

Women of Theater

In 1998, Julie Taymor and Garry Hynes made theater history as the first women directors to win Tony Awards. Recognition of the immense contribution the two directors made to a vibrant theater world was an important step in affirming the role of women directors today. To a large degree, however, women directors, artistic directors, and general managers still remain the inspiring exception, rather than the rule.

A conversation with seven Boston-area women directors reveals the successes and challenges which have defined their careers, and some notably similar experiences that have taken them on their theatrical journey. They come from various backgrounds and have different careers in the theater, but there are currents that run through the conversations that suggest a commonality of experience.

This is by no means a comprehensive list of women directors in Boston-area theater. My hope is that this engenders a dialogue that continues through forums, conversations, networking and other opportunities to reflect on what it means to be a woman director today.

—Lisa Rafferty, November 2004

The directors: (all with credits too numerous to mention):

Melia Bensussen has directed extensively in NYC and throughout the country and is the producing director of the Emerson Stage.

Zoë Bradford is artistic director and executive director, with Jordie Saucerman and Michael Joseph, of the Company Theater.

Rose Carlson is artistic director of the Devanaughn Theatre

Celia Couture, award-winning director for over 20 years throughout the Boston area.

Sheila Stasack is a director, actress, and acting teacher in Boston.

Nelida Torres is a founding member, actress and director with Escena Latina.

Nancy Curran Willis is currently the Managing Director for Boston Theatre Works and a director with over 30 years of theater experience.

How did you get started in directing?

Celia:

I got started as a performer but didn't get involved in directing until I started working with people who weren't very good. I was on the receiving end of no suggestions, not enough feedback, not enough assistance with interpretation of roles, direction, concept. I thought maybe I should go learn about this and try it. And from there I got a Master in Fine Arts from Emerson. I started as a high school teacher and was directing shows there and then got started on the community theatre circuit.

Melia:

I started officially as a director in college – Brown. I had a genuine impulse – as an actor I watched directors and thought – I could do this. I understood instinctively about directing. After college, I did some directing at the Actor’s Theater of Louisville and was an Artist in Residence at the Publick Theater (in NYC). And it went from there.

Nelida:

In my group, there was need for a director. Because there wasn’t anyone else from outside, I decided to take it on.

Zoë:

I watched a lot of old movies as a kid and started directing small movies in high school. It was the end of the Donna Reed era and I was scared I was going to have to wear an apron and pearls. I didn’t want to be that person, I wanted to be a director. I majored in film in college - the only female film major. After college Jordie and I started working for children’s theater groups around Boston.

Nancy:

I come from a theatre family. I grew up playing with the rest of the theater brats outside of Quannapowitt Players. But I didn’t really get into theater until my children were young and I wanted to do something for me. I learned directing by watching and observing, by stage managing and producing and learning all the ins and outs for 15 years.

Sheila:

I first took a directing class in college - Illinois Wesleyan. I had been directing a musical every year for a kids program in Brookline, and I’ve always worked with kids. My Master’s is in education. I’ve also directed adults in various productions and have been teaching for years.

Rose:

You just say you’re a director and you do it! Back in 2001, I fell in love with *Three Sisters* by Chekhov and decided to direct it on my own. The vision and ambition that was born out of doing *Three Sisters* lead to starting the Devanaughn Theatre. Through that experience people see a style of directing they like and ask you do things. One thing leads to another.

Were you influenced or mentored by any women directors when you started out?**Zoë:**

My high school art teacher – Claudette Bobay. She taught me how to think, to question, to discover, how to be high on life. She was like Maude – in *Harold and Maude* – but younger – she was incredible. She made me realize I could be anything she wanted to be. She opened up the art spirit for me.

Melia:

My mentor was Joe Papp. The women I met weren’t interested in mentoring.

Nancy:

There are two women directors who had had a profound influence on me. Irene Ehl – she had a wonderful way of getting things from her actors. The other was my 9th grade English teacher – Diane Lind - she was a huge influence. She has a quiet, stately, positive yet firm approach. She is a joy to watch.

Sheila:

There certainly weren't many women directors around when I got started in theater or certainly not high profile directors.

Celia:

At the time, Emerson didn't even have female instructors in directing. Fran Weinberg was one of my mentors, though. I love how she works with actors.

Rose:

I've certainly had a couple of directors that have meant a great deal to me. Rick Lombardo, and Scott Zigler at ART. I've also been influenced by other female directors as colleagues.

What challenges do you face as a director? Are any unique to being female?

Nancy:

There is no "old girls network" in Boston. There are some male actors I have worked with where I needed to break down the barrier of being a woman. You spend the first few rehearsals and early stages of "what the hell does she know," especially in a male dominated play like *A Few Good Men* or *The Boys Next Door*. For the most part, the work is not about the struggle of being female, but more about how can I break through to the next level.

Melia:

As a younger woman director, there was the challenge of being taken seriously – in part because I was female and young, and in part because my nature is to make the room feel non-authoritarian. I stress collaboration, and now at my age, it's clear I'm in charge even when I'm gentle about it. When I was younger, I was sometimes misunderstood as not being as in control as I was.

As a young woman, if you hide the controlling card, you can be misunderstood. Whereas a younger man just seems like a nice guy, the young woman cannot seem like a pushover. Once you've got enough experience or enough of a resume, people assume you know what you are doing. I'm really enjoying this time of life because I don't have to worry about how I'm perceived anymore.

Celia:

It's rather difficult for women without a ton of professional experience to break into theatre in Boston. It's pretty closed. If you do break in, you only get so far. Even in community theater circles, there is a majority of men who are directing. But I've been fortunate enough in working with actors. They respect you if you know what you're doing and treat them with dignity and respect. Even with the artistic teams I've worked with, I've always felt respected and appreciated. It's very much collaborative thing with me.

Zoë:

Being a female in business was extremely difficult – not a female director so much. It was exciting because we overcame it and gained the respect of the (South Shore) community. But we had to prove what we had set out to do. It seems my whole life has been about that - there has been nothing handed out on a silver platter. It's really important to surround yourself with strong people – both men and women. We started with nothing. Right away, I knew we have to get going and be brave – no one was going to hand it to us. Male oriented obstacles were all on the business end.

Sheila:

Boston is still more male-oriented than female-oriented. There seem to be more opportunities for women in community theatre.

Nelida:

The access to resources is a challenge. I have to delegate so much to people who are already in power to get anything done. I sometimes have to rely on male production staff to get things done – it's easier.

Sometimes, I direct people who are resistant to female directors. Some male actors question a lot – it's harder for them to believe in my vision. It doesn't happen a lot, but there are some that can't take direction from a woman.

Rose:

Gender can play into the dynamics with the cast. In American society, a female director has to work much more diligently at the beginning to underline a tone of authority. I don't like that and I don't appreciate that but it's the honest truth. A male director can walk in the room and a lot of casts will simply give them respect because they are wearing the pin that says "director." But I have to immediately establish a sense of authority, and then I get the respect and it's usually unwavering after that. And certainly once you get involved in the work and they see what you are doing, they appreciate it and respect your vision.

Ironically, I feel I can't be as warm and flexible as some of my male colleagues are allowed to be. If I do that I give up a certain ground of authority.

The very strong women who are my colleagues, all seem to have the same personality type that I do. It's not hard for them to underscore a sense of authority right away. But I wonder what would happen if we couldn't do it.

How do you find the balance of work and personal life?

Rose:

I'm not very good at balancing work and personal life. Basically I just work all the time. My friends understand the ebb and flow of my work life and know when I'm not available because of a show schedule. Just the parameters of doing theater – the hours. Theater is not very conducive to having a so-called "balanced life." In a romantic relationship, just pure schedule can make things difficult.

Nelida:

I haven't had a personal life – it's more a theater life.

Celia:

Because I love it so much, I make sure my schedule accommodates theater. Because if I didn't do it, I couldn't do anything else in my life. I'm discriminating about what I gravitate toward.

Sheila:

I don't have much of a personal life – I've raised 3 boys – 3 men now. Most of my life is about work and some of it is by choice and some of it isn't.

Melia:

It is very difficult to be a professional and have a family. In theater, it is very complicated for anybody. Because it's still a medieval profession in its attitude about work – most of us came to the theater in part because of its obsessive nature. It's all about the work and the people we work with become our family.

When you get to a certain point, this career is not welcoming to compromise. How does this profession adjust around the rest of us that aren't the young Turks anymore? Universities have benefited greatly from this. It's a way to marry your career and your life – in a way that professional theater alone does not allow. I love that about my job – that I am trying to bridge the gaps in my own life. This year, I'm adapting and directing a new show for kids.

I'm drawn to theatre for young audiences because it can involve my children. I try and keep one professional show a year that is not about my family. My grown-up connection.

Nancy:

I didn't do a good job balancing work and family life. I was a divorced mother, raising three children, working full time, doing theater as an avocation.

Zoë:

The key to balancing my work life and my personal life is having a great team (at Company Theatre) and pacing myself. I'm lucky that my two stepsons have really enjoyed growing up in the theater. It's something we could do together. I'm lucky to work so close to my theater that I can have the stepsons and the committed relationship and make it work. My partner is the one who keeps our home running. The opening night is what we do for social life sometimes. And I can bring my dog to work.

What shows attract you?**Nancy:**

I like shows that are psychologically dark and complicated, complex. Shows that have a dark side, that appeals to me. Finding the moments of good over evil. Even the comedies I direct have an edge – as in *As Bees in Honey Drown*. I also like shows that are complex technologically.

Sheila:

I like serious pieces that make a statement of some kind or tell us something about life, rather than pure entertainment. In theater, we have a unique opportunity to move people, to reach people in some way – that makes them talk about it afterwards.

Celia:

It's a lot of different things. I typically don't gravitate back to traditional kinds of musicals. I've been there, done that. If I'm going to tackle a musical, it has to be rarely done, or challenging. I gravitate toward work that is really challenging.

Melia:

I want shows to say something that I believe in. I'm interested in plays that somehow illuminate our time spent on this planet. Enlightening plays are more interesting to me than entertaining plays. The art of directing is being possessed by the spirit of the writer.

Zoë:

I like shows that are big, glitzy and challenging. We like mainstream shows- we enjoy them. But I also love a sleeper, too, a risk show. Something just for us, something we can help teach audiences to enjoy beyond *The Sound of Music* or whatever. But we still enjoy doing *Sound of Music* – you can put your heart and soul into it and find the edge and be creative with it. And then move on to something like *Falsettos* or the *The Rocky Horror Show*.

My favorite thing is to get people laughing and crying at the same time. It's pretty basic stuff really. One of my favorite things to do is to write and direct our own work like *Gloryland*.

Rose:

Dark shows attract me. Contemporary or classic theater that explores the darkness of life - why we do the things we do – what is part of our innate humanness and what is part of some outside influence.

Things that revolve around passion are important – passion for another person or passion for an idea. I like things that explore loss and what we do about that. Not in a macabre way but a search for catharsis. For me, that's the angle of life that is very worth exploring and the truth I want to find. The tragicomic is very important to me – I've been influenced by Charlie Chaplin and that's why I'm very involved in Irish theater.

Nelida:

I really like absurd comedy. I don't do musicals, I don't do social-in-you-face stuff with large speeches about whatever. I like shows that shock you in a second and then go back to the regular flow. It's a challenge but very satisfying.

Are there shows that should only be directed by a woman?

Rose:

In general, no. There might be a couple of plays that are by and about women that may be the exception. Although there are differences to gender, we are artists first.

Celia:

A play like *Sisters Rosensweig* is better served by being directed by a woman.

Nelida:

No, I have a problem dividing, putting genders to theater. I've seen a play about women's things, directed by a man and it was wonderful. I directed the same play and it was wonderful too.

Zoë:

I would never say that. I've had people say I'm not black so I can't direct *Dreamgirls* or I'm not Jewish so I can't direct *Fiddler on the Roof*, and I say yes, I can. If it's something I'm unfamiliar with, I will put myself in those minds and surround myself with people who know this culture. I want to go on a new trip, do something different.

Nancy:

Genders matters but what really makes a difference in interpreting the play. There are some plays that need to be directed by and extremely aware and sensitive director, be it man or woman.

Sheila:

Any show that is primarily female should be directed by a woman.

For instance, I am directing the *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and by virtue of being female, I'm going to know more about oppression in society that just reading about it but not really knowing. A woman can make a difference in the material.

Melia:

There aren't plays that should be directed by a woman, because then we would say that there are plays which should only be directed by guys, or people of color.

Do you have the opportunity to mentor or encourage other female directors?

Melia:

At Emerson, I can advise my students on the workings of a career. I didn't have any of that when I was in school.

Nelida:

I like to take someone on to help them in a way I didn't have. I learned by doing on my own.

Zoë:

At Company Academy, we do a lot to really encourage the kids – boys and girls. We give them a lot of responsibility in shows, and we offer a directing class and it's usually taught by a woman.

Celia:

I try and encourage young directors. There is still a majority of men directors and I don't quite understand how to help these women take that leap. I always say to people, does anyone want to apprentice or work with me? I'm one for mentoring and sometimes it comes to fruition.

Nancy:

I love to instill the love of the art in young people, especially in the non-professional theatre world.

Sheila

Between teaching and directing, I haven't come across many women who are interested in directing.

Rose:

I'm honored to give directors work through the Dragonfly Festival. We use several female directors and I'm grateful that I can offer opportunities to young directors.

Lisa Rafferty has directed and produced shows in New York, New Jersey, Los Angeles and the Boston area. She wrote and directed "The MOMologues," which had its European premiere in the Netherlands on October 14.

StageSource Marquee Online, November 2004.