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February 11, 2013

In News That Should Surprise No One...

by Isaac Butler

Making the rounds of the internet today is [this report that less than 25% of roles on New York City stages were played by actors of color](#) from 2011-2012.

99 and I have been sounding the alarm on this issue for so long that I don't really know what to say. Every time this issue comes up and there's evidence that there's under representation of people of color on our stages (and in other jobs, the two are related) someone chimes in to say we need more statistics, or more anecdotes, or more something and tries to shift the debate.

I want to be all even handed right now but this is such a depressing topic for me, so I'm just going to say I'm tired of having a debate over whether this problem even exists when it seems so glaring to me that it does.

I do not believe that any role can be played by any race, there are times when racializing casting choices really does have impacts on a play and production that must be considered. At the same time, I call on my colleagues to use this as an opportunity to reconsider how they go about casting and about picking and staffing the plays they produce.

Part of the issue here is that we love to think about the art we make as proceeding organically. But change doesn't come without self-conscious efforts to change. Thus, making self-conscious efforts to change something about our artistic practice feels inorganic, and thus like we're forcing our art. I get it. I get that it's uncomfortable. I sympathize. I get that, for example, it's very hard for white writers to write characters of color and that there's a lot of justifiable fear about doing it wrong. But it is never going to get better if we don't try.

Right now, we have theater in one of the most diverse cities on Earth that on all levels, Broadway, Off, Off-Off and Indie is perpetuating an all-white myth on its stages. This must change.

UPDATE: [The AAPAC report](#) also names names, which I forgot to mention:

MOST DIVERSE

1. SIGNATURE THEATRE (46.4%)
2. ATLANTIC THEATRE COMPANY (29.5%)
3. VINEYARD THEATRE (28.6%)
4. PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS (27.8%)
5. NEW YORK THEATRE WORKSHOP (25%).

LEAST DIVERSE

1. YORK THEATRE COMPANY (0%)
2. CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY (2.9%)
3. PRIMARY STAGES (5.6%)
4. ROUNDABOUT THEATRE COMPANY (6.1%)
5. MCC THEATRE (7.7%)

MOST INCLUSIVE CASTING

1. PUBLIC THEATRE (19.2%)

2. THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE (13.3%)
3. MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB (13%)
4. SECOND STAGE COMPANY (12.5%)
5. VINEYARD THEATRE (7.1%)

Posted by [Parabasis](#) on February 11, 2013 at 01:37 PM in [Isaac Butler](#), [Theater](#) | [Permalink](#)


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Gets interesting when you drill down a little, courtesy of this:

<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>

US population: White: 78%, Black: 16%, Asian: 5%, Native American: 1.2%, Hispanic: 16%

According to the article: "African American actors were cast in 16 percent of all roles, Latino actors in 3 percent and Asian American actors in 3 percent"

So African-Americans are represented on NY stages at exactly the number they are in the U.S. population (though not in NYC's), Asians are slightly under-represented, and Latinos are *massively* under-represented. Which makes the problem a bit more specific.

Posted by: [That Fuzzy Bastard](#) | [February 11, 2013 at 02:36 PM](#)



I think you mean "actors of color," not "playwrights of color," in the first sentence, no?

Nevertheless: yes.

Posted by: [Gwydion Suilebhan](#) | [February 11, 2013 at 02:39 PM](#)



(I tried posting this from my phone, but I think it didn't go through.)

Fuzzy Bastard, the aside about the demographics of NYC is actually key to this discussion. Theatre is a local phenomenon and the discussion here is the diversity of NYC stages, not national stages. According to the 2010 census, the African-American population of NYC is at 26%, the Latino population is at 27% and the Asian population is at 9%*. The white population? 44%. The theatres listed here are non-profit, Off-Broadway theatre that are supposedly serving their community. In terms of reflecting the diversity of New York City, by and large, they are clearly failing. The problem is already plenty specific enough. There are not enough people of color on NYC stages.

Posted by: [99 Seats](#) | [February 11, 2013 at 03:33 PM](#)