# Is Theatrical Experimentation Gendered?

DOI : 10.46522/S.2026.01.6

**Cristina-Genoveva MODREANU, PhD**
University of the Arts Târgu Mureș
cmodreanu@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** *In a recent book, I analyzed reviews of productions authored by women and found that, in the 1960s and 1970s, Romanian women theatre directors were at the forefront of theatrical innovation, yet critics were not prepared to recognize the originality of their contributions. What Magda Bordeianu, Sorana Coroamă, Ariana Kunner, or Olimpia Arghir were proposing—popular theatre, the use of Brechtian tools, direct engagement with audiences, musical experimentation, and the integration of songs—was not appreciated at the time. Today, however, similar approaches are widely embraced and regarded as successful, by both male and female creators. These women's names have not entered the Romanian theatre canon, which remains predominantly male, with the notable exception of director Cătălina Buzoianu, whose work, however, is not typically classified as experimental. In short, the female contribution to experimental theatre is consistently underacknowledged on both sides of the Atlantic.*

*Drawing from my analysis of local female contributions to experimental theatre, and building on the critical frameworks presented over time by Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", RoseLee Goldberg's "Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present", and Kim Solga's "Theatre and Feminism", my presentation will explore the following questions: Is theatrical experimentation gendered? Why is experimental work more readily recognized when produced by male creators than by female artists?*

*A recent study on the perception of abstract art suggests that "art has no gender, only gender bias," as its authors argue. If art has no gender but is filtered through gendered bias, can the same be said of theatrical experimentation?*

**Key words:** *theatre, experiment, gender, female artists, theatre canon.*

In the modern history of theatre, the most widely recognized and canonized experimental creators have overwhelmingly been men—Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson, Peter Brook, Andrei Șerban, among many others. A recent online series documenting the experimental theatre scene in New York, *Artifacts*, reflects a similar imbalance: the majority of its interviewees are male. They speak at length about their artistic visions and conceptual approaches, collectively creating the impression that Downtown Theatre—the

equivalent of experimental theatre in New York during the 1960s and 1970s—was largely a male-dominated field.

This impression, however, is contradicted by feminist critical theory. Essays and books published on this period by scholars such as Elin Diamond (*Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory*, 1988) and Jill Dolan (*The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 1988), to name only two, analyze a wide range of radical practices developed by women artists. These include the work of playwrights and directors such as Caryl Churchill and Joan Littlewood; lesbian performances at New York's WOW Café, including Holly Hughes's *Lady Dick* and Split Britches' (Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver) *Upwardly Mobile Home*; Karen Finley's controversial feminist, body-based performances; and the work of Ruth Maleczech and JoAnne Akalaitis, two of the founding members of the experimental theatre collective Mabou Mines as well as that of director Elizabeth LeCompte, co-founder of The Wooster Group. Yet, out of the eight interviews featured in the *Artifacts* series, only three focus on women creating experimental theatre, and among all the figures mentioned above, only JoAnne Akalaitis is included[1]. Female artists are remembered less frequently in dominant theatre histories, and some disappear almost entirely from the historical record, one recent article about actress Anne Elizabeth Howes, another member of The Wooster Group explains. Howes performed in a trilogy created by Spalding Gray in the 70s and was remarked as a powerful actress and dancer after she appeared in *Rumstick Road*, the performance being considered „a legacy-building triumph for the Woosters, which just celebrated 50 years of making genre-dissolving work under LeCompte's direction"[2]. Yet, little attention was paid to what happened to her after she disappeared from The Wooster Group's productions.[3]

A similar pattern can be observed in Romanian theatre history. In a recent book, *Învinși și învingători. Artiști în culisele scenei socialiste* [*Defeated and Victors. Artists Behind the Scenes of the Socialist Stage*], published by Vremea in 2025, I analyzed critical reviews of productions directed by women during the 1960s and 1970s. This research revealed that Romanian women were often at the forefront of theatrical innovation, yet critics were largely unprepared to recognize the originality and significance of their contributions.

My analysis is based on three volumes of theatre criticism published in the 1970s, covering productions from the previous decade. Out of a total of 198 critical texts, only 24 —approximately 12% of the total corpus —were dedicated to performances created by women directors. A qualitative analysis of these articles revealed recurring prejudices

[1] https://artifacts.movie/downtown-performance/ last accessed February 4th, 2026

[2] https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/04/theater/wooster-group-libby-howes-theater.html last accessed February15th, 2026

[3] Ibidem

and stereotypes used by critics in their evaluation of women's work. By cataloguing the 'pros' and 'cons' articulated in these reviews, I identified two main categories of criticism directed at women theatre-makers. The first concerned what critics described as the "popular character" of these productions, which included collective forms of play, direct audience involvement, an emphasis on comic elements, and the use of songs or other musical devices to advance meaning. The second category focused on 'interventions in the text', such as translations deemed 'too free', the transformation of verse plays into prose, textual collages, cuts, or outright rewritings.

When praise was granted, it was often framed in distinctly masculine terms. Critics lauded 'virile performances', understood as strict dramatic articulation, clearly delineated characters, violent scenes, and a forceful acting style. Similarly, qualities such as 'coherence, rhythm, and structure' were valued—terms that, in practice, signified the absence of abrupt shifts, surprises, or formal instability, and instead privileged rigidity and inflexibility.

What female directors such as Magda Bordeianu, Sorana Coroamă, Ariana Kunner, or Olimpia Arghir proposed—popular theatre forms, the use of Brechtian techniques, direct engagement with audiences, original approaches to dramatic texts, musical experimentation, and the integration of songs—was not appreciated at the time. Today, however, many of these same artistic strategies are widely embraced and celebrated as innovative forms of theatrical practice, employed by both male and female creators alike. Despite this, these women's names have not entered the Romanian theatrical canon, which remains predominantly male, with the notable exception of director Cătălina Buzoianu, whose work, however, is not typically classified as experimental. In short, female contributions to experimental theatre have been and still are consistently underacknowledged on both sides of the Atlantic.

At this point, I would like to focus on three major female contributions to the critical thinking about art.

The first is Linda Nochlin's seminal essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* Published in *ARTnews* magazine in 1971. The essay directly addresses the structural conditions that shape artistic recognition. Significantly, in that same year, out of eighty-four articles devoted to painters in *ARTnews*, only two focused on women artists. This striking imbalance exposes how the very notion of "greatness" in the art world was implicitly constructed as male. Rather than accepting the absence of women from artistic canons as evidence of inferior achievement, Nochlin challenged the institutional, educational, and ideological structures that prevented women from accessing the same opportunities, resources, and visibility as men. Her argument shifted attention away from individual talent and toward the social mechanisms that determine who is remembered, celebrated, and incorporated into cultural history.

A similar gendered logic has historically governed the field of theatre, where recognition, visibility, and institutional legitimacy have likewise been overwhelmingly reserved for men. Theatre histories have traditionally been organized around the figure of the male genius—the visionary playwright, director, or theorist whose innovations are understood to have transformed the art form. The canon of twentieth-century experimental theatre exemplifies this tendency. Figures such as Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, and Augusto Boal occupy central positions in scholarly narratives of theatrical innovation, while the contributions of women have often been marginalized, fragmented, or relocated to adjacent categories such as performance art, community theatre, feminist theatre, or contemporary dance.

Nochlin's intervention is particularly useful for understanding this process because it encourages us to ask not whether women have produced experimental theatre, but rather how experimental theatre has been defined, documented, and canonized. The question is not the absence of women from theatrical experimentation but the criteria through which experimentation becomes visible and historically significant. Women artists have long developed innovative performance practices, challenged theatrical conventions, experimented with collective creation, audience participation, bodily expression, and alternative dramaturgies. Yet these contributions have frequently been excluded from dominant histories of experimental theatre or interpreted through gendered assumptions that diminish their significance.

These dynamics are examined in detail by RoseLee Goldberg in *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, the second essential critical contribution I intend to discuss. In her book, artists such as Joan Jonas, Meredith Monk, Laurie Anderson, and Pina Bausch are situated within the history of performance art. While Goldberg's categorization highlights the interdisciplinary nature of their work, it also raises important questions about disciplinary boundaries, as these practices can equally be placed within the history of postmodern theatre. Their work traverses multiple artistic fields, resisting stable classification while exemplifying a shared experimental impulse.

Taken together, these examples suggest that "experimental theatre" is not a fixed or autonomous genre. Rather, theatrical experimentation emerges through ongoing exchanges with other artistic forms, including visual art, music, and dance. In this context, practices are often labelled according to institutional conventions rather than artistic substance, revealing how gendered structures of recognition have shaped not only artistic careers but also the terminology and historiography of experimental performance.

The case of theatre demonstrates precisely the kind of structural exclusion identified by Nochlin and the need of an alternative genealogy addressed by Goldberg. Access to directing positions, major stages, funding, critical attention, and archival preservation has historically been unequal. Consequently, male artists have enjoyed greater opportunities not only to create experimental work but also to have that work documented, reviewed, taught, and remembered. The issue, therefore, is not whether women have participated in

theatrical innovation; rather, it concerns the institutional processes through which certain innovations acquire legitimacy and become part of the canon. Nochlin's critiques and Goldberg's genealogy of "performance at" allow us to understand experimental theatre not as a neutral field of artistic achievement but as a domain shaped by broader relations of power, including gendered systems of recognition.

The third contribution I want to mention in this context is the critical framework developed by Kim Solga in *Theatre and Feminism*. This book offers a comprehensive re-engagement with key feminist interventions in theatre, literary, and performance studies since the 1980s. It traces gradual yet decisive shifts in critical tone, methodology, and political orientation—from the early "feminist revolution" in theory to later analytical frameworks addressing the male gaze in theatre, feminist critique as an interpretive lens, and gender as a socially constructed and performative process

Solga also critically interrogates the concept of "post-feminism," demonstrating how it operates as a discursive trap promoted by neoliberal agendas that obscure persistent structural inequalities. This argument is supported through engagement with contemporary feminist scholarship across diverse racial and positional perspectives, including both white and black feminist thinkers (Butler 1993; Phelan 1993; McRobbie 2009; Gay 2014; Solga 2016). Finally, the book convincingly argues that theatre, as both an artistic and institutional practice, is profoundly shaped by gender relations, as evidenced by extensive empirical research and the continued underrepresentation of women in mainstream theatre across Europe, Canada, and the United States.

Building on these three foundational works, I pose the following questions: *Is theatrical experimentation gendered? Why is experimental work more readily recognized when produced by male creators than by female artists?* While theatre is undeniably shaped by gender, it remains unclear how gender operates specifically within the domain of theatrical experimentation.

To address these "big questions," I propose breaking them down into smaller ones.

First: *Is theatrical experimentation gendered?* A recent study on the perception of abstract art suggests that "art has no gender, only gender bias," as its authors argue (Damiano et al. 2024, 727). The study examines whether viewers can identify an artist's gender from abstract artworks and how gender bias shapes both attribution and evaluation. Across three experiments involving approximately 800 participants and 160 abstract paintings by an equal number of male (Pollock, Louis, Twombly, Kline) and female artists (Krasner, Frankenthaler, Mitchell, Hartigan), artworks were consistently attributed to male authors, irrespective of the creator's actual gender. Although perceived male authorship influenced descriptive judgments derived from art criticism, the artist's real gender did not significantly affect overall aesthetic appreciation. These results indicate that abstract art is not inherently gendered; rather, interpretation is filtered through persistent gender bias. Moreover, the findings suggest a disconnect

between the gendered frameworks of 1960s art criticism and contemporary audience perception, with stylistic cues playing a more decisive role than gender itself in aesthetic evaluation. This raises a broader question: if art itself has no gender but is mediated through gendered bias, can a similar dynamic be observed in experimental theatre?

Second: *Why is experimental work more readily recognized when produced by male creators?* Recognition is generated through multiple mechanisms: institutional decision-makers, critical discourse, and audiences. When theatre managers are predominantly men, recognition often circulates among peers. When critics—regardless of gender—operate within misogynistic frameworks, validation is likewise distorted. Audience reception plays a similar role: if spectators are biased or lack exposure to experimental work, they are more likely to reject it. This dynamic poses an additional challenge in contemporary Romanian theatre, where women appear to be among the most daring experimenters, not only in the past but also in the last decades, particularly in documentary theatre, political theatre, intimate narratives, taboo topics, archival work, and hybrid forms.

This leads to a final question: *Are the new emancipatory strategies employed by female artists working against them within a patriarchally structured theatre industry?*

Based on my archival research, the answer is yes. The case of theatre director Magda Bordeianu is illustrative. In 1968, while still a student, she founded Podul Theatre, which generated significant interest despite existing in its original form for only two years. She introduced shadow theatre, worked with non-actors, placed spectators within the performance space, and encouraged direct interaction. After her political expulsion, Teatrul Podul continued for decades without this experimental drive, and Bordeianu herself was erased from its history until her recent rediscovery within *The Feminist Theatre Archive. FEM100* project. Theatre director and playwright Gianina Cărbunariu later addressed this erasure in the performative lecture *Magda by Gianina*, linking Bordeianu's story to her own and exposing the mechanisms through which patriarchal systems render female creators invisible.

Interviews with contemporary female artists published in *Scena.ro*'s "Superwomen" series confirm similar patterns. Female theatre directors such as Alexandra Badea, Carmen Lidia Vidu, Adina Lazăr, and Catinca Drăgănescu recount entering a professional environment dominated by men, where women were discouraged from directing and relegated to smaller spaces and budgets. Despite high numbers of female graduates from directing programs, access to state theatres, major stages, and prestigious awards remains limited due to informal networks, patriarchal attitudes, and institutional inertia—not only in Romania, but internationally.

In a conversation between Badea and Vidu, Badea notes that she was only the third woman to direct on the main stage of the National Theatre in Bucharest in one hundred years, while Vidu recalls that only two women had won the UNITER Award for Best Director (founded in 1990) before her win in 2021. They discuss how representation—or its absence—shapes artistic imagination, internalized limitations, and career

trajectories. Both describe how they initially perceived directing as a masculine field and required years of feminist reflection, new collaborations, and international exposure to reclaim the identity of *regizoare* [female theatre director]. Their dialogue exposes the myth of the male "master director," the devaluation of feminine perspectives, and the absence of women from theatrical canons and pedagogies, while also advocating for gender-parity policies, such as those implemented in France.

Theatre, like all art, has no gender, but it is filtered through gendered bias. Over time, female artists have responded to representational and narrative constraints in diverse ways: some through emancipatory strategies, others through counter-emancipatory adjustments that allow access to mainstream stages. Theatre history suggests that those who adapt are remembered, while others are forgotten (see the detailed research at www.fem100.ro).

But this situation is changing. Today, theatre history is increasingly contested; counter-histories are being written; and researchers are recovering women's contributions across cultures, reshaping the canon. While some women still choose counter-emancipatory paths in order to survive institutionally, others do not. These artists—who persist in experimentation despite systemic resistance—may well be the ones who enter the new histories of theatre, even if those histories must first be written specifically for them.

The question posed in the title—whether theatrical experimentation is gendered—can therefore be answered only with an important qualification. The evidence discussed throughout this article suggests that experimentation itself is not inherently gendered. Women and men have employed comparable aesthetic strategies, formal innovations, and modes of theatrical inquiry. What remains profoundly gendered are the mechanisms through which experimentation is recognized, legitimized, documented, and incorporated into theatre history. The experimental theatre canon has historically privileged male creators, while the contributions of women have frequently been marginalized, reclassified, or forgotten. In this sense, theatrical experimentation is not gendered as an artistic practice, but its historiography and institutional recognition continue to be structured by gendered forms of power.

Viewed from this perspective, the history of experimental theatre appears less as a succession of exceptional male innovators and more as a contested field in which recognition has been unevenly distributed. These arguments thus provide an essential framework for examining why female theatre-makers, despite their substantial contributions to theatrical experimentation, remain underrepresented in theatre historiography. It also suggests that recovering these histories requires not only to add women to an existing canon, but it also demands a critical reassessment of the very criteria through which theatrical innovation and artistic greatness have been defined.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

BUTLER, Judith. 1993. Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex". New York: Routledge.

DAMIANO, Claudia; WINTER, Stefanie de; RUTA Nicole; WAGEMANS Johan, 2024. Art has no gender, only gender bias, *Journal of Vision* September 2024, Vol.24, 727. doi:https://doi.org/10.1167/jov.24.10.727

DIAMOND, Elin, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory", in: *The Drama Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1988, pp. 82–100.

DOLAN, Jill, 1988. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

GAY, Roxane, 2014. *Bad Feminist*. New York: Harper Perennial.

© Cristina-Genoveva Modreanu, 2026. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).