

WOMEN'S VOICES THEATER FESTIVAL

STUDY GUIDE

FALL 2015 | OUR NATION'S CAPITAL

In the fall of 2015, more than 50 professional theaters in Washington, D.C. are each producing at least one world premiere play by a female playwright. The Women's Voices Theater Festival is history's largest collaboration of theater companies working simultaneously to produce original works by female writers.

CONSIDER

- Why is it important for artists of diverse backgrounds to have their work seen by audiences?
- What is the impact of seeing a play that you can connect to your own experience?
- How would you react if you knew that you and the playwright of a production you were watching had something in common (ex. ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, where you grew up or went to school, etc.)?

GO DEEPER

Women playwrights are not the only artists that are under-represented on professional stages. If you were to create your own theater festival to give a larger stage to groups that are often unheard, what group of people would you choose? What would your festival be called? What would its mission be? What would you hope to accomplish?

WHY A WOMEN'S VOICES THEATER FESTIVAL?

If someone asked you to quickly name three playwrights, who would they be?

Shakespeare likely tops your list. Perhaps you remember Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams or August Wilson. Sophocles, Molière, Marlowe, Ibsen, Chekov, Shaw, O'Neill — these are among the most famous Western playwrights. They are central to the dramatic canon. A "canon" is an authoritative list of important works — think of it as the official "Top 40" of dramatic literature. Their plays are the most likely to be seen onstage and assigned in schools.

A large group is often missing from the canon, professional stages, traditional reading lists and your education in theater: women playwrights.

Plays by women are as important, artistic, rigorous, compelling and producible as plays by men. They are also plentiful. Women's perspectives are also key to more fully understanding our world.

According to a recent *Washington Post* article, surveys say that D.C. audiences are 61 percent female and Broadway audiences are 68 percent female. Yet, in 2014-2015, only 27 percent of plays professionally produced in D.C. were written by women.

IN WASHINGTON, D.C., ON AVERAGE, PROFESSIONAL THEATERS PRODUCE THREE PLAYS WRITTEN BY MEN FOR EVERY ONE PLAY WRITTEN BY A WOMAN.

The trickle-down effect of this is critical. Universities, community theaters and schools look to professional theaters to determine what is worthy to produce and assign. In school, people learn who and what is important and seek out familiar names when buying tickets. If women's plays are not seen on professional stages they are less likely to be seen and valued by the population at large. As a result, our chance to understand our world and see a broad range of perspectives and experiences at the theater is limited.

One thing is clear: more plays written by women need to be produced. The Women's Voices Theater Festival is an effort by theaters in our nation's capital to address this gender gap.

So, as you attend festival plays this fall, remember your playwright's name. While you're at it learn these names — Lorraine Hansberry, Wendy Wasserstein, Suzan-Lori Parks, Alice Childress, Lynn Nottage, Eve Ensler, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Yasmina Reza and the other women in these pages. Seek out their work and the work of other women, because women's voices need to be heard and remembered.

TRAILBLAZING WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

From **HROTSVITHA**, a 10th century German nun who is considered the first Western woman playwright, to **LISA KRON** and **JEANINE TESORI**, whose *Fun Home* won the 2015 Tony Award for Best Musical, women playwrights have made valuable contributions to theater. Here are just a few notable female playwrights:

Actress-turned-playwright **ALICE CHILDRESS** (1912-1994) started writing plays to combat the lack of interesting roles for African-American women. In 1952, *Gold Through the Trees* became the first play by an African-American woman professionally produced in New York.

ANNA DEAVERE SMITH (b. 1950) turns verbatim interviews with people on social issues into virtuosic one-woman shows, playing as many as 52 characters. She is developing a new piece about the school-to-prison pipeline.

EVE ENSLER'S (b. 1953) *The Vagina Monologues* broke taboos about women's issues and sexuality. Groups can perform it without royalty fees during February to raise awareness about violence against women.

MARÍA IRENE FORNÉS (b. 1930), a Cuban-American playwright, was a leader of avant-garde theater in the 1960s and 70s.

LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S (1930-1965) *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play by an African-American woman produced on Broadway, where it premiered in 1959. Considered an American classic, it is known for being a realistic depiction of African-American life and racism in the 1950s.

LILLIAN HELLMAN (1905-1984) was a political activist and rabble-rouser, whose plays, like *The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes*, explored critical social themes like the abuse of power.

Pulitzer Prize winner **QUIARA ALEGRÍA HUDES** (b. 1977) began writing plays when her mother told her it was her responsibility to tell the stories of her West Philadelphia family, especially those struggling with poverty and addiction.



Photos on left (top to bottom): Suzan Zeder's plays for young audiences have been performed in all 50 states. Rafael Sebastian and Matthew Schleigh in Imagination Stage's *Wiley and the Hairy Man*. Photo by Margot Schulman. • E. Faye Butler and Marty Lodge in Arena Stage's production of *Trouble in Mind* by Alice Childress. Photo by Richard Anderson. • Tim Getman, Amy Waschke, Arturo Soria, Gabriela Fernandez-Coffey, Maboud Ebrahimzadeh, and Vincent J Brown in Studio Theatre's 2014 production of *Water by the Spoonful* by Quiara Alegría Hudes. Photo by Teddy Wolff. • Vanessa Locke, Paul Morella, Naomi Jacobson, and Andy Brownstein in Signature Theatre's production of *God of Carnage* by Yasmina Reza. Photo by Scott Suchman. • Theresa Cunningham in Compass Rose's production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Photo by Stan Barouh.

NAOMI IIZUKA (b. 1965) is known for bending and breaking the conventions of theater. One of her stage directions for her 1997 play *Polaroid Stories* is she “slowly turns into a star, bright and glowing, a neon girl, a constellation in a sky full of stars.”

In 2003, **JULIA JORDAN** had four of her plays professionally produced in New York – an exceptional number for a single year.

ADRIENNE KENNEDY (b. 1931) is a pioneer of surreal, non-linear, experimental theater and pushed the limits of what could happen on stage with plays like *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.

Just 411 years after it opened, Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, commissioned its first play by a female playwright:

NELL LEYSHON’S *Bedlam*.

LYNN NOTTAGE (b. 1964) is the most recent female Pulitzer Prize winner. Her winning play, *Ruined*, focuses on the rape of women during the civil war currently raging in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

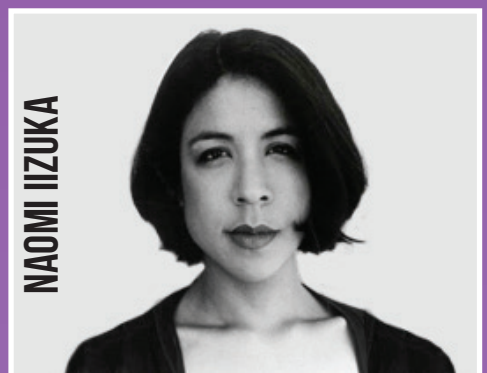
SUZAN-LORI PARKS (b. 1963) became the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, with her 2001 play *Topdog/Underdog*.

YASMINA REZA (b. 1959) won the highest theater awards in England, in France and in the U.S. for her 1994 play, *Art*.

Pulitzer Prize winner **PAULA VOGEL** (b. 1951) is a renowned playwriting teacher, whose students have also won drama’s highest awards.

In 1989 **WENDY WASSERSTEIN** (1950-2006) was the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama with *The Heidi Chronicles*. She was a pioneer for plays centered on modern women striving for balance in their lives.

The MacArthur “Genius” Awards recognize people who excel in their field, giving them \$625,000 for their creative pursuits. Playwrights Anna Deavere Smith, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks and Sarah Ruhl have been recipients.



THE 2015 WOMEN'S VOICES THEATER FESTIVAL PLAYWRIGHTS

Kathleen Akerley
Marilyn Ansevin Austin
Claudia Barnett
Jennie Berman Eng
Amy Bernstein
Mel Bieler & Jami Brandli
Bekah Brunstetter
Sheila Callaghan
Audrey Cefaly
Marcia E. Cole
Patricia Connelly
Karin Coonrod
Jessica Dickey
Nevaeh Edwards
Allison Engel & Margaret Engel
Christine Evans
Yaël Farber
Nora Foster
Gabrielle Fulton

Susan Galbraith
Jacqueline Goldfinger
Miranda Rose Hall
Mary Hall Surface
Ty Hallmark
Marilyn Hausfeld
Patricia Henley
Ginna Hoben
Jennifer Hoppe-House
Rosemary Jenkinson
Julia Jordan
Patti Kalil
Sandra Kammann
Leslie Kobylinski
Monique LaForce
E. M. Lewis
Clare Lizzimore
Liz Maestri
Martyna Majok

Susan McCully
Madison Middleton
Ann Marie Mulhearn Sayer
Carmela Pascale
Jaci Pulice & The October Issue
Ensemble
Hope Price-Lindsay
Ursula Rani Sarma
Laura Rocklyn
Lloyd Rose
Jen Silverman
Caleen Sinnette Jennings
Julia Starr
Lydia Stryk
Tammy Turner
Anderson Waltz
Sheri Wilner
Karen Zacarías
Suzan Zeder

FOR COMPLETE DETAILS ABOUT THE FESTIVAL, PLEASE VISIT WWW.WOMENSVOICESTHEATERFESTIVAL.ORG

HONORARY COMMITTEE

First Lady Michelle Obama, Chair, Jane Alexander, Karen Allen, Megan Beyer, Paula Marie Black, Lydia Diamond, Heidi Lennard Dupler, Margaret Edson, Senator Dianne Feinstein, Zeldia Fichandler, Katori Hall, Marg Helgenberger, Beth Henley, Wilhelmina Cole Holladay, Quiara Alegría Hudes, Allison Janney, Commissioner Kay Kendall, Téa Leoni, Marsha Mason, Audra McDonald, Senator Lisa Murkowski, Marsha Norman, Lynn Nottage, Diana Prince, Anika Noni Rose, Sarah Ruhl, Julie Taymor, Kathleen Turner, Paula Vogel, Mare Winningham, Joy Zinoman

RESOURCES

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GO DEEPER

This guide only scratches the surface of women playwrights. Learn more about the playwrights listed below. Read their plays and seek out the work of other women playwrights not mentioned in these pages.

Aphra Behn
Julia Cho
Caryl Churchill
Betty Comden
Kia Corthron

Migdalia Cruz
Teresa Deevy
Lydia Diamond
Diane Glancy
Katori Hall

Beth Henley
Amy Herzog
Velina Hasu
Houston
Cherrie Moraga

Aishah Rahman
Ntozake Shange
Diana Son
Sophie Treadwell