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# Four fixes for Chicago theater's diversity problem

Here's a call for the local scene to be a better mirror

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First Folio Theatre

First Folio Theatre's cast for the 2017 production of "As You Like It."

Chicago is a third white, a third black and a third Hispanic, more or less. So why doesn't its theater industry—widely recognized as being in the national vanguard—reflect that diversity? [An October survey](#) by union Actors Equity revealed that white actors are cast far more often and make far more money than actors of color. Leadership at the city's biggest theaters—Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Second City, Drury Lane, Marriott, Paramount, Steppenwolf, Goodman, Broadway in Chicago and Northlight—is predominantly white and male. Victory Gardens, led by Artistic Director Chay Yew and Managing Director Erica Daniels, is the only major producing house where the top spots aren't dominated by some combination of white people and/or men.

All art needs to diversify with a goal of equity—a true sharing of power and resources—rather than "tokenistic" representation, says Angelique Power, president of the [Field Foundation](#) of Illinois and founder of Enrich Chicago, a coalition of local arts organizations and foundations working toward racial equity for the city's arts scene. Still, theater bears a greater responsibility to the public. Theater is "a living, pulsing dynamic source that brings people together and bridges differences," says Harvey Young, chair of

and a professor in the theater department at [Northwestern University](#). "It needs to be a better mirror."

Here are four ways for Chicago theater to become that better mirror.

**Leadership.** Most theaters decline to comment on diversity issues. Several are addressing leadership homogeneity through programs that recruit and nurture leaders who reflect Chicago's "majority minority" demographic.

Victory Gardens has established three paid immersion mentorship programs. The Directors Inclusion Initiative, launched in 2015, recruits directors who identify as disabled, women, transgender or gender-nonconforming. Alumni include director Lavina Jadhvani, whose acclaimed work has been seen at many of Chicago's Equity houses and nationwide. On Nov. 3, Victory Gardens announced two new paid fellowships for people of color, one for artistic endeavors and the other for management.

Steppenwolf's Multicultural Fellowship brings in "early career" people of color interested in learning theater arts, from administration to costume design. The program has produced 37 graduates, several of whom now work at Steppenwolf. The fellowship was established in 2007, the same year Steppenwolf added four actors of color to an ensemble that for 14 years had only one. "As a historically white institution, a lot of work has to be put into making systemic structural changes," says David Schmitz, executive director. "The fellowship is one of those changes."

**Casting.** Is the fix color-blind casting, which regards race not at all? Or color-conscious, which dictates that skin color on stage does matter?

At First Folio Theatre in Oak Brook, color-blind casting has worked well for the past 22 years. During the casting process, how an audience will respond to a cast "never crosses our mind," says David Rice, co-founder and executive director. Once a show is cast, the theater plans for whatever audience reactions it can anticipate. For instance, during last spring's production of "Silent Sky," which featured Wardell Julius Clark as an early-20th-century Harvard astronomy professor, a display in the theater's lobby included information on black professors working at Harvard during that period. Rice says he knew audience members would wonder about the historical accuracy of the casting, even though the character was fictional.

Color-conscious casting "recognizes that race and ethnicity is not something you can just ignore," says JC Clementz, casting director at Steppenwolf. "Rather, it is part of the character, and it is important to acknowledge how the character's race affects the play." Clementz notes that playwrights sometimes make requests, and that Jessica Dickey, author of "The Rembrandt," which Steppenwolf staged this past fall, said, "Please don't make everyone white." To honor her request, Steppenwolf cast Mexico-born actor Karen Rodriguez in the role of Madeline/Henny. She joined three white men and a Latino actor,

Gabriel Ruiz, on the stage.

**Funding.** Nationally, 60 percent of contributions go to just 2 percent of all cultural institutions. That concentration has risen over the years, not fallen. Donors, both individuals and foundations, can contribute to racial equity in theater by "funding the living daylights" out of African, Latino, Asian, Arab and Native American theater groups, says Angelique Power of the Field Foundation. "Fund these spaces like you mean it," she says, meaning providing general operating support for long periods of time, not just a year or two. "These spaces are incubators," she says. "They feed the whole theater scene." Field, which grants about \$2.7 million a year, earlier this year [retooled its funding model](#) to focus specifically on these groups, referred to by the acronym Alaana. Its fall group of grantees included the Chicago Latino Theater Alliance and Victory Gardens.

Individuals need to step up, too, says Power, citing [2015 research](#) that shows they account for only 5 percent of Alaana funding, versus 60 percent for primarily white organizations. "Does a big organization need another \$10 million?" she asks. Major donations to minority theater groups would present a "potential for big-time change," she says.

**The Joseph Jefferson Awards.** The annual Joseph Jefferson Awards are often billed as Chicago's answer to the Tony Awards. The Jeff Committee, which determines which theaters and actors will win awards, has 55 members, 49 of whom are white.

Diversifying is easier said than done, says David Liesse, committee chair. "We're trying," he says, explaining that the committee has contacted minority theaters for the names of potential members. One issue: membership dues, about \$300 a year, and the fact that committee members must attend about 150 shows a year. "They need to do a gut rehab of the membership requirements," says David Cerda, founder and artistic director of Hell in a Handbag Productions.

The 2017 Jeff Award winners, announced Nov. 6, included four actors of color (out of 11 categories for best actor/actress). Two of the three awards for best new play went to writers of color. The casts for four winning shows, Writers Theatre's "East Texas Hot Links," Court Theatre's "Blues for an Alabama Sky," Drury Lane's "Smokey Joe's Cafe" and Porchlight's "Scottsboro Boys," were overwhelmingly people of color.

If the stage is a magical place where all things are possible, so, then, is Chicago's theater scene.

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