignorant opposition to the entire ecological system we inhabit. It might take the shape of narrative equilibrium between human and the nonhuman stories, a recontextualised action within a wider system of affect and effect in the natural world, or even just an acknowledgement to the way human-centred theatre can shape an apathy to the wider nonhuman world.

Much like feminist dramaturgy, queer dramaturgy, and indigenous dramaturgy, ecodramaturgy is, and should be, radical to our current way of being. It should affect, in very tangible terms, the narratives that we share and the units we utilise to form those narratives. An industry's sustainable practice should feed into every part of the theatre making process; green logistics behind the scenes can only be strengthened by stirring the imagination of the audience with greener narratives.

By thinking of ecodramaturgy as a radical or disrupting practice, it becomes easier to think about the ways we can use it to alter our management (or curation) of narrative. I would argue that outside of the avant-garde, though even that often relies on its own set of conventions, theatre regularly falls back onto a familiar and comfortable range of narrative structures. These are often linear in

design and use external cause-effect devices which depict the "rational" world we occupy. Looking to indigenous dramaturgy, particular within Sámi theatre, we can instead find spiral narratives that hybridise the mythical with the natural world and use internal effective devices that are perhaps more associative than oriented within the story.

**"If we can think of sustainability in terms of reparation and rewilding, then we should perhaps apply this logic to ecodramaturgy too."**
*- note from project work*

To take this further, thought should be given to what we structure. The narratives that we work with can be broken down into various units. These units are different motifs that feed into the overall narrative, like the colours used to build up a completed painting. However, these units are also being made within a greater social context (our community, our nation, our shared global events) and often reflect external grand narratives from our lived experience.

A grand narrative is a major shared story that shapes ideology and how we might view a particular theme, a part of history, or a national agenda. These grand narratives then utilise dominant units - motifs that take on an agency of their own with which they propagate, collaborate with other units, and lead to the corroboration of a "truth". Their agency lies in the fact that their overwhelming presence makes it more socially difficult to not relate to these units for fear of being ostracised from a collective, and thus affirming them as dominant. And so, they are repeated. These are the norms that we find ourselves working with today.

There are some aspects of the popular sustainability movement that utilise grand narratives and have harnessed dominant units to create new norms. I was once disappointed when attending a European session on sustainability within the arts sector and a leading British consultant said that those from marginalised backgrounds perceive barriers to the arts sector which do not reflect the reality of the sector, and as such everyone has equal access to sustainable practices within it. I whole-heartedly disagree with this. We should be wary of dominant units that state every individual has an equal access to sustainable practices, especially in the arts industry - an industry that is not currently equitable.

This highlights the importance of different units an ecodramaturgy should engage with in the curation of a green narrative. I propose we untangle grand narratives, we question new ones that are being produced, and we explore what dominant units are being shared around us. We should be checking-in to see if they are propagating in our texts, we should be asking what they are collaborating with in other narratives, and we should be wondering if we are comfortable with the "truths" that they are corroborating. From here we implement subversive units and see what life they take on, what effect they have on our narrative structure, and what they can do to ignite the imagination of our audiences. This is the radicalism of ecodramaturgy.

In my practice, one of the key subversive units I use is magic. Magic disrupts the linearity causal-effect of rationality. Magic creates new spaces for alternative ways of being to exist. And ultimately, magic provides a level of agency to the nonhuman characters that scientific rationality might otherwise deny them. As a motif, magic requires my narrative to fit a multiplicity of truths within it, and how characters react to this (if they react at all) can set the linearity on a different path, a path of duality perhaps. I don't believe this diminishes my agenda at all, but instead it can create opportunity for critical thinking around the idea of perception, and how that perception is used to perpetuate our current course of action against the natural world.

The magical real can share links with other forms of spiritualism, animism, and pagan practices. However, rather than keeping these things as separate beliefs outside of the realm of the rational, it welcomes them into being a part of the world and offers alternative modes of narrativising the crises we currently face. That's not to say this is the only unit we can use to structure our ecodramaturgies, but for my work now, it is the most exciting subversion I can make.

# some notes on slow travelling...

I took the train from Perth, Scotland to Östersund, Sweden. Behind this trip was an endeavour to experience what slow travel for work (and leisure) could look like.

En route to Östersund, I stopped for two nights in Rotterdam, a single night in Osnabrück, two nights in Lund, and one night in Stockholm; a pleasant route which encompassed my "holiday" for the year. The single journey times ranged between 3 hours 55 minutes minimum to 11 hours 30 minutes as a maximum. All second class, one night train, and a range of carriage designs/layouts with some more comfortable than others. I was away for exactly 14 days. The journey home, however, was done in one fell swoop taking approximately 55 hours and 20 minutes with a single 8 hour hotel stop in Hamburg. Both outbound and return journeys were thus quite different. But each enlightening in their own ways.

Travelling slowly like this is not immediately accessible to many people, particularly artists. It is expensive, although potentially not as expensive as one may think, and eats up time which is either unpaid, using up annual leave, or simply unaffordable in other ways. It requires a level of privilege to move slowly by train, but considerations of the privilege that is human convenience over environmental impact should also be made. From my personal pocket I paid for my interrail ticket (whilst discounted: £346), with any reservations fees (approximately £90 in total, mostly going to Eurostar), all my food/drink (with a planned budget of £35 a day), and the hotel stays in the Netherlands and Germany (approximately £290 across 4 nights). Costs that were covered by my theatre company were on accommodation across Sweden. I do not think that I spent more than an average person going on holiday, which is generally estimated at approximately £1310 for a nine-night break (my trip came to around £1216 out of pocket). Had I flown from Edinburgh to Stockholm then onwards to Östersund, I would have reached my destination within a day, but the flights along these routes wouldn't have been that much more cheap than my interrail ticket. Flying would have an estimated carbon emission of 0.61 tonnes, whereas my train travel emitted approx. 0.02 tonnes, although, I am somewhat sceptical about the calculator I used.

Photo © Matthew Short

# case studies/ /work samples



Photo © Mihaela Bodlovic

# There's A Place by Gabe Quigley *dir. Sally Reid* 2024

My role on There's A Place commenced 18 months before production upon delivery and a sharing of the second draft. This play represents the wealth of opportunity that regional theatres hold in terms of heritage through drama. It is a play set sixty years prior, when The Beatles played in Dundee and stayed in a cabin on the edge of Loch Earn. Four girls camp out overnight in hopes to see their favourite band, and we witness the overcoming of their own small but important dramas as they come of age in Perthshire.

Supporting the development of the script at this juncture allowed me to carry a broad dramaturgical eye throughout the rest of production. The writer herself underwent much of the research, and considering this from a heritage point of view, it provided opportunity to strike a chord with the local community. It tapped into their lives and memory. Sometimes overly researching can hinder the storytelling, and so my notes were directed in finessing the core heart of the play, trying to cut some of the additional padding.

Once the final draft of the script



Photo © Leisure and Culture Dundee

was taken into the rehearsal room, I was able to go on to expand the dramaturgy by considering how other teams could understand and go on to communicate elements of the story. Again, the local heritage that was embedded into the play allowed for the marketing team to engage with real places and tangible history as a tool of connecting with audiences. I was able to signpost to the most important elements of the text and which would be wiser kept secret to elicit surprise.

There was a brilliant opportunity for the theatre and cast to engage further with heritage by connecting with the McManus Museum in Dundee by recreating a famous Beatles shot in front of the very same painting. These are threads that help to embed a story outwith



Photo © Leisure and Culture Dundee

the stage space and into the real fabric of a local community. The concept of fans and fandom has real appeal across generations, something that most people can engage with in one way or another.

In the lead up to the premier, I had the opportunity to work with the local Waterstones and curate a unique shelf focused on The Beatles and the stories most relevant to production. In the context of UNESCO, the leading forum for maintaining living heritage, theatre falls through the cracks. It can and should be celebrated within the creative network of literature, but this has its own pitfalls and is rarely grouped here in practice. However, in this example, I was able to engage with wider literary forms to help bolster the over-arching messages that Gabe Quigley wove into her script.

There's A Place dealt with more than just a singular local event. The four girls represented a wider diversity of cultural heritage and history in Perth and Kinross. Our characters had to grapple with their own identities, whether it was being mixed-race, a traveller, or a catholic thinking of becoming a nun. Their conversations gave the audience insight into the rich cultures that have shaped Perth to be the city it is now whilst also providing reflection on how we can embrace this diversity today with the growing demographics that are making this city and the region home.




Photo © Matthew Short



Photo © Johan Svensson

# Hamlet, Prins Av DanmarQ *dir: Johan Svensson, 2021*

“I Teater Dictats queera läsning är pjäsen full av modersarketyper: Köttmodern, den styvmodern, den svärmodern och den frånvarande spökmodern – alla vill de något med sonen och hans liv.”

“In Teater Dictat’s queer reading of Hamlet, we bring the mothers centre stage: the meat mother, the stepmother, the mother-in-law, and the absent ghost mother. Each one wants something from the son and won’t stop at pulling the strings of his life.”

The artistic director wanted this version of Hamlet to be a queer performance with an all male cast which examined “motherhood”. As such, I was undergoing desk-based research into the history of this story and the cultural context which it was written in. I looked into forms of queer motherhood, including within the local and international drag culture of today. I also examined important cultural figures that represented, or literally were, mothers of the time that Shakespeare was writing to see just why they were so absent from his dramas. This created questions but allowed space in which I could imagine and play with the role of

## Mothers in drag culture:

In the drag community, a drag mother takes on very much the same function as the traditional "heteronormative" mother. She is typically an older/more experienced drag queen, who "adopts" a younger/less experienced drag queen. She teaches her daughter the tricks of the trade, often being the first one to apply makeup to the new drag queen, or teaching her how best to do it, and helping the daughter to get work/a stronger network.



The drag mother/daughter relationship has also started to create drag families that often share/inherit a drag name. This indicates a close-knit group of performers who might work together or share a distribution of shows. This is of particular relevance/importance to the queer community because it represents the "chosen family" that liberates queer people from dangerous family environments where they may not be accepted.

motherhood and queer gender expression.

Following the concept and research stage of the project, I went away and started working on some vital scenes/speeches to demonstrate how we could adapt them with a drag-like cultural perspective. My strategy was to create Golden Girls-esque “mother” characters whilst leaning into overt queer sexuality.

It embraced the significance that Elizabeth I held during the time of the play. A woman who, one could argue, was regularly appearing in drag; performing the image of a queen. A woman who bore no children, nor appeared to want to, and yet was regularly hailed as the "mother" of England. The question of familial inheritance was a great tension in the nation of the era, and that tension still exists today

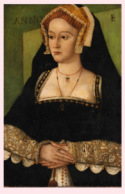
## Interesting mothers(?) in Shakespeare's time:



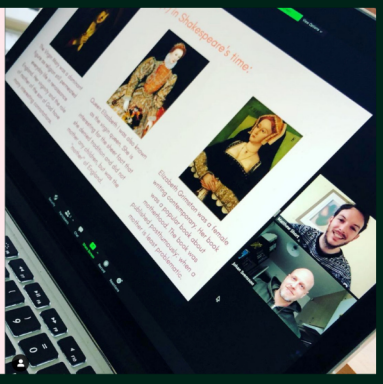
The Virgin Mary was a dominant figure as religion still permeated everyday life in renaissance England. Her virginity and the role of mother of the son of God have many interesting connotations.



Queen Elizabeth I was also known as the virgin queen. She is interesting for the sheer fact that she denied tradition and did not mother any children, but was the "mother" of England.



Elizabeth Grimston was a female writing contemporary. Her book was a popular book about motherhood. The book was published posthumously: when a mother is least problematic.



within queer families where having and/or raising a child is a real possibility.

I used a "queer embodied reading" method as a tool to help shape and refine the script. This then carried into the rehearsal room, where we worked closely with the actors to adopt this method and help redirect the understanding of the language through their lived experience as queer artists. The method aims to connect the body and its memories with the text in a new way. This presented new ways for us to collaboratively re-contextualise our version of this play whilst also empowering the actors to discover who their characters are and could be. I have been formalising this method with Teater Dictat for several years now. This helped me to put it into practice, experiment with new forms, and refine the method to be suitable across a range of forms and mediums.

The script went through multiple drafts, with some scenes re-worked in several differing ways dependant on how our collectivised queer experiences aligned with or against the text. As such, it was a dynamic process that presented new and refreshing insights into this well worn play. With the team we had, we ended up moving away from the drag cultural elements, as most of our actors conceived of queer mothers through alternative lenses. With the scene on the next page, I wanted to highlight a potential Polonius by situating him backstage in a cabaret club setting. His daughter is a blow up sex doll, to emphasise and in turn satirise Shakespeare's misogynistic view of Ophelia' character. Here, I wanted to maintain the language of the original text as much as possible but show its absurdity within a new hyper-queer visual, conceptual, and performative space. This is one example of a draft that went in a different direction, but still highlights the fun and playful process we underwent as a team.

As a queer theatre company, we are used to the varying perspectives that both queer and non-queer audiences have on our work. This project, in particular, made us reckon with our daily performances and how these translate both on and off the stage. It created times where we reflected on the extent of queerness in this production, how far did it go, and did we push it far enough? I'm certain, though, that this will always hang over our work.

**ACT I SCENE III**

*Enter POLONIUS carrying a blow up sex dell. This is OPHELIA. He seems agitated and concerned, having just come from bringing OPHELIA out of HAMLET's room. He places her in a chair and checks her for any damages.*

Polonius: What is't, Ophelia, he hath done to you?
'Tis told me he hath very oft of late
Given private time to you, and you yourself
Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.
If it be so - as so 'tis put on me,
And that in way of caution - I must tell you
You do not understand yourself so clearly
As it behove my daughter and your honour.

*POLONIUS calms after seeing that there isn't any damage to Ophelia. He moves over to his vanity table, fixes his turban, and brings up gaudy earrings to his ears, trying them on in the mirror. He turns to Ophelia and continues.*

Polonius: (cont.) Marry, I will teach you; think yourself a baby
That you have taken these tenders for true pay Which are not sterling. (*He imitates the queens' behaviour*) Tender yourself more dearly
Or - not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
Wronging it thus - you'll tender me a fool.

*He returns once more to his mirror, now reapplying his make up, paling his skin, trying to reduce his wrinkles, adding lipstick and rouge. It is clear that he is trying to imitate the faces of CLAUDIUS and GERTRUDE but is somehow missing the mark. He looks old and tired. He sighs.*

Polonius: (cont.) Ay, springes to catch woodcocks - I do know
When the blood burns how prodigal the soul
Lends the tongue vows. These blazes, daughter,
Giving more light than heat, extinct in both
Even in their promise as it is a-making,
You must not take for fire. (*He gets up and sashays to OPHELIA*) From this time
Be something scanter of your maiden presence;
Set your entreatments at a higher rate
Then a command to parle. For Lord Hamlet,
Believe so much in him that he is young
And with a larger tether may he walk
Than may be given you— (*He grabs some toilet roll, unwinds it, spits on it, then cleans the doll.*)
—In few, Ophelia,
Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers
Not of that dye which their investments show
But mere implorators of unholy suits
Breathing like sanctifies and pious bonds
The better to beguile. This is for all;
Have you so slander any moment leisure
As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.

*Having finished cleaning OPHELIA, he searches for a turban to match his own. He ties it around Ophelia's head and adds a pair of large sunglasses, knock-off designers. Then he picks her up, swans over to his vanity and looks in the mirror.*

Polonius: (cont.) You shall obey, my dear. (*He exits with the doll.*)



Photo © Viktor Weird



Concept & Design: Matthew Short

# Dance of Death/ Dödsdansen after Strindberg *dir. Matthew Short, 2026*

I have spent many years now sitting with and working on an adaptation of August Strindberg's Dance of Death. This has been a passion project which is now getting to meet the stage. Ultimately, it encompasses all of my practical threads, its recontextualised into a queer setting, the story is adapted to address the climate crisis and the existential anxiety it creates. I have examined it through the lens of neocolonialism, addressing how internal and external powers have shaped Scotland's history and its present.

To get to where I am now with the work, I have pulled from a wide breadth of sources for inspiration. When I first read the original work, I was struck by how similar it felt to Mark Ravenhill's Vicious; a series of barbed and witty dialogue which indulges in the melodrama of modernist theatre. With this, it became so easy to imagine how The Captain and Alice could become Edgar and Alex, a tired gay couple who are bored with the



August Strindberg, Wabe IX

mind games they play against each other and are desperate to seek out fresh meat.

The setting of an island created fertile ground for me to explore rising sea waters and land ownership as entanglements of the climate crisis. The tone and mood of this psychological threat was shaped by Strindberg's own paintings of waves. His series uses rather ominous colours, tones that evoke a threat, not the usual calm that waves and water are typically associated with. They felt like insights into his own often tumultuous mind. So I expanded this motif into the play-world, both textual and aural, to help create the sense of danger that



August Strindberg, Wabe VIII

drives our characters into their own self-made madnesses.

My experiences of learning about indigenous languages and cultures both in Sweden and Scotland have informed my locating this play on an unnamed Scottish island. It draws parallels with real world histories and goes on to provoke the audience to address their role in the colonial present. I've even been fortunate enough to pull from Strindberg's A Dream Play, and translate a poem from it into Scottish Gaelic. It has been a great opportunity to work with a queer Gaelic poet to do so. As it gives voice to the waves, it fits perfectly with the themes of my take on a Strindberg classic.

It has been a real pleasure to find a play that gives space to all my greatest concerns without having to move oceans to fit it in. To then find common threads across a wide spectrum of art forms by both classic and current artists helps to embed the material questions my work poses alongside pressing conversations. With this, the found common ground ensures a key for audiences to access what could be challenging. And that is the most important part of a dramaturg's job.

**av August Strindberg**

Det är vi, vi, vågorna,
Som vagga vindarne till hvila!
Gröna vaggor, vi vågor.
Våta äro vi, och salta;
Likna eldens lågor;
Våta lågor äro vi.
Släckande, brännande,
Tvättande, badande,
Alstrande, aflande.
Vi, vi, vågorna,
Som vagga vindarne till hvila!

**trans. Matthew Short**

It is we, we the waves,
Who rock the winds to rest.
Green cradles are we,
wet and salt,
We are but tongues of fire.
Quenching, burning,
Cleansing, bathing,
Begetting, Bearing.
We, we the waves,
Who rock the winds to rest.

**trans. Robbie MacLeòid**

Gur sinne, na tuinn,
bhios a' tàladh nan gaoth gu tàmh.
Is creithlean gorma sinn, flichead is salann,
cha sinne ach teangaichean teine.
A' casgadh, a' losgadh,
a' sgùradh, a' bàthadh,
a' gineadh, a' giùlain.
Gur sinne, na tuinn,
bhios a' tàladh nan gaoth gu tàmh.

Edward II



Images from Hamlet, Den Du Är, Sketches Invented and Drawn, The Ginger Girl, Sunday in Sodom, Perth Theatre Scratch Night, Den Andre/