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**The Status of Women in Theatre: Disturbing Reports from Australia, Canada and the US
Report from Australia**

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A Chinese proverb tells us that 'Women hold up half the sky'. This is an image of complementarity and equality but such gender balance is severely lacking in the world of theatre. In April 2012 the Australian Council for the Arts released a research report called *Women in Theatre*. This report offers the first detailed analysis of the representation of women in creative roles in the Australian theatre scene from the early 1980s to the present. In addition, it suggests strategies to address the lack of female representation.

The statistics are damning and reveal that the theatre is dominated by men. For the eight major performing arts companies, women are writing only 21 percent of productions and directing only 25 percent. The report shows that the distribution of women as playwrights/writers and directors follows a pattern of 'good' and 'bad years'. However, even in a 'good year' women's participation lags significantly behind their male counterparts. Only 30-40 percent of productions have a woman in a creative role and this number falls below 30 percent in both 2008 and 2010.

The statistics are slightly better in the medium and small-sized theatres but still do not reach parity. 37 percent of productions are written by women while 37 percent have a female director and 52 percent have one of either.

Only one of the eight major theatre companies has a female chair while board members are 59 percent male. The gender disparities are largely due to a patriarchal leadership model where the overwhelmingly male boards appoint artistic directors who are quite often also male. Those interviewed for the report described the culture of creative leadership as a '*feudal system of patronage*' where the artistic director functions like a '*monarch at the centre of their court*'¹ leading to a predominance of white middle-class men. One respondent described this situation as '*protectionist*' and '*reek[ing] of elitism*'.²

The qualitative aspects of the report underline the factors which contribute to the lack of gender parity in the theatrical world. In addition to the presence of a '*boys' club*', lack of work life balance, prevailing gender tropes and stereotypes³, poor remuneration and lack of opportunities, family-unfriendly work environments and unstable or unpredictable career paths affect gender diversity both on stage and behind the scenes.

Instead of the 'glass ceiling', women encounter a 'sticky floor', meaning that they can't easily move out of certain sectors. The report finds that there is a distinct separation between 'women's work' and 'men's work'. This is the main reason why women are much better represented in areas such as youth theatre, education or community arts sector. Typically these are the areas that are poorly-paid, under-resourced and seen as low status. This is exacerbated by stereotypes about women being good communicators, teachers, trainers and nurturers. Together these factors hamper women's progress and impede their development in the theatre world.

The quantitative and qualitative data contained in *Women in Theatre* shows disturbing similarities over the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. More unsettling still is the fact that these trends are not unique to Australia.

Report from Canada

In 1982 Rina Fraticelli published *The Invisibility Factor*, a ground-breaking study on the place of women in Canadian theatre.⁴ Fraticelli's study, focused on the years between 1978-1981, revealing that just 10 percent of plays produced were written by women, female directors made up a shocking 13 percent while women artistic directors was a mere 11 percent

In 2009 the Professional Association of Canadian Theatre (PACT) *Equity in Canadian Theatre Report* on gender shows that little progress has been made in the interim. In 2008/2009 season, women made up 29 percent of the artistic directors, 36 percent of the working directors and 29 percent of the produced playwrights. Fraticelli's study coupled with the PACT report confirms that men are, by and large, still running theatre companies across Canada. In fact these reports combined make plain that the larger the theatre company, the less women in creative leadership positions.

Both Fraticelli's findings and PACT's conclusions are remarkably similar to those of the Australian *Women in Theatre Report 2012*. Common to all of these reports is the fact that female artistic directors are the most important determining factor of a higher level of participation by women on the stage across all sizes of theatres. Theatres with female artistic directors had on average 61 percent of women playwrights and 70 percent female directors while companies with male artistic directors had 32 percent of women playwrights and 20 percent of women directors.

Fraticelli also found that despite these numbers women made up the majority of both audience members and volunteers. Women form 60 percent of the theatre going audience and account for 68 percent of student enrolment in the performing arts, communication and technologies fields and women buy 70 percent of theatre tickets sold. Despite these numbers only 27 percent of the plays produced in Canada are written by female playwrights.

Report from America

How does the representation of women in theatre compare in America? In 2002 the New York State Council for the Arts published a similar study called the *Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement*. According to this survey, women directors make up 17 percent and 16

percent of produced playwrights. Women artistic directors were not included in the study. In April 2009 Emily Glassberg Sands published a report examining gender bias against female playwrights in the United States. Sands surveyed artistic directors and literary managers showing that women's writing is viewed as being of lower quality and as less likely to be produced. She draws attention to the fact that Broadway plays written by women earn on average 18 percent more than those written by men. Given the overwhelming involvement of women in all aspects of the theatre, then why are they offered plays written mainly by men? As Carolyn Heilbrun says in her book *Writing a Woman's Life: 'Power consists to a large extent in deciding what stories will be told.'* As we have seen, that power lies firmly in male hands.

All of this data suggests that gender-neutral representation in creative leadership is elusive. More troubling still is that the lack of gender diversity in the theatre world indicates a lack of other forms of social and cultural diversity. This has huge relevance for Australia, Canada and the US. In 2006 Census 45 percent of Australians were either born overseas or have a parent who was. Statistics Canada projects that, by 2031, approximately 28 percent of the population will be foreign-born while 200 different ethnic origins were reported in the 2006 Census. A lack of gender diversity will inevitably have repercussions for other forms of diversity.

The *Women in Theatre* report found that three major issues continue to hamper gender parity. There is a perception gap on the current state of parity. First, although both men and women agree that it is a desirable goal, 80 percent of women surveyed agree that gender parity should be an imperative within their own organization whereas only 48 percent of men agree that it should be a critical business imperative. Moreover, about twice as many men as women think that women have an equal chance of being promoted to senior leadership or governance positions. Second, balancing family and career remains a major obstacle towards women achieving gender parity. Women still bear the brunt of childcare and are statistically more likely to take a flexible work path or leave of absence in order to care for children. Third, organisations must show sustained commitment to achieving gender parity.

The *Women in Theatre* report encourages the adoption of a cross-sectoral approach, involving information, accountability and mindfulness, to counteract the under-representation of women in theatre. A systematic approach towards the compilation of statistics to measure the state of the sector, to track advances and monitor any regressions is needed. The Australian Stock Exchange has made efforts to change its corporate governance principles providing a model for encouraging and measuring accountability. They operate on an 'if not, why not?' principle. If the targets set have not been achieved, an explanation of the reasons for failing to achieve them must be given. Being mindful means becoming aware of our unconscious biases and assumptions and stepping out of our comfort zones away from the habitual and familiar and embracing something new.

Moving forward, addressing inequities

Laura Shamas, co-founder of the Los Angeles Female Playwrights Initiative (LAFPI), a grassroots advocacy ad hoc group, suggests that ticket buyers need to stop being so passive. In an online interview 'Taking Initiative', Shamas offers suggestions for increasing the visibility of

women in theatre. She says *'personally, I've decided this year to see shows only by female playwrights. It's a question of economic support. How can we financially support theater written or directed or starring women? This isn't something everyone has to do, by any means, but it has helped me think about where our money goes, and how that affects the situation in a very real way.'*⁵

Sometimes we can feel hopeless in the face of such negative statistical analysis and such obvious systemic inequality. However, Shamas offers us a real way in which we can register our disapproval and actually begin to make a difference. As ticket buyers and audience members we have more power than we realise. To paraphrase Jennie Webb, co-founder of LAFPI, we can become 'instigators'; we can bring about change.

¹ ‘Some Perspectives from the Field’, p. 26

² ‘Some Perspectives from the Field’, p. 27.

³ For more information on the way in which women and men’s writing is perceived see Sands, Emily Glassberg, ‘Opening the curtain on playwright gender: an integrated analysis of discrimination in American theater’, Princeton University, Department of Economics, 2009.

⁴RinaFraticelli, *The Invisibility Factor*, FUSE Magazine, September 1982.

⁵ Grace Suh, ‘Action Plans: Three Women on Women in Theater’, June 19, 2011