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Aim: To stage more plays by women

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



Phaneuf

A hundred years ago, about 12 percent of the plays produced on American stages were written by women. Today that number is about 17 percent, according to a study by the New York State Council for the Arts.

Hoping to change the onstage imbalance, the National Theatre Conference has begun a three-year initiative to encourage professional, regional and nonprofit theaters to stage works by women.

"People don't know plays by women playwrights because they aren't produced as much," said Cindy Melby Phaneuf of Omaha, vice president of the NTC. "Instead of only doing the plays that have already been on Broadway, we're saying let's get more plays by women out there in regional and community theaters. Let's do them."

Thanks in part to efforts by Phaneuf, chairwoman of the graduate program in theater at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and former artistic director of the Nebraska Shakespeare Festival, plays by women will be seen this season at the Omaha Community Playhouse ("Flyin' West" by Pearl Cleage), Blue Barn Theatre ("In the Next Room, or The Vibrator Play" by Sarah Ruhl), Bellevue Little Theatre ("Girl's Room" by Joni Fritz) and the University of Nebraska at Omaha ("12 Ophelias" by Caridad Svich).

The Playhouse's 21 & Over series of play readings and its drama book club are also including works by women, including "End Days" by Deborah Zoe Lauffer, "Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom" by Jennifer Haley, "Circle Mirror Transformation" by Annie Baker, "Passion Play" by Sarah Ruhl, "By the Bog of Cats" by Marina Carr, "Heddatron" by Elizabeth Meriwether, "Ruined" by Lynn Nottage and "DollHouse" by Theresa Rebeck.

The Great Plains Theatre Conference this year inaugurated a new Women Playwrights Fund that will bring a nationally established playwright and an emerging playwright to the conference each year.

Phaneuf says there is no shortage of excellent scripts by women and that she has no issues with men writing for or about women. But, she said, female writers give voice to stories not heard before.

"I think women and men see the world in different ways, they have different growing-up experiences," she said. "When women write their stories, with their eyes and voices, we see them in a different way."

Kevin Lawler, who began the female playwrights effort at the GPTC, agreed.

"Getting a variety of voices as our storytellers makes us a healthier society," he said. "Nearly half the world's populace is a pretty good chunk to be missing out on their viewpoint."

Lawler said the percentage of female playwrights staged at the GPTC varies, because play selection is blind. Playwrights' names are

unknown to the selection committee as it reads the scripts.

"It's going to take a few years," he said. "Professional theaters have a patriarchal structure in a number of different ways, and it's a generational change that is maybe just starting."

Lawler, who reads hundreds of new scripts each year for the conference, said the perspectives female writers bring is "utterly fascinating and widely varied." He cited "Boy Gets Girl," a play about a stalker by Rebecca Gilman, as an example of a viewpoint that can be stronger coming from a woman.

Amy Lane, who also reads many new scripts in choosing the Playhouse's 21 & Over series, said she's always tried to advocate for female playwrights.

"It's not even about equality. There are some terrific plays that are not getting the attention they deserve."

Ironically, she said, studies indicate women buy the majority of theater tickets and make up more than half of most audiences. They are also at least half of the graduate students in play writing programs, she said.

Lane brought "Flyin' West" to the attention of the Playhouse's play-reading committee. It opens Oct. 20. Susan Baer Collins is directing the story of black farmers in Kansas at the turn of the century.

"These are not pity picks," Lane said. "They are just really brilliant plays most people haven't discovered yet. We're turning a spotlight on writers you may not know."

Playwright Ellen Struve of Omaha said diversity is key to a rich range of human experience expressed onstage.

"Every playwright, whether it's the region they're from, their gender, orientation, race or life experience, they bring that to their work," Struve said. "We want our theaters to look more like our country. Gender is just one piece of that puzzle. There are other pieces missing as well. This is one we can focus on right now."

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