

# All Change Please

---

A Practical Guide for  
Achieving Gender Equality  
in Theatre

Lucy Kerbel



NICK HERN BOOKS  
[www.nickhernbooks.co.uk](http://www.nickhernbooks.co.uk)



TONIC THEATRE  
[www.tonictheatre.co.uk](http://www.tonictheatre.co.uk)

# Contents

---

	Foreword by Rufus Norris	vii
	Introduction	i
1.	<b>About Change</b>	15
2.	<b>About Theatre</b>	
	<i>Processes</i>	41
	<i>Unconscious Bias</i>	55
	<i>Art</i>	69
	<i>Artistic versus Admin Roles</i>	83
	<i>Young People</i>	101
	<i>Self-awareness and Self-monitoring</i>	115
3.	<b>About You</b>	129
	Finally...	149
	Get Involved	151
	Acknowledgements	153
	About Tonic	155

## Foreword by Rufus Norris

---

Story has always been the lens through which the human race has understood itself, and the work of the storyteller – though transient – can be seismic in the moment and profound in its historical and political impact. Those storytellers, however, have almost entirely come from just one half of humanity.

‘Achieving gender equality in theatre is a no-brainer,’ says Lucy Kerbel – and in this illuminating work she lays out the ethical, creative, political, commercial, social and artistic arguments for why and how the historical imbalance of voice and practice must be addressed.

Her experience and knowledge as a show-maker from the factory floor roots her insight, guidance and encouragement, making it deeply practical and un-sensational. Consequently, her informed strength is twofold: it empowers action, converting weary frustration or unfocused anger into measurable and long-lasting practice. At the same time it disempowers the denial, driven by a throng of mere details, that has stunted what should be a leading example of brilliant diversity: the theatre.

As someone who railed against the gatekeepers for much of my early career, I now find myself in the privileged but often

challenging position of being one. The endless deadlines, crises, triumphs and unexpected clattering obstacles are constant distractions from a simple truth: that the gatekeepers' main responsibility is to look at why they are letting who they are letting through the gates. The work that the National Theatre have been doing with Tonic Theatre is enhancing our understanding of this with both nuance and vision.

In fact, Lucy Kerbel's work through Tonic has become increasingly pivotal in helping the entire industry, through organisations and individuals, raise its game. As she points out, we are the theatre industry; it is alive in us, and will develop or stagnate under our collective stewardship. So it is timely and invaluable that she has added to that well-researched insight with this book.

In it, she ranges across history, unconscious bias, the inevitable elitism of the freelance path, the multiple ways of taking action and responsibility, self-assessment, even the exit chat at the end of a project, and in doing so breaks down the insurmountable into a staircase of constructive progress.

For the open-minded, Lucy provides both tools and imperatives. For the sceptical – and here I include myself – she calmly and completely punctures the myths both of the theatre-maker as deep-thinking and reconstructed occupier of the moral high-ground, and of the arts as the front line of all things visionary. And she reveals, step by step, the deep-rooted self-selection that has underpinned where we find ourselves today.

This book will, I hope, have a breadth of readers – the cynic, the impartial, the supporter, the activist. She answers the cynic, informs the impartial, converts the supporter into an activist and equips them all; not in a rallying cry of anger-fuelled idealism, but in a calm, pragmatic and clear-eyed way. She talks about the 'what' coming before the 'how' – knowing exactly

## FOREWORD

---

what you want before trying to illuminate how best to achieve it. What she herself wants is inspiringly clear, and the work of Tonic – and this excellent guide as an aspect of that – is a crucial part of how it will be achieved.

*Rufus Norris is Director of the National Theatre.*

# Introduction

---

One of the things I love about theatre is that it isn't a solitary activity; it can only happen when a group of people with a range of skills work together to achieve a shared goal. Some of those people are really visible in that process; they get to take a bow at the end of the evening, or get their names on the poster. Others are behind the scenes; they may be the person who built the set or looks after the accounts. The role each member of the company plays is crucial and yet no one person can put the show on alone – without the plethora of skills, talents and interests that the people around them have, there would be no production or, at least, a poorer, less well-executed one.

When it comes to the question of how we can achieve greater gender equality in the theatre industry, I think there's a similar principle at play to how we put a show on stage. It will only happen, and happen in the best way possible, if a whole range of people are involved in its creation, and can bring their own particular talent, skill and interest to the mix.

This is a book for people who want to be part of that change, whatever their starting point is or wherever they're currently working – and regardless of their gender. It's for people who

## INTRODUCTION

---

may have been thinking about and active in driving for gender equality in theatre for some time – hopefully this book will give you some further sustenance as you continue on your journey. It's for people who are taking their earliest steps – hopefully it will provide you with a way in. It's for people who may simply be intrigued by the shift they see is happening in theatre at the moment and are wondering how they might be a part of it.

What this book won't do is tell you exactly what you should be doing. It's not an instruction manual; if creating a culture shift in an industry were as straightforward as assembling a model aeroplane we'd have achieved it long ago. Instead it is intended to be a springboard from which you will – if it does its job – feel inspired and equipped to come up with your own ideas and plans for how you will contribute to the wider changes that are currently happening. That's in keeping with the approach taken by Tonic, the organisation I founded six years ago. We work across the UK theatre industry, supporting it to achieve greater gender equality in its work and workforces, but we never go into an organisation and tell the people there what they should do. I never sit down with an artistic director and tell them what they should think. Instead, Tonic's job is to provide tools, information, insights, and create the circumstances in which *they* can work out for *themselves* why imbalances exist and what they could best do to address them.

By not providing all the answers in this book, I'm not letting myself off the hook, but rather I'm suggesting that many brains and perspectives on how to move forward on this very big issue will always be better than one. Because if we are going to achieve proper change across theatre – and do it in the most joyful, imaginative, thorough and effective way possible – that will require a whole range of brains on this and a whole range of approaches to it. Besides, you know the part of theatre you inhabit the best. If you come up with your own solutions to the

particular challenges that exist there, the results will be more nuanced, longer lasting and stronger.

Now is a time of hugely exciting change across our industry. The last five to ten years have – in line with a broader societal reawakening to the ongoing need for feminism – meant discussions about gender equality are being had in theatre in a way they haven't for years, and arguably on a greater scale than ever before. A swathe of new artistic directors keen to place women's art and stories at the heart of their programmes – many of them themselves women – are shifting the dial, as are individual artists driving new and invigorated ways of thinking about how the canon can be staged and by whom. A questioning has begun of how our theatre organisations are run, from the administrative to the technical to the creative to the financial, and the beginnings of a reconsidering of how pay, hours and working practices feed into the debate. All of this is hugely exciting and it's providing us with the impetus and the opportunity to re-imagine what theatre can be, as an industry, an art form, and a medium through which we converse with the public.

While all of this is thrilling and positive, there remains a long, long way to go. This book explores what those of us who want to see the green shoots of change establish into permanent features in the theatre landscape can do now, so that in another thirty years' time we're not still pointing to early indicators of progress and predicting that equality is somewhere on the horizon. This will be about capitalising on the shifts that, long-fought-for, have already been achieved, and about embedding this change properly, so that it's not a brief burst of brilliance before things return to how they have always been. It's also about ensuring we properly check that progress really *is* happening, not simply settling for the outward, and at times deceptive, signs that it is.



Having been working towards this change over the last six years, I'm firmly of the opinion that everyone who has a stake in theatre – whether they work in it, teach it, study it, watch it, or make it – has the potential and the opportunity to get involved in driving forward change. You don't have to be the Artistic Director of the National Theatre to make change happen. You can be an A-level student just embarking on a Theatre Studies course. Granted, if you are a student then there are certain things that, realistically, you can't do that the Artistic Director of the National Theatre can. But conversely there are things that *you* can do that he can't: there are ideas that you will have; there is a perspective you will bring to the subject; there is a language you are in command of that he isn't, and you can use all of these things to make your own contribution at the same time as he is making his. If many people enact many types of change on many different scales and in many different settings across theatre, a major shift will occur. Working together on the shared goal of achieving greater gender equality is like collaborating to put the most brilliant production on stage. Collectively we have a shared goal; through each contributing our own skill, knowledge and creativity, we will achieve it in the most successful manner.

### About writing this book

I founded Tonic Theatre in 2011 to support the theatre industry to achieve greater gender equality in its workforces, on and off stage, and in its repertoires.

Prior to starting Tonic I worked as a freelance director for several years. During that time I was aware that, when it came to gender, there were big imbalances in the industry I worked in. I'd spotted that when I went to the theatre (and that was a lot) the casts on stage and the names of the creative teams and playwrights in the

programmes were overwhelmingly male, especially when I was at the larger theatres. I had noticed that when working on a production I was often, as a woman, a minority in the rehearsal room or a tech. I was aware that the list of actors' names I'd personally worked with far outnumbered those of actresses. I saw all this and yet just got on with it; the situation was admittedly crummy but hey, that was just the way the world worked, wasn't it? I had my own career in directing to pursue and how was I ever going to get on if I allowed myself to be distracted by something that would probably sort itself out in a few years' time anyway? With the naivety of someone in their early twenties, I assumed it would all be fixed by the time I was in my thirties. Besides, we were pretty much there. Weren't we?

A working visit to Stockholm in early 2009 completely reconfigured my thinking and shattered my carefully constructed sense of inertia. While there I stumbled across the remarkable work that the Swedish performing-arts industries had been doing to improve gender equality over the preceding few years. Sure, everyone there told me that there was still far to go, but it wasn't difficult to see that their performing arts had been altered dramatically over a five or so year period. I was actually stunned. I'd been living quite happily in a deeply unequal system but telling myself in a resigned manner (and, if I'm honest, to avoid the responsibility of doing anything about it): 'That's just how it is.' Having got on a plane and flown in one direction for a couple of hours, I'd learned that is not necessarily 'how it is' nor, back in the UK, how it automatically had to be.

Sweden as a society is far ahead of ours in terms of gender equality in certain key respects. In particular, the Swedish government's focus on supporting working families and ensuring men and women have equal paternity/maternity rights and responsibilities mitigates some of the key challenges faced by theatre professionals, especially female, in the UK. But regardless of this, what was

striking when I spoke to people in Sweden was how many used the term ‘golden age’ to describe the phase they felt their theatre industry was having. Proactively targeting gender inequalities had released a rush of talent into their field, both in terms of individual people working in the industry, and by excavating long-forgotten or previously little-known artistic works by or about women. Wow, I remember thinking, wouldn’t it be wonderful to create a similar injection of energy in the UK?

I began thinking a great deal about how this could be done. Over the period of about two years I went on a self-driven journey of discovery, focused on understanding firstly why things were unequal here, and secondly how they could be made different. I started thinking about the situation a lot, and sometimes this involved bringing into the conscious part of my brain some of the instances of inequality I’d absorbed but which I assume had lodged in my unconscious; pragmatically I was aware of these inequalities on some fundamental level, but I hadn’t actually processed them. I’d not inspected them, turned them over like a pebble in my hand, hadn’t really examined their composition, wondered where they had come from or how they could be dispelled. I’d just accepted them as immutable. But suddenly I found myself thinking: what were the norms that had to be challenged? And what are the best forms for those acts of challenge to take?

The eventual result of this train of thought was Tonic Theatre. Tonic is an unusual theatre company in that we don’t put on plays. That’s because staging productions is massively time-consuming, energy-sapping and expensive (even a fringe show can now easily cost upwards of £20,000 to stage in London, where Tonic is based) and, besides, I didn’t think us putting on plays would have brought Tonic any closer to achieving our ultimate goal. From the beginning, Tonic’s aspiration was to create a culture shift in terms of how the theatre industry

## INTRODUCTION

---

thought about and responded to gender inequalities. Us staging one or two small-scale productions a year – about all we could have afforded or managed to have done back then – wouldn't have made a dent. There had to be a better way.

At the same time, it seemed there was a moment of opportunity that hadn't necessarily been there before and I was desperate to grab it. Around this time, circa 2010, there were conversations about the situation for women in theatre bubbling to the surface that I, as someone who'd entered the industry some ten years before, hadn't heard before, or certainly not at that level of intensity or with such regularity. Questions were being asked about why things still didn't seem to be demonstratively better and why the inevitable progress women in the industry had been envisaging since the 1970s still hadn't materialised. It seemed that the subject was back on the agenda but, without a concerted effort to keep it there, could easily fall away again. If the window of opportunity was not wide open, it was at least propped slightly ajar. Getting through it and forcing it wider open – and quickly, before the industry's attention switched to something else – felt important. The mood towards change happening was, largely, open – and so a catalyst was required to speed that change up, to intensify it, solidify it, and ensure it reached as many parts of the industry and benefitted as many women, and as many types of women, as possible.

Instead of attempting to create change by leading through example – i.e. putting on plays in a gender-balanced manner and hoping the industry (which probably wouldn't even have known we existed) somehow magically followed suit – Tonic decided to offer something that at that point didn't exist: we became the first providers of a service that gave the UK theatre industry the support, information, guidance and practical assistance it needed to make progress in regards to gender equality. I began initiating conversations with theatres across

the country, essentially asking them ‘How can we help?’ I offered Tonic as a support mechanism to enable them to better understand why imbalances existed within their work and working practices, and then expressed Tonic’s desire to collaborate with them to devise and trial alternative approaches. We prioritised building relationships with those organisations that had the highest profile, and the lion’s share of funding, resources and clout – the big players if you will – because we knew that if they changed how they made work, took decisions, and built their artistic programme, they would take others with them. Sometimes this work happened on a one-to-one basis with a theatre. Often, though, we concentrated on bringing together cohorts of organisations, recognising that working on a problem with a group of colleagues is often far more interesting and productive than doing it solo. Our flagship Advance programme was designed with this in mind; over a six-month period we guide a cohort of organisations through a process of research, self-reflection and group activities, enabling them to create targeted change within their own companies while considering how, collectively, they can initiate industry-wide shifts (there is lots more information on Advance at [www.tonictheatre-advance.co.uk](http://www.tonictheatre-advance.co.uk)).

This approach is one that has been received with great positivity by the theatre industry. To date, our partners on such work have included major institutions such as the National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, West Yorkshire Playhouse, Young Vic, Northern Stage, Chichester Festival Theatre, Sheffield Theatres, New Wolsey Theatre, the Almeida, the Tricycle, English Touring Theatre and Headlong. Demand for our work has seen us expand into opera and dance, where we’ve collaborated with organisations such as the Royal Opera House, Sadler’s Wells and Northern Ballet. We are in the process of broadening our remit even further, into the wider creative industries, and are beginning to engage with TV and film.

Beyond supporting organisations to re-imagine their working practices, we connect them with great work that has women's voices, ideas and creativity at its heart. For instance, my 2013 book *100 Great Plays for Women* was created because I'd realised the reason so few plays with female-centric casts were being staged was a belief that, beyond *Top Girls*, few high-quality plays with mainly female casts had ever been written. In *100 Great Plays for Women*, by introducing just a hundred such works, I sought to ensure theatres could never again use a lack of available material as a reason not to depict the lives and experiences of women on stage. Similarly through Platform – a series of new scripts for young actors with mainly female casts that we commission, publish, and then disseminate to schools, colleges and youth theatres – we seek to disrupt the expectation that tomorrow's generation of theatre-makers and audience members may otherwise grow up with, about the incapacity of women to be at the centre of drama.

At just six years old Tonic is still a young organisation and I'm aware that in many ways we're still just at the start of things. And yet the level of change I have been privileged to witness first-hand during Tonic's life to date has been extraordinary. Of course, there is still far to go before theatre in this country becomes equal. But what is so heartening is the number of us from across the industry – organisations and individuals – that are committing to making this journey together. If it continues to be as fascinating as it has been to this point, I cannot wait to see where it will lead us next.

*January 2017*

### About this book

This book is divided into three sections:

In **Part 1: About Change** we'll start by talking about change, and I'll be seeking to convince you that, while it may look like a daunting thing for an individual to achieve, it doesn't need to be. We'll look at some of the forms that change can take and will consider what the benefits of being a change-maker are.

**Part 2: About Theatre** is a series of provocations, designed to explode the question of why theatre remains imbalanced, while, hopefully, providing a few 'light bulb' moments for you along the way about what can be done to remedy this situation. Each provocation looks at gender inequalities in theatre from a different angle, focusing on certain aspects of how we work, think and behave which, based on what I've seen and heard over the last six years, are particularly worthy of our attention if we are to move forward as an industry. They aren't exhaustive (someone else writing this book may have selected entirely different areas of focus), aren't listed in any particular order of importance, and some may speak more directly to you than others, depending on what area of theatre you are most connected to. However, I hope all of them, even those that feel distant to your particular involvement in theatre, will be interesting to you and useful in achieving a holistic understanding of the manifold challenges we face – and the solutions available to us.

Finally, in **Part 3: About You** I'll be saying: 'Okay, now over to you', and giving you some space to think about what you want to do next. By that point you should hopefully be raring to go, but before you go tearing off on a change-making mission, we'll spend some time looking at how you can ensure that the approach you take is strategic, realistic, structured, and conducted in such a way as to stand the very best chance of

## INTRODUCTION

---

being successful. We'll be looking at tools you can equip yourself with, either to embark on or develop your work, to measure your progress and also to keep you on track. Above all, we'll be focusing on how you can ensure that the change you achieve is meaningful and long-lasting.

Whatever your involvement in theatre, and whatever your engagement in the subject of gender equality has been up to this point, this is something that you can be a part of. The opportunity for us to collectively remodel, re-imagine, and refresh what our industry and our art form could be is ours for the taking. It's a mission I hope many of us will work alongside each other to achieve.



# 1 About Change

---

What is it, and how can we achieve it?



# About Change

---

Let's begin by talking about plastic bags, bicycles, and eating lunch at your desk.

## The change that you (yes, *you*) can make and do make

It may be, that having read my introduction to this book, you were left feeling 'Okay, that's all very well-intentioned but, to come back down to earth, how the hell could *I* realistically change things?' Perhaps you feel utterly disempowered in regards to your position in theatre or your ability to impact on what feels like the immovable monolith of inequalities. Alternatively, you might be someone who *is* in a position of seniority or influence in theatre – you're absolutely the kind of person who should be driving change – and yet, when you look at your already overwhelming 'to do' list, may find yourself thinking: 'But how the hell am I going to find time to sort out gender equality on top of everything else I have to do?!'

In response to both of these quite understandable concerns I would say that you are never without agency, nor does creating change automatically have to add to your workload, but often