A New Perspective of Theatre Going in England

A Comprehensive Study Based on trends over 2012 & 2013

Gender in Theatre

Based on trends 2012 - 2015
Gender and Theatre

A study by Purple Seven reveals the gender gap in theatre is wide, but closing.

**Key Findings**

Female customers account for 65% of ticket revenue, but only 39% of actors, 36% of directors and 28% of writers of plays performed are women.

Male playwrights write 37% of parts for women, while female playwrights write for 60% female casts.

Critics award more 4 and 5 star ratings to plays with casts of their own gender.

Male Directors and Writers command bigger stages and higher ticket prices.

The proportion of female directors has increased by 5% since 2012.

**Background**

Lyn Gardner asks of the lack of female representation in theatre: “Why keep going to the theatre if you seldom see yourself reflected there?” Purple Seven’s new study blends programming, review and box office data to reveal the extent of the gender gap in the theatre – and suggests it isn’t justified.

**Audience Profiler**

This research comes as Purple Seven launches its Audience Profiler tool – for theatres to discover the age, gender, ethnicity and disability status of an audience before they’ve walked through the door. It is powered by the largest survey of UK theatre-goers with half a million responses and is designed for venues to precisely target marketing and identify the diversity in their audiences before opening night.

*Florence Hope*
Data Scientist, Purple Seven
65% of Tickets, 36% of Directors

Female customers account for 65% of commercial revenue; for every 65 tickets which are sold to female customers, just 35 are sold to men.

The Gender Gap

Purple Seven has collected data from the programmes of over 6,000 plays across 159 UK venues between 2012 and 2014 to look at the gender gap on the other side of the curtain, and found the roles are reversed; women made up 39% of theatrical casts; 36% of plays had a female director at the helm; only 28% of plays had a female playwright.

The majority of male performers are in large part due to the predominance of male playwrights; we found that playwrights tend to write more parts for actors of their own gender, with women taking 37% of parts written by men and 62% of parts written by women.

Consciously or otherwise, venues are systematically programming work performed and created by men and selling it to a predominantly female audience. Assuming there is an equal number of women creating work at the grassroots level, there are two possible justifications for this.

The first is that men make better theatre, and any gender imbalance on a venue's programme arises as a natural consequence of selecting work of the best quality.

The second justification is commercial, in the assumption that audiences distrust the work of females and are less likely to pay for it. In a world where funding is increasingly scarce, venues could be forgiven for aversion to risk taking and despite best intentions to programme more female work, their hands might be tied into putting on “safer” male work.

We at Purple Seven are in the business of understanding audiences, using data to understand what motivates people to engage with arts organisations and creating opportunities to increase ticket sales. It's our job to turn assumptions about audience behaviour into questions we can answer with an unbiased, quantified response.
Reviewers Prefer Casts of their Own Gender

Looking specifically at plays, we matched data across three different data sources: lists of contributors for 6,000 plays, a set of reviews obtained from the Guardian and the Telegraph, and our own Box Office database covering 70% of UK ticket sales across over 200 UK theatres.

Do Men Make Better Theatre?

If men make better theatre, then those plays that are written, directed and performed by men should receive better ratings from theatre critics. We matched theatrical 835 reviews from the Guardian and the Telegraph critics to our database of gender-coded play data to investigate whether plays written and directed by men receive higher ratings. We also looked at whether having a cast consisting of at least 50% women affected the number of stars awarded. In every case there was a slight difference in ratings, but these differences failed to pass any test of statistical significance.

Finding 1: Reviewers slightly favour male directors – but the difference is insignificant. The average female directed play receives a 3.40 star rating, compared to a male score of 3.48. Female reviewers awarded 4 or 5 stars to male and female directors equally, whereas male reviewers were 20% more likely to 4 or 5 stars to a play directed by a man.

Finding 2: Reviewers rate plays by authors of each gender mostly equally - plays written by women get 3.41 stars; plays by men receive 3.44.

Finding 3: Reviewers slightly preferred plays with majority casts of their own gender. More plays with casts of at least 50% women received high ratings from female reviewers. Male-heavy casts were much more likely to receive four or five stars from men.

These results should be treated with caution as sample sizes here are small and only twenty reviewers contributed five or more reviews to the study. It is also heavily influenced by the input the Guardian's Michael Billington and Lyn Gardner, who together contributed 45% of the reviews in the study.
Male Directors Command Bigger Stages

Do audiences prefer work by men?

We matched 1,500 shows to our own database of historical Box Office data and found that plays directed by men tended to sell more tickets over the course of their run, and also generate more revenue.

However, male directors tended to be given bigger stages, with tickets being sold at higher prices than those of their female peers. When looking at the percentage of seats a performance managed to sell, the gap narrows and female directors slightly surpass males, with an average 53% of capacity sold out compared to male directors’ 51%.

Play authorship tells a similar story: plays by men are given longer runs with higher average ticket prices. Productions of plays by male playwrights also tend to fill up a higher capacity.

However, the scope of this study includes both classics and new writing, and further work is needed to test whether this is a true preference of audiences or a result of a historical prevalence of male work in the theatrical canon.

The gender gap is closing

As the conversation around the theatrical gender gap continues, female directorship is becoming more established, directing 39% of plays in 2015 so far compared to just 34% in 2012. Female playwriting is also on the up, albeit in a less steady trajectory; 2015 has been a better year for the female playwrights currently representing 32% of productions, a huge jump on 2014’s 27%. Casting, however, remains static. In 2015, as in 2012, women took up 99% of stage roles.

This study has found no significant difference in overall critical judgement of male and female work; plays by men do sell more tickets, but while female-led productions are given smaller runs in smaller venues it’s difficult to say whether this is an inherent preference of audiences, or whether we simply attend what’s on offer.

Of the five new plays with the highest sales in the study, three were both written and directed by men and two were both written and directed by women. We should continue to monitor the theatrical gender gap, using data to identify opportunities for increasing diversity in the arts in a way that mutually benefits venues, practitioners, and the people without whom the arts could not survive: the audience.