

## The Status of Women in Theatre – The Ontario Experience (Volume 8, No. 1, January 2004)

*This issue of ArtFacts examines data on the participation rates of women as primary creators in professional Ontario theatre companies. It compares those participation rates for four seasons ending in 2002-03 with those found by Rina Fraticelli in a cross-Canada survey in the early 1980's, and by the New York State Council for the Arts in 2002.*

Just over 20 years ago, Rina Fraticelli published a ground-breaking study on the place of women in Canadian theatre.<sup>1</sup>

In 2002, the New York State Council for the Arts published a similarly focused study called *Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement*.

How does Ontario stack up?

### The Past

Fraticelli looked at the years between 1978 and 1981, analyzing 1156 productions by 104 theatres across Canada. The picture looked like this:

- ▲ Women playwrights produced – 10%
- ▲ Women directors – 13%
- ▲ Women Artistic Directors – 11%

She tried to trace the roots of this disparity a number of ways, including the proportion of theatre schools graduates who were women, and the proportion of female Canada Council jurors between 1972 and 1981. She also noted that women make up the majority of audiences and arts volunteers. While volunteers, audiences and graduates were disproportionately female, jurors were not (at less than one-quarter of all Canada Council jurors).

### The Present

Over the past four seasons, roughly one-third of the playwrights, directors and Artistic Directors engaged by the Ontario companies in the OAC database were women.

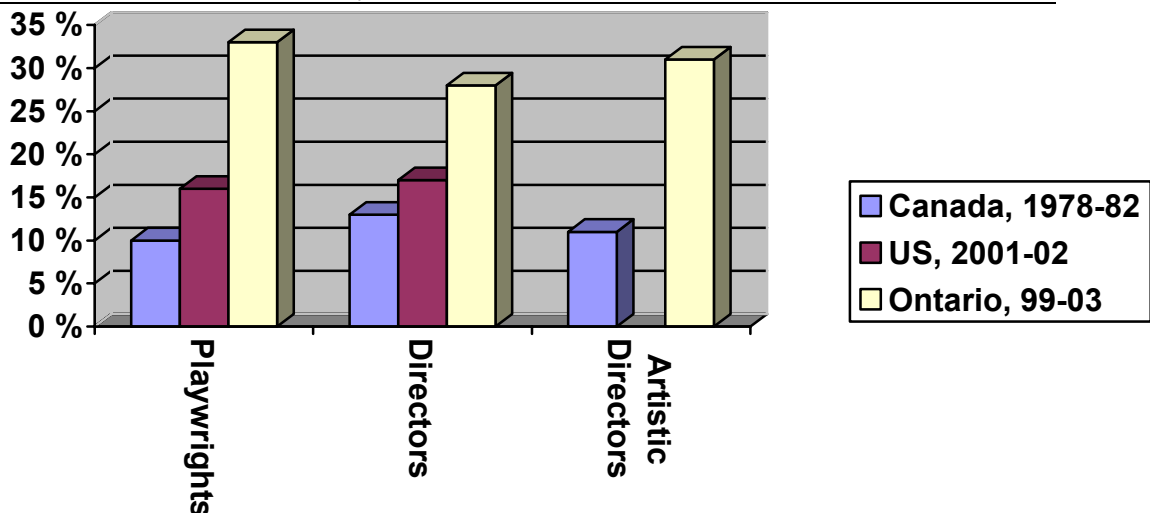
The sample is made up of professional theatre companies funded on an operating basis by the Theatre Office of the Ontario Arts Council during the seasons 1999/00, 2000/01, 2001/02 and 2002/03. There are only anglophone companies in the sample, as francophone companies are funded through a different OAC program. During the four seasons, the number of organizations funded varied between 48 and 52. Not all produce theatre, however, because training organizations, fringe festivals and service organizations are all funded. The sub-group of producers was 44 in the first year and 45 in the final, and during this time, they produced and presented a total of 812 productions.

On average over the four years:

- ▲ Women playwrights produced – 33%
- ▲ Women directors – 28%
- ▲ Women Artistic Directors – 31%

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<sup>1</sup> Rina Fraticelli, *The Invisibility Factor*, FUSE Magazine, September 1982



### The American Experience

The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) convened a series of meetings of scholars, artists, critic, producers and sociologists over three years to discuss a phenomenon observed by the Council’s Theatre Program – few mainstage productions were written or directed by women, particularly in the larger theatres. Surveys of Broadway and regional theatres confirmed that while some strides had been made in the participation rates of women since the late Sixties, the rate was still significantly lower than that of men. According the study’s analysis of the 2001-02 season preview edition of *American Theatre* magazine, regional theatres in the US engaged women as follows:

- ▲ Women playwrights produced – 16%
- ▲ Women directors – 17%
- ▲ Women Artistic Directors – not included in the study

### The Roots

The Fraticelli report observed that women constituted a majority of both audience members and volunteers, citing a 1975 OAC study that identified 60% of all arts audiences as women, and a similar study in Edmonton that cited 58%.

Given the very high proportion of women serving as volunteers and making up the theatres’ audiences, she found the miniscule numbers of women in the “key creative capacities” to be disturbing.

The situation today has changed somewhat, although women still form a majority of both consumers and volunteers. In a 2002 report, OAC found that slightly more Ontario women than men attend performing arts

activities; this was confirmed specifically for theatre by a 2000 report by Statistics Canada.<sup>2</sup> Women continued to form the majority of volunteers in Canada – 58% of all arts and culture volunteers in Canada in 2000.<sup>3</sup>

Fraticelli surveyed the proportion of male and female graduates from performing arts programs, which is beyond the scope of the current study.

She also surveyed the Canada Council for the gender breakdown of juries (those that awarded grants to individuals) between 1972 and 1981. 24% of jurors during that time were women, and “while no exact correlation can be found between the percentage of women jurors and the female success rate in any given year, the fact that so few women were considered qualified by the Council to judge awards competitions is a sharp reminder to women of their low status in this field”<sup>4</sup>.

OAC juries in theatre programs serving individuals (Theatre Projects and Playwright Residencies) during the study period comprised 52% women. Perhaps more relevant to the group of theatres studied (the operating grant recipients), but with a similar bottom line, advisors during the four year period assessing operating grant applications were 53% women.

<sup>2</sup> *ArtFacts*, Volume 6, No. 2, June 2002, Arts Attendees in Ontario – Kelly Hill, Ontario Arts Council & *Patterns in Culture Consumption and Participation*, Statistics Canada, Culture Statistics Program, December 2000

<sup>3</sup> *Volunteers in Arts and Culture Organizations in Canada*, Research Series on the Arts, Vol. 2, No. 1, November 2003 – Kelly Hill, Hill Strategies Research

<sup>4</sup> Rina Fraticelli, *ibid*.

Furthermore, the statistics for the two OAC programs serving individuals show approximately half of all applications come from women, or from teams led by women; successful women applicants appear in the same proportion. Specifically, during the same four-year period, 45% of applicants to the Playwright Residency program were women and 48% of successful applicants were women; for Theatre Projects, the proportion of women or female project leaders was 48%, and of successful women applicants 47%.

This trend seems to contradict similar Canada Council experience. In materials prepared in 2003 by the Guild of Canadian Playwrights in its materials prepared for a panel entitled *Re-Opening the Rina Fraticelli Report: Artistic Directors and Theatre Professionals discuss the current status of women in theatre in 2003*, the Guild noted that “women continue to be a minority among applicants for Canada Council funding”.

**The Details**

Breaking down the statistics by size of theatre does, indeed, confirm the American experience. The larger the theatre (as aggregate groups), the less likely it is that women lead the organization artistically, see their work produced on the stages, and direct that work.

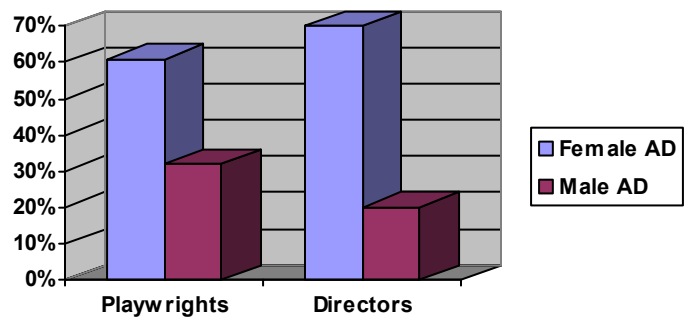
The Ontario group was divided into 5 groups by budget size: less than \$250,000 annual revenues;

between \$250,000 and \$500,000; between \$500,000 and \$1 million; \$1 - \$1.5 million; and more than \$1.5 million.

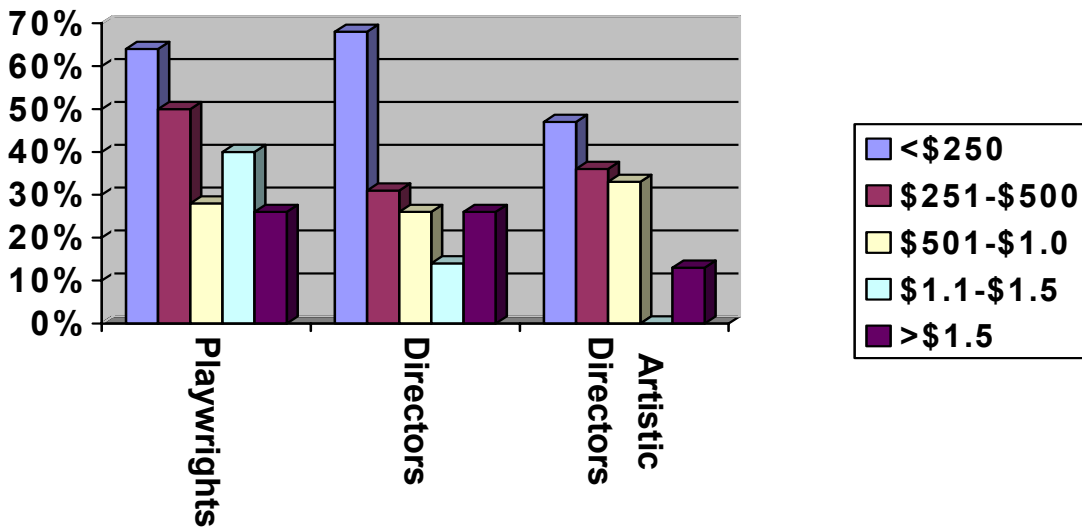
In general, the smaller the theatre, the more women were in positions integral to its artistic mission.

Aside from size, the other common factor that indicated a higher level of participation by women on the stage was the presence of a female Artistic Director.

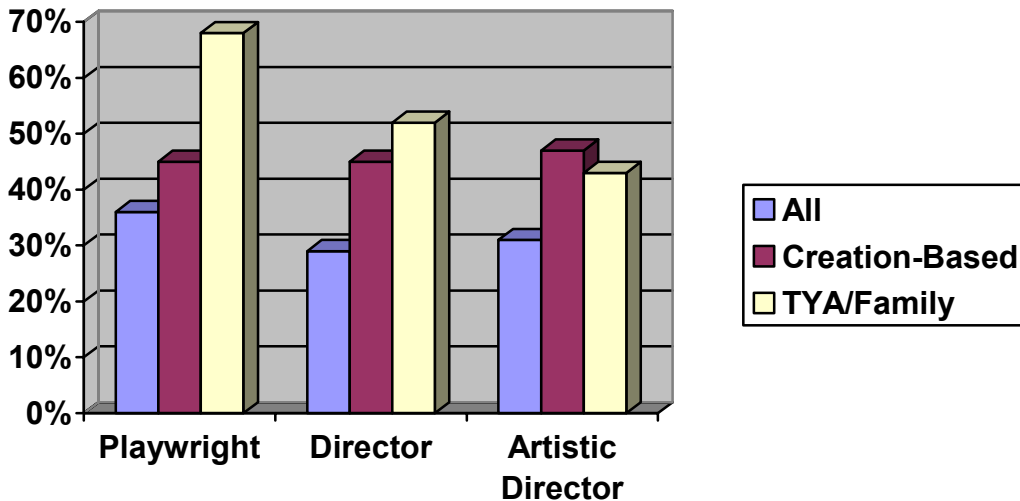
The contrast is profound.



Across all sizes of theatre with women Artistic Directors, 61% of playwrights were women, and 70% of directors were women. This contrasts with companies with male Artistic Directors, where 32% of playwrights and 20% of directors were women.



In examining the organizations by very general types, there are two classifications of companies that consistently engage a higher proportion of women playwrights and directors, and are more often led by women Artistic Directors – creation-based companies and companies programming for children, youth and

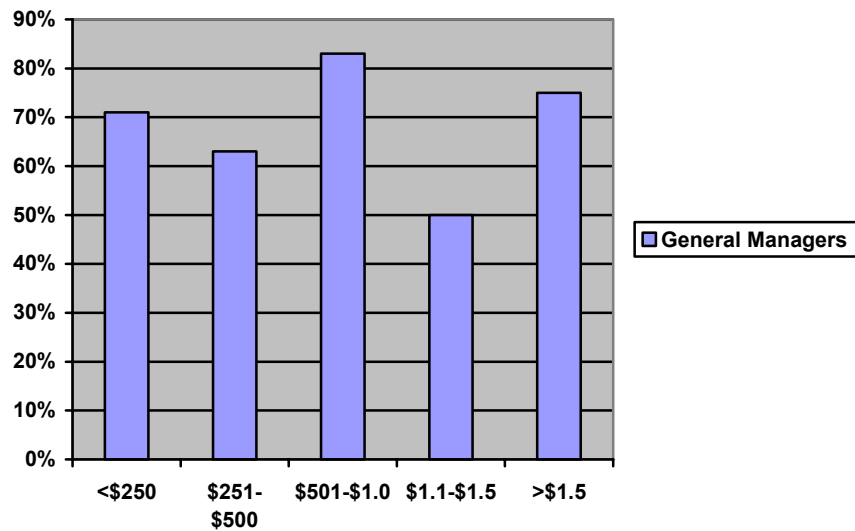


families (including Theatre for Young Audience, or TYA, companies).

The situation with the organizational leader, as opposed to the artistic leader, is starkly different. Overall, 67% of General Managers (and Managing Directors, Executive Directors, etc.) were women. This preponderance of women proves true across all sizes of theatre.

**A brief note about methodology**

Co-productions and similar arrangements were counted only once. Tours were not included in the sample, except for at the originating theatre. Playwrights were counted as women if at least one member of a team that wrote, adapted or translated was a woman, and directors if at least one woman when there was more than one director (e.g. musicals).



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All Ontario data were drawn from Ontario Arts Council Theatre Office records, from OAC fiscal years 1999-2000 to 2002-03.