

Broadway diversity improves for all but Asian Americans, report finds

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Asian Americans were the only minority group to see a drop in representation on New York City stages during the 2015-2016 season, even as nearly two in five roles — a record high over the last 10 seasons — went to minority actors, according to a new report

The findings, released this week by the Asian American Performers Action Coalition, a volunteer advocacy group, showed that actors of color received 35 percent of all roles on stage in the Big Apple, up 5 percentage points from the previous season.

For Broadway musicals, the news appeared even better. Some 43 percent of actors hired in the season were minorities, the report said.



"Allegiance" will make its Broadway debut on November 8, 2015. The show, which was inspired by actor George Takei's early life, tells one story of Japanese-American internment during World War II. Matthew Murphy

But the numbers for Broadway plays paled in comparison, as people of color made up just 16 percent of hired actors. What's more, not a single Latino made it into a Broadway play, while just one Asian actor was cast in an ensemble role, according to the report.

"It's a very positive outlook for the industry," said Pun Bandhu, a member of the steering committee for the Asian American Performers Action Coalition. "However, Latinos and Asians are very removed out of the diversity conversation still."

Within the entire industry, Asians accounted for just 4 percent of all roles, falling 5 percentage points from the previous season, according to the report. It was the steepest drop among all minority groups.

The study tallied a total of 1,149 actors for the 2015-16 season, with 574 employed by the commercial sector and 659 by non-profit theater companies.



Actor Leslie Odom, Jr. (L) and actor, composer Lin-Manuel Miranda (R) and cast of "Hamilton" perform on stage. Theo Wargo / WireImage

The coalition said the season, which saw Lin-Manuel Miranda's Broadway smash "Hamilton" take home 11 Tony Awards, was the most diverse yet in the 10 years for which it has data. The 14 Tony nominations in 2016 for performers of color painted a stark contrast to the all-white nominees in top categories for Oscars that same year.

But while Broadway itself filled 36 percent of its roles with minority actors, a new record, it gave just 5 percent of all roles to Asian-American performers during the season, the study showed.

This drop of 6 percentage points compared to the previous season came despite the musical "Allegiance," which featured a predominantly Asian cast and marked the first time an Asian-American composer and lyricist, Jay Kuo, was produced on Broadway, according to the report.

The study also noted that figures for Asian representation during the 2014-2015 Broadway season were unusually high (11 percent) because of the revival of "The King and I." That show, it said, hired almost half of all Asian actors employed during that season.

On average, over the last 10 years, 76 percent of all roles went to whites, 15 percent to African Americans, 4 percent to Latinos and 4 percent to Asian Americans, the report said. Middle Eastern/North African, American Indian and disabled actors together amounted to just 1 percent of all roles.

By contrast, in New York City, 44 percent of the population is white, 29 percent Hispanic or Latino, 26 percent African American or black, and 13 percent Asian, according to the 2010 Census.

"Caucasians continue to be the only ethnicity to over-represent compared to their respective population size in New York City," the report concluded.

Other study findings for the 2015-2016 theater season:

- African-American actors were cast in 23 percent of all roles, Latino actors in 7 percent, and all other minorities (Middle Eastern/North African, American Indian and Disabled

actors) 2 percent. White actors accounted for 65 percent of all roles.

- Around 15 percent of available roles were “non-traditionally cast,” meaning that actors of color were cast in roles where race is not part of the story being told. That is an increase from 9 percent for the previous season and is the highest level in 10 years.

Study Finds Asian-American Characters 'Tokens' on TV

Bandhu said he believes theater definitely lags behind television when it comes to Asian-American representation. [A September 2017 study](#) entitled “Tokens On The Small Screen: Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in Prime Time and Streaming Television” found that 4 percent of series regulars in the 2015-2016 season were Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders.

Bandhu said resources exist for Asian-American actors, including advocacy groups like theirs, as well as nonprofit institutions and at least four major Asian-American theater companies in New York.

But he also said more work needs to be done, adding that there’s a dearth of Asian-American stories being told.

“There are so many strong Asian-American playwrights, and it’s an exciting time actually amongst Asian-American theater makers,” Bandhu said. “But that’s not necessarily being reflected in mainstream theater.”