WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS’ SOLUTIONS ROUNDTABLE

A facilitated conversation seeking negotiated solutions to the under-representation of women playwrights in Australian mainstage productions.

Friday 12 August 2011
10.00am – 4.30pm

Richard Wherrett Studio
Sydney Theatre
Hickson Road
Sydney NSW

Report to the Australia Council
by Gail Cork, facilitator

This report has been prepared as the documented record of discussion at the Women Playwrights’ Solutions Roundtable on 12 August 2011. It does not purport to be an authoritative or definitive encapsulation of the full range of views, data and research on the issues canvassed. Enquiries may be directed to:

Gail Cork
Director
Australian Script Centre Inc
77 Salamanca Place,
Hobart, TAS 7004 Australia
T +61 3 6223 4675
director@ozscript.org
www.australianplays.org

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Executive Summary
The Women Playwrights Solutions Roundtable, jointly supported by the Australia Council’s Theatre and Major Performing Arts Boards took place on Friday, 12 August 2011. This report documents the processes and people involved, the substance of the discussion and the outcomes.

The roundtable was a gathering of women playwrights, theatre programmers and other key stakeholders who set aside a day to consider the under-representation of women playwrights in Australian mainstage productions and contribute practical ideas for redressing the gender imbalance.

The discussion took place in an atmosphere of intense anticipation, high expectation and broad sector support. Notwithstanding a degree of wariness among some participants, there was a high level of goodwill around the table; the very fact that it was happening was, in itself, cause for optimism, particularly among playwrights, that the sector was ready to move beyond naming and shaming and get down to the business of finding its own solutions to the problem.

It was a robust exchange, canvassing a wide range of views and interests. The small number of commissions and productions of Australian plays overall and the impact of economic constraints on programming provided a sobering and ever-present backdrop but even within those constraints, there was broad acknowledgement of certain procedural and cultural barriers facing women playwrights in their efforts to build a viable career.

Consensus was reached on four strategies for removing, or at least for mitigating those barriers. In essence they involved a targetted program, such as a festival of plays by women, improved communication and transparency, a pro-active approach to the appointment of women in artistic roles and a commitment to paying deliberate attention to company processes and practices that may disadvantage women playwrights.

To the extent that it advanced the dialogue, fostered a shared understanding and reached consensus on some key strategies, the roundtable achieved its objective. Unsurprisingly, it stopped short of producing a universal panacea for the problem. Some important topics such as the contentious question of mandated quotas had to be hurried and left to some extent unfinished. It is noted that the issue of quotas evokes strong feelings on both sides. Exploration of this and other issues could easily have spilled over into a second day.

Importantly however, the underlying and complex interests in the core issue of fair representation for women playwrights were comprehensively aired and, perhaps even more importantly, owned by those at the table. There is every likelihood that the goodwill and forward momentum generated on the day will bring about positive change on the part of the companies involved and have a ripple effect throughout the sector.

The recommendations at the end of this report have been drawn from points of leverage identified in the discussion. They are intended to translate the intention of those present into an indicative action plan for moving forward.
Background
The enduring image of 11 men and one woman lining up for the launch of Belvoir Theatre’s 2010 season became the catalyst for a wave of protest about the endemic under-representation of women in Australian theatre. First to mobilise were women directors, led by the Australian Women Directors’ Alliance whose representations led to a Women Theatre Directors Action Planning Forum supported by the Australia Council and hosted by Belvoir in May 2010. Outcomes from this forum were presented to the Australia Council as a series of recommendations. The Australia Council undertook, among other things, to promote the fair and equitable inclusion of women in the core creative processes of mainstage theatre companies.

While these initiatives amounted to a significant step towards gender equity, they did not address the well-documented under-representation of women playwrights in Australian mainstage productions. In May 2011, the group of playwrights known as 7-On made a successful representation to the Australia Council for financial support towards an event to address the gender issue for women playwrights. The event became known as the Women Playwrights Solutions Roundtable.

The Solutions Roundtable was conceived as a group of up to 30 participants comprising a representative group of women playwrights, representatives from the larger producing companies and other key stakeholders, the Australian Writers’ Guild, Playwriting Australia and the Australia Council. The brief was to facilitate a candid sharing of experience about what has been happening with the work of women playwrights, and what might happen in an ideal scenario. The proposed outcome was a range of practical negotiated solutions to bring about positive change.

Process
The Solutions Roundtable was devised in the first instance by 7-On, represented by playwright Verity Laughton, with assistance from playwright Catherine Zimdahl. Logistical details were developed over several weeks in a consultative process. Gail Cork was engaged to facilitate the event in her dual capacity as director of the Australian Script Centre and an experienced commercial mediator. Playwright/project manager, Rebecca Clarke was engaged to manage logistics.

The Script Centre, through its website AustralianPlays.org, set up a Roundtable landing page (http://australianplays.org/roundtable2) which served as a hub for background resources, schedule for the day, links to a range of statistical data and relevant commentary and a facility for receiving online submissions.

Sydney Theatre Company demonstrated its support by generously making its Richard Wherrett and Ruth Cracknell Studios available at no cost.

Invitees were drawn from around Australia. Of the 30 available places, 15 were reserved for women playwrights. In selecting playwright invitees, consideration was given to achieving a national spread and a diversity of ages, views, career stages and production history. Guidance on a representative choice of playwrights was sought from bodies such as Stages, WA, Playlab Qld, the Darwin Festival and also from individual playwrights.

The grant budget provided $5,000 towards travel and accommodation for interstate playwrights. To the credit of the organisers who rallied to arrange billeted accommodation, this amount stretched to cover ten interstate playwrights; four from Victoria, two each from Queensland and Western Australia and one each from South Australia and the Northern Territory.
The remaining 15 places were set aside for non-playwrights. At the top of this invitation list were artistic directors, literary managers and other decision-makers from major and small to medium theatre companies. Also invited were participating observers representing the Australia Council, PlayWriting Australia and the Australian Writers’ Guild. Non-playwright participants covered their own costs to attend.

The full list of participants is attached at Appendix 1

**Submissions**

Five submissions were received by the closing date of 8 August. These were collated and copies distributed to participants at the roundtable, together with a summary version of a late submission from the 56-member collective, Australian Women Playwrights Online (AWOL) which included a further 16 individual playwright contributions. With the exception of one submission from a dramaturg and one from an Artistic Director, all submissions received were from, or on behalf of playwrights.

The AWOL submission, while raising many more issues than the roundtable could have addressed in the time available, is notable not only for its comprehensive coverage of women playwrights’ views on the gender issue but also as a testament to the passion and pain that characterises their engagement with it.

The full list of submissions is attached at Appendix 2

**Methodology**

The Solutions Roundtable took the form of an interest-based negotiation; in other words, a facilitated conversation aimed at resolving a problem in a way which addresses the needs and interests of all involved. The success or otherwise of such an approach depends on many variables, the two most important being the time available to fully explore the issues and participants’ readiness to listen to, and accommodate interests other than their own.

Considering the complexity and long gestation of the issues under discussion and the large number of participants at the table, timing was always going to be tight, despite best efforts to keep it tightly focussed. In terms of the participants’ readiness to listen, the many expressions of goodwill and support received from all sides in the lead-up to the roundtable were encouraging. There was a palpable sense that the sector as a whole was ready to have the difficult conversation.

As the focus of the day was on finding solutions, the starting point was a shared acknowledgement that a problem exists. Time was not spent trying to establish its precise quantum which, in itself, had proved somewhat contentious in the past. All present agreed that the proportional representation of women playwrights in Australian mainstage productions needed to improve. Questions at the roundtable were around how, rather than why. Notwithstanding, it was noted that the collection of accurate data going forward is a key requirement for the purpose of monitoring progress.

For reasons of time, the following sector-wide issues were noted as falling outside the roundtable’s purview, despite having a perceived or actual impact on the number of opportunities available to women playwrights;

- The number of Australian plays that are being commissioned and staged generally,
- The relative success of Australian versus international plays in drawing audiences,
- The relative number of premieres versus remounts or buy-ins,
- The relative number of opportunities for emerging versus established playwrights,
- The number of development opportunities for Australian plays overall, and
- Whether or not it’s too risky to take on an Australian play that has not been produced previously.
The following questions were posed for the roundtable;

• What are the critical points in the journey from page to stage where plays by women have tended to fall out of contention?
• What is it about those critical points that has statistically favoured plays by men over plays by women?
• How might it be different?
• What might we do, individually and collectively, publicly or privately, to make it different?

**Schedule**
The process moved through four stages as follows;

1. Identification of the key issues
2. Exploration of the issues
3. Option generation in separate sessions
4. Presentation of options and points of agreement

**1. Key issues**
Participants were asked to nominate key stumbling blocks to increasing the proportion of mainstage productions by women playwrights. As discussion moved around the table, topics for further exploration began to emerge as follows;

• Gender differences in choice of subject matter/creative process
• Quotas - artistic freedom versus social responsibility
• Programming model
• Mindfulness/awareness - paying attention on purpose, individually and collectively
• Sources – where do we look for plays?
• Embedded masculine culture and value system
• Socialisation/biology
• Professional development pathways
• Artistic merit

**2. Exploration of the issues**

• *Gender differences in choice of subject matter/creative process/artistic merit*
Several supported the view that women tend to write riskier plays, as in works where the narrative process follows a more varied path than many of the plays by men, and that this might mitigate against their appeal to major companies inducted with conservatism. It was also suggested that the current model did not favour women’s tendency to work more collaboratively.

Importantly, participants representing theatre companies strongly agreed that;

Any difference in subject matter between men and women playwrights is academic – a great play is a great play, and

There is no discernible difference in the ‘audience pulling power’ between plays by men and plays by women *per se.*
• **Quotas - artistic freedom versus social responsibility**
  There is no easy solution to the inherent tension between women playwrights’ demand for equity and the threat posed to artistic freedom by mandated quotas. It was noted that, when the number of Australian plays that can be programmed is so small, there is not much room to move. Some playwright participants held fast to a mandated 50/50 quota as the only acceptable solution. It is noted that this position was also strongly supported by the Australian Writers’ Guild and in the joint submission from AWOL. However, as a practical, negotiated solution which addressed the interests of all involved, mandated quotas did not gain traction among non-playwright participants, despite all being in agreement that 50/50 was the target to which all should aspire.

• **Programming model**
  Economic and other constraints on programming generally and the risk-averse conservatism inherent in the way big companies work can tie the hands of artistic directors.
  The way text is treated within theatre companies, including a growing predilection for non-text-based work, further reduces the already small pool of production opportunities for playwrights.

• **Mindfulness/awareness – paying attention on purpose individually and collectively**
  A broad lack of ownership of the problem across the sector to date was noted; however the wide support for the roundtable was welcomed as an encouraging move in the right direction. The view was expressed that the under-representation of women playwrights would be largely resolved if programmers conscientiously factored it into their thinking when making decisions.

• **Sources – where do we look for plays?**
  The personal energy needed to maintain playwright relationships results in a tendency for artistic directors to gradually drift inward and to favour those (mostly male) playwrights who can ‘cut through’ with a confident, articulate pitch and vision. There is a common perception among playwrights that the few opportunities that exist go to a small stable of highly visible writers. A current preponderance of plays by young men was noted.

• **Embedded masculine culture and value system**
  Pathways for women playwrights tend to be impeded by the ‘gendering’ and impact of reviews, the lack of a wise and constructive critical culture and an unspoken and perhaps even unconscious perception that storytelling for theatre is a male domain. There is a need for greater diversity of experience among artistic directors.

• **Socialisation/biology**
  Children and family responsibilities are more likely to undermine women’s careers. This contributes to an erosion of confidence and visibility which is further compounded for women in regional and remote locations. Some playwrights reported difficulties finding people to talk to in companies. There was broad agreement that women playwrights tend to be less adept than their male counterparts at articulating and pitching their work.

• **Professional development pathways**
  The small number of commissions, writer-in-residencies and opportunities to workshop plays were noted as contributing factors in the extraordinary difficulty most women playwrights face in trying to establish a viable longterm career.

3. **Option generation**
   Immediately after lunch, participants were divided into two interest groups, namely playwrights and programmers. Their task was to consider the questions;

   *How might it be different?*
   *What might we do, individually and collectively, to make it different?*
Each group was asked to brainstorm ideas then consider the feasibility of each resulting idea. How realistic was it? How would it work in practice? Did it address the interests of all parties? How effective was it likely to be in driving change?

4. Presentation of options and points of agreement
When the two groups came back together, a spokesperson from each was invited to present their best ideas.

The playwrights put forward these ideas;

i. ‘Hope Chest’ – a special fund dedicated to the production of plays by women. A Hope Chest might find expression either as a funded initiative in its own right or in the form of a curated festival of past and present plays by women, hosted by a theatre company and/or touring season,

ii. Mandated 50/50 quota over three years,

iii. Greater transparency in the processes followed by major companies, incorporating clear timelines, respect and courtesy in their communications with women playwrights,

iv. More resourcing of Literary Manager and writer-in-residence positions in major companies on the basis that the presence of a writer-focused position greatly improves playwrights’ access to and communication with the company,

v. Making playwrights feel at home – a plea to theatre companies to be more welcoming of playwrights, such as writer-in-residency programs (for which there used to be Australia Council funding available), maintaining a playwrights database and making tickets available to playwrights for Australian plays and related events.

The ideas advanced by the non-playwrights’ group encouragingly, shared many points of similarity with those put forward by the playwrights;

i. Targetted programs benefitting women playwrights,

ii. More transparent, accessible, efficient and responsive processes in relation to the management of submissions, commissioning and sourcing plays,

iii. More women inside companies in all areas, particularly in artistic roles,

iv. Greater awareness and generosity of spirit towards women playwrights.

As there was strong support from both interest groups for a targetted program, MTC General Manager, Ann Tonks undertook to approach the Major Performing Arts Board as to the possibility of funding for a curated festival of plays by women along the lines suggested by the playwrights’ group. She will report back to the National Theatre Forum in Brisbane in September.

Recommendations
There was insufficient time to translate the points of consensus into an agreed action list. The recommendations which follow were drawn from points of leverage where further progress seems most viable considering all the circumstances.

For the Australia Council (Theatre and Major Performing Arts Boards)
1. Acknowledge and incorporate women playwrights into any articulation of policy to progress equal opportunity and pathways to mainstage production for women in theatre.
2. Extend the scope of the reporting tool and guiding principles currently in development for women directors to explicitly include collection of data on women playwrights and in company target setting and reporting.

3. Actively monitor industry data on the proportion of productions of plays by women and consider initiatives to redress the imbalance, until such time as equity for women playwrights has been demonstrably achieved.

4. Consider offering financial support to a sector-driven curated season or festival of women’s plays.

**For theatre companies**

5. Review current script submission practices against the agreed principles of improving transparency, accessibility, responsiveness and generosity of spirit and take steps to advance those principles within your company.

6. Deliberately factor gender equity into decision-making with respect to the programming and commissioning of plays and artistic appointments.

7. Consider offering practical support and input into the development of a sector-driven curated season or festival of women’s plays.

**For playwrights**

8. Continue to bring an intelligent and robust voice to ongoing dialogue in the cause of equal opportunity for women in Australian theatre.

9. Monitor developments in the programming of plays by women and alert the sector to particular issues of concern and/or interest as they may arise.

10. Explore new ways to understand and accommodate the needs of companies when submitting or pitching works to them.
## Appendix 1 - Participants

### WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS SOLUTIONS ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Company</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verity Laughton</td>
<td>Playwright</td>
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<td>Catherine Zimdahl</td>
<td>Playwright</td>
<td>NSW</td>
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<td>Tahli Corin</td>
<td>Playwright</td>
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<td>Alana Valentine</td>
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<td>Katherine Thomson</td>
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<td>Melissa Reeves</td>
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<td>Kit Lazaroo</td>
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<td>Hannie Rayson</td>
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<td>Kathryn Ash</td>
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<td>Hellie Turner</td>
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<td>Rosalba Clemente</td>
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<td>Maryanne Butler</td>
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<td>Tom Wright</td>
<td>Artistic Associate</td>
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<td>Sydney Theatre Company</td>
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<td>Polly Rowe</td>
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<td>Sydney Theatre Company</td>
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<td>Ralph Myers</td>
<td>Artistic Director</td>
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<td>Belvoir St Theatre</td>
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<td>Anthea Williams</td>
<td>Literary Manager</td>
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<td>Ann Tonks</td>
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<td>Adam Cook</td>
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<td>Sam Strong</td>
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<td>Charles Parkinson</td>
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<td>Tasmanian Theatre Company</td>
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<td>Lyn Wallis</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Australia Council – Theatre Board</td>
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<td>Sarah Miller</td>
<td>Research Consultant</td>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>Australia Council - MPAB</td>
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<td>Chris Mead</td>
<td>Artistic Director</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>PlayWriting Australia</td>
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<td>Angela Keefe</td>
<td>Industrial Manager</td>
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<td>Australian Writers’ Guild</td>
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<td>Rebecca Clarke</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gail Cork</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Australian Script Centre</td>
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Women Playwrights Solutions Roundtable Report – 26 August 2011
Appendix 1 - Participants

APOLOGIES

Van Badham  Playwright  NSW
Angela Betzien  Playwright  VIC
Melissa Bubnic  Playwright  VIC
Patricia Cornelius  Playwright  VIC
Suzie Miller  Playwright  NSW
Debra Oswald  Playwright  NSW
Kate Rice  Playwright  WA
Peter Evans  Artistic Associate  NSW  Bell Shakespeare
Aiden Fennessy  Artistic Associate  VIC  Melbourne Theatre Company
Brett Sheehy  AD (Incoming)  VIC  Melbourne Theatre Company
Wesley Enoch  Artistic Director  QLD  Queensland Theatre Company
Todd MacDonald  Artistic Associate  QLD  Queensland Theatre Company
Kate Cheery  Artistic Director  WA  Black Swan Theatre Company
Marion Potts  Artistic Director  VIC  Malthouse Theatre
Rachael Maza Long  Artistic Director  VIC  Ilbijerri Theatre
Melissa Cantwell  Artistic Director  WA  Perth Theatre Company
1. Catherine Zimdahl
Playwright

I would like to respond to the Theatre Board’s proposal addressing the inequity of female playwrights in major performing arts bodies. The proposal for Self-Setting Targets for companies is a very thought-through and wide ranging response to the problem. The idea is for each MPA Company to undertake a series of initiatives in the form of graded activities for emerging to established female playwrights from mentorships to fully-fledged productions. They will set their own target % of women to be involved in the year ahead (more on this later). After a year they will report back to the Australia Council with the results of this project.

Earlier this year the Theatre Board canvassed 7-On to offer ideas for what would make this Target Plan most useful. Because we are established playwrights, contact also was made with emerging female playwrights regarding their specific needs and this was included in the 7-ON feedback. I believe this investigation by Lyn Wallis and the Theatre Board to be very significant as to where the “holes” are and how best to address systemic problems.

I have some ideas that may well have already been incorporated in this model – so please excuse if I am covering the same ground. The thoughts below are suggestions that I hope can increase the strength of the model.

1. Firstly I think transparency would keep the dialogue open. I believe that the results of each year’s target from the MPAB’s should be made public.

2. Under the Self-Setting Target model companies would self-select the % of female playwrights included in their programs. I believe it would be more helpful for women playwrights if each Company has the same percentage to aim for. Alternately, the reasons for self-selecting % needs to be explained more clearly. While my own view is that it ought to be 50%, at the very least a mandatory minimum which each company can improve upon but not drop below might be helpful.

3. I’m sure most submissions have mentioned this but it is very important that any workshops of plays by women lead (as often as possible) to productions. I’m sure many women attending this Roundtable have had plays in development hell. I am concerned that women could be lost in workshop statistics. We all know that the momentum of a play workshop that is heading into production raises the bar of the play exponentially. A playwrights’ development depends crucially on experiencing a fully formed production with a director and all the elements of design, sound, actors without scripts in hand and a public audience. It’s an honest experience for better or worse, and whichever way it turns out if you are serious about your art you take from it and push harder.

4. After the first year of the Self-Setting Target project (and please correct me if I am wrong in this) Theatre Companies will have to report back to the Australia Council with their efforts at inclusion of female playwrights. If they fall below the target set they will need to discuss the reasons for this with the Australia Council with the aim to counter and understand what were the specific difficulties. I think this is a very good approach, it leads to a greater understanding of what hindered compliance to the target. It gives the space to address the needs of female playwrights and the companies themselves and to mediate. I do have a concern however about how best to give the Companies a push if need be. If there are poor results, will there be any form of sanction? Can there be greater encouragement (I don’t know in what form) to let women in?

5. The other point I would like to raise is that a culture shift within the companies needs to be over a considerable length of time. My worry is that if there is one bad year and the work of women is critically and commercially panned then will this project for equity and justice lose its momentum? I suggest that Target Setting Model be confirmed for a 5-10 year period.
Appendix 2 - Submissions

2. Cristin Kelly
Freelance Dramaturg

Whether the solution to the problem of parity for women in theatre is quotas, I cannot say. The more important question is how can plays by women become more enticing to Artistic Directors?

As someone who sat on the programming end for a theatre in the US, I can honestly say that it's not a conspiracy. A conspiracy would be easier to fix. Rather, than choosing not to program women, Artistic Directors are making the decision to program men. They're not even thinking about women. Men tend to write plays that feel familiar, comfortable, establishment. In other words, sell-able.

Plays by women may not look as profitable, but I believe that's a ridiculous superstition that will prove patently untrue when female writers are pushed to the fore.

-Artistic Directors: You must think about gender disparity as a moral concern. An entire population of worthy artists are not working. The numbers don't lie. This is a civil rights issue in your industry. You know that women are not writing "worse" plays than men, so what is your part in their inequality? Perhaps, for a few seasons, you need to self-impose the challenge of programming half female playwrights in the season. Has your literary department run the numbers on the percentage of plays by women that you consider? If you're not getting the submissions, ask yourself if your theatre looks welcoming to female writers. Pick female writers for development/commissions and commit to a production. Make the effort on the forefront, and I am certain that in couple of years, you will begin programming plays by women naturally.

-Artists: Female writers, of course, keep speaking up; but moreover, male and female theatre artists of all disciplines ... speak up and do your part. Talk up the female writers you love. Suggest their scripts to Artistic Directors. Limit the work you are willing to do for theatres who don't program women. Again, you work in an industry with a serious moral concern that needs to be addressed.

-Audiences: Go to see plays by women. If plays by women become a success, theatres are going to program more plays by women. They may not consciously say, "More plays by a lady, just like that one!," but they will say, "Look! We can do plays that challenge established aesthetic norms/feature female characters/center upon with 'women's issues.'" In addition - write letters of support for plays by women. If Artistic Directors know that more representation of women is a priority for the audience, they will take note when it's time to do their programming for next season.

When I think that 88% of what I see is written by just one gender, I have to wonder how much depth of thought and experience is missing from my theatergoing experience. Now that the problem has been acknowledged, the next step is a commitment to change by a hearty chorus of theatre-makers and theatre-lovers who declare that mere whispers of women's voices are not enough for our ears.
Appendix 2 - Submissions

3. Chris Bendall
Artistic Director and CEO, Deckchair Theatre

A few quick thoughts on gender in Australian theatre from an Artistic Director of a new writing theatre company…

I certainly agree that there is an issue of a dearth of women playwrights being presented on Australian stages. However, from my perspective I believe that this is part of a broader national issue. My feeling is that the issue is that there is a dearth of new Australian plays being programmed nationally, irrespective of gender. I believe there is a programming issue nationally, and to a lesser extent internationally, that preferences ‘image’ over ‘the word’. This is an aesthetic that preferences the adaptation of classics over an entirely new Australian work, that preferences cross-performance work over what is perceived as ‘the straight well-made play’. This may be due to aesthetics of various artistic directors, vagaries of funding at Australia Council and state funding over the past decade, and simply the nature of advancing the form of theatre into the 21st century for better or worse.

I believe, and always have, that we should celebrate diversity across the theatre spectrum and this should include brilliantly written ‘wellmade plays’, written or created by men and women, as well as crossformal work. The growing predilection on our stages for non-text based work is potentially a good thing in terms of diversity on our stages. But only if ideas such as ‘character’, ‘story’ or ‘narrative’ are not considered out-dated.

I have always celebrated women playwrights as an Artistic Director. Out of the 16 new plays I produced under the banner of Theatre @ Risk, 8 were Australian and 5 were by women. Of the three years since I have been Artistic Director at Deckchair, in 2009 & 2010 we produced each year two new Australian plays (1 by a woman and one by a man).

But here lies the problem with statistics. We only produce a handful of new Australian works a year, and some state theatre companies only program 1 new Australian work in a year, so its hard to look at trends and percentages when the numbers are so low. Again the problem comes down to the sheer fact that there aren’t enough new works being commissioned, developed or produced. If there was more work being developed and presented, I would suggest we would be seeing more work from women playwrights.

We need to build the strength of the sector as a whole. The task of commissioning and developing ‘the new’, is usually left to the underresourced small to medium companies. The challenge is that in the current economic climate this is the sector that can least afford to take risks on new works. And programming new Australian works is always going to be a risk…

I hope you have a productive forum and look forward to hearing what comes out of your discussions.

Best wishes
Chris Bendall
Appendix 2 - Submissions

4. Jansis O’Hanlon
Director, StagesWA.com, the WA Playwrights’ Consortium

NOTES FOR AUSTRALIAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS’ ROUND TABLE (Sydney, August 2011)
Jansis O’Hanlon, Director Stages The WA Playwrights’ Consortium (7th August 2011, Perth WA)

A World View
This information came through today in a press release from THE SUSAN SMITH BLACKBURN PRIZE (this prize, established in 1978, is given annually to recognize women who have written works of outstanding quality for the English-speaking theatre. The Prize is administered in Houston, London and New York and currently awards $35,000 annually to the Finalists.)

“When the Prize was established in 1978, only 6% of new plays produced, on both sides of the Atlantic, were by women. That number is now 20%. Although the Prize has helped bring visibility to many women writing plays, production is a part of the equation that is beyond our reach. Women are achieving parity with men in every aspect of the theatre except in numbers of productions.”

It would seem the lack of parity for women playwrights is not unique to Australia.

Questions to consider

• Are the plays that women write intrinsically different from plays written by men?
• Do the ways of creation differ? (eg collaborative performance making rather than a solo act of creation – the gatherer rather than the hunter)
• Do the works created by women playwrights tend to be different in form and/or content then work created by non-women playwright?
• Do they tend to be more (or less) political/domestic/emotional/ /experimental?
• Do women tend to favour (disfavour) structures that are non-narrative / fragmented / linear / deal with complexity and ambiguity / tell the story of the heroes journey?
• Given that it is likely that a woman’s voice and work practice are likely to be different from that of the non-woman writer, do these differences provide possible insight into why there is a lack of take up in programming work written by Australian women?
• Is this conversation an interesting distraction from other (perhaps more obvious) causes for lack of parity in programming of new work by Australian women playwrights?

Assumptions to be tested

1. The quality of the work of women playwrights is as good as men.
2. It is a reality that there is a lack of parity in programming of new work by Australian women playwrights, particularly by mid-tier and flagship companies, and this fact can be supported by valid statistical evidence.
3. As well gender, additional barriers to production may also include race, age, class, postcode and life cycle ‘challenges’. It is likely that multiple barriers will compound the difficulty of developing traction in career pathway.
4. Playwriting is both a craft and an art. The craft of a playwright develops over time. If Australia is to produce theatrical works of depth, diversity and distinction, then practical opportunities for playwrights to take creative risks and to see their work produced to a
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professional standard need to be available to the playwright throughout their career. Experience, as a necessary precursor for quality, should not be under valued. The production of a poorly reviewed play should not be a signal to drop the development of a playwright of promise.

Barriers to developing traction as a playwright in Australia

The broader environment in which new Australian work is being created can also be considered as a factor that will influence the type and range of work that is currently being programmed and viewed by Australian audiences. Do we have in place the policy, infrastructure and mechanisms that best support the production of high quality, distinct and diverse new Australian theatre?

Whilst there are reasonable entry-level opportunities for new and emerging playwrights to develop and produce new theatre in most states of Australia, many of these opportunities are unpaid or lowly paid (below industry standard). Interestingly at the point of entry, unlike class and race, gender does not seem to be a significant barrier to production.

Opportunities for the production of Australian theatre (first season or remounts) by major state funded companies are rare. State companies (understandably) tend to be risk averse and tend to program international works that have been audience and media tested. When a new Australian work is programmed, these works tend to be by writers with strong brand recognition. These writers tend to be men.

Playwrights and their work are not adequately supported by a national network of companies providing “second tier” opportunities. Second tier companies can be considered those companies best placed to produce the work of developing and “established” writers; to promote the best of this work on a national platform; to support risk-taking and manage critical ‘failure when necessary; and to ensure minimum conditions of employment (at least) are met.

Considering a national network. There is a perception that it is easier to develop professional traction in inner urban Melbourne or Sydney. Playwrights working in the peripheral capital cities of Australia can often feel invisible outside of the state in which they are working. This is exacerbated by the low number of productions (particularly drama) that are remounted or toured outside of the state in which they were first produced; as well as poor critical mechanisms for reviewing of new Australian drama by and for the professional theatre sector.

Without a range of second tier opportunities, working through a national network, we are unlikely to create a diverse pool of Australian playwrights that have the ‘brand credibility’ required to be programmed by the State flagship companies.

When opportunities are scarce the gatekeeper will look after their own and those marginalised (for whatever reason) will fall victim first. Introducing prescriptive programming guidelines, quotas and pilot programs may address issues of diversity in the short term but they are unlikely to address the real cause.
5. Elena Carapetis
Actor/playwright

The first thing I remember an industry professional saying to me in the mid 1980’s when I was 14 was this: “You’ll never be an actor because there aren’t many people who look like you (read, dark European) on TV”. This woman was an “agent” speaking to a young person who was willing to commit her life passionately to the arts. Regardless of her cold insight, I became an actor. What can I say, I got the calling.

Unfortunately she was the first of many people I have encountered throughout my career who have told me that because of my “ethnicity” I would struggle to find my place within the cultural landscape of my own country. A teacher at my drama school then told me I’d “only ever get cast in pasta commercials”. He also argued that I wasn’t suitable for the role of Portia because she was blonde, to which I replied the play was called Merchant of Venice and that she was, in fact, Italian.

And then the final blow when a casting agent told me “Oh we’d love to cast more ethnic people, but they just aren’t very good.” So there I was, hardworking, passionate, willing to sacrifice and pay my dues to become worthy of the title of actor being constantly told by those in positions of power that I should give up because I was just a wog. I was not able to go for many mainstream roles because I was perceived as being too ‘dark’. But to add insult to injury, when roles came up that I was appropriate for, I’d be auditioning with actors with fair skin who’d get their hair dyed, or miraculously the character’s surname would be changed to Smith.

It was a double-edged sword. On one side, I was told I didn’t belong to my country’s idea of what was Australian, and on the other I was told that I wasn’t going to ever be good enough anyway. I was cut off and discouraged at every path.

I have been a professional actor now for 18 years.

As a woman who is starting out on her career as a playwright, my loins have been well and truly girded for the next challenge. We’re told that women just aren’t as good as the men and that’s why the men have more opportunities hurled upon them. To this I say, not necessarily. I say this based on my struggles as a Greek-Australian actor. If we are not given equal opportunities to work our craft, to pursue excellence, then how are we ever going to develop as artists? I would also like to point out that in order for our culture and our arts to evolve we must be allowed the opportunity to fail in the process of discovering the best way to contribute our skills.

There is no way I am going to emerge into the world of playwriting perfect and fully formed. I will need time to hone my craft, to learn from my mistakes and to find my creative feet. If the boys get more opportunities to be supported, validated, encouraged and nurtured perhaps it is because they have grown up in an environment where they have been constantly told that the world is their oyster and what they have to say is important. That kind of endorsement can do so much for one’s confidence; no doubt the work comes out in a bold and self-assured voice.

But there are those of us who have had not had that luxury, who have had to battle our inner demons from being told from the outset we’re not good enough and quite frankly, this can really mess with your head. I don’t know what’s going to happen with my career as a writer, but I pray that there will be someone out there who will see beyond the imperfections of my work. I hope they have the ability to see the kernel of potential my early drafts hold and give me the opportunity to re-write, fail and finally succeed.

All the best with this conversation. I look forward to hearing the outcomes.
Appendix 2 - Submissions

**Australian Women playwrights On Line (AWOL)**

Dear Roundtable,

I write on behalf of AWOL to offer a submission to the discussion on 12 August 2011. I was invited to attend and apologise for my absence but I am in outback WA undertaking a development for the Perth international Festival.

AWOL was set up in 2010 in response to a need expressed by Australian women playwrights that they had no network and were experiencing similar responses from the theatre industry. A highly intelligent multi-voiced and thoughtful online discussion has ensued from them on, strongly alive and often accessed by members. It is a women-writers-only site inviting candour, and is currently a group of 56 from all around Australia.

When members were invited to the Roundtable we decided to also send through a submission from AWOL based on many of the ideas and experiences that have been posted online. I note that many of our members will also be in the room on Friday 12 August and so the written submissions made by them are less formal due to their voices being heard in the room. I note that there were 18 formal responses to the AWOL submissions amongst it’s members and there are 16 attached individual submissions to this letter.

A few suggested questions were posed by myself for the Roundtable to get the ball rolling and some of the submissions responded to these while others offered insights separate to the questions. I have outlined some paragraphs selected from the submissions received on AWOL, however I urge you to read in your own time the detailed submissions received from which these paragraphs have been lifted. This is a unique chance to have the very real experiences of women playwrights highlighted for your understanding.

I note that there is no particular order to the submission, just discussion points, AWOL hopes it will be engaged in further discussion together with our union the Australian Writers Guild before outcomes are established. Should any of you require an emailed copy for yourself, your staff and company, we would be happy to consider sending one through.

May the Roundtable be a fruitful and interesting discussion as the first step in solving some complex and ongoing issues?

Very best regards

Suzie Miller
Playwright
Together with the following individual AWOL members who offer submissions below:
Catherine Ryan
Kate Rice
Katherine Mackinnon
Melissa Bubnic
Melissa Reeves
Noelle Janaczewska
Patricia Cornelius
Rebecca Lister
Van Badham
Vanessa Bates
Suzie Miller
Katherine Thompson
Kit Lazaroo
Virginia Rose
Francesca Smith
Tee O’Neill
Melita Rowston
Peta Murray

(Attached is the overall submission – and then each named individual submission, I urge you to read all of the separate submissions as a way of fully understanding the issues at hand.)
AWOL
Australian Women playwrights On Line – Submission of summary of discussion points to the Roundtable on 12 August 2012

• 50/50 is the only fair and reasonable use of public monies, it is just as easy as ‘one from the men and one from the women’.

• Request for the companies to really detail their processes for programming and selection of works. To identify all the small steps over that year that are part of how they consider works, and to then look at positive ways of ensuring that there is equity at each and every one of those steps, throughout the entire year.

• The defensiveness of the industry really surprised me, that some men in the industry took it personally rather than acknowledging the politics and the experience behind the argument.

• Consider the GAL (guarantee against loss) model of funding that operates for regional and rural touring works – which provides a backup subsidy to presenters when works lose money, this would allow for new and perceived risky works to be considered in programming.

• Career investments. It appears that the mid career playwright is most at risk of ‘giving up’, this is a combination of lack of support, the invisibility of women and the reality of childcare responsibilities falling on the shoulders of women. The other risk to theatre is that TV and Film offer much more fulfilling and apparently more equity to women writers in that genre than theatre.

• Competitions are important for women playwrights as they are the only real form of acknowledgement that there is merit to their work, however these do not translate to production or the breakthroughs in actual theatres.

• Vicious circle of lack of self belief, whenever a male theatre company representative comments that there are no good plays by women and that they are programming the best that is there, this sets women playwrights back. As women in a general culture of lack of representation, this only serves to demonstrate how strongly our male counterparts can self justify not attacking the issue with independence and without pre conceived ideas. It also means that women have to yet again battle the internal self doubt that is inherent in being told expressly and implicitly that women are not as good at their craft as men. This adds further burden to the self-doubt inherent in being an artist.

• The invisible ceiling in place is called the ‘taste argument’, and it legitimizes choices made that reinforce gender imbalance. Decision makers, be they men or women, who are not properly thinking outside the gender divide, and who are not prepared to ask the questions of themselves and the theatres they work for, can always hide under the wonderful umbrella of TASTE and use it to exclude the ‘other’. The ‘other’ being not just women, but voices of ‘other’ generally.

• The taste argument is impossible to counter argue, and so successfully excludes women from the debate and consequently entrenches a male dominated storytelling culture that educates audiences that such storytelling is the ‘chosen’ paradigm and sends a circular message to women writers that their work is not as good.

• I know that many of the women on our AWOL network have had a similar experiences to mine in their successful careers overseas compared to their Australian experience, and I challenge the theatre decision makers in this country to put this down to merit. At the very least there has to be an acknowledgment of a case of decision makers wearing ‘male middle class coloured glasses’, whether they choose to or not.
• AWOL online network has been a source of great debate and insight for me, and the sheer intelligence of the women on line is exciting. Here are writers who have quietly thought about these issues for a long time expressing it to a writers-only audience, no holds barred, and not prepared to stay still any longer. A great support and network that continues to grow. There are currently 56 members, all active and engaged.

• AWOL has made me feel less alone, and I feel very grateful that people with better careers than mine are affected by the same issues, and have spoken up.

• Broad cultural lack of representation keeps recreating itself, unless we can battle those structurally created internal demons and armour ourselves with the chutzpah and confidence I see roll so easily from so many men.

• A small solution is that there is a response to any work that is being submitted to theatre companies. That there is the respect to the artists that send the work in. At the very least this should be available to playwrights who have proven their craft and should at the very least have a meeting or a response that shows a considered read of the work. For emerging playwrights this should also be the case, as they are at a vulnerable time in their career and require guidance and support by the industry to allow them to feel part of an industry. Literary managers should have a proven track record on how to read scripts, in particular those which are challenging and if required be unafraid to request a reading in tandem with the playwright.

• Regional or rural writers should have access to companies and to contacts with directors so that they are included in the industry. The perception in various states that the best artists are in the bigger states means that women playwrights in those states are perceived as firstly not as good as their male counterparts and secondly not as good as the women playwrights of other states. A double whammy.

• Residencies with clear aims and the nurturing of writing. Models that include real time and focus on writers and linking playwrights in so that they feel part of the company. Playwrights and women here in particular feel included in the industry, as someone respected, heard and visible. Something that is not the case at it currently stands in the industry.

• Women playwrights need to feel supported by their local industry, rather than being sidelined for writers from other states, usually men.

• There is a very strong bias against scripted theatre and storytelling in favour of devised, post-dramatic work. The Australia Council's restructuring of how small-to-medium theatre companies are funded has reflected this bias: theatre companies that used to commission and produce work have been edged out in favour of companies that support individual visions or are "hubs" for de-centralised groups. This significantly reduces the number of companies with the time and resources to commission playwrights and support diversity.

• Issues around connections to others and feeling outside the club. The theatre industry in Australia is one that is perceived that there is a club that is who the companies work with – people that they know and choose over and over again. The work of a company is built on playwrights.

• As a nation it's important to commit to developing contemporary Australian playwrights. But still our arts culture refuses to really commit. Despite fine speeches artistic directors often fail to see the obvious irony of the funding the company administration receives in relation to the playwrights, whose work they rely on. Theatre has suffered from the loss of many women playwrights who have moved across to film and television

• Commissioning original works versus translations: Translations of play classics can be wonderful, however, this is often an easy way for companies to develop new work with less risk. It's important that new plays continue to be written if we want to tell those stories
particular to our culture in relation to a global environment.

- In the Australia Council tallying of plays by men and women, there needs to be a clear indication of what plays are translations and what are original ideas.

- Investigate how TV and film have maintained such high numbers of women writers in their area — many of which have come from a less supported industry of theatre — challenge companies to question why women screen writers are thought to have talent and merit and women playwrights are not thought of in the same light by their own industry. How can this be?

- AWOL members strongly argue for a 50/50 split at least when it comes to numbers. Some artistic directors have said recently that they fear a quota system would be limiting, others have mentioned that a female playwright receiving a commission (because of a quota system) may then doubt the rationale for their commission. *(Why was I chosen - ability or quota?)* But such systems are set in place to redress an imbalance. Women are under-represented and this needs to be addressed. There need be no fear of limiting an artistic vision, but it will require more thought in the planning of artistic programs. All new plays need nurturing, (despite the writer's ability) and the kind of nurturing depends on the playwright. Understanding different development needs is part of the skill of a good literary manager. In reality a quota system will develop more dialogue between playwrights, literary managers and artistic directors, and their audiences.

- In the UK, almost every theatre company you want to submit a play to requires you to fill out an Equal Opportunities Monitoring form where they collect data such as gender, age, ethnicity, etc. This is the same for every job application you submit also. The reason is that you can't demonstrate your commitment to equal opportunities if you don't have any way of telling whether you are committed to equal opportunities in practice. You can't combat institutionalized racism or sexism if you have no way of confirming that it actually exists. Collecting and reporting the data means we can move on from the status quo where the debate is 'there's a problem/no there's not' to 'there's a problem, so what do we do about it?'

- Transparency in play selection processes and commissions – local solution.

- I think the major issue women writers face is getting company management to even admit that there is a problem. I still feel that despite the articles, forums, and meetings with Ozco, the perception from companies is that this is a 'storm in a teacup', and it's a bunch of writers whinging because their plays aren't getting on. I'm not whinging because my plays aren't getting on; I'm whinging because hardly any women writers' plays are getting on.

- Wouldn't it be great to see a range of residencies--of varying lengths and aims, not only for young or emerging writers, but also for mid-career and well established writers as well? They could be a good way of breaking up that 'in-group/out-group environment that is so prevalent and such a barrier for many women writers (especially those of us not so efficient at, or enamoured of the whole networking and foyer thing!!--assuming of course that the companies do look outside their inner circles and comfort zones for their writers-in-residence.

- Should any residency scheme eventuate, companies should be obliged to advertise them.

- Difficult for female playwrights to be inside theatre company culture; to feel that we have an important place in the administration. Theatres that do produce text based theatre buy plays that have been proven to be box office successes overseas. Theatres here are reluctant to take risks with new plays.

- We should encourage and train dramaturges. We should promote our own stories written by our own writers and make sure there is a vibrant new writing culture in every state of
Australia. We should tour the best of the local plays so we can see a lot of interstate work and playwrights can get the touring royalties that give them proper financial security. Look to the Royal Court and other new writing theatres in the UK, (not to just poach their local writer’s play) but as models in how to make local writing and the local playwright’s work relevant and an exciting night out for local communities.

- That female stories are not as interesting / important to the people choosing the seasons than male stories. That both male and female Artistic Directors favour stories with a male viewpoint. That people like working with their ‘mates’.

- I only feel like I have a ‘career’ when I am overseas. In Australia I feel that it is so much harder to get anyone to read your work with a fresh and open mind. My last three plays have all won or been short listed for major awards yet they have not been produced in Australia- two of them have been produced overseas. I may have given up if I didn’t have contacts overseas that were made when I won a Churchill Fellowship in 1998

- I find that my plays always do well when they are actually read! And that means when I send them to competitions! When I, or my agent, sends them to theatres I suspect they are either not read at all or not read with care. I have rarely received an official response from the theatres- just silence. In the UK and Ireland there is a system in place where every play is responded to in a three tier system.
  1. A polite letter of rejection,
  2. A Not this play but we would like to read more of your work so come in for a chat about this.
  3. A Yes we want this play.

- AWOL makes me feel less alone, less isolated but it also makes me feel that this problem is so endemic that solving it, in the time I have left to write, may be difficult.

- Artistic Directors and Artistic Associates should invite writers in. Ask them what they are writing. Be in touch with their plays and their careers. Let the writers know that the theatre is also a home to them. Gate Keepers such as Tom Wright say that there are no writers of quality that are not programmed at STC. This must be challenged. Has he read or seen enough female work to know this?

- Have a resident playwright at every theatre company with a twelve month tenure. Have a quota system- one male writer then one female writer. Give theatre companies incentives to produce local female work.

- Have a special fund just for addressing the imbalance.

- Bring Playworks back.

- Have funds that are for the promotion and development of female plays and female playwrights.

- Give the flagship theatre companies incentives to produce local female work.

- Create a national theatre company dedicated to only new and old Australian work with fifty percent works by women.

- Playwrights are given status in the UK and Ireland. There is an acknowledgement that theatre needs writers and they are respected. Yes it’s tough and competitive and good plays can be ignored but there is more openness and opportunity. I have worked in the literary departments of Royal Court, Abbey Theatre and Soho Theatre and they remain open to the possibility that a good play can be sent in the post. Australia’s focus on building relationships can mean that if the playwright isn’t lucky enough to find a company or director interested in their plays they are left isolated. Sometimes it is better to get the play and then find the best director for it. Lally Katz success was that she found a great collaborator with Chris Kohn and she could build a body of produced work. I also had a
great collaboration with Chris Bendall at theatre @ Risk but this should not be the only way a good piece of writing for the theatre can live.

- In Australia it is so very difficult to get the people in theatre to read plays that have not been ‘proven’ while in the UK and in Ireland theatre makers are open to the possibility that an unproven writer could write a smashing play. Directors are encouraged to seek out new writers and build relationships with developing writers.

- Unfortunately, like teaching, welfare, health etc very little status is attributed to youth, community or student theatre and my experience (over 20 years) is that it is very difficult for women writers (and artists) to transition from or between these areas of theatre into so called ‘professional’ theatre.

- Funding bodies are often quite prescriptive in what constitutes an emerging or developing writer and these definitions frequently state that work that has had professional casts is deserving of emerging or developing status. How can we get funding bodies, theatre companies, producers, peak bodies etc to see the work developed in community and youth theatre and give it the status that it deserves and support the women who work on these projects greater exposure so that they can move between both community and mainstream theatre.

- The most supported I have ever felt as a playwright was when I had engagement with Playworks. When I first joined Playworks I was working as a regional based artist and the organisation gave me the opportunity to feel that I belonged to a broader arts industry. Working as a regional or rural artist can be quiet an isolating experience and having a peak body gave me a broader network to engage with.

- In one of the AWOL emails over the past week someone wrote about feeling that they were not in the ‘club’. If you are not a tertiary trained artist, not urban based or have not had work produced by mainstream or professional companies it is very easy to feel that you are not in the ‘club’.

- Some issues are not directly about gender but they accumulate with the issues that do relate to gender. For instance, the current preference amongst some artistic directors for work that is devised through the company rather originating through the writing of the text isn’t obviously about gender, but becomes refracted by the difficulty some women may have with the confidence to pitch ideas they haven’t worked up through a draft, a preference for working more intensively at home because of motherhood, different patterns and opportunities for socializing/networking etc.

- I agree with the Wheeler Centre discussion that socializing is central to the problems women face. Australia doesn’t work hard enough at critiquing the concept of canon, and this contributes to this blindspot. In Australia, I have no doubt that Canon = Men and whilst this persists we will continue to fail to understand the writing of plays by women.

- It also seems that the pairing of a woman director with a woman playwright results in a double dose of marginalization.

- I feel generally we have become too focused on awards and the like, but I feel especially for women that THEY MUST win awards in order to have any kind of visibility at all – but winning awards for women, while essential, is not sufficient for their progress.

- SO many women playwrights have won and been shortlisted for prestigious awards but this has not translated to production or any increase in profile in the industry

- I have had multiple nominations and awards, and some glowing reviews of productions in the independent scene. This has failed to translate into genuine interest amongst mainstage companies. Male peers all around me have made that transition. I don’t believe that the quality of my writing or my theatrical intelligence are at fault but again I can’t separate out my gender from my genre. So yes, the glass ceiling for me sits
somewhere between acclaimed independent productions and the main stage, and I believe this translate across to the chances are that ones work will be received into the “Canon”.

• The knowledge that women in general are marginalized made an enormous difference to me, helping me to see my situation as part of a larger pattern and not evidence that my writing must be crap. AWOL has helped diminish the sense of isolation, to think more critically about the dilemma, and to have hope that in Australia we can have a more intelligent conversation and discover constructive approaches.

• I do think funding bodies need to make sure women playwrights are not disadvantaged by the prominence of devised works, adaptations, hybrid theatre etc. Funding to mainstage companies must have a mechanism to robustly encourage equity. There could be more funding specifically to remount independent productions that were acclaimed, to help us get out of the premiere culture and to support the presence of women’s work in our cultural lives.

• In 2011, 12% of plays produced by major theatre companies will have been written by women. Let’s not go on making the same mistakes. Let’s allow women playwrights and their aesthetics, themes and ideas onto the mainstage. It’s easy – all you have to do is match one for one with a 50/50 quota system; female/male, including mainstage revivals of work by Australian women writers.

• Why did the Elizabethan Theatre Trust (and other gatekeepers) decide not to produce Gray’s play, but to produce Lawler’s play. And how did this alternative choice affect the Australian theatre industry? *The Doll* was a nostalgic nod to male archetypes such as the bushman and the digger. *The Torrents* was an optimistic tale about the ‘new woman’, with themes related to equity and the environment.

• It might have helped me when I started out as a fledgling playwright in the late 70s, if Oriel Gray’s name had been in lights – or at least on the radar - and her optimistic themes had been allowed to evolve and influence Australian theatre. It may have influenced my confidence as well as the direction of my writing and trajectory of my career. I wrote about women because that was what I knew and yet my work was labelled political. I now see that this had little to do with any artistic choice or lack of aesthetics, and a lot to do with how it was viewed and received by the mainstream.

• I think the 50/50 percent programming woman is good. What about if it is 50/50 over more than one programming year? If it is 50/50 over three years say, (as opposed to every year) it means that some years they would be able to have more women playwrights than men. It also gives companies’ flexibility in choice. There are many many factors to take into account when programming, the 50/50 thing will be one more thing to consider.

• I also think the idea of theatre companies being seen as closed off to all but a few needs to be looked at by the companies. Ie they need to take this on and address it. Forums, speakers and readings are all great but what about residencies? The great thing about writers residencies in the past was that a writer got to interact with a company in a sort of nuts and bolts way-not just if/when they were having a play produced. More residencies please.

• We do need to rethink the loss of Playworks from the scene. What has happened over the last ten years has demonstrated that the odds are stacked against women.

• There is a traditional bias towards male playwrights in the career development process of playwriting. Note, this is not merely about men receiving more mainstage productions.

• We live in a patriarchal culture where at repeated points of development, women are stereotyped, generalised, genrefied, discriminated against and discouraged from participation in cultural production.
• A lack of visible female role models impoverishes the aspiration of female writers in the theatre.

• There is a discernible absence of obvious career-pathing for women.

• Theatre traditions reflect CENTURIES of culturally hegemonic values - plays traditionally favour narratives associated with a white, male, bourgeois experience.

• Therefore, plays that are structured around non-white or non-male or non-bourgeois protagonism or narratology appear overtly ideological - as the white, male, bourgeois viewpoint is hegemonically normalised it is not considered ideological.

• The solution here is engagement of the theatre community in a proactive cultural discussion that considers sexism towards women within a broader issue of diverse representation itself.

• A start could be an industry-wide commitment to a diverse casting policy - that is, casting against ethnic stereotypes in traditional drama, as a means of exploding established perceptions of "role" and "representation".

• Thanks to my membership of the AWG Writers' Group, and my inclusion in AWOL, I feel visible and appreciated as a playwright at last. It is also very helpful that both these groups pass on and link members to development opportunities.

• Giving my work some readings with actors.

• Including the script writers in the play production teams is I think the single most important big change that is needed in the Australian theatre industry – which we must acknowledge is, like the film industry, a "cottage industry" in terms of it’s small size, and the very sporadic work it is able to offer to the professionals in every calling who grace the industry.

• This is such an important point – the writer of theatre works belongs in the theatre with the other theatre workers.

• Modern Australian theatre companies must include the writers in the production process

• Membership-based playwrights’ organisations, such as the Australian National Playwrights’ Centre, and Playworks Women Playwrights’ Organisation.

• In the UK, the Royal Court, the National Theatre, and High Tide, are all open to – and in fact invite – unsolicited submissions from playwrights from all over the world. This is in marked contrast to companies such as the STC, which insists that submissions be solicited, and through an agent, or some other person of influence. Those UK companies welcome scripts from all comers precisely because it brings so many more potentially fabulous plays into their hands.

Models in Aus that have worked
Theatre in the Raw at Playbox, Hard Lines at MTC.
The mid range theatre company theatre @ risk that commissioned and produced a series of my works.
STC resident writers under Nick Marchand.
Griffin Residencies
Playbox Theatre- (produced and published at least eight Australian plays each year)
Theatre in the Raw at Playbox. Funding to develop and publicly present several plays a year
Playwright in Residence in theatres (MTC had Michael Gurr as playwright in residence)
Playworks- much missed agency devoted to raising the status of female writers and writing in theatre.
Hard Lines at MTC- Julian Meyrick would nurture a writer and a play over 12 months.
The following individual AWOL submissions provided the information in the group submission.

Please note there was a loose set of questions that were sometimes used as a starting point. These were:

QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think the major and minor issues facing women playwrights are in Australia? In your particular state?

2. What are the invisible ceilings that you perceive are in place? How have these affected your sense of rising in the industry, that might be different to those which affect male playwright?

3. How do you 'feel' about your career in Australia? Have you ever seriously considered giving up?

4. How has the group AWOL or other groups affected your sense of visibility or being heard?

5. What small changes in Aus theatre do you think might make a difference to your presence in the industry?

6. What big changes that might be effected over a long period would you consider would make a difference to your presence in the industry?

7. What innovations at particular theatre companies (small or large) have made a positive impact on your career or perception of your career?

8. What suggestions can you make to funding bodies that can effect long term impact on women playwrights?

9. (for those who have been in in the industry more than ten years): What previous practices/innovations in the industry which have now been deleted do you think should be re-introduced?

10. (for those with OS experience): What practices have you observed OS that could be valuable as models in Australia?
Catherine Ryan

You’re such a champion getting this together. Damn shame we won’t get to catch up in Sydney though - your presence would have been fantastic, not to mention I’d just love to see you and hear your news etcetc....

Anyways, some thoughts from your fab questions.....

As a general sweep...

Of course, of course, it has got to be 50/50. That is the only fair and reasonable use of public monies that should be spent in ways that equitably represent our whole Australian community. I reckon there should be some official requirements for such equity in the use of public funds.

On a more personal level ... Questions 2,3 & 4

Yes yes yes I have often felt and feel like giving up. Despite numerous writing awards, shortlists, radio and independent theatre productions, despite past and present development affiliations with mainstage comps, despite tv doco broadcasts and awards for projects I have dramaturged, despite 15 years of all this I just don’t know if I’m ever going to get the mainstage breaks that might actually generate some kind of opportunity for my work to really fly, some kind of professional profile and (shock) maybe even a little income.

But despite the despites I hang in there. Cos just when I feel I might be able to let go without too much grief, a small flicker of something keeps me going - a small offer, a shortlist, AWOL, a beautiful positive comment from someone who has experienced my work. It's hard to let the passion and ideas go.

I know my work isn't simple straightforward narrative. But I know it has heart. I know it takes a bit of openness and investment from readers/audience. But I do also suspect that major orgs are TOO AFRAID TO TAKE RISKS with work that might step outside some common conventional paths. And that it's easier for companies to ismiss this sort of work when its from women writers. I feel that blokes who play with form still get the guernseys. Companies' fear of perceived box office risks/failures provides easy excuses not to give a "new" woman writer a go. So I think that these companies need to be offered some kind of backup subsidy "guarantee against loss (GAL)" that would give them a sense of more financial security to programme works that are currently not equitably representative. (I’m going to research this a bit more Suzie, from Regional touring models, to bring to the table for discussion).

I also think there's a vicious circle of lack of self belief at play here. The harder it is for women, the easier it is to doubt ourselves and our abilities, and then the harder it is to push and put ourselves out there, to fight to create opportunities. Broad cultural lack of representation keeps recreating itself, unless we can battle those structurally created internal demons and armour ourselves with the chutzpah and confidence I see roll so easily from so many men.

5/6. It's big, it's small. It's just knowing that when someone from a Company asks to read my work, or is happy to receive it - that they actually read it. I don't mean disrespect to those excellent people who do – but there are many times when I reckon it hasn't been read. Or has been read so quickly as to do it a disservice. Or should have been read in tandem with a discussion with me - my work can require quite a lot of visual/physical imagination to get it properly. To be able to talk someone intelligently through a piece, to paint the picture, to pull out all the threads, would be such a brilliant luxury. And that's about money, time, resources and willingness from companies to create those positions and culture within them.

And there is also the big problem of not being in Sydney or Melbourne. So getting reps from major companies to come to productions is very very difficult. How can we overcome this??? How to make connections with directors or independents in these cities to try to get indy level productions happening in the major centres?
7. I think my most exhilarating professional development time was in 2006 with Julian Meyrick at the MTC's Affiliate Writer's program. Julian, and then by definition, the company, put real time and resources into a year long program for three writers - we met regularly for good long meaty discussion sessions about our own work, about the work that we all saw together, and about broader issues and trends in theatre/writing. Julian put in focussed and dedicated time to individual sessions and discussions with us to develop our scripts for the project. Actors were involved. I felt PART OF THE COMPANY, not just the charity arm.

Likewise currently with the Malthouse Writers Workshop, the company had raised the resources and gathered good people to make this an event of substance, where I also felt a part of something bigger, and respected. It's hard to maintain self respect when you feel like you're begging for any little morsel of support.

Sorry, running out of time now... But I'm thinking about (for now, hopefully there might be more) two possible threads of solutions ...1. I'd like companies to unpick in detail their processes of programming and selection of works. To identify all the small steps over the year/s that are part of how they consider works. And then to positively look at ways of ensuring equity at each and every one of those steps. So that when it comes to final decisions, there is already the best possible range of equitable possibilities on the table 2. The GAL option

Yes I completely agree on the 50/50. That is the only fair and reasonable use of public monies that should be spent in ways that equitably represent our whole Australian community. I reckon there should be some official requirements for such equity in the use of public funds. And yes it is just as easy as one from the men, and one from the women.

I'd like to ask the companies to really unpick, in detail, their processes for programming and selection of works. To identify all the small steps over the year that are part of how they consider works. And then to positively look at ways of ensuring equity at each and every one of those steps, throughout the entire year. So that when it comes to final decisions, there is already the best possible range of works and artists on the table – so that 50/50 is that easy to achieve.

I've also been thinking about the perceptions of Box Office risk that companies might hold when it comes to programming our work. It's such a lame and easy excuse on "business" grounds, to allow them to dismiss works or not try someone or something new. I'm thinking about the GAL “guarantee against loss” model of funding that operates for regional and regionally touring works. This provides a backup subsidy to presenters when works (esp works that might be seen as new or risky or not local) lose money and do not meet box office projections. While I'm not for a moment suggesting that women's work is more likely to fail at the box office – I certainly don't believe that at all – but having the option of this type of back up govt support might encourage some companies to take what they might perceive to be a risk and put more work up there. It could be available only to cover works that specifically address existing inequities in representation ie women's work, other than anglo work, indigenous work. And because it is not written into budgets, as it would only be available in the case of a loss, rather than up front, it doesn't make the assumption that these works are more likely to fail. I'd love to tease this idea out with you all and see what you think?
Francesca Smith

A moment of private reflection for those in positions of influence...

When you think about playwrights (or writers for theatre) ... Who do you know?

How do you know them?

Who do you rate? (really)

Why?

Are the people you like the same as the people you rate?

Who don't you know?

How could you get to know them or their work?

Who is uncomfortable for you?

How committed is your theatre company to the work of Australian/local writers? a little/a lot/not our thing/they're all crap?

Who is your audience and what do you want to be able to offer them?

How does the concept of diversity sit with that?
Kate Rice

1. What do you think the major and minor issues facing women playwrights are in Australia? In your particular state?

Women playwrights are not supported because they are considered to be not as good as men playwrights. The situation in Perth is worse, because local women playwrights are also considered to be not as good as Eastern-states-based women playwrights. Sorry Suzie, I don't begrudge you the work, but there are a bunch of women playwrights in Perth (including me) who are not getting work. Black Swan, Barking Gecko and Deckchair have all treated local women rather shabbily: commissioning them then not producing, or using them on low-profile productions then dropping them, or by blatantly favouring local men, despite them producing turkeys. I examined the topic earlier this year in relation to the three major adult companies: see http://alwaysworkingartists.blogspot.com/. Basically, local women playwrights are not supported by their local industry (or, in my case, are supported so far and no further) and we all know that writers can only grow and achieve with sustained industry support.

2. What are the invisible ceilings that you perceive are in place? How have these affected your sense of rising in the industry, that might be different to those which affect male playwrights?

See above. Basically I feel that the only explanation for me and my female peers not receiving commissions/productions while our male peers do, is that our work is considered to be not as good.

3. How do you 'feel' about your career in Australia? Have you ever seriously considered giving up?

I feel really shitty and angry. I haven't given up, but I have done the next best things: retreated to academia, where brains are appreciated, and left the country.

4. How has the group AWOL or other groups affected your sense of visibility or being heard?

It has made be feel less alone, and I feel very grateful that people with better careers than mine are affected by the same issues, and have spoken up.

5. What small changes in Aus theatre do you think might make a difference to your presence in the industry?

If government funded companies were obliged to program local female writers then I think I would stand a chance. I think a quota would make a huge difference to me and my female peers.

6. What big changes that might be effected over a long period would you consider would make a difference to your presence in the industry?

Same as above. But of course the overall big difference has to be a culture that values the arts, a population that goes to the theatre, an industry that's welcoming rather than elitist, that values storytelling rather than spectacle. Not sure what we can do about that.

7. What innovations at particular theatre companies (small or large) have made a positive impact on your career or perception of your career?

Not sure. Can't think of any. The benefits I have had from residencies have been somewhat illusory.

8. What suggestions can you make to funding bodies that can effect long term impact on women playwrights?
I have no idea. I'm feeling really negative about funding bodies as well, as I feel there is a very strong bias against scripted theatre and storytelling in favour of devised, post-dramatic work. The Australia Council's restructuring of how small-to-medium theatre companies are funded has reflected this bias: theatre companies that used to commission and produce work have been edged out in favour of companies that support individual visions or are "hubs" for de-centralised groups. This significantly reduces the number of companies with the time and resources to commission playwrights and support diversity.

9. (for those who have been in in the industry more than ten years): What previous practices/innovations in the industry which have now been deleted do you think should be re-introduced?

I have been working professionally for ten years but I don't feel as though I can answer this question, because I haven't been supported by the funding bodies or the major institutions, and I still feel like an outsider.
Katherine Mackinnon

Thanks for those questions. You are such a great organizer and contributer, and it's much appreciated. I’ve put a few answers below. Melissa, I also agree with the 50/50 quota. We just need to keep putting it in the positive. Commissions in this country are not excessive; we need to keep pushing original work, from male and female writers; commissions require a bit more planning ahead of time but can be more satisfactory, most especially when given the right development plan- a process that suits writer and play. Van, I think it’s good to reprogram female classics but I worry that companies will use translations and classics to say – see, we are doing lots of work by women - and still do very little in terms of developing new work. Catherine, I think the subsidy idea for plays assessed as risky sounds interesting but I still believe the real risk is that companies don’t/wont face up to the time factor and time commitment, and hence financial commitment needed to finish a play. (There’s still a lot of productions out there, by men and women that while good, are still a draft or two short of great.)

Susi, some answers to your questions, but really fleshed out versions of above, plus a few notes. Happy for my name to be associated with anything etc. Thanks Cath.

1. What do you think the major and minor issues facing women playwrights are in Australia? In your particular state?

• Connection to others –(obviously helped by awol/ those indiv who have formed larger groups have solved this in positive way)- the venue for writers to develop work that is political or experimenting with form- lack of financial support to write–(two writers have recently complained to me that they have had difficulty getting their work workshopped, and feel they are outside the club, which they perceive as being the funding club).

• The work of a company is built on playwrights – some living many hundreds of years ago, some living in other countries – as a nation its important to commit to developing contemporary Australian playwrights. But still our arts culture refuses to really commit. Despite fine speeches artistic directors often fail to see the obvious irony of the funding the company administration receives in relation to the playwrights, whose work they rely on. Theatre has suffered from the loss of many women playwrights who have moved across to film and television – although the traffic has been both ways. Most have cited the need to make a reasonable living. Wages for playwrights, (as for lighting designers and composers), has been relatively stagnant.

• Lack of good (individually focused) development for commissioned plays: An individual play development process for each commission might be a good policy to adopt rather than to try and create a standard company development process meant to fit all writers, or all plays. But some aspects of the development process could be standard; each receives so many hours of dramaturgy, a set number of public readings etc.

Other points:

• Commissioning original works versus translations: Translations of play classics can be wonderful, however, this is often an easy way for companies to develop new work with less risk. It’s important that new plays continue to be written if we want to tell those stories particular to our culture in relation to a global environment.

• (In the Australia Council tallying of plays by men and women, there needs to be a clear indication of what plays are translations and what are original ideas.)

• I see no difficulty with having a 50/50 quota on new commissions. In Australia, the number of commissions each company sets in progress is never excessive, and, with the variety of playwrights available, a quota system really only requires pre-planning.
• Some artistic directors have said recently that they fear a quota system would be limiting, others have mentioned that a female playwright receiving a commission (because of a quota system) may then doubt the rationale for their commission. (Why was I chosen-ability or quota?) But such systems are set in place to redress an imbalance. Women are under-represented and this needs to be addressed. There need be no fear of limiting an artistic vision, but it will require more thought in the planning of artistic programs. All new plays need nurturing, (despite the writers ability) and the kind of nurturing depends on the playwright. Understanding different development needs is part of the skill of a good literary manager. In reality a quota system will develop more dialogue between playwrights, literary managers and artistic directors, and their audiences.

10. (for those with OS experience): What practices have you observed OS that could be valuable as models in Australia?

• High Tide might be an interesting development model. A similar model could be adopted as adjacent to/associated with Playwriting Australia-although it needs extra/ new funding. Three new plays are taken to full production. Different outside directors are invited in to direct the plays. The playing space is in a small town and the town is involved in the festival. I spoke with one of the directors from recent years (from the Bush Theatre), who said- general gist- it bought him into contact with writers he didn’t know, and with a program that was more political than was usual for government funded companies. However I spoke with one of the writers whose play had been performed and although she was happy enough, it had been a difficult journey (as it can so often be.) This particular writer has moved onto writing a television series for BBC.
Van Badham

There is a traditional bias towards male playwrights in the career development process of playwriting. Note, this is not merely about men receiving more mainstage productions.

- We live in a patriarchal culture where at repeated points of development, women are stereotyped, generalised, genrefied, discriminated against and discouraged from participation in cultural production.
- A lack of visible female role models impoverishes the aspiration of female writers in the theatre.
- There is a discernible absence of obvious career-pathing for women.
- Mentorship and outreach are essential strategies for enfranchising female playwrights at emerging - and pre-emerging - stages.
- The paucity of opportunities for all playwrights privileges the access of assertive or aggressively careerist personalities - in male playwrights, this behaviour is rewarded, in female it is considered hostile or "difficult". Theatre being a collaborative artform with meagre resources and tight schedules, associations with "difficulty" are understandably undesirable... the consequence being that loud women are unemployable and the silent disappear.
- The solution is constant diversity assessment and ongoing reporting to redress gendered employment decisions at an onset stage.
- Theatre traditions reflect CENTURIES of culturally hegemonic values - plays traditionally favour narratives associated with a white, male, bourgeois experience.
- Therefore, plays that are structured around non-white or non-male or non-bourgeois protagonism or narratology appear overtly ideological - as the white, male, bourgeois viewpoint is hegemonically normalised it is not considered ideological. "Ideological" plays present a dramaturgical challenge lest they be accused of unFashionable didacticism, and for this reason threaten critical or "uncommercial" liability.
- Plays written by women that do not appear to be overtly ideological are those that reinforce traditional gender roles (concerning the “emotionality” of women, their relationship struggles, etc) and are consequently genrefied at a programming level.
- The solution here is engagement of the theatre community in a proactive cultural discussion that considers sexism towards women within a broader issue of diverse representation itself.
- While women lack a sense of entitlement as playwrights, it's crucial to recognise that that lack of entitlement is compounded by cultural factors of social class and ethnicity. The few women who do make it through to mainstage productions in Australia are overwhelmingly white and middle class.
- A start could be an industry-wide commitment to a diverse casting policy - that is, casting against ethnic stereotypes in traditional drama, as a means of exploding established perceptions of "role" and "representation".
Kit Lazaroo

Roundtable ideas

1) what are the minor and major issues facing women playwrights in Australia?

Some issues are not directly about gender but they accumulate with the issues that do relate to gender. For instance, the current preference amongst some artistic directors for work that is devised through the company rather originating through the writing of the text isn’t obviously about gender, but becomes refracted by the difficulty some women may have with the confidence to pitch ideas they haven’t worked up through a draft, a preference for working more intensively at home because of motherhood, different patterns and opportunities for socializing/networking etc.

I agree with the Wheeler Centre discussion that socializing is central to the problems women face.

I don’t have any statistics to show that women’s writing is more experimental or non-realistic than men’s, but I do wonder if the kind of experiments women make in theatre drift too far away from a male-centred reality for a male-minded industry to grasp their significance and validity. I feel with my own writing that I am caught in a trap where I need to write non-realist plays in order to escape the way reality dictates to women – but then my plays are dismissed by ADs because they can’t quite place the genre. So I think there may be a profound relationship between genre and gender that sits within some kind of blindspot.

Australia doesn’t work hard enough at critiquing the concept of canon, and this contributes to this blindspot. In Australia, I have no doubt that Canon = Men and whilst this persists we will continue to fail to understand the writing of plays by women.

It also seems that the pairing of a woman director with a woman playwright results in a double dose of marginalization.

I feel generally we have become too focused on awards and the like, but I feel especially for women that THEY MUST win awards in order to have any kind of visibility at all – but winning awards for women, while essential, is not sufficient for their progress.

2) I have had multiple nominations and awards, and some glowing reviews of productions in the independent scene. This has failed to translate into genuine interest amongst mainstage companies. Male peers all around me have made that transition. I don’t believe that the quality of my writing or my theatrical intelligence are at fault but again I can’t separate out my gender from my genre. So yes, the glass ceiling for me sits somewhere between acclaimed independent productions and the main stage., and I believe this translate across to the chances are that ones work will be received into the “Canon”.

3) I have many times been profoundly disheartened about my career and have seriously considered giving up – it is financially as well as psychologically costly to be limited to the independent scene. To give up however is like some kind of psychic suicide, or at least chopping off one’s legs – I write theatre because that is somehow closely tied in with my understanding of what it is to value life. So I have to keep going or else life will be hollow and I will not be fully myself.

4) The knowledge that women in general are marginalized made an enormous difference to me, helping me to see my situation as part of a larger pattern and not evidence that my writing must be crap. AWOL has helped diminish the sense of isolation, to think more critically about the dilemma, and to have hope that in Australia we can have a more intelligent conversation and discover constructive approaches.
5) More support to remount a show which has previously had a successful season; more deliberate inclusion of the work by women in the “Canon”; Playwriting Australia to deliberately support conversations/relationships between women writers and theatre companies.

6) More funding for independent theatre to support playwrights and their productions; accountability of the main stage regarding representation of women writers; greater access to avenues such as the Lawler Studio for women; residencies and fellowships for both emerging AND established women writers – a focus on one without the other just perpetuates the ghetto. Perhaps more opportunities for women directors would in the long term be positive for women writers.

7) I can’t think of ANY innovations by theatre companies that have directly given me any hope! The times plays of mine received an RE Ross award, I felt greatly encouraged but as it is an award, it is highly competitive and can’t be relied upon, and it does not translate automatically into funding for production.

8) I do think funding bodies need to make sure women playwrights are not disadvantaged by the prominence of devised works, adaptations, hybrid theatre etc. Funding to mainstage companies must have a mechanism to robustly encourage equity. There could be more funding specifically to remount independent productions that were acclaimed, to help us get out of the premiere culture and to support the presence of women’s work in our cultural lives.

9) Yes, we do need to rethink the loss of Playworks from the scene. What has happened over the last ten years has demonstrated that the odds are stacked against women. If the equivalent of Playworks were to be reintroduced, it could benefit greatly from an analysis of what has happened over the last decade, and what it is that women writers really want, and it would need to be robustly supported by policies from Australia Council and a range of theatre companies to make sure it could really make a difference. I wonder whether there could be an organization that would support both women writers and directors, as their difficulties do seem to be interrelated.
**Suzie Miller**

1. What do you think the major and minor issues facing women playwrights are in Australia? In your particular state?

The lack of acknowledgement in the industry, by those in power, that there is a lack of equity.

It appears that many decision makers are content with the response that ‘plays by women are not as good’ or that they are ‘choosing the best plays only and they happen not to be written by men’. This is the ABC of gender politics, and to have to begin again in explaining that all of us have limitations in the way we engage with non dominant voices just feels exhausting, at the very least it would surely have to be the case that the decision makers would acknowledge their own backgrounds, or examine their lack of own self education on the issues and recognise that they have limited vision when it comes to this area, and be prepared to listen to voices of experience.

The defensiveness of the industry really surprised me, that some men in the industry took it personally rather than acknowledging the politics and the experience behind the argument. I found that defensiveness unique to my experience in various other industries, a shock to experience in theatre where every decision made – from choice of writer and director, to choice of production, to choice of stories told – is political. As commentators on contemporary society I would expect theatre makers to be bold and confident in knowing that of course they are excluding various voices and to be open to discuss how they can best address and engage with them. It is obviously possible, as I have spoken to (male) Chris Mead, who has thought and educated himself long in these issues and as a consequence the gender split at PWA in engagement is at least 50/50.

2. What are the invisible ceilings that you perceive are in place? How have these affected your sense of rising in the industry, that might be different to those which affect male playwrights?

Yes the invisible ceiling in place is called the ‘taste argument’, and it legitimates choices made that reinforce gender imbalance. If decision makers, be they men or women, who are not properly thinking outside the gender divide, and who are not prepared to ask the questions of themselves and the theatres they work for, there is the wonderful umbrella of TASTE for them to use to exclude the ‘other’. The ‘other’ being not just women, but voices of ‘other’ generally.

The taste argument is impossible to have a counter argument to, and so successfully excludes women from the debate and consequently entrenches a male dominated storytelling culture that educates audiences that such storytelling is the ‘chosen’ paradigm and sends a circular message to women writers that their work is not as good.

As a parallel experience, as a working class university student I was received into the legal profession not because of privilege or status, or any contacts whatsoever, but on the pure basis of my high academic marks (many of which were gained while the university used pseudonyms in the examination process).

I knew that if any male law firm partner had the choice they would feel more comfortable mentoring a ‘mini me’ a young man that they felt they understood (even if this was not acknowledged) but in the incredibly sexist industry of law, there was the objective fact that if you had the highest marks at law school you were a choice candidate for making money for that firm and as such they were forced to overcome such barriers (reluctantly and not entirely) and found themselves hiring at least equal amounts of young women (often more) because they were the ones with the highest academic grades, and were therefore the best economic bet. Of course mid career this becomes harder to sustain because once the objective standard of grades is not written in black and white and performance is more subjective the gendered politics of that industry comes to the fore. Nevertheless women in law have fought really hard, and perhaps luckily for them are equipped with strong arguments about merit that they can literally point to and claim as their own.
In the theatre industry, this taste and merit argument are not objective, and yes that of course is unique to arts and theatre, but we must see how it has served to marginalize women so much further - to low percentage of engagement and low level production. In turn women playwrights have believed that they are not as good, are not armed with strong arguments to the ‘taste and merit’ debate and so have silently moved, or considered moving, from theatre.

3. How do you ‘feel’ about your career in Australia? Have you ever seriously considered giving up?

No I haven’t but I fully understand those that have. I have felt that the profession was difficult to figure out. It was hard to gauge why one could win awards and yet not be welcomed into theatre companies.

I decided to ‘test the water’ in the most objective manner I could by changing cities for my career, I now feel my career is firmly based in London. Plays that have never been produced OR EVEN HAD A RESPONSE from various theatre companies have been developed at the National Theatre in London (2 plays), have been produced (one has had 2 productions and tours, and is about to be performed in Brazil, it received terrific reviews and won an award in NY ‘Overall Excellence and Outstanding Playwriting Award at the NY fringe – amongst an international curated series of 200 plays), another has been produced and toured in Ireland and was voted Best of Irish Theatre 2009 by the Irish Times, in competition with Sebastian Barry and Connor MacPherson. Another play has just been produced in London to critical response and there are 2 productions ear marked for next year. Frantic Assembly in London have chosen one of my works for production, and on the basis of reading one of my plays Robert LePage has invited me personally to be attached as a writer to his next piece Le Cartes in Quebec 2012. These productions and acknowledgements have come about in the last 2 – 3 years in total.

I write this not as a list of my achievements but I did set out to see if the work that was being refused in Australia – indeed I didn’t even received letters from companies indicating they had read any of these plays bar one – was a result of that industry or was something that was about my work. I feel strongly that this was a test for me to undertake before I believed the lack of response as being testament to my work not being good enough.

I have commissions from London companies, am invited in constantly to meet with theatre professional of amazing standard and my work is discussed in detail and with incredible respect and a desire to know my body of work. That the National Theatre in London – highly competitive, and is choosing works from the best of the English speaking playwriting world – has chosen two of my works to develop in the studio there, funding actors and director and choreographers to develop it, is an indication of the difference in the worlds I inhabit. I note that there are more funds in London, but there are also so many more writers, you are competing against the worlds best English speaking writers, and yet it appears that Australian women have more hope over there than they do in their own backyard.

I know that many of the women on our AWOL network have had a similar experience to mine in their careers overseas compared to Australia, and I challenge the theatre decision makers in this country to put this down to merit. At the very least there has to be an acknowledgment of a case of decision makers wearing ‘male middle class coloured glasses’, whether they choose to or not.

4. How has the group AWOL or other groups affected your sense of visibility or being heard?

I sat on the floor of my tiny flat in London reading an email from Patricia Cornelius, a wonderful articulate email about a recent experience of hers. I thought the content of that email was so reassuring to other less vocal (and frightened to be vocal in case it ‘hurts my career’ women playwrights), and then and there started AWOL Australian Women
playwrights On Line, as a chance to share such experience. Within minutes Van Badham was on the first member and amazingly within a few hours the numbers were rising. Here I was in London (and incidentally Van as well) and here were these wonderful writers from Australia desperate for engagement and understanding of what was going wrong in Australia. It has been a source of great debate and insight for me, and the sheer intelligence of the women on line is exciting. Here are writers who have quietly thought about these issues for a long time expressing it to a writers-only audience, no holds barred, and not prepared to stay still any longer. A great support and network that continues to grow. There are currently 56 members, all active and engaged. Some of these members have attached the written submissions along with this one to form part of the AWOL submissions. I note that some emerging writers felt unsure about being publicly outspoken and indeed fear for their careers if they are, but have quietly provided their experience to AWOL.

I note that one of the initial discussions on AWOL was the fear of speaking out – feeling alone when one does so, and therefore repercussions in what is perceived as a ‘invite only’ type industry. If one’s work was not being invited in, was there a legitimate concern that speaking out would in fact marginalise them further as a trouble maker – it appears that women are trouble makers if they speak out and men are assertive and political.

I note that the AWG have been a tremendous support to women playwrights, and it is interesting that through the AWG we realised that women in TV and Film are not represented in the same small numbers as those of us in theatre are. In comparison to theatre writers, they are working and are highly respected in those industries. In fact many of those writers were originally theatre writers and gave up because they recognized that their talent was sought on screen. The number split of women and men engaged as writers in TV and film appears to be a much more equal split. It appears that theatre has a lot to learn from screen in how this came about.

5. What small changes in Aus theatre do you think might make a difference to your presence in the industry?

In general as a playwright I want to feel respected as a professional. I want the companies to actively engage with writers, that when they receive a script they afford that playwright time and at the very least the respect of a response. I think at the very least playwrights with ‘runs on the board’ deserve a professional response, what a waste of arts funding to develop artists to a certain level and then just ignore them. Emerging playwrights also need this respect or they will give up. For women this lack of respect and engagement has particularly calamitous effects. I note that for emerging playwrights there is the issue of stumbling as a learner and being classified by those stumblings for the rest of their career as a certain ‘type’ of writer. This is dangerous as it means that theatre companies might read early work and make a decision that is attached to ‘life’ for that playwright, or make a decision about their personality or their image that also is stuck for the remainder of that playwright’s career. Once this happens there is no way to have the growth of a writer’s work accepted into theatre companies. They are effectively out to pasture.

I think formulating and disseminating a series of self-questions similar to those by Francesca Smith that those reading plays and making decisions need to ask themselves, to challenge themselves.

Clearly we need to have a record of process of selection of writers. Transparency processes are in effect in every other government funded activity and must be instilled in the arts as well, particularly when the numbers in equitable distribution are clearly very low.

6. What big changes that might be effected over a long period would you consider would make a difference to your presence in the industry?

There is no doubt whatsoever that the funding bodies are the ones who have to set the standard. There must be an equal split, the possibility of redressing imbalances. This applies not only to women but to writers of different class, culture, voice etc. . The Australian council
of the Arts by the legislation that establishes it is required by law to set standards so that the arts funding is not just based on accepted taste but as all tax payers are contributing, that there is some accountability. It is extraordinarily in a country as advanced as Australia that accountability of arts funding on gender lines at the very least are not distributed appropriately and decisions based on such numbers are not made. While I have my law hat on – the sex discrimination laws effectively would classify that many of the practices with regards to public funding of theatres that exclude women (and of course we are not saying by choice, but what is choice, if the same decision is made over and over again where does choice start?).

I note that a few years ago I innocently suggested to a major AD of a Sydney theatre, that perhaps they might consider a season of women playwrights, there are say only 4-6 slots a year, and the confusion, and almost flabbergasted response was amusing, do they not realise that for years and years women artists and women audiences have been subjected to the same in reverse, and while not every year is all male, there are indeed some years that are, and in those years there appeared to be nothing unremarkable about that at the time.

7. What innovations at particular theatre companies (small or large) have made a positive impact on your career or perception of your career?

Invited in as an artistic associate.

Invited as a senior reader of plays at a major London theatre

Residency at the London National Theatre

Residency at the Ransom New Writing Theatre, Ireland

2 x Developments at the national theatre

My attachment to Frantic Assembly

Various awards from Aus and overseas.

Being made to feel visible and included by various ADs

Playworks.

8. What suggestions can you make to funding bodies that can effect long-term impact on women playwrights?

A very real and very strong commitment to redressing the imbalance. A forum that directly impacts on production funding and commitment to the stories of women and to the voices of other. An acknowledgement that the merit and taste argument hide other agendas that their champions may or may not be aware of. This does not mean we need to outlaw the taste argument but to delve into it and explore the factors it takes into account.

Educating and indeed having ongoing education of those theatre company members who READ the plays, who make the early decisions. Dramaturgy should be real dramaturgy not just a director deciding he/she is a dramaturg. There is an art in dramaturgy and playwrights are often vastly more educated than those reading their plays.

9. (for those who have been in the industry more than ten years): What previous practices/innovations in the industry which have now been deleted do you think should be re-introduced?

Residencies. The STC group of writers that was present many years ago – I can’t remember this name but I started out in theatre in 2001 and I remember noticing that group and thinking what a terrific innovation it was, they met and engaged with each other and directors, and had small readings and small productions.
Literary managers who are also dramaturgically educated, and who undertake to do continuing education in that area. The position of literary manager needs to be taken seriously, not as an add-on in a theatre, nor someone who doubles as something else. Readers of plays for competitions should be screened for the way they read plays and each play should be read by at least 2 readers to allow for mistakes.

A greater appreciation for text based work.

A return to the understanding that writers are not the enemy.

Mentoring – while I never had a mentor in theatre I have mentored marginalized and disadvantaged law students and I think this is the only way to allow young and emerging professional to have access to the industry, to networks, to engagement and to a humanized face of an intimidating world.

Setting up some hubs and networks – so that there can be work read and discussed.

Companies making the effort to see everything that is on in their own city. If small companies in the UK can do that, without funding, then in the much smaller pool that is Sydney or other Australian cities, there should be a guarantee that a senior member of staff at a state funded theatre company will see everything. The bad the good and the terrific.

Revive Australian theatre from a culture of compliant and not good enough to one of excitement and possibility. I feel that the ‘rules of discussion’ of the work of others in Australia are ones that do not allow for possibility of improvement. A more sophisticated discussion acknowledging that a work is ‘in progress’ could be made. As a reader of professional works in London, there is a strict standard required or readers – none of the quick, ill-considered or easily critical responses will be entertained or tolerated. The attitude there is that someone has written this work and there are always at least two readers, which provides a check on easily dismissive comments. There is also a detailed discussion about the work that looks for what works and what doesn’t. I have been privy to the reports written by directors in assessing various competitions in Australia while I have been a co-reader, and it was a shock to discover the form that the so-called ‘clever’ witticism, comments and rejection of work took. There is no point sending work to a competition, a company or a government-funded agency that has no respect for writing as a profession.

10. (for those with OS experience): What practices have you observed OS that could be valuable as models in Australia?

I could write a whole submission on this alone, as no doubt many others also could. I would be happy to provide a full submission on this should it be required. Many of my suggestions above area gleaned from my experience in OS industries. The UK and London models at various theatres provide numerous innovations that Australia could easily adapt to its culture here.

Suzie Miller
Playwright
LL.M; B.Sc.(Hons), MA (Theatre), NIDA (playwriting)
Vanessa Bates

Yes, thanks Suzie. EXCELLENT!

I think the fact that the ozco has responded and is supporting this roundtable indicates they also see a problem that needs redressing. This is great and I think allows for combined problem solving.

I think the 50/50 percent programming woman is good. What about if it is 50/50 over more than one programming year? If it is 50/50 over three years say, (as opposed to every year) it means that some years they would be able to have more women playwrights than men. It also gives companies’ flexibility in choice. There are many many factors to take into account when programming, the 50/50 thing will be one more thing to consider.

I also think the idea of theatre companies being seen as closed off to all but a few needs to be looked at by the companies. Ie they need to take this on and address it. Forums, speakers and readings are all great but what about residencies? The great thing about writers residencies in the past was that a writer got to interact with a company in a sort of nuts and bolts way-not just if/when they were having a play produced. More residencies please.
Virginia Rose

Answers to some Roundtable questions:

2. What are the invisible ceilings that you perceive are in place? How have these affected your sense of rising in the industry, that might be different to those which affect male playwrights?

What I see is failure to encourage playwrights of the female persuasion. For instance my writer peers in my Australian Writers' Guild Writers' Group are excited by some of the qualities of my play Keepers that I'm working on at the moment – in particular they talk of its breadth of imagination, and depth and range of themes, and the power of the language and the characters and so on – but I have found it very difficult to get any such encouragement or even any response from the Australian theatre companies I've approached.

When I discussed this with dramaturg Peter Matheson – who is also encouraging in his response to the same play that most of the AWG group likes – and asked why do I not get the same sort of encouragement that a male playwright with my potential and promise would get, Peter said the answer was simple – though not publicly admitted – “You're the wrong sex.”

I know that my work needs development, and I am all the time learning and applying new script structuring and writing skills – but the point is that male playwrights are encouraged and supported by theatre companies to undertake exactly this kind of development of promising scripts. Because I am female, it seems, I have to do all this on my own, before they are going to show any interest at all.

This in turn makes me feel, why would I bother offering my work to any company in Australia – except Merrigong, who have shown an interest, thanks to their literary manager Anne-Louise Rentell.

I have had more response to and interest in my work from the Royal Court and High Tide in the UK, than from major Australian companies.

3. How do you 'feel' about your career in Australia? Have you ever seriously considered giving up?

My career as a playwright in Australia has been distinguished by a very long hiatus, after a promising start way back in 1985-93. But part of the hiatus has been a result of my need to improve my skills, and find ways to wrestle my talents and ideas into suitable dramatic forms.

I have seriously considered giving up playwriting several times. However about 18 months ago I guess – largely because I got some encouragement for an earlier draft of Keepers, from Noel Tovey and Peter Matheson, and then from Anne-Louise Rentell – I decided to go for broke and have a serious try at breaking in to the playwriting scene in the English-speaking world.

4. How has the group AWOL or other groups affected your sense of visibility or being heard?

Thanks to my membership of the AWG Writers' Group, and my inclusion in AWOL, I feel visible and appreciated as a playwright at last.

It is also very helpful that both these groups pass on and link members to development opportunities.

5. What small changes in Aus theatre do you think might make a difference to your presence in the industry?

Giving my work some readings with actors.
6. What big changes that might be effected over a long period would you consider would make a difference to your presence in the industry?

Including the script writers in the play production teams is I think the single most important big change that is needed in the Australian theatre industry – which we must acknowledge is, like the film industry, a “cottage industry” in terms of it’s small size, and the very sporadic work it is able to offer to the professionals in every calling who grace the industry.

The writer’s job does not end at the theatre door – getting the work up on the floor, and tweaking and adjusting it to fit the actors, and the times and the places that we are living in, is an essential part of the playwright’s work.

This is such an important point – the writer of theatre works belongs in the theatre with the other theatre workers.

Modern Australian theatre companies must include the writers in the production process.

9. (for those who have been in in the industry more than ten years): What previous practices/innovations in the industry which have now been deleted do you think should be re-introduced?

Membership-based playwrights’ organisations, such as the Australian National Playwrights’ Centre, and Playworks Women Playwrights’ Organisation.

10. (for those with OS experience): What practices have you observed OS that could be valuable as models in Australia?

In the UK, the Royal Court, the National Theatre, and High Tide, are all open to – and in fact invite – unsolicited submissions from playwrights from all over the world.

This is in marked contrast to companies such as the STC, which insists that submissions be solicited, and through an agent, or some other person of influence.

Those UK companies welcome scripts from all comers precisely because it brings so many more potentially fabulous plays into their hands.

Yours sincerely,

Virginia Jane Rose
Playwright
“Wombat Hill”
290 Quinlans Rd
Verona NSW 2550
SOLUTIONS ROUNDTABLE
Submission from Melbourne playwright Merilee Moss

I have been a playwright for more than 20 years. I've had 8 plays produced, including If Looks Could Kill, Over the Hill, Empty Suitcase and Tango Femme. In 2010 I won an AWGIE for my play Night Breakfast.

I'm currently writing a PhD about women playwrights, focusing on Oriel Gray (1950s) and Patricia Cornelius (2000s), so I have quite a lot to say on the subject, but I'll try to keep it brief.

As you may be aware, in 1955, Australian playwright Oriel Gray shared the Playwrights' Advisory Board prize for Best Australian Play with Ray Lawler’s play Summer of the Seventeenth Doll. However, Gray’s play, The Torrents, has faded from public memory; Lawler’s play (now referred to reverently as ‘The Doll’) has travelled the world, and is considered by many scholars of literature to be the most significant work in Australia’s theatrical history.

There are uncanny similarities between Oriel Gray and contemporary Melbourne playwright Patricia Cornelius. She too is left-wing, she too has won major awards, and she too has yet to be produced in the mainstage.

Why did the Elizabethan Theatre Trust (and other gatekeepers) decide not to produce Gray’s play, but to produce Lawler’s play. And how did this alternative choice affect the Australian theatre industry? The Doll was a nostalgic nod to male archetypes such as the bushman and the digger. The Torrents was an optimistic tale about the ‘new woman’, with themes related to equity and the environment.

It might have helped me when I started out as a fledgling playwright in the late 70s, if Oriel Gray’s name had been in lights – or at least on the radar - and her optimistic themes had been allowed to evolve and influence Australian theatre. It may have influenced my confidence as well as the direction of my writing and trajectory of my career. I wrote about women because that was what I knew and yet my work was labelled political. I now see that this had little to do with any artistic choice or lack of aesthetics, and a lot to do with how it was viewed and received by the mainstream. I wrote for community theatre because I did not feel there was a place for me on the mainstage.

In 2011, 12% of plays produced by major theatre companies will have been written by women. Let’s not go on making the same mistakes. Let’s allow women playwrights and their aesthetics, themes and ideas onto the mainstage. It’s easy – all you have to do is match one for one with a 50/50 quota system; female/male, including mainstage revivals of work by Australian women writers.

Merilee Moss, 2 August 2011
Melissa Reeves

I’m coming up from Melbourne. This is terrific to have a dialogue now. They’re great questions Suzie. I feel like the most important thing is that we stick to the 50 50 quotient idea, and argue persuasively and passionately why. Melissa
Hi Suzi,

It has been great to read all the various comments and perspectives via the AWOL emails. Glad to be included in such stimulating discussion. I am in full agreement with all points made. I hope I have not left this submission too late.

Here are my two points:

1. Community and Youth theatre. My experience as a writer and community artist is that the community, youth and student theatre sectors are full of fabulous writers, directors, producers and facilitators – and like areas such as teaching, welfare, health and child care these three areas are predominantly ‘staffed’ by female artists.

Unfortunately, like teaching, welfare, health etc very little status is attributed to youth, community or student theatre and my experience (over 20 years) is that it is very difficult for women writers (and artists) to transition from or between these areas of theatre into so called ‘professional’ theatre.

Funding bodies are often quite prescriptive in what constitutes an emerging or developing writer and these definitions frequently state that work that has had professional casts is deserving of emerging or developing status. My experience in community, youth and student theatre is that the cast members (though not professional) are extremely discerning and can smell a stinker of a play a mile away and if the work is lame they won’t engage. This forces writers in these sectors to have to work incredibly hard at their art in order to develop work that people feel is ‘real’ and strong and engaging theatre.

Writers in community theatre have come a long way since the late 70’s and early 80s where work was often denigrated or dismissed for being too preachy, too didactic, too obvious etc. The work that I see and am employed to do is frequently cutting edge, interesting and challenging – yet still frequently ignored or dismissed.

Additionally the audiences who see youth, community and student theatre are often not traditional theatre goers. Funding bodies frequently request funding applicants to address and state ways in which their work will increase audiences. For me this is often a ‘no brainer’ - support the work done (predominantly by women) in community, youth and student theatre and you will capture new audiences. My experience has been that new audiences often state (in feedback forms, evaluations etc) that they don’t go to the theatre because they don’t understand the work – yet feel that they can understand the work that is presented to them in more community contexts. Surely this is a good thing for the industry overall. Demystify the arts – it will create more audiences and ultimately more dollars which appears to be a driving factor in the Australian theatre industry.

How can we get funding bodies, theatre companies, producers, peak bodies etc to see the work developed in community and youth theatre and give it the status that it deserves and support the women who work on these projects greater exposure so that they can move between both community and mainstream theatre. For me community, youth and student theatre has been my bread and butter. Without these forms of theatre I would not have worked as a practising artist. I now have over 20 years of experience but still find it extremely difficult to be taken seriously as a mature artist from funding bodies, theatre companies and peak theatre bodies.

I have received great reviews, feedback, funding and even a national award as a community and youth theatre writer – but still can’t ‘crack it’ within the mainstream or larger company sector. I frequently fall into the thinking that my work is bad or weak or not up to scratch – but when I am more buoyant and resilient realise that this is not the case. My work is just overlooked by the broader industry.

In one of your emails you posed a question about whether women playwrights have ever felt
like giving it all up. I have to say yes to this question. In the last few years I have submitted applications to a wide variety of funding rounds, playwright development funds, awards etc and all have been rejected. Yet I have worked as a practising artist (i.e, earning an income) for many years and feel that I have skills and something to say about and within our society. I’m not an emerging artist but can’t get past the emerging artist barriers and I suspect that there are many other female artists who share similar experiences.

2. Bring back a national peak body for women writers such as Playworks.

The most supported I have ever felt as a playwright was when I had engagement with Playworks. When I first joined Playworks I was working as a regional based artist and the organisation gave me the opportunity to feel that I belonged to a broader arts industry. Working as a regional or rural artist can be quiet an isolating experience and having a peak body gave me a broader network to engage with.

In one of the AWOL emails over the past week someone wrote about feeling that they were not in the ‘club’. If you are not a tertiary trained artist, not urban based or have not had work produced by mainstream or professional companies it is very easy to feel that you are not in the ‘club’.

Peak bodies such as Playworks assist women to feel that they do belong to the ‘club’ and that club is full of women making art. Ultimately we all want the same thing – to make and show work.

Best wishes to all those attending the forum.

Thanks
Tee O’Neill

1. What do you think the major and minor issues facing women playwrights are in Australia? In your particular state?

• There are not enough plays written by women, especially local female writers. Theatre Companies are conservative so if they put on a female writer, she is a ‘name’ that they produce over and over again. Which is fine keep producing her! Just don’t think that this is enough for female writing content.

• If your best work is not performed, as well as being hard on your self esteem- which affects your ability to produce more work - you don’t improve as a writer. To develop as a writer you need to see your play in front of audiences. That is how the male writers get better and better.

• Writers who are shy in promoting their work can very easily remain invisible. A reading of an early draft is often where the promising play’s life will end. Difficult for female playwrights to be inside theatre company culture; to feel that we have an important place in the administration.

• Theatres that do produce text based theatre buy plays that have been proven to be box office successes overseas. Theatres here are reluctant to take risks with new plays and often don’t have the creative resources (ie a trained dramaturg) to develop them.

• We need to be braver and take risks with local writers. We should encourage and train dramaturges. We should promote our own stories written by our own writers and make sure there is a vibrant new writing culture in every state of Australia. We should tour the best of the local plays so we can see a lot of interstate work and playwrights can get the touring royalties that give them proper financial security. Look to the Royal Court and other new writing theatres in the UK, (not to just poach their local writer’s play) but as models in how to make local writing and the local playwright’s work relevant and an exciting night out for local communities.

2. What are the invisible ceilings that you perceive are in place? How have these affected your sense of rising in the industry, that might be different to those which affect male playwrights?

• That female stories are not as interesting / important to the people choosing the seasons than male stories. That both male and female Artistic Directors favour stories with a male viewpoint. That people like working with their ‘mates’.

3. How do you ‘feel’ about your career in Australia? Have you ever seriously considered giving up?

• I only feel like I have a ‘career’ when I am overseas. In Australia I feel that it is so much harder to get anyone to read your work with a fresh and open mind. My last three plays have all won or been short listed for major awards yet they have not been produced in Australia- two of them have been produced overseas. I may have given up if I didn’t have contacts overseas that were made when I won a Churchill Fellowship in 1998.

• I find that my plays always do well when they are actually read! And that means when I send them to competitions! When I, or my agent, sends them to theatres I suspect they are either not read at all or not read with care. I have rarely received an official response from the theatres- just silence. In the UK and Ireland there is a system in place where every play is responded to in a three tier system.
  1. A polite letter of rejection,
  2. A Not this play but we would like to read more of your work so come in for a chat about this.
  3. A Yes we want this play.
• I mentor promising young female writers and I find that the problems I have are even worse for them. Two of the writers I mentored are living overseas. Patrick White Award Winner Melissa Bubnic and St Martins Playwright Award winner Carly Nugent. I directed a reading of Carly Nugent’s RE Ross Award winning play at 45 Downstairs and I called all the theatres to send a representative and no-one came. The play was extremely well received by the audience but the play is yet to be picked up anywhere.

4. How has the group AWOL or other groups affected your sense of visibility or being heard?
• I feel less alone, less isolated but it also makes me feel that this problem is so endemic that solving it, in the time I have left to write, may be difficult.

5. What small changes in Aus theatre do you think might make a difference to your presence in the industry?
• Accessibility - the willingness to engage with writers, for people in the theatre industry to be much more pro-active in seeking out female writers especially the mid career and established playwrights and have them involved. Artistic Directors and Artistic Associates should invite writers in. Ask them what they are writing. Be in touch with their plays and their careers. Let the writers know that the theatre is also a home to them.
• Gate Keepers such as Tom Wright say that there are no writers of quality that are not programmed at STC. This must be challenged. Has he read or seen enough female work to know this?

6. What big changes that might be effected over a long period would you consider would make a difference to your presence in the industry?
• Have a resident playwright at every theatre company with a twelve month tenure.
• Have a quota system - one male writer then one female writer.
• Give theatre companies incentives to produce local female work.

7. What innovations at particular theatre companies (small or large) have made a positive impact on your career or perception of your career?
• Theatre in the Raw at Playbox,
• Hard Lines at MTC.
• The mid range theatre company theatre @ risk that commissioned and produced a series of my works.

8. What suggestions can you make to funding bodies that can effect long term impact on women playwrights?
• Have a special fund just for addressing the imbalance.
• Bring Playworks back.
• Have funds that are for the promotion and development of female plays and female playwrights.
• Give the flagship theatre companies incentives to produce local female work.
• Create a national theatre company dedicated to only new and old Australian work with fifty percent works by women.

9. (for those who have been in the industry more than ten years): What previous practices/innovations in the industry which have now been deleted do you think should be reintroduced?
• Playbox Theatre (produced and published at least eight Australian plays each year)
• Theatre in the Raw at Playbox. Funding to develop and publicly present several plays a year
• Playwright in Residence in theatres (MTC had Michael Gurr as playwright in residence)
• Playworks - much missed agency devoted to raising the status of female writers and
writing in theatre.

- Hard Lines at MTC- Julian Meyrick would nurture a writer and a play over 12 months.

10. (for those with OS experience): What practices have you observed OS that could be valuable as models in Australia?

- Playwrights are given status in the UK and Ireland. There is an acknowledgement that theatre needs writers and they are respected. Yes it’s tough and competitive and good plays can be ignored but there is more openness and opportunity. I have worked in the literary departments of Royal Court, Abbey Theatre and Soho Theatre and they remain open to the possibility that a good play can be sent in the post. Australia’s focus on building relationships can mean that if the playwright isn’t lucky enough to find a company or director interested in their plays they are left isolated. Sometimes it is better to get the play and then find the best director for it.

- Lally Katz success was that she found a great collaborator with Chris Kohn and she could build a body of produced work. I also had a great collaboration with Chris Bendall at theatre @ Risk but this should not be the only way a good piece of writing for the theatre can live.

- In Australia it is so very difficult to get the people in theatre to read plays that have not been ‘proven’ while in the UK and in Ireland theatre makers are open to the possibility that an unproven writer could write a smashing play. Directors are encouraged to seek out new writers and build relationships with developing writers.
Patricia Cornelius

Hello from Hanoi, I'm here on an Asialink residency for 3 months. I've already given Melissa Reeves my fairly short and pithy input for the round table. Basically it comes down to a demand for a quota, and to not being overly polite. I wish you all well with it and hope that it will address the terrible and miserable state of affairs for women playwrights in particular and to Australian theatre in general.
cheers
Patricia
Noëlle Janaczewska

Yes, thanks for the excellent questions Suzie. Just wanted to add my ten cents' worth to Vanessa's about residencies. Wouldn't it be great to see a range of residencies--of varying lengths and aims, not only for young or emerging writers, but also for mid-career and well established writers as well?

They are a good way of expanding a company's knowledge about who is out there and what they are writing; they may be a useful way of developing new areas or genres of work for the writers; they could be a good way of breaking up that 'in-group/out-group environment that is so prevalent and such a barrier for many women writers (especially those of us not so efficient at, or enamoured of the whole networking and foyer thing!)--assuming of course that the companies do look outside their inner circles and comfort zones for their writers-in-residence. Should any residency scheme eventuate, companies should be obliged to advertise them.

Thanks and good luck to all the writers attending the day, and to the organisers.

Noëlle

Noëlle Janaczewska
Melissa Bubnic

2. What are the invisible ceilings that you perceive are in place? How have these affected your sense of rising in the industry, that might be different to those which affect male playwright?

I didn't realise there even was a problem until I saw the figures: male playwrights are getting their plays on much more so than female playwrights. The only conclusion I could reach is that a) men write better plays than women, or b) companies for whatever reason like the plays men are writing more. I don't believe male playwrights are inherently better than women so it has to be that whoever is choosing to put on plays are biased (intentionally or otherwise) towards a male perspective.

I think the major issue women writers face is getting company management to even admit that there is a problem. I still feel that despite the articles, forums, and meetings with Ozco, the perception from companies is that this is a 'storm in a teacup', and it's a bunch of writers whinging because their plays aren't getting on. I'm not whinging because my plays aren't getting on; I'm whinging because hardly any women writers' plays are getting on. Until companies can admit that there's a bias (unintentional as it may be), they can't begin to interrogate the reasons that guide their choices and we can't begin to effect any change.

5. What small changes in Aus theatre do you think might make a difference to your presence in the industry?

I think a more transparent process on getting plays from script to stage would be a positive thing. How do plays get commissioned? Do they get commissioned? What's the process? Who decides? I think this could be more formalised. I'm completely in the dark on how the process works currently and that feels very disempowering.

6. What big changes that might be effected over a long period would you consider would make a difference to your presence in the industry?

This is an industry where most practitioners work freelance. This means little job security, no paid maternity leave, no childcare provision, no sick leave, etc. This is a problem that both male and female artists encounter but given that the majority of child-rearing still predominantly falls on female shoulders, female artists are disproportionately disadvantaged. And given that women are more likely than men to act as primary care givers (supporting children, elderly parents, etc), they are more likely to give up artistic practice to take on these other responsibilities. Long term, we need to make it viable for women to continue practising as artists until retirement, or beyond. Affordable childcare and paid maternity leave would make a massive difference to keeping more women working as artists beyond their 20s and 30s.

10. (for those with OS experience): What practices have you observed OS that could be valuable as models in Australia?

In the UK, almost every theatre company you want to submit a play to requires you to fill out an Equal Opportunities Monitoring form where they collect data such as gender, age, ethnicity, etc. This is the same for every job application you submit also. The reason being is that you can't demonstrate your commitment to equal opportunities if you don't have any way of telling whether you are committed to equal opportunities in practice. You can't combat institutionalised racism or sexism if you have no way of confirming that it actually exists. Collecting and reporting the data means we can move on from the status quo where the debate is 'there's a problem/no there's not' to 'there's a problem, so what do we do about it?'
Peta Murray

Hello, Suzie,
I had a conversation with Patricia Cornelius, Sara Hardy and Melissa Reeves, all AWOL members, here in Melbourne last week about this. Melissa will be attending the round table and is intending to put our views. In a nutshell:

Consensus was that transparency and accountability around public monies dispersed to funded companies must be increased.

We were all pro-quota for as long as is necessary to restore some kind of parity.

I also suggested that given what now seems clear was the premature demise of Playworks, there needs to be an individual at Ozco who is responsible for pursuing change on the gender equity front - the "women's officer" of the olde parlance...?

Hope to meet you and so many of the others on this list one day, and thanks so much for starting it up. It's been a great, and already very effective forum, and a wonderful way of focusing the energies. It's certainly re-invigorated me!

Your questions below are fabulous and if I had more time I'd love to think through them all. I seriously don't have answers to lots of them; I don't understand how the current situation has come to be, except by a kind of stealth or oversight... Perhaps, somehow while everyone's eyes were fixed on non-text based stuff, an adaptations of recent years, a big swifty was being pulled. I feel gulled into believing we were dealing with a level playing field, and so as the stats have come through I have been gob-smacked.

It's been very confronting at a personal level too. For many years I have called myself the slowest writer in the southern hemisphere and struggled with what I cast as "writers' block." In the light of what's happened lately I have done a bit of a three-sixty. I no longer see this as me vs all my inner angst and personal demons stuff.... I see my slowness as a more pragmatic response to the state of play. That, in itself has been a remarkable revelation. And it's got me writing again. Because I have most certainly been one of the ones on the brink of giving up. Daily, and for years.

So, as I said the other day, having AWOL has been a tonic... It has revitalised my writing, and also re-connected me to what got me writing for theatre in the first place, a belief in women's stories and the need to find my own way of telling some.

To do this means a reconnection with the poor, rough, the vulgar, popular and community theatre traditions I came from. And to answer one of your questions below, that's where I found companies that gave me my apprenticeship and affirmation as an emerging writer etc. Most of them have disappeared now - the TIE and Community Theatre companies.

Call me old-fashioned, but I rue their disappearance. Likewise the demise of Playworks and the majority of the "women's theatre" companies - a la Vitalstatistix - and women's theatre groups and troupes..... It still makes steam come out of my ears when I go to "the theatre" and see the audiences chockers with women, faithfully attending the stuff the boys serve up, year in, year out...

I'd love to see Playworks or similar resurrected. Better still, what about a big fat National Women's Theatre Company started somewhere?