



FEMALE THEATRE DIRECTORS IN THE UK: WHY THE NEED TO “PROVE OURSELVES”?



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Amy Golding, Artistic Director and founder of award-winning Newcastle based theatre company Curious Monkey has worked as a director for the past 10 years. She has a strong passion and commitment to community theatre. She loves working with children and young people and those who may not have the opportunity to access the arts to create new thought-provoking theatre that brings to life stories that deserve to be told. She is known for her work with women, striving to give them a voice both in the North East and internationally. She graduated with a BA(Hons) in Drama at Northumbria University where she now works as a researcher and associate lecturer in performance and applied theatre. Amy has recently completed her Clore Fellowship where she was on secondment at the Young Vic. Her directing credits include: Beats North (Curious Monkey - Winner of Title Pending award) Live Witness (Live Theatre), Mamela (Afrovibes UK tour, Ovation award winning production at National Arts Festival, South Africa) Bunker Blues (Curious Monkey), Untitled (Nabokov), Geronimo (Company TSU), Rattle and Roll (Open Clasp).

This paper was written as a part of the author's Fellowship with the Clore Leadership Programme in 2014.

The Clore Leadership Programme is a not-for-profit initiative, aimed at developing and strengthening leadership potential across the cultural and creative sectors in the UK. The Programme awards its flagship Clore Fellowships on an annual basis to exceptional individuals drawn from across the UK and beyond, and runs a choice of programmes tailored to leadership needs of arts professionals at different stages of their career. This provocation paper has been produced under the aegis of Clore Leadership Programme. For more information, visit www.cloreleadership.org.

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Young female theatre directors may have more role models to look up to in 2014 than in the past, but the structures and progression routes to leadership roles in theatre are still not working for them. The 2012 Guardian survey in collaboration with Pentabus Theatre showed women are still badly under-represented in theatre, with a 2:1 male-to-female ratio. The boards of the top 10 subsidised theatres in England were made up of 33% women, and only 36% of Artistic Directors were women.

I worked in a regional theatre for four years as the only woman in the creative team, younger by at least 10 years than my male counterparts, all of whom didn't seem to be going anywhere in a hurry. I loved my work and the organisation but I was hungry and ambitious; I struggled to work out how I could progress. In this environment I felt the constant need to prove myself - to win approval.

I look back and I wonder what this was about. Was it my age? My confidence? My gender? A combination of these things? Or could it be that working in a male dominated industry within a patriarchal structure is very challenging as a woman whatever your age, confidence and experience?

Over the past year, through my fellowship with the Clore Leadership Programme, I have met many different women working as directors in theatre at various stages of their career and each has stimulated my thinking. I am beginning to see more women taking the big jobs in theatre and to be able to identify female role models - Vicky Featherstone, Erica Whyman, Gemma Bodinetz, Indhu Rubasingham, Jude Kelly, Sarah Frankom, Orla O'Laughlin. This change is wonderful but it's also slow; I could still probably only name a dozen women in high-profile leadership roles in theatre. Speaking to some of these women and others aspiring to take on leadership roles in the future inspired me to write this article.

During a very frank and inspiring conversation with Lucy Kerbel, we discussed a common concern for many female directors in their twenties as feeling like "that person on the first date who wants a relationship". Alongside incredible ambition and drive comes a great need to "get on" and prove themselves so they can be regarded as "established" by the time they are 30. For many it feels important in order to be able to take time out to have children and to be able to still have something to come back to. As a director in their 30s (when many of us realise 30 isn't the cut off point for motherhood) it is easier to be more relaxed. One young

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female director commented on this time limit as *“this big metal shutter closing in front of me”*.

There is of course a difference between men and women in terms of having a child, not only the biological restrictions on when women can conceive but in terms of how we view parenting in our society. This is reflected in the lack of parity between paternity and maternity leave and the portrayal of parenting in the media and advertising. It is still expected that the woman will take on the bulk of the childcare. With long hours and low wages in theatre, unless you do make it to one of the top jobs, childcare is difficult to afford. This pressure to prove yourself before having a family can also affect how you deal with failure and risk taking. One director commented:

“If a show wasn’t great or the critics didn’t like it, instead of thinking, ‘Oh well it was a risk worth taking’, I would take it hard, thinking I only have 8 shows left in me before I stop to have kids. The stakes were so high and it really affected me”

This idea of proving oneself so that you can disappear for a while, return and still get opportunities, this fear of being forgotten about, is very real for a lot of women in the industry, as is the effect of the realities of motherhood on confidence.

Annie Rigby, Artistic Director of Unfolding Theatre, commented that

“Having recently become a mother, with all the lack of sleep and time that goes with that, my professional confidence has taken a knock. I think this must happen for men just as much as women, but they don’t seem to talk about it. I sometimes wonder whether it would be better not to talk about it. By admitting my own limitations and fallibility, do I end up getting others to doubt my ability?”

There is also a general feeling that your gender is more likely to be remarked upon as a female director. This is not particular to theatre - in many fields when a woman achieves something the press focuses on her gender rather than on the work. When Vicky Featherstone got the job at the Royal Court the press coverage focused on her being the first female Artistic Director. Brilliant news - but do these comments on our gender again ignite this need in us to “prove ourselves”?

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In Vicky apparently not, perhaps because her unique career path started by being mentored by Jude Kelly at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. When I met Vicky the first thing she said to me when describing her career path was *“I’ve never ever worked for a man. I have no idea what it’s like to work for a man. Not by choice, but it’s definitely influenced who I am as a leader”*. Vicky seems a very confident, down to earth and authentic leader; I wonder how much of this is down to working in a female environment.

Gemma Bodinetz, artistic director at Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, had the opposite experience, working mostly for men. She was mentored by and assisted some renowned male directors including Max Stafford-Clark and Trevor Nunn. When I met with her at Liverpool Everyman she described to me her view of herself as a director when she was younger. She said, *“I was arrogant, a horrible person. I’m much nicer now”*. At the age of nine, Gemma won “a load” of books in a competition including Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*. After reading it, she wanted to direct. She had a goal and did everything in her power to achieve it. I was intrigued by her perception of her younger self as an arrogant young woman rather than a confident, ambitious young woman and wondered how many of her male counterparts would describe themselves in the same way.

Both Gemma and Vicky have a certain level of confidence that comes with being artistic directors of two of the country’s leading theatres. I had conversations with both of them about confidence. How and when do we gain that confidence? How come so many younger women in the industry struggle with this? Both Gemma and Vicky commented on the noticeable difference in confidence between emerging female and male directors. Gemma described sitting on the panel for the RTYDS (Regional Theatres Young Directors Scheme), seeing two directors, one male, one female with equal experience and skills on paper. In the interview situation the male director would be saying with confidence, *“I am a director, I want to be the next Michael Grandage”* whilst his female counterpart would be saying, *“I think I want to direct, I’m not sure yet. I maybe just need a bit more training.”*

Vicky said:

“I have noticed a phenomenal difference in confidence between the young men and women. There’s a few people who have defied that. On the whole, the level on which they have been able to convince me that I could take a risk with them is poles apart. I’m more convinced on

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a regular basis by the young male directors who come in and talk to me about what work they like and what they want to direct, than by the young women. That's how I receive it, so I don't know if it's about vocabulary or confidence, but I'm more convinced, worryingly so, by more young male directors. I don't mean I am fundamentally more convinced. Just that their behaviour and language is more conventionally convincing and that is a worry. "

This idea about language was something that Stella Duffy and I talked about - are young men just as scared as young women but are using different vocabulary? If this is the case where do they learn this and why does it come more naturally than for women? Is the language we are expected to use within the current structures really accessible for both men and women?

Before I started my Clore Fellowship one of my biggest hang-ups was that I didn't use a 'posh' vocabulary when discussing theatre. I thought, 'how could I possibly be a leader without a sophisticated vocabulary?' I put this down to the fact I didn't go to Oxbridge or have a literary background. As a director I am very clear about the kind of theatre I like and want to direct, why I do it and my artistic vision, but it took a year of growing in confidence and thinking about authenticity before I could communicate this in my own way without worrying about my use of language in certain contexts.

If we go right back to childhood, when girls are developing faster than boys and their confidence is high, we can gain some insight. Gemma described an observation from a reception teacher she knows whose experience in her class was that the four year old girls always had their hands up, eager with answers; the boys needed huge amounts of encouragement to put their hands up. She would end up telling the girls to put their hands down and encouraging the boys to have a go at answering. By year 6 of primary school, the classrooms were full of girls who would need to be really sure and confident to speak up and boys who would always confidently have a go even if they didn't fully know the answer.

Drama in school or youth theatre is often the place where young people have their first experiences of creating theatre. According to Tonic Theatre's research *Swimming in the shallow end... a report on quality and quantity of roles for girls in youth drama*, girls' experiences and opportunities in youth drama are not equal to those of the boys.

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Of the 340 youth theatres, schools, colleges and drama groups who took part, 75% described their organisation as having more girls than boys or having an entirely female membership. The research highlights a paradox within the youth drama sector - there is a huge majority of girls taking part and far fewer plays with female roles. “Possibly because the girls generally had less opportunity to get substantial roles, if and when their turn came around to play one, they spoke about the excitement of it, but also the huge pressure of wanting that production to go well and wanting to ‘prove themselves’ in it. The boys in contrast appeared more relaxed about the success of individual productions, instead tending to talk more about their youth drama “career”, with the implication of repeated access to opportunity and longevity.”

The result - girls become “grateful” for whatever role they were offered and boys become a “precious commodity”. The report covers a whole range of challenges around getting boys into youth drama and filling male roles in the scripts currently available. Some youth theatre leaders talked about “pandering” to the boys’ needs, including fast-tracking them up waiting lists, spending more time dealing with behavioural issues and offering free places. Some of the people involved in the study suggested that “this gradual erosion of confidence could be self-perpetuating, in that it reduces the likelihood of girls challenging the inequalities they are facing.”

Women continue to be underrepresented in artistic roles in theatre, as well as being less visible in leadership positions, despite the evident enthusiasm of girls at school and at youth drama level.

We cannot deny the fact we live in a world that has been designed by men for men - middle-class, able bodied white men. But feminism has been around a long time - so why in 2014 is there still a gender gap in theatre when other creative industries have managed to make such advances? In publishing there is a 50/50 gender split.

The traditional route into directing and leadership roles in theatre comes from a patriarchal tradition, a linear route put in place by the old boys’ club. The exceptional emerging female directors that Vicky Featherstone described have all had journeys that are much more varied and untraditional.

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“Some of the women who are exceptions are those whose experiences and learning has not been part of that treadmill of director training. They are people who have much more random introductions to theatre and work in different ways. It’s the ones who have got into the elite that feel nervous.”

There tends to be more confidence in young women who are doing it their own way, and more women are creating their own leadership roles by setting up companies with rules and structures that work for them. It will be interesting to see whether this generation of female directors will reject the traditional routes and patriarchal structures in theatre, find their own winding journeys and create their own flexible structures to work within. I worry what effect this might have on the mainstream. If young women are doing their own thing will the traditional patriarchal theatre world continue unchallenged, or will it recognize the changes it needs to make to provide the kind of environment that works for both men and women to work equally within the industry?

As Stella Duffy says *“We are creative people! We can create flexibility in the arts... lets look at the generation we are in...it’s like we are stuck in the 50s!”*