

LIFESTYLE

The long road toward gender parity on Marin stages

By **SAM HURWITT** | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: January 29, 2020 at 12:00 pm | UPDATED: January 29, 2020 at 12:16 pm

With its current production of Diana Burbano’s play, “Ghosts of Bogota,” San Rafael’s AlterTheater hits an important turning point, achieving 50-50 parity between men and women playwrights over its entire 15-year company history.

This milestone has been a long time coming — at least since 2013, when the 100th anniversary of the Actors Equity Association drew attention to how much had changed in a century and how much hadn’t. In the 2008-09 season, only 12.6% of major New York productions were by women — almost exactly the same percentage of female playwrights on Broadway 100 years earlier in 1908 (12.8%), when women hadn’t yet won the right to vote.

There’s been a lot of advocacy work to correct the imbalance, much of it focused on this year. The 50-50 in 2020 initiative is a push begun in 2009 to achieve equal representation for women in theater by 2020. The Jubilee is an organization started in 2015 to create a nationwide, yearlong theater festival in 2020 centering

Locally, the Bay Area Women's Theatre Festival has been enlisting theater companies and other artists to produce works by women between March and May of this year. In 2011, local actor Valerie Weak started her Counting Actors Project, assembling statistics on the gender split between actors, playwrights and directors in shows in the Bay Area.

"Although I like to think of AlterTheater as a pretty representative organization and we prioritize underrepresented voices, I didn't realize how underrepresented women's voices were in the American theater until all of this advocacy came out," says AlterTheater artistic director Jeanette Harrison.

"So, we created a spreadsheet and listed out our plays and counted them up, and we were less than a third. And it's funny because activists in this cause would say, 'Oh, well, you're AlterTheater. I'm sure you're at 50-50.' And women are so poorly represented that what we're doing seems like it's 50-50, but it took us this long to actually get to 50-50. Because we didn't overcorrect. We didn't say, OK, we're never producing men again until we hit gender parity. We've just produced more women."

Unintentional parity

At Marin Theatre Company, the current season has plays by five women and one man, and MTC's previous four seasons have had a 50-50 gender split among the playwrights. The last four seasons have also had about half playwrights of color. Previous to 2015, there was a gradual upswing in works by women after a couple of all-male playwright seasons a decade ago.

Surprisingly, artistic director Jasson Minadakis says the shift wasn't due to any internal conversations about representation.

"It hasn't been an objective to try to achieve parity," Minadakis says. "We've really tried to stress in our season selection that we're just trying to do the six best plays that are available to us. In trying to tell stories that are really affecting us right now, we have been leaning toward more nonbinary or female-gendered playwrights, partly because the things that those writers are focusing on feel more of the moment and feel more urgent in terms of their storytelling. American theater has always sort of been this big exploration of the American dream, and it feels like these writers are bringing perspectives that we have not heard about the American dream and how it works or how it fails or what it means."

As a Shakespeare company, Marin Shakespeare Company's main stage offerings naturally skew toward one white male playwright in particular. Among its non-Shakespeare offerings (usually one per season), the 31-year-old company has done one Lauren Gunderson play, "The Taming," and at least a couple of adaptations of classic works by managing director Lesley Schisgall Currier: "Alice in Wonderland" and "A Thousand and One Arabian Nights."

Beyond the Bard

"Gender equity in playwrights is very difficult to achieve when you're a Shakespeare theater," Currier says. "But, a lot of the work that we do has to do with equity and diversity. Most of the education work that we do in the public schools in Marin, we do in schools that serve low-income families. And then we do a lot of work in prisons. We're in 14 correctional facilities right now around the state. We also have a returned citizen theater troupe (of formerly incarcerated performers)."

Both MSC and MTC will participate in the Women's Theatre Festival this spring, Marin Shakes with a staged reading of Joanna Baillie's "Witchcraft" and MTC with Lauren Gunderson's solo show, "Natural Shocks."

The Mountain Play does just one musical each summer, ideally a popular enough show to attract crowds up to Mount Tamalpais for the afternoon. There aren't as many big Broadway musicals by women as one would like, although at least two recent productions ("Mamma Mia!" and "Beauty and the Beast") have books by women.

Mill Valley's Curtain Theatre also typically does only one play a year, and that play is usually Shakespeare, or occasionally another classic of the 17th or even 18th century. Even so, Curtain once did "Hot Day in Ephesus," Vicki Siegel's musical version of Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors."

"Shakes circles have, of course, long been wrestling with this problem," says Curtain director Michele Delattre. "Actresses find few parts and age out quite young. In the modern theater, we have to beat more female playwrights out of the bushes, and that is slowly happening."

Balance of voices

Now in its 90th season, Ross Valley Players has made a noticeable effort in recent years to increase its representation of plays by women. Its last couple of seasons

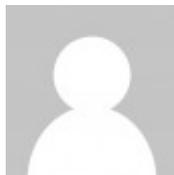
“Ross Valley Players has been actively discussing and implementing gender equality for playwrights, directors, actors, designers and crew for its productions for the last five years,” says RVP board member and actor Steve Price. “It’s important to me and to my associates at RVP that there’s a balance of female and male voices representing our community.”

Novato Theatre Company often has one play by a woman in its five-show seasons, although the current season is all works by men.

“It’s been something that NTC has been looking at for like the last two years,” says actor Alison Peltz, vice president of NTC’s board of directors. “And I think a lot of our small theater companies, especially community-based theater companies, need audience education on the importance and value in this. We’ve been discussing getting a reader’s theater program going. That’s where we do casual readings of plays that might not have made the cut for this season but we really liked, to get audiences exposed to that kind of work and potentially getting excited about a full-blown production of the show and an author that they’re not familiar with.”

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