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Bay Area Artists Plan Women's Theatre Festival

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by Lauren Spencer

Imagine opening up to the pink section in the San Francisco Chronicle and seeing its pages filled entirely with plays written, directed, designed, and acted by women. This is the vision Michaela Goldhaber shared with members of the Bay Area group Yeah, I Said Feminist after she returned from a galvanizing trip to the Women's Theater Festival (WTF) in Raleigh, North Carolina.



Michaela Goldhaber.

“Plays by and about women have always been my passion,” says Goldhaber who co-founded New York based Flying Fig Theatre, a company devoted to telling women’s stories on stage through new commissions and rediscovered plays from the past. When the Bay Area native returned home after suffering a stroke at age 36, she continued to fight for representation on stage through both her playwriting and her work with Wry Crips, a theatre-making group for disabled women.

Goldhaber traveled to Raleigh when WTF selected her play, *The Lady Scribblers*, for the festival's staged reading series. WTF Artistic Director Ashley Popio founded the festival in 2016 as a constructive response to the staggering disparities between theatre opportunities for men and women. The month long festival advertises a mission: "to create, produce, and promote extraordinary theatre by women" and involves numerous theatre companies local to the area.

"I was blown away by what they've done in three years," Goldhaber says. "Ashley, is a powerhouse and I spent some time talking to her. By the end of that weekend, I started thinking, "Why aren't we doing this in the Bay Area?"

Goldhaber reached out to Yeah, I Said Feminist, a group that has worked in conjunction with Works by Women and Counting Actors to progress gender parity and inclusivity on Bay Area stages. She proposed an invitation to members on the group's Facebook page, asking if anyone would be interested in helping her to organize the first ever Bay Area Women's Theater Festival (BAWTF).

"Immediately I got responses and within 20 minutes we scheduled a meeting," Goldhaber says. With the goal of getting every theater in the Bay Area involved, the newly minted organizing committee scheduled the festival for March/April of 2020 in order to coincide with the national 50/50 by 2020 gender parity initiative, SWAN Day (Support Women Artists Now) and, of course, the primary elections.

"I call it an influence campaign," says Goldhaber. Much like a grassroots campaign, Goldhaber and members of the committee have been leaning on their collective strengths and skills in order to fundraise, build a website, recruit fellow instigators and, most importantly, get theatre companies on board.

In order to participate in the festival, BAWTF is asking theatre companies to program a play written by a female-identified playwright, directed by a female-identified director, and utilizing a cast and creative team that is 50% female-identified. For theatres that perform work seasonally and will not be staging full productions in the the spring of 2020, BAWTF invites them to host an auxiliary event such as a staged reading, a symposium, solo shows, or a festival party.

So far the response has been enthusiastic with several theaters committing immediately including TheatreFIRST, Golden Thread, Shotgun Players, Ferocious Lotus, Custom Made, and Wry Crips.



Fontana Butterfield. Photo courtesy Ms. Butterfield.

Yeah, I said Feminist founder and organizing committee member Fontana Butterfield speaks about the sense of expansion this type of festival can provide. “It’s an incredible feeling to be in a female space,” she says. “It feels like an expansion of taking up all of our space, expansion of ideas and of safety.” This sense of taking space will be deeply explored through one auxiliary event that she and director Erin Merritt will be producing during the festival called “Occupy the Stage” during which work by female-identified artists will be presented continuously for 24 hours.

Expansion also plays a role in the classical reading series slated to occur during the festival. The series, curated and co-produced by Goldhaber and San Francisco Shakespeare Festival Artistic Director Rebecca Ennals, will work to expand audiences’ notions of the classical canon beyond the dominant white male writers.

The expansion of theatre’s relationship to gender is also on the committee’s mind as they acknowledge the work they will have to do to be as intersectional as possible and hold space, specifically, for non-binary artists.

The committee is currently in search of “fellow instigators” to join in the planning of the festival. Goldhaber makes a passionate open invitation to community members and theatres to reach out if they are interested in getting involved.

“We definitely have room for people to join the organizing committee,” she says “I’m working very hard to make the organizing committee representative of the festival. It

sounds enormous and it is. But there are so many people working on it and I really hope it will have something for the whole Bay Area.”

Contact the Bay Area Women’s Theater Festival at bayareaWTF@gmail.com or visit the festival’s website: <https://bayareawomenstheatrefestival.com> for more information.

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