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Date Book **THEATER**

Here are just some of the ways theater depends on ‘women’s work,’ often unpaid

Theater demands a high level of emotional labor relative to many other industries.

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Lisa Anne Porter (left) as Julia, Sarita Ocón as Christina, Jennifer Ikeda as Cindy, Cindy Goldfield as Emma, Catherine Castellanos as Fefu and Marga Gomez as Cecilia in American Conservatory Theater’s “Fefu and Her Friends.” Photo: Kevin Berne / American Conservatory Theater

In honor of Labor Day, I got to team up with five female photojournalists at The Chronicle to explore the notion of women’s work. The team followed five Bay Area moms for an entire day each to document their paid and unpaid labor, which got me wondering about the unpaid women’s work of theater.

In other industries, the phenomenon often manifests as tacit expectations, outside of a job description, that a woman plan parties or take notes at meetings or perform emotional labor such as making sure everyone is OK after a tough announcement. Men could just as easily fulfill each of

these essential duties, but somehow, even in 2022, we still almost automatically look to women to take on these duties, often without awarding additional pay or even recognition.

To these, theater adds its own special set of obligations.



Valerie Weak in “Witness for the Prosecution” at Center Rep in Walnut Creek. Photo: Valerie Weak /

San Francisco actor and teaching artist Valerie Weak said that shows set in a historical period might require two hours of prep time per performance to, say, set her hair in hot rollers — time that she’s not paid for and a demand that male peers have been exempt from throughout her career.

Female actors, in fact, have to spend extra time and money on appearance almost no matter the show, she said. She recalled carpooling from a school tour to a Berkeley Rep audition early in her career.

“As we drove across the Bay Area, I put on makeup, fixed my hair, shimmied into a dress while trying not to flash others on the highway, etc.,” she said. “The driver, also female, was doing her best to do makeup at stoplights, and planned to change in the restroom once we got there, since she had a little more time. My male colleague napped the whole way, and when we arrived, he rubbed the crust out of his eyes and changed his T-shirt in the parking lot.

“It’s frustrating that this is part of what I have to put my energy toward,” she added, though she noted she’s not sure how to change it. “It’s an appearance-based profession.”



Stephanie Anne Johnson (middle) with the production team before the start of “Binding Ties: The 16th Street Station,” Oakland Theater Project’s 30th-anniversary production of the drive-in show. Johnson was one of the creators of the show. Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle 2021

Berkeley lighting designer Stephanie Anne Johnson recalled that decades ago, at her first gig at the Paramount Theatre, she had to bring donuts and coffee every day to get her white male crew members to stop ignoring her. Looking back now, she said, it’s less the “extra” tasks that bother her, “it is the hindrance against doing the job in a professional manner.” And she said she still sees women performing extra tasks, such as staying late to clean up, even though the ask is no longer explicit.

Johnson can’t consider her gender in isolation, though.

“Being a Black woman carries with it many other factors: representing all Black people; less room, forgiveness or space for mistakes or missteps; disrespect of experience and expertise,” she said.

“Further complications are the current rush to hire people of color in the theater industry and the acceleration and effects of the enormous pressure to be perfect.”



Director Darryl V. Jones watches actors Emily Kistner (left) and Miriam Ani during rehearsal for Lorraine Hansberry Theatre’s “The Urban Retreat,” at the Greater Cooper AME Zion Church in Oakland. Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle 2019

The cost of unpaid women’s labor goes beyond inequity; the art can suffer. Miriam Ani of Point Richmond, an actor, director, teaching artist and Las Positas College adjunct theater professor, recalled one “stormy” project with a male director and male lead. She said she felt “the need to peace-keep between them and show up as a mentor and support to the younger cast members rather than investing my focus and energy fully into my own artistic process.”

“Imagine splitting yourself to show up as the ‘mom’ of the cast,” she said, “rather than putting all your energy into your actual onstage performance.”

Relative to many other industries, theater demands a high level of emotional labor, i.e., the managing of feelings required to achieve workplace goals. “We’re constantly practicing exposure,” said actor Catherine Castellanos, who recently played the title role in **“Fefu and Her Friends”** at American Conservatory Theater. “There’s a cost to that. It doesn’t leave me. I’ll go home that night, and it’ll be reeling in my brain.”

Castellanos doesn’t want coddling, she said, and she takes responsibility for communicating her emotional needs. But the cost is still there.



Catherine Castellanos as Fefu (left) and Sarita Ocon as Christina in American Conservatory Theater's "Fefu and Her Friends." Photo: Kevin Berne / American Conservatory Theater

"It's emotional work, making theater, and if you're doing it right, stuff is going to come up," said East Palo Alto director Leslie Martinson, who was associate artistic director at TheatreWorks for 33 years. "If we're going to have a heightened experience when we're making the art, you've got to help people climb up to that and climb back down from that."

For her, effective emotional labor in a rehearsal room ensures that everyone is "feeling brave."

"My opinion is somebody is doing that work if the room is functioning at all," Martinson said. That somebody could be anybody — director, stage manager, cast members — and, she jokes, emotional labor doesn't require a uterus.

“Men do pick up that work, but there’s just sort of a cultural expectation that the women are going to do it,” she said. “Women are so culturally trained to look after other people’s needs.”



Playwright Jeffrey Lo works with director Leslie Martinson at City Lights Theater Company in San Jose during rehearsal for “Waiting for Next.” Photo: Paul Kuroda / Special to The Chronicle

“We have set up theater to not acknowledge how important that (work) is,” Martinson went on. If a director’s note makes an actor upset, often there’s no designated time or space to process that feeling. Emotional labor makes that time and space. “Sometimes it’s literally just information sharing,” she said.

Effective emotional labor intuitively or directly asks what someone’s limits are and how close they are to them that day. It doesn’t just throw together different creative processes and hope for the best; it ascertains and normalizes what everyone’s disparate needs are.

“Actors suck it up all the time,” Martinson said. Done effectively, “emotional labor is not making them do that unnecessarily.”

One partial solution to gendered expectations is for women to run their own companies. Michaela Goldhaber, who’s the “lead instigator” for the Bay Area Women’s Theatre Festival and artistic director of Berkeley’s Wry Crips Disabled Women’s Theatre Group, and Ayodele Nzinga, who founded Oakland’s Lower Bottom Playaz, both took that step.



Ayodele Nzinga directs the Lower Bottom Playaz' rehearsal of "Mama at Twilight: Death by Love" in Oakland. Photo: Scott Strazzante / The Chronicle 2016

"I create at the intersection of racism and sexism," Nzinga said via email. "The place ascribed to me in the line is usually at the end. Sometimes there is no around, only a through. So I found my throughline in founding my own company."

That move wasn't a magic wand, though.

"Even as a producing director it's still often difficult to be 'seen,' " she admitted. "It can be a really long trip to the big kids table."

Eugenie Chan, a San Francisco playwright and screenwriter and instructor at the University of San Francisco and San Jose State University, recalled a moment during her internship at Théâtre du Soleil in Paris 20 years ago that was likely only possible because a woman, Ariane Mnouchkine, was at the helm.

"At the end of the workshop day, interns help clean the facility, led by ensemble members, which seems fair, since we use the space," Chan recalled. "One day, as we were cleaning the toilets, Mnouchkine yelled, 'Women! I see you cleaning the toilets while the men do not. Drop your mops. Men! Do your duty! To the toilets! Clean! We shall not have this inequity here.' "



Eugenie Chan is a San Francisco playwright and screenwriter and instructor at USF and San Jose State University. Photo: Michael Macor / The Chronicle 2017

Martinson pointed out that some big-budgeted theater companies now hire counselors to help carry out emotional labor. Especially since the pandemic and the racial reckoning following the death of George Floyd, many theater companies do daily check-ins to help acknowledge that team members are humans, not just workers.

Still, the emotional laborer has needs of her own.

“I have worked with people who did not feel it was a two-way street,” Martinson said.

As a director, she might field 10 urgent requests in a row. “A bunch of those go by, and then you really need somebody on the show who’s a friend of yours to say, ‘Hi, how are you doing? Can I go take care of that? Can I bring you some water?’ ” she said. “Or literally to just say, ‘Good job. You’re doing great.’ ”

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