

Diversity Representation in Theatre:
How to Change the Landscape

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Gender Studies

I. Introduction

Knowledge is power: Thomas Hobbes.

Theatre is an absolutely magical art form. Going into a room where our perception of reality is allowed to stand still makes sitting back, relaxing, and enjoying the show the best course of action.

Theatre allows the world to tell countless stories, especially the ones that truly matter. That is why my career path will be in the direction of either communication work within theaters (i.e., marketing, public relations, audience development, or human resources) or as a full-time actor. Realistically, I could do both and fulfill both of my passions in life. My dedication and passion for theatre will likely lead me down that path.

Through my time at Slippery Rock University, I have taken two different gender studies courses as well as an intercultural communication course. This has given me a base of knowledge that, sadly, not all of the world has. It does give me the ability to recognize and attempt to fight back against the cultural norms that our society so tightly grasps. Within the theater world, we tend to think of ourselves as progressive, diversity accepting and loving people. While this may have some truth, I believe that theatre, the art form, and theaters, the physical place, can and should do more to include diversity of all forms. Not only should there be more diverse representation of actors but also more accommodation within theaters, more behind the scenes representation of diversity, and more diversity training for the professionals who work within the said theaters.

II. Research

I would like to begin with a definition of diversity, because without it, this could easily become an argument of semantics. A study done on the campus of the University of California Santa Barbra set out to understand the level at which diversity exists and is accepted within the campus. It study was done to see if the perceptions of diversity differ between the majority and minority groups. Through Chen and Hamilton's research, they found that both the majority and minority identified acceptance of diversity as objective and subjective (Chen & Hamilton, 586). This means that there must be statistical inclusions of diverse populations and a psychological inclusion and acceptance of the same diversity population. One without the other negates the existence of diversity at its core. To present an example: this could be seen in places such as a school that has numeric minority inclusion but fails to represent the point of view and ideas of the minority group within the curriculum.

To further the understanding of diversity in all aspects, it is important to define the minority group. I would say that many people hear "minority group" and immediately assume that it refers to a racial group, however "minority" exists far beyond the bounds of race. Minority groups can be defined as groups of people who face systematic discrimination in society daily. Women, people of different races, religions, sexual orientations, bodies of sizes and shapes other than the culturally expected norm, and people with both mental and physical disabilities. To know that discrimination affects all of these groups and the ways that it affects them is a stepping stone to full acceptance of diversity within our society.

Historically there has been a statistical lack of representation of diversity within the theatre community. This is in regards to onstage representation. In 2016, the AAPAC (Asian American Performers Action Coalition) reported on the ethnic representation on the stages within

New York City. Some of the statistics found are both terrifying and hopeful. In the 2015-2016 season, only 35% of roles were occupied by minority actors. The representation breakdown was as follows: African Americans, 23%; Latinx, 7%; Asian American, 4%; and Middle Eastern/North African, American Indian and actors with disabilities, less than 2%. The other 65% of roles were filled by Caucasian actors. Actors with disabilities category represented only 0.67% of roles within the industry. The year of this report was the first year that disabled actors became statically significant (Bandhu & Kim, 2).

This data shows one very profound reality: underrepresentation of minorities on all fronts. This data only represents New York City, but if we think of less urban theaters, representation throughout the country would most likely show statistically similar evidence or statistically higher roles filled by Caucasians. This poses two questions: why is the industry under-representing minorities and how can it be changed? The answer to the second question would answer the first.

Diversity challenges in theaters present themselves in more ways than cast and crew representation. The question of diversity within a theatre also depends on how accessible the theatre is to people of different capabilities. A theatre which upholds ADA requirements still may not be allotting access and accommodations for all disabilities. Based on ADA regulations, handicap accessibility is one of the few disabilities that is really taken into consideration. Assistive Listening Systems are also apart of ADA requirements but are they are not required in spaces that do not use audio amplification. For anyone who has a disability outside of these two circumstances, theaters are not legally required to provide accommodations for you. On Slippery Rock University's campus, there are two places dedicated as performance spaces for the theatre

department. One is the theatre in Maltby, which is not handicap accessible. Shows that take place there also normally do not take into consideration accommodating for hearing impairments and non-physical disabilities. Recently, I took an informal survey by asking 20 performing arts students at Slippery Rock University the yes or no question, “should there be more representation of diversity within theatre and theater audiences?” Overwhelmingly and unsurprisingly, 20 out of 20 of the people answered yes. This shows that, yes, students here see diversifying the arts organizations and the attendance of the events we put on as necessary. My question to them is, why hasn’t anyone taken a stand that one half of our performing arts spaces entirely limits accessibility? We, as a theater community, pride ourselves on being accepting of diversity. This makes me believe that there is a problem at the core of our education of diversity and intersectionality. We, as a department, do not talk about taking advances to make the voices of minority groups heard or diversifying our performing spaces. This is a serious issue because it ultimately limits our reach to new diverse audiences. If we cannot use our voices to get a performing space on campus to its legal requirements for accessibility, when will we use our voices to create a diverse theater environment? This survey was informal and the results should not be duplicated because it is only applicable to our campus.

However, at the University of California Santa Cruz, a study was done by one student on how to create racial and ethnic diversity within the student-run theatre organization there by producing a play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. This is a play about the struggles that black women face in their lives. One of the problems that they faced immediately, which is a problem faced in theaters throughout the country, was that they almost did not have enough diversity within their auditions to cast the show. Out of 116

theatre majors at UCSC, only 5 of them were black (Pearson, 18). To me, this suggests that diversity within theaters can be a problem that works in a circle. Because there is not enough diversity, the shows about diversity do not get produced, and because there are not enough shows about diversity, there is not enough diversity within the people auditioning for roles in shows. These two factors become codependent of one another and cause a vicious cycle that results in a lack of diversity and portrayal of diversity within theaters.

After a long and tedious auditioning and casting process, they were able to cast and produce the show. A survey was handed out to the audience, not only to the audience of *For Colored Girls...*, but also to the audience of *Woyzeck*, their other play produced in that semester. They were vastly different shows for a multitude of reasons but one of the major reasons is that *Woyzeck* had little-to-no focus on diversity. What resulted out of the survey was absolutely astonishing. They found that 72% of the audience at *For Colored Girls* were people of color. This group includes African American/Black, Biracial/Multiracial, Chicano/Latino/Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and Pacific Islander. The audience at *Woyzeck* had only 37% of the attendees being people of color. The question, “how important is it that a play you attend reflects your culture” was asked within the survey. At the audience for *For Colored Girls...*, 58% of people thought it was somewhat important or very important for the plays they see to reflect their culture. Within the audience for *Woyzeck*, the same question resulted in 11% thinking that it was somewhat important for the plays they see to reflect their culture and no one believing it was very important (Pearson, 28-29).

More than anything, this study shows a solution to the problem more than a problem. While the underrepresentation does present itself as a problem, the statistics show that there is a

solution to changing the diversity representation levels within a theatre. When a show involves diversity, there is more diversity within the audience with higher numbers of people believing that it's important to have plays that reflect their culture. When presented with a play that does not involve diversity on any level, the exact opposite occurred. The representation of diversity within the audience decreased and so did the number of people who believed the importance of having a reflection of their culture within plays. This is important to keep in mind for the proposed solution to diversifying theaters and theatre audiences.

III. Proposing a Solution to the Problem

Nearing graduation, 26 days at the time of writing this sentence, I have begun looking for jobs within the theatre world. With the knowledge of diversity and intersectionality I have, I realize that it is important not only to get into the career field I love, but also to make a lasting impact there by helping to create a work environment that fosters diversity across the board.

I would like to propose a possible solution to creating a more diverse theater environment. There are many areas that must be accounted for when talking about the diversification of a theatre. The board, the show season, the actors, and finally the audience are the different “sectors” that require attention for diversification. This solution lies in a “ground up” approach.

At the ground of all 501c3 / Nonprofit organizations is a board of directors. Being in a communicative position, a part of my job would be directly working with the board of directors and also interviewing and hiring new potential members of the board. The board in a nonprofit theatre organization has many jobs in its hands, one of which is helping to select the shows for a

theatre season. This being said, the first step to aid in a more diverse theatre and theatre audience results out of the diversification of the board of directors.

In an article analyzing diversity within nonprofit board members, Wilkinson discusses how integral diversifying a board is to a nonprofit organization. More than just having a diverse board for the sake of being able to say it, there are a plethora of benefits that come along with this diversification. In the year 2017, there was only a 14% representation of diversity within nonprofit board members. When there is a majority within a group of people, in this case Caucasians, the group will almost always fall into groupthink. Groupthink is a theory within communication studies that says everyone's voice within a group will reflect that of the majority. Because there is so little board diversification, the voice that is being reflected is that of Caucasians, overwhelmingly. A result of the diversification of a board is a diversification of the voices within that board. This elicits better and more effective decision making because there are more voices, perspectives, thoughts, and opinions. This will ultimately result in a more informed decision (Wilkinson).

Through Pearson's study, it was seen that a majority of the audience members seeing a show that was centered on diversity believed there was importance in the reflection of their culture in theatre. The board of directors within a theatre organization are given the task of voting on and picking the shows within a theatre season. The reflection of culture that audience members believe has importance would, in my opinion, also be of importance to the board of directors within a theatre. They would value the importance of their story being told and their voice being heard. In the diversification of a board, a direct result would be a diverse season of

shows being selected. The diverse show season would cause a diverse cast of actors to audition and be cast within the shows.

Referencing Pearson's study again, *For Colored Girls* brought in a audience containing 72% people of color. If the audience reflects the shows being put up, then playing a season of shows depicting diversity will diversify the audience as well. Connection with that audience is also an important thing to do as a theatre communication employee. This job is referred to as audience development and it is not about getting more people into theaters, but getting more people connected with the art within theaters. My job as a communication professional doing audience development for a theatre is to connect with the audience of the shows, both before and after. If the theater develops a personal connection with anyone, but specifically a diverse audience in this case, they will continue to come back to connect with us and with our shows.

Audience development can also exist to do things such as providing arts programming for underfunded areas or creating spaces in which a community comes together through the arts. Reaching out and creating programs that encourage diversity and diverse attendance can change the landscape within a theater as well.

To reiterate, diversifying a board of directors helps diversify the shows within a season which diversifies the cast and the audience seeing the show. This potentially shows a way of creating diversity across all aspects of a theatre.

This is just one of the many steps towards creating a diverse working environment within a theatre but there are many other steps that I would be apart of. Having a theatre up to ADA requirements is one thing but ensuring accommodations, or being aware of the accommodations that the theatre cannot provide, for a person with a disability, visible or not, is step that I would

take. It is so easy to assume that being handicap accessible means that a theatre is “accommodations,” but accommodations lie much deeper than this. Permission for having service animals within a theater, assistive listening systems and other accommodations for a person who is hearing impaired, and trigger warnings for specific traumatic events within a show. Accommodations for a person with disabilities does not start and stop at handicap accessibility.

As a communication professional within the theater world, my jobs are far and wide. It is not just doing public relations or social media for the theatre. My voice within the company becomes an integral part to making the theater run. I then get to choose how to use my voice. If I use my voice to encourage diversity and diversity training, it will elicit results that ultimately change the landscape within a theater. This is no small task but it is something that holds great value to me because I have gained a greater understanding of diversity and intersectionality. Moving forward into my future careers, I want to be apart creating spaces that foster a diverse and accepting working environment.

IV. Citations

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