

READ THE ROOM
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#4

What Is All This
Dramaturgy About?

Questions &
Answers with

Krystel Khoury
Noor Abed
Salma Abdelsalam
Samaa Wakim

مفردات
Mophradat

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Questions & Answers with Krystel Khoury, Noor Abed,
Salma Abdelsalam, and Samaa Wakim

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The booklet follows the “Advanced Dramaturgy
Workshop for Women Choreographers” led by
Brazilian dramaturg Carolina Mendonça that took place
November 1 to 5, 2023, with the participation of Nour
Abed, Manal Tass, nasa4nasa, and Samaa Wakim,
and coordinated by Krystel Khoury.

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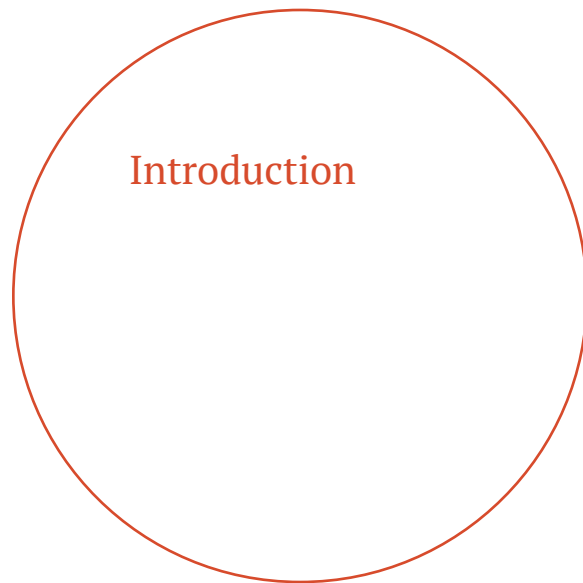
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A couple of years ago Mophradat decided to start organizing workshops for professional artists to gain specialized knowledge and skills to use towards refining their crafts and expanding their toolboxes. This relatively new strand of programming has included the following and more: a studio-based workshop exploring music mastering; a retreat to break down conflict in group situations and think through how it can be mediated; an online introduction to digital archiving; and a gathering of filmmakers trying to reinvent their industry from idea to production to distribution.

In summer 2023, Mophradat began planning a workshop titled “Advanced Dramaturgy for Choreographers” aimed at women working in and with dance from the Arab world, to be led by Brazilian performer and dramaturg Carolina Mendonça, to take place in the fall. That October, as we watched, some of us from a distance and others from closer to home, the tragedies unfolding in Palestine, we decided—as the organizers along with most of the invited participants—that it was meaningful and relevant to still go ahead with the workshop. Gathering and creating a shared emotional space at that moment felt important, especially as the workshop intended, in the words of Carolina, to introduce dramaturgy as “a specific way of bridging the privacy of the studio and the outside world.”

The workshop took place over one week in Athens, bringing together a small group of women artists who have a choreographic

practice and had expressed an interest in expanding their understanding of dramaturgy. Although dramaturgy is just one of many elements of choreography, it is an integral part of how performing artists create. In dance specifically it is not usually tackled in its own right as a practice that plays a role in how performances are developed. The workshop was designed to allow myself and the artists to enter unreservedly into each other's works in progress and their own, and to use each other's processes to engage with dramaturgy, its references, and its strategies. Afterwards, some of us kept our conversation going to hold on to the space we had shared and make sure it would keep growing and affecting our respective practices.

6 As a woman working in and with dance, we wanted to develop a more explicit conception for ourselves of dramaturgy as a tool that supports and informs our practices, and to put our reflections on the topic in written form to be discussed by others. Given a general ambivalence around dramaturgy, we decided to ground our conversation in two key interests. The first would be the possible meanings that emerge from the movement of bodies in space, generated by looking closely at our own choreographic processes. The second would be what dramaturgy involves in terms of creating relationships, specifically the types of relationships we each want as part of and as extensions of our practices.

To bring our four distinct voices together in a way that emphasizes the collective dynamic that emerged from our recent common experience,

we decided on the format of a circular Q&A where each one of us receives and answers a question from a person in the group, and in turn addresses a question to someone else. We used this approach as a way to be playful but also in order to weave a set of new connections between us as a group and as individual practitioners. Here we share our questions and answers as the initial building blocks of an evolving conversation with and for our peers.

Krystal Khoury
Programs and Grants Associate

BEING INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

SAMAA WAKIM TO SALMA ABDEL SALAM: In our practice as dance makers, it seems we are all playing the role of dramaturg in our own work. Different definitions and points of view exist regarding the role. Which one resonates most with you and how does it apply in your work as nasa4nasa?

SALMA: nasa4nasa consists of Noura Seif Hassanein and me. I think that as a duo the dramaturg position becomes more fluid and collaborative, as though two bodies and minds merge into a third phantom body with agency, intuition, and habits.

Together we have summoned a dramaturg, perhaps one that knows us too well, and she continues to exist and change with us. We think a lot about being inside and outside all of our pieces. Being both inside and outside is difficult. We enter and exit each space we have chosen to work in and often our only reference, afterwards, is the recording we made of whatever we explored there. We think of the screen as a collaborator—a third choreographer. But the dramaturg, as our third body-merged body, allows us to see beyond the factual or the captured. We play a lot with the language that two bodies, a duo, can create. To broaden the duality into a unit or a more aesthetic and, dare I say, political way of seeing twos, beyond descriptive comparisons.

I say that, and then I also think that because the essence of a dramaturg, as we have discussed, is a friend—a friend who accompanies you in the process, in your findings and your question—very tactically we have found our dramaturgs in each other. Someone to believe with, imagine with, create with, but also to create a third body that allows for a third choreography that belongs to neither Noura nor me. I think of the dramaturg in our process and thus also our choice to even be in a duo as intuitive. I want to have a collaborator to lean on, to echo with, to get feedback from, viscerally but also pragmatically. I think we literally chose a friend. A person to accompany you in the journey of creation, as a witness, a shadow, a proposer. And now I realize the choice is nuanced and potent. What is most thrilling in our case is the fluidity of

Questions
& Answers

that visible-invisible actor or body we have created that has grown silently, as our phantom or even our aura.

Our relationship also allows us to think through the enmeshment of the roles of who owns, creates, and proposes, and to believe wholeheartedly in the potential of the dramaturgy of the collective to transcend the framework of ownership and leave space for magic, for the unseen, for the previously unimagined. For me this is a significant way to think of dramaturgy beyond ownership—through companionship and that third body.

DISSOLVING INTO COLLECTIVITY

SALMA TO NOOR ABED: You mentioned that making a film is built on the collective—that the structural process of film creation operates in collectivity. You also mentioned that you have made a clear choice to only work with friends. Can you expand on both points, perhaps specifically on what friendship and collectivity mean in your process and the co-imagining of your work?

NOOR: Perhaps I can start with the notion of social choreography, which I have been working around for a few years now. In the way I have been thinking through it, this essentially means questioning the choreography that regulates our social lives as individuals and in relation to others, and further observing how our social-political unconscious is revealed through practices of “everyday” movement. It is to study models of relations that are loosely bound together. If we think through this lens in different situations, in this case artistic creations, film, performance, etc., then we start sensing a deeper level of relational dynamics, the structure below the surface.

Now I feel that seeing the movement embedded in the structure behind any work situation is close to the Marxist theory of the base (the mode of production) as distinct from the superstructure of society—the relations of production beneath the surface of the final work. What I am trying to say is that we need to be aware of the social formations that become structured on the basis of a mode of production.

In terms of cinema being collective on a structural level, it has a clear model of roles and relations behind the scenes, and we can learn from this because it is so structured and clear that we can reject it, dismantle it, reconstruct it, and create new formations. It forms a space to critique and re-imagine.

From that point, working with friends becomes an attempt to uphold a social formation model that stems from its own locality. Perhaps a model that is rooted in daily social life. Notions of communality and collectively are deeply planted in a society like Palestine, a society that has been exercising solidarity and resistance on a daily basis for generations. Not as broad notions, but as physically embodied and sensed practices. I think what resistance teaches us is collectivity in its true essence, reminding us that collective work requires organization; the importance of roles, different roles, working on different fronts or clusters at the same time. It teaches us that anonymity is essential for collective action to rise, that the I dissolves into a beautiful chain of action. It also teaches us trust. Collectivity for me is recognizing that we are a collective whether we like it or not. It is exactly in this act of recognition that relational dynamics can appear and manifest.

Working with friends extends from the immediate circle to become a ripple of friendships. There is always a “co-” in the imagination and creation of a work. With and in relation to people, sites, time, locality, the particularity of things. Perhaps a “co-” that is also similar to the one in contextualization, configuration, and coping.

EMBRACING THE UNKNOWN

NOOR TO KRYSTEL KHOURY: We have spoken about dramaturgy as an immediate sensing to grasp deeper structures that are choreographed below the surface. How do you see intuition playing out in the role? Do you think there is a link between intuition and invisibility in dramaturgy?

KRYSTEL: If intuition is following our immediate senses in articulating what feels right in the moment rather than complying with a pre-established set of relations, it is definitely

part of how I conceive of dramaturgy. I see intuition as the careful listening to the heartbeat of a work and then engaging in a process to reveal the characteristics of its rhythm, its breathing and intensity. By work, I don't only mean what will be seen at the end on stage but also the unseen relationships, the off scene that makes the work what it is. I use the image of the heartbeat because everyone can listen directly to their own but not to someone else's unless they position themselves in a specific way. To make our heartbeat audible to the outside world, we need someone else to relate to it. It's like an echography: you put your hand or ear on the chest of the other and listen—you reach beyond your body to enhance the volume of a heartbeat. This gesture involves a bodily posture and quality of touch that are determined by a relation of proximity and distance.

From this perspective, grasping deeper structures in dramaturgy can be about how the non-visible waves of a work's heartbeat evolve over time and relate to each other, how this inner movement can be heard or seen from outside as well as inside. It is about engaging in a confident, generous relationship with who and what is creating the work and all the elements that make it what it is when someone watches it. One way for me of practicing such a dramaturgy is observing the relational dynamics between those involved in the work process, taking part in the interrelated configurations, trying to understand the studio context and the outside context, and activating the multiple interplaying gazes during the development process. It requires a mutual invitation, an availability to receive, giving attention to both the body of work and the bodies at work while entering into a friendly process through conversation.

Another aspect of this approach is listening to what the material has to say without imposing meaning on it, without restricting or obstructing the time needed for its own agency to emerge. This creates certain feelings, ideas, images, contexts, or imaginations that can contradict, follow, or add to what is already there. I do this by looking within the material that forms the work, imagining and playing with the possibilities of how it can be organized in time and space: combining, unfolding, layering, appearing, disappearing, creating counterpoints to its rhythms, and so on. Letting the infrastructure of the work surface until together we reach the

layer that speaks the most—where giving meaning and giving sense are in tune. I try to allow for the known and unknown to emerge and to figure out ways to navigate them, let a perspective be shared and challenge it, and enable a trouble to express itself and then befriend it.

I reinvent this practice depending on whom I am working with, which moment in the working process I am invited to step in, the nature of the project, and what is happening in our world.

WORKING WITH A FRIEND WHO KNOWS

KRYSTEL TO SAMAA: I am interested in the relationship that you develop with the person bringing a dramaturgical eye to your work. Based on what you have experimented with so far and what you wish to bring to your creative process, what is it and what could it be? And to what extent does it impact your work as a performer and choreographer?

SAMAA: I always wonder whether having someone from a different background in terms of traditions and culture would be more interesting for the research stage of my work—widening the range of topics and bringing a different approach to what is very clear for me or the artist I am working with—than a person from the same background, who can help with diving deeper into the known.

When I create my own work, it is solo work about personal stories, subjects, and experiences. In these cases, I feel it is more efficient for the project that I work with someone who knows me personally, knows where I come from, the history of the occupation and the complicity of belonging to the third generation of a displaced Palestinian family living inside Israel, someone familiar with our culture and traditions. As Palestinians we are blessed with a very rich culture in which songs and dance are present at every gathering, every occasion, whether happy or tragic. For my own work, then, I tend to work with someone who connects to the words and movements and has a relationship to the cultural heritage:

For example, in my current project I want to collaborate with a friend who knows me very well. I believe she can un-

derstand the underlying motivation and context. And I chose a “she” because when I’m tackling gender, femininity, relations with mothers and grandmothers, a female dramaturg can add to the work from her own experience, personal history, and views on life. I describe her role as a mirror reflecting what I’m trying to say and telling me if what I mean to deliver is passing the edge of the stage or not. Usually in the studio I don’t work with mirrors, as it affects my perception, increases my self-awareness, and makes me focus on shapes instead of living the moment. A dramaturg colleague can be a mirror that reflects after the act is done, translating what we had into words, creating questions and images to describe it, emphasizing, criticizing, and giving me an anchor to check if what I went through on stage projected the way I meant it to.

I’m not sure if this is the right decision, not because I doubt my collaborator’s ability to add to the process but because I wonder what would happen if the dramaturg came from a different background with less sentimental ties to our culture. Would it take the project to a different, more interesting approach? I guess I’ll never know. And as we concluded in the workshop in Athens, there is no one method or role for the dramaturg. Each case has its own singularity.

I look for a work partner who can provoke and push me out of my comfort zone. We usually work with what we know and feels good for our bodies and souls, but sometimes having an external voice pushes you to challenge your physical and mental abilities. Someone prodding my ego is a perfect addition to the process. A partner who sees my thoughts and helps me translate them on the stage, who can enrich the research and open my mind to aspects I didn’t know or see before.

DOING RATHER THAN NAMING

SAMAA TO KRYSTEL: I am curious to know now how you describe your contributions as a dramaturg. When you have served in that role, what were the tools you used? And do you prefer to be part of the process from the beginning or join at a later stage, and why?

KRYSTEL: I have been practicing artistic companionship for many years without caring to name it. I enjoy making myself available and supporting my artist friends in developing their projects by bringing in my curiosity, enthusiasm, knowledge, organizational skills, and interest. I did not study dramaturgy, and only understood more recently that this is what I was doing.

I have been collaborating mostly, although not only, with dance makers from the Arab world and recently based in Europe. This was not a deliberate choice and probably came about due to my nomadic professional experience. Reflecting on it now, I have a feeling that this is one of the things that makes my dramaturgical practice insightful, as dramaturgy constantly calls for an inside-outside awareness. I have a feeling that many artist-friends reach out because we might share a language—in the broader sense that includes our cultural and professional knowledge and modes of communication. One of my most exciting contributions has been in discussing and figuring out the modalities of reception of a work when an audience is not necessarily familiar with the artist’s contextual concerns and background. It is often about linking the studio work and what’s happening outside of it, so it carries a political aspect for me.

I have also collaborated with artists looking to expand their understandings outside of their own cultural vision and confront their ideas with a non-Eurocentric gaze. And then some artists simply request advice or an external eye at a specific moment of their process. In any case, what is essential for me is to understand first where I am situated in the overall configuration and to then see if and how I can be useful before engaging in a project’s development.

One can contribute dramaturgically on many levels depending on what the artistic endeavor requires: discussion, research, writing, translation, organizing, trouble making, problem solving, and sensing... For me the most meaningful contributions have been in the growing professional friendships developed with artists I did not know before and the extent to which I could participate to the evolution of their work.

In any case, time and trust are key. They often condition the nature of the dramaturgical work. By time, I mean the duration of the engagement one wants and can give to the creative process and how deep one delves into it. By trust,

I mean the degree of value given to one's gaze—a gaze that often searches alongside the artist's in the beginning of the process to support them in clarifying what they are doing, figuring out how to continue doing it, and to help clear the ground before embracing the pathway chosen.

On a microlevel, sensing comes together with one's ability to read the movement of the performer's body with all the components that are activated. One can find oneself constantly translating the inner intentions and stories that accompany a work in an attempt to get closer to what it wants to convey. On a macrolevel, sensing is listening to the language the work speaks in. My familiarity with the language used—spoken or unspoken—has often aided my understanding of specific contexts and allowed me to help the artistic process advance more smoothly.

Dramaturgy contains many layers and the tools are endless, not all of which are used at once. I have to trust the timing, so I have no preference about being a part from the start or joining later. Each offers ways to co-invent types of relation and attention.

WORKING SIDE BY SIDE

KRYSTEL TO NOOR: I would like to zoom in on this collectivity you describe so well and imagine the roles and relations that emerge behind the scenes. Earlier, you made an analogy between the role of the creative producer in cinema and the role of dramaturg in performing arts—can you elaborate on how they function within constellations of relations?

NOOR: The analogy between creative producer and dramaturg came to me recently, when a filmmaker friend asked if I would work as the creative producer of her film. She explained that the creative producer in film, or at least how she sees the role, is someone who works side by side with the director, bringing the director's vision into reality from the idea to production. The creative producer is a trusted friend who oversees the creative, artistic, and overall aspects of the production.

She used words such as “guiding,” “overseeing,” “imagining,” “thinking together,” “intuitive artistic decisions,” and

“sensing.” It's a long relationship with the project, and in some phases the creative producer works invisibly below the surface, while in others they appear above the surface and in between relations. They are always attentive, with a sensitivity that doesn't compromise the director's vision.

While she was talking, our dramaturgy conversations were the only thing I could think of. What my filmmaker friend described of a creative producer in the film industry sounded like what we had discussed of the dramaturg in performance. A third or external eye that helps weave all the layers into the process of creating the final piece.

IMAGINING TOGETHER

NOOR TO SALMA: I want to go back to dramaturgy as co-imagination and link it to the duo, the co-, the double. How do you see roles fluctuating and shifting between the two bodies? The way you speak about the space created from and between the two is inspiring. If it is the third choreographer, the phantom, the psychic sense of space, then what does its creation rely on? How do you sustain it? And what agency does it have?

SALMA: I think co-imagination is the outcome of trust. When speaking of imagination, one thinks of fantasy, surprise, the unreal, and perhaps when we work with imagination, we are giving space for that phantasmic creature to emerge. It's as though the work has space to expand as a third body, and it often feels like the outcome does not belong to me or to Noura; it takes on its own language, pace, and thought processes.

Sometimes our roles in the studio are clear. One of us might make a proposal and we build on it together. One of us might operate as the outside eye, setting the pace, and highlighting what works. Other times we use the camera as our director while co-creating a language or prompt through listening. Or the space between us leads us through the choreography. There is a constant negotiation that demands a rigorous attention to being in the moment and in time—I think it is also time that allows for that third body to appear, when it trusts that it will not be rushed or overlooked.

We speak of listening and tuning because that's primarily how we function in our practice. Perhaps that is the reality of a duo, a co-, perhaps it is that labor that is the third body, or the initiation of it. You become so acclimated and sensitive to, so able to predict, even trained in, the other body's inclinations, impulses, and desires. So you constantly anticipate the reception of a certain fantasy or imagination, to build off of and co-imagine with.

Other times you fail at listening, but it is a constant labor and perhaps now even a sixth sense in our work. The longer our collaboration, the more I (we) am (are) interested in the role of friendship, intimacy, togetherness, and tuning in our practice—that tension, that breeding ground that lies between us. The longer the collaboration, the more dramatically the duality or polarity of the duo subsides into the double, as you say: each body serves as an extension of the other's, each body is of service to the creation of that third amorphous organism, each body becomes more attuned to the negative space that surrounds it and the body next to it.

The space in between becomes an active vessel, even a brain, for the bodies surrounding it.

You experience a certain magic when that third body begins to insert itself as an active participant, not just as a co-creation between the two of us. You begin to tune into its own habits, but more importantly its desires. You realize that the work grows beyond you. That that body's agency is present. I wonder if that body would take over completely if we allowed it to... But I do think that all three bodies can only emerge in dialogue, not as singular entities. With time we have begun to speak of the three bodies as an interlaced singular body, of symbiosis. This merging or folding of the space around our bodies creates an organism that is a symbiotic amalgamation of our three bodies. The bodies become unidentifiable in their singularity, they exist only in symbioses and mutual fluctuation. On occasion we mistake ourselves for the other when rewatching a video, and this pushing or reconceptualizing of our subjectivity into a relational being might be the transformative power that the third body harnesses.

The third body was present in our work from the beginning. We only showed our work on Instagram then. We would enter different spaces as a duo, creating compositions that

we would capture and share. Our work was shot mostly from a camera stand, so a frontal perspective, and we began to build on and develop that aesthetic. Through that perspective the space in between, the in-betweenness, became visually evident. We also knew from the start that two bodies function very differently than one, three, or four. We were aware of the function of two. As a mirror, reference point, block of color, and mode of relating.

To be two, to blend into being a duo, you create a third body to move past the duality. One that learns how to shape-shift. The space between us becomes a kind of magnetic field of negotiation, but also our third brain, third body, or, as you so beautifully describe it, our "psychic sense of space" in which telepathy happens. I say telepathy to indicate a deep desire to communicate tactically, affectively, and molecularly. What allows it to emerge and grow is our desire to feed it. This is not a passive collaboration; it involves making choices and sometimes lending one body the lead while the other follows. We actively invoke choices. For example, do we want to highlight the space, blend into the space, merge with the space, oppose the space, or ignore the space? Sometimes space refuses our prompts and inflicts its own power. The same goes for our bodies: they will be synchronous, asynchronous, decorative, or functional. Will they be amorphous, will they function symbiotically, will they be separate or operate as one? We are researching these ideas affectively and instinctively.

This third body, phantom, organism, web is always becoming and is always prone to failure. Our practice commits to it, allowing the spectral to be a vocal part of our process. Invisible bodies always exist; after all, beings are porous and affective, but it is about shifting one's attention to that body and giving it, as you say, agency to reveal itself to find its own being beyond our desires.

We have grown familiar with enacting and highlighting different collaborators because of the compositions we want to explore. In some of our works, the third body is the active space between us and the fourth body is the space we are in conversation with. The third body is often also felt as tension, yearning, closeness, an energetic field or proximity that lurks. Other times it is gestated through symbiosis. We sustain it by desiring it and communicating with it. Its pushes for speculation, surprise, and potential in the process. I imagine this

body as a third all-encompassing, fluctuating blob that keeps morphing, changing, shifting. It is not static; it is a current of intensities. It attracts, it repels, and we do the same. In a phenomenological sense, more precisely in a queer phenomenological sense, it relies on our orientation towards it and its orientation towards us. When it is lost, a re-imagination or re-orientation occurs, and if we desire to be together again, it re-emerges into being.

NO NEED FOR DEFINITION

SALMA TO SAMAA: I sense that you want to define the dramaturg's role and function more concretely. Do you feel our conversations have aided that, or does it remain too abstract for you?

SAMAA: If someone asked me today what dramaturgy is, I couldn't give a specific answer. The dramaturg role in dance has multiple definitions—a friend, a colleague, an external eye, one who's questioning what's already there, one who makes sure all participants are on the same page and mediates between them, one who connects the work on stage with the bigger world/community. And much more.

Gathering and putting everything together from our encounter made me conclude that the role of dramaturg is flexible and can be formed according to the necessities of the work. It's like the missing puzzle pieces to complete the whole picture. I thought I would come out with a clear definition of the role, yet I find myself discovering new approaches and roles given that name by other artists.

To summarize, there is no one way to describe dramaturgy because it depends on the artist's needs. It seems that in the artistic configuration of some countries they point at that role and give it a title, while in other countries it exists as a natural part of a whole without being pointed out and given a clear title. Does bolding the font and underlining the title make the role more efficient than when it is organic and instinctive? This is the question I was left with after all our conversations, and I assume that it too has more than one answer, none are right and none wrong.

About the writers

Krystel Houry is a Lebanese performing arts researcher and dramaturge. She holds a doctorate in anthropology of dance and is head professor at the Institut Supérieur des Arts et Choreographies in Brussels. She has been part of the Mophradat team since 2016.

Noor Abed is a Palestinian artist who works at the intersection of performance and film. Her practice examines social choreographies and collective formations, combining forms of the “staged” and the “documentary.”

Salma Abdel Salam is a Cairo-based choreographer, dancer, and co-founder of dance collective nasa4nasa together with Noura Seif Hassanein. She holds an MA in performance studies from NYU Tisch. She is currently working on a book about the Egyptian dancer Farida Fahmy.

Samaa Wakim is a Palestinian performer, choreographer, and cultural activist interested in contemporary multidisciplinary art creations infused with Palestinian culture and heritage.

