

Jake-ann Jones  
Lynne Alvarez  
Beth Henley  
Zora Neale Hurston  
Carson McCullers  
Wendy MacLeod  
Anna Cora Mowatt  
Susanna H. Rowson  
Zoe Akins  
Megan Terry  
Elizabeth Egloff  
Susan Glaspell  
Pearl Cleage  
Corinne Jacker  
Adrienne Kennedy  
Clare Booth Luce  
Heather McDonald  
Diana Son  
Naomi Wallace  
Lynn Nottage  
Sophie Treadwell  
Lillian Hellman  
Tina Howe  
Lorraine Hansberry  
Emily Mann  
Marsha Norman  
Milcha Sanchez-Scott  
Wendy Wasserstein  
Ntozake Shange  
Maria Irene Fornes  
Alice Childress  
Rachel Crothers  
Wakako Yamauchi  
Mercy Otis Warren  
Constance Congdon  
Paula Vogel  
Cherrie Moraga  
Gertrude Stein  
Olive Logan  
Anna Dickinson  
Wendy Kesselman  
Beth Henley  
Eve Ensler  
Martha Morton  
Lottie Blair Parker  
Aphra Behn

**It's Pretty Good...  
For A Girl:  
Female Playwrights  
and Gender Bias in the  
American Theatre**

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## **Introduction: Why Study Female Playwrights?**

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In 2002, I elected to create a summer reading list of plays that I had been meaning to read, but had not yet had the opportunity. While browsing through my own small play library for inspiration, I realized that very few of my scripts were written by women. Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neill, Christopher Durang, Arthur Koppit, William Shakespeare, David Rabe; my shelves were populated by white, male playwrights. As I began to wonder why this was, I realized that I could not recall the last time I had *seen* a play written by a woman, let alone read one. In response, I decided to make a conscious effort to include more women writers on my reading list. Again, I was struck by how little I knew regarding female playwrights when I was unable to produce more than three names from memory. It occurred to me that there was a time many years ago when I had believed that women simply must not write plays, or did not write them well enough to be remembered or produced. Disgusted with myself for harboring that thought, I consulted the current regional theatre production listings in the back pages of *American Theatre* magazine in the hope of finding more female playwrights. Unfortunately, most of the theatres listed featured seasons consisting of primarily white, male playwrights, and my reading list remained incomplete.

My curiosity about the seeming exclusion of female playwrights was elevated after I examined the online production histories of several well-known American regional theatres. Many of these theatres’ histories indicated they had gone several years without producing the work of even a single woman writer. Others included a token production here and there, or female playwrights were relegated to their smaller, black box venues. I was greatly troubled by what seemed to be the common practice of excluding female playwrights from the mainstages of the American theatre, and decided that I was in the ideal position to investigate

the reasons behind this phenomenon, as well as offer recommendations as to how theatre managers might begin to correct this inequity.

Upon deciding to pursue this topic, I casually presented my idea to two men who have ties to mainstream theatre: a board member and an artistic director. These men reside in different states and do not know each other, but their responses were complementary. When asked when the last time was that his theatre presented a play by a woman, the board member said, "I guess I never really thought about it." When the artistic director learned that I would be investigating the factors contributing to the dearth of female playwrights' work being presented, he said, "That's easy. There aren't any female playwrights." According to Julia Miles, former director of the Women's Project at The American Place Theatre and Founder/Artistic Director of Women's Project & Production, "though plays by women are...being written, few are produced on mainstream stages, talked about, or considered as important contributions to the theatre" (Austin, 1983, p. 93). Julia Miles' statement and the responses of the board member and Artistic Director convinced me that many theatres could benefit from a list of recommendations for better inclusion of female playwrights in their regular season schedules.

## **Parameters**

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The purpose of this paper is to examine cultural and sociological factors that have contributed to the dearth of female playwrights' work being presented in the mainstream American theatre. The identification of these factors stems from a review of theatre history, feminist theory, literary criticism and contemporary theatre related literature from 1981-2003. In addition, I will utilize information from my Capstone coursework, including a Sociology

course addressing women's work and class status in the United States. Based on the factors presented, I will develop recommendations and strategies that theatre managers may implement to better incorporate female playwrights into their regular season schedules.

For the purposes of this paper, the terms *female* and/or *women playwrights* are used in an all-encompassing fashion, representing women of all colors and sexual orientations. From a literary criticism standpoint, this would be inappropriate because female playwrights are often grouped "solely by gender, (likening) playwrights who are essentially dissimilar when analyzed according to ideological concerns and theatrical style" (Dolan, 1989, p. 339). Similarly, from a sociological standpoint, these generic terms do not accurately represent the diversity among women, but lump them together into one group that has come to be identified with white, European-American women, especially in the feminist movement (Amott & Matthaei, 1996). This is not my intention. The terms *female* and/or *women playwrights* are meant to represent those who have been marginalized in mainstream American theatre because of their gender, regardless of theatrical style, color or sexual orientation. Where appropriate, I will identify the race, ethnicity and/or sexual orientation of the playwrights cited, as lesbians and playwrights of color face multiple and differing forms of discrimination that reach beyond their gender. For example, Pearl Cleage is "oppressed across the board," as an African American, female playwright (Greene, 2001, p. 53).

The labels *female* and *women* are problematic in and of themselves. Women are labeled "gendered beings," while men are seen "as having no gender – practicing, for example, 'sports,' while women...practice 'women's sports'" (Amott & Matthaei, 1996, p.6). The majority of the female playwrights I cite prefer to be known simply as *playwrights* without their gender attached, a preference with which I completely agree. As Alexis Greene

states in the introduction to *Women Who Write Plays*, “(female playwrights) want producers, audiences and critics to recognize their art before their gender...but their personal struggles with professional inequities caused by their gender, and with how that tension affects their art and their identities, continue” (2001, p. viii). In response to being labeled a female playwright in 1941, Lillian Hellman stated, “I am a playwright. You wouldn’t refer to Eugene O’Neill as one of America’s foremost male playwrights” (Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987, p. 343).

Additionally, Clare Hanson points out, “the qualifier ‘woman’ suggests a concentration on the feminine sphere, which is generally constructed as the private, the domestic, and perhaps, the everyday. To be classified as a woman writer is thus to have one’s broader (or ‘universal’) artistic status compromised” (1998, p. 66). Thus, the term *female playwright* can be misleading, because most playwrights, both male and female, strive for a universal appeal that extends beyond gender. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will continue to attach gendered terms, because I am specifically addressing the marginalization of women as a group in the American theatre.

### **History of Women in the Theatre (Extremely Abridged)**

Theatre history demonstrates that whether as actors, audience members or playwrights, women have been excluded from and marginalized within the theatre since its origins in Ancient Greece. Women were not allowed to act in the Classical Greek theatre, and were represented onstage by men in masks. The tradition of barring women from the stage continued well into the Elizabethan period, when young boys in drag portrayed women onstage. At this time, “(male) players boasted that they needed no women, like the whores and courtesans of Europe, to play female roles” (Kuritz, 1988, p. 194). In the 1700s, the

Church denounced cross-dressing as immoral, and women were finally allowed on the English stage. However, women who dared to act were likened to prostitutes, thus lowering their status in society. “To lessen the social stigma of appearing on the stage for the first time, actresses took the title ‘Mrs.’, whether married or not, in the hope that audiences would perceive them as virtuous and committed to their marriage vows (Kuritz, 1988, p. 231).

The association between immorality and acting haunted actresses for nearly two centuries, enduring in colonial America. “Most of the expressed disapproval of the theatre and actresses,” write Chinoy & Jenkins, “could be traced to nineteenth-century sexual mores and the commonly held belief that all or most actresses led immoral lives both on and offstage. With the sole exception of prostitution...no single profession was so loudly and frequently condemned” (1987, p. 68-69). It was rumored that actresses were more than willing to finish their onstage love scenes with their co-stars offstage. Amid these rumors, the Church further denounced the theatre, equating all actors to liars, and accusing actresses of wearing immodest costumes that displayed their immorality.

The period between the late 1870s and World War I signaled a shift in the perception of actresses. In the late 1800s as attitudes toward the theatre and actors relaxed, “it became more acceptable for women of high social status to join acting companies, and the social standing of all actors rose accordingly” (Wilmer, 2002, p. 155). The cultural concept and social reality of *The New Woman*, one who “experimented with new forms of public behavior and new gender roles,” was widely revered among actresses (Glenn, 2000, p. 6). The general public accepted this new kind of woman onstage, because “women of the stage...occupied a unique cultural and social zone where females were not only permitted but expected to live unconventional lives and play unorthodox parts” (Glenn, 2000, p. 6-7). Many actresses of the

time achieved international fame, although their “chorus girl” cohorts continued to be labeled prostitutes, and flighty gold diggers (Glenn, 2000).

Women were regularly prohibited from attending the theatre, as well. In Ancient Greece, women were not allowed to attend the theatre, and this practice continued in England and America well into the 1700s. The Church played a significant role in warning women against attending the theatre “because their imaginations so easily led them into depravity,” and would surely be susceptible to any indecent ideas presented onstage (Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987, p. 71). Respectable women were expected to steer clear of the theatre, and most women who did attend were assumed to be of questionable morals. If a “lady” were to be present at a play, she would be restricted to the boxes or lower tier of seating, separated from the men and less respectable members of the audience, such as the prostitutes who were confined to the third tier (Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987).

Theatre in colonial America was so widely reviled that each colony, excluding Maryland and Virginia, outlawed theatrical performance at some point (Davis, 1993; Kuritz, 1988). The ban on theatre represented the views of the Church and government who believed plays had “a peculiar influence on the minds of young people and greatly endanger their morals by giving them a taste for (intrigue), amusement and pleasure” (Kuritz, 1988, p. 240). No doubt women were more susceptible to the influences of theatre than were men.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it became more common for women to regularly attend the theatre, as many American playhouses began “catering to so-called respectable middle-class audiences...and by the 1890s it was not uncommon to find women occupying the majority of seats at certain plays” (Glenn, 2000, p. 14). Susan A. Glenn asserts that the rise in female attendance was probably due to the “increasing visibility of members of their own sex in the

theatrical profession” at the time (2000, p. 14). During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a different kind of misconception relating to female audience members surfaced. According to theatre historian Richard Huggett, “some producers believe that it is bad luck for the show if the first customer is a woman, and there is record of a rather misogynic gentleman trying to prevent a lady from entering until a man arrived to save the situation” (1975, p. 67).

Historically, these restrictions against female actors and audience members were a symptom of the dominant patriarchal culture that sought to prescribe appropriate female behavior. Women were expected to enact certain culturally provided roles, which limited their participation in society to the private domestic sphere as wife, mother, and intellectually inferior subordinate to men. Despite these limitations, several women rose to prominence as playwrights, although they were constantly judged and ridiculed by male scholars and critics for their “inferior” writing. Judith Olauson states, “the woman writer has had a long history of struggle for recognition in virtually all areas of literature which she has attempted. Not much has been preserved of what women have written or said throughout history” (1981, p. 2), and consequently, most of the women who wrote plays between the mid-1600s and the early 1900s have been virtually erased from the male dominated theatrical canon of *important* American theatre (Brater, 1989; Nichols, 1991; Olauson, 1981).

The first recognized professional female playwright, whose work was as popular and profitable as any man’s, was Englishwoman Aphra Behn (1640-1689) (Son, 2003; Spender, 1989). Writing in the latter half of a century that is inextricably linked with William Shakespeare, Behn has been largely forgotten today. Even some contemporary playwrights who have been extensively educated in theatre history are unfamiliar with Aphra Behn (Son, 2003), because unlike Shakespeare, Behn’s works are seldom performed today. Concurrently,

the first successful American woman playwright, Martha Morton, has been lost in the annals of history. Morton's accomplishments, including having 14 of her plays professionally produced in New York between 1888 and 1911, and helping women win membership in the American Dramatists Club, have been disregarded. Other pioneering women gained popularity and financial success as playwrights, some earning more than \$100,000 a year in the 1900s (Londré, 1993). Lottie Blair Parker's 1896 play *Way Down East* was called "the best play ever credited to a woman," and remained popular for 27 years, while Anne Nichols' *Abbie's Irish Rose* enjoyed a five year run and earned "more money than any single play (had) ever earned for a writer" (Londré, 1993, p. 134, 137).

The success of these playwrights has been undercut by the fact that they were women attempting to master a historically masculine art. Their short-lived popularity and financial prosperity failed to earn them a prominent place in theatre history. This is likely the result of male theatre scholars and other *experts* who have examined the work of women writers and found it wanting. Dale Spender reports some scholars have argued "if women are not proportionately represented in the literary world...it's women's fault; you can't accuse men of doing anything to keep them out," and "if any explanation is needed for women's absence, it is because their *writing* is not up to standard" (1989, p. 28, 30). On the contrary, there is sufficient evidence, which is explored below, that men have been successful in barring women from the world of playwriting on the basis of their gender, although their second-rate writing is blamed.

Judith Olauson cites a 1963 *Harper's Magazine* article called *The Angry Young Women* in which Ellen Moers asserts that women have been unable to succeed as playwrights

due to the gender roles imposed through social conditioning. Moers presents six socially maintained misconceptions about female playwrights and women in general:

1. Women are uncomfortable with facts or big ideas. Their intellectual preoccupations are small.
2. Women's experience is limited to home and hearth.
3. Women are naturally sensitive to smaller emotional states but usually have less perceptive powers than men.
4. Women's natures are passive, not active, and ordinarily they observe rather than do. Therefore, they are more adept at noting detailed social nuances than men; thus they are more conservative, nostalgic, and, at times, brilliantly satiric of small social scenes.
5. Women are able to write short pieces of literature best because they are often interrupted by domestic demands.
6. Women are deficient in logic and order therefore lack the ability to create good plots. (Olauson, 1981, p. 3)

These misconceptions have led men to declare for centuries “that because women are women they cannot be good or great writers” (Spender, 1989, p. 35). In the decades prior to the 1963 publication of *The Angry Young Women*, many prominent male theatre critics lashed out at female playwrights and criticized their work for the same reasons outlined by Moers. In the 1930s and 40s, critics denounced female playwrights for their attempts to feminize the traditionally masculine theatre and proclaimed that women were too delicate to persevere within it (Olauson, 1981). In 1947, critic Norris Houghton “expressed the belief that in order for the theatre to serve its artistic ends adequately it must recover its lost sense of masculinity...which would bring rationality and order back to the theatre” (Olauson, 1981, p. 8). Similarly, in 1941, critic George Jean Nathan declared women second-rate writers

incapable of formulating good, coherent plays. Some critics were so opposed to the inclusion of women in the theatre that even male playwrights who wrote about women were chastised for their excessive concentration on women's themes (Olauson, 1981, p. 8-9).

The timing of this critical backlash may be attributed to the United States' entrance into World War II. Just as onset of the war provided job opportunities for women in the traditional labor force, "the theatre became a more receptive place" for female playwrights, "since the reservoir of male talent was being depleted" due to military enlistment (Olauson, 1981, p.147). Women were filling men's roles nationwide causing some to fear the feminization of traditional labor and the theatre. However, with the end of WWII came the return of male laborers and playwrights, signaling "that the vacancies women were called upon to fill during the war were now to be made available to the returning men" (Olauson, 1981, p. 147), thereby stifling women's opportunities. After the war, "the dominant ideology of the 1950s projected men as war heroes and women as homemakers and beautiful objects, and the gains of the *New Woman* from the turn of the century became less visible" (Wilmer, 2002, p. 160). Women once again returned to the private domestic sphere, where the critics thought they belonged.

Prior to the critical backlash of the 30s and 40s, "the press coverage (of female playwrights from 1890-1929) tended to focus on their success as a social phenomenon more than it celebrated them as individuals. And those feature articles devoted to individual women playwrights tended to make a point of describing them within the context of their domestic settings" (Londré, 1993, p. 131). Becoming a playwright was a risky business for a woman, as her domestic competency would surely be questioned when leaving the home for rehearsals and performances. "For women writers," states Dale Spender, "art and domesticity

have been inextricably linked...So, while men may be able to exclude the domestic realm from their writing...for women it has been virtually impossible to sever the personal from the professional commitments: This is one of the fundamentals of the writing woman's working conditions" (1989, p. 121). The press sought to portray the female playwright as proficient in the private domestic *and* public theatre spheres, thereby making her appear fully feminine.

Felicia Hardison Londré states, "it was important to show how a woman dramatist's essential femininity – her attractive appearance, her social position as a wife, her ability to run a household, her maternal devotion, and so forth – had not been impaired by her writing career" (1993, p. 131). These articles often emphasized the female playwright's financial success and glamorous lifestyle while simultaneously commenting on the cleanliness of her house or the way she served her tea.

Although a 1910 article stated that more plays by women had been produced in the preceding two years than ever before on the American stage, female playwrights continued to be excluded from the literary canon (Londré, 1993). There are several instances in which plays written through male/female collaboration were attributed solely to the male playwright, as it was assumed the woman had made no significant contributions to the script (Londré, 1993). In 1911, playwright Marion Fairfax responded to being excluded and overlooked, saying, "Women can write just as good plays as men can write, and they have proved it, but it's a difficult thing to make the public and the managers believe it. The best thing an aspiring playwright can do is to be born a man, and then he'll be treated like a 'business equal' when he hustles out into the market of the world with something to sell" (Londré, 1993, p. 132).

As female playwrights became more aware of the societal advantages of being born a man, so too did American women. The suffrage movement allowed playwrights, and women

in general, a forum to address their lack of legal and social privileges, specifically the right to vote in the United States. Playwrights responded to the movement, and “in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, American theatre increasingly drew attention to the conditions of women and their legal and social subservience to men” (Wilmer, 2002, p. 153). Playwrights such as Rachel Crothers, Elizabeth Robins, Anna Cora Mowatt and Susan Glaspell used their plays as a platform to publicize women’s status, issues and the suffrage movement. The theatre “attracted publicity and glamour to the cause of women’s suffrage,” which “added enormously to its credibility and popularity” (Wilmer, 2002, p. 155). Many of these plays spoke to middle and working-class women, urging them to fight for suffrage, higher wages and better working conditions.

The plays and playwrights of the suffrage era were the precursor to the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s in the United States when many female playwrights began to respond to social issues such as the Vietnam War, civil rights movement, gay and lesbian rights and the overthrow of the dominant patriarchy. Much like during the suffrage era, “the social unrest in the United States (during the feminist movement) provided a background for women’s overt expression of opinion and reaction to their changing roles in a changing society,” allowing the new feminist theatre to address issues surrounding motherhood, women’s work and pay inequities while experimenting with innovative theatrical forms (Olauson, 1981, p. 132; Wilmer, 2002). These original, non-linear, avant-garde structures were used by playwrights like Megan Terry who “seemed concerned with the fact that in the patriarchal society of America, American women were forced to imitate masculine models in literature since there were few great women figures whose human identity had been expressed in terms of their intellect” (Olauson, 1981, p. 171). Several feminist playwrights of the time

not only eschewed the traditional linear structure in favor of the avant-garde, but they incorporated sexuality and nudity in order to push the envelope a bit further (Olauson, 1981; Wilmer, 2002). Many audience members and critics felt alienated by the overt images and messages of the feminist playwrights, and once again women were denied a place in the realm of *important* and *universal* American theatre.

### **Current Status of Female Playwrights in the American Theatre**

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Female playwrights today find themselves in a somewhat improved, albeit similar situation as their foremothers. While women are not openly discouraged from writing plays, implicit discrimination continues to hinder the production of female playwrights' work. Evidence of this implicit discrimination can be found in *American Theatre* magazine's list of the most produced plays of the 2002-2003 regional theatre season. Of the 22 plays that tied or ranked in the top-ten, two are by women and 20 are by men (Sampson, 2002). Additionally, feminist arts activist group the Guerrilla Girls have posted an online list of well over 100 theatres that have no female playwrights scheduled for the 2002-03 season ([www.guerrillagirlsontour.com](http://www.guerrillagirlsontour.com)). A recent study by the New York State Council on the Arts shows that "only 16 percent of the plays produced on the mainstages of nonprofit theaters nationwide in 2001-02 were written by women" (Goreau, 2003, [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)). A study done in the 1970s by Action for Women in Theatre calculated that only seven percent of plays produced were by women (Austin, 1983; Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987; [www.womensproject.org](http://www.womensproject.org)). These percentages from the 1970s and the 2001-2002 season show that during the last thirty years, the percentage of female playwrights represented in American theatre has increased by only nine percent, or three percent per decade. Playwright Lynn Nottage is able to put a more

positive spin on the situation, stating, “as an African American woman, I feel more optimistic today than I did ten years ago about my prospects as a writer...Slowly I’m beginning to chip away at the establishment” (Greene, 2001, p. 361).

During the past two decades, the “establishment” has recognized the achievements of female playwrights to a certain extent. For example, since 1998, three women have won the Pulitzer Prize for drama: Suzan-Lori Parks in 2002, Margaret Edson in 1999, and Paula Vogel in 1998 (Son, 2003). Additionally, Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein and Marsha Norman were awarded Pulitzers in the 1980s. However, when Henley won in 1981, “it had been more than twenty years since a woman last won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, and before that only five had been awarded to women...since the first prizes were given in 1918” (Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987, p. 342-343). The Pulitzer Prize often has a “favorable impact on the public’s perception” of a play, influencing “spectators’ expectations by validating and legitimizing the production” (Dolan, 1989, p. 321). Nevertheless, winning the Pulitzer can be a double-edged sword for female playwrights. While women writers should be recognized for their excellence through prestigious awards as often as male writers are, these awards often reinforce the patriarchal structure of the American theatre because they aid in *legitimizing* the work of women from a largely male perspective. As Dale Spender states, “it was men who made up the rules (for what constitutes good writing), who constructed the theory and practice, who decreed what was good, bad and indifferent long before they allowed women educational and occupational rights” (1989, p. 24). So, while female playwrights are making some progress in the theatre, it is slow going and fraught with obstacles.

Current literature reveals that few female playwrights are able to make a living solely from the production of their plays. Many supplement their income through freelance work in

film and television or through other means such as grant money. The economics of playwriting are such that it is difficult for a man or a woman to earn a living solely from their productions, however women are more susceptible to financial difficulties. Just as women in the traditional American workforce must compete for equal pay and comparable benefits with their male counterparts, female playwrights are subject to lesser wages and fewer productions, thereby perpetuating the glass ceiling phenomenon. The glass ceiling, “an invisible barrier halting progress to the highest reaches of executive status,” is commonly associated with “gender and racial-ethnic discrimination...at the top of the (traditional) labor market” (Amott & Matthaei, 1996, p. 347). Due to the similarities between the male dominated traditional labor market and the dominant male culture of the American theatre, many women are deterred from realizing their full potential as playwrights. Playwright Lynne Alvarez states, “I don’t believe in victimization, but yes, I think being a woman hinders (progress in the theatre)...There is no woman playwright, I think, who is as successful as the most successful man playwright” (Greene, 2001, p. 20). Because male playwrights are produced more often and in a wider variety of venues, they are able to generate a greater income than their female contemporaries. After 20 years of writing plays Adrienne Kennedy realized that, “although I had many first-class productions, apart from grants my plays did not seem to generate an income...I had been living on grants, and I hadn’t quite realized that” (Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987, p. 348).

Additionally, it appears that women writers are unable to make a living from their plays due to the widespread bias among theatre managers that plays by women lack universal audience appeal, and therefore will not make any money. A play that will not make money for a theatre should not be supported financially through production. “According to some

contemporary women playwrights, women's works have often been met with...lack of encouragement and even total disregard" (Olauson, 1981, p. 7), and consequently, many theatres will only support one-woman, performance art oriented pieces that are less financially risky than full-scale theatrical productions. Playwright Susan Yankowitz's experience in regional theatres has been that "you get your play up through the woman who is second in command, and when the script ascends finally to the top, the person who really has the power is a man, and the man says no" (Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987, p. 345). Playwrights such as Jake-ann Jones, Theresa Rebeck and Elizabeth Egloff agree that this is a product of the enduring white male dominant culture of the American theatre. This culture not only determines aesthetics, but also promotes the misconception that female playwrights *always* have a *feminist* or *feminine* agenda when writing, whereas male playwrights are *agenda-less*, and therefore universally appealing (Greene, 2001).

Audiences are also inclined to share the bias that plays by women are not universal. Constance Congdon believes, "if you're female, there is a preconception that there's an agenda, and the audience doesn't trust the work" (Greene, 2001, p. 78). Paula Vogel agrees, stating, "Everybody comes to a play and looks at (the author's name) and then has preconceptions about what kind of drama that should or should not be...gender is thought to have its own decorum," meaning that men are allowed to write things that women should not (Greene, 2001, p. 431). Congdon concurs, stating that when she writes something, "it is always seen as a political statement, i.e., feminist or anti-feminist...a man can write the same (thing) and it's seen as life. It's seen as art. It's seen as universal. The male gets the universal, the female gets the particular" (Greene, 2001, p. 78). This misconception could be attributed to lingering memories of the feminist theatre of the suffrage and women's liberation

movements mentioned previously. During these times, it was not uncommon for women to write plays with specific feminist or feminine agendas, which may have caused a sense of alienation among some audience members. However, as Margaret Drabble points out, “being a writer means that you do not have to adopt a single ideology but that you are able to communicate differing points of view” (1998, p. 171), and therefore, audiences should not be apprehensive about attending plays by women.

In order to compensate for their marginalization in the theatre due to the biases of theatre managers and audience members, many women have created their own theatre companies with the aim of producing plays by and/or for women. Companies such as Spiderwoman, Split Britches, Five Lesbian Brothers, Coatlicue and New Georges, among hundreds of others nationwide, are giving voice to female playwrights and performers who have found few resources and little success or encouragement elsewhere. For example, the New York-based New Georges “fulfills its mission to ‘produce and develop imaginative new works by women’ not only by putting on full-length, full-scale mainstage productions, but also by organizing festivals, readings, workshops, and Perform-a-Thons (where short plays are performed back to back), as well as maintaining an affordable rehearsal space” (Drama Mamas, 2002, p. 42). Similarly, Julia Miles founded Women’s Project & Production in 1978 in response to the under-representation of female playwrights in the mainstream American theatre (Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987; [www.womensproject.org](http://www.womensproject.org)). Despite “the accusation that there were not enough plays by women available,” in its first year 700 scripts were submitted for production (Chinoy & Jenkins, 1987, p. 345; Wilmer, 2002). Women’s Project & Production is now a formidable operation with a permanent facility and year-round season, celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> year in existence ([www.womensproject.org](http://www.womensproject.org)). In addition, some more

progressive mainstream theatres sponsor playwriting competitions specifically for women writers. For example, Providence, Rhode Island's Perishable Theatre implemented the International Women's Playwriting Festival in 1992 in order to "spotlight emerging female writers and to encourage their unique artistic voices," through "presenting three previously unproduced one-act plays a season" (www.aboutwpcf.com; Drama Mamas, 2002, p. 36).

These women's companies and playwriting festivals provide unique and much needed opportunities for contemporary and emerging playwrights, while other organizations work to rediscover and preserve female playwrights of the past.

Currently, the New York-based Juggernaut Theatre Company is presenting *The First 100 Years: The Professional Female Playwright*, as series of staged readings featuring largely forgotten female playwrights from the late 1600s to the mid-1800s (Son, 2003; Goreau, 2003). According to Juggernaut Theatre artistic director Gwynn MacDonald, "There were more than 60 professional female playwrights writing between the years 1660-1800 with commercial and critical success, but people only ever know Aphra Behn" (Son, 2003, p. 52). Juggernaut's readings series is designed as a celebration of these pioneering women writers in the English-speaking world who "survived criticism, ridicule and even sabotage to become a familiar presence on the English stage," although "by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the playwrights had dropped out of history" (Goreau, 2003, www.nytimes.com).

Contemporary playwrights Diana Son and Ellen McLaughlin expressed their chagrin at being unaware of early female playwrights such as Behn, Susanna Centlivre, Elizabeth Inchbald and Joanna Baillie during a Juggernaut sponsored symposium in October 2002 when they were asked if these women would have influenced their work. McLaughlin replied:

I can only imagine what would have happened to me in a parallel universe – if I had been growing up, falling in love with this medium, and had seen one of these plays...If I had (only) come into this world of playwriting thinking that I was standing on the shoulders of these women, and not always feeling like, “I will try to write a play and somebody will think: It’s pretty good for a girl.” (Son, 2003, p. 54)

Women’s theatre companies, playwriting festivals and staged readings all provide female playwrights with significant opportunities, but the problem remains that female playwrights are treated as niche-fillers instead of credible and vital artists, and their plays continue to exist on the fringe of the American theatre. While there are some female playwrights who choose to associate their work exclusively with women’s theatres, most strive for equal standing and increased production in the mainstream theatre. I believe that women’s companies and festivals are valuable and necessary, however they should not be the sole channels through which female playwrights are able to succeed. Women writers should be included unconditionally in the regular season schedules of mainstream American theatres.

## **Recommendations**

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The following five recommendations are my response to the previously mentioned factors that have caused female playwrights to be marginalized and underrepresented in the American theatre. Several of the recommendations may seem to suggest that I am in favor of implementing quota systems in order to rectify the inequities present in the theatre, however this is not my intention. I do not believe a play should be produced *just because a woman wrote it*. However, I do believe that many plays are not produced more often simply because they *are* written by women, and these recommendations provide a means to *help*

rectify this discrimination. Ideally, these recommendations will provide a starting point for theatre managers who might be skeptical about the merits of female playwrights, or who may be unsure of how to begin integrating them into a regular season. By implementing one or more of these short-term solutions, theatre managers can begin to correct the implicit discrimination against female playwrights that permeates the mainstream American theatre.

#### ❖ **Tokenism**

Although selecting a token female playwright for each season is not the definitive answer to correcting the gender inequity in the theatre, it is a start. One woman in the season is better than none. This is by no means a long-term solution, as it perpetuates the notion of *playwrights vs. female playwrights*. Playwright Elizabeth Egloff admits that the “paranoid” part of her still “suspects theatres of picking (her) plays to fill slots,” left vacant for the token woman (Greene, 2001, p. 153). Concurrently, writer Margaret Drabble states, “women nowadays have become more alert to (the) phenomenon” of the appearance of equality in numbers between male and female writers, and “they are no longer prepared to accept the token woman as an accurate representation of the whole picture” (1998, p. 167). The reason I recommend tokenism here, is out of my hope that by presenting one play by a woman, theatre managers will see how easy it can be to take the next step by including two or more women in the following season.

#### ❖ **Take A Chance (Without Hurting Yourself)**

There is no need to compromise the mission statement or quality of performance when taking a chance on a female playwright. Great plays by women are readily available from many publishers. Theatre managers should be open to reading scripts by women with whom

they are unfamiliar because they might just stumble upon something amazing. Theatre managers should also closely monitor national playwriting festivals for new works by women. If the production of new work does not harmonize with a theatre's mission statement, theatre managers should be receptive to reviving a historic piece of theatre by a woman.

#### ❖ **Inventory and Increase**

Theatre managers should inventory the plays produced by their theatres during the past five seasons in order to determine the percentage of female playwrights that have been included. Whatever the percentage is, they should make a commitment to increase that number by at least 20% over the next five seasons. For example, if a theatre featured only 5% women writers 1997-2002, they should commit to programming at least 25% female playwrights during the 2003-2008 seasons. A 20% increase in production per theatre seems like a very small amount, yet I believe it can greatly elevate the overall production frequency for female playwrights in the US. If theatre managers are committed to increasing their production of female playwrights by 20% every five years, women writers will soon receive the recognition they have been largely denied throughout history.

#### ❖ **Develop, Produce and Disseminate**

Managers whose theatres support the development of new plays can have a significant impact on female playwrights. Playwright Constance Congdon asserts, "We need to make sure (plays by women) get produced. Not just developed. Audiences don't see our work, and our careers don't go forward" (Greene, 2001, p. 78). Therefore, it is up to theatre managers to commission, develop and produce new work by female playwrights. In addition, they should take the opportunity to recommend their newly developed work to

their colleagues at other theatres for production. This way, female playwrights will be able further their careers through additional productions while reaching wider audiences with their work.

#### ❖ **Create an Entire Season of Women Playwrights**

Because female playwrights write in a variety of genres and styles, just as men do, an entirely female season would not be restrictive. After all, entirely male seasons are currently playing at hundreds of regional theatres around the country. An entire season of female playwrights may assist in generating an expanded and fresh audience, as well as garner critical attention. Theatre managers may take the opportunity to market the season as a step forward for the theatre: “From now on, we will be making an effort to produce more plays written by women, and this season is just a sample of the great productions to come!” Conversely, theatre managers may decide against this obvious marketing technique, choosing to quietly implement the all female season while waiting for audience response. Did anyone notice? Did anyone complain? Did anyone send their thanks for including female playwrights? In any case, an all female season will succeed in drawing attention to several playwrights who are not produced as often as they should be.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Study**

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Although there is a general perception that women have achieved equal status in American society, the plight of female playwrights shows us otherwise. As I mentioned in the Introduction, it was shocking for me to hear a talented and educated artistic director tell me that there are no female playwrights. This is clearly a reflection of the past marginalization of female playwrights as it continues today. As women writers strive for acceptance in their

profession, so too do women in the traditional labor market. Their common struggle for fair wages and career advancement echo a centuries old attempt for women to gain equal footing with their male counterparts without falling victim to their gender.

In developing this paper, I found that studying the status of female playwrights in the American theatre is a vast and complicated undertaking. The possibilities for further study and in-depth inquiry are far reaching and include audience perception of female playwrights, the responsibilities of family and motherhood and their relation to the frequency and perceived quality of female playwrights' work, and the sporadic inclusion of women writers on the male dominated syllabi of American educational institutions, among many others. Until female playwrights are acknowledged as vital, equal and important artists instead of obligatory niche-fillers, there will be countless issues for scholars to address and deconstruct.

In addressing the issues of female playwrights, I began to wonder if it is actually possible for theatres to be all-inclusive, presenting playwrights of various ethnicities and races, genders, sexual orientations, political agendas and theatrical styles. As most theatres produce an average of only five plays per season that must be compatible with their mission statements, it is understandable that incorporating diversity presents a challenge. However, I doubt there are any theatres that strive to produce plays solely by white men. Playwright Paula Vogel states, "The sooner we include more artists and expand the definition of what theater should be, the stronger theater will be" (Austin, 2001, p. 429), and I agree. It is time for those in positions of power to become more aware of ongoing discrimination while taking steps to correct the inequities present in the American theatre.

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