

(re)Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Current Methods in Feminist Performance

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Research Capstone

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ABSTRACT

Theatre has always been a refuge for the educated woman. The women's movement, in all its iterations, has made use of the stage. During the campaign for suffrage, this meant propaganda plays that defied the censor. In the second wave beginning in the 1960s, women adapted Augusto Boal's techniques from *Theatre of the Oppressed* to bring the audience into feminist dialogues. Now, during a period of transition in third wave feminism, we are seeing these dialogues in commercial theatre. Whether it is the feminist one-liners in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* or Lauren Gunderson, a playwright devoted to putting women's history on the stage, becoming one of the most-produced playwrights in the United States, feminist performance has officially become big-business. This capstone intends to understand the impact of popular feminism on commercial theatre and to expand feminist performance scholarship to include the commercial theatre industry by applying pre-existing theory to contemporary productions.

Keywords: theatre, feminism, contemporary, performance, women

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“Silent gratitude isn’t very much use to anyone.”
– Gertrude Stein

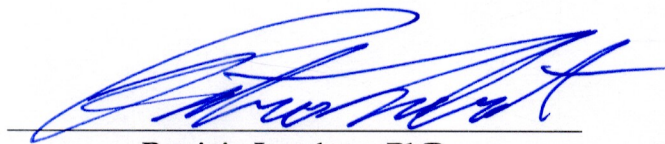
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PROJECT APPROVAL

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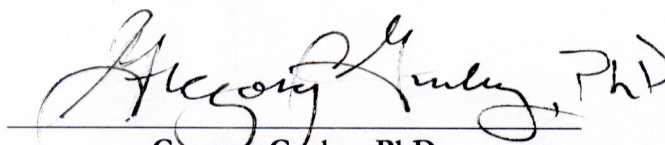
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Approved by the Arts & Administration faculty at the University of Oregon in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in Arts Management.



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Chapter 1: Introduction to Research

“My contention is that ‘Mrs. Warren’s Profession’ should be read carefully through every year by your whole staff... The play, like the gospels, will never change... My only fear is that it might end in the play being licensed...” – G.B. Shaw¹

I. Problem Statement

In its original form, feminist theatre was aligned with activism and the diverse, lengthy history of the women’s movement. There is an entire body of scholarship on feminist performance theory and the history of feminist theatre dating back to Sappho’s poetry and the ancient Greeks. Even in the most conservative periods of history, the theatre has been a home for rebellion and provided a place for women to express an independent voice. During the suffrage movement, women used the stage to defy government censors and present controversial propaganda pieces urging for their enfranchisement and satirizing their opposition. The second wave of feminism from the 1960’s into the early 90’s saw the incorporation of Augusto Boal’s theatre of the oppressed methodology, furthering the connection between feminist theatre and grassroots initiatives. Many of these smaller companies have since closed for a variety of reasons including finances, artistic differences, and changes in the political landscape.

Interestingly, however, feminist voices can now be found in several, highly successful, mainstream productions. The Women’s Project Theatre in New York is an excellent example of this trend. It has become one of the most lucrative theatres around and there are companies with a similar model popping up all over the country. Lauren Gunderson, a devoted writer of women’s history, has become one of the most produced playwrights in the country. Broadway has finally seen its first musical produced by an exclusively female creative team, *Waitress*, which has been very well received. Jessica Swale’s 2012 play, *Blue Stockings*, about the first women students at Oxford,

¹ Shellard, Nicholson & Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain Regrets: A History of British Theatre Censorship* (2004), p. 70.

was workshopped and produced through Shakespeare's Globe in London, the international holy grail of theatre. These examples cumulatively demonstrate a more commercial, more mainstream understanding of feminist theatre. My research intends to explore this change within contemporary theatre and new play development.

After a survey of the literature available on current feminist theatre, I have arrived at the following research questions;

- 1- How and when did feminist performance become part of mainstream theatre?
- 2- What might the commercialization of feminist performance mean for the future of performance?

I would like to evaluate these questions from both academic and professional perspectives, reviewing journalistic writing on the subject including show reviews, opinion pieces, and other discourse. Academically, my concern is to expand the current body of feminist performance theory and begin to document this part of theatre history. Dr. Kim Solga's text *Feminism & Theatre* (2016) hints at this new era and her research is at the forefront of feminist performance scholarship. This is one of few complete books published on post-2000 feminist theatre and references the most current literature (Solga, 2016, pp. 82- 86). This body of scholarship is very new and only scratches the surface of what is sure to be the next critical chapter in feminist performance. To ensure this project provides a comprehensive and unique contribution to this area of research, I will be incorporating relevant journalism by current theatre professionals as well as the written scripts for the applicable plays. These primary sources will provide key insights on how feminist theatre works in the practice of commercial theatre.

II. Methodology and Design

Regarding methodology, this capstone will be a qualitative project. Beginning with a strong foundation of feminist performance theory and history, I intend to incorporate commercial performance into this literature, connecting the legacy of activism with some of today's most popular and lucrative productions. In addition to the existing scholarship on feminist performance theory, I will employ journalism as primary source material. This will include reviews of relevant productions, opinion pieces, and other articles that demonstrate the trend of feminist voices being showcased in well-known productions. Additionally, the original scripts for relevant plays will be key to the discussion. Reviewing the scripts directly is essential to ascertain the playwright's original intent, separate from artistic choices of directors, production crews, and actors. These three components will form a comprehensive literature review that will broaden academic and professional understandings of feminist performance to include commercial and mainstream shows that address feminist issues.

In the broadest sense, the aim of this study is to understand the relationship between contemporary theatre and current feminist politics and discourse. There will be three main components to my research. The first component will be a review of the existing scholarship on feminist performance theory and history. This will provide critical context for understanding the position of feminism in contemporary theatre and highlight the phenomenon of commercial feminist works. As a capstone project, my research includes two additional courses as well as independent research credits. *Performing Arts Management* through the Arts and Administration Program provided critical insight into production management and commercial performance. *Theories and Histories of New Media* in the School of Journalism will focus on digital communications and provide key academic context for the online dramatic criticism central to this paper.

My second component will be a survey of recent plays that best demonstrate contemporary feminism and I will look for any common threads in the literature and production process. In addition to the playwright's perspective, the scripts can provide insight into how feminist narratives have evolved and to define a commercial feminist play. I am defining contemporary as having been written, published and/or produced since 2000. This will allow me to include to some established plays that have already been through a complete production process as well as other works still in development through organizations such as the National New Play Network or other new work organizations. In addition to the scripts, I will review any possible promotional materials or playbills for relevant shows that have been produced.

For my third component, I will research the perspectives of current practitioners on the mainstreaming of feminist theatre and its impact. I believe this can best be obtained through the appropriate journalistic sources. This will include reviews of relevant productions and assorted professional blogs and forums such as *HowlRound* and the Chicago Tribune's *Theatre Loop*, as well as a variety of websites maintained by independent theatre professionals and scholars. These sources will be important since they, speaking from a historical perspective, are the primary source material. Not only is discussion new specifically to feminist performance theory, but this is part of a larger emerging period in the history of theatre. It is therefore imperative that this transition is addressed from a variety of perspectives and that the primary sources be documented for future research on the subject.

III. Theoretical and Historical Framework

In an article for the *Theatre Survey*, performance scholar Charlotte Canning articulates the complex relationship between feminist history and feminist performance as follows:

No single performance can, or even should, resolve feminism's tangled relationship with history. Nor can or should performance supplant or replace other historical modes. But feminist historiography can learn much from feminist dramaturgy (Canning, 2004, p. 232).

The performing arts have a long and complex history that is consistently intertwined with activism and social history, in particular regards to feminism. There are many terms in this field of study that are necessary to unpack; including feminism, commercial theatre, and mainstream performance. For the purposes of this research, commercial theatre will be defined as professionally produced shows. Mainstream performance will be defined as pieces that are widely produced. Many plays overlap between these two categories, but the distinction will be important for lesser-known pieces of feminist theatre. Feminism will be defined according to pre-existing scholarship. As described by Dolan (1991), there are a variety of feminist philosophies through which to produce and view performances. When discussing contemporary performance, the most relevant of these models is materialist feminism. Materialist feminism is the most intersectional, inclusive branch of feminism, understanding women “as historical subjects whose relation to prevailing social structures is also influenced by race, class, and sexual identification” (Dolan, 1991, p. 10). Applying this broad lens it is possible to identify even more commercial, mainstream productions as feminist, bringing non-traditional voices back to the stage.

In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Dr. Jill Dolan (1991) argues that commercial performances spaces are inherently non-feminist. At the time this text was written, she was correct. Within the theatre, feminism was predominantly rooted in non-traditional, activist spaces, as shown in Charlotte Canning’s *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A* (1996) and other books focusing on Second Wave performances. This is a dramatic shift from the power women had held in the industry at the turn of the century. However, a cursory look at contemporary theatre reveals that this is no longer the case. Applying Dolan’s vocabulary and theoretical framework, I intend to bring women back into the narrative of mainstream performance. Many of the definitions Dolan uses are quickly becoming applicable in both mainstream and commercial productions. The next step in feminist performance

scholarship is to build this bridge between feminism and commercial performance and begin a contemporary body of work that will document this new era of commercial theatre.

While women have had a voice in performance and literature since the Ancient Greeks, modern feminist theatre has its origins in the women's suffrage movements of the early nineteenth century. The original text to document the theatre of the suffrage movement is Holledge's *Innocent Flowers* (1981). Holledge provides an in-depth account of women in British theatre with an emphasis on political actresses and plays. Women used performance to make their voices heard. A career as an actress-manager was one of the first careers available to women, allowing independence without entirely sacrificing their social status. The theatre was therefore the main industry in which women had significant influence and resources. Women and men alike, including such esteemed playwrights as George Bernard Shaw, penned and performed propaganda pieces articulating women's issues and campaigning for the vote. Through satire, many of these works capture the violence associated with the Suffrage Movement in a way other artistic mediums could not.

Lisa Kelly's 2009 dissertation, *The Politics of Tea and Theatre*, offers an example of a more focused narrative. Primarily concerned with the cult of domesticity, Kelly demonstrates how suffragists used the social constraints placed on women outside of the theatre to their benefit. The idea behind Kelly's writing is that by maintaining a lady-like and delicate image, women were able to have people actually listen to their message and earn the respect of those who were in the position to give them the vote, the theatre being a socially acceptable venue for women and because of women's power and autonomy in the industry (Kelly, 2009, pp. 22-32).

While progressive politics were already part of the theatre industry's culture, making suffrage messaging approachable for the audience was critical in garnering financial and political support. Davis's *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre* (1994) and Dolgin's *Shaw and the Actresses Franchise League* (2015) provide more detailed insight into the overlap between the politics and the art. The

rise of these individuals, organizations, and ideas then points to larger political trends at the beginning of the twentieth century. George Bernard Shaw's involvement in the Suffrage Movement particularly demonstrates the connection between politics and theatre. He was first and foremost a thespian and a playwright, writing roughly fifty scripts that are still performed today. A member of the prominent socialist organization, the Fabian Society, he was also very politically active and wrote copiously about politics and philosophy.

Of the entirety of Shaw's canon, *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and *Press Cuttings* are the most relevant to suffrage drama. *Press Cuttings* is openly about and in favor of the movement while *Mrs. Warren's Profession* addresses questions of propriety and womanhood. *Press Cuttings* is a particularly colorful and sarcastic work:

MITCHENER (*unlocking the door and admitting the Orderly, who comes between them*). What was it?
 THE ORDERLY. Suffragette, Sir.
 BALSQUITH. Did the sentry shoot her?
 THE ORDERLY. No, Sir: she shot the sentry.
 BALSQUITH (*relieved*). Oh: is that all? (Shaw, 1913, p. 9)

In this excerpt from the opening scene of *Press Cuttings*, the audience is given a satirical view of suffragist actions. Reading the script, it is possible to imagine the mix of laughter and shock from the audience. The sharpness of the humor is characteristic of suffrage drama and the tongue-and-cheek propaganda of movement in general.

This era in women's history is traditionally dubbed First Wave Feminism. The primary concerns of First Wave feminists were getting the right to vote so that women could have a say in local and national issues. This was also an international movement, gradually gaining traction from the mid-nineteenth century into the twentieth century. The bulk of Suffrage theatre was taking place in England. However, the messages of these productions and the leadership of major organizations such as the Actresses' Franchise League and the Pioneer Players affected change abroad through conferences, publishers, and sheer force of will. With the outbreak of World War I, scholars initially

claimed that the suffrage performances came to a halt at the outbreak of the Great War (Hollidge, 1981). The idea that suffrage was eclipsed by the war has since been challenged by historians. More recent scholars writing about suffrage theatre simply approach the start of the war, when performances were at a high point. However, women took this opportunity to prove themselves. In addition to maintaining their homes, many women directly contributed to the war effort as nurses, factory workers, and more. The women involved in the drama troupes even ventured to the front on occasion and would perform for soldiers. These efforts ultimately paid off and shortly after the war women won the right to vote in several countries.

With the advent of the second world war, women returned to the workforce and filled many of the same roles they had during WWI. There were even women fighting the war as part of the Navy WAVES and the Air Force WASPs this time. This increased political involvement created a profound awareness throughout the world wars. Artists reflected this change. *Exiles, Eccentrics, and Activists* (Seig, 1994) is a study of the dramatic works produced by German women during WWII. All of the plays discussed in this text have overt political themes, bringing light to issues women were facing under the Nazi regime and more generally in German culture. Many of these performances were characterized by their blunt depictions of real life and representations of traditional tropes such as the fallen woman. However, some were very distinctive and reminiscent of the type of performance art produced by activists today. Additionally, the book chronicles the individual struggles these prominent playwrights faced in these political conditions. These grim tales are in direct opposition to the United States, as WWII and the post-war era are considered glory years and many find themselves nostalgic for the period.

The passing of the World Wars marked a new era for women in the United States, defined by both an emphasis on women's role in the home as well as their newly recognized strength and aptitude. Women's education was in its Golden Era, with the Seven Sister colleges (Radcliffe, Bryn

Mawr, Wellesley, Vassar, Barnard, Smith, and Mount Holyoke) and other women's schools at the peak of their prestige (Tuite, 2014). At the same time, traditional gender roles were at an all-time high and there is a definitive break in the fight for women's rights. This duplicity resulted in a complex era that has become a significant source nostalgia for American society, even for those were not part of this history. As a result, there are a variety of artists and scholars who continue to document women's voices during this period through literature, film, fashion, and historical writing.

The feminist movement regained momentum during the 1960's, creating Second Wave Feminism, which continued into the 1980's and early 90's. This was a generally radical period in the United States and abroad, so there is a definite growth of activism for a greater variety of issues affecting women with the same militant fervor of the First Wave feminists. There is also have the development of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a formal pedagogy for using performance for social change that completely reinvented how scholars thought of performance. This was a highly influential text and a variety of performance groups employed these methods, including some dedicated to issues of feminism. The text's key message is that performance is fundamentally political and the two cannot be separated. This text also provides critical artistic framework often used by social justice performance troupes.

The messages of inclusion and the strong political notions provide the philosophical foundation for the troupes and performances of the period. Canning's *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.* takes cues from Boal, demonstrating how feminist performance often disregards traditional performance framework and is intended for activism. Providing an in-depth history of American feminist theatre in the 1970's and 80's, Canning also emphasizes the irrefutable connection between theatre and politics, elaborating on the myriad of ways theatre can be used as a tool for activism, community building, and dialogue. While Canning is hesitant to make this connection explicit, her conversation surrounding community is very diverse and she makes several direct connections to the

Chicano movement of the 60's. She thus references several groups derived from Luis Valdez's Teatro Campesino, the roots of which have been explicitly linked to Boal by a variety of performance study scholars.

There are two recent articles in the *Theatre Survey* and the *New Theatre Quarterly* that emphasize the political and historic relevance of performance as well as the connections between and these major social movements. One is an article by Canning (2004) entitled *Feminist Performance as Feminist Historiography*. As indicated by the title, Canning expertly argues that political works (such as those performed by women activists) are informed by history (pp. 227-230). Finding feminism in the theatre of the Chicano movement, Jacobs (2015) provides insight on prominent Chicana playwrights and critical cultural context. Jacobs' research is primarily based in the feminism of the 1980's, similar to Canning's *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.* This article further illustrates the interconnectedness of activist theatre troupes. Understanding the historiography of activist performance is essential for a complete portrait of the history in which today's feminist thespians are operating at all levels of theatre.

IV. Contemporary Theatre

Currently, we are generally considered to be in the Third Wave Feminism. This approach to feminism is concerned with issues of intersectionality and moving away from the radical tactics required of our predecessors. Today, there are still several production companies dedicated to feminist causes, some of which rely on Boal's techniques and others that stay within traditional theatre. This long and complex history of performance and feminism is still evident in the work these organizations produce. In addition to being informed by this history and conceptual framework, contemporary feminist theatre is part of the unique culture and broader vision of Third Wave Feminism. In contrast to their predecessors, third wave feminists have become thoroughly invested in women's issues as related to other identities (race, socioeconomic status, sexual

orientation, disability, etc.) These ideas of intersectionality echo Dolan's definition of materialist feminism and have broadened the goals of women's rights activist. As such, the theatre being produced by the movement is exceptionally diverse and rooted in a wide array of communities.

This is exemplified in the work of The Survival Girls, a feminist theatre project. The group, founded in 2011, is based in Nairobi, Kenya "bring together young female refugees in urban areas and empower them with art, awareness, and counseling" (<http://thesurvivalgirls.com/>). Such a project has roots in Boal's pedagogy and is bringing together a wider group of people than ever before. *The Survival Girls: A Nonfiction Novella* is a compilation of stories told by young women from all over the world, as well as the founder, Ming Holden. Dubbed "a nonfiction novella," the format is not traditional to dramatic literature but regardless provides a series of powerful narratives that lend themselves to storytelling and performance (Holden & Joldersma, 2013). This major initiative, lauded by such influential figures as Hillary Clinton and Nicholas Kristof, is just one example of the kinds of initiatives included in this research topic.

The work of Holden and *The Survival Girls* project exemplifies these methodological principles of action research and performance studies. Holden's academic background is in creative writing and her visit to Kenya was originally to organize a theatre performance for World Refugee Day 2011. What was intended as one-time event then developed into this major project that has remained active (Holden & Joldersma, 2013). Gathering the stories of these young women and using the performing arts to unify and strengthen their community, while not intended as research, has provided critical scholarship in understanding international activism, third wave feminism, and how theatre is relevant to both. Looking at contemporary feminist theatre more holistically, an article in *Horizons* magazine cites a 1982 study by Rina Fraticelli, *The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre*. This study was later updated in 2006 by Rebecca Burton (Dempsey, 2015). It is a highly in-depth analysis of women's place in Canadian theatre pulling information on employment, salaries,

and workplace environment from a wide array of companies, councils, and organizations (Burton, 2006). Such information is relevant in the sense that feminist theatre is not only about the women being served by the art, but also women being involved in the process itself. This international perspective will generally provide a complete picture of how this art world has evolved and generally improve the understanding of what is needed to ensure that critical organizations such as *The Survival Girls* succeed in their work.

In addition to the philosophic developments within the feminist movement, social media has allowed these ideas to become central to popular culture. This phenomenon, hereafter referred to as popular feminism, has had a significant and quantifiable impact on business in general. Major companies now print t-shirts and mugs with feminist slogans and iconography. Women's colleges have been receiving more applications and administrators at these schools have taken the lead in continuing the fight for women's rights. Film and television companies have created franchises for previously ignored female characters. This trend has even become evident on Broadway and in major regional theatres. Management theory, case studies, and the voices of current theatre professionals will demonstrate how feminist performance is no longer confined to grassroots spaces and that commercial productions need to be included in this body of scholarship moving forward.

Chapter 2: Commercial Theatre in Context

“The cool thing is that, unlike film, the theatre roles for women get better and better as you get older.” –Idina Menzel

I. The Professionalization of Theatre Management

In 2013 Dolan wrote a new book entitled *Feminist Spectator in Action*. This text breaks contemporary feminist performance into four parts: advocacy, activism, argument, and artistry. This newer text primarily consists of case studies. Cumulatively, these four sections point towards feminist performance being defined by extremely intentional content with a clear message above all else. Focusing on the production process, I would like to start with advocacy. Dolan’s discussion of advocacy offers a wide range of production contexts, ranging from low budget live productions to major TV shows and films. Solga (2016) also places a lot of emphasis on the film industry as well. This is part of a larger scholastic and professional trend. Within academia, many university theatre programs are beginning to include film and new media in their curriculum. In the professional world, performing arts organizations are having to compete with online streaming and movie theatres. American thespians are thus collectively working to keep up with these broader cultural changes and incorporate new technologies in order to innovate and continue to be relevant.

Popular feminism is byproduct of these social and technological shifts. With the incredible reach of the internet, feminist ideas are spreading quicker than ever and are rapidly impacting business decisions in a wide range of industries. In some respects, this is highly problematic. Information about feminist causes gets highly diluted, resulting in a spectrum of conflicting and often poorly-informed understandings of feminism. This leads to the neglect a lot of smaller details, like the femme cut of a feminist shirt costing extra or the overwhelmingly male executive team behind a particular product or organization. Politics have become integral to American popular

culture once again, and it is now highly problematic to appear uninformed or apathetic. It has therefore become beneficial for companies to market a particular event or product as political. This extends to theatre, where many artists and managers are seizing this opportunity to bring politics and social issues back to the stage.

Especially within feminist performance, there are many examples of well-known, successful theatre companies that produce politically charged, socially conscious shows. There have always been strong roots between theatre and social justice, especially feminism. Performances of Second Wave feminism, which lasted from the 1960's into the early 90's, further developed the connection between feminist theatre and activism. Many of these smaller companies have since closed for a variety of reasons including finances, artistic differences, and changes in the political landscape. However, there are two artistic powerhouses from this era that continue to produce feminist work and support women artists: The Women's Project (WP) Theater and the Brava! Theater Center.

Founded in 1979, WP Theater has sustained for nearly forty years in one of the most competitive theatre markets in the world; New York City. Similarly, Brava Theater Center is vibrant organization dedicated to producing feminist voices in San Francisco, another incredibly strong theatre community. Brava was founded in 1986, less than ten years after WP. They are now a leader in the San Francisco theatre community and offer an impressive variety of programming. Both organizations are incredibly proud of not only the present successes, but their histories as well. While there is little overlap in the people or productions between these two theatres, both companies serve a similar mission and studying these organizations in tandem will provide key insights into the history of feminism and American feminist theatre.

WP was founded by a group of friends working in New York. The catalyst was a woman named Julia Miles, who realized that "the American theatre was not paying attention to its women" because of the Women's Movement and the larger political conversations happening at the time

(Miles, 2003, p. 4). The goal of WP has therefore always been and continues to be the advancement of women in professional theatre. Emphasizing the professionalism and management over the message of the art is incredibly unique, especially for this point in feminist history. This is a vision that Brava! shares, though from a broader sociological perspective.

On the west coast, Brava! Theater Center offers an impressive parallel to the WP. Those few years between WP's founding and Brava's inception made a significant difference in their definitions of feminism. Similarly, Brava is vibrant organization dedicated to producing feminist voices. Brava was founded in 1986, less than ten years after WP. They are now a leader in the San Francisco theatre community and offer an impressive variety of programming. Both organizations are incredibly proud of not only the present successes, but their histories as well. While there is little overlap in the people or productions between these two theatres, both companies serve a similar mission and studying these organizations in tandem will provide key insights into the history of feminism and American feminist theatre.

Brava's history is not as widely documented, but their origins are much more radical than WP. The organizations started with the meeting of an incredibly intersectional group of women in 1986. The late 1980's mark an important transition in feminist thought, moving into third wave feminism. During this time, the notion of materialist feminism had emerged and was working its way into feminist performance. Theatre scholar Jill Dolan defines materialist feminism as understanding women "as historical subjects whose relation to prevailing social structures is also influenced by race, class, and sexual identification" (Dolan, 1991, p. 10). As such, the founders of Brava! were concerned with women's experiences in tandem with race, gender, socioeconomics, sexual orientation, disability, and more (brava.org). This variety of work was actually showcased in an article for Duke University's academic journal, *Radical History Review*:

Three women's theater companies — Lilith, the Minneapolis-based At the Foot of the Mountain (ATFM), and San Francisco's Brava! for Women in the Arts — did help individual

disabled women theater artists who had been barred from mainstream performance opportunities develop their own projects (Lewis, 2006, p. 103).

Beginning with their mission statements, there are some key differences between WP and Brava! that become immediately evident. The following is WP's current mission:

WP THEATER (Women's Project Theater) is the nation's oldest and largest theater company dedicated to developing, producing and promoting the work of female theater artists at every stage in their careers. WP Theater supports female-identified theater artists and the world-class, groundbreaking work they create, and provides a platform where their voices can be heard and celebrated on the American stage. (wptheater.org)

From this statement alone, it is very clear that WP is rooted in Second Wave Feminism.

While WP was definitely influenced by these artistic trends, the philosophy is more relevant. Second Wave feminists were entirely focused on women, leaving little room for today's more open-ended beliefs of intersectionality and non-binary definitions of gender. It is interesting that WP has continued this arguably limited focus. This is not to say that WP and their work has become outdated; they continue to be a highly successful organization and regularly produce plays that are philosophically up-to-date. Their mission is simply to provide opportunities to women theatre artists, something that is sorely lacking in the commercial theatre industry. It is also important to note that the term "female-identified" does include transwomen, showing that WP has kept up with the recent developments in feminist theory.

Turning to Brava, their mission is much more focused on representation and inclusion.

Brava's mission statement reads as follows:

Brava! for Women in the Arts celebrates over 30 years as a professional arts organization dedicated to cultivating the artistic expression of women, LGBTQIA, people of color, youth, and other underrepresented voices. (brava.org)

Brava's mission is much more in-line with Dolan's definition of materialist feminism and is therefore much more representative of the later second wave feminist thought, really the beginning of Third Wave feminism, which began in the late 1980's and has continued into present day. As

feminism began transitioning into the Third Wave, the idea of materialist feminism emerged. Brava's founding is right in the midst of this period of transition, which is reflected in the organization's history and culture.

Looking at their recent production histories, WP and Brava have both worked with some well-known playwrights including Sarah Ruhl, Laura Eason, Suzan Lori-Parks, and more. Both companies focus on new play development, but offer a range of programming. Brava! actually has an entire performing arts series called Brava Presents that features musicians, dancers, and other types of performance from all over the world. WP has been collaborating with other women-centric arts leadership organizations on a variety of projects such as the 50/50 by 2020 initiative and their Lab residency program. 50/50 is a playwriting collaborative organized by the League of Professional Theatre Women, New Perspectives Theatre, Works by Women, and Women's Work. This grassroots effort was founded in 2009 in response to the Sands Study, which confirmed that less than 20% of professionally produced shows were written by women (Steinberg, 2012). There is no clear organizational structure to the project, but it remains active and they post updates frequently on a centralized Facebook page. The current programming offered at WP and Brava respectively further demonstrate a key difference between the two organizations.

WP's primary and arguably only concern is to further the professional development of women theatre artists. Brava! takes it a step further, exclusively producing shows that address feminist issues and highlight underrepresented voices and perspectives. WP produces a significant amount of feminist work, especially compared to the average theatre. However, WP's focus is different enough from Brava that they both fulfill different needs within American theatre. WP provides women with leadership opportunities and access to New York's theatre community while Brava! provides women an opportunity to produce radical theatre in a professional environment. Both organizations continue to be incredibly successful at their work, operating out of impressive

venues and working with some high-profile artists in two of America's biggest and most competitive theatre markets.

While WP and Brava remain the most lucrative examples of commercial feminist performance, there are numerous smaller organizations throughout the United States that have chosen to follow in their footsteps. By producing plays by women or about women, these theatre companies have made the feminist dialogue accessible to a wider range of people and gotten the attention of many who previously had no knowledge or interest of feminism or women's history. Non-traditional performances by activists often go unnoticed by the typical theatre-goer and can potentially alienate their audiences. By using a traditional performance methodology, these theatres have eliminated a barrier for many people. This is not to say that activist performances are not impactful or wide-reaching, but to say that traditional theatres producing women-centered works contribute to their efforts and reframe the conversation in a way that can reach less receptive audiences. Traditional theatres typically also have more resources and better media coverage. At the very least, audiences in these shows are hearing women's voices and learning a new side of history.

There are several smaller organizations throughout the United States that have chosen to follow in WP's footsteps and devote themselves to women's theatre. Examples include the Venus Theatre in Maryland, Maiden Phoenix in Boston, West of Lenin in Seattle, the Tennessee Women's Theatre Project in Nashville, Artemisia Theatre in Chicago, and many others. Venus Theatre, founded in 2000, is a fairly young organization that is distinctly part of Third Wave feminism. Seventeen years is actually rather significant in the world of activist theatre, however, and their website identifies them as one of "the longest-running women's theatres in the world" (www.venustheatre.org). As explained in Chapter 1, many of the activist troupes from the Second Wave movement have since disbanded due economic and socio-political factors. Venus was therefore at the forefront of production companies devoted to Third Wave feminism and they have

made some strides in trying to stay relevant with our rapidly evolving technologies and culture. As a smaller company, however, this has been a challenge and they are much more focused on their artistic mission than on financial success.

By producing plays by women or about women, these theatre companies have made the feminist dialogue accessible to a wider range of people and gotten the attention of many who previously had no knowledge or interest of feminism or women's history. Non-traditional performances by activists often go unnoticed by the typical theatre-goer and can potentially alienate their audiences. By using a traditional performance methodology, these theatres have eliminated a barrier for many people. This is not to say that activist performances are not impactful or wide-reaching, but to say that traditional theatres producing women-centered works contribute to their efforts and reframe the conversation in a way that can reach less receptive audiences. Traditional theatres typically also have more resources and better media coverage. At the very least, audiences in these shows are hearing women's voices and learning a new side of history.

In addition to these theatre companies that have dedicated themselves to feminist performance, there are several theatre companies with broader missions that regularly showcase feminist voices. Oregon Contemporary Theatre (OCT) is one such example. I have had the opportunity to attend two Lauren Gunderson plays there, *Silent Sky* and *The Revolutionists*. I will go into more detail about these scripts and Lauren Gunderson's background in the next chapter, but for now I would like to focus on these two specific productions.

Silent Sky tells the story of the women computers of Harvard's astronomy lab at the beginning of the twentieth century, in particular the story of Henrietta Leavitt. Leavitt is known for her calculations of the stars' light pulses which allowed astronomers to measure the universe and determine Earth's location, as well as the existence of other galaxies. The five-person cast includes Henrietta, her two fellow computers, Williamina Fleming and Annie Cannon, a graduate student

named Peter Shaw, and Henrietta's sister, Margaret. The script was published in 2015 and serves as an excellent example of contemporary feminist theatre. Gunderson's play tells the story of Leavitt's pivotal scientific discovery and the barriers she faced as a woman. Due to her social context, Leavitt's contributions never received proper recognition. This play is an attempt to give her a small portion of the notoriety she deserves. Penned by a woman playwright, *Silent Sky* offers a representation of women's history in dramatic literature and the work being produced by women in theatre.

OCT's production of *Silent Sky* ran from February 26th through March 19th, 2016. Attending a performance, it was exciting to see the audience engaging with this part of history. The house was approximately two-thirds full and mostly consisted of individuals age 35 and older. OCT is not a particularly formal theatre, so the audience was casually dressed. In general, everyone seemed enthusiastic and conversational prior to the performance. The pre-show music was subtle piano music, no lyrics. The stage was preset in a wash of blue light. According to the curtain speech, there were a lot of season ticket holders and subscribers in the audience. There was not an overwhelming gender-split, a seeming balance of male and female participants. The audience laughed at a few comedic lines, but was mostly silent throughout the performance. This particular performance was on a Thursday evening, so the audience did not linger after the performance. There were no other special events associated with the performance.

In researching *Silent Sky*, I have read the script and reviewed online discussions and media about the play. The online research includes several reviews of productions and a Tumblr blog dedicated to the play. This range of material allowed me to contextualize the play within other current performances about women's history and feminist causes. Additionally, I attended the current production of the play at OCT. In attending the play, I evaluated both the production itself

and the audience. OCT also did not have any explicit feminist or social justice oriented goals in producing this show, simply wanting to tell this story.

The production's aesthetics were artistically quite impressive. OCT is a professional company, with a highly trained and educated individuals working on their productions. The set was simply designed with three desks, a piano, and some props. Using the staging concept of levels, the stage was designed in two parts with a staircase linking the main platform to a balcony. The piano sat between the platform and the balcony, with the other furniture on the platform. There were five panels hanging behind the set used to display a variety of projections throughout the performance. In addition, the show ended with a detailed light wash that mimicked the stars. The stage itself was painting to look like the night sky and the panels were distinctively modern, however the set pieces, props, and costumes were distinctly period. In looking at the script and online at other documentation of other productions, this is the traditional design for *Silent Sky*. As a note, the acting was also strong and detailed. Each character had a distinct mannerisms and appropriate accent, keeping the audience's attention.

OCT's interpretation of *The Revolutionists* was more unique. Gunderson's *The Revolutionists* tells the story of revolutionary France and the assassination of the controversial journalist Jean-Paul Marat through the lens of three famous women from the period; playwright Olympe de Gouges, activist Marianne Angelle, Marat's assassin Charlotte Corday, and of course her majesty Marie Antionette. The action starts with Corday suddenly and forcefully commissioning a speech from de Gouges to read at the time of the assassination. Ultimately, all de Gouges is only one left to fight and she ultimately finds her voice, penning her famous *Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen*. This production OCT's overall design of the production was fairly similar to *Silent Sky*, save the historical details they chose to include. The scenic scope of the play is fairly limited, so the set design was simple. There were also fewer technical elements, which made the production feel a bit

more raw. The most noticeable artistic choice was probably the injection of hip-hop music in between scenes. All the songs chosen had strong feminist overtones, giving the show even more energy and a strong, rebellious feel that differentiated it from other productions. *The Revolutionists* and *Silent Sky* both showcase real women who had a major historical impact, and OCT's productions found ways to bring this story into today through contemporary media.

While OCT is not a feminist or activist theatre company, presenting such work has made the organization part of the artistic discussion of women's issues. They even organized and hosted a forum on women in theatre in March 2017. Additionally, this production provides insight into how feminist dialogue is presented in a more traditional theatrical setting. The performance was not designed or presented in such a way to shock the audience or provoke action, as is part of activist theatre. There was no interaction between the audience and the performers. The curtain speech was the standard cell phone reminder and sponsor recognition. There was no talk-back or Q&A with the cast, director, or playwright. The program did not include any explicit feminist propaganda. OCT's only intention was to produce this play and tell the story of Henrietta Leavitt. This is no less valuable to the feminist movement and no less part of the dialogue.

Operating in the present context of third wave feminism, OCT is by no means alone as a professional company investing in productions of plays about women. In summer 2016, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival premiered *Roe*, an original play about *Roe v. Wade*. The Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis, MN recently staged a production of *You for Me for You*, telling the story of two North Korean sisters fleeing to America. On a smaller scale, the Phoenix Theater in Indianapolis, IN produced Stephen Dietz's *On Clover Road* as part of their 2015-2016 season. The play is a thriller about a mother rescuing her daughter. These are just a select few examples of women's voices being heard on stage. This does not include theatres dedicated to producing work

by and about women, or explicit activism. These companies have, either intentionally or unintentionally, contributed to the feminist movement and become part of the discussion artistically.

Popular feminism also extends beyond regional theatre, all the way to Broadway. Stacy Wolf's text *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (2011) discusses how powerful female leads have been taking center stage for generations and have even had a direct hand in shaping this new trend. The most contemporary example included in the text is, of course, *Wicked*, but there have been several shows produced since that continue to grow this legacy. Broadway management has many of the same diversity challenges faced by major regional companies, however the social and financial pressure to produce socially conscious, inclusive work has become overwhelming. This is evident in the *Hamilton* phenomenon as well as the success of *Fun Home*, *Waitress*, *Kinky Boots*, and more. These larger trends have sparked a dialogue among theatre professionals about activism in commercial theatre that shows a recognition of these values and an interest in continuing to produce these kinds of shows.

II. Online Professional Discourse About Activism and Feminism

Online, there are a wide variety of forums, blogs, and websites for theatre professionals to engage with each other about a variety of issues in the field. These authors come from various educational, professional, and personal experiences. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to focus on the conversations surrounding activism and feminism. Commercial theatre has undoubtedly become increasingly political since the start of the 21st century, and these various online communities excellently demonstrate this passion within the theatre community. *HowlRound*, the most organized and dynamic example of such a forum, offers an online community for theatre professionals all over the world. Their content is supplied by their community and put through a rigorous editing process. Anyone can contribute and it is an incredibly diverse space. Given *HowlRound*'s dedication to inclusion and their position as a leading voice in American theatre, the

majority of the articles I will feature come from this website. The website is home to a notably large body of work about women in theatre, feminist performance, and political theatre. An October 2016 article by Deborah Randall, founder of Venus Theatre in Maryland, best articulates the symbiotic and vital relationship between feminism and the theatre:

It's essential for women to have access to black boxes and storefronts because we have been smashed into silence for so long that we need time to stretch and safe spaces to explore our ideas without being held to larger theatres' budgetary standards (Randall, 2016).

Randall's words harken back to the Second Wave activist performances and to the propaganda of the Suffrage movement. Venus Theatre was founded in 2000, making it a fairly young organization that is distinctly part of Third Wave feminism. Seventeen years is actually rather significant in the world of activist theatre, however, and their website identifies them as one of "the longest-running women's theatres in the world" (www.venustheatre.org). As explained in Chapter 1, many of the activist troupes from the Second Wave movement have since disbanded due economic and socio-political factors. Venus was therefore at the forefront of production companies devoted to Third Wave feminism and they have made some strides in trying to stay relevant with our rapidly evolving technologies and culture. As a smaller company, however, this has been a challenge and they are much more focused on their artistic mission than on financial success.

Looking at larger companies that qualify for the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), the picture is a little more concerning. According to a 2015 study, the overwhelming majority of managers at these theatres are still white men (Erkut & Ceder). The authors of this study followed up with an article in 2016, demonstrating how not much has changed. This trend is important for two main reasons. First, these statistics mean that the growth in feminist productions at the commercial level are not necessarily a result of sympathetic producers. This implies that, in addition to being a force for social change, it has become good business to showcase strong female characters and feminist messaging. This can be seen in a variety of industries in the form of

products with feminist slogans and iconography, a feminist reimagining of a popular film or literary franchise, or the recent slew of “girl power” pop songs. This is reinforced by the inclusion of the film industry in Dolan (2013) and Solga (2016). Second, this begs the question of what kind of feminism is being represented in these more lucrative productions.

In addition to the organizations, it is equally important to talk about the work being produced. The scripts I will cover later come from a variety of genres and a diverse group of playwrights. *HowlRound* has featured a few articles recently that aim to understand what exactly constitutes a feminist play. These contributors all subscribe to an intersectional, materials definition of feminism and keep their language broad. For example, *HowlRound* featured *A Feminist Manifesto for Playwrights* written by a graduate student from Arizona State University, Paco José Madden. In this article, he identifies intersectionality as one of his criteria of and states that “feminist plays are not just about sex and gender, but also create dialogue around class, race, privilege, and other forms of oppression” (Madden, 2016). This inclusive definition makes an important distinction that opens the discussion to his perspective as a male theatre artist who supports feminism and feminist art.

Madden further defines feminist plays as “(including) characters who favor cooperation over conflict. Contrast, mystery, revelation, surprise, and suspense are other types of dramatic plot structures that don’t necessarily include conflict” (Madden, 2016). His claim that feminist shows rely on non-conflict based plot devices, while legitimate, is in fact a statement on women and conflict. Showing women who handle situations in a logical, collaborative, non-aggressive manner can be seen as showing women with superior problem solving abilities. However, it is also important to remember that in order to represent women’s struggles, there are actually many feminist pieces that follow some derivation of the “(wo)man vs.” literary trope. Historically, women have faced everything on stage from unforgiving politics to abusive lovers to stubborn coworkers to

technology. Both men and women of all different backgrounds have written scripts telling a wide range of women's stories.

In the same article, Madden references another *HowlRound* piece entitled *What Is a Feminist Play Anyway?: Getting Specific* where playwright Catherine Castellani asks the question "but what about stories that are not specifically about women, or women's history, or even written by women?"

(2016). Dolan's broad definition of materialist feminism tells us to include everyone of these plays, a lead which Castellani follows enthusiastically:

Whatever a feminist play is, it's not about shutting doors and declaring "you can't talk about that." Historical play, science fiction, any class, any race, experimental or straight-forward, there is no formula for a feminist play because there is no formula for how to be human (Castellani, 2016).

Madden's point of contention with Castellani's open-ended definition is that "permits almost any play or playwright to claim a work is feminist" (Madden, 2016). While materialist feminism offers an incredibly broad understanding of feminism, there is still some criteria for whether or not a show can be considered feminist. Castellani's views represent an emerging wave of feminist thought that expands feminism beyond intersectionality to include every person and every identity. This idea is reinforced by Dolan (2013) and Solga (2016), both in the examples they include and in their approaches to feminist theory.

In another *HowlRound* article, *Let Them Speak* (2017), playwright Chisa Hutchinson and artistic director Wesley Frugé call for more work by women writers of color. In calling out the lack of diversity in current professional theatre, Hutchinson and Frugé (2017) discussed the importance of women of color needing to tell their own stories. While there are many white theatre artists working to diversify their writing, they are not necessarily the best people for the job. The characters and stories they create are inevitably based in research and second-hand stories, not their own experiences. Hutchinson and Frugé also address issues of how a show might be received based on an author's identity. This is only one example of how theatre managers are pushing for more

inclusion in their body of work. Again, it is important to remember that unfortunately theatre management does not yet reflect what audiences see on stage. I am interested to see how the statistics for representation change over the next five to ten years, however, as the numbers are likely changing rapidly both in the United States and even abroad.

III. Offering an International Perspective

I would like to take a moment to recognize the global reach of the internet. The *HowlRound* community, like most online forums, is international. Contemporary understandings of feminism and feminist performance must therefore be evaluated in a global context, taking into account all forms of multiculturalism. Within *HowlRound*'s discourse about gender and performance, I was particularly struck by the projects coming out of Ireland. There are two main movements happening as of 2016, *Waking The Feminists* and *Mothers Artists Makers*. Both campaigns worked diligently to expose issues of gender bias in professional theatre in Ireland through activism, art, and statistics. I will go into detail about these projects in Chapter 4, but for now I would like to focus on their digital presence. Recently, Irish playwright and doctor Naomi Elster wrote an article for *HowlRound* entitled *Initiatives for Women in Theatre in the UK and Ireland* (2017) that focused on *Waking the Feminists* and on the status of women in theatre throughout the UK. She begins by talking about the women people see on stage:

The tendency to limit women to eye candy and/or props for men, coupled with stories not being written and/or directed by women, comes from a place where women's stories aren't put on an equal value to those of men—and ultimately deprives us of the platform we need to start telling more of our own stories (Elster, 2017).

Elster also speaks to the importance of character development, stating that “Weak characters make weak writing. Writing more and better female roles isn't just a feminist statement. It will make for better plays.” (Elster, 2017)

Overall, Elster's article makes it very clear that just putting more women on stage is not enough. Referring to the data gathered by *Waking the Feminists*, she felt compelled to consider why

these statistics might be so dismal. Elster's ultimate conclusion, inevitably and tragically, was that systematic sexism was responsible. The article refers a lot to Stella Duffy's independent blog, *Not Writing, but Blogging*². Duffy is a London-based theatre artist and writer who is very politically active. Duffy's work, among others, offers an example of how the world of online dramatic criticism extends beyond *HowlRound* to include an infinite body of work by a wide range of theatre participants. Dolan also maintains an independent blog dedicated to feminist performance and several newspaper websites, in particular the Chicago Tribune and the New York Times, have an entire section dedicated to dramatic criticism. The countless articles written from a feminist lens are a product of popular feminism, encouraged by an unprecedented interest in feminist issues. This body of work collectively also demonstrates how feminist theory has been evolving recently.

Feminist theory has arrived at its next point of transition as a culmination of the advent of popular feminism and advancements in scholarship and we are arguably entering the fourth wave. Scholars and activists alike have moved beyond simple intersectionality to define feminism as relevant to everyone, regardless of identity. This recent shift towards universality comes from a developing relationship with queer theory as well as new ideas around how patriarchal structures impact people of all genders, not just women. As feminism enters this new era of universality, it is important to identify current art that is influenced by this new form of thought. In the world of commercial theatre and new play development, this means that theatre managers will be part of a new era in performance defined by feminist theory as much as traditional business practices. This opens up a whole new range of creative possibilities for engaging with artists, community members, and patrons as main stream theatre becomes a political forum once more.

² Stella's blog can be found at <https://stelladuffy.wordpress.com/>

Chapter 3: Literary Approaches to Feminist Performance

“My only responsibility as a playwright and a storyteller is to give you the time of your life in the theatre.” – Lin-Manuel Miranda

I. Contemporary Playwrights

Dolan emphasizes having an intentional point of view as key to creating feminist performance. Within contemporary theatre, there are several playwrights who are dedicated to discussing feminist issues on stage. For the purposes of simplicity, I initially narrowed it down to women playwrights of note. This section will focus on the work of Caryl Churchill, Suzan Lori-Parks, Lauren Gunderson, and Sarah Ruhl. These four women have all had their work widely produced to great success and are dedicated to putting women and women’s stories on stage. Churchill and Lori-Parks represent the transition from Second to Third Wave feminist performance while Gunderson and Ruhl are firmly rooted in the present transition from the Third Wave into this new, undefined era of feminism.

Going chronologically, Churchill is fundamental to today’s commercial feminist theatre. Throughout her career, she was never particularly vocal about identifying as a feminist. However, Churchill’s personal and artistic commitments to feminist values were unwavering (Solga, p. 64). As one of the most recognizable female playwrights, it is not difficult to imagine that her caution was at least partially due to professional pressures to avoid alienating potential audiences. She was also writing during a time when the feminist movement was particularly stigmatized. Churchill’s work address an unparalleled range of political issues, making her a strong example of a playwright who was able to build a successful career through political writings. Scholars Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond summarize the political nature of Churchill’s work in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill*, stating that “For Churchill, dramatizing the political is not just a question of content, but also of form. With the renewal of form comes the renewal of the political: new forms and new socially and politically relevant questions” (Aston and Diamond, 2010, p. 2).

Churchill's plays are also known for pushing artistic boundaries, often straying from theatrical and story-telling conventions. Of her body of work, *Top Girls* (1982) is most clearly linked to feminism. The show is known for its opening scene where the main character, a business woman named Marlene, hosts a dinner party for famous women from history. As the show goes on, we learn about the less glamorous past Marlene has left behind.

Love and Information (2012) offers a more contemporary example of Churchill's rule-bending. I had the opportunity to see a production by the Bryn Mawr College theatre department while I was an undergraduate there. The play filled the space, physically breaking the fourth wall in every direction and moving the audience through a series of thematic vignettes that address themes of love, technology, and communication. This was much more of an experience than a production. Giving the script a closer look, the show offers a contemporary view on challenges faced by everyone, not just women. *Love and Information* therefore offers a literary example of this new wave of feminism many theorists are gradually beginning to identify.

Looking at a different side of early third wave feminism, Suzan Lori-Parks is perhaps the most well-known and widely-produced women playwright of color. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College '85 with honors in English. Lori-Parks regularly attributes her professional successes to her experience at this prestigious women's college and cites playwright Wendy Wasserstein, Mount Holyoke '71, as one of her strongest creative influences. Wasserstein was a prominent Second Wave playwright, best known for *The Heidi Chronicles*, which received the Tony Award for Best Play, and *Uncommon Women and Others*, which was workshopped at the prestigious Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Connecticut.

Being part of the Third Wave and a woman of color, Lori-Parks' plays offer a very different perspective than Wasserstein and highlight a broader range of social issues. Of Lori-Parks' body of work, *The Hester Plays* are probably the most well-known. *The Hester Plays* consist of two shows, *In*

the Blood (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000). Collectively these scripts offer a modern retelling of the classic novel *Scarlet Letter*. Lori-Parks used the novel's premise to show the gritty reality for single mothers. These scripts challenge people's notions and judgements of what women go through and are particularly meaningful in communities impacted by those issues. A 2014 production of *In the Blood* at Theatre Horizon in Norristown, PA actually took the opportunity to create a storytelling initiative within the local homeless community. This is just one example of how feminist performance can have a significant impact both on and off the stage.

Moving on to more contemporary playwrights, Lauren Gunderson is a native of Atlanta, GA and holds a BA from Emory University and an MFA from New York University. In 2016, she was named the most-produced living playwright by *American Theatre Magazine* and has received substantial recognition for her work. Her plays typically focus on women's history, especially women in science. Gunderson frequently lectures on science and theatre, considering the subject a personal passion. Gunderson's play, *Silent Sky*, offers a strong example of her emphasis on women scientists. Henrietta Leavitt, the main character and historical figure, was an exceptionally educated woman, a graduate of Radcliffe College with honors. Cheekily referred to by Leavitt as "Harvard in skirts," Radcliffe was Harvard's sister school and the best education available to American women at the time. She eagerly accepts a job offer at Harvard, thinking she will have the opportunity to do her own research and access to the observatory. Upon her arrival in Cambridge, she quickly realizes that was not the case. Shaw, her supervisor, makes it clear she is to remain in the office with her fellow computers, recording star positions from glass plates. Computers were exclusively employed for calculations, no other work. This was not considered academic and, until the 1950's, was perceived as women's work. These women were often treated with disrespect by their male colleagues.

Leavitt does not lose hope, however, and begins staying after-hours with the permission of Cannon to do her own research. The audience then follows Leavitt on her journey of scientific

discovery and sees how the history of World War I and the Suffrage Movement impacts her and her colleagues. Gunderson also provides insight into her personal life, particularly the challenges facing the Leavitt family and Henrietta's romance with Shaw. Henrietta then concludes the show with an emotional speech about the future of each character and how history progresses.

Other scripts by Gunderson about women in science include *Emilie* (2010), *By and By*, *Ada and the Engine* (2015), and *The Amazing Adventures of Dr. Wonderful (and her dog!)*. In addition to *The Revolutionists*, she has written a couple of Shakespeare-inspired pieces and several other historical plays. Most notably, her latest work, *The Book of Will*, premiered at the Denver Center April 2016 and was then presented at the renowned Folger Theatre in Washington D.C. in January 2017. It is also worth noting that Gunderson teaches a couple of classes through her playwriting residency at the Marin Theatre in Mill Valley, CA and she has recently made them available on YouTube and *HowlRound* (Gunderson, 2017).

Gunderson's success, though remarkable, is not isolated. She is part of an emerging group of women playwrights who are working to put women's history and women's issues on the stage. Trina Davies, based in Vancouver, is a celebrated playwright in Canadian contemporary theatre. She offers an international parallel to Gunderson for aesthetic, awards, and notoriety. While she is not as widely produced and has a smaller body of work, she holds a similar place in contemporary Canadian theatre. Her current project is *Silence: Mabel and Alexander Graham Bell*. This script revives the story of the often-overlooked president of the Bell Telephone Company, Mabel Gardiner Hubbard. This play was commissioned by Theatre Calgary in Alberta, which was founded in the 1960's and remains one of the one of the oldest and largest theatres in Canada. The subject matter of this play and the scale of the commission undoubtedly echo Gunderson's work. Her other full-length plays include *The Bone Bridge*, *The Romeo Initiative*, *Shatter Waxworks*, and *West of the 3rd Meridian*.

My next example, Sarah Ruhl, creates incredibly unique and more abstract work about contemporary challenges facing women. Ruhl, a Chicago native with an MFA from Brown University, is another example of an incredibly successful woman playwright with a political agenda. Ruhl has received substantial recognition, including being named the Feminist Press' Forty under Forty . She is currently on faculty at the Yale School of Drama. Last year, the University of Oregon's theatre department produced one of her plays, *Stage Kiss*. Additionally, *Melancholy Play* was part of OCT's 2016-2017 season. Both these scripts can be considered romantic comedies, though artistically are very different. *Stage Kiss* is relatively traditional, employing a lot of literary and staging devices from Thornton Wilder's well-known play, *Our Town*. On the other hand, *Melancholy Play* is much more absurdist.

In contrast to Gunderson and Lori-Parks' more grounded plays, Ruhl's *Melancholy Play* offers an abstract look at the female condition. The story centers on a young woman, Tilly, who is known for her melancholy disposition. Her melancholia makes her irresistible to all she crosses paths with. However, Tilly is suddenly overwhelmed with joy at her birthday party and everyone's affection turns to shock and confusion. Later, it is revealed that melancholia has been catching and those so afflicted have been turned to almonds. As previously mentioned, this play can be considered absurdist. In order for it to make some sense, Ruhl does include very specific instructions for staging. Holistically, this play is a not-so-subtle representation of the double standard women face today, expected to be happy but not too happy. Throughout her body of work, Ruhl sets her own rules and consistently challenges her audiences, though much like Churchill she also makes sure that everyone feels comfortable approaching her work. In *Women's Voices on American Stages in the Early Twenty-First Century* (2013), scholar Leslie Atkins Durham states that "(Ruhl's) preference for the staging that demands the audience's imaginative intervention is significant to her larger project" (Durham, p. 85), hinting that Ruhl wants her audiences to find the lessons on their own and engage

more with her art. This subtlety harkens back to Churchill's work and looking at the literature directly reveals even more connections between them and other feminist playwrights.

II. Scripts

In both the *Feminist Spectator as Critic* and *The Feminist Spectator in Action*, Dolan emphasizes media literacy as part of feminist performance. This is arguably the primary point of both texts. Feminism can also be used as a lens to create and interpret any piece art. All of that being said, at the base of every production lies the playwright's script. This is arguably the show in its purist form, usually unburdened by the layers of artistic and logistical decisions that got it to the stage. In an effort to narrow down which plays to feature, my initial criteria for selecting scripts was that they must have been written and produced after 2001 and they must have been written by women, about women. As I further explored feminist theory, however, I realized that this was only a single category within a much larger, more diverse body of work. Nevertheless, this is the most sensible starting point for understanding the literature of feminist performance. These first few scripts therefore meet this narrow criteria.

Given Lauren Gunderson's current notoriety, I would like to start with her work. More specifically, I am beginning with *The Revolutionists* because it tells a story of feminist activism. While many of the events in the play are pure fiction, Olympe deGouges' writing the *Declaration of the Rights of Women* is a major piece of feminist history that is too often neglected by the average history class. In fact, all four characters are all actual historical women of the French Revolution; Olympe deGouges, Charlotte Corday, Marie Antoinette, and Marianne Angelle. Thrown together, their individual accomplishments become an empowering demonstration of what women have always been able to accomplish together. This script is unpublished, but I was able to retrieve a copy of the February 2016 draft from the New Play Exchange. In the script, Gunderson included actual portraits of the women with their more casual character descriptions. She also provides very specific

notes on how the lines are supposed to be delivered, even including the following punctuation guide at the beginning of the script:

PUNCTUATION AS RHYTHM PRIMER:

(-)	<i>hyphens</i> at the end of a sentence are cut-offs by the following line.
(-)	within a sentence are a self cut-offs, an acceleration into the next thought.
(...)	<i>ellipses</i> at the end of a sentence are trails off, unsure of what's next.
(<i>breath</i>)	is a small, personal pause
(<i>pause</i>)	is a shared pause of average duration
(<i>beat</i>)	is a longer pause in which a personal change or revelation happens
(<i>Silence</i>)	is an intentionally wielded quiet, a line without words.
[[---]]	the lines inside of double brackets are what the speaker would have said

LEVELS OF INTENSITY INDICATED BY DIALOGUE FONT:

Italics are more intense than not.
ALL CAPS ARE VERY INTENSE.
ALL CAPS AND ITALICS ARE THE MOST INTENSE.

Writing about women's history is one of the most effective ways to address gender inequality. There is also a very strong market for historical work, especially in light of the *Hamilton* phenomena. While *The Revolutionists* was before *Hamilton* and this does not seem like a natural connection to make, there is something to be said for providing audiences with something intellectually challenging that they are comfortable with. Being able to understand a piece of art is viewed as a status symbol, which allows people to feel good if only for a short while, and adds to the perceived value of their experience.

Continuing with works about women's history, Jessica Swale's *Blue Stockings* (2013) offers a quintessential international example of a commercially successful feminist play. The script, workshopped and premiered at the Globe in London, tells the story of the first women students to enter Oxford University. The following quote from the text beautifully portrays the challenges women came up against in their education:

TESS There was a girl at home. Lived at the parsonage. Annabel. She'd spend a whole afternoon sewing a ribbon onto a bonnet, and she'd be content. Why wasn't that enough for me, Celia? You know, I'd climb the roof of Will's classroom just to listen. Once I lost my footing and they found me hanging by my underskirt, but I wouldn't let go of my notebook. I should have fallen and cracked my skull right then and there, I'd have been better off (Swale, 2013, p. 102).

The despondent nature of this quote illustrates the heartbreak each of these young women face while trying to attend university. Full of personal obstacles and collective challenges, Swale beautifully shows the audience how hard women had to fight for education. While this is not the only play about women's education, this is the only script that tells this piece of women's history. Referring back to Madden's *HowlRound* article and his point of cooperation of conflict, *Blue Stockings* offers an excellent example of women working together to overcome a series of challenges. While I have not had the opportunity to see this script produced, the camaraderie and support within this special group of women absolutely leaps off of every page.

Collectively these scripts illustrate two artistic approaches to representing women's issues on stage; absurdism and realism. Both styles effectively communicate their message by taking reality to the extreme and are regularly applied outside of feminist performance. Churchill and Ruhl work in absurdism and Lori-Parks and Swale use realism. Their approaches mean Churchill and Ruhl tend to address big picture issues facing women while Lori-Parks and Swale focus on the consequences of those challenges. The first chapter discussed some of the historical roots of realism, but absurdism is much more contemporary and flexible. This flexibility is what makes it such a good fit for cause-oriented writing. As feminist philosophy continues to evolve, however, there is an increasing variety of scripts on both sides of this equation and I expect this trend to continue as feminism continues to become more broadly defined and more inclusive.

III. Feminist Plays That are Not Just About Women

As feminism enters this next stage of universality, it is important to recognize current work that is either influenced by or can be considered relevant to this new form of thought. This philosophical approach goes beyond basic intersectionality to include people of all gender identities and sexual orientations. A second category of scripts has emerged from these theoretical developments. This category is difficult to define since it is so broad, but there is a general focus on

the gender and sexuality of the playwrights and characters. Of late, there are three hugely successful examples of these stories. On Broadway, the two major examples that come to mind are *Kinky Boots* and *Fun Home*. *Kinky Boots*, the 2013 recipient of the Tony Award for Best Musical, tells the story of a dwindling shoe company finding a new future by designing shoes for Drag Queens. *Kinky Boots* is a stage adaptation of the 2005 film. While dressing in Drag has been part of theatre since before the days of Shakespeare, *Kinky Boots* is one of a very small group of contemporary plays that showcase Drag culture and is the only one to reach this level of success and recognition.

Sweeping the 2015 Tony Awards, *Fun Home* is a musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's graphic novel of the same name that chronicles the overlap between her father being outed and her own journey with her sexual identity. The show had two incredible runs on Broadway and is currently on tour throughout the United States. Alison Bechdel, a famous lesbian cartoonist, has been an icon of the LGBT community for many years. Her popularity mostly came from her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which was distributed in *The Funny Times* and several LGBT news outlets from 1983-2008. In 2007, she published *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and became a household name. She is also the originator of the popular Bechdel Test, which states that if two female characters have a conversation about something other than a man a story can be considered feminist. This is typically used to talk about films, but the Bechdel Test can be applied to plays and literature as well and is considered a cornerstone of popular feminism.

Turning to non-musicals, Taylor Mac's play, *Hir* (2015), offers a chaotic family story featuring a trans character. While this not seem like much at first glance, this show has been very widely produced and has made incredible strides for trans representation. *Hir* is a unique play for several reasons. While the story and characters are absolutely absurdist, the writing is grotesquely realist and Taylor Mac does not shy away from the slightest detail. For the purposes of this discussion I would like to focus on the role of the trans-identified character, Max. As part of the

family, they are certainly central to the story. However, the play is not about their transition or their identity. They are arguably not even the main character. Max being transgender is treated a simple fact, only discussed in detail once. There is also no noticeable impact on Max's relationships with the rest of the immediate family. The noticeable absence of conversation is indeed a statement, subtly normalizing the transgender experience. Since its publication, numerous regional theatres all across the United States have produced *Hir* and there are more productions on the way, including one at the famous Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago.

In addition to these more prominent shows, there are countless feminist plays currently being written and produced through the National New Play Network (NNPN). The NNPN is a collection of theatres across the United States that are dedicated to producing contemporary shows. The New Play Exchange (NPX) is a website managed by NNPN that allows playwrights from all over the world to share their new work with other writers, literary managers, artistic directors, and students. NPX features an endless variety of scripts from a diverse group of writers, with several handy search features to help people navigate their digital library. Scripts can be filtered by length, genre, geography, the playwright's identity (gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity), as well as cast size and diversity.

The Mermaid Hour (2016) by David Valdes Greenwood offers an excellent example of a lesser-known NPX script that has been hugely successful within the new play development community. The script was a 2016 finalist at the Eugene O'Neill Center's annual National Playwrights Conference and was one of six plays featured at NNPN's 2016 National Showcase of New Plays. The story is incredibly unique, dealing with the gender identity of a young Latina woman, Vi. A young trans girl, Vi makes a YouTube video that goes viral to the shock and frustration of her family. In the fallout Vi falls victim to self-harm and ends up in the hospital

(Valdes, 2016). There are definitely some moments that feel absurdist as we experience what Vi is thinking, however the show itself is consistent with the harshly realist style of *Hir*.

Looking at these scripts collectively, they reflect two sides of commercial feminist performance. *Kinky Boots* and *Fun Home*, being blockbuster Broadway musicals, represent popular tastes that have a large following beyond the traditional theatre-going community. *Hir* and NNPN pieces such as *The Mermaid Hour* represent a more artistic form of success. While theatres are able to market and sell these shows effectively, they are suited for a very specific audience and are not as widely known. People who are unfamiliar with theatre are significantly more likely to invest in a show they've heard of and that has the support of Broadway names and awards, especially compared to a contemporary production they view as a risk. Popular feminism is beginning to make a substantial difference for whether a new script become widely produced. In addition to credibility that can come from the NNPN or a popular artist or company, adding a feminist stamp approval to marketing materials gives theatres more confidence in a script and helps companies reach a new audience. The impact of popular feminism is evident in programming decisions, promotional materials, and dramatic criticism. These elements are derived from the literature and collectively determine the success of a particular script or playwright.

IV. Dramatic Criticism in the Digital Age

In theatre, dramatic criticism has been the most noticeably impacted by new technologies. Dramatic criticism, being a type of journalism, has a more traditional relationship with new media. The overwhelming majority of theatre reviews are now being published online through newspapers and independent blogs. In addition to formal online publications, social media outlets also provide a new, more casual outlet for critiquing a production that allows anyone to share their opinion on a particular production. In addition to individual posts and comments, theatres receive substantial feedback directly to their own website and social media pages. While formal reviews still carry more

weight, especially among theatre professionals, potential audiences are more likely to hear about a production from a friend's post or an informal blog. These technologies and have thus directly impacted how theatres promote their work and engage with their audiences.

Yale Repertory Theatre recently commissioned a new play by Aditi Brennan Kapil, *Imogen Says Nothing*. The title character, Imogen, is based on a silent character that appears in the stage directions of a couple of Shakespeare plays. In *Imogen Says Nothing*, Kapil has brought this character to life not just as a woman, but as a leading lady. Kapil also made use of the more infamous stage direction from *A Winter's Tale*, "exit pursued by a bear" (Act III, Scene 3)³. Many of the characters are double cast as bears and Imogen is described as "a lumbering woman and/or a bear" (Kapil, p. ii). The production ran from January 20th – February 11th, 2017. I did not have the opportunity to attend the production, however the script was available on NPX. In reading this story, the feminism was simultaneously subtle and direct. There are some blatant moments, such as the ending where Imogen devours a man.

The online buzz around *Imogen Says Nothing*, excellently demonstrates the intersection of popular feminism and dramatic criticism. A review in the Hartford Courant (January 31, 2017) dubbed this show "a fiercely feminist fable," a label the production eagerly applied in their own marketing. The show has also been referred to as politically charged and subversively funny in other reviews. There is also particular attention to diversity, with a review in the New Haven Independent (January 27, 2017) calling the show "feminism, un-whitewashed." As of yet, no other production in Yale Rep's 2016-2017 season was so anticipated. This script was in development for five years before finally making it to the stage and was ultimately very successful. While popular feminism and the feminist dialogue around this production only aided in the promotion of the play and not the

³ Page numbers will vary by edition. For quick reference, retrieve the full script from: http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=winterstale

actual artistic product, it was a clearly strong strategy. With a reputation as a piece of feminist theatre by a celebrated woman playwright of color and coming out of one of the most respected repertory houses in the country, producers will undoubtedly see the artistic merits of *Imogen Says Nothing*. Kapil's play is a particularly strong example of how dramatic criticism and professional networks can set a script apart and I look forward to seeing future productions once the rights to the script are made available.

V. Professional Development for Women Theatre Artists

There are three major professional organizations for women in theatre; the League of Professional Theatre Women (LOPTW), WomenArts, Women in Theatre (WIT), and Equity in Theatre (EIT). LOPTW and WIT are specifically American organizations while WomenArts is international and EIT is Canadian. In addition, there are countless groups and festivals serving women theatre professionals at the local level with more emerging every year. Collectively, all of these organizations work to empower women theatre artists professionally and artistically through a combination of events and online communications. Over the past few years, the work of these organizations has increasingly included activism. Activism in this case is the cumulative result of the organizations' art, messaging, and the aforementioned professional development opportunities for women administrators and artists. Statistics can be a major component of this work as well, providing concrete data that proves the inequities in theatre and encourages individuals and companies to diversify their staffing and programming.

In my research, I have found statistics for the United States, Ireland, and Canada. This is not to say that this research is not being done elsewhere, but that these countries have been my geographic focus and where the data is most accessible. I addressed the data for theatres in the United States in the Chapter 2 and in Chapter 3 I have begun to illustrate the profound impact this data has had on the professional theatre community in the United States. Chapter 4 will go into

more detail about the statistics from Canada and Ireland. There is a new attention being paid to gender representation both on stage and behind the scenes. This is evident in dramatic criticism, marketing, and the plays themselves. By focusing on playwrights with careers defined by feminism as well as some successful feminist scripts, this chapter has illustrated the intersections between commercial theatre and today's feminist movement and that questions about popular feminism were answered through the variety of examples from mainstream theatre.

Chapter 4: International Feminisms on Stage

“The average Hollywood film star’s ambition is to be admired by an American, courted by an Italian, married to an Englishman and have a French boyfriend.” – Katharine Hepburn

I. Feminist Theatre as a Global Trend

The feminist movement, in all its iterations, has always been and continues to be international. Given their histories, there have always been significant cultural and artistic parallels between the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. America’s First Wave and the Suffrage Movement was very much inspired by the events in England. British women fought for their rights during the Second Wave beginning in the 1960’s. And now, with the growth of intersectionality in the third wave, women from all over the global community are exchanging ideas and finding innovative ways to support each other. With the advents of new communications technologies and popular feminism, it is no surprise that women all over the world are bring their stories to the stage.

In my earlier chapters I have included a few examples of feminist performances from the United Kingdom and Canada, and I would like to take a moment to talk about these theatre communities in greater detail. My decision to include these two countries, in addition to their deeply interconnected histories, was inspired by Solga’s *Feminism & Theatre*. Solga also includes a survey of theatre in the UK and Canada, which is a common approach in performance studies. Solga is actually a Canadian scholar, currently a Professor of English and Writing at Western University in Ontario and a founding faculty member of their undergraduate Theatre Studies program. Her graduate studies were split between King’s College London and the University of Toronto. She is therefore uniquely qualified to draw these connections and I will defer to her conclusions on the relationships between feminist theatre in these countries.

Solga begins her discussion of international feminism by talk about the status of women in the Anglophone West, including the US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zeland, and parts of South

Africa and Asia. She talks about the paradox popular feminism has created where the movement for gender equality appears to be making significant strides when it's not (Solga, 2016, pp. 4-14). After my research, I strongly disagree with Solga labeling popular feminism as "post-feminism" since there is still so much substantial activism. This section, as with much of Solga's book, focuses more on feminist theory than performance theory. She cites British cultural theorist and feminist commentator Angela McRobbie in her discussion of post-feminism. Solga was working on *Theatre & Feminism* in 2014, before Ireland's Waking the Feminists movement. However, she does offer substantial discussion based on British politics and scholarship and references the 2006 Canadian study about the status of women in Canadian theatre. Later in this chapter I will use this material to help analyze the data from studies on Irish and Canadian theatre.

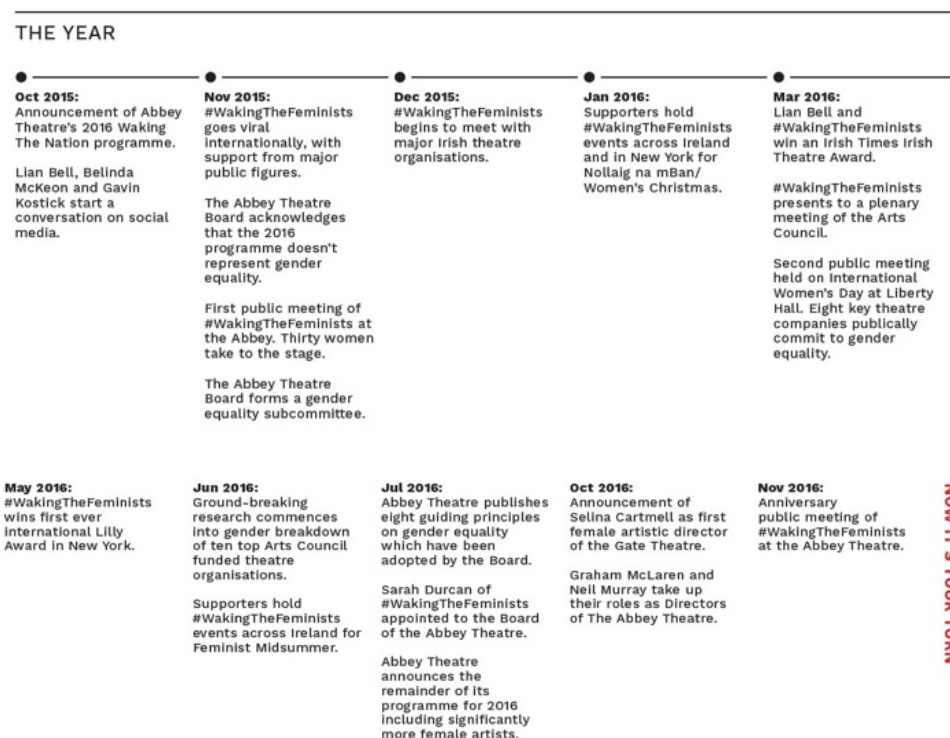
In *A Brief History of the Gender Parity Movement in Theatre*, an article on *HowlRound*, playwright and theatre manager Jenny Lyn Bader also casts a very wide net geographically. Bader addresses the discussion of gender in American, Irish, English, and Australian Theatre beginning during the Second Wave. She even included a nod to the first woman playwright, tenth century German canoness Hrosvitha of Gandersheim (Bader, 2017). Most important, this article highlighted the connection between artistic leadership and the art being produced. There are two ways to fight for women in theatre. The first tactic is to make sure women and women's stories are being represented on stage and in the literature. This was the primary focus of Chapter 3. While there are many activists focused on the representation of women, this approach is gradually becoming outdated as the theatre becomes increasingly professionalized and administrators face more bureaucratic hoops. The second strategy, and the focus of this chapter, is to make sure women are writing plays themselves and are present at all levels of theatre management. There has been a noticeable growth of initiatives for women playwrights and in collecting data on women theatre professionals. Data collection is becoming particularly important across the arts. From what I can tell, these studies are

making a significant impact in their communities and these examples from abroad can hopefully inspire American thespians to better organize the research being done here.

II. Ireland and #WakingTheFeminists

In the fall of 2015, professional women in Irish theatre organized one of the largest campaigns for women's equality in theatre called Waking the Feminists. The project lasted for one year and included substantial grassroots activism and critical data collection. Figure 1, a graphic from WTF's website, offers a detailed timeline of the project:

Figure 1: WTF Timeline (wakingthefeminists.org)



This timeline visually demonstrates the impact WTF had on the professional theatre community in Ireland. The Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland, seems to have taken this research the most to heart. Their staff even took direct action not only by employing more female artists, but also by publishing the *Eight Guiding Principles on Gender Equality*. The article is still available on the Abbey's website. The principles are as follows:

1. Update the mission statement and other key documents within the Abbey Theatre to specifically reflect a goal of gender equality. The key documents include:
 - The Mission Statement of the Abbey Theatre
 - The Memorandum and Articles of Association
2. To put gender equality as a key board priority and responsibility, meaning that gender equality will become a permanent board agenda item with immediate effect.
3. The Abbey Theatre commits to continued gender equality at board level.
4. To achieve gender equality in all areas of the artistic programme over the next five years by presenting more work led by female theatre practitioners. Gender equality will be measured in five-year periods starting from 2017. There will be ongoing flexibility within programming for a given year but over the course of each five year period the artistic programme will achieve gender balance.
5. The Abbey Theatre commits to gender equality in the play commissioning process.
6. The Abbey Theatre undertakes to deliver a workshop programme for all employees, examining issues of gender equality in the workplace.
7. With a view to raising awareness of the career opportunities for women in theatre, the Abbey Theatre will create an annual programme for second level students within the National Theatre.
8. Progress made by our gender equality initiatives will be specifically reported in the Abbey Theatre's Annual Report. This recommendation will ensure that both the focus and progress on achieving gender equality at the national theatre will be documented and detailed within the Annual Report thus ensuring that there is clear visibility on this journey. The 2016 Annual Report will contain the first update on gender equality.

(McGann, 2016)

Having these concrete strategies in place has already lead to some great successes for the Abbey and offers a great model for other theatres to follow, both in Ireland and elsewhere.

In addition to the accomplishments listed on the timeline, Waking the Feminists also gathered substantial statistics on the status of women in Irish theatre. The rallies, discussion, and awareness generated as part of this project were made more consequential by these hard numbers. For their research, the organization limited their inquiries to the top ten organizations funded by the arts council and looked at all their productions from 2006-2015. The numbers were categorized by

designers, cast, authors, and directors and then presented in a few different ways to point out some trends. The full report is available on their website, but the key provisional findings are as follows:

- We found that there is a general, though slight, upward trend towards gender equality in most roles.
- Some roles, such as costume and sound design, are clearly gendered.
- Significantly, we discovered that women struggle to assert their presence in the role of author, though they fare better in some organisations than others.
- When we compared the averages across roles, we found that the top three funded organisations grouped together (Abbey Theatre, Gate Theatre, Dublin Theatre Festival), had lower averages for female participation in all categories.

(Donohue, Dean, & O'Dowd, 2016, p. 8)

While many of those conclusions may seem a bit dismal, there was significant hope in the upward trend of these statistics. This is especially true for directors, with nearly a 10% increase in the number of women over the nine year period. As women take more leadership roles within theatres, these numbers will continue to improve.

Returning to *How/Round*, there have been a few different articles about the feminist movement in Irish theatre. A December article, *Where are the Disappeared Women of Theatre?* by actress-manager and mother Rachel Spencer Hewitt, told the story of the Mothers Artists Makers (MAM) movement. She cites the influence of *Waking The Feminists* and offers insight into the intersection of feminism and motherhood. Hewitt provides the following insights into the goals of the organization:

First production in the books, MAM now has detailed dreams for the future. In addition to meeting publicly and providing networking and artistic support, they want to curate grants and generate government support for theatre artist childcare, advocate for an artist in residence in every department, develop family-friendly studio space to make work with children welcome, and create plans for their own symposium (Hewitt, 2016).

Networking and mentorship are critical to individual success in any job, but this is particularly true in a collaborative industry such as theatre. MAM is based in Dublin but has groups all over Ireland. Motherhood can often become a huge career impediment for women, but MAM's

programming aims to help women balance their professional goals and the demands of being a parent. By creating these opportunities for mothers in Irish theatre to join forces MAM has given mother's a voice and a support system among Irish theatre professionals. This is a terrific model that could easily be replicated in other communities. However, motherhood does seem to hold a particularly special place in Irish literature. In Lisa Fitzpatrick's *Performing Feminisms in Contemporary Ireland* (2013) there are two chapters dedicated to theatre about mothers and additional chapter about how performance was used to advocate for reproductive rights. This book is not exclusively about commercial theatre, but still demonstrates the profound link between the status of Irish women and how they are represented on stage and in theatre and helps to contextualize the data activists have gathered so far.

III. The Status of Women in Canadian Theatre

There have been two recent studies on women in Canadian theatre, one in 2006 and one in 2015. Both studies were organized through the Playwrights Guild of Canada's Equity and were sponsored by the Canadian Council for Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Having such high-level support means these studies were able to go much more in depth than the research done in Ireland. In addition to directors, designers, actors, and playwrights, the Canadian studies include literary managers, stage managers, artistic directors, artists-in-residence, board members, administrators, and an "other" category. The 2015 study helped launch the Playwrights Guild's recent initiative, Theatre (EIT). EIT's website describes the project as "a multi-stakeholder initiative aiming to remedy existing gender and related inequities in the theatre industry" (<http://www.eit.playwrightsguild.ca>). The inclusion of "related inequities" means that EIT is concerned with intersectionality and hopes to address issues of race, socioeconomics, sexual orientation, and more. The Guild has partnered with several other arts organizations as part of the initiative and is primarily an effort to open up discussion about issues of diversity in Canadian

theatre. Data collection was a critical starting point so that activists can have a clearer picture of what needs to be done and there will hopefully be future studies to track any progress.

In discussing the 2006 study, Solga reminds us of the importance of intersectionality and emphasizes that these statistics, however problematic, were even worse when specifically talking about women of color in theatre and reminds readers that “non-white women face significantly increased hostility and danger compared to white women” (Solga, 2016, p. 7). In reviewing this study, it was immediately clear that Canada was not exempt from the challenges women face all over the world. In Canada, there are roughly 10% less women across all disciplines in theatre. This, of course, does not include costume design which is always predominantly women. Additionally, companies run by women are usually less credentialed and less well-funded than companies run by men. More positively, organizations led by women tended to have higher success with project grants. The most telling statistic of all, however, was that 59% of audiences were women. This clearly indicates a need for Canadian women to be represented both on the stage and behind the scenes. (Burton, 2006).

The 2015 study was released after Solga’s book had gone on to publication, so there is unfortunately no scholarly discussion of this data yet. However, the report is even more detailed than the 2006 study. Overall, the study shows a strong correlation between companies with women in leadership positions and opportunities for women writers and actors. Revisiting the example of Trina Davies, her career offers a clear demonstration. The overwhelming majority of the theatres she works with are smaller companies that are run by women. In general, Davies’ trajectory as a playwright exemplifies the unique challenges facing women in Canadian Theatre. While her plays have been incredibly successful, she is still balancing a career as a business consultant and is unable to entirely support herself as a playwright. This is unfortunately the situation for the majority of women theatre artists in Canada.

While disheartening, this data does not mean there is no cause for optimism regarding gender parity in Canadian theatre. Canada's support infrastructure for the arts is extensive and there are efforts to repair this coming from a wide range of organizations, including the government. Additionally, women make up the majority of theatre students and graduates. To improve the statistics for women theatre artists, EIT has come up with four major recommendations. First, since women have a strong presence in academia and in youth theatre organizations, education is key. This means finding opportunities to produce work by marginalized groups in schools, developing new curricula, and create professional development opportunities for women. The professional development opportunities are also key to the second recommendation, networking and mentorship. It is up to both the theatre community at large and individual organizations are responsible for making sure women have the opportunity and necessary experience to progress in their careers. EIT also recommends some administrative changes to make the work environment more inclusive and to regularly evaluate all types of diversity in the workplace. The fourth and final piece of advice is for advocates of equality, both in theatre and in general, need to continue the fight and support only organizations doing their part for gender equity. These guidelines are publically available in the form of an infographic on their website. Like the methodologies in Irish and Canadian activism, these recommendations can also be applied in theatre communities all over the world.

IV. Advocating for Women in American Theatre

Advocacy for women professionals in American theatre dates back to the Second Wave and the work Action for Women Theatre, which gathered data about US theatres from 1969 to 1975. Similar to the Suffrage Drama of First Wave Feminism, their tactics were based on activism going on in England around the same time. These earlier initiatives were still more concerned with the representation of women on stage more than the disparities in who was running the theatres. It's also important to mention that this was taking place at smaller independent theatres, not major

institutions (Wandor, 1984). Collectively this work was an important first step in highlighting issues for women in theatre, it was not until the late 1970's and early 80's that activists started fighting to get women in leadership roles and it was not until recently that people have been taking a look at larger theatres.

Looking at the on-going study on LORT theatres, this is the most organized example of American activism for women theatre professionals. The project, beginning in 2014, is a collaboration between the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco and the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. The numbers reflect the general 70/30 split between men and women across the UK and Canada. The authors, Ekrut and Ceder, also offered the same recommendations in their executive summary.⁴ Conclusively, this means that the American theatre community knows exactly what needs to be done to repair the gender inequity we are facing and we have the resources to do so.

While there has been some data-collection, activism, and professional discourse about women professionals in contemporary American theatre, there have not been as concrete initiatives. The 50/50 by 2020 project, as described in Chapter 2, has fallen short and there does not seem to be an organized, centralized means of collecting data and community actions steps American theatres can take. It's also important to note that the international initiatives did not operate at a grassroots level. What American theatre is lacking is the organization and enthusiasm of the examples from Ireland and the investment of the Canadian examples. If arts leaders in the United States find ways to get a similar level of engagement across all stakeholders, American theatre artists will begin to see the positive upward trends being experienced abroad.

⁴ Information on this research project, as well as the executive summary and full report, are available at <https://www.wcwonline.org/Active-Projects/womens-leadership-in-resident-theaters>

Chapter 5: The Future of Feminist Performance

“Theatre specifically requires us to show up and participate in the story and feel the particular power of congregation as well as catharsis. The communal embrace of theatre was always an ancient way of processing politics, society, and great change. I believe it still is.” – Lauren Gunderson

I. Summary

In my introduction, I asked the following two research questions:

- 1- How and when did feminist performance become part of mainstream theatre?
- 2- What might the commercialization of feminist performance mean for the future of performance?

In seeking an answer to the first question, it was challenging to differentiate mainstream and commercial theatre. Thinking in the broader terms of commercial theatre, the link between performance and feminist activism and performance dates back to Suffrage Drama and potentially earlier. When considering mainstream theatre, or shows that have not only been produced professionally but are also known and appreciated by larger audiences, this date moves up to the later of the Second Wave. The 1980’s saw an abundance of professional theatre written by women, for women. While it is not entirely possible to trace it back to a specific script or production, the work of Caryl Churchill was definitely at the forefront of this trend. Wendy Wasserstein was also an early contributor to mainstream feminist performance. As ideas of intersectionism developed and feminist philosophy transitioned into the third wave, Suzan Lori-Parks became one of the leading feminist voices on stage. Now, as feminism prepares to make another transition, there is a new group of playwrights taking inspiration from these early pioneers.

This brings me to my second question regarding the future of feminist performance. Currently, the most well-known feminist playwrights would be Lauren Gunderson and Sarah Ruhl. There have been many writers taking Gunderson’s lead and focusing on women’s history, including the international examples of Trina Davies and Jessica Swale. Ruhl’s work is much more abstract

and addresses the female experience more generally. Both approaches are very much grounded in the work of their predecessors, but Rhul's work is noticeably more linked. Moving forward I do believe Gunderson's historical approach will become increasingly common and celebrated. This is especially true in the wake of the *Hamilton* phenomena and a new appreciation for history plays in popular culture. However, scholars and practitioners alike must also consider how broad and inclusive feminist theory has become.

Additionally, this paper addressed the growing body of work around gender and sexuality being produced. My discussion did not include older shows about the LGBT+ experience, but all of these pieces can and should now be considered part of the feminist canon. As the understanding and language around gender identity and equity becomes increasingly refined, this component of feminist performance is likely to experience some major artistic and professional changes.

Artistically, the work on stage should gradually begin to reflect the complex discussions about gender that many scholars and theorists are already having. Professionally, I hope that there will be more of an effort to include these voices and opportunities to refine their work. This should be parallel to, not replace, all the work being done for women in theatre. The assorted initiatives for women in theatre have had incredible success and these approaches to activism and data collection would be an excellent first step to bridge LGBT+ and feminist performance. While these are two distinct communities, these movements are becoming increasingly linked philosophically and theoretically. Theatre is an ideal platform for reflecting this connection and bringing this conversation to a wider audience.

II. Conclusion

When thinking about commercial theatre it is important to consider the broader challenges performing arts managers will be facing in the coming years. Michael Kaiser's most recent book, *Curtains? The Future of the Arts in America* (2015) offers a thorough survey of the current state of the

arts in the United States. While Kaiser includes a variety of examples, his focus is on the performing arts companies as the former president of the Kennedy Center. To orient his readers, Kaiser begins with a historical overview of the arts in America from 1950-2000. The book then analyzes how the arts have been operating in the United States since the start of the twenty-first century so far.

Kaiser's analyses also account for macro-environmental factors such as politics and economics, as unpredictable as those conditions may be. Using this historical and current information as a foundation, Kaiser then makes a series of educated predictions about the future of the arts and then closes with some suggestions on how to create the best possible future for the arts in America.

Long before 2035, it is likely that many more productions will be available for viewing at home, on demand. While these performances should attract sizeable audiences, there will be a reduction in overall demand for the classical arts, owing to another two decades of without comprehensive arts and education (Kaiser, 2015, p. 58).

It is common knowledge that during the fiscal crises of the early 2000's, arts education took a considerable beating. Countless public schools lost their arts programs entirely and many organizations were unable to survive the turbulence. There were thus very few opportunities for the average American to engage with art at a young age, yielding a generation with a limited understanding of the arts and their value. The challenge of engaging the next generation of arts participants in addition to the technological and cultural shifts has resulted in a heavily pessimistic outlook, especially in the performing arts. There is a general fear that this will continue and the importance of the arts will be lost on future generations until there are no more theaters or museums left. Many arts managers are working to fight this possibility, focusing on accessible programming and community outreach. Many organizations have found great success with this strategy, and in his final chapter, Kaiser offers an alternative to that bleak, almost dystopian future.

Most notably, Kaiser encourages arts managers to learn from the movie industry, stating that "movies today are bigger and better marketed than ever because of (not in spite of) the popularity of television and the Internet" (Kaiser, p. 124). Not only have movies incorporated new technologies

to make films more engaging, but they have also taken advantage of their shared medium for advertisement. Movies will buy ad time on streaming sites and TV stations to air their trailers; a strong strategy. Additionally, movie franchises are very good at creating a family amongst their fan base. Kaiser recommends arts organizations work to build this level of excitement and loyalty in their audiences by creating new and engaging, sometimes risky, art. While economic conditions have frightened many arts organizations away from taking risks in their programming, Kaiser's ultimate conclusion in *Curtains?* is that these risks combined with aggressive marketing will continue to create some of the most successful American art.

Dolan's *Feminist Spectator in Action* (2013) has taken into consideration these technological developments, incorporating movies and digital content. Dolan's logic for including these is not explicit, but is likely that movies and television are also performances that need be evaluated through a feminist lens. In 2006, performance scholars Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris published a volume entitled *Feminist Futures* that predicted many of the trends that Dolan's 2013 text and my own research have verified. In addition to the use of technology in performance and theatre management, *Feminist Futures* addresses the relationship between feminism and technology, offering several key examples of plays about women and technology. More relevant, however, was the chapter contributed by British scholar Aoife Monks, *Predicting the Past: Histories and Futures in the Work of Women Directors*.

Early in the chapter Monks states that "the representation of history on the stage must be a key way in which we understand theatre performance as 'feminist'" (Aston & Harris, 2006, p. 89). This is incredibly relevant with the recent popularity of history plays, and in particular the success of Lauren Gunderson and other playwrights who are showcasing women's history. By reinterpreting history to empower people of all genders, especially women, theatre artists are providing future generations with both the inspiration to defy social expectations and a vision for an equal society.

This sentiment reflects the larger goals of the feminist movement, for which the theatre will undoubtedly continue to play a critical role.

III. Future Research

A more expansive version of this project could apply ethnographic methods appropriate to activism and the performing arts and will be rooted in the framework of action research. This would strengthen the historical context and definitions for the field of feminist performance, as well as the world of commercial theatre. Looking for intersections between the two is the primary goal of this research. In Greenwood and Levin's *Introduction to Action Research: Social Research for Social Change* (1998), referenced in O'Leary's *Doing Your Research Project* (2010), action research is clearly defined as direct engagement in the process, which differentiates the practice from other methods. Action research is fundamental to social science and the text elaborates on two approaches to action research. The first approach is evaluative, with many factors predetermined. There is a known issue and potentially some corrective measures are already in place. The goal of the researcher is then to improve on what already exists. This approach suits my larger research goals of documenting the influence of popular feminism in commercial theatre. An alternative approach is when the researcher has recognized a social problem but there are no pre-existing systems for remedying the issue, or the systems in place have been proven entirely ineffective and there needs to be an entirely new approach. Their goal is then to find and implement their own solution. As can be surmised, this is a very hands-on methodology. However, Levin and Greenwood (1998) emphasize the importance of objectivity and they do not recommend the researcher be someone directly involved in or affected by the subject. This is in direct opposition to the ideas presented in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* by Kernshaw and Nicholson (2011).

Recently, there have been major developments in arts-based methodologies, including the performing arts. *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (2011) is a collective work compiled by

members of the Theatre and Performance Research Association, or TaPRA. The most fundamental concept addressed in the text is the idea of the body as research. Performance is a physical activity and rooted in the mind-body connection. Performative research involves a lot of introspection, a traditional approach to performance research. The text continues into a myriad of interdisciplinary approaches including historiographical research, digital performance, and other elements of theatre such as scenery and costumes.

What is consistent throughout *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (2011) is the importance of connecting with the research and finding hands-on experience. Similar ideas can be found in *Method Meets Art* (Leavy, 2015). *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, being the most recent text, is thus far at the forefront of performance-based research methods (Kershaw & Nicholson, 2011). The interdisciplinary approach is incredibly relevant to the specific genre of feminist theatre and leaves room to incorporate some of these practices with other relevant methodological frameworks. As I make the transition from a researcher to a practitioner in my own life, action research will become my primary method of study. Action and performance-based research will allow me to reflect on and incorporate my own experiences as a theatre practitioner, in particular allowing me to better understand how the larger social and artistic trends identified in this paper will impact my approach to the new play development process and community engagement.

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