

While researching for the Townhall meetings at New Dramatists last fall, that were organized to discuss the low numbers of female written plays reaching production, I noticed that by every estimate work by women made up approximately 17% of the total new plays produced in this country, but, 31% of the plays on TCG's list of "The Top Ten Plays in American Theater" were written by women.

The fact that women are nearly as twice as likely to write hit shows as their production numbers suggest they should, led me to believe there might be a case for economic discrimination. I emailed an old friend, Steven Levitt, (University of Chicago, the economist behind Freakonomics and John Bates Clark Medal winner.) Levitt agreed that there was a possibility there was a case there and suggested that he find a student to take it on as a thesis. Simultaneously, I had been talking to Cecilia Rouse (Princeton, The White House Economic Counsel) about the study she wrote with Claudia Golden "Orchestrating Impartiality The Impact of "Blind" Auditions on Female Musicians" and how its findings could be applied to the world of theater. A strange and wonderful coincidence occurred. Rouse emailed asking if I had some connection to Levitt. Her prize student, Emily Sands, had just returned from visiting him in Chicago and he had suggested she consider a thesis based on the idea of an old friend with some intriguing data but who was probably completely biased. Full disclosure, I was and still am and so is my friend and partner in all this, Sheri Wilner. She and I, shortly thereafter, headed out to Princeton to have lunch with Ms. Rouse and the highly regarded Emily Sands.

Julia Jordan

By Sheri Wilner and Julia Jordan

Seven months later, on May 27, 2009, Emily presented the findings of her study, "Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination in American Theater" at the 59E59 Theatre. The results were enormously surprising and complex. Unfortunately, most of the subsequent media coverage was sensationalist in nature - "*Women Beware Women!*" - and offered highly misleading and reductionist reports. But more on that later...

At the event, Ms. Sands explained that her "Integrated Economic Analysis" consisted of three separate studies, each employing different and highly trusted forms of research methodology. (Assuming very few readers of The Dramatist are familiar with economic research methodologies, we'll refer to these studies as the Audit, the Doollee and the Broadway). The aggregate results of these studies did indeed indicate that gender discrimination exists in the American theatre and also suggested compelling reasons why. Here's a brief rundown of how each study was conducted and what the findings were:

The Audit Study

Discrimination is notoriously difficult to prove. Was a person not hired because of their race or did they come off badly in an interview? An audit study overcomes this ambiguity by isolating a single characteristic, such as race or gender, and controls for everything else. A famous study by Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, has a title that says it all, “Are Emily and Greg more Employable than Lakisha and Jamal, A Field Experiment in Labor Market Discrimination.” Spoiler alert- yes, they are. Based only on resumes that were identical in every way but name, Emily and Greg were granted many more interviews for employment than were Lakisha and Jamal. The number of opportunities “Emily” and “Greg” enjoyed could be directly attributed to societal bias and called discrimination because there was absolutely no other explanation.

Using this as a model, Ms. Sands asked us to gather four previously unseen ten-page script samples, two with male protagonists and two with female protagonists. She then made equal copies of each of the scripts. On half of each she assigned a male pen name and on the other half a female penname. She sent them out to the 252 theaters culled from The Dramatists Sourcebook and The Dramatist Guild Resource Directory that had agreed to complete the study she presented as “A Princeton sponsored study of the process of script evaluation.” 82 recipients actually completed the survey. Artistic Directors made up the majority of the respondents, 56% and most of the remaining 44% were Literary Managers. The gender breakdown was approximately 50/50. Each respondent received all four scripts – albeit with different combinations of male and female pen names on the title pages. Some theaters received for scripts with all male names, some with all female, most with a combination. The collective responses to “Script A” with a male pen name were then compared to the collective responses to “Script A” with a female pen name, and so on for all four plays. The results were not what we expected.

But first, a sidebar:

Cecilia Rouse predicted that we wouldn’t find bias at all through an audit study. The cat is out of the bag on these sorts of studies, (a few letters from respondents confirmed this.) Subjects hide bias when they suspect it is being looked for. Not finding something means very little in economics. For example, imagine I send you into a dark room to find hidden oranges. You have five minutes. Go. You emerge empty handed. I ask you how many oranges were hidden in the room. The correct answer is, you don’t know. There could be a hundred oranges hidden very, very well, deep under the floorboards. Or you might just be a lousy orange hunter. Or both could be true. If, on the other hand, you emerged from the dark room with three oranges, you can confidently and accurately state, “There were

least three oranges were hidden in that room.” Your “findings ” are three and only three oranges, but that does not constitute proof that there were only three oranges in the dark room. Ms. Sands’ study only found that women discriminate against women’s scripts but that does not constitute proof that men do not.

The crucial point that much of the media and blogs have missed is that the discrimination women displayed was not of the straightforward, taste-based variety that proves personal bias; rather it was an unusual form of statistical discrimination that, for lack of a better word (and believe us, we looked), we’ll call prophetic discrimination. We define prophetic discrimination to be a projection, based on personal experience, that *others* will discriminate against a person’s own group, causing a person to discriminate against the group themselves in the belief that hiring or advocating for a person of the group would be at least futile and at most economically damaging. For example, an African-American who believed that though Obama was the superior candidate, he could not win the U.S. presidential election due to bias might have voted for a more “electable” white candidate in the primary, believing that not doing so was in effect a vote for the other party. Voting in such a way can be called a discriminatory act, because it is based on race not the candidate’s qualifications, but it’s also a laughable and a gross oversimplification.

Ms. Sands found that female respondents did not judge work to be of lower artistic merit when they believed them to be written by women. The lower marks came on questions that related to how they believed others would receive the scripts (i.e. the prospects of winning awards, of being widely produced, and whether the financial officers of their theaters would be supportive of a production.) Moreover, Ms. Sands found that the scripts that the female respondents rated the lowest were the ones that had both female pen names and female protagonists. The question “How likeable are the play’s characters?” yielded the most statistically robust results. Female characters that were “likeable” when purportedly written by men, evoked the opposite response when they were purportedly written by women. The word “likeable” is a problem as it is not clear if it pertains to a person’s own opinion or the perceived opinion of others. In context, while it may also include personal opinion, it seems to fall most cleanly into the category of relating to the perceived opinion of others. The only other question that related to the respondents own personal taste was on the question of whether they would like to produce the work and no discrimination was found. Unfortunately though, the respondents did believe that scripts with a female pen name were far less likely to “fit with their theater’s mission statement” than the identical work when it wore a male pen name. In essence, they said that though they would like to produce work by men and women equally, their hands were tied. These findings are not just statistically significant. If the same study could be continually performed under perfect circumstances, one should expect to get the same results at least 95 out of 100 times.

The Doollee Study

In this part of Ms. Sands' thesis, she addressed claims by Artistic Directors that they simply receive more scripts by men for consideration. She looked at Doollee.com, a database of over 80,000 plays and 20,000 playwrights. Included is information on whether a play has reached production and whether or not the playwright is professionally represented. It is an admittedly flawed resource, so Sands obtained a second database of plays and playwrights from the Dramatist Guild. She found both data sets to show basically the same thing and so merged the findings.

Artistic directors are right. Fewer women than men are writing professionally (this was also corroborated by what we have learned "off the record" from some of the top graduate playwriting programs, applicants are approx 45 percent female, 55 percent are male.) In addition, women playwrights were found to have written fewer scripts than their male colleagues.

And so are actresses. They're right too. There is a paucity of roles for them to play. Although Doollee does not specify whether a play has a female or male *lead*, it does count the number of male and female roles. And it shows that of plays written by men, 81% have a majority of male roles and 19% have a majority of female roles. You'd expect female written plays to be the mirror opposite, but only 33% of women's plays had a majority of female roles, 67% had a majority of male.

Remember, Ms. Sands found in the audit study that the female respondents believe the scripts most likely to face discrimination were those by women with female protagonists. Female writers obviously agree and are protecting themselves from the worst discrimination by limiting the amount of estrogen in their work. Furthermore, the Doollee study shows that a play by a man with mostly female characters has a much better chance of being produced than a play by a woman with mostly female characters. The population with the most innate impetus to write for actresses is being economically discouraged from doing so. The root of the actresses' problem is the same as the root of the female playwrights problem, the discrimination against plays by women about women. (Please pass this information on to powerful actresses.)

The kicker is that, despite such bias, plays with female protagonists do not appear to be less economically viable or less likely to win critical acclaim than those with male protagonists. You don't need to be a Princeton economist to figure this out. Look at the past ten years worth of TCG's Top Ten Most Produced Plays in the American Theater and count the number of male vs. female protagonists for the two most widely produced plays each year. Out of the twenty-seven plays (the math doesn't add up due to some ties), fourteen have female protagonists, seven have male protagonists and the rest are ensemble works. Seven out of the past ten Pulitzer Prize winning plays had female protagonists. There's ample evidence that both award committees and the ticket buying public (by every estimate at *least* 60% female) find female characters extremely likeable, whether written by men, or women.

The Broadway Study

In the third portion of Ms. Sands' thesis, she followed the money. She is an economist, after all. She went straight to Broadway and left behind such subjective notions as "likeability" and "artistic exceptionalism" and focused on more objective criteria such as weekly revenues, ticket prices and length of a show's run. First she compiled a list of all the new plays or musicals produced on Broadway between 1999 and 2009 and then identified the gender of the playwright or book writer. She found that women exclusively wrote only 11% of the shows. And that the shows written by women earned an average of 18% higher revenue and sold 16% more tickets, weekly. And yes, she controlled for the type of play (i.e. straight, musical or one person show) due of the large variations in production costs across play types. She controlled for outliers, the one big hit that could tip the results unfairly. She controlled for all sorts of things and her methodology has been vetted by some of the most prominent economists at our universities and in our government. Sands used numbers that came from BroadwayLeague.com and looked at them every which way, but nothing changed the fact that *the female-written plays on Broadway were more profitable than their male-written counterparts*. And even more remarkable is this paradox; even though the female-written plays made more money and sold more tickets, they ran for the same amount of time as the less-profitable male-written works.

This finding has caused the most head scratching and skepticism. If those female-written shows were so profitable, why wouldn't the producers keep them running longer than their less profitable male counterparts? We offer one possible explanation: Imagine there is a show with a bankable star whose contract is expiring. The producers must predict whether or not the play will continue to sell tickets without that star. Based on the evidence, we can guess, that when a play has a male writer, producers are more likely to recast the role and take a chance on future profits by keeping the show running. When a female has written a show, they are more likely to assume that the high-ticket sales are not due to the writers work but to the departing star. The producers prophesy is that there will be a drop in revenue when the star leaves the show, becomes a self-fulfilling one when they then close it down.

The higher relative success of work by women is not in any way, shape or form, proof that women are better writers than men. Rather it suggests that the bar is set markedly higher for female writers to be produced. A young male writer shows promise, receives a production and then a few more, and then he writes a hit. He develops his craft along the way. A young female writer who shows promise, however, is not as likely to be produced *until* she writes a hit. She must come to the table with her craft highly developed. It's a Catch-22 that catches all female playwrights. And it explains the statistics that started this whole thing. Female playwrights are twice as likely to land on the TCG list of the Top Ten Plays in the American Theater as their percentage of productions suggest they should, because the American Theater doesn't take as many artistic "risks" on women writers. And this is corroborated by a quick look at last years

NYC season, of the “unknown” writers only around 10% were female, which does not bode well for the numbers improving in the future.

There are basically two ways to interpret all of this. The first is that women don't want to become playwrights as much as men and they just aren't as good. The exceptional plays by women prove the rule. Or you can subscribe to what seems obvious to us in this day and age and having witnessed and acknowledged bias in other situations against other groups. When discrimination is present the classic scenario is that of the discouraged worker. Women are inherently as good as writing drama as men, and they plays that top the lists are evidence of that. Not as many women write for the theater because as difficult as it is for a talented male writer, it is far, far more difficult for a talented female writer to eek out a living.

If you ascribe to the second interpretation, what is to be done? There has to be a concerted effort by Artistic Directors to find and develop women writers just as they do men. That means productions, lots of them. They are going to have to get rid of the understood quota, the twenty percent or so that is set aside for women and writers of color to fight each other for. Quotas are illegal. They need to put the call out to schools, agents and their own literary departments, and they'll need to actually read scripts by women, a lot of them. Women inside the theaters have essentially reported that bias is at work and affecting the decisions of what gets produced. Artistic Directors need to create a working environment that does not indicate to workers that advocating for a script by a woman is futile. Women who work in theaters need to pay attention to the possibility that they engage in prophetic discrimination unconsciously. Basically, if you read a script by a woman and think its good but not going to “fit” with your theater, pretend it was written by someone named John and read it again. Artistic Directors and those running the economic bottom line should take advantage of all the free market research Ms. Sands has provided. It all makes perfect sense. We know the audiences are largely female. So, start looking for more plays with female leads. They are the least produced and the most successful plays around. We'll even tell you where you are most likely to find them - in the hearts, minds and hard drives of female playwrights.