

# arts scene

by FOOTLIGHTS.COM

**BROADWAY**  
plays by women  
sell an average of

**3,538**  
more seats

...so why aren't more  
being produced?



Check out the  
spring lineup inside!

# BALANCE:

## The Story of Renaissance Theaterworks

By Ryan Albrechtson

The original founders of Renaissance Theaterworks, an organization founded in 1993 to further gender parity in the arts.



“Classrooms are where the magic happens.”

# renaissance

T H E A T E R W O R K S

Theater By Women  
For Everyone



This quote can be applied in many places – such as all of the magic happening worldwide in virtual and in person classrooms by hardworking teachers in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Artistic Director Suzan Fete and Managing Director Lisa Rasmussen in front of Next Act Theatre, the new home for RTW performances.

# NEXT THEATRE

It also applied back in 1993, in a Milwaukee acting class taught by C. Michael Wright. This class would bring together some incredible women, including Suzan Fete, Marie Kohler, Raeleen McMillion, Jennifer Rupp and Michele Traband. From the class this group of artists would create some magic of their own: a little company called Renaissance Theaterworks.

“It just was starting to kind of dawn on all of us at the same time that there weren’t a lot of opportunities for women in the theatre,” said Fete, who serves as Renaissance’s Artistic Director. “There weren’t a lot of plays written by women that were being produced in our community... we were really young and thought ‘Well, we could do that.’”

Renaissance Theaterworks’ initial vision was interested in providing more roles for women that “went beyond the ingenue or the mom.” From that mission the company was born, whose mission is to “create moving theater that connects with our shared sense of being human.” Renaissance is dedicated to artistic excellence and to promoting the work of women onstage and off, and takes pride in their accomplishments towards improving gender parity in Milwaukee theater.

What exactly is gender parity, and what does it have to do with the arts?

“Parity is kind of a funny word, because it’s not used as much as ‘disparity,’” said Lisa Rasmussen, who became Renaissance’s Managing Director after over 10 years as Development Director. “There’s so much disparity in the field of the arts. It seems surprising because there are so many women actors. 70% of the ticket buyers are women. It seems like it should be overbalanced toward women... but only 20% of plays produced in the US are written by women. And when the plays aren’t written by women, it follows through that the



stories aren't women centered and the roles for women aren't as well fleshed out."

"The natural choices men make of what speaks to them and what they want to put on their stages relates to their own experience. That's human nature," said Rasmussen. "Renaissance is interested in raising the stories told by women up to 50%, because we're 50% of the population."

In 1993, the group had their work cut out for them. "At that time in Milwaukee, I think less than 10% of the plays that were produced in our area were written by women," said Fete. "There were no female producers, no female Artistic Directors, and very few roles for women in general."

Fighting for equality and representation in a male dominated field wasn't easy. "It was so ridiculous," said Fete. "At first, we were the 'lesbian theatre company.' And people saying nasty stuff, like 'Well, you don't want to exclude men!' The fact that someone could say that with a straight face when at every other theatre company in town all of the work was written by men and acted by men and directed by men and produced by men... no one batted an eye about that."

"Something that happens if you're lucky to live long enough is that you start to see change," said Fete. "Where I've seen it the most is in the younger people that are on staff now... I was telling some of the younger women the same things, and they were so shocked. 'People really said that to you?' On a daily basis, my friend. 'I can't believe that!' And I realized, that's true for them. And I'd love to think that maybe we were a tiny part of that."

“Balance should be the goal, no matter what,” said Rasmussen. “We shouldn’t have to defend that we want to get toward balance.”

The current season has brought its own set of challenges, finding work that aligned with Renaissance Theaterworks’ mission while staying safe and responsible in the midst of the pandemic. Although it is no easy feat, Fete has come up with a great solution, and it’s pretty “neat.”

NEAT is a magical, often humorous, coming-of-age story. Based in the oral traditions of the African Diaspora, award-winning playwright, Charlayne Woodard is a modern-day griot. NEAT is based on the playwright’s lived experience. As an infant, Woodard’s beloved Aunt Beneatha (Neat), is denied treatment at the local “white” hospital, leaving her with permanent brain damage. But Neat possesses an enormous heart. With love and simplicity, Neat teaches young Charlayne to embrace black pride and cherish life through the turbulent 1960s and 1970s.

“In NEAT, Woodard is a magnificent storyteller who spins her own exquisite real-life remembrances of love and resilience. I’m so excited to bring NEAT back to Milwaukee. A sell-out hit for Renaissance Theaterworks in 2012 followed by a successful South African tour in 2013, NEAT is an inspiring story that reminds us all of what really matters, especially at times when we need it most,” said Fete.

The show, once again starring Marti Gobel in the tour-de-force role, will stream to audiences March 19-April 11. [Click here for more information and to purchase your streaming tickets.](#) You can also learn more about the history of Renaissance Theaterworks and their journey with NEAT in our video interview!

