Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Canadian Theatre Here and Now

Part 1:
Playwrights Guild of Canada and its Women's Caucus

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When I last wrote for *alt.theatre*, having just completed a study on the status of women in Canadian theatre, I condemned the sector for systemic discrimination and called for "an industry-wide revolution in consciousness" (7). That was 2007. This series investigates the current state of affairs in the Canadian theatre industry in relation to the goals of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Where are we now? Are the recent rumours true? Has there been great and sudden change?

I will tackle these questions head-on in Part Two in a later issue of *alt.theatre*, but here in Part One I begin with a case study: looking at the EDI initiatives of an industry stakeholder: Playwrights Guild of Canada (PGC). The activities of PGC exemplify what I believe to be one of the most significant changes in Canada's theatre ecology in the last decade: a move from institutional interest in EDI to institutional action around it. As the PGC demonstrates, in this respect positive change has occurred over time. Stakeholders are introducing concrete actions to effect change, but it is often difficult and slow-going due to various challenges, such as entrenched biases, participants' differing perspectives, and limited resources.

PGC is a national arts service organization representing Canada's professional (and emerging) playwrights. Approaching 900 members, the guild has a mandate to "advance the creative rights and interests of professional Canadian playwrights, promote Canadian plays nationally and internationally, and foster an active, evolving community of writers for the stage" ("Who We Are"). In addition to its usual duties, which include administering amateur rights, facilitating play readings, engaging in advocacy efforts, running the Canadian Play Outlet (a physical and online bookstore), and negotiating a collective agreement with the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres, PGC also dedicates time and energy to EDI.

Pluralism is embedded in the organization's vision as one of three lenses (promotion and protection are the other two). PGC actively works "to create more visibility and representation for women, people of colour, people with disabilities, Indigenous and LGBTQ+ playwrights," providing "a safe and supportive community," as well as programs and services for "greater inclusion and accessibility" ("Home"). On offer are general opportunities—as with Pathways to PGC, which invites people to create customized initiatives in and for their own communities. There are also curated events, such as the 2019 International Webinar Series for Playwrights, which on the PGC side featured Indigenous perspectives throughout, a nod to the International Year of Indigenous Languages. PGC's employees also partake in EDI actions, such as anti-oppression workshops, or most recently, a week-long pilot project of immersive Indigenous cultural competency training.

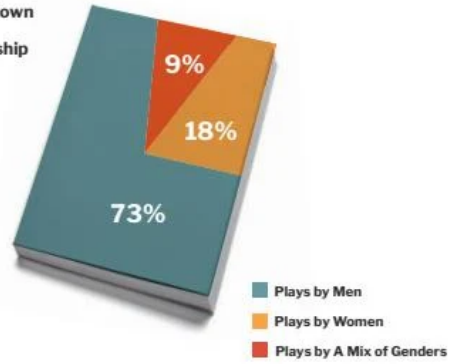
More often than not, PGC's outwardly focused EDI initiatives are spearheaded by its Women's Caucus, which is composed of PGC's women members.[1] The Women's Caucus functions more or less autonomously, except that it is administratively and financially supported by PGC, and the executive holds veto power should actions run contrary to PGC's vision. According to the website, the Women's Caucus "meets annually, publishes a monthly newsletter, and pursues various initiatives that advocate for women playwrights, improve the underrepresentation of women in the industry, and encourage greater pluralistic and inclusive arts practices" ("What We Do"). In the last few years, the caucus has increased its EDI efforts and focused on more sustained and intersectional activities, starting with the Equity in Theatre (EIT) initiative (2014–2017),[2] and continuing after its demise with the PLEDGE Project, the SureFire List, the Bra d'Or Award revamp, and the CASA Award.

As PGC's membership and professional contracts manager, and staff liaison to the Women's Caucus, I participated in the execution of these projects, and I witnessed firsthand the challenges that arose along the way, starting with the need for engaged and reliable leadership. Traditionally, the Women's Caucus is overseen by a chair and deputy chair who are most often elected by acclaim, but in 2017, the governance model shifted to a committee of five in an attempt to make the workload more manageable. Even still, there have been both staff and member changeovers, but an advantage of the committee structure is that it remains stable and intact even with (some) personnel fluctuations. The women who form the Women's Caucus Committee donate their time as a labour of love,[3] since the positions are not paid—given that the caucus operates with an annual budget of $200. With the economic restraints and concomitant leadership challenges, it is no small feat that the Women's Caucus has managed to launch several long-term, purpose-built initiatives to redress industry problems.

In her 2015 study, "Achieving Equity in Canadian Theatre: A Report with Best Practice Recommendations," Michelle MacArthur identifies four key areas for change: education; mentorship, networking, and extended training; administration; and advocacy and awareness. The initiatives undertaken by the Women's Caucus in the last three years cover this spectrum. In the realm of education, the PLEDGE project was devised to help counter the discovery that on average 18 percent of the mainstage plays produced at Canada's post-secondary training institutions are written by women (see Chart 1) (Hanson and Elser 37).

CHART 1:

A Gendered Breakdown of Mainstage Play Production Authorship at Canadian Post-Secondary Theatre Training Institutions, 2012–2015.



Although racialization was not included in the study, it may be stated with absolute certainty that the numbers for Indigenous women and women of colour are much lower still. Utterly deplorable, these statistics, among other things, indicate a glass ceiling affecting the economic survival of women playwrights; pedagogically, the perpetuation of patriarchal methodologies (e.g., canonization) that safeguard the dominant culture and "other" all else; and for students, a biased, exclusionary, and incomplete training experience. Conversations and surveys with educators revealed that aside from not knowing good plays by women, they especially need but have trouble finding large-cast plays to accommodate class sizes and student populations.

The PLEDGE project was developed in direct response to this feedback, as a corrective countermeasure to help combat the underrepresentation of women creators in our schools. PLEDGE provides educators with a database of large-cast plays by Canadian women, searchable by different filters (cast size, genre, length, theme, and identity factors) to assist with a myriad of situations and student demographics. To directly engage with schools and increase the project's impact, a component was introduced inspired by the US initiative One Play at a Time, for which educators make public declarations to teach plays by women. The name PLEDGE, an acronym for a "Production Listing to Enhance Diversity and Gender Equity," additionally points to the pledge aspect of the action.

PLEDGE is a joint project of PGC and its Women's Caucus along with Equity and Diversity in the Arts (EDA), an initiative of the Department of Arts, Culture and Media at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Instigated by Dr. Barry Freeman, PLEDGE exists as a result of funding from the EDA, which paid for the building of the website and the hiring of researchers to populate the database, while PGC and the Women's Caucus provide administrative and promotional support.[4] Officially launched in 2018, the project's website has received approximately 3500 visits in one year's time. It would be ideal

for the numbers to increase further, of course, but of greater concern is that only two pledges have been logged to date. While PLEDGE is intended to inspire educators, clearly there is a problem with engagement and uptake, and in turn, with the project's impact and efficacy.

To generate new strategies and make stronger connections with the intended audience, a PLEDGE panel was held as part of the University of Toronto's 2019 Festival of Original Theatre. Many ideas emerged, such as extending academic outreach efforts to other disciplines and international associations, adding video excerpts of plays to the website, and getting students involved, perhaps with a nation-wide trailer contest. While these are all excellent suggestions, they require time, effort, and money, so either a team of volunteers or hired employees would be necessary, neither of which is possible at this time due to a general lack of resources.

While vital to the project, one-time funding from the EDA established but cannot sustain the PLEDGE project. The EDA granted PLEDGE a second influx of money for 2019, which will be used to update the website, create promotional print materials, and conduct a targeted outreach campaign. The goal is to improve the project's visibility, thereby increasing audience engagement in order to influence diversifying curricula and programming choices at Canada's postsecondary institutions, which are in dire need of transformation. The project's future is precarious (a common scenario for many social actions), given uncertainty around future EDA funding. But for now, PLEDGE exists as a tool to help educators work towards equity.

As with PLEDGE, the SureFire List identifies plays by women as a means to help counter the problem of underrepresentation. This tool targets the professional theatre sector, placing it in MacArthur's administration category. This Women's Caucus action is modeled on a successful US initiative, the Kilroys List, and it complements other similar projects, such as the 49 List.[5] The SureFire List aims to provide ADs, directors, and producers with a programming aid to help increase productions of plays by women in the professional sector. According to PGC's National Production Surveys, conducted annually since 2012, plays by women account for less than 30 percent of the nation's total offerings (see Table 1), and less than 35 percent of homegrown shows (see Table 2), with little change occurring over time (PGC Annual Production Surveys, 2012/13, 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16, and 2016/17).

When it comes to programming work by women, false assumptions and stereotypes prevail, such as the misconception that women playwrights are few and far between (this is not the case, as women currently form 54 percent of PGC's membership), that their writing is inferior (somehow dubbed lacking in universal experience, though women comprise half the world's population), and that their plays are risky to produce (the assumption being that no one is interested in "women's stories," though women outnumber men as audience members). The stereotypes and statistics are much worse for Indigenous women and women of colour, and as a press release states, "Canada's stages need to reflect the actual demographics of its population, and The SureFire List provides a resource tool that can help encourage and contribute to that transformation" (PGC, "The Women's Caucus"). The list is community-generated, offering a sustainable action for the Women's Caucus, since it does not require much money. The caucus asked 202 "Recommenders" (producers, artistic directors, directors, dramaturges, theatre critics, academics, and other theatre aficionados) nationwide to email their "top three 'passion picks' of full-length plays that are unproduced or under-produced (meaning, fewer than three professional productions), written by Canadians who identify as women, trans, or gender non-conforming" (Burton, "The SureFire List"). A total of 199 playwright and 285 play suggestions were submitted by 128 Recommenders (a 63 percent return rate). The top 23 ranked plays constitute the SureFire List, which is impressive for its diversity, not only in terms of identify factors (racialization, age, region, and so forth), but also for aesthetic and stylistic differences ("SureFireList").

TABLE 1: A Gendered Breakdown of Play Production Authorship in Canada—Compared across PGC's Annual Production Surveys, 2012/13–2016/17

Survey Year	Plays by Men	Plays by Women	Plays by A Mix of Genders
2012/13	61%	23%	16%
2013/14	63%	22%	15%
2014/15	64.5%	23%	12.5%
2015/16	64%	26%	11%
2016/17	64%	26%	10%

TABLE 2: A Gendered Breakdown of Play Productions by Canadian Authors—Compared across PGC's Annual Production Surveys, 2012/13–2016/17

Survey Year	Plays by Men	Plays by Women	Plays by A Mix of Genders
2012/13	47%	32%	21%
2013/14	53%	30.5%	16.5%
2014/15	58%	30%	12%
2015/16	54%	34%	12%
2016/17	54.5%	33.5%	12%

Given the vast wealth of submissions received and the significant regional differences that emerged, additional listings were created to provide access to the full data.[6] The Women's Caucus Committee planned an aggressive PR campaign, but after the press release went out in October 2018, some caucus members criticized the multiple listings for creating a hierarchical impression suggestive of merit and quality, which was not the case or the intent. Critics also interpreted the anonymity and confidentiality of the Recommenders (implemented to ensure unbiased responses) as establishing an exclusionary and non-transparent club. Issues also emerged around the chosen name, and the phrasing "Canadians who identify as women, trans, or gender non-conforming," which can derogatorily suggest that those who "identify" as women are not actually women. While many members applauded the initiative, the internal controversy led to the raw data listings being removed from public access, leaving the 23 plays to stand alone, and the PR campaign was cancelled, effectively obscuring the List's existence. Needless to say, the project did not live up to its potential and intended purpose.

The list's reception offers a valuable lesson in EDI advocacy: having material resources in place is not enough; there must also be group cohesion with regard to a project's purpose and execution, or ideological differences can lead to impasses that make it difficult to move forward. There has been much discussion about the matter since (revisions were offered up, alternate methodologies proposed, and more precise wordings developed), and a survey was sent out to the Women's Caucus in March 2019 to determine the fate of the SureFire List and other caucus actions. While some members vehemently oppose the SureFire List, the majority are supportive, as 85 percent voted to repeat it with adjustments in 2020. Members also affirmed that the Women's Caucus should stay the course and continue its present EDI efforts despite the sometimes controversial and difficult nature of the work.

The longest-running initiative of the Women's Caucus is the Bra d'Or Award (BDA), which incentivizes equity via recognition and commemoration, positioning it in MacArthur's advocacy and awareness grouping. The origins and purpose of the award are recounted by Marcia Johnson, who first suggested the idea:

> I was at the PGC AGM in Montreal (circa 2003) and we [the Women's Caucus] had started to devolve into complaining about how men had things so much easier and how difficult it was to be a woman playwright. I was still just an associate member and I wanted to hear about what I could do; not about how impossible it all was. Someone suggested that we shame directors or ADs who had bad track records when it came to producing plays by women. I thought that we shouldn't focus on the negative. In fact, why didn't we spend our precious energy celebrating a person or institution that had promoted, showcased, or supported female playwrights? Everyone loved the idea and immediately said that I should be the one to spearhead it.

Taking responsibility and a leadership role, Johnson later introduced the idea as a full member of PGC and the chair of the Women's Caucus at PGC's AGM in Calgary, where it was officially adopted. First awarded in 2006, the BDA recognizes "an individual for his/her/their efforts in supporting and promoting the work of Canadian women playwrights" ("Awards").

An accomplished list of BDA winners has emerged over the years, including artistic directors who lead by example, programming gender-balanced seasons.[7] While winners such as Bob Metcalfe and Rachel Ditor cherish their awards, the BDA suffered from a lack of monetary accompaniment and visibility, as past prizes consisted only of a paper certificate presented at an industry event. As such, the BDA was placed on hiatus for two years, during which time the Women's Caucus identified areas in need of improvement, and a subcommittee of members and award recipients was tasked with finding solutions. The BDA was re-launched with modifications in conjunction with International Women's Day on 8 March 2019. One major challenge remains yet to realize the BDA's full transformation, and that is sustained funding. Money is required to grow the award further and increase the overall impact, so the Revamp Committee will focus on that objective for the remainder of 2019.

While the BDA celebrates the efforts of allies on the home front, a more recent Women's Caucus initiative, the CASA Award, assists women playwrights abroad. Falling under mentorship, networking, and extended training, the CASA Award provides "support, financially and artistically, [for] an experienced woman playwright living in South Africa" ("CASA Award"). The idea was sparked at the 2015 Women Playwrights International (WPI) conference in Cape Town,[8] when Women's Caucus attendees noticed the plays offered for sale did not include South African women. Investigation revealed that few such publications existed, due in part to oral traditions of resistance, but also to the steep obstacles faced by women playwrights in South Africa. Women's Caucus members wanted to help, and they theorized that $5000 CAD would cover the equivalent of a three-month residency (complete with writing space and dramaturgical support), which could make a big difference to a playwright.

Beverley Cooper spearheaded the initiative, striking a subcommittee to build the new award from the ground up. Through WPI's chairperson, Amy Jephta, a partnership with the African Women Playwrights Network was formed, the services of South African theatre makers were enlisted as jurors and mentors, Canadian playwrights were recruited as dramaturges and mentors, and the Theatre Arts Admin Collective in Cape Town and the Hillbrow Theatre in Johannesburg provided writing and workshop space. International cooperation aside, the CASA Award would not be possible without an ongoing funding source, as the Women's Caucus's fundraising efforts are insufficient to support a project of this size. Thanks to the beneficence of an anonymous Canadian sponsor, the CASA Award is fully funded for five years, secure until 2022 (Cooper).

The first CASA Award, bestowed in 2017, did not attract mid-career playwrights as intended, so it was shared by three emerging playwrights instead: Kela Maswabi, Koleka Putuma, and Philisiwe Twijnstra. A pen-pal program was also established, matching 28 Canadian and South African playwrights in a peer-to-peer correspondence exchange. The

second CASA Award went to established actor, director, and playwright Rehane Abrahams, who began her residency in Cape Town in June 2019.

While there has been much learning along the way, and a few changes in protocol, the CASA Award has led to new networks and unanticipated outcomes in its two short years. In 2018, Twijnstra attended a reading of her work in Vancouver and connected with caucus member Sally Stubbs. Putuma participated in Toronto's Wee Festival, along with 2018 CASA Selection Committee juror Jenny Reznek, and they met with CASA organizers Beverley Cooper and Marcia Johnson. Putuma went on to win the Distell National Playwright Competition (dedicated to "discovering emerging South African talent and fostering new South African voices") with the script she worked on during her CASA residency. And the pen-pal program resulted in material assistance when a playwright in Zimbabwe experienced financial distress due to the politically tumultuous climate; "CASA was able to raise some funds…, helping her get through a very tough time" (Cooper).

With the rare confluence of committed leadership and secure funding, the CASA Award facilitates international mentoring, networking, and extended training opportunities, helping to grow a global EDI movement. The next WPI conference will provide additional opportunities to connect with women from all over the world; and PGC will be there, as it is slated for Montreal in 2021. We are looking forward to showcasing national initiatives and talent, strengthening international networks (via community-building, allies, and mentorship), and furthering advocacy and awareness, education and skills development, and play production possibilities.

As MacArthur's 2015 report states, "given the persistent and deep-seated inequities embedded in the [Canadian] theatre industry, it is clear that informed, coordinated, and varied responses are required if change is to occur" (51). PGC and its Women's Caucus recognize this, having implemented a gamut of initiatives and partnerships to help redress specific industry injustices on a national and international scale. Similar social actions are required across the board if institutional change is to become a reality. Taken up further in Part Two, evidence suggests that other industry stakeholders are tailoring their programs to redress EDI problems, particularly since the explosion of #MeToo, which ushered in new levels of visibility, accountability, and action. I can personally attest that there is no shortage of transformative project ideas put forth by PGC's members, staff, and executive.

The implementation of those actions, however, is another matter entirely, since actions require resources and these are in short supply. The Internet and shareware provide cost-effective delivery systems for assistive tools, making new databases and lists possible. But a rare alignment of circumstances is required for the actualization of large-scale projects, most particularly stable and engaged leadership, a unified front, and ongoing funding. Despite the difficulties and challenges, positive change is being realized over time, as Part Two of this series will illustrate. But this progress is incremental; the patriarchy and systemic discrimination remain intact for the time being, while we inch our way ever closer toward societal metamorphosis.

Top to Bottom:
Rehane Abrahams,
2019 CASA Award Winner.
Photo by Keara Edwards;
Kela Maswabi,
2018 CASA Award Winner.
Photo by ACTVST Clothing;
Koleka Putuma,
2018 CASA Award Winner.
Photo by Sithembele Jnr
Photography;
Phillisiwe Twijnstra,
2018 CASA Award Winner.
Photo by Val Adamson
Photography.

Notes

1. All women members of PGC are automatically included in the Women's Caucus, but the term "women" is applied in its broadest sense. The WC supports sexual and gender self-determination. All people who feel they are women are considered women. This includes cis, trans, and other gender oppressed people.

2. Spearheaded by PGC and Pat the Dog Theatre Creation, EIT was "a multi-stakeholder initiative aiming to remedy existing gender and related inequities in the theatre industry." Between 2014 and 2016, EIT carried out a four-pronged agenda: a preparatory research study (MacArthur's 2015 report), an industry symposium (which spawned a one-day side conference with American groups), a website dedicated to equity in Canadian theatre (www.EquityInTheatre.com), and live performance events (including play reading series, social actions, and more) ("About"). In 2017, EIT partnered with like-minded organizations and continued to produce live social actions (e.g., annual hackathons, post-show talkbacks, and panel presentations) up until the group folded.

3. Presently, the Women's Caucus Committee consists of Kelley Jo Burke (Chair), Beverley Cooper, Marcia Johnson, Marilo Núñez (Deputy Chair), and Deborah Williams. I assist as staff liaison.

4. The website was designed and built by Mariel Marshall. A first phase of research for the database was carried out by graduate students Lisa Aikman (U of T) and Grace Phan (U of T), followed by a second phase of research conducted by Collette Radau (York U) and Sarah Robbins (U of T). Currently, Barry Freeman and Rebecca Burton carry out the administrative responsibilities associated with the project, while Alexa Elser volunteers her time, adding content and updating database entries.

5. Since 2014, the Kilroys have released "an annual industry survey of excellent un- and underproduced new plays by woman, trans, and non-binary playwrights," thereby providing "a tool for producers committed to ending the systemic underrepresentation of woman, trans, and non-binary playwrights in the American theater" ("About the List"). The Kilroys Lists have inspired other initiatives; Canada's first being "The 49," released in June 2016 for Fu-Gen Theatre's Walk the Walk: National Festival of Asian Canadian Women. A committee of four women consisting of Yvette Nolan, Donna-Michelle St. Bernard, Jenna Rodgers, and Mel Hague curated a list of forty-nine plays by women of colour that one could "program tomorrow" ("49 Plays").

6. In addition to the SureFire List, four other lists were compiled: one with all the ranked plays, a second with all the chosen playwrights, a third with all the play and playwright picks arranged by region (based on the playwrights' place of residence), and a final list with statistics pertaining to the Recommenders' response rates in each province ("SureFire List"). These lists are available upon request from PGC.

7. For a list of BDA recipients, visit the PGC website at www.playwrightsguild.ca/awards/bradorawardrecipients/.

8. Gail Nyoka provides an account of the 2015 conference in a dispatch for *alt.theatre* titled, "Report from Cape Town: Women Playwrights International," *alt.theatre* 13:1 (2016), 34-35.

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