

Waiting in the wings

Women theatre directors are as scarce as hen's teeth, but it's not because they don't exist ... only that they're largely ignored

NAME FIVE WOMEN stage directors earning a full-time living in the Australian mainstream theatre. Well, four then ... Three? The fact that is you would be hard-pushed to name even one. You might think of Gale Edwards, whose production of *The Magic Flute* for the Victoria State Opera opens on November 18 and whose previous credits include *Les Misérables* (as assistant director in Australia and director in Vienna) and *The Rover*. An associate director at the Melbourne Theatre Company, she is about to return to Hollywood where she is working with George Miller on a film called *Lorenzo's Oil*.

That she is the only woman director who springs to mind is cold comfort to Edwards, who regards the state of affairs as "disgusting and frightening".

It's not just the upper echelons of theatre that are male-dominated — the vast majority of plays are written by men and so, predictably enough, most roles are for men. (A 1987 Actors' Equity survey found that only 30 per cent of roles went to women.)

Our culture has been brought to us through male eyes for centuries and theatre is no exception. "Women do get to direct new Australian plays written by women," says Edwards. "I'm not putting that down, but they should also be working on plays by men, including the classics."

Lindy Hume, who, after a lengthy apprenticeship as an assistant director, is making her mark at the Australian Opera (AO), agrees. "Opera is terribly misogynistic, with women as vic-

tims, throwing themselves off parapets and the like. I think it is morally essential for women directors to be reassessing the repertoire."

So where are the women direc-

of extremely talented women directors: Lindy Davies, Sandra Bates, Kerry Dwyer, Jennifer Flowers, Lois Ellis, Jenny Kemp, Margaret Davis, Katerina Ivak, Teresa Crea, Sarah Carradine and Angela Chaplin to name a few, but most of them are working on their own projects in smaller, alternative theatres.

And yet women directors are making it big in Australian film, and the success of Gillian Armstrong, Jane Campion, Ann Turner (*Celia*), Jocelyn Moorhouse (*Proof*) and Jackie McKimmie (*Waiting*) is even more notable when one considers how few women directors there are in the American industry. In film, of course, unlike theatre, if you can find both a producer and finance, you can work without having to wait for an invitation.

Although it is difficult for any young director to break into Australian mainstream theatre, it is infinitely tougher

for a woman because the powers-that-be are much more prepared to take a risk with a young male director. Many young women directors blame this on a misogynist gay mafia at work, though in fact the majority of Australian subsidised theatre companies are said to be run by straight men. But men nonetheless.

"We kid ourselves that we are working in an equal world but there is still inequality at the top," says Edwards. "The terrible truth is that it is still a man's world, and although we don't want to think that the theatre, which we like to consider as bohemian, socially aware and all-embracing, is the same, it is still a bastion of male ▶



Women directors at Sydney's Belvoir Street: (from left) Lynette Curran, Monica Pellizzari, Kathryn Fisher.

tors? They exist, but they're a breed not often sighted in theatre's mainstream. Robyn Nevin and Ros Horin have both made it as respected main-stage directors, though neither works with the regularity of Edwards, possibly because Nevin has a career as one of our top actors to attend to and Horin has children. Hume was working regularly for the AO but, ironically enough, is taking a year off in order to study arts administration, so aware is she of the limited opportunities for women directors.

Beyond this group, there is a host

power. The director is a role of authority and they still don't want to hand authority over to women."

And to reach a position of authority requires ambition and a competitive streak — qualities which are praised in men but generally frowned upon in women.

"Because women are good initiators and motivators, they are good at starting their own projects as I did when I formed my own company [Energy Connection] at the start of my career 10 years ago," Edwards

because she felt she had put back the whole cause of women directors."

Yet most women directors agree that things are gradually improving, even if it is at a snail's pace. Just opened at Sydney's Belvoir Street Theatre is *Three Stories High*, three one-act plays written by women, and directed by Lynette Curran, Kathryn Fisher and Monica Pellizzari. The plays, which run until December 1, are tucked away in the Downstairs Theatre, but they're a start.

"When I began directing [10 years

woman director in a season of 10 plays at the STC. "It's an area of gradual change," says STC artistic director Wayne Harrison. "When I came to Sydney 17 years ago, it was unusual to find Australians running a major theatre company — they were controlled by people from the English repertory system. Now we are all Australian, apart from Simon Phillips who is a New Zealander. Large organisations change slowly and we have reached a stage of such intense economic pressure that the opportunities for change are even fewer."

In the STC's defence, Harrison cites assistant director Melissa Bruce who he expects will eventually direct mainstage productions. "I did enquire about Gale Edwards for next year but she is unavailable." He also hopes the New Stages Project will employ some women directors.

"My politics are pro-feminist," says Harrison. "I would love to reach a stage where five of the 10 plays are directed by women but I won't do it just to make up numbers. Everybody must have earned the right."

Women, he says, should be taking over companies like the Marian Street Theatre on Sydney's North Shore, "getting a few runs on the board and impressing us. There is a whole new generation of women directors coming up — Sarah Carradine, Melissa Bruce, Lindy Davies — who I think will make a real impact. Robyn Nevin and Gale Edwards are the trailblazers and the role models. Hopefully, in the end, women will be employed not because of positive discrimination but because their talent is impossible to resist."

Meanwhile, even those who do well aren't guaranteed work. Katerina Ivak, for example, won the 1990 Sydney Critics' Circle Award for best director for *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (which she mounted herself at Belvoir Street) but has no work for 1992.

The odds appear to be stacked against women in the theatre, just as they are everywhere else. But the tide is slowly turning. "I do think we're getting there," says Edwards. "I have to believe it is getting better, or I'd give up." And she has no intention of doing that.

Sarah Thomas ■

"Hopefully, women will be employed not because of positive discrimination but because their talent is impossible to resist"

adds. "But they tend to get stuck there. I realised early on that unless I consciously moved into the same sort of territory as the boys, I wouldn't be taken seriously."

Having said that, Edwards is well aware that she owes her success to a few enlightened "boys" who recognised her talent and were prepared to give her a break: John Clark at NIDA; John Gaden, who asked her to join him as associate director at the State Theatre Company of South Australia; Trevor Nunn, who insisted that she had the talent to direct the Viennese production of *Les Mis*; and now George Miller. "Were it not for them, I'd still be working in a garage in Adelaide."

There's no doubt that as a woman you have to work longer and harder to prove yourself. As Gillian Armstrong says, "Women still have to be better than men. Mediocre women don't succeed." Mediocre men do.

The right to fail is essentially a male prerogative. Women are much less readily forgiven their mistakes. Thus when it comes to stress, women have to weather a double whammy. Not only do they have to fight for a break, but once they are given that chance the eyes of the world are upon them. Hume tells the story of a friend, Julie Hollander, who last year became the first woman to direct for the English National Opera. She was given an obscure opera, which was badly received. "She was devastated

ago] I really felt I was the token woman," says Horin. "Over the past three or four years that has changed. It is no longer an issue. The opportunities have increased everywhere, except in Sydney. I think there is an extraordinary anomaly there."

Though Horin lives in Sydney, she works primarily in Melbourne where she is currently directing *Early Days Under the Old Hat* for the Playbox Theatre which, in this year's subscription season of seven plays, had three directed by women (Horin, Ariette Taylor and Babs McMillan). Playbox's nearest Sydney equivalent, Belvoir Street, had only one out of six directed by a woman (Teresa Crea) in its 1991 subscription season.

A quick comparison of the Sydney Theatre Company and the Melbourne Theatre Company tells a similar story: in 1990, five of the 16 MTC productions were directed by women (Robyn Nevin, Nici Wood and three by Edwards), while at the STC, that figure was one out of 10 (Jules Wright, after Gale Edwards had to pull out).

In 1991, four of the MTC's 17 productions were directed by women (three by Edwards and one by Ros Horin), while at the STC, Jules Wright again directed one of the 10 (she was to have directed two but resigned as associate director).

In 1992, three of the MTC's 10 plays will be directed by women, while Robyn Nevin will be the only