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New York Theater and Diversity

FEBRUARY 13, 2013 [1 COMMENT](#)

Should the stage reflect the demographics of the city in which it is located?

That is the assumption of the second annual report from the Asian American Performers Action Coalition, the [AAPAC Stats 2011/2012](#) report, 28 pages full of charts and lists. Its conclusion:

"The percentage of minority actors rose to 23% this past year, a 2% increase from the year prior."

But they are still under-represented as a proportion of the population.

Cast makeup on Broadway and 16 leading non-profit NY theaters versus population of New York City

African-Americans: 16 percent of actors, 23 percent of the population.

Latinos: three percent of actors, 29 percent of the population

Asian-Americans: three percent of actors, 13 percent of the population

White: 77 percent of the actors, 33 percent of the population.

Of interest are several charts.

Theater companies that hired the highest percentage of minorities as performers:

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%)

Theater companies that hired the lowest percentage of minorities as performers:

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%)

Theaters that hired the most number of minorities in non-traditional casting (in other words, roles that were not specific to be for a specific ethnicity or are traditionally always cast as white):

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%)

How much do these percentages mean anything? As Brian DeVito asks: Maybe 29 percent of New Yorkers are Latino, but what percentage of New York actors are Latino?

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And then there is the issue of whether these same theaters hire more minorities in non-performing roles — as stage managers and directors, etc. — something that the report does not calculate.

Looking at the same year, the Broadway League has determined that 78 percent of the tickets on Broadway are bought by white people. So the Broadway stage is actually (slightly) more representative of society than its audience.

Responding to the report, arts consultant Adam Thurman makes the general case for diversity: The real reason many arts organizations struggle is that they compete for the exact same wealthy, white audience.

“A wise investor wants diverse portfolio because they understand that similar bunches of assets move in similar ways...Many arts organizations have created a “bubble” in which their wealth is supported by a small homogeneous group that could leave at any moment...Diversity is about spreading out that risk. It’s about creating a much strong business and artistic foundation.”

In his blog post, [the weight of white people in the world](#), Clayton Lord, studying a similar lack of diversity on stage in the Bay Area, writes: “When I asked...whether companies in more diverse areas should be expected to have more diversity in their audiences, the answer was almost universally, “Yes.” We value diversity almost universally. We get it, abstractly...The inertia of whiteness is strong and pervasive, which makes the problem relatively easy to identify and very difficult to consider tackling. The monoliths that are our older, white, wealthy subscribers, many of which directly prop up our organizations and without which we would horribly destabilize, make thinking about the people on the other side of that monolith difficult.”

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About New York Theater

Jonathan Mandell is a 3rd generation NYC journalist, who sees shows, reads plays, writes reviews and sometimes talk with people.

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