

# And All the Men Merely Players: Gender in the Classical Theater

by [Ella Webb](#)

“The word theater comes from the Greek. It means the seeing place. It is the place people come to see the truth about life and the social situation.”  
–Stella Adler, *The Art of Acting*

Classical productions occupy quite a bit of real estate in the performance world and constitute much of the theater students’ curriculum. Proponents of ancient Greek and Shakespearean productions advertise that the classics remain relevant to all genders, sexes, races, and backgrounds today because they speak to universal truths about our human nature. This search for human truth, as Stella Adler muses, is often the goal of great artists. It is no wonder then, that American instructors are compelled to teach their students about the first recorded playwrights to accomplish so much.

Today, in BFA acting programs, girls rule. Undergraduate training in theater is now infamous for its gender imbalance, female-identifying students outnumbering male-identifying students. At Syracuse University, the 2017 class of BFA performance majors was “83 percent female” (McGerr). Similarly, NYU’s drama department in the 2018-2019 academic year was 66 percent female (“The Theater Major”). While the high percentage of female theater students in most programs may seem like a sign of gender

progress in the arts, the training these women receive once they enter academia is often stuck in the patriarchal past.

Theater has historically been a male-dominated profession. For centuries, women across the globe were barred from performing on public stages or writing their own theatrical works due both to gender biases and legal barriers. Some of the most celebrated works of theater originated from societies that forbade women from setting foot in their theaters. Nevertheless, today an abundance of young actresses work to train in top undergraduate drama schools across the nation, in spite of the knowledge that the canon of classical works they are expected to know and perform to be successful in the theater industry is almost entirely written by and for their male counterparts. Of the three most studied classical playwrights in collegiate acting programs – William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, and Arthur Miller – only 18 percent of Shakespeare’s characters are female, and only 38 percent of the characters are female across both Chekhov and Miller’s most notable works (McGerr). Given these statistics, female students in theater programs must constantly compete for the few available female roles. Moreover, female acting students are forced to reconcile themselves with the reality that classical plays will undoubtedly continue to be staples in mainstream theater repertoires and in theater education for years to come. The classics, seen by many as undeniably great works, are also “inextricably linked to the methods of actor training that dominate English-language schools: Chekhov, for his relationship to Stanislavski; Miller, for his connection to the Group theater; Shakespeare, as the basis for so many voice and text training methods” (McGerr). We are left, then, to investigate why gender inequality lingers in our arts education and how to cope with its effects.

By exploring Western theater history from a feminist perspective, we are better able to understand and address current gender inequities. In her acclaimed 1985 essay “Classic Drag,” Sue Ellen Case, the Chair of Critical Studies in the Theater Department at UCLA, argues that classical Greek plays are not capable of accurately conveying real women’s

experiences because the female characters in these plays were constructed, performed, and viewed solely by men. Case distinguishes the actual experiences of women living in ancient Athens from their fictitious depictions onstage, labeling the latter “Woman.” The fictional construct of ‘Woman,’ she asserts, was created at the same time that Athenian society was experiencing economic, political, and social changes that required families to produce male heirs to retain both wealth and citizenship and relegated women to the private sphere (318). Considered property, Athenian women were prohibited from participating in government and other “public” cultural institutions, the theater included (318). Acting, writing, and attending plays were boys-only activities, a policy that ensured the exclusion of any genuine female influence on the dramatic arts. Even mythology, which provided Greek life and theater with their core narratives, supported patriarchy. Take the myth of the Amazons, for instance: Stone carvings in the Acropolis, Athens’ civic center, depicted the matriarchal society as conquered by men and absorbed into a ‘superior’ patriarchal one; the goddess Athena was also supposedly born from Zeus after he “swallow[ed] his wife . . . in order to gain her power of reproduction” (321). In this context – where actual women were eliminated from the public sphere, subjugated through the economic structure, and subverted in mythology, men in the theater went unchallenged as they created their fictitious construct of ‘Woman.’

In her critique, Case frames female characters like Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and Athena of *The Oresteia* cycle as a collection of stereotypes and idealizations that men formed “while suppressing the experiences, stories, feelings, and fantasies of actual women” (Case 318). For example, Clytemnestra’s “steady resolve” is dismissed as a manifestation of her “male (inner) strength,” and regarded as “unnatural”; Cassandra is Agammon’s mute hostage, denied “the privilege of effective public speech”; and Athena settles Orestes’ trial by declaring that he should be forgiven for murdering his mother because he was avenging his father, a “public rationalization of misogyny . . . rest[ing] upon establishing the parental line as male” (323-4). These are all

representations of the sexist 'Woman' construct depicted in Greek theater. In her essay's resounding note, Case ultimately declares that "each culture which valorizes the reproduction of those 'classic' texts actively participates in the same patriarchal subtext which creates those female characters as 'Woman,'" and claims that women today should take no part in these performances because they were never meant to in the first place (322). Essentially, since men already created their ideal, subjugating 'Woman' in our absence, we as women should reject these parts.

Case's essay was influential, but not nearly enough to diminish the classics' influence on theater education. High school and undergraduate theater programs continue to use ancient Greek and Shakespearean plays for study, as do professional companies, summer stock programs, and Broadway alike, which many actresses rely on for work after graduation. Thus, many actresses have found solace, and even a sense of victory, by playing roles originally meant for men. In the past ten years, there has been a surge of classic plays with gender-blind casting, where the best actor is cast in the role regardless of gender, or gender-bent casting, where the role is changed to reflect the actor's gender. Some companies see creative benefits to casting non-male actors in male roles, even producing all-female shows. Celebrated film and theater director Phyllida Lloyd, best known for *The Iron Lady*, cast her 2012 stage production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at the Donmar with only women. Reflecting on the possibilities for future productions, British theater director Elizabeth Freestone argues, "a more imaginative approach to casting the classics will unlock all kinds of creative interpretations, and naturally feed into all other areas" (qtd. in Higgins). Additionally, when directing a production of *Timon of Athens* at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Simon Godwin shared that by re-gendering these classic characters, you "discover that Shakespeare was really interested in what's humane, what's universal, [more] than what's gender-specific," adding that female actors playing traditionally male roles offer a unique benefit by making characters "more transparently universal" (qtd. in "Women Playing Male Roles"). Godwin then expressed a sentiment that might make Sue Ellen

Case shake in her boots: “I don’t want re-gendering to have any additional significance. I just want it to be seen as natural and normal.”

This desire for gender-blind or gender-bent casting to be “natural and normal” indicates a surface-level understanding of the way gender functions in classic plays. While Shakespeare’s plays might exhibit fewer instances of blatant misogyny than those of the ancient Greeks, they still carry every marker of a male-dominated worldview in which women are secondary and only find value in relationship to male figures (e.g. Ophelia, Gertrude, Juliet, Helena, Lady Macbeth, etc.). The principal issue with Godwin’s solution is that it assumes Shakespeare was above the sexism of his time. Because his works still resonate with audiences today and occasionally grant some female roles redeeming qualities – strength, kindness, wisdom, wit, we may presume that women are accurately represented in his work. However, the fact that male lines significantly outnumber female lines indicates the opposite. Because the male perspective in theater has been dominant historically in cultures across the globe, how are we to know that Shakespeare’s work is really universal to anyone outside of the white male population?

Faced with a male-authored classical canon (and a male-authored history, for that matter), women are taught from their earliest years of education to see the world through male eyes. Playwright August Wilson unpacks this idea of a unilateral universality in the theater, which has forced non-white, non-male groups to choose between assimilation or inferiority. In a 1996 moderated discussion with theater critic Robert Brustein, Wilson was criticized for saying that Black theater-makers needed the opportunities, funding, and space to properly express the Black experience. Brustein argued that Wilson wanted to create a “theater of racial exclusion,” where Black artists were limited to so-called “Black subject matter” (Grimes). In response, Wilson asked:

*Why is white experience assumed to be universal . . . and black experience somehow particular? Why are black artists expected to become universal by transcending race and moving beyond black themes? Never is it suggested that playwrights like David Mamet or Terrence McNally are limiting themselves to whiteness. (qtd. in Grimes)*

Recognizing first that race and gender are two separate, nuanced issues, Wilson's line of thinking can be used to question why we accept white, *male* experience as universal in the classics. While directors like Simon Godwin surely mean well by their optimistic love for the classics, it is ultimately harmful to groups historically excluded from theater to propagate the message that the arts they were systematically excluded from somehow reflects a universal, non-gendered human spirit.

This messaging, instilled in Western culture since the dawn of ancient Greek theater, takes a veritable toll on actors' identities. When women play male characters in the classics, they exercise a male point of view and are encouraged to develop an empathetic relationship with their character, at least for the performance period. In small doses, empathizing with a character of a different gender, written by another gender, may be a good exercise in broadening an actor's perspective; however, this type of empathy is almost exclusively required of female performers in classic plays. Men acting the classics are hardly ever compelled to take on the role of a female character that is written by a woman because so few such characters and plays exist. But empathy has to go both ways.

The effects women endure even when playing female characters in the classics can be just as insidious, as they are asked to bring 'Woman,' a caricature based on patriarchal gender stereotypes, to life, inadvertently validating its assertions. Although this may seem like an issue of the past, the acting methods most frequently used in the American theater education system call on actors to find commonality and personal connections to the characters they play. During their training, at a time when actresses are often their most vulnerable and trusting of authority, classic plays ask actresses to "align with

an unhealthy gender role” and “to search for self-revelations that are demeaning” in order to connect with female characters on a personal level (Jenkins and Ogden-Malouf qtd. in Malague 2). These subtle perpetuations of sexism in the prevailing methods of theater education are dangerous mostly because female actors – and for that matter, their directors – might not know they are happening.

Inevitably patriarchal, the classics put women in situations that are detrimental to their social standing and self-esteem, whether they play a character that was originally male or originally “Woman.” Still, it is unrealistic to expect the classics to become obsolete simply because they do not offer fair representation to anyone outside of the white, male, able-bodied category. There are too many ardent defenders of the classics and they are essential components in understanding a history of the theatrical artform and the oppression that artform sometimes supported. Ironically, a man may have provided us with some tools that help us to find a solution.

Bertolt Brecht, father of the epic theater, theorized that naturalist theater, a style of drama committed to absolute realism, had a keen ability to control public opinion because it disguised its own biases as objective truth. Much like the institutionalized misogyny contained in the classic theater repertoire, naturalism was, to Brecht, an illusory tool that kept society stagnant, as only the people with enough power and wealth to produce theater could control the human truths depicted onstage. One of the cures Brecht proposed for this problem was an acting technique he called the “alienation effect” (91). Brecht suggested that directors and playwrights insert projections, songs, gestures, and sets that periodically broke audiences from the spell of naturalist illusion and reminded them that they were witnessing theater made by real, flawed human beings and not by supernatural beings who possessed absolute, universal truths. Without using these exact stylistic choices, theater educators have the opportunity to use Brechtian theory to mitigate the effects of misogynistic depictions on young actresses in training. Rather than attempting to naturalize oppressive fictitious

constructs, a theater employing the alienation effect “concentrates entirely on whatever in [a] perfectly everyday event is remarkable, particular, and demanding inquiry” (Brecht 97). By that logic, simply contextualizing classic plays for young performers within a gender-focused history may begin to provide them with the protective gear to approach classic productions without internalizing their misogynistic messaging. It is irresponsible to throw actresses and actors into classical productions without helping them to acknowledge the inequities these plays represent, not just in their plots but in the cultures of their inception. Brecht argues that allowing an actress to acknowledge the context of her character’s environment “Underline[s] the historical aspect of a specific social condition . . . Without it all she can do is observe how she is not forced to go over entirely into the character on the stage” (98). Incorporating historical and feminist learning into theater training programs from middle school to post-graduate may provide performers with enough context to allow them to celebrate classic theater’s accomplishments while also understanding the places where it fails to truthfully represent their experiences.

While we may teach, learn, and perform the classics more equitably, there is simply no replacement for new, female-led theater, regardless of how hard we try to make classic theater more accessible to women. After years of taking on male-heavy productions with our female-heavy high school class, mustering through *True West*, *Lord of the Flies*, and yes, *12 Angry Jurors*, nothing matched the feeling of visibility we felt when we first performed *The Wolves*, a contemporary work by Sarah DeLappe that centered around a group of teenage girls on a soccer team. Luckily, the number of female writers and directors on Broadway stages is on the rise. *American Theater* magazine reported that of the 2,085 documented productions in 2019, approximately 30 percent were written by female-identifying authors (Weinert-Kendt). Productions like *What the Constitution Means to Me* and *In the Next Room (Or the Vibrator Play)* are invaluable not only to young actresses in training who can use the material to study their craft without compromising their self-worth, but also to all young women who finally see their stories told through

voices that sound like their own. The Greeks may have intended to erase real women from their narratives, making us invisible from the start of an ancient artistic tradition, but now, the theater is a “seeing place” for women too: we see ourselves. By understanding the origins of institutionalized gender inequality in our education and in our artistic practices, perhaps we do have the power to help people see what Adler calls “the truth about life and the social situation.”

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