

THE BROADWAY CANON

JANUARY 2020

What is the Broadway Canon?

Musical theatre, or theatre in general, has traditionally been rooted in Eurocentric composers and playwrights such as Shakespeare, Bernstein, Miller, and Hammerstein. BIPOC playwrights face numerous hurdles when producing their work, especially if their show does not utilize/highlight whiteness in their production or if the story is not rooted in a history or trauma. In recent years, we have seen a call to action to break open the classical musical theatre canon to ensure it includes BIPOC composers, playwrights, and lyricists, and to have their work produced in modern-day Broadway theaters. We artists, must strive to uplift the stories by BIPOC and ensure that the stories we tell accurately represent the diverse society we are a part of.

To break open the musical theatre canon and uplift the voices of BIPOC playwrights and composers, we must also hold our directors and producers accountable to ensure that BIPOC writers have a place at the table—to share their stories, to cast BIPOC actors in roles that reflect our world, and to challenge the implicit bias/assumptions present in our communities.

When we speak about diversifying the musical theatre canon, we do not mean the erasure of white writers and performers within the Broadway Community, but merely the expansion of it. It means providing the space and freedom for BIPOC playwrights, composers, and actors to create bodies of work that are not centered around whiteness and to gain the opportunity to tell more stories to the greater public.

SIGNIFICANCE & EVOLUTION

While not necessarily the end-all-be-all of a successful production, the financial backing of a Broadway production often provides a new musical theatre writer the highest levels of exposure and incubation there are: extensive marketing, critic reviews, global exposure via tourism, cast recordings, and subsequent demand for touring, regional, and community-licensed productions. For that reason, it is critical to recognize the lack of representation there has been for BIPOC writers on Broadway, even with so-called pushes for diversity in casting. Casting nonwhite actors has tended to only go so far for diversity if the stories being written are still centered in whiteness; whether that means stories about people of color are written and produced by white people, or “universal” shows are cast in a colorblind manner but still assume whiteness as a default. To quote an essay from Michael R. Jackson, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer of *A Strange Loop*, “Casting should be part of a larger project that aims to decenter whiteness as the primary reference point in the stories nonwhite bodies populate. To do this, we urgently need help from nonwhite musical theatre writers.”

The statistics behind BIPOC representation for musical theatre writers speak for themselves. As of January 2021, the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical has only ever gone to 3 people of color: Stew for *Passing Strange* (2008), Robert Lopez for *Book of Mormon* (2011), and Lin-Manuel Miranda for *Hamilton* (2016). The Tony Award for Best Score has gone to 2 distinct people of color, neither Black: Robert Lopez for *Avenue Q* (2004), Lin-Manuel Miranda for *In the Heights* (2008), and Robert Lopez for *The Book of Mormon* (2011). Notice the overlap in names, as well as the lack of women represented.

While more BIPOC writers have had work produced and nominated than have won, the overall numbers still point to significant disparities. Recently, the Asian American Performers Action Coalition’s Visibility Report for 2017-2018 noted that, with the population of New York City being only 32.1% white, 79.1% of all theatre productions that season were written by white authors.

Why is this the case? The answer is complicated: a mix of systemic barriers, implicit biases, economic and cultural hurdles, historical precedents, and nepotism—this newsletter will only scratch the surface. As previously mentioned, Broadway, like most other major American institutions, is rooted in a history of white supremacy that has too long been swept under the rug by those in power. Since the beginning of the American musical theatre tradition, white writers, composers, and lyricists were put at the forefront, and the gatekeeping of wealthy, white male theater owners and producers continued to only support a similar class of creatives. Fast forward to today, in which we must reckon with a feedback loop created over decades. The theatre industry serves mainly white audiences, expensive tickets, and a small group of mostly white, mostly male creatives that producers support again and again because they are less “risky” for their investors to throw money at since they represent what has been deemed successful in previous years.

In order for nonwhite musical theatre writers to get their foot in the door, it requires the current landscape of theatrical leadership—namely producers and artistic directors—to examine their own implicit biases and make room for more BIPOC artists to join them by reducing the racial nepotism that has led to all-white creative teams. At the same time, there needs to be substantial work done to the business model of Broadway, which often necessitates a lead producer to come from wealth in order to support themselves in the process of mounting a production since those who have been able to accumulate such wealth are overwhelmingly white. The American theatre must come to recognize that BIPOC musical theatre writers have incredible work to share, and that there are audiences that will come to see it—if only we work to dismantle the systems in place that argue otherwise.

PERSONAL INSIGHT



In our very own USC community two members from the inaugural BFA Musical Theatre cohort shared with us how they feel working amongst the eurocentric theatre canon. The first personal anecdote is from sophomore musical theatre major, Munachimso Mbaezue. Mbaezue comments, “As a Black actor in training, I have noticed what most have noticed with Broadway’s inherent lack of enough affirming BIPOC work. What is unsettling, however, are the steps being proposed to counter that culture. Their theatre programs boast the discussion without equipping their students with the authentic and historic information to make that change. Questions such as “How are we complicit in Broadway’s continual appropriation, misrepresentation of BIPOC stories, and inability to make space for proper and accessible BIPOC representation?” are not asked with the intent for radical change. I have learned that I must carry the weight of being the change I wish to see in writing, casting, production, technical theatre, producing, marketing, and more. It is a charge that might sound inspiring at first, but turns out to be exhausting after a while. When I think of the ‘struggle’ canon of BIPOC work, I wonder what it will take to reconstruct an industry that is supportive of BIPOC people from the college audition to the writing room to opening night.”

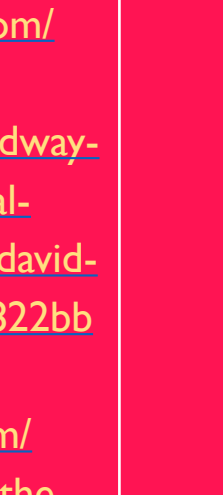
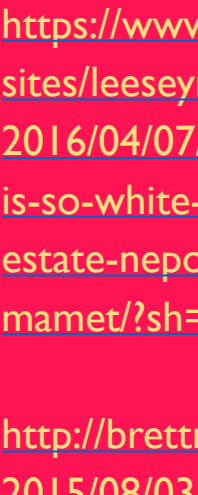
Mikayla Villalpando, also a sophomore musical theatre major, states that “It’s no doubt that artists of color are limited to very few roles/opportunities on Broadway since the musical theatre canon is very Eurocentric and historically has been from the start. I do feel that it is slowly starting to shift and we see changes in the newer productions from the storyline, to production teams and casting. But musical theatre has a long way to go. I hope that artists, creators, playwrights continue breaking the typical traditions from older musicals and we can step outside of the boundaries for future Broadway productions to come!”

DIVERSIFY YOUR FEED

Jeremy O. Harris

[@jeremyoharris](#) Playwright.

Author of *SLAVE PLAY*, *BLACK EXHIBITION*, and more



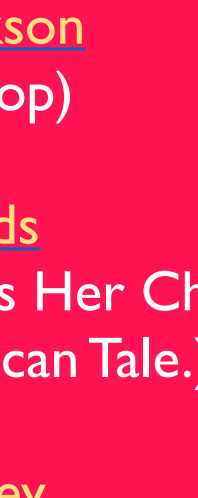
Broadway Advocacy Coalition

[@broadwayadvocacycoalition](#) Empowers the community to actively participate in the fight for social change



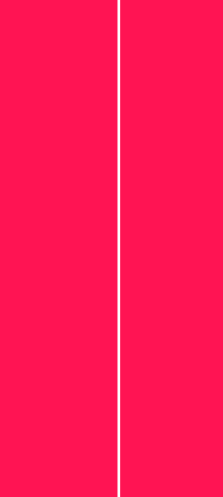
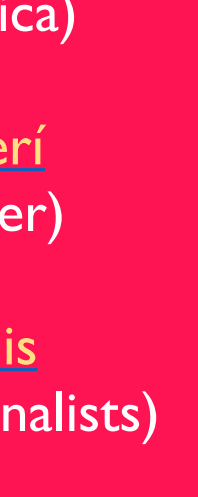
The Industry Standard Group

[@tisc_fund](#) - First BIPOC commercial theatre investment and producing organization



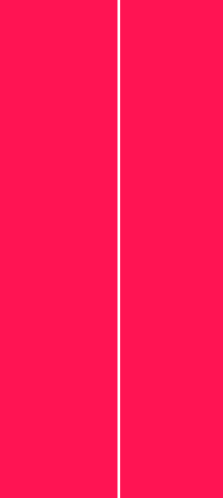
Theatre Producers of Color

[@tpoc_bway](#) - Supports the next generation of BIPOC producers by providing access to education, training, and mentorship



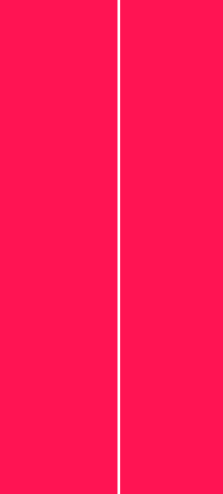
The Business of Broadway

[@bizofbway](#) - Offers affordable, accessible courses on the process of producing and developing work on Broadway, empowering theatre artists to demystify the systems they work within so that we can work to make them better



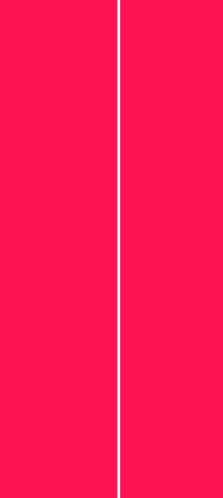
Broadway for All

[@broadwayforall](#) - Creates space for aspiring arts leaders with programming, experience, and visions to build a more socially conscious art entertainment industry



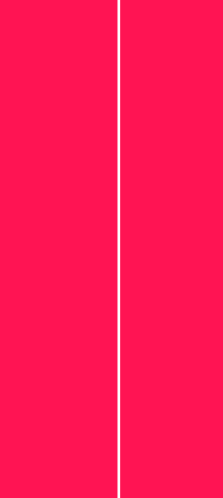
Black Theatre Caucus

[@blacktheatrecaucus](#) - Ensures Black identifying theatre throughout the life of their career



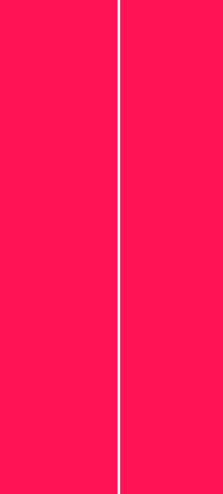
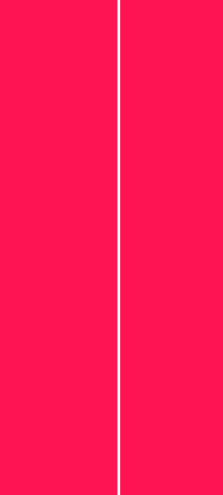
Everybody Black

[@everybodyblk](#) - Building Black Power to transform the American Theatre Industry



Asian American Performers Action Coalition (AAPAC)

[@aapac_nyc](#) - Works to expand the perception of Asian American performers in order to increase their access to and representation on New York City’s stages



ACTION ITEMS

WEBSITES

<https://blackworkbroadway.com/>

http://www.aapacnyc.org/uploads/1/1/9/4/11949532/aapac_report_2017-2018_single.pdf

ARTICLES

<https://howlround.com/unpacking-diversity-musical-theatre>

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/leeseymour/2016/04/07/why-broadway-is-so-white-part-1-real-estate-nepotism-and-david-mamet/?sh=633361b822bb>

<http://brettryback.com/2015/08/03/race-and-the-new-generation-of-musical-theatre-writers/>

BIPOC MUSICAL THEATRE WRITERS TO KNOW (not a full list!)

[Michael R. Jackson](#)

(*A Strange Loop*)

[Kirsten Childs](#)

(*The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin*, *Bella: An American Tale*.)

[Khiyon Hursey](#)

(*Love in America*)

[Angelica Cheri](#)

(*Gun & Powder*)

[Jill Jerome Ellis](#)

(*The Conversationalists*)

[Griffin Matthews](#)

(*Witness Uganda*)

[César Alvarez](#)

(*Futurity*, *The Elementary Spacetime Show*)

[Masi Asare](#)

(*The Family Resemblance*)

[Quiara Alegría Hudes](#)

(*In the Heights*, *Miss You Like Hell*)

[Douglas Lyons](#)

(*Polkadots*, *Five Points*)

[Karole Foreman](#)

(*Rule My World*)

[Troy Anthony](#)

(*The River is Me*)

[Jacynth Greywoode](#)

(*Iron John: An American Ghost Story*)

[Eric Ulloa](#)

(*Passing Through*, *Molly Sweeney*)

[David Henry Hwang](#)

(*Soft Power*)

[Sukari Jones](#)

(*The River Is Me*, *Ain't Far From Home*)

[Ari Asfar](#)

(*Jeannette*)

[Jason Ma](#)

(*Gold Mountain*)

[Jay Kuo](#)

(*Allegiance*)

[Stew](#)

(*Passing Strange*)

[Lin Manuel Miranda](#)

(*In the Heights*, *Hamilton*)

[Brenda Russell](#)

(*The Color Purple*)

[Stephen Bray](#)

(*The Color Purple*)

[Bill T. Jones](#)

(*Fela!*)

[George C Wolfe](#)

(*Jelly's Last Jam*, *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*)

[Eubie Blake](#)

(*Shuffle Along*)

Best Wishes,
MTR's Diversity Equity
and Inclusion team

January Issue Editors:

Sam Aliva

Nick Kassoy

Ella Lao

Who Does Your
Theatre Serve?