

# Why wait for women's position to worsen?

As government budget cuts have a disproportionate effect on women and their career progression, **Jo Caird** asks what the industry must do to enable women to rise up to the top positions in the arts

**T**he first issue of 2012 saw the release of *The Stage* 100, this newspaper's annually updated list of the biggest names in UK theatre. As always, it contains plenty to excite debate, but one of the most striking aspects of this year's list is the paucity of female theatre-makers.

Of the 117 industry movers and shakers that appear (there are some joint listings), 92 are men and 25 are women, a mere 21% of the total. Looking at the top 20, the situation seems a little better – women make up 27% here. But further examination reveals that although there are seven women on this list, all but three of them appear in double acts with men. It is only Ruth Mackenzie (at eight), Sonia Friedman (at 13) and Josie Rourke (a new entry to the top 20, at 17), who occupy solo entries.

According to a report published by Arts Council England last month following its annual survey of regularly funded organisations, women made up 59% of permanent staff and 47% of contractual staff at organisations

funded in 2010/2011. There is clearly no shortage of women working in theatre. Yet why is it the case that men dominate numerically in chief executive roles, in the boardroom, and in subjective lists such as *The Stage* 100? Why is the industry still led by men?

In 2007, the Cultural Leadership Programme, a government-funded scheme to promote excellence in leadership across the creative and cultural sectors commissioned a piece of research into women in leadership. They asked more than 800 women and men about their ambitions, qualifications, experience and what they felt to be the barriers to success. The data they gathered presents a rather depressing picture of women's status in the creative industries but, on the bright side, it gives us almost everything we need to address the issue of under-representation of women at top levels in the performing arts.

The most important factor is unquestionably theatre's lack of flexibility when it comes to work/life balance. Regrettably, the majority

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Josie Rourke (above), Sonia Friedman (right) and Ruth Mackenzie (below) were the only women in the top 20 of *The Stage* 100 not to appear in partnership with a man

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of care-giving in British society still falls to women, so while men are free to pursue their careers unhindered by the constraints of family life, many women feel they have no choice but to interrupt their professional development with career breaks or part-time work in order to devote time to their families. This issue affects childless women too, as the possession of a womb is enough to make a woman a 'risky' appointment. As with every other profession, the solution is greater flexibility within organisations and fairer parental leave legislation. It's not a problem for women alone and it shouldn't be something that either prevents women from putting themselves up for the top jobs, or stops trustees appointing them when they do.

Another barrier in women's way is our unwillingness to put ourselves forward for leadership roles. A lack of female role models, along with the pernicious societal rhetoric that says that men are natural leaders and women natural carers, leads women to believe that the top jobs are not for them. The positive effect of seeing successful all-female teams, such as that of Gemma Bodinetz and Deborah Aydon at the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, cannot be underestimated. For this reason, it's imperative that women in power are celebrated.

In March 2010, following its report on women in leadership, the CLP published a list of 50 'Women to Watch' in the creative industries, relevant highlights of which were published in *The Stage*. The intention

was for the list to be an annual event, designed to inspire future generations of female creative professionals, but with the closure of the CLP in March 2011, a second 'Women to Watch' list was never put out. Now is surely the time to rectify the situation. Perhaps this very newspaper could spare the pages?

If we want the faces at the top of the industry to be truly representative of theatre as a whole, and more pertinently, of society in general, this is something that all of us, women and men, need to commit to. Only by acknowledging that this problem exists and by pulling together and encouraging women to be ambitious for themselves and each other can we affect the sort of sea change required.

Now especially is the moment to be vigilant. It's an acknowledged fact that the coalition's budget cuts are affecting women disproportionately – as services are axed, it's women who are taking up the slack in terms of caring for vulnerable partners and family members, and as child-related benefits are withdrawn, it becomes more difficult for women to afford the childcare they need to work outside the home.

We may not see this reflected in next year's *The Stage* 100, or the one after that, but if women are allowed to fall silently out of the running for leadership positions over the coming years as the cuts really take hold, we may one day find ourselves going backwards rather than forwards, and that is not something the industry can afford to do.