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The Empty Space: A Look at How Theaters Have Filled Gaps in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion



Oren Jacoby's adaptation of Ralph Ellison's INVISIBLE MAN / [The Huntington](#)

Editor's note: This piece is part of our ongoing [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion \(EDI\) Project](#) created to spotlight millennials' voices and thoughts on diversity and justice. We urge you to read how this project came together in collaboration between NPO and the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network and about the ideology behind this series. We intend to publish another 16 pieces in the coming months. Readers will be able to subscribe to an RSS feed to follow articles as they are published. NPO and YNPN will be using the hashtag #EDISeries, so post about the series along with us.

To stay informed on the project, we encourage readers to sign up for our daily newsletter on the right side of this page. If you have any questions or would like more information about the EDI Project, please email vanessa@npqmag.org.

This article is from NPQ's fall 2016 edition, "The Nonprofit Workforce: Overcoming Obstacles."

In October 2015, the Theatre Communications Group released its thirty-fifth annual research report, *Theatre Facts 2014*. The report reflects data from the fiscal years 2013/2014 from a broad overview of the estimated 1,770 U.S. professional nonprofit theaters.¹ It shows that contributions have driven the American theater's comeback from the 2008 recession, and that theater, by and large, is thriving—and it is doing so in the face of increased pressure for more earned income dollars due to decreases in government funding and corporate giving and financial obstacles presented by the Great Recession. The report concludes the following:

Professional not-for-profit theatres can be found in every state and provide meaningful employment to artists, technicians, and administrators. In 2014, they created a diverse and rich theatrical legacy. They are significant contributors to their communities and to the U.S. economy. We estimate that theatres contributed over \$2 billion to the economy in the form of direct compensation and payment for space, services, and materials. They shared their art with 32.8 million patrons and provided employment to 135,000 artists, administrators, and technical personnel. They created 216,000 performances of 22,000 productions that now represent the U.S. professional not-for-profit theatre heritage of 2014.²

According to the National Endowment for the Arts, the arts (performing, visual, and literary) contribute \$698 billion to the U.S. economy each year.³ Numbers, of course, cannot tell the whole story. On a balance sheet and income statement, numbers represent the salaries of artists and technicians—and every new space built with community development grant dollars signifies living and breathing members of a community.

Theater is, ultimately, about people working together to make art; however, these collaborations are far too often fraught with conflict, particularly when diverse constituencies and stakeholders are involved. Alongside the success of the industry in the past decade, fissures in the field's landscape with regard to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) have taken center stage. Public outcry in the mainstream press, on social media, and within prominent organizations highlights a host of troubling trends in the industry, including a lack of diversity in casting and programming and homogenous leadership, staffs, and boards at theater organizations. *The Count*, for instance, a recent study by the Dramatists Guild, revealed that over their three-year period of research, only 22 percent of plays produced each year in the United States were written by women.⁴

There is general consensus among nonprofit arts administrators and boards that our increasingly multicultural society is a reason to embrace diverse perspectives in the arts. Chay Yew, artistic director of Victory Gardens Theater, in Chicago, said, "We can't be twenty-first-century Americans if we don't know African American, Latino, Asian, Native, and white histories and narratives. They make up our complicated collective history as citizens, as a nation, and we need to own them."⁵ To remain relevant to their local communities, nonprofit theaters must also reach younger audiences. As the *Boston Globe* reported, "Next time you're in a theater in Boston—or down on the Cape, or out in the Berkshires, or on Broadway, or pretty much anywhere, really—take a look around at the audience. Chances are you'll notice something missing: young people. What you're likely to see instead is wave upon wave of gray hair. Most of the seats will be occupied by baby boomers and those of the generation born around the time of World War II. Thirtysomethings will be scarce; twentysomethings will be even scarcer. And teenagers? Don't ask."⁶

Directing acting ensembles, hanging a spotlight high above the stage, and running a busy box office all require intensive collaboration. Indeed, theater work requires a tremendous amount of teamwork, and makes for a unique atmosphere in which EDI will either thrive or fail. Theaters collectively choose their seasons of plays, write value statements about identity (i.e., gender, race, sexual orientation), and create policies and practices that influence the culture of the organizations. Theater largely presents as a shining liberal beacon. Progressive values are touted as hallmarks of the industry. All opinions are supposedly accepted, and it is generally viewed as the most open of the arts because of its sense of adventure and boldness around the work created. The picture of the field of theater at large tends to look very elegant in its representation of equity, diversity, and inclusion. But there are many hidden ways in which the various “isms” (racism, sexism, ageism, and a whole host of others) manifest themselves.

We write this article at a point when, between the two of us, we have worked both as artist and administrator in over thirty theaters. We have done so as interns, fellows, full-time staff members, volunteers, and executive leaders. We have seen hundreds of plays at any number of theaters, national and international. And, as professionals of color, we’ve not only read about diversity and discrimination in the press and studied it in school but also have lived it in the workplace and in our daily lives. We’ve encountered surprise and disbelief that we are so well read in dramatic literature or that we’ve attended competitive graduate school programs. As staff members at theater organizations, we’ve rarely had supervisors of color, we’ve been told we are too “threatening” or “hostile,” and we’ve repeatedly had our concerns about EDI ignored or brushed aside.

Just as in our educational and financial systems, the American nonprofit regional theater industry has a long history of structural racism and inequity in its programming, staffing, and business practices. As people of color working in the nonprofit theater industry, we wanted to take a step back and reflect on—and share—some of the efforts around EDI made by a variety of nonprofit regional theaters that have resonated with us. These case studies are not all-inclusive but rather represent a wide range of institutional responses to the EDI problem in American theater. The powerful actions and accomplishments of these companies inspire confidence that progressive social change is not only possible in our field but within reach of organizations willing to work for it.

Oregon Shakespeare Festival: A Holistic Approach

“We live in a world where the demographics are shifting—that’s a reality. [Nonprofit theaters] have to have an organizational workforce with cultural competency. This is professional development. It is not philosophical. It’s very practical,” says Claudia Alick, community producer of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF).⁷

In March 2010, OSF developed its Audience Development Manifesto, which crystalizes principles for cultivating a richly diverse audience—one that represents the United States.⁸ OSF takes an all-inclusive approach to diversifying, not only focusing on audience but also on staff, board, programming, accessibility, and community outreach as points for working toward EDI both inside and outside the organization. Alick’s job is to create collaborations with the local, national, and international communities. She seeks a variety of voices in her programming choices. “This work,” she said, “has to be done holistically. You have to have a top-down, bottom-up approach. It’s about having multiple places for engagement and training. I’m not saying that every organization should do what OSF is doing, but my instinct says you can’t work toward EDI with only one method.”⁹

This comprehensive approach is inspiring to us because of our experiences working with organizations in which only one or two departments are charged with working on diversity (usually the marketing or education departments) and with organizations that have overtly refused to incorporate antioppression or EDI training in their professional development for staff.

Victory Gardens Theater: Sharing Leadership and Power

Chay Yew, artistic director at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater, speaks candidly about his role as one of the few leaders of color in nonprofit theater: "Equity, diversity, and inclusion are major pillars of our theater that seek to represent and reflect the city and our country on our stages. It is also a personal passion of mine as one of the few theater artistic directors of color. I was also a beneficiary of past theater leaders who believed in EDI in our field, thus giving me the opportunity to become the artist and leader I am today. I'm intending to carry on the tradition of opening the same doors that were open to me when I was younger....To create EDI in action means sharing leadership and power. Having EDI in middle or lower management isn't enough. It's merely lip service. Look at the new Canadian cabinet. That's EDI in action. And that's the future."¹⁰

Every aspect of Victory Gardens Theater is diverse—artists, staff, board, and audiences. The theater produces plays that include multiracial casts. In recent months, the theater also coordinated antioppression training for staff members. The training inspired Yew and the theater's former managing director, Christopher Mannelli, to create programs that would help increase EDI throughout the organization. Yew said, "Chris and I were invigorated by this workshop and have since instituted many ideas we learned into our theater through hiring practices, mentorship, community development, and access. Some of our recent results have been starting our Directors Inclusion Initiative, through which we provide access and professional experience for emerging disabled, women, transgender, and gender-nonconforming directors and directors of color; being more rigorous in casting nontraditionally, and identifying new board members who are culturally diverse; and hiring two community engagement managers, who will be our personal liaisons to diverse Chicago communities."¹¹

These kinds of efforts are important because of the persistence of microaggressions: the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults—intentional or unintentional—that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based on their marginalized group membership.¹² We've experienced a number of microaggressions in the business over the years. We've been told that a play will appeal only to a specific cultural group and that the theater cannot possibly convince that group to come to the theater. We've been told that there are no experienced designers (scenic, lighting, costume) of color. We've been laughed at while presenting a concern about discrimination, and been mistaken for interns while working as full-time staff members. We've been told to smile more, and that we don't "sound like" we're Black. We've had punitive action taken against us for reporting gender-based harassment, disclosing a disability, and expressing opinions based on our unique cultural backgrounds. We get a kick out of social media and entertainment blogs like BuzzFeed and Tumblr that chronicle microaggressions in the staff break room and white fragility in business meetings.¹³ Sometimes you've got to laugh to keep from crying! Cultivating a diverse staff is a good first step that must be paired with antioppression and EDI training, so that the diversity created has longevity and thrives in a positive environment.

Theatre Communications Group: Leading the Charge

Theatre Communications Group (TCG), in New York, operates as a national field organization for nonprofit theater. Recently, TCG has intensified its focus on EDI, but Dafina McMillan, former director of communications and conferences, says that diversity has always been embedded in the fabric of the organization: "TCG has always served a diverse field and [diversity] has remained a core value. TCG can centralize the field and adopt a challenge of greater inclusion in the field."¹⁴ McMillan explained further that TCG had recently completed a strategic plan and has launched and advanced several programs to address issues of EDI in the field. This includes their SPARK Leadership Program, created in 2014, which seeks to highlight and provide professional development opportunities to rising leaders of color in theater. In 2013 TCG formed their Diversity and Inclusion Institute, to gather together theater organizations that were interested in creating EDI action plans. This cohort of theaters meets periodically throughout the year, and TCG recently acquired funding to continue the institute's work. TCG has placed an emphasis on nurturing theaters of color, and in 2014 began an ongoing video project that highlights legacy leaders of color such as Luis Valdez, Lou Bellamy, Frank Chin, and Douglas Turner Ward. And in June 2015, TCG acquired funding for an associate director of equity, diversity, and inclusion to oversee its EDI efforts.

McMillan believes that TCG's programs have a galvanizing effect on the field: "The conversations are more nuanced and the field wants to work together and strategize. Funders see it and want to do something about it. There is a hunger happening in the field for EDI."¹⁵ One of the most profound developments currently at TCG is the organization's focus on creating a demographic survey that investigates how theater practitioners identify themselves. The survey is being developed by August Schulenburg, the director of communications and community engagement at TCG. "We have to honor people's complex identities and empower people to self-identify," McMillan said.¹⁶ TCG specifically focuses on nine points of identification: ability/disability; age; class/educational background; gender; place of origin; race/ethnicity; religion/spirituality; and sexual orientation. The survey will provide an accurate picture of the demographic makeup of theater professionals. TCG plans to launch this innovative tool soon, intent not only on measuring aggregate changes but also on changing the way that we measure individuals.

East West Players: Preparing for the Future

East West Players, in Los Angeles, is one of the oldest theaters of color in the United States still in existence today. In January 2016, Tim Dang, the theater's former producing artistic director, released a document called the "51% Preparedness Plan for the American Theatre." Snehal Desai, the theater's new artistic director, explained that the purpose of the plan was to "shake things up."¹⁷ It was a place to start the conversation and encourage theaters to look at their numbers.

The plan proposes that theater organizations meet one of three demographic criteria by 2020:

- Fifty-one percent of the artistic and personnel staff are people of color.
- Fifty-one percent of the artistic and personnel staff are women.
- Fifty-one percent of the artistic and personnel staff are under the age of thirty-five.

Desai emphasizes that the plan is not meant to be hard and fast but rather a starting point for organizations to develop various metrics and goals that can be met gradually. He explained that the plan is not meant to be static: "It is not enough for the plan to be just a plan, but a model."¹⁸ The "51% Preparedness Plan" is part of East West Players' "2042: See Change" model, and encourages theaters to prepare their own plans. The model highlights organizations that have developed preparedness plans as well as East West Players' partnering with organizations that are increasing their efforts around EDI. Desai acknowledges that the plan applies not just to mainstream, predominantly white theaters but to theaters of color, as well—for they too have work to do in terms of diversifying: "Everyone can be pushing for more equity, diversity, and inclusion. Although East West Players is an Asian-American theater, we are working toward gender equity, engaging the LBTGQ community, and including more plays from South Asia."¹⁹

For Desai, the future of the field lies in intersectionality: "People are multivaried," he said. "People do not enter a room checking only one box."²⁰ Indeed, both in the field and personally, we have seen how intersectionality functions in various settings. As a colleague of ours has noted, "I don't enter a room just as a woman and leave my Black person behind." The next challenge that faces the field—and, arguably, the country—will be around how to confront multiple identities and recognize the wholeness of a person.

Dallas Theater Center: Diverse Programming

"[Incorporating] equity, diversity, and inclusion is important because it is necessary. It is the right thing to do, but also vital in terms of our sustainability. The theater is a town hall of sorts. We need a variety of voices at the table for dialogue," says Martha-Elena (Mel) Howard, manager of board relations, diversity initiatives, and executive

operations at Dallas Theater Center (DTC).²¹

As outlined on DTC's website, specific goals for diversity in its artistic programming are as follows:

- Produce at least one production per season written by a Latino playwright as part of DTC's mainstage season.
- Ensure that DTC's Brierley Resident Acting Company is comprised of at least 50% diversity by hiring more people of color.
- Ensure non-traditional (color blind) casting in all productions.
- Guarantee that at least 25% of all teachers/teaching artists in SummerStage and Project Discovery are people of color.
- Hire at least two people of color to direct and/or choreograph productions as part of the mainstage season.
- Collaborate with at least one culturally specific theater company or arts organization to create productions for DTC's mainstage.²²

According to Howard, full-company meetings at DTC always have a diversity component—a reading, a workshop, or some other educational component by which the company learns about various people in the field who have helped further EDI, such as Joseph Papp, founder of The Public Theater, in New York, and Lloyd Richards, theater director and former dean of the Yale School of Drama.

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As artists and administrators, we have been influenced by W. E. B. Du Bois's call during the Harlem Renaissance for an African American theater "by us, for us, near us, and about us."²³ We have found safe spaces for theater based around our gender and racial identity groups to be both rewarding and necessary for opportunities and growth. In his famous TCG conference keynote address, the acclaimed African-American playwright August Wilson echoed Du Bois: "We cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products. We reject, without reservations, attempts by anyone to rewrite our history so as to deny us the rewards of our spiritual labors and become the cultural custodians of our art, our literature, and our lives. To give expression to the spirit that has been shaped and fashioned by our history is of necessity to give voice to the history itself."²⁴

A recent example of such cultural appropriation occurred in 2015, when the New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players planned a production of *The Mikado* in which white actors were to play the roles in yellowface. After a public outcry from the theater community, the production was eventually cancelled. Of course, cultural appropriation is at the very root of *The Mikado*—but to continue to perform the opera as it has traditionally been performed is not only unnecessary but also indicates a willful blindness and refusal to acknowledge both past sins and present realities. It demonstrates a hidebound attitude toward theater, too—and, as Jeff Yang pointed out in his Op-Ed "Yellowface staging of 'Mikado' has to end"; for in theater, "Even 'traditional' productions embrace mutability and modernity."²⁵ So, it was an example of insult being added to injury when the Manhattan Theatre Club (MTC) announced its 2015–2016 lineup: every play was by a white male. This prompted criticism and scrutiny from the press and industry professionals. *The New York Times* reported the controversy in its August 2015 article, "Internet Outcry Over Diversity Leads Manhattan Theater [sic] Club to Announce Season Details Early."²⁶

Studies show that experiencing identity-based oppression such as that which occurs in the workplace causes a variety of negative effects among employees. According to Maria del Carmen Triana et al., "The outcomes of discrimination to the target can range from trivial to moderate to severe and can be tangible (e.g., missed promotions, lost salary) or intangible (e.g., lower job attitudes, increased stress). Experiencing or perceiving workplace discrimination can affect the individual in several ways including physical effects, psychological effects,

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and work-related attitudes or behaviors.”²⁷ Former Engineering Manager Leslie Miley’s departure from Twitter exemplifies how this can play out. Miley, who was the only Black engineer in a leadership position at Twitter, publicly announced that he left the company because Twitter was not addressing diversity and inclusion. As outlined in an interview by NPR correspondent Karen Grigsby Bates, “Miley says he tried to move the needle—lobbying for diverse candidates at ‘contentious’ hiring meetings, pitching a new Diversity Engineering Manager position—but ultimately gave up. ‘For some at Twitter, diversity is an obstruction to avoid,’ he writes.”²⁸

While an unconventional and creative workplace, to be sure, theater is not exempt from stress and burnout among its workers due to such oppression; and it may surprise some to discover that theater, like any other industry, has its share of discrimination lawsuits and alienated audiences and donors due to a lack of attention paid to EDI.

But the field has changed and will continue to change. We must remember that EDI is not only a moral imperative but also a vital component of a new economic model for nonprofit theater that calls for diversifying its audiences, artists, and administrators in order to survive. EDI is necessary for theater’s continued relevance in our multicultural society. U.S. demographics are changing, and so must the American theater. Dartmouth Assistant Professor of Theater Irma Mayorga, who researches contemporary theater and performance by U.S. people of color, once said in private conversation, “Change is not for you; it is for those who come after you.”²⁹

While the work that must be done seems daunting and incremental at times, now is the time to begin making major changes. The organizations we have profiled here are part of the seismic shift needed to maintain a vibrant future for the American theater—one that represents our multicultural nation and presents stories that matter to a multiplicity of its citizens. We call for other organizations, artists, and leaders to take a hard look at their audience demographics, workplace culture, and programming. Careful and sober assessment is the first step to solving the pervasive problem. But we cannot stop at studies, seminars, and meetings. Action must be taken, and it must be taken now. The very power and impact of theater in American society are at stake.

Notes

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5. Chay Yew, in an interview with Jocelyn Prince, November 7, 2015.
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29. Irma Mayorga, in private conversation with Al Heartley, spring 2011.

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