



Fontana Butterfield Guzman (right) with Dave Maier in Shotgun Players' "The Three Musketeers," 2007.
Photo: Howard Gerstein

Why It's Time to Bust Out the F Word *by* / [Velina Brown](#)

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I like to be careful about my language, but it's time to do this. It's time to bust out the F word. That's right, "feminism." Why such tart language? Why do we need feminism in the theatre? I will explain.

First allow me to define the term. What is feminism? Lots of people who are feminists are afraid to say they're feminists or simply don't know that they're feminists because of the negative connotation the word has acquired. For many, images of angry, screaming, bra-burning, man-hating, unattractive and badly dressed women come to mind. Where did those pictures come from, and who benefits when otherwise intelligent people start sentences with, "I'm not a feminist, but..."? "Sure I believe in equal work for equal pay," they say, "of course women should be able to vote, own property and have control over their own bodies, but no, no, I'm not a feminist."

Friends, feminism, according to the “American Heritage Dictionary,” simply means, “The belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.” Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler famously said, “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.” So, regardless of your gender or the unburnt state of your underwear, if you believe that women are people, you’re a feminist. Feminism is also about another F word: fairness.

**Why do we need feminism in theatre?
Because it’s never been fair.**

Suze Allen, AJ Baker and Lee Brady of the writer-driven **3Girls Theatre Company** explain, “Surveys tell us that the small percentage of women playwrights produced in mainstream American theatre is roughly the same today as it was a century ago. We aren’t interested in debating the politics of this problem. We’re just interested in solving it.” So these ladies have started a company in 2011 to promote the work of women writers and to, as they say, “Put women’s work on stage where it belongs.”



3Girls Theatre Company cofounders Lee Brady, Suze Allen and AJ Baker.

Photo: Michael Bellino

Sometimes people will ask, “Who, then? Who are these writers that you think I should know about?” To assist in such a search, Christine Young started **Works by Women San Francisco** in late 2012. Inspired by the New York group Works by Women, the Bay Area group organizes events to see shows that feature women in writing, directing and design positions and/or have a gender balanced or majority female cast. Young is also creating a [web page](#) listing a catalog of plays by women. The shows will be listed by type of show, with a synopsis describing each show and why it should be produced.

When it comes to directing or designing [jobs](#), consistently fewer than half are going to women

nationwide. And when audition notices go up, often there are desperate exclamations on Facebook: “We need more men!” Routinely, the breakdown is something like five men and one woman, with the male roles frequently precast with union men so there are no [contracts](#) left by the time the women audition. Very disheartening.

Perhaps people have no idea of the environmental impact their play choices, and therefore their casting choices, are having on the ecosystem of our theatre community. So Lauren Bloom formed the **Bay Area Equity Women’s Group** in early 2012. Bloom describes it as “a collection of local female Equity members who are working, both independently and in cooperation with other similar groups, to raise awareness of the challenges facing AEA women actors and stage managers in the Bay Area market.” Though not an official AEA subcommittee, the group hopes “to organize, foster and facilitate an expansion of work opportunities for Equity women in our community.”

So far there have been two events: the first, a trip to see Lauren Gunderson’s “Emilie” at Symmetry Theatre Company, and the second—inspired by the provocative article in the July/August 2012 “Atlantic Magazine”: “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” by Anne-Marie Slaughter—to see Madeleine George’s “Precious Little” at Shotgun Players, after which they stayed for a spirited panel discussion, moderated by Bloom, of the issues facing women who seek to balance family and motherhood with being a theatre artist. Attendees were relieved and validated to learn that (a) pretty much everyone is juggling and struggling from time to time, (b) it’s okay to say so and (c) we can help each other.

Why do we need feminism in theatre?

Because we need to create a context that makes it easier for artists who are also mothers to keep going.

Jennifer Welch, Cary Cronholm Rose and Ann Hopkins started **Tides Theatre** in January 2012. Since then, Tides has taken over the old SF Playhouse space at 533 Sutter and has upped its season from two shows in 2012 to three planned for 2013. Its mission is “to inspire, challenge and heal our community by creating visceral theatre experiences that are bold and truthful.” Though its mission statement doesn’t mention women or feminism, when asked about it, producing artistic director Welch says, “We are feminists. We are working mothers who want to be making art full-time. We are interested in finding ways that are conducive to women who have children being able to continue to do their art.” To illustrate the point, one of the first things they did when they moved into the 533 Sutter space is toddler-proof the green room.

Why do we need feminism in theatre?

Equal pay for equal work.

Because not only is there less work for women, but the women who are working are frequently earning a stipend while the men are on salary, accruing health and pension benefits. This is definitely not equal work for equal pay. Chloe Bronzan noticed this in 2010: “A year after I turned Equity I began to realize how few roles were going to Equity women. The discrepancy became so clear.” She and her friend Jessica Powell were talking about this one day and decided to produce their own work. Bronzan’s boyfriend Robert Parsons wanted to direct and produce.

So the three of them founded **Symmetry Theatre** that year. Now, artistic director Bronzan continues, “The plays we choose will always have at least as many female characters as male, and in any given show there will always be at least as many Equity contracts given to women as to men.”

What began as a desire to make more work for themselves grew into a desire to be of larger service to the community. Powell is now an artistic consultant for the company, and current members also include Danielle Levin and Stacy Ross.



Danielle Levin in Symmetry Theatre Company's 2012 production of “Emilie.”

Photo: Bob Grace

Why do we need feminism in theatre?

Because you are not crazy.

Women struggling with the inequities often have difficulty figuring out who to even talk to about it, let alone what to do about it. There is the fear of sounding whiny or angry or difficult. Just be more positive, you tell yourself. You wonder if the difficulty is all in your head. Meanwhile, family may be less than understanding. Perhaps your folks never thought acting was such a great career choice anyway. So they may not want to hear about how it's even harder because you're a

woman. Remember, they did offer to send you to nursing school. There's a shortage of nurses. Talking to other actors can be tough, too. Some short-sighted women, not realizing that their turn will come, may see your being discouraged as good news. If you give up, that's less competition for them. And a lot of guys just don't see the problem as they go from Shakespeare festival to Shakespeare festival. From their perspective, there's plenty of work. Even if they don't get exactly the role they wanted, they could still spend a summer playing Trinculo and get their health insurance.

When asked what inspired the **Counting Actors Project**, Valerie Weak shares, "this feeling after going to many auditions and callbacks over a period of about six months. Feeling like I was doing good work but I wasn't getting cast. And in each instance, I would later learn that the role went to a nonunion actor." After working so much before joining the union, it was disorienting to suddenly be working so much less while still doing strong work at the auditions and callbacks. She'd wonder, "Did I suddenly start sucking? Am I being 'gaslighted'? What's happening? Sometimes I got really upset."

Then Weak remembered something she had read by Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology, in which he advised, "When feeling pessimistic it is helpful to measure." For example, if you're feeling lonely and friendless, before going into an emotional nosedive take a moment and count how many friends you actually have. Measuring helps you figure out if your feelings have a basis in fact. This concept prompted Weak to start the Counting Actors Project in June 2011.

As she began to gather the numbers and invite others to help, she was able to see more clearly the number of jobs there are for women compared to men at any given time. The picture the numbers began to paint helped Weak depersonalize the rejection that had come to feel very personal. She began to feel better. The fact is, there's a huge number of actors in her type compared to the number of roles available. With so many talented women competing for so few roles—many of them willing to work for nearly nothing—the casting choices are more likely about who can do the part well enough for the least amount of money than about her individual acting ability. And as Dr. Seligman suggests, having the cold, hard numbers can really help.

As of this writing, Weak has gathered stats for more than 200 productions. The information includes gender of writer and director, total number of actors, gender of actors, numbers of union and nonunion actors, numbers of local and nonlocal actors and numbers of male and female union actors. The information is submitted by Bay Area actors, stage managers, directors, designers, theatre administrators and audience members who have either seen or worked on the shows.

The Counting Actors Project is essential to grounding the conversation about equal opportunity to work in the facts; the numbers speak for themselves. Weak has accomplished two things: she's broadened her perspective and therefore has helped herself feel better. And she's making an extremely valuable contribution to the community. If you'd like to contribute data to the survey, visit Valerie Weak's blog at sfbayareaactor.blogspot.com.



Counting Actors Project creator Valerie Weak.

Why do we need feminism in theatre?

Because you can be awesome and still have dry spells.

I'm reminded of an actress friend who was also married to an actor. They met in college. The number of roles for each of them was not exactly even, but it wasn't so bad. When they graduated, they both worked locally in the Bay Area. Things were going okay. Then they moved to New York, a much larger market where they had no network. They would both go out every day, pounding the pavement looking for work. But he got traction right away. He quickly booked an acting job, then another, then got an agent. Meanwhile, she was still going to audition after audition, cattle calls really, and not booking anything. She was getting exhausted and disheartened. He was getting soap opera gigs and developing connections.

When she tried to talk about it, he finally said, "Look, ever consider that you just don't have it? I'm already working and you haven't gotten the first thing." Besides, he said (and I'm not exaggerating), "I like dinner ready when I get home." They broke up, and she gave up and came home. She has since built a fine life in another line of work. She's doing great. But what makes me sad is not just that she quit acting, but why she quit. She took a beating those first few months in New York, but the knockout punch came when someone whom she expected to be in her corner said the thing she feared most: Maybe she didn't have it.

But it wasn't true. She was very talented. He was good. But he was not better than her. Yet he has gone on to have a respectable regional theatre career working at the big houses and going from Shakespeare festival to Shakespeare festival. It's not fair.

One of the biggest theatres in the country is the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. In 2012, the Guthrie illustrated how difficult it is for women even in the nation's foremost regional theatres, theatres that we expect to lead and set a positive example. When artistic director Joe Dowling announced the Guthrie's 50th anniversary season, it set off a firestorm of criticism. While Dowling called the season "so varied and immediate," others called it "a tragedy" due to the absence of women and minorities among the playwrights and directors.

Not one of the 12 productions slated for the Guthrie's two large stages, the Wurtele Thrust and the McGuire Proscenium, was written by a woman. Only one of them ("Nice Fish") was to be codirected by a woman. The people involved with the writing and staging of the plays were all white men. Adding the tiniest tad of diversity was Carlo Goldoni, an Italian playwright from the 1700s.

There were open letters to Dowling and news articles criticizing the programming and questioning the fairness of the Guthrie receiving so much funding from the community (over \$2.2 million in the last three years from the Minnesota State Arts Board alone) while not representing the community in its work.

In response, Dowling later released "additional details" about the season that underlined that the Goldoni play's translator and adapter were women; Lisa Peterson would direct "Clybourne Park"; and Dowling Studio, the Guthrie's much smaller space, would host "Buzzer" by Tracey Scott Wilson, directed by Marion McClinton, both African American.

Here in the Bay Area, Shotgun Players' artistic director Patrick Dooley announced to his company that there probably wouldn't be a woman playwright in the entire 2013–14 season. He asked what the company members thought about that.

Actress and company member Fontana Butterfield Guzman found herself very upset about it. But because of her fondness for Dooley—"He's my brother," she says—it took her two days to compose the email she sent back to Dooley saying she did not think it was okay to have only male writers for the whole season. While she was composing her letter to him she also had Facebook open. She typed, "Thinking of starting a feminist theater." The word "feminist" was pulsing on the screen. It was scary to use the F word. Then Butterfield Guzman typed, "Yeah, I said Feminist," hit "post" and left her desk. Within about 20 minutes she had 53 "likes." She laughs, "It's the most attention I've ever gotten on Facebook!"

And so began the "**Yeah, I Said Feminist**" Facebook group and theatre salon. The idea has evolved from starting a theatre company to curating a salon that meets every second Sunday to vent, share ideas and plan next actions. One of the actions was to gather names of writers and plays. As of this printing there have been three meetings and there are 250 members in the Facebook group. The actions of speaking out and giving names of writers and plays to Dooley

was effective. There will now be two women writers in Shotgun's 2013–14 season, and Dooley has decided that 2015 will be a season of all women writers.

Perhaps a different theatre company each year will take up the torch of presenting an all-woman season of plays. To whom can Shotgun Players pass the torch in 2016, and so on? If the will is there, Shotgun Players and indeed the Bay Area theatre community could become the nation's leader in gender parity in the arts.

**Why do we need feminism in theatre?
Because, well, let's look at three great examples.**

In 1974 Terry Baum founded **Lilith**, a groundbreaking San Francisco women's theatre collective. The company did original work that addressed women's experiences in relationships, work and religion. Looking at these topics from a woman's perspective onstage was new. The company toured nationally and internationally and attracted many artists such as Marga Gomez, Carolyn Myers and Joan Mankin. When asked about feminism then and now, both Baum and Myers agreed, "What people don't know nowadays is how much fun it was. We were not angry all the time. We had a blast." Lilith ended in 1984, but Baum and Myers went on to write the successful play "Dos Lesbos," and today they are the comedy duo A Coupla Crackpot Crones.

Two years after Lilith ended, Ellen Gavin founded **Brava! For Women in the Arts**. The mission was to "produce, present and cultivate the artistic expression of women and also people of color, youth, LGBTQ and other unheard voices."

A major Mission District fixture under Gavin's guidance as executive/artistic director for 21 years, Brava collaborated with prominent San Francisco feminists, community leaders, activists and artists. It also produced award-winning premieres by nationally and internationally known playwrights such as Diana Son, Eve Ensler, Cherylene Lee, Suzan-Lori Parks, Joan Holden, Anne Galjour, Mabou Mines and Culture Clash.

Raelle Myrick-Hodges took the reins in late 2007, and as Brava's artistic director she produced three seasons of new and reimagined works until her departure in January 2012.

In February 2012, Brava's board of directors hired current executive director Anastacia Powers Cuellar. When asked how she would describe what's going on with Brava at this time, Powers Cuellar explains, "This is a transitional phase. We are studying how we can best balance Brava! For Women in the Arts' mission as a producing and presenting entity with Brava! Theater Center, which is a large building with a lot of needs."

Is not having an artistic director the new normal, or is it simply another aspect of the transitional phase for the company? Powers Cuellar shares, "This is also part of what we are studying, whether a single artistic director is the best thing for Brava. We currently have an artistic advisory committee."

She continues, "Over Brava's 26-year history, Brava has owned its building for 16 years. Because there was so much city money that went into the building, there is a mandate about how

much community programming and youth programming goes on in the building. Bringing all those programs back into alignment with the funding that keeps the organization running was really important. Now that those programs have been revived and shored up we can focus on producing and doing theatre.”

Is Brava still a feminist theatre? “I do feel it’s a feminist theatre,” says Powers Cuellar. “We do work that is important to women’s lives and bring light to women’s issues. Queer women, women of color, disenfranchised women are a big part of our constituency.” Presenting, producing, residencies, youth training projects and collaborations are all ways that Brava has for nearly 30 years contributed to the community and highlighted women artists. The company has had its up and downs and is currently charting its new course. In the meantime, Brava continues to be a place where women from whom we don’t normally get to hear speak up, as evidenced by Rhodessa Jones and the Medea Project moving in for a February–March residency. The important work continues.

Erin Merritt’s vision was to create a place where women could get more work, experience and training in the classics. To that end, in 1998 Merritt started **Woman’s Will**, one of only three all-female theatre companies nationwide. She says of the time, “There weren’t that many women writers getting their plays produced on the national stage. Besides Paula Vogel, there was Suzan-Lori Parks, but she was mostly writing for men. There was Tina Howe and Wendy Wasserstein, but they weren’t writing roles I wanted to play.” Merritt says with a chuckle, “I like the tough manly-man parts, only with women doing them.”

Was there any difficulty getting an audience for all-women casts of Shakespeare and other classics? “Never. We always had great audiences and a lot of men and women coming to see the shows. Even though we did not gear our work towards men at all, they still came.”

What is happening with Woman’s Will now? Current artistic director Victoria Evans Erville has posted this message on the company’s webpage: “It is with a heavy heart that I announce that Woman's Will Theater Company will enter a one-year hiatus. I have met with the Woman's Will Board of Directors and rather than permanently close the company we will take a one-year hiatus to consider the company's future.” While Woman’s Will lies dormant right now, it leaves a void. Because of Woman’s Will, many wonderful actors have had a chance to push the envelope of what audiences get to experience and whom women get to play onstage.

Why do we need feminism in theatre?

Because very talented women are leaving the field since there doesn’t appear to be a place for them.

We need to create more places where talented women can work just as much as talented men, for the same pay and benefits as men. And we need to support and appreciate the places that are already doing that. We need places where women’s stories are told, where at least half the time the plot is about women, where the adventure, the hero’s journey and the triumph can belong to women.

Because we as a people need these stories, these experiences, and these artists.

In a November 2009 “American Theatre” article titled “Not There Yet: What Will It Take to Achieve Equality for Women in the Theatre?,” playwright Marsha Norman explains it this way: “We need to hear all the American stories, not half of them. When Bill Gates went to Saudi Arabia, he declared publicly that the only way it could possibly compete as a first-class country was if it started using more than 50 percent of its brain power. And the women, covered in burkas, their identities obscured as their society demands, cheered. If American theatres want to produce the best work, they will have to find a way through our own cultural issues in order to grant equal status to the words of women. A theatre that is missing the work of women is missing half the story, half the canon, half the life of our time. That is the situation we have now.”

Lilith is long gone. Woman’s Will has shut down for the time being. And Brava is mainly a rental house that’s nurturing its revived youth projects while the board studies what’s next. In the middle of this Great Recession, funding is the biggest issue facing every company right now. But in the last year and a half, Bay Area women have taken some useful and sustainable actions to gather information and level the playing field.

I’d like to offer this idea: Radical actions are sometimes required. But instead of ping-ponging between radical action and no action, perhaps it’s time we focus on sustainable actions to help us move forward in these challenging times and maintain our gains. The Counting Actors Project, the Works by Women San Francisco webpage and the Yeah, I Said Feminist theatre salon are great examples of sustainable actions.

I’m excited to see what 2013 brings. To my women friends, stay awake and resist old patterns. And to my male friends, we are not trying to get rid of you. We just want you to make some room for all of us men and women. Because feminism is in the house!

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