

# Teaching Women in Theatre – Our issues and our future

SONIA BYRNES

**In 2012 I began work at an all-girls school and began my journey into realising some truths about the ways in which we teach Drama in NSW. I had previously only worked in co-ed schools and loved my experiences teaching the syllabus. In my time at these schools I taught mostly plays by men. Not because it was a deliberate decision to do so, but simply because it was what I knew. It was the syllabus and the training I had received and the ways I knew to teach theatre and Drama well.**

In that very same year interesting things were also occurring within the theatre world in Australia. The Australia Council finally released its investigation into women in theatre entitled 'Women in theatre – a research report and action plan for the Australia Council for the Arts'<sup>1</sup>. This had emerged after years of outrage beginning publically in 2009 with Neil Armfield's choice to have only one female playwright in his farewell season at Belvoir. He argued his reason was to do with merit only and thus began a much needed debate about women in theatre in Australia.

It strikes me as odd then that we seem to have left much of that debate to the theatre world and not brought it back into the teaching of theatre itself. For where else do we begin the creative revolution but in the classroom where we have the chance to teach a practice and a theory and a world of theatre that is the ideal? Where voices previously unheard begin to be heard, where the status quo is challenged and where we see a movement and a change begin to occur. Where is the debate amongst teachers about incorporating more diverse voices? Why is it that until recent years we have had a stage six syllabus largely full of white men? Why is that we haven't challenged the very idea that what we teach is perpetuating the problems in gender parity, representation and work available in the current theatre world? As Katherine McGerr from Syracuse University says in her paper 'It Starts in the Classroom: Approaching Gender Parity through Actor Training'<sup>2</sup>: *"The representation of women, in all disciplines of theatre, matters to their equal treatment. Yet in the classroom-where we not only encounter but commit to shaping young voices and visions – we still rely on plays in which women are underrepresented."*

When I began teaching all girls I had absolutely no qualms with the texts I taught. In fact almost no thought went into the gender of the playwrights or practitioners I taught. It was only when confronted with the need to teach Dorothy Hewitt's 'The Chapel Perilous' that I understood something very significant about why we need to teach women in theatre. Here I was in front of class of ten young women teaching them about a world they knew all too well. A world of religious

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1 <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/workspace/uploads/files/research/women-in-theatre-april-2012-54325827577ea.pdf>

2 'It Starts in the Classroom: Approaching Gender Parity through Actor Training' by Katherine McKerr was originally published on HowlRound <http://howlround.com/it-starts-in-the-classroom-approaching-gender-parity-through-actor-training>

ideals, where young women were fearful to explore their sexuality, where the careers in front of them were full of hope and yet also full of hurdles to overcome as a woman, where respect was given and didn't have to be earned and where academic success changed many things.

I saw my students exploring a take on the world that they previously hadn't encountered in a play. It was a woman's take on the world and the lines that they delivered and the scenes that they workshopped brought fierce debate about women's experiences into our classroom for the first time. It's not that we hadn't seen strong women represented at all, we also studied Brecht's 'Mother Courage and her Children'. But there was indeed something different about a play written by a woman. It was simple things like the way sex was portrayed or friendships spoken about, the subtle lines delivered by authority figures and even choices in form and style that seemed to speak all too clearly into the experiences they knew. It was innate to them and therefore, the exploration of this play pushed them to consider themselves in a way they hadn't before. It was here that I began to understand that there was a power to teaching women's voices that I hadn't ever considered before. And not only was there a power to it but there was, I felt, an impetus to use the fact that we are educators to expand the minds of those we teach by giving them plays and characters and opportunities that they hadn't seen before.

## Context

In the past five years the amount of females enrolled in Drama in NSW has hovered around 70%.

2013 – 70%<sup>3</sup>

2014 – 69%<sup>4</sup>

2015 – 69%<sup>5</sup>

2016 – 67%<sup>6</sup>

2017 – 66%<sup>7</sup>

We have also improved how many males are enrolled since Drama was officially brought into the HSC which I am thrilled about and, I think speaks to a change in what gender stereotypes are associated with different subjects. However, the fact that over half of the candidates that sit the HSC Drama exams are female shows that the subject is still largely populated by women. Yet, despite this we seem to teach a majority of male practitioners and playwrights.

In the 2015–2018 NESA, Stage 6 Drama Prescriptions list<sup>8</sup> we have the following:

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3 [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos\\_stats/media-guide-2013/stats/enrolments-course.html](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos_stats/media-guide-2013/stats/enrolments-course.html)

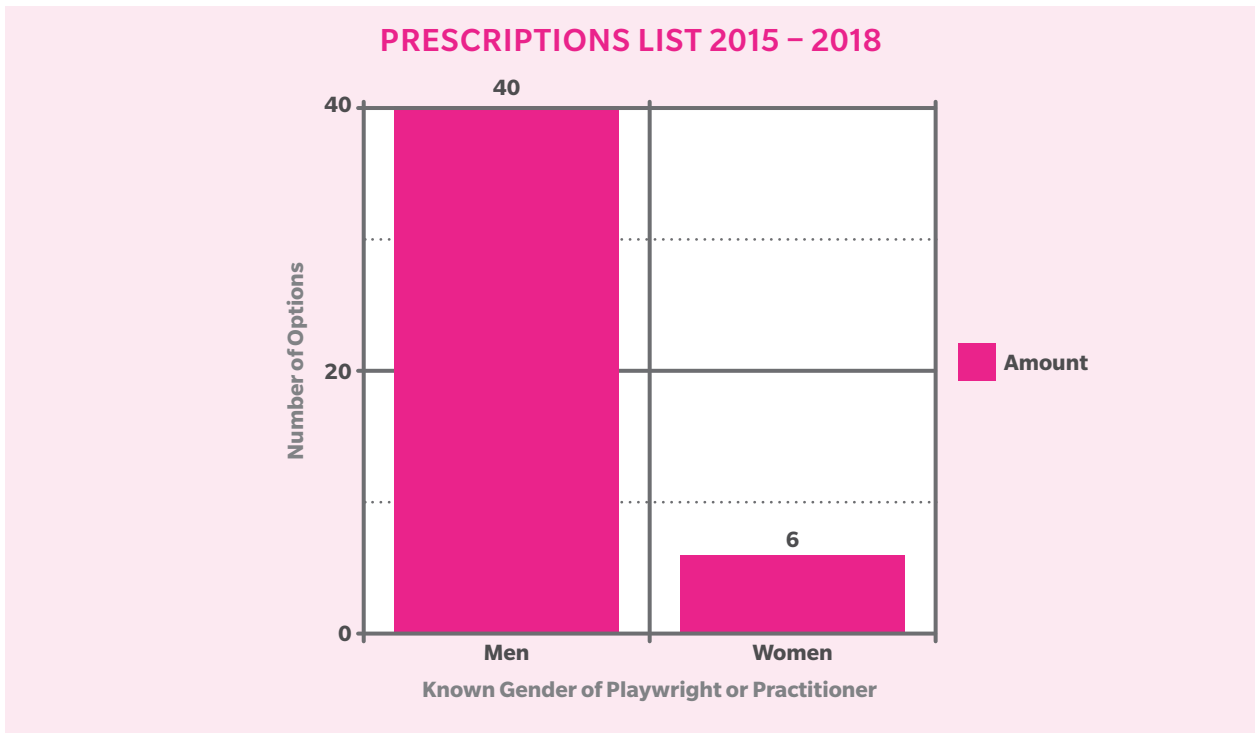
4 [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos\\_stats/media-guide-2014/stats/enrolments-course.html](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos_stats/media-guide-2014/stats/enrolments-course.html)

5 [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos\\_stats/media-guide-2015/hsc-enrolment-snapshot-2015-course.html](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos_stats/media-guide-2015/hsc-enrolment-snapshot-2015-course.html)

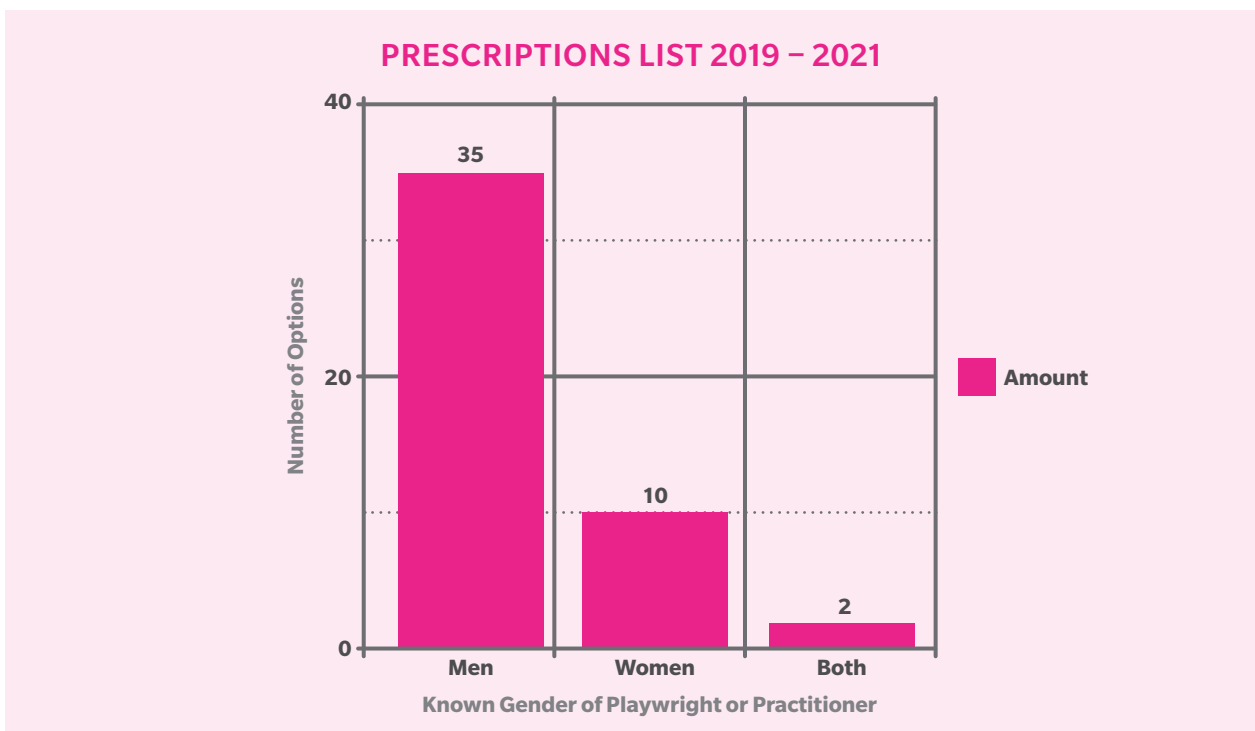
6 [http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos\\_stats/media-guide-2016/course.html](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/bos_stats/media-guide-2016/course.html)

7 [https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/hsc/about-HSC/HSC-facts-figures/HSC-course-enrolments!/ut/p/z1/IZHBDolwDIYfad0YGxwHkW1gXAXDcBfDySxR9GB8fngGAwYRemvyfW36FznUINe1T39uH\\_7WtZe-Pz p2oloBBEC2YGkAlhOxsrLE0hBUDwARmGFFcRHxCiOwDJtNnPQQQ26VD2-f0iLMAEtOV\\_pGDr7BjOScmCpc5sOPeRDMnwHc\\_PgaufGkiOwICM645mlKxAG-AWkVA5HspcoV6DL\\_AHM\\_GAMTIY-BiRT\\_3XG\\_Vn014LXXL3hU4y!/#general](https://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/11-12/hsc/about-HSC/HSC-facts-figures/HSC-course-enrolments!/ut/p/z1/IZHBDolwDIYfad0YGxwHkW1gXAXDcBfDySxR9GB8fngGAwYRemvyfW36FznUINe1T39uH_7WtZe-Pz p2oloBBEC2YGkAlhOxsrLE0hBUDwARmGFFcRHxCiOwDJtNnPQQQ26VD2-f0iLMAEtOV_pGDr7BjOScmCpc5sOPeRDMnwHc_PgaufGkiOwICM645mlKxAG-AWkVA5HspcoV6DL_AHM_GAMTIY-BiRT_3XG_Vn014LXXL3hU4y!/#general)

8 <http://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/538866d5-9140-4e34-82ce-9cbfe10f19c4/drama-st6-course-prescriptions-2015-18.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>



And in the 2019 – 2021 NESAs, Stage 6 Drama Prescriptions list<sup>9</sup> we have improved to have:



This is not to say that what we currently have as prescription lists are bad. In fact I am proud of the ways in which the playwrights and practitioners often explore many a minorities’ voice even if they themselves aren’t. However, I do think it goes some way into showing the amount of male examples we are drawing on. Indeed, they are prescriptions where women and men can equally get something from them but perhaps not where we are hearing from the actual women themselves.

<sup>9</sup> <http://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/83784209-49be-4347-8f49-6ce70011713d/drama-st6-course-prescriptions-2019-21.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>

## **Why is this the case?**

There are a couple of reasons why I think this current situation is the case:

### **1. Resources available**

I know all too well how difficult it can be when you want to start a new unit of work and there aren't many or any resources out there on the topic. Even when we desire to teach our students something different there aren't many resources to pull on and to create our own takes a lot of time, effort and research ourselves.

The majority of resources we have available to us are on what we consider the canon of plays or the heavyweight practitioners that have shaped our theatre to what it is today. These, I am sure you are not surprised to hear are men.

This leads me on to another reason I think we teach mainly men.

### **2. What is considered good theatre training and plays in the western world.**

In our current theatre world we have a history and tradition that draws on many different styles and forms. At school and university we are trained in these, when we attend theatre we see these and variations of them and, our national institutes and schools training our future actors use these. However, our foundations of theatre are based on the work of men and therefore often include the great examples and writing of men. As teachers we have often been trained in this way and our thinking around good theatre is shaped by this.

Indeed, if I was to say what gives a student a holistic and in depth knowledge of current of theatre practice I would probably find myself pointing to a knowledge of practitioners such as Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Brecht and playwrights such as Shakespeare, Chekhov, Beckett, Williamson and more. Because, this is largely our theatre history in the west and what shapes our current practice.

### **3. What the theatre world itself wants**

I made reference at the beginning of this talk as to the debate that emerged in Australia in 2012 regarding the gender in theatre. This debate is still going and some theatre companies seem to have made significant changes in their casting, use of female playwrights and directors and commissioning and development of new work other than men. However, there are still more roles for men in theatre and film in Australia and therefore we are still seeing a lot of work being made available for men. This in turn shapes our perception of theatre (whether consciously or unconsciously) and the ways in which we teach it.

### **4. We just haven't thought about it**

Until I started teaching girls and seeing how they were getting something different from doing plays written by women I hadn't consciously considered exactly how many women in theatre I was teaching. I believe this is the case for most Drama educators out there. It's not that they want to teach only men but rather that they haven't considered the gender or life experiences of

the playwrights and practitioners that they teach. This is also true of other voices in theatre like indigenous playwrights, LGBTIQA playwrights, disabled playwrights and more.

## Why teach female playwrights and practitioners?

Firstly, as outlined earlier they are far more than half of who is present in our classrooms. This in itself is a major consideration as to why we should teach more female playwrights and practitioners. However, there are also some other important reasons.

- **Validation of experience and exposure to new experiences**

Not only will teaching the voices of women in theatre help all students, male and female alike understand the experiences of others unlike themselves but it will help to validate the experiences they themselves have had. As I said at the beginning of this talk the girls I taught in a private, religious girls school understand 'The Chapel Perilous' by Dorothy Hewett in a way I hadn't seen before because it was a play that validated their own experiences with sexuality, religion and intellect. In a world where we are understanding the power of representation in the arts we need to heed the studies that show the impact this can have on our involvement in certain areas, the future of the art form and the way it can impact a classroom.

As Katherine McGerr from Syracuse University says at another point in her paper "*So many of the women in Chekhov, Miller, Shakespeare – and Shepard and Williams too – are defined by circumstances that have only to do with men and play for objectives that relate only to heterosexual love. If we include more characters not processed through a male perspective, do we offer female students the change to develop and tune a wider range of their instruments?*"<sup>10</sup> My response would be yes, yes we do.

- **Empathy and understanding**

Another reason that we teach drama is that through it we teach students empathy and understanding of many people and situations. Suddenly a student understands why the old woman down the road is perhaps unnecessarily fearful or controlling after playing the part of Ana in Lally Katz's 'Neighbourhood Watch' or students engage with the horror and loss of the stolen generation in a way that will actually change the way they think and speak about it through workshopping scenes from Jane Harrison's 'Stolen'.

It is one of the reasons I am extremely proud of what I teach and, indeed, the syllabus we do have where we can expose students to the LGBTIQIA experiences, Indigenous experiences, refugee experiences and more. However, despite this I do think we need to be careful to make sure that what we are exposing them to is from the experiences of the people themselves (i.e. we prioritise works written by people who have lived experiences of what they write) and because of this we need to prioritise female playwrights when teaching about female experiences. By doing this, not only are girls developing empathy and understanding about older women, women from other cultures, women with different experiences etc. but so too will boys! And this is huge! In our current climate

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<sup>10</sup> 'It Starts in the Classroom: Approaching Gender Parity through Actor Training' by Katherine McKerr was originally published on HowlRound <http://howlround.com/it-starts-in-the-classroom-approaching-gender-parity-through-actor-training>

we are more than aware of how much needs to change in regards to our perspectives on what it means to be a man. I firmly believe that part of that includes teaching boys about the experiences of women and making it less of a 'men are from Mars women are from Venus situation' and more of a situation where commonalities and differences enrich understandings of what it means to navigate humanity.

- **Exploration of identity and development of agency**

Dr Christine Hatton has been writing about girls in the Drama classroom for some time now. Much of her research focuses on the positive influence Drama has on young girls in shaping ideas and identity. She has written a lot about the ways in which classroom drama allow us to open a world that allows them to play with their own identity and develop a sense of agency in the forming of this. She notes in one paper, 'Exploring the potential space of drama in the secondary classroom' that:

*"Because drama education is embodied, collaborative, aesthetic, playful and identity-infused, educators and researchers need to consider more fully how the potential space of the drama classroom supports and shapes students developing sense of identity and agency"* <sup>11</sup>

In another work called 'Performing Girl in the Facebook Era: Drama as a safe space for negotiating adolescent identities and Agency' she says:

*"The challenge for drama practitioners in schools is to craft a curriculum that matters in a contemporary sense and engage young people in work that positions them meaningfully and agentively within the artistic process but also within their own worlds"* <sup>12</sup>

It is essential that we use this powerful space to open opportunities for our students to explore identity. So, for girls, it is essential that the curriculum we have in front of them is one that allows for them to meaningfully engage with female experiences. Not only is it essential for girls but also for boys whose identity, we can no longer assume, will be formed from purely a male perspective on the world.

- **Exploration of things traditionally considered 'women's issues or roles' which are actually everyone's issues and roles**

By teaching female playwrights many issues traditionally considered women's issues are inevitably explored. However, if we begin to teach this to both male and female we show how there are issues that need to be changed to be considered everyone's issues.

For example, in a recent play the Wolves by Sarah Delappe we see a girl's football team and their training sessions. Throughout the sessions issues such as sexual harassment, consent, dreams of working in science, violence, women working and access to feminine hygiene products and abortion are explored. There are no male characters but it becomes very apparent that the issues

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11 Hatton, C. (2004), "Exploring the 'potential space' of Drama in the Secondary classroom." In C Hatton and M Anderson (Eds) The State of our Art, NSW Perspectives in Educational Drama, Sydney: Currency Press

12 Hatton, C (2012) "Performing 'girl' in the Facebook Era: Drama as a safe space for negotiating adolescent identities and agency." NJ: Drama Australia Journal;2012, Vol. 36, p36

explored are ones not just relevant to these young women but equally need to be considered by the men in their lives for change to genuinely occur. It struck me as I walked out the theatre and heard men talking about this play that they had genuinely been challenged by how relevant these issues of teenage girls were to them as grown men. There was a fresh perspective that they had attained on things they perhaps would have considered “women’s issues” that allowed for them to rethink. It was a small moment but a moment that serves to explain the point I am making that if we start to study “women’s issues” we actually normalise this as everyone’s issues.

## **Common Questions and statements**

- ***Would we be pushing a feminist agenda in our classrooms?***

Yes and no.

Yes we would be pushing an agenda of more women’s voices being heard and valued and this is indeed part of a ‘feminist agenda’. However, it is also a no, because what we are teaching is the value that different voices have in reflecting, analysing and critiquing the world we live in. It fits into the very essence of drama and theatre if we believe it is an art form that explores humanity.

The Drama classroom needs to be one that equally values voices, whether they’re our own ones or those of others. This has to mean women’s voices as equally as men. Homosexual voices, disabled voices, indigenous voices and more.

- ***There aren’t enough women to teach even if we wanted to.***

This is difficult at times. I have written many new units of work where I have actively tried to include more female playwrights and practitioners and it has taken longer to find resources. Once they are found they are far less. However, change occurs from education. If we’re wanting change in the theatre world or the world in general surely we need to begin by showing our students some of the areas that need improving and equipping them with a nuanced and in depth understanding of how to explore this. Sometimes this means still teaching the traditional theory or practice but critically examining it and adding to it with an emphasis on the women emerging. (Or the minority group emerging) and sometimes this means taking the time to create new resources that enable us to teach more women in theatre.

- ***What about boys in classrooms?***

A common concern I hear is that if we teach a unit like women in theatre to boys they will lose interest and disengage. I understand this fear. I used to have it when teaching the boys I taught even in regards to any plays by men that focused on female leads.

However, girls have been studying the works and theories of men in theatre for many years and have maintained an interest and engagement with the work. They are often in situations where the leads are male and there is little to no reference of women and they still explore the play with enthusiasm and gain much from the characters and themes. It seems illogical to me that simply by using plays written by women and exploring female playwrights and directors we will see boys lose interest. I understand that a lack of female characters may mean boys have less

characters of their own gender to engage but this doesn't mean there is not useful, engaging and inspirational work to be gained through this. Again, it is something girls in classrooms have been doing for many years.

I also come back to the idea that if we want a revolution it has to occur through education. Surely a drama classroom is the place to be doing this.

## The future

One of the most important things for us to do as Drama educators is to start considering the voices we prioritise in Drama and what this means to our students. My first step when I started to realise this disparity in voices was to look at my units of work from Stage 4 through to 6 and find ways to include a wider variety of voices. It wasn't just women. I wanted there to be a better representation of cultures, sexualities and experiences for the young women I taught. I wanted them to see the ways in which theatre gave voice to the many stories we have in our world. It can be as simple as using excerpts from plays that are by women, changing the texts you study to ensure that at least one in each stage is by a woman and including units of work that allow for the critique of our theatre world and what it could do better.

I would also suggest that we consider the following.

- **Critical examination in every unit**

Another important thing to consider is how we can explore some of the issues with the theatre world (such as gender disparity) through raising the inequalities and promoting critical thinking across all of our units of work. So even if we're doing a unit that doesn't involve many women we raise this and question it and get our students considering what voices are missing. Once I started doing this I found my students started to notice things I hadn't about missing voices and why this might be the case. By making our students aware of inequality we start to give them the ability to make changes to it.

- **Opportunities for young women**

When we make commitments to enhancing the voices that are usually considered we need to create opportunities alongside this. Therefore, in education we need to celebrate the work already occurring that allows for girls to be valued voices in the theatre world as well as continue to create new ones. I have seen wonderful initiatives promoting the work of female playwrights from the HSC, acceleration and mentoring projects for young women, the new ventures by theatre companies to enable students from many areas to gain experience such as STC's Young Wharfies, Belvoir's Ambassador Program and Griffin Ambassadors and others but I feel there is still more to do. What can we implement in our own schools to give all voices an opportunity to grow in theatre? What opportunities can we promote to our students? What initiatives can we create ourselves? All of these are valuable and important questions to ask.

Finally, one of the most significant opportunities we have at the moment is the new unit of work included in our new prescriptions list.



- **The Voices of Women in Theatre, Stage 6**

This new part of our syllabus is a joyous opportunity to actively teach more female playwrights and practitioners. It should be considered by all schools as an opportunity to challenge our usual teaching of majority men in Drama. It is a robust rubric with a considered and thoughtful approach to varied voices of women (not just white, middle class women) and will indeed allow for a rich and robust practice to be taught. Below here I have included the rubric and my breakdown of it as a starting point for those wanting to teach this new unit of work. Seeing as it is a new unit of work there will be a need for more teachers to support this and create resources that enable the less experienced teachers a door into this.

## **The Voice of Women in Theatre**

This topic explores, theoretically and experientially, plays written by women or as a particular collaboration with women, which give expression to a female vision of human experience.

Students compare two female playwrights from different contexts and consider the ways women create, develop and assert their voice in a distinctive theatrical expression. In particular, the roles, characters, issues and situations depicted, the maintaining or breaking of stereotypes and socio/cultural judgements made about women are considered.

Students engage with the plays dramatic forms and techniques, performance styles and conventions to explore how varied issues affecting women's equality, status and identities are voiced. <sup>13</sup>

### **Things to note about the rubric:**

- The comparison of the female playwrights. It's not just writing about them, it is an active comparison. This means that they should be studied at the same time so the comparison with similarities and differences is seen.
- Different contexts. The rubric deliberately points to the fact that we're not seeing the same story told many ways. The different contexts allow for us to see women in many circumstances, times and places.
- Create, develop and assert – it is the creation and development of the theatre not just the writing of it and it is important to note the mention of assert which suggests that we're exploring how these women pushed their voices. They had something to say and they asserted that.
- Distinctive theatrical expression. We need to be finding what about these plays are distinctive. It cannot be that they are just written by women. Each of these plays have been included because there is something distinctive about the ways in which things are expressed. Indeed, many women challenged form and style as the very structure of traditional playwrighting came from men. They found that the distinct theatrical expression attributed to them has much to do

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<sup>13</sup> <http://educationstandards.nsw.edu.au/wps/wcm/connect/83784209-49be-4347-8f49-6ce70011713d/drama-st6-course-prescriptions-2019-21.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=>

with the fact that they were forced to find new forms in order to tell the stories that they had, traditional forms just didn't serve them in the same way.

- Maintaining or breaking of stereotypes. This means that there is a need to explore what the stereotypes are for each play and character, how the playwright has dealt with that stereotype (considering form, style, conventions etc.) AND why they have done it in this way.
- Socio/cultural judgements made about women – This suggests that there is a need (much like context) for students to have a basic understanding of feminist lenses by which to look at the play through. If their understanding of socio/cultural judgements only expands to be that women aren't always equal they may miss crucial judgements in regards to things such as motherhood, sexuality, work and so forth. It is not just that these playwrights are showing inequality at times it is that they are also commenting on things like the cost of equality for example.
- Also, remember that all of this is studied both experientially and theoretically so it is crucial that students are doing regular workshops for this to come alive for our students.

As I continue to prepare for this unit of work I will be creating more resources for it and finding ways to share these. It is important that as educators we support one another in making change and this means ensuring that opportunities created through units such as this are successful. I strongly suggest that those teaching this new unit find ways to collaborate and share in order that it be as strong a unit as the others.

## Final thoughts

We currently teach Drama with an emphasis on the voices of men. Whether we have realised this before or not I think most would be hard pressed to argue otherwise. When we consider the value that is brought to our classrooms by teaching more women it would seem ludicrous to then turn from this and continue to do as we always have. Our students live in a world that is more aware than ever of how we value certain people over others and the theatre is the very space we need to be challenging this in. Therefore, there is an important part for Drama educators to play in ensuring that we teach an art form that values, highlights and promotes the stories of the less privileged, less seen and less represented. What small things can we do to expose our students to the voices of more women in theatre (or indeed any other group less heard)?

*Sonia Byrnes has been teaching Drama for over ten years now and has experience in developing ways to incorporate women's voices in the classroom. She is an experienced HSC Marker and has contributed to both Drama NSW and AIS Drama workshops and conferences. Sonia is Drama Coordinator at Meriden where she has developed many new ways for young women to learn about and succeed in theatre. She is a passionate feminist who is keen to bring intersectional voices to our classrooms and develop a pedagogy that extends beyond the teaching of curriculum.*