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Who's Getting
Produced in the
U.S.?

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A Solution to Gender (and other) Inequality

BY JULIUS GALACKI

DURING THE DRAMATISTS GUILD NATIONAL CONFERENCE, on July 17, 2015, there was a presentation of “The Count,” a major study that quantified the gender and racial disparity in theatre productions in America: within the survey criteria, only 22% of plays produced in the last three years were written by female playwrights.

The sheer weight of the lopsided numbers was indeed surprising, and very powerful to anyone who has any developed sense of justice and fairness, and/or any desire to experience art from the full multiplicity of human experience, i.e. half of the human population.

Therefore, I would like to propose a long term, institutional solution to this societal problem. (Marsha Norman made it abundantly clear from her speech that same night that the 20% ceiling is a disquietingly common percentage across fields, so it is clearly a widespread phenomenon in our culture.)

Lisa Kron, in her speech about *The Count* said she didn’t care why this problem existed but just that it had to change. But “why” is key to making the change permanent. Yes, the anger is righteous and justified, but as previous, similar studies by other researchers have shown, there is a temporary bump of reform after any particular study’s publication, then things return to nearly the same level of inequality. So, to solve the problem, one **MUST** consider how plays actually get selected.

Over and over one hears, and my observations have concurred, that theatre is a relationship business. So knowing the artistic director, literary manager and/or some important artistic associate is what, more often than not, leads to productions. So all other aspects of a play and its merits are only evaluated **AFTER** a relationship has already been established with some influential decision maker.

Equally important, regional theatres very typically include one, two, up to all programming slots for plays that have already had successful Broadway, Off Broadway runs, and sometimes LORT A production(s). Quite simply, it’s not just an artistic decision, it’s a marketing decision where productions beget productions.

So real change will only happen if the reality of the above is engaged. And no matter how much any particular decision maker genuinely wants to choose more female written plays, an additional reality must be acknowledged: be-

sides conscious bias, we all, men and women, have internalized a subconscious gender bias. For example, to prove this contention, there are a plethora of easily Google-able studies demonstrating that both male and female teachers will favor boys in the classroom.

But there is one cultural institution that has very successfully dealt with subconscious gender bias: classical orchestras. In a survey of American orchestras from 2007-2008 season, the percentage of women players was 48.63%.

This change has been accomplished through “blind” auditions, i.e. the person literally performs behind a curtain. So not only is gender bias eliminated, but so are other biases, e.g. racial bias.

In theatre we can do the same thing by submitting our scripts blind, where the script name and author would only be identified by a number. And then a separate data base would cross-reference actual names and titles to these numbers.

Optimally, if all scripts at all theatres were chosen this way, not only would gender and racial parity improve, and most likely, reflect the actual make-up of the playwrighting population. Additionally, I would contend that the overall quality of plays produced would go up, as selections would be made on a true merit system.

So not only would female and minority representation rise, so would plays by writers from outside of the major population centers. The truth is well-known writers are usually well-known for a reason: they’re talented and write very good plays – but even the greatest writers sometimes write mediocre plays that still get produced. But wouldn’t it be better if a precious production

slot was given to a better play...quite possibly one written by a woman or a person of color?

Obviously there would be enormous – ENORMOUS – resistance to this proposal citing the additional cost of administering blind submissions, the inability to reward colleagues, the security of doing things the way it's always been done, the entrenched self-interest of the successful, and especially, those same successful people's agents, who wouldn't want to give up the advantage of their clients' name recognition and reputation, as after all, *that* is their job – to get their clients work.


First of all, cost could be dealt with by having a central repository of blind scripts. I would propose that the New Play Exchange, if reconfigured, would be the perfect avenue for this. All of the search key words and other delimiters that the NPE has available now would still be there.

Secondly, not every theatre would initially need to institute a blind system. However, it would be critical that the Off Broadway and LORT A theatres do so, since their productions so influence the other regional theatres' choices.

Thirdly, the theatres can start off conservatively by reserving only one or two programming slots from their seasons for a "blind" choice. Thus there would still be a majority of production slots available from which they can knowingly choose this Pulitzer Prize winner or that white male playwright whom they've produced previously, etc. or, even, if they so wish, consciously choose some unknown woman and/or person of color's play.

So, initially limiting the number of "blind" slots could mollify the agents, and allay the fears of the established writers to some degree.

Then when everyone sees that the sky has not fallen, these theatres can even increase the number of blind submission slots.

But the more that a system of blind submissions can be institutionalized, across the board, the more the culture of theatre will change... and then, the more theatre can help change the culture of America as a whole. 

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Stage Directions: Do Playwrights Offer More than Dialogue?

BY JOHN PATRICK BRAY

I TEACH THE DRAMATIC WRITING sequence at the University of Georgia. The classes are geared at budding playwrights and screenwriters, and are offered as electives. During my Basic Dramatic Course today (the beginner's class), a student told me they learned from their high school teacher to cross out every stage direction because the stage directions didn't matter. I

responded that to some extent the stage directions in a licensed play are the choices of the first director, however, a number of stage directions are still the physical actions, atmosphere, etc., created by the playwright that simultaneously create and are created by the world of story; and that in original work, in particular, the stage directions are entirely the playwright's and need to be considered. The student responded "I don't agree with you."

I was genuinely surprised (and to be honest, a little angered by the student's cheek). Why would a playwright's work be so disregarded? What lessons are we teaching our students in regards to plays—those established, and those that are new? What was perhaps most surprising for me was that I had an opinion that I never realized was up for debate: for me, the stage directions that I write are just as important as the dialogue. We learn more from the characters by how they behave rather than by what they say. Jeffrey Sweet, one of my teachers, used to give us an example: if Character A approaches Character B and asks "do you love me?" and character B responds "Yes," while approaching Character A, we trust that Character B loves Character A. If Character B responds "Yes," while taking a step back, the physical behavior suggests otherwise. If we did not have the direction "Character B steps back," we would have been losing a major component to the inner life of the character, as well as the nature of their relationship. An audience would know from Character B's behavior that there was uncertainty at best, and the relationship was doomed at worst.

I reached out to friends in the custom of the twenty-first century (I asked a question on Facebook)