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GENDER DISPARITY OF WOMEN
IN THEATRE DESIGN

by

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ABSTRACT

The question of why there is gender disparity in the field of theatre design continues to be an issue that has been widely debated in the field of theatre; scholars such as Tish Dace argue that workplace environments and family support are two of the main reason women leave the field of design. However, there are works, articles, arguments and perspectives that have not been adequately addressed regarding why the issue of why gender disparity in theatrical design still exists. My thesis addresses the issue of gender disparity in theatre design with special attention to the underlying issues that exists. Specifically, in my project, I will be looking at the history of women in the workforce, and women in theatrical design in order to show the severity of gender disparity that still exists in theater design. I will discuss harassment and gender discrimination and juxtapose them against growth and job security of women in theatre design. I argue that gender disparity in theater design fields still exists today, preventing women from growing and maintaining a job in this field. In conclusion, this project closely examines gender disparity of Women in theater design, shedding new light on this issue and acknowledging the effects it has on the industry of theatre, while also, presenting some viable solutions to this very important issue.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a junior in college during the summer of 2019, I worked in a theatre scene shop. I was so excited to be around the wood and the tools and to create beautiful set pieces that would be on stage. To my surprise, I was the only woman working in the scene shop, as well noticing the lack of women on the design team. I was there with a co-worker, but he was a man. We met and chatted; we were around the same age. As the days went on, the Technical Director and his Assistant became every close with him. More complicated projects were given to him and I was given very simple tasks. Despite the fact that I am fully trained with all power tools and welding equipment, I was seen as less capable. One day I sent an inch-long staple all the way through my finger, but I did not cry. A lesson my mom taught me, and surely other mothers and mentors have taught other young women, is: "don't let them see you cry; you can cry on your way home, but do not let them see you crack." This is something I have to do in this field and many other women have to do as well. I excused myself for the scene shop very discretely, went to the bathroom, and cried. Then I pulled the staple out. I put a Band-Aid on and walked back to the scene shop to continue to build. I never told anyone in the shop I hurt myself because I did not want to appear incompetent. It is not uncommon that, if a staple hits a knot in the wood, the staple can bend and shoot out the side, but I felt like I had too much to lose by making such a mistake. By the end of the summer, I had gained a lot of perspective about this field. I myself have never experienced gender discrimination, but I've come to realize it is still a very pervasive thing in our society.

I will begin my study of the gender disparity of women in theater design first with an analysis of women in the general workforce, followed by a critique on the effects of social

media on the perceptions of women. Then, I will take a closer look at women designers in the field of theatre and how these wider issues come to bear on their careers in a niche industry. In the conclusion of this thesis, I will propose some strategies to increase diversity and equality in the field of theatre design.

HISTORY OF WOMEN IN THE WORK FORCE

Women have long been confronted with hinderances in the workplace. This is something we hoped would have changed over the course of time; but progress is painfully slow. Women continue to fight for equality across the board, including equality in the work force. One might think the "male breadwinner" would be a term that would have died when women entered the workforce, but it is a still a relevant term for a lot of society. In *Survival of the Male Breadwinner*, Shalene Werth reveals that the breadwinner concept remains the most significant barrier of women in the workforce hoping to gain equality. Werth writes:

> The cause of the male breadwinner has been advanced in recent times with legislation that inadvertently supports inequality in the workplace. Work has traditionally been seen as the domain of men and only with the wisdom of hindsight and the benefit of collective achievement can existing perceptions of social justice for women continue to be challenged and advanced. The support women had previously received from unions in their quest for flexible work has denied them. The male breadwinner was beginning to re-emerge through the disadvantage experienced by women brought about by a neo-liberal approach to industrial relations (153)

Indeed, women have again been put in this box of where they are seen as requiring protection and care; one where they are viewed as incapable of providing for a family. Women have plenty of representation at the lower levels, but when women are looking to grow in a company and seek leadership positions, they face gender discrimination. It is a time old tale where women stay at home, take care of the children, and cook. But many women, like men, want to

work – to make money to support themselves. But women have a hard time getting in to the work force, therefore there exists a hesitancy to invest time, money, and training into women, with the extremely likelihood of her becoming pregnant, and starting a family. According to Iversen, Torben in *Women Work, and Politics* by "women are left out of this game because employers know they are most likely than men to interrupt their carriers for childbearing and other family work" (6). Yes, women bear children, but why are they penalized for preforming a natural process of life? A woman's purpose is also called into question if and when they decide to not go down the "traditional" route of having children. A woman who chooses to stay in the workforce leads to a different discussion. A woman who faces the challenge of doing both then is criticized if neither are perfect. Pregnancy discrimination has long been illegal, but women are often pushed out of the workplace for being pregnant or breastfeeding. Yet women do have the power to be mothers and be very successful in their chosen field. According to an article by Kim Parker, "women in majority-male workplaces are less likely to be treated equally as their male counterparts; as well as less likely to receive advancement in the company" (9). Women continue to push for equal rights in the workplace. Mothers are teaching their children about feminism, how women are capable of doing everything a man can do, moms are creating the new generation or little boys and little girls, teaching them about how to treat everyone as equals, and hopefully there is no longer gender discrimination in the workplace, or gender discrimination in general. Change and progress are slow, but this is gradually changing, and this will continue to improve.

Discrimination has moved from not only physical, but now to names. In "This Female Executive Changed her Name to a Man's to Get a Job,*"* Laura Chon examines name bias, and how it has helped women get jobs they would not have otherwise gotten, if they had not changed or shortened their names to something more masculine. Chon states "this issue has bubbled up

recently as people with feminine or ethnic sounding names have told stories of finding jobs only after tweaking their names to ones that are likely to be perceived as more masculine or more white… discrimination that continues to plague workplaces worldwide" (2). Research has shown that more women are changing their names to something shorter, going from Samantha to Sam, or from Natalie to Nat. They felt this gave them more of an advantage getting a job, because it is hard to determine whether they are a man or women. Women have had to become very innovative, but they always find a way to make it. The fact that women need to change their names just for an opportunity for an interview is pretty disheartening. According to Chon, "if somebody is being disadvantaged by having a particular name and they choose to change the name to something that take away the disadvantage, I would support that (3)." People in Hollywood change their names all the time, and if it gives women in that work industry an edge, that is okay. Women are doing all they can to figure out how to maneuver this very complicated work environment.

MEDIA'S EFFECTS

The media has a huge effect on today's generation, and it has largely defined how women are expected to look by creating an image of the "perfect woman." In *Popular Culture, Political Economy and the Death of Feminism* Penny Griffin states that "young women tend to be depolarized and individualized and many are heavily influenced by the media" (106). Most people living in this modern age are influenced by social media, and most women on social media experience body shame or hypersexualized. This is an issue that has spread into the work force, hindering women from having a safe work environment, where they are not whistled at or shamed for looking a certain way. Women have a hard time being taken seriously in this day and age because they are seen as sex objects.

Women's clothes have a huge effect on how men perceive women. A woman's appearance affects how a woman will be treated in the workplace. In Allison Yarrow's book *90's Bitch*, she discusses stereotypes of women, and how clothes effect their image in the workplace. Women who wear clothes that are too confident such as a red blazer are asked tone down their image to appeal for people who may find her to be too pompous. Additionally, women are forced by society to wear certain clothes to make their appearances softer or more palatable, as a women's appearance can stain her professional credentials. According to Yarrow, "we live in a totally fucked up patriarchal society run by white men who don't represent our interests at all" (177). A woman's appearance affects how she is perceived in workplace, time has not shifted the ideas of women needing to be conservative and soft. Similarly, women continue to try to break barriers and grow in the design industry.

WOMEN IN THEATRICAL DESIGN

Research shows statistics of women in the field of design in American theatres is highly disappointing. However, a quick fix is not what the industry needs. It needs real progress made through systemic integration of new ideas. According to Tish Dace in *Designing Women*

> "93 percent of women who work in those [Scenic, Lighting, Costume, and Sound Design] fields reported experiencing gender discrimination. According to the study, this kind of treatment has consequences to the theater industry. Of the 533 respondents, 266 (50 percent) reported leaving the field, citing discrimination, workplace harassment, and lack of support for parents as their reasons. Said one respondent, "I was demoted after they found out I was pregnant. I lost my position after a very short maternity leave. I have been told straight up that I will not progress because I chose to have children over having my career be my main priority" (2)

Women in theatre design have continued to be thrusted out of the business. Women are pushed out of a business they love, a place they wished to express themselves and create beautiful art. Dace's research demonstrates the extent of the discrimination in the design field by bringing to light just how many women are leaving and why.

Women have been thrust out of other fields of design, but the more female- dominated field of design is costume design. In "A Call for Equal Support in Theatrical Design," Elsa Hiltner writes that "costume design is also the only area of technical theatre in which women make up the majority…This inequity stems from our culture's gendered views on who makes clothing, how much their time is worth, and the often skewed understanding of what skills are required to design and build a costume, let alone an entire show." (1). Women have been labeled by society and pushed into roles like clothing construction and clothing design. Theatre and our society are still

stuck in a past mindset. Costume construction remains the only field of theatrical design that has the highest percentage of women working and growing in that field.

Even with women making up the majority of costume designers and technicians, it is still difficult for women to get their foot in the door and grow in the industry. That challenge is even more difficult in other design areas. Furthermore, women in this field are basically shunned from theatrical design when they decide to have children. Additionally, if they are kept on, they are not given the leave needed to recover, or the space they may need to use their breast pump. In my research, I have found that men see this time women need to use their breast pump as a break, and not as a life necessity. Yet it is a necessity, not a wanted break. But most women do not get the opportunity to stay on and work at the theatre after they have a child, because they chose starting family over their career. As I have already claimed, "the lack of support for parenting and harassment are workplace issues that still disproportionately affect women. That is why, in addition to hiring diverse talent, theatres need to make sure they take steps to retain them by making workplace culture less toxic and more sustainable for long term employment of artists at all stages of their career" (2). According to Diep Tran's "Why So Few Female Designers":

> "The research suggests two major areas in dire need of change: workplace environments and family support. Technical theatre has an obligation to uphold a positive workplace environment for all people and provide support for parents. Without this welcoming environment, we will lose countless artists and their skills, further shrinking the pool of theatre practitioners to a select few" (3).

Women in this field are being punished for wanting to start a family. Women are losing a stream of income right before it is needed most. To solve this issue, theatre companies must take the initiative to cultivate an environment that allows mothers to pump without a stigma of shame. Creating safe spaces for women would encourage them to stay in the design field knowing that they are being fully supported by companies.

Indeed, women who are very talented and love theatre and love creating art are losing their positions because of unhealthy workplace environments. We can do better, and we must do better. If we have any hope of changing the theatre industry and changing who we are hiring as designers, we need to be more supportive of what may be needed to keep these very important assets. It takes a lot of training and time to learn what these designers do. We must figure out compromises across all boards to make our work environments more inclusive, helpful, and safe for all. It seems that theatre is not being progressive but going back to the ancient theatre days, days where men played women, because women were not allowed on stage. More and more women are leaving because they feel excluded, or not supported by their male counterparts, and women should not experience harassment at their place of work and have to take it. Men can and should be doing better.

There are platforms trying to invoke real improvements, but it is well known that the field is slow to change. As this field is so heavily male-dominated, as a woman in this field you are made to feel alone or less-than. As expressed by *Hadestown* director Rachel Chavkin: "the theme in this show reflects real world injustice of how power structures try to maintain control: by "making you feel like you're walking alone in the darkness, even when your partner is right there at your back" (1). In the field of design there is next to no gender and racial diversity. But why? Chavkin argues that diversity is not a pipeline issue. She says that "our field is filled with progressive people, and yet our field is not exemplarity in terms of living its politics- first and

foremost, who is telling the stories and what stories they are telling" (1). There are women and women of color ready for a chance to display their art – art that is great, thought provoking, and innovative. Could it be that we are expecting diversity to find us? Theatres need to work harder to find the amazing directors, and scenic designers, so we are not using the same artists over and over. Monopoly of the same individuals prevents theatre from gaining a new perspective and diversity that the field needs so badly. There are so many new and innovative artists that have amazing talent that is just waiting to be unlocked. Elsa Hiltner further explains the problem:

> "As companies, theatres have done little to question how often set and lighting designers only work with hired technicians. It serves their bottom line not to. Statistics show that women are more likely to take on uncompensated work than are men. For better or worse, it's a tactic used by ambitious women who need to maneuver in our culture's male-dominated system. Women are also much less likely to ask for increased compensation or assistance. In many ways it's a rigged system in which women who don't take on extra work are penalized for seeming uncooperative, or unmotivated, while women who ask for increased compensation are often deemed entitled. Theatre company's benefit greatly from this free labor" (3)

Theatre companies with low funds will underpay staff because there is an expected period in which artists do what they can to just "get their foot in the door," this leads to artists taking positions outside of their training, outside of what they find fulfilling just to get an "in." the men are then promoted to position like assistant scenic designer, while women are offered jobs in props or costume design.

Theatrical design is something these women want to do for a living, but they are not given adequate compensation for the time and effort put in, hindering women from being able to continue this craft. Meaning they may have to leave this field and find a different job because they are not

given a livable wage. Designers and technicians of both genders usually start out their careers by participating in uncompensated jobs, such as unpaid internships or mentorships. This tradition comes from the classical training traditions that many of the designers working today had to go through. This tradition is hopefully becoming old-fashioned and no longer the norm but is still very present. The issue is that men are more likely to have that unpaid internship or mentorship turned to a paid position, while it usually takes women longer to transition to a paid position that is in the field that they want. Many women end up leaving the field that they want to pursue in this stage of their career. This is not a viable option for single-income households that are expecting a paycheck to make ends meet.

Through the history of America, women have always been seen as the home makers, the care takers, the people who constructed clothes not only for themselves, but for their families. Women take uncompensated jobs to get a little bit of experience in their desired field. As women, society has told us we need to be small, not take up too much space; because if we do, we are overbearing, and entitled. But this a is a new day and age, women are beginning to have more confidence, and demand for higher pay, and even promotions.

HARASSMENT

As I have argued, there are multiple reasons women tend to leave the field of theatre design; harassment is one of those two main reasons. Harassment, and gender discrimination have hindered women from entering the field, as well contributing to why they leave the field. This is why we have seen a massive decrease of women in the field. Women who are brilliant and have a true passion for theatre and theatre design have had to leave the field because of harassment. Yarrow states "flirting? Seriously? Because I smiled at him? I mean, come on. Either I'm too stern or too playful. It lose-lose proposition" (111). Women are too friendly, or not friendly enough. They smile too much or staring too long, it is assumed they have a crush on you, or think they are cute. This is a dangerous concept, one that is harmful to a woman in the workforce, including her in potential growth in the company. Women in toxic work environments feel small in their space, and try to avoid their harasser, or avoid staring too long or smiling. This makes women feel self-conscious, and in turn makes them contemplate, "was I staring too long? Did I flirt with him?" The tables are then turned to make women feel like they did something wrong, when they in fact did not.

According to *Facing (and Fixing) the Problem of Sexual Harassment in Theatre* by Stefanie Maiya Lehmann, "just over 80 percent of those who experienced or saw harassment said they had not reported it. Top reasons for not doing so were that the artist 'felt I might be over-reacting,' 'didn't want to negatively affect the production,' 'didn't think anything could be done,' or was 'worried about professional repercussions'" (12). If the harassment is not resolved, the harassed still have to work with the harassers. This makes the workplace feel strained and confining, which can limit the creativity in the workplace. When the problem of harassment is not addressed, it is a vicious cycle that continues day after day, creating an ongoing negative effect on

the harassed in the workplace environment. Anyone who is working in a job should feel safe in their work environment. Women are consistently spoken down to and criticized for the way they complete a job. According to Lehmann "When dealing with harassment in the not so distant past, theatre professionals would often be told that 'to be in this business, you have to have a thick skin,' hearing entreaties to 'suck it up' and 'nobody likes a whiner,' which wasn't simply about dealing with artistic rejection, but also verbal abuse and sometimes physical abuse" (10). No one should have to continuously look over their shoulder for a specific coworker or coworkers who continue to harass them. A work environment should be collaborative and safe, and all employees should be equally supported. Theatre needs to be better with their policies in terms of protecting all employees, and possibly having onsite therapy or HR personnel to have an outlet in the place of work.

Theatre should be a collaborative work environment; we all rely on one another to make our productions successful. According to Lehmann "theatre artists must watch out for each other and encourage others to speak out. Even if you have only witnessed sexual harassment, you have still experienced a hostile workplace and are indirectly being victimized by the behavior. This means you have the right to report on your own behalf" (12). Theatre is supposed to be a safe space, one where you can express your creativity, and try new concepts, and designs. Harassment is something that hinders these creative environments from being successful. Daily check-in sessions should be implemented to help limit and prevent these types of behaviors from spreading and going too far.

FIGHTING GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

Discrimination in the workplace has been proven to still exist even today. Women continue to fight for discrimination to be a thing of the past. Diversity is something that is a struggle in the theater industry, women and women of color are being passed over for the same white male designers, a problem that continues to exist, even in this very diverse world.

People are looking for new and innovative way to run businesses, ways that are inclusive and fair to all genders and sexual orientations. Companies need to support women with things they may need, health care, therapy, childcare, and equal pay. Benefits that are going to allow them to work at their fullest potential, because they want to feel supported but their company, and should be. Women are now speaking up against this gender discrimination, standing up fighting for themselves, and others. According to Yarrow, "BECAUSE I am tired of these things happening to me, I'm not a fuck toy. I'm not a punching bag. I'm not a joke" (178). Women deal with a lot of stress, especially when they are working in a space that is made of ninety nine percent men. Women have been pushed around too long and have be discriminated again for so long, we are tired, and ready to be treated equally. We are wanting equal pay, and for benefits that women need as well as being considered equally for promotions. Many theatre designers and technicians are "gig" workers. They are hired to work on a single production with a team that is also hired for that one production. When the production is over, they must find work on another production. "You are only as good as your last show" is the mantra of the theatrical job search. This setup makes it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to report harassment without the possibility of retaliation. If a complaint is made about a collaborator, and the other collaborators side with the accused, the possibility that the accuser will not be asked to work with them again is large. If a complaint is opened with the producers or directors of a theatre venue the accuser may not be hired back at that

theatre because, they caused HR problems and were not considered easy to work with. In the theatre environment and gig work set up, there isn't the structure that allows reporting of harassment in a safe way. Theatrical unions are only now working on this issue, they are becoming the reporting agency, where members can report complaints to them, but this only helps when projects are being supported by Unions. Many early career designers are not working under union contracts or at union supported venues. Creating an environment that is difficult for young designers to grown and learn in. Women bust their butts twice as hard as men do "just to keep up", but that should be a thing of the past, and companies need to support all employees the same way.

RESEARCH FOR THE FUTURE

Women who are very talented, love theatre, and love creating art are losing their passion because of unhealthy workplace environments. We can do better, and we must do better. If we have any hope of changing the theatre industry, and changing who we are hiring as designers, we need to be more supportive of what may be needed to keep these very important assets. It takes a lot of training and time to learn what these designers do. Let us figure out a compromise across all boards to make our work environments more inclusive, helpful, and safe for all. I suggest that to solve part of this issue, we implement training: harassment training and daily check-ins with employees to make sure things are going well. Additionally, by changing this tradition from an unpaid position to a paid position that has clearer guidelines towards promotion will be helpful in making sure that gender does not offer advantage or disadvantage. Also, I think resources should be available if there is a harassment situation that has gotten out of hand, a resource that is discreet but has major reprocessing for the harasser. Standardized reporting guidelines need to be set up for theatres nationwide and include the entire entertainment industry. These standards should allow reporting without the fear of retaliation for a gig worker. It is very hard to prove that a designer was not rehired because of their harassment complaint. A standardized reporting structure will make this type of retaliation clearer and easier to prevent. Additionally, parents need the resources at hand, so they feel supported when they are at work for long and odd hours. Having pumping rooms available for new moms so they don't have to do it at the designers table or in a restroom. As well as having accessible childcare for new parents, whether it be a day care on sight or a partnership with care.com so parents know their children are safe at home and are being taken care of by a trusted nanny. Having these resources implemented would give working moms more ability to focus on their work and continue to create amazing art. Having the burden of childcare and

accessible pumping rooms available would be a weight lifted off the shoulders of these moms. Allowing them to be able to focus while at work and now have to worry about these other circumstances. Making these changes will be beneficial to women, but it will also make the theatrical workplace a better and safer space for everyone. Standardizing and training on reporting of harassment for example will create a better system for reporting discrimination based on LGBTQ, race, age, immigration statutes to name just a few. Having support for new mothers that allow them to keep working creates a workforce that keeps some of the most talented artists working and training future generations. It also creates a system that supports families.

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