

Laura Pels Keynote Address
Theresa Rebeck

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Because I am someone who believes in the power of storytelling, I am going to tell you a story. It is the story of a play, and the story of things that happened to me, because of that play.

The play is called [*The Butterfly Collection*](#). I wrote it in 1999. It is about a family of artists, and the tensions that rise between the father, who is a successful novelist, and his two sons, one of whom is a struggling actor, and the other who is an antiques dealer. Tim Sanford at Playwrights Horizons fell in love with this play and said he would produce it in the fall of 2000, and he talked to the guys who run South Coast Rep and they read it and included it in the new play festival that spring, so that we had a chance to work on it out there. The workshop was great, and we were the hit of the festival. When the play came into New York the following fall, we had a thrilling cast—Marion Seldes and Brian Murray, in their first production together, Reed Birney, Betsey Aidem, and the young Maggie Lacy in her New York stage debut. Bartlett Sher directed, and there was enormous excitement gathering around the production. A lot of commercial producers came, as people felt that it could potentially move. Nine separate regional theaters were circling to produce it. American theater magazine called my agent to ask for the script because they were interested in publishing it (in those cool inserts I was very excited I've always wanted one of those). Audiences were thrilled with the play. Lincoln Center Library was filming it for their collection.

When the New York Times published its review it was not what anyone expected. The reviewer, who shall remain nameless, dismissed the play—which was about art and family—as a feminist diatribe. He accused me of having a thinly veiled man-hating agenda, and in a truly bizarre paragraph at the end of the review, he expressed sympathy to the director because he had to work with someone as hideous as me.

The review was horrible and personal and projected all sorts of terrible things on me. I was shocked, a lot of people were shocked. And there was real outcry in the community. A lot of letters were written to the Times—someone told me it was sixty letters, which I don't know how anyone would know that but it made me feel better, even though none of them were published. Apologies were made behind the scenes, none to me but to other people. The heroic Tina Howe went to the Dramatists Guild council and read the review aloud and insisted something be done about this; she and a lot of people made the excellent point that if anyone at the Times had ever dared to publish a review as racist or homophobic or anti-Semitic as this review was, in its bigotry—well, the review would never have been published. So there was a flurry of upset. But with a review that bad,

the play closed. All the other productions went away. American Theater magazine went away. Everybody knew that that was a crazy misogynistic review. But no one would produce the play. Ever again. And you should know that many people consider it my best play. Still.

This is what happened to me in the months after that.

—People couldn't get over it. For about a year and a half, I had people come up to me at least once a week and this is what the conversation would be:

NICE PERSON: Hi Theresa, how are you? I saw the *Butterfly Collection*! Wow it was so beautiful! What a great evening of theater!

THERESA: Thank you.

NICE PERSON: That review was crazy! So misogynistic! Wow, how could he write something like that?

And then this nice person would go on and on and on about that crazy misogynistic review, so I got to live through it all over again.

I cannot tell you how many of these conversations I had. Maybe 200. Then one day I did an interview with the great Chuck Mee, and after the interview was over, and the reporter had left, Chuck said to me, "I saw *The Butterfly Collection*. It was really beautiful." And I said, "Thank you." And then I waited, for the rest of the conversation, about that crazy review, and Chuck didn't say it. All he said was, that play was beautiful, and for a minute, I had my play back.

The other person who repeated and heroically gave me my play back was the wonderful actress Lyn Cohen, who was really angry about what happened and who would speak to me with such courage and compassion about it that even though I didn't want to really talk about it, she always made me feel better.

This is another thing that happened: A whole lot of people decided I should change my identity. This is the conversation I had with other well meaning people:

NICE PERSON: You know Theresa everybody knows that your work is terrific but the New York critics don't like you personally.

THERESA: How can they not like me personally? They don't know me!

NICE PERSON: Hey! We love you. But you know what you should do? You should produce your plays under a male pseudonym.

THERESA: You mean, I should pretend to be a man?

NICE PERSON: That's right. That's the only way they will accept you. Or the plays! They would like your plays, if only you hadn't written them!

Okay I know that sounds crazy but I swear I had that conversation at least a dozen times. Arthur Kopit, who really is great and I love him, thought this was a hilarious idea and he had a lot of fun figuring out for me how I would pull that off, becoming a man. We never went as far as surgery but there were lots of other clever ideas about how what I might do to trick people into thinking I was a man, which is what I needed to do, to make my identity acceptable.

This is another thing that happened to me: One of my friends who was a producer in New York told me that this was all a sign, that I was being told by the Times that I am not welcome in New York and I should think of something else to do with my life.

This is another thing that happened: A close friend of mine who is a theater director started screaming at me in restaurants and he told me I wasn't an artist.

This is another thing that happened to me: My agent said, you know Theresa, how you've always wanted to write a novel? Maybe you should do that. Which is not necessarily bad advice, but it's also not particularly advice you want to hear from your THEATRE AGENT. He also told me that my next two plays, *Omnium Gatherum* and *Bad Dates*, were unproduce-able and that he couldn't represent them.

And, I couldn't get produced. He was right about that. No one wanted to touch the *Butterfly Collection* and no one wanted to touch me. And then I fell off of the map. I got really depressed because of all this, as you might imagine, and I couldn't think anymore, and I was spending way too much time lying on the couch all day, and I was drinking white wine a lot, in one inch increments, I would lie on the couch and tell myself I wasn't turning into an alcoholic because I was only drinking white wine one inch at a time. And then one day my son, who was five years old at the time, came up to me and said, "Mom, are you all right?" And I looked at him and I thought: GET UP. It is your job to take care of this kid and it's not his job to take care of you and you are not going to turn into this person. So I got off the couch.

And then a bunch of other things happened that were equally or more hideous, it's not like getting off the couch solved everything. I did start writing a novel, although that's a whole different story. But I really was off the grid, for two years, and then one day I went to see my friend Sinan's play up at the Longwharf, and I caught a ride back to the city with John Eisner, and we talked for three hours and he said you should come up to the Lark. And then the next day Arthur Kopit called and told me as well, you should come up to the [Lark](#). And the Lark saved me. They saved my sanity and they saved my career and I thank them for everything they have done for me, and what they do for a lot of playwrights, there is no organization, in my mind, that does more.

And that is the last time I am telling that story. I am never telling that story again. But I tell it today because I don't want to hear from anybody that there isn't, or hasn't been, a

real gender problem in the American theater. I really did think about what I might talk to you about today and I had no choice, honestly, I felt like my whole career as a playwright has been so hyperdefined by my gender—sometimes I feel like it is strangely blinding, even—and it's time for all of us to look at this, and talk about it, without going “oh there's not really a problem” because there IS a problem—and then start talking about what we, as a community, are going to do to solve it.

This is an important point to realize: Before I came to New York and started working in the theater, I was never told that being a girl was going to be a problem for me in any way that I took seriously. It's not like I was a stranger to conservatism. I know a lot about the Republican party and the Catholic church because I was raised, basically, in both. Both my parents were staunch Ohio Republican Catholics until some point where my mother got a clue and switched parties and now she's a democrat and my father is still a republican so since then they've done nothing but fight incessantly about politics. My father, who is as I said both republican and catholic, thinks I'm insane BUT there was a moment in my childhood, when some of his buddies got into ribbing him about having so many daughters. He had four daughters and two sons, and someone apparently even expressed pity one day, the story goes, one of his golfing buddies said something like, “Poor George, what is he going to do with all those girls?” And it pissed him off, and he came home and said to my democratic mother, “Those girls can do anything the boys can do.” And that is what the expectation was, in my house. Then I went to an all girls Catholic high school where the nuns were all quietly radical liberation theologians who were secretly agitating for women's ordination. Then I went to Notre Dame, which was more traditionally conservative, but I couldn't take it too seriously because they had things like panty raids there. I thought it was just too dumb to be believed. And then I went to Brandeis, where I read a lot of feminist literary theory and considered questions like “Is the Gaze Male?” This was in the EIGHTIES, that's more than 25 years ago, for people who are counting. And at the time there were fantastic plays being produced all over the country by Wendy Wasserstein and Tina Howe and Marsha Norman and Emily Mann, and I thought it was a cool thing, to be a woman playwright. I thought, I'm not in the Catholic Church anymore, and the world is saying we haven't heard from the women, and now we're ready!

And then I began my career as a professional playwright, where I was told that since I'm a woman, if I write about women, that means I have a feminist agenda and that's BAD. I also got told that when I write about men, since I'm a woman, that I clearly have a feminist agenda, and that's bad too. I couldn't write about anything without hearing that I had a feminist agenda. It turned out that being a woman playwright was just in and of itself suspect; if you are a woman playwright by definition you have a feminist agenda, which was so bad, it annihilated the work itself. Apparently the other word for woman playwright might as well be ‘witch.’

As an aside let me add, I would rather be called a witch than a man hater. Honestly ‘man hater’ really does need to be simply off the table. It bugs the shit out of me. I have a husband and a son and a lot of men in my life who I love a lot and it's creepy, that people would toss that ugly accusation at anyone in the jovial spirit of name-calling. Someone

actually called me that at a party a couple of weeks ago and I wanted to hit him. BUT I DIDN'T. Anyway, if you need to call me a name, the preferred insult would be “witch,” or “madwoman in the attic” is also acceptable.

So those are some of the ways I know there actually is a gender problem in the American theater. This is another way: Because so many people—not just Arthur Kopit—have told me, over the years, that in order to have a career that is commensurate with my talent, I should pretend to be a man. This is another way I know there is a problem: Because the extraordinary Julia Jordan ran the numbers for us.

Two years ago in what I think was an act of inspired intelligence and courage, [Julia Jordan](#) conducted a series of town halls at New Dramatists, which put the question of gender parity on the table for the American theater to discuss. She invited women playwrights to come and present their situation and they showed up in droves. Then she invited artistic directors and literary managers to come and confront the situation with us. And this is the situation: Plays written by women are not being produced. In 2007, the one year I opened a play on Broadway, I was the only woman playwright who did so. That year, nationwide, 12 per cent of the new plays produced all over the country were by women. That means 88 percent of the new plays produced were written by men. (Back in 1918 before women had the right to vote, the percentage of new plays in New York, written by women, was higher. It was higher before we had the vote.)

Generally, over the last 25 years the number of plays produced that were written by women seems to have vacillated between 12 and 17 percent.

This is a disastrous statistic, and it is related to another disastrous statistic, which is the number of women writers and directors in Hollywood. This year 6 percent of films were directed by women, and 8 percent of produced screenplays were written by women, or women had a shared credit on them. That means 88 percent of all plays were written by men, 94 percent of all movies were directed by men, and 92 percent of all movies were written by men.

Women playwrights like myself have a lot of anecdotal evidence to support some pretty coherent theories about why this is the case. People in the power structure seem more mystified and often they don't seem sure that there is a problem. (One of them actually said to me, not to long ago, “But Theresa, where ARE the women playwrights?” Seriously, he looked me in the face and said that.) Several artistic directors have expressed concern at the idea of “quotas,” they really don't like the word “quota.” I don't like that word either. Another word I don't like is “discrimination” and, “censorship,” and I wish I could get them to dislike those words as much as they dislike “quotas.” “Boys club” is another couple of words I could very well live without. But since there is so much murky territory in language, I think this discussion of numbers is very useful.

Here is what the numbers say to me: If we lived in an ideal world, the balance of new plays produced in theaters all over America would come out to, roughly, fifty/fifty. The Dramatists Guild—of which I am a proud member, I serve on the council and it's a great

organization, everyone who is a playwright should belong, here's a shout out to Gary Garrison and Ralph Sevush you are excellent, and so is Stephen Schwartz our excellent president. Anyway the Dramatist Guild tracks the percentages of women and men who enter graduate school as playwriting students, and it also tracks the numbers of people who apply for membership, and those numbers either stick to the 50/50 ratio OR there is a higher number of women. So in the ideal world, those women and men who are over the years developing their craft as playwrights should rise though the system at an even rate. This is not what is happening. Women are being shut out, at different levels of development and production, and you end up with this crazy 17 percent number which seems to be the highest percentage we can get to, year in and year out. Seventeen percent of fifty percent is thirty four percent of a hundred percent. (Bear with me I'm not making this up I'm actually pretty good at math.) That means that sixty-six percent of the best plays by women—the plays that SHOULD be rising to the top, the plays that in a fair world would move into the culture as the stories we are telling ourselves—sixty six percent of women's stories are being lost. Every year.

And I have to reiterate the premise of those numbers is that playwriting is NOT in fact a gene on a Y chromosome, and that we are NOT losing women playwrights because they decided to run off and have babies. The reason we lost all those women playwrights is, We buried their work, and we sent them away.

I would also like to note that in January a lot of reports came out about the recent study of the American Council on Education, which informed us that last year women earned more than half the degrees granted in every category—associate, bachelor, master, doctor or professional. The actual numbers nationwide stand at 57 percent women, and 43 percent men, and they have stood somewhere in that vicinity since the year 2000. USA Today asks, is this “cause for celebration, or concern?”

When I read all these accounts, I thought 43 percent, wow, women playwrights would be so happy if our numbers got up to 43 percent. We would be throwing parties. But the people who do the studies and write these reports up are in fact WORRIED that it's not fair to the boys, that they only have 43 percent of the slots in the college population. This is a bad thing we are told, for a lot of reasons, principle among them that smart girls won't have enough men to date. (That is how the NY Times reported the story.) A lot of colleges have admitted that just as they might consider race or geographical diversity in building freshman classes, they similarly look for gender parity, which means they are letting boys in over more qualified girls—which does look like affirmative action, or shall we say “quotas,” which apparently are okay when they favor boys.

So women playwrights live in a world where we are told it is a bad thing if women are 57 percent of the undergraduate population, because that's too big an imbalance, but it's an okay thing if women are only getting 17 percent or 6 percent or 9 percent of the best jobs in show business (and elsewhere, in America) and if we tried to rectify that it would be unfair because it would involve “quotas.”

Now let me tell you something: A lot of people will think that what I just pointed out was a “feminist” statement. But I don’t actually see it that way. I see these contradictions as just kind of comical and even, well, stupid. As an indication that there is just something truly systemically unfair going on here. That’s not a feminist agenda. That’s the truth.

I never had an agenda. I just wanted to write plays that told the truth. Some of those plays told the truth about what it is like to live on this planet, as a woman. Why would that be off the table? Why would that story be something that they only do in fiction, or on cable tv? Why can’t we do that in the theater? I just don’t think that we want to align ourselves with the backward-looking institutions of culture. We want to see ourselves, I think, as a relevant and intellectually rigorous and culturally progressive community. It’s past time to acknowledge the fact that that means welcoming the voices of women into the cultural discussion.

There are a lot of ways to do this. Primarily, I think, we need to encourage theaters and producers and foundations and boards of directors, to extend to women playwrights the kind of excellent programs which have been put in place to encourage the work of minority playwrights. All across America, and here in New York, there has been strong and necessary support for these voices, and wonderful writers have emerged because of that support. I have been told so many times over the years that theaters and foundations are interested in “diversity” but that doesn’t mean women. That needs to change. We need to stop discussing why the numbers are so bad, and stop asking where are the women playwrights, and we need to start recognizing them where they are—which is right in front of us—and hold them up and celebrate their voices, and produce their plays.

In that context, I would like to report that this year, in New York, the following plays were produced:

Circle Mirror Transformation, by Annie Baker

Or, by Liz Duffy Adams

This, by Melissa James Gibson

The Vibrator Play, by Sarah Ruhl

The Understudy, by me

Smudge, by Rachel Axler

Happy Now, by Lucinda Coxon

All of these plays have received wide critical recognition; most of them were extended and all of them played to packed houses. In short, there were a lot of plays by women in New York this year, and they were not only fierce and dazzling and interesting: They also made a lot of money. Tim Sanford, over at Playwrights Horizons, who has long been

an unacknowledged champion of women's plays, is having a truly sensational season, in a worried, recessionary economy. He deserves it. Julia Crosby over there at the Women's Project is also having a sensational season, and she and they deserve it, too.

Which brings us finally to another couple of statistics which I think are worth noting: Women buy more tickets. They buy 55 percent of movie tickets and anywhere from sixty to SIXTY FIVE percent of theater tickets. So opening our stages and our hearts and our minds to women playwrights is not only cool and relevant and interesting and just—it is also a sound business model.

Sir David Hare recently made news by informing the London Telegraph that “many of today's best plays were being written by women, but that “macho” theater managers were failing to capitalize on the trend.” That is a direct quote, and here's another: “I don't think the repertory of most theaters is reflecting what seems to be happening in terms of the most interesting new theater. We would hope to see management in theater reflecting where we think the creativity in playwriting is coming from.”

A friend of mine was worried about me after all that shit went down with *The Butterfly Collection*, so she got me a session with an astrologer named Coral. So Coral did my chart, which was apparently in very poor shape at the time, like me. And she got very specific about the names of the stars and the planets which were passing through my heavens, and apparently there's a planet out there named Cairon, it's not actually a planet I think it's one of the moons of Jupiter, but Coral informed that Cairon is the wounded healer, and Cairon was just all over my chart. Then, and now; I apparently have been claimed in every way by Cairon, the wounded healer. And there is no question, I am wounded. But I offer you all this information as a hope that I might actually provide one of the healing voices in this discussion. I really do believe that if enough people stand up and say this cannot go on, it will not go on. After a season like this one, where so many plays in New York were by women, and were so relevant, and important, and successful, both in what they achieved dramatically, and the way they drew in audiences, we will not go back. We will not go back.

There is a Native American saying, “It takes a thousand voices to tell a single story.” And Walter Cronkite told us, “In seeking truth, you have to get both sides of the story.”

It's time to hear both sides, to hear all voices, to build a culture where stories are told by both men and women. That is the way the planet is going to survive, and it's the way we are going to survive.

Thank you very much.