Bringing Gender into Development Theatre: Five Cases in India

After reviewing people's participation and gender in development theatre in general, the role of development theatre is described in five water and sanitation programmes in India. The author concludes that collective action and behavioural change require a different type of theatre than now practised in some of these programmes. A gender perspective, present in some cases, is needed consistently to avoid a situation whereby performing arts confirm and reinforce existing gender inequalities. Empirical research is recommended for further insight into gender aspects of contents, access, and impacts.

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Performing Arts and Development Programmes

For generations, people have expressed themselves through music, songs, dance, plays, puppets and other performing arts. Such arts have long been a form of social memory and a means to pass on commonly held values and perspectives to younger generations. They have also been an important medium to spread news and expand cultures. South and East Asian religions and philosophies have spread mainly through the medium of performing arts (Storey, 1992:12). In the second half of the 20th century the performing arts began to play a role in development programmes. Kidd has classified such programmes according to their functions and the degree to which the target groups see their perspectives reflected and can control contents, forms, and follow-up action (Kidd, 1992a:108–113). Table 1 contains a summary overview of this analysis.

The influence of indigenous performing art alerted governments to its usefulness for spreading and popularizing their own development plans and concepts. Ministries began to finance mobile theatre groups and traditional performers to give performances on, for example, cash crop growing, adult literacy campaigns, improved sanitation, and family planning (Kidd, 1992a:113; Storey, 1992:9).

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Public participation in the formulation and implementation of such theatre programmes was low. Themes and scripts were not based on the perceptions of the audiences and no members of the public took part in preparing and staging the shows. Audiences were seen as the passive receivers of information. However, information does not necessarily lead to behavioural change (Röling et al., 1994:176).

Some governments mobilized theatre groups locally. In China, government workers created over 280,000 amateur village theatre clubs. These provided a means for recreation, but were also obliged to spread government messages and create acceptance of the government's policies. A 'cultural animator' saw to it that no views deviant from government policy were expressed (Kidd, 1992a:114).

A new stimulus for local performing art came from universities and extension services. Students in, for example, Ghana, Lesotho, Kenya, and Botswana began to promote local theatre and music to revive ethnic cultures in new transethnic forms and as part of extension programmes (Collins, 1992:172; Mda, 1992:81; Mlama, 1994:57). Workshops were organized to help villagers start theatre groups, and scripts for development theatre were based on discussions with local people. Spontaneous dialogues during the shows and discussions afterwards became part of the programmes (Mda, 1992:117, Kidd, 1992b: 133). Training in theatre art became part of the training of extension workers, who gradually began to research village issues and concerns and to use this information to develop locally-

Table 1						
Development of performing arts for social change						

Ty	pe	Performers	Local relevance	People's control	Change-related functions
1.	Indigenous art	confirmers	high	low	confirm/convey own culture
		protesters	high	high	mobilize and feed protest
2.	Mobilization	programme employed mobile teams	low	low	spread and promote pre-determined messages
		traditional performers programme-formed	high	low	-do-
		village groups	low-high	low-high	-do-
3.	Cultural revival campaigns	academicians	low	low-high	revive and reassert local artforms
4.	Training courses	extension workers	high	low	convey programme messages
		participants	high	high	practice self- expression and new skills
 5.	Programmes for socio- economic and political analysis	community groups	high	hígh	create awareness and concerted action for societal change

specific drama (Curruthers et al., 1978:11; Hubley, 1993:134, Kidd, 1992b:127).

Kidd points out that such theatre is still little participatory in nature. The performances are made about and for, not by, the villagers and the initiative lies with the actors, not the villagers. Messages are prescriptive rather than stimulating people to make their own analyses and choose their own solutions. Follow-up is often absent (Kidd, 1992a:116). In contrast, participatory theatre has the people select the themes, make scripts, and put up performances. This provides a medium for active learning and stimulates processes of problem analysis and action as part of social development processes (Anderson, 1989:13, Hubley, 1993:134; Kidd, 1992a:116–117).

The use of such participatory theatre may remain limited to internal sessions, when the participants do not perform their work outside their group. When they perform also in public, performing becomes a tool for change in a wider environment. Performances may not just tackle the symptoms of a problem, but also lay bare the underlying questions, such as why people do not act themselves and what keeps some groups more than others from solving problems (Mda, 1993: 156). Moreover, performers are often associated with local organizations concerned with implementing the identified actions. In this form performing arts are not controlled by an outside authority or programme. They are created, owned, and controlled by the people themselves and are a tool to express the people's own

concerns, analyse the system, and organize against forces in society which keep them in a disadvantaged position (Kidd:1992a:118).

The Gender Aspect

A noticeable aspect in the foregoing accounts of theatre for social change is that the writers describe and analyse developments almost invariably in gender-neutral terms. In other words, they do not mention whether those participating are men or also women, whether women take part in subservient or equitable roles to men and, when realities are acted out, whose realities these are: those of men, women, or both.

Yet reality is not gender-neutral. Men and women have different responsibilities, needs, and interests, and differ in freedom to gather and speak out in public and in access to information. These differences are not static, but change through internal processes and external influence. When development programmes neglect these realities they do not fully reflect the situation of the people and may consolidate and reinforce existing inequalities (Moser, 1989:1799–1825).

In her analysis of communication for social change Riaño distinguishes four types of communication programmes on the basis of how they address and involve women: development communication, participatory communication, alternative communication, and feminist

communication. In development communication, women are addressed in their traditional domestic productive and reproductive roles, and as subjects of information. Goals are to inform women and motivate them to change risky practices, support the development programme, and mobilize fellow women for such support. In participatory communication, women are not subjects of the communication programmes, but active participants who make their own communication products, going from initial needs assessment through media production, to final evaluation and effectiveness measurement. In alternative communication women are leaders who seek alternative ways of communication to bring up women's issues and rights, promote group reflection and undertake social change. Feminist communication has inequalities between men and women as its basis and promotes fair representation and equitable access to and control over communication processes and media (Riaño, 1994:6).

Although gender inequalities are not part of the first three types of programmes, they cannot be overlooked when wanting to avoid negative effects and marginalization of women. For example, in expecting women to change risky practices in hygiene and sanitation, one has to consider whether they are to be blamed when they do not improve conditions and practices in their families. The reasons may well be that women do not have the required extra time and physical and financial means to make these changes, nor the authority to ensure that other members in the household, especially older boys and men, also improve their behaviour (Wijk et al., 1995: 22).

When looking for a gender focus in the various types of performing arts identified in Table 1, several examples can be given. In his book, When People Play People, Mda describes gender in a traditional artform. Girls from a village with an improved water supply made a song to ridicule girls in the neighbouring village for their unimproved system (Mda, 1993:77).

The song expresses the needs of rural women and girls for an improved water supply and stresses the chief's responsibility in obtaining such an improvement for the women in his village. Although the women are not mentioned as direct actors, the case shows that traditional performing art may inspire critical thinking among young women on gender issues and can be a tool for pressurizing local leadership to meet women's needs.

Another case concerns development theatre in Western Kenya (Levert, 1995: 27–28). A theatre group was engaged to perform plays on better sanitation and hygiene in villages served by a water supply and sanitation project. During the show the actors invited reactions from the audience, including comments from women and children. An evaluation afterwards revealed that one play blamed especially the women for being dirty, unhygienic, and guilty of poor sanitation practices and gave the impression that women should be shouted at and ordered around. The women objected to this treatment and stressed that responsibilities for good sanitation and hygiene had to be shared between women and men.

In communication it is often held that women are shy,

cannot speak in public, and are predominantly passive in public gatherings. This alleged passiveness is, however, strongly related to the selection and way of use of the media. In theatre for development workshops organized in Tanzania between 1983 and 1991 women proved to be very active communicators when the workshop organizers involved women and men in the research of village problems and the choice of themes and artforms. Women always selected problems which concerned them most and chose traditional women's dances with songs as the artform culturally acceptable for them, but introducing new gender themes. Key themes included schoolgirls made pregnant by teachers and wealthy villagers, poor water supply, unfair division of labour, and failing income-generation projects. The dances proved an effective mechanism to bring out the viewpoints of the various groups, unite the women, hold leaders accountable in a way which was culturally accepted and put pressure on them to take things in hand (Mlama, 1994:61).

An account of how performing arts are used to raise gender awareness in training workshops comes from the Philippines. Here, conscientization on gender and change of gender roles are the specific objectives and themes of *Usapang babae*, or gender awareness through theatre arts, games and processes (Magtoto et al., 1992). During the three-day workshop, the women practise various forms of performing arts to become more aware of their restricted position, identify changes, and build confidence to undertake these changes. The women participants also learn how to organize the same workshop with other women.

Including a gender focus requires that gender aspects are explicitly recognized and planned for in the formation of the group and the development of the story and messages. This is illustrated in the case which occurred during a Pan-African Training Workshop on Popular Theatre in Zimbabwe. As part of the training the participants visited a nearby village to assist the inhabitants in organizing a theatre workshop of their own. The aims of this workshop were to help the villagers identify and analyse social problems and present them in a performance to the whole village to start community decision-making and remedial action.

The original plan was that the work would be with an organized village group. However, the group ended up working with an informal community gathering in which people, especially men, tended to come and go. As a result, the debate on village problems kept changing. One day it was dominated by well owners and more affluent men, the next by poorer villagers. This made it hard to get a deeper understanding of local issues and a consensus on action. For example, when the well owners were present, they resisted any analysis of use and payment for water, simply by citing the national policy. Another problem was that even though the women outnumbered the men 10 to one, the agenda and debate tended to be dominated by the men.

The author concluded that the workshop would have been more effective if the facilitators had worked first with the women, who were already organized and motivated for action, and then gradually brought in the male members of the community. In this way, the workshop would have recognized and strengthened women's organization and would have given them a structured input in community problem solving. Now the workshop never got beyond the point of providing a forum for women's ideas which had never been discussed in public as a matter for the whole village (Kidd, 1992b:141).

From the above cases it is clear that elements of gender are an important aspect to be looked at when planning and analysing various forms of development theatre. In the next section it will be assessed how gender has been dealt with in the popular theatre programmes in five rural water supply and sanitation programmes in India.

Development Theatre in India

General position and roles

India is one of the countries in which the performing arts are an accepted medium for development communication. Nationwide, India has some 150,000 traditional performers and groups, for whom theatre is a means of earning a living. Some of them are employed by development programmes. The Indian Ministry of Information has had its own song and drama unit since 1954. The groups of the unit give an estimated 14,000–20,000 performances per year (East West Center, 1975:3; Kidd, 1992a:11). The government also organizes short-term campaigns on specific development themes. Development theatre is further used in implementation projects in various sectors of rural development.

The focus in this paper is on the gender aspects of five cases of development theatre in rural India: one mass campaign of the central government and four cases that are part of rural development projects. The projects are being carried out in some 7,000 villages in Uttar Pradesh in the north east, Andhra Pradesh in the east, and Karnataka and Kerala in the southwest and south of India. Financial support comes from the Government of the Netherlands. In the fifth state, Gujarat in the northwest, development theatre is not used. All five cases have water and hygiene as the common theme.

Five cases with a gender focus

Case 1: Mass media campaign at country level

In 1989, the Government of India undertook a large mass communication campaign to spread information and motivate adoption of a safe water source and regular handwashing among rural populations, especially women. The nature of the strategy and materials was that of a government planned, standardized campaign with no participation of village groups. The campaign was built around an artform known as *Nautanki*, a poetic form of play that is popular in many parts of India.

• To lower the recurrent costs of the performances, the government decided to use a 30-minute video film of the play instead of the customary all-night performances by professional theatre groups. The script was based on

traditional gender divisions, with Mother Earth as the venerated mother figure as well as a figure of religious authority for all denominations. Mother Earth intervened in the battle between the king of germs and the villagers by giving advice on hygiene and providing a handpump. The performance was backed up by television spots, radio spots, songs, posters, banners, and a flipbook for use by local extension workers.

Among the frequently mentioned advantages of local theatre are easy accessibility and attractiveness to rural audiences (Hubley, 1993:130; Storey, 1992:7). Research on the gender-specific attendance of the Mother Earth show revealed, however, that although targeted, women formed only 15 per cent of the audience, while 40 per cent were men and 45 per cent children (Unicef, 1991:23). The reasons for this difference have not been investigated and require further research. It may be that information on the performance and its theme reached women less well than men, or that the time or location of performances were less convenient for women. Or a video show by outsiders may have been considered less appropriate for women to attend than a performance by a well-known local group.

When both men and women can watch and women are not confined to sit at the back where they cannot properly see and hear, it can be assumed that the use of the local language, images, and themes in popular theatre ensures that the messages are equally well understood by all. On these aspects the Unicef study found no problems, as long as ethno-linguistic differences were observed. The impact of the performances on hygiene behaviours of the different target groups was not researched (Unicef, 1991:24).

Case 2: Programme employed mobile team in Nalgonda, Andhra Pradesh

The Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh is a poor rural district whose population suffers from fluorosis due to the high fluoride content in the drinking water from wells and handpumps. The drinking water supply and sanitation project brings treated tap water free of fluoride to the district. Promotion of the general use of this water is an important objective of the project.

To make the villagers aware of the project and distribute messages on safe water use, the project employs a professional theatre group, which uses the traditional artform of the *Barakatha* as a medium for development communication. A *Barakatha* is an all-night epic drama about a historic hero, in which jokes and funny comments on current events are woven in. In Nalgonda, the actors inserted messages on the project and on health and hygiene.

Themes and messages have been chosen by the project staff and are the same for all the villages. The performances are set up as one-time events to present the same general problem and solutions to all the villages, rather than engage the audience in discussing local water use patterns and develop problem solving skills.

The plays have been well attended by men as well as women and children and have raised interest in and knowledge about the project. However, they have not led to solving village-specific problems related to drinking water supply and changing water use patterns. The development theatre in the three other case have, therefore, shifted to forming and involving local theatre groups and developing locally-based plays on water use and hygiene.

Case 3: From professional to community theatre groups in Dharwad, Karnataka

Dharwad district in northern Karnataka lies in the hard rock belt of the Deccan plateau in peninsular India. The traditional way of obtaining water in this belt is to store run-off rainwater in large tanks. These are no longer adequate, due to neglect under the colonial times, population growth, droughts, shift to crops with a higher water demand, and more rapid run-off due to deforestation. They have been replaced by borewells with handpumps, or, where groundwater is brackish, small piped water supplies using surface water.

To promote the hygienic use of this water and better sanitation the project engaged Myala, an existing theatre group from the town of Dharwad, to make and perform a streetplay with a function and set-up similar to the Barakatha show in Andhra Pradesh. The play raised interest, but was too general and Myala seen as too much of an outsiders group to have a particular impact. The project, therefore, stimulated the formation of a voluntary theatre group in the villages concerned and organized a training in theatre skills. Myala was contracted to develop two new plays on critical hygiene behaviour, one concerning the safer storage of drinking water, the other on handwashing after defecation and before eating. Although the project staff has chosen the themes and messages and Myala developed the scripts, the plays are based on participatory rural appraisal exercises, in which a large part of the community has participated. Participation had been either mixed, or in specific women's groups for certain subjects, such as water source ranking and women's work.

The research has lead to the identification of local beliefs, practices, and priority problems and the planning and implementation of village action plans for improving environmental sanitation and education for the below-fives. The implementation of the plans is guided by mixed village water committees. The plays serve to support the plans and promote better hygiene practices.

Case 4: Participation of women and schoolchildren in Kerala

The development level of Kerala, the southernmost state of India, is relatively high. Seventeen per cent of its population lives below the poverty line, against 30 per cent for the whole of India. Male and female literacy are 95 per cent and 87 per cent respectively, while the national figures are 64 per cent and 39 per cent. Kerala has also the highest population density of India and some of the project communities have an urban, rather than a rural, character. Better sanitation is a felt priority in these communities, especially in households below the poverty line which have no latrine (RNE, 1993).

To reach these households, with their lower access to

modern media, the project initially used a play showing the relation between scavenging crows, poor sanitation, and high incidence of disease developed by the movement for adult literacy. The story was conceived by a professional group, but performed by village literacy groups and youth clubs. The actors used mime and dance, while the storyteller gave comments and a chorus recited the sounds of the scavenging crows, the cries of the sick, and the wails of bereaved relatives, until the householders in the play adopted safe sanitation and the crows left for lack of human waste.

This approach has now been replaced by a more participatory and locally specific approach, in which plays are made and performed by school health clubs and the female members of ward water committees. The initiative for establishing and training the groups has been taken by those project staff who are interested in development theatre as a means of project communication as well as stimulating and strengthening local development initiatives. The latter process has developed most extensively in another case of development theatre, in Uttar Pradesh.

Case 5: From communication to social analysis and community action in Uttar Pradesh

The bilateral co-operation project in water and sanitation is carried out in 22 of the 62 districts of Uttar Pradesh. This is the most populous state of India. The percentages of people above the poverty line, female participation in the workforce, and male and female literacy are all lower than for India as a whole. The project areas are poor, highly rural, and have not only strong social, but also religious restrictions on female mobility and participation in community affairs. Hence a great challenge was to reach not only the men, but also the women with communication about the project and stimulate village action on water and sanitation management as well as other aspects on which local men and/or women want to initiate community action.

Compared to other states Uttar Pradesh has a rich variety of traditional artforms. However, they have lost much of their popularity due to competition from the mass media. Initial performances on development themes were, therefore, given by professional groups from inside and outside the region. The shift from external to local performers and scripts based on local artforms came when the voluntary extension workers of the project discovered the potential of the performing arts and together formed a theatre group. Subsequently other village women and men became interested and joined in the performances.

Gradually a stepwise approach developed to revive existing artforms and link them to village problem analysis and action planning. Team building and self-evaluation are important parts of the process. The groups analyse local conditions, dynamics, and problems and revert them into local issue-based themes and scripts. Although water and sanitation are the entry points, local analysis can show up other underlying or interfering issues, such as a culture of excessive alcohol use which prevents concerted action, or the felt need of women and girls to be literate, so that those in power can no longer misuse the women's illiteracy to

cheat them.

Village theatre teams are put through the paces of physical exercises and games which are not only geared toward ensuring bodily strength and flexibility, but also contribute to the teambuilding process. Theatrical skills of the members are enhanced, covering voice modulation, facial expressions, body movements, and developing a relationship with the acted characters. Use of local material as props and musical instruments makes the performances affordable and stimulates the creativity of the groups. The development theatre process includes evaluation of the activities and documentation, often on video. The groups themselves monitor and evaluate their activities and new performances are recorded on video. Self-review of each performance through group discussion and video review is encouraged and provides substantial inputs for further development.

Analysis of approach and gender focus

Development theatre in the cases described above has generally evolved from general mobilization and information campaigns by external and professional groups to participatory and village-based theatre developed and performed by people from the communities themselves.

The performances have generally drawn large village audiences, in which women have joined freely and extensively, although no statistics on gender specific attendance have been collected. Low attendance of women occurs, however, when locations and timing of performances have not been adjusted to women's realities. In Kalwad village in Karnataka, for example, the local leaders insisted on holding the performance in the village parade ground instead of between the houses and at a time when the women were still seen to be coming home from the fields or were dealing with cleaning up after the evening meal. As a result few women attended and those who came later could only sit behind the stage.

Other gender-related aspects concern the sex and functions of the performers. Songs and dances in indigenous art are often performed by separate groups of men and women and have the function of transmitting and confirming prescribed gender roles. The songs may, however, also express gender problems, criticize the hardships involved, and point out responsibilities for men and women to make changes.

In many Indian areas women cannot perform in mixed groups, or have roles as actors or musicians. Women have their own songs and dances and, in mixed performances, tend to take the role of chorus. When the script has one or more female roles, these are often performed by a young boy. Such segregation can also be noted in the cases reported here. The professional team in Andhra Pradesh consists of men only. Myala and the village literacy groups in Kerala are both mixed. But in their performances the acting roles, also of female characters, are performed only by men. The women are the chorus and clap hands. The plays themselves, with theme community decisions on environmental improvements, also show an all-male village council analysing the situation and taking the decisions.

In contrast, the two new plays in Karnataka have been based on the observations and knowledge which the village women gave in participatory rural appraisals on water and sanitation. Each play has significant women characters, which are acted by women. The women analyse the situation and take responsibility for changing habits. The plays thus recognize and reconfirm the roles and authority of women in health and hygiene. However, they do not challenge the existing gender division, in which all hygiene work rests with women and girls, who often do not have the time or the financial means to implement the promoted changes, nor the influence to change the behaviours of the male members in their families.

In Uttar Pradesh, the original performances also stuck to existing norms on segregation and gender roles. But gradually, participation in the same processes of team building and theatre skills development as the male team members gave the women confidence to express themselves in the group and in performances. As a result, both teams and villagers came to accept that men and women perform together and that both contribute their views to the choice of the themes and messages and the development of the script. The puppet play Bahu man gayee, for example, was developed by a mixed team and its script reflects the viewpoints of the women as much as those of the men. It tells the story of a city bred bride who asks for a sanitary latrine in her village home. The play not only expresses what women and men themselves see as the main benefits of a latrine (safety, privacy, modernity, and status), but also involves women as puppeteers for the female puppets and brings into focus the decision-making role which a woman can play in a society where she has so far been marginalized.

Several scripts also depict changes in existing gender roles on health and hygiene. An example is a modern version of the Mahabharata saga, developed by the representatives from several local theatre groups. In this version, the five brothers from the saga stand near the broken village handpump. They are dying from thirst and complain that their common wife Draupadi does not provide them with drinking water. Draupadi appears and explains that she had gone to a training course for handpump mechanics. She shows her materials and equipment. explains what they are for, repairs the pump and begins to move the handle. Her husbands ridicule her pointing out that no water was coming, but she answers that the pump has been broken for some time and several stokes are needed to prime the pump and bring the water up. Water then appears, reconciling the five brothers to their wife's new training and function.

Performances as described above are often followed by local discussions and action planning. The discussions and the presence of neighbourhood water committees help to link community analysis and decisions with action. Because neighbourhood organizations are not equally strong everywhere, periodic support from programme staff at district level remains imperative. For action the programmes also offer other forms of external support. The programme in Uttar Pradesh has, for instance, a training course for village handpump mechanics. In the pilot training, nine village women participated along with a group of men.

Field visits revealed that only the women caretakers continued to function and that their performance was better than that of mobile district teams at a lower cost to the water agency. Hence the training was extended to other project areas, with a female participation of 75 per cent. Opportunity costs for female mechanics can, however, be high (Jonsson et al., 1991). What impact the performing arts and their portrayal of women as managers and technicians have had on changes in gender roles in the technical and decision making aspects of water supply and sanitation has not yet been investigated.

Summary and suggestions for further research

The above reported cases show that gender roles and relations are not static. Active participation of women in problem review, theme selection, script development, and performance can influence gender roles and relations. Enabling women to express themselves ensures that women's concerns and viewpoints are included in the collection of scripts and that gender concepts are communicated between women and between women and men. Women's artforms are recognized and consciously used alongside those of men, preventing the reinforcement of the myth that women are audiences and theirs is only a passive role. But where the initiative of the group and the reception by the community allow, changes go further. It is remarkable that in the five cases reported here, gender-sensitive development theatre has evolved furthest in the project villages in Uttar Pradesh, despite the fact that impediments of an economic and socio-cultural nature are the strongest in the project areas concerned. Women in the theatre groups in this state have become musicians or storytellers, functions which they were traditionally not allowed to have. New gender concepts and relations in the programme have been communicated on stage and linked to activities in the field.

The step from women as performers to women as producers has been made when an external consultant helped one group to make a slide show to provide the context for a puppet show on village sanitation. Training of illiterate village women to produce their own modern communication materials does exist in India and is, for example, carried out by an all-women, non-governmental organization, the Self-Employed Women's Association (Sewa) in Ahmedabad. It is less common to find general development programmes which train village women to become producers of modern communication products.

The use of the performing arts for the promotion of water and sanitation projects and for changing risky behaviour is an established phenomenon in India. Forming local theatre groups and equipping them to develop and perform their own plays based on their own analysis of local conditions and practices is a further development. Very recent is the incorporation of a gender perspective into such groups and their productions. By assisting male and female villagers to translate a gender-specific analysis of village conditions and problems into performing arts and to link the performances to action, the case reviewed here aim at a more effective use of development theatre for

environmental and social change in the country.

This development can be further stimulated through more in-depth research by development theatre specialists of the approaches which the groups have used, and the results and impacts they have had. In particular, it would be useful to carry out a systematic field review of the impacts of the activities of the respective groups on gender relations and on division of knowledge and tasks in water supply, sanitation, and hygiene. Typical issues for further research related to gender would be a content analysis of the existing plays on gender aspects and field studies on access of men and women to performances and the appreciation and effects of gender themes.

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