

Race, Equity, and Inclusion in Musical Theatre Education

WEBINAR SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION by Tim Espinosa

THE FULL WEBINAR, INCLUDING SOME PRESENTATIONS NOT SUMMARIZED BELOW, CAN BE VIEWED AT [WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/ WATCH?V=NBA9XI3HOIU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBA9XI3HOIU)

RESOURCES FOR RACE, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION CAN BE FOUND ON THE MTEA WEBSITE AT WWW.MUSICALTHEATREEDUCATORS.ORG/REI-RESOURCES

Over the past several months, there has been a powerful movement taking place in our theatre community. Students from across the country and across the globe have been engaging with their professors and mentors to fight for common solutions to achieving greater equity in musical theatre education. As educators, we have a responsibility to rise to the current moment and begin the process of systematically uprooting the history of inequity that has plagued many of our theatrical institutions. MTEA's newly formed Committee on Representation, Equity, and Inclusion (REI) was created to develop and implement immediate actions and solutions to address these challenges in our industry. Over the next few months, you will begin to hear more about the important work that this committee is dedicated to accomplishing in order to create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students, faculty, and staff in both the classroom and in production experiences.

On July 15, 2020, MTEA hosted a webinar, titled, Race, Equity, and Inclusion in Musical Theatre Education. This webinar was dedicated to introducing the MTEA community to the REI committee members as well as beginning the necessary conversations about our current educational climate. Following is a summation from the July webinar with contributions from many of our committee members. Some of the work cited in this webinar summation may challenge your preconceived notions about your current pedagogical practices. Some of what you read in this summation may open your eyes to new ideas and inspire you to implement further positive change in the classroom. Some of what you read may ask you to quietly sit in a moment of discomfort as we begin to peel away the layers of inequity that have existed in our industry for far too long. It is our sincerest hope that some of the discomfort you feel after reading this summation will be transformed into positive action.

It is also important to acknowledge that while the July webinar was dedicated to specifically addressing racial inequity, the REI committee acknowledges the intersectionality of inequity that exists in many other areas including sexual orientation, gender, mental health, disabilities, and neurodivergence. We are dedicated to addressing the inequities in all of these areas and are looking forward to expanding our committee representation within these specific areas as MTEA develops future webinars and workshops.

MTEA

JULY 15, 2020

7-10 PM EST

PRESENTS

MUSICAL THEATRE EDUCATORS' ALLIANCE

A ZOOM WEBINAR ON

RACE, EQUITY, & INCLUSION' IN MUSICAL THEATRE EDUCATION

STRENGTHENING RACIAL LITERACY IN YOUR INSTITUTION

RACIALIZING MUSICAL THEATRE CURRICULUM

PROMOTING EQUITY WITHIN REHEARSAL & PRODUCTION PROCESS



WILSON MENDIETA
CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY



TIM ESPINOSA
FULLERTON COLLEGE



RUFUS BONDS, JR.
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY



MARTY AUSTIN LAMAR
HOWARD UNIVERSITY



LEO YU-NING CHANG
MARYMOUNT MANHATTAN



KIM VARHOLA
KEIMYUNG UNIVERSITY



GWENDOLYN WALKER
PENN STATE UNIVERSITY



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THE FUND FOR COLLEGE AUDITIONS



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Tim Espinosa is a professional director, educator, actor, and electric violinist who currently serves as the head of musical theatre and department coordinator at Fullerton College. Tim has directed many diverse productions ranging from classical literature in Spanish to conceptualized contemporary musicals. Tim also serves as the Lead Diversity Officer for MTEA and is a member of the Committee on Representation, Equity, and Inclusion.

DID YOU KNOW? by Marty Austin Lamar and Gwendolyn Walker

The Committee on Race, Equity, and Inclusion (REI) was formed to ensure that the work toward achieving justice in training programs and the musical theatre industry moved beyond apologies and empty promises of change. Marty is a Black man leading the BFA musical theatre program at Howard University—a historically Black college/university (HBCU), and Gwen is a White woman in the BFA musical theatre program at Penn State—a predominantly White institution (PWI). It was imperative that we honored our racial and cultural differences while uniting our voices to encourage lasting impact. Together, we acknowledged the ways we had been complicit, the ways that the academy continues to support racist practices, and the lasting effects of racist practices on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students and faculty.

We determined that our conversation must be centered on the historical understanding of systemic racism and its continued impact on the theatre industry and training institutions. Our conversation was guided by the inquiry, “Did You Know?” We agreed that posing the question rather than making assumptions would provide a reflective space for our colleagues and allies in attendance. We discussed topics including the origins of the minstrel show, the impact of Jim Crow on our industry, and the absence of equitable hiring practices within the theatre industry and the academy.

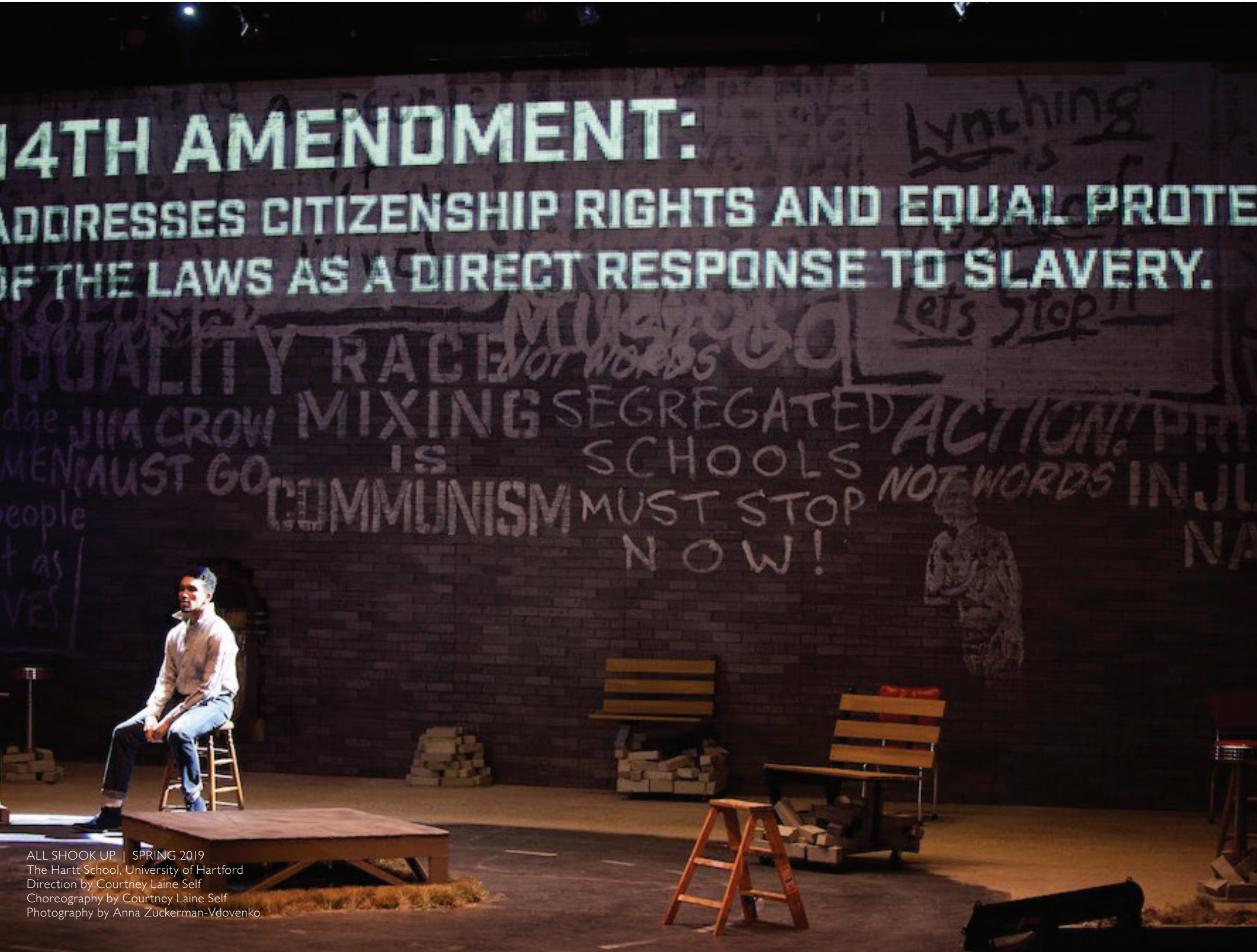
Ultimately, our work sought to mirror the necessary collaboration needed to move beyond the assumptions of equity and equality. Our industry must become an industry of justice that regards all art, all culture, and all artists. The entertainment industry and the organizations that advocate on behalf of the industry have been silently complicit for far too long. It is time for all of us to now hold organizations like the Musical Theatre Educators’ Alliance accountable for the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Continued opportunities, like the REI webinar, offer artists, teachers, advocates, and students the space for honest conversation and education.

No more moments! We must now do the urgent work of ensuring a lasting movement of change. This change can only be achieved when truth is met with action. The result is impact.

The following transcription summarizes the historical, political, and statistical information shared during the webinar.

Marty: This is intentional—my name is Marty Austin Lamar. I use he/him pronouns, and I am a Black, male-identifying, musical theatre artist and educator.

Gwen: My name is Gwendolyn Walker. I use she/her pronouns, and I am a White, female-identifying, musical theatre educator and artist.



ALL SHOOK UP | SPRING 2019
The Hartt School, University of Hartford
Direction by Courtney Laine Self
Choreography by Courtney Laine Self
Photography by Anna Zuckerman-Vdovenko



ALL SHOOK UP | October–November 2019 / February 2020
Universidad de las Américas Puebla
Direction by Luz Elena Martínez and Cristóbal Meza
Music Direction by Sergio Castro Medina
Choreography by Mariana Servín and Sophia Escobar
Set Design by César Rojas, Cristina Rosales, and Daniela Romero
Costume Design by Luis Arturo García
Lighting Design by Elba Emicente
Sound Design by Daniel McCoy
Photography by Luis Arturo García

M: We understand that our work together is more powerful than our work would be separately.

G: Our diversity is our strength, and we have so much to learn from each other.

M: For many of us, much of our work is listening and educating ourselves.

G: Did you know that the first known professional performance of a musical in New York was John Gay’s, *The Beggar’s Opera*, in 1750 (Griffel 45)? This was 130 years after the beginning of slavery and 113 years before the end of slavery.

M: Did you know that the oldest recorded form of synthesized musical theatre (acting, singing, and dancing) in the United States was the minstrel show, first seen in the 1830s (Mates)? The minstrel show is a uniquely American art form because it has no roots in Greek, Roman, or European theatre.

G: Did you know that blackface is the act of using burnt cork ash or black shoe polish to darken a performer’s complexion to caricature and dehumanize persons of African descent? Blackface was worn by White performers beginning in the 1830s and didn’t start to decline in popularity until over one hundred years later in the 1930s. Blackface enforced a range of negative stereotypes and further ignited racial unrest over a White supremacist political system. While blackface experienced a decline in popularity by White performers after the 1930s, African American performers continued to use blackface to ensure employment and exposure. Musical theatre in the United States has frequently turned a blind eye to the lasting effects of blackface in theatre training, hiring, and production (Clark).

M: Did you know that Thomas Rice, a White American actor, is considered the “daddy” of the minstrel show (Lhamon 2; Clark)? Rice introduced the character of Jim Crow in the early 1830s. Rice sang and danced in blackface, caricaturing the religious practices and traditions of enslaved Africans on the plantation. Jim Crow laws harshly mandated the segregation between Black and White citizens in public schools and restrooms and at water fountains and restaurants. These laws were in effect from the end of the Reconstruction Era (the period after the Civil War, approximately 1865–1877) to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—roughly 100 years (Kousser).

G: Did you know that almost all musical theatre history textbooks used in musical theatre education were written by White men?

M: Did you know that according to a 2019 survey conducted by The Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC), 95% of the shows on Broadway in the 2016–2017 season were directed by White directors or written by White playwrights and that shows rarely focus on the contributions of BIPOC, women, and minoritized communities? In this same survey of Broadway and non-profit actors, 66.8% were Caucasian, 18.6% were African American, 7.3% were Asian American, and 5.1% were Latinx (*Ethnic Representation*).

G: These non-White percentages were much higher than in previous years due to a little musical called *Hamilton* and August Wilson’s play, *Jitney*, both on Broadway the year this survey was taken. Additionally, 86.8% of all shows produced in the 2016–2017 season were written by White people, and White directors were hired for 87.1% of all New York productions (*Ethnic Representation*).

M: Did you know that according to a Pew Research Center survey published on July 31, 2019, postsecondary faculty are predominantly White? Professors are 81% White and 19% non-White (including Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Alaska Natives, and those of two or more races). Associate professors are 76% White and 24% non-White (Davis and Fry).

G: The theatre industry reflects the current hiring practices and diversity disparities within higher education. If we use our combined power to challenge and diminish the disparities in higher education, the industry will change as a result.

G: Our goal this evening is to build a community where we can be brave enough to have difficult conversations and be uncomfortable together.

M: We celebrate you for being here with us this evening. My name is Marty Austin Lamar, and I have been complicit.

G: My name is Gwendolyn Walker, and I have been complicit.

M: It’s my job to educate myself...

G: It’s my job to educate myself...

M: ...and not put the burden of that education on my students.

G: ...and not put the burden of that education on my students.

M: Thank you for listening.

Both: Together, we must do better.

Gwendolyn Walker is an assistant professor of musical theatre voice at Penn State University. She is certified by the Contemporary Alexander School as an Alexander Technique teacher, and she maintains a busy New York City studio. Her students can be seen in most shows on Broadway today.

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SEEING THE STUDENT AND ENCOURAGING THEM TO WORK FROM THEIR CULTURAL POINT OF VIEW

by Rufus Bonds, Jr.

In DRA 261:Musical Theater Practicum—Acting the Song, a course offered at Syracuse University, investigating culture is used as a vehicle to acknowledge the student's ancestral heritage. On day one, the students share with the class the culture of their families. As they share, the students recognize their classmates' various ethnicities ranging from German to Irish to Australian to Nigerian.

The students are always encouraged to bring themselves and their culture to their work. For the first unit, The Song You Know, the students sing a selection of their choice. We discuss why they selected the song and how it represents them. This unit continues the idea of seeing the student. The second song in this cycle, "Something's Coming" from *West Side Story*, reminds the students to dream. After

the student sings the lyric, "with a click, with a shock, door will jingle, door will knock, open the latch," the following questions are posed to the student: "Using those lyrics, what could happen right now in your life that would set you on fire?" and "What dream do you see coming true?" With these questions, the students come alive, place themselves in the situation, and the moment is activated. The next song, "Who Can I Turn to When Nobody Needs Me" from *The Roar of the Greasepaint the Smell of the Crowd*, guides the students to the opposite end of their emotional life. The assignment requires the vulnerability of the students as they reveal their most painful moment. These two songs provide a space for the students to be seen while giving them the freedom to reveal themselves in their work.

The final unit, Breaking the Box, uses *Once on This Island* as the vehicle to investigate culture. Students read *My Love My Love* by Rosa Guy—the book that provides the cultural and historical foundation on which the musical is based. Research begins on the history, historical timeline of the play, and the people of Haiti. We discuss the racial and economic divide between the characters to understand one of the play's themes. We compare and contrast the storyline and character's intent between the book and the musical. Once students compile their findings, the songs are assigned.

One semester, as I began to assign the songs, a very talented young lady approached me and stated that she did not feel comfortable singing material that was not from her culture. I replied, "If I thought that way, I would not have a career. For my entire education and most moments in the business, I did not sing material from my culture." After class, she expressed that she understood and thanked me for hearing her. I also spoke to her and the class, explaining that this would not be material to sing out in the world, but it was a moment to learn about another culture and sing beautiful music. I continued to reiterate that one cannot sing from another culture until you understand their voice. In that quick moment between the young lady and me, space developed for me to speak about the inequity of the musical theatre canon, the system of racism, and the fight I encounter as a Black man.

We must see our students. When a student feels invisible and as if nothing about who they are culturally exists in their work, they feel unwanted and sense they are viewed as less than. In this cry of invisibility, the student believes their training expects them to assimilate and blend in while leaving themselves behind. We must begin to truly see our students from all walks of life and teach them to investigate the world as a whole. When this happens, not only will the classroom shift, but also concurrently, a change for humanity will emerge.

BEAST MODE CHAMPION: THE PRO-WRESTLING ROCK MUSICAL | November 2020

Elon University
Direction by Kirby Wahl
Music Direction by Dan Gibson | Choreography by Deb Leamy
Set Design by Natalie Hart | Costume Design by Jack Smith
Lighting Design by Bill Webb | Sound Design by Mike Smith
Photography by Dan Gibson and J McMerty





Rufus Bonds, Jr. is an assistant professor in the Department of Drama at Syracuse University. Mr. Bonds performed the title role of Porgy in *Porgy and Bess* in London. He has performed as the baritone soloist for *Duke Ellington's Sacred Music* at Carnegie Hall and on Broadway in *Rent*, *Once on This Island*, and *Parade*, for which he won the Drama Desk Nomination, Best Supporting Actor. He is also an Eugene O'Neill semifinalist.

TRIAL AND ERROR: HOW LEARNING ABOUT RACISM AND MICROAGGRESSIONS CAN BE LIKE LEARN- ING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

by **Leo Yu-Ning Chang**

A week before the webinar, United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) unexpectedly announced that international students with F-1 and M-1 visas could not

remain in the United States if their schools went entirely online in the fall semester. Though this controversial policy was rescinded a week later after numerous complaints and lawsuits, many international students are still left with uncertainties about their future visa status and the fear of deportation.

On top of that, students studying musical theatre suffer from racism. According to a survey that I conducted for my presentation, "Surfing the Waves with International Students in Musical Theatre Programs" for the 2020 MTEA conference in San Diego, 70% of participants (current and alumni musical theatre majors) were BIPOC and spoke English as their second language. Almost all international students reported experiencing racial discrimination in their musical theatre programs because of their skin tone, accent, appearance, and cultural background (Chang).

To adapt themselves to a foreign land, these international students must learn the nuances of language, culture, and traditions through intense study and by making mistakes and being open to suggestions from others. Their courage to learn through trial and error serves as an excellent example of how we need to examine and learn about racism and microaggressions in our industry and society.

To ensure an equitable environment for all students and increase fluency in incorporating inclusive actions and language, we have to treat these issues as if we are learning a new language. I've included two core actions to start.

LISTEN AND LEARN

First and foremost, we have to unlearn the habit of making assumptions. What we perceive from the outside does not always align with what may be true. Our BIPOC students should not be responsible for our own education as teachers. Instead of putting them in the spotlight to share their pains and experiences, we can:

- *Invite students to correct us if our language or behaviors are not inclusive or appropriate.*
- *Prepare a student questionnaire before the first class.* The purpose of this questionnaire is to have a better understanding of the students' backgrounds and future goals. Students should always have the right to answer questions as they feel comfortable. Using open-ended questions and inclusive language tends to be more successful in obtaining responses from students.
- *Incorporate the students' voices in choosing scenes and repertoire.* Ask students if they are passionate about any specific materials or if there are any they want to avoid. Opening up the conversation about choosing materials gives students a sense of authority in the educational process and encourages them to think outside of the box when considering what kind of characters they aspire to play.

EXPAND AND REACH OUT

The history of musical theatre has predominantly been told through the lens of cisgender, White males. We cannot deny the merit of their contributions. However, these authors and writers present one point of view and select what information to include or leave out. To offer more inclusive perspectives, we can implement the following actions in both performance and lecture courses:

- Choose reading materials written by authors who identify as BIPOC.
- Feature a larger percentage of BIPOC theatre creators and performers in the curriculum.
- Reach out and collaborate with BIPOC composers and playwrights to expand the repertoire your students learn.
- Invite BIPOC creators and performers to be guest artists, share their experiences, provide feedback, and mentor BIPOC students.

We have to challenge what has been told about our history; we have to challenge the "norm"; we have to challenge ourselves, our colleagues, and our institutions. We will undoubtedly experience many trials and make many errors throughout the process; we can only own up to them and continue to learn.

Leo Yu-Ning Chang is a bilingual performer and educator born and raised in Taiwan. He currently teaches at Marymount Manhattan College and New York City Center. Leo also serves on the Committee on Representation, Equity, and Inclusion for MTEA and is committed to being a strong advocate for international and BIMPOC artists. He received his MFA in musical theatre from San Diego State University.

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PRINCIPAL ROLES, PRINCIPLED DECISIONS

by Kim Varhola

Aspiring young artists need more than formal academic training in our field to become professional practitioners. *They need meaningful stage experience.*

American musical theatre is an overwhelmingly White art form. Historically, creative teams and casts have been predominantly White in the professional theatre. Furthermore, White actors are often cast in roles that do not require the character to be White. This results in fewer opportunities for actors of color. Additionally, actors of color have not only had fewer opportunities for meaningful participation on the American musical stage in general, but they have also often been denied their own ethnic-specific roles. This system is called whitewashing. Despite recent increases in representation and diversity on our stages, actors of color still seem to be relegated to supporting roles or ensemble tracks and are often subject to a system called tokenism.

Many times on our school stages, we make casting choices based on the appearances of the original, professional cast. We may refer to this as “traditional casting.” If we are, in fact, casting our school stages according to a traditional look, and American theatre has a precedence of being predominantly White, then how are we providing meaningful opportunities for our students of color? If we do not provide meaningful stage opportunities for our students of color, the outcomes are as follows:

- Students of color will not be prepared for the professional realm.
- Students of color may be overlooked or considered “not quite good enough.”
- Students of color may not work professionally.
- Audience members of color will not see themselves reflected on stage.
- Young artists of color may have doubts about working in the field.
- Young artists of color may not apply to academic theatre programs.

What happens on the professional stage is related to what happens in our university programs and other training arenas. To illustrate this point, let’s take a look at a few key events leading up to the casting of the original Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*.

In 1990, after a successful opening in London, Cameron Mackintosh announced *Miss Saigon* was coming to Broadway. This was an incredible opportunity for the Asian American theatre community; *Miss Saigon* was a huge production with dozens of available roles for Asian Americans. Mackintosh later announced that British, White actor, Jonathan Pryce, would reprise his role as the Vietnamese character, The Engineer, in the production. The announcement spurred a public outcry from the Asian American community and prompted an objection from the Actors’ Equity Association (AEA). Mackintosh fought back, cancelling the production since Pryce was not given clearance to play the role. AEA quickly reconsidered their position, and the show eventually went on as planned (Lee 177-90). The insistence of using Pryce seemed to center on the creative team’s inability to find an “Asian actor suitable for the role . . . who could both act and sing” (Rothstein). In other words, Mackintosh couldn’t find an Asian or Asian American actor he considered good enough.

In preparation for the London production, the creative team conducted a worldwide search for the role of Kim, traveling to New York, Los Angeles, Honolulu, and finally, Manila, Philippines, where they eventually found Lea Salonga. Salonga’s alternate, Monique Wilson, was also cast out of Manila (*The Heat Is On* 3:50-25:25). And although Wilson was not selected to transfer to the Broadway production, the fact that three top slots for this new, Broadway-bound musical were filled with non-Americans is rather distressing. Frankly speaking, what does this imply about theatrical education for Asian Americans?

According to figures from the United States Census Bureau, there were only approximately 320,000 Asian Americans living in the US in 1950 (19). Consequently, when Rodgers and Hammerstein’s, *The King and I*, opened on Broadway in 1951, none of the other principal Asian roles were played by Asian actors with the exception of Yul Brynner (who has some Mongolian ancestry) (“*The King and I* [1951]”). In 1970, the Asian American population had increased to approximately 1.5 million (United States 19). Thus, for the 1977 Broadway revival of *The King and I*, both the role of Tuptim and the role of Lady Thiang were cast with Asian actors (“*The King and I* [1977]”). The remaining principal characters were played by White actors. In 1980, the Asian American population had risen to 3.5 million (United States 19). And yet, for the 1985 Broadway revival of *The King and I*, none of the principal Asian roles were played by Asian actors (“*The King and I* [1985]”). It is discouraging to see that during this time when the Asian American population was increasing, representation of Asian American actors on the Broadway stage was decreasing. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the Asian American talent pool was so small by the time *Miss Saigon* arrived in New York; Asian American actors couldn’t even get roles that were written for them. Rather than helping to cultivate the Asian American acting community, the powers that be often hinder it.

In the documentary film, *The Heat Is On—The Making of Miss Saigon*, Chloe Stewart, one of the young actresses from Honolulu, is encouraged by the team to keep working on her craft. They said, “We’d like to suggest you go on working very hard . . . We’d like to keep in touch with you” (*The Heat Is On* 13:50-14:20). Stewart eventually went on to have a successful professional career in musical theatre. She also eventually played the role of Kim. If there are viable opportunities, young artists of color will train. If there are viable opportunities, young artists of color will take a class. If there are viable opportunities, we will see more young students of color entering our programs—and thriving.

Kim Varhola appeared on Broadway in *Rent*, *Flower Drum Song*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and *Pacific Overtures*. A former marketing manager for Center Theatre Group, Kim is currently a professor of drama at Keimyung University in South Korea. She holds a BS in theatre from Northwestern University and MA degrees from Columbia University and New York University.

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