

Australian Theatre Forum — 14 September 2011

Women in Theatre Salon — Conversation starter

The issues, data and suggested strategies below have been compiled from interviews with over 30 practitioners, including artistic directors, artistic associates, directors and playwrights, representing the experiences of emerging, developing and established artists in the major, small-to-medium and independent companies. The intention of this 'conversation starter' is to move beyond the well-trodden grounds of previous discussions towards an Action Plan for the sector.

Some cultural reference points

- Sustaining a career as a director/playwright in Australia has been a preoccupation of the sector for a considerable period of time. Opportunities for advancement have grown significantly over the past several decades, but disparities in career achievement remain.
- In 1982, the Australia Council sponsored a study of the status of women working in the arts. In 1984, *Women in the Arts: A Strategy for Action* was published by the Australia Council. The 1994 *Report on the Evaluating and Monitoring of the Australia Council's Women and Arts Policy* included updated research and documented advances but described the improvements as 'uneven'.
- A number of initiatives, reports and inquiries have looked at ways of strengthening the sector and addressing systemic challenges, including *Make it New?* (2006), *Love Your Work: Training, Retaining and Connecting Artists in Theatre* (2008), *Report to Ministers on an Examination of the Small to Medium Performing Arts Sector* (2002), *An Analysis of the Triennially Funded Theatre Organisations of the Theatre Boards of the Australia Council* (2003), *An Examination of Resources for Writing for Performance* (2005).
- In December 2009 the iconic image of eleven men and one woman lined up for the launch of the 2010 Belvoir season launched a storm in the media and the blogosphere. This momentum translated into several events, including the 2009 Phillip Parsons Memorial Lecture panel, the Women Directors Forum in May 2010, the Playwrights Solutions Roundtable in August 2011, and this Salon at the Australian Theatre Forum in September 2011.

Some diagnostic reference points

There are several different sorts of explanation for where the 'problem' lies. The issues outlined below aren't mutually exclusive and there is a complex interplay between many factors operating in different domains. Many of these are issues which affect not just women, but they tend to impact on women more than men and therefore the result is that women are differentially disadvantaged (along with other forms of diversity). There are clearly no simple solutions and different kinds of action are needed on different fronts, but it is hoped that a level of collective

understanding about the underlying dynamics will allow for coordination of efforts by stakeholders in different locations across the sector.

It's a problem in particular companies

- Particular Artistic Directors are well known for the gender imbalance of their selection practices

It's a problem with the autonomous Artistic Director model

- Positions aren't advertised and people are 'fast-tracked' by being directly appointed by the Artistic Director (usually men).
- There are very few positions of influence and they become available very rarely, so any imbalance can only be addressed very slowly.
- Although there may be spheres of influence around the Artistic Director they are all different in the degree to which they are open to input from others. Those around them need to take responsibility however for asking questions about balance, and accountability for diversity and openness in the choices and decisions they make.
- Collaboration in theatre-making requires a level of trust that is built up in teams or networks of people who work together across multiple projects over a period of time. This is great if you're part of a successful network but is hard to break into for outsiders. There is a recent trend towards more highly collaborative theatre-making that has exacerbated this, resulting in even fewer opportunities for women.

It's a problem of commercial focus

- Artistic choices are driven by box office considerations and subscriber numbers. As long as these are increasing there is little pressure to take what might seem like commercially risky decisions.

It's a problem with the nature of employment and career advancement in the sector

- Hours are unsociable and not family-friendly, workplaces aren't conducive to having young children
- It's become harder and harder to cobble together a living from freelance work ('there aren't enough weeks in the year'). Are the fees paid to freelance directors and playwrights commensurate with the work?
- Freelance work is a young single person's game: when you want to settle down, get a mortgage, 'behave like a grown-up', you need to find stable income. It's at this point that people tend to move into the administrative and support positions that are more readily available than the creative leadership ones, or into university teaching, or elsewhere.
- Nobody is looking out for industrial issues in the sector. What checks and balances are there in relation to governance and human resource processes?

It's a problem of shrinking opportunities in the context of increasing numbers of graduates

- Resources in general are more scarce and this has affected women differentially
- Companies in the past had to apply project by project for funding: shifts in the funding models have concentrated decision-making into a smaller numbers of hands
- The closing down of the regional theatre network has reduced opportunities for mid-career artists
- Although there are many more forms of theatre now, this may create fragmentation and difficulties for people who want to move between different parts of the sector (movement tends to be lateral rather than 'upwards' to the majors)

It's a problem in the broader culture

- All large hierarchical social structures are characterized by gender imbalance at the top end
- Australia has a 'blokey' culture that is obsessed with sport, youth and 'rock star' celebrity artists
- Calls for greater accountability for diversity issues are seen as political correctness; 'feminism' is a taboo word in some quarters but there are younger women (and men) who are quite politicised
- All kinds of diversity awareness are needed, not just in relation to women

Some potential action points

'We don't want special treatment we want equal treatment'

- Unconscious biases are in play and people need to be reminded to consciously reflect on their choices. The debates need to be kept moving, ongoing disparities need to be given ongoing visibility
- Quotas are often mentioned: they aren't widely supported, however. It may be that quotas would be bad for self-esteem in a sector where low self-esteem is endemic anyway: if you got the job you wouldn't know whether it was on the basis of your work or your gender
- What is the best balance between opportunities for emerging artists versus those who are more established in their careers? There's a sense that it's the mid-career artists who are missing out on opportunities for development to take their careers to the next stage
- Opportunities are needed for development of the skills and experience to work at scale

Accountability is what is needed

- Various sets of statistics exist, and some are collected on a regular basis (e.g. PWA's data on women playwrights) but it needs to be more systematic — a kind of regular 'scorecard'
- Change won't happen until audiences start giving feedback with their choice patterns; guerilla tactics combining awareness-raising, information and humour could combine with social media possibilities (including crowd-sourcing of funding) to create grass-roots momentum

Not quotas but targets

- Should public funding to the major companies be tied to particular targeted areas?
- Gender parity on Boards: establish a register of women who have expertise to be appointed to Boards

More family-friendly employment conditions

- Some companies seem to be exemplary in this area: what sorts of actions are they taking to support employees with families?

More opening out of opportunities

- Facilitating partnerships for development programs between the majors and the rest of the sector (small-to-medium and independent). Most majors have some kind of partnerships in place – usually on a project basis. What is the impact of these on opportunities for women and other under-represented diversity groups?
- Companies doing more to find playwrights and connecting playwrights to production or workshopping opportunities. Playwriting Australia has quite a strong brokering role and commissions statistics annually (see below)

Developmental opportunities

- Fellowships and residencies
- Skills and development funding
- Mechanisms to support production aligned with playwriting awards and prizes

Accolades and commendation for organizations who are doing a great job

- The 'Employer of Choice for Women' recognition through the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency is only available for organizations with more than 80 staff. The current list doesn't even have a category for arts and cultural organisations. However, the criteria for recognition provide a checklist of actions that organizations can take

Some quantitative indicators

Gender balance in creative leadership positions in the MPAG companies

- In 2011, women hold 3 (33%) of the 9 positions as Artistic Director in MPAG companies. (If Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton are each counted as .5, these proportions reduce to 31% and 22%).

Data compiled by Jane Howard and published on the No Plain Jane blog¹

Compiled in November 2010, analysis of the productions of the 8 Theatre companies in the Major Performing Arts Group for their 2011 season.

- Of the 80 scheduled plays that have credited writers (omitting 8 choreographed dance works without a credited writer), a female writer is credited in 13, or 16% of texts. Among new works, 29% have a credited female writer.
- In 2011, the balance of directors is 28 female (45%) alongside 34 male (55%). However, 33 of 85 productions are directed by females (39%) alongside 52 directed by males (61%).

Data compiled by Lucy Freeman, Women Directors in Victoria: A Saga in Three Acts²

Analysis of data on 540 theatre productions staged in Victoria that opened their seasons between 1 January 2007 and 31 December 2007.

- Sole female director: 156 (29%); sole male director: 251 (46%); no director (~15%); unknown (~7%); mixed (~4%). However 31% of the male-directed productions were main stage, compared with 18% of female-directed.
- Analysis of reviews: 50% of 577 reviews published in 2007 in the daily and weekend newspapers focused on MPAB company activity and Australian and international commercial productions. Work by men is more likely to be reviewed irrespective of the location within the sector
- In new and existing works, male directors tend to direct productions where the concept or theatre text is created by men. Women directors tend to direct works created by women. The most common repertoire for women directors in 2007 was Australian new works created by women.
- Historical data on artistic leadership in theatre companies
 - Prior to 1968, of the 60 individuals who were founders, co-founders or artistic directors in the 47 significant pioneer Australian Theatre companies, 27 (45%) were women and 33 (55%) were men. There is however a tendency for women to take on leadership positions at an

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¹ <http://noplain.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/if-you%E2%80%99re-not-shakespeare-it%E2%80%99s-good-to-be-brecht-or-lally-katz/>

² Unpublished Master of Arts thesis, School of Theatre and Drama, Faculty of Humanities, La Trobe University, March 2011

older age than men (30s–40s for women vs 20s–30s for men), which persists into the present patterns of promotion and career progression.

- In 1979 only 5 of 32 subsidised companies had women in artistic director positions (16%).
- In 1999, of 42 subsidised companies, 21 (50%) had male-only leadership, (artistic director, co-director, or member of artistic directorate/collective); 15 (36%) had female-only leadership and 6 mixed (14%).

Data on gender of playwrights compiled & commissioned by Playwriting Australia

- National Play Festival 2010: 7 plays in all, of which 4 by women, 3 by men. National Script Workshop 2010: 6 plays in all, of which 4 by women, 2 by men.

The following data is extracted from the Ipsos-Eureka Project report ‘Australian Plays: Attitudes, Development and Production in 2010’, prepared for Playwriting Australia (April 2011).

- Seventy companies responded to the survey, reporting data for their 2010 programs. Of 216 plays produced, 87 were written or co-written by a woman (40%). However, more than a quarter (26%) of these were produced by Victoria’s La Mama alone, a further 17% by youth companies, 12% by major performing arts companies and the remaining 47% produced by small to medium companies.

Average proportion of Australian plays produced by writers of different experience levels, by company turnover

Ann. turnover	Emerging	Developing	Established	
<\$500k	44%	23%	33%	100%
\$500k-\$1m	34%	33%	38%	100%
\$1m-\$5m	15%	16%	62%	100%
>\$5m	15%	32%	53%	100%

‘emerging’ = two scripts workshopped or one short play professionally produced; ‘developing’ = one–three plays professionally produced; ‘established’ = four or more full-length plays professionally produced

- Commissions: 45 companies, or two-thirds of those surveyed had playwrights working under commission, for a total of 133 commissions (an average of 2.9 commissions per company). 39% of commissions were valued at \$10,000-\$14,999, with only one commission of more than \$20,000. 22% of commissions were for less than \$5,000, and 35% between \$5,000 and \$9,999.