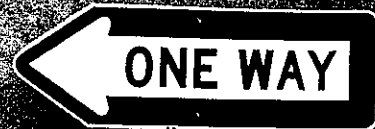


NOT THERE YET



WHAT WILL IT
TAKE TO
ACHIEVE

EQUALITY
FOR WOMEN
IN THE THEATRE?

BY MARSHA NORMAN

DISCUSSING THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE THEATRE FEELS A LITTLE LIKE DEBATING GLOBAL WARMING. I MEAN, WHY ARE WE STILL HAVING THIS DISCUSSION?

According to a report issued seven years ago by the New York State Council on the Arts, 83 percent of produced plays are written by men—a statistic that, by all indications, remains unchanged. Nobody doubts that the North Pole is melting, either—we see it on the news. These are both looming disasters produced by lazy behavior that nobody bothered to stop. End of discussion. What we have to do in both cases is commit to change before it is too late.

But, you ask, why is it a disaster that women writers are wildly underrepresented on the American stage? Actually, it's awful all over the arts world for women. My painter pals tell me that at one big museum in New York City, the new acquisitions by men are on the walls, while the new work by women is all in crates in the basement. Only in the orchestra world are the gender numbers equal, and that's because they started holding blind auditions a few years ago.

The U.S. Department of Labor considers any profession with less than 25 percent female employment, like being a machinist or firefighter, to be “untraditional” for women. Using the 2008 numbers, that makes playwriting, directing, set design, lighting design, sound design, choreography, composing and lyric writing all untraditional occupations for women. That's a disaster if you're a woman writer, or even if you just think of yourself as a fair person. We have a fairness problem, and we have to fix it now. If it goes on like this, women will either quit writing plays, all start using pseudonyms, or move to musicals and TV, where the bias against women's work is not so pervasive.

IN THE LATE '70S, WHEN I CAME OF AGE AS A PLAYWRIGHT—ALONG WITH BETH HENLEY, WENDY Wasserstein, Tina Howe, Paula Vogel and Ntozake Shange—we thought the revolution would be over by now. We thought

we were changing things, that regional theatres and New York institutional theatres would soon be presenting seasons filled with plays by women. But that did not happen.

The regional theatre movement spun out into a new-play gold rush. Theatres deserted the writers they had just discovered, seeking fresher, newer faces. Even today, newly discovered writers of all kinds find themselves forgotten all too soon, in the theatre's version of Warhol's 15 minutes of fame. This has been hard on all writers, but it has been hardest on women.

NYSCA's aforementioned three-year study of the status of women in the theatre came to precisely this conclusion: Women are welcome at the front door of the theatre but not at the stage door. This goes for actresses, costume and lighting designers and directors as well as writers. (If you haven't read the NYSCA report, you can find this staggering document online at www.womenarts.org/advocacy/WomenCountNYSCAReport.htm.)

At the Juilliard School, I have taught playwriting with Christopher Durang for 17 years. Our students are all fantastically talented and bold—and successful, by and large. They win Pulitzer Prizes, write big musicals and movies, and run TV shows. But upon graduation, our men get far more stage productions than our women. And the women who *are* produced are likely to get one production, not 10 or 15, as the men almost always do.

Last spring, one of our former students, Julia Jordan, instigated a new study of women writers in the theatre, carried out by Princeton researcher Emily Glassberg Sands. One of the most horrifying facts to emerge from this study was that women have a better chance of reaching production if they write about men than if they write about themselves. Imagine if writers of color were more likely to enjoy a career if their plays were populated by white people.

This past season, theatres around the country did six plays by men for every one by a woman, and a lot of theatres did no work by women at all, and haven't for years. And as the writing has disappeared, so have roles for actresses and jobs for costume designers and directors. It doesn't take an economist to draw a conclusion here. Either women can't write, or there is some serious resistance to producing the work of women on the American stage.

MY PURPOSE IN THIS ESSAY IS NOT TO COMPARE the two big studies on this subject. The NYSCA report and the Sands study together form an unassailable case. The NYSCA study portrays the scope and depth of the bias facing women's work. The Sands study addresses why fewer scripts by women are submitted to theatres (she calls female playwrights "discouraged workers") and demonstrates to theatres why it is actually in their best economic and artistic interests to choose more plays by women.

As in the global warming debate, nay-sayers will always try to pit the authors of these studies against each other, hoping to derail the discussion and get back to the status quo. In this case, squabbling over methodology is particularly pointless. All the method that is required here is to look at the last season produced by the theatre nearest you.

I have one purpose here, and that is to try to determine why this situation is still so bad. Why does the American theatre ignore its women writers? No other developed nation does this. American fiction and poetry don't do this. The list of top American novelists, poets and short-story writers is easily half women, and reflects all races and creeds. The only American writer to win

the Nobel Prize for literature in the past 50 years was a woman, the great Toni Morrison. The richest writer in the world is a woman, J.K. Rowling, and the longest-running play in England was written by a woman, Agatha Christie. The problem is not that women can't write.

And it's not audiences, either—they like plays by women. In the last 10 years, according to *American Theatre's* lists of the top 10 most-produced plays at TCG theatres, 30 percent of the top 2 on the lists were written by women. That's nearly double the percentage at which plays by women are produced overall. Of these same plays, more than half have female leads. Plays about women have won 7 of the last 10 Pulitzer Prizes for Drama.

Plays by women make money, too. The Sands study indicates that Broadway plays written by women earn on average 18 percent more than those written by men, even when the data are controlled for the type of play and corrected for massive failures and for whopping successes like *Wicked*, whose book was written by a woman, the great Winnie Holzman. Plays by women sell on average 3,538 more seats per week than do those written by men.

So why, with so much money to be made and so many audiences to please, does the American theatre resign its women writers to readings and development? Why do the critics correct, condescend and admonish women playwrights as if they were schoolgirls trying and failing to write like men?

I don't know the answers to these questions. But let's look at the major players in this situation and see who's saying what. At the very least, we can figure out what role each of us has to play in turning it around.

Literary Departments

One of the most disturbing findings of the Sands study was that literary departments can be reluctant to champion plays by women because they fear their artistic directors won't choose those plays, and that will make the department look bad. This is what Sands and Jordan call "prophetic discrimination." The study also found that women artistic directors had the same fear, and thus failed to credit a work by a women writer as having as much economic value as the same play with a man's name attached.

(This last bit was reported incorrectly by some media sources when the study was announced. They pounced on the sensational and false claim that women artistic directors don't like women's plays. The actual finding, one more time, was that *women artistic directors knew plays by women would face bias and thus predicted they would have a lower economic value.*)

Literary managers are caught in a kind of limbo. They don't have much real power and they are swamped with work. They probably know more about good writing and good writers than anybody else in their theatre, but in practice, they feel very much on the outside, underpaid and underused. Worst of all, they have been put in charge of readings and re-readings, the process by which most new plays are worn out. We are wasting our lit managers, their time and their talents.

Richard Nelson, writing in these pages in September '07, was right: Theatres need to abandon development, talkbacks and rewrites. I suggest they adopt the rules of the fine art world—if you like it, you buy it. You don't bring a piece into your gallery, take a brush and change the red patch in the bottom of the painting to green, and then decide not to buy it and send it back. ►

That's exactly what happens to playwrights' work in development.

Any artist whose painting hangs in a theatre lobby has more artistic control than the playwright whose play is on the stage. We have to stop letting staff and patrons fiddle with plays; literary managers need to stop second-guessing their audiences and their artistic directors. They need to adopt a gender-blind process for discovering and discussing new work. And they need to do this now.

Artistic Directors

Okay, artistic directors are in a tough spot, too. They tell you that they have their boards of directors to satisfy, so they have to look for hits. They troll the Broadway crowd for enhancement money and keep an eye out for movie stars looking for some "theatre cred." And as for gender equity—they throw their hands in the air and say, "Women don't send us their plays." This one just kills me. *Nobody* sends out their plays anymore; plays come to theatres from agents, directors and actors, all of whom *can be asked* for plays by women. Or, in a pinch, an artistic director could go to the website of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, which for the last 32 years has produced a list of the 10 best plays written by women (www.blackburnprize.org).

The truth is, many artistic directors are too tired to look for any plays they don't already know. But these plays are not locked away in drawers; all you have to do is ask for them. One of the strangest things about my career as a teacher is that for all the glory of my students at Juilliard and NYU, I have never, *ever*, received a phone call from an artistic director of a regional theatre—or from a Broadway producer, for that matter—asking me to recommend one of my writers for a production. I have called *them*, to be sure. I have stopped them in parking lots and Broadway lobbies to talk about Juilliard kids. But something about the communication system is off. Artistic directors, stop saying you can't find great plays by women. Call the agents, call New Dramatists, call the Dramatists Guild, call the teachers. Call us.

Funders, Donors and Patrons

What do funders, donors or patrons have to do with this, you ask? They don't write plays; they don't pick plays. But funders have failed virtually across the board to ascertain whether the theatres they support are presenting the work of women and people of color. This is simply unacceptable stewardship of public and private money. Is this a question that cannot be asked: How many plays by women did you produce last season?

A few years back there were virtually no plays by writers of color on our stages. That is now unacceptable. The resulting work by women of color has been especially notable. But the number of women writers produced in America has remained virtually the same for a century. Cheers to the foundations who ask how many writers of color a theatre produces. But what is this cultural agreement that more than 80 percent of plays should be by white men, and everyone else can share the remaining 20?

The NYSCA report observes that both women and men consistently overvalue the work of men and undervalue the work of women. So maybe we are conditioned by our society to see the ideas of men as superior. Then again, most of us are also hard-wired to want to go 80 miles per hour on the highway regardless of the speed limit. But there are laws that keep us from doing that, so we don't kill each other. If we need rules to give women equal access

to American stages, then the NEA and all the big funders should impose these regulations on us until these numbers improve. The Endowment must take the lead here—its guidelines prohibit the support of theatres that discriminate against every group of writers in America *except* women. This is not okay.

Change is possible. In the example of nontraditional casting, the casting directors of America simply called everyone's attention to the fact that actors of color should be allowed to audition for all kinds of roles, and cast in nontraditional ways. This has produced a huge and wonderful change in the life of the American stage. This is what we're looking for in regard to work by women—a real change in consciousness and in behavior.

The next time you're in a theatre lobby, look up. Odds are, the patron named over the entrance to the theatre is a woman. Women like the theatre. Women buy 70 percent of theatre tickets sold, and make up 60 percent of the audience. But year after year, they are mainly offered plays written by men. Even when the story is *about* a woman, the play will almost certainly have been written by a man.

Donors and ticket-buyers need to stop being so passive. Women writers need them on their side.

The Writers Themselves

This brings us to the final group that has been blamed for the underrepresentation of women in the theatre—the playwrights themselves. Women's plays are boring, people say. They have too much talk and there's no event. They choose "soft" subjects and aren't aggressive enough about promoting themselves and their work.

But I fear that a more accurate picture of the writing complaint can be seen in something the late critic and author Mel Gussow once told me. He said, "Marsha, people like the plays of yours where the women have guns." In other words, Gussow was saying, people like plays in which the women act like guys, talk like guys, wave guns around and threaten to kill each other. In my experience, his observation is true. The critics have liked my "guy" plays—the ones with guns in them—and pretty much trashed the rest. Seven of the nine plays I have written go virtually unperformed. Thank God I had the sense to write for television and film and write books for big musicals, so I could get health insurance, feed my family and can now afford to teach.

Are those other seven plays of mine worse than *Getting Out* and *'night, Mother*? Well, how would you know? You haven't seen them. They are perceived to be "girl plays," concerned with loss and death, love and betrayal, friendship and family. But no guns.

Are you with me here? *There's no such thing as a girl play*. But the girl's name on the cover of the script leads the reader to expect a certain "soft" kind of play. I don't get this. Lillian Hellman did not write girl plays. Neither did Jean Kerr or Lorraine Hansberry or Mary Chase.

The expectation of soft work from women writers comes from something way more awful in the society—the commercial romantic idea that all female stuff is soft, an advertising idea. Buy these products and you will have soft hair, soft skin and a soft voice. Unfortunately for writers, *soft* is perceived as playful and decorative and insignificant, not worthy of our time. We don't like soft in this country—we like hard here. Hard guy stuff, like in guy plays.

The problem is—and I say this having seen what feels like thousands of them—plays by men are not more violent

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or more active or smarter or raunchier or more tragic or more *anything* than plays by women. But plays by men are *expected to be better* even before they are seen, even before they are read—even, yes, before they are written. This is bias, pure and simple. And we also don't like bias in this country, so it's time to stop thinking this way. Women's plays are written by women, that is all.

A DIGRESSION: I SPEND A LOT OF MY free time reading about the brain. I recommend to you a remarkable new book, *On Intelligence* by Jeff Hawkins and Sandra Blakeslee. Hawkins founded Palm Computing and invented the communications tool Graffiti; Blakeslee covers science and medicine for the *New York Times*. Their book sets out a new model for understanding brain function, one with serious implications for our topic. The brain, they say, is a memory machine. It remembers events, sorts memories into bins, and then makes predictions for us based on the contents of the bins.

"Most of what you perceive is not generated through your senses," they say. "It is generated through your internal memory model." This model is made from the stuff in the bins, and you can call it an invariant memory or a stereotype. But "you cannot rid people of their tendency to think in stereotypes because stereotypes are how the cortex works." Our cultures and family lives teach us stereotypes, the book says. But "to prevent the harm caused by stereotypes, we have to teach our children to recognize

false ones, to be empathetic and skeptical."

On Intelligence would suggest that the reason we expect women's plays to be soft is because we have them in the soft bin instead of the play bin—and we have them there because we keep sticking the qualifying word "women's" in front of them. So I propose that we stop saying the words "women's plays." We should, if we have to, simply say "plays by women," or just "plays." End of digression.

This is not to say that men and women know the same stories. And this is the final argument for more plays by women on American stages: We need to hear *all* the American stories, not half of them. When Bill Gates went to Saudi Arabia, he declared publicly that the only way it could possibly compete as a first-class country was if it started using more than 50 percent of its brain power. And the women, covered in burkas, their identities obscured as their society demands, cheered. If American theatres want to produce the best work, they will have to find a way through our own cultural issues in order to grant equal status to the words and work of women.

A theatre that is missing the work of women is missing half the story, half the canon, half the life of our time. That is the situation we have now.

I WAS DEEPLY MOVED A FEW WEEKS ago, when Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* proclaimed in print that saving the women of the world was the central cause of our time. "The world is awakening to a powerful truth," he wrote. "Women and girls

aren't the problem; they're the solution." If you didn't read this important piece called "Saving the World's Women," find it on the *Times* website. Telling the stories of women is the first crucial step in insuring their safety and their worth. We must join Kristof in this cause. Lynn Nottage's beautiful play *Ruined* is a perfect testimonial to the power of a storyteller to make a difference.

As women writers, we must demand the best of ourselves. We must travel and learn and listen. And then we must claim our place on the American stage. We have to be more aggressive in this regard and help each other more than we have, and not just side with the boys because we expect them to win.

Finally, communities must insist that critics be removed if they prove they cannot judge the work of women without snide condescension and dismissive ire. There have been several such situations over the past few years that should have ended up in court, in my view. Critics should be put on notice by their publishers and by our theatres. Newspaper boards may not be able to challenge a critic's taste, but they sure as hell can fire people whose reviews reveal a dislike of women. We need more women critics, and we need them to write without the expectation that a woman's work will be less significant than that of a man. And when they like a piece by a woman, they need to write without the fear that they themselves will be found lacking for admiring the work of a woman.

In her book *Writing a Woman's Life*, Carolyn Heilbrun says: "Power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told." That's the challenge here. We have to commit to telling all the stories of this country. We need to make some new rules for ourselves, and do our jobs fairly. We need to stop expecting plays by women to be soft. We need to see what they actually are when we read them. We should've done this a long time ago. But we can do it now. We can even up these numbers and then we will never ever have to read or write this article again.

And then we can get to work on the climate. ☒

Marsha Norman is a Pulitzer- and Tony-winning playwright, co-director of the playwrighting program at the Juilliard School, and former vice president of the Dramatists Guild of America.

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE (All Periodicals Publications Except Quarterly Publications)		11. Publication Title		12. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below	
Publication Title		American Theatre		October 2009	
13. Issue Frequency: Monthly		14. Number of Issues Published Annually: 12		15. Annual Number of Issues Published: 12	
16. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: 10		17. Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: 17,465		18. Total Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: 16,000	
19. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Street, city, county, state, ZIP+4®): Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156		20. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (Not printer): Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156		21. Complete Mailing Address of the Publisher: Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156	
22. Complete Mailing Address of the Editor: Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156		23. Complete Mailing Address of the Business Manager: Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156		24. Complete Mailing Address of the Circulation Director: Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156	
25. Complete Mailing Address of the Advertising Manager: Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156		26. Complete Mailing Address of the Distribution Manager: Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156		27. Complete Mailing Address of the Fulfillment Manager: Theatre Communications Group, 520 Eighth Avenue, 24th Floor, New York, NY 10018-4156	
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