Introduction

The Context for Ruhl and Her Contemporaries, or Women’s Playwriting: Strictly Prohibited in the New Century?

For more than a decade, activists, writers, and critics have been calling for a change to unfair working conditions faced by contemporary female playwrights. During the 1998–99 theater season, the Guerilla Girls put stickers in the stalls of women’s restrooms in New York City theaters that had not produced a play by a woman that season—this included some of the city’s most well-regarded companies. The stickers proclaimed, “In this theater the taking of photographs, the use of recording devices, and the production of plays by women are strictly prohibited.” The Susan Jonas and Suzanne Bennett study “Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?” was released three years later, in January 2002. In their study, funded by the New York State Council on the Arts, Jonas and Bennett reported on the number of female playwrights at work in the American regional theater and in Off-Broadway theaters at several moments: from 1969 to 1975, the number was 7 percent; in the 1994–94 season, 17 percent of plays were written by women; in the 2000–2001 season, 20 percent “had a woman on the writing team”; and in the then current season of 2001–2, 17 percent of plays were written by women.¹ They observed that in 1998 in Off-Off Broadway theaters the percentage of plays written by women neared 30 percent, but if one looked uptown to Broadway houses that same year, only 8 percent of dramas and 1 percent of musicals had female authors. While women’s voices might not have been literally prohibited in the years covered by the study, the statistics Jonas and Bennett gathered demonstrated that on American stages, these voices were rare. It was at roughly this time that Sarah Ruhl began her professional playwriting career.

In *The New York Times* the next year, Jason Zinoman trumpeted “The Season of the Female Playwright.” Noting the perception among playwrights that Jonas and Bennett’s study was a “turning point,” he compared the 2002 and 2003 seasons: “Last year’s fall season did include New York premieres by Caryl
Churchill, Dael Orlandersmith and Elaine May, but the majority of new plays were written by men and there were hardly any debuts by female playwrights.\textsuperscript{2} By contrast in 2003, he argued, “Downtown, the highest profile commercial play was \textit{Omnium Gatherum} by Ms. [Theresa] Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros. Arguably the best-reviewed plays so far this season have been Lisa Loomer’s \textit{Living Out}, Amy Freed’s \textit{Beard of Avon} and Paula Vogel’s \textit{Long Christmas Ride Home}.” But before Zinoman concluded his thoughts, he did note that even in this golden season for women, “the only play written by a woman on Broadway this fall closed before it opened—\textit{Bobbi Boland} by Nancy Hasty.”\textsuperscript{2}

The public furor over gender equity in American playwriting quieted for a time, Sarah Ruhl’s list of plays and productions expanded, and tension continued to simmer just beneath the surface of critical discourse. Writing a little more than four years after Zinoman, Alexis Greene decried the lack of a new and comprehensive study mapping male and female writers’ work opportunities in \textit{American Theatre}.\textsuperscript{3} In October 2008, female playwrights took matters into their own hands in order to restart large-scale, public conversations. Playwrights Sarah Schulman and Julia Jordan organized a town hall–style meeting at the nation’s oldest organization supporting playwrights, New Dramatists, to discuss the struggles female writers continue to face if they aim to have their work produced Off-Broadway, a segment of New York theater generally hospitable to new, nonmusical plays. The then current 2008–9 season at the Public Theater would feature six new plays by men and one by a woman;\textsuperscript{4} at the Manhattan Theatre Club five news plays were written by men and one was by a woman (Lynn Nottage, whose Pulitzer Prize–winning \textit{Ruined} will be discussed in this study). At the time of the meeting there were no nonmusical plays on Broadway written by women.

Meanwhile, at the instigation of Jordan, Emily Glassberg Sands began studying the situation. When she shared her findings at the 59E59 Theatre in New York in June 2009, she confirmed some assumptions while upending others. Sands found that in 2008, 82 percent of plays in nonprofit theaters with more than 99 seats were written by men while only 18 percent were written by women, thus indicating no profound change from the seasons studied by Jonas and Bennett.\textsuperscript{5} In addition, she found that there are more scripts being written by men, so the percentage of male-authored scripts that find their way to production is actually almost equal to the number authored by women; she found that women are more likely to write plays about women and that plays about women are less likely to be produced; she found that women artistic directors (those who schedule plays for production) tend to anticipate bias and thus worry more about female-authored texts’ economic value than male artistic directors; and she found that while women’s scripts, when they make it to