

DEAR WHITE AMERICAN THEATER, OUR DEMANDS ARE IN



PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING ANTI RACIST THEATRE SYSTEMS

As the calls for long overdue change sweep every aspect of our society, we as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color theatre workers are meeting the moment, developing a new social contract for our work environments that cares for and sustains our artistry and lives. We insist on this reckoning precisely because of the successes of those artists of color working in the theatre, as those victories have come at a steep cost. Our love of theatre has often meant surviving an industry-wide culture of fear poisoned by racism and its intersecting oppressions. But when we lift the veil of white supremacy, we know how best to support our theatrical expressions, our culture, and ourselves. We are resilient. We carry ancestral wisdom. And so we are ending a war we did not start. We call for transformative measures guided by principles of self-determination, presence, joy, access, protection, transparency and integrity in the spirit of independence from our colonized past and present.

EQUITABLE PRESENCE

As the global majority, we demand a bare minimum of 50% BIPOC representation in programming and personnel, both on and off stage. This applies universally to all hiring tiers of Broadway, Off Broadway, regional theatres, funding recipients, artistic commissions, production departments, front of house staff, offices, professional training centers, unions, agencies, casting companies, critics and the media establishment. And—we are not only our bodies. We insist on intentional, meaningful, and exploratory long term engagements with us, as cultural workers and audiences.

We make our own theatre, and have done so for millennia, in our own organizations and as freelance artists. Invest in us in our own spaces, and provide BIPOC artists and our infrastructures free rein over your spaces and budgets so we may do our work on our own terms. Eliminating the hiring criteria of years of experience or degree requirements will also foster this 50% minimum in white spaces, as will the development and retention of robust BIPOC student cohorts and faculty in professional training departments with historically less BIPOC representation than performance.

Reviews introduce us to audiences, extend or foreshorten project lifecycles, make or break careers. As such, we demand BIPOC critics, marketing reps and PR consultants cover our shows, as well as those by white artists. Press outlets must expand their narrow perspectives by hiring more of us as contractors, and depend less upon salaried critics. We demand investment in BIPOC critic training and fellowships, as well as in BIPOC media, marketing, and public relations firms.

Our BIPOC community members with disabilities have led the way in revealing that when theatre facilities are accessible, everyone benefits. A similar principle applies with equitable presence for all BIPOC theatre artists: everyone benefits when we create excellence.

CODE OF CONDUCT

We demand structures for our protection in white spaces and with white artistic collaborators immediately. Antiracism must become a mandatory, well-budgeted, and explicit core value, with interventionist practices implemented universally and consistently to dismantle white supremacy throughout institutions and project workflow.

An antiracist code of conduct must be adopted, with trainings instituted and Native land acknowledged at the start of every rehearsal process, production meeting, theatre walkthrough, casting, board, PR, and marketing session, then maintained by all employees, contractors, vendors and investors. Protocols for disrupting racist incidents and repairing harm after an accumulation of aggressions, volitional or “accidental”, should be normalized, without penalizing the harmed party. The show must NOT go on if our wellbeing is compromised. Respect our skin, our shapes, our black hair, our bodies, and know we are not only our bodies. Respect our instincts, our knowledge, our aesthetics, our practices. Do not police us or our audiences. Do not exploit us or relegate us to the second stage. Do not determine our value by reviews or ticket sales or white cultural standards. Achieve cultural competency in us. Address your vocabulary, behavior, implicit bias, and lack of understanding. We are the experts, not the accessory.

“Safety first” is the theatrical motto. Antiracism is what makes us safe. We demand safe and exclusive affinity spaces for BIPOC protection inside all institutions. Antiracist support staff must be available at all times. Hostile environments and racial harassment must cease, and immediate divestments must be made from police departments and police-affiliated security firms that may endanger our or our communities’ safety.

We require community with each other for our sustenance. Our BIPOC community members must be a priority in the cultivation of all audiences, and not only for BIPOC focused shows. We resist paradigms of competition and scarcity, or the fallacy that our narratives must center on trauma.

In all points of contact, we require adherence to the principles of right relationship and equality, and a workplace designed to protect our full personhood.

TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES

We demand a transformation of our theatrical ecosystem. We demand your commitment to radical change now, and we will hold you to it.

We require regular accountability to antiracist measurables, as well as to a racial integrity index ensuring that our 50% minimum representation in all offstage positions corresponds to onstage optics.

We demand transparency regarding all investors, funding sources and board affiliations. All boards must develop proactive recruitment methods to appoint BIPOC members, as well as BIPOC artists.

We demand hiring, salary, and budgetary transparency and parity, and an explicit history of theater land acquisition. We demand compensation for all our work and refuse to engage in unpaid labor through internships, donor cultivation, galas, talkbacks, marketing, or otherwise, as slavery has been abolished. Unless, as the 13th amendment also states, we are being kept as prisoners.

We demand term limits on executive leadership service. While the arts are biased by definition, access to making art should not be, and this requires a regular changing of the guard. Succession plans should include the sustained development of BIPOC leaders through gap training and non-paternalistic mentorship opportunities, with clear and non-transactional paths of advancement.

We demand a revolutionary approach to funding for BIPOC theatres and theatrical organizations. Funding us rather than redlining and bankrupting us is the route to parity. We demand the selection of BIPOC program officers and adjudication panels, and the elimination of budget size qualifications. Multiyear sustainable gifts that allow for general operation support, acquiring space, staff hiring, and regular external audits will provide proper remuneration for our continuously underfunded theatrical homes.

Just as our unions have fought for our pay equity and working conditions, we insist that our unions listen to our evolving needs for better treatment. We demand healthcare without dependence on work weeks, or a lower threshold for BIPOC artists hired less often. We demand shorter, more humane tech days and work weeks, with more time allotted for the production process. And without a minimum of 50% BIPOC membership, administrative staff and leadership in all unions, divestment and the formation of BIPOC unions will be necessary.

We demand proper credit for our work and legacy, and an end to the culture of theft and extraction. BIPOC artists must benefit from our own stories. We are not only our bodies. We insist on the integration of rich BIPOC curriculum and pedagogies in schools so that our lineages are recognized and honored.

The elimination of racism in the theatre is not up for debate. Become our co-conspirators in antiracism. Theatre is struggling through the challenges of this time, but we must be better when we return. The demands synthesized here from our more comprehensive list of stipulations represent the reparative, decisive, seismic shifts toward making equity and justice our reality.