

MANIFESTO FOR THEATRE: MFTConference: read Vice-President Jean Rogers' speech

Manifesto For Theatre Conference - Lyric Hammersmith, 22 March.

Speech by Equity Vice-President Jean Rogers

When I wrote my speech I was not privy to Billy Clark's but I was pretty confident he would outline, as a mature actor, what is my experience too. Most of the problems we face in the business are the same whatever our gender and as an actress I back to the hilt this campaign to fight for a theatre which is valued both artistically and financially.

BUT I can't help thinking that much of modern theatre is letting females down.

In the Stage last summer, Lucy Perman, the Executive director of the woman's theatre company "Clean Break", wrote,

"the stage is still a male domain, particularly the main stages of most of our leading companies."

I came into the "business" in the sixties and I was one of the lucky ones. Rep at Farnham and the Belgrade— seasons at Chichester with Laurence Olivier's company - then as a founder member of his new National Company at the Old Vic, and, despite starting a family, hundreds of radio broadcasts - 11 years in a TV soap.

But coming out of the soap I was approaching 50, and an artistic director asked me how I was going to cope now I had reached a "certain age" – and do you know - I really didn't understand what he was getting at, but a decade or more later I do now!

Most of our female members' careers in all areas of the industry start to peter out after 40.

Ours is one of the few professions where the genders are not in direct competition with each other Yet the chances to portray the many facets of what it is to be a woman, particularly after the age of 45, are limited.

Ask Margaret Tysack!

And younger women like Claire Skinner and Maxine Peake have publicly stated their trepidation as their middle years are about to unfold.

So is Lucy Perman right? My fellow actresses have been on the job opportunities trail.

Let's look at the National.

With 80% of theatre tickets bought by women, and women representing 52% of the population, the newest production has 'THE WHITE GUARD' with 20 men and 1 woman, 'THE HABIT of ART' with 9 men and 2 women and, of course, the specially commissioned, 'THE POWER of YES' with 17 men and 3 women.

And just down the road, at the Old Vic, there is 'SIX DEGREES of SEPERATION' with 12 men and 4 women.

And we've discovered a recurring 2 to 1 ratio!

In 2008-9 the National's 24 productions had two men to every one woman actor, 16 were directed by men, 8 by women; 17 written by men, 7 by women and of those 7, 3 were played in the Cottesloe, 3 in the Lyttleton, and only one in the Olivier.

As Lucy Perman also said "there is no dearth of women playwrights" and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain agrees.

The National works with experienced playwrights, however they monitor plays and readings in the new-writing theatres. But if these and the smaller regional theatres continue to only concentrate on young writers then the National won't hear the voice of older women. It's good to hear that the Hampstead Theatre has opened itself up to older writers and career-changers.

Now let's number crunch the South West where in 2009 there were 307 male roles to 171 for women.

Bristol Old Vic had an encouraging 19/16 split whereas, Kneehigh, and Clwyd were weighted heavily towards male casting and even the Tobacco Factory had 17 to 10 BUT Plymouth - an incredible 46 men to 14 women in its choice of plays!

In 2007 all public bodies were required to actively promote gender equality. Three years on, in the Arts Council England's current consultation paper, there is absolutely no mention of Gender. Diversity – yes – 8 times – 4 of which are about the audience. So do we take it that to be a woman in 2010 is to be diverse? That surely leaves only white males who aren't.

I challenge artistic directors to commit themselves to making the right play choices, and to commission the right kind of work.

It all boils down to choice and in our survey some have come up trumps! The Manchester Royal Exchange, Oldham Coliseum, the Theatre by the Lake, which incidentally used creative casting to change some traditional male roles to female ones in A Midsummer Night's dream AND the Royal Court with its 68 males to 63 females. So it can be achieved!

Alas, our accommodating hosts here have under Sean Holmes so far 51 male roles to 21 females but hopefully this will be redressed in May with "A Thousand Stars Explode in the Sky" - but it is a trilogy of 3 male writers.

A recent, depressing theatre survey by Sphinx found that only on the fringe was there any equality of opportunity for women. Everywhere else it was between 30 and 39%. Which proves Lucy Perman's assertion that the main houses are a male domain. Not West End musicals, though, where it was an encouraging 43%.

So what kind of theatre do I want? Well I for one don't want to be pushed to the fringes anymore.

Our female membership says we want equality, and portrayal of females to be as varied and insightful as it is for males, and judging by the comments on our Equal Representation in Drama Petition, so do the public.

Let me quote Philip Hedley from it -

“For drama to bring the richest possible experience to audiences, it is vital that characters of all races, ages and sexes are fully and fairly represented. This campaign for women of all ages to be represented is of great importance to the creative industries. All strength to it!”

Art is a tapestry bigger than our own vision on which to hang ALL the stories of ALL our lives.

We have a fight ahead to get the theatre back into artistic hands. Let's fight for it together and equally share the rewards.