

# Theatre In Greater Boston

## A Major Force with a minor inferiority complex

A report based on interviews with 75 theatre artists

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# Disclaimer

Although the use of StageSource publications aided me in the preparations for this study, StageSource is not responsible for the content of this report.

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# I. Introduction

During the fall of 2009, seventy-five theatre artists agreed to be interviewed about their experience with theatre in the Greater Boston area. The objective of the project was to give a large number of people working in theatre a chance to voice their opinions on a wide range of topics and concerns pertaining to theatre. Although surveys had been conducted over the years to register people's opinions, these interviews were meant to offer a setting where theatre artists could speak in a more conversational mode, and where questions from the interviewer served largely as triggers to give the interviewees the freedom to talk about any topic of relevance. The interviewees were offered anonymity, and all accepted.

## The interviewees

The main criterion for participation was to be active—no matter in what form—in the theatre in the Greater Boston area. No 'scientific' approach was used in selecting the theatre artists. Therefore, opinions voiced in this document cannot be seen as 'scientific' representations. Yet I do believe that the voices of the seventy-five people who participated are worth listening to. Since the Boston theatre community is not large, seventy-five theatre artists is not a small number within the context of the Boston theatre scene.

A total of 393 theatre professionals were approached and asked whether they wanted to be interviewed. They represented a variety of theatre artists: actors, producers, directors, artistic directors, administrators, stage managers, designers, acting coaches, theatre educators, choreographers, casting agents, and voice teachers. Using diverse resources—such as websites, playbills, "The Source," StageSource announcements, the Yellow Pages, personal data, and personal recommendations by participants—I obtained the mail and email addresses of these professionals, and sent out almost 400 letters and emails during September and October 2008, requesting their participation. The text included the following explanation:

*"I intend, during the coming months, as my sabbatical project, to study the state of the theatre in the Greater Boston area. I'm in the process of interviewing theatre artists in order to hear their opinions. Topics of discussion are: actor training, casting, job opportunities, how theatre in Boston has improved, and any other topic you see as important. I plan to make findings, conclusions, and eventual recommendations of this study available to those working in the Greater Boston theatre community. The interview can take place face-to-face, by phone, or by email. The interviewee may stay anonymous if she or he so wishes."*

A total of 134 people responded that they were willing to participate. From these 134 people I selected 75 theatre artists using the criterion that participants needed to be active in and with theatre. In order to protect their anonymity, I will have to abstain from specific information, but this is what can be said about the interviewees:

The interviewees identify themselves as actors, directors, educators, playwrights, stage managers, dancers, singers, voice-over professionals, acting coaches, voice trainers, producers, designers, stage-fight instructors, casting directors, artistic directors, and administrators. Many interviewees identify themselves in more than one category: Thus, actors might also direct, playwrights might also act, directors might also educate. Close to 70 percent of the interviewees see their main work in acting; 20 percent in directing; 10 percent in diverse theatre work. They range from young theatre people still in training to professionals “famous” in the area. About three-fifths of them are women. Close to 40 percent are members of at least one union. They range in age from late teens to late seventies. About 30 percent of them work in their profession almost continuously; 60 percent have worked during the last three years; and 10 percent have not worked in theatre during the last three years but still attend auditions or are otherwise actively connected to theatre.

## The Interviews

Forty-one of the interviews took place face-to-face, five were conducted through email, and the rest were done by phone. The average length of time spent on an interview was thirty-five minutes. Interviews started with questions asking for personal data, such as theatre training and how long the respondent had been in the Boston area. Depending on the direction the conversation took, the following topics might be addressed by the interviewer: professional goals, audition experience, training opportunities/needs, work, casting, union/non-union, women in theatre, theatre in Boston compared with that in the rest of the country, ways to improve theatre in the area. But more importantly, the interview gave space to participants to address any topic deemed relevant. The interviews were recorded electronically—with permission from the interviewees—and in a few occasions were recorded through note taking. The electronically recorded interviews were transcribed to text and were then erased.

## Reportage Format

The conversational nature of the interviews made for a wide range of topics, concerns, opinions, and findings. And of course, in no way can a written report adequately capture the rich character of the spoken content. I had originally planned to report the findings of the interviews through interpretive summaries using my own phrasing. In the end I decided to let the interviewees speak for themselves. I realize that the disadvantage of this approach is that it makes for a “choppy” report, but the advantage is that readers can hear the interviewees in their own voices. I did not report all opinions, of course, as this would have resulted in hundreds of pages. And although interviewees frequently returned to opinions they’d expressed earlier—or even offered divergent opinions—I have tried to include these repetitions only if a new angle was added. None of the quotations is 100 percent verbatim. I have changed wordings either to make the phrases more readable or to protect the identity of the interviewee. By withholding the identity of the person being quoted, I hope the reader can focus on the content, rather than the

source. Although many topics overlap, I have decided on the following categories: actor training, reviewers, women in theatre, building an audience, equity and making a living, auditions and casting, rehearsals, diverse opinions on a variety of topics, and how to improve theatre in Greater Boston.

I hope that readers of this report will act as "listeners" to what is being said, even—or maybe especially—when opinions and findings clash with one's own. Greater Boston theatre is a major force and it deserves to be taken seriously.



## II. Actor Training

Participants opined about this topic in several ways: They assessed the condition of acting in the Boston area, or they proclaimed the need for more professional classes. Others discussed the diverse types of training available in the area, while a number of people compared Boston-area training with that in other cities. Quotes on this topic:

*I think the level of actor training in America has gone down. Many actors think that if they have experience, they don't need training. There are somewhat more chances to be cast, and so when they get roles, they don't go back to training; they get all that superficial sense of skills, but there is a lack of depth of exploration. I don't see the depth in New York actors either. I have seen New York actors at the ART that seriously lack depth of acting, and have seen New York actors at Huntington with astonishing lack of depth. Even on Broadway I witness much superficiality in acting; they rely on techniques.*

*There are simply not enough master classes for experienced actors in Boston.*

*There are great acting training programs and great teachers at BU, Brandeis, Emerson, etc. Yet the discipline of voice and diction training is missing. Furthermore, many young actors stop growing, they stop learning. I know of actors who were cast in an Equity show but are not getting hired because they did not keep up with training. Coaches are important but, I acknowledge, expensive.*

*Many Boston actors do not seek out professional training. I think it is a cultural thing. I agree that there is not enough high-level training in this city, and for a lot of Boston actors, New York is far. Still, I hate to say it but many actors become complacent, they say "I'll learn from auditions," but that is a different process than acting. It is unfortunate: often producers seek out actors from outside Boston; they feel these actors are continuously in training and Boston actors are not. In these larger markets, such as New York and L.A., they work more and they can train more, and [they] also have agent representation.*

*I try to seek out professional training. Still, it can be frustrating because the classes are so open with the result that you get students with a variety in range. A lot of extras who happen to be cast in a film—but have little acting experience—realize that they all of a sudden need training. And so you are in a workshop with people who have never been on stage. Even an Equity card is not always a correct indication of people's ability, so that should not be the single criterion to allow people in workshops. I understand that StageSource needs to open things up as far as workshops are concerned, but that means that everybody can attend. There's [a] lack of vetting procedures. Maybe University faculty could extend and offer workshops to (experienced) outsiders.*

*Training in Boston consists too much of scene study, not enough scene breakdown or the creation of aesthetic goals and framework. There is a lack of multilevel acting training: beginner-intermediate-advanced. There's also a lack of good master teachers. It's the age-old problem: The fact that you know how to act does not mean you know how to teach.*

*Rarely do I see master classes being offered in Boston. What is missing also is a system of weekly drop-in classes. It could be because of financial reasons. Some actors believe that the moment they get cast then they do not have to continue to train.*

*Voice and movement training seem not important in academic training. I see students graduating without having had solid movement and voice training.*

*I understand that there is little time to take classes. Furthermore, a lot of young actors get distracted and are not focused. I'm afraid that in most acting training the emphasis is on oral interpretations and scene and character study, but not enough attention is being paid to the actual technique of speech. They don't learn to speak in a more conversational way that can be heard in the last row of the house. It is apparently a matter of time constraint in programs, where not enough time is spent on basics such as proper breathing, relaxed enunciation, and articulation.*

*If students don't see immediate benefits, they tend to give up. They know enough to get them through, but do not learn enough to advance. Dancers have a totally different mindset; they understand that their body is their instrument. Many actors look at voice as something much more vague.*

*Some people teach master classes. But since most of the people who are doing the teaching are our peers, I'm not going to pay lots of money to pay for classes taught by one of my colleagues; I'd rather work.*

*I have not seen any evidence that Boston-trained actors are less well-trained. Quality [here] is as good as any place, and I have worked at many places around the country. The quality of Boston actors is just as good. There might not be as many types to fill all the [casting] holes in Boston, but the talent is here.*

*When I see young actors on stage, I am bothered. I see far too much subjective emphasis; it lacks tension. The conflict is never made enough manifest, and there's an overemphasis on the self of the actor and not enough attention is being paid to character and the situation. So what you get is some amorphous, ingrown, and highly subjective performance, and to me that's uninteresting. I'm not sure if this is symptomatic of the kind of teaching they get. I'm not sure if it is a matter of technical skill or an ability to make the self count in terms of imaginative situations; there's not enough investigation.*

*For many years I could see a difference in skills between Boston and New York actors. I don't see that difference anymore now. I do believe in the necessity of professional training when you want to be on stage. Musicians and dancers know they have to keep training, and they do: why not actors?*

### III. Reviewers

Although the topic of theatre review and criticism was not addressed extensively, viewpoints expressed were rather fervent. They ranged from reviewing the reviewers to discussing the effect reviewers have on productions and theatre attendance. Quotes on this topic:

*Because newspapers [have] become less important, theatre reviewers are becoming less important.*

*The critics in this town destroy us: They rip good plays apart and praise bad ones; there's such a double standard. In-depth criticism is lacking in this town.*

*The public tends to believe the press, so when you get a good review, the public thinks you deserve it. We are not engaging in critical internal assessment within the theatre community. We should use the internet more to spread reviews and criticism.*

*Maybe we need to become less dependent on reviewers and subscribers, and perform in smaller houses and create smaller but dedicated audiences. And don't invite the critics. I think that should be the future of theatre in this town.*

*There's so much less space dedicated to the arts in newspapers nowadays. The reviewers of *The Globe* and *The Phoenix* are fine. Others, who go for snappy phrases that are catchy, are less helpful. And then sometimes you get a great review and still do not get an audience. Reviewers cannot make a play successful, but they can kill a play. Some come with preconceived notions of how the play should be presented instead of evaluating the play on its own merit.*

*There's no theatre criticism; it's reviewing. Most reviewers do not have enough insight in the dramatic arts.*

*Theatre companies are hypocrites. They say the reviewer is a moron when a review is bad. But then when that same reviewer later in the season writes a positive review, the marketing people use the reviewer's blurbs as an authoritative voice in their advertisements.*

*Theatres know they need the press, so they decide on works that are audience-friendly. We cannot just blame the reviewers for dumbing down the audience; the theatre companies are responsible. You make a bargain with the devil when you become dependent on local producers and or local corporate interests.*

*There are definitely some good reviewers in Boston.*



## IV. Women In Theatre

This was a passionate topic, and one that turned up quite a lot of frustration. Viewpoints included a substantial female-actor population, upset at the dearth of female roles, the suspicion that male theatre professionals tend to give preference to dramatic works that are male-oriented, and the question of why even contemporary playwrights populate their works with more male than female characters. Quotes on this topic:

*There's a serious lack of good female roles. Once I added up the female roles in three companies—SpeakEasy, New Rep, and Lyric—during one particular season: There were ten times the number of male roles versus female roles. There is so much competition for a woman in her thirties. Yet, it is interesting to see how many contemporary plays continue to have a vast majority of male roles. Also, see how many female directors there are who set the season. It all comes down to one's experience: If it is the male experience, then decisions are made accordingly.*

*I want women to create and produce their own work.*

*There's still a lack of female playwrights. About 12.6 percent of plays are written by women; compare that with 12.8 percent in 1912.*

*Theatres are run by men, seasons are driven by money. They decide what will sell, and maybe they don't value [the] female sensibility.*

*You cannot force directors to cast more females. SpeakEasy did *The History Boys*, but also *The Women*.*

*Female roles are few and far between, even in female playwrights' works.*

*There are still the basic "kinds of women" in plays: the older, the younger, the whore, etc. Most women in plays are identified with their relationship to men instead of relationship to other women or themselves.*

*I agree that plays that are produced have many males, but what about the plays that are written? Maybe they have more female characters but are simply not being produced.*

*Maybe subconsciously women playwrights believe that if they write male characters, their work has more chance to be produced?*

*It is a problem, but I think the situation is improving.*

*In Boston there's at least one play per company per season without women roles. As an ingénue, we are a dime a dozen; it's almost impossible to be cast.*

*The good female roles are out there, but it's almost impossible to get cast because there are some amazing established actresses who get just about all the work. Not that they shouldn't! They are fantastic! The smaller ingénue roles go to girls in local university or college programs, as they are non-Equity and are looking for work—pay isn't*

*important. So they can take 100 bucks or so for a full run instead of what some of us, who are more experienced, might need to take the same role. Sometimes it is a financial decision for the producing theatres.*

*A lot of good women actors who are in their forties and fifties have left town for better work opportunities.*

*Companies have a lot of leeway in their choice of material to ensure that female roles are as prominent as male roles. I would like to see more female playwrights produced.*

*There are many more women writers published than women playwrights produced. Theatre is behind most of the arts in the representation of women. None of the companies in Boston are companies dedicated to producing women's work. Many men are interested in their own stories.*

*Theatre companies look for men in their forties but [for] women in their twenties. People think that women in that older age group are not interesting. It seems that society doesn't know what to do with women who are no longer childbearing and sexy and are not yet grandmotherly: What is their function in society? It is interesting that when women come into their power ([in their] forties), they are no longer interesting for society, and so you see little representation of them in plays.*

*Casting directors and producers want young and sexy-looking females rather than older women. I don't think it depends on the play. It just comes down to any business: The higher-ups just want younger and more beautiful people.*

*Most boys/men do not empathize with a female character; yet girls/women can empathize with a male protagonist. The overall view is from a man's point of view.*

*Maybe male characters are more interesting: Men are bad-asses, they get more into trouble, and are thus more dramatic.*

*We still have ways to go to have women writers, directors, producers. There's still a tension, sometimes, when a woman is at the helm.*

*When men get older, they get more distinguished; when women get older, they get less beautiful.*

*I think there's a fear of women as they age. We're not afraid of telling stories about older men with power but are afraid of older women with power. *The Visit* and *Top Girls* show women in power, but they are not sympathetic characters.*

*I create strong female characters in conflict. My characters are usually women because I'm a woman. In general there's a difference in the types of plays men write: Men like plot-driven plays.*

*It's about time that people who pick seasons pick more plays written and directed by women and with women casts.*

*There's a tendency to say that male playwrights write plays and female playwrights write women's plays. A number of plays with women show women bitching with and to each other, and we have to watch it because it's women's theatre. As a woman, I'm all in favor to get more women characters in plays, but we have to do better than all those mother and daughter relationships.*



## V. Building An Audience

The theatre professionals I interviewed were greatly concerned about the graying of theatre audiences, the challenges of creating a new generation of theatre-goers, and the need for theatre education. Quotes on this topic:

*It is hard to take a core group and extend it as an audience. It seems that audiences do not change. In general the make-up is white, college educated, middle aged. Theatre is a literary medium and it requires specific experience. I know theatre education is necessary, but our budget is so tight we cannot take it on.*

*Huntington has a very clear approach to creating an audience. It also has an education department that reaches out to young people.*

*My belief is that ticket prices need to be lower. Boston is very expensive for its size, and the city is not helpful enough in addressing theatre expenses.*

*Education of theatre means cultivating the next generation of theatre-goers.*

*Marketing for new plays is very hard. We try to engage the audience by asking them to write comments in the program.*

*There's less value placed on theatre in Boston. People do not invest in youth, do not do enough with theatre education and work with schools.*

*A huge component of a successful theatre company is the education part: going into schools, and knowing how to build a young audience. This simply does not happen enough in Boston.*

*Most actors are not interested in audience building; many refuse to speak to the audience after a show or refuse to go into [a] school. It's baffling; actors don't seem to understand the connection between relating to [the] audience and having a job in theatre.*

*We do tremendous community outreach and also have pay-what-you-want performances.*

*Get children interested at a young age in any kind of theatre, through plays, puppet theatre, etc. Many of our generation have not been taken to the theatre as kids, and so have no incentive to attend theatre now.*



## VI. Equity And Making A Living

Here we see many conflicting opinions about the efficacy of being a union member, whether making a living by working in the theatre is even an option, and to what extent union regulations affect the art. Quotes on this topic:

*What I like about Boston is that I do not have to get an agent because it is a smaller community. I know it is not possible to make a living as an actor, so I'm conflicted [about] whether to stay Equity. Equity limits my work, and it's tempting to take a non-Equity part. Sometimes I wanted to say, "Fuck it; if they [Equity] find out, they find out."*

*We need a major examination and discussion with Equity and their policy about actors working in non-Equity jobs. Actors need to work, and they know they are not going to make a living anyway. It would be great if Equity was more flexible to allow actors—especially women—[to] do non-Equity work.*

*It is, for many, impossible to make a living on stage, as it has [been] through history. Three hundred dollars per week is not enough to live on. And so a lot of people make money elsewhere.*

*The thriving industrial acting has a detrimental effect on stage acting. I see as [an] effect a certain external polish that's not driven from the inside. There's a lack of truth and lack of urgency for truth. If you spent all your time hitting your mark, it has an impact on your work. I see a lunchbox mentality—a job you do—and it leads to complacency.*

*The problem for theatres is to be able to pay actors a living wage. Theatres have an arrangement with Equity for what [they] can pay actors, but it also means it is hard for actors to make a living.*

*I believe in the union. Equity has a contract for almost any occasion.*

*Young women who become Equity have a hard time getting work. It's easier for younger men because there are more roles for them and less competition.*

*The new NEAT agreement starts at \$210 and goes up to about \$550. How can you live off \$210 a week? It's an insult. And that's the union contract? The rate is pathetic.*

*Equity must be seen as a benefit; it pays a basic decent wage. Non-union people tend not to pay into a health insurance [policy].*

*There are only a handful of places you can work as an Equity actor.*

*I never know what to say to people who want to become Equity. What the union can do is create work opportunities by getting theatre companies on contract. The union can't get you work; your talent gets you work.*

*Joining the union at any age means less work because a whole area has been cut off.*

*There's plenty of opportunity: The union offers special-appearance contracts that enable actors to play in a non-union house.*

*I worked under a pseudonym because I wanted to work non-Equity. I think people should think twice before joining the union.*

*Equity has been flexible and understanding when we need to cast more non-union actors.*

*Getting my Equity card hindered [me] tremendously; I worked much less. An Equity show is very structured, which is good, but this also can decrease the enthusiasm and the joy, and can affect the nature of theatre negatively.*

*I resigned from Equity. I lost two parts last year because of Equity. It was a hard decision. The opportunities for an Equity actor, when you are new in town, are so limited. I'm playing a great role as non-Equity now, making a pittance, but loving what I'm doing. The question is, do you stick with a system that's not working, or do you ultimately have to make a choice that does work for you?*

*There are instances where I lost work because people could not afford Equity. A company needs to have money in the bank if it wants to pay for an intensive rehearsal process. I understand the union is trying to look out for their actors, trying to protect people. Unfortunately, that protection works often preventatively. It does not allow you to take risks and work different projects. Nobody I know in Boston makes a living through acting; they teach or have day jobs.*

*As a newcomer, I don't think it makes sense for me to become Equity. People who have been here for twenty years and are talented are cast continuously.*

*Equity? Don't make the jump before you are ready, because you may never act again.*

*It's not cheap. Even at a pay scale of \$200 a week, the company still pays for pension, health, social security, workman's comp., and unemployment. So a \$200 salary becomes a \$500 packet.*

*The union guarantees access, not casting. All actors need is to have a fair chance of being seen. There are simply too many actors chasing after too few jobs.*

*I have experienced that the non-Equity acting arrangement in New York is far more flexible than the one in Boston. I have done non-Equity shows and changed my name so I could work.*

*Boston actors need to get more dispensation to do non-Equity work. They are well trained but don't have enough chance to be on stage.*

*The fact that we are an Equity house determines the size of the cast. A large cast becomes too expensive.*

*There are way too many women in my age range that are non-Equity, that theatres can hire for less money.*

*Equity helps me to work at a civil level.*

## VII. Auditions And Casting

Not surprisingly, auditions and casting was an important topic. Opinions ranged from assessment of auditions, the way directors cast, casting from Boston versus from New York, agents and casting directors, and directors' stables. Quotes on this topic:

*In general I experience auditions as very pleasant, directors very helpful, other actors respectful.*

*Majority of the roles are usually white: Do I lose out because I'm non-white?*

*[As an actor] I don't like general auditions; it is much better to prepare for a certain role.*

*The ART open call is a big joke, unprofessionally led. It looks like they do it because they have to do it. A number of good Boston actors don't even try ART anymore.*

*Why are some artistic directors directing so many shows? There are about five directors always working in this town, and they hire the same actors over and over.*

*There's good theatre going on here, but I moved back to New York because Boston is so incestuous.*

*ART auditions were helpful.*

*[As a director] I never hold auditions in New York. I believe in investing in the local talent and community. There's a lot of great, young talent.*

*Some producers feel that the talent pool in Boston is stagnant; they are tired of seeing the same people. They feel that if an actor knows he is not right for the role, then don't audition for it. At the same time, some directors always cast the same actors, so many actors have said, "Why bother? I'm not going [to audition] for that guy anymore."*

*The Lyric does its level best to cast locally, although it tends to use its regular stable of actors.*

*[As a director] I have learned that what I can do with the play is so much shaped by that moment of casting. Let's not forget that theatre is the actor's medium, not the director's medium.*

*There are two key elements missing in Boston, as far as casting is concerned: agents and casting directors. Although it puts more middlemen in the system, it is a process that actually works, because the system preselects and it allows for a more specific search. The director does not have to sit through hours of assessing many actors who either lack experience or are not right for the part.*

*It is very easy in this small community to get pigeonholed as an actor.*

*A lot of local casting is based on who I know, who I see. When I cast an actor, I often go back to him or her. One of the biggest problems is finding time to see other theatre.*

*There are a lot of actors I do not know, who I have not yet met—many of the young actors. If I know who they are, they often do not have to audition; we contact them. We are lucky they live and stay here.*

*Theatre is an art form; it is not created through democracy. Actors are cast because they are good and right for the role, not because they live in Boston or New York.*

*Some directors want to improve their national standing as director and therefore cast people from New York and L.A.*

*If you know actors well, then—as a director—you want to work with them again; it's a safety issue.*

*We hire almost exclusively directors from the Boston area. It is partly a budget reality, but more than that, we need directors who are familiar with the company and its needs.*

*Our audiences like to see local people, like to see what Nancy Carroll or Paula Plum is doing. They are outstanding actors. Also, press attention is important when you cast someone who has a track record.*

*Artistic directors in the Boston area are not good [at] getting to other theatres to see the body of work that is being presented. That's a problem, because rarely is someone being cast after a ten-minute audition. Most of the time actors are cast because the director saw them in a show.*

*In general I have felt welcomed by casting directors at auditions, even when I was tense, nervous, and/or underprepared. As far as auditions themselves are concerned, they vary: from highly disorganized auditions—lots of waiting, sides not prepared, etc.—to clockwork schedules;[and] from responses like a curt “That's all we need to see” to intense work with the director.*

*I believe that the attention paid to local actors varies from company to company. Some companies, such as the Lyric Stage, Foothills Theatre Company, and Stoneham Theatre, and they are not alone, feel an obligation—and go out of their way—to cast locally. Other companies have the mindset that “If you are a real actor, you can only be found in New York.” For these companies, it's a given that I will attend their New York call. It's backwards, but true.*

*In general, auditions in Boston are much more relaxed than, say, New York calls, but in the same breath, very much less heavily attended. This can sometimes be great, as the Boston-area theatres get to know performers more quickly and on a more personal level than in New York, where it can take months or years to get known to casting agents and directors. In general, actors have a lot more control over their career in Boston, as a lot of us do not have agents or managers and, frankly, in Boston, do not really need them—that is, if [actors in Boston] are diligent and efficient at keeping track of auditions on their own, which is not that difficult. StageSource is a big, big help in keeping abreast of local auditions—that I cannot stress enough.*

*What is unfortunate is when a secondary role is cast from outside Boston.*

*There's a human tendency for a director to cast someone [she or he] feels comfortable with, and since we have many directors from out of town, they will cast actors they have worked with out of town.*

*Most auditions are cold cattle calls where casting directors pay little attention to the actor's work.*

*These directors and producers can hire whoever the hell they want. It's their prerogative, choice, and business. I never felt anybody from New York was taking a job from me. Most of the roles I auditioned for I didn't get, but I didn't feel [the directors] were obliged to cast me. I heard rumblings that you have to have a 212 area code. It's a myth. It's not a New York thing; it's a trained actor thing.*

*I agree that the ART has a higher mission to fill than accommodating local actors.*

*My ethnic looks have kept me out of consideration, although nontraditional casting is getting somewhat better.*

*Compared with New York, people in Boston are very respectful to actors at auditions; I have had terrible experiences in New York.*

*Occasionally we go to New York for casting; for example, if we can't get an actor in Boston with specific ethnic requirements.*

*My experience with auditions is great. I hated New York auditions. As a whole, casting directors at Boston auditions are more interested in the person.*

*There are stables; everybody knows it. There are directors in this town that hire the same actors because they sell tickets, whether they are right for the part or not. There are places that tend to hire their usual cronies.*

*I felt I had more of an opportunity in New York, because people were looked at for their own merit and not because they were known to the director. I was cast, not because [of] who I was, but because of the role I could play.*

*Boston theatres tend to cast productions early, often for the whole season. One started to do that and now they all do it. Roles are often handed out beforehand. Actors are often pigeonholed by directors; you play this kind of role really well, so then they keep casting you as such.*

*Large houses pay almost exclusively attention to out-of-town actors. Many directors work with the same casting directors. It is hard to be cast as a young actor, and too many directors keep using the same actors.*

*Most of the directors are very personable and welcoming.*

*Some auditions are badly organized.*

*Casting in this town is incestuous.*

*I believe that if Boston theatres cast more and more actors from out of town, Boston will never become a vital theatre town. Many young actors leave Boston. If they want to perform at the Huntington, they need to go to New York anyway. There are a lot of talented people in this town, but it seems that if they think they have become good enough, they move to New York. If you want this town to become a vital theatre town, you need to make sure to cast locally. It is an investment that's worth making.*

*Even a lot of fringe theatres cast from the same pool of actors. Some actors are cast in multiple shows without even auditioning.*

*The problem with general auditions for actors is: How do you audition for something like that? Who—and what—is your target? Casting directors will counter: We don't have the time to invest in show-specific auditions. But isn't that their job? There are directors who do cast show-specific, no matter how long it takes.*

*From the approximately 500 equity actors living in the greater Boston area, maybe about 250 are actively looking for work in the market. Many producers will say this is a very small pool to draw from, we need a wider pool.*

*A lot of actors have learned to self-select [regarding auditions].*

*I believe that the artistic product that can be gained by hiring exclusively from the local talent pool in Boston is inestimable. There's an amazing range of incredibly talented people here. The crying shame is that nobody is working as much as they should.*

*A lot of local actors are overlooked. Producers go for flashy looks.*

*As a theatre company, we do want to contribute to making the Greater Boston area a theatrical community; we therefore cast within this community.*

*People need to understand that it takes a long time to be recognized.*

*We would become insular if we never cast from outside.*

*When we accept a play, we already have local actors in mind.*

*I get to know my actors off-stage and so get a sense of the whole person, which helps me bring new things to their performance.*

*Larger theatres do not hire local directors, and the out-of-town directors want to bring in their own out-of-town actors; it gives them a certain distinction.*

*The question for theatre companies is, do they want to see themselves as a Boston company? The irony is that we have a Boston Ballet, Boston Symphony, etc., but not a Boston Theatre Company. None of the theatre companies have "Boston" in their title.*

*Competition is good for us; we should not become too insular.*

*Theatre here—as everywhere else—is very cliquy. Are people on the union boards always cast because they are on the boards, or are they on the board because they are always cast?*

*Maybe Boston needs to have a few agents who can preselect actors for auditions so that local and out-of-town directors don't have to see so many bad actors auditioning.*

*The biggest challenge in Boston is the small pool of actors when you look for a certain type of actor.*

*Can you blame a director [for working] with the same actors again if you have only a few weeks to get the show up?*

*I see absolutely no difference in skills between Boston actors and New York actors.*

*The competition [among actors] in Boston is nothing compared with New York, L.A.*

*There were people—actors and directors—who were turned off by my New York credits. I had expected a more professional attitude. It is funny because I didn't see any difference between Boston and New York actors.*

*ART and Huntington favor out-of-town actors; it's part of the culture. I don't think it is a bad thing.*

*There's nothing wrong with working with people you trust, nothing wrong with having a stable. If an actor comes along that you like to work with, you continue to work with her or him. Sometimes it's a matter of connecting; it's the nature of art. Relationships are a big piece of theatre.*

*There's this perception that New York has better actors. We have a tendency—in Boston—to be lazy; we don't pound the pavement every day. But I have yet to see a New York actor in a Boston play that would do a better job than a Boston actor who also was considered for the role. It is a perception: New York is better. If we have an inferiority complex, this is the reason.*

*Boston has fewer actors, fewer "pretty" people. There's a trend that more and more directors go for a TV model of appearance. Looks apparently don't hurt. It's the prettification of the American stage, the generic pretty boys and girls, distinct pretty stereotypes.*

*I believe the skill level between New York and Boston actors is huge. I think it is a matter of training. The upper echelon actors in Boston are great; they have worked their way up. But for some others, their resumes get heavier and heavier, their ambition gets greater, but their skill levels are not progressing at the same rate. Playing a lead in small theatre doesn't mean you are going to play the lead at a leading theatre in Boston. It is a sensitive issue when Huntington and ART are not casting local actors; there's a resentment among the locals. Part of the reason a company goes to New York is not because it doesn't like local actors; it is because the directors it uses are highly sophisticated, and often the acting style of the local actor is not at the level the director needs.*

*When I go to New York, I see more better actors and more worse actors, simply because there are more actors. I think that the best actors in Boston can compete with the best actors in New York.*

*I used to say that [the] best actors are in New York because they are getting more work, but lately I have seen New York actors perform in Boston who are not any better—if not worse—than Boston actors. I see some very fine actors in Boston, but because the pool is so small, they often get cast in roles that are not right for them. Boston doesn't have the choices to find someone who is exactly right for the part; you want to see the actor that fulfills the role best.*

*Our fear is that all young people will leave for New York.*

*The "Broadway comes to Boston" actors are not much better than the Boston actors.*

*Even community theatres start casting from New York. It's very self-defeating.*

*Sometimes auditions are held in Boston as a token courtesy to local actors. Then they go to New York and cast the production from there.*

*There's a national sentiment that privileges New York. I'm guilty of this too. We all put the New York credits on top of our resumes. I still have a New York area code.*

*Depending on the size of the theatre, it is often not fiscally prudent to hire actors from New York; they have to put them up and offer higher salaries.*

*New York actors will hustle much more than Boston actors do. It has always been the case that Boston theatres cast in New York. Every time new artistic directors come to town, they do the rounds and say that they will cast more locally. That lasts for about a year and then they are back to casting from outside. Almost all big parts in the larger theatres go to actors from out of town, and the local sheep get the secondary roles: It's the pseudo-celebrity thing.*

*I don't see the reason to sit and stew in Boston about not getting hired if you can do something about it: You can get training or you can move. I believe that nobody owes you anything.*



## VIII. Rehearsals

Respondents almost unanimously shared a serious grievance about brief rehearsal times. They discussed the effect these short rehearsals have on the artistic product and its consequences for the actors, and touched upon a lack of efficiency during rehearsals. Quotes on this topic:

*As a director, my rehearsal time is one to two weeks less than I had nine years ago. It's economics: Everybody has to cut rehearsal time because of the money, and it is a shame. It hurts the art, the quality of theatre, and it hurts the livelihood of actors because they have to memorize their lines at home. Two-and-a-half weeks of rehearsals is shocking.*

*The short rehearsal time is an imperfect system, but we need to try to work around it.*

*Rehearsal time: two-and-a-half weeks if you are lucky; three weeks I haven't seen in years. Rehearsals in New York are longer—more money. But there's a never-ending supply of actors, and they accept it.*

*Short rehearsal time is responsible for many superficial choices made on stage, and it shows in the productions.*

*Three weeks' rehearsal time, including tech, is for us—medium-size theatre in Boston—pretty standard rehearsal time.*

*Average rehearsal time is about two-and-a-half weeks, and that's very short. New York actors get more weeks. It is quite frustrating and hard to do real ensemble work, although it helps that you do know one another. It requires memorizing before you start rehearsal. In Boston you get three previews—if you're lucky—and then you open. The reason rehearsal time is so short is because there's not enough money. Yet, you could argue that it has to do with how one decides to spend the money. For example, wouldn't it be great to add another week of rehearsal, but have a lighting or set design that is less complicated—and less expensive—or have less-slick publicity material? Producers do not talk much with actors; actors simply accept it as a given that rehearsals are only three weeks.*

*Many people—actors and directors—in rehearsals lack focus. There's too much chitchat, and a lot of time gets used inefficiently.*

*First day of the play should be used to read the play, but often that doesn't happen. First there's the costume designer, who tells you what you will look like, and I want to say, "Are you out of your mind?"*

*In a way rehearsals are too short; in a way, just fine. Because only running with an audience can you discover and grow. If anything, the runs need to be longer.*

*Rehearsal time in Boston is too short; you do not have time to understand one another's language. Occasionally for a musical you have four weeks. It's terrifying, because actors who come together for rehearsals speak different languages and there's no attention being paid by directors to address this.*

*Two-and-a-half weeks of rehearsals is utterly ridiculous. We should at least have previews. It's what we need as actors to grow.*

*I start two months before rehearsals to prepare myself—of course without pay. It's one of the biggest scandals.*

*Often actors need to be off-book before they show up for rehearsal, because companies have to pay for rehearsal time and are not able or willing to pay for more.*

*Boston audiences do not seem to understand the concept of previews; that doesn't mean they can't learn.*

*Rehearsal time in Boston theatres is a travesty; two-and-a-half weeks to put a show together is ridiculous. There's no opportunity for an actor to change his mind once in the process, and it is almost impossible to not feel rushed or try a totally different take on a character. There is very little time for conversation. Two days of table work, then tables go away and you're on your feet. Rehearsal should be a laboratory where you put something on its feet and then experiment with it.*



## IX. Diverse Opinions On A Variety Of Topics

Following are an assortment of opinions regarding theatre in the Boston area that would not easily fit in the categories above: from the alleged complacency of Boston actors to the essential loneliness of the actor, from needs for community to the need for risk taking. Theatre in the Greater Boston area is reviewed here by theatre artists. Quotes on this topic:

*There's a lack of drive and push to levels of excellence among many Boston actors, a lack of hunger to excel. Maybe it stems from low aspiration.*

*There is such an isolation within the Boston theatre community. We're in a small house with too many rooms and too many walls. It's hard to get a collective awareness. StageSource conferences help, but it is not enough. I don't understand why we don't have a community that can be encouraging but also critical of one another.*

*It took me a while to find out who the good actors are in Boston. They would not approach me. I would have to see plays and see them perform. I think that since they are the top actors they assume that everybody knows them.*

*The biggest concern I have about Boston theatre is the compartmentalization of theatre. People who do children's theatre or dinner theatre, or improvisation theatre often feel they are seen as second class by people who do main theatre. They are often left out at theatre conferences and awards. Also, opera and dance are not pulled in sufficiently. We need to think about a much larger picture where all those forms can find a connection and be integrated.*

*I detect a lot of complacency in Boston actors. I think it comes out of fear; one wants to stay safe, not give up what is familiar.*

*There are quite a lot of directors in Boston who do not know how to talk to their actors. Some directors are more interested in dramaturgy; they should become dramaturgs, not direct. Many suffer from an inability to get in the trenches with their actors. My best directors have been actors themselves.*

*I have seen some really fantastic actors in the fringe companies. How come so few directors know about them?*

*Some of the actors I see are quite good but simply have not had the chance to work with a great director.*

*In no way are musicals I see in Boston on the same level as musicals I see in New York. Yet straight plays in Boston are often excellent and can easily compete with plays in New York.*

*I think lot of main theatre in Boston is behind the times; it could use a lot more risk taking. To me, the smaller fringe theatres do the stuff that's really inventive.*

*I think that the Huntington Theatre is concerned whether a production will transfer to Broadway and therefore tend[s] to engage directors who know New York actors and the New York theatre scene.*

*Some directors in Boston throw their actors on the stage and just let them loose. But the actors should not have to worry about the staging; they should not have to worry about the visual, about the total vision of the play, while they are doing their acting jobs. It seems that a number of directors have been trained to let the actors do their job without much direction. A lack of structure adds to the stress of the actor; it's not their job to worry about vision.*

*BCA has brought better, smaller theatre groups to the forefront.*

*[The] Boston theatre scene is less cut-throat, more of a community.*

*What is being offered depresses me. You see the oldies, the musicals, and what has been on Broadway. They pour money into shows that have been done so many times before, what a waste. Artistic directors do not do enough research on what is new and great.*

*A lot of the young actors are afraid of mistakes, they don't take risks. It looks as if everybody wants to be comfortable, but you need to want to be vulnerable. Theatre comes out of religion; you need to pay attention to that. I prepare as if I'm going to church; the stage is sacred, holy. It takes ten years to be good at anything; same with acting.*

*There's a lot of theatre going on in Boston, but I find that about 80 percent [of it] is not very good. Most of the plays I see I might as well watch on TV. For a number of companies, the emphasis is on the décor—how do we dress up the script?—as opposed to the actual story. The emphasis should be on how to tell the bare basics of the story to a room full of people, who simultaneously get wrapped up in the experience. I often feel disengaged; I'm a spectator. But we need to be participants, have a spiritual connection. Theatre is about community. If the company is not a community, not rooted in community, how can you expect your audience community to become excited?*

*More people should know about the small companies. Whether these companies pay stipends or nothing, they are intimate companies who work collectively with actors to create unique work.*

*Sometimes I see a show in New York and then I see it here. When I see it in Boston, I like the strong ensemble work. The emphasis in New York is more on individual "stars." I think, though, that the artistic bar is set lower here, so there is less reason to extend oneself.*

*There's an extreme deficit in experimental theatre in Boston—multimedia theatre, dance-theatre, dramatic expressionism. There's a tendency in this town not to take risks. I'm convinced that if you educate an audience, they will catch up with you.*

*It's a big financial gamble to take on ambitious productions.*

*I feel that a lot of theatre in Boston is hurriedly put together.*

*I see more and more would-be actors wanting an easier road to opportunity. I see a laziness. But theatre is not for the faint of heart. I would like everybody to strive for excellence, but I feel often people accept less than excellence.*

*New actors don't know how to move onstage. Too often, directing is also teaching, since actors are not prepared.*

*We only do plays we believe in.*

*I try to see as much theatre as I can, but am often disappointed. There's too much theatre done by people who do not care enough about the production. They did not care enough when they chose it, and so you watch a three-hour play that the actors and director do not sufficiently care about; it feels amateurish.*

*A lot of smaller companies in Boston let themselves off the hook by compromising through rickety props and set, while they should have focused more on acting. They trap themselves by focusing on design instead of the communication with the audience.*

*So then all of a sudden there's this enormous buzz in the Boston theatre community: "A director has been spotted attending another company's performance! The first time in years!" And I think, you must be kidding. What's wrong with these producers and directors who hardly see other people's work in this town?*

*As a director, I'd rather do an interesting new play or a new approach to a classic than doing these middle-ground plays that were done last year in New York.*

*This is what kills me about Boston actors: There's a complacency and an amount of indulgence, and they do not challenge themselves and one another. They tend to perform for themselves, to have a good time.*

*There's a younger generation of theatre artists in Boston and they are not being let in. It seems that the older generation is not making room. There are some excellent young directors in this town who need to get better but are not given a chance, because there's an established tier of directors in Boston.*

*Many designers here don't give a damn about the play, they don't come to rehearsals, don't collaborate enough with directors. The same people get hired over and over and don't feel the pressure to challenge themselves. A lot of theatre goes over the top with sets, projections, and cram too much in a small space. It looks as if people have never heard of—or read—Towards a Poor Theatre or The Empty Space.*

*Because so many directors have worked with the same pool of actors, there's a repertory feel to the Boston theatre scene.*

*Theatre in Boston is in danger of becoming an incestuous industry.*

*I get impatient when I hear people say it is so hard to make a living as an actor. Well, maybe not a living, but you can make a life out of it. Very few people in history have made a living from doing their art. Does anyone know how hard it is to have a poem published, a composed piece of music performed? We are not unique in the theatre arts. Many theatre artists have separated their creative life from how to pay the bills. I think that's a good thing, because this allows the artist the freedom to do what she really wants to do. It is less compromising, and the art has a chance to be more pure.*

*Directors seem to refuse to attend other shows in town. They say they are busy. But they are in rehearsal three weeks, while actors are in rehearsal and then attend a run for over eight weeks: Directors have no excuse.*

*Boston is not really a city with great chorus dancers. They put on Follies on a miniature Lyric stage; it's ridiculous.*

*Theatre companies and artistic directors are not running theatre as a business; they make poor choices in choosing shows, actors, marketing. The companies need to be financially savvy, know how to do marketing, and spend more money on the actors.*

*I see the same stable of actors, and some of them should simply go. There are a lot of good young actors in Boston, but they don't get cast because of the stables. The result is that the same actors get cast even if they are not quite correct for the role.*

*What does it mean to have success? There's so much mistaken mythology around this topic. Look at *A Chorus Line*: If you are rejected, you are a failure. As long as I'm collaborating with other theatre artists, and connect with a community, then that's what matters, that's my success. Never mind whether you present your art in a small church basement.*

*Some actors start to do theatre because they need their health insurance but have absolutely no passion for the particular play.*

*I think that the real bias in theatre is toward family and children. The theatre industry is very hostile towards children and families.*

*Kate Snodgrass single-handedly has brought a large number of new playwrights into this area. She's a gem.*

*Actors are sheep, they move from gig to gig, and they accept things and circumstances that nobody should put up with. The first thing students in acting schools should learn is to say no: No, I will not put up with this, I will not be a sheep. I have been on stage almost continuously during the last eighteen years, here in Boston and elsewhere, yet I have begun to feel that the actor is no longer the most important element on stage. Actors have become secondary if not tertiary characters.*

*The ease with which "settled" actors can get work here results in a complacent and non-challenging attitude.*

*What I love about Boston is the balance of life and theatre work. It is so much more enjoyable than New York.*

*Why don't more theatre people see each other's shows? I overheard a director say [she/he] doesn't go to see other plays, because all [she/he] can do is sit there and think [she/he] can do it better. What kind of attitude is that? First of all [the person] could use some new ideas, when I see [her/him] having the same directorial approach year after year. But what about supporting other people's work and seeing new actors?*

*I have been working with the same actors, with the result that there is much trust. The lack of cut-throat competition in Boston allows me to work more.*

*Artists in this town have a different balance in life. They want family; life is more than just work. You have to sacrifice a lot of your personal life in New York. I think it enriches our art if we have a fuller life.*

*Boston audiences tend to ask one thing about theatre: Is it going to New York or is it coming from New York? The perception that we are a try-out town still somewhat remains. We value excellence by comparing [ourselves] with New York too much. We have to understand that perceptual change takes a long time. Although it is changing, Boston is culturally conservative. To what extent—when choosing a season—are you connecting with the community? It is not easy to ask people to take a risk on a new play. Audiences find out about a movie through trailers. It is more difficult to assess a new play.*

*I have given up on companies like Huntington, ART, New Rep, Lyric: They are not going to change, they do what they do. There are many smaller companies, such as Orfeo, Company One, Whistler in the Dark, and others, that do the really interesting and inventive work, that take the risks. Actors' Shakespeare Project does passionate and wonderful work, always challenges itself. Let's all group around and support these companies.*

*What's great about the Boston theatre scene is that it is a place of possibilities. We are a warm community. There's a real sense of community that allows for relationships being built so that better work can [be fostered] and grow.*



## X. How To Improve Theatre In Greater Boston

I ended all interviews by asking the interviewee how theatre in the Greater Boston area could be improved. Some participants would readdress items that had been covered earlier in the interview; many came up with new issues. Quotes on this topic:

*We need more artistic commitment to continually develop work as an ensemble. There's too much work done in a hierarchical way in Boston. People are hired from the outside to do work that goes by too quickly and too superficially. We need stage companies in the sense Steppenwolf is a company. We have theatre companies, but we need ensemble companies, companies where people come together to collaborate. This would improve theatre; it would value the actor, and audiences would feel a closer relationship. It would encourage change rather than inhibit change.*

*We need new work and development of new work by living playwrights. With a few exceptions, I see a reticence to mount new works; they do readings but not productions.*

*Increase Equity cast ratios; make theatres increase the number of Equity actors in their contracts. More casting opportunities will result in more acting experience and acting quality. We need to be judged on our acting ability rather than "do we fit the part?"*

*We need more collaborative efforts to create new work, collaboration between actors, producers, playwrights, and designers.*

*Actor training is important, but seeing an ethnic diversity represented on stage is also a burning issue.*

*Directors need to pay more attention to actors during auditions and work more with the actors to find out about their abilities.*

*Boston could profit from a handful of commercial producers and one or two venues of off-Broadway size that are not used by a resident company: freestanding theatres. Producers could then "pick up" and transfer the best productions of the area theatres for three to six months of commercial runs in Boston. In Boston, every play, no matter how good, runs four weeks and then it closes. It never has the chance to get the exposure it deserves. And so Boston audiences are denied seeing these works, because if they don't belong to a company as subscribers and/or can't fit it in their schedule, they don't see it. A long run would transform this city. This way, a great work would be awarded with a larger audience instead of getting a drama award at the end of the season. Subscription audiences have to go and see the bad as well as the good, but if a good play runs four to six months, people will see the good instead of—as a subscriber—many boring and a few good plays. It is the essence of theatre [that] we all make more bad theatre than good theatre: It never amazes me when it fails; it amazes me when it succeeds—there are so many things that can go wrong. But if it is good and it has a run, then it reinforces the belief that theatre can be fun and good. Maybe Boston doesn't have the audience for it, but it has never been tried, so who knows?*

*There are theatre companies in this town that are not picking challenging works, because they believe that their audiences do not want to see challenging things. Based on knowledge of the plays generated from New York Times reviews—or what the Tonys give out—many artistic directors keep picking plays that come directly from Broadway. In that case, why not provide a bus to take Boston audiences to New York; why would we do them here? Audiences need to be developed, their imagination needs to be pushed, and artistic directors need to lead their audiences.*

*The best way to improve theatre in Boston is to stop complaining, do better theatre, and keep a positive attitude.*

*We need to develop high-quality and new material: We need to be originators. There's a lot of talent in Boston, and we need to keep this talent here, use their work, whether as actors, directors, or playwrights. We have a dedicated following in this city, and yet there's still a vast number of potential audiences that has not been tapped.*

*We must have more funding for small companies. They are the ones who do inventive works, and it gets harder to rent spaces. Right now, most money goes to pay rent instead of paying actors. The quality of work is based on talent, not size of company.*

*We have to find an answer to a recent development which has audiences move away from subscriptions and do last-minute ticket buying. This makes it harder for theatres to budget ahead. Older audiences still buy the subscriptions, but young people are no longer advance planners; they decide to go and see a play at the spur of the moment.*

*We must all take responsibility to make sure that StageSource continues to grow. Jeff Poulos is doing an outstanding job.*

*Audience building is the number-one issue. It demands a combination of programming and sense of community building. SpeakEasy is doing that; their work might be uneven, but they are doing an outstanding job building a community.*

*Instead of trying to be like everybody else, we should be unique. Theatre should come and go, should be based on originality. We must ensure that Boston theatres will produce unique theatre instead of the work that everybody else is doing. You see the same line-ups in all regional theatres in the country. If theatre continues to homogenize, then it will end up in bad shape.*

*There's no simple solution on how to improve theatre, no easy way out. Maybe the issue is to answer the question, Why are people doing and producing theatre? Is the theatre there for the people doing it? For the audience? Maybe theatre people should get together and do whatever they want to do, whether they get paid or not. People have to stop worrying how they are being judged but do the things they feel passionate about.*

*More attention needs to be paid to the financial situation; [the] fiscal situation is severe. Producers are having more and more problems fund raising. [With this in mind, the] relationship with media must improve. We need to get the attention of a broader public.*

*Actor training needs to be improved; there seems to be no decent vocal training. I don't know what the acting training programs at the colleges are doing, but I can hear at the auditions that the young, trained actors lack vocal skills. Also, subtext and depth of character are really limited. Some acting coaches are good; some are mediocre. Some studios are taking the money and all they do is put out people with weak skills. In general I find actor training mediocre. Actors lack solid training in playing different styles. And then there's the problem with playwriting: So many contemporary plays only deal with one issue; it's one-dimensional, it lacks layers.*

*We need to expand the audience; it is so middle/upper class, old, white. Playing to one demographic is limiting. We need to address the relevance of theatre for these audiences: What is the point? Boston theatre needs to ask: What is the purpose, who do we want to reach?*

*We need a community of artists who support each other; there's little connection between the theatres. Artistic directors and actors in general do not go and see each other's work; they certainly do not see the work of smaller theatres.*

*We must pay more attention to the community aspect of Boston theatre by using more local artists. Theatres need to be part of a community.*

*We need to address the fact that there's rivalry, even among the fringe theatres.*

*Small Theatre Alliance is a great idea, it will improve collaboration.*

*Theatre in Boston needs more funding, yet unfortunately there are not many foundations in [the] private sector. Everybody is fighting for the same few dollars, for the same audience. We need to combine forces to address the financial situation instead of competing with one another.*

*Boston theatre companies' mission statements are very similar; their work is very similar; people go for the same shows. We need more artistic differentiation between the companies.*

*I'm dying to have more Boston theatres put on new, exciting work. Everybody says that the audience in Boston is conservative, but how true is that? We might be underestimating the Boston community.*

*We need to address the fact that a large amount of talented people are not given a chance to work: There's so much talent that's not being utilized. We have a core group of actors that's being used over and over—directors and producers want to play it safe. Many of the people who are in charge of casting in this town have a frighteningly narrow knowledge of the talent in this town. They are lazy and refuse to look "outside the box."*

*Addressing the rehearsal process should be part of the discussion on how to improve theatre. It is seldom in this town that a first preview is ready. Of course you learn in front of an audience, but you need to be prepared, you need to be ready to tell a complete story that has been investigated. But that's seldom the case. You have to come to the table with decisions already made, there's no time to explore, and it is all very "surfacy."*

*I think a theatre network is important so [that] theatres can share resources and more new companies [would] have a chance of surviving and producing new and/or unusual work.*

*Nobody has figured out yet how to attract a new, younger audience, how to connect the plays with community. How do you change what you do and make it a better product? People have values and you need to match what you do with the audiences' values, otherwise you are just masturbating. It's hard to find plays with content that touches people's lives. Most places have to think in terms of marketing when picking a season; we—as a small company—have the luxury to do what we want to do.*

*Since the majority of the audiences consists of women over fifty years of age, why not have more plays about women of that age group? There are many great actresses in that age group in this area.*

*There's a disturbing lack of real exploration, of in-depth dramatic work. It would be preferable to present a smaller number of productions but with higher quality.*

*We need an inexpensive place to hold classes that is centrally located, and an actors' drop-in-center for information, meeting, hanging out, etc. Actors need a place to meet and support [one another]. They are not in competition with one another, since directors look for a specific person. Acting is a very lonely profession.*

*We need help with marketing to get an audience. There are so many small great theatres and people do not know about them; they don't know how good they are. [The smaller theatres] don't have the budget to market.*

*We need a community of theatre artists. We don't see and support each other's work. There are times when I invite every theatre professional to our production, and nobody comes. People seem not interested in a conversation; the conversation we are having is one-on-one, yet we should be having it within the community. We need a community that is built around work.*

*Maybe we need to become less dependent on reviewers and subscribers, and perform in smaller houses and create smaller but dedicated audiences.*

*People need to chill out over the inferiority complex toward New York. I think it is partly due to Boston as a city; it's baseball-related. Maybe the best way to address it is by not addressing it. Boston needs to take itself seriously on its own merit.*

*We need theatre festivals in this town.*

*This large town deserves a state-funded, nationally known company that can do theatre that is not compromised.*

*We need far more honesty between directors, actors, artistic directors, designers. We need a more honest communication and discussion about the specific dramatic works and anything related to it.*

*One thing I hope for is for every theatre to offer free or discounted tickets and/or pay-what-you-can in order to get a larger audience. If we don't do this, then theatre will become more and more elitist.*

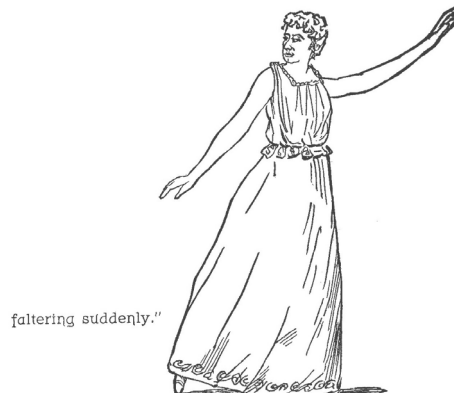
*We need more funding on a governmental level. We get way less than other cities or states. Boston thinks it needs to preserve Boston Ballet, -Opera, -Symphony, but theatre is seen as a "scrappy" phenomenon, it's taken less seriously. One sees it as popular entertainment. Maybe it is a New England, puritanical thing.*

*One should not be punished when being Equity. We need more flexible rules to allow people to work.*

*No wonder Boston has an inferiority complex, we continuously copy what happens outside Boston. We need to carve out our own identity, celebrate our own playwrights.*

*We need to change the clique system. You have cliques in Boston, certain directors who work with the same people over and over: the New Rep clique, the Lyric clique, the ART clique, the SpeakEasy clique, etc. It's like high school. Too many directors have their stables. They all want to play it safe. I see great actors, but I would like to see other faces on the Boston stage.*

*In order to create an audience, we first need outstanding theatre to make sure audiences will come back. But more importantly, we need theatre education affiliated with the theatres in order to create the next generation of audiences. We are a dying breed, and if children are educated to appreciate good theatre and see the difference between movies and live theatre, then we might survive.*



# XI. Commentary On Selected Topics

## Audience Building

The latest survey conducted by the NEA, “Arts Participation 2008,” finds that “Between 2002 and 2008, the percentage of U.S. adults attending arts events declined for every art form except musical plays. In 2008, for the first time, non-musical plays, opera, and jazz concerts saw significantly lower rates of adult participation than in 1982. Long-term trend analyses show an aging audience for all art forms. In the most recent period, [even] 45–54-year-olds curbed their attendance.”

I assume that this conclusion does not come as a surprise to many theatre administrators. And I hope that these outcomes challenge theatre companies even more to address the problem of building audiences (although I also hope that theatre companies—reading these data—will not start filling their seasons with just musicals). It seems, though, that theatre companies are “on their own” as far as building an audience is concerned. There are a number of companies that pay attention to this issue through theatre in education programs, on-tour educational outreach, school performances, and education departments. But many do not. Several companies neither have the manpower nor the funds to address this issue. Yet, if we want to be responsible for the future of theatre, we had better acknowledge that we—the community of theatre professionals—have a major crisis at hand. I’m sure that many theatre administrators have better and clearer data than I have, but the older age group that most companies presently rely on for ticket sales will have left us within the next ten years. How to create a new, younger, and different audience has been a topic at meetings of theatre administrators for years. Although the competitive nature of companies results in separate audience marketing, this is an emergency that calls for collective action. This is a problem too large for individual companies to handle. A collective act will be a challenge. But as one of the participants says, “*We are a dying breed,*” and we will not survive if no action is taken.

## Rehearsals

Although participants had differing opinions on many topics, this was certainly not the case with the issue of the length of rehearsal time. Almost all directors and actors thought that the brevity of rehearsals was a major problem. Many interviewees believed—and I agree—that a two-and-a-half or three-week preparation time for a play harms the artistic product. Arriving in this city some nine years ago, I was pleasantly surprised to see such a variety of theatre. Yet, no matter how great the directors and the actors, I often feel that productions lack creative unity and, as one of the participants states, “*true ensemble work.*” A producer once told me: “*Oh, attend the last week of the run, and you’ll see how the [play] has gotten on its feet.*” Tell that to the subscriber who attends during the first week. I concur with the interviewee who declared that “*only running with an audience can you discover and grow.*” Yet that doesn’t mean that the process of creation can be curtailed without affecting the shape and condition of the work the moment it opens to an audience.

The reason for the short rehearsal period is clear, of course: finances. Actors need to be paid, and an extra week of preparation is a financial burden for companies already short on funds. Equity protects its actors to make sure they don't work "for free" or for less than their contract requires. But isn't that what most actors are doing anyway? Most actors I listened to start preparing and memorizing many weeks prior to the first day of rehearsal—without pay. Thus, if an actor gets paid \$550 per week but actually works a number of weeks without pay, then that \$550 a week (not a living wage to begin with) shrinks significantly. Nowhere are unions more important, I think, than in our field of work. Yet I believe that an honest discussion might be needed to address the balance between protecting the artist and protecting the artistic product. I indeed agree with the participant who says: *"I get impatient when I hear people say it is so hard to make a living as an actor. Well, maybe not a living, but you can make a life out of it. Very few people in history have made a living from doing their art. . . . Many theatre artists have separated their creative life from how to pay the bills. I think that's a good thing, because this allows the artist the freedom to do what she really wants to do. It is less compromising, and the art has a chance to be more pure."*

I might ruffle some feathers here, but if almost no actor makes a living doing stage work, why not accept that fact and treat stage work as a creative endeavor where financial compensation is important, but less important than the creative product and thus the creative reward for the artists? What are we, theatre artists, doing when the artistic product becomes negatively affected because protecting actors and producers—financially and otherwise—has been given a higher priority than creating great art? No doubt many theatre professionals in this area will say that good theatre is produced, given the limitations and constraints every company is faced with. I agree. But I—and a number of my interviewees—believe that the artistic quality of theatre productions could still be greater if the constraints and limitations now in place would be modified. Extending rehearsal time certainly is an important issue.

But there's another side to the coin. A number of participants have questioned the priority given to the actor and to acting by theatre company administrators and producers. In the experience of many theatre professionals, actors—and the text—have become the least important of all the production elements. Says one interviewee: *"I have been on stage almost continuously during the last eighteen years, yet I have begun to feel that the actor is no longer the most important element on stage. Actors have become secondary if not tertiary characters."* How much priority is given to the actor in relation to staging, set, and lights by directors and producers? What is the ratio of money spent on actors compared with all other production expenses? To quote an interviewee: *"wouldn't it be great to add another week of rehearsal, but have a lighting or set design that is less complicated—and less expensive—or have less-slick publicity material?"* To what extent are the short rehearsal times caused by costly production components? There is a small number of companies in this town that believes an extensive time for rehearsal and play development is sacred, and thus they set aside available funds to make this possible. In my assessment, this approach results in superior artistic products. Nobody, of course, needs to agree with my appraisal. But we should listen to the established Boston actor who says, *"Rehearsal time in Boston theatres is a travesty; two-and-a-half weeks to put a show together is ridiculous."*

## Actor Training

Many respondents had a positive assessment of the Boston-area theatre and actor-training institutions. When negative appraisal occurred, it pertained to the lack of specific skills such as voice and movement in many young actors. Representative of this assessment: *“They don’t learn to speak in a more conversational way that can be heard in the last row of the house.”* I’m not sure whether this failure is the result of constraints in class time, changed priorities in the schools’ teaching objectives, or the young actors’ seeing such skills as no longer compulsory. One could argue it is the educators’ responsibility that students graduate with sufficient basic skills. Says one director: *“Voice and movement training seem not important in academic training. I see students graduating without having had solid movement and voice training.”*

The continuation of actor training is another issue that calls for attention. A number of directors and actors believe that many Boston-area actors stop training and therefore cease to improve their craft. Yet, many actors express their frustration over the lack of substantial actor training outside of academia or conservatories. The first complaint is that there are not enough of those opportunities; the second complaint is that those that are offered are not selective enough to be worthwhile for an experienced actor. As far as the first complaint is concerned, it is unclear what has caused the paucity of master classes and acting schools. Are there so few because there’s not enough interest from actors to make it financially feasible for the teachers? Or are there plenty of actors in the Boston area desiring continuing training, but are the offerings too limited? The second complaint addresses a rather acute problem. In order to make acting classes financially sound, many teachers feel obliged to open up their classes to all. An actor with fifteen years of stage experience is justifiably impatient with a fellow student whose only acting experience has been entering Filene’s Basement for nine seconds as a movie extra. The need for multilevel and selective acting workshops is more than apparent.

## Women in Theatre

A recent study, “Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination in American Theater” by Princeton economics graduate student Emily Glassberg Sands, is extremely relevant to the discussion of women in theatre included in my report. A *New York Times* article by Patricia Cohen reporting on the study (24 June 2009) began:

*When more than 160 playwrights and producers, most of them female, filed into a Midtown Manhattan theater Monday night, they expected to hear some concrete evidence that women who are authors have a tougher time getting their work staged than men. And they did. But they also heard that women who are artistic directors and literary managers are the ones to blame. . . .Ms. Sands sent identical scripts to artistic directors and literary managers around the country. The only difference was that half named a man as the writer (for example, Michael Walker), while half named a woman (i.e., Mary Walker). It turned out that Mary’s scripts received significantly worse ratings in terms of quality, economic prospects and audience response than*

Michael's. The biggest surprise? "These results are driven exclusively by the responses of female artistic directors and literary managers." Ms. Sands put it another way: "Men rate men and women playwrights exactly the same."

(To read the article, go to [nytimes.com/theater](https://www.nytimes.com/theater))

And here is a summary of the researcher's conclusions:

*Results of my adaptation of the experimental audit study reveal ample evidence of all three forms of taste-based gender discrimination in theater. Scripts bearing female pen-names are deemed by artistic directors to be of lower overall quality and to face poorer economic prospects than otherwise identical scripts bearing male pen-names. In addition, artistic directors believe cast and crew will be less eager to work on a female-written script. Female artistic directors, in particular, deem scripts bearing female pen-names to be poorer fits with their theaters, and to face not only worker discrimination, but also customer discrimination. The severity of the discrimination against female playwrights appears to be more pronounced for women writing about women than for women writing about men.*

*To test for actual taste-based employer discrimination on Broadway, I compared the profits of the male-written and female-written plays in production over the past decade. I find that, while less than one-eighth of productions on Broadway are female-written, female-written plays on supposedly profit-maximizing Broadway over the past decade averaged significantly higher revenues than did their male-written counterparts. This result holds even when controlling for play type, a partial proxy for production costs. Female-written scripts, then, must have higher audience appeal than their male-written counterparts in order to reach production. These results provide preliminary evidence of discrimination by artistic directors on Broadway.*

*Although this thesis focused on potential gender discrimination in the decision of which plays to select for production, the results of the audit study indicate that artistic directors perceive scripts bearing female pen-names also to be less likely to receive prizes and awards. Since these very artistic directors are often the judges in playwriting competitions, I have reason to believe that gender discrimination may occur in the allocation of prizes and awards as well.*

(To download the study, go to [nytimes.com/theater](https://www.nytimes.com/theater))

As Emily Glassberg Sands states in her study, there are many explanations possible for the findings. She also acknowledges many unanswered questions. My own question would be: Do female artistic directors "favor" male playwrights because they do not want to be seen as "favoring" their own gender, and so overcompensate?

What was not addressed in the study—but was a major theme in the interviewees' responses—was the paucity of female roles in plays. And although female playwrights tend to create more female characters than male characters, there is still a vast discrepancy between the number of male and female dramatis personae in present productions.

I assume that an artistic director's objective—when creating a season—is to respond to the company's mission, not to create more work opportunities for female actors. That being said, as one interviewee states: *"Companies have a lot of leeway in their choice of material to ensure that female roles are as prominent as male roles."* Why, then, with noted exceptions, does the majority of dramatic works produced in this area—as well as nationally—continue to present mostly male characters? If (theatre) art is supposed to reflect life, what is the message here? A dramatic work, I think we all agree, is chosen for its artistic merit, not to conform to some politically correct idea or to right a wrong. Still, do we see more dramatic works with a majority of males presented because the "best" and "popular" works just happen to have mostly male characters? Or are the "best" works popular because of a preponderance of male characters?

Any dramaturg searching for works with a majority of female characters written before the 1980s will come up with only a few works. But what about recent dramatic works? Although things have improved, why do playwrights, including female playwrights, still seem to put more males than females on stage? (Dramatists Play Service just announced their latest addition of contemporary plays. The overall tally of characters in all six plays? Twenty-nine male and six female characters.)

Still, I believe that artistic directors could do a better job in expanding their horizon, and could search for and present dramatic works in which women are more prominent; not as a "political" move, but from a sound artistic point of view. Yet, above all, playwrights—male and female—might want to query the crux of the matter: Why, in the year 2009, in the process of writing a play, do far more males than females still "enter"?

## Seeing Theatre

Many interviewees compared theatre in the Boston area with theatre taking place elsewhere, and some would assess the "elsewhere" more positively on diverse grounds. I think there might be places where certain aspects of theatre are more developed, due to the geographical context. But as a whole, theatre in this area can hold its own very well. I agree with the participant who says that the best way of addressing Boston theatre's inferiority complex is by not addressing it. Yet, there's one phenomenon in this area that I find rather peculiar. In theatre communities I'm familiar with—New York, London, Amsterdam—I have always witnessed among all theatre artists an intense discourse, exchange, and participation regarding one another's work. In other words, theatre people in those cities continually attend—and give feedback to—each other's work. With noted exceptions, this type of interaction seems to happen less in our area. Interviewees have noted that some producers and/or artistic directors seldom attend performances presented by other companies. The reason often given is lack of time—they are too busy. I find that strange. The same theatre professionals who attempt to convince the public to come and see theatre often don't see much theatre other than their own productions, citing their busy schedules as the reason. Yet, many subscribers are people with a family and a seventy-hour work week; if anybody had an excuse not to attend theatre, it would be them.

There are many reasons for directors and producers to see a diversity of theatre in the area, the least of which would be to support the work of colleagues. How can attending a colleague's

production not affect a director's work? I'm not aware of any novelist who would not read another writer's work. As a novelist said, "Many of the books I read influence me in subtle ways that enrich my own writing without defining it. Some of them influence me by opening a window in my mind that wasn't there before."

Another important reason for a person who regularly casts actors to attend a variety of productions—including fringe—is to see actors at work. One theatre artist I interviewed commented: *"Artistic directors in the Boston area are not good [at] getting to other theatres to see the body of work that is being presented. That's a problem, because rarely is someone being cast after a ten-minute audition. Most of the time actors are cast because the director saw them in a show."*

I know that the lives of directors and producers responsible for casting are hectic and busy. But if we want to expand theatre in the Boston area, whether by presenting a wider array of actors, challenging directors' works, or introducing new styles, theatre professionals need to see theatre that's being offered in this town.

## A Great Community

Reading the criticisms voiced by many of my interviewees, one could feel pessimistic about the outlook for theatre in the Greater Boston area. My hope is that the items of discontent and suggestions for betterment offered here—plus the positive assessments—can contribute to the conversation on how to improve theatre in this area. Many of these critiques can be heard in all theatre communities in this country. That said, I believe that theatre in this area is flourishing and rich, and can hold its own in all comparisons with theatre in other cities.

Yet, there's one characteristic addressed by some participants that I believe is a prerequisite for improving theatre in Greater Boston: honesty. In our field, where terms such as *success*, *brilliant show*, *glossy*, *blockbuster*, *glamorous*, *best*, *exciting*, *outstanding*, *smash hit* are part of our common vocabulary, we may want to come down to earth more often and pay heed to the candor of the participant who says: *"It is the essence of theatre [that] we all make more bad theatre than good theatre: It never amazes me when it fails; it amazes me when it succeeds—there are so many things that can go wrong. But if it's good and it has a run, then it reinforces the belief that theatre can be fun and good."* We all know that creating theatre—as is the case with creating all art—is a difficult undertaking and requires arduous labor. The chance of failure makes us all vulnerable, and it makes no sense to gloss over this fact. Yet, in order to lure an audience, we do gloss, promising brilliant blockbusters, if not searing dramas, as if we are promoting a new and improved product. Maybe we underestimate our audiences by thinking that they will come to the theatre only if we announce a season with a "tah dah" flourish. Do we dare to share with an audience the fact that it is hard to produce great theatre? That—as with all other forms of art—it is often less than perfect? That the rawness of drama might be more remarkable than its sheen? That drama's final product is never final and always far from perfect?

The least we could do is to acknowledge to one another that we frequently fall short. Mutual support, honest and critical professional feedback, collaborations, and frank discourse

within our theatre community will, I think, serve artistic objectives better. As one interviewee states: *"We need a more honest communication and discussion about what is happening in theatre in this area. We need honesty between directors, actors, artistic directors, designers, and all other theatre artists."*

Theatre in Greater Boston is alive and well, and will only improve if participants stay passionate and honest. Although our theatre does not need to be quantified as superior to that of other cities, neither does it deserve its antonym. It can do without comparisons. It can stand on its own.



"He was as a giant"



"Who sometimes proved a dwarf."

## XII. About the Author

Born and raised in The Netherlands, Frans Rijnbout moved to New York in 1977, where he studied acting, dance, and theatre movement. After a career of performing and directing in the United States, Europe, and Canada, he returned to New York, where he taught at New York University. Rijnbout received his Ph.D. from NYU in 1997. Since 2000 he has been an associate professor of theatre at Regis College in Weston, Mass., where he teaches diverse theatre courses and directs.

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### Illustrations from:

Author Unknown, *Pastimes at Home and School: A practical Manual of Delsarte Exercises and Elocution* (Chicago: W.B. Conkey Co., 1897)

### URLS found in report:

Glassberg Sands, E., "Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination in American Theater". [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/24/theater/24play.html?\\_r=1&scp=2&sq=opening%20the%20curtain%20on%20playwright%20gender&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/24/theater/24play.html?_r=1&scp=2&sq=opening%20the%20curtain%20on%20playwright%20gender&st=cse)

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