# The stage is theirs: At a majority of Boston-area theaters, women leaders have taken charge

By Don Aucoin Globe Staff, Updated June 1, 2023, 1:54 p.m.

From left: Dawn M. Simmons, cofounder and co-producing artistic director of the Front Porch Arts Collective; Loretta Greco, artistic director of the Huntington; and Megan Sandberg-Zakian, artistic director of Boston Playwrights' Theatre. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Back in 1975, launching on a career trajectory that would see her become one of the most important Boston stage performers of her generation, Paula Plum landed her first professional acting job in “Dial M for Murder,” at Lyric Stage Company.

At the helm of the production was Polly Hogan, who was also Lyric Stage's cofounder and co-artistic director. As the decades went by and the number of theaters in Greater Boston expanded, however, female artistic directors remained decidedly in the minority, particularly at the region's most prominent and influential theaters.

When it came time to fill a leadership position, search committees and boards of directors tended to reflexively Dial M for Male.

Not anymore. Of 30-plus Boston-area theater companies, more than two-thirds are now led or co-led by women. As men have stepped down in the last few years, women have stepped up. An increasing number of theaters, including the Huntington, a regional powerhouse, have female leaders for the first time in their history.

"We're in a change revolution right now in so many ways," says Plum. "The assumption is no longer that it takes a man to lead a company. With this kind of female leadership, we're encouraging and modeling for the next generation to step into leadership roles."

ADVERTISING

Adds Catherine Peterson, executive director since 1997 of ArtsBoston, the city's largest arts service organization: "There's a growing awareness of the inequity in not having representation from over 50 percent of the population, and the audience. It's about damn time it's happening. I mean, come on."

The leadership shifts mirror a broader transformation that ranges from government (Maura Healey is the first woman to be elected governor of Massachusetts, Michelle Wu is the first woman to be elected mayor of Boston) to the media (Nancy C. Barnes this year became the first female editor in the 151-year history of The Boston Globe) to business, academia, and the health care industry.

Theater makers say the ascendancy of women leaders could result in a stronger commitment to diversity of all kinds, onstage and off. And the infusion of new blood — most of the women are younger than their predecessors — could also help when it comes to one of theater's most pressing challenges: attracting young audiences.

For the past decade, alarms have been sounded locally and nationally about gender disparities in the theater, at all levels.

"When I first got here 10 years ago, one of the first things I heard was that the opportunities for women just did not exist," says Lee Mikeska Gardner, artistic director at Cambridge's Central Square Theater.

So Gardner made it a priority to do what she could to change that status quo by hiring women directors for nearly all her productions, adding by e-mail: "I have nothing against male directors!! It's just that there are official and unofficial pipelines primarily for White male directors and I just started one for femme directors."

The #MeToo movement shone a harsh light on the theater industry, accelerating the push to increase the number of women in leadership positions. Nationally, women now hold the majority of artistic leadership posts at major regional theaters that belong to the League of Resident Theatres (LORT).

Their representation has nearly tripled — from 20 percent to 56 percent — since 2014, according to Linda Charmaraman, senior research scientist at the Wellesley College-based Wellesley Centers for Women and project director of LORT's ongoing study of race and gender representation in theater leadership.

Locally, a spate of retirements and resignations by male leaders in the Boston area in the last few years opened up opportunities for women who had long been preparing for their moment by directing as many productions as they could.

The shift in Boston-area theaters to mainly female artistic leadership has implications that could play out onstage — indeed, are already playing out. Productions of plays by and about women, and directed and designed by women, have occupied a more prominent place in recent seasons. A number of productions have featured all-female casts.

"There are as many identities and ways to be human as there are reasons to make plays," observes Courtney Sale, the executive artistic director of Lowell's Merrimack Repertory Theatre and the first woman to lead the company since its founding in 1979. "Different lived experiences bring that to light. That's one reason it matters that women are leading and shaping cultural conversations."

To Megan Sandberg-Zakian, who last year became artistic director of Boston Playwrights' Theatre, it is particularly notable that women hold leadership positions in large theaters like The Huntington, Cambridge's American Repertory Theater, Merrimack Rep, and ArtsEmerson.

"Having women at the helms of the most resourced theaters in the region is a significant shift in power," Sandberg-Zakian notes. "It means that women ADs have discretion over exponentially more resources and are reaching much larger audiences than in the past. . . . I do think it is a redistribution of power and resources that is hugely consequential."

Courtney Sale is the first woman to lead Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell since its founding in 1979. KEVIN HARKINS

Reverberations from that power shift are being felt offstage as well as onstage: There are now more potential mentors for young women trying to forge careers on the financial, marketing, public relations, and development side of the theater industry. Mindful of their own obstacle-strewn struggles, the new artistic directors are looking to clear a path for other women.

“I worked my ass off and I was lucky, but it took a long time,” says Loretta Greco, the first female artistic director in the four-decade-plus history of The Huntington (formerly known as the Huntington Theatre Company). “I want to make sure that women coming up have all the tools they need, and it doesn’t take as long for them. I feel the responsibility of that.”

Suiting the action to the word, in early May Greco appointed Lyndsay Allyn Cox, a dynamic actor-director-producer, as the new producing director at The Huntington, where she will report to Greco.

Of course, it's not as if works written and directed by women were not presented by male artistic directors, or that Boston has been devoid of women theater leaders up to now. Since 2009, the American Repertory Theater has been led by Tony-winning Diane Paulus, the first female artistic director at the ART and a nationally known figure who has shepherded numerous productions to Broadway.

Central Square Theater has been run for years by a troika of women: executive director Catherine Carr Kelly, Gardner, and Debra Wise (who retired from her leadership post last year). The widely admired Kate Snodgrass played a key mentorship role during the decades she ran Boston Playwrights' Theatre before stepping down last year.

What's new today, however, is the critical mass, and the number of theater companies that are being led by a woman for the first time in their history. Of the half-dozen new appointees to artistic leadership positions at Greater Boston theaters in the last three years, nearly all have been women.

"I think it's an exciting moment for Boston theater, and for Massachusetts," says Barbara Wallace Grossman, a professor of theater and performance studies at Tufts University. "There used to be lots of barriers and obstacles. It was kind of a cultural given that men led and women served. That's really changed."

To Central Square's Gardner, the keys to that change are the number of qualified women who have been ready to step up and the changes in the industry pattern whereby "opportunities just automatically went to men, and usually white men. Those blinders have been taken off. Boards of directors are now aware that they really need to be looking at women."

Randy Peeler, chairman of the Huntington's board of trustees, says the board picked Greco not because it believed the theater needed a female artistic director after being run only by men since 1982 but because she stood out, even in a deep talent pool of applicants. But he said diversity of all kinds needs to be a priority at any theater.

“It matters because in theater, as in all walks of life, the leaders of institutions should look like their audiences and the communities they exist in,” says Peeler. “So it’s extremely critical that we have diversity. Social justice issues have certainly made people more aware and sensitive to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.”

The advances women have made in theater leadership are striking, but there are shadows on that milestone. For one, women (and men) of color remain underrepresented in leadership positions. For another, the new leaders have taken charge at an extraordinarily challenging moment in theater history, raising the possibility that they will be held to unfair expectations.

The COVID pandemic upended the industry, forcing a protracted nationwide shutdown that delivered a financially devastating blow from which many theaters are still trying to recover. Audiences are still not back at their pre-pandemic levels at a number of theaters in the Boston area.

“Anybody running an arts organization right now is running toward the fire,” remarks Rebecca Bradshaw, appointed artistic director at Gloucester Stage Company in March. “This is a time when we need fighters in this role; when leaders need to be feisty and scrappy.”

Rebecca Bradshaw was named artistic director at Gloucester Stage Company in March. COURTESY OF GLOUCESTER STAGE COMPANY

Sandberg-Zakian, of Boston Playwrights' Theatre, says she is "really proud of Boston for having this leadership profile," but she voices a skeptical view of the larger theater world's motives in hiring women leaders. "The reality of the field at this moment is that [women] are getting the opportunity to step into leadership since it's such a [expletive]-show," she says. "It's 'Sure, we'll let you give it a try,' because it's all burning down.'"

Among the myriad duties of an artistic director are to choose the plays and musicals that will constitute their theater's season and select the directors for those shows (and usually direct one or two productions themselves). Through that process, they shape a company's aesthetic identity and overall vision.

Across the region, theaters of all sizes are now run by women. When Spiro Veloudos retired after running Lyric Stage Company for more than two decades, he was replaced by his protégé, Courtney O'Connor. When Robert J. Eagle retired after running the Reagle Music Theatre of Greater Boston for more than half a century, director-choreographer Rachel Bertone replaced him. After David Dower left Boston's ArtsEmerson, Ronee Penoi was named director of artistic programming two years ago. (She reports to executive director David C. Howse.)

Dawn M. Simmons, cofounder and co-producing artistic director of the Front Porch Arts Collective, a Black theater company whose mission is to advance racial equity through theater, calls the new generation of female leaders the "graduating class." Now that they are leaders, Simmons says, they will be inclined to think outside the box, their reasoning being: "What do we have to lose? We've been so shut out for so long."

"If you want things to change, you can't keep hiring the same kinds of people," says Simmons. "You can't keep filling the artistic leadership position with an exact replica, with a white man. What I like about this new leadership is that many of the women running organizations are challenging boards to think differently."

Sale, of Merrimack Rep, says that "the ways I challenge boards to think differently is connected to the care and nurturing of artists. I want our stakeholders to know the

humans at the front line of this art form. They are bold and adventurous and brave in ways many will never know. We live in a country that has little regard for artists — and, in a lot of spaces, outright contempt. Illuminating what it takes and means to make theater, especially now, is a prime motivator for me."

Sandberg-Zakian describes her own sense of mission this way: "I am likely to champion the voices of a huge range of writers whose voices may not have traditionally been heard. It might be women playwrights, playwrights of color, playwrights with disability, or queer or trans or intersectional playwrights across many different identity categories. Writers who are writing in less traditional aesthetic forms."

Even as they celebrate the opening of long-closed doors, women theater leaders say it would be a mistake to view their newfound clout only through the lens of gender.

"Yeah, I happen to be a woman," says Greco. "And I'm going to bring the next exciting era to the Huntington. Is that because I'm a woman? I'm not sure. It's not just about putting more women out there. It's about putting more great art out there."

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