

From 19th Century Gossip to 21st Century Production

By Anna'le Hornak, Senior Literary Fellow and Production Dramaturg

The story at the heart of *The Heiress* grew from a piece of gossip.

Actress Fanny Kemble told writer Henry James about her brother, a handsome but selfish young man who got engaged to a girl he described as “dull” and “plain” with a very large fortune.

James transformed that gossip into *Washington Square*, a novella originally published serially in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1880, and used Kemble's story to pose two central questions to his readers: what happens when a woman is raised by a father who doesn't love her? Is it possible to love someone and also seek financial gain from them?

In 1945, Ruth and Augustus Goetz adapted *Washington Square* for the stage, first under the title *The Doctor's Daughter*, then back to *Washington Square*, and finally in 1948 as *The Heiress*. Along the way, the Goetzes evolved the narrative. Whereas James' *Washington Square* has the heiress Catherine Sloper picking up her embroidery at the end of the story “for life as it were,” condemning her to a life of solitude and sadness, Ruth and Augustus Goetz's *The Heiress* has Catherine complete her last sampler and say “I can do anything now.” While we hope the audience debates whether Catherine's final act in the play is good or bad, from Catherine's own perspective—and the perspective of this production—Catherine is making her own choice, with freedom and agency. She isn't a tragedy, but a courageous woman in her full authenticity.



Henry James



Augustus and Ruth Goetz

Women's Voices

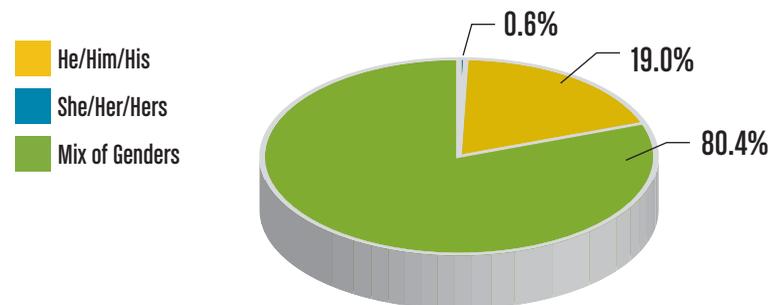
This production builds upon the evolution of this story from a piece of gossip about a woman with no voice, to a play about a woman who finds her voice, by featuring the work of an all-female, multiracial design team comprised of award-winning artists.

The set is designed by Mikiko Suzuki MacAdams, costumes are designed by Ivania Stack, lighting by Sherrice Mojgani, sound design and original composition by Emma M. Wilk, the voice and text coach is Jan Gist, and the production is helmed by Arena Stage's Deputy Artistic Director Seema Sueko.

A recent study on “Who Designs and Directs in LORT Theatres by Gender” by Porsche McGovern found that in the past five seasons only 0.6% of design teams at LORT theatres were composed of people who all use she/her pronouns. We are honored to increase that statistic with our production. LORT refers to the members of the League of Resident Theatres, a group of 75 major theatres in the United States. The full breakdown is pictured here:

Who Designs in LORT Theaters by Gender: All He/Him/His and all She/Her/Hers Design Teams

Percent of teams over all 5 seasons (2012/13–2016/17)



2619 Total Design Teams

Source: HowlRound Theatre Commons (<https://howlround.com/who-designs-and-directs-lort-theatres-gender-4>) November 28, 2018.

Arena Stage has a long history of championing diversity, equity, and inclusion, dating back to its beginnings—when Zelda Fichandler, Tom Fichandler, and Edward Mangu founded Arena Stage in 1950, it was the first integrated theater in Washington, D.C.. Since Artistic Director Molly Smith came to Arena Stage in 1998, 70% of Arena's directors have been women or people of color. In the last decade, 50% of Arena's productions were written by women or playwrights of color.

“In the privacy of her room she is very expressive,”

So says the character Lavinia Penniman about Catherine to Dr. Sloper at the start of *The Heiress*. By the end of the play, Catherine outgrows her room. So, too, our field of American theater strives to outgrow outdated systems that have closed doors on women artists. This play, this production, this design team are a step in that direction—up the staircase, as it were, with Catherine.