

**“Achieving Equity in Canadian Theatre: A Report with Best Practice Recommendations”  
By Michelle MacArthur**

**Executive Summary**

Although women form the majority of theatre school graduates, support workers, and audience members, when it comes to key creative roles in Canadian theatre, their numbers diminish substantially, dropping below 35%. For example, women form 50% of Playwrights Guild of Canada’s membership, but they do not account for even one quarter of the nation’s produced playwrights (the numbers for women of colour are lower yet), and rates of representation are regressing rather than improving over time (PGC, “Theatre”). These imbalances have a negative trickledown effect on the industry, making an impact on the variety of work produced, available employment opportunities (for women actors, designers, and directors), and audience experience.

This report responds to the enduring and urgent question of women’s absence from Canadian stages by investigating what Rina Fraticelli, over 30 years ago, termed “the Invisibility Factor”—that is, “the absence of women from significant roles in the work of producing a national culture” (v). Following-up on previous landmark studies, including Fraticelli’s 1982 report and Rebecca Burton’s 2006 study, this report presents an updated picture of (in)equity in Canadian theatre, makes international comparisons, and outlines a series of recommendations to increase the representation of women and other minoritized groups. Its ultimate goal is to support the move from awareness to action to rectify imbalances in the Canadian theatre industry.

This study shows that the rough 70/30 division of men and women in the artistic triumvirate—artistic director, director, and playwright—has generally remained unchanged for the past 30 years. While women saw increased representation between Fraticelli’s and Burton’s studies, the most recent data from the Professional Association of Canadian Theatres and Playwrights Guild of Canada show a regression in each category. Data collected in Australia, the UK, and the US reflect similar disparities between men and women to those experienced in Canada, with women comprising on average 30% or less of professional artistic directors, directors, and playwrights. Various systemic and ideological barriers prevent women from achieving equity, the most significant being bias and discrimination.

Given the persistent and deep-seated inequities embedded in the Canadian theatre industry, informed, coordinated, and varied responses are required if change is to occur. As this report demonstrates, action must be taken in four key areas: education, mentorship and networking, administration, and advocacy and awareness. These areas represent a wide-ranging and multipronged approach to redressing inequities, from changing how we train and educate future theatre practitioners and audiences, to improving the support systems for women early on and throughout their careers, and from transforming the structures and operations of theatre companies in order to provide more opportunities for women, to raising awareness about equity issues and women’s work among arts administrators, funders, and the general public. The collaboration of multiple stakeholders, including government, arts organizations, theatre companies, individual artists, educators, and audience members is vital to the success of improving equity in Canadian theatre.

## Study Highlights

- It's been over thirty years since Fraticelli's landmark study and women are still under-represented in major artistic roles in Canadian theatre. While there was an increase in representation between Fraticelli's and Burton's reports, recent data shows regression.

**Table N.1: Comparison of Fraticelli, Burton, PACT, and PGC Study Results**

<b>Industry Position (Women)</b>	<b>Fraticelli's Findings (1982)</b>	<b>Burton's Findings (2006)</b>	<b>PACT's Findings (2010/11)</b>	<b>PGC's Findings (2013/14)</b>
Artistic Directors	11%	33%	28%	--
Directors	13%	34%	32%	--
Playwrights	10%	27%	29%	22%

- The greatest disparity in gender equity happens in the playwright category. According to Playwrights Guild of Canada's Theatre Production Survey from 2013/14, out of 812 productions in the 2013/14 season, 63% were written by men, 22% by women, and 15% by mixed gender partnerships.
- There is a significant need for research on how these roles break down in terms of other marginalized groups, including people of colour, Aboriginal people, immigrants, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ, who are likely marginalized further in the above roles (as Burton's study found for women of colour).
- Despite underrepresentation on stage, women constitute the majority of theatre audiences in all demographic categories. Statistics Canada data from 2010 indicates that women are more likely than men to attend theatre performances (49% compared to 40%), and men are 37% less likely than women to attend plays. Canadians who belong to minoritized groups attend theatre less often than other respondents. However, within these groups, women are more likely to attend theatre than men.
- Development and Theatre for Young Audiences theatres tend to be the most equitable, unlike Regional and Summer theatres; thus, women are most often employed at small, lower-budget theatres, rather than at larger, higher-paying and more visible companies.
- Data collected in Australia, the UK, and the US reflect similar disparities to those experienced in Canada, with women comprising on average 30% or less of artistic directors, directors, and playwrights.
- Women earn less than men in major artistic roles. According to a 2011 National Household Survey, as actors and comedians, women earned 26% less than men; as authors and writers, women earned 12% less; and as producers, directors, choreographers, and other related roles, women earned 16% less than men.

- Women constitute over half of all theatre school students, as at the National Theatre School of Canada, where they were 58% of the enrollment in 2014/15. Yet, after graduation, women make up fewer than 30% of the profession's creative leaders.
- There is a link between women artistic directors and women directors, and women playwrights and roles for women actors, meaning that increasing women's representation in one area will have a positive effect on the others.

Best practice recommendations can be drawn from equity initiatives undertaken in Canada and abroad, summarized here, and divided into four key areas:

### **Education**

- Increase the percentage of plays by women and other marginalized groups taught and performed at elementary schools, high schools, and post-secondary institutions
- Develop, document, and disseminate approaches to teaching acting and directing that deconstruct gender
- Generate curriculum at the post-secondary and conservatory level to expose students to the gendered realities of professional theatre and develop their leadership and problem-solving skills to overcome these barriers
- Create a Women's Leadership and Professional Development Institute to prepare women for careers as directors, artistic directors, and executive directors

### **Mentorship, Networking, and Extended Training**

- Increase funding for women's theatre companies and festivals to help them move from developing women's work to producing it
- Offer management development and mentorship programs to train women to become artistic directors and courses to foster leadership and negotiation skills
- Provide "virtual mentorship" by posting detailed profiles of successful women online
- Develop and distribute directories of women artists; use online platforms to connect women artists with each other and with employment opportunities and commissions
- Increase the number of women in leadership positions to act as role models for women in earlier stages of their careers
- Recruit men as mentors for early-career artists, especially in areas where it is difficult to find women mentors due to their underrepresentation
- Orient intensive mentorship programs towards creative outcomes, recruiting participants with diverse skill sets to collaborate on play creation and production
- Host live networking events for artists to meet regularly to connect, discuss gender parity, build community, and brainstorm ideas for advocacy

### **Theatre Administration**

- Conduct internal audits of administrative practices and identify weaknesses
- Set organizational targets to achieve and enforce parity
- Ensure that gender is not subsumed under overarching institutional goals or ambiguous diversity mandates, and clearly articulate goals related to recruiting and retaining more women

- Develop policies and procedures to ensure that theatres comply with human rights laws and professional codes of conduct
- Require administration, hiring managers, and creators to take self-assessment tests to uncover their own biases
- Remove all indicators of gender, age, and race from decision making contexts
- Create consistent interview processes that aim to eliminate bias and discrimination
- Use a blind submission process for vetting scripts
- Rectify imbalances by programming more work by women and people of colour
- Take advantage of resources (such as the EIT database) to recruit more women
- Track demographics about women within individual theatre companies to aid in the development and implementation of equity initiatives; collect these statistics annually to identify trends and changes over time
- Create flexible work environments that accommodate different needs, such as those of parents and elder care providers
- Initiate conversations with commissioned playwrights about roles for women; encourage playwrights to create more meaningful roles for women
- Support the advancement of assistant directors to directors by providing mentorship, training, and fellowships
- Partner with educational institutions to provide training to underrepresented groups, such as women lighting and sound designers
- Ally with colleagues belonging to the same professional organizations to advocate for pay equity between masculinized and feminized jobs
- Create a resource kit for pregnant actors, outlining responsibilities and considerations for both actors and their employers
- Lobby the government to create legislation requiring employers to institute equality plans
- Lobby arts councils to require theatres to institute equality plans and/or meet equity targets as a condition of funding

### **Advocacy and Awareness**

- Form audience advocacy groups to organize outings to plays by women and productions featuring an equitable number of artistic and technical roles for women; arrange discounts to these productions and make theatres aware of the demand for women's work
- Assemble lists of companies that have the best and poorest records of hiring women and minorities and publicly disseminate them
- Rate representations of women using the Bechdel test
- Write theatres in support or condemnation of their gender equity efforts
- Create awards for theatre companies that meet equity targets
- Curate a list of plays by women and other equity-seeking groups and make it publicly available online
- Ally with men to advocate for gender equity; men can refuse to participate in theatres that don't program women in their seasons