

THEATRE & HOW IT INTERACTS WITH OTHER MEDIUMS

FEBRUARY 2021

Are DEI issues in film/TV/other mediums different to those in theatre?

As technology has advanced, so has its integration into art, for better or for worse. The ability to create continually gets easier, and opportunities to experiment, play, and build original work are right at our fingertips. That being said, theatre seems to be the only medium incapable of this same accessibility for its future writers, directors, designers, and actors. A likely cause for this inability to update is the need for the theatrical container. Technology has allowed for audience consumption in film, sculpture, music, or dance to be viewed through the screen; theatre is an exclusively live in-person art form through history and tradition. Of course, there is an argument to be made for movie musicals, specifically those filmed on stage with an audience, commonly referred to as “pro-shot” musicals. However, the inability for theatre to become more accessible through time sets it apart from other artistic mediums.

Theatre at the highest quality is only available on a few streets in New York City – the theatrical landscape targets older white audiences and only plays at certain times every night but Monday. At the touch of a button, we now immerse ourselves in media and artistic content created anytime from today to hundreds of years ago. Social media serves the venues and museums’ purpose, and the subscription has become more valuable than the movie ticket. Theatre does not succumb; it persists in practice, form, and performance.

This is not to say theatre is not similar in other ways, though. Unfortunately, issues of representation and inequality are not dissimilar from those in the film industry. The rates of BIPOC discrimination and gender inequality are equally high, and there continues to be a lack of representation: from casting to creative to production.

SIGNIFICANCE & EVOLUTION

At a time when the current Broadway lineup features a Latino Founding Father, Black British royalty, and an Asian-American Eurydice, it appears as though Broadway is transitioning to become more inclusive and racially diverse. Yet this perception of diversity is indisputably punctured by the many overt issues that underlie the entertainment industry—a lack of representation in front of and behind the scenes, gender inequities, and a narrow target audience. The year 1990 bore witness to a striking racial controversy: the casting of white actor Jonathan Pryce as the Engineer in Miss Saigon was met by a significant amount of backlash. To achieve more Asian features, Pryce wore eye prosthetics and bronzer; the U.S. Actors’ Equity Association thereafter became entangled in a controversy over the boundaries between protecting the professional interests of the union’s ethnic minority members and interfering with artistic decisions. Following this striking instance of yellow-face, subsequent productions of said show have been cautious in avoiding the same mistake. This same sentiment similarly extends to such spaces as film and television, leading to more comprehensive considerations of such complex issues and mindful endeavors to foster greater inclusivity. Certainly, the arts have traditionally been potent in their ability to shape and influence culture: individuals often look toward these far-reaching and accessible mediums for a multitude of content. With this increase in awareness and consumption comes a proliferation of practices aimed at bettering issues in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion. For one, greater accountability by unions has accorded actors and production team members access to increased welfare benefits. From Dear White American Theatre to Deaf West Theatre, organizations now retain a particular focus on creating safe and welcoming spaces for those who have historically been marginalized.

The implementation of these establishments has undoubtedly culminated in improved practices. Brittney Johnson’s casting as Wicked’s first Glinda of Color presented a distinct milestone and a move in the right direction. For the time that Johnson was in the bubble, the Gershwin was no longer the dedicated white space it had been for so long. It represented hopes for equality, enabling those who have long been silenced and tokenized to assume a position at the forefront. The same year, the Tony Awards stage constituted a moment of consequence with Ali Stroker’s groundbreaking win: the first Broadway actor in a wheelchair. Her receipt of the award for Best Featured Actress delivered a strong message to the thousands watching.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the push for diverse casting appears to have somewhat stalled. Having reached a peak during the 2015-16 Broadway season with Hamilton and The Color Purple, the arts industry feels as white as it did five years ago. Opportunities for performers of color exist primarily as exceptions to the rule rather than the norm. The harsh truth is that racism, ableism, and LGBTQ+ representation have not necessarily been solved, and the arts sphere remains a predominantly white space. From casting to leadership, the problems needing change in theatre are also prevalent in film, television, journalism, and social media. Those belonging to every entertainment field must actively work together toward equal access opportunities through the reconsideration of fundamental core standards and practices. Only then can change be affected.

PERSONAL INSIGHT

Many students of MTR’s board have agreed that, even though many industries differ regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion culture, there are significant similarities between them that are beginning to be recognized by institutions that can create lasting progress: schools and universities. The University of Southern California’s School of Dramatic Arts and School of Cinematic Arts have both begun processes of restructuring into more equitable spaces for student artists. Both schools’ DEI pages and statements include an acknowledgment that there is much more work to be done towards making their schools more inclusive and uplifting for students of any “age, race, ethnicity, physical ability, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, country of origin, veteran status, religious practice, and political ideology.” However, SDA and SCA also recognize the power that they have to “establish a model for media industries to empower different voices and perspectives” in the next generation of artists. SCA’s DEI page states that “as a pipeline to the media industries and graduate media programs, SCA is uniquely positioned to play a leadership role in preparing the next generation of media producers and scholars to critically engage with issues of diversity and build inclusive creative and scholarly communities within media industries and academia.” By creating safe, anti-racist, and inclusive learning environments, recruiting and training diverse faculty and staff, and giving attention to all areas of our community, SDA and SCA are beginning to devote themselves to similar, commendable standards of diversity, equity, and inclusion across their artistic industries.



DIVERSIFY YOUR FEED

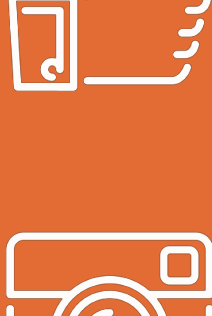
USC African American Cinema Society

[@uscaacs](https://www.instagram.com/uscaacs)



USC Asian Pacific Cinema Association

[@uscapca](https://www.instagram.com/uscapca)



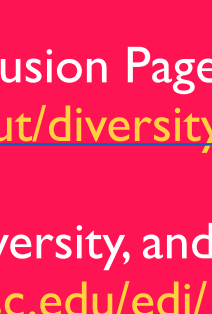
SCA Queer Cut

www.facebook.com/SCAQueerCut/



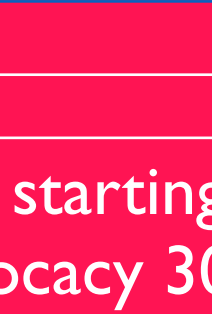
Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

[@inclusionists](https://www.instagram.com/inclusionists)



We See You White American Theatre

[@weseeyouwat](https://www.instagram.com/weseeyouwat)



ACTION ITEMS

Check out these websites:

SCA Diversity and Inclusion Page
<https://cinema.usc.edu/about/diversity.cfm>

SDA Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
<https://dramaticarts.usc.edu/edi/>

Annenberg Inclusion Initiative
<https://annenberg.usc.edu/research/aii/#inequality>

Look into and consider starting SDA’s Anti-Racism and Advocacy 30-day challenge with friends!

<https://dramaticarts.usc.edu/30day-challenge/>

Think about your personal experiences consuming or creating media and art of any kind.

Do you expect the same standards that you do in theatre across other mediums?

How can you help demand more inclusive and equitable progress in all industries?

Best Wishes,
 MTR’s Diversity Equity and Inclusion team

February Issue Editors:

Beth Yeo

Austin Karkowsky

Eric Renna

Who Does Your Theatre Serve?