

Advance Notice

Abstract: A brief introduction to 'Advance', a project currently being tracked and documented by a research team from Royal Central School of Speech and Drama¹ in collaboration with industry partners, Tonic Theatre. Funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Advance is working with (and for) eleven leading theatre companies across England, facilitating reflection and knowledge exchange on the means to achieve greater gender equality in the theatre industry's workforces and repertoires. A full report on Tonic's work through Advance will be published later in the year. What follows is not, therefore, an assessment but a pause in the process of critical documentation, a reflection on the terms by which questions on the present project, and projects undertaken within the recent past, might be seen to interact. It hopes to link to earlier key moments; to raise queries and to take notes from colleagues, who are cordially invited to respond to me on this work in progress via email to Gilli.Bush-Bailey@cssd.ac.uk²

There is something in the air. Not yet the strong winds of change blowing through the order of things as we know them, but a definite sign that the sea levels are rising around more than our shores in this spring of 2014. There is growing evidence of a call for change, circulating around our subsidized theatre companies - in ways that even the most hardened sceptics will be hard-pushed to ignore. But this short piece of writing on a project in process is not about the latest Arts Council cuts, although cuts will undoubtedly have an impact on the theatre companies' ability to work with necessary change; it is not about the battle to ensure that the vibrancy and diversity of many different kinds of live performance is celebrated and recognized in our schools and colleges, although protecting our discipline from eroding policies is increasingly urgent. It is about the rising tide of debate and

¹Dr Katharine Low and Dr Sarah Grochala bring their separate expertise and interest in documenting practices from applied theatre, playwriting and performance to the project

²See <http://www.tonictheatre.co.uk/our-work/initiatives/advance.php>

For a complete list of participating theatre companies. The Advance team have requested that any enquiries should, in the first instance, be directed to Gilli.Bush-Bailey@cssd.ac.uk rather than to Tonic Theatre or the participating companies.

calls for action to improve the visibility of women in our theatre companies and performance industries. It is about enriching and broadening the experience of live theatre for its audiences and theatre makers by working to see more women working at every level of the industry. This is, of course, far from the first challenge to the perceived 'glass ceiling'³ effect on women's career progression and recent reminders of statistical data around female employment may well find some considering gender-issue fatigue. But the context in which Tonic Theatre's mission statement has been made and from which the *Advance* project has been launched, is a fresh and genuine sign of a commitment to make a real and sustained change happen – the success of which depends, I would argue, on a concomitant will to understand the significance of such work. In other words, there is a need to think afresh about how we contextualise such work: how we historicise the present.

February 2014 [saw](#) BBC's Danny Cohen arguing for an end to the 'all-male' panels on satirical quiz and comedy news shows. [A recent](#) report in the national press on an appeal by Cambridge academics to 'change the way it appoints staff because the current system favours men', reveals a related concern about career levels (or ceilings) at which women's progress seems to be halted: 'Women in academia: what does it take to reach the top?'⁴ This particular moment of renewed interest, the 'gender-[re]turn' as we might see it, has been gaining speed and visibility for some time, especially in the arts. In December 2012, Charlotte Higgins, *The Guardian's* Chief Arts Writer, was among many voices asking 'leading figures why women are still underrepresented at every level of the [theatre] business – and what

³ For more on Sphinx Theatre Company and Glass Ceiling events which ran from 1991, see Kate Dorney, 'Women's Theatre Group/Sphinx' in *British Theatre Companies of the 1980s*, edited by Graham Saunders (forthcoming).

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2014/feb/24/women-academia-promotion-cambridge>

needs to change?⁵ The questions have continued, with a notable outpouring of cultural pride, matched by indignation and frustration, over the choices made for the National Theatre's 50th Birthday celebrations. *What's On* critic and blogger, Catherine Love was appreciative of the inclusion of 'older' actresses, so forcefully represented by Dames Smith and Dench as part of the televised NT gala but rightly asked 'where were the women writers?'⁶ Theatre critic Lyn Gardner took up the same point in her online blog a few days later, encapsulating the troubled and troubling question in her headline: 'Does the National Theatre have a problem with women?'⁷ Picking out just ten women currently writing critical and commercial successes ('I could easily have chosen 50'), Gardner turned to address Rufus Norris, the RNT's Artistic Director, in waiting: 'Here's my hope for the building, and my challenge for him. Why not make it your aim for the National theatre to achieve gender equality in writing in the next 10 years? Women are already writing the plays. Go on – I dare you.'⁸ But as past challenges have shown, it takes a lot more than daring and courage to shift the ground and yet Tonic have launched *Advance* to do just that.

Tonic Theatre was formed in 2011 by theatre director Lucy Kerbel, who designed and is also leading the *Advance* programme. She approached me initially to discuss ways in which the *Advance* work might be 'captured' in such a way that future project developments might build on the findings in either quantitative or methodological terms – or both. As many of us have witnessed in our students' course choices, there is a perception that the histories of

⁵<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/dec/10/women-in-theatre-glass-ceiling> Stella Duffy also called for more commissions for women writers following Elizabeth Freestone's research findings <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/12/women-theatre-stand-up-inequality> <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2012/dec/10/women-in-theatre-research-full-results>

⁶http://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/11-2013/catherine-love-great-gala-but-where-were-the-women_32534.html

⁷<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2013/nov/07/national-theatre-problem-with-women>

⁸ibid.

theatre and performance are separate from contemporary practice and not important to it. This is a misconception evidenced by the urge that is also felt to create ever more sophisticated modes of documenting contemporary work, especially in practice as research projects. As a theatre historian with a specific interest in women's performance history I want to think of the present in relation to the future as well as the past. This turn to contexts invokes the familiar theoretical frames established by cultural studies but with a renewed currency garnered from cognate fields of public history and cultural geography with, as a recent paper from colleagues in sociology calls for, a greater sophistication in 'historical sensibility'.⁹ I therefore want to think more openly about the process we use as a team documenting *Advance*. My colleagues from [the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama](#) bring their expertise in applied theatre and playwriting to enrich the language we use in capturing the process. My concern is to bring their analysis into critical dialogue and relationship with work already undertaken in the field of gender equality in theatre over the past twenty-five years. This contextualization is not meant to play into the hands of either a cynical old guard or an unthinking assumption that the job has been done. As Tonic Theatre recognize, a new approach is necessary because we are still far from equal in terms of the numbers of men and women occupying the top creative roles in the theatre industry. This is demonstrated by recent observations on the unbroken succession of men to the roles of artistic director at both the RSC and National Theatre.

There are other current initiatives underway which add weight and context to *Advance*. The 'Swedish Database for Theatre, Dance and Opera!' has been collecting data on every theatre in Sweden since 2006 and has worked on a similar project model, including the

⁹ Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson, 'The past in the present: historicizing contemporary debates about gender and education', *Gender and Education*, (2014), vol.26, No.1, 70-86. The term 'historical sensibility' is first used p.70 and developed in detail on p.73 onward.

publication of statistical findings on 'Women and Men in the performing Arts in Sweden'.¹⁰ Arts Council England launched its 'Rapid Evidence Assessment on equality and diversity' (REA) in a bid to gather in research completed within the past twenty years and is due to report in March 2014.¹¹ Such research gathering will doubtless include but not focus directly on issues of gender provided by data from Jennie Long's 'What Share of the Cake' (1994), which detailed the position of women in Arts Council grant funded theatres. The data from such number-crunching exercises still makes interesting reading and as Long compares the findings with those from Caroline Gardiner's 1987 study (funded by the Women's Playhouse Trust) she concludes that 'the statistics show a very small overall increase of 1 per cent in the percentage of women employed' in creative roles in funded theatres, with a 'substantial decrease' of around 15% in amount of productions written or devised by women.¹²

Tonic Theatre's *Advance* project aims to use but also to move on from data collection, turning 'aspirations into practical steps forward', to inspire change by working collaboratively through 'support' and 'partnership' with the theatre industry: 'our goal is to give our colleagues the tools they need to ensure more female talent rises to the top'.¹³ The emphasis, as elsewhere on their website, is to change thinking and action, not only around women's initial entry point into the theatre industry but more importantly upon their progression within it. A series of *Away Days* are taking place over a seven month period, and involve all eleven participating companies. These consolidate interim work with artistic directors who have identified specific areas of focus

¹⁰ see <http://www.scendatabasen.se>

¹¹ This initiative, like the earlier lists gender as one of its concerns but does not focus upon the specifics of that issue.

¹² Caroline Gardiner, 'What Share of the Cake?' and Jennie Long, 'What Share of the Cake Now?' can be found in *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance* (1998), eds., Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Gay (Routledge) pp97-102 and 103-107 respectively.

¹³ See <http://www.tonictheatre.co.uk> for further details on the background to Tonic Theatre and two earlier projects.

for their company. *Advance* is not limited to seeing change in any one creative area but change for any woman working in an 'artistic capacity: actors, directors, designers (including lighting, sound, and video), writers, and other 'creatives' such as composers and choreographers.'¹⁴ Lucy Kerbel and her team recognise the pressures on time and resources (including the current round of funding applications to ACE) and work responsively to the specific needs of each company, designing the Away Days to provide further incentives for cross fertilization of ideas and to open up ways for companies to improve shared approaches.

Advance is a very hands-on, intensive project and, as the process develops, our research possibilities are made all the richer by our awareness of the context in which the ambition for female theatre-makers is being forged by Tonic and the leading companies engaged with *Advance*. As a research team from R/CSSD we are ideally placed to question current gender assumptions as they affect the coming generation of theatre professionals. We would welcome comment on the models of documentation we might usefully create. What might we have missed? Where else might we be looking as we work to historicise the contemporary moment – the present that is also creating the future *Advance* to equality?

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¹⁴<http://www.tonictheatre.co.uk/our-work/initiatives/advance.php>