

**COMMERICAL THEATER: A Channel for Liberation or Discrimination?**

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## INTRODUCTION

In our vast historical context, diversity and representation have always been an issue within American pop culture. Whether taking a critical look at modern art, or exploring the infinite canon of American classical works, the issue of representing diverse identities is painfully apparent. With American performing arts rooted in minstrelsy, freak shows, and circus acts, institutionalized racism and prejudice play an integral role in what we still see on stage. Consequently, as someone with the intention of pursuing a career in this industry, I began to ask myself; why, in 2018, is diversity and representation – whether that be race, gender, sexual identity, body shape, socioeconomic status, etc. – in the commercial theater industry still problematic?

When formulating my idea for the case study I began to question the lack of diversity and representation within theater as a whole. Where were the obvious issues, and why? As much as I would love to study the entire realm of theater and its entire artistic makeup, this single semester study wouldn't allow for such a wide matter. After more research and reflection, I realized that I needed to narrow my overall topic. It wouldn't be fair to generalize this issue and act as if theater in all forms fails to represent diverse and honest narratives, as a matter of fact I would simply be incorrect. There are hundreds of playwrights and theater companies whose work is centered around epitomizing diversity and creating work that tells a new or uncharted story, which raises questions of its own about our commercialized theater industry. Why, with all the innovative and original work out there, are we continuing to center our stories around the same identities? Where does the central problem lie? What identities should I be looking at? From this I chose to formulate questions and conduct research that could help narrow my topic into something more constructive and realistic. Do non-commercial theaters, as opposed to Broadway, provide more opportunities for diverse and honest representation?

In this paper, I will explore the issues of diversity, representation, and honest storytelling by looking at them from several viewpoints; media representation of diversity, the never-ending efforts of non-commercial theaters, accountability for the deficit, and how I hope to actually put this to practice. While I am aware that my overall research question still leaves room for a very broad understanding of the topic it is my hope that, through a comparative lens, I will be able to deduct an informed and insightful answer to this central subject. It was this thought process that sparked my interest and propelled my research forward into this case study.

### **UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY: In the Context of this Project**

In order to gain an understanding of diversity, it is important to recognize the context of the word. The most basic definition of diversity is simply a variety but, in the environment of this case study, it would be irresponsible to trust that definition. Diversity, through the lens of this report, is so much deeper than a simple variety. Merriam Webster's dictionary defines diversity as "the condition of having or being composed of differing elements... the inclusion of different types of people (such as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization" (Diversity). Taking into consideration everything this paper will address, this definition is getting much closer to the meaning we are searching for, however, it is still only a small portion of the vast contextual understanding of the primary issue at hand.

Within the framework of this senior project, I am seeing diversity as much more complex than our basic understanding of race and culture. As we progress into a seemingly more socially conscious society, we have expanded our understanding of diversity exponentially. While still a crucial part of our history and understanding of the topic, we have moved away from seeing diversity as simply white versus non-white people. Diversity has expanded into the realm of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, heritage, body composition, and so much more. To limit

the public representation of these identities is to create a harmful standard that does not mirror our society in an accurate way. Art has a unique ability to be reflective and show us a version of the world in which we are already familiar. It is important for our society as a whole, especially the commercial theater industry, to start paving the way for acceptance and appreciation for diverse groups of people. Broadway sits on a platform that has the ability to make people listen; people come from far and wide and spend their money to sit in a room and absorb some piece of art. Why aren't we using this platform to the fullest extent of our ability?

This specific study will take a look at Broadway stages, specifically who we are seeing on stage. In the 2014-15 Broadway season minority actors (Black, Asian, Hispanic, etc.) dropped to 22% from 24% the year before (Viagas). While this statistic is almost five years old, and we have made incredible strides to improve since then, one cannot help but wonder what causes such a staggering imbalance of white actors occupying roles on Broadway stages. To gather some insight on my topic I surveyed 20+ people for this project. Those surveyed included students of Purchase College, citizens in the greater New York City area, working professionals in the arts, and some who live out of state. Of those surveyed, 43.5% of individuals attend 1-3 Broadway shows per year and more than 26% do not attend Broadway performances at all. This raises important questions about not only diversifying what we see on and back-stage, but also diversifying our audiences. Many of those surveyed believed that the largest contributor to issues of diversity within commercial theater lie with audience attendance. As it is now, Broadway is not an accessible art form. The audiences for these shows are primarily tourists with the means of easy admission. There are also huge socioeconomic factors at play that keep working class people from experiencing these shows.

“Rich white people run the theaters and only want to see a reflection of themselves upon the stage” (Browne), was one of the responses when asked “Do you believe there is a lack of

diversity in popular theater? If so, why do you think we are seeing this issue?” Most surveyed had very similar reactions and responses to this question. Taking into consideration the importance of seeing diverse people on stage, this inequity actually carries a whole slew of harsher consequences along with it. Sociologically speaking, this lack of equality can harbor consequences to one's own mentality. Studies have shown that being able to see one's self represented is incredibly important to mental health and sense of belonging, especially to young or developing minds.

To fully understand the scope of these issues, it's important to understand how these issues effect people on a very personal scale. There have been countless studies from sociologists at various universities shedding light on the penalties of not seeing some version of oneself, or seeing a negative portrayal of a relatable identity, when consuming any forms of mass media. In 2017, *Huffington Post* published an article titled “Why On-Screen Representation Actually Matters.” The authors of this article, Sara Boboltz and Kimberly Yam, provide numerous quotes citing specific psychological and sociological studies. These quotations provide insight and context to back the authors' claim of representational importance. Dr. Nicole Martins is an Associate Professor within the Media School at Indiana University. Her expertise, and teaching, revolves around “the social and psychological effects of the mass media youth” (Martins). In the *Huffington Post* article, Martins is quoted as saying “There's this body of research and a term known as ‘symbolic annihilation,’ which is the idea that if you don't see people like you in the media you consume, you must somehow be unimportant.” (Boboltz and Yam). This explains the negative implications of lacking representation, especially for youth audiences, so it's important for an entertainment juggernaut like Broadway to understand the consequences of creating non-inclusive art.

## **MEDIA REPRESENTATION: Seeing One's Self – an Analysis of LGBTQ+ Tropes**

Diversity and representation often go hand in hand because, in theory, representation is to embrace diverse people in a way that promotes inclusivity. In this section of the study, I will be veering away from live theater to analyze how and where we see these issues in, the more accessible, mass media. By studying the issue through an altered perspective, I hope to gain a stronger understanding of the relation between my topic and how it manifests itself in our culture. In context for example, when you turn on the television, flip the channel to *Scandal* and you see Kerry Washington “the first black woman to lead a network drama in nearly four decades” (White) that is effective representation of diversity. In the context of this project, representation is seeing an honest – honest being the operative word – depiction of a specific identity on stage. Honest, in this setting, means that the character in the show is actively steering away from common tropes or stereotypes, and rather showcasing an authentic narrative. These small details can truly make all the difference.

Sarah Flack is a Junior Dance student at Purchase College. When asked “Why is diversity and inclusion important within the arts?” her response worked in conjunction with the idea of showcasing authenticity.

...If a show is interpreting the lives of two homosexual lovers, why have a heterosexual actor play the role of such character, when you could have someone who can provide first hand experiences? Diversity and inclusion is important because art depicts real life. Why mask this side of reality when presenting art? Art is supposed to be raw, and real, why change this? (Flack)

This isn't to say that gay actors cannot play straight characters, however this is where casting can get a little tricky. There is something to be said about a person, specifically a person of privilege, playing the role of a minority or someone who has faced discrimination. You would never cast a

white man to play a black character, but a black man could play a traditionally white role (see *Hamilton*). While this issue should be seen from a case to case basis, I believe when a character has faced hardships, or prejudice of some kind, it is wise to cast an actor who is capable of understanding and doing justice to that character while translating their story in a respectful way.

Casting can make a huge difference when trying to show an identity on stage. It's not enough to weave a gay, black, Asian, Latinx, disabled, etc. character into the narrative of a show it's important to the identity of the character that the actor is actually capable of telling their story. While representation is exceedingly important, and often the first step towards creating a piece of art that is inclusive and all-encompassing of the different identities that comprise our culture, it can sometimes actually hold a very specific set of dangers in itself.

One of the most staggering issues within representation is the ability to integrate unique stories within a single illustration – the idea of “diversity within representation.” What this means is that we are currently at an all-time high for representation in pop culture and media, but we are still seeing an issue of diversity within that. We are stuck in a paradox of creating characters that help share identities, but the identities we are sharing are not diverse enough. For example, we might be seeing a lot of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) people in television but those characters are still falling into dangerous stereotypes that don't always fully embody what it means to fall within one of those identities. Some stereotypes, of which I am sure you are familiar, include: “the gay best friend,” girls experimenting with their sexuality in college because it's “hot,” the closeted jock, the crazy lesbian, or an entire television universe where everyone is “straight.” These tropes are common and can be seen in almost any television show featuring a character who falls on the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Shows like “Glee”, that feature a major gay character flourishing through the world of competition choir, only give us their narrow view of what it means to be gay in high school. Inclusion of this character in the



series is something to be commended; however, it can be harmful to viewers to only see dramatized versions of one's self on the show – whether that be the “hot girls” experimenting with each other, or the closeted sports captain bully. Going back to the concept of “symbolic annihilation;” not to say that the Glee character isn't relatable to many, but if you have a young gay boy watching this show that doesn't fall into the category of “feminine or overly flamboyant” he now sees himself as outcasted or abnormal.

Another huge trope seen not only in LGBTQ+ characters, but any characters that can be put into the category of a minority are “killed off.” When talking about LGBTQ+ characters this trope is commonly referred to as “bury your gays.” What this means, is that shows who are presenting audiences with these characters end up killing or writing them off after a short-lived period of popularity on the show. Two specific shows, *Game of Thrones*, and *Orange is the New Black*, both of whom are holding spots as top watched in the country, have fallen guilty of this in a big way. *Game of Thrones* a medieval fantasy show about the constant fight for power and royalty, is arguably the most popular show on Television since its debut in 2011. In early seasons it showcased a gay character who actually held a position of power and was destined to be the king. That in itself is a huge step for the creation of diverse storylines within the show; they're doing so by putting someone of minority in a powerful position, recognizing that LGBTQ+ characters can be kings or leaders of their communities. This is the kind of representation that provides a platform for audiences to feel elevated and empowered. Unfortunately, after a short time on the show, this character's storyline ended due to his untimely death and has since been almost completely forgotten within the series.

In one of their most recent seasons *Orange is the New Black*, centered around a woman's prison in New England, and one of the largest enterprises to come out of the Netflix streaming service, wrote off a favorite character within the show. One of the main characters, and a fan

favorite, Poussey Washington was a queer woman of color who, in the end of the show's fourth season, was violently suffocated by a white security guard on the ground of the cafeteria in the prison. This scene itself created a huge dialogue amongst fans and toyed with the line between perpetuation and enlightenment. This removed a character who was an amazing representation of being queer and being a person of color from the show, and one could argue that it perpetuated the true narrative of white people having the upper hand over the lives of people of color. On the other hand, this could be seen, and was likely intended, as the show raising social awareness of an unfortunately authentic depiction of police brutality in America. While these tropes and stereotypes are very much centralized around LGBTQ+ characters in television and film, this deviation from the topic was to serve as a jumping point to discuss the lack of "honest" diversity and representation within characters across all art forms.

So how does this translate into the world of commercial theater? Where are we seeing parallels of these issues, and have Broadway seasons fallen into similar trends?

### **BROADWAY IS MISSING THEIR CUE: How Media Issues Translate to a Broadway Stage**

Broadway has had an interesting history in terms of showcasing and celebrating different identities on stage. "Much of the Entertainment Industry does not reflect the demographic diversity of the United States" (Paulson). In 2017, the New York Times published a piece titled "Theater Jobs Skew White and Male, Study Finds" by Michael Paulson. In this article Paulson highlights some of the most daunting statistics about the distribution of jobs amongst different gender identities, races, and similar minority groups. Data like this is important because the issue of lacking diversity and representation doesn't just lie with racist characters, or too many white

actors on stage. The first underrepresented group to be researched in this study was women. The study had shown that:

On Broadway and in national tours, where salaries are highest, women had 35 percent of the principal roles in plays and 42 percent of principal roles in musicals, and 37 percent of stage manager jobs. Even in chorus parts, women were underrepresented, at 44 percent. (Paulson)

Although these statistics may not appear staggering, when looking at the industry as a whole, a small percentage can mean a very large population. After taking a look at the roles of women within Broadway and national tours, the article talked about minorities and how their numbers are even lower. “African-American performers, for example, got 11 percent of the principal roles in Broadway and touring plays, and 9 percent in musicals,” and “Equity said that whites were generally hired with higher contractual salaries at all levels” (Paulson). Later in the article, Paulson is talking to Mary McColl, the executive director of Actors Equity Association. Ms. McColl has been the executive director for Actors Equity since 2011 and oversees more than 40 national and regional contracts while supervising the national professional staff of Equity. When talking about the issue of diversity and underrepresentation within our theater community she had this to say.

I think it’s because the canon is written with more characters for men, and all of us have to sit down and have hard conversations about how to address the problem... And if people of color can’t see themselves onstage, how long will theater remain relevant? (Paulson).

She poses a really important question here, similar to some of the questions posed in this paper, how can we expect theater to remain relevant if its only appealing to a specific group of people.

If individuals, or entire communities of people, don't feel connected or represented it is not easy to maintain their relationship to the art form.

What I found most interesting, and most valuable to my specific study, was the comparative statistic with Off Broadway theaters. There is a higher rate of African American performer representation with "14 percent of the principal roles and 22 percent of chorus jobs" (Paulson). While this one statistic cannot possibly answer my entire research question, of whether or not non commercial theaters offer more opportunities for diverse and honest representation, this does carry some weight in that there are higher percentages within these spaces. I said before, these small differences could be thousands of people, so recognizing the changes and reflecting on their merit does provide a very strong insight for my topic.

Another incredibly interesting piece to critique are the shows centered around performing diverse stories, with strong representation within the cast, whose time on Broadway are cut incredibly short. Some shows from the past few years are: *Fun Home*, *The Color Purple* (Revival), *Ruined*, *Sweat*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and so many more. Each of these shows tell stories that provide an inside look into what it means to struggle with identity issues, as well as illuminating the minority experience in our world, more specifically our America.

*Fun Home* is a musical adapted by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori. This show tells the story of Alison Bechdel discovering her sexuality as a gay woman, exploring her relationship with her closeted father, and moving through the dysfunctions of life. *Fun Home* "made history as the first show written by all women to win the Best Musical Tony" (Viagas), it was the first Broadway musical to feature a Lesbian protagonist so, in terms of representation, these were big steps. However, the multiple Tony award winning show opened in April 2015, and only stayed on Broadway a little over a year before closing in September of 2016. Since its closing on Broadway, the musical has had a relatively successful national tour, which provides a little bit of

insight into the popularity of the show but still poses the question of “why did this show have to go?”

*The Color Purple* was revived on Broadway in 2015. The show tells the story of Celie and her life living as a black woman in the American South during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Featuring a primarily black cast, this Tony Award winning revival stayed on Broadway for two years before closing in January of 2017. *Sweat*, by Lynn Nottage was a play centered around the working class of Reading Pennsylvania. The play is based on interviews of people in the town, after Nottage was inspired by an article talking about how Reading had the highest poverty rate in the country. This play deals with issues of poverty, economy, racism, and so much more. This Tony award nominated show stayed on Broadway for less than three months.

It is important to look at shows like these and ask ourselves questions. Something is holding these shows back from achieving the success and esteem of some of their other Broadway counterparts like *Wicked*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, or *Chicago*. While we still see diverse long running shows like *A Chorus Line*, *The Lion King*, and *Rent*, it's still interesting to question what is stopping so many from pushing through the barrier and maintaining commercial success?

## **HONEST AND DIVERSE REPRESENTATION IN NON-COMMERICAL SPACES**

Part of the necessary research to inform my understanding of the lack of diversity and representation in commercial theater is to recognize those who are “doing it right.” Some of the best examples I was able to find in terms of producing and promoting shows with diverse characters and stories can be seen in non-commercial venues. What this means is that places like The Public Theater in Manhattan, New York or the small Watah Theater in Toronto, Canada are pushing the boundaries of what we are normally seeing on Broadway. They are making it their

mission to create work that provides a better look or better representation of the diverse culture we are seeing all around us. How, through their identity as less-commercialized or independent theaters, are they making such strides toward a different type of theater on stage? This was the main question I asked myself when studying and pursuing knowledge of these spaces.

The Public Theater has been devoted to this mission of supporting and encouraging these original innovative works since their founding over 60 years ago. Its mission statement declares:

The Public Theater is theater of, by, and for the people. Artist-driven, radically inclusive, and fundamentally democratic, The Public continues the work of its visionary founder Joe Papp as a civic institution engaging, both on-stage and off, with some of the most important ideas and social issues of today. (Public Theater 2018)

But why is the Public Theater relevant to the project about diversity and representation in commercial theater, specifically Broadway? It is important to distinguish spaces like The Public who are pushing the boundaries and showcasing advanced theater that is diverse in nature as well as properly representative of our civilization. Not only is The Public committed to generating diverse and inclusive performances, but they have showcased some of the most well-known Broadway shows before their debut in the commercial atmosphere. Some of these famous shows include *Hamilton*, *A Chorus Line*, *Fun Home*, *Into the Woods*, *Hair*, and so many more. Another phenomenal program in The Public Theater's repertoire is their annual Shakespeare in the Park. The purpose of this is to create work that is free and accessible to all audiences regardless of socioeconomic background. In the words of Natasha Scheuble, a senior Opera student at Purchase college "we need to change tradition," and that is exactly what theaters like The Public are doing. By opening up an art form to the population, you are allowing people to join the experience. Removing the exclusivity of the work helps propel the theater itself in the correct direction in terms of seeing diverse shows on stage. Programming the arts is to please those who

are coming to your venue, catering to the crowd. I believe places like The Public theater are creating and showcasing groundbreaking work because part of their mission is to satisfy the needs and the wants of their community. While some people see Broadway versus The Public as highbrow and lowbrow, its important to recognize the simple difference of audience demographic. In its name, The Public Theater asserts that its sole purpose is to cater to the community. Gathering more diverse audiences allows for more diverse programming. Broadway is expensive and in past studies it has shown that more than half of attendees are tourists. Broadway is failing to reflect the diversity of New York City because it is not aiming to cater to the audience of New York City.

Around the world there are artists and organizations that devote themselves to the creation of inclusive opportunities. “d’bi.young anitafrika is a queer Black feminist artist. African-Jamaican dubpoet, playwright, monodramatist, and educator d’bi. young anitafrika is internationally celebrated as a visionary storyteller, a passionate humanist, and a leader in the development of arts education.” (BIOGRAPHY) Anitafrika is the founder and artistic director of “The Watah Theater.” In 2016 Anitafrika published an article titled “Black Plays Matter: Watah Theatre, Creating Safe Space for Black Artists in These Dangerous Times.” In this article she talks about The Watah Theater, what they do, and the importance of supporting black and underrepresented artists. “Watah, previously “anitafrika dub theatre,” is a theatre company that specializes in the professional development and mentorship of primarily Black artists and also welcomes artists who are People of Colour, First Nations, and/or LGBTQQIP2SAA.” (Anitafrika) While this company resides in Canada, it still deserves recognition for their radical performances and innovative work. Companies like this help to spearhead trends within the art form, and with audience support they are capable of creating work that helps to change our culture.

Aside from theater companies, it is very important to recognize the work of playwrights who are blazing the trail for those coming after them. Their work, whether on stage or on the page, provides us with a story that needs to be told. Some incredible artists paving the way are Lynn Nottage, Suzan Lori Parks, Young Jean Lee, Diana Son, and so many more. In the context of this project, one playwright that I will be devoting extra attention to is Diana Son. Son is an American playwright, writer, and television producer. Her work is often centered around the stories of underrepresented individuals and the trials they face in everyday life. One of her most well-known works is *Stop Kiss*, a queer non-linear love story centered around the time leading up to and after a heinous hate crime.

### **PEOPLE IN POWER: How Those at the Top can Make a Change**

So, who needs to be held accountable for the issues addressed in this essay? Is there someone to blame? A large issue at hand lies with individuals in positions of power. Such people as producers, directors, casting agents, need to be taken into consideration when talking about a lack of diversity or representation. “If the producing team or the theater company doesn’t reflect diversity, then inclusion is not on their radar, or at the forefront of their minds; they’re not going to market to a diverse audience” (Astor del Valle). For example, bringing it back to Kerry Washington, the first black woman to lead a network drama in a very long time. Washington was cast in that role because the producer and writer, the incomparable Shonda Rhimes decided it was important for that character to be a black woman. It is these kinds of decisions that create truly diverse and inclusive art.

How could I write a paper about diversity and representation on Broadway in 2018 without mentioning *Hamilton*? Lin Manuel Miranda, a Puerto Rican American composer, lyricist, playwright, rapper, and actor created this show with huge intentions. When asked about



his process going into the creation of *Hamilton*, he talked about himself getting started in his career. He began by writing because as a Latinx actor, his opportunities in the successful Broadway industry were very limited. Concerning his first huge hit, *In the Heights* which told the story of a Hispanic-American neighborhood in Washington Heights New York. He said, “*In the Heights* came out of an awareness of, well, 'I don't dance well enough to be Bernardo (from *West Side Story*) or Paul from *A Chorus Line* and if you're a Puerto Rican man, that's what you get...’” (Deerwester).

*Hamilton*, the show that “consistently sells out all 1,321 seats at the Richard Rodgers Theater in New York City and its touring productions across the country and in London” (Wittmer), tells the story of Alexander Hamilton, one of the founding fathers whose ideas completely shaped the world we live in today. However, a simple musical about an old white guy is not what Miranda created when coming up with this show. One of the most notable, if not the most notable, characteristics of *Hamilton* is the groundbreaking casting. Miranda wanted to create a story about America at that time told by America in this time. All of the roles, with the exception of the British King are played by non-white actors, and it works perfectly.

Talking about this from the perspective of this paper, it is vital to see Lin-Manuel Miranda as the person behind the casting choices. This is a model of decision-making that could reshape how we see all shows in the future. Miranda wrote a show with the understanding that the story did not need to be restricted by the race of the actor portraying the character. He opened up the opportunity for actors of all racial backgrounds to have equitable opportunities through color conscious casting. In terms of the issue of the lack of diversity and representation in commercial theater we have come far, but from here forward, the standard has been challenged and those who have the authority to evoke change, should be expected to do so.

**PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH: Producing a 20 year old play about a hate crime.**

When establishing the ideas for this senior project, I knew that I wanted to do something deeper that fell under the umbrella of my topic. In order to fully understand the issues I have discussed in this study, I feel that I need to completely immerse myself in the topic. As part of the research for my senior project I will be producing *Stop Kiss*, a play written by Diana Son, and performed by students on the Purchase College campus. *Stop Kiss* tells the story of two women trying to understand their own sexualities while coming to terms with their attraction to one another. During the play, the two characters share a kiss on the streets of New York City and fall victim to a violent hate crime. The play explores themes of LGBTQ+ identities as well as the prejudice and intolerance faced by minorities.

The first question I asked myself when deciding to incorporate this into my senior project was: Why now? Why is it important to produce *Stop Kiss* in 2018? Unfortunately, our current social norms and political climate have cultivated an environment of hatred in America. Under the Trump presidential administration, minorities are facing outward prejudice and discrimination in a way that seemed to have subsided in previous years. It is almost as if intolerance and animosity over these past couple years have become trendy. People are becoming less and less afraid to spew and spread their distaste of others. In times like this, it is vital for artists to step up and utilize their platform to tell stories and create discourse to effect social change. With *Stop Kiss* we hope to not only tell this story, but open eyes and hearts to the meaning within.

As I mentioned earlier in this essay, the Public Theater is a nonprofit mission driven organization devoted to serving the public and showcasing works that cater to a wide audience. Their mission to operate in conjunction with the community has allowed them to program their seasons in a way that showcases diverse identities and stories. *Stop Kiss* premiered as part of the

1998-1999 season at the Public Theater. It was very well received as it sold over 85% of its tickets for the entire run during the first two days of previews. Of the 15 shows during this specific season, only two of the plays were written by non-white playwrights, Diana Son and Thulani Davis. Diana Son is an award winning Korean American playwright, who is best known for this specific play. At the time of release, “*Stop Kiss* won the GLAAD Media Award for Best New York Production and was on the Top 10 Plays lists of the New York Times, New York Newsday, the New York Daily News, and other major publications” (Young).

As part of this project, the cast and crew of the show decided that we wanted to do more than just produce a show. We are trying to create something that can help educate, inform, and enlighten audience members. We are currently in the process of working with Center Lane, which is a non-profit LGBTQ+ center in White Plains. Our goal is to have LGBTQ+ youth in the surrounding communities come to the show, see it, and have a talkback with the cast and crew about what it means to be queer and how that looks in college. Conversations like this help create a culture that is not only recognizing these identities but allowing them to flourish.

The more I thought about my role within this project, the more I reflected on my own experiences within theater. My interest and love for this art form began at a very young age, and I was fortunate enough to have been provided with the opportunities to pursue this passion. Since childhood, I have come to realize that not everyone is granted these opportunities. Subsequently I am incredibly passionate about advocating for accessibility within the arts. However, the first step in creating accessible opportunities for everyone is to ensure that the industry itself is creating spaces that allow for the representation of diverse individuals. Once we have cultivated these inclusive environments for everyone, we can ensure accessibility within the art form itself.

Our production of *Stop Kiss* premiered in the Humanities theater on December 6, 2018. The show was staged in an intimate setting in order to keep audience members engaged and

feeling as though they were close to the story. The episodic nature of the show was super interesting in this context. Similar to that of flipping through TV channels, each scene was a little snippet of what was happening in the lives of the two characters. Bookended by an on stage “NYC Band” the show almost seemed to jump cut back and forth from the past to present as if we were watching a movie.

The show was extremely well received from the audiences of Purchase College students, as well as the family and friends of those involved in the show. Similar to the original Public Theater production, the entire four day run of the show was completely sold out before the second performance. While watching, one could not help but draw haunting connections between the events of the play to our current social climates. A play, written and premiered 20 years ago, has the ability to make audiences question their humanity and gather an understanding of where we are today. When talking to attendees from the performance, the reviews were glowing and honest. Stephanie Farber, a student at Purchase College spoke with me after seeing our opening night show. She said that in her years at Purchase she has never felt more of a connection to a piece of theater. She said that as a queer woman it was amazing to see a “play that reflects my life” (Farber) she also said “I especially loved the scenes with the police detective. So realistic how queer women are treated. Being called dykes and twisting it to make us believe it’s our fault for speaking back to a man...” (Farber). Through a mix of social commentary and a certain element of realism, *Stop Kiss* was able to connect with audiences and “inspire people to feel more in touch with their identities... inspire [people] to be more queer” (Farber). This was such an important piece of field work for my senior project because it proves that through the creation of work that stages diverse identities and honest stories, you really can connect with people in a way that helps them feel heard. We had hoped that through the reproduction of this beautiful

play, we would help to inspire queer audiences and it is clear that we were able to achieve this goal.

As this study comes to a close the final question, we should be asking ourselves is, “Do non-commercial theaters, as opposed to Broadway, provide more opportunities for diverse and honest representation?” I believe that, while there is room for vast improvement, we are making strides in the correct direction in terms of opening up stages for diverse creation. The final quote I will be using is from Nadia Duncan, a senior theater student at Purchase College. When asked about diversity on Broadway and why we are seeing these issues, she had this to say:

I feel that the tides are shifting, and there is definitely more inclusion on our stages than ever before. The work of many commercial and non-profit theatre organizations to push diversity and inclusion is starting to pay off. However, there is still a long way to go. The next step will be moving towards having more plays written by women of color, disabled people, LGBTQ+ identifying people and members of other marginalized groups produced and performed on major stages. In order for that to happen, we need to support new works rather than countless revivals, revamps and plays based on other media (Duncan).

What Nadia says here is a perfect response; we are seeing a shift in the tides and slowly taking baby steps towards creating art that is diverse, representative, and inclusive. As audience members we have the ability to effect change. First, by holding “people in positions of power accountable to ensure they are hiring diverse playwrights, directors, and actors, thereby creating spaces for marginalized groups to share the power” (Astor del Valle). While also helping to fund inclusive art, making the decision to avoid less diverse works, and supporting the work of minority artists we can slowly but surely change the standards of commercial theater.

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