

Equity and the Academy: A Survey of Theatre Productions at Canadian Post-Secondary Institutions

by Nicholas Hanson and Alexa Elser



Production photo from *If We Were Birds* by Erin Shields. Directed by Kim Renders at Queen's University, February 2015.
Photo by Tim Fort

On a periodic basis, reports from arts organizations as well as articles in the popular press scrutinize the inequitable rates of gender participation in the professional theatre landscape. But what about the school play, particularly at Canadian post-secondary institutions with drama and theatre programs? Both the 2006 report, “Adding It Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre,” and the 2015 study, “Achieving Equity in Theatre: A Report with Best Practice Recommendations,” suggest a need to further investigate gender equity in the academy (Burton 105; MacArthur 8). This project aims to compile and disseminate empirical research about artistic programming at post-secondary institutions, with a specific focus on the gender ratio of playwrights. Are schools empowering the next generation of artists to push for greater equity in the professional theatre? Or is the academy entrenching mindsets and perspectives that stay with graduates throughout their professional lives?

Methodology

Our project surveyed theatre productions at English-language post-secondary institutions across Canada, with a particular interest in calculating the gender distribution of the playwrights. This section explains the parameters we established to increase the consistency of our data collection and categorization. First, we focused on productions directly connected to academic departments,

most commonly drama, theatre, or English; as such, we excluded all extracurricular theatre projects that appeared to be primarily produced by students, societies, or community groups. Next, we narrowed our attention to the major activities of each academic department, enumerating the productions that included some or all of the following elements: descriptions in promotional materials as a “mainstage” or “major” production, multiple performances open to the general public, participation of faculty members or guest artists, and the presence of design and technical elements. As a result, we omitted supplementary artistic programming like staged readings, workshop productions, one-night events, cabarets, revues, and so on. Last, we compiled information for three academic years: 2012/13, 2013/14, and 2014/15. Many institutions mount a small number of annual productions; counting three years of activities yielded more data and bolstered the statistical reliability of our findings.

We collected the substantial portion of our information directly from the websites of drama, theatre, and English departments. When faced with missing or incomplete information, we conducted additional searches on the websites of universities, colleges, and media outlets, as well as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Moreover, we emailed eighteen departments with requests for material, resulting in seventeen replies. In the end, we gathered complete information from forty-five post-secondary institutions across Canada, which we believe represents more than 90% of

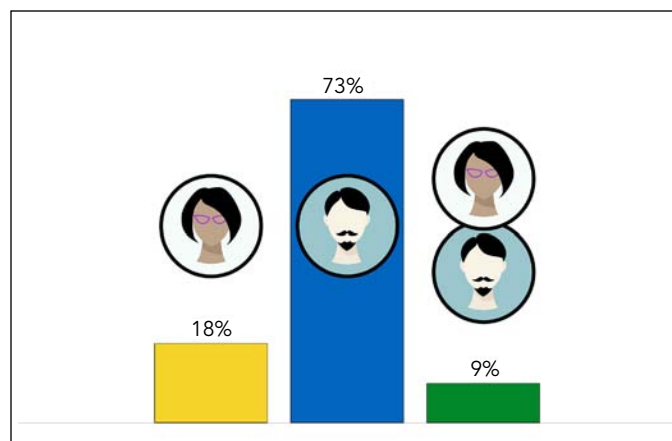


Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Playwrights: School Productions, 2012-15

the English-language academic departments that stage theatre productions.

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Results

For the sake of compatibility, our project used the same three categories as a 2015 Playwrights Guild of Canada survey: “productions by women,” “productions by men,” and “productions by mixed-gender partnerships” (“PGC Annual Theatre Production Survey, 2014/15” 1). In our interpretation of those categories, we considered plays written or created by one or more women as “productions by women” and plays written or created by one or more men as “productions by men.” We classified plays written or created by one or more women and one or more men as “productions by mixed-gender partnerships”; moreover, we included any productions created by student ensembles in this category, assuming that any school-based project likely included mixed-gender participants. In total, we gathered information on 434 theatre productions staged at 45 post-secondary institutions for the academic years 2012/13, 2013/14, and 2014/15. We categorized 79 (18%) as productions by women, 318 (73%) as productions by men, and 37 (9%) as productions by mixed-gender partnerships (Figure 1).

Next, we compared our results to two previous studies on gender equity: “Adding It Up: The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre,” written by Rebecca Burton in 2006, drawing on information from 2000/01 to 2004/05; and the Playwrights Guild of Canada’s “PGC Annual Theatre Production Survey, 2014/15,” which compiled information for the 2014/15 season (Figure 2). Our research reveals that women playwrights’ participation in the academy is even less equitable than in the profession. The percentage of productions by women is lower at post-secondary institutions (18%) than was reported in either the 2006 (28%) or 2014/15 (23%) surveys of professional theatres. We note that

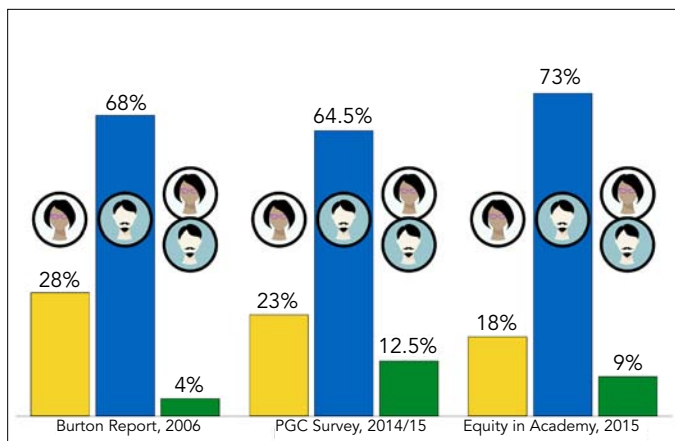


Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Playwrights: Comparison of Studies, 2006–15

various equity studies from Canada, the US, and elsewhere may use slightly different methodologies for classifying plays; for instance, a play co-written by a woman and man might be recorded in the “mixed-gender partnership” (or similarly titled) category in one study but counted in both the “productions by women” and “productions by men” categories in another study. Although such deviations would account for relatively minor discrepancies in the overall totals, we recommend caution when comparing studies without close examination of their respective research methods.

In addition to surveying the gender ratio of playwrights across the entire post-secondary sector, we also analyzed the results on a school-by-school basis (Figure 3). Of the forty-five institutions surveyed, twelve (27%) staged zero productions by women in the entire three-year period of 2012–15. In other words, a student in one of those dozen drama, theatre, and English departments might have completed her or his entire diploma or degree without seeing a single mainstage production written by a woman. At the top end, only one institution achieved 50/50 gender parity with its mainstage productions; moreover, no schools programmed a majority of productions by women.

In contrast to professional theatres, post-secondary institutions select productions—at least in part—to enrich curricular study, especially for theatre history courses. To assess the possibility that a commitment to historical plays was skewing the gender ratio of playwrights produced by post-secondary institutions, we considered the data by era. We divided the productions according to the year of their original creation, using a fairly arbitrary demarcation of 1990 to identify contemporary productions (Figure 4). Of the 434 productions, we categorized 259 (60%) as pre-1990 and 175 (40%) as 1990 or later; in terms of gender distribution, the difference between the eras was striking. In the earlier period—which covers all of the frequently studied historical eras as well as most of the twentieth century—productions by women (9%) and mixed-gender partnerships (2%) were rare. The scarcity of pre-1990 productions by women is especially glaring because of how few distinct titles appeared in our research: only four plays,¹ repeated by multiple schools, accounted for half of the productions from this era. Moreover, the contributions of women throughout theatre history are chronically under-represented on post-secondary stages; the majority of productions by women in

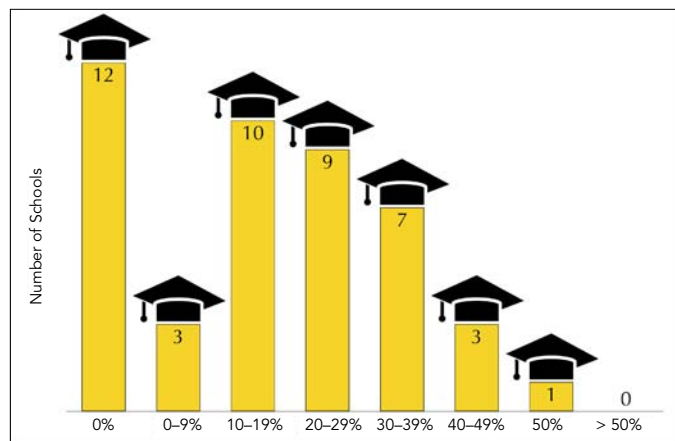


Figure 3: Productions by Women—By School: School Productions, 2012–15

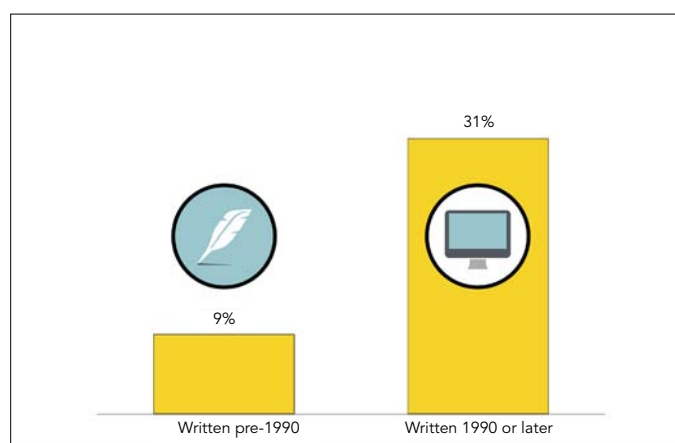


Figure 4: Productions by Women—By Era: School Productions, 2012–15

the entire pre-1990 period were written during the 1970s and 1980s, with only four plays written before 1960.²

For the plays written in or after 1990, productions by women (31%) and mixed-gender partnerships (18%) occurred with more frequency. Whereas the earlier era included a limited set of productions by women, the contemporary period featured a much wider range of women playwrights and plays. Overall, our analysis confirms that gender equity at post-secondary institutions is skewed by the fact that schools program a majority (60%) of productions from the pre-1990 era, and those plays are overwhelmingly written by men. As one possible remedy, departments could balance their commitment to theatre history by producing women playwrights who have adapted classical texts or created original works with historical elements; some prominent examples include Helen Edmundson, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Sarah Ruhl, and Timberlake Wertenbaker.

Reflections

We wholeheartedly concur with Rebecca Burton’s assertion “that statistics alone cannot account for something as seemingly ephemeral and elusive as equality” (1). While our research has contributed quantitative evidence about inequity in the academy, we did not analyze the representation of gender within the artistic ele-



Production photo from *Crimes of the Heart* by Beth Henley. Directed by Becky MacDormand at Trinity Western University, November 2013. Photo by Jef Gibbons

ments of the productions. To that point, a number of academic departments communicated that a strictly numerical evaluation of playwrights did not reflect the gender-subversive interpretations of their productions, especially for canonical works; for example, some schools intentionally cast women in roles like Macbeth and Arturo Ui to interrogate societal conceptions of power and violence. A thorough examination of these practices would be a welcome research project for the future.

Anyone familiar with school productions could share anecdotes about the bottleneck of many talented women competing for scarce roles, the stereotypical and superficial nature of roles for women, and the ubiquity of women performing as men (either in costume or in roles that are gender-reversed). A number of material factors exacerbate the casting inequities of school productions. Generally speaking, academic departments desire shows that provide opportunities for as many students as possible. In the professional theatre, on the other hand, large cast sizes significantly increase labour costs; as such, scripts with ten or more roles tend to originate from larger, well-established theatre companies. A report from the Playwrights Guild of Canada for 2013/14 “revealed that the theatres with the most money ... exhibited the greatest gender imbalances in play production” (3). Investigations of gender equity in English theatres indicate that “women playwrights write more roles for women than their male counterparts” (Higgins). Thus, women—whose plays tend to feature a greater number of roles for women—are less likely than men to write for the bigger organizations that can support productions with large casts (i.e., the types of plays that often end up on academic stages). The final section of this article discusses strategies to disseminate plays by women that include casts with suitable opportunities for post-secondary institutions.

Beyond material conditions, gender inequity in the academy poses real challenges for the development of students. Lucy Kerbel, Director of UK-based Tonic Theatre, explores the prevalence of gender-related casting issues in youth theatre projects; her interviews with theatre instructors highlight many issues that extend to the post-secondary level. As she explains:

They shared concerns that routinely asking girls to play boys affected the girls’ confidence in themselves, contributed to insecurities over body image, inhibited the depth of their creative engagement and left them with a reduced appreciation of female voices, experiences and stories. Above all, they commented on the ideological problems inherent in asking girls to dress up as boys in order to fully participate in the action on stage. (8)

Furthermore, the influence of theatre productions in post-secondary institutions is amplified by the common practice of studying the scripts and playwrights in the departments’ academic courses. The curricular emphasis on specific—mostly men—playwrights not only reifies works by men as reflective of universal experiences but also entrenches men as the primary artistic role models for students.

Another distinction between professional and academic theatre stems from the responsibility for artistic programming. The “Achieving Equity in Theatre” report states that “there is a direct relationship between the gender of artistic directors and the gender of the produced playwrights; that is, men ADs are more likely to hire men playwrights than women playwrights, a trend that has a real impact when the majority of artistic directors are men” (MacArthur 24). While an artistic director might be primarily responsible for artistic programming at professional theatres, decisions at post-secondary institutions typically involve a number of individuals or committees. We were unable to identify national data for the gender ratio of post-secondary faculty in Canadian drama, theatre, and English departments; as a reasonably comparative example, the 2012/13 composition of full-time Ontario university faculty in “Visual and Performing Arts, Communications and Technology”³ was 52.5% male and 47.5% female (Canadian Association of University Theatres 7). If academic departments with approximate gender parity are determining artistic programming, how do we explain the disproportionately low number of productions by women in post-secondary institutions? More urgently, how can we inform departments about the systemic imbalance in their theatre seasons, as well as share actionable strategies for change?

Conclusion

Previous equity reports include calls to action related to schools:

- “Examine the university and colleges’ production seasons to assess the number and quality of roles available to female students” (Burton 105).
- “Increase the percentage of plays by women and other marginalized groups taught and performed at elementary schools, high schools, and post-secondary institutions” (MacArthur 8).

There are multiple resources that could inspire more diverse artistic programming at post-secondary institutions: the One Play at a Time initiative encourages the study of plays by women written before 1960, the Kilroys compile lists of outstanding plays by women that have received no more than one professional production, and the largest competition for women playwrights—the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize—lists all of the winning and short-

listed plays in its history online. Although these sources offer a treasury of titles and playwrights, their usability is hampered by the limited production details about each play; other web-based script catalogues (e.g., Playwrights Guild of Canada and Samuel French) feature searchable databases for genre, running time, casting, and technical elements. Researching and selecting productions can consume significant time for faculty members and students, so disseminating information about scripts by women that are appropriate for post-secondary institutions—especially in terms of cast size and suitability—could provide a tangible strategy to encourage gender parity. To that end, we compiled a list of the productions by women that were staged by Canadian post-secondary institutions from 2012 to 2015; the document has been posted on the Equity in Theatre website⁴ so that it might serve as a productive starting point for schools during their season planning.

At present, when arts organizations and mainstream media examine gender disparities in theatre, they tend to concentrate on professional contexts. Artistic programming at post-secondary institutions is usually overlooked, so we launched this research project to investigate equity in the academy. Based on our empirical evidence, we can confirm that school productions in Canada fail to achieve anything close to gender parity among playwrights. The typical school play is not just an artistic showcase; it reifies a canon of celebrated works and restricts the participation of women. In the post-secondary classroom, instructors often emphasize the unequal gender conditions in historical plays and eras; ironically, few schools recognize the present-day inequities in their own productions and seasons. Thus, instead of empowering students to consider theatre's capacity for fostering equity, academic departments are embedding gendered perspectives that stay with graduates throughout their lives as practising artists or engaged audience members. Thinking optimistically, though, we believe that post-secondary institutions can act as catalysts for positive change in the theatre community. Increasing women's opportunities for participation, representation, and celebration in the professional theatre—the goal of so many reports and initiatives—could be bolstered by focusing greater attention on improving gender equity in the academy.

Notes

- 1 The titles produced multiple times were Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982), Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* (1980), and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988).
- 2 The titles written before 1960 were Mary Chase's *Harvey* (1944), Agatha Christie's *The Hollow* (1951), Hannah Cowley's *The Belle's Stratagem* (1780), and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928).
- 3 This grouping is used by Statistics Canada for "instructional programs that focus on the creation and interpretation of works and performances that use auditory, kinesthetic, and visual phenomena to express ideas and emotions in various forms, subject to aesthetic criteria and instructional programs that prepare individuals to function as equipment operators, support technicians, and operations managers in the film/video, recording, and graphic communications industries."
- 4 <http://www.eit.playwrightsguild.ca/post-secondary-institutions>



Production photo from *Oh, What a Lovely War!* by Joan Littlewood. Directed by Autumn Smith at York University, January 2015. Photo © Jeremy Mimmagh, mimmagh.ca

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