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Promoting Gender Equity on the American Stage (2): *50/50 in 2020*

Interview with Melody Brooks (co-founder)

Emeline Jouve



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Promoting Gender Equity on the American Stage (2): 50/50 in 2020

Interview with Melody Brooks (co-founder)

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50/50 in 2020: Website

<http://www.womenarts.org/2012/04/10/bringing-theatre-women-together-for-change-the-5050-in-2020-movement/>

[figure 1]



Biography of the Interviewee

- 1 Melody Brooks is an award-winning producer and director working in NYC since 1983. In 1991 she founded *New Perspectives Theatre Company* (NPTC) and serves as Artistic Director and CEO. Its mission and goals are a result of her long experience working in the Off- and Off-Off Broadway arenas and reflect her commitment to true diversity and arts as education. Brooks directs the *Women's Work LAB*, which develops short and full-

length plays by 12-16 members per year, and produces ON HER SHOULDERS, staged readings of plays by women from the past in partnership with the New School for Drama. Brooks is also Executive Producer for NPTC's Voices From the Edge Festival, which has showcased more than 75 new works by African-American writers since 1997. Through these programs, she has developed and directed numerous original and classic plays (with 2 OOBRA Awards, an Audelco Award, a Princess Grace Finalist and Essence Entertainment Option among the honors plays have received.) In addition, she supervises the creation and implementation of all NPTC arts-in-education workshops and residencies, and has brought Shakespeare to disadvantaged communities in all five boroughs for the last 20 years. She is an advisor to the Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre new play lab; has served as an Associate Producer for Education for the NY Musical Theatre Festival; has been a non-profit management consultant for 25 years, including with the NYSCA TAP Initiative; and was an Asst. Professor of Theatre at LIU/Brooklyn from 1999-2009. She is a co-founder of 50/50 in 2020: Parity for Women Theatre Artists, a grassroots initiative named by nytheatre.com as a 2009 "Person" of the Year, and a member of the Board of Directors of the League of Professional Theatre Women, and was co-chair of the 2014 LPTW Gilder/Coigney International Theatre Award.

The Interview

Emeline Jouve: Melody Brooks, what is 50/50 in 2020?

Melody Brooks: 50/50 in 2020: Parity for Women Theatre Artists, is a grass-roots initiative with many projects and activities put forth and managed by individuals—Melody Brooks, Julie Crosby, Susan Jonas (founders); Yvette Heyliger, Andrea Lepcio, Gwynn MacDonald, Ludovica Villar-Hauser, among others associated with the initiative. There is a loose leadership group that monitors what is done in the name of 50/50, but no official organization/company behind it.

EJ: Have you chosen the year 2020 as a symbol of the celebration of the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment?

Melody Brooks: Yes, and interestingly we also had the debate about whether we would say

"in 2020" or "by 2020". We chose "in" because it seemed to be more definitely an absolute goal. And we also learned that many other initiatives were using the 50/50 in 2020 tag for exactly that reason—the centennial of women's suffrage in the US.

EJ: Could you come back on the genesis of movement?

Melody Brooks: In the Summer of 2009, playwright Julia Jordan convened some roundtables seeking to highlight the scarcity of women playwrights in theatres with actual money to spend—Broadway, Regional, Large non-profit. Subsequently a young Princeton undergraduate student—Emily Glassberg Sands—set out to create a quantitative mechanism to see if she could get actual numbers. The results of her survey were published in *The New York Times*, and caused a great deal of anger and conflict—not because she was wrong about the inequity, but because she partially attributed the lack of women playwrights nationally to women Artistic Directors! Her methodology was shoddy, the data from playwrights was self-reported, her conclusions suspect. It was frustrating that *The New York Times* would give it such visibility and I think perhaps they did so because of her conclusion that women themselves shared the blame.

I wanted to find a forum to rebut the "study" and so contacted Susan Jonas. Susan had been responsible for producing the ONLY COMPREHENSIVE study: *Report on the Status of Women: A Limited Engagement?* back in 2003, while she was a program officer with the New York State Council on the Arts. That report showed that works by women were roughly 17% of plays produced nationally at the large regional, not-for-profit theatres. And although there has been no additional comprehensive study—notably because of lack of funding—we know from the bits and pieces gathered by individuals, who took on the task of looking at small parts of the issue on a volunteer basis (via surveys, looking at theatre websites and counting women, etc.), that the number STILL is under 20%.

So, back in 2009, I had in mind a Panel that would be moderated by Susan to dispute this report by Ms. Sands. Instead Susan suggested that I contact Julie Crosby, who was then Artistic Director of the *Women's Project*, the oldest company in NYC dedicated to producing works by women. She agreed to host our panel which turned into a major event with speakers addressing the historical situation, the fact of gender inequality as an employment issue versus an aesthetic one, and included prescriptions for addressing the problem from many angles.

The fact that we were able to get a full house (almost 200 people) on the last Tuesday in August testified to how critical people took this issue. We were very surprised. But out of that event grew the grassroots movement, and we then moved to monthly meetings and the development of about 10 specific initiatives/undertakings that would advance the visibility of the problem and try to make a dent in the numbers.

EJ: How does 50/50 in 2020 explain that inequality still persists in the theatre in the USA?

Melody Brooks: The main answer from the theatre companies we have approached about their lack of women playwrights has been "we are not discriminating; we are just producing what we like." But that implies that there is a level playing field for ALL writers to get their work in front of Literary Managers and Artistic Directors, and we know that this simply is not so.

EJ: Do you think that the companies are being honest in their answers to you? Are they sincerely not aware of practicing discrimination against women?

Melody Brooks: I think it's willful ignorance about what really constitutes discrimination—which is to some degree dishonesty. Because they don't actively say "oh we won't produce a play because it's by a woman," they do not think they are discriminating... they think they are simply exercising artistic choice. But when they fail to take into account the foundational/systemic bias against women having an equal chance, and *insist* there is not a problem, then they are being both dishonest and lazy.

EJ: Can you see any other reasons to further account for the perpetration of gender inequality on the American stage?

Melody Brooks: Many of these companies (Regional and Off-Broadway) work over and over again with the same writers; when the majority of those are male, the problem is perpetuated.

Even though it IS documented that plays by women on Broadway, and in the larger non-profits, win more awards and earn more money, there is still a deep bias towards "women's plays." It is similar to the "chick flick" problem: movies that tend to have female stars with stories in the personal sphere (like romance, friendship, life

challenges) instead of action adventures, violence, competition, etc.) It is perceived that these stories are *only* of interest to women, or that if written by a woman, it must be about these topics. Female playwrights have thus been ghettoized in the same way; there is the perception that stories by women are not "universal," that these plays will not appeal to a broad audience, etc. This is well documented—especially the idea that women's stories are not perceived as "universal."

A colleague at the *League of Professional Theatre Women*, Judith Binus, just last year, undertook to do her own study of the Off Broadway theatres in NYC. As a veteran professional stage manager, she hadn't personally perceived any bias and she wanted to find out if what she was hearing from everyone else was true. Her study is quite wonderful and she has teased out a lot of information—among other things, she did find that the one area in which women are not under-represented in theatres that can pay was stage managing.

She then started contacting some of the theatres—the project is ongoing and she continues to have conversations with companies. When she talked to the male Artistic Director of one of the oldest Off Broadway companies, he felt they were doing "pretty well" with female parity. When she showed him the actual numbers, he was stunned.

We need more of this kind of study and direct dialogue with theatre companies, but all of the current initiatives of *50/50 in 2020* are unfunded and done on a volunteer basis.

EJ: Dealing with gender inequality is challenging but it seems that the challenge is even more daunting in the field of theatre. Why?

Melody Brooks: Because Theatre is ART, it is hard to get producers and others to understand that this is not just a question of taste or talent, but one of economic opportunity and advancement. In all other fields, employers are required to keep gender statistics for reporting to the government—but not Theatre.

In NYC, women are over-represented at the small companies—the ones that do not pay salaries—and so too, some people look around and don't think there is a lack of women working in Theatre.

EJ: Despite the status quo in terms of equality, has there been some kind of improvement since the creation of 50/50 in 2020?

Melody Brooks: We are slowly making progress in publicizing the issue of inequality, and we seem to have just maybe cracked the code with a few male artistic directors.

EJ: How does 50/50 in 2020 raise the visibility of women artists?

Melody Brooks: *50/50 in 2020* has created national visibility for the problem of inequity for women theatre artists, and has created a platform for many women and groups to pool information and strategies.

We have an active Facebook page which allows for open posting. One of the most successful initiatives, Works By Women, has developed into its own organization, and has a website promoting productions that have at least 50% women among the director, playwright and designers. They have worked to bring groups to these shows, negotiating a reduced ticket price with the producers, allowing women to "put their money where their mouth is" by supporting productions that support women.

The 50/50 movement also generated an enormous interest in learning about, reclaiming, and proclaiming the 1000-year history of women in theatre. This has led to a number of specific projects via member theatre companies and associations, including ON HER SHOULDERS, staged readings of plays written by women from the past, with a PLAY IN CONTEXT component that provides dramaturgical and background information to modern audiences—Susan Jonas and Andrea Lepcio launched this and I have become the primary producer through New Perspectives.

The *League of Professional Theatre Women*, which is a partner of 50/50, also has a number of initiatives. WOMEN STAGE THE WORLD is a perfect example, as it has produced two marches through the Broadway Theatre District, directly confronting the situation on the home turf of commercial producers. In this project women dress as historical women from the theatre, and engage in conversations as that person. They appear at smaller events as well.

EJ: To what extents would you say that 50/50 in 2020 is successful?

Melody Brooks: To the extent that we have elevated the conversation, and brought the issue of gender inequality front and center, we have been successful in raising awareness and leading numerous individuals and organizations to try and find solutions. In fact, the issue was prominently mentioned at the Oscars this year!

We have also created numerous educational materials and programs that are teaching young artists as well as the general population the true history of women's contributions to the Theatre, and spurred in them a desire to learn more and to spread the word.

To an extent, I also really believe we have radicalized a large number of women, young and old, who are ready and willing to take the fight for parity directly to the producing organizations responsible for the problem. In times past, women were reluctant to openly challenge the status quo, because as I am sure you know, in this industry, the fear of black-listing still exists.

EJ: Can you actually come back on this fear of "blacklisting" as I am not certain that this phenomenon is well-known to all. How do people—and especially women here—get "black-listed"? What are the consequences?

Most people, when they hear the term "Blacklisting" will think of the McCarthy era in the US and the attack on Hollywood artists accused of being communists. Broadly though, the term means that a specific group of people will not be hired to work, and their livelihoods therefore put in jeopardy. My use of the term references the fact that the Theatre Industry remains a top-down, largely patriarchal system. Artists—actors, playwrights, directors—are beholden to the producers for work. So, there has always been fear that if the artists push too hard, they risk being unemployable. In earlier efforts to promote parity for women theatre artists, there were many who hesitated to use radical or aggressive language or tactics to confront commercial producers or artistic directors at the regional theatres. And this fear was still in evidence in 2009 when we were meeting to create initiatives for 50/50 in 2020. The Guerilla Girls were the only ones who were using in-your-face tactics. Now we have many women and projects that are *demanding* parity, not just promoting the idea or asking politely for it.

EJ: What are the main sources of support of the 50/50 in 2020? Do you have state/government support?

Melody Brooks: We are an entirely grassroots, volunteer initiative. There is no funding, and any expenses that are incurred are paid for by the individuals/organizations managing the project or activity. For instance, Works by Women has become its own organization and seeks funding to run its website; New Perspectives produces ON HER SHOULDERS and receives some funding from LPTW and from individuals who donate to the program; WOMEN STAGE THE WORLD is under the umbrella of LPTW with individual members of that group supporting the work.

EJ: Do you consider asking for funding or do you feel that it would be a betrayal to the spirit of your movement?

We would love to have funding, but since 50/50 is not an organizational entity, it would be hard to get someone to give it money. To date any funding—and it's been tiny—has come through the various organizations running the initiatives that have come out of the grassroots efforts. The *League of Professional Theatre Women*, however, is in the process of a Strategic Planning initiative that is intended to position the organization to take the lead on the issue of employment parity in a big way. If this happens, large scale studies and promotional activities will be a big part of the work.

EJ: What about the position of the American government as regards the issue of the gender gap in the field of theatre?

Melody Brooks: Very much behind the times! The previous head of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Rocco Landesman, a Broadway producer himself, was asked in 2010 or 2011 directly by Susan Jonas if the NEA would start looking at employment of women as a funding issue. His response was that the government didn't need to be concerned about it. Only non-profit theatres are eligible for government funding, and the applications do already ask about the ethnic diversity of the Board and staff. But apparently looking at the employment data for women is somehow not the same.

EJ: Would you like 50/50 in 2020 to evolve from a "grassroots movement" into a more formal organization?

Melody Brooks: We don't have a desire to be more formal—maybe if someone gave us a lot of money we would.

The reason is that most of the women who founded 50/50 are running their own theatre companies—small mostly—or are theatre artists of some sort trying to have a career. The amount of work and commitment needed to start a new and formal organization is beyond our capacity at the moment. There is also something refreshing about the fact that an initiative or a project or just a "happening" can bubble up at will or as needed, without having to worry about institutional permission or oversight.

EJ: The prospect of the 100th anniversary of woman suffrage saw the emergence of various groups promoting parity in different fields. What are the links between your movement and, for example, 50/50 in 2020 the bipartisan initiative launched by Maggie Tinsman and Jean Lloyd-Jones to achieve political equity in Iowa (<http://50-50in2020.org/>) or 50/50 by 2020 the campaign "that seeks to establish an equal number of women and men within leadership roles by the year 2020" (<http://5050x2020.org/>)?

Melody Brooks: We have no formal links with those two initiatives, but there is a lot of cross-fertilization between various groups/activities and ours.

I will say however I find the statement "an equal number of women and men" to be disappointing, as it says to me they are afraid to demand parity for women without worrying about what men think, and the fact that women are the MAJORITY of the population should mean that we get the majority of leadership roles! Men have had the majority—a super, super majority, for centuries, so why can't we say they should now be in the minority?

EJ: 50/50 in 2020 is allied with the League of Professional Theatre Women (LPTW). What is the nature of your collaboration?

Melody Brooks: Many of the women who started 50/50 are members of LPTW and so the overlap is natural. Some of the initiatives are supported financially a little bit by the League—i.e., they contribute to The Play in Context component of ON HER SHOULDERS. LPTW also has its own projects and programs that they link under the banner of 50/50.

EJ: 50/50 in 2020 supports the initiatives of the feminist anonymous—gorilla masked— artists and activists, the Guerrilla Girls, who have been fighting against inequality in the art world since 1985. Can you come back on the reasons why you support their actions?

Melody Brooks: Because all of their actions are necessary to achieving the goal of parity for women theatre artists. They have been a lonely voice with their radical activities, and now I think the rest of us are catching up!

EJ: What are the future projects of 50/50 in 2020?

Melody Brooks: I have just been asked by one of the original members of the group if we can start having monthly meetings again, so we are looking into that. With only 5 years left to go, I imagine that we will stay focused on gathering the evidence—numbers—but also make a more concerted effort to reach the large theatres and get them to agree in some fashion to change their ways and guarantee more equity.

EJ: How 2020 will be like?

Melody Brooks: I don't know. I would hope that the renewed and expanded focus on women and girls around the world will lead to change—but we are in the midst of such violence and ugliness—perhaps the death throes of the old order?—that I do not know if we can get there in my lifetime. A lot has changed, but the finish line is still over the horizon.

ABSTRACTS

Interview of Melody Brooks, co-founder of 50/50 in 2020. The interview was conducted by emails in February 2015.

Entretien avec Melody Brooks, co-fondatrice de 50/50 in 2020: L'entretien, réalisé en février 2015, consistaient en un échanges de courriels.

INDEX

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