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IN PRODUCTION | “HANDS ON A HARDBODY” / Casting:
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Blair Underwood, Nicole Ari Parker, and Daphne Rubin-Vega in “A Streetcar Named Desire”

N.Y. THEATER

THE STATE OF DIVERSITY IN NEW YORK CITY THEATER

AAPAC TAKES PULSE OF MINORITY CASTING

BY MARISSA MAIER

From corporations to the federal government, employers and industries continue to struggle with creating an ethnically diverse workplace. The theater world of New York City is no exception. While many Broadway and Off-Broadway professionals have noted an increase in diversity casting over the past few decades, a recent report published by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition shows there are still strides to make.

According to the AAPAC’s “Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages” study, released Feb. 11, Caucasian actors filled about 77 percent of all roles both in Broadway and not-for-profit theater company productions during the 2011-2012 season. African-American performers made up the largest portion of non-Caucasian hires, at 16 percent, while Asian-American and Hispanic-American/Latino actors trailed at 3 percent each.

These results ring true for Asian-American actor Christine Toy Johnson, who has enjoyed a 25-year career in film and television and on the stage. “From the beginning, I don’t even

know how I thought it was possible [to become an actor] because there were no role models to watch onstage,” Johnson told Backstage.

For years, Johnson auditioned for stereotypical roles and was often told she was “too tall or too curvy” for Asian roles, a critique Johnson found confusing since her parents are of Chinese descent.

While Johnson has seen increases in opportunities for ethnically diverse actors in the past few years, AAPAC’s report revealed a surprising trend: For the second consecutive year, Broadway surpassed the not-for-profit sector in terms of hiring minority actors. The 2008-2009 season, however, had not-for-profit theaters casting more minorities than the commercial market.

Nancy Piccione, director of casting for the nonprofit Manhattan Theatre Club, theorized this could be due to the difference in the number of roles in not-for-profit versus commercial productions, which can create more opportunities for diversity casting. “When we did ‘Wit,’ that play only has nine actors, compared to ‘Mary Poppins,’ which has 30 to 40 people,” said Piccione. She added that most of



For a full list of these and other Broadway productions onstage and in development, visit backstage.com

her colleagues working for Broadway productions cast Off-Broadway as well. Nina Lannan, who has served as a general manager on dozens of Broadway musicals, attributed the change to a recent influx of colorblind productions of classics such as "A Streetcar Named Desire." She added that increased diversity in film and television spills over into Broadway casting as producers attract well-known minority stars such as Tony winner Denzel Washington, poised to star in a new production of "A Raisin in the Sun." "As these plays come to Broadway and play to full houses, people say, 'This makes sense financially,'" postulated Lannan on future increases in minority casting.

"Really from the beginning, I don't even know how I thought it was possible [to become an actor] because there were no role models to watch onstage."

—CHRISTINE TOY JOHNSON, ASIAN-AMERICAN ACTOR

Johnson, who has become an advocate on these issues over the course of her career, points out that actors of diverse ethnic backgrounds are not asking for roles but for equal access to audition for roles that may have previously been open only to Caucasians. "A lot of [minority] actors will say they want the best person to get the job, but what happens when we aren't being allowed in the room [to audition]? We are not getting the chance to compete for the roles," said Johnson. She questioned whether these choices were mostly subconscious, pointing out the cyclical nature of casting: If you have a lack of representation of minority actors onstage, then you are less likely to automatically think of them as part of the American landscape or experience.

While Johnson conceded that there are more opportunities now than when she first started, improvements can be made in the industry. "We are seeing nontraditional casting more and more, but there is still lots to be done," Piccione said. **B**



Joshua Salzman and Ryan Cunningham

THEATER

2013 Jonathan Larson Grants Something to Sing About

COMPOSER-PERFORMER

Kamala Sankaram ("Miranda") and musical theater writing team Joshua Salzman and Ryan Cunningham ("I Love You Because") are the recipients of the 2013 Jonathan Larson Grants, the American Theatre Wing announced Feb. 13.

The awards, totaling \$10,000, will be presented March 24 at a private event in New York City, where the recipients will perform selections of their work.

Established in 1997 and named after the late Tony winner Jonathan Larson ("Rent"), the grants are given annually by the American Theatre Wing to honor emerging composers, lyricists, and book writers.

Previous Jonathan Larson Grant recipients have included Benj Pasek and Justin Paul ("A Christmas Story"), Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey ("Next to Normal"), Laurence O'Keefe ("Bat Boy: The Musical"), and Amanda Green ("Hands on a Hardbody"). —DANIEL LEHMAN



Kamala Sankaram

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