

Acting While Black: A retrospective on the effects of Misogynoir on Black actresses in Hollywood

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Impact and Goals

I remember my first experience with the theater watching *The Lion King* on Broadway with my grandmother. Witnessing Simba's story on that stage accompanied by breathtaking visuals was the key turning point as to why I chose a theater career path. Being able to carry on that legacy is just something that's inspiring to me. Acting has always been a significant part of my life, and College has only amplified that love. While I could not get a lot of experience in my early school years, I need to expand on this now. The ability to experience theater in different fashions has opened my eyes to the versatility the career can bring.

My aspiration post-graduation is to act in Off-Broadway productions. I value the flexibility and experimentation of their storytelling. I also want to venture out into Broadway productions as well. I've gotten inspiration from plays like *Issue 9*, created as a Purchase senior project. It manifested into an off-Broadway production. Seeing complex, retrospective projects like *Issue 9* that started as small ideas on this campus is exactly why I'm so passionate about theater. Having the opportunity to tell stories and touch people emotionally with them is so powerful. I want other kids to see me up there and realize that this is a dream they can also accomplish. This has always been important to me. I want younger audiences to know that careers in the arts while hard are possible. I remember a lot in my childhood years being told that a career in theater wasn't plausible because you needed to find a "real job". I just want to inspire audiences and inform them that the arts are not only an important career but a feasible one.

As an actor, I've mainly been in dramatic roles. Participating in a play like *Till Death Does Its Part* (Spring 2022, Independent project), has helped me to use my body to express language and feelings more than ever before. With *Collective Rage*, however, I will be acting in a romantic comedy. I aim to learn how to hit comedy and romantic beats, especially in scenes of

unrequited love, as I play Betty 4. *Collective Rage* by Jen Silverman, is a play focusing on five women named Betty who attempt to discover themselves, their relationship to queerness, and gender as they try to put on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I value versatility as an actor, and this project will help me prepare for more comedic roles down the line in my career. I tend to gravitate towards darker, more serious roles as I've found dramatic acting to be more in my element. However, I also want to expand my craft as an actor and not conform myself to just one specific style of acting. Performing in *Down With The Fourth Wall* (a theater of the oppressed piece) in the spring of 24 has only increased that desire. It was my first time performing in forum theater, and it opened my eyes to how experimental and creative theater can be. I appreciate the flexibility and experimentation with this type of storytelling. In *Collective Rage*, I will act with exaggerated aspects of my character to play into the comedic timing. Timing is super important as it helps the jokes and set-up feel authentic, making or breaking the whole dynamic of the show. I think it would be a great challenge for me, as it's something I've never gotten the chance to do before. I think this will be a great opportunity to learn more about my presence as a comedic actor. This will be a great opportunity for me to use body language to express more comedic acting particularly because it's something I don't have a lot of experience with. I am excited and open to seeing what *Collective Rage* can bring forth. Additionally, I feel this will help be a stepping stone for ways in which I can improve my comedic timing in theater, and how I'm able to go about auditioning for more community roles in the future. It is important to me to find a balance between choosing comedic roles as well as picking out dramatic roles that have more of a commentary.

I am just passionate about letting people know that you don't have to have all of this incredible amount of fame to be successful and make your mark. Moreover, whether an individual is making a steady income, if you're just performing to a crowd of 20 people and those 20 people are inspired by what you do then the work is fulfilling. This is my thought process and the belief I have for acting as a whole. If I can successfully resonate in terms of my performance with at least one person, then I feel like I've done my job as an actor. I don't care about the paycheck. I don't care about the awards. I truly just want to be able to make a difference with acting and I feel like because with acting you can tell so many stories, you're able to have political commentary about the world. The ability to just have a space where you can create a positive impact in the world is super important. Additionally, I also think it's important to be a part of narratives that give people a chance to escape. There are many points where life gets intense and a good show can bring a smile to someone's face, even if it helps them forget their troubles for a bit. It's important again to maintain that balance and to showcase to audiences the many facets of acting.

I think this project is essential in the here and now because of the impactful statement this representation can bring. As an executive board member of a diverse club, I have witnessed firsthand how meaningful and accessible representation can profoundly influence individuals' lives. Being part of a club that prides itself on diversity and welcoming all walks of life motivates me even further, to provide that space in theater. *Collective Rage* is unapologetically queer and accessible in terms of gender expression. Growing up, games like *Life Is Strange* and shows like *Legend of Korra* were significant stepping stones in helping me come out as a lesbian. Seeing sapphic representation in both mediums helped me start a journey of self-acceptance by allowing me to see myself reflected in the characters and narratives they

presented. I deeply believe that bringing diverse productions to various communities can help others navigate their journeys of self-discovery and acceptance. However, the glaring lack of representation on Broadway, particularly for non-binary lesbians, where opportunities for visibility remain scarce is apparent. Productions like *Jagged Little Pill* have faced criticism for erasing non-binary representation and have doubled down on their shortcomings when called out. This is something that I want to change not only as a non-binary actor but for other marginalized actors who feel like their roles are not being taken seriously. I want Broadway to be a space that fosters the belief that every actor is treated with the notion that they matter. I often recall the wise words of my movement professor, who reminded me that I have every right to exist and thrive as an actor. This is a challenge I wholeheartedly accept.

Although the lack of representation disheartens me, it empowers me to let my voice be heard. I want to become that representation so others like me don't feel alone. I want to create and be a part of projects that allow voices to be heard and not silenced.

Something big that is changing in Hollywood is how people of color are valued in the workplace. I think we're coming into a very new age where people are advocating for actors of color in ways that we have not seen before. Although we still have a long way to go, we have a better foundation to not only protect but also truly amplify the voices of actors of color.

My voice is one I want to be amplified, but also become a voice that is able to amplify others. The arts community is so important, and actors of color knowing that they have a space both on and off the stage where they can feel safe and supported is a number one priority. I think here at Purchase, being able to find actors who look like me, have the same orientation as me, and have the same gender expression as me has really helped me as an actor to feel safe. When you feel safe, you're able to perform your job well. Reading some of the accolades from

other actors of color and how they've expressed how much it means for them to feel supported as well as how that support helped them to do some of the best acting in their career has been a strong motivation. So I want to foster that environment everywhere that I go. I want actors of color and queer actors in general to feel like they belong, that they matter, and that their voices are going to be heard because they deserve to be. This is why I genuinely value plays like *Collective Rage*. Projects like these serve as a powerful reminder that all performers have the right to feel, be seen, heard, and validated in their identities. We are starting to see a big change for the positive in terms of diversity on Broadway and I also want to help continue that change.

As a senior collaborator, my goal is to strengthen my collaborative work ethic. I can do this by making decisive, carefully thought-out decisions with my collaborators to ensure the show's success. I think working as a senior collaborator will help the transition into real-world jobs and how we can navigate collaboration in a professional theater setting. It's very important as collaborators to communicate and be actively present in all meetings and rehearsals, and I think having those skills of time management responsibility will be beneficial not only in the rehearsal process but also for auditions down the line when I graduate. Even outside of the theater, it's good to practice punctuality and be a good active worker in the field. Another important factor is also getting more experience with the process from reproduction to closing night. I think being able to adapt to new problems and changing your original plan is good, especially for the chaotic world of Broadway. You never know when you might end up having to go on for someone else or ending up being in an extra show you weren't aware of. I want to be not only a better actor but a better coworker. This is not only important for my fellow actors, but also for directors down the line.

Video Essay

Here is the link to my video essay, which can be viewed with this Google Drive link.

 Senior Project Essay (2).mp4

Reflection Essay

I remember when I first received the email that I was chosen to be Betty #4 in *Collective Rage* by Jen Silverman. I was nervous because this project would be my first time in a fully queer play. It was so important to me to take on this project as a lesbian. I wanted to portray a character that was as authentic to me as possible. Nevertheless, of course, I was nervous; I've never produced a senior project before, and honestly, I didn't even know how to produce a senior project fully. I met up with my producers, Briana and Isabela, to discuss how we would take on the project in the upcoming semester. Our meeting and collaboration were definitely successful, but I was worried about my overall role as a producer, actor, and the ability to share my identity as a whole. Being able to meet just the three of us helped me to feel more comfortable, as we were able to share common interests and excitement for the play. While my nerves were still heightened, I felt supported in joining this project.

The journey of *Collective Rage* from pre-production to the final bows was filled with excitement, nerves, and self-discovery. One of the biggest things that helped us in make sure we were on top of everything was having biweekly production meetings during the Fall 2024 semester. There, we focused on advertising the casting for Betty 3 and 5, in addition to seeking the designers that we wanted to add to the project. By November, we had successfully cast our entire show, and by early December, we had completed our entire production team.

It was wonderful to see so many people come out to share their ideas for the project. I believe the success of the project was adding people to the team who not only read the play but also resonated with the text. In my opinion, that dedication, in addition to the actors (myself included) having some familiarity, made it easier to work together as we weren't completely starting from scratch. Briana, Isabela, and I decided to do a table read at the end of the semester

as a way to get everyone acquainted and start brainstorming ideas for designers. This decision helped me to get adjusted to this new space. The table read was one of the best decisions we could have made in the early semester. It was also a great way to have everyone get to know each other beforehand and relieve a lot of the awkwardness, allowing everyone to let loose and understand the different perspectives that were coming to the table. As a black lesbian actor, I wanted to make sure I was in a space where I felt safe to explore and thrive, especially as one of the few black actors on the cast.

Rehearsals were very nerve-wracking at first, especially when I read over the scenes I had with Betty 3. My character, Betty 4, not only confesses her love to Betty 3 but also has an intimate scene where we are looking at each other's genitals in hand mirrors. It's a pivotal moment where Betty 2 has a breakthrough in her journey of sex positivity. This play definitely had moments that were outside my comfort zone, and that, coupled with all the lines I needed to learn, was a major point of anxiety. I think something that helped me during this process and ease my anxiety, was the set of grounding exercises that my director provided for me. Doing some vocal warm-ups, especially the ones I learned in Acting Scene Study, helped me to loosen up and enunciate words. You essentially make different sounds like 'Ga, Cha, Ka', etc, and repeat quickly to loosen up the jaw and pronounce syllables that can get lost in everyday speech. We also were able to break up rehearsals into scenes, so we spent an hour or so working on scenes with specific people, asking questions about the text, playing around with blocking, and ultimately doing little run-throughs of the scenes to get a feel for them. I think these exercises helped me to get grounded not only as Betty 4 as a character, but also as an actor. In times of stress, using the grounding techniques has improved my public speaking overall, in addition to my overall confidence when standing around.

Looking back, I believe one of the biggest sources of anxiety began to happen around the middle of February. As we began to work on getting ready to buy props, solidify our set, and figure out costumes, some people on the team began to have creative differences. As a result, we did have some moments of tension between some of the members of the team. As a person who attempts to avoid conflict, I tried my best to defuse the situation when needed. However, things really came to a head during our photoshoot, another factor of creative differences. Two of our team members got into an argument, and additionally, we had some members who weren't stepping up to their responsibilities. I freaked out! I've been on productions where there were people who had differences, but usually they worked themselves out. However, the extra label of producer meant that the responsibility fell on me and two others to figure out this situation for the betterment of the production. But since I had no idea what to do, I asked for help. I texted my friends, who also graduated from the Theatre and Performance major, and knew the nuances of working on a senior project. I was given some good advice by my friend James. He essentially said that a meeting should definitely be held to establish the boundaries between the roles of senior producer and director, stage manager, etc. If I could do anything differently with this production, I think that's one of the few things I would do. I think not having that meeting with our designers and team definitely led to some people feeling they couldn't speak up right away, or having some producers feel like they weren't being heard. Ultimately, the three producers sat down and had a long conversation to put a plan into motion. We had one producer and director have a conversation with each other to hash out differences, and then proceeded to talk to the people who weren't pulling their weight. We did decide to let one person go, as we all decided that they couldn't give their all to our production. I think if I could go back, I would tell myself not to be as scared when having these difficult discussions. Of course, nobody wants to have

them. However, when you're in a leadership position, it's your responsibility to lead by example and make sure that an environment is healthy and respectful, as well as one that is created for everyone on the project.

Just when things were beginning to settle we ran into another issue. As luck would have it, the day of our faculty dress, the school had a blackout. At this point in time, I can laugh about it, but the day it happened, it felt like I couldn't breathe. I was already nervous about messing up a line, something going wrong with tech or some magical other circumstance. My anxiety was at an all time high. Of course, I had family and friends talking me through it but I just couldn't help myself. This was my senior project after all and it felt like if it wasn't one thing messing us up it was another. When the power finally came back on, I felt a wave of relief I hadn't felt since the project began.

In the blink of an eye, it was opening night. Isabela, who was also nervous and noticed how everyone in the cast was freaking out, decided to lead us in a little prayer circle. Even if it wasn't towards anyone specific, just having the entire cast and crew together giving thanks and comforting each other provided everyone with a little reset to take on the show. We were prepared and we knew what we needed to do, our nerves were just getting the better of us. The minute I walked onto the stage for my scene however, it was like I hadn't been nervous at all! I immediately got into character and hit all my blocking and lines like it was second nature. Were there mess ups in terms of lines and cues? Yes! Did it stop me? Not at all! We were quickly able to bounce back, recovering in a way that the audience couldn't even realize something was off. The show only got better as we continued, the nerves disappeared, and every performance felt electric, especially with the audience reaction. I noticed a huge difference in my overall groundedness when performing as Betty 4. I noticed that my enunciation as well as my

projection improved significantly once I got on stage. We went through so much this past year to make *Collective Rage* happen, and for it to be over in 72 hours was unreal. The feedback we got was amazing, the audience was so engaged, they laughed, cried, cheered, and I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. As I took my final bow, I looked into the sea of people with one thought on my mind: “I did it.”

I’ve grown a lot as an actor and a person through the production. I’ve admired the growth in being able to speak out more and speak up for myself and others in times of need. I feel like my ability to tackle comedic timing has improved so much. I’ve learned how to improve my enunciation in addition to my projection, and watching the replay of my senior project solidified this. We decided to tape our show during the closing night so we can share with family, friends, and watch it back ourselves. I can hear how strong my dialect is, in addition to making sure I’m aware of my spacing as an actor. I feel like this experience has also helped me to be more attentive and aware when I’m in conversations. I’m able to not only articulate my words better, but also stand more confidently in what I speak. Finally, I believe being in a queer play on campus has helped me to feel safe; to not only put my all into this craft but to feel the support of people who are just like me.

Collective Rage has taught me a lot about being a leader, speaking up for what’s right, and honestly affirmed for me how much I loved theater. Regardless of how many issues we ran into, I’m so grateful for this experience. I made some incredible friends and memories that I will carry with me even after I graduate. I’m thankful for the opportunity *Collective Rage* gave me to expand my craft as an actor and provide me with some internal analysis about me as a person, a leader, and an actor.

Acting Portfolio



Top Photo: Me as Betty 4, alongside Isabela Carmina-Ragano as Betty 2 and Judit Queral Perramon as Betty 3. Betty 4 confesses her love to Betty 3 at a chaotic dinner party.



Bottom Photo: Me as Betty 4, alongside Isabela Carmina-Ragano as Betty 2 and Judit Queral Perramon as Betty 3. Here Betty 2 is rushing to go home after all the Betties on stage look at their vaginas in hand mirrors at Betty 3's dinner party.



Top Photo: Me as Mom in the devised senior project *Down With The Fourth Wall* created by Celine Goris Luna. This play surrounded a

teenager experiencing microaggression from her parents and having audiences participate to find a solution. From left to right:

Daniel Pierre, Tionne Watson, Elissia Harris, Celine Goris Luna, Rayna Brown and Lashay Santana.



Bottom Photo: Me as Tatiana in the 2023 independent project *Till Death Does It's Part*. Here everyone in the family is worried about our grandmother at a family dinner full of awkward tension. From left to right: Wren Woodward-Aviles, Amaya Adu, Carlens Sainvil, Jack Boucher, Daniel Griffith, Niko Williams, Isabela Carima-Ragano, Max Tandy and Shjmara Harris.