

**THE EVOLUTION OF DIVERSITY,EQUITY AND INCLUSION;
CONSCIOUSNESS AND PRACTICE IN NEW YORK THEATER.**

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INTRO

Live Theater has historically been influential in, and associated with life and culture and the economy of New York City for many years. Although New York is known for being a place filled with people of all different cultural backgrounds and identities; theater arts in New York has historically struggled to represent New York's diversity. Theater has a long history of not being inclusive or diverse. An example of this racially segregated history is that there was a time in America where black people were legally not allowed to share the same stage as white people. While American theaters are now integrated, many still feel meaningful representation is still lacking.

The research that follows, I seek to document the evolution of DEI (*Diversity, equity, and inclusion*) efforts and leaders as it has impacted theater professionals in New York in the present day. Through diverse secondary sources, and first hand interviews with accomplished active practitioners in the theater community, this report will focus particularly on current strategies and methods that support a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive Broadway based theater industry. My report will put a spotlight on the work of The Public Theater because through my research I found they have been pivotal leaders in the ongoing pursuit to diversify New York Theaters. Recent industry advocacy has called for a more representative industry. Current DEI practices and results will be reported and evaluated to determine the validity of calls for more action as well as recommendations toward additional actions to ensure a long lasting social shift for the future of theater.

While particularly focused on people of color (POC) who strive to earn their livelihood through the performing arts, it is hoped that anyone dedicated to storytelling in theater will benefit from the research that follows including the creatives, owners, casting directors and producers. There is a necessity to have equal access to the performing arts and equal opportunity to a career onstage. Samantha Barrie, the producer of the off Broadway show *Toni Stone* describes the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion by saying "Theater can't exist without

it. Theater is about telling stories about the human condition. If you're excluding humans, from the human condition, you are not doing theater.” *DEI* is a pivotal tool to create equal access to opportunities in theater. Theater arts should reflect the diverse world we live in.

DEFINING *DEI* TERMINOLOGY

Throughout the paper I will be describing how the terms Diversity, Equity and Inclusion apply to, and are practiced by theater professionals. Before reporting on the benefits of *DEI*, I would like to give the dictionary definition of each term and some background on how they may apply to theater:

EQUITY

I the equity of Finnish society: fairness, fair-mindedness, justness, justice, equitableness, fair play; impartiality, even-handedness, lack of discrimination/bias/prejudice/bigotry, egalitarianism; honesty, integrity, rightness, rightfulness, rectitude, uprightness, righteousness, properness, decency, goodness, honorableness, scrupulousness, conscientiousness; reasonableness, sensibleness; disinterest, disinterestedness, neutrality, objectivity, balance, open-mindedness. ANTONYMS inequity, imbalance - Dictionary.com

Equity can apply to a lot of different aspects of theater because it speaks to the “fairness” of the productions. Theater notoriously has lacked equity throughout history. The lack of equity in theater can show itself in many different ways. Some examples is; lack of equal pay between those in the production, lack of financial support, marketing and publicity to shows representing marginalized people, lack of access to opportunity for POC in high positions behind the scenes of productions, and many more ways. One example of this is two performers may be on stage for the same amount of time, however one actor may be paid more than another. We have seen in the past that actors of color are paid disproportionately less than their white co-workers. In a recent article By *USMAGAZINE*, it is explained that “Leslie Odom Jr. Refused to Film ‘Hamilton’ for Disney+ Unless They Matched Aaron Tveit’s ‘Grease Live’ Salary” Popular actor Aaron Tveit shared his salary with phenomenal actor Leslie Odom Jr. And to Mr. Odom Jr. 's surprise he was making less money than Tveit, despite being in the more successful production. This was not fair. In a demand for equity, Mr. Odom Jr. refused to film until he was paid the money he deserved for his hard work.

DIVERSITY

“the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, etc.: equality and diversity

should be supported for their own sake | cultural diversity within his businesses helped generate his success.”- Dictionary.com

Theater is slowly becoming more diverse. However, there is a lot of work that could be done. Theater prioritizing diversity would allow people of different ethnic backgrounds, races, sexual orientations, genders, and more, to come together in a production both on and off the stage. People coming from different backgrounds allow theater to reflect what the world's population truly looks like. Throughout this report I will give examples on ways that diversity contributes to theater. One example of the theater community lacking diversity is; Since 1947, 95% of nominations for Broadway's TONY awards have gone to white people. This statistic highlights the lack of inclusion of POC in theater productions, and the lack of celebration for their outstanding work throughout the years.

INCLUSION

“the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or mental disabilities and members of other minority groups: we value and promote diversity and inclusion in every aspect of our business.”- Dictionary.com

The theater community has a lot more work to do in order to be perceived as inclusive. Some things they could do to be more inclusive is;

- incorporate entrances and exists to allow differently abled people to have access to theaters,
- give access to theater classes, training, and auditions to those who don't have equal opportunities to a career in theater, a
- and make seeing theater more accessible to those who theater is not often marketed, or priced for.

These are a few examples of ways theater can be more exclusive. In this report I will explore other ways people have attempted implementing inclusivity in their theater policy plans.

CASE STUDY ON DEI THEATER: THE PUBLIC THEATER

Diversity, inclusion and equity are crucial to the success of theater! *DEI* is important because it allows different experiences to be showcased through the storytelling of theater. I had the privilege of discussing the importance of DEI with some accredited professionals in the New York theater community, and the majority of those I interviewed mentioned The Public Theater's early efforts in making theater more inclusive. Through my research into The Public Theater's

policies, I found the work Donna Walker Kuhne did for the theater through developing their *Department of Community Affairs starting in 1993*. In this report, I will use The Public Theater as my reference point exploring at the evolution of the theater's DEI policies from then and now, evaluating their effectiveness towards creating a more inclusive theater. I will look at the Public theater's *DEI* Goals, practice and impact throughout the decades in terms of Diversity, equity and inclusion. I hope to evidence the importance of *DEI*, how it affects the theater community and most importantly why efforts in *DEI* are necessary to the future of live theater.

Donna Walker Kuhne discusses the importance of diversity, inclusion and equity in theater in her book *"Invitation To The Party"*. Donna Walker Kuhne is a noted "thought leader, writer, and strategist for community engagement, audience development, and social justice advocate." (*Wikipedia.com*) Her accolades include innovating theaters, including the Public Theater, to be more diverse and inclusive. In her book *"Invitation to The Party"* Walker Kuhne discussed the necessity for *DEI* in theater by stating; "I have learned from experience that when diverse groups of people come together and experience the arts as one, that not only are they enriched by experience, they also develop appreciation for our shared humanity. Making the arts accessible to as broad an audience as possible helps us build a better society." (*Donna Walker Kuhne*) Theater can be used as a tool for those of different cultural backgrounds to share space, experiences and perspectives. When diverse groups of people come together to make art that reflects their personal stories, they are teaching others different to them, about their perspective in their shared humanity. Walker Kuhne states that it is important to use theater to embrace our differences and the distinctions between "race, age, sexual orientaton, physical dissability, geography and class" (*page 10*) When Ms. Walker Kuhne started her journey with the Public Theater during the early 90's, she was invited by George C. Wolfe (*credited director*) to develop progress in the *DEI* of the theater by establishing the Public Theater's Department of Community Affairs. Through this department, Walker Kuhne explored an innovative ways to diversify New York theaters, with The Public as her model. George C. Wolfe discussed why he felt diversity in the theater was important by stating "I want to create an American theater that looks and feels like the people we serve" (*Invitation to the party.*) Wolfe trusted Donna with his vision for theater.". During the early 90's, The Public Theater's approach to *DEI* focused on diversifying their audiences. The press release announcing the new Department of Community

Affairs, states that “the department will serve to break down barriers of unfamiliarity and misconceptions among communities who have little or no contact with the theater world.” The release continues by explaining that diversity goals will be achieved through the offering of “a range of public relations and outreach activities that extend into the five boroughs. Ms. Walker-Kuhne will open a program with “Cultural Explosion”, an aggressive and proactive group sales campaign geared toward attracting specific minority groups”, it continues by stating that they would through the programming at the public theater they would inspire more people belonging to marginalized groups to want to engage with theater by putting up productions that reflect their cultural backgrounds. ”

Donna Walker Kuhne felt that the way for DEI to develop in New York theaters during the 90’s was to focus on community outreach, theater education, and accessibility to theater for different communities contributing to diversifying the audience. They believed that it was important to diversify audiences in order to be inclusive to those who may not normally have access to theater, but also to set the standard that theater can be for, and created by anyone. Having more diverse audiences would shift the amount of inclusion there was in the way shows would be produced as well. When there were all white audiences there were often all stories being told with all white casts. White audiences had less interest in attending theater when people of color’s experiences were the focal point of the story. Instead of catering to the racism of white audiences during the time, Donna Walker Kuhne made it a point to focus on how to bring POC (*People of color*) to the theater . Cultivating diverse audiences would support the need for and interest in theater theatrical performances centered on issues and experiences of non white communities. *The Department of Community* being created at the Public was a key moment for theaters everywhere to follow their influence and create programs that would diversify their audiences and bring inclusion to their productions. Donna Walker Kuhne’s work towards diversifying the theater audience was the beginning of theaters acknowledging the necessary changes they needed to make towards building more diversity, equity and inclusion.

By the early 2000’s Donna Walker-Kuhme and George Wolf’s efforts had been put into place. One of their pivotal projects was called *Harlem Song* in the year 2002. They implemented their DEI policies and practices, and also pushed a campaign for the show into marginalized communities that had less access to theater, with hopes of working towards making a more

diverse and inclusive audience. Through the Harlem Song project we are able to see the results of all the hard work done by the “Department of Community” at the Public Theater.

In Ms. Walker-Kuhne’s book *Invitation to The Party*, she explains the success of her DEI incentives for *Harlem Song* by stating “*Harlem Song* changed the perception of Harlem residents; they now believed their community could sustain a major-long term theatrical event with public interest and financial support. 147,000 of a potential 221,000 people came to the show. Audience surveys told us that 65% of those attending were African-American.” The success of *Harlem Song* is a prime example of the importance of valuing diversity and inclusion in theater. The Public theater made it a priority to make their audiences inclusive, due to their efforts more than 50% of their audience were people of color and Harlem residents, when typically theater audiences are majority white.

CURRENT DEI EFFORTS: PUBLIC THEATER

Donna Walker Kuhne’s efforts in the “Department of Community” beginning in 1993, influenced The Public Theater’s historic journey to be a theater that values diversity, equity and inclusion. Today, The Public practices DEI by enforcing what they call an “Anti-racism and cultural representation plan”. This policy, established on May, 27th 2021, starts by reflecting on the lives lost to police brutality and the importance of the black lives matter movement. It highlights how the tragic brutality against POC inspired the organization to look inward to best restructure systems of oppression, including theater. The policy begins by stating “we in the theater also have our own specific challenges. As the tellers of stories and the makers of images, we must strive to center those our country has marginalized, to tell truths our culture has suppressed, and to create the narratives that allow us to imagine a more just and inclusive nation. We know that art always reflects the conditions under which it was made, so we must also look inward and ensure that our own structure, processes, and behaviors reflect the world we are striving to bring into being.”

Progressing from Donna Walker-Kuhne's original DEI plan for the Public Theater, this policy centers less on audience and more on ensuring the inclusion of marginalized voices in their staff and on stage. There are three sections to The Public Theater's "*Anti-racism and cultural representation plan*" stating guiding principles:

1. "We are committed to workplace reconciliation, trust, and collaboration."
2. "We are committed to building an anti-racist culture."
3. "We are committed to equity and empowerment."

These three sections each detail actions and processes that specify how the Public Theater integrates and develops DEI throughout the organization. One example of the way the plan advocates for Diversity is by creating anti racism training programs for all staff members. This ensures that The Public Theater is a safe work environment for all employees. An example of equity (*as well as diversity and inclusion*) being prioritized in the "*Anti-racism and cultural representation plan*" is the policy that states "The public will enact a communications plan that addresses the preferred languages of staff, committing to the availability of multilingual translations, formalizing the process(es) regarding document translation, and appropriately compensating translators." This is a great example of how theaters can take leadership to create equal access opportunity, and jobs in the theater community for those who may be disadvantaged by language differences and marginalization. A good example of a strategy that ensures DEI is regularly practiced and evaluated is the directive to "Create a pipeline document, with trimester reporting, for all projects, recording information on artists via self-identification forms to ensure that diversity is centered from the beginning through the end of all projects. Artistic Staff reports metrics on a trimester basis." This part of the policy provides a practical method supporting the inclusion and value of diverse groups of people through the entire development of a project.

DEI PROGRESS AT THE PUBLIC THEATER

I recently conducted an interview with actor, director and choreographer Julio Monge about his recent work with The Public Theater focusing on his experiences with the organization's DEI strategy. Mr. Monge participated as an actor in the audio play *Romeo and Julieta* produced by The Public Theater in March 2022. He positively reflects on his time in the production stating: "I did an audio play with Lupita Nyong'o, *Romeo and Julieta* for the Public

Theater. And it was a bilingual version of that. And I played Friar Lawrence. and it was great to mix my original language(*Spanish*) ; with everything I've done here. It was kind of a celebration of my whole career here.”

Monge continued to explain to me how he feels that The Public has continued to be dedicated to properly depicting different cultures on stage. Throughout my interview with Julio Monge I asked about his history in the theater community as a proud Puerto Rican man. Mr. Monge talked about his long love for performing arts.

Julio Monge was raised in Puerto Rico and began working in theater at the young age of six. He realized early that he was a talented dancer, and he was determined to use his talent to pursue a career in theater. As a teenager he had established a professional career in performing arts, while pursuing a college education majoring in drama. By the age of 19 he decided to move to New York, in order to continue his theater training. Julio Monge has now had a successful career in theater for over 34 years.

I asked Monge to share his experience in theater and what theater was like regarding diversity, and inclusion as he began his career in New York.. He shares:

“ When I was starting in New York, it was the early, mid 80s. And they still had that sort of the demographics of the theater, especially on Broadway, which was a field that I wanted to sort of, you know, get into. The demographic was majority folks who were Anglo Saxon (White) people . And then there was always the tokenized black people, one Hispanic or two Hispanics, rarely any Asians, that was really rare. And however, I always knew, well that it made sense to me because there was no incentive then for them (POC). Because a lot of casting directors and directors will say that; “we tried to get them but they're not prepared and are ready” That was usually what they used to say. But the truth is that there were not a lot of people of color in the field because there was not an incentive for them to be in the theater.

They would not see that there was a career to be had. There were always a couple of brilliant people like the TITO Rivera's, and maybe one other. But they were the only ones. And if you went to the theater in New York or anywhere in the American theater, it was not a lack of diversity but also representation. So maybe people didn't see themselves.

Julio Monge continues to speak about the importance of representation and inclusion. When he first came to New York in the 80's there were less acting opportunities being given to people of color. However, he touches on the lack of inclusivity in theater. There weren't many people of color who had the opportunity to train in theater, which led to less POC in the audition room when actors were being hired for productions. He highlights that when he began his theater journey in New York there were only a few people of color that rarely got a chance to shine on stage, and hardly ever multiple people of color in one show. He was privileged to come to New York during a time where diversity began to change and he could see the shift of more people of color being included in theater.

The Public theater's early and recent DEI efforts are important because of talented people like Julio Monge. The Public Theater allowed Julio Monge to showcase his talent and culture through the show *Romeo and Julieta*. But by also being inclusive to those of different cultures, they may inspire people in the audience to also pursue theater, despite what background they come from.

CASE STUDY 2: ACTOR'S EQUITY ASSOCIATION

The Public Theater is not the only organization to establish policies that focus on developing a more systemic approach to DEI. Another organization that prides itself in prioritizing DEI is *The Actors Equity Association*. The association's website shares their organization's purpose by stating “*Actors' Equity Association is a national labor union, founded for the purpose of negotiating strong agreements that protect the wages, hours and working conditions of its members*” (<https://www.actorsequity.org/resources/diversity/>.) This organization protects their actors' rights to equity in their theater careers. The Actors Equity Association began their work back in 1919, but in recently in 2018 they have drafted a new policy called “Diversity and Inclusion” Their mission statement states

The Diversity and Inclusion Department; is responsible for enforcing their DEI policies, is dedicated to promoting *Actor's Equity's* values of equal opportunity, diversity, and inclusion by leading the industry in creating cultures that promote diversity, celebrate inclusion, and foster a deep sense of belonging in Equity members, audiences, and all people who engage with the

American theater. In short, we're here to #ChangeTheStage." The page continues by stating the key ways they will achieve their goal is by the following activities:

- "offering educational programming and talk space for members so they understand their rights regarding equal access to employment and a safe and inclusive workplace
- advising council and staff on inclusion-related policy and practice
- developing best practices that drive the equitable and fair representation in all theater roles
- collaborating with our colleagues across the industry to ensure that inclusion is a central tenet in all conversation about the American theater"

The Actors Equity association is following these steps to ensure that the artists they represent and their staff, reflect their values of diversity, equity and inclusion. They are also using their policy as a tool to insure an inclusive and equitable environment.

ARE DEI EFFORTS CHANGING THEATER IN NEW YORK?

You might be wondering, if all these efforts are being made, and policies are being written; can we claim that theater in New York is now fully diverse, inclusive, and equitable? The quick answer is no. Through research reported by various industry based organizations, I was able to take a closer look at the diversity rates, and statistics regarding inclusion and equity of recent Broadway productions. Through these statistics I made observations about the recent success of DEI efforts in Broadway Theater.

I looked at AAPAC's (*Asian American Performer Action Coalition*) "'Ethnic Representation' Report Indicates Record High in the Season of Hamilton" to get more statistics on the demographic of theaters in New York. Before AAPAC provides information on the ethnicities involved in theater, they highlight the progress that had been made towards developing DEI in theater, after the opening of the show *Hamilton*. The article states that in the years 2016-2017 "The season that brought such shows as *Hamilton* and *The Color Purple* to Broadway led to the most diverse season on Broadway (for performers, at least) and first time all

four musical performance categories at the Tony Awards were won by people of color (*all four were black*).” Hamilton and The Color Purple cast an all black cast of performers, allowing new standards of POC to be represented on stage. However, despite the show’s being centered around black actors, “off-stage” staff remained majority Caucasian.

Although theater may be more inclusive than in the past, modern theater still lacks diversity and equal access to opportunity. In an article published in the New York Times, on October 1st, 2020, titled “White Actors and Directors Still Dominate Broadway Stages, Report Finds,” reporter Sarah Bahr explores studies that break down the ethnic demographics of today’s New York theater industry. In the article it states “Approximately 23 percent of roles overall at New York City theaters went to Black actors, 7 percent to Asian-American actors, 6 percent to Latino actors, 2 percent to Middle Eastern or North African actors and fewer than 1 percent to Indigenous actors”. According to the report Latino actors were also more than three times as likely to be cast in a chorus role than as a principal in a Broadway musical.” This quote affirms that there is still a larger percentage of white actors represented on Broadway than POC actors. But an equally important underlying issue is lack of inclusion, while casting may be more representative, opportunity in other key roles in creating and producing still do not reflect equality for all. a report that analyzed the 2016-17 Broadway season found that, “ about 87 percent of shows on and Off Broadway had white authors.” (citation) Both Theater staff on and off stage are still lacking diversity in New York Theater. A way that theater could work towards implementing DEI is to hire people of color, both as creatives on stage but as part of the team that creates the production. Although we have seen more POC being represented on the Broadway stage compared to the 90’s, the cast, crew, directors and producers are often white men.

Through their *Anti-Racism & Cultural Transformation Plan*; The Public theater makes a commitment towards making their cast and crew more diverse and inclusive. In the transformation plan it states that they are determined to “Employ staff, create programming, and cultivate audiences that reflect the demographics of New York City (currently 70% BIPOC), fostering an environment that welcomes all individuals. Staff will report metrics on a trimester basis.” This is a distinct example of a New York theater seeing an issue in the fact that the majority of directors

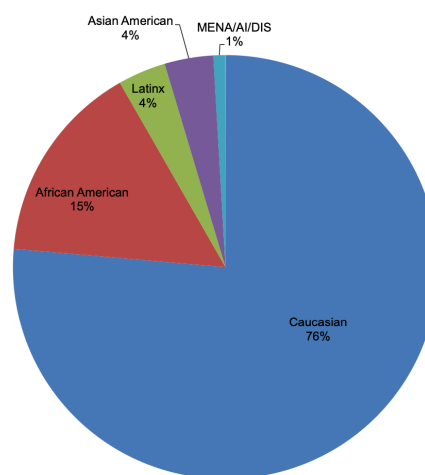
and writers are white men, and making a public commitment towards enforcing DEI standards and documenting their progress.

During an interview with a credited theater actor, and performer from Broadway's *The Color Purple*; Antoine L. Smith, discussed whether or not POC being included in the off stage positions (*such as, writers directors and producers*) of a production would allow the shows to be more inclusive, and help towards a more accurate portrait of POC in storytelling. Mr. Smith stated his opinion by stating "We are not given the opportunity to direct our own stuff. I've been in productions where a person that was not of my color, not of my experience, tries to tell me how to be in and do that experience? How do we have no idea what it is to do this? And then when we do that, you see it? You say, Oh, that's not it? What do you mean, that is it? You just don't understand it. But the people that it's for will understand it. So it's just, yeah, it's crazy." More often than not white directors and producers are behind the plays and musicals that we see having a majority black and brown cast. This can be problematic to the concept of *Inclusion*, because if the goal is to include the black perspective, it could take away from the black person's narrative if a white person is directing the black person how to be themselves. A white person telling a black person how to be black means that we are seeing a white version of a black narrative rather than amplifying and being inclusive to a black voice. However, Smith also makes the point that he has seen brilliant white directors who take their differing cultural perspective into account and use DEI practices while directing to ensure they amplify the black voice. One thing he said that had impacted my thinking was "I think that if you're going to be white, and you're trying to tell a black story, let the black people give you input, don't just tell us how to be right, or any person of color, you know, or any race that you are not familiar with? Don't try to tell them how to be you. Let me show you how they really are that you go from there." He spoke about the importance of White directors doing their research when telling a story of a culture they don't belong to. I think doing research into the culture being portrayed on stage before the production allows there to be assurance that the portrayal will be accurate to the actual people whose story they are attempting to tell. Research is a key factor in Diversity, equity and inclusion. Research shows that there is respect and care in the production to ensure that everyone's cultures and stories are being well represented and respected.

Mr. Smith reflects on his experience in *The Color Purple* by stating “I will say that, in my career, there has been one man that has successfully done this and not even that he was telling us how to be he opened up the opportunity to let us be out our authentic selves. And that was John Doyle, in *The Color Purple*, our director of *The Color Purple*. God bless that man. He didn't tell us how to be black. But he would set up a scenario, a scene and say, This is what I want to see. Can you make that happen in your reality? So even having those opportunities in the room will be great. Instead of just being like, well, this is this this is this is what you're going to say this is how you're going to act is good how you're going to move. You've never walked down a dark alley in a black neighborhood. You can't tell me how to be black in a dark alley in a black neighborhood.”

In 2017 *Hamilton* and *The Color Purple* influenced the inclusion we saw of other races on Broadway stages, but not by as much as you may assume. AAPAC states that during 2017 “African American performers saw a 6-point gain from the year prior to 23% and Latinx actors saw a 4-point gain to 7% this season, both of which set new record highs in terms of their representation across the industry.” Below I will add a graph provided by AAPAC that demonstrates the lack of diversity prevalent in theater today:

CASTING BREAKDOWN BY ETHNICITY, 10-YEAR COMBINED (2006-07 TO 2015-16 SEASONS)

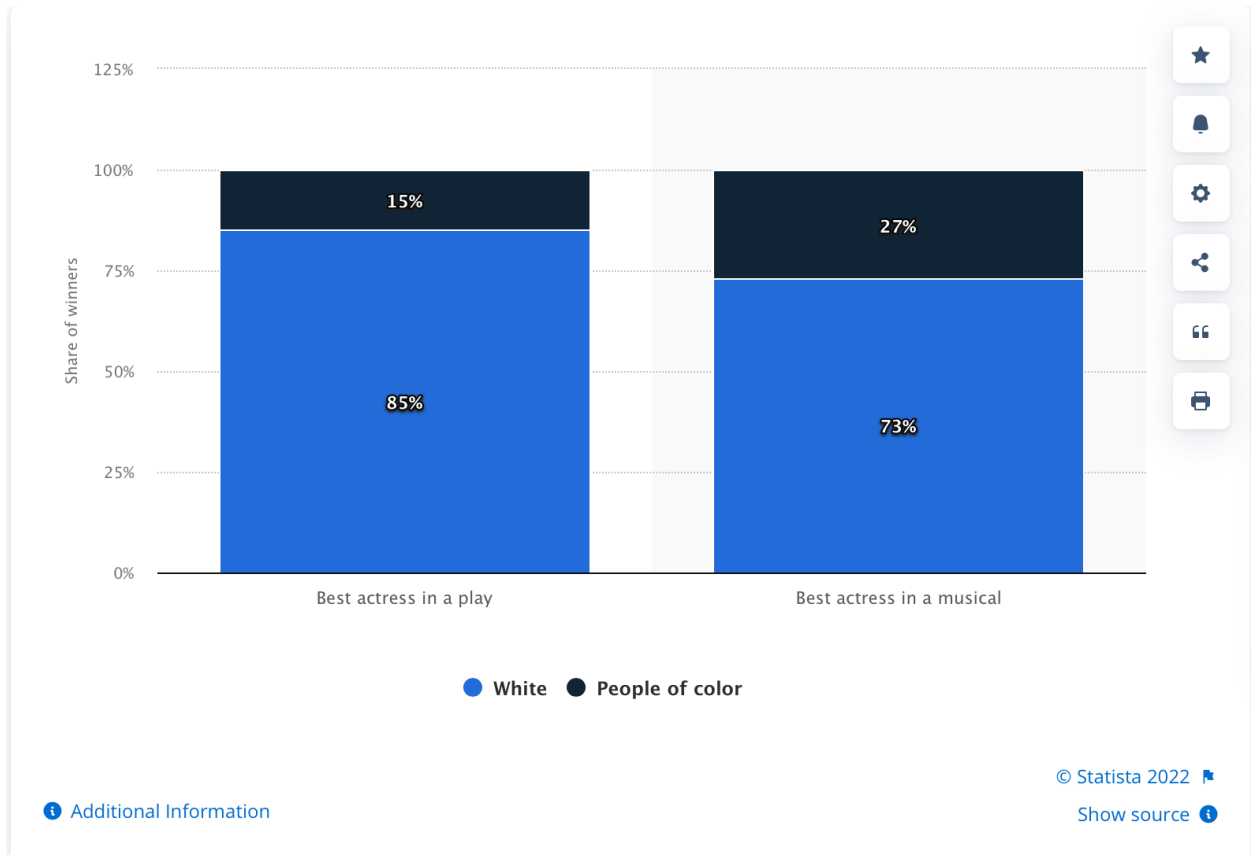


Looking at the averages over the last 10 years for which we have data, 76% of all roles were filled by Caucasian actors, 15% by African Americans, 4% by Latinxs and 4% by Asian Americans. Middle Eastern/ North African, American Indian and Disabled actors together amounted to just 1% of all roles.

Demographics for New York City, US 2010 Census:

- Caucasian: 44.0%
- Black/African American: 25.5%
- Hispanic/Latino: 28.6%
- Asian: 12.7%
- Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander: 0.1%
- American Indian and Alaska Native: 0.7%
- Two or more races: 4.0%

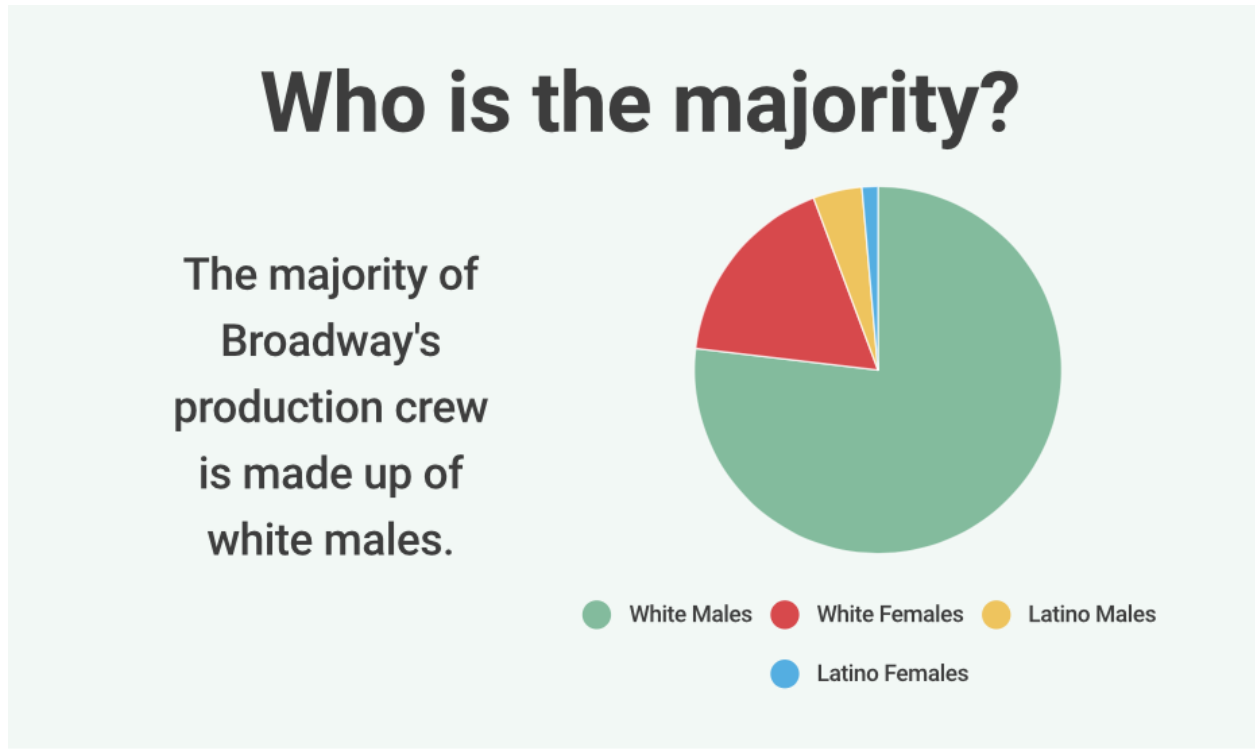
After finding the dedicated research done by AAPAC I was shocked to conclude that, despite the efforts by the Public and others, there was still clear proof of the need for more focus on DEI in theater. Their most recent graph from 2017, showed that despite the rise of predominantly POC Broadway shows in 2016, the amount of people of color being represented in Broadway compared to white people was still disproportionate. I wanted to dig and see if I could find more recent data regarding the ethnic demographics of theater in recent years of Broadway. I started by looking at the Tony awards. The “Tony” Awards stands for the *“Antoinette Perry Award for Excellence in Broadway Theater”*. Every year incredible theater performers, directors and writers are awarded for their hard work on and off the Broadway stage. However, the past years of the Tonys have indicated that those being awarded in Theater are still predominantly white. An article called *“The Tonys Are Just As White As The Oscars”* written by Forbes in 2016 speaks on the lack of POC being represented by the Tony’s saying *“Since the awards began - 1929 for the Oscars, 1947 for the Tonys - over 95% of all nominees have been white, with the Tonys recognizing more people of color by 1%.”* When looking further into the ethnic demographics of Tony winners, I found an article by Jose’ Gabriel that compares the development of diversity by the Tony awards in the years 1982 and 2015. I am going to add Jose’ Gabriel’s findings below:



(<https://www.statista.com/statistics/674077/best-actress-winner-tony-awards-ethnicity/>.)

This graph above from Statista.com shows that in the year 1982, the percentage of nominated actresses of a Tony award in the category “Best Actress” were 85% white, and 15% were people of color. In the year 2015 the percentage of women nominated for a Tony award in the category “Best Actress” were 73% white, and 27% of the nominees were people of color. That means in 2015 only 12% women of color were nominated for more Tony awards compared to 1982. This indicates to me that progress regarding diversity on Broadway is moving very slow. In an article by a writer named Marris Rubin she writes about “Diversity Lacking In Broadway Musical Production Crews” she teams up with Rachel Hartenstine, and together they create graphs to show the recent findings regarding diversity in Broadway. Their first graph indicates “Who is the Majority” showing the racial demographics of Broadway crew members

in 2017. The conclusion made from the graph below is that white males hold the majority of the positions of production members in Broadway theater as well as winning positions in the Tony Awards.



(<http://towsondatastories.weebly.com/broadway-diversity.html>)

Although it may feel disappointing that the majority of TONY award winners, in categories that represent both cast and crew are white, there are also notable people of color that have been both nominated and won a TONY in the past few years. Notable black artists in theater such as, George C. Wolfe, Audra McDonald, James Earl Jones, and Viola Davis have deservedly been awarded multiple Tony awards. Recent plays like *The Color Purple*, and *A Soldier's Play*, two shows that are predominantly black, also won Tonys in the categories of *Best Revival of a Musical* and *Best Revival of a Play*. Antoine L. Smith, a successful Broadway performer, and actor in *The Color Purple* to speak on his perspective on the Tony Awards. Antoine L. Smith stated

“I think it's definitely a system that we should focus on. Because some of these awards have garnered people incredible careers, I will use again, Cynthia Erivo, five years ago, nobody knew she was she won that Tony Award for one of the best performances I have ever seen in my life and got to witness every single day of my life, and is now a two time Oscar nominee, and has a career within the past five years that is just unbelievable. So I will say that awards do have their place. I will also say awards still have a lot of work to do. Because there are still years as recently where there was not one single black woman or person of color in the leading actress category, which absolutely blows my mind. So again, are things getting better? Sure. Are they getting better fast enough? No. Nope, no.”

Antoine L. Smith agrees that award shows can be a good tool to celebrate the brilliant work people are working in theater. However, he also explains that the lack of people of color represented in those nominated and winning the awards is indicative of the lack of diversity in theater, and the lack of POC being respected and valued members of the theater community. There are fantastic black performers already on the Broadway stage throughout history, who were never nominated for a Tony award, despite giving a performance that some would argue deserved one.

I wondered why if we are seeing more black plays and musicals being produced from 2020, how come we weren't seeing more black people represented in the 73rd annual Tony awards. There were only two productions representing POC performers nominated for multiple Tonys that year; *Tina Turner the musical* and *A Slave Play*. This year in 2022 we are lucky to see over 8 productions that include an inclusive and diverse cast and crew be nominated for Tony awards.

Recently we have seen proof of progress being made through the recent 2022 Tony award nominations. An article called ***“Black talent shines through in 2022 Tony noms”*** written by *The New Amsterdam News*, discusses how plays and musicals being written, performed by, and directed by black artists have been nominated for a plethora of Tony Awards. An example of this is *“A Strange Loop”*, a show performed by a majority black cast, and written by African American artist Micheal R. Jackson has received 11 Tony nominations. The achievements of the production *A Strange Loop*, and their success in showcasing talented black artists, illustrates the

growth in diversity and inclusion in Broadway theater today as reflected on stage. I wondered why the year 2020 hadn't been equally representative of theaters progress in *DEI*.

After doing research I found a few reasons this may be the case. The first reason is, although there are more plays being written about the black community the productions that often do well on Broadway are musicals. Musical usually have longer running seasons than plays, allowing for more opportunity for nominations. If play is not marketed correctly it can have a very short running season; that means less people have the opportunity to see and there is less of a chance it will receive a nomination. Some may argue that those in power actually took this into consideration when producing black plays instead of Musical. When the Black Lives Matter movement began there was a push for theater writers, producers and directors to produce shows about black people. However, these shows that were produced often didn't receive the same marketing and publicity as musicals centered around white people's stories. Since the shows lacked publicity and support they often only remained in popular New York theaters for only a few months, sometimes less.

So although black people's stories were being told more than before, they didn't get the support or funding to remain successful in the theater for long periods of time. Since all the plays surrounding black narratives were coming out at the same time, it was almost as though the shows were competing with each other for press.

I asked Producer Samantha Barrie her thoughts on the recent rise of plays about black people and if she thought it was contributing to *DEI* in the theater community. Samantha said "They're not it's not helping amplify voices, it's more like drowned out, so they're sharing press sharing resources. No one is getting the spotlight. Because everyone's getting the same light it's like, oh, good luck on your season. Okay, bye!" She continues speaking about whether or not these recent black plays are helping amplify the black voices in theater by saying "Yeah, I just, to me, it just feels false." She continues by explaining how it isn't enough for there to be new plays that have short runs about black people, but the people in the positions of power in the Theater community need to support these shows in order for them to be successful. She reiterates that although big New York theaters are making a commitment to showcase new black playwrights, new black actors and new black directors, there are still no positions of power being made for people of color. Black artists are not being hired in administrative roles in theater. She explains how she feels *DEI* "officers" are being hired for productions to satisfy the public's

desire for *DEI* progress in theater. Although *DEI* officers may obtain the community standards within the theater, they do not satisfy the public's need for change in theaters as an institution. In order to make big changes in Diversity, equity and inclusion in theater, there needs to be a major shift in who is included in the positions of power.

Later in my interview with Samantha Berrie, she explains her perspective on *DEI* in the year 2020 for theater by stating, "I think you can't uncouple it from COVID, where the commercial theaters that we're opening, we're going to reopen in the fall, we're never going to make any money. Theater Owners needed to put something in there. And they're all getting their asses handed to them for never doing black plays. And so they were able to make deals to look better in the press, get some sort of write off for doing plays, and say they were doing more diverse plays, and have someone pay their rent in a time when the other option would be to not have anything in there. And so they did a whole season of black shows that for the most part, were doomed to fail commercially. So that they could then say, well, we tried. Right, so then not be able to do them for 40 years." This was really disappointing for me to hear. I wanted to believe that since the rise of social advocacy, the rise of policies being written regarding *DEI* and the rise of black plays being performed in 2020, was a shift for the better. However, without support from positions in power in New York theaters, money, and marketing support; plays centering black people wouldn't have the same opportunity to be equally as successful.

I am happy to say that in contrast to 2020, the year 2022 has had a plethora of more productions celebrating people of color! I am hoping that this progress sticks.

I asked Julio Monge how he felt about the progress slowly being made in New York Theater. Mr. Monge spoke in a similar sentiment to Samantha Barrie, stating "if you look at the percentages, it is still not a good progress. But I don't think that you can make those changes overnight, I think, now the progress has accelerated. Thank goodness! I think the movements we see Black Lives Matter, the pandemic. As you know, it's accelerated that awareness, which is great. But I still think there's some logistics that have to be taken care of, in order for us to have more visibility, because usually, we're focused more on the performing part of performance arts, but we're not in positions of power. We're not directing, we're not writing that much. I mean, there's more writers now, but we're not producing. And those are the positions and the places where decisions are made." Julio Monge is agreeing that in order for change in

Diversity, Equity and inclusion to come, there needs to be a shift in the positions of power in theater.

A CALL TO ACTION

The lack of diversity, inclusion and equity of today's theater productions has caught the attention of different popular theater creatives. In 2020 a document called "A NEW DEAL FOR BROADWAY" was created by the *Black Theater United* organization, and the Center for Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging at NYU School of Law. The document was signed in support of popular Broadway organizations and actors, like Broadway actress *Cythia Erivo* and *Disney Theatrical Group*. The document focuses on key concepts like "Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Belonging for the Theatrical Industry" It highlights how those in each position of theater arts, specifically Owners, Producers, Unions and creatives, can make efforts towards making theater more equitable, diverse and inclusive. One of the main efforts being made is addressing those in positions of power in theater to reallocate their power. The document points to the importance of DEI by stating "For far too long, Black artists, theater makers and technicians in all areas of our industry have been subjected to systemic and interpersonal racism that has harmed their lives and careers and diminished us all." The central argument is that since theater is reopening after the pandemic, there is a responsibility to push theaters to be accountable, equitable, and inclusive. This document also provides solutions and ways they believe they could successfully transform theater. There are 7 sections to the document dedicated to different commitments that could be made by those who are influential in theater, that would progress theater to be more diverse, equitable and inclusive. The target audience of this document is Owners, Producers, Unions and creatives. The seven sections are: " Section 1: Core principles and joint commitments 3

Section 2: Joint commitments of theatre owners and producers 4

Section 3: Commitments of theatre owners 5

Section 4: Commitments of producers 6

Section 5: Commitments of unions 8

Section 6: Commitments of creatives (directors, choreographers, music teams, designers, casting directors, composers, and playwrights) 10

Section 7: Procedural commitments”

An example of one of the “Joint Commitments of theater owners and producers” is “We will conduct an audit of existing mentorship and sponsorship programs for Black talent across our industry to identify gaps and find opportunities to establish new mentorship programs or enhance existing ones. We will provide a list of all such existing programs to Black Theater United, and work with Black Theater United to ensure that those programs are widely publicized within the industry.” This is a great example of a “Commitment” I could see shifting the future of Theater. If black performers have access to theatrical programs, this will influence their access to opportunity to pursue a career in theater professionally. Providing professional theater education and training will give POC a better chance to be cast on the professional stage, and diversify casting in theater. *A New Deal For Broadway* is filled with rich suggestions on how to make Broadway more diverse, equitable and inclusive.

Antoine L. Smith reflects on the intentions of “*A New Deal For Broadway*” by explaining that he agrees with the sentiment; that those in positions of power need to support DEI initiatives in order for progress to be made. He spoke to me that although it is nice that the commitments are written out in “*A New Deal For Broadway*”, he hopes to see actions steps that will force those commitments listed into place. I asked him what he thinks the steps towards true progress would look like and he states “The first steps are allowing more producers of color to come on board, allowing more creatives that are people of color to come on board, I mean, it all starts at the top? To me. That to me would be the main focus is just getting more people of color, getting more of our stories, I think that they think that our stories aren't commercial enough, because now theater is truly about being commercial, and what can sell fast and what can you know, make that money real good. But just giving us the chance, because it is not the lack of skill, or the lack of talent. It is the lack of chance, right? Lack of Opportunity.”

Even though we are still waiting for the result of the hard work of those who have made calls to action towards a more diverse, equitable and inclusive theater community, I feel hopeful. I feel like the issues have been identified and now it is time for active change.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

There have been some “wins' ' regarding the importance of DEI, in the Theater community during the pandemic. The recent nominations in the 2022 Tony awards of shows like *A Strand Loop*, is an example of the meaningful changes in terms of DEI value and in practice in theater. We are seeing innovative ways that productions are prioritizing diversity and inclusion. An example of this is a production recently mounted The Public Theater that authentically showcased multiple cultures. Julio Monge describes his experience in the recent production of *Romeo and Julieta*, as an audio play by the Public theater. He says ” *Romeo and Juliet* but it was bilingual, and instead it was *Romeo Julieta*. With a mix of actors, that was incredible!” He continues by saying.

“And that's the Public Theater, but they've always been ahead like that since Joseph Papp.” Joseph Papp is a well known theatrical director and producer. Joseph Papp is also known for establishing The Public Theater and constituted DEI values in the Public Theater’s policies since its early days. Joseph Papp had a large influence on the way performing arts theaters in New York took accountability towards being more diverse, equitable and inclusive.

Julio Monge joked that he feels that “Everybody has to pull *the Joseph Papp* now”. Like another theater that I just worked at, where I directed, they were going by those principles (*The Public Theater’s principles*) without giving away the name of the theater of course. but I knew about it because I read their policy. And because I was in that theater; I know what it is about. And George (*George C. Wolfe*) continued that tradition. And I come from that school! I'm like, welcome to The Club! Everybody is trying now! Now I can see the effort. I know I can see an impulse to do it. And I say hallelujah, right?! I see. I see the light, really. I see the light.”

Through my research I've learned that there is a lot of progress that needs to be made regarding transforming theater into a diverse, inclusive and equitable environment. Nonetheless, I feel like innovative thinkers like *Donna Walker Kuhne*, *George C. Wolfe* and the writers of *A New Deal for Broadway* have taken the necessary steps towards ensuring DEI is being valued in New York theaters. Due to the recent racism marginalized peoples and the black community have been facing in America, it is more necessary than ever to utilize art to support POC, educate, and to create an inclusive, diverse and equitable environment through theater. Many black performers on Broadway have shared their experiences with racism during their careers in theater. It is not Broadway's obligation to create new ways of producing shows that value the importance of inclusion, equity and diversity. After my reading I feel the most positive changes have been made through policies that establish the necessity of DEI, Owners, Producers, Unions and creatives taking responsibility to practice DEI when creating their productions, and by creating space for artists of color to have equal opportunity to shine on stage. As a performer myself I look forward to the changes being made in theater, and I hope I can be a part of the impact.

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