

New York City Theater Community Convenes to Discuss Representation of Minority Actors

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Actors, directors, playwrights, and other stakeholders in the theater community gathered at Fordham on Feb. 13 to discuss the startling reality behind the representation of minority actors on New York City stages.

Over 400 attendees gathered in the Pope Auditorium for the roundtable discussion, "RepresentAsian: The Changing Face of New York Theatre," presented by the Asian American Performers Action Committee (AAPAC) and the Fordham University Theatre Program.

Moderated by Tony Award-winning playwright **David Henry Hwang** (*Chinglish*, *M. Butterfly*), the panel featured nearly 20 prominent figures from every corner of the industry, including playwright **Douglas Carter Beane**, (*Sister Act The Musical*, *Lysistrata Jones*), Broadway producers **Nelle Nugent**, (*Stick Fly*, *Ghetto Klown*) and **Stephen Byrd** (first African-American cast of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, upcoming production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*); and, **Mary McColl**, executive director of the Actor's Equity Association.

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Representatives from all corners of the industry discuss ways to make New York City stages more inclusive.

Photo by Chris Taggart

The roundtable kicked off with the release of AAPAC's report "Ethnic Representation on New York City Stages 2006/07-2010/11 Seasons," the first comprehensive report on minority casting in New York City to be made public.

According to an AAPAC report on minority casting in New York City in the last five Broadway seasons, African American actors were cast in 13.2 percent of all available roles; Latinos were cast in 3.5 percent of roles; and Asian Americans were cast in 2.3 percent of roles.

"In the industry as a whole, actors of color are only 20 percent of the actors employed in the last five years," said actor and AAPAC member Pun Bandhu. "It's about access, it's about making sure that the most qualified actor gets the role, regardless of race."

While the numbers are clear, their meaning is decidedly less so, Bandhu said.

That is because there is no one lone offender, the panelists concluded. Playwrights who draw inspiration from their own families and friends tend toward actors who look like those families and friends; agents often book actors for whom the best training was made available; and, industry members of all kinds tend to use race to portray "realistic" situations within the theater.

"There are still directors who stop cold at the idea of members of a biological family group being of different races," said Public Theatre artistic director Oskar Eustis. "And they're not trying to be close-minded. For them, race is such a central category that when they see a black parent and white child, it doesn't feel real to them.

"It takes a lot time to say that in this world that we've created, we cannot view race as an essentialist category," he continued. "We cannot view race as so primary that it overrides all of the other ways that we suspend our disbelief when we go to the

theater.”

Although minority actors are underrepresented, a conversation about inclusion has, at the very least, begun, the panel agreed.

“This community has become so galvanized in a positive and proactive way and we hope that it’s just the beginning of conversations that we can continue to have with each other as collaborators,” said actor and playwright Christine Toy Johnson.

Founded in 1841, Fordham is the Jesuit University of New York, offering exceptional education distinguished by the Jesuit tradition to approximately 14,700 students in its four undergraduate colleges and its six graduate and professional schools. It has residential campuses in the Bronx and Manhattan, a campus in Westchester, the Louis Calder Center Biological Field Station in Armonk, N.Y., and the London Centre at Heythrop College in the United Kingdom.

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AAPAC members reveal data from the first public report on minority casting in New York City theaters. From left, Christine Toy Johnson, Pun Bandhu, and Angel Desai.

Photo by Chris Taggart