

ANTI-RACIST PRACTICES IN COMMUNITY THEATRE

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How are we making sure that we put the word racism in people's mouth, have them sit with that discomfort and have a self-analysis around how they have been complicit in the harm of others, through racist ideas or policies or practices, and what they are willing to do to actually step into their own power and create anti-racist practices and policies to counter the racist ones (Brewer)?

Nicole Brewer, a member of the acting faculty at the Yale School of Drama, creator of Conscientious Theatre Training, and a founder of the Anti-Racist Theatre Movement, made this statement in a 2020 *DC Metro* article exploring anti-racist theatre work in the local community. Twenty-four years earlier, before the social and racial awakening of 2020, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson famously delivered "The Ground On Which I Stand" as a keynote speaker at the Theatre Communications Group Conference. Wilson asked for a change in the theatrical landscape. He said, in theatre, "economics are reserved as a privilege to the overwhelming abundance of institutions that preserve, promote, and perpetuate white culture" (Wilson). Decades separate these two statements, yet theatre is still seeking answers to change its racist culture.

As one prime example, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) are still not equitably represented in the theatre community. Professional

theatres, from Broadway to regional houses, are taking steps to call attention to some of the racist hiring practices. Actors Equity Association, the professional union of actors and stage managers with 51,000 members, has released its third equity and inclusion hiring bias report, which it began tracking in 2013. The report's numbers reflect an increase of about 3% from the 2016 to 2019 period.

American theatre is undergoing a reckoning to acknowledge and correct past wrongs, well-documented traumas, intentional exclusion, and systematic racism. The racial reckoning of 2020 and 2021 amid a COVID pandemic forced the theatre community to notice a change in the culture. Some professional theatres have a plan to acknowledge and create change. Community theatre, as a whole, has not addressed any disparity in casting or systematic racism. Few, if any, of the thousands of community theatres have anti-racist policies. By adopting collective anti-racist theatre practices, community theatres will help ensure their survival and dismantle systematic racism embedded in the national theatre community.

This paper will explore the definitions of community theatre around the country and identify some of the most prominent examples of anti-racist practices from other theatre environments. It will then illustrate the long-term need for the implementation of anti-racist practices in community theatre. Finally, some concrete starting points for collective practices will be examined as a place to open the dialogue.

Community theatre stems from the Little Theatre Movement, which started in 1912 (American Association of Community Theatre). Author and authority on community theatre, Dr. Twink Lynch, said that amateur theatre has been around since 1850 (American Association of Community Theatre). Community theatre in this country is supported by the American Association of Community Theatre or AACT but means different things to people. AACT has a membership of 1,464 theatres as of February 2022 and contact with approximately 5,600 community theatres (AACT). In Massachusetts, the Footlight Club is the oldest continuously running community theatre, founded in 1877. Others range in age from more than a hundred years to fewer than a season (AACT). Of these community theatres, budgets range in areas such as the Elite Theatre in Oxnard, CA from under \$50,000 per year to Omaha Community playhouse with a budget of over \$5,000,000 annually. Community theatre has evolved over the years, but Robert Gard's statement from 1968 remains true.

Community theatre occupies a peculiarly important position in the American theater picture. It is the largest, by far, of the theater's numerous segments and has the best chance of reaching the average citizen and family. In the bigger cities, its clientele is the neighborhood; in smaller ones, a fair cross-section of the stable, educated population; and to countless localities not served by the

professional or the educational theater, it offers the only opportunity to see live drama (Gard).

Community theatre is now represented in every state of the union, the US Virgin Islands, and the US military (AACT). While there is no accurate count of regional or professional theatres, the League of Resident Theatres (LORT) has 78 LORT theatres. LORT is the largest professional theatre association in the country, with specific requirements for joining. For clarification, Broadway theatres and many regional theatres are not counted as LORT theatres. The last count of regional theatres was almost twenty years ago in a *Time* magazine article discussing the lure of regional theatre: approximately 1,800 regional theatres in 2003 (Zoglin). The community theatre spectrum is much larger. It is a fair assumption that more people in the United States see community theatre than all professional theatre combined. As Robert Gard said, community theatre has the best chance to reach the average citizen. John Prignano, Chief Operating Officer of Music Theatre International, one of the largest and most popular licensing houses, says while they see more of a financial impact from professional theatres, the amateur or community theatre productions of shows vastly outnumber the professional productions. He says, "without community theatre, there would be nothing else" (Prignano).

Models of Anti-Racist Policy

Community theatre need not create all of the anti-racist theatre work from scratch. Anti-racist policies and practices are readily available for theatres to use as models but are not specific to community theatre. In June of 2020, during the COVID pandemic and after countless Black Lives were extinguished, *We See You White American Theatre* (WSYWAT) was written by a collective of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to “expose the racism and non-equitable treatment in American Theatre” (WSYWAT). Its anonymous authors first released the document as an open letter to White American Theatre. One of the most stinging lines states, “We see you. We have always seen you. We have watched you pretend not to see us” (WSYWAT). The powerful language echoes words said by August Wilson and was signed, “the ground we stand on” (WSYWAT). The open letter was followed shortly after by detailed demands of over thirty pages for safer and more equitable spaces and signed by over 50,000 theatre-makers (WSYWAT)¹. The document came as a surprise to the theatre industry and exists as a guide and example for theatres to follow should they want to make any noticeable changes. The WSYWAT website received 80,000 unique visitors on the first day of its appearance. The number of signatures from around the American theatre community is still growing (WSYWAT). Approximately 100 professional theatres from across the country have

¹ WSYWAT. 6 December 2021. www.weseeyouwat.com/demands

responded with statements of support and a promise to change their behavior.

WSYWAT, in its opening letter, asks for an equitable presence, a code of conduct and transformative practices (WSYWAT). WSYWAT lays out these tenets clearly and asks for “transformative measures guided by principles of self-determination, presence, joy, access, protection, transparency and integrity in the spirit of independence from our colonized past and present” (WSYWAT). WSYWAT goes on to delineate the requests even further. Interestingly, WSYWAT ignores community theatre in its demands.

The document calls for immediate action and makes demands of the professional theatre industry. It serves as a model and guide for the professional theatrical community. Anti-Racist theatre instructor Nicole Brewer celebrates it and explains,

What we have here is a document that took so much labor from the BIPOC community to share their trauma again, dig it up, make it fresh, put it into written word, then edit it into this document. How could anyone pass this up? Some of it’s low-hanging fruit. Some of it is much more strategic and a longer plan. But none of it should be ignored. (Brewer)

While WSYWAT is aimed at larger professional theatres, some of the tenets can be used in smaller organizations and community theatre.

After distillation, these tenets were taken and became a starting point for the LA Theatre Standards, released via email to 130 theatres in September 2021. The Los Angeles Anti-Racist Theatre Standards were written by a group of LA theatre artists “dedicated to true equity and looking to create lasting, systematic change in our institutions and our community” (LA Theatre Standards). One of the authors, Zach Davidson, Artistic Director of Coin & Ghost in LA, said that this document came about as a subgroup of a subgroup of the intimate theatres in Los Angeles. The intimate theatre community in Los Angeles comprises those theatres with 99 or fewer seats (Intimate Excellent). Davidson explained the conversation began with about 60-70 of these small theatres talking about what to do for marketing and survival during the pandemic. It quickly evolved and expanded to a group to explore what equity and systematic change would look like in the LA theatre community (Davidson).

While the LA intimate theatres appreciated what WSYWAT had to say and noted that it was incredible, it was something that covered larger theatres and all theatres on a much larger scale. Davidson and his fellow authors realized the community needed specific “actionable items” (Davidson). The LA Theatre Standards went through revisions and focus groups, ensuring that as many different segments of the community as possible were represented. It was written by “majority BIPOC, majority female, intersectional, intergenerational and contains representation from

the LGBTQ+ community and other marginalized populations” (LA Theatre Standards).

These standards align with WSYWAT but are designed for the specific community and could serve as an example for community theatre². They are a conversation starter and not the end of the conversation (Davidson). The authors welcome the chance to talk with other theatre-makers about using the standards. The 11-page document is a living document with a prologue, glossary, hyperlinks to valuable resources, and lists the standards in four concise headings with explanations. The standards are: “the stories you tell (and how you tell them), the people you work with (and how you treat them), the company culture (and how it functions), and the work continues (accountability and transparency)” (LA Theatre Standards).

The document was written focusing on theatres with smaller budgets. Still, the authors note it can be effective in theatres with budgets of all sizes that prioritize the resources to do the anti-racist work (LA Theatre Standards). The authors understood the need for a collective voice to synthesize the standards and practices. The need for continued engagement is of primary importance, as stated on their webpage.

“Anti-racism,” to put it simply, is the active and ongoing practice of recognizing and combating racism, whether on an individual, institutional, or systemic level. It must be ACTIVE, as it isn’t enough to

² LA Theatre Standards. 6 December 2021. latheatrestandards.com

“not be racist;” we must be proactive and intentional in our dismantling of the racial inequities all around us. It must be ONGOING, because anti-racism is not a permanent identity, but rooted in what we are doing or not doing, supporting, or expressing in each moment (LA Theatre Standards).

Survivability

If theatre does not combat racism now, the future will look very different. As John Steinbeck said in *Once There Was A War*, “the theatre is the only institution in the world which has been dying for 4,000 years and has never succumbed. It requires tough and devoted people to keep it alive” (Steinbeck). Community theatre is a significant part of this devotion. While it may be true that theatre will survive as a whole, will the current model survive without telling the stories of the entire country? WSYWAT demands immediate action, or the BIPOC community will tell their own stories (WSYWAT). The LA Theatre Standards further explore actionable items on how to “uplift a wide variety of voices...not just those deemed acceptable, respectable, and profitable by White American Theatre” (LA Standards).

During the COVID pandemic, AACT began to reevaluate its mission of “helping theatres thrive” (AACT). The organization could not connect with member theatres across the country as it had, but it made an enormous impact with virtual offerings. The expected drop in membership did not happen, says Executive Director Quiana Clark-Roland. Not all theatres

survived, but fewer closed permanently than the thirty percent speculated (AACT). Individual community theatres were seeking a way to connect with others. The virtual offerings of AACT reached more theatres and individuals than some of the pre-pandemic resources (Clark-Roland). AACT opened a dialogue with new community theatres that had never participated in the in-person events. At least once a month, these virtual offerings include a topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). They are open to the entire membership and bring this conversation to those with a shared understanding (Clark-Roland). Removing the travel barrier opened up a new world to membership and engagement, says AACT President and Executive Artistic Director of Tacoma Little Theatre, Chris Serface. The engagement has not stopped since theatres are opening back up and returning to producing. Through the connectivity of AACT, some theatres that had been closed found ways to reopen (Clark-Roland).

With membership rising and a return to in-person activities, the AACT staff and board are looking toward the organization's future and how to continue helping members thrive. Clark-Roland says AACT is "including anti-racist practices and DEI initiatives within its strategic plan." She questions, "What do we imagine the future of theatre to look like when the minority becomes the majority? Are we preparing ourselves for that shift" (Clark-Roland)? At one of the virtual DEI discussions, Chris Serface says, "the global majority is here; how do we welcome them?"

Clark-Roland and Serface refer to census population projections that state the United States population will be “minority white” in 2045 (Brookings). This data also states the aging white population will “see a modest immediate gain through 2024 and then experience a long-term decline through 2060” (Brookings). Community theatre can look to this population forecast for guidance on survival, sustainability, and preparation for future generations. Under the leadership of Clark-Roland, AACT has already begun a collective conversation to unite community theatres in collective anti-racist practices. Thus far, Clark-Roland says the feedback has been mostly positive. She did note one negative response from a mention of WSYWAT on the AACT website. This theatre is no longer a member of the organization.

Theatres that do not embrace anti-racist practices may last for a few years but will not survive long, said one anonymous participant at the AACT National Directors Conference (Anonymous). The National Directors Conference is a biennial three-day conference sponsored by AACT of individuals employed full-time in an administrative or artistic position in a community theatre across the country (AACT). Being one of the first in-person events for AACT since 2019, the 2021 event in San Antonio brought over 80 community theatre leaders to the table. At this conference, DEI efforts were a topic of importance. Susan Goes, Executive Director of the Cottage Theatre in Oregon, states in a recent article about the conference, “I

was struck by how much we all have in common, even though our theatres may differ in many ways. Our common love of theatre creates strong rapport” (Goes).

The rapport and passion these community theatre leaders have with each other is a prime reason why a collective view on anti-racist practices in community theatre can succeed. During one survey of participants, 68% said their theatres are better than before the pandemic because of the forced introspection and reimagining (Goes). These leaders asked the same questions Zach Davidson and the authors of the LA Theatre Standards asked in their initial virtual meetings. As Goes summarizes, the questions were which stories are most important to tell, whose voices are being heard, are we providing opportunities for all performers, and if not, what are the barriers (Goes)? The leaders at the conference are receptive to collective thinking.

The administrative leaders of a theatre are not the only stakeholders in looking at anti-racist practices. While the staff is important, the board of directors of an organization would also need to be receptive. WSYWAT has a section to explore what an equitable and accountable board would look like, but this essential work cannot even begin without the current board's commitment. “If the commitment is not there from everyone, it will fail,” says Donna Walker Kuhne. Kuhne is an expert in audience development, a leader in DEI work, a professor, and the author of *Invitation To The Party*.

She explains that every board member must be on board for the audience and culture to shift (Kuhne).

Economics

Once the board and staff are on board, other stakeholders are essential. Volunteers are the lifeblood of community theatre. Historically community theatre operates with volunteer actors and crew. Of the AACT member theatres, at least 50% have one or fewer staff members (AACT). The others range between 1-5 staff and a few with over 20 staff members. In most of these theatres, the paid staff are not the actors or crew, which are still volunteer positions (AACT). Using WSYWAT or the LA Theatre Standards as a guide would help develop collective anti-racist practices for community theatre. In both WSYWAT and the LA Theatre Standards, payment for work is encouraged. "Prioritize paying people ahead of other budgetary concerns" (LA Theatre Standards). The standards further remind us that not paying artists "is asking them to subsidize your work; without their sacrifice, you wouldn't be able to produce" (LA Theatre Standards). WSYWAT and the LA Standards acknowledge that BIPOC people make less than their white counterparts in most jobs, as the Actors Equity Hiring and Wage Gap Report notes.

Some community theatre leaders are looking for ways to pay actors and crew. Katie Hallman, Executive Director at Theatre Cedar Rapids, says community theatre has to evolve from the idea that we are strictly amateur.

She is one of the community theatre leaders trying to explore methods of at least a stipend for some actors and crew, who have long commutes or child care considerations. A few community theatres have begun to address this tenet with some success by already moving from volunteer actors to paying actors stipends. Omaha Community Playhouse in Nebraska and the Hale Centre Theatre in Utah have already begun paying actors. Omaha pays its actors above eighteen years of age up to \$1000 per show. The Hale Centre pays a weekly wage of approximately \$300. The payment is not a living wage but goes beyond the original concept of what defines community theatre. It asks, "is community theatre too exclusive? Only those who can afford to participate are able" (Hallman).

WSYWAT does not acknowledge volunteers. The LA Standards recognize a nuanced view of volunteers in a professional theatre setting: "volunteers have always been a critical part of the theatre ecosystem. Though they aren't paid, you should always look for ways to recognize, appreciate and otherwise care for your volunteers" (LA Theatre Standards). Community theatres working together can find a way to work through the pay conflicts and find a collective understanding.

Community Theatre is Stronger Together

Community theatres across the nation are working together to navigate the new theatre landscape. Community theatre leaders around the country are sharing resources to unpack the racism embedded in their

theatre and community. Katie Hallman says Theatre Cedar Rapids is supporting other performing arts organizations “in their pursuit of anti-racism training so that we may partner and be leaders in anti-racism work in our region, as making change as a single organization does not feel impactful enough” (Hallman).

Michael Cochran, Executive Director of Market House Theatre in Paducah, KY, is working on a Cultural Equity Plan with the staff and board (Cochran). The Plan is not yet complete but will have information to be shared among other theatres (Cochran). The Cultural Equity Plan and anti-racist work done by Cochran and Hallman are two examples of things happening in the community theatre world. Both leaders have generously offered to share their work with other community theatres that may not have the resources. Within the community theatre world, Hallman and Cochran are both employed by larger community theatres that have an almost weekly email thread to work together and pass ideas back and forth across the country (Hallman). These theatres are already working toward collective practices.

As theatres are working together, there are voices asking for even more unification. One of these voices comes from Scot MacDonald, Executive Director of the Memorial Opera House in Valparaiso, Indiana. MacDonald states,

We are all working toward a common goal and people want to do the work... but there's a real fear of pioneering in the community or saying the wrong thing or implementing standards that aren't well researched or practiced by everyone (MacDonald).

MacDonald emphasizes that using a collective voice will help those in the community who do not understand the importance of the work (MacDonald).

Conclusion

Transforming the theatrical ecosystem will not be achieved overnight but will be a valuable process. The LA Theatre Standards state, "No step is inconsequential, as long as you're moving forward" (LA Theatre Standards). Community theatres have made individual statements about the support of Black Lives and anti-racist theatre from social media to their websites, but there is no unified voice. Racism is embedded in the fabric of theatre; missteps cannot be avoided. A unified community theatre is in a prime spot to take up the cause and craft the positive change our industry will make. A collective change can and should happen with the American Association of Community Theatre to support these efforts with their tight network of more than 1,500 theatres. Established systems are in place to develop the authors and leaders who will build a collective set of anti-racist practices. These practices will honor WSYWAT and embrace the work done by LA Theatre Standards. As an organization, AACT already has regional representatives to

cover the country and a board representing all regions. The infrastructure to build success exists.

Community theatres across the country can bring the practices that work for their changing community and perspectives to a national audience through integration with others. Due to the nimbleness, as we have seen during the global pandemic, community theatres have been able to adjust seasons, try new things, push forward, and reinvent themselves while a captive audience is waiting in the wings.

Community theatres are looking to professional theatres for answers. But these theatres do not have the answers, nor do they possess the understanding of a community theatre model. Community theatre leaders understand their communities and know how to reach out to other community theatre leaders for better practices. Community theatre leaders across the country are already discussing and working to build a collective understanding in small groups. A unified collective knowledge will amplify all voices and help the forward momentum. Yes, community theatres will help ensure their own survival and dismantle systematic racism embedded in the national theatre by adopting collective anti-racist practices. More importantly, anti-racism in community theatre will flourish because of the tenacity and indomitable spirit of those who love and work in community theatre.

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