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UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

# Ahead of the curve

Impacts of Tonic Advance on Gender Equity  
in the Performing Arts, 2014-2020.

This report was prepared by Central for Tonic Theatre

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# “The Advance Programme in 2014 was ahead of the curve.”

Rachel Tackley, Creative Director, Riverside Studios, 2020.

## Introduction

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In October 2013 Tonic Theatre embarked upon its innovative gender equality project for performing arts organisations. Working collaboratively with senior staff across a range of leading National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs), the Advance programme set out to address the complex conditions that prevent talented women in the performing industries from rising to the top.

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This report has been prepared by a team from The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Academic **Partners** on the Advance programme. The report provides an account of the work of the eleven NPOs committed to participating in **Tonic Theatre’s Advance Programmes** launched in 2014 and continued with a further nine NPOs in the second, 2016 cohort – seventeen companies continue the work on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion work with Tonic’s current programme [Advance Network](#).

The objective of this report is to offer:

- an overview of the NPOs’ initial commitment, in terms of researching and responding to specific **gender equity** issues for their company;
- a distillation of the immediate **pledges and outcomes** from 2014 or 2016 (as cohort relevant);
- an **updated account** of Central’s research findings on NPOs’ work since the 2014/2016 programmes.

It should be noted that this report is in many ways a ‘snapshot’, marking a critical moment for the performing arts industry at the end of 2020. The catalyst for producing a report at this moment is an awareness, and wariness, triggered by the as-yet unknown full impact of COVID-19. As Academic Partners for Advance our research driver is to ensure that we mark the significant gains in terms of gender equity made by the companies up to COVID-19 and the devastating closures for the live-performance industries in 2020/21.

The aim of the report is to:

- recognise and celebrate significant changes made for women working in creative freelance roles in performing arts companies since Advance 2014 & 2016;
- ensure that we can take full account of the impact of Covid-19 for women working in full and part time salaried positions;
- draw attention to the work companies are continuing to develop in the drive toward greater equality, diversity and inclusion advances post COVID-19.

Our research objectives for this report focus specifically on what the NPOs **have been doing differently** as a result of their involvement with Advance 2014/2016; **what visible changes** are evident via data capture, and **what new policies** or initiatives have been implemented in terms of organisational protocols and professional practices.

It is important to establish the difference in Tonic Theatre's fundamental approach to the development and implementation of the Advance programme. Advance was designed to work directly and **in partnership** with performance companies, fostering collaborative approaches to identify and address key issues: **to work from within**. Advance worked directly with senior staff in each organisation, enabling people to make time, and to do things better by creating the **space and 'toolkits'** needed to make change.

The information for this report has been drawn from publicly available materials and interviews with individuals conducted during the month of December 2020.

## Background and Context for this report

Twenty **National Portfolio Organisations** – that is, companies core-funded by Arts Council England (ACE) over a four-year period, providing consistent, large scale financial security<sup>1</sup> – participated in Tonic Theatre's Advance Programmes.<sup>2</sup> There were two

cohorts of companies, 11 theatre companies in 2014 and 9 performing arts companies in 2016; these included opera, ballet and dance companies. Both Advance programmes covered four stages:

**Stage 1 – Preparation:** Before beginning Advance each organisation was asked to select one specific area it wanted to focus on over the six-month duration of the programme. Examples included a desire to better understand routes for women aspiring to make the move from assistant directing to directing and whether commissioning models for playwrights better responded to the needs of men than women. After selecting their area of focus, each organisation worked with Tonic to craft a question in relation to it (e.g. “does our current commissioning model suit men better than women? If so, what could we do about that?”). These questions would serve as a frame through which each organisation would a) undertake an investigation into its chosen area, and b) consider how it could change its working practices in relation to what it learned.

**Stage 2 – Investigation:** Responding to the questions the organisations had written, Tonic conducted research in collaboration with them and on their behalf, examining how things were currently working and where, within that, barriers to women existed. Tonic then shared their findings with the organisations.

This step was about the organisations enhancing their own understanding and asking ‘why’; it was about them questioning their own thinking and that of others, and about exposing themselves to perspectives and information that may previously have been off their radar. Over all, it was about them being reflective and listening to others, not about them leading or needing to come up with solutions; that would come in Stage 3.

**Stage 3 – Innovation:** Based on the findings of the investigation, the organisations explored and considered alternative or supplementary ways of working which would go some way towards removing the barriers that had been identified.

This step was about dreaming up new ways of doing things, and of challenging existing preconceptions and the 'but we've always done it this way' approach. At the same time, any new approaches were required to be achievable, realistic, and deliverable within the organisations' already busy schedules and programmes of work.

**Stage 4 – Action Plans:** By the conclusion of Innovation, the organisations had identified a range of new actions they would like to implement and each produced an action plan outlining steps towards making this happen.

The programme also required organisations to:

#### **Participate in Away Days**

Although every organisation was pursuing its own question, their findings were of course of interest to one another, and they were encouraged throughout to share their learning, provide provocation to one another, and look for opportunities to create future collaborations. To facilitate this, Tonic led four Away Days over the course of each programme.

These brought the lead members of staff from the participating organisations together in a focused environment and away from their desks, emails and to-do lists. The Away Days were an opportunity for the organisations to come together to:

- talk, share progress, make requests of one another, and feel like peers taking part in a collective journey;
- participate in joined-up conversations, facilitated by Tonic over matters besides their individual areas of focus but relevant to how broader change could be achieved across the industry;
- learn about topics such as unconscious bias and change management from guest speakers.

#### **Commit to data gathering**

Early in the 2014 programme it became clear that few in the cohort had data to hand about the gender of creative practitioners their

organisations were working with. Consequently it was hard to establish a baseline, or for the organisations to have an accurate sense of how representative or not they were in terms of their casts and creative teams.

The 2014 cohort agreed therefore to collect data for the ten year period leading up to the commencement of Advance. Using a simple spreadsheet template (referred to as the 'Gender Tracker') they captured numbers of women in their casts and creative teams and also counted the number of women playwrights whose work they had staged. This process – a new one for many in the cohort – enabled the organisations to adopt a data-driven way of understanding the picture around gender both on their own stages, and across the cohort.

The spreadsheet was developed further for the 2016 cohort, partly to respond to the wider range of creative roles in play once dance and opera were factored in, and partly in an effort to capture a greater level of nuance e.g. the difference between numbers of women working on main stages as opposed to studio/secondary spaces.

#### **Share their learning with the wider industry**

All organisations participated in a **culminative symposium** (2014 and 2016) where findings, commitments and pledges were shared with the wider industry. These were jointly planned and designed by Tonic and the Central team with breakout sessions led by individuals from both teams. Hosted by Central in its Embassy Theatre, both events were attended by over 200 senior industry figures. Insights into each organisations' work on Advance were also made public on a [website](#) created to disseminate the methodology and findings of Advance.

The NPOs represent performing arts companies across England and it is important to take into account their differences in infrastructure, scale, and the administrative capacity to undertake the gender tracker updates (the Advance Programme deliberately worked with a full range of companies, from large scale (including the Royal Shakespeare

Company, the National Theatre and the Royal Opera House) to small scale (for example the Gate Theatre and Mahogany Opera) and mid-scale (including New Wolsey Theatre, Chichester Festival Theatre and Northern Ballet).

The full list of companies, their chosen research questions, partners and participants can be found on the [Advance Website](#), including additional research and background from the team of academic partners at [The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama](#) (London) from where the first Advance Symposium and website was launched (September 2014). Central also hosted and contributed to the second symposium (September 2016). Both events received national press coverage (notably Guardian's Lyn Gardner) with digital platforms (Twitter) and live feeds via *WhatsOnStage* reaching a wider digital audience. To date the **Advance website has had over 25,500 users since its launch.**

This report comprises data from eighteen of the twenty companies, with specific numbers from ten companies and commentary on new processes from thirteen companies.

- 1. **Headline Findings:**** a summary of the key numerical data.
- 2. **Progress towards Change:**** a quantitative account of the numerical changes.
- 3. **Changes in Process and Policy:**** a qualitative account of the initiatives with potential impact for gender equity.

The data has been gathered from the period following the NPOs' involvement in the first two Advance Programmes until March 2020 when, following COVID-19, most performing arts venues were closed. For the purposes of this analysis online productions, or subsequent in-person productions that may have occurred, have not been taken into account.

Tonic's intention for the Advance programme was, and continues to be, to raise awareness about the lack of women in top creative roles in the industry and to work for 50:50 gender equity. During the Advance programmes, the terminology of 'women' and 'female' were used interchangeably. As academic partners, the

Central team is aware that these terms can be read as exclusionary, or mean different things in different contexts, and the ensuing debates around definitions of gender and identifying markers have significantly shifted since 2014. It is not the intention to open this debate here (it is better addressed in many other fora)<sup>3</sup>, but rather to support the creation of a space to consider the lack of opportunity for women – encompassing **everyone** who chooses to define themselves as such in the performing arts sector.

In preparing this report, Central's team have primarily worked with the companies who are continuing to be part of the next stage of the Advance Programmes – the Advance Network.<sup>4</sup> This report has only been possible thanks to their generosity and the enthusiastic response of individuals to our enquiries for this report, at what has been a significantly pressurised time for the performing arts industry. As key partners in the research process, and as stakeholders in preparing future generations of professional performance arts practitioners, Central's team share a genuine awareness and openness to change, along with a commitment to pushing forward to greater understandings of the implications for intersectional equity. As project partners [our research initiative](#) for 2016 cohort was to raise awareness of [intersectional equity](#) and to draw attention to models for sustainability and longevity.

The concluding section to this report highlights the importance of succession planning as part of NPOs' research, recruitment, evaluation and commitment to gender equity and the attendant implications for embedding intersectional equity and inclusion in our performance industries.

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# 1. Headline Findings

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As outlined in the introduction, each organisation was encouraged to focus on one particular aspect of its work with women, rather than to seek holistic change. As such, the statistical increases shown below relate to these areas. Although the raw numerical data may only suggest marginal increases for women employed in creative roles, their significance should be read against the following 'changes in professional practice', and is best understood through the subsequent individual company narratives which follow, where procedural, operational, and day-to-day production processes offer the deeper context for the significant changes achieved.

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## Progress towards Change (statistical increases)

- 4 NPOs have increased the proportion of female playwrights commissioned and programmed by 8-28% (Almeida (8%), CFT (28%), Headlong (13%), and Leeds/West Yorkshire Playhouse (12%)).
- 1 NPO has increased the proportion of female-identifying directors contracted by 22%, and 58% of productions have employed a female-identifying assistant director (RSC).
- 2 NPOs have regularly achieved 50:50 casting and/or increased parts for women (Almeida, Sheffield Theatres).
- 1 NPO has significantly increased representation of female creatives, including revivals of plays and focussing on female-centred stories (Northern Stage).
- 1 NPO has increased the proportion of female conductors employed by 6% (ROH/ Royal Opera).
- 1 NPO has significantly increased their employment of female librettists, with a 33% increase in proportion (Mahogany).
- 1 NPO has increased their employment of female creatives across the artistic and technical teams by a 14% in proportion (New Wolsey).
- 1 NPO has increased their employment of female creatives in set, light and sound design teams by a 1.53% in proportion, which is significant in terms of the number of people employed (Kiln Theatre).
- 1 NPO has increased the percentage of female choreographers of productions commissioned, produced and presented across their stages, with an increase in proportion of 2.80% (Sadler's Wells).

## Changes in Professional Practices

- 13 NPOs introduced new policies or initiatives following their involvement with the Advance programmes, which impacted the following areas and experiences:
  - The creation of a new programme to support the creative development of mid-career companies in the North East, most of whom are female-led (Northern Stage). Almost 70% of people participating in the NORTH programme identified as women.
  - Establishment of a funded artist/talent development programme and the establishment of a producer to support emerging talent, not solely focused on gender but also in terms of access and disability (CAST).
  - Improving touring experiences for women (ETT).
  - Developed an embedded practice to increase roles and space for female choreographers within existing training and working practices and the creation of new opportunities for female dancers to begin developing choreographic practice in house (Northern Ballet).
  - More equal access/routes into lighting and sound design (Gate; Kiln).
  - Role-modelling good practice via Youth Theatre projects targeting potential next generation theatre-industry (i.e. mix-gendered creative teams) (New Wolsey).
- Focus on equality and inclusion as standing item; first question for every meeting (New Wolsey, Gate, Headlong).
- Changing how meetings are run and shifting communication strategies across the organisation (NT).
- More equal access/routes into choreographing for female creatives, with the commitment of having a 50:50 gender balance in their new Young Associates programme and the aim to achieve gender balance in the Back to the Lab platform (Sadler's Wells).
- New hiring practices for female-identifying creatives to include:
  - New procedures for commissioning female playwrights (CFT).
  - An appendix to contracts issued to freelance directors outlining the expectation that they would assemble a diverse, ideally 50:50 creative team (Gate).
  - New recruitment processes to improve diversity in staff (Clean Break) (not solely gender-related but more broadly to reflect the company's main audience/participants).
  - Creating opportunities to work with solely female creative teams, improving gender-balanced auditioning panels (ROH).

## 2. Progress toward Change

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This section of the report offers a precis of each NPO's initial question, a brief account of the research process tailored to the specific enquiry and, where appropriate, the 'pledge' for change made following the initial Advance engagement.<sup>5</sup> Central's team then tracked the progress the company has made and notes demonstrable change.

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### The 2014 Cohort

#### Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC)

In 2014, the RSC pledged to investigate the following question: ["What is the ladder of progression for an assistant director and is it different for men and women? What can the RSC do to change any discrepancy?"](#) As part of their research with Tonic, the RSC met and consulted with their alumni Assistant Directors and members from the industry to consider the routes into directing and how to engender more favourable conditions for female-identifying directors. Through their research they learnt that routes into directing have changed, significant factors such as the economic crash of 2008 has meant the industry is more risk-averse in terms of emerging career directors, a dearth of opportunities for freelance directors (as opposed to in-house directors), the impact of childcare and pregnancy for female-identifying directors. As a result, the RSC re-examined their 'offer' for their alumni assistant director and pledged to provide a more holistic experience at the RSC with opportunities to widen and develop their skills and to draw from all the different departments at the RSC.

Since the RSC's participation in the 2014 Advance programme, they have continued to support their assistant directors through their alumni programme in terms of training and have significantly increased their employment of female-identifying assistant directors, often offering contracts for ADs over different shows over a year. In terms of numbers: before Advance, the percentage of productions directed by female directors was 27.39%. In the years following Advance, the percentage is 50%, an increase in proportion of more than 22%. After Advance, the percentage of productions with a female assistant director is of 57.99%, and the total percentage of female creatives working in directing teams (As Director and Assistant Director) is 53.90%. As a result, of their participation in Advance, the RSC pledged to at least 50:50 gender creative teams and they continue to uphold and work towards this pledge. The RSC reflected that one of the biggest impacts of this policy has been visible 'in terms of the thinking behind the programming both in content, context, creatives involved and cast' with a number of 'female writers under commission and writing for programming across all the houses ensuring women get to write for a variety of scales' (Birch 2020).

## Sheffield Theatres

As part of the 2014 Advance programme cohort, Sheffield Theatres' focus was on the employment of female actors and they set out to research the following question: ["We acknowledge that we have historically employed more male actors than female. In programming a balanced repertoire across the year what factors need to be in place to ensure a gender balance in the employment of actors?"](#) Acknowledging that historically they employed more male than female actors, Sheffield Theatres researched what factors needed to be put in place to ensure gender balance in the employment process and the balance of role prominence in their production choices. After scanning their past seasons, they created an Action Plan that covered a year's programming and confirmed the necessary steps for achieving gender balance between male and female actors, both in terms of number, and in terms of range and scope of role. These included planning, timeline and budgeting. As part of this Action Plan, Sheffield Theatres established the following pledge: "To employ an equal number of male and female actors throughout each season and ensure that female roles also have prominence and run against current stereotypes."

After participating in the Advance programme, 56.86% of Sheffield Theatres' productions employed at least 50:50 male/female cast. Likewise, all their Shakespeare productions have had a 50:50 gender balance between male and female actors, evidencing Sheffield's conscious choice and work around this commitment. The percentage of female actors employed after Sheffield Theatres' involvement in Advance is 45.89% and, as expressed by the current artistic director Robert Hastie, the balance of gender, on stage and in the stories told, is now part of every programming conversation and a fundamental part of the production processes at Sheffield Theatres (Hastie 2020).

## Chichester Festival Theatres (CFT)

Chichester Festival Theatres examined what the organisation can do to support mid-career female playwrights, rather than focussing predominantly on female creatives at entry level. CFT pledged to research the following question: ["There are more women succeeding in getting new plays on stage at the entry level of the profession than there are at a mid-career level. Is there a disconnect between early success and career progression? If so, what are the barriers to more established female writers getting their work on larger stages and how can Chichester Festival Theatre \(and other regional producing theatres\) contribute to addressing this disconnect and gender imbalance?"](#) Taking inspiration from the work that Tonic and the Almeida Theatre undertook on the representation of women writers on London stages in 2013 as part of the Almeida's own research for Advance, CFT carried out a research process to understand why there were more opportunities for female playwrights at entry level, and if there was a disconnection between early success and career progression within the wider sector, and how they, and other regional producing theatres could contribute to address the disconnect and gender imbalance. Jenny Roberts, on behalf of CFT, carried out interviews with playwrights and literary and artistic associates from within the industry. Some of the findings included: a production house trend in proactively approaching young, new female playwrights rather than focusing on mid-career female playwrights; venues not always offering the best support for female playwrights; pressure of reaching a certain level of success before being programmed on the bigger stages; and caring responsibilities that took priority over work for female playwrights – either through choice or necessity.

As a response to these findings, CFT made a commitment to commission more work from female mid-career playwrights. A change in leadership in 2016<sup>6</sup> placed a greater emphasis on inclusion and subsequently the number of female playwrights commissioned and produced increased exponentially over the next five years rising from 9% in the period 2003-2016 to 37.14% in the period 2016-2020. This represents an increase in proportion of more than 28%. CFT remains committed to achieving a gender balance in its commissioning and producing of plays.

## Headlong

Headlong set out to question their commissioning model, asking if it was designed to suit men better than women: [“Does our current commissioning model suit men better than women? If so, what could we do about that?”](#) As part of their research, Headlong found favourable gender statistics when looking at women employed across the company, but less favourable statistics when looking at women taking key roles in creative teams. In their commitment to improving this, they decided to start focusing on improving gender balance for writers, putting out surveys to both male and female writers and to agents, holding discussion groups with male and female writers and meeting with Literary Managers from several other Advance programme theatres. The results of their research demonstrated an industry-wide disparity between male and female writers: on average, female playwrights write more plays, get fewer plays on, and get paid less. It was also clear that women perceive that they are treated differently because of their gender (60% compared to just 25% of men).

As a response, Headlong identified key actions to take, including supporting the existing cohort of exciting female voices to move from the studio spaces to main stages, analysing the way that they as a company communicate and work with writers on commission, improving general writer information and first access. In terms of statistics, Headlong had a percentage of 36.84%

female writers who had been commissioned. Post their involvement with Advance, Headlong have achieved a 50:50 split in commissioning, which represents an increase in proportion of more than 13% in commissioning plays from female playwrights. They have also reported an improvement in the communication with all the writers, and especially with female writers. They aim to nurture more artists, including writers, and other creatives, and aim towards a fully intersectional approach.

Headlong’s commitment to gender equality fits into their Justice Plan for the company. Written in the summer of 2020, in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, it continues to be a living, developing document under constant review and includes considerations on race, disability, and gender, which are discussed and reviewed in the weekly justice group meetings that they have been holding, demonstrating a key move towards intersectional understandings of equity and practical action.

## Leeds Playhouse (formerly West Yorkshire Playhouse)

Leeds Playhouse focused its research on examining female-centred stories and considering how to get more of these onto their stages. Their question was [“What do we mean when talk about female-centred stories and what are the ways in which we can get more of them on our stages?”](#) They were interested in questioning clichés and stereotypical representations of women’s experiences and how production companies could avoid these when commissioning writers. With Tonic’s support, Leeds Playhouse created an Action Plan with timelines and working frameworks. The implementation of the Action Plan supported them to establish that ‘female-centred stories’ mean: female characters driving narrative – and that narrative, and who’s driving it, is a powerful, political choice.

As a consequence of their participation in the Advance programme, Leeds Playhouse started focussing on their recruitment processes for creative teams and improved their efforts

to identify and recruit outstanding female directors, designers and writers. They also put in place a three-year action plan for the delivery of new work by female writers and/or about female protagonists. While there is a key differentiation to be made between an increase in female-centred stories vs. an increase in commissioning of female-identifying playwrights, Leeds Playhouse moved from 21% of female playwrights authoring their produced and co-produced pieces in the period between 2007-2013 to more than 33% of produced and co-produced work in the period 2014-2018. That represents more than 12% increase in female playwrights in their produced and co-produced work after their involvement in the Advance programme. It is worth highlighting that the 2018-2019 season, named the pop-up theatre season, in which Leeds Playhouse had no visiting productions and all the presented pieces were in-house produced, facilitated the implementation of the action plan created with Tonic's support. In this season, the percentage of work by female-identifying playwrights represented 53.8% of all the produced plays. In addition, at present, Leeds' commissions slate (which has ten productions under commission at the moment) is 80% female-identifying artists with 60% of the narratives specifically female driven, demonstrating the impact of Leeds' earlier action plan and revising of their recruitment processes.

## Kiln Theatre (formerly Tricycle Theatre)

Kiln Theatre's work in the Advance programme focussed on how the organisation could better represent female set, lighting, and sound designers in its creative teams. Their question was "[How can the Tricycle better represent female designers \(set, lighting, and sound\) in its creative teams? Also, both male and female, what can the Tricycle do to broaden the cultural make-up of its creative teams, now and for the future?](#)" They were also interested in what they could do to broaden the cultural make-up of their creative teams, as Kiln Theatre identified a disparity between

the diversity of acting companies, writers and directors and the diversity of their wider creative teams. After carrying out internal research with Tonic's support, statistics showed women were underrepresented in design roles in creative teams. In Indhu Rubasingham's inaugural seasons, 89% of directors were female, 45% of writers were female, and 43% of actors were female, yet only 9% of set designers were female, although 35% lighting and sound designers were female.

As a response to these findings, Tonic facilitated conversations between Kiln Theatre and the Gate Theatre, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, Clean Break and the Association of Lighting Designers. They discussed training opportunities, mentoring and access conditions from underrepresented groups, and the possibility of sharing resources within these emerging networks. Kiln Theatre decided to host annual days of introductory meetings between designers and their artistic team, to host workshops including prominent female role models, and to continue to be alert to opportunities for inviting talent from underrepresented groups to be part of their creative teams.

In reflecting on their work over the past few years, since their initial participation in the Advance programme, Rubasingham has emphasised that gender is only one part of the picture for the organisation as a whole (Rubasingham 2021). Specifically, Kiln is interested in better understanding the blockages in the routes into the industry, and in exploring ways to open up a more inclusive and equitable pipeline into creative roles, particularly in terms of design and backstage positions. As part of this initiative, Kiln has focused on different routes into technical production, either from drama schools or through in-house training and/or apprenticeships. For example in Spring/Summer 2019 Kiln piloted a production arts scheme where 11 young people from underrepresented backgrounds in technical theatre were invited in to participate in a pilot course in backstage and technical

skills, including lighting, sound and stage management called Act One Beginners (funded by a private donor). Kiln had established a partnership with Mountview drama school, who waived the fees for one of the students to complete a diploma in Production Arts. In 2021, Kiln has been awarded funding from Backstage Trust to have two resident assistant designers on 9-month placements at Kiln, and an associate designer (Tom Piper), who with Kiln's Head of Production will mentor the two designers.

In terms of future plans (which currently remain funding dependent) Kiln aims to create shadow placements in a number of backstage technical and creative roles; to create opportunities for young people to 'try out' and specifically, to address the issue raised by Kiln's commitment to the question: 'how do we ensure that there are meaningful and transparent routes into different positions and creative backstage roles'. In addition, Kiln has projected a minimum of 33% of female-identifying creatives for their 2021-2022 season.

During their capital project, whilst the building was closed,<sup>7</sup> Kiln worked with a number of community groups all around Brent to produce a Mapping Brent Festival of new, original pieces of work. In 2017, Kiln worked with 5 groups and in 2018, there were 6 productions. After participating in the Advance programme, female creatives in Kiln Theatre's set, light and sound design teams have accounted for 28.66% of the total number of designers employed in the period 2018-2020, which is an increase in proportion of 1.53% when compared with the percentage of female creatives employed in these designing teams during the 2013-2015 period.

## Almeida Theatre

The Almeida Theatre focussed their work on looking at the numbers of parts written for women and on the commissioning of work by female playwrights. Their question was "[Are living playwrights writing a disproportionately low number of parts for women? If so, what](#)

[can we do to address this?](#)" As part of the research, Tonic looked at every new play given a full production in a sample of 12 London theatres (Almeida, Bush, Donmar, Finborough, Gate, Hampstead Theatre, Lyric Hammersmith, National Theatre, Royal Court, Theatre503, Tricycle, Young Vic) in the year 2013. For each piece of new writing, Tonic noted the male/female character ratio and plotted that against the gender of the playwright. This research project showed that across the sample of new plays, of those written by women, 52% of the cast were female and 48% were male. In those written by men, 35% of the cast were female and 65% were male. Tonic's research also showed that a new play by a male playwright was more likely to be produced on a large stage and a new play by a female playwright was more likely to be produced on a smaller stage, a discrepancy that was even more significant within buildings with more than one auditorium.

In response to these findings, the Almeida's participation in Advance began by studying actions needed to address this discrepancy, and considering how, as a venue with a larger stage, they were contributing to the 'different stages for different genders' finding of Tonic's research. Besides their aim to commission an equal number of female and male playwrights, they moved on to consider questions around the parts for women in their commissioning conversations, including reflections on the playwrights' creative freedom, onus of fulfilling quotas and the role of unconscious bias towards creating male characters. As a result, Almeida raise the question of female characters as an early part of the process of commissioning – for both male and female playwrights. After their participation in Advance, Almeida has staged approximately 30% of plays written by female playwrights, which represents an increase in proportion of more than 8% compared to the 21% of the produced work before Advance (in the 2003-2014 period).

## The 2016 Cohort

For the second iteration of the Advance programme, the cohort of participating NPOs was expanded beyond theatre alone, to also encompass dance and opera organisations. While the companies in the 2014 Cohort were encouraged to focus on creative roles, such as performers, directors, writers, designers, in 2016, some companies looked at other areas of importance, such as internal communication mechanisms, artist and company development and the progression of women into leadership.

### Mahogany Opera Group

Mahogany Opera focussed their research and work on the Advance programme around exploring the available routes for aspiring librettists and, in particular, how they could broaden those opportunities and encourage more women to consider writing libretti. Their question was ["Where are the female opera librettists? What routes are currently available for aspiring librettists? How can we broaden these opportunities and encourage more women to consider writing libretti?"](#) They were particularly interested in exploring how to find and support female librettists as up until 2016, Mahogany Opera Group had never commissioned a female librettist. With Tonic's support, Mahogany Opera Group ran focus-groups with opera-making women, including those who have written opera libretti, for analysing the existing pathways for people interested in writing libretti and what might feel appealing and accessible to female librettists and what less so. Tonic also carried interviews with opera 'gatekeepers'; producers, artistic directors, and those involved in training.

Some of the findings included the few artistic and career development opportunities for librettists, their 'junior' or 'low' creative status compared to composers, the lack of networking opportunities and librettists' work not receiving enough attention and recognition. In terms of gender-specific findings, Tonic's research found that there are complex issues regarding how women are viewed in opera

and taken seriously as creators. Other findings included that the majority of 'gatekeepers' in the opera world, including those involved in the commissioning of new opera, are male and relatively homogenous in terms of age, ethnicity, and class background, which means that the decisions are made by a relatively narrow group.

As a response to this work, Mahogany Opera Group started putting in place internal strategies to build awareness of diversity into decision making across the organisation and for becoming more thorough in monitoring those processes. They initiated a range of 'open calls' so they could meet a broader range of artists and started an evaluation process of the R&D opportunities that they provided. Finally, they started discussions around how to inspire young girls to consider all professional careers in opera open to them. After the Advance Programme, Mahogany Opera Group increased their proportion of female librettists employed by 33%, going from none to three female librettists employed, out of a total of nine librettists commissioned. Although no longer an NPO (since 2017), following their [decision](#) to focus on working with young people (versus mounting three opera productions a year), Mahogany have significantly increased their commissioning [female librettists and composers](#).

### Royal Opera House

As participants in Tonic's Advance Programme in 2016, The Royal Opera House (ROH) focused on enriching the diversity of their creative work and, in particular, on the employment of female conductors. The ROH entered the Advance programme knowing that female conductors were underrepresented across both the Royal Opera and the Royal Ballet and the ROH wanted to better understand and respond to the obstacles preventing them from working with more female conductors. Their question was ["Why is it that such a small proportion of the conductors we employ are women? What can the Royal Opera House do to increase the number of women conductors working in](#)

opera and ballet?” In partnership with Tonic, the ROH began with a workshop involving staff across all three of the ROH's Opera, Ballet and Orchestra companies, considering together why so few women conductors were employed. Tonic then followed the workshop with a series of interviews with senior members of ROH staff, women conductors who have worked with the ROH over the years, and with conductors who have not worked with the ROH, in order to examine women's experience of beginning, building and sustaining a career in conducting more widely. Tonic also spoke to the Royal Academy of Music and Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and observed and surveyed attendees of the Morley College Women Conductors workshops for ballet and opera, hosted at the ROH in 2016. Finally, Tonic's research received input from Christina Scharff, Senior Lecturer in the department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at Kings College London, author of *Equality & Diversity in the Classical Music Profession* and whose research interest is Music, Gender & Entrepreneurialism, and with The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, their academic partners in the Advance Programme.

Some of the findings from this research included a greater understanding of the different experiences and different routes that women take into and through the conducting profession: the potential impact that the lack of visibility can have in fostering aspiration and ambition for girls and young women; the highly competitive environment for conductors; and the difficulties of managing a freelance career alongside family pressures and financial commitments. They examined their scouting processes, aiming to identify female talent at every level, nationally and internationally, proactively increasing the number of women conductors working within the organisation. Finally, they began conversations about how to develop the best possible environment for women conductors to thrive in, and about increasing the visibility of the female conductors working within the ROH. According to the ROH's recent estimates, following their

participation in the Advance programme, coupled with their engagement with other organisations, the ROH estimates that the percentage of female conductors working with the Royal Opera is approximately 9.3%, which represents an increase in proportion of more than 6% in comparison to the 2.9% of the 2013-2016 period. Likewise, the percentage of female cover and assistant conductors shows an increase in proportion of more than 3% after the Advance programme, moving from a percentage of 1.6% (2013-2016) to a 4.9% (2016-2020). It should be noted that the relatively low number of female cover and assistant conductors is based on the fact that approximately 90% of the assistant and cover conductors are members of the permanent music staff who are mainly male, only about 10% of the Assistant Conductors are guests.

As participants in many conversations, alongside research undertaken across the different partnerships, the ROH's commitment to taking action towards increasing the number of women conductors working in Opera and Ballet has resulted in the ROH putting in place significant changes in processes and procedures. These actions include ensuring a gender balance on their auditioning panels and inviting guest female conductors to participate in assessment panels for both courses and auditions. This change has been implemented in the recent Constant Lambert/Jette Parker Young Artists Programme (JPYAP) conductor auditions involving candidates working with piano and with a full orchestra over more than one day. The two successful candidates were one female conductor and one male conductor. As part of their proactive search for female talent, the Linbury Creative Producers regularly attend concerts specifically to see the work of female conductors. The Director of Casting is also ensuring that the careers of female conductors are followed with special interest. The ROH now has a female conductors list that is being regularly updated with new talent coming through, including those conductors that have participated in conducting competitions or through recommendations by agents or colleagues within the operatic world.

The ROH recently had a female conductor as JPYAP Link Artist (2017-2018), Sonia Ben-Santamaria, further demonstrating their commitment to encouraging and enhancing networks for rising young female talent.

From their involvement in the Advance programme and in the Advance network, the ROH values the sharing of different facilitation dynamics that enable conversations about Equality, Inclusion and Diversity, creating the space for 'planting seeds' that bring about change. Fundamentally, the ROH's aim is about creating a culture of inclusion, having a sense of the whole house contributing and working together. In terms of new initiatives, the ROH regularly carries out R&D workshops and is constantly working to expand its reading and reviewing panel, drawing on both internal and external assessors in terms of creating equitable representation on the panel, including inviting input from junior ROH staff members. In addition to its long-standing Staff Diversity & Inclusion Network, in 2020 additional staff diversity discussion groups have been established within The Royal Ballet and Royal Opera companies. Along with attending Tonic meetings as part of the Advance Network and learning through the experience of other artists and companies.

In addition, the ROH/JPYAP has an ongoing Women Conductors initiative, that has its origins in the Royal Philharmonic Society's Women Conductors initiative. The JPYAP has worked both independently and in partnership with the National Opera Studio and Royal Philharmonic Society to run courses for emerging women conductors in opera and ballet since 2018 and has used both the Orchestra of the ROH and Chroma ensemble. Alongside this, The Linbury Theatre is connected into the JPYAP conductors programme and leads on the Engender R&D programme, a developing network for women in opera. As plans are made for coming seasons, there is an increased focus on seeking opportunities for ROH led productions to have female conductors, or offer assistant conductor roles. This enables next steps for the relationships built with conductors through

the JPYAP and as work from the R&D is staged, will increase opportunities further. In the last two years, the ROH has also opened their rehearsals to conservatoire students. Pre-pandemic, they were starting to plan observer opportunities for women conductors for ROH productions, an initiative that they plan to continue when productions resume.

## New Wolsey Theatre

New Wolsey Theatre focused on what processes and procedures they needed to ensure a mixed-gender environment, especially in terms of creatives employed. Their question was "[How can we build on what we have learnt and achieved through our work on disability, so that when we make creative decisions we are fully conscious of the need to ensure a mixed gender environment?](#)" Through an established programme called 'Agent for Change' for auditing the organisations processes and activity, particularly in regard to disability, New Wolsey Theatre wanted to use the basis of this work to look at how to affect the same change in relation to gender equality. Although the percentage of female staff in their core workforce was at 48%, New Wolsey's use of the gender tracker highlighted a clear underrepresentation of female-identifying creatives within New Wolsey Theatre casts and creative teams. In order to investigate this numbers, Tonic Theatre conducted workshops and interviews with New Wolsey Theatre staff and gathered academic input to assist in informing actions going forward.

As a result of Tonic's findings, New Wolsey Theatre developed an action for increasing awareness across the whole organisation around questions of gender. The plan included filling in a 'gender representation analysis' by those responsible for the creation and programming of new work. These changes in processes and procedures aimed to increase the numbers of female-identifying creatives within New Wolsey Theatre's creative teams and to reflect on women's representation on stage. After their participation in Advance, the

percentage of female creatives in New Wolsey Theatre teams is 45.16%. That represents an increase in proportion of more than 14% in comparison to the statistics before their involvement in the Advance programme. Regarding their work in the youth theatre programme, New Wolsey Theatre has put in place organisational and structural changes, including the creation of new roles, developing thinking around gender and intersectional diversity. There is a significant majority of female-identifying creatives in decision-making roles and in young participants of the programme, which evidences New Wolsey Theatres commitment not only in the employment of more female-identifying creatives, but also in the potential impact that these individuals can have in terms of role modelling for young people.

Following their involvement with the Advance programme in 2016, New Wolsey Theatre have continued to examine their processes and procedures, looking at gender representation not only in terms of numbers but also in decision-making roles and the impact that individuals can have. They have reported that using an intersectional perspective, they now have a gender representation analysis for their own produced work and include 'Equality and Inclusion' as a standing item on all internal meetings across all levels of their work. New Wolsey Theatre has also included Unconscious Bias training as part of their rolling programme and aim to deliver remote training for all staff in early 2021 (New Wolsey 2020). New Wolsey Theatre reports an ongoing and conscious effort to diversify the creative, production and acting teams, rewriting scripts when needed and implementing an active search for bringing more female-identifying creatives to the creative teams – including using a list of female-identifying freelance artists supplied by Tonic.

## Sadler's Wells

Sadler's Wells focused their work on female-identifying choreographers and how women might be better supported by the organisation. Their research question was "[What challenges](#)

[can women encounter in building and sustaining a career in choreography? How might Sadler's Wells tailor its working processes to better support the development of women's careers?'"](#) Tonic supported Sadler's Wells research by carrying out a wide-ranging investigation including discussions with Sadler's Wells' staff members responsible for artist development and programming decisions. Tonic also held conversations with female-identifying dance producers, conducted one-to-one interviews with 18 female-identifying choreographers and organised a focus group with four women choreographers at different stages of career development and across a range of different artistic practices.

Some of the findings of this research included: the impact of the competitive journey as a professional dancer in the development of female-identifying creative voices, the notion of authorship, the preference of arts organisations for certain artistic practices, the interviewees' experience of fewer and lesser opportunities being offered to them than to men, and the challenge of managing family, personal and financial circumstances. In response, Sadler's Wells' teams implemented a developed version of Tonic's gender tracker, so they could monitor the work that they commission, produce, and present on their stages. They also considered analysing this information for making curatorial decisions, and for paying immediate attention to how to offer a greater number of opportunities to female-identifying choreographers. After Sadler's Wells' participation in the Advance programme and the actions taken, the percentage of female choreographers for productions commissioned, produced and presented on Sadler's Wells' stages rose to 38.80% for the period 2016-2020, representing an increase in proportion of 2.80% from the period 2013-2016 before the Advance programme. Alongside the statistical increase, Sadler's Wells has continued to be alert to the gender imbalance in the artistic programmes by means of the gender tracker, and has actively sought to support female-identifying artists to develop work in its studios through in-kind studio space.

After analysing the results of the investigation carried out in partnership with Tonic, and with the intention to redress the gender imbalance, Sadler's Wells has focused on different aspects of its artistic programmes. For example, looking at guest artistic directors working with the National Youth Dance Company, Sadler's Wells moved from having one female and four male guest artistic directors during 2012 – 2016, to having a 50:50 balance, with two female and two male guest artistic directors in 2017 – 2021. Regarding their 'New Wave Associate' programme, in 2018 Sadler's Wells appointed three new female-identifying or non-binary associates: L'atisse Rhoden, Julie Cunningham & Project O (Alexandrina Hemsley and Jamila Johnson-Small). Within the Breakin' Convention programme, Sadler's Wells is working to develop more female mentors to join the programme, inviting artists like Julia Cheng (UK) and Axelle (CN). Finally, in 'Back to the Lab', Breakin' Convention's annual professional platform, Sadler's Wells is aiming to have a 50:50 gender balance, and for 2021's edition, they are working with three female artists and one male artist. Sadler's Wells has continued to ensure visibility for strong female voices in the Lillian Baylis Studio's artistic programme, including programming artists such as Eva Recacha, Kiera Martin and Nora (Flora Wellesley Wesley, Eleanor Sikorski & Steph McMann). Additionally, as part of the same programme in the Lillian Baylis, Sadler's Wells has made a commitment to cover childcare costs, where possible, for dance artists who might not be able to perform at Sadler's Wells without this assistance.

Other new initiatives and projects that Sadler's Wells has established for emerging young choreographers include their Young Associates programme, launched in 2018. This initiative aims to support young dance-makers at the start of their careers. Within this programme, Sadler's Wells is committed to ensuring that female-identifying artists represent a minimum of 50% of each cohort. During 2018, Sadler's Wells organised a Summer University event in which they invited Parents in Performing Arts (PiPA) to lead a session and to offer a discursive space to bring light to the challenges of being an artist-performer and a parent. In this event, Sadler's Wells offered access to a mobile crèche in order to facilitate the participation of the group members.

# 3. Changes in Process and Policy

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As indicated above, this report recognises the limitations of expressing change in statistical form and so works to express the **impact of Advance** on procedural change and the benefits for individuals, the participating companies and the **industry as a whole in terms of shared experiences and best working practices.**

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In an industry drawing largely on fixed term and freelance workers, comparisons between working contexts, work models, and changes in provision and company procedures can make one company more desirable to work for than another – and word travels fast. This section draws attention first to the ‘local’ impact introduced by day-to-day changes in policies, processes and procedures before moving on to consider the potential impact for the wider industry arising from new initiatives instigated by an individual company.

As a result of their engagement with the Advance Programme, the following companies implemented specific changes in their policies and procedures which exemplify best practice and which are detailed below. It is to be noted that for other companies, namely Headlong, New Wolsey, ROH, Sadler’s Wells, and CFT, we have included significant accounts of initiatives and changes in policies in the section above.

## English Touring Theatre (ETT)

As part of Advance 2014’s cohort, English Touring Theatre (ETT) examined the implications of touring on female-identifying creatives and exploring what procedures they could improve on. Specifically, they researched [“What are the gender specific implications of touring for a woman and how could a](#)

[company such as ETT address them?”](#) Tonic conducted research with a group of actors who had toured with ETT and gathered information that was then shared with ETT. The company confirmed that many of their assumptions about why touring is hard were correct: finding appropriate accommodation and gaining information about potential digs from the list provided were the hardest aspect of touring. The research showed that the main gender specific element was personal safety and, in general, the lack of information regarding facilities, location and conditions of individual digs.

As a response to the feedback from Tonic’s research, ETT implemented changes in procedures, including a review of budgets to see if it is possible to accommodate cost of hotels and Airbnb’s. When that is not possible, ETT decided to visit the digs and check conditions. Another important policy change is related to childcare and caring responsibilities. ETT has introduced a line to their equal opportunities form asking about any caring responsibilities. Likewise, they have implemented a communication strategy between agents and casting directors, to find out if the creative staff member has any caring responsibilities and how they could arrange the creative’s accommodation to meet any different needs the individual may

have. ETT has also started to send a weekly email in advance of tour dates, listing family friendly activities. According to Sophie Scull, ETT's Executive Producer, the work initiated with Tonic in the Advance programme has been really supported by the creation of PIPA (Scull 2020). In an example of this, ETT has significantly overhauled its maternity provision, a change that according to Scull would not have happened without the work by Tonic and PIPA. Finally, as a new initiative, ETT has created a production management specific role, with the aim of recruiting staff that are less likely to be hired in different creative roles. For example, they have offered a 6-month training bursary for a female production manager.

## Gate Theatre

Through their involvement in the Advance Programme in 2014, the Gate Theatre focused its consideration on the reasoning and implications of the assumption that men are more attracted to Lighting and Sound FX roles. Specifically, they were interested in examining if there is a bias in recruitment and in training opportunities, which led to their research question ["Men are more naturally drawn to lighting and sound design.' Is this true? And if not how can access to these roles be made more equal?"](#) In collaboration with Tonic, the Gate investigated this idea further, speaking with student designers, educators and industry professionals and discussing the roles in more depth. A key finding was that the long hours (particularly in production weeks) and perceptions of personal confidence appeared to impact recruitment. As a result, the Gate explored alternative ways of doing techs. Following the lead set by Rachel Tackley (then AD at ETT) The Gate made a public 'pledge' to 'never again have an all-male creative team'. The Gate supported this commitment in the form of an appendix, an addendum to directors' contracts, which outlined that the Gate expected directors to commit to avoiding employment of an all-male creative team.

Former Executive Director, Clare Slater commented on the appendix, noting that

it 'was the single most effective outcome of the Advance programme at the Gate' (2020). Although it was only sent to directors and not other creatives, such as writers, it encouraged the lead artists to think more broadly about their usual 'go to' list. Slater reported how positively it was received and shared how the idea had been transported to the US Theatre Industry scene, with Rachel Chavkin 'sharing it widely at a conference in America, saying it was an example of good practice in the UK'.

Since 2017, when Ellen McDougall started as AD, this contractual requirement has evolved to ensure that representation within creative teams encompasses ethnic and cultural diversity. This commitment to representation further expanded to counterbalance the binary assumption of 50/50 gender representation, creating opportunities for trans, non-binary and gnc people. Since then, the Gate has had internal quotas for on stage representation and creative teams, and has run an open recruitment process for all assistant designers and directors, ensuring that across a season, these cohorts are representative. Looking forward, this work will extend to all freelancer recruitment, ensuring that the hiring of casual staff does not rely on a small network of known technicians, for example, but continues to provide open opportunities. In 2019, the [Queer House](#) became an Associate Company at the Gate, and their campaigning for, and representation of trans and non-binary performers in particular has fed in to all casting processes since. Having worked with Rachael Young on the freelance taskforce in 2020, who completed research into how to make the industry more accessible to neurodiverse freelancers, the Gate are working with her recommendations to improve accessibility in this area. Alongside this, the Gate are re-assessing fees for freelancers, recognising that low fees are a barrier for people from marginalised backgrounds, and in addition, that the historic working culture of the wider industry celebrates burn out, and pushes people to regularly work 12 hour days. The Gate are restructuring their tech schedules for

21/22 to ensure that there are no scheduled 12 hour days going forward.

In Summer 2020, alongside most arts organisations, in response to the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Gate published [their data](#) as part of the #PullUpOrShutUp call to action. The Gate declared that, 'We want our workforce - across all areas - to be representative of the communities that are local to the Gate, and of London more widely. We recognise that this involves a process of education, unlearning, and change. We want the Gate to be a truly antiracist organisation, and to be a place that people – audiences and employees alike, want to come back to, and feel safe, supported, excited, and able to make their best work.' The Gate will publish updates to this data annually, to ensure they are held accountable and that improvements to the representation of staff, board, and freelancer teams can be clearly measured.

## Northern Ballet

Being concerned at the lack of women choreographing classical and narrative led ballet, Northern Ballet joined the Advance programme in 2016. The main aim of the organisation was to investigate why they saw fewer female choreographers of classical ballet than men and how Northern Ballet could ensure that the girls and young women who dance with them were aware that choreography is an option, while having the opportunity to engage with choreographing practice. Specifically, they researched the following question: [“Why do we see fewer female choreographers of classical ballet than men and how can we ensure that the girls and young women who dance with us are aware that choreography is an option for them and have the opportunity to engage with it?”](#) The research process started with Tonic conducting workshops, focus groups and interviews with practising choreographers, women and men, to explore why fewer women are working in the field. The question was discussed not only with staff at Northern Ballet but also with staff at The Royal Ballet,

the Royal Ballet School and Sadler’s Wells. As a result of this initial part of the research, the company learned that a complexity of factors contributes to fewer women than men moving into the choreography of classical ballet, understanding that female dancers face issues of self-consciousness and confidence in training spaces that their male colleagues do not usually face. Other findings included the lack of role models and pressure to build-up a career as a dancer can affect female dancers’ considerations of choreography as a career pathway.

To respond to the findings, Northern Ballet developed an action plan across the Northern Ballet Company and the Academy of Northern Ballet,<sup>8</sup> encouraging girls and young women towards choreography of classical ballet. This plan has been embedded into their daily practice, instead of being implemented as a parallel initiative. Some of the actions that Northern Ballet has taken includes the inviting of women choreographers, such as Cathy Marston, as guest choreographers working with the Academy and the Ballet company, highlighting role models for young female dancers. Also, the creation of choreographic laboratories, with a strong encouragement to female dancers to take part, building up a playful and creative space for female creatives to explore their choreographing practice. Finally, Northern Ballet has created new opportunities for female dancers to start developing their choreography practice in house. One example is Mariana Rodrigues, who joined Northern Ballet in 2016 and in parallel with her work as a dancer, is developing her practice as a choreographer, creating the choreography for two of the latest Northern Ballet’s productions.

## Clean Break

As a theatre company focused on women, specifically those impacted by the criminal justice system, Clean Break dedicated its participation in the Advance programme on researching how it might be able to achieve better representation for all women within all

areas of the company. Specifically, the Senior team explored the following question: ["How can we alter our structures to increase the diversity of the women we employ to create a power shift at Clean Break and lasting change within the theatre industry?"](#) Clean Break was particularly inspired and challenged by a question from one of the Advance Away Days about 'routes into leadership', what the company was doing to ensure succession and how to embed greater diversity within the company, particularly at senior management and leadership levels. With Tonic, Clean Break undertook research into progression routes in arts management, examining barriers faced by Black and Global Majority individuals, working class women and those with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Clean Break specifically focused on an examination of its recruitment processes, different routes into the theatre industry and the possibilities for creating and developing new entry pathways.

Since its participation in the Advance Programme in 2016, Clean Break has significantly reviewed its recruitment processes, paying particular attention to attracting new trustees, the recruitment application process, and implementing its commitment to change. Clean Break notes that for it, diversity is emblematic of the women it works with and their shared stories. As a company it sees itself as offering the means and routes for those with lived experience of CJS to have better access to the wider theatre industry. After Advance, Clean Break focused on its internal senior management, trusteeship and leadership model. In its recruitment processes, it asks individuals to declare if they have lived experience of CJS and if so, those individuals who meet the person specification are guaranteed an interview. It has continued to work on its job advertisement process, with trustees, senior management and leadership attending a number of sessions run by People Make it Work as part of the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursary Fellowship scheme, which Clean Break is participating in throughout 2021-22 to support an individual from a lower socio-economic background into

employment with the Company. The focus to date has been around recruitment, including reviewing all recruitment packs, introducing video applications, audio and streamlining job descriptions, visuals and languages used. Clean Break has increased representation of individuals with lived experience of CJS on its Board, moving from having one Trustee with CJS lived experience (recruited in 2014) to 2019 when an additional two Trustees with CJS lived experience (from Clean Break's own membership) were recruited. Currently a quarter of Clean Break's Board Members have CJS lived experience and it is Clean Break's aspiration to increase this further. Finally, Clean Break has committed to increasing the diversity of the women it commissions; developing further new models of co-production; embedding anti-racism across all areas of company life, and advancing its influence in the wider theatre sector as part of a key impact strategy (Herrmann & McBrinn, 2020).

## New initiatives

As a cohort, several NPOs implemented new initiatives based on their response to the information discovered during the research process. It is also worth noting the importance of discussion, exchange of ideas and comparisons in practice, made possible during the **Advance Away Days**. Working as a cohort, large company alongside smaller, afforded the opportunity to share experiences and good practice, recognise habitual patterns and share individual experiences of bad practice. Specifically, the following four companies made changes to provisions and/or procedures or created specific initiatives to alter the experience of female-identifying creatives working with them: Northern Stage, Cast, Headlong and National Theatre.

### Northern Stage

As part of Advance programme's 2016 cohort, Northern Stage reflected on their contribution toward the creative development of mid-career companies in the North East, most of whom

are female-led. Northern Stage considered how the resources of their regional producing house might be used for addressing the operational issues the smaller local companies were facing. Specifically, they researched the following question: [“What are the specific needs of small, female-led, non-NPO companies in relation to sustainability and growth that can be met by a regional producing house?”](#) Tonic focused their research on the increasing reliance on small project-based grants and the barriers to sustainability and growth for female-led, mid-career artists and companies. They held a workshop session and a round of interviews for several female-led artists and companies based in the North East, through which Northern Stage started unpicking some of the issues that they face regarding sustainability and growth, especially funding models and organisational structures.

As a result of this research, Northern Stage decided to expand a strand of their artistic development activity to include focus on supporting the organisational development of companies in the region. In 2018, the NORTH training programme introduced Company Development alongside Actor Training and Small Scale Touring to help support the development of North East-based performers and theatre companies. The Company Development strand consists of a 12-month programme of support to help create a step change in the development of independent theatre companies and theatre makers. In the two cohorts of the programme, the selection and participation of female creatives and female-led companies has been outstanding: female beneficiaries of the program constitute almost 70% of the total. The programme is an important incentive on issues of sustainability and growth, as it includes workshops covering Finance, Fundraising, Marketing, Production, Participation and Technical Theatre. Besides that, the selected companies have four additional hours with a member of Northern Stage staff to support them in any given area.

As a direct outcome of Advance initiatives

addressing inequalities in female representation in the dramatic repertoire, particularly the low number of ‘classical’ play revivals and/or adaptations by female playwrights, Northern Stage presented their ‘Queens of the North’ season (December 2016) with re-tellings of *Hedda Gabler: This is not a Love Story* and *Dr Frankenstein* in adaptations by Greyscale’s Selma Dimitrijevic. In addition, Northern Stage artistic director Lorne Campbell commissioned Central’s Gilli Bush-Bailey to prepare two ‘forgotten’ plays by women for staged readings as part of the Queens of the North programme. Central’s collaboration with Northern Stage saw the RSC’s associate director Erica Whyman directing the staged reading of Susannah Centlivre’s *The Basset Table* (1705) and Rebecca Frecknell directing Jane Scott’s comedy *Whackham and Windham* (1817). Both plays were presented to a public audience with Newcastle University hosting a collaborative post show discussion with industry and academic partners from Manchester, Oxford, and Bristol. Funded by Northern Stage the week-long workshop provided work for local professional performers, introduced two new plays to directors, actors and audiences and demonstrated the potential for collaborations between academic research insights and professional theatre practice. The project showed the potential for a digital resource of plays by and for women with texts, readings, discussion and interviews on ‘forgotten’ plays (more information can be found [here](#)).

## Cast

As a relatively newly established receiving and producing theatre venue in Yorkshire,<sup>9</sup> Cast was most interested in reconsidering their structures and production strategies as an organisation with a specific focus on their relationships with and support for local and visiting artists. As a result of their reflections in 2016, Cast focused their research on the question: [“Do the development needs of male and female artists differ and if so, how? When formalising an artist development programme, how do we ensure women and](#)

### their needs are properly represented in it?"

Having determined their focus on developing a programme of artist and talent development, Cast undertook research with Tonic to identify the needs of local artists and the needs of female-identifying artists in order to inform their new programme to more succinctly reach these groups.

Since their involvement with the Advance Programme in 2016, Cast has received funding from Esme Fairburn to for a producer's post with a focussed remit on artist/talent development and support (COVID-19 has significantly impacted the development of the whole of the second year of this program). As a result of this funding, Cast now has a producer working closely with local artists, developing their projects alongside searching for new artists. Significant time and space is now available for emerging artists at Cast. The Deputy Director, Clare Clarkson, commented that resulting from their participation in Advance, Cast has extended from the initial focus on gender equality to broader questions of access, and more precisely, how Cast can better support people from low socio-economic backgrounds (Clarkson 2020). Cast is working with artists who are deaf or hearing impaired and are thus broadening their contact with local artists from the Doncaster area. Recent developments include Cast's shift developing local working models, creating local partnerships, and encouraging open and wide ranging conversations in early encounters with artists in order to make space for all their creative requirements.

## National Theatre

The National Theatre focussed their attention on their embedded working culture, to explore whether the way they were conducting their everyday business could be holding up some deep-rooted unconscious gender biases. Their questions were "What about how we currently communicate within the NT supports our aspiration to work more effectively with women and what could stand in our way? How can we ensure a full range of voices and perspectives are both heard and supported

### within our organisation and are given full opportunity to be expressed in the work we make?"

Besides their organisational targets around gender parity, in terms of the artistic work that they were creating, the National Theatre was interested in observing their own internal structures and dynamics. As part of Advance work they decided to focus on meetings as a particular aspect of their internal communications. The National Theatre invited Tonic to sit in their regular meetings, including artistic, operational, and departmental meetings, to observe behaviours and take notes. Tonic also conducted interviews with a range of staff from across the organisation, researching how they were experiencing and perceiving meetings at the National Theatre.

The research that Tonic carried out highlighted the importance of questioning the way in which the National Theatre conducted their meetings and the participation dynamics in them. Some of the findings included a tendency towards speed and 'getting things done', which perhaps was awarding more airtime to authoritative, decisive voices, that often were carrying perceived masculine behaviours – louder, more confident and invoking action rather than discussion. As a response to this, National Theatre's Senior Management Team undertook training into meeting facilitation, and they started looking into how other cultural leaders were running their internal communications. As a result of the Advance programme work, the National Theatre invited Tonic to carry out a year-long project (Project Rendezvous) designed to analyse the meeting dynamics and what actions could be taken to deliver a more inclusive and equalitarian working culture. This initiative continued to look through a gender lens as well as broadening out to other areas of diversity, at teams' meetings, as these are central to how the organisation operates and communicates internally.

# Expanding on Advance

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To return to our introduction, it is important to reiterate that this report seeks to identify and **celebrate the successes and changes** that the companies have implemented over the intervening years since their participation in the Advance 2014 and 2016 programmes.

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We have noted that most of the companies are continuing the journey toward greater equity and inclusion through the **Advance Network**, demonstrating that the ‘seeds of change’ are becoming green shoots, changing the way women are represented in performing arts companies and on their stages. This report is interested in establishing benchmarks for quantitative, numerical data, but more to expand the boundaries beyond numbers to include qualitative change; reporting on the different approaches, ideas, and initiatives that the companies have worked with, as well as drawing attention to some of the key wins that companies have achieved. Crucially, the publication of the report at this point of the Advance programme is to place a clear marker in the sand – **March 2021** – a full year after the first ‘Lockdown’ ushering in the closure of live arts buildings and the cessation of live performance. **It is vital that the evident gains in gender equality are not lost; that women in the performing arts are not yet another casualty of the global COVID-19 pandemic.**

## Thinking through Change

“If we don’t keep thinking about the pipeline into our industry in times of crisis and pay attention – we are going to get a less diverse pool of creatives in the future.” **Indhu Rubasingham, Artistic Director, Kiln Theatre, 2021**

Tonic developed the Advance programme to work specifically in partnership with

performance companies – **to work from within** – to collaborate with organisations, to help them ask difficult questions and to highlight blockages; to enable people to do things better by creating the space and ‘toolkits’ needed to make change from the inside out. The **Advance Programmes** established [Tonic Theatre](#) as a key instrument of change for women working across the industry.

Tonic has an ongoing and significant role to play in the recovery of the performance industry in the post-COVID-19 landscape. With the **Advance Network**, Tonic and its partners are now seen as a leading agent for change in EDI across the performing arts. From 2017, Tonic has been based in, and working out of the National Theatre, demonstrating impact and influence across the sector right at the heart of the industry. The Advance Network is one of a number of different programmes run by Tonic, and for each project Tonic works collaboratively with relevant industry partners. For example, in partnership with Equity, UK Theatre and the Society of London Theatre, Tonic have created a [Casting Toolkit](#), which offers an extensive range of tools, resources and prompting the casting process, clearly extending the use of the gender tracker which was an integral part of the initial Advance programmes.

The approaches and methodologies established during the Advance programmes have provided models for other organisations working for change. For example, Advance

established the template for working in participation with performance companies, taken up in the subsequent programme developed by Parents in the Performing Arts (PiPA), where cross-over gains in areas such as creating female / family friendly digs lists (ETT, CFT) are obvious. Advance also reinforced work by established pressure groups, such as SPHINX theatre company, (first established as a female playwriting cooperative thirty years ago), which has re-visioned its earlier 'Glass Ceiling Events' in a series of 'Women Centre stage' events. In 2020 Sphinx delivered 'Women in Theatre Forum Report' in association with Women in the Arts, PiPA, Women in Equity, Act for Change, 50.50 etc. to revive the wider study of women in the Arts (again Arts Council funded).

Through the success of the Advance Programmes in England, Tonic and Lucy Kerbel have worked closely with similar programmes calling for change in the UK and abroad. Tonic was involved with the [Waking the Feminists](#) call for women's equality in Irish Theatre, with Kerbel being invited to provide a keynote address at the group's seminal conference on stage at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin in 2015. Kerbel has also given presentations on Advance in Scotland (for the Scottish Theatre Federation), Sweden (at Stockholm's Stadsteatern) and the US ([Athena Film Festival](#), NYC) Since 2018, Tonic has been working with [ENOA](#) (European Network of Opera Academies) where, building on what has been learnt through the Advance programme, Tonic is now working with twelve different opera companies in Europe.

## Making Change Visible

Tonic has successfully created public platform events from which to celebrate the changing work of companies and individuals: **Tonic Connects Events** offer key spaces and opportunities for individuals and companies to come together to share best practice and address some of the key challenges facing the industry. The 2018 and 2019 events, hosted respectively by Kiln Theatre and the Lyric Theatre, addressed bullying and harassment (2018) and financial security for freelance

working women (2019). Tonic Connects 2020 event was postponed due to COVID-19, **Tonic Awards**, which began in 2017 (also postponed in 2020 as a result COVID-19), is an annual event sponsored by leading industry organisations, recognising and drawing attention to excellence by women working in all aspects and disciplines of performing arts industries. The list of recipients can be seen [here](#).

"Using data to track employment stats was very helpful. I think it was the single most effective thing of the whole programme, for all participants. Things changed radically thereafter. I still doggedly use data to track all sorts of equal opportunities areas at the Donmar in my current role. Colleagues think I'm a bit obsessed – but it works. [...] The spirit of being transparent (via data) and then pledging to make positive change whilst reflecting honestly what did and didn't work is something I continue to do in my practice. I learned that from Advance" – **Clare Slater, formerly Executive Director at the Gate Theatre, now Head of New Work at Donmar Studios, 2020.**

**Central's team** conducted interviews with current and past members of staff involved in the Advance programmes – two points kept emerging: the opportunity to create **change from within** an organisation, and the fact that taking part in the Advance programme **sowed seeds of change** in their own working practices and, for some, the organisations they went on to work with.

Several companies reported that the plans and processes they put in place as a result of Advance's work for gender equity, have been vital in more directly embedding processes and procedures for improving racial equity. Part of this shift is **making visible** the commitment to change, sharing practices and communicating change. For example, we note that the Gate publishes its policies and statistics on its website under [Our Values](#) section. The openness and ease of access to this data invites a conversation with its audience, its creatives and the industry as a whole. It also places the Gate's commitment to intersectional equity

front and centre to its work. In July 2020, in response to [The Call to Action's](#) Theatre: #PullUpOrShutUp, the Gate published [data](#) on their website from a survey they conducted between September 2017 and March 2020 with performers, lead artists and freelancers they worked with during that period, again demonstrating the Gate's commitment to change and its intention to becoming an anti-racist organisation.

## Changing the 'Go to List'

As a university and conservatoire [Central's role as academic partners](#) and **stakeholders**, preparing the next generation of professional practitioners, placed the research team in a position to bring specific relevance to the Advance work. The research was informed by a depth of vision informed by earlier calls for equal representation in the performance industries (specifically earlier Arts Council reviews on female employment in the industry 1987; 1994 etc. 'What Share of the Cake Now?').<sup>10</sup> Central's role as Academic partners underlined the importance of **expanding the discussion** around gender equity, tracking **pathways to impact**, and encouraging attention to **sustainability and longevity of change** by asking:

- How is change embedded in company policy and process when individuals move so rapidly and frequently within the industry?
- Given that there is a rapid turnover of creative personnel within the industry how can modes of change travel with them?

The marked success of the Advance programmes has been the opportunity for organisations and individuals to **network**, to come together to talk, research and learn together. The patterns for exchange established during Awaydays, and the events which Tonic has continued to run in the form of Tonic Connects, and now the Advance Network programme expand the potential for establishing best practice. As Rachel Tackley put it: **challenging the 'go-to list'** (2020) in a fast-changing industry, where opportunities and

openings are very limited and time pressures lead to individuals and so organisations working repeatedly with and through the same pool of people – the people they know.

Moves to confront and change this practice lie in the **outreach or community-based practice** organisations also engage in but which are often confined to 'new' work in small spaces rather than main stage work – this is a key route into the industry for many creatives. Where more attention and focus is given to youth theatres, community-based projects and the educational or outreach work, key changes and a shifting of the 'go to list' can occur. A number of companies contributing to this report are making significant gains in this area. See the work by Kiln for example or New Wolsey Theatre's work around diversity in race and ethnicity, disability and gender, demonstrating impact in terms of shifting change and vision for potential career pathways open to young female-identifying creatives taking part in their youth theatre programme.

## Continuing Change

Events triggering the #MeToo and the Black Lives Matters movements have all worked to shift the terrain and **Advance Network** works with companies' commitment to the process, working on broader questions and understandings of intersectional equity and inclusion.

As **academic partners**, we offer the following observations and provocations in conclusion to our report on to the ongoing work of the **Advance Network**:

- The effectiveness of the Advance programmes can be seen in the many **small, yet practical changes** that organisations were able to make.
- Acknowledging that **change takes time**. We are now seeing the impact 5-7 years later. What needs to be put in place now to track change in 2031?
- The importance of continuing to track this data, making the gender tracker, as outlined

on the Tonic Casting toolkit site, more widely available – to include conservatoires and other professional training organisations – also extending its range to cover **more than gender while maintaining a space for women.**

- **Networks** offer support and models of best practice but can also act as a form of **gatekeeping**. Commitment to constantly revisit and re-examine, work fluidly, responsibly and openly to mitigate against unintentional gatekeeping.
- Leading companies to consider working more closely with different types of organisations:
  - For example, **setting up supportive partnerships** (e.g. by Northern Stage and the Gate) allowing for collaborative exchange and growth, bringing new work, new changes and new voices to wider platforms.
- **Challenging places of professional preparation:** ensuring industry engages more fully, especially in terms of leading next generation industry recruitment from traditional and non-traditional pathways to work.
  - Potential partnerships with organisations such as the [Diversity School Initiative](#).
  - Working partnerships with conservatoires and training institutions, ensuring UK wide, and socio-economic equity recruitment to industry creative roles.
  - Working in partnership with alternative programmes offering training opportunities (as demonstrated by Kiln).

The Central team acknowledges the responsibility of conservatoires and educational establishments to lead and model the type of changes and ways of working from within. The call to model best practice for students so that as graduates they are able to work in an industry that represents and reflects them fully. For people at the centre to ensure that the pathways are kept open for all those entering the industry. Within education, here have been

significant changes since 2014 (links to [Sarah Frankcom](#) (LAMDA) [Bernadine Evaristo](#) (Rose Bruford), [Josette Bushell-Mingo](#) (Central). The conservatoires play a keen role here – with stronger links needing to be made between companies, advocacy groups and other education establishments.

## Staging Change

To conclude, emerging reports note that as a result of COVID-19 across all sectors, female-identifying and non-binary individuals have been significantly impacted in terms of job losses. Women are leaving, or being forced out of, the job market due to shouldering the majority of childcare and other caring responsibilities.<sup>11</sup> PriceWaterhouseCoopers' annual report [Women in Work](#) Index found that that COVID-19 has placed progress for women in work back to 2017 levels. PWC concluded, "In order to undo the damage caused by COVID-19 to women in work – even by 2030, progress towards gender equality needs to be twice as fast as its historical rate." The arts must be the sector which leads this focus on a progress towards greater gender equity. In the UK, women were furloughed in greater numbers than men during the first lockdown and calls have been made for the UK government to implement women's strategy to "to tackle the unequal economic and domestic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic" ([Topping](#), 2021). During the first lockdown, according to the campaign [ERA 50:50](#) "women were around a third more likely to work in a sector that was completely shut down during the first national lockdown than men, with accommodation and food services and arts, entertainment and recreation among the most impacted sectors" ([2021](#)).

**This is the moment for the arts to show the value of its leadership in realizing gender equality, progress to gender equity and intersectional equity. This is not an aspirational statement – the time for aspiration is gone, it needs to be reality – and Tonic's Advance programmes works from a position to help achieve that reality.**

# Further Reading

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Tonic's Advance Programmes coincided with a new wave of awareness and continues to engage with conversations and calls for action around gender equity.

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At the beginning of Advance, in 2014, Laura Bates's [Everyday Sexism](#) and Lucy-Ann Holmes' [No More Page Three](#) were among the movements identified by some as defining a 'fourth wave' of protests around gender equity. These and other pressure groups generally worked from outside, calling for changes across broad social and cultural terrains and, notably, recruiting support via social media. Other key texts and references we recommend include:

- Babb, Gail (2018). ['Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: What is stopping us?'](#) *Provocation Paper for the Clore Leadership Fellowship 2017/18*.
- Fallow, Catriona, with Mullan, Sarah (2021). 'The Royal Court in the Wake of #MeToo', with Sarah Mullan, in Judith Rudaoff (ed), [Performing #MeToo: How Not To Look Away](#), (Bristol: Intellect), pp. 123-140.
- Golding, Amy (2015). ['Female Theatre Directors in the UK: Why the Need to "Prove" Ourselves?'](#) *Provocation Paper for the Clore Leadership Fellowship 2013/14*.
- Masso, Giverny (2021). ['Gender inequality likely to increase post-pandemic, report warns'](#) *The Stage*, January 13, 2021.
- Sphinx Theatre, University Women in the Arts & December Group (2020). [Women in Theatre Forum Report: Part One](#).
- The Stage (2020). ['The Stage diversity in leadership study: Slow change at the top.'](#) *The Stage*, January 2, 2020.
- Topping, Alexandra (2021). ['Women's wellbeing hit harder than men's during pandemic, says ONS.'](#) March 10. *The Guardian*.
- Kerbel, Lucy (2013). *100 Great Plays for Women* (London: Nick Hern Books).
- Kerbel, Lucy (2017). *All Change Please* (London: Nick Hern Books).
- [ERA 50:50](#)
- European Theatre Convention (2021). [Gender Equality & Diversity in European Theatres: A Study](#). (Berlin: European Theatre Convention).
- Stellar Quines and Hamilton, Christine (2020). [Where are the Women? Part 2](#). An analysis of creative roles by gender in Scottish theatre 2019/2020, commissioned by Stellar Quines.

# Interviews

Interviews were conducted by [Dr Katharine Low](#) and [Gabriel Vivas-Martínez](#), with the following people, conducted under full compliance with Central's [ethics and integrity framework](#).

We thank: Gemma Baxter, Claire Birch, Anneliese Graham and Alistair Spalding, Robert Hastie, Chris Haydon, Anna Herrmann and Róisín McBrinn, Greg Jauncey, Lucy Kerbel, Elaine Kidd, Rosie Mortimer, David Nixon, Mariana Rodrigues, Indhu Rubasingham, Sophie Scull, Rachel Tackley.

We also thank everyone from the companies who responded to our numerous emails.

<sup>1</sup> A [guide](#) to how ACE works with their NPOs.

<sup>2</sup> The 2014 Advance programme was supported by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the 2016 programme was supported by Arts Council England.

<sup>3</sup> See: Lola Olufemi's [Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power](#) (2020), The Gender Trust's [Gender Concepts around the World, What is wrong with labels?](#) by the Institute of Development Studies, [Transgender, Third Gender, No Gender: Part II](#) by Neela Ghoshal, the [Resources for Professionals](#) by Gendered Intelligence amongst others.

<sup>4</sup> A four-year Tonic-led programme of ongoing training, exploration and collaborative working supporting organisations to deepen engagement begun during the Advance programme but now extended more broadly across all their work on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. 16 of the 20 Advance organisations chose to join the Advance Network: Almeida, Cast, Chichester Festival Theatre, Clean Break, English Touring Theatre, Gate, Headlong, Kiln, Leeds Playhouse, National Theatre, New Wolsey Theatre, Northern Ballet, Royal Opera House, Royal Shakespeare Company, Sadler's Wells, Sheffield Theatres. Although not members of the Advance Network, thanks to a prior research partnership between Northern Stage and [Professor Gilli Bush-Bailey](#) and Mahogany Opera's recent contact with Tonic, we are also able to share their initiatives and work in this report.

<sup>5</sup> This is a distillation of the information found in the Advance website.

<sup>6</sup> NB. Artistic Director, Daniel Evans and Executive Director Rachel Tackley (2016-2018) were both previously attached to companies participating in the 2014 Advance Programme: English Touring Theatre and Sheffield Theatre respectively. In 2019, Rachel Tackley moved from CFT to her appointment as Creative Director at [Riverside Studios](#). Kathy Bourne was then appointed as CFT Executive Director.

<sup>7</sup> Kiln closed for a capital project between July 2016 – Autumn 2018 – reopening the new building as Kiln, hence the lack of numbers in that period.

<sup>8</sup> The [Academy of Northern Ballet](#) is a centre for ballet training in which the students train in the same setting as professional company dancers, which creates 'invaluable opportunities for mentoring and unique possibilities to work with, train alongside and gain an insight into life as a professional dancer' (Northern Ballet, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Cast opened in 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Gardner's 'What Share of the Cake?: The employment of women in the English theatre (1987)' was a report commissioned by the Women's Playhouse Trust on companies then in receipt of Arts Council Revenue grants. In 1994 the study was updated and reported by Jennie Long 'What Share of the Cake Now?' Both reports appear as Chapters 15 (pp. 97-102) and 16 (pp. 103-107) respectively in *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance* eds. Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Gay (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> See the Fawcett Society's reports on the impact of COVID-19 on [mothers, low-income families with children, parents](#). This is discussed in more depth in their [Coronavirus Crossroads: Equal Pay Day 2020 Report](#).