

# (Asian) Dramaturgs' Network:



Edited by  
**Charlene Rajendran and Peter Eckersall**  
With Daniel Teo, Chong Gua Khee,  
Nah Dominic and Ugoran Prasad

(Asian) Dramaturgs’ Network:  
Sensing, Complexity, Tracing and Doing

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# PREFACE

Peter Eckersall & Charlene Rajendran

*(Asian) Dramaturgs' Network: Sensing, Complexity, Tracing and Doing* explores the histories, stories, and practices of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network (ADN), a network of dramaturgs, performance makers, cultural producers and performance scholars in the wider Asian region that has been active since 2016. Building on the context of often Anglo-European scholarship, ADN has been mapping the creative research and evolving discourses of dramaturgy in the region.

In light of this work, the book seeks to explore two questions that have emerged through varied ADN dialogues and events. Are there Asian or Asia-based dramaturgies of practice and performance? And how does one write about these with contextually grounded frames and beyond Eurocentric paradigms? In selected essays, extracts from documented presentations, case studies and critical reflections, this book will explore the story of ADN, and summarise and examine some its main discussions, activities and outcomes.

Our hope is that this book is both a record of ADN and that it will be an integral part of its continuing activities. In other words, our aim is to reflect on and evaluate ADN's considerable achievements and to use the book as a multi-perspectival critical space to explore the future of dramaturgy in and for performance in the region.

→ Participants of the ADN Lab 2018 discussing a conceptual map for a performance.



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## Dramaturgical Concepts and Contexts

Dramaturgy is a critical process in and for making theatre, dance and other forms of contemporary performance. It is a transformative artistic practice that bridges ideas, themes and politics, and considers how these can be communicated and represented in and through the medium of performance. As a concept and a practice — and dramaturgy blurs these distinctions — it often extends beyond the scope of composition in performance and is applied to a diversity of artistic practices and media, as well as social activities and the everyday. Hence, we can talk about the dramaturgy of political campaigns, sporting events, religious gatherings, concerts, lectures, exhibitions, urban spaces, and so on. These are often tacit dramaturgies that occur without necessarily being identified as such, and yet an awareness of them advances understanding of relevant discourses and the meaning of actions.

Dramaturgy has been described as thinking through doing, and is simultaneously a method of thinking about performative structures and events. In the introduction to *The Practice of Dramaturgy: Working on Actions in Performance*, editors Konstantina Georgelou, Efrosini Protopapa, Danae Theodoridou, put it in artistic terms — to them, dramaturgy is a collective form of labour and a practice that “attends to the distinct ways through which we activate ourselves, our work, and our communities” and “a fusion between action and work that operates in a specific catalytic mode”.

At ADN, there has been a conscious effort to examine and explicate these various modes of thinking and doing dramaturgy within specific contexts, and in relation to practitioner-oriented approaches and philosophies of performance. The intention has not been to subsequently arrive at singular, definitive or prescriptive notions of dramaturgy and what dramaturgs do. Instead, the hope has been to allow for a multiplicity of perspectives and practices to interact, and thereby critique and inform an understanding of what it means to develop dramaturgies that are attentive to the local, while engaged with broader concerns and aesthetics as well. Peter Eckersall calls this an “expanded” dramaturgy.

As editors, we also argue that the “expanded” uses of the term in contemporary arts and cultural discourse are productive. It is in this context, that the influential dramaturg Marianne Van Kerkhoven (1946-2013) argued that “dramaturgy is a means to handle complexity”. For Van Kerkhoven, complexity is a requisite of theatre — that should reflect on the world as something changeable, and a place with complex forms, relations, cultures,

and values. She resists the idea that theatre should be hermetically predictable, rather, it should expand our experience of the world and invite responses and interventions. We use the term ‘complexity’ in a similar way here — amplified by the notions of network and sensing. Dramaturgical complexity is in essence networked (in a Latourian sense) — it is a way of bringing sensitivity and sensibility to complex issues and problems that we face in the world. Sensing asks for reciprocity and empathy, while also pointing to dramaturgical forms of expression that are seen and felt in the theatre. The sensibilities of bodies, performance histories, and diverse non-textual expressions that include dance, music and ritual are also signalled by this notion.

The range of languages, histories, ontologies and etymologies that ADN has engaged in its various events and programmes indicate a starting point from which to consider some of these complexities. But more importantly perhaps, the intersections, overlaps and distances between varied spatialities, temporalities and aesthetic proclivities hint at the expansive dramaturgical terrains that still remain to be encountered. This book offers a glimpse into the kinds of dialogues and deliberations that have been presented thus far by ADN to address questions and concerns that arise, and includes thinking and writing by individuals who continue to reflect on, analyse and theorise how dramaturgy is sensed, concretised and embodied.

Dramaturgy is also ineluctably a practice involving tracing and doing. It is about keeping track of and contributing to the artistic process, and about making sense of an artwork in its wider contexts, be they cultural, political, economic, personal, and so on. The tracing is a reference to the need for the contemporary performance to be given its sense of importance alongside traditional and canonical forms. It is a need to make sense of the greater creativity and contestation of contemporary work and support this with documentation, analysis, and rich dramaturgical thinking. It is about thinking through how tracing and doing dramaturgy are interwoven processes — the awareness of how one makes something is also seen in the work itself. The trace, in philosophical terms, is not only the sense of context or background to an artwork but speaks to how ideas are expressed through the medium of performance — the sense of pleasure of an artwork lies in its provocations and possibilities — its careful expression of dramaturgical imagination.

Tracing and doing also responds to the need for ADN to document its activities and reflect on them. *ADN Re/View*, a series of three E-zines published in 2021, that draws from the documentation of ADN events and presentations, preceded this book as an initial attempt to map, trace and frame some key

themes and issues that arose in varied ADN meetings, workshops and symposia. Several questions arose in the process and some of these are addressed in this volume, namely: Thinking forward, how will dramaturgy be done in the region? Will there be training programmes that incorporate dramaturgical practices from the region with those already well-known in theatre academies, and if so, how?

In *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, the dramaturg and scholar Magda Romanska argues that: “If the twentieth century can be called the century of the auteur director, the twenty-first century will be the century of the dramaturg”. Dramaturgy has been investigated and adapted by artists who are keen to develop their practices in new and interesting ways in different places around the world. At the same time, there are debates about the relevance of dramaturgy and the presence of dramaturgs in local situations, where it can be seen as a totalising or even an imperialising practice. How to define dramaturgy and its relevance to local practices, traditions and established artforms are some of the most important questions being asked in performance networks, and the circulations of these ideas beyond the western performance sphere offer some of the most important outcomes for dramaturgy in recent times.

What is the specific value of including dramaturgs within creative teams and collaborative projects, particularly interdisciplinary and intercultural ones that navigate complex borderlines and require skills of negotiating difference? How might ADN contribute to enlarging and deepening discourses, as well as sharpening and clarifying practices, which in turn enhances the way regional practitioners understand dramaturgy and participate critically? Hence, the need for this book.

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### ADN and the Dramaturgy of This Book

What is the need for dramaturgy in today’s world? How can we use our dramaturgical thinking to make better arts practices? How do we develop our capabilities to understand the arts in new and different ways? These are some of the important questions behind the formation of ADN in 2016 when it was founded in Singapore as a network of artists, performance scholars and dramaturgs from the South, East, Southeast Asian and Oceania regions.

Responding to the global interest in dramaturgy, ADN has presented symposia, workshops and laboratories focusing on defining and developing

the knowledge of dramaturgical practices. The ADN Report in this volume, written by its co-directors, articulates how this occurred, why it matters and what else can be explored. ADN has been a creative space for rethinking dramaturgy and developing new dramaturgical models that are informed by regional and local arts practices, and the work done thus far, has propelled further interest and curiosity that will inform future efforts to think through and document regional dramaturgies.

It is now timely to document, synthesise and theorise ADN’s dramaturgical impact, and it is with this in mind that ADN has been working to publish a series of documents that provide a resource for practitioners, researchers and students. Having collated multiple perspectives on dramaturgy and the work of dramaturgs in the region, it seemed important to find ways of mapping, tracing and framing the material to then make it accessible and draw links between varied ADN discussions and events. Led by Charlene Rajendran, who is also Co-Director of ADN, the publication project has focused primarily on revisiting and examining the materials already documented and archived, to select a range of critical perspectives and key ideas that inform thinking about and doing dramaturgy from a contextually grounded perspective. This work has been made possible with support from Centre 42, and the National Arts Council, Singapore.

In 2021, *ADN Re/View: Vols.1-3*, a series of three E-zines co-edited by Charlene Rajendran, Daniel Teo, Chong Gua Khee, and Nah Dominic, was published. These E-zines included edited transcripts of a range of artist talks, keynote and panel presentations from ADN events. The aim was to offer a glimpse of what ADN had been doing since 2016, as well as curate important nodes in the discussion that had become critical to an evolving discourse on dramaturgy and how dramaturgs negotiate their practice. Three online dialogues were then held to discuss these online volumes, and extend the dialogue on how practitioners were navigating emergent challenges and questions, some of which were directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the shifting lines of what was dramaturgically possible. (These publications and recordings of related online events are available on the ADN website at [www.asiandramaturgs.com](http://www.asiandramaturgs.com).)

Building on *ADN Re/View*, a book with an expanded frame that also includes new writing, has been put together. For this book, Rajendran invited Peter Eckersall to co-edit — with additional editorial support from Anuradha Kapur, Nakajima Nanako and Ugoran Prasad, and ongoing collaboration with Daniel Teo, Chong Gua Khee and Nah Dominic. This group, all of whom have been involved in ADN as presenters, participants

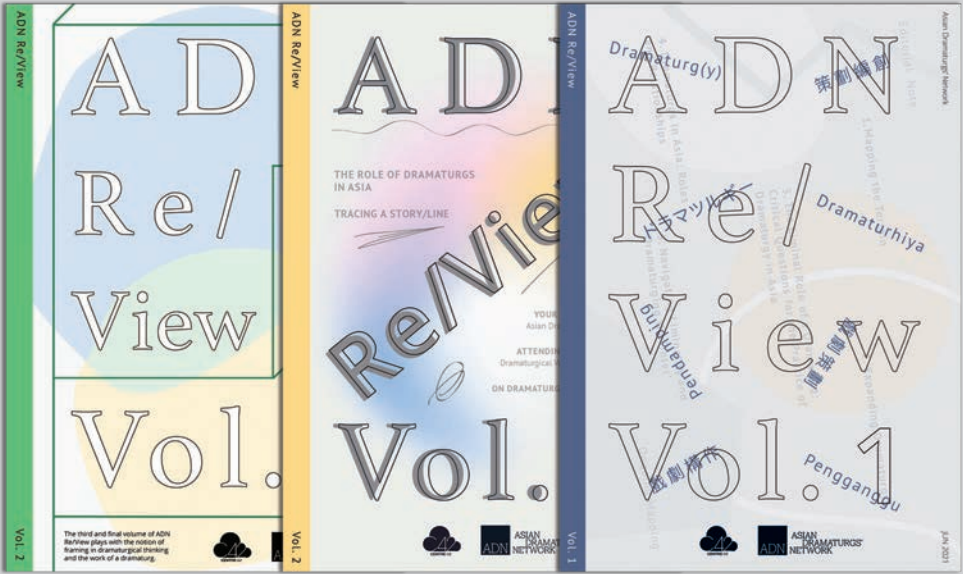
and documenters, worked as research, creative and editorial advisors and interlocutors who have contributed ideas and labor to the creative imagining, editorial and production work of the book. It is a team that draws on its varied experience, informed by diverse expertise including contemporary performance, dance, dramaturgy, arts criticism, playwriting, and scholarship on and in performance across the region.

Also, in one way or another, we are all working dramaturgs. The work of making the book has thus been a dramaturgical process of listening, negotiating and collaborating, to devise a structure, curate material, and develop frames for engagement with dramaturgy that also provide meaningful insights into ADN. Decisions have been made through a conscious ‘collaborative listening’ in which everyone involved becomes part of a “listening presence”. (See Chapter 3.3 “Three Attunements for a Listening Dramaturg”.)

The book team had three initial meetings online in the first half of 2022, and then in August 2022, most of the group gathered in Singapore for a workshop in which we developed the structure and broad contents of the book. This dialogue was crucial in helping us clarify the key concerns and emergent questions that have arisen from ADN, while giving us opportunity to articulate our particular motivations for co-creating a book and identifying ways to conceptualise a publication that reflects the multiplicity of ADN. Many of the ideas excited us, and fueled ways of thinking dramaturgically about what it means to curate material for a printed publication. Some of these ideas are manifest here, while others may be options for a future project.

The book itself consists of varied kinds of writing, some of which is material drawn from the *ADN Re/View*, edited and reworked for publication here. We also include newly-commissioned essays and interviews, background material on ADN and a summary of its chief activities. The aim is that the book becomes a meaningful resource that complements the work already being done by dramaturgs, performance makers, researchers and students in their contexts, which we acknowledge as a body of knowledge that is crucial in dramaturgical discourse. Responding to the ideas that emerged in discussion among our team, and to assist navigation of the book for the reader, we have organised the book in five main sections with themes that reflect the broad areas of inquiry:

- i. theories of dramaturgy and dramaturgical thinking;
- ii. dramaturgies of productions and institutions;
- iii. dramaturgies of learning and unlearning;



→ The E-zine series *ADN Re/View* was published in 2021.

- iv. dramaturgies of activism;
- v. dramaturgies of futures.

Each of these sections reflects aspects of ongoing discussion in ADN, and curiosities about how dramaturgical thinking informs choices made and frameworks developed for performance. Some of the chapters constitute extracts from presentations and articles that are available online, and we invite readers to draw from these resources. Editorial introductions and frameworks are included when we have felt it useful to draw connections and focus particular ideas. These are far from comprehensive articulations of complex terrains, but nodes for thinking and doing that we have put together in the hope that they will provide insights as well as points of reference for further thinking and doing. The chapters can also be explored across the categories, since overlapping concerns and questions emerge in relation to how dramaturgs work and what curtails or enhances dramaturgical practice. However, the arrangement is one way to suggest links and synergies that we think are productive in apprehending ADN’s journey thus far. We invite readers to follow their own interests in engaging with the book and navigate between and across chapters accordingly.

The title of the book points to how the term ‘Asian’ has been both crucial and problematic in the development of ADN, providing a key point from which to articulate and interrogate dramaturgical thinking and doing, while



remaining a contested idea that resists definition and raises questions of relevance. By using the parenthesis, we intend for (Asian) to be a critical yet optional dimension in the reading of the book, and one that provokes questions about how ADN navigates its capacity to 'be' Asian and 'define' what is Asian. This is a paradox that we invite you to consider as you engage with the book, especially in the spaces allocated for you to incorporate your views on what makes an (Asian) dramaturg and how (Asian) dramaturgs engage with their field. In that vein, we recognise the importance of sensing, complexity, tracing and doing as key elements in the work that ADN has done, and include these terms as ongoing capacities that inform and enhance dramaturgical work in the region, and wider afield.

We acknowledge the work on developing theories and practices of dramaturgy that has been undertaken by others across the region. *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy* includes texts by William Huizhu Sun, Eichiro Hirata, and Keitaki Datta on the situation of dramaturgy in China, Japan, and India. Hirata's monumental *Doramaturugii* introduced concepts from European dramaturgy to Japanese readers. One of the most sustained projects to develop the awareness of dramaturgy in Japan was Fujii Shintaro's workshops and symposia on the theme of dramaturgy at Waseda University in the early 2010s. Much of the focus of the programme was to better understand the outcomes of new dramaturgy and its relationship to contemporary theatre. Yoshimi Shun'ya's *Toshi no dramaturugii* focused attention on social dramaturgy, civic performances and the modern history of Tokyo. And arguably, Japan has some of the most important examples of thinking about dramaturgy: in Zeami's treaties on Noh, in the development of Bunraku, and in the progression of modern and contemporary theatre over the last century. Meanwhile, Kai Tuchmann and Li Yinan's pioneering dramaturgy course at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing explored documentary theatre and the development of postdramatic theatre in China. These perspectives, and the voices of leading scholars and artists in China, are discussed in *Postdramatic Dramaturgies: Resonances Between Asia and Europe*. Interest in Lehmann's theories and pedagogy for dramaturgical practice was also evident at the Shanghai Theatre Academy in the early 2010s, when Lehmann was a regular visitor there. All this is to say that dramaturgical thinking in theatre communities across the region has grown appreciably in the last decade, even if the term itself is debated.

We hope that *(Asian) Dramaturgs' Network: Sensing, Complexity, Tracing and Doing* will reflect the contributions of the many participants in ADN and show how they stand for a wide interest in dramaturgy and performance in the region. As a 'network' of practitioners, ADN has brought people together

as a starting point for engagement, dialogue and the exchange of creative ideas and practices. The scope for networking in the future could expand through varied kinds of interaction, reflection and documentation. It is hoped that the essays, interviews, accounts and threads of conversation will express the creativity and diversity of thinking and practice across the region, and garner further curiosity and capacity in relation to dramaturgy and dramaturgs. The book in its totality makes a strong case for rigorous and vibrant dramaturgical thinking. It is an open invitation for further dramaturgical work: for developing our theatre and performance for the times that we live in, for new collaborative practices and new artistic communities and creative voices. We hope that this in turn encourages deeper dramaturgical engagement, and becomes a catalyst for further creative research and dramaturgical developments which embody and enact more inspired practice. In one way or another, we hope this book will open up sustainable spaces for thinking and doing dramaturgy in the region, and thus contribute to the future of ADN.

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# ADN Events 2016 – 2022

## 2017

2017 | 16-18 February

**ADN Meeting 2017 (Yokohama, Japan)**  
“Tracing Asian Dramaturgy”

Co-presented by Centre 42 & Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama / Supported by Japan Foundation Asia Center & National Arts Council, Singapore

## 2016

2016 | 23-24 April

**ADN Inaugural Symposium 2016 (Singapore)**  
“Mapping Out, In & About: Dramaturgical Thinking & Practices in Asia”

Co-presented by Centre 42 & Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay / Supported by Japan Foundation Asia Center & National Arts Council, Singapore

2017 | 1-2 October

**ADN Satellite Symposium 2017 (Adelaide, Australia)**  
“Dramaturgies of the Social & Cultural”

Presented by Centre 42 / In association with Australian Theatre Forum / Supported by OzAsia Festival & National Arts Council, Singapore

## 2018

2018 | 16-17 February

**ADN Satellite Symposium 2018 (Yokohama, Japan)**  
“Dramaturgy & the Political”

Co-presented by Centre 42 & Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama / Supported by Japan Foundation Asia Center

2018 | 4-12 May

**Points of View 2018 (Singapore)**  
“Critical Frames for Performance Writing and Making”

Presented by Singapore International Festival of Arts 2018 / Developed by Asian Dramaturgs’ Network / Organised by Centre 42

## 2021

2021 | June, August, December

**ADN Re/View Vols. 1-3 E-zine Series & Critical Discussions**

Published by Centre 42

## 2019

2019 | 24 May

**ADN Workshops 2019 (Singapore)**  
“Dramaturgy & Technology”

Supported by National Arts Council, Singapore / Organised by Centre 42

2018 | 7-10 September

**ADN Lab 2018 (Yogyakarta, Indonesia)**

Supported by Japan Foundation Asia Center, Asia-Europe Foundation, & Teater Garasi / Organised by Centre 42 & Cemeti — Institute for Art and Society

## 2022

2022 | January, August

**ADN Workshop 2022 (Singapore)**  
“Thinking Dramaturgically as Directors”

Organised by Centre 42

2022 | February, March

**ADN Event Series 2022 (Online Panels)**  
“Bodies to Bodies Dramaturgies”, “Ongoing Online: Durational & Digital Dramaturgy”, “Translocal Connections: Introducing the Asian Performing Arts Lab (APAL) in Germany”

Organised by Centre 42

2022 | 3-7 August

**ADN Workshop & Lecture 2022 (Singapore)**  
“Contemporary Performance is Dramaturgical”

Organised by Centre 42

2019 | 25-26 May

**ADN Conference 2019 (Singapore)**  
“Dramaturgy and the Human Condition”

Co-presented by Asian Dramaturgs’ Network & Singapore International Festival of Arts 2019 / Organised by Centre 42

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



"This stimulating and thought-provoking book tackles the multiplicity of dramaturgy in Asia, raising questions about what dramaturgs do, and how dramaturgies evolve in relation to context and change. In a cogent and eclectic manner, the combination of texts grapples with diverse modalities of dramaturgical thinking and rethinking, informed by the regional practices of dramaturgs and artists. As we navigate a world that is becoming increasingly complex, this is a rare and significant compilation that everyone, artists especially, must read."

— MARION F. D'CRUZ

Dancer / Choreographer / Producer / Educator  
Founder Member of Five Arts Centre (est.1984)

*(Asian) Dramaturgs' Network: Sensing, Complexity, Tracing and Doing* explores the histories, stories, and practices of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network (ADN), a network of dramaturgs, performance makers, cultural producers and performance scholars in the wider Asian region that has been active since 2016. It explores two questions that have emerged through ADN dialogues and events. Are there Asian or Asia-based dramaturgies of practice and performance? And how does one write about these within contextually grounded frames, moving beyond Eurocentric paradigms?

In selected essays, extracts from presentations, case studies and critical reflections, the collection explores the story of ADN, and the future of dramaturgy in and for performance in the region. It makes a strong case for rigorous and vibrant dramaturgical thinking, and is an open invitation for further dramaturgical work, opening up sustainable spaces for thinking and doing dramaturgy in the region.



ASIAN  
DRAMATURGS'  
NETWORK

