



Taking CENTER STAGE

Women's roles in theater are changing as their presence expands in what used to be a man's world.

by Lauren Cabral

T

hink of the most famous playwrights you've heard of. William Shakespeare, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill will likely come to mind. All were brilliant, all earned their places in the history books—and all were men.

After all, through most of theater history, women did not play with the big boys. They weren't allowed to. "Women, especially up until the Renaissance, were banned from the stage," said Dr. Steve Burch, associate professor of theatre history and playwriting at The University of Alabama. And when they finally did start appearing on stage in the 1600s, he said, it was still very much a man's world. They were almost never in leading roles; instead, they served as mothers or lovers.

"From that time on, other than the occasional play, women were treated as adjuncts to male characters," Burch said.

Of course, we've come a long way since the 17th century. There are many actresses, female playwrights and directors among us today. But we haven't come as far as one might think, said Gaye Jeffers, MFA '06, a playwright, director, designer and assistant professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

The plays she has authored include *Appealing Women: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happy Meals*; *Philo* (an adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*); and *Peace* (adapted from Aristophanes' *Peace*). Jeffers likes to give women



Steve Burch

prominent roles in her scripts, and isn't afraid to turn classics on their heads to do so.

"If I'm directing a classic play, I will often reconceptualize the world of the play in order to offer more roles to women," Jeffers said. "It's not usually enough to just switch the character's gender. We also need to see how this 'new' character fits into this world."

Jeffers acknowledged that it can be a challenge to raise awareness of the need and validity of the female voice, and it's still rare for plays to have a female protagonist. Women have, for the most part, been viewed as supporting characters, something she wishes would change.

"Often the journey of a woman is not viewed as worthy or as important as that of a man," she said. "Theater should be representative of everyone. We're really not there yet."

Getting There

We may not have arrived yet, but thanks to alumnae like Caroline Reddick Lawson, '74, MA '88, we're well on the way.

When Lawson came to UA, she liked theater, but was certain English was her calling, and earned both her undergraduate and graduate degrees in that department. With a love of literature, she enjoyed teaching the subject for many years in Tuscaloosa schools.

But gradually, her interest in theater turned into a passion she couldn't ignore. It started when she was placed with the Children's Theater Company in Tuscaloosa through the town's Junior League, a women's organization aimed at improving the community through volunteer service. It grew when her English students petitioned for her to be their theater teacher after she directed a



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—Gaye Jeffers



school play that was a hit.

And finally, after her youngest daughter graduated high school and headed to New York City to attend college, she made a life-changing decision. “I realized this is what I want to do



Caroline
Reddick Lawson

more than anything, to go to New York and go to school for theater,” she said. “That was one of the things I regretted: that I didn’t have the real training. I always felt I was sort of an imposter.”

She applied to grad school at New York University for educational theater, and then she waited. She told herself if she didn’t get a full assistantship, she’d just stay in Alabama.

Needless to say, she didn’t stay. “I felt like that was my sign,” she said. “So I sold my house, quit my job and moved into a very tiny apartment in New York City and started that chapter of my life.”

One week later, as she made her way to a rehearsal for a play in which she’d been cast, she watched as the twin towers tumbled to the ground. In the weeks that followed, while New Yorkers and the nation mourned the tragedy of 9/11, she and her fellow actors kept going to rehearsals. “It was our lifeline,” she said. “We could go to that theater and enter

A performance of Peace, written and directed by Gaye Jeffers. She adapted the Greek comedy to be more female focused.

an alternate universe amidst all the sadness and the chaos.”

Something Different

Theater would continue to provide that relief for Lawson, who became more and more connected to the Big Apple’s theater community as the years went by. She acted in a few plays, directed many more and went on to serve as the director of education for the New York Theatre Workshop.

As she gained experience, she began to see the stage as a venue to communicate important messages and to raise awareness for important issues, especially after she met Yasmine Rana.

Rana, a drama therapist and playwright, worked with non-government organizations (NGOs) to help refugees



Yasmine Rana

in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Republic of Georgia and Switzerland, and drew from her experiences to write scripts. Lawson served as assistant director of Rana’s *Blood Sky* at the Looking Glass Theater, a place dedicated to showcasing female playwrights’ work. The two hit it off, and so began a long partnership on the stage, with Rana writing and Lawson directing.

The women soon began thinking of what they could do with that partnership, and how they could contribute to the world of theater in a different way. “We wanted to do something new and independent,” Rana explained. “It was very important to tell the stories of women, to show the voice of women.

And not just women playwrights, but women directors.”

A few years later, in 2005, Nora’s Playhouse was born. Along with Lawson and Rana, a third founder, Emily Richard, joined in as managing director. The name of the theater company is from *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen, published in 1879. Controversial when it debuted, the play sharply criticized marriage norms at the time. The play was the subject of Lawson’s thesis, and Nora, a main character in the play, was the first feminist on the stage. Lawson felt the title an appropriate one, given what the playhouse symbolizes.

The Mission

Nora’s Playhouse isn’t just an outlet to showcase female playwrights, but an avenue for female directors and designers to do work. In short, a theater company run by women.

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—Yasmine Rana



self-acceptance and reconciliation. The topic is something Rana learned a lot about while working with refugees.

“For me, theater is not just this tool of entertainment. It’s something that I think can be a life-changing experience, an introduction to something you never knew about,” Rana said. “To me, it’s much deeper than entertainment.”

She said she didn’t want to focus on the trauma she witnessed, but rather bring what’s in the news into theater to humanize it a bit. “I thought, that was 12 years ago, now those children born from rape are of a certain age, and cases

Nora’s Playhouse founders, (from left) Rana, Lawson and Emily Richard, at its launch in October 2009

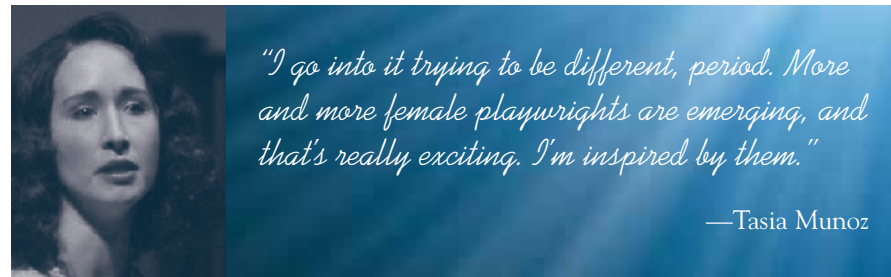
are now being opened and discussed,” she said. “Now is an important time to remember this and not forget the tragedy of what happened.”

She is doing that in another way as well. Her book *The War Zone Is My Bed and Other Plays*, published by Seagull Plays and distributed by the University of Chicago Press, has garnered much attention, and she’s already traveled as far away as Warsaw, Poland, to present readings from it. Her play *Blood Sky* is continuing to get exposure, and it was recently featured in a production for the International Festival of Women’s Writers.

“Yasmine’s star is really on the rise,” Lawson said. “I believe in her talent



Promotional materials for Nora's Playhouse productions and readings



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—Tasia Munoz

even more strongly than I did when we first began our collaboration.”

While Nora’s Playhouse is making great strides for females and the theater community in general, Rana and Lawson would love to see it become something more. Almost all of the women who work for the playhouse are volunteers who have other full-time jobs to attend to. “What we do at Nora’s is in addition to that, and that makes it challenging because we’re not working on it full time,” Lawson said.

Another challenge, Lawson said, is that she now spends most of her time in Alabama. She and husband Tommy Lawson, ’57, JD ’63, moved to Montgomery, his hometown, more than a year ago. Lawson teaches at Booker T. Washington Magnet School, and flies to New York when she can—she will be there this summer for a month to direct *The Fallen*. Tommy, who did some theater himself while at UA, is very supportive, she said.

Rana said she hopes Nora’s Playhouse hosts many other productions in the future and inspires women everywhere to practice their craft. “I hope that we’re an inspiration to other women who want to collaborate,” she said. “I encourage female theater artists, designers and lighting directors to really come together and find the resources in your community to do what you want to do. Don’t wait for someone to offer it.”

Take Your Place

There are women throughout the country doing just that. One of them, Anastasia Munoz, ’06, is a popular playwright, actress, director, choreographer and producer in the Dallas area. Her journey to prominence has not been an easy one, however, and she knows

all too well the importance of making your own way.

When Munoz was in high school, she loved participating in student plays. But that wasn’t enough, according to one of her senior-year teachers. “She made it a point to tell me every day that I should not pursue this career,” Munoz said, recalling the warning that she wouldn’t be able to handle such a tough field. “It got to the point where I surpassed the ‘I’ll show you’ and really listened to her.”

When Munoz got to UA she started off studying pre-med, but slowly made her way back into the world of theater. She signed up for an acting class at the last minute, loved it, and kept exploring the craft, eventually changing her major. After graduation, she took whatever theater-related jobs she could get her hands on: She served as an assistant at festivals, a stage manager and a costume designer, among other things.

She’s come a long way since then. Now directors seek her out for acting roles, she’s written a few plays herself,



Anastasia Munoz



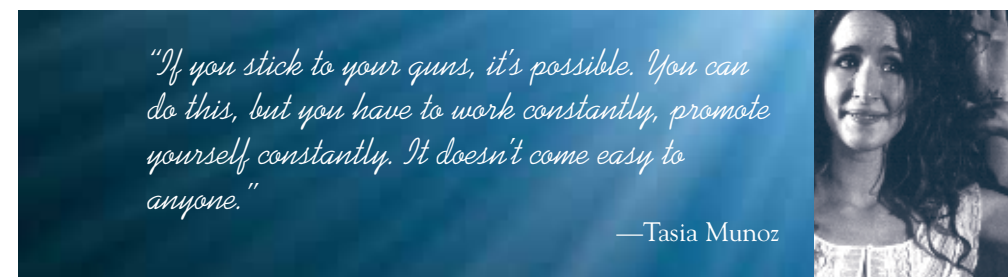
Katherine Owens

and she does everything in between—with a twist. She wrote her own version of *The Summoning of Everyman* (commonly known as *Everyman*), a Medieval morality play. In its evolution, she remade traditionally masculine characters into females and modernized the script, which met with success, considering her first show was a sellout.

She has a few more ideas for plays, all of them nontraditional. “I go into it trying to be different, period,” she said, adding she’s pleased other women are doing so as well. “More and more female playwrights are emerging, and that’s really

exciting. I’m inspired by them.”

When she’s not onstage or writing dialog, Munoz serves as a creative arts teacher for a nonprofit organization called Junior Players. She teaches theater, dance, modeling, creative writing and art at underprivileged schools, something she enjoys. “I’ve always loved school, and the fact that I can go back and share my passion for art, and that I don’t have to be married to any specific school, that’s been amazing,” she said. “I’ve been exposed to lots of different kids, and lots of different art forms.”



“If you stick to your guns, it’s possible. You can do this, but you have to work constantly, promote yourself constantly. It doesn’t come easy to anyone.”

—Tasia Munoz

Munoz performed as the main character in Eurydice in 2008. Sarah Ruhl recrafted the classic tale to be seen through the eyes of the heroine.

Munoz is also determined to motivate those in her classes, unlike her former high school teacher, though she does understand where that person was coming from in discouraging a thespian career. “She was laying out the reality of it to her students,” she said.

“If you can do something else, you should probably do it. If you stick to your guns, it’s possible. You can do this, but you have to work constantly, promote yourself constantly. It doesn’t come easy to anyone.” ■

Lauren Cabral, ’10, lives in New York City, where she is an editorial intern at BobVila.com.