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Looking beyond the Tonys, women on Broadway seek to increase their numbers

THERESA AGOVINO



Walter McBride

A TONYS TRIPLE THREAT: Director Taichman, lead producer Roth and playwright Vogel are nominated for the play *Indecent*.

Broadway adores its divas. Bette Midler is a resounding smash in *Hello, Dolly!* Glenn Close is once again packing the house with her reprise of the role Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*. Stage veterans Christine Ebersole and Patti LuPone deliver in *War Paint*. Each of those shows rang up between $1 million and $2 million in ticket sales the final week of the 2016-17 season, in May.

But the standing ovations for the women onstage serve to underscore the challenges many women face behind the curtain. Female directors accounted for just 16% of Broadway contracts in the past five years, while female choreographers fared only slightly better at 24%, according to the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. The numbers are pretty flat in comparison to the previous five years. The imbalance is especially ironic given that women make up 67% of audiences and 54% of ticket buyers.

"The theater sees itself as liberal, open and progressive, and we tell stories that are risky and cutting-edge," said Laura Penn, executive director of the society. "At its core, however, Broadway is a business, and we still live in a male-dominated culture."

The generally accepted rule is that only 2 out of 5 Broadway shows typically turn a profit, and it costs from $3 million to $5 million to stage a play and between $10 million and $20 million for a musical.

"There is a lot of risk associated with these projects and a great deal of money," said director Rebecca Taichman. "Producers want to work with people they know, and a lot of those people are men. I understand wanting to work with people you know, but it does create a vicious cycle."

Since 1990 seven of the 26 Pulitzer Prize–winning plays were written by women; only three made it to Broadway, compared with 16 of the winners by men. Edward Albee's 1994 winner, *Three Tall Women*, announced for the 2017-18 Broadway season, will make it 17. The three by women were *Sweat* by Lynn Nottage, now playing at Studio 54, *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks and *Wit* by Margaret Edson.

With *Sweat*, Nottage just made her Broadway debut, as did playwright Paula Vogel with *Indecent*, now at the Cort Theater. "Twenty years is a long time to wait," said Vogel. She is referring to her 1998 Pulitzer winner, *How I Learned to Drive*, about an older man's sexual abuse of a young woman. It won an Obie and has been staged around the world, but she was told Broadway audiences wouldn't tolerate the topic. "There's misogyny out there," she said, noting that *Blackbird*, a 2005 play written by David Harrower that has a similar theme but no Pulitzer, has been staged twice on Broadway.

Women in theater say another hurdle is that most of the influential theater critics are men. They claim sexist language often seeps into reviews, which are closely read by producers and theater owners. Of the 22 current members of the New York Drama Critics' Circle, five are women.

"People say it shouldn't matter, but it does," said playwright Julia Jordan. "There is subconscious bias."

In December theintervalny.com, a website for female voices in the theater, urged readers to complain to *The New Yorker* about a savage review by critic Hilton Als "that is too blatantly sexist to not go refuted." In it, Als belittled *Sweet Charity* director Leigh Silverman for being "too serious about theater; she wants her shows to count."

Doing it for themselves

For those who see the glass as half full, the 2017 Tony Award nominations have brought some reason to be positive.

Nottage's and Vogel's plays are vying for best drama, and both were directed by women. One of those women, Taichman, is among four nominees for best director of a play, for *Indecent*. Two women are up for best choreographer and one for best director of a musical.

But no matter what happens at the June 11 awards show, women in the industry are putting programs in place to develop a pipeline of others who may finally break the gender imbalance.

The Lilly Awards, which recognize women's contributions in theater, gave two new monetary prizes this year. Ten-time Tony Award–winning producer Daryl Roth underwrote one, a $10,000 prize for a woman in a design field, such as lighting or sound direction, while an Alabama businessman funded the $25,000 Harper Lee Award for a female playwright. In addition, the Lilly Awards Foundation, playwright Sarah Ruhl and New Dramatists together established a fund to help playwrights pay for child care expenses when they are working.

Roth, a lead producer of *Indecent*, said she decided to fund an award when she realized there weren't many female set designers. However, she expanded the eligibility. "We need women in all roles," she said.

"We have to pay it forward."

QUOTE

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As in other fields, many women are trying to establish their career at the same time as they are raising a family. Child care can be an especially vexing problem because often plays are staged outside of New York before they ever get to Broadway.

"It takes so much longer for women to get their due, and a lot of that is driven by child care issues," said Jordan, a co-founder of the Lilly Awards. She added that the foundation also runs a summer residency for women and offers child care so the participants can concentrate on their craft.

Women in theater say the best thing they can do to end gender inequity is to hire other women. *Sweat* director Kate Whoriskey said that a few years ago, she was given a list of potential assistants and all six were male. "I said, 'Are there no women?'" recalled Whoriskey, who added that she consistently hires female assistant directors. "You have to bring it up. You have to start the conversation."

And enlist men. After discussing gender disparity on his theater podcast, producer Ken Davenport decided to tally all the men and women he had interviewed. The male guests outnumbered the female. "I had to change my mindset and make a conscious effort to broaden my circle," he said. "People tend to go back to the same circle and don't even realize it."

Now when people give him lists of potential collaborators that include only men, he asks about women. This fall he is producing *Once on This Island*, a musical that will be choreographed by Camille Brown, a woman he has never worked with before.

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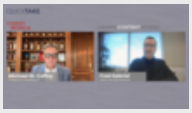

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