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Is Theatre a place for Women?

A piece on the gender roles presented on Broadway

Is theatre really inclusionary? There's no answer that everyone would agree to as in many forms of academia. Many people would say yes, but some feminist and LGBTQ critics of theatre would say no. Theatre in many ways is an elitist art form. Elitist meaning it relies on the extra income of others in order to survive. Seeing shows, especially breakthrough new works shows, is sometimes hundreds of dollars to get a ticket. An example of a recent show release that follows this example is *Hamilton*.

Hamilton originally on Broadway had an audience of mostly BIPOC, following its immediate release on Broadway. After *Hamilton* was talked about by critics, the price to see the show shot up from a \$50 ticket to a hundred of dollars for the same ticket. This change happened significantly more after the reopening post pandemic where ticket seats can now go for \$599 a ticket (Passy). A more significant word over elitist would be exclusionary. Theatre can often leave out people of color, women, and LGBTQIA. More importantly, theatre leaves out the stories of these people. In western theatre, the stories of these people are very rarely seen. In the Western theatre today we still see systems of power that were set up and never disassembled by the white man. Our government and many other systems that we operate under today are explicitly oppressionary, and theatre follows this same past. In theatre it is represented by the long oppressive history of women and people of color not being allowed to act and perform in theatre for many centuries. This makes most academic and community spaces in the western theatre exclusionary towards women, LGBTQ, and people of color. Western theatre is fraught

with problems. It's a white boys game that discriminates and doesn't often tell the story of women, bipoc, or LGBTQ. Historically this has always been the case. On Broadway today, we very rarely touch on women, BIPOC, or LGBTQ issues. *Hamilton* will be used a case study to show this particular issue.

In theatre we often pride ourselves on being ahead of the social curve. The theatre space as a whole has pride in being inclusive to women, people of color, and the queer community. This, though, when given the evidence is not true. Historically in theatre men have played women. When looking at research and representation, it's theorized that in ancient times men often played the roles meant for women. In Ancient Greece women in society were put in an inferior position to men. When considering the roles of women in shows, men would not let women plays these roles in order to keep them in their inferior positions (NCTheatre 2015). In Sue-Ellen Case's piece *The Greek Creation of Female Parts* she notes, "Our notions of plays, acting, physical theatre space, costume, mask, and relation of play to audience begin with the Athenian festivals. In the sixth century both men and women participated in these ceremonies but by the fifth century when the ceremonies were becoming what is known as theatre, women disappeared from the practice," (319). Women roles in theatre spaces, theorized by historians, were men wearing masks of a woman. This practice continues til at least the 17th century when we start to see female playwrights emerge in the theatre scene.

"The silence of women's voices in these traditions led feminist historians who were interested in women to concentrate on periods in which did playwrights periods they emerge: The

seventeenth century in England, the nineteenth in America, and the twentieth century in Europe and America,” (Case 317).

Case also writes about the need for male dominance in ancient Greece and early Europe. This translated into the roles of women in society, in mythology, and also in the appearance of women in theatre. The Romans also had a similar view of women as inferior to men and, even in title, women were belongings to the men. Women in Ancient Rome were also not allowed on stage.

Going forward in time, in Medieval times women started to push through the barriers put on theatre and begin to write shows. One specific example is the German playwright Hrothsvitha (NCTheatre 2015). Her plays presented women as something other than inferior. Oskar Brokкетet would argue that Mrs. Aphra Behn is the first female playwright, though writing from 1640-1649 in England (238). Women were finally allowed on stage in the 17th century with the creation of the Opera Theatre (NCTheatre 2015). There were also women performing on stage for plays as well during this time. These women are often left out of the telling of theatre history though. At the time these women were also not viewed in high regard by society as a whole. Oftentimes they were seen as whores and the gender roles of the time were very set in this way. Women were looked down upon for making their own living during these times and not letting a husband provide for them. This patriarchal idea of the husband providing still exists to a certain degree today. It is assumed that women, especially in theatre, will get married to have someone provide for them. The general notion towards this is that it's hard to make it to the top and therefore hard to make a living out of theatre, but in reality it does not have to be at the top where it becomes a sustainable career. The stigma behind people of color through the years and the stigma of “making it” on Broadway are not helpful factors to creating a more diverse stage. People of color

were also looked upon as owned for a long period of time, and didn't have a theatre space they could formally use until after the civil war in minstrel shows and the 20th century in complete black written, produced, and acted shows (Britannica). These factors still influence Broadway today.

Specifically, gender roles today are still very fixed. In the 21st century, generation z and millennials have brought along a change in the existing gender role binary. In the United States, more and more we're seeing the emergence of gender expression in the LGBTQ+ community. The fight for women's rights, Black Lives Matter, and the existence of LGBTQIA emerging is not a new idea, but has encountered a lot of resistance from more conservative idealists. This happens because this shift in gender roles does not suit the agenda of those in power.

The emergence of these movements shouldn't also face resistance in theatre, but in a way it does.

Scripts, written before this separation from gender roles, often focus heavily on the pre-existing gender roles. A woman plays a wife or a female teacher or the sister, while a male role is a husband or brother or a male teacher. These roles are then reinforced by costumes, whose job is to communicate to the audience who the person on stage is supposed to represent (Cunningham). Costumes specifically communicate age, gender, social status, time in space, change of time, and personality (2-3). During a semester in University, the university produced a play called *American La Ronde*. The play is fairly modern, the playwright is still alive and saw the production in 2021, and is a rewrite of a previous play *La Ronde* written and released in 1920. The original play focused heavily on gender roles, which the

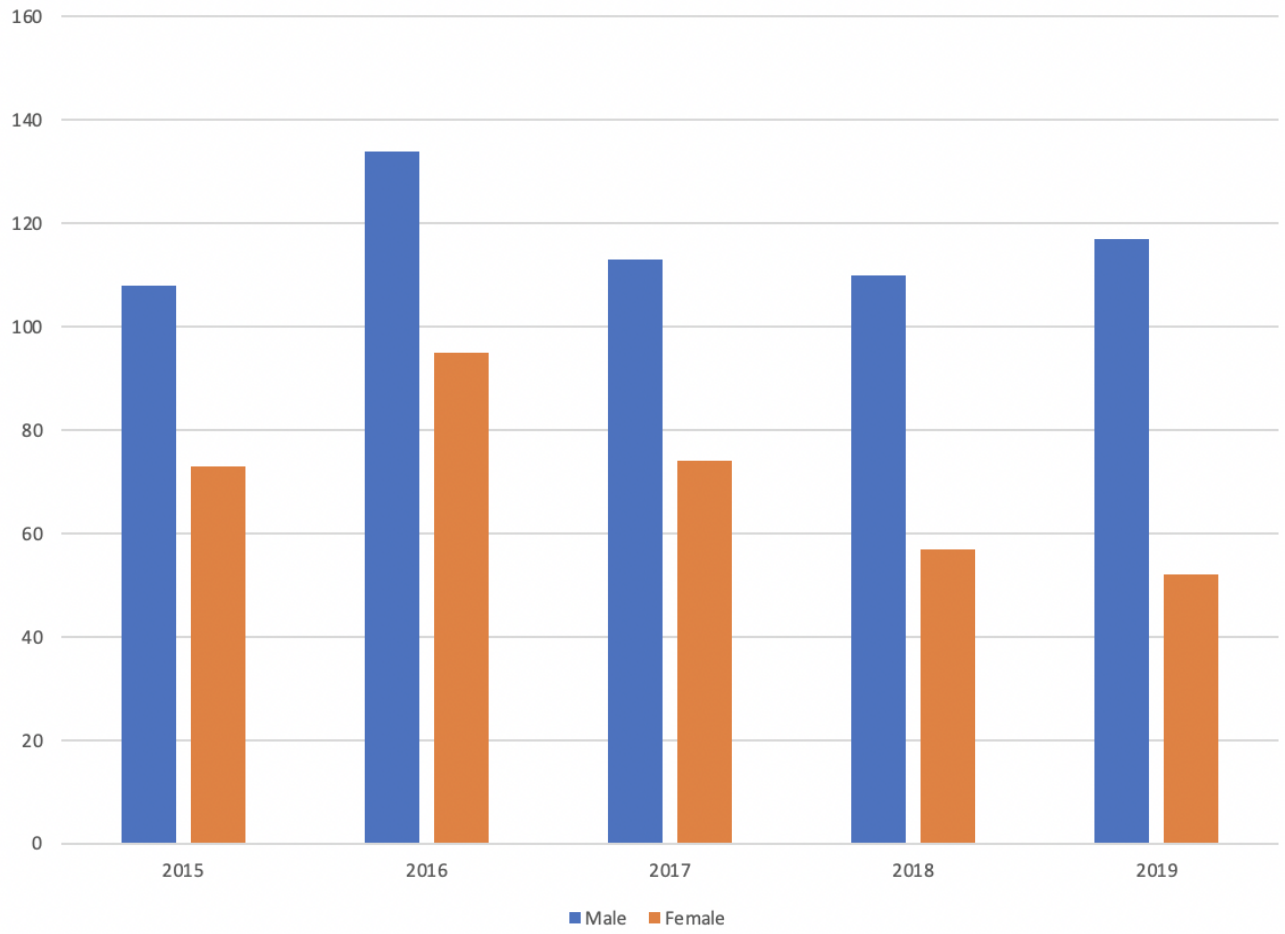
more recent adaptation pays less attention to, but the characters are still heavily based on stereotypes and gender roles. While doing the production, the directors had the costume designers research designs based in androgyny. This idea was exciting to see theatre play out in a different way than originally designed. Research for this project included constructivist ideas and plays. Costume design looked at celebrities as well who play in the realm of androgyny. The word, being a new word to the theater space, made it very difficult to find the right words and phrases. With the research done on costumes in androgyny and gender bending, what was next was casting. When casting went through, the cast was pretty set on what the original casting looked like. Genders were not changed much at all or the performance of the role was played to the original gender. If the show had changed gender roles, would the message really change or would it just be more representation of women on stage?

Theatre is an art form that throughout the years people have deemed an inclusionary safe space. Even in interviews Lin Manuel Miranda claims that theatre is an inclusionary space. Gender roles still exist heavily in theatre and we can see this in many shows that have made it to Broadway. This is seen through the vastly male population on Broadway. There's not a great way to perceive race on Broadway other than from reading all the shows and articles about peoples experience (Belnavis) on Broadway. Gender though is a far easier construct to deconstruct. [For clarification race and gender do not equate to each other, but both present a level of inequality in a capitalistic system.] Gender representation in theatre is massively less for women than it is for men. In theatre it's often seen the Bechdel test is hardly passed by the women of the show. What is the Bechdel test and what does it represent?

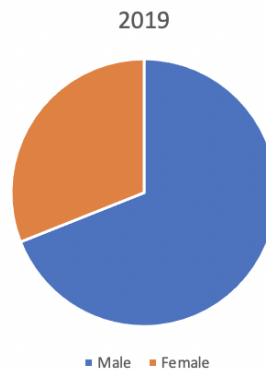
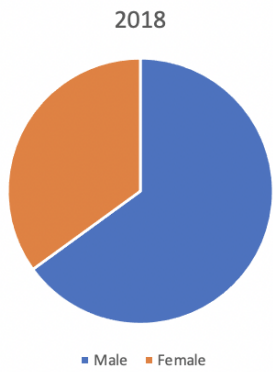
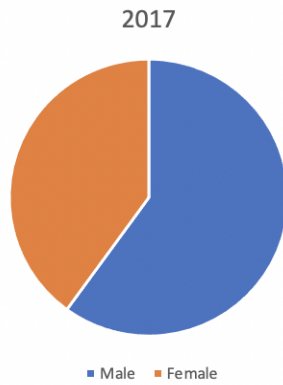
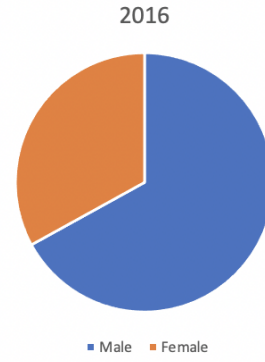
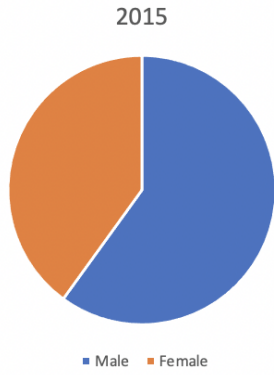
The Bechdel test is a test created by Allison Bechdel. The test denotes that in order to be a feminist piece there must be two or more women on stage/screen having a conversation about something other than a man. This test is the bare minimum for a feminist piece. Over the past 10 years we've seen an emergence in some shows of a drive to pass the Bechdel test. A few shows that pass this test are *Fun Home* (Written by Allison Bechdel), *Wicked*, and *Avenue Q*. The reason these shows pass the Bechdel test is because the goal is not to highlight the relationship that women have with men, but rather portraying women how they actually are, a three dimensional person with more cares of other than the men in their life. These stories allow women to tell the story instead of men telling the story for the women.

In order to confirm suspicions of theatre being a man's game, research was conducted on all the Tony award Nominations on the last 5 years of active theatre. These shows were then looked up for the amount of male and female roles available. This data set discludes shows that dictate roles that could be either gender or general ensemble roles. It is strictly male and female roles indicated by the script. The Tony nominated shows, while a great indicator, programs could not be found. The information for these charts was found off of Stage Agent. A software that allows you to research a show and bring up different information about the show including characters and their gender.

Male and Female roles on Broadway Tony Nominated shows



Based on the research conducted and the graph above it's clear that there are drastic differences between the male roles on Broadway and the female roles. The actual percentages are as follows: 2015 Male 60%, Female 40%; 2016 Male 67%, Female 33%; 2017 Male 60%, Female 40%; 2018 Male 65%, Female 35%; 2019 Male 69%, Female 31%. These numbers show that the male population of Broadway is always over half of the total population. If the numbers had gone both ways shifting from female dominated to male dominated then more data would be needed to determine if Broadway is overall balanced gender. The numbers, however, prove that no one show is an overly male show but rather that there are enough shows with more male roles than female to consistently have 60% of roles be male in Tony Nominated shows. There are a few shows in each year where the amount of roles of Male to Female and sometimes the reverse was 2:1 or 4:1. These shows include: *the Iceman Cometh* (more male), *My Fair Lady* (more male), *Saint Joan* (more male), *Choir Boy* (no female roles), and *Hamilton* (more male).



The history of theatre on Broadway shows that women over the past century have only made it to this 40%. Women at this point have been a part of theatre for 4 centuries and still only make up 40% of actors in Tony nominated shows on Broadway.

A show that focuses heavily on gender roles is *Hamilton*. *Hamilton*, the musical, was revolutionary as a piece meant to showcase people of color as actors. What *Hamilton* did for people of color in the theatre space cannot be discounted, but there are so many problems embedded into the script of *Hamilton*.

The first problem is whose story it is. Lin Manuel Miranda rewrote the story of white male colonizers to be told by people of color but didn't change the perspective of the story. So whose story it is, is mixed into what meaning the audience is supposed to interpret from this story and the way it is told.

More information on the culture of *Hamilton* and the way it was toured and was detrimental for some people of color is noted in "[the Unraveling of a Dream](#)". This article notes the experience of one of the ensemble members, who is a gay person of color, and contains a new point of view to *Hamilton* as a whole. Though this isn't the focal point, it is important to note that when white producers have complete control over a show whether about people of color, women, or otherwise it can present many problems for the people involved. The story being a white story over the creation of the government, influences the telling of the story as well and more importantly what the audience is going to look like those nights.

While *Hamilton* does celebrate people of color in many ways, it discredits the value and role of women in the founding of America. In roles alone women make up 30% of the actual roles available (not including ensemble). There are three opportunities for women to be cast in the show of *Hamilton* even though there are technically four female roles. If the fourth role of Maria was split from Peggy the roles for women in *Hamilton* would rise to 36%. Even still there would be a problem with what the women represent.

In the production and script of *Hamilton*, at the end of the production there's an aside for Eliza to show all the good that she went on to do after the death of her husband. That is all Eliza is able to present about herself other than her relationship as Hamilton's wife and the entire concept of this is an aside at the very end of the production. Working backwards in the script someone might feel hopeful about the role of women in *Hamilton*, but this is very quickly discredited as many songs can go by without a female presence in a lead role. In Stacey Wolfe's Blog, *Feminism in Hamilton*, she talks about the way women in the show are introduced: the Schuyler sisters by daddy's money and Maria the seductress.

In an interview with Rebecca Mead, Miranda said that Angelica is the smartest character in the show (Wolfe). The article talks about Angelica and Hamilton had alluded to Angelica having a backdoor influence to politics, but we don't see that for a while after this song as she pines for Alexander. The first time we see her have influence is when she encourages Alexander to talk to Thomas Jefferson. Other times we see Angelica talk about her love for Hamilton and how she wishes she didn't have to marry rich. She is smart by knowing how to survive in a male dominated world and it's seen when she sings "My father has no sons so I'm the one who has to Social climb for one." She shows a few other times throughout the show that she has back door influence through men. She could never say what she would mean out right though because of the male dominated world. Peggy on the other hand has no real role in the show other than to follow her sisters around. This, according to sources, would be an incorrect and unhistorical view of Peggy Schuyler. In *Hamilton*, Peggy Schuyler's personality is

changed to match the needs of the show. One moment in particular: when she frets about going into town this is made up to create fun and interesting lyrics. The actual Peggy Schuyler was described by others as a “spunky individual” (Ellewoods). In the bibliography of Hamilton written by Chernow, it’s also seen that Peggy and Hamilton would’ve been good friends frequently confiding in each other and that Hamilton was even at Peggy’s death bed. In some cases it makes sense that this was left out of the story, because it is only so long, but a lot of Peggy’s story is left out and the parts left don’t portray her in her own light. Having characters like the Schuyler sisters isn’t inherently problematic for a period piece.

Hamilton did evolve into what it is now through workshops of the show. One of those workshops was the *Hamilton Mixtape*. The role of women in this version of the show was exponentially smaller than where it is now. Without the contribution of the women during the workshop of this show, their roles would have been really small (*Hamilton History has Its Eyes on You*). Women should be a natural part of the story, even a story from the 1700’s. Women still had influence over their husbands at the time, as *Hamilton* ends up showing through Angelica Schuyler, and therefore still had an unseen role in government.

What leaves this piece in the 1700’s is that none of the male roles of the show are gender bent and when asked about this, Miranda said he would be willing to allow George Washington or Thomas Jefferson to be genderbent (Wolfe). Why only these two characters? There’s a possibility to make more of a statement for others if Burr or Hamilton was bent. The two characters Miranda is ok with bending are

the two characters who don't come into contact with the female roles of the show. What is the statement made if characters are allowed to be gender bent? George Washington and Thomas Jefferson would show that women can hold a place of power. This is a role that women don't often, historically, get to hold. If characters like Aaron Burr and Hamilton were allowed to bend gender, there would be a female lead, maybe an immigrant woman who shares that identity, playing the lead in a Broadway musical about an immigrant. If Aaron Burr were bent it would also show a women in power but also show a lesbian relationship on stage that would other wise be a heteronormative relationship. Relationships like this and women in roles like Hamilton and Burr would present a more inclusive world while still telling the story from the founding of America. Just because history lacks female presence does not equate Broadway to the same 1700's standards.

The show itself and producers could also be more accepting of changing the normal in their revolutionary musical. As seen in the New York Post an actor in *Hamilton* filed an Equal employment opportunity commission complaint about the show after not having their contract renewed after request for a gender neutral dressing room. Why does it become a spectacle to have females in men's roles and men in "women's" roles.

The fact that we can't move past this gender problem, as a society, is one of the reasons why there are very few stories in theater that show LGBTQ non-comforming individuals and people of color on Broadway. The show has to present the ability to make money for producers to put money into the show. If we, the audience, create more paths for others to make theatre then we also make more space

for people to fill other roles as well. Experimental theatre at a workshop stage is the best time to look and see what's missing from the show or whose missing.

As a whole of theatre practitioners we need to be telling the stories of people of color and women, not just putting people of color into a white man's story. As great and revolutionary as *Hamilton* is because it is revolutionary by creating a space for performers of color, creating a new type of Broadway style, and using music that is traditionally from black communities. The show is incredibly revolutionary, and had it been more it might not have been successful. The structure of Broadway today allows for more male dominated shows than female. This has a lot to do with the producers on Broadway and the shows they will support. The audience is the biggest influence on what shows producers think will succeed. Sometimes money is the strongest voice.

How does the presence of change on Broadway shift? Well, the audience using their money to show more of what they want is shows with people of color and women. That means seeing shows like *Come From Away*, *Hamilton*, and *Fun Home*. *Hamilton* is included because it is the most revolutionary show for people of color on Broadway. *Come From Away* is a revolutionary show in its storytelling of 9/11. It also shows women as they are and includes people of color into the casting. *Fun Home* is a show written by Allison Bechdel and definitely passes the Bechdel test. Doing research on the shows you, as an audience member, want to see and acting on the research found is a great way to show Broadway Producers what kind of shows the audience wants to see.

Another way to change the system at the top, Broadway shows, is to change the system at the bottom with children's arts education. If we can educate children about the arts and women and people of color the future of our world could change. Also, the more we educate children on the people that look like them the more successful they could be in the future. Seeing yourself represented shows that "maybe I can do that too,". If people of color and women can be actors then we shouldn't stop there. We could also bring this inclusivity in all areas of theatre. There could be representation of women and people of color in all areas of craft: actors, producers, designers, etc. Some of these areas are heavily lacking in women and people of color. Technical directors, for example, is severely dominated by men. Stage Management though is dominated by women. There's a huge stigma around gender roles in these positions. Eliminating the stigma one person at a time creates a more inclusive theatre space overall.

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