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Bathtub Dramaturgy: An Experimental Syllabus for Theatre and Performance Studies Classrooms

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Article abstract

This annotated syllabus proposes an undergraduate course designed to develop dramaturgical methods around a common theme. While the course focuses on performances in and around bathtubs, the ultimate goal of this essay is to put forward methods that can be applied across an expansive range of theatre and performance studies topics. Each unit in the proposed course explores a different facet of dramaturgical practice with corresponding assignments that challenge students to practise essential research, writing, and communication skills. These assignments culminate in a final project: the presentation of students' own devised bathtub performances. This syllabus, aiming toward a restorative pedagogy, imagines a future in-person classroom where students can collectively explore the relationship between public and private through bathtubs as a microcosm for the complexity of human experience.

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Chloë Rae Edmonson

On March 22, 2020, Madonna uploaded an Instagram video of herself in a bathtub filled with milky-white water sprinkled with crimson flower petals. The international pop superstar made the post just nine days after former US President Donald Trump declared COVID-19 a national emergency. At the time, many Americans were either in their first week of lockdown inside their homes or risking their health to report to essential jobs, and countless businesses and public institutions had closed for the foreseeable future. Madonna's posture in her tub embodies the tense cultural atmosphere; with knees bent to her chest and hair pulled back from her face with a barrette, she grips the faucet knobs and holds a downward gaze towards the opaque water. She glances up only a few times to make eye contact with a handheld camera, which shakily records her from above. With foreboding piano music [by Roger and Brian Eno](#) playing in the background, Madonna speaks slowly and in a serious tone, portending that COVID-19 would be a "great equalizer" because it would not discriminate based on social markers such as wealth, fame, education, or beauty. Of course, quite the inverse came true, as the virus proceeded to disproportionately devastate poor and minority communities across the globe.¹ Indeed, Madonna's bathtub monologue was immediately and widely criticized for its tactlessness—both in the comments on Instagram and by the tabloid media—and the video was eventually deleted. Today, portions of it remain viewable on [YouTube](#), a surreal relic of the early days of the pandemic, when so much was unknown.

From a historical perspective, Madonna's video earmarks a cultural moment when celebrities littered the Internet with all kinds of [cringeworthy content](#) attempting to wax poetic over the new global health crisis. Like so many Americans living in isolation, these famous personalities were grappling to make sense of the chaos; however, some celebrities performed these anxieties in very public online spaces and with little acknowledgment of the enormous wealth and privilege they possessed relative to the general population. From a performance studies perspective, what especially piques my interest about Madonna's video is its location: her bathtub at home, an otherwise private space rendered public by the extraordinariness of the moment. The background footage captures the stunning whiteness of her pristine bathroom: white tub, white walls, white votive candles, and a folded white hand towel perched on the smooth white tile ledge behind her. This exquisitely hygienic theatrical set provides an ironic contrast to the pop goddess's closing adage that "if the ship goes down, we're all going down together." In response, one commenter drily posed the rhetorical question, "do you really think we're going down together while you're in your bathtub having people working for you to be there?" (Owoseje 2020). Their observation reveals how bathtubs are at once universal in basic functionality, yet infinitely divisive in design, accessibility, and context. For example, Madonna's ability to use her bathtub in private and without assistance already entails the particularities of her privilege and abilities. The bathtub can be a multivalent container for performance, especially during an era of acute collective anxiety around hygiene practices and inequities surrounding wealth, housing, and healthcare.

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Yet Madonna’s infamous Instagram post was not the first bathtub performance to ever exist, nor would it be the last in the context of our global pandemic. As a practising dramaturg and college theatre educator, this video brought the genre of bathtub performance to my attention, not only as a scholarly topic of interest but as a pedagogical means of analyzing social performances in their cultural and historical context. Like many educators in the spring of 2020, I was struggling to adjust to online teaching and feeling overwhelmed by the task of curating virtual content for my students. Below I present a selection of bathtub performances I began collecting in 2020 as part of my own dramaturgical and scholarly practice. I have discovered that the odd topic of bathtub performance presents opportunities not only for broad coverage and deep engagement in the classroom but also for case studies and assignments that motivate student imagination and critical thinking. As a methodology, I propose a teaching approach grounded in dramaturgy because it confounds the apparent dichotomy between theory and practice. My own creative practice has led me to the conviction that dramaturgy is best learned by doing; this syllabus allows students to develop their dramaturgical skills around a common theme (bathtub performance). In the remainder of this essay, I will demonstrate how professors and students might employ dramaturgical methods within units comprising a class entitled “Bathtub Dramaturgy.” The ultimate goal of this essay, though, is to put forward methods that can be applied across an expansive range of theatre and performance studies topics.

Dramaturgy, Teaching, and Learning

Many educators working in the fields of theatre and performance studies will recognize two pedagogical quandaries at the heart of this essay. First, there is the relatively universal challenge of creating syllabi that balance breadth (the amount of content covered) with depth (the duration and degree of engagement with individual concepts). Indeed, some instructors must meet departmental requirements in terms of breadth; on the other hand, as specialists, we are often excited to share with students the deeper nuances within our various areas of study. Yet research shows the best learning outcomes occur not necessarily when students are assigned more content but when they are motivated (Beghetto 2004), engaged in active learning (Cronin 2014), and when their curiosity is aroused (Bain 2014). A second pedagogical concern is one perennially at the heart of our disciplines: the perceived divide between theory and practice. In many theatre departments, for example, there are classes on literature and history operating quite separately from classes on acting and directing. In performance studies, we might witness an antagonistic relationship between “critic” and “artist” manifest in class discussions. I imagine a classroom that empowers students and instructors to navigate these fundamental tensions (breadth vs. depth and theory vs. practice) together, and the experimental syllabus below offers some strategies for the theatre and performance studies classroom. The course reflects my view that dramaturgy offers tools not only for teachers designing curricula but for students in pursuit of answers to the intellectual and artistic questions that matter most to them. Dramaturg and professor Peter Eckersall similarly claims that dramaturgy productively “blurs distinctions” between ideas and practice and can be applied not just to theatre but “to a diversity of artistic practices and media as well as social activities and the everyday” (Eckersall 2018, 241). This opens the question: *what is dramaturgy?*

Many scholars attribute dramaturgy’s foundations to German writer Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, an eighteenth-century collection of essays on theatrical theory, performance methodology, and the social function of theatre. Today, there are as many approaches to dramaturgy as there are dramaturgs, and definitions vary widely across individuals and

institutions.² Some professional dramaturgs specialize in developing new works in collaboration with playwrights and other artists. Others work directly as members of production teams to conduct research that grounds and contextualizes a particular performance. Still other dramaturgs (sometimes synonymous or overlapping with the role of “literary manager”) work in-house at regional theatres, writing grants and aiding in season selection. Despite variables in the profession, certain core practices are essential to good dramaturgy: research, development, world-building, engagement, and performance. By developing these foci in a classroom environment, students of all disciplines (not just aspiring dramaturgs) can gain valuable writing, critical inquiry, and presentation skills. Below I have organized my experimental syllabus in units coinciding with these essential dramaturgical practices. The performances I have selected take place in and around bathtubs, which I believe to be a rich site for analysis, especially in the context of a pandemic that has drastically altered the usually embodied relationship between artist and audiences. Thinking toward future curricula, however, I believe we can apply dramaturgy as a pedagogical methodology to an array of timely content, depending on the course, the interests of the students and professor, and the institutional context.

On Bathtubs

There is no bathtub inside my home in Orlando, Florida, but my thinking turned to tubs in March 2020 after viewing the Madonna video and the consequent public scandal. Weeks later, in May, Erin B. Mee (the artistic director of This Is Not A Theatre Company and a colleague from my days in New York City) fortuitously invited me to attend her company’s show *Play in Your Bathtub: An Immersive Audio Spa for Physical Distancing*. The short audio play is meant to be experienced while taking a bath or footbath, featuring an auditory mélange of sounds, poetry, singing, and music designed to soothe and inspire. It is theatre as self-care, designed to soothe a multitude of stressors brought by the new (at the time) pandemic upon our minds and bodies. I participated in the performance using a large plastic bin as a footbath, and the experience reminded me of another performance entitled *Broken Bone Bathtub*, a solo bathtub show by artist Siobhan O’Loughlin I had seen in Winter 2019 while teaching a “Performance in New York City” course at New York University. O’Loughlin’s live piece, which she performs while taking a bath, is based on her own experience after a life-altering bicycle accident; it is what you might call site-responsive because it simply requires a host, their bathtub, and a small audience (the size of which depends on the capacity of the bathroom). Like Mee’s *Play in Your Bathtub*, O’Loughlin’s performance centres on themes of healing and self-compassion during and after personal hardships. In January 2019, O’Loughlin kindly agreed to visit my class to talk about her work, and one particularly valuable insight she offered students was to think outside the budgetary and institutional constraints of making proscenium theatre in an established venue. She suggested that aspiring artists can make art not only in bathtubs but in parking lots, kitchens, and other found or public space. Little did we know, this advice was especially prescient in advance of COVID-19, which enormously compounded the existing pressure on artists and venues to save money, find space, and compete with virtual forms of entertainment.

With these two performances in mind, I began to think about how bathtub art transforms the domestic space of actual, functional bathrooms into live performance spaces. I considered how the tub can be a site of meditation and reflection, where we can be alone with our thoughts, even if for just a few minutes of the day. Sometimes, the silent solitude of the bathtub leaves us alone with our deepest fears and anxieties for the future. Of course, the bathtub is also a splashy place for joy, song, and child’s play. For some, it is a space for childbirth. The bathtub can also be a place for nakedness,

sensuality, and sexual expression. There are acts of care and domesticity playing out in bathtubs across the world, such as the intimate act of bathing an elderly or injured loved one. As I began to construct a broader genealogy of bathtub performances, I realized how much daily life plays out in these mundane spaces—cleansing, rejoicing, crying, praying. At the same time, however, bathrooms more generally have become increasingly politicized as US legislators have attempted to advance or block “bathroom bills,” which dictate who can and cannot use public facilities based on their gender identity. Therefore, although bathtubs may be relatively ubiquitous, we cannot presume any universality in their meaning or accessibility. The “Bathtub Dramaturgy” syllabus below explores such paradoxes and complexities through individualized readings and in-person discussions.

Each unit in the proposed course explores a different facet of dramaturgical practice with corresponding assignments that challenge students to practise essential research, writing, and communication skills. These assignments culminate in a final project: the presentation of students’ own devised bathtub performances. What distinguishes this course from other devised theatre and performance as research classes, however, is the application of dramaturgy as the operative methodology; specifically, the course frames dramaturgy as the dynamic labour of building relationships with and between playwrights, technicians, designers, directors, actors, audience, communities, and institutions. As such, this course tasks student dramaturgs to consider the wider impacts of creating and presenting a given performance. In practice, this means that each unit contains at least one class session in which students collaborate with a peer dramaturg, who will actively listen and ask questions designed to strengthen and clarify the performance piece. In this same vein, the course also includes an excerpt from Chelsea Pace’s *Staging Sex*, a pivotal text on intimacy training, which is dramaturgical in the sense that it focuses on fostering healthy and safe channels between performers, directors, collaborators, and viewers. Lastly, the final unit implements Liz Lerman’s techniques for constructive criticism—another essential dramaturgical skill. These approaches lay the cumulative groundwork for students to continue fostering creative collaborations using dramaturgy as a guiding method long after the course has concluded.

For many of us, the pandemic intensified the emotionality of daily life by isolating us from friends, loved ones, and even strangers with whom we would normally share embodied experiences. As restorative pedagogy, this syllabus envisions an in-person classroom where students can collectively explore the relationship between public and private through bathtubs as a microcosm for the complexity of human experience.

Bathtub Dramaturgy A Syllabus

*Such a lovely day
And I'm writing just to tell you
I only slipped and drowned
In the bathtub of the world*

—Tyler Burkhart, “[In the Bathtub of the World](#)” (2015)

Learning Objectives

This course investigates various sites of bathtub performance using dramaturgical methods. In this class, students will:

- Conduct, organize, and present original **Research** on performances and their context.
- Hone strategies for the **Development** of new works and works-in-process.
- Develop collaborative and solo processes for creative **World-Building**.
- Practice methods of **Engagement** with artists and audiences.
- Devise and present a unique **Performance** using the dramaturgical approaches above.

Assignments

Unit 1: Mini Casebook

Unit 2: Guest Artist Interview Questions

Unit 3: World-Building Song Assignment (Small Groups)

Unit 4: Audience Engagement Proposal (Partners)

Unit 5: Public/Private Written Reflection

Final Performance (in stages)

Stage 1: Research of the Self

Stage 2: Developing the Self

Stage 3: World-Building Wish List

Stage 4: Rehearsal Journal

Stage 5: Final Performance and Casebook

Content

Unit 1: Research

Many dramaturgs are researchers at heart. The research we do gives valuable context to the play or performance we are working on. While it is relatively easy (in this information age) to collect a wealth of research on most any topic, a larger challenge lies in organizing, synthesizing, and presenting our findings without overwhelming audiences with too much information. As foundational readings for this unit, we will mine excerpts from Wayne Booth's *The Craft of Research* and Michael Chemers's *Ghost Light* to hone strategies for conducting and presenting research findings.

Then, as a preliminary assignment, students will assume the role of dramaturg by finding and researching one art object (performance, writing, visual art, music—any medium) involving a bathtub but not bulleted here on the syllabus. Students will come to class prepared with a 1–2 page “Mini-Casebook” on the art object. The casebook should explain what the thing is, who made it, and other details about the creative process. It should also attempt to describe its impact: what the thing meant in its original context and what it might mean now to audiences today. In class, students will give three-minute lightning presentations of their individual casebooks, culminating in an intertextual discussion on how they all relate.

Students will then be introduced to a triptych of pandemic-era bathtub performances:

- This Is Not A Theatre Company, [Play in Your Bathtub: An Immersive Audio Spa for Physical Distancing](#) (Audio play, 2020)
- Todd Buonopane, [“Bathtub Theatre”](#) (YouTube series, 2020)
- [“Swan Lake Performed in 27 Bathtubs!”](#) (Dance Recording, 2020)

The three performances above originated in 2020, when social distancing requirements dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic were relatively new and artists everywhere struggled to reimagine a world without live, embodied audiences. Aesthetically, these performances are very different. The first is an audio play designed to be experienced individually and from the comfort of one’s own bathtub. The second is a YouTube series by Broadway actor Todd Buonopane, who performs a series of popular songs and monologues from his bathtub. Each recording begins with a dramatic swish of Buonopane’s shower curtain, revealing him once again in his tub. The final performance is a collaborative collage of professional dancers offering unique renditions of *Swan Lake* in bathtubs around the world. In class, we will use our research skills to endow these performances with additional context and gain a deeper understanding of their impact.

As a conclusion to this unit, students will be introduced to their final project: a devised bathtub performance of their own. This performance assessment is scaffolded into five stages, one due during each unit. The first stage of this assignment is entitled “Research of the Self” and requires students to apply elements of Booth’s *Craft of Research* toward an autoethnographic portfolio of research. The objective of this self-research is for students to cultivate a set of themes and issues that matter deeply to them and to lay a meaningful foundation upon which they will devise their final performance. In class, students will pair up with a partner who will act as a dramaturg for their peer’s “Research of the Self” project. The dramaturg will actively listen to the presenter’s autoethnographic research and then ask a series of questions for clarification and development. Then, the students will switch roles.

Unit 2: Development

Dramaturgs often function as mediators between creative process and product; this is especially true when dramaturgs work with artists and playwrights to develop new works. This unit considers a multitude of approaches to developmental process but is grounded in Suzan-Lori Parks’s concept of “Repetition and Revision” (1995) and Heidi Bean’s notion of “dramaturgical arousal” (2015).

This unit provides three opportunities for exploring development via three different art objects:

- Siobhan O’Loughlin, [“Broken Bone Bathtub”](#) (Performance, 2015)
- Adrian Howells, [“Foot Washing for the Sole”](#) (Performance, 2008)
- Patrisse Cullors, [“Respite, Reprieve and Healing: An Evening of Cleansing”](#) (Performance, 2019)

These three performances explore themes of vulnerability and cleansing. This unit will feature a class visit with guest artist Siobhan O’Loughlin, who will discuss her solo show *Broken Bone Bathtub*. In preparation for that interview, students will watch footage from the performance and submit a list of five “Guest Artist Interview Questions” for O’Loughlin about her performance development

process. Finally, we will read and discuss two pieces featuring Howells and Cullors on how they developed their performances and an excerpt from Chelsea Pace’s handbook on intimacy training:

- Adrian Howells, “[Foot Washing for the Sole](#)” (*Performance Research*, 2012)
- Makeda Easter, “[Q&A: Patrisse Cullors on Using Performance Art to Confront Exhaustion](#)” (*Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 2019)
- Chelsea Pace (with contributions from Laura Rikard), Introduction to *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (2020), 1–15.

This unit culminates in the “Developing the Self” assignment, the second stage of the final performance project. Building on the research collected in unit 1 and drawing from the creative process strategies explored in unit 2, students will take a field trip to Orlando’s local Turkish Baths. Reflecting on their experience and preparing for their final devised bathtub performance, students will submit a vision board or other creative reflection on their process. This submission should be accompanied by a calendar or other structured written plan for the development, creation, and rehearsal of the final project. In class, students will again partner with a peer who will function as a dramaturg by asking a series of questions about the presenter’s “Developing the Self” assignment in the interest of clarification and development. Then, the students will switch roles.

Unit 3: World-Building

Once an artist or ensemble has laid the foundation for an imagined world, a dramaturg may be asked to step in and help build it out. Using Elinor Fuchs’s “Visit to a Small Planet: Some Questions to Ask a Play” (2004) as a guide, this unit focuses on the dramaturg’s role in bringing ideas and theories into practice. We will discuss three art objects:

- Lola Arias, “[Maids](#)” (Performance Series, 2010)
- Don Herron, “[Tub Shots](#)” (Photography Series, 1980)
- “[Bathtub Dramaturgy in Music](#)” (Spotify Playlist, 2021)

We will discuss how the first two performances reveal worlds that are otherwise hidden: Arias’s *Maids* explores the often-invisible lives of workers who clean hotel bathrooms, while Herron’s *Tub Shots* captures celebrities in their private bathtubs. The “Bathtub Playlist” is a collection of musical interpretations of bathtubs; working in groups, students will pick one song from the list on which to apply the questions listed in Fuchs’s article. The resulting “World-Building Song Assignment” will be a design for a “World” rooted in and inspired by the song’s aesthetic. Finally, groups will present or perform their world in class and explain its genesis in their chosen song.

This unit culminates in Stage Three of the final bathtub performance project. As the foundation for their material performance “world,” students will synthesize the themes generated in Stage 1 with the visions imagined in Stage 2 of their projects. As a deliverable, students submit a “World-Building Wish List,” which provides a short narrative of this synthesis and outlines the material items needed to create the final performance. As in Units 1 and 2, students will pair up in class to perform dramaturgical reviews of each other’s Wish Lists.

Unit 4: Engagement

One reason why Lessing’s *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* is so foundational to modern dramaturgy is because it was one of the first European treatises on engaging theatre audiences. More recently,

theorists like Erika Fischer-Lichte and Teresa Brennan have contemplated the mechanisms by which audiences and artists interrelate with each other. There are multitudes of ways to involve audiences around an art object: program notes, talkbacks, lobby displays, workshops, artist interviews, and social media campaigns are a few of the more common methods.

We explore four objects in this unit—one sculpture, one performance piece, and two modern operas:

- Jeff Koons, “[Woman in Tub](#)” (Porcelain sculpture, 1988)
- Yann Marussich, “[Glass Bath/Bain Brisé](#)” (Performance, 2013)
- Christopher Alden and George Freidrich Handel, [Aci, Galatea e Polifemo](#) (Opera, 2017)
- Du Yun and Royce Vavrek, [Angels’ Bone](#) (Opera, 2016)

All four of these performances use bathtubs as flashpoints for themes that are shocking, intense, or complex in some way. Working in pairs, students will develop an “Audience Engagement Proposal” around one of these four performances.

This unit also provides time and space for devising, rehearsing, and revising the final performance projects. As evidence of their progress, students will submit “Rehearsal Journals,” which are dramaturgical self-reflections on their own creative process and specifically how they intend to engage their audience. Time will be allotted in class for the collaborative dramaturging of each other’s audience engagement proposals and performance pieces.

Unit 5: Performance

Too often, dramaturgs are depicted as bookish types remaining behind the scenes of a piece’s development and presentation. Yet, as this course hopefully demonstrates, the work of a dramaturg is often deeply creative, passionate, involved, and embodied. In his essay “Doing Time,” Tim Etchells writes that as a dramaturg, he is “flesh, and bones, not just ideas” (2009, 72). Building on this notion of embodied dramaturgy, this unit provides a platform for sharing and evaluating the devised performances students have built over the semester.

Our final art objects for analysis are two paintings and nine iconic scenes from cinema:

- Frida Kahlo, “[What the Water Gave Me](#)” (Painting, 1938)
- Jacques-Louis David, “[The Death of Marat/Marat Assassiné](#)” (Painting, 1793)
- “[Bathtub Dramaturgy in Cinema](#)” (YouTube Playlist, 2021)

The bathtub performances above stand out from the others in this syllabus in that they are widely recognizable. They demonstrate the popularity and universality of bathtubs, which is one reason they are so prolific in art both historically and today. Indeed, as sites of performance, bathtubs occupy a uniquely tenuous position between public and private. Choosing one object of focus, each student will submit a two-page “Public/Private Written Reflection” on what makes that bathtub performance both deeply personal and widely popular.

In the final weeks of class, students present and workshop their final bathtub performances (live or recorded) to the class. Their peers, many of whom have been actively contributing as dramaturgs to the development of these performances, will respond using Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Methods

to build and sharpen the world of the performance. Finally, students will submit “Final Casebooks” containing documentation of each stage of the performance process.

Closing Thoughts

While the “Bathtub Dramaturgy” syllabus would be an obvious fit for a course on dramaturgical methods, I suspect aspects of it will be relevant across disciplines. While the bathtub may at first seem shallow in its ability to accommodate robust inquiry into broader topics, I hope the abundance of performances surveyed above reveals a surprising potential. Although it is a very specific milieu, the productive constraint of focusing only on bathtub performance presents us with an opportunity to confront the pedagogical tension between the breadth of content and depth of engagement. For educators, this suggests value in “zooming in” on niche topics. Furthermore, as a practical methodology, dramaturgy enables teachers and students to shuttle between theory and practice in a way that breaks free from traditional pedagogical divides. Most importantly, my hope is that this kind of teaching approach engenders a classroom dynamic that supports the collective healing of teachers and students in the wake of the grief caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Notes

1. For more information on healthcare inequity and the pandemic, see <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>.
2. There are a variety of good Internet resources on dramaturgy, but one of the best places to start is LMDA.org, the website for the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas. There you will find student resources, employment opportunities, conference information, and other helpful information relevant to dramaturgical practice today.

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