

A Brief Survey of Gender Parity in the Theatre Industry

Tiyatro Sektöründe Cinsiyet Eşitliği Üzerine Kısa Bir Araştırma

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ABSTRACT

Throughout centuries, women have been excluded from theatre, an otherwise significant part of Western culture. Even after they have been allowed to attend theatrical performances, perform on stage, and publish their work, their contributions have been obscured or downgraded. In modern times, the inequality between male and female playwrights and theatre practitioners saw only marginal improvement. This study investigates the presence of women as playwrights and directors in the 40 plays uploaded to the National Theatre at Home platform in the year starting with December 2020. Studies conducted since the 1980s have systematically pointed out the lack of equal opportunities for men and women in the theatre industry. Our findings comply with relevant studies and attest that gender parity is far from being attained despite efforts to include more women in theatre in various roles.

Keywords: National Theatre at Home, Survey, Gender Parity

ÖZ

Yüzyıllar boyunca kadınlar, Batı kültürünün önemli bir parçası olan tiyatronun dışında tutulmuşlardır. Tiyatro gösterilerine katılmalarına, sahnede performans sergilemelerine ve çalışmalarını yayımlamalarına izin verildikten sonra bile, katkıları gizlenmiş veya küçümsenmiştir. Modern zamanlarda, erkek ve kadın oyun yazarları ve tiyatro uygulayıcıları arasındaki eşitsizlik sadece marjinal bir iyileşme göstermiştir. Bu çalışma, Aralık 2020 ile başlayan bir yıl içinde National Theatre at Home platformuna yüklenen 40 oyunda oyun yazarı ve yönetmen olarak kadınların varlığını araştırmaktadır. 1980'lerden bu yana yapılan çalışmalar, tiyatro sektöründe kadın ve erkekler için fırsat eşitliğinin bulunmadığına sistematik olarak işaret etmektedir. Bulgularımız ilgili çalışmalarla uyumludur ve tiyatrodaki çeşitli rollerde daha fazla kadının yer almasına yönelik çabalara rağmen cinsiyet eşitliğinin sağlanmaktan uzak olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: National Theatre at Home, Anket, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged today that, historically, numerous professions have been largely inaccessible to women; nonetheless, some women have still succeeded in making significant contributions across various professional fields, despite the fact that their contributions have ultimately either been marginalised or obscured from history. The field of theatre serves as a prominent example since there is ample data on the historical development of the art form. The first theatrical performances date back to ancient times and although scholars have yet to reach a definite conclusion, it is largely agreed that in those early times, women's presence at theatre was not even allowed (Day, 2016). Regardless, Goldhill (1997) takes as "uncontested facts" that in Ancient Greece, "no women participated directly in the writing, production, performance or judging of the plays" (p. 62). In the following centuries, women could definitely attend theatrical performances, yet, the first professional actresses appeared on stage much later. In Britain, this development took place after the Restoration of King Charles II to the throne in 1660, when "it is known that a woman played Desdemona in a production of *Othello* by Thomas Killigrew's King's Company" (Howe, 1992, p. 19). Furthermore, women's contribution to the development of theatre has been efficiently suppressed until the seventeenth century, as evidenced by the sparse number of plays from earlier periods (Case, 1988). For feminist scholars and playwrights searching for a female tradition and a female canon of plays, there are very few examples to draw on. In Sue-Ellen Case's (1988) opinion, if these few examples managed not to disappear from history, it is by virtue of certain privileges, either "by class, by their beauty, by their association with men of influence, or perhaps because their work manifested some similarities with the works in the [male] canon" (p. 28). Given such weak representation in the theatrical domain, Ferris' (1990) argument that "women had absolutely no part in their own dramatic image-making" (p. 19) seems to be particularly compelling.

Gradually, women managed to make their way into theatre, without this meaning that their share has been, or is, as a matter of fact, equal. Lafler (2004) reports that from 1670 until 1695, apart from Aphra Behn's work, "no other woman had plays produced" (p. 81) on the British stage. In the following period, between 1695 and 1705, only thirty-one "of the nearly two hundred new plays staged" belonged to female playwrights (p. 86). Prior to the latter half of the eighteenth century, "only ten female playwrights were active" (p. 88); this number did not see significant growth in the decades to come.

In 1987, Gardiner conducted research into the employment of women in the English theatre. Her report begins with statistics from 1984 when only seven per cent of the plays performed were written by female playwrights and less than 50 per cent of the management or senior artistic posts were held by women (Gardiner, 1998, p. 97). Three years later, when Gardiner's study was published, the picture was not improved significantly and "only 7 women held the post of artistic director in a building-based theatre company, compared with 41 men" (p. 101). Of equal significance is that, in the matter of plays written or adapted from books by women, they accounted for less than 17 per cent of the total number of plays staged in the main house of permanent theatres (p. 102). A study from 1994 by Long follows Gardiner's research and investigates what has changed in seven years, revealing that "in virtually every post investigated, women are under-represented" (Long, 1998, p. 107), and "overall only 20 per cent of all work staged during 1994 was by women" (p. 106). The disparity in male and female employment within the theatre industry is striking, and it appears that the passing of time has not significantly benefited women in this particular field.

The National Theatre at Home Case Study

In the twenty-first century, one might expect these figures to have become a thing of the past; however, this does not seem to be the case. Referring to the British Theatre Repertoire's report dating back to 2013, theatre critic Lyn Gardner (2015) asserts that the report found that while 30 per cent of new plays were written by women one decade earlier, in 2013, the percentage has risen only by one point. One of the leading feminist theatres in the UK, the Sphinx Theatre Company (2020) continues the tradition started by Gardiner in 1987 of researching 'what share of the cake'¹ women get in theatre. Through research conducted in 2019, the company published a comprehensive report revealing that "women theatre artists still have not reached parity in employment and status in English theatre" (p. 2). Once again, the findings of previous studies, which had reported a relative lack of women in the theatre industry, were corroborated: only 31 per cent of artistic directors were female, 38 per cent of staged plays were written by women, and 16 per cent of the revivals were by women.

It is clear that an even more conscious effort as well as a broader perspective is necessary to amend the gender gap in the theatre industry. While all theatre companies are crucial in achieving

¹ The phrase is a reference to the title of Gardiner's study.

this goal, certain theatres seem to be of particular significance. The Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, more widely known as the National Theatre, is one such theatre for various reasons. First of all, it is a leading theatre institution with a remarkable cultural significance, yet, it also represents the national character of theatre in Great Britain and secures a good portion of funding from the Arts Council. Writing for *The Guardian*, Sam Potter (2013) notes the under-representation of plays written by women in the National Theatre's programme and challenges Rufus Norris, who was to become the artistic director in 2015 and will, in fact, remain so until 2025, to strive for gender equality. In a direct address to Norris, she ends the piece with the words: "Why not make it your aim for the National Theatre to achieve gender equality in writing in the next 10 years? Women are already writing the plays. Go on – I dare you". Norris has actually taken up the challenge as Aston (2020) points out his commitment "to achieving a 50:50 gender split for women directors and playwrights by 2021" (p. 16), an endeavour which he does not seem to have fully accomplished as evinced by the National Theatre's report for the year 2021-2022 (*Equity, Diversity and Inclusion*).

Informed by research such as Gardiner's (1998) and the Sphinx Theatre Company's (2020), this study is comprised of a survey related to the employment of women in the 40 plays uploaded on the National Theatre's streaming service, i. e., the National Theatre at Home platform², in the first year of its existence (December 2020-December 2021). The elements examined here are the number of plays written by women, the number of plays adapted from books and plays written by women, and the number of plays directed by women³. In order to avoid excessive congestion within the text, information pertaining to the examined plays is provided as an appendix at the end of the study. The layout of the plays corresponds to the order in which they were uploaded to the platform during the given period.

The National Theatre at Home was initially launched as a free-stream programme of 16 plays on YouTube for 16 weeks starting in April 2020. This initiative came as a response to the first lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and it continued as a subscription-based platform from December 2020 on. The endeavour made it possible to rent a single play or to subscribe

² The platform can be accessed here: <https://www.ntathome.com/>

³ This study is, in fact, part of a more extensive research that investigates the representation of women in the 40 plays uploaded on the National Theatre at Home platform between December 2020 and December 2021. The tool employed for analysing the parts written for women is the Sphinx Test (<https://sphinxtheatre.co.uk/resources/>), developed by the Sphinx Theatre Company. This study will be published elsewhere by the authors of this article.

monthly or for annual unlimited access. Bringing on a great deal of suffering and loss to many people, the pandemic has also “precipitated a huge change in perspectives on digital theatre, building interest from audiences and artists” (*Annual Report 2020-2021*, p. 8). Although the theatres opened their doors permanently in June 2021, the National Theatre’s streaming service, just like other forms of digital theatre, seems to be a permanent feature of theatre to come.

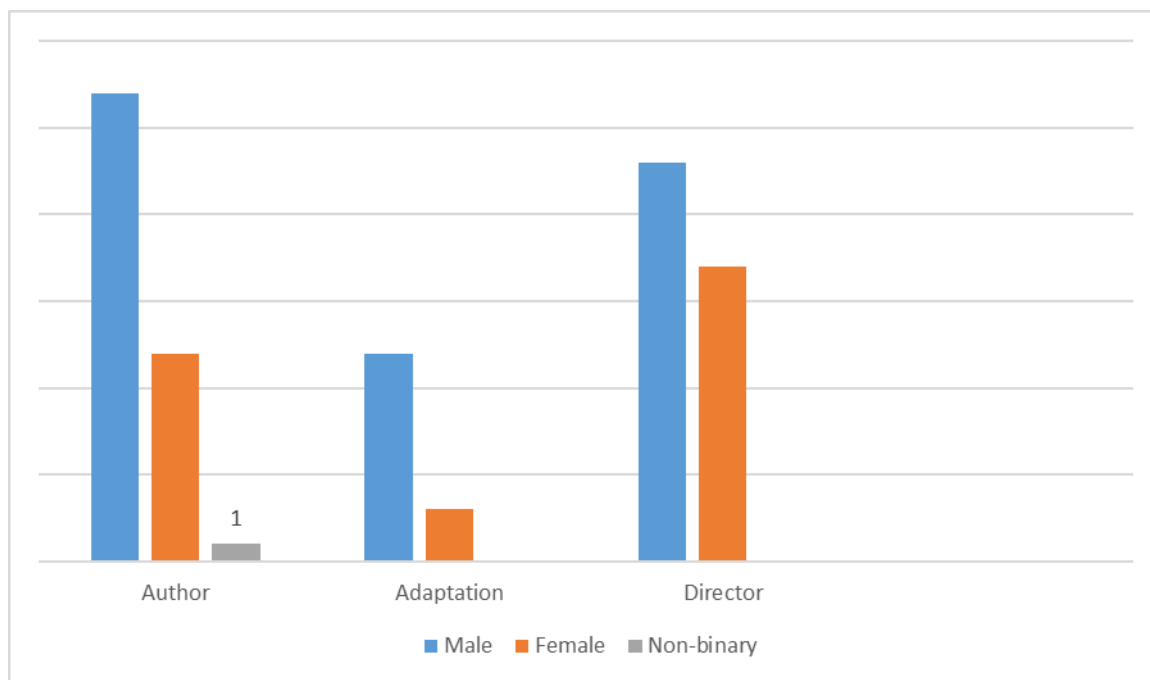


Figure 1. Distribution of male, female, and non-binary individuals in the examined plays.

The raw results of the survey conducted in this study show that from the corpus of 40 plays, only 12 belong to female authors (30 per cent). 15 out of the 40 plays are adaptations and only three of them are based on works by women (20 per cent). Finally, 17 plays are directed by women (42.5 per cent), which seems to be the area where gender parity has nearly been achieved. The above figure is meant to visually represent the lack of equality between men and women’s opportunities. Before proceeding, the following point has to be clarified. This study builds on the presumption that a female name corresponds to a woman and a male name to a man. Nevertheless, in the case of Kae Tempest, the playwright of *Paradise*, the author identifies as a non-binary person, which may also be the case for the other authors/directors this study focuses on. However, there was no available information on the Internet regarding such choice.

Going a step further, a closer examination of these figures reveals a distinct perspective. The

27 plays authored by male writers are attributable to 18 individual men, while the 11 plays attributed to female authors correspond to an equal number of women. What this ultimately means is that, unlike a female playwright, a male playwright has more chance to have more than one work produced, which, in turn, increases the chance of obtaining new contracts and winning awards. Within the 40 plays examined in this study, there are novels written by women which are later adapted for the stage while there is no play by a female playwright that has been adapted. Regarding the director posts, 17 plays are, in fact, directed by eight women and the other 24 are directed by 14 male directors. This analysis suggests that, unlike male directors, there are fewer female directors to choose from in the theatre industry and some of the female directors were offered more than one production by the National Theatre.

Some further considerations should be devoted to the fact that the authors and the directors are not the only significant agents in a theatrical production. Every production involves the contributions of numerous individuals. However, examining the number of women employed for each of the 40 plays would have been a challenging endeavour. For instance, for the first play in this study, *The Deep Blue Sea*, the entire crew amounts to 162 people, including the cast, ensemble, creative team, production team for broadcast, production team for National Theatre, people who receive special recognition for the National Theatre at Home delivery, and finally, the joint chief executives and deputy artistic director. The other reason for restricting the study to only these elements is that the authors and the directors are the names usually included in the production poster, as is also the case with the description provided for each play on the NT at Home streaming service. Finally, even if the percentage of women employed in posts other than those measured by the present study (such as designers and technicians) might be higher, thus far, the authors and the directors are the primary posts by which gender parity has been measured in the theatre industry.

Conclusion

While the present survey deals with a small number of theatrical productions and is limited to a single theatre, it still serves as a representative sample since the National Theatre is one of the leading theatres internationally and its streaming service seems to be one of the most well-known attempts to offer theatre lovers access to digital theatre globally. Despite its limitations, our findings are in correlation with more comprehensive studies conducted by established figures and institutions, such as the Sphinx Theatre Company.

Even though the National Theatre and its streaming service are not strictly interchangeable entities, during the period when the pandemic rendered live theatre infeasible, it was only the National Theatre at Home platform that effectively represented the theatrical productions of this national institution. It must, however, be stated that the general picture of the plays uploaded after 2021 is quite different from that displayed in the first year of the platform's existence. In the following years, a smaller number of ancient and Shakespearean plays were uploaded, which provides space for more recent pieces of writing and, presumably, for more women to have their work represented. What this further implies is that the National Theatre was unsure of the platform's reception and turned predominantly to established male authors to ensure its success.

In the spring of 2025, the National Theatre will finally have its first female artistic director, that is Indhu Rubasingham, who will have followed six men holding this post since 1962. Potter (2013) reports that the only theatre with less work of women playwrights being produced other than the National Theatre was, at the time, the Donmar Warehouse. As a writer and director herself, Potter points out that "the appointment of a woman as the artistic director of Donmar had done nothing to improve that – in fact, Josie Rourke is yet to programme a single play written by a female writer in the theatre's main space"⁴. While Rubasingham's appointment is a development to celebrate, it remains to be seen what it will mean for the employment and representation of women in theatre since the system in which the theatre makers operate is still widely male-dominated.

Another positive step is that the members of a campaign to address the under-representation of women in theatre have secured a meeting with the Arts Council England (Luckhurst, 2024). Gender parity is not only a matter of cultural attitudes towards women, but it strongly depends on economic support, and the involvement of Arts Council England in this pressing issue may provide the necessary factor for a remarkable change. The data regarding the pervasive gender imbalance in theatre is still considerable in the twenty-first century and while a possible solution will have to be multifaceted, it looks like British theatres (and ideally all others) should adopt a policy of equal distribution of works by male and female playwrights as a starting point even if that might undermine some of the artistic choices. The same should be the case while appointing directors.

⁴ This statement was later corrected as there was one play written by a female playwright which Josie Rourke included in the programme of Donmar Playhouse. However, a single play by a female playwright does not really contradict Potter's main point.

Indeed, there is no shortage of noteworthy plays written by women (Lucy Kirkwood, Michaela Coel, and Winsome Pinnock, to name a few) and directed by female directors (such as Miranda Cromwell, Nadia Fall, and Carrie Cracknell). Having seen remarkable productions written and directed by women through the National at Home platform, as few as they may be, a global audience can now attest to this.

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Appendix

Title	Year	Author/s	Director
<i>The Deep Blue Sea</i>	2016	Terence Rattigan	Carrie Cracknell
<i>Amadeus</i>	2017	Peter Shaffer	Michael Longhurst
<i>Coriolanus</i>	2014	William Shakespeare	Josie Rourke
<i>Dara</i>	2015	Tanya Ronder/Shahid Nadeem	Nadia Fall
<i>I Want My Hat Back</i>	2015	Jon Klassen	Wils Wilson
<i>Medea</i>	2014	Ben Power/Euripides	Carrie Cracknell
<i>Mosquitoes</i>	2017	Lucy Kirkwood	Rufus Norris
<i>Othello</i>	2013	William Shakespeare	Nicholas Hytner
<i>Phèdre</i>	2009	Ted Hughes/Jean Racine	Nicholas Hytner
<i>The Cherry Orchard</i>	2011	Andrew Upton/Anton Chekhov	Howard Davies
<i>Three Sisters</i>	2020	Inua Ellams/Anton Chekhov	Nadia Fall
<i>Yerma</i>	2017	Simon Stone/F. G. Lorca	Simon Stone
<i>Julie</i>	2018	Polly Stenham/August Strindberg	Carrie Cracknell
<i>Angels in America I</i>	2017	Tony Kushner	Marianne Elliott
<i>Angels in America II</i>	2017	Tony Kushner	Marianne Elliott
<i>Antigone</i>	2012	Don Taylor/Sophocles	Polly Findlay
<i>Behind the Beautiful Forevers</i>	2015	David Hare/Katherine Boo	Rufus Norris
<i>Cat on a Hot Tin Roof</i>	2017	Tennessee Williams	Benedict Andrews
<i>Consent</i>	2017	Nina Raine	Roger Mitchell
<i>Julius Caesar</i>	2018	William Shakespeare	Nicholas Hytner
<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>	2012	William Shakespeare	Dominic Cooke
<i>All My Sons</i>	2019	Arthur Miller	Jeremy Herrin
<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	2019	William Shakespeare	Nicholas Hytner
<i>A View from the Bridge</i>	2016	Arthur Miller	Ivo van Hove
<i>Chewing Gum Dreams</i>	2014	Michaela Coel	Nadia Fall

<i>Everyman</i>	2015	Carol Ann Duffy/Anonymous	Rufus Norris
<i>Frankenstein</i>	2011	Nick Dear/Mary Shelley	Danny Boyle
<i>Frankenstein</i>	2011	Nick Dear/Mary Shelley	Danny Boyle
<i>Hamlet</i>	2015	William Shakespeare	Lyndsey Turner
<i>Hansard</i>	2019	Simon Woods	Simon Godwin
<i>Treasure Island</i>	2015	Bryony Lavery/R. L. Stevenson	Polly Findlay
<i>Home</i>	2013	Nadia Fall	Nadia Fall
<i>Under Milk Wood</i>	2021	Dylan Thomas/Siân Owen	Lyndsey Turner
<i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i>	2014	Tennessee Williams	Benedict Andrews
<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	2021	Emily Burns/William Shakespeare	Simon Godwin
<i>Ian McKellen on Stage</i>	2020	-	Sean Mathias
<i>Top Girls</i>	2019	Caryl Churchill	Lyndsey Turner
<i>Paradise</i>	2021	Kae Tempest/Sophocles	Ian Rickson
<i>Rockets and Blue Lights</i>	2021	Winsome Pinnock	Miranda Cromwell
<i>This House</i>	2013	James Graham	Jeremy Herrin