

From Shakespeare to Steve Carell: The life of a dramaturg

ASU Regents Professor Ayanna Thompson relishes role as dramaturg, saying 'I have the best job in the world'

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
May 30, 2025

Editor's note: On July 18, Ayanna Thompson was [elected as a fellow into the British Academy](#). She was one of 92 scholars worldwide elected into the fellowship in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the humanities and social sciences. Read about some of her recent work below.

The smile on Ayanna Thompson's face is a giveaway for the words that follow.

"I have the best job in the world," said [Thompson](#), a Regents Professor of English at Arizona State University, the executive director for the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies and a theater consultant.

"Being at ASU, working with ASU students and then bouncing around between London and New York for different plays that are in production — it's pretty great."

These days, Thompson, a noted Shakespeare expert and past president of the Shakespeare Association of America, is working as a dramaturg for a forthcoming London production of "[Hamlet](#)," which features music by the English experimental rock band Radiohead.

ASU News talked to Thompson about her role as a dramaturg and the production itself.

Note: Answers have been edited lightly for clarity and brevity.

Question: Let's start with this: What does a dramaturg do?

Answer: Someone summed it up interestingly to me — that an assistant director is someone who's there to ensure that the director's vision is carried out, and the dramaturg is there to ensure that the text vision is carried out. So, I'm like the steward of the text.

Q: So, your mission is to make sure the production is true to the author's words?

A: It depends. Is it an adaptation or a straight production? It depends on what the vision is. Oftentimes, I work really closely with the director. I'm also frequently looped in for casting, so I get

brought in early in the production. I will have conversations with the whole production team to make sure ... like, do the costumes in the setting help with the storytelling as well, or are there things that are at odds?

Then, for Shakespeare productions, I'll work with the whole company so that everyone understands what the text means, and then individually, usually with the lead (performers) on their lines.

Q: You've been a dramaturg for several productions, most recently the new Broadway production of "Romeo and Juliet," and notably "Suffs," the 2022 musical about the women's suffrage movement in the early 1900s. Do you ever find yourself at odds with the directors because they're trying to stray from the text?

A: I don't win every argument, but I do find that people, if they hire me, are really excited. And I will say the actors are particularly excited to have a scholar who likes to be in the rehearsal room with them and who doesn't lecture but will give them the background and answers to their questions. It's a very, very fun environment and much more collaborative than being a scholar.

Q: I'm guessing some of the answers you provide could be found with a Google search. Why do you think productions keep seeking your counsel?

A: I don't want to sound narcissistic or anything, but it takes a special kind of person to be a scholar in the room. It can't be about your ego. I think I'm pretty good about it being about the collective story that we're telling. And I wear my knowledge lightly. I always say, "Oh, I don't know. Let me look that up" or "That's a really great question." You know, the things that I say to my students all the time.

They do ask me things I don't know the answer to, and they do ask brilliant questions that I've never thought about. But I think being open to multiple interpretations or their lived experience may enrich the meaning of a phrase, a soliloquy or a speech. I'm always open to that as long as everyone's on the same page about the meaning that they're bringing.

Q: It sounds like fascinating work.

A: I love it. It's the best. I feel very, very lucky.

Q: You're currently working on the London production of "Hamlet," and it features music from Radiohead. That seems like an odd coupling. (The production opens June 4 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in England.)

A: So, I've been involved in this project for about two years. One of the directors, Christine Jones, I guess was reading "Hamlet" and listening to the Radiohead album "Hail to The Thief." She thought the music of the album really tells the story of "Hamlet" in a musical way. So, she approached Thom Yorke (Radiohead's lead vocalist) and he was really excited about collaborating. ... I was brought in to make sure the story is being told in a clear way. I've been involved in all the casting as well. It's unbelievable. I've been in workshops with Thom Yorke and Radiohead for the past two years. It's crazy. I'm like, "Oh look, I'm in a room with Thom Yorke and he's singing."

Q: What's next for you after "Hamlet"?

A: I think I'm working on seven different productions that are in various stages of development. The next one will be an adaptation of "Antigone," (an Athenian tragedy written by Sophocles in 441 B.C.). I also recently worked on "Uncle Vanya" (a tragic play examining the hopelessness of country life in Russia during the late 19th century) on Broadway with Steve Carell. And I did "Macbeth" with Daniel Craig.

Q: Did you manage to resist asking Daniel Craig about James Bond and Steve Carrell about "The Office"?

A: Do I ask? I'm a fan. And when I was talking to Steve, I told him I have a weird connection with him because the writer of "The Office," B.J. Novak, was my student at Harvard. And Steve was like, "No way." I said, "Yeah, and B.J. was always trying to get out of writing his Shakespeare papers."

Q: That's awesome. (Novak) managed to do pretty well for himself.

A: He did.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Ayanna Thompson. ASU photo