

On 11 and 12 March we were happy to welcome many of you to our first showcase and discussion events at the Red Hedgehog in north London.



Playwright Emma Adams and 17percent founder Sam Hall

After a panel discussion, on each day, five new short plays were performed in a script in hand performance. The ten plays were chosen from 45 submitted. We chose the plays as they were all quite different and we wanted to show that women don't just write about domesticity – not that there is anything wrong with writing about domestic issues – as long as you're writing well and saying something different.

Contrary to some opinion, domestic drama is not a female-specific topic.

A definition from the English Communications Syllabus is that it 'concerns people much like ourselves, taken from the lower and middle classes of society, who struggle with everyday problems such as poverty, sickness, crime, and family strife'. Ibsen, 'Look back in anger', 'The beauty queen of Leenane', anyone? Isn't that most drama ever written by men or women in fact?

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A month when it seemed like dreams could come true...

"The journey for women, no matter what venue it is, politics, business, film - it's a long journey."

(Kathryn Bigelow on 60 Minutes on 28 Feb 2010.)

March has been an auspicious month for women. It was the month which held International Women's Day, had a female director break through the American Academy of Film's glass ceiling to win an Oscar for Best director; a relatively unknown female playwright won the Olivier Award for best new play; and of course, **17percent** held their first events.

Whether Kathryn Bigelow's Oscar comes from Academy politics and is just a blip in a shocking 82 years of male dominated awards, or is truly the beginning of a positive change, we will have to wait and see. At the moment it seems like an incredible leap forwards, just in terms of all the discussion it's started about what types of films women can and should direct (and by extension, write). How often does every main newscast include information about such truly rather shameful Hollywood figures?

At least issues of equality have been pushed out into the open, (though for how long, we shall have to wait and see). According to one American academic who

annually analyses data about women in the American film industry, women comprised just 7 per cent of all directors working on the top 250 films of 2009.

Katori Hall's award for 'The Mountaintop', an 80-minute magical realist play about Martin Luther King's final night before his assassination, was almost more of a surprise to the pundits than Bigelow's award. Her play had registered relatively little hype, yet pipped 'Jerusalem' and 'Enron' at the post. She is only the second black writer (after fellow African-American August Wilson, in 2002) to win the new play Olivier, and only the fourth woman in 34 years.

The play had its world premiere at Theatre503 in June 2009, before transferring to the West End, proving that the dream does sometimes happen.

"Theatre is an exclusive place that tends to be dominated by white men..."

(Katori Hall, The Guardian, 23 March 2010).

17percent London events

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It was really good to see so many like-minded people together in a room, as part of the reason 17percent was set up, was to find a way to talk to other writers.

For those who are new to 17percent, a little background. It's a new organisation to support and promote female playwrights. We'll do this through networking events, courses, showcases with opportunities for feedback and development. Our events are not for women only, though the training opportunities will be focussed on women, as there is an imbalance that needs to be addressed. But we believe that to achieve equality, women and men should work together: in a conversation not a competition.

Why 17percent?

So why 17percent? It's a significant figure; it was quoted last year at Sphinx theatre's 'Vamps, Vixens and feminists' conference as the percentage of UK women playwrights being produced and it's also the pay gap between men and women. When only 17% of UK produced plays are written by women, when women make up 52% of the UK's population, and 65% of the theatre audience, something is badly skewed.

Drama and the stories that drama tells us are crucially

'I'm a compulsive writer. Something springs to mind, often a couple of lines of dialogue, and I go along with it until a messy puzzle emerges that challenges me to make some sort of sense of it. And that's the part I enjoy most.'

Maggie Drury,
'Do the right thing'

important to the way we understand our world. If all the stories being told are being told from one perspective, from one voice, generally a white, middle class, male voice, then we don't see the whole picture, and the picture we see just keeps reinforcing stereotypes about what women and men should be.

Of course, it's a situation that is changing over time, women in all creative spheres are making huge breakthroughs, in fact the week we held our events, the week of International Women's Day, was auspicious with Kathryn Bigelow, becoming the first female director in the history of the Academy Awards to win Best director. And in theatre it's changing too, in 1983 only 7% of playwrights were women, in 2006 out of 140 productions on in London, only 13 were written by women (9%).

So though there are some positive glimmers, according to Time Out (11-17 March), three plays on the main stages in London are by women, and 14 in Fringe spaces, that's out of 108 plays (only about 15%) we can't afford to rest on our laurels, and we're here to speed the change along a little bit.

'I am a writer'

Nobody likes to be labelled, and maybe that is why there are relatively few networking organisations like this.

We all want to just say 'I am a writer', not 'I am a female writer', or 'I am a male writer', or a

'I wanted to explore vast, lonely, anonymous places, and the people who are drawn to them; this place became the M25 and the stops along the way. I liked the idea of a character taking a physical as well as emotional journey, and couldn't resist the potential for humour that comes with this man who is obsessed with motorways!' Sarah Davies, 'The road to enlightenment, via Maidstone'

gay/straight/black/white/disabled/able-bodied writer. In fact we all want to just say 'I am a good writer, and I'm writing about things that interest me, I'm just telling my stories whatever those stories might be about. It doesn't matter who I am or what my background is'. But we're not at that point that, and we won't be until we have to change the name of 17percent to 50percent.



Lindsay Mace and Ben Hall in 'Do the right thing'



Richard de Lisle in 'The road to enlightenment, via Maidstone'

The discussions:

The panel on Thursday discussed issues around why it was so few women make the transition from student to practising playwright and explored the reasons why people thought it was that so few UK plays by women actually get produced, this covered areas such as; who the gatekeepers are, less women writing in the first place, attitudes to rejection, attitudes to women's writing: when a woman writes 'kitchen sink' drama it's domestic, when a man writes it, it's revelatory.

Friday's focus was on what positive actions we can take to increase the number of plays being produced. This included advice to write what you are passionate about, not what you think people want you to write, write meaty roles for older actresses who are finding there are few good roles for them, and to do something every day to further your writing.

'I write in part to make sense of my life, and also to connect with audiences and other theatre makers. The prospect of inspiring collaboration is a huge motivator for me.'
Joanna Norland,
'Lydia Bennett returns'



Lindesay, Kirsty, Elena, Marie and Shakera in 'Lydia Bennett returns'

Little acorns

From little acorns, mighty oaks can grow. We can sit around talking about the unfairness of hearing fewer women's voices onstage, or we can get together and do something about it. Individually and collectively people can make a difference, so this is my call to arms. Obviously this is a vast arena, one which requires lots more research and development, lots more events like this, lots more discussions. In this auspicious week, these events were just the beginning. Our ultimate aim, perversely, is to make 17percent obsolete and to get to the point where we can all just say 'I am writer'.

We will be organising more events soon, watch this space!

Speakers 11 March:

Clare Bayley (playwright and former theatre editor, The Independent), Sarah Davies (playwright and educator), Barbara Norden (Course director, MA Creative writing (plays and screenplays) City University), Olusola Oyeleye (producer, director, writer).

Speakers 12 March:

Emma Adams (playwright), Sue Parrish (artistic director, Sphinx Theatre Company), Lucy Pitman-Wallace (director), Cheryl Robson (founder Aurora Metro Press)

For the full lineup of plays, and further information on the writers and actors, please visit the 17percent website. (Podcasts available from April.)

Pictures: Nikki Price



Friday's panel:
Sue Parrish, Lucy Pitman-Wallace, Cheryl Robson

Bushgreen - an exciting use of new technology from The Bush Theatre

The Bush is a world-famous home for new plays and an internationally renowned champion of playwrights. They discover, nurture and produce playwrights from the widest range of backgrounds, and present their work to the highest possible standards. They look for exciting new voices that tell contemporary stories with wit, style and passion and we champion work that is both provocative and entertaining.

The Bush has produced hundreds of groundbreaking premieres since its inception in 1972, many of them Bush commissions, and hosted guest productions by leading companies and artists from across the world.

They receive more than 1,000 scripts per year and read every single one.

With the support of the Jerwood Charitable Foundation, the Bush Theatre has developed a new social networking and play publishing website, bushgreen. The site connects playwrights with theatre practitioners and plays with producers to inspire the creation and production of exciting new theatre.

Bushgreen is for people in theatre to connect, collaborate and publish plays in innovative ways. On the site you can:

- * Submit plays directly to The Bush for the team to read and consider for production
- * Connect with other writers, directors, producers and theatres
- * Publish plays online
- * Earn money from downloads of your plays (if you choose to do so)
- * Find fresh new work and generate people for readings, scratch nights and full productions

The site launched internationally on the 1st December 2009 and has thousands of members and hundreds of plays online for download. You can join at www.bushgreen.org

Reading list

Reading list (opposite) is a new feature: where we will review productions of plays by women and invite discussion on women's plays.

If you are interested to join in the discussion - please visit the blog - where you can comment, or send us your review by email. (Shameless plugging of your own productions very welcome!)

Reading list

4.48 Psychosis by Sarah Kane

TR Warszawa / Barbican Theatre (23-27 March 2010)

4.48 Psychosis is Sarah Kane's last play, and has been interpreted as a scorching, elegiac suicide note from a mind that knew true darkness and yet light too. From a body of work that only comprised of five plays, one short film, and a couple of newspaper articles, Kane's innovative theatrical experimentation has become part of the canon.

Her fellow writer Mark Ravenhill described her as a 'contemporary writer with a classical sensibility who created a theatre of great moments of beauty and cruelty, a theatre to which it was only possible to respond with a sense of awe.' Indeed, a sense of awe is what you come away from this TR Warszawa production of the play at the Barbican.

4.48 Psychosis dispenses with plot and character, there are no stage directions or character names to indicate who is speaking, yet from this collection of prose snippets, Grzegorz Jarzyna has created the finely crafted story of a mind crumbling.

Performed in Polish by theatre group TR Warszawa with bright green LED surtitles (somehow seeing the words seems to add to the stark, pared down quality of Kane's writing), the play goes from image to image of brilliance. The shiny, clinical set by Małgorzata Szczeniak suggests chambers of memory as it effortlessly transforms from a flat to a hospital; the lighting design by Felice Ross singles out the main character and pins her in its spotlight, and the audience's gaze. There is an amazing scene where numbers that represent treatments for the patient's depression are projected, that overwhelm her in a terrifying *Matrix*-like dissolve.

Magdalena Cieleka plays the main character/author in this disturbed mindscape, confronting the ruptures in her psyche directly, as an older woman and a little girl appear on stage, swallowing pills, arguing with doctors, her lover and a friend, cutting her wrists and throwing herself against the wall. It is disturbing, yet impossible not to watch, even more so as she screams at the audience, semi-naked, exposing herself and our voyeurism.

Strangely though – it's not all darkness, there are a few moments of humour, which illuminate briefly like the surtitles above. The main character tells us of how she dreamt that a doctor gave her eight minutes to live when she'd been waiting to see him for half an hour; and it's a welcome moment of light in the dark.

The last line is repeated over and over, "Watch me vanish" as Cieleka vanishes into the darkness, but the haunting images of the play linger long after. People were crying as they left the building, if that's not the true power of theatre I don't know what is.

17percent aims to redress the current gender imbalance in plays being produced in the UK, by providing women with opportunities to develop as writers, through peer-to-peer networking and educational opportunities, championing women's achievements in the theatre, promoting female writers and providing positive female role models and inspirations.

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