

8 WAYS FOR THEATRE MAKERS TO TRULY STAND WITH ACTORS OF COLOR

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rev. 6/4/20

1) Hire POC in all positions--this includes administration. Most cringe moments are the result of a 100% White staff attempting to represent artists of color without actually committing to listening to, employing, or personally knowing artists of color. The implicit bias present in casting is staggering because producers and casting directors are human and a group of humans from the same demographic will not be able to think of every possibility.

2) Consult an artist of the respective ethnicity/race for plays in which their culture is the subject. Consult does not mean invite them to sit in on rehearsal and then not pay them and/or get defensive when they offer any insight.

This will make your play better! Specificity and authenticity are the first things you learn in acting class. Why are we so specific about what race, hair color, and dress size Christine Daae can be but I can count on one hand the amount of West Side Story productions I have seen cast actual Hispanics/Latinos? Is hiring Hispanic/Latinos not a basic requirement of that production? Do you not think your play would be dramatically enhanced by casting people who are experts on the culture?

3) Recognize that racial trauma is part of our story but it is not our story as a collective. We are individuals. We are not all fatherless crack babies from the ghetto. We are not all illegal immigrants. We have a place in life outside of trauma. If theatre is to imitate life, it is not accurate to only employ actors of color in "Hairspray" and "Miss Saigon".

4) Employ designers that know how to work on all actors. Even on the celebrity level, Black talent often do their own makeup and hair because stylists don't know how to. This is not acceptable. A professional makeup artist should know how to do makeup on everyone. A professional hair stylist should know how to do hair on everyone. A professional lighting designer should know how colors reflect off different skin tones. "Nude" is not beige; the color of "nude" varies per skin tone. Laduca did not start selling brown dance shoes free of custom pricing until 2018. Mic cords come in brown. Select brands carry tights in brown.

5) Come to the epiphany that you do not have a superior understanding of inclusion, diversity, and equity solely because you work in theatre. The fact that many companies that directly profit from Black talent had to be cajoled into commenting at all on the recent social movement is proof of that. There is a thread on the Internet where POC have voiced the bigoted, ignorant, and flat-out racist comments they have received in the industry. That thread has become ONE THOUSAND (1,000) comments deep in a matter of DAYS.

This ties into the subject of POC being portrayed as difficult to work with. I have seen and heard of actors who will not be named getting away with some truly heinous things. The guillotine is prepared in a heartbeat for actors of color and I have personally seen and been involved in situations where production was basically looking for any way possible to justify ousting POC.

6) If you can "never find" artists of color at your auditions, it's likely because you either live in a small town or they realized you seldom cast them and started auditioning elsewhere. Bridges have been burned. It is not enough to state "open ethnicity" and not follow through. Once you uphold your end of the deal to find and employ actors of color, they will come to you.

7) Protect them. Actors of color are often sent out on tours to locales that are not diversity-friendly. Peers have told me how they leave the theatre in crowds to avoid being heckled. Peers have told me how they were called "nigger" on the job with little response from admin. Peers have told me how they had to be escorted anytime they went in public in certain countries overseas because they would be swarmed and spectated. I have worked in towns where I was afraid to go for a jog on rehearsal breaks. It is not acceptable to not have a protocol in place in the event of a racial transgression or any transgression for that matter.

8) Listen. The hardest and most simple step. I once went back and forth with a director over my role as "the help". The director asked me if my character loved the family she served. I tried to have an enlightening conversation about how complex that question is, how much texture could be brought to the role with the complexities of that question, and my personal knowledge on the subject. I was cut off and told that my character loved the family they served and then treated to a tangent about how said director grew up with Black maids and how well his family treated them.