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Ph.D. Program - Theatre Studies

“Module: History of World Theatre”

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Gender in Western Theatre History

(From Theatre's Origins to 2000)

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The purpose and relevance of the research topic

Gender studies as an independent academic discipline emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Gender, as a socio-cultural construct, gained its relevance in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily due to the rise of the feminist movement. Over time, gender studies have evolved into an interdisciplinary field closely intertwined with various scientific disciplines such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, economics, political science, and others. Consequently, the scope of gender research has broadened, encompassing nearly all facets of human social experience. At the modern stage, gender studies focus on examining the power dynamics inherent in gender and deciphering the socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity.

In gender studies, it is crucial to differentiate between the terms "sex" (referring to biological characteristics) and "gender" (linked to cultural constructs). Masculinity and femininity are socially constructed concepts that vary across cultures and are distinct from biological sex. In contemporary discourse, researchers universally acknowledge gender as a social construct, separate from biological sex. One of the primary objectives of gender studies is to investigate the social and cultural forces that have historically shaped hierarchical structures and traditional ideologies, such as the predominance of male gender and the privileged position of men in society. Additionally, it's essential to recognize that unlike feminist (women's) studies, gender studies encompass the examination of masculinity as well. Since the 1990s, gender studies within the performing arts, including theatre arts, have gained considerable importance. Towards the end of the 20th century, driven by the momentum of feminist movements, there emerged a critical demand within scholarly circles to examine gender roles and representations across all facets of public engagement, including theatre.

Given the significance of the subject matter, the presented dissertation undertakes an examination of gender dynamics throughout the history of Western theatre, spanning from its origins to the year 2000. Within the scope of gender and feminist studies, this research explores the evolution of gender roles across different eras, stages, and facets of world theatre. It delves into how gender roles were perceived in Western professional theatre and early theatrical traditions. It investigates the social, political, and cultural circumstances that historically resulted in the limited involvement of women in theatre.

The thesis examines gender roles in theatre arts, exploring their distribution and the stereotypes that have historically shaped (and to some extent continue to shape) these roles. It investigates the nature of these stereotypes, their origins, and provides concrete examples of their manifestation across various cultures. For centuries, the theatre retained its status as a strictly patriarchal institution, excluding women from roles as spectators, performers, playwrights, directors, and other forms of participation. Cross-cultural gender studies have unequivocally demonstrated that biological sex minimally influences the performance of social roles, with women and men displaying equal capabilities in various tasks. What factors, then, have contributed to the dominance of one gender over the other throughout the centuries?

In the dissertation, I aim to address central questions crucial to gender studies in theatre, including: What is the position of women on the global theatre stage? What roles and contributions did women have in early theatrical traditions, and how did these evolve over time? What socio-cultural factors have historically led to the marginalization of women from nearly all spheres of theatrical involvement over the centuries? How significantly did female playwrights and directors contribute to the evolution of theatrical forms and genres? Is there equitable recognition and representation of women and men within the contemporary theatre industry? Lastly, what contribution can theatre make towards addressing gender discrimination and inequality?

The research methodology

Research Methods: This study employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating historical research, literature analysis, feminist theory, and cultural studies. Through the utilization of diverse methodologies, the study attempts to enrich scientific discourse and, in practical terms, foster gender equality and inclusivity within the theatre arts.

Literature analysis: This component involves an examination of existing theories pertaining to gender studies within the performing arts.;

Historical Analysis: Drawing upon foundational texts in theatre history alongside archival sources and historical documents, this aspect investigates the evolution of gender representation within theatrical contexts.

Textual analysis: Involves the systematic examination of plays, performances, and theatrical texts across various historical periods and cultural contexts.

Comparative Analysis: Examines gender dynamics across various theatrical traditions, geographic regions, and historical periods. It delves into similarities and differences in how gender roles are portrayed within diverse cultural and temporal contexts.

Intersectional Approach: Examines how gender intertwines with other aspects of identity like race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality in the performing arts.

The research employs both **qualitative** and **quantitative** methods, as demonstrated by the recent study on "Gender Equality & Diversity in European Theaters" conducted by the European Theater Convention - ETC.

The results of the research topic, scientific novelty, and literature review

In recent decades, there has been a growing scholarly focus on the study of gender within Western theatre history. Notable works related gender studies in theatre have been published. However, the literature on this topic still exhibits gaps and limitations. Most studies tend to concentrate on a particular historical era and geographical area. Remarkably, there has yet to be a comprehensive examination of gender dynamics spanning the entire history of Western theatre, from its origins to the contemporary stage. This dissertation aims to fill these gaps by conducting a comprehensive and inclusive examination of gender within Western theatre history. Furthermore, there has been a notable absence of thorough research conducted in the Georgian language on the topic of gender studies within theatre, which, we think, determines the scientific novelty of the work.

Although there have been noticeable advancements in recent years, gender inequality persists as a significant issue within the performing arts, including theatre, mirroring broader social inequalities. Stereotypical perceptions deeply ingrained in society continue to uphold traditional gender norms within the theatre. This study is crucial for understanding and analysing the intricate gender dynamics in theatre, intending to foster a more inclusive, equitable, and just environment for the future. The study brings attention to the enduring challenges that women encounter within the theatre arts industry, illuminating issues like gender bias. Through research insights, it aims to advocate for inclusivity, diversity, and gender equality in theatre, targeting theatre practitioners, educators, policymakers, and industry stakeholders. Thus, the objective of gender studies in theatre extends beyond scientific inquiry to laying the groundwork for the development of models promoting gender equality.

Due to the complexity of the research topic, a varied selection of scholarly literature has been employed. Among the primary resources is "The Theatre" by Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy (Brockett O., Hildy F., The Theatre, Allyn and Bacon, 2003), recognized as one of the most comprehensive studies of theatre history. This seminal work provides a chronological examination of theatre as a socio-cultural institution, enabling a broad understanding of its significance as a social and anthropological phenomenon.

The structure of the work

The present dissertation titled "Gender in Western Theatre History (From Theatre's Origins to 2000)" consists of seven chapters with corresponding sub-chapters. The opening chapter delves into theories surrounding the origins of theatre, examining gender roles within early civilizations. Through an analysis of the interplay between ritual, myth, and gender, it offers insights into the lived experiences of women in ancient societies. Additionally, it explores how cultural and social constructs from this period have shaped gender dynamics across historical epochs. In the second chapter, the focus shifts to the roles of women in ancient Greek theatre. This segment provides a concise overview of the origins of theatre and drama in ancient Greece, as well as an examination of the social status of women in classical Athens. Additionally, it explores the multifaceted roles women played in ancient Greek mythology, tragedy, and comedy. In the ancient Greek theatre, masculine discourse held a dominant position, with tragedies and comedies reflecting and reinforcing prevailing attitudes towards women. The idealization of male-centred narratives not only influenced gender dynamics within ancient Greek theatre and society but also established the groundwork for gender norms and performances in Western theatre for centuries to follow. Critically analyzing and deconstructing these narratives from a feminist and gender perspective is crucial for gaining insight into and challenging the historical imbalance of power and representation in theatrical discourse. By examining these narratives through such a lens, we can uncover underlying biases, question traditional interpretations, and work towards fostering more inclusive and equitable representations on the stage. The third chapter is dedicated to Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, widely recognized as the first female playwright in theatre history. This section emphasizes the significance of Hrotsvitha not only in the annals of theatre but also in the broader context of women's history, Western literature, and the Middle Ages as a whole. The fourth chapter investigates and analyzes the role and function of women in Renaissance-era theatre, with a focus on Italy, Spain, England, and France. Moreover, it delves into a review of gender roles for women during the Renaissance period. The fifth chapter is devoted to women in the theatre during the Age of Enlightenment, examining examples from England, Italy, France, and Germany. Additionally, it outlines the status of European women during the Enlightenment and poses several central questions: Did the social and economic status of women improve? Did they gain greater access to power and were they able to express themselves in more varied ways compared to the Middle Ages? In the sixth chapter, gender dynamics in nineteenth-century Western theatre take centre stage. The chapter provides an overview of the history and theory of early feminism during the 19th and early 20th centuries, explores gender within the context of nineteenth-century European theatre, and briefly examines women's contributions to the establishment of professional theatre in the United States. The seventh and final chapter explores the paradigm shift in gender constructions and their deconstruction on the Western theatrical scene throughout the twentieth century. The introductory section examines feminist progress during this period, while also analyzing gender constructions in European theater from 1901 to 1950. It further delves into the deconstruction of these norms and the redefinition of gender roles on the European stage from 1951 to 2000. Additionally, the chapter highlights the central role of women in the evolution of professional theatre in the United States during the twentieth century.

Summary of the thesis

This dissertation focused on the exploration of gender in the history of Western theatre spanning from its origins to the year 2000. Through the lens of gender and feminist studies, considering various eras, stages, and facets of world theatre, the research examined the perception of gender roles in Western professional theatre and its antecedents. It delved into the social, political, and cultural circumstances that historically contributed to the lesser involvement of women in theatre. For centuries, the theatre remained entrenched as a strictly patriarchal institution, excluding women from roles as spectators, performers, playwrights, directors, and other forms of participation. It wasn't until relatively late that a woman's voice began to be heard on the stages of Western theatre.

The research revealed that ritual practices and mythological narratives of early civilizations played a significant role in shaping the gender roles of women in ancient societies. These ancient theatrical forms, rooted in rituals and myths, not only mirrored prevailing societal attitudes towards gender but also actively reinforced and solidified gender norms and expectations. Through the analysis of the interplay between ritual, myth, and gender, valuable insights can be gained into the lived experiences of women in early societies, shedding light on how these cultural and social constructs have continued to influence gender dynamics throughout history. Indeed, in primitive societies, mythological beliefs often served as the foundation for understanding one's place in the world. Consequently, it's reasonable to infer that during the archaic period, the roles of women and men in society were influenced to some extent by mythological narratives. Over time, this function of shaping societal roles transitioned into the domain of religion, which continued to play a significant role in defining and reinforcing gender roles and expectations. Studies examining the beliefs of early civilizations have revealed a noteworthy correlation: societies where women held significant roles as religious figures and were actively involved in religious rituals tended to exhibit greater gender egalitarianism in everyday life. In contrast, societies where religion was predominantly male-centric often displayed more pronounced gender disparities in the division of roles between men and women. This underscores the influential role of religious beliefs and practices in shaping societal attitudes towards gender and influencing gender dynamics. Examining ancient Egypt provides a clear illustration of how myth and religion shaped the socio-cultural fabric of society. In ancient Egypt, there was a notable emphasis on treating men and women equally, reflecting a unique social system where gender equality was more pronounced. This egalitarian approach can be attributed, at least in part, to the mythological beliefs ingrained in Egyptian society. The reverence for goddesses alongside gods and the presence of powerful female figures in mythology likely contributed to a more balanced perception of gender roles and relationships within Egyptian culture.

The exploration of ancient Greek mythology presents a contrasting picture. In examining the roles of women in ancient Greek theatre, it became crucial to provide a brief overview of myths surrounding women, alongside an examination of the social status of women in classical Athens. This broader context sheds light on the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and societal structures prevalent in ancient Greek society, which significantly influenced the portrayal and treatment of women both on and off the stage. Sarah Pomeroy highlights the significant influence of Hesiod's ideas on both the gods and humanity, suggesting that they not only shaped the views of the populace but also potentially conformed to them; Hesiod's *Theogony*, often regarded as the standard Greek version of divine evolution, outlines the transition from a female-dominated generation to the rational monarchy of the superior and Olympian Zeus.¹ This historical transformation within Greek religion contributed to a shift in emphasis from the worship of female deities to male deities.

¹ Pomeroy S., *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, Schocken, 1975, p. 12.

Consequently, masculine discourse began to permeate public philosophy, a shift that could be directly linked to Hesiod's personal, unfavourable views of women.² While female deities held significant positions within the Olympian hierarchy, their roles still operated within the framework of a dominant masculine discourse, with Zeus reigning as the supreme deity. Despite their importance, female deities were ultimately subordinate to Zeus and subject to his authority. These mythological beliefs likely played a substantial role in shaping the gender roles of women in ancient Greek society, including their portrayal and treatment within the realm of theatre.

Masculine discourse held dominance in ancient Greek theatre. For instance, it's well-documented that all roles, including those of women, were portrayed by male actors. However, scholarly discourse continues to debate whether women were permitted to attend performances alongside men during this period. Despite the lack of consensus, evidence suggests that women's participation in theatre as spectators may have been limited or restricted, reflecting broader societal norms and gender dynamics of the time. Performances in ancient Greece undoubtedly emanated from a male perspective, given that men were primarily responsible for writing, staging, and acting in plays, as well as comprising the audience in the theatron. However, it's important to note the presence of all-female choruses and numerous strong female characters in ancient Greek drama. Figures such as Medea, Phaedra, Lysistrata, Antigone, Clytemnestra, and Electra, among others, not only demonstrate the richness and complexity of female roles within the theatrical canon but also attest to the significant influence and presence of women within the dramatic narratives of the time. Despite being interpreted and portrayed by male actors, these female characters often served as powerful vehicles for exploring themes of agency, identity, and societal norms within the context of ancient Greek society. Nevertheless, ancient Greek tragedies and comedies reflected and reinforced prevailing attitudes towards women. The idealization of male-centred narratives within these theatrical works not only influenced gender dynamics within ancient Greek theatre and society but also exerted a profound impact on the establishment of gender norms and performances in Western theatre for centuries to come. The portrayal of women in these dramatic narratives, often through the lens of male authors and actors, contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes and ideologies surrounding gender roles and relationships, shaping theatrical conventions and societal perceptions throughout the evolution of Western theatre. Throughout the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods, the status of women in theatre saw little change from the precedents set in ancient Greece. The patriarchal systems and societal norms established in ancient Greek theatre persisted, resulting in minimal progress in the representation and involvement of women in the theatrical sphere. Consequently, theatre during these periods remained predominantly male-dominated, reinforcing existing gender dynamics and ideologies prevalent at the time.

For centuries, the respectable role of a professional playwright was exclusively reserved for men. It wasn't until the 10th century that the name of the first female dramatist emerged in historical records, marking a significant milestone in the recognition of women's contributions to the field of theatre. Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim (c. 935–973) holds the distinction of being the earliest recorded female playwright in the history of world theatre and drama. Almost all the information we have about Hrotsvitha is contained within a single manuscript. Housed in the Bavarian State Library (German: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) in Munich, this manuscript contains Hrotsvitha's writings, including eight legends about saints, six dramas, and two historical epics. Alongside these works are prefaces, dedicatory poems, and inscriptions, which provide limited insight into her life and literary endeavours.³ Among Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim's works, her dramas hold particular significance. She stands as the first dramatist to write in the Latin West following the decline

² Pomeroy S., *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, Schocken, 1975, p. 12.

³ *Hrotsvitha's Poems*, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2021667975> Retrieved - 05.01.2023.

of the Roman Empire. Western Europe had been without drama since Christianity gained political influence in the fourth century. Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim emerged as the pioneering (female) dramatist who authored non-liturgical dramas during the early Middle Ages, marking a notable revival of dramatic expression in this era. In her second book, *Liber Secundus* ("The Book of Drama"), Hrotsvitha combined six Latin dramas, which she wrote under the influence of the comedies of the Roman playwright Terence. However, unlike Terence's works, the themes of Hrotsvitha's plays were religious. According to the prevailing opinion, Hrotsvitha's plays were never staged. Most scholars concur that they resembled the "closet drama" of later periods, intended not for direct performance on stage but for reading. Hrotsvitha's dramas were initially published in 1501 and exerted a significant influence on the religious and didactic plays of the 16th century.⁴ Hrotsvitha's plays hold profound significance in the history of theatre for several reasons: She stands as the first recorded female playwright, breaking ground in a male-dominated field. Additionally, she emerges as the initial Western dramatist of the post-classical era, marking a revival of dramatic expression in medieval Europe. Furthermore, Hrotsvitha is credited with introducing a feminist perspective to drama, challenging prevailing gender norms and ideologies through her works. In her plays, which are composed in rhyming prose, Hrotsvitha juxtaposed the worldview of the Carthaginian-born Roman playwright Terence with the Christian perspective. She depicted narratives of Christian women enduring torture during the pagan Roman period, as seen in works like "Dulcitius" and "Sapientia". Additionally, she portrayed stories of women embracing the Christian faith, as exemplified in "Abraham". Overall, Hrotsvitha's plays can be categorized as works of the hagiographic genre, which is understandable given that they were rooted in the values of the Christian religion prevalent during the Middle Ages. However, despite their religious underpinnings, her works can also be examined from a feminist perspective. By portraying strong female characters, challenging traditional gender roles, and addressing themes of women's agency and empowerment, Hrotsvitha's dramas offer a lens through which to explore feminist interpretations within the context of medieval literature and theatre. Hrotsvitha's dramas often showcase a diverse array of female characters, all of whom are treated with equal respect by the author. From prostitutes to pious women, Hrotsvitha's portrayal of female characters transcends stereotypes and demonstrates a nuanced understanding of women's roles and experiences in society. The dichotomy between the virgin and the harlot, symbolized by figures such as Mary and Eve, serves as a particularly compelling lens through which to analyze how Hrotsvitha reflected 10th-century social attitudes toward women.⁵ Through her exploration of this dichotomy, Hrotsvitha delves into complex themes of purity, sin, redemption, and the societal expectations placed upon women, offering valuable insights into medieval perceptions of femininity and morality. Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim's plays delve into issues that profoundly impacted women of her time, including themes such as marriage, prostitution, sexual violence, and the objectification of women by men. For instance, works like "Dulcitius" and "Calimachus" confront the issue of gender violence as a form of oppression experienced by women in the Middle Ages. Through these narratives, Hrotsvitha sheds light on the struggles and injustices faced by women within medieval society, offering a critical commentary on the patriarchal power structures that perpetuated such forms of oppression. During Hrotsvitha's era, characterizations of women in literature were indeed a rarity.⁶ Female characters, whether in classical texts or hagiographic works, were often relegated to the role of passive objects, serving merely as vessels for the advancement of male-driven narratives. They lacked autonomy and agency, existing solely to fulfil predetermined roles and objectives. Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim, however, broke new ground by granting autonomy to her female characters within her texts. By imbuing her female protagonists with agency,

⁴ Brockett O., Hildy F., *The Theatre*, Allyn and Bacon, 2003, p. 77.

⁵ McCue L., *Feminist Views of the Fallen Woman: From Hrotsvit of Gandersheim to Rebecca Prichard*, University of California, 2015, p. 96.

⁶ Bonds T., *Voice in the Dramas of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, Florida State University, 2014, p. 63.

complexity, and depth, Hrotsvitha challenged traditional gender norms and paved the way for a more nuanced portrayal of women in literature.

Signs of feminist discourse are evident throughout Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim's entire body of work. As one of the few women to write about her life during the early Middle Ages, Hrotsvitha holds a unique position in history. She stands as the sole individual from the tenth century to provide historical accounts from a woman's perspective, offering valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of medieval women. For this reason, she has been recognized as one of the most significant figures in the history of women⁷, whose contributions have had a lasting impact on feminist discourse and scholarship. Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim's works remained largely unknown to the public until 1493 when the humanist scholar Conrad Celtes (German: Konrad Celtes; Latin: Conradus Celtis) discovered them in the Regensburg Saint Emmeram's Abbey. They were subsequently published in the original Latin in 1501⁸, marking their first appearance in print. Hrotsvitha's works gained further recognition when they were translated into English in the 1600s, sparking increased interest and appreciation for her contributions to literature and theatre. In the 1970s, feminists rediscovered Hrotsvitha's works and reexamined them through a gendered lens. They argued that women in the past held significant roles in society, even though many of their works had been lost or overlooked for centuries. By contextualizing Hrotsvitha's writings within the framework of gender studies, feminists highlighted the importance of recognizing women's contributions to literature and theatre throughout history. This renewed interest in Hrotsvitha's works helped to elevate her status as a pioneering female playwright and advocate for women's voices in the arts. The case of Hrotsvitha further underscores this point, as her name is often overlooked in traditional histories of theatre, drama, and literature. However, Hrotsvitha's significance and contributions have continued to capture the interest of feminist scholars, who recognize her as a trailblazing figure in the history of women's literature and theatre. By studying Hrotsvitha's life and works, feminist scholars contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the historical recognition, achievements, and significance of women who were historically excluded and marginalized from dominant narratives. Hrotsvitha's legacy serves as a reminder of the importance of reclaiming and amplifying the voices of women throughout history.

During the Renaissance, a significant shift occurred in the European theatre with the emergence of female performers on the stage. In particular, the commedia dell'arte played a pioneering role in providing opportunities for female actors. Female performers were integral members of each commedia dell'arte troupe, contributing alongside their male counterparts to the development of stage art and dramaturgy.⁹ This improvisational theatre, characterized by its use of masks and stock characters, became a dominant theatrical form of the Renaissance period. The inclusion of female actors in commedia dell'arte troupes marked a notable departure from previous traditions and opened new avenues for women in the performing arts. The commedia dell'arte was characterized by its use of stock characters, with actors portraying specific social or psychological types. While most characters wore masks, except for performers in lyrical scenes, female actors typically played female characters without masks. Among the archetypal female characters in the commedia dell'arte

⁷ Sack H., *Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim – The Most Remarkable Women of her Time*, <http://scihi.org/hrotsvitha-gandersheim/> Retrieved - 18/01/2023.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In addition to their presence in commedia dell'arte troupes, female performers also featured prominently in other forms of Italian theatre during the Renaissance period, including interludes and opera performances. These theatrical genres provided further opportunities for women to showcase their talents on stage and contribute to the vibrant cultural scene of the time. The inclusion of female performers in a variety of theatrical productions reflected the evolving social and cultural dynamics of the Renaissance era, marking a significant departure from earlier traditions that had limited women's participation in the performing arts.

were: Isabella (A young, naive lover, often caught in romantic entanglements); Columbina (A witty servant, known for her sharp wit and cunning, often serving as a ladylove to Harlequin); La Ruffiana (An older woman, typically depicted as a former prostitute, known for her cunning and manipulation); La Signora (A lady of high social standing, sometimes depicted as Pantalone's wife, known for her strict and calculating demeanour). Within the expansive repertoire of commedia dell'arte characters, the roles allocated to women were often limited and defined by social stereotypes. Female characters were typically depicted as young, naive lovers, clever and resourceful servants, prostitutes, or strict and calculating wives. Despite the stereotypical representations and the gender imbalance inherent in these roles, the commedia dell'arte stood out during the Renaissance period as the only form of professional theatre that permitted female actors to perform on stage. This provided women with valuable opportunities to showcase their talents and participate in the burgeoning cultural scene of the time, albeit within the constraints of prevailing social norms and theatrical conventions. History remembers the name of one of the most renowned female actresses of the Commedia dell'Arte, Isabella Andreini (1562-1604). She was a prominent member of the Italian acting troupe "Compagnia dei Gelosi"¹⁰ and was celebrated for her portrayal of the archetypal female character in love, known as the "Inamorata". Andreini's performances captivated audiences with her skilful interpretation of the lovelorn and romantic heroine, contributing to the popularity and success of the Gelosi troupe during the Renaissance era. Her legacy endures as a testament to the significant contributions of women to the Commedia dell'Arte tradition and the broader landscape of theatre history. Following Isabella Andreini's death, the stock female character of the commedia dell'arte, known as Isabella, was named in her honour. Isabella Andreini's iconic portrayal of the lovelorn and romantic heroine left an indelible mark on the tradition of commedia dell'arte, and her legacy continued to resonate even after her passing. The character of Isabella, representing the young, naive lover, served as a tribute to Andreini's talent and influence in shaping the theatrical landscape of the Renaissance era. Italy during the Renaissance period was at the forefront of enabling women's active participation in both public and private theatrical endeavours. Women not only attended theatrical performances as spectators but also began to engage actively in various roles within the theatre industry. This included acting, playwriting, translating, managing theatre troupes, and even holding shares in theatre companies. The Renaissance era marked a significant shift in societal attitudes towards women's involvement in the arts, providing them with newfound opportunities to contribute to and shape the evolving theatrical landscape of the time. Italy's pioneering approach to gender inclusion in the theatre paved the way for broader advancements in women's participation in the performing arts across Europe in subsequent centuries.

Touring Italian commedia dell'arte troupes exerted a considerable influence on the emergence of professional Spanish female actors in the 16th century and French female actors in the early 17th century. The innovative performances and techniques of these Italian troupes inspired and influenced theatrical practices across Europe, including the inclusion of female performers. Additionally, in the English theatre of the Renaissance era, female actors were also present, particularly in productions known as "Masques". These elaborate and extravagant theatrical performances, often featuring music, dance, and elaborate costumes, provided opportunities for female performers to showcase their talents alongside their male counterparts. The cross-cultural exchange and diffusion of theatrical practices during this period contributed to the growing presence and recognition of female actors in the European theatre. According to scholar Clare McManus, female actors in English Renaissance theatre were not limited to performances solely in masques but were

¹⁰ Gelosi was one of the oldest and most renowned commedia dell'arte companies in 16th-century Italy. Founded in the late 16th century, the Compagnia dei Gelosi (Company of the Jealous Ones) gained widespread fame and popularity throughout Italy and beyond.

also involved in various types of street performances.¹¹ These included roles such as acrobats, clowns, sword dancers, and tightrope walkers, showcasing the diverse range of talents and roles available to women in the theatrical landscape of the time.¹² Additionally, McManus suggests that women likely participated in carnival-theatrical processions and masquerades, further expanding their opportunities for involvement in public performances and celebrations.¹³ This multifaceted participation of women in street performances and carnival events highlights their integral role in shaping the vibrant and dynamic theatrical culture of the English Renaissance era. Furthermore, according to Brockett and Hildy, noblewomen also participated in amateur theatrical productions staged by the royal court. Alongside the queen, these noblewomen actively engaged in the performances and occasionally took on speaking roles. This practice not only provided entertainment for the court but also allowed noblewomen to showcase their talents and creativity in the realm of theatre within the exclusive confines of courtly life.¹⁴ History has also preserved the names of several female playwrights who made significant contributions to the theatre during this period, yet they often remain overlooked in mainstream theatre history narratives. Examples include Margherita Costa, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Feliciano Enríquez de Guzmán, Ana Caro de Mallén, Mary Wroth, Marie-Catherine Desjardins, and many others. These women defied social norms and societal expectations to pursue their passion for writing and theatre, leaving behind a rich legacy of dramatic works that deserve greater recognition and appreciation. Their plays explore diverse themes and perspectives, offering valuable insights into the experiences and voices of women in the Renaissance and early modern periods.

The contributions of women to European Renaissance theatre were often overlooked for centuries, overshadowed by prevailing gender biases and patriarchal norms. However, in recent decades, scholars have increasingly recognized and appreciated the significant role that women played in shaping the theatrical landscape of the Renaissance era. What's particularly noteworthy is that a significant number of these scholars who have worked to shed light on women's contributions to theatre history are themselves women. This underscores the importance of diverse perspectives and voices in academic discourse, as well as the dedication of these scholars to uncovering and celebrating the often-neglected achievements of women in the arts. Through their efforts, the rich legacy of women in Renaissance theatre is being brought to the forefront and given the recognition it deserves. The research conducted reveals that European women during the 15th to 17th centuries played multifaceted roles in both public and private theatre activities. Beyond being mere spectators, women actively contributed to various aspects of theatrical life. They served as playwrights, translators, actors, patrons, shareholders, theatre employees, and even leaders of acting troupes. This extensive involvement underscores the significant and diverse contributions of women to the development and flourishing of theatre during the Renaissance and early modern periods. It highlights their agency, creativity, and resilience in navigating and shaping cultural and artistic landscapes that were often dominated by men. Female monarchs such as Elizabeth I of England, Anne of Denmark, and Catherine de' Medici played pivotal roles in fostering the development of theatre culture within their royal courts. These influential women, along with other noblewomen, served as patrons and financiers of acting troupes, providing crucial support that contributed to the growth and flourishing of theatre during the Renaissance era. By patronizing theatrical

¹¹ *Women Performers in Shakespeare's Time*, Shakespeare Unlimited podcast, Clare McManus is interviewed by Barbara Bogaev, Folger Shakespeare Library, Published November 12, 2019, https://www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited/women-performers/?fbclid=IwAR2rAmbLq5g5_xeSJaQoRoNDm9DgoY65ZpqxsUz_XyTT1GvOUqqoqEmwpczg Retrieved - 17/07/2023.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Brockett O., Hildy F., *The Theatre*, Allyn and Bacon, 2003, p. 135.

performances and providing financial backing, they helped to legitimize and elevate the status of theatre within society, ensuring its acceptance and popularity among the elite and broader public alike. Their contributions not only enriched the cultural landscape of their respective kingdoms but also left a lasting impact on the trajectory of European theatre as a whole. Despite the numerous challenges and barriers they faced, Renaissance women were undeniably active participants in the development of theatrical art. Despite societal norms and religious restrictions that sought to limit their involvement, women demonstrated resilience and determination in challenging these constraints. Through their creativity, talent, and tenacity, they made significant contributions to theatre as playwrights, actors, patrons, and behind-the-scenes contributors. Their willingness to defy social conventions and push against moral restrictions imposed by the church and society speaks to their agency and determination to assert their presence and voices within the cultural landscape of the Renaissance era. In doing so, they paved the way for future generations of women in the performing arts and left an indelible mark on the history of theatre.

In the Age of Enlightenment, although there weren't radical shifts in the position of women within family, society, and high culture compared to previous centuries, important strides were made towards gender equality. Despite persistent social norms and religious doctrines that continued to limit women's rights and opportunities, the Enlightenment period saw a growing awareness of the need for equal rights and opportunities for women. This led to an increasing number of women advocating for their rights, which ultimately contributed to the emergence of the first wave of feminism in Europe and America. The Age of Reason fostered intellectual and philosophical movements that questioned traditional authority and championed principles of reason, liberty, and equality, providing fertile ground for the advancement of women's rights and the promotion of gender equality. English theatre underwent significant transformations during this period. The introduction of professional female actors on the London stage marked a pivotal moment in the history of English theatre, signalling a departure from centuries-old conventions that had excluded women from performing. The re-opened theatres provided opportunities for both female performers and playwrights to participate in the theatrical scene, breaking down longstanding barriers that had previously restricted women's involvement. The appearance of female actors on the English stage after 1660 was closely intertwined with changing attitudes towards women and their sexuality, particularly among the upper and middle classes. This shift reflected broader societal changes influenced by Enlightenment ideals, which emphasized reason, individual rights, and equality. As Enlightenment thinking spread across the continent, it helped to challenge traditional notions of gender roles and paved the way for greater acceptance of women's participation in the public sphere, including the theatre. The performance of "Othello" by Killigrew's "King's Company" at the Vere Street Theater on December 8, 1660, is widely regarded as the first instance of a professional female actor appearing on the London stage.¹⁵ To mark this historic occasion, Thomas Jordan penned both a prologue and an epilogue, which served to announce the groundbreaking casting of a female actress in the role of Desdemona. In the prologue, it was said:

„I Come, unknown to any of the rest
To tell you news; I saw the Lady drest;
The Woman playes to day, mistake me not,
No Man in Gown, or Page in Petty-Coat.“¹⁶

¹⁵ Ritchie F., *The Reception of Women on the English Stage in the Renaissance and Restoration: A Comparative Study*, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/230561902.pdf> Retrieved - 23/08/2023.

¹⁶ Danchin P., *The Prologues and epilogues of the Restoration*, Publisher Pu Nancy, 1981, pp. 55-56.

The exact identity of the actress who played Desdemona in the 1660 performance of "Othello" remains unknown. However, scholar Elizabeth Howe, in her book "The First English Actresses" (1992), suggests that it may have been Anne Marshall (fl. 1661 – 1682)¹⁷, a member of the "King's Company".¹⁸ Howe's reasoning is based on later records that confirm Marshall's performances in the role of Desdemona. The period between 1695 and 1715 was significant for the increased presence of female playwrights in London theatres. During this time, a notable thirty-seven new plays written by women were produced on the London stage.¹⁹ Despite their significant contributions, women playwrights such as Mary Pix, Delarivier Manley, Catherine Trotter, and Susanna Centlivre, among many others, are often overlooked in historical accounts of the period. These writers were indeed among the most successful playwrights of their time, yet their names have not received the recognition they deserve in mainstream narratives of Restoration-era theatre. It's crucial to highlight the significant challenges that female playwrights faced during the Restoration era and its aftermath. In a society dominated by patriarchal norms, women were often relegated to inferior positions in the literary and theatrical spheres. Female playwrights were subjected to harsh scrutiny and criticism, with their works automatically deemed to be of lower quality than those of their male counterparts. Moreover, they were frequently accused of sexual immorality, facing prejudice and discrimination based on gender stereotypes. Despite these obstacles, female playwrights of the period exhibited remarkable resilience and creativity. Their plays were characterized by a strong individual vision and often espoused feminist themes, challenging prevailing notions of gender and power. Female authors often provided more speaking roles to female characters, allowing them to express themselves and assert their agency on stage. This decision was significant as it allowed female characters to take centre stage, shaping the narrative and driving the plot forward. Additionally, both the prologue and epilogue of many plays were dedicated to speeches by female characters, further amplifying their voices and perspectives.

The contributions of female dramatists extended beyond the English-speaking world to encompass Italian and French theatre during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Figures such as Elisabetta Caminè Turra, Anne-Marie du Boccage, and Olympe de Gouges made significant impacts on their respective theatrical landscapes, both on the public stage and within salon culture. Both within the public theatre and the more intimate setting of salon culture, female dramatists played vital roles in shaping the discourse surrounding gender, society, and politics. Their voices resonated far beyond the confines of the stage, inspiring audiences and sparking important conversations about the nature of power and privilege in society. During the Enlightenment period in France and Italy, female actors were a prevalent and accepted presence on the public stage. This marked a significant departure from previous eras, where women's participation in the theatre was often restricted or frowned upon. In the 18th century, theatre emerged and flourished in Germany, with female leaders playing decisive roles alongside prominent male figures. While female practitioners in German-language theatre were among the last in Europe to become involved in various aspects of theatre activities, including performance, playwriting, and theatre management, their contributions to the formation of the theatre were undeniably significant. Friederike Caroline Neuber, founder of the Leipzig Acting School; Sophie Schröder, a distinguished practitioner of the German stage; and Friederike Sophie Seyler, one of the most important German-speaking actresses, playwrights, and librettists of the

¹⁷ Anne Marshall, also known as Mrs. Anne Quin, was a leading English actress of the Restoration era. One of the first generations of female actresses to perform on the English public stage, Marshall played a significant role in breaking down barriers and paving the way for future generations of actresses.

¹⁸ Howe E, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660–1700*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 24.

¹⁹ Brockett O., Hildy F., *The Theatre*, Allyn and Bacon, 2003, p. 293.

eighteenth century, stand out as clear examples of influential female figures who helped shape 18th-century German theatre.

The nineteenth century brought about the most radical social and political changes since the Renaissance.²⁰ These changes had a profound impact on the struggle for women's rights, catalyzing a movement that aimed to secure equal rights for women across all facets of life. This activism evolved into the broader social and political movement known today as "feminism". The emergence of the feminist movement in the 19th century exerted a significant influence on gender dynamics within the Western theatre of the time. This era saw the rise of influential theatre practitioners who actively advocated for women's issues and rights. Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen holds a prominent position among these influential figures. His plays, particularly those from the latter half of the 19th century onward, played a pivotal role in the exploration and redefinition of gender roles on the European theatre stage. Ibsen gained renown as one of the most radical playwrights through works like "A Doll's House", "Ghosts", and "Hedda Gabler". In these plays, he crafted formidable female characters such as Nora Helmer, Mrs. Alving, and Hedda Gabler, who defy the prevailing gender norms and challenge the dominance of male-centric society. Ibsen portrayed women's rights as integral to human rights, advocating for women's education and cultural empowerment as fundamental solutions to the challenges of the 19th century. Through the redefinition and repositioning of women's gender roles in his plays, he made a significant contribution to gender studies in theatre. Following in Henrik Ibsen's footsteps, numerous playwrights in European theatre began to delve into gender issues with increased depth and scrutiny.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, spurred by the momentum of the feminist movement, the presence of female playwrights, theatre managers, owners, artistic directors, and performers surged within European theatre. By the century's end, women were actively engaged in all aspects of creative entrepreneurship, a shift propelled by evolving historical conditions, including profound social and political transformations, and a redefinition of women's roles in society. The pivotal role of female actors on the European theatre stage during this era is especially remarkable. Figures like Ellen Terry, Sarah Bernhardt, and Eleonora Duse stand out among the numerous renowned female performers who elevated the art of acting to new heights. They not only introduced innovative styles and techniques to European theatre but also left a memorable mark on the global theatrical landscape. Despite notable progress, the overall circumstances for women in 19th-century European theatre remained challenging. They grappled with entrenched gender norms and societal expectations pervasive both within European society and the theatrical milieu. For instance, from the late eighteenth century to the close of the nineteenth century, approximately five hundred women writers penned around 1,200 plays for the theatre.²¹ However, many of these works remain obscure in contemporary times, underscoring a significant gap in awareness and recognition of the dramatic and stage literature produced by women writers during the 19th century. In the late 19th century, the feminist movement played a crucial role in reshaping societal attitudes toward gender roles across various professions, including theatre. This pivotal shift paved the way for newfound opportunities and rights for women as they entered the 20th century.

It is also crucial to acknowledge the significant contribution of women to the development of professional theatre in the United States of America. The status and role of women in American theatre have been shaped by a multitude of factors, including historical conditions, socio-cultural influences, and the evolution of the theatrical landscape itself. The role of women in early American theatre, particularly during

²⁰ Brockett O., Hildy F., *The Theatre*, Allyn and Bacon, 2003, p. 293.

²¹ Newey K., *The Aesthetics of the Marketplace: Women Playwrights, 1770-1850*, [file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/5745-241-10772-1-10-20120220%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/5745-241-10772-1-10-20120220%20(1).pdf) Retrieved - 05/01/2024.

the 18th and 19th centuries, was complicated. History commemorates several influential female practitioners from this period, including Judith Sargent Murray, Mercy Otis Warren, Anna Cora Mowatt, and others. Their substantial contributions greatly fostered the development of theatre art in the United States of America. At the outset of the nineteenth century, in the theatre of the United States, the profession of actress was often associated with prostitution for women, leading to considerable societal and church opposition. Actresses faced significant challenges in safeguarding their reputation, often resorting to marrying a male member of the company or restricting their dramatic roles to portraying passive virginal characters. Unmarried actresses encountered even greater difficulty in maintaining their reputation due to the prevalence of the "combination company" and "star system", which remained dominant in US theatre until the late nineteenth century. During this period, theatre in the United States was predominantly viewed as popular culture, prioritizing entertainment for the audience. The prevalence of "light-natured" female characters on stage, common in entertainment-focused performances such as burlesque, revue, vaudeville, and extravaganza, contributed to reinforcing the stigma of female actresses being associated with prostitution. Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876) was the most renowned American-born actress of her time, attaining international acclaim for her performances. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the professionalization of the theatre industry in the United States, along with the advocacy for actors' rights and the women's suffrage movement, led to a notable increase in women's participation in theatre. This period witnessed changing cultural attitudes, which compelled men to accept professional female playwrights, theatre managers, and performers in the public sphere. In the US theatre of the 20th century, the role of women expanded significantly compared to the previous century.

The Western theatre culture of the first half of the 20th century underwent significant changes, largely influenced by new historical conditions, particularly the effects of World Wars I and II. These conflicts catalyzed shifts in moral standards, codes of dress and behaviour, women's and workers' rights, and artistic experimentation. The most significant change that the new century brought was the waning influence of religion as the primary force shaping theatre and society. This shift greatly accelerated the emancipation of women in the theatre. At the turn of the century, Western theatre remained predominantly male-dominated, with the institution of the director further reinforcing this dynamic. Research into gender constructions in European and US theatre during the first half of the 20th century revealed the persisting limited opportunities for women in the industry. Unfortunately, significant changes for women were still elusive during this period. Theatre, like many other domains, largely remained under male control and operated within traditional norms and gender biases well into the new century. Notably, significant changes in gender dynamics within the theatre industry only became noticeable in the second half of the twentieth century. Since then, there has been a notable increase in women's involvement in the theatre, somewhat attributable to the growing feminist movements in the West. The emergence of gender theories and postmodern philosophy in the latter half of the 20th century significantly influenced Western theatre. Avant-garde theatre in Europe and America during this period increasingly focused on issues of gender, race, and class. It was during this time that the previously closed doors of the theatre were widely opened for women. The latter half of the 20th century marked a turning point in theatre, where the established foundations of gender representation were questioned, dismantled, and reconstructed. The Western stage became a platform for deconstructing norms and establishing a new, more inclusive theatrical environment. Especially since the 1960s, significant and influential female practitioners have emerged in Western theatre, playing a crucial role in shaping modern European and American theatre. During this period, there was a notable rise in the number of female playwrights and directors whose work often challenged social norms and delved into detailed explorations of gender roles, relationships, and societal expectations. These women brought unique perspectives to Western theatre, helping to create a more inclusive, diverse, and equitable environment on stage. "Feminist theory,

queer theory and postcolonial theatre scholarship, as well as the more recent analyses of disability and performance and age and performance, have all pointed out that performance has the power to question and destabilize the spectator's construction of identity and the 'other' – more so than realist mimetic drama, which remains caught in representation and thus often reproduces prevailing ideologies"²² - writes Hans-Thies Lehmann in his groundbreaking book "Postdramatic Theatre". Lehmann's assertion highlights the transformative power of performance to challenge established notions of identity and otherness. The examples and arguments presented in the thesis align with this perspective, underscoring the profound impact of gender theories and postmodern philosophy on Western theatre. Indeed, these intellectual currents have paved the way for the emergence and recognition of significant female practitioners in the theatre industry, enriching the art form and fostering greater diversity and inclusivity on stage.

Despite progress and increased awareness, gender disparities persist in the theatre industry, with men continuing to hold dominant positions in mainstream theatre. Statistical data underscores the unequal representation and limited opportunities for women compared to their male counterparts. Addressing these disparities requires ongoing efforts to challenge systemic biases, promote gender equality, and create more inclusive spaces within the theatre community. The latest study, "Gender Equality & Diversity in European Theaters," conducted by the Berlin-based organization "European Theater Convention - ETC," offers valuable insights into the status of gender equality and diversity in the European theatre.²³ Released on March 8, 2021, International Women's Day, this statistical analysis included theatres from 22 countries, covering a wide range of perspectives. With data compiled from 4,000 theatre employees and an examination of 650 performances, the study provides a comprehensive view of the current landscape of the theatre industry in Europe. This thorough analysis serves as a benchmark for understanding the progress made in promoting gender equality and diversity in the theatre sector, as well as identifying areas that require further attention and improvement. The findings of the statistical research conducted during the 2019/2020 period reveal significant disparities in the representation and conditions of women in the theatre industry. Women are more frequently found in "stereotypically female positions", indicating a prevalence of gendered roles within the theatre hierarchy. Additionally, women are less likely to occupy leadership positions at the top of the hierarchy, highlighting a persistent gender imbalance in positions of power and decision-making within theatre organizations. Moreover, the research indicates that contractual conditions for women are less secure and reliable compared to their male counterparts, suggesting systemic challenges related to gender equality and workplace equity in the theatre sector. The data-based research also revealed disparities in the credits of theatre programs, with men outnumbering women in the composition of performers. Specifically, for every four women listed in the credits, there were six men, indicating a significant gender imbalance in the representation of performers. Moreover, men were found to dominate "prestige positions" such as dramaturg, director, and technical staff, while women's roles were predominantly limited to positions such as costume designer and make-up artist. The research findings highlight the correlation between gender diversity in leadership positions and the overall gender balance within theatre workplaces. The data suggests that theatres with more men in leadership roles tend to have a higher proportion of male employees, both in the cast and in other prominent positions. Conversely, theatres with more gender-diverse management teams are more likely to have a diverse troupe, reflecting a more balanced representation of genders across various roles. A key takeaway from this study is the importance of women occupying leadership positions in theatres to promote gender equality and diversity in the workplace. By ensuring greater representation of women in decision-making roles, theatres

²² Lehmann H. T., *Postdramatic Theatre*, Routledge, 2006, p. 5.

²³ The complete statistical study is available for viewing at the following link: <https://www.europantheatre.eu/news/six-men-for-every-four-women-gender-inequalities-in-theatre-programming-revealed-in-new-crosseurope-study>
Retrieved - 17/02/2024.

can create more inclusive environments that embrace a wider range of perspectives and talents. This underscores the need for concerted efforts to empower women and foster their advancement into leadership positions within the theatre industry.

In summary, the exploration of women's roles in the history of Western theatre unveils a complex and paradoxical narrative. Despite the undeniable contributions of women across various aspects of theatre, including performance, playwriting, directing, producing, and innovation, the industry has remained predominantly male-dominated throughout its history. This persistent pattern of neglecting the accomplishments of women underscores the ongoing gender disparity in theatre, highlighting the need for meaningful solutions in the contemporary era.

This paper not only aims to provide a scholarly examination of the issue but also seeks to lay the groundwork for developing models of gender equality within the theatre industry. By shedding light on historical injustices and disparities, it prompts critical reflection and encourages action to address gender inequality in the theatre. Through continued research, advocacy, and concerted efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, the goal is to create a more equitable and inclusive theatrical landscape that celebrates the contributions of women and fosters opportunities for all individuals, regardless of gender.

List of publications relevant to the dissertation topic:

1. *Creative Research of Gender Studies in Contemporary Georgian Theatre*, Journal of Performing Arts – refereed journal of Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu (JAS), ISSN 2066-8988, #1/2024, pp. 15-24, Sibiu, Romania.
2. *Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim: The First Female Playwright in Theatre History*, International scientific and practical conference “Current problems of theatre science and education in conditions of modern challenges”, Almaty, Kazakhstan, Conference Proceedings, ISBN 978-601-7800-94-9, pp. 144-148, 2003;
3. *Elfriede Jelinek's Dramaturgy*, Batumi Art State Teaching University, Studies in Art Criticism, Collection of Scientific Works with International Index (ISSN 1987-5851), „Artistic Etudes“ IX, Batumi, Georgia, pp. 203-212, 2022;
4. *20th Century American Women Playwrights*, Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film Georgia State University, International Journal of Arts and Media Researches, 2022 #2 (12), ISSN 2667-9914, pp. 20-23, Tbilisi, Georgia;
5. *Gender and Contemporary Georgian Theatre*, Shota Rustaveli Theatre and Film Georgia State University, International Journal of Arts and Media Researches, 2021 #1 (11), ISSN 2667-9914, pp. 22-25, Tbilisi, Georgia;
6. *Feminist Theatre as Political and Social Activism*, Batumi Art State Teaching University, V International Scientific Conference Publication, „Culture and Art in Contemporary Context”, Batumi, Georgia, pp. 226-231, 2021.