

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION STATEMENT

Advocating for the words diversity and inclusivity as necessary additions to our daily vocabularies in music and theatre has always been an important component of my artistic career. Within my own work, I seek to empower diverse teams of artists to create performances that amplify voices that are often not heard, and perspectives often not seen. I strive to be a champion for equal change and representation within our community, helping all to feel empowered in their jobs by creating a brave working environment for all involved both in and out of the rehearsal space.

Growing up gay in conservative rural Arkansas, I was a personal victim of a hate crime. It is an isolating feeling to find yourself unsafe and alone in your own hometown. Intolerance comes in many forms. So many people face similar feelings on a daily, and often omnipresent, basis. While our experiences all are different, each one deserves to be given agency to be heard and the opportunity to heal. As teaching artists we have a responsibility to educate our audiences, and our students, while at the same time listening to one another, so we can work on breaking the cycle.

One key initial component to facilitating anti-racism and other inclusive growth in the classroom, and in the rehearsal space, is active listening as a tool of communication. Using this tool myself, I developed an empathy for those who have to work harder for a seat at the table, and a willingness to listen and learn about the journeys that have been different than the one I have taken. Active listening enables empathic learning and understanding from one another.

We must start the listening process together with honesty, transparency and openness to amplify the voices that we need to hear to incite change around the issues of racial/gender equity. Developing spaces where these uncomfortable conversations can be explored is the only way we can collectively unlearn some of our more ingrained, systemic issues and find ways to elevate all voices in the common goal of enriching audiences about the true breath of the human condition.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN TEACHING

Part of my teaching philosophy is that I believe that each student deserves a specific, individualized approach to their learning of the craft of storytelling. However, that approach does not take place in a vacuum. Not only can each student learn through observations of each other's processes, but also from learning more about one another along the way. Building a curriculum that includes a broader list of playwrights and techniques not only makes all students more well-rounded but gives agency to the members of the class that may more strongly identify with less "mainstream" theatre artists.

Historical context for plays, music, and performance methodology is also very important to diversify the understanding of the craft today. Works of Shakespeare, for example, can both be celebrated for their use of language and universal themes, and at the same time opened up for discussion to see if they truly speak to a diverse audience, or if they encourage and maintain a more myopic view of theatre. Understanding the history of art forms such as tap, jazz, and other dance and musical forms to include their rich cultural origins is important to the understanding of the work and those who have created it over time.

INCLUSIVITY OF LANGUAGE

There are often discussions of the canon of works that have become part of our shared theatrical legacy. Before looking to dismantle this relatively short list, I first would advocate removing the term "canon" from the conversation in the first place. With its roots in Catholic history, which has some more than problematic moments, the term "canon" or "canonical" can be considered exclusive. I encourage the term "inherited repertoire" to acknowledge that these are works that have been revered and maintained, sometimes over centuries, but also highlight that they are not necessarily required to be part of our current conversation. We may have inherited this list, but we are not bound to it.

In fact, I would argue we are obligated to challenge and expand this list to make sure it does the job of representing the stories that all of our audiences deserve to see and hear.

How we make our art as a society is as important as the creation of art itself and I am drawn to collaborations that revise or refocus our inherited theatrical repertory, as well as to developing new works to expand this heritage, across our ever-evolving culturally diverse landscape.

IDENTITY IN CASTING AND CLASSROOMS

Within the context of casting, identity plays a key role. If, using some methods of acting, we are to draw on our own experiences, then it is important to know that identity history is a part of shaping those experiences. For example, Lou Bellamy, the Founding Artistic Director of Penumbra Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota aimed to erase the idea of "color blind" casting from the vernacular because it functioned to erase the cultural history that a black actor might bring to a role, influencing their choices in a different way from the cultural history of a white person or another person of color from a different background. Understanding that identity informs the choices an actor makes, or how they see a role, is part of inclusion in theatre. Creating a safe space to allow discussion of these different perspectives of identity is especially crucial in educational theatre.

Changes can also be made on a daily basis in the classroom to help marginalized students feel more included. For example, beginning a class introduction by encouraging students to share their pronouns if they'd like allows for a level of self-expression not always experienced on the academic level and helps to normalize the behavior whether or not a trans or non-binary student is present. Using more neutral pronouns as well can help draw attention away from gender in a more constructive way.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN DIRECTING

One of the most important aspects to becoming a successful director is the assembly of the perfect collaborative team. When selecting my designers and other staff for a project, it is my goal to have 75 percent of my team be from marginalized communities. Adding their voices and perspectives to my own in the collaboration process is essential when reaching out to audiences hailing from a variety of backgrounds.

I identify opportunities to be inclusive in the kinds of performances I develop and share. The performing arts can help children with developmental disabilities better understand and respond to social cues, facilitate peer interaction, increase self-awareness and insight, resolve conflicts and solve problems, and foster family cohesion. Yet many children with these types of challenges have a low tolerance for crowds, loud noises, darkness, flashing lights, and other similar sensory input. Often, the families of these children believe the worlds of theater and opera are inaccessible to them.

Sensory-friendly productions, which alter some technical and dramatic elements of a performance, are a way for neurodiverse communities to access theater. During these programs, patrons enjoy shows together with family and friends in welcoming, inclusive, and relaxed spaces. Having safe places in the community where these patrons can experience acceptance and support, while increasing their optimism about their ability to manage their situation and their sense of control, are two important assets that increase quality of life. Bringing this kind of approach to theatre education not only helps audiences experience our work, but our students better understand the diversity of their audiences.

During the pandemic, while our industry has been dark, I have also been a key participant in a new organization called Balancing The Stage. Together, we have been collaborating to bring the work of anti-racism and dismantling systems of oppression to the operatic stage. Serving as a member of the ERD (Equality, Representation, and Diversity) committee, my colleagues and I have continued to help shape a living document we hope to use as a catalyst for change in companies across the USA and abroad as our industry begins to reopen.

A TIME TO TEACH, A TIME TO LEARN

We are in a unique and challenging moment in the history of our country and our work as theatre artists and educators. Universities and conservatories are rising to the challenge of scrutinizing our long-held methodology, making sure that everyone has a place at the table when we are able to return to the public stage. The solutions we develop now will no doubt inspire additional changes down the line that no one has yet anticipated. But as we start this process together, both sharing our knowledge and being open to learning something new, we can move forward stronger and braver together.