

What Do We Want? Theatre!

When Do We Want it? Now!



TheatreNow!
podcast gives voice to influential women
in contemporary theatre

BY MARGOT MELCON

THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF DISCUSSION OVER THE past few years about women's voices being underrepresented in the theatre—there aren't enough female playwrights being produced, not enough women in executive positions in regional theatres, not enough female directors or roles for female actors. And not enough women speak out as informed, educated, experienced and qualified representatives in the field. Though there has been a flood of discussion about gender disparity, talking doesn't always lead to action.

But Anne Hamilton isn't just talking. In response to the acknowledged under-representation that leads to so much frustration, the New York City-based freelance dramaturg, script consultant and playwright has offered up a solution. Recognizing the dearth of opportunities for women in theatre to have a voice, she gave them one. In 2009, Hamilton launched an oral history project called TheatreNow!, a series of podcasts interviewing important American female theatre artists.

TheatreNow!, online at www.hamiltondramaturgystheatre.com, promotes development of women by sharing their artistic voice and processes. "It's about creating an equal presence," says Hamilton simply. "How are women going to be chosen for the good jobs and the good opportunities and the good prizes? It's by being there. It's by more women creating more content, putting it out there and banging on the doors. It's not by sitting down and being disgruntled. It's very active."

Hamilton set out to raise the profile of these theatre artists so they could be accessed as experts and resources

for journalists, academics, historians or documentarians. "There must be women experts who are equal to the men who are *always* being quoted," she reasons. "It's impossible that female theatrical experts of equal caliber do not exist. I wanted to bring to the attention of the public that these women are doing amazing work."

Hamilton is the host and producer of the TheatreNow! podcast and the curator of the diverse collection of interviews. She also publishes plays and writes an e-newsletter for playwrights called ScriptForward!.

Seizing the opportunity provided by new media and new technology, she came up with the structure for the series and taught herself how to create a podcast. With the help of free Internet software and a friend with sound-editing expertise, Hamilton began by simply interviewing the women in theatre she found interesting, with the conviction that what she was doing was important, not only to herself but also to the wider community.

Her first interview, in August 2009, was with playwright Quiara Alegría Hudes. At the time, Hudes was nominated for a Tony for the book of the musical *In the Heights* and has since gone on to receive the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play *Water by the Spoonful*. The interview with Hudes covers her multicultural background and childhood as well as insights into how her love of music influences her playwriting.

"I was taking classical piano lessons. I made a horrible mistake while practicing and the mistake sounded really good," says Hudes in a TheatreNow! interview. "So I thought, 'Let me play around with that mistake.' I loved the way the

wrong notes sounded. I have similar feelings about writing. I can plan things out to a T, I can really have a preconceived notion of where things are going, but it's what surprises me when I'm actually writing, what comes out the wrong way or differently, that is usually the direction I should be going in."

Hip-Hop Theatre Festival artistic director Kamilah Forbes discusses everything from Shakespeare to what hip-hop means to her in a 2010 TheatreNow! interview, speaking not only to her roots in classical drama but also to the importance of embracing contemporary storytelling as forms continue to evolve. "I look to our poets and our MCs as almost like the purveyors of news in our culture," Forbes shares with Hamilton. "I think that 300 years from now we're going to look back to them to get a clear understanding of what the emotional, political and social states of the people of the time were."

The guests on TheatreNow! are directors, choreographers, designers and actors, as well as critics, activists, artistic directors and educators. Says Hamilton, "I try to find a balance of professions. I choose by race and nationality; I want to keep it very diverse. I'm always reading who's doing what and where. When someone catches my eye, I just know it."

The candid, conversational exchanges between Hamilton and her subjects are engaging and light. Rather than going over readily available biographical information, the interviews explore the challenges of creating art, the myriad influences that contribute to one's body of work, and the often unexpected and winding path an artist travels.

Interviews with women who have achieved wide visibility—renowned lighting designer Jennifer Tipton and HERE co-founder and artistic director Kristin Marting for example—are placed alongside interviews with up-and-coming artists like Yvette Heylinger and Yvonne Farrow. Accounts from artists with years of creative experience and knowledge play well with the innovative and thought-provoking perspective of relative newcomers or voices outside the traditional theatrical structure.


Season three of the series features interviews with Wooster Group actress Kate Valk, scenic and costume designer Rae Smith, theatre and cultural critic Margo Jefferson, playwright and lyricist Maria Alexandria Beech, playwright/producer/director Murielle Borst Tarrant and Living Theatre co-founder Judith Malina.

Hamilton works with a small staff of artists and technicians—sound engineers, composers, archivists, transcribers and program assistants—to create between five and seven podcasts each season, which are posted free-of-charge on her website. The transcript of each interview and sound files of the original podcasts from the past three seasons are available online. The website offers an RSS-feed subscription for updates on when new interviews become available. The project is sponsored by Fractured Atlas, a nonprofit arts-service organization.

Hamilton is already planning her next round of subjects and hopes to include such art stars as producer Arielle Tepper Madover, actors Viola Davis and Bernadette Peters, experimental theatre director and playwright Young Jean Lee, Donmar Warehouse artistic

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director Josie Rourke, director Liesl Tommy and playwright Lynn Nottage.

Hamilton hopes her efforts will inspire others to document their own theatrical journeys and make them available to the public—a goal made more possible by the technology and resources now more widely available. As Hamilton puts it: "I hope for average people—in high school, in a community theatre, Off-Broadway, in a regional theatre—to make oral histories of their theatrical communities. They could curate their own lives." 

Margot Melcon is the literary manager and dramaturg at Marin Theatre Company in the Bay Area. Get in touch with Hamilton via the TheatreNow! website.



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