

Women
Centre Stage
Interviews
with NPO
Artistic
Directors

0.64%

WOMEN'S
THEATRE
COMPANIES

99.36%

OTHER

21%

FEMALE
ARTISTIC
DIRECTOR

79%

MALE
ARTISTIC
DIRECTOR

Women Centre Stage Interviews with NPO Artistic Directors

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1

INTRODUCTION

Women Centre Stage

Interviews with NPO

Artistic Directors

This report is the third in a series of new research reports from Sphinx Theatre Company. The aim of these research reports is to provide new data on gender parity and equality in UK theatre in order to encourage awareness of current issues around gender parity and equality.

This report contains key themes identified from ten interviews with NPO Artistic Directors in 2019.

The key themes contained in this report were identified via a process of coding. The report provides short quotations from the speakers to illustrate each key theme. Each key theme was referred to by more than three separate Artistic Directors in order to qualify as a key theme.

Founded as The Women's Theatre Group in 1973 Sphinx Theatre Company, renamed in 1990, has been in the vanguard of promoting, advocating and inspiring women in the arts through productions, conferences and research for more than 40 years. Previous work includes the premiere of April de Angelis' modern classic Playhouse Creatures,

Pam Gems' The Snow Palace and Bryony Lavery's Goliath, plus the Glass Ceiling and Vamps, Vixens and Feminists conferences with the National Theatre, Young Vic, Southbank Centre and West Yorkshire Playhouse. In 2015 Sphinx produced Women Centre Stage Heroines Festival at the National Theatre, and in 2016 Power Play at Hampstead Theatre, each year showcasing 25 exciting new theatre pieces with women at their centre.

This research project was commissioned by Sphinx Theatre Company and the researcher and author of these reports is Jennifer Tuckett. Jennifer is a researcher, writer, producer, consultant and academic, currently based at the University of Cambridge.

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KEY THEMES FROM INTERVIEWS

The following key themes were identified from interviews with ten Artistic Directors of NPO theatres.

1.0

Theatre's mission to inspire, entertain and engage

Artistic Directors repeatedly highlighted their theatre's mission and vision as to inspire, entertain and engage. Combined with the research from the Women Centre Stage symposium (Research Report Two), this suggests the need for women's stories to inspire female audience members, who are the majority of the audience, and the need to engage women workers if theatres are going to fulfill their mission to engage all.

This can be seen in the following quotes where Artistic Director's describe their theatre's mission and vision:

"To engage, empower, inspire and enable the widest possible audience through transformational learning and theatre."

"To be increasingly enjoyed, actively supported and cherished by our audiences."

"We will develop an artistically led, forward looking and relevant theatre, fit for the 21st century, which inspires and entertains."

"Our purpose is to bring the community together and reflect it back to itself...it's a place where everybody comes together and everybody belongs so it has to represent on its stage the people in its constituency."

"To make great theatre in the place and for the people of the place and beyond, ensuring the audiences and participants had access to great art".

"We're as committed to creating great art on our stages as well as engaging deeply and meaningfully with communities. We are overtly committed to those two aspects of contributing to the quality of people's lives on a local and national and international basis."

"It is to serve the community offering them access to theatrical arts through participation."

"We strive for inclusivity... I think what we strive to be is the big welcome for our communities and audiences.... Within that, I think the overall drive is to make work that reflects the modern Britain and which resonates with this region."

1.2

Financial restrictions

Finance was highlighted repeatedly as the main restriction for theatres, suggesting the need for ring-fenced funding for work by women to address this inequality, as proposed by some of those interviewed, as can be seen in the following quotes:

“Definitely financial. There isn't enough money to make exciting commissions happen and there is pressure on the bottom line to deliver sure fire winners which often means extant texts, which often means male written.”

“We have had to reduce our R&D budget which has meant there has been less support for readings and workshops. We have had to reduce our travel budgets which has meant we are seeing less work by artists unknown to us.”

“All theatre is the art of the possible, all subsidized theatre is the art of the just about possible. The height of Thatcherism chopped the arms and legs off regional theatre, for example all three of the regional associate positions (at a theatre where the speaker was working) were cut...The minimum fees for freelance artists are disgusting...There's a massive oversupply of new people whilst the number of productions are shrinking every year”.

“If you put the problem at the centre of it – which is how do we get more people involved – in doing that you solve the financial problem.”

“One of the big ones (challenges) is about the conflict between needing to fill the theatre seats as our programme generates a huge amount of our income and balancing that with the kinds of stories we want to see on our stages”.

“Financial restrictions are that the funding of culture is undeniably changing and diminishing from a public source. We lost our local authority money. And the amount of money we get from the Arts Council hasn't changed in years so it's naturally diminishing.... What's happened is there is nobody considering how do you do it otherwise... the lack of a sustainable financial vision for culture that is understood within communities and owned by communities is the issue. Until people have an ownership of it that they value in some way, it's always going to be difficult... It will only happen in communities where the groundwork is done.”

“I would say that managing risk is a challenge for every theatre. There are things that I know that in the wider sphere wouldn't be a risk but here they would be. And that often is to do with contemporary new work that's not necessarily of a known quality”.

1.3

Commissioning problems

In terms of commissioning, the need for ring-fenced money for women was highlighted repeatedly by Artistic Directors, as can be seen in the following quotes:

"I think the ultimate issue for us is there is no money for grass roots development. We need ring fenced money to support new writing which allows us to take risks and then develop writers from there. We also need slots that don't have the financial expectation on them to allow us to take risks on new titles."

"Adaptations from well-known books and films are commissioned more frequently across the sector for box-office appeal and of course extant classics with well-known titles gain more traction than risky new titles. Often four theatres (or more) are collaborating on one show and this reduces the number of newly commissioned work on offer to any writers of any gender."

"A festival model could prove useful – a festival showcase of work by talented and currently under-recognised women could be created which could travel for a week at a time to, say, 30 different venues, with a tie-in programme of activities or showcases for women writers in the local area to be produced alongside by each venue. This would help to introduce the work of more women playwrights both to theatres and to their audiences. Any intervention around commissioning needs to acknowledge the financial risk around new work, and that this is having a negative impact on commissioning of new work in general, alongside the fact that women are under-represented in commissioning."

"We have so few commissions we try very hard to support our writers through this process to fruition. We extend deadlines as much as we can and try to offer readings and R&D as much as we can when a writer feels locked. We are a female led organization and I like to think we are open to female stories and

perspectives. Recent box office data shows us that female stories SELL. We need to remember this!"

"(In the past) the more money that was involved, the fewer women there will be. There are still a lot of women going for project funding. I'm not quite understanding why. One of the things I'm sometimes troubled by with project grants is the amount of time the artist has to spend before there's any money."

"The challenge is we need a play that's recognizable, that we can get an audience in with.... and the repertoire's dominated by men. So it's how you change that."

"We want to see women writers on the big stages... Therefore what are the tools we are giving people to make sure they understand how a play needs to be written to fill different size spaces?"

"I think its about how you perceive your role in a community as a group of artists and cultural commissioners, how you see yourselves as being responsible to the close community you reflect and the wider community."

"Contemporary stories require us to build risk into audience numbers... Our budget is modest. We don't have any room. If we commission something, we have only one slot".

"I think it's people in my position... providing the opportunities and pathways (to encourage more women writers)."

"If ACE made dedicated project funding available for commissioning female writers, this would be extremely helpful."

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THE ROLE OF ARTS
COUNCIL ENGLAND

The need for support from Arts Council England in terms of making a gender a priority was also highlighted by the majority of those Artistic Directors interviewed, with many speaking of gender not appearing as a priority in The Creative Case, as can be seen in the following quotes:

"I don't really feel like this is a focus from ACE – I think more of a focused discussion around this and a higher profile of it in the Creative Case (is needed)."

"Everything we do is only possible with the financial support of Arts Council England, so in that sense of course they support our goals around gender parity, but I can't think of any support they provide that is specifically focused around this."

"If ACE made dedicated project funding available for commissioning female writers, this would be extremely helpful. They could also look at gender parity more carefully and specifically when rating an organisation's achievement of the Creative Case for Diversity."

"Obvious and pointless to say but of course greater subsidy allows for more R&D and greater confidence in programming plays perceived to be from minority perspectives. It also allows theatres to be more generous with deadlines and thus allows writers to balance family commitments with work."

"The Arts Council haven't cut anyone for not being diverse and inclusive yet, but if they will do that for women, I think we may be able to crack this thing."

"I would say the Creative Case doesn't feel as focused on gender as it does on other protected characteristics... I would say within the Creative Case what we've particularly focused on is age, disability, ethnicity and socio-economic status... those are the four... Gender doesn't feel like its part of the Creative Case in the same way other things are".

"Its not as much as BAME (in terms of gender and priorities for the Arts Council), BAME is much more a priority."

"I don't think the Arts Council push on gender as much as diversity in terms of BAME, they don't really say anything about it, they talk more about diversity in terms of ethnicity and disability".

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THE WILLINGNESS TO TACKLE THE ISSUE OF GENDER PARITY AND EQUALITY

All theatres interviewed said they would be willing to work with Sphinx Theatre Company on an initiative to tackle this issue and would welcome initiatives specifically targeted at gender parity and equality in UK theatre.

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CONCLUSION

This report is the third report in a new series of research reports being completed by Sphinx Theatre Company. All theatres interviewed in this report have stated they would be willing to work with Sphinx to develop a project to tackle gender parity and inequality. Another key theme has been the suggestion of the role Arts Council England could play both in terms of ring-fenced funding and in terms of making gender a priority.

Combined with research reports one and two, these findings suggest the need to take action to address gender parity and equality in UK theatre.

Other reports in this series include a quantitative report on current data regarding gender parity and equality in the UK (research report one) and a qualitative report on the Women Centre Stage symposium (research report two).

The aim of these reports is to encourage and support awareness of gender parity and gender equality in UK theatre.

The author of this report is Jennifer Tuckett, researcher for Sphinx Theatre Company, who is also currently researching how to improve the transition for women from studying the arts to working in the arts at the University of Cambridge, and is Director of University Women in the Arts, which is run by Art School, the new organization supporting the arts industry and education sector to work together, and who, coming from a single parent not associated into the arts, has worked to help many women into their first jobs in the arts.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Jennifer Tuckett is the researcher and author of these reports, which aim to improve awareness of gender parity and equality issues in UK theatre.

Jennifer is a researcher, writer, producer, consultant and academic, currently based at the University of Cambridge.