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Why is the Theater Canon Filled with Men? These Women Want to Change That

BY DIEP TRAN | SEPTEMBER 21, 2020



“**W**hy have we only been producing dead white men?” That was the question that Mary Candler asked herself one day. Candler runs Hedgepig Ensemble Theatre, a Brooklyn-based company that specializes in classic plays and hiring women and non-binary individuals to star in and direct them. But there was a slight snag in their mission statement: the classical canon is white, male dominated.

According to a [2018 study by American Theatre](#), while men and women are almost evenly produced when it comes to plays written in the last 10 years, when it comes to classics (anything written before 1968), men are produced a whopping 88% of the time. That’s a whole lot of Shakespeare.

Hedgepig wants to change that.

“If we as a feminist theater company aren’t producing plays by women, how are other people across the country and around the world going to

do that?” said Candler. “So we thought, let’s make this as easy as possible for the industry to get these amazing plays on stage.”

On Sept. 21, Hedgepig is unveiling their Expand the Canon initiatives. At the center of the initiative will be a list of notable plays by women, written before 1960. They include the Restoration comedy *Bold Stroke for a Wife* (1718) by Susanna Centlivre, who is the most successful English playwright after William Shakespeare by number of performances before the twentieth century, though she has rarely been produced in modern times.

There’s also 20th-century works. Another play, *Rachel* by Angelina Weld Grimké (1916), was about a Black family in the early 20th century. The list also includes more well-known writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Mae West, and Alice Childress (who will be getting her much-belated Broadway playwriting debut in 2021).

“We were really intentional that we wanted this list to be diverse,” said Candler. “Going from just dead white men to dead white women is not the kind of step that we’re trying to take. In English, it’s much easier to find dead white ladies. And those also tend to be more of the names that got submitted that people knew.”

That’s why some of the plays on the list are English translations of international works: such as the 1693 play *House of Desires* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, translated by Catherine Boyle, which is a comedy about two sisters.

Hedgepig was inspired by the Kilroys List of contemporary plays by women and non-binary individuals. The plays are gathered from industry recommendations and suggestions from academics. The initial list contained nearly 600 plays. A team of dramaturgs, professors, and artists then read nearly 200 plays. Then a team of four—Candler, Hedgepig associate artistic director Emily Lyon, actor/director Skye Pagon, and actor/director Shannon Corenthin—whittled it down to nine plays for the inaugural list.



Hedgepig artistic director Mary Candler and Hedgepig associate artistic director Emily Lyon.

In addition to the list, Hedgepig will also produce a series of readings from Sept 22 to Oct. 1. They’ve partnered with Ma-Yi Theater Company and The Classical Theatre of Harlem to produce the readings.

Florida State University professor Chari Arespachoga will be directing two one-acts: *Restless Night in Late Spring* and *A Hell of Her Own* by Fumiko Enchi, dating to 1928. One play is about two students who debate whether to give up their art to pursue political activism. The other play is about a woman who wants to rebel against the gender confines placed on her. Ayako Kano translated both plays and the reading will be the first time the plays will be presented in the English-speaking world.

“[Enchi] really navigates women’s place in Japanese society at that point, especially during the political upheaval that they were dealing with—the

influx of Marxism, young student activism, and all of that changing the political landscape of Japan," said Arespacochaga.

The director hadn't been aware of Enchi's work, or most of the works on the canon list, and it's been a revelation. "Why have we never been told about this? Why are these plays not in the anthologies?" she exclaimed. "It's also really humbling, like, oh my god, we silo so many things as sources of knowledge. And we just overlook so many places and so many things that we can learn from. I think that's why work like this is important."

Hedgepig plans to release a list every single year and part of their dream is to one day be able to commission original translations; many of the plays by women of color on the list were already translated. So there could literally be a whole world of work out there that has been overlooked.

"In our dreams, upon which people understand why this is so cool and important and then people give us tons of money and want to work with us, we get people translating plays from all over," said Lyon. "It was very challenging to find plays from, like, India."

Hedgepig is also making PDFs of some of the plays available to download, or they've linked to places where the plays can be purchased. They want other classic theater companies to look beyond Shakespeare, Chekhov, and other men when planning their seasons. Lorraine Hansberry wasn't the only woman writing plays before 1960.

"I think that a lot of classical companies rest on what's tried and true," said Candler. She hopes the list will be a resource for these companies. "I think you take a risk anytime you produce a play that doesn't have a writer attached or name attached that people know and recognize. We've got to get over that if we're gonna change anything."

Adds Lyon, "I feel like when it comes to these classic theater companies, in the diversity conversation, it always comes down to casting. And so I feel like this is an opportunity to really make it more holistic."



Chari Arespacochaga

Arespacochaga also sees the list as an opportunity to educate not just professionals, but students. She wants to take the Expanding the Canon list and turn it into a course for her students at FSU, so that they know that there is more to the canon than dead white men, and that what is considered canonical has historically been based on the whims of other white men.

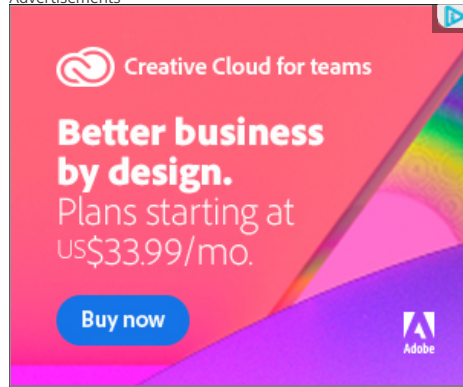
She believes one way to make change and to create more diversity is to educate the next generation.

"That part of building the theater landscape, which is educating the young people who are about to go into the industry, is failing us," she said. "It'll be harder to have change at the professional level, if at the training level, we have not changed the basic things. We have to recognize that the canon has been prescribed by white men. So I think this [list] is a great way to disrupt it."

According to Lyon, "I didn't know," is no longer a viable excuse for exclusion. "Women have always been here, women have always been writing, women have always been amazing," she said. "It's just honoring what already exists."

The full list of plays, with casting notices, and links to purchase, is [available here](#).

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