Women and Leadership: Theatre

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Abstract
"We have something of the utmost importance to contribute: the sensibility, the experience and the expertise of one half of humanity. All we ask is that we are able to do this in conditions of complete equality.” (Dorothy Hewitt, launching the Australia Council's 'Women in the Arts' report, 1983) Published in 2005, Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney's important book, The Doll's Revolution: Australian Theatre and Cultural Imagination, argues that the 1990s was a period in which women entered the theatrical mainstream and radically changed not just theatre but the way in which we think about Australian culture and identity: "Women playwrights, directors and actors have entered the mainstream. Their work has contributed to, if not radically transformed, the production of local and export quality Australian theatre and culture. At their most innovative, these women artists have revolutionised the stage of the last fifteen years with celebrated and award winning productions." (Fensham and Varney, 329) This surely is the very definition of creative leadership: to have not only the creative wherewithal but the ability and influence to affect not just theatre but ideas around nationhood and identity. It suggests that women have come a long way indeed since the 1970s, when they had to fight to be heard in even the most alternative and apparently radical of forums. Notably, however, Fensham and Varney also draw attention in closing to several key areas of concern, the first of which is the decline 'in the proportion of women writers in the repertoire of the mainstream companies in the mid-2000s' (337).

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Published in 2005, Rachel Fensham and Denise Varney's important book, The Doll's Revolution: Australian Theatre and Cultural Imagination, argues that the 1990s was a period in which women entered the theatrical mainstream and radically changed not just theatre but the way in which we think about Australian culture and identity:

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In the context of women's expanded participation, it seems ironic that, just a few short years later, the launch of the 2010 season of Australia's most famous theatre director, Neil Armfield-his final as artistic director of Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre-exposed what was described at the time as a 'tsunami of discontent' among female creatives. It seemed that no-one at Belvoir had anticipated the uproar that would ensue at what director David Berthold later described as 'the sight of a stage full of bright young men, and just one woman'-a consequence of the inclusion of only one woman, Lee Lewis, directing the only play written by a female playwright, Polly Stenham (UK), in the company's annual subscription season. Responding to the storm that erupted in both social media and the press, Armfield justified his programming on the basis of 'merit'.

Three months later, Belvoir replaced its annual Philip Parsons' Memorial Lecture with a public forum, entitled 'Where are the women?' Chaired by Belvoir's then general manager, Rachel Healy, speakers included highly regarded theatre critic and writer Alison Croggon, emerging director Shannon Murphy, Bell Shakespeare's then associate director, Marion Potts, and Gil Appleton, who had worked with Belvoir's co-founder, and inaugural general manager, Chris Westwood, in the early 1980s to insist on the place of women in the arts. One clear difference of opinion went to the heart of the matter: the role and responsibility of the artistic director, as the supreme arbiter of merit, to develop annual seasons according to his or her personal vision, as opposed to the responsibility of subsidised companies to make opportunities available to writers, directors and designers from a diversity of backgrounds in a transparent process. As a public discussion, it was notable for drawing attention both to
some of the mostly unspoken tensions around concepts of leadership in the arts (which pride themselves on taking the high moral ground) and to the uneven presence of women in Australia's mainstage theatres, despite the fact that, at the time, celebrated actor Cate Blanchett was co-director, with her husband Andrew Upton, of the Sydney Theatre Company, one of Australia's major performing arts organisations.

Subsequently, the Australia Council for the Arts Theatre Board, through Director Lynne Wallis, commissioned Elaine Lally (University of Technology, Sydney), in consultation with Sarah Miller from the University of Wollongong, to 'bring the research on women in creative leadership up to the present day, and provide a basis for the sector to discuss these issues and to reach agreement on some strategies to address the situation' (Lally, with Miller, 7). That research demonstrated unequivocally that women continue to be systematically under-represented in creative leadership roles, particularly in mainstage-typically state-theatre companies, which receive both state and federal funding through the Australia Council's Major Performing Arts Board, and, to a lesser extent, in those companies designated 'key organisations', a term that applies to small to medium companies funded through the Australia Council's Theatre Board.

This is an issue of artistic leadership, clearly differentiated from the management and production roles in which women are often well represented, typically as general managers or producers. When it comes to creative leadership-the makers of meaning and shapers of influence-women have often found themselves overlooked and under-represented, whether as artistic directors in a mainstage theatre company, as theatre directors commissioned to direct within a subscription season, or as writers/playwrights. The Women in Theatre report identified a pattern of 'good and bad years', but noted that 'the issue of gender equality in creative leadership had largely fallen off the agenda' since the mid-1990s (Lally, with Miller, 18). Lally and Miller identified this as being part of a bigger picture in which feminism, affirmative action and gender equity have generally fallen out of fashion, deemed irrelevant at best and subjected to derision at worst. This is not to suggest that there have been no significant improvements to the status of women over the past thirty years but, rather, that 'gender-neutral representation in creative leadership remains elusive' (Lally, with Miller, 8). This is particularly disappointing given the consistent advocacy and affirmative action policies developed since the early 1980s, when, as part of its Women & Arts project, the Australia Council sponsored a study on the status of women working in the arts.

It may be asked whether this seemingly intractable tendency can be understood as deeply rooted in the history of theatre in general, of Australian theatre in particular, and perhaps also in the dominant masculinism of this country's collective imaginings. Theatre in this context references the western tradition, rather than Indigenous sacred ritual and performance, dating back around 40,000 years, although the impact of Indigenous theatre on our stages since the late 1970s has been crucial to shaping our sense of a national theatre. The first known theatre production by European settlers took place in 1789, one year after the landing of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove. No women are recorded as being part of either the cast or the audience, which is scarcely surprising not only because Port Jackson was a penal settlement, and because the relationship between women and theatre has always been contested, but also, because theatre itself has been viewed with suspicion since the earliest days of European culture. From the belittling mimesis and representation of Plato's Republic to Michael Fried's 1967 essay on minimalism, Art and Objecthood, in which he famously wrote that 'art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre' (Fried, pdf version, 8), theatre has been
viewed with hostility. Even Plato's pupil, Aristotle, while celebrating the very idea of theatre, saw no place at all for women as either performers or theatre-makers.

It is ironic that women, although they were forbidden to appear on the stage for at least two millennia until the mid-17th century, should be understood as displaying a particular affinity for theatricality, being-like the biblical Eve-associated with pretence, masquerade and dissimulation, along with such undesirable traits as histrionics, exhibitionism and duplicity. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that theatre earned the condemnation of the early Christian church, not only for its emphasis on public display, 'lying' and pretence, but also because it was seen as seeking to mimic the demiurigic impulse in its re-creation of alternative realities that subverted or undermined the world created by a Christian God. The English Puritans went so far as to ban all public stage performances for eighteen years, with theatres only reopening after the restoration of the English throne under Charles II in 1660. Paradoxically, it seems that this closing of the theatres was what opened the way for the first professional women to work in theatre, including actress Margaret Hughes (1643-1719) and playwright Aphra Ben (1640-1689). As theatre scholar Lesley Ferris points out, 'when women began to act for the first time, the audience had to acknowledge real women, not simply their symbolic or aesthetic representation' (Ferris, in Goodman, with de Gay, 1670).

However, according to many feminist historians and theatre scholars, the official accounts of women's absence from the histories of theatre are misleading. Such theatre histories render invisible those women who performed over a far longer time frame in 'theatres of low status and informal organization, and as travelling players performing often without script on makeshift stages in the open street, [rather] than in the high status theatres equipped with permanent buildings and [official] patronage' (Cockin, in Goodman, with deGay, 20). In Australian theatre history, this tension between popular entertainments including variety, the pantomime, music hall and circus on the one hand, and what may be described as dramatic theatre on the other, has continued to reinforce the distinction between high and low art forms, high and low status space and venues, as well as the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles that continue even into the present day.

This tension around the moral appropriateness of theatrical entertainments, and their presumed impact on an impressionable and susceptible population, was exacerbated in Australia in the decades following European settlement. While theatre in some quarters was thought to offer a distraction from the greater evils of drinking and gambling, its generally unsavoury associations meant it was viewed with suspicion, particularly in a settlement designed specifically for the purpose of punishment and reform. Nevertheless, as noted previously, theatre has existed in Australia since the early days of European settlement, beginning with George Farquar's *The Recruiting Officer*, presented by a cast of convicts on 4 June 1789 and directed by Lieutenant Ralph Clark, an officer in the Royal Marines. Two years later, Robert Sidaway, a former convict and cast member of *The Recruiting Officer*, opened his convict-built theatre in Sydney (Wimmer, 259 & 260).

Throughout the 19th century, the plays that were performed were mostly imported, and the acting styles followed those in Europe. The men and women who leased the theatres in the Australian colonies were almost always actor/managers, meaning that they not only produced their plays, they also performed in them. Actor/managers were responsible for everything, from finding and hiring venues and actors to choosing repertoire, organising the front-of-house and publicity, as well as both directing and performing in the leading role. The first female actor/manager in Australia was an English actress, Mrs Anne Clarke, who bravely opened her own company in Tasmania, which operated successfully at the Theatre Royal in
Hobart from 1840 to 1847 (Wimmer, 257). However, most women in theatre in late 19th and early 20th-century Australia were actors rather than managers or directors.

In the decades after World War II, the role of women and their proper place in society was transformed on a scale that was inconceivable previously and the effects were gradually felt in theatre. In Sydney, the Phillip St Revue, founded in 1954 by Glasgow-born impresario William Orr, established a home for political satire that honed the performance skills of a generation of women, including Wendy Blacklock (Van Straten, 'Blacklock'), Noeline Brown (Alafaci, AWR), Ruth Cracknell (Van Straten, 'Cracknell'), Judi Farr, Gloria Dawn (Van Straten, 'Dawn'), Jill Perryman and June Salter, all of whom were able to sustain careers and continue working in film, radio, television and theatre. Critical, too, in 1954 was the establishment of the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, set up to establish 'high culture' nationally, meaning drama, opera and ballet companies; however, it did little to promote home-grown theatre or to encourage local playwrights. What it did do, according to academic and critic Geoffrey Milne (1945-2013), was foster and promote a network of subsidised, non-commercial theatre companies throughout Australia, establishing what he describes as the first wave of Australian theatre. In this context, a growing, though still small, number of women were able to enter the fields of direction and management.

The role of the actor/manager may be understood as key to an essential but not always acknowledged form of creative leadership. The committed investment into the development of the professional repertory model of theatre in Australia undertaken by Miss Doris Fitton (later Dame Doris, 1897-1985) (McPherson, ADB), originally an actress but best known as the utterly tenacious director/manager of Sydney's Independent Theatre, provided an important pioneering role model. Fitton established the Independent Theatre in 1930 with capital she organised from fellow actors. Though never financially secure, the company lasted nearly five decades, closing finally in 1977 when Fitton was 80 (Van Straten, 'Fitton'). The groundbreaking work, undertaken by actor turned producer, Wendy Blacklock AM (born c.1932) was also of particular importance from the 1960s, and remains crucial to any description of women's leadership in Australian theatre.

In 1982, actress Wendy Blacklock, then best known for her role as 'Mummy' McDonald in Australia's infamous, long-running soapie, Number 96, famously entered the offices of the Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT) in order to learn about 'contracts and budgets'. Five months later, she was appointed coordinator of the Trust's new and entrepreneurial Australian Content Department, which in 1990 incorporated to become Performing Lines Ltd, an independent not-for-profit organisation known for developing, nurturing, producing and touring new Australian work. Blacklock, who retired from Performing Lines in 2012, was a visionary in her early support for contemporary Australian theatre and performance. She was, for instance, the first to commission and tour theatre by Aboriginal writers and directors, including the 1982 tour of Bobby Merritt's The Cakeman (1975) to the World Theatre Festival in Denver, Colorado. One of her early commissions was Western Australian Noongar artist Jack Davis's No Sugar, and she toured this and several others of Davis's productions both nationally and internationally. Interestingly, and like many other such women, Blacklock has not presented herself as a leader, but her role as an advocate, producer, presenter and promoter has been of key importance to the development and reception of Australian theatre, whether dramatic or contemporary, and has consistently included support for original and often experimental work created by artists from diverse cultural and art-form backgrounds. Her contribution has been recognised by many awards, including in 2005 the premier's personal nomination for the NSW Women's Honour Roll.
Other leading women in this context have included Marguerite Pepper, whose support for the work of individual artists and ensembles from inception through to production and touring has been distinguished by commitment, intelligence and longevity. Blacklock has also inspired producer/presenters and advocates such as Fiona Winning, currently (2013) head of programming at the Sydney Festival, and Angharad Wynne Jones, creative producer at Arts House, Melbourne.

This perhaps more pragmatic model, which differentiates itself from that of the artistic director, typically a theatre director, has been understood by many as 'servicing' the theatrical vision rather than leading it as the initiator or creator of art. Whilst this is a tenuous distinction, it is a remarkably tenacious one, and can be read in gendered terms to represent women's skills and habits of organisation as performing the function of handmaiden to the arts, rather than artist and creator of cultural meaning and value per se. It may also be a matter of deep cultural conditioning that women in these roles (as well as others) deny or downplay their leadership. On the contrary, they are crucial to creativity in the theatre arts and should be celebrated as effective advocates on behalf of artists as well as for their critical dramaturgical interventions, support for creative programming, and development of supportive but critical contexts for the reception of new work. Conversely, the idealisation of autonomous artistic leadership may be critiqued as perpetuating an outmoded feudal and masculinist model of patronage that inherently favours the status quo and existing networks over a potentially riskier model that opens doors not only to new people, including larger numbers of women, but also to new and unfamiliar ideas. At the heart of such debates is the question of who should make decisions about an individual's opportunity as well as ability to sustain a career as a theatre artist. Alternative models to the autonomous artistic director threaten to distribute power away from the few and enlarge the field of those who make the decisions, who define the 'state of the art', who get the money, who get the attention, who get the press, and who, consequently, provide the imprimatur for the chosen few to continue to develop as theatre artists.

Highly acclaimed actress Robyn Nevin was artistic director, not only of the Queensland Theatre Company (QTC) in the late 1990s, but also of the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) from 1999 to 2007. Renowned for her meticulous attention to detail and capacity for hard work, as much as for her extraordinary acting skills, Nevin has since been part of a curatorial triumvirate that programmed the Melbourne Theatre Company season, prior to Brett Sheehy taking up the role of artistic director and CEO in late 2011. Succeeding Nevin at STC, internationally renowned actress, Cate Blanchett took up the position of co-artistic director with her husband, playwright Andrew Upton, for three years from 2008. Blanchett has since returned to her international film career, following the introduction to STC of an artistic program that provides new opportunities for more experimentally inclined ensembles as well as bringing international star power to the stage in a range of productions that attracted box-office breaking attendances. In South Australia, writer, actor and director Rosalba Clemente headed up the State Theatre Company of South Australia for five years from 1999 to 2004, and Kate Cherry was appointed artistic director of Western Australia's Black Swan Theatre in 2008, which coincided with its rebranding as the State Theatre Company. These, however unevenly given the very different financial and audience base of each company, represent Australia's mainstage companies, and, while it is notable that the Melbourne Theatre Company is yet to appoint a woman to its most senior creative leadership role, it has for the first time in eight
years appointed a woman, Letecia Cáceres, as its associate director. Similarly, Belvoir has recently appointed two female resident directors: Adena Jacobs, artistic director of Fraught Outfit, and Anne-Louise Sarks, artistic director of the Hayloft Project. Melissa Cantwell was appointed artistic director of the Perth Theatre Company in late 2008; Marion Potts went from being Bell Shakespeare's associate artistic director to artistic director of Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre in 2010; and, in 2013, Lee Lewis commenced her tenure as artistic director of Sydney's Griffin Theatre Company.

It seems that Belvoir's 2010 forum, 'Where are the Women', was indeed a watershed moment. And, although the debates over creative leadership continue to reflect theatre's complex ecology, in contradistinction to the iconic image of Belvoir's 2010 season launch, attention is being now paid to ensuring that women get the gigs. To quote the Women in Theatre report, it seems that 'mindfulness', by which is meant 'an awareness of our unconscious bases and assumptions is not something we can decide to switch on and off. Mindfulness then, can only be achieved through processes that we refer to as vigilance' (Lally, with Miller, 54).

The tension now is perhaps less about whether women get the top jobs, with the commensurate perks of salary and prestige, and more about ensuring that other forms of diversity, where women are often more prominent, are enabled and rewarded. This notion of diversity refers to the existence, apart from the state theatres and other leading companies, of those forms of theatre created in low-status spaces, whether engaging with children and young people or emphasising community-engaged practices, work made by project-based ensembles, or emerging and experimental forms. All of these activities may be understood as being just as essential to the health and viability of the theatre as the more visible and prestigious state companies, where the very idea of artistic leadership is necessarily constrained by a necessarily narrow artistic and commercial agenda. This latter model finds an easy parallel in the corporate world, where high salaries and prestige go hand-in-hand, but it is a business model that is arguably at odds with the not-for-profit status and purpose of most small to medium theatre companies, which have often been described as the 'engine room of culture'. It is arguably in these less visible organisations that the kind of leadership that progresses the art form can more readily be found. Some of these small to medium companies, collectives and ensembles are in receipt of annual or even triennial funding, whether through state-based funding agencies or the Australia Council for the Arts. Many more, however, are project-based, some coming together when the increasingly rare subsidy is available, but more often working with producing/presenting organisations and, in recent times, generating financial support through social media platforms and crowd funding.

The extraordinary women who have continued to enable increasingly hybrid performance works in circumstances that are under-resourced and underpaid include Sarah Austin at St Martin's Youth Centre in Melbourne, Caitlin Newton-Broad at Shopfront and Julie Vulcan and Cat Jones at PACT Centre for emerging artists in Sydney. The ground-breaking practice of Alicia Talbot and now Rosie Dennis at Urban Theatre Projects in Sydney's west has seen the stories of marginalised and dispossessed communities, including Aboriginal and Islander peoples, refugees and migrants, the elderly, and that perennial favourite, the working class, told through theatre in a variety of site-specific and non traditional venues. The work of theatre directors such as Angela Chaplin, who over a period of twenty years was artistic director of Magpie Theatre in Adelaide, Arena Theatre Company in Melbourne and Deckchair Theatre Company in Fremantle, and Rosemary Myer, currently artistic director of Windmill Theatre for children in Adelaide and previously director of Queensland's 'Out of the Box' Festival and artistic director of Arena Theatre Company, has contributed significantly to
Australia's artistic and social capital. In Adelaide, Vital Statistix, which was founded as a feminist company dedicated to working women, has since evolved into a boutique producer and presenter of contemporary theatre and interdisciplinary arts projects, but is still solely run by women. Marrugeku company, under the joint artistic leadership of Rachael Swain and Dalisa Pigram, creates ambitious intercultural theatre in remote communities in north-west Australia that brings together professional and community-based practitioners and a commitment to art-form development that sees the company touring internationally. This is leadership. These are women experienced at working multiple agendas, who are often actively committed to exploring the intersections between social inclusion and theatrical experimentation, and between sustainable practices and new choreographies, as well as dedicated to encouraging critical discussion and debate, not just about the art but also about the context and conditions in which theatre and performance are made and presented.

Increasingly problematic, however, are what seem to be the diminishing opportunities for Australia's female playwrights, a recurrent concern. At the present time, playwrights, who are typically dependent on the repertory model associated with mainstage companies, have limited opportunities. Some attribute this to the proliferation of adaptations of the classics, now prevalent on the Australian stage, while others emphasise the fact that the few opportunities available nevertheless tend to go to young white men. It may also be related to the reality that, in many contemporary theatre and performance contexts, the play is associated with a dated approach to form and structure, which is a direct consequence of hostility towards much text-based and particularly naturalistic theatre that proliferated during the 1980s and 90s. Nevertheless, there are many highly regarded female playwrights whose work has diversified beyond the page and the stage into film, television and radio, in some instances leaving the theatre behind them altogether. In playwriting in particular, it seems 'that there are differences in the quantity and quality of the attention that the media pays to women's and men's work' (Lally, with Miller, 31). The Women in Theatre report also cites quantitative research by Lucy Freeman, which demonstrates that 'work by men is more likely to be reviewed, irrespective of the "tier" within the sector, and observes differences in the kind of language used to describe women and men' (31). The formation of a collective such as 7-On Playwrights, comprising Donna Abela, Vanessa Bates, Hilary Bell, Noëlle Janaczewska, Verity Laughton, Ned Manning and Catherine Zimdahl, is one response to a critical situation. Writers such as Patricia Cornelius, founder of the Melbourne Workers Theatre, and Joanna Murray-Smith necessarily look to overseas opportunities, while Katherine Thomson has moved pretty much exclusively into film and television. Other high-achieving playwrights include Melissa Reeves, Alana Valentine, Hannie Rayson, Van Badham and Lally Katz. In the case of Van Badham and Lally Katz, it seems clear that to have work embedded within a theatre company or ensemble opens up opportunities not available to many other writers, while Catherine McKinnon, working as a writer/director at the University of Wollongong, is able to workshop her plays with undergraduate students.

It is impossible to imagine what theatre in Australia would be without the leadership of women; however, it is crucial to recognise that Australian culture is a complex organism, which, if it is to flourish, needs to acknowledge the contribution made by all participants and not simply the historically favoured few. Having said that, it does seem strangely ironic that the women in theatre leadership debate should have re-ignited just at the point when theatre as a live art form seems under threat as never before, given the intense competition from a wide range of social media, entertainment technologies and leisure activities. Still, it has been observed that art rarely comes from the centre; rather, it flourishes at the margins. Women working in a diversity of contemporary theatre and performance practices in this country
reflect this truism, despite the difficulties and impediments they have encountered. While being marginalised in terms of profile, access to financial and moral support and visibility, they have, in many areas of practice and against the odds, continued to grow and their achievements to proliferate.

Arguably, as the Women in Theatre report maintains, it is 'diversity [that is] the real issue … Access and equity are very bad for non-Anglo Australians, both women and men. More commitment is needed to equal representation across all forms of diversity not just gender' (Lally, with Miller, 46). Similarly, it is important to note the difficulties of sustaining opportunities not only for women, but also for members of culturally diverse communities, to take up appointments as creative leaders through transparent processes that move beyond habitual patterns of recognition and employment. The relatively small number of opportunities available is exacerbated in a country distinguished by a small population dispersed across a large landmass, where the arts are scarcely at the top of any politician's list of priorities. To work in the arts is to work in a condition of chronic advocacy, and this necessitates ongoing mindfulness, if not vigilance, in order to ensure that diversity in creative leadership, which is arguably more urgent than ever before, is encouraged and fostered for the benefit of our communities and our nation.

Published Resources

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Books

- Rees, Leslie, A History of Australian Drama: From the 1830s to the late 1960s, 2 edn, vol. 1 of 2, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, New South Wales, 1987. Details

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Reports


Online Resources

• Fensham, Rachel; Lasica, Shelley and Lasica, Wendy, 'Studio practices 1, extensions: room to move', in Real Time, http://www.realtimearts.net/article/9/10081. Details


