



NEWS RELEASE

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Revealing Numbers and Raising the Question: Where are Women's Voices on Local Stages?

Looking to find the work of a woman playwright in the Los Angeles area? It might be harder than you think. The results of a Study by the Los Angeles Female Playwrights Initiative (LA FPI) working with LA STAGE Alliance revealed that only one in five plays seen on LA-area stages was written, or co-written, by a woman. Unfortunately, this is a figure which echoes the statistics from theatres across the country. Together, the numbers throw new light on the fact that women playwrights in America are seriously under-represented. To quote playwright and activist Marsha Norman, "A theatre that is missing the work of women is missing half the story, half the canon, half the life of our time. That is the situation we have now." From Terence McFarland, LA STAGE Alliance Executive Director: "It is impossible not to notice injustice where it glares out at us." McFarland made these remarks at the ceremony celebrating the 2009/2010 Ovation Award season, highlighting the fact that none of the nominees for Original Playwriting were women.

In 2009, the Sands study on gender disparity in the American theater confirmed the findings from earlier research. Plays by women represent only a fraction of the works on and off-Broadway and in regional theatres - around 17%. This spurred a groundswell of action across the country.

In Los Angeles, playwrights Laura Shamas and Jennie Webb were inspired by artists in New York and elsewhere. But at the same time, they realized that none of numbers reflected in national studies included the vibrant, but historically marginalized, Los Angeles theater scene. They reached out to other like-minded artists to form the LA FPI, a movement working to ensure fair representation of women playwrights on local stages, and beyond. As a first point of action, the LA FPI commissioned a survey of LA-area theaters and LA-based playwrights, led by Study Director Ella Martin.

A sampling of theatres who self-reported in the survey revealed that less than 20% of the plays produced or presented in workshops or readings for a ten year period (2000-2009) were written by women. Data from LA STAGE Alliance reflects statistics from the nine years the organization has been registering productions for Ovation Award consideration (2002-2010). Of the 4796 productions in LA STAGE Alliance's database only 993, or about 20%, were written or co-written by women playwrights.

While slightly over the 17% accepted as a national average, the figure of 20% is certainly not heartening. This percentage of women's plays staged is not representative of the overall ratio of

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male to female playwrights based in the LA-area, nor the achievements of Los Angeles female playwrights.

"Sadly, the lack of productions for women playwrights isn't even a trend. It's the status quo. And yet so much really exciting work that I'm seeing in our Dramatists Guild reading series here in Los Angeles is created by women," says Larry Dean Harris, Guild Los Angeles Regional Representative.

According to baseline data from local playwright organizations, approximately 45% of members are women. During the first decade of the 21st Century (the period covered by the survey), the 84 LA-area female playwrights who self-reported had a total 1,421 presentations (including readings and workshops) of their plays.

But the Ovarions were not alone in overlooking the work of women in their recent award nominations. None of the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle or LA Weekly Award nominees for writing in 2010 were women.

And on a wider scope, New York's Guerilla Girls on Tour recently named 114 theatres across the country who will not be producing even one play by a woman on their mainstage during the 2010/2011 season.

Some statistics show that over the last century the disparity for women playwrights in America has gotten worse. In 1908/09, only 12.8% of the productions on Broadway were by women playwrights. Some 100 years later, the percentage of major New York productions written by women was 12.6%.

"No matter who you are, it's difficult to get your plays produced," says Study Director Martin. In addition to statistics, the LA FPI Study's inclusion of subjective data also provides glimpses into the LA theater community and artists. "But whatever the reasons behind the numbers," she adds, "It is clear that women playwrights are almost as numerically present as male playwrights, but that their work is far less frequently seen on local stages."

"I think it is important that sobering numbers like these get out there so that people start asking questions and become more aware of the fact that things aren't functioning perfectly as they are," continues Martin.

Producing more women playwrights could be a positive change for Los Angeles theatermakers in many ways, if Broadway is a relevant indicator. The latest [Broadway League Study](#) found that in 2009-2010, 63% of the audiences were female, and 69% of ticket-buyers were women. And historically, Broadway plays written by women earn more than those written by men - during the 10-year the period covered by the [Sands study](#), they were 18% more profitable.

"We had a huge rise in the number of productions by women in 2010, and a far higher percentage of those female written plays were hits than those their male counterparts," says playwright and activist Julia Jordan, commenting on how the gender parity movement on the East Coast affected the NY-area theater scene.

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Statistics from 21 League of Resident Theatres (LORT) in the Tri-State area reveal that in 2008-2009, only 12 out of 82 productions by living playwrights, or 14.5%, were written by women. In 2009-2010 that number was 39.5%. For productions planned in 2010-2011, it's 32% - still a marked increase. (By comparison, 12 of the 53 mainstage contemporary works announced for the 2010-2011 seasons on eight of Southern California's LORT stages are female authored, or 22.5%; this includes co-written productions with at least one woman writer.)

Other positive news: the Guerilla Girls on Tour also published the names of 68 theaters across the country with current seasons featuring 50% or more female-authored plays. The Geffen, Native Voices at the Autry and South Coast Repertory made this list. (For more theaters, visit www.querrillagirlsontour.blogspot.com.)

In November, the National Theatre Conference announced the National Initiative to Celebrate American Women Playwrights. Spearheaded by award-winning writer Robert Schenkkan, the NTC is enlisting its members affiliated with producing organizations or theaters to pledge to produce at least one work each year for the next three years by a contemporary American female playwright.

And on the local front, although the names will not be published until March 10, two recipients of Back Stage Garland Awards for playwriting in 2010 will be women.

With new numbers as a starting point, LA FPI and allied partners mean to draw Los Angeles into the national conversation about gender parity on American stages. While the movement recognizes that the "state of the arts" at present puts all artists in a rather tenuous position, Martin and fellow LA FPI members see the LA FPI Study as means to raise awareness and encourage positive action locally. "I added a subjective question for theaters/theater companies: describe the LA theater community in one word," says Martin. "The word that came up the most? 'Struggling.' Female playwrights described their experience as 'Challenging.'"

As a grass-roots initiative which serves as a nexus of community support, LA FPI hopes that the energies surrounding the Study and other recent efforts continue to instigate positive action in Los Angeles, and that a new perspective will create new avenues for all theater artists. "We are all in it together," Martin concludes. "The support LA FPI has received from the LA theater community reinforces that truth. As long as we support each other in light of these findings, we'll be in a good position for whatever lies ahead."

For more information on the Los Angeles Female Playwrights Initiative and the [LA FPI Study](#), email info@lafpi.com or visit lafpi.com. The site is set up as a hub for theater artists as well as theatergoers, with [Resources](#) and [Involvement Opportunities](#), and details about using the [LA FPI Logo](#) – an easy way to spread the word which acts as a signal of change.

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