

New York State Council on the Arts Theatre Program
Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?

Executive Summary

The Theatre Program of the New York State Council on the Arts is releasing a report on its three-year research initiative assessing the status of women in theatre. The initiative sessions produced a body of invaluable historical, anecdotal and statistical information on the ways in which women have confronted, overcome and continue to face discrimination in the field. The panels also produced a series of recommendations both to monitor and to assist women in theatre. What follows is a narrative summation.

“[Power] consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told”

— Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life*

Introduction

In recent years, women have achieved notable successes in the theatre. In 1998, Garry Hines and Julie Taymor were the first women in theatre history to receive Tony Awards as Best Director and Best Director of a Musical. According to the Theatre Communications Group (TCG), among the ten most produced plays nationally by TCG members in the 2000-2001 season are five by women. Tied for first place is *Art* by Yasmina Reza. The others are *Spinning into Butter* by Rebecca Gilman, *Fully Committed* by Becky Mode, *Wit* by Margaret Edson and *Dirty Blonde* by Claudia Shear. Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* is in production worldwide. In the previous season the top two were *Art* and *Wit*. During 1998-99, the most produced play was *How I Learned to Drive*, by Paula Vogel. Meanwhile “downtown” director Tina Landau (*Space*) has successfully “crossed over” to Broadway; last season Landau directed *Bells Are Ringing*. Now when we think blockbuster musical, we think Susan Stroman of *Contact* fame. This new generation of women artists, nurtured and developed in non-profit theatre, is achieving impressive prominence. But do these successes indicate that women directors, playwrights and producers have achieved parity in these once male-dominated realms? Or are these exceptional successes that prove the rule—that women are still largely operating in the margins of prominence and power?

Rationale

In reviewing applications for state funding, the Theatre Program noted the consistently low main stage participation of women playwrights and directors, particularly among theatres with higher budgets. Even at many theatres with the avowed mission of producing new American plays, the number of plays by women produced on the main stage was extremely low; in some cases, none. More scarce still were female playwrights of color. Female directors were also absent on the main stages of many theatres.

Concerned about the situation, NYSCA invited some 135 scholars, artists, critics, producers and sociologists from around the country to participate in a series of roundtable and panel discussions over the course of three years. The sessions, held in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, were hosted by: NYSCA, Women's Project and Productions, New Georges, Judith Shakespeare Company, and Theatre Communications Group. Care was given to achieving representation that was diverse in terms of race, age, sexual preference and parental status. Participants included freelance or individual artists at all stages of their careers, as well as institutional personnel from theatres of all sizes and missions. Among the participants were: playwrights Tina Howe, Lynn Nottage and Constance Congdon; directors Diane Paulus, Karin Coonrod and David Herskovits; artistic directors Carole Rothman (Second Stage), Julia Miles (The Women's Project) and Casey Childs (Primary Stages); performers Jessica Hecht (*Stop Kiss*), Helen Stenborg (*Wit*), and Peggy Shaw (*Split Britches*); critics Margo Jefferson (*New York Times*), Alisa Solomon (*Village Voice*) and Linda Winer (*Newsday*); executive directors Ben Cameron of Theatre Communications Group and Virginia Louloudes of Alliance of Resident Theatres-New York; producer Susan Gallin and scholar Dr. Virginia Valian, whose landmark study *Why So Slow?* addresses the problems women face rising in corporate industry.

Statistical Findings and Implications

Progress with regard to women's participation in the theatre has been both inconsistent and slow. Latest figures indicate that advancement has stalled or even deteriorated as a sampling of numbers from the late 1960's until the present will show. According to a report issued in the late 1970's, “Action for Women in Theatre,” the total number of professional women playwrights and directors hired by regional and Off-Broadway theatres over a seven year period from 1969 to 1975 was 7%. Nineteen years later, in the 1994-95 season, playwright representation was at 17% and directors at 19% for Off Broadway and regional theatres. A study six years later showed an increase: According to the 2000-01 season preview in *American Theatre* magazine, among the 1,900 Theatre Communications Group member theatre productions, **23% of the productions were directed by women and 20% had a woman on the writing team.** (It should be noted that this figure does not represent discrete authors. For example, *Art* by Yasmina Reza accounts for thirty productions and Margaret Edson's *Wit* twenty-two.)

This current season of 2001-02 as listed in *American Theatre* magazine actually shows a decline, with directors at 16% and playwright representation at 17%, back at the 1994-95 percentages. (When productions of Shakespeare are removed from consideration, playwright representation increases to only 18%.) Considering the considerable media attention given to Eve Ensler and *Vagina Monologues*, playwright Susan Lori Parks, who won a McArthur genius award, and the ubiquitous Broadway director Susan Stroman, this diminished presence of women is puzzling.

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A study on women directors and playwrights commissioned by NYSCA in 1998 found that at Off Off Broadway theatres with total operating budgets of less than \$500,000, the participation of women increases. Production of women playwrights was at around 30% and director participation rose to over 40%.

While NYSCA's constituency is the non-profit regional, Off, and Off Off Broadway theatre, a cursory look at Broadway demonstrates, not surprisingly, that as money and stakes increase, percentages of women participating declines proportionately. In 1999 women wrote only 8% of all plays and only 1% of musicals. This same year the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of artists who protest the under-representation of women and artists of color in the visual, theatre and film arts, published a full-page ad in the 1999 Tony awards issue of *In Theatre* magazine. The headline read: "There's a tragedy on Broadway and it isn't *Electra*."

Like the wage gap between men and women that has hovered between 70 and 74 percent throughout the 1990's, **advancement for women in theatre is stagnant**. A clear understanding of the factors that inhibit growth continues to be limited by the lack of comprehensive studies carried out by professional researchers and underwritten by foundations or academic institutions. The theatre, thus far, has had no organization willing to commit resources to provide the kind of ongoing quantitative analysis of gender differences that Catalyst has provided for women in business or various law schools have provided for women in law. Until we have more comprehensive data, our picture of employment in theatre will be incomplete and means of identifying discrimination limited.

Challenges

The W.I.T. Roundtables focused on identifying both the obstacles to women's careers and strategies to overcome them. The challenges ranged from such practical concerns as childcare, which remains a disproportionate responsibility of female parents, to more subtle factors, such as the influence of a protagonist's gender on play selection. Playwrights **Neena Beber and Tina Howe remembered being pressured to write plays from a male point of view, because they were more commercially viable**. The question was asked, "Would *Art* have been produced had it been about three women?" *Newsday's* Linda Winer and *Village Voice's* Alisa Solomon noted that **stories about men are considered universal while those about women are not**, or that, as performer/writer Lisa Kron put it, "Men are universal; women are specific." Therefore, as director Pam Berlin noted, *Wit* is perceived as a play about a woman dying rather than about death, like *King Lear*. *Time Out* reviewer Sam Whitehead admitted his surprise at the merit of *Wit*, saying, "That's what really knocked me out. While it was about a woman, and a woman's problems, it was really about the human predicament." He had expected it to be "a whining victim play." Solomon wondered if anyone considered *Oedipus Rex* "a whiny victim play."

Panelists observed that men and women tend to identify with men. Drama League Executive Director Jane Ann Crumm, explained that women are trained from early on to make "deep connections with male protagonists," while "the same thing simply cannot be said of men." Hamlet is not merely Everyman but everybody. As Carole Rothman noted, even television cartoons are created with the expectation that girls will identify with male characters, but not the other way around. Winer added, "As a woman going to the theatre...I've been trained to expect that the theatre will not be about me... or half the world like me." She spoke of the impact of seeing Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women and Others* in 1978: "The stuff of my life had never been considered material for the theater by playwrights." **Primary Stages' Artistic Director Casey Childs explained that he had passed on the scripts of both *How I Learned to Drive* and *Wit*, because he felt his audience would share his tendency to identify more with male protagonists, and because of the depressing nature of the subject matter**.

The gender of the author also provokes assumptions and generalizations about the nature and universality of the work. New Georges Artistic Director Susan Bernfield expressed her frustration with this: "Women's theatre is not a genre... We produce plays by women. I don't know what 'women's theatre' is." **Plays by women, as well as plays about them, are perceived as less universal and less important**. Bernfield contended that while the work of women is marginalized within most large theatres, theatres that exclusively produce plays by women are marginalized wholesale. The gender of the playwright even informs expectations about the form of the play, and the skill of the playwright. As NYSCA Theatre Program Director explained, **plays by women are considered "risky," regardless of their subject or form, even conventional plays by women are perceived as unconventional**. Furthermore, when form is indeed experimental or unconventional, plays are evaluated differently by critics according to the gender of the author. Critic Jonathan Kalb compared the critical reception of similar plays by Beth Henley and John Guare, to demonstrate that when "a man challenges received ideas of form... he is seen as taking a risk," but when **women challenge the status quo, or "try to do something different, they are often treated as though...they don't know what they are doing"**. Kalb noted that critics comment without accountability unless disputed by readers, and he exhorted participants to voice their frustrations directly to critics and editors.

But the relationship between gender and judgment about quality runs deep. As Valian pointed out, men discern early on-- even as children playing in the schoolyard--that the opinions of males matter more than those of females: "The people you want respect from are the people who have the power. And it's men who have power. White men..." This helps to explain how men, as arbiters of quality — audiences, artistic directors and critics — perhaps quite unconsciously, undervalue and under-represent women in their selection process.

But what about the selection process among women? According to Valian's research, **both women and men share the same consistent subconscious over-valuation of the work of men and under-valuation of the work of women**. *New York Times* critic Margo Jefferson asserted, "[We] all want to believe — especially people in power — in our powers of objective judgment." Valian elaborated, "The idea that there might be social factors that influence evaluations is something they find offensive... as if you're calling them sexist or racist." However, while most men and women would assume otherwise,

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when judging quality, they are acting on deep assumptions that are neither equitable nor accurate. **Unless men and women become conscious of these assumptions, and make a conscious decision to achieve parity, they will automatically prefer men** — even in fields where women predominate.

Valian used a model to demonstrate the repercussions of even slightly preferential treatment. In a situation where men and women in equal numbers begin their careers with precisely the same qualifications, and a mere 1% bias is introduced, in time, a top executive level of 35% women and 65% men will be affected. This might help to explain why women, though often trained in equal numbers with men at the most prestigious theatre training programs, and though they receive a majority of honors as emerging artists, are nonetheless usually outpaced down the line by their male counterparts. The disadvantage of women, however slight, accumulates until there is an unbridgeable gap in competitiveness. “Success,” Valian explains, is “largely the accumulation of advantage.”

If, for all the reasons outlined, plays by women are deemed less commercially viable, then an additional significant factor intensifies the effects of assumption. In a climate of diminishing financial support and rising costs, theatres increasingly depend on “recognizable” product. Given climbing ticket prices, audiences are less willing to take chances on unknown quantities, and look more to “name” authors and revivals. They also depend more heavily on consumer guidance from mainstream reviewers — almost exclusively male. Linda Winer reminded participants that after twenty years on the job, she is the sole female first-string reviewer at a daily newspaper. New voices were once the centerpiece of the non-profit theatre, and created the point of entry for “newcomers” — often women and artists of color. And risk, once the very rationale of the non-commercial Off-Broadway and regional theatre, is now to be avoided rather than embraced. The predominantly white male elders are safe bets. And, as playwright Lynn Nottage put it, “**A lack of access perpetuates a lack of access.**”

For good and ill, women tend to operate outside the mainstream. In the absence of opportunities, women are resourceful and create their own, self-producing or starting enterprises outside of the mainstream. However, as many participants testified, burdened with child care, “day jobs” and lower salaries (75.8%) than those earned by their male counterparts, women’s theatre work is often their third shift. Underfunded and understaffed, female theatrical entrepreneurs “burn out” even more rapidly than men in this high-burnout field. In the end, as Valian explained, because women operate outside of the mainstream, they tend to “reform” it less quickly than they could from within.

Strategies

Often with the guidance of Valian, participants identified beneficial strategies in pursuit of equity. **Women in theatre, as in other professions, do not benefit from crucial advancement strategies in which men traditionally participate, most notably mentorship and networking.** Catalyst, an organization that researches strategies for the advancement of women in business, confirmed that **mentoring was the single most influential factor in career advancement.** Participants frequently used the term “king-making” or “the young genius syndrome” to describe the ways in which men valorize other men and “fast-track” their careers. Often women do not realize they are being excluded from these practices until it is too late. Underestimating their disadvantage, they do not organize collectively to leverage change. Many participants advocated strengthening “the old girls’ network.” Martha Richards, Executive Director of The Fund for Women Artists, emphasized the need for theatre to ally with the media reform movement, and to lobby the vast network of funding organizations dedicated to women’s issues, and the increasing number of women philanthropists, to include cultural support. Many participants stressed the importance of resisting the impulse to isolate within the profession by creating alliances across professions. Scholar Helen Chinoy reminded all that gender equity was an issue that must be addressed broadly, socially and internationally.

Historical awareness is also a significant factor in women’s advancement, as well as their confidence; ignorance of precedent contributes to disadvantage. Biographer Helen Sheehy explained, “[An] old stage manager was telling me about this great Margo Jones in Texas, who had started the whole regional theater movement. And I thought, ‘Wait a minute. In the books I’ve read, that was Tyrone Guthrie in 1963’... And he said, ‘It was Margo and Zelda!’” Sheehy set about writing a biography of Jones, and later one on Eva LeGallienne. The pivotal role women have played in history is often neglected, and theater history is no exception. For decades, textbooks have minimized or ignored the contributions of such pioneers as Hallie Flanagan, founder of the Federal Theatre Project, Cheryl Crawford, who co-founded both the Group Theatre and the Actors Studio, and Eva LeGallienne, who produced her own translation—the first in English—of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, at her own theater, The Civic Repertory Theater—a few among many who have shaped the theater as we know it. For many years however, women in the profession were given few role models, despite the fact that many existed.

Recent biographies and textbooks have begun to redress the situation. Similarly, until recently, the plays of women were “lost” to the repertoire; the publication of anthologies of historic plays by women from the Spanish Golden Age and the Restoration, for example, has begun to remedy the situation, and can change our restricted notion of “the canon.” Slowly theatres are rediscovering the wealth of neglected works or “new classics” by once-celebrated and often commercial women playwrights from the turn of the century through the Thirties, through a variety of recently published anthologies. There is a re-invigoration of adaptation of the classics among women, such as Migdalia Cruz’ *Another Part of the House*, based on Lorca’s *The House of Bernard Alba*. Directors are bringing feminist perspectives to classical plays. Non-traditional casting is proving the timeliness and universality that “classics” imply. In the last decade, there has also been an increase in the number of books surveying craft and interpretation from the point-of-view of women playwrights,

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directors and performers. Restoration, preservation and valorization of women's work are key elements to the progress of women artists.

Without historic precedent, without role models, mentors, consistent statistical data, and often not realizing they are operating at a disadvantage until late in their careers, women are constantly re-introducing themselves to the field. As perpetual newcomers, they are constantly elbowing for their place at the table and defending themselves against charges of inferiority. **And they are caught in a paradox; they do not want to be counted as "women artists" but simply as "artists," yet when gender is not counted, it continues to count against women.** What is not perceived can't be challenged or altered.

For this reason, participants advocated emphatically for consistently tracked and regularized field statistics, with gender and race participation ratios. Ben Cameron, Executive Director of Theatre Communications Group, explained, "By making this public, and asking people to measure it, we're going to put into people's consciousness that this is worth measuring and paying attention to." He added, "[To] not embrace diversity is to collude with... oppression and silence, and we know that's wrong." Valian reinforced that such information is prerequisite: "To change our implicit hypotheses we need to become explicitly aware of them."

While some participants were concerned that awareness would not be enough to guarantee progress, many were sanguine that the dissemination of information would significantly benefit the field and catalyze action. Gigi Bolt, Director of Theatre and Musical Theatre at the National Endowment for the Arts, expressed her belief that the field would be extremely receptive to research and recommendations that would help them to better achieve diversity, saying: "[There] aren't a whole lot of people of ill-will in this profession... People who are in positions of power need to be... made to think about their choices more seriously. We can all take responsibility for that."

Recommendations

Recommendations focused on the following areas.

- research
- advocacy
- education
- alliance
- preservation
- forum
- creation

Research and *education* would work hand-in-hand to appraise the theater community, audiences and funders of the effects of gender bias, and of strategies to support and valorize the work of women. Through *preservation*, the work and lives of women in theater would be restored to theater history. Increased resources would increase opportunities for the *creation* of quality productions. *Advocacy* would involve valorizing the work of women through means such as documentation, award programs and critical attention. Facilitating *alliances*, within the field and across professions, would offer women a greater community and increased opportunities for advancement strategies such as networking and mentorship, as well as the heft to leverage change. Finally, there was a perceived need for a *forum* offering sustained field-wide discussion of diversity, rather than episodic conferences that often lack follow-up. Participants recognized the great opportunity suggested by the Internet in support of all of these areas.

Conclusion

Given the great range of participants, the breadth of opinions expressed was unsurprising. There was, however, absolute consensus about the value of diversity. Participants agreed that diversity is aesthetically necessary to the vitality of theatre, a democratic imperative, and a practical economic necessity for the endurance of theatre. Frequently participants noted that gender was but one aspect of diversity, and race and age must also be considered.

There are many reasons for optimism about the future. Among the positive indicators are the commercial and critical success of women playwrights and directors, and the influence of women as a niche audience on that success. Primary Stages' Artistic Director Casey Childs noted that producers would serve neither their own interests nor those of their theaters and audiences should they ignore the implications of hits such as *Wit* and *How I Learned to Drive*. Other indicators that bode well are the increasing domination of women in philanthropy, both as grant-makers and individual donors, and through targeted organizations, such as The Fund for Women Artists. There is the increasing presence of women on the boards of arts organizations; in 1999, women constituted 45% of board members of all T.C.G.'s constituent theaters. Also encouraging is increased general attendance, with, according to the League of American Theater Producers, some 12 million attending Broadway and some 8.5 million Off- and Off-Off-Broadway last season. With more people going to the theater each year, there is an increasing need to satisfy what Margo Jones terms the "demand for more human material," and that increase suggests opportunities for diversity. Finally, it was **Virginia Valian, one of the few non-theatre participants, who noted what we in the field may sometimes forget: It is the unique creativity of the medium itself that offers the best hope for change. She explained, "The theatre has a way of making people think about issues of sex, ethnicity and age that isn't possible elsewhere."**

In sum, participants determined that, through raised awareness and focused efforts, accelerated progress is necessary and achievable.

— Susan Jonas and Suzanne Bennett, January 2002

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Appendix A

The complete executive summary will be available via e-mail through the Theatre Program of the New York State Council on the Arts. E-mail sjonas@nysca.org with WIT in the subject line. The report will also be available on-line in early 2002 on The Women's Project and NYSCA website.

Appendix B

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Participants

Victoria Abrash, Dramaturg	Anita Gates, Critic	Kristin Marting Artistic Director
Gayle Austin, Scholar	Alexis Greene, Dramaturg/Critic	Marya Mazor Artistic Director
Judith Barlow, Scholar	Fanni Greene, Performer	Gretchen M. Michelfeld, Performer
Neena Beeber, Playwright	Heidi Griffin, Actress	Maria Mileaf, Artistic Director
Pam Berlin, Director	Jan Leslie Harding, Actress	Julia Miles, Artistic Director
Susan Bernfield, Artistic Director	Julie Hebert, Playwright	Emily Morse, Director
Julie Bleha, Dramaturg	Jessica Hecht	Susan Mosakowski, Playwright
Gigi Bolt, National Endowment for the Arts	Mona Heinze, Dramaturg/Scholar	Brigide Mullins, Playwright
Barbara Bowen, Scholar	David Herskovits, Artistic Director	Greg Naughton, Artistic Director
Norma Bowles, Artistic Director	Tina Howe, Playwright	Lynn Nottage, Playwright
Anne Cattaneo, Dramaturg	Leslie Jacobson	Lizzie Olesker, Performer/Writer
Una Chaudhuri, Scholar	Frederica Jarcho, Grant Maker	Annie B Parsons, Artistic Director
Mei Ling Cheng, Scholar	Margo Jefferson, Critic	Lola Pashalinski, Performer
Helen Chinoy, Scholar	Sharon Jensen, Executive Director	Diane Paulus, Director
Gay Gibson Cima, Scholar	Susan Jonas, Grant Maker/Dramaturg	Carrie Preston, Performer
Kaia Calhoun, Director	Jake-Ann Jones, Playwright	Randolph Curtis Rand, Director
Ben Cameron, Executive Director	Melanie Joseph, Artistic Director	Martha Richards, Executive Director/Grantmaker
Aviva Jane Carlin, Performer	Jonathan Kalb, Critic/Scholar	Joumana Ritzk, Artistic Director
Stacie Chambers, Performer	Mia Katigbak Artistic Director	Carole Rothman, Artistic Director
Lenora Champagne, Playwright	Floraine Kay, Dramaturg	Kate Moira Ryan, Playwright
Linda Chapman, Associate Artistic Director	Maxine Kern, Dramaturg	Valda Satterfield, Performer
Mei Ling Cheng, Scholar	Anna Kohler, Actress	Richard Schwartz, Chairman
Helen Chinoy, Scholar	Jayne Koszyn, Dramaturg	Peggy Shaw, Performer/Writer
Gay Gibson Cima, Scholar	Chris Kraus, Writer/Film/maker	Helen Sheehy, Biographer
Casey Childs, Artistic Director	Lisa Kron, Performer/Writer	Christina Sibul, Casting Director
Darrah Cloud, Playwright	Donna Walker-Kuhn, Marketing Director	Jay Singer, Scholar/Dramaturg
Karin Coonrod, Director	Le Chanze, Performer	Alisa Solomon, Critic
Jane Ann Crumm, Executive Director	Susan Lee, Producer	Helen Stenborg, Performer
Migdalia Cruz, Playwright	Roberta Levitow, Director	Beatrice Terry, Director
Heather Dundas, Playwright	Jan Lewis, Scholar/Dramaturg	Lynn Thomson, Dramaturg
Nancy Davis	Donna Linderman, Director	Nina Trevins, Artistic Director
Kathleen Dimmick, Dramaturg	Kristin Linklater, Scholar/Director	Carmelita Tropicana, Performer
Faye Dudden, Scholar	Kate Loewald, Dramaturg	Virginia Valian, Scholar
Kim Durban, Director	Todd London, Artistic Director	Bethany Wall, Grantmaker
Linda Earle, Executive Director	Virginia Louloudes, Executive Director	Sam Whitehead, Critic
Sarah Edkins, Designer	Lisa McNulty, Dramaturg	Linda Winer, Critic
Carol Fishman, Managing Director	Kathleen McHugh, Scholar	Joanne Zipay, Artistic Director
Mary Gallagher, Playwright	Ellen Maddow, Actress, Director	
Susan Gallin, Producer	Deb Margolin, Performer/Writer	
Michael Garces, Director	Ruth Margraff, Playwright	

Appendix C

The Guerrilla Girls: In 1998-9, the Guerrilla Girls posted stickers in the ladies' rooms of major theaters that had not produced a single work by a woman in that season. Many had not produced works by women in most or all seasons. The stickers read: "In this theater the taking of photographs, the use of recording devices, and the production of plays by women are strictly prohibited." Check out the Guerrilla Girls Official Website for more information, and to order copies of their posters, books and materials. We thank the Guerrilla Girls for allowing us permission to reproduce these materials.