

DEI Statement

As educators, our job is to know where we come from, understand where we are, and work to get where we want to be as artists, individuals, and as a society. Allow me, then, to begin this statement by acknowledging an inconvenient truth of our discipline: the theatre is not as welcoming a place as we claim it to be. Many of us wish it was a true, safe haven for everyone - for some of us holding more privilege it has been. But the truth, the reality is that it hasn't been. I do believe it is an industry made of fundamentally good people, but one that has grown stagnant in its efforts. We fought for the rights of some and then, when strides were made, we forgot to look for others left behind. As many of our critics would claim, we were an illusion at times – on several occasions, our commitment and support were indeed smoke and mirrors. Perhaps it was subconscious, perhaps we didn't know better. But now we do.

It is important to stress that I say this as a white, cis-gender, Hispanic male from a privileged economic background, I have benefited greatly from this reality. I have often been the perfect token in the American theatre industry. My heritage allows organizations to showcase a commitment to diversity, while my whiteness prevents them from patrons' racism and, most importantly, their own. The same can be said of my sexual orientation, as I "pass" and therefore provide the best of both worlds on paper, but only the convenient part on stage. This has gotten me a lot of work. Many jobs, for which there were multiple other qualified candidates, have landed in my hands in part due to the color on my skin and my box-ticking identity. This happened both knowingly and unknowingly, and for a long time I believed what it was convenient to believe. For a long time, I turned a blind eye to my own privilege and, after years of listening, observing, and learning, I still have extensive work to do. And I am determined to do it.

As a teacher, this is something that I actively make a part of my pedagogy, and the key of that statement resides in the term "actively". I cannot allow for my commitment to diversity to be limited to words on a syllabus or my current knowledge on the matter; I have the obligation to continue learning as I aid my students in doing the same. It is not the responsibility of any of my students to point out my deficiencies or educate me, nor is it my coworkers or superiors who identify as part of marginalized groups. That is my responsibility as an educator, mentor, and professional. If we need to wait for someone to speak up about an offense, we are already too late.

As educators, we are called to instill the notion in our students that everyone has the same rights and deserves to be seen and heard, and to celebrate our diversity within that framework. This is where I believe theatre has the potential to change the world, as it is, at its core, an exercise in empathy. It is a universal agreement on taking time to understand someone's narrative that may very well be different from our own. Furthermore, we agree to do so in a communal way and without any separation between us and said story. The question then becomes, what stories are we presenting? How are we bringing awareness to audiences and students alike based on the materials we choose?

As an actor, I have been trained in techniques that were mostly developed by white men, through titles that were written about white men, and in classes that were predominantly taught by white men. Therefore, it is also my obligation to reach beyond my training, to carry out a search for methodologies and texts that come from a different perspective, that look at humanity from the eyes of different

groups, and that seek answers from a different frame of reference. These white, male-centric techniques do make up for the core of the acting training in the United States at the moment, and they are effective, useful, and do have a rightful place in the curriculum. But we must ask ourselves if our willingness to listen to them, in detriment of other groups, played a part in their establishment. This is not something that we can change immediately, but it is a process we must start immediately. In my classroom, I have changed the plays I use to uplift a variety of voices which reflect my students; I aim to include methodologies crafted by female-identifying teachers such as Hagen or Bogart, and look beyond the west for theatrical traditions that may engage my students and aid them in developing the tools they need. We can teach movement referencing Kabuki or Suzuki, and what better example of social action theatre than Boal?

However, the classroom is sometimes the source of friction. I will never forget an improv exercise in an intro to acting class, where one of the students started making racially charged jokes as part of the performance when an Asian classmate jumped into the exercise. I immediately stopped the class, and while shaken myself, I calmly addressed the student and the classroom. The student who had made the comments was visibly ashamed and apologetic about them from the second I interrupted the exercise, which allowed to start a conversation. After making sure that the victim was comfortable and felt safe with it, we allowed it to become an open discussion in class. We talked as an ensemble, we discussed ways to move forward, ensuring that similar situations did not happen again. We did not shy away from the situation, but rather faced it while acknowledging our deficiencies as individuals and as a collective. It was a compassionate, engaged, and honest conversation. I truly believe we healed more than was hurt in that moment. We healed as a community.

In my career, I have been lucky to meet and work with colleagues who have opened my eyes to inequality and injustice that I was utterly unaware of. From true accessibility for people with disabilities, to cultural appropriation in productions, or to fatphobia in casting practices – there is a strong current of people trying to raise awareness. I am a better artist, educator, and a better person for accepting the discomfort of facing my mistakes, listening to those voices, and being willing to have difficult conversations when they present themselves. And this is one of the most valuable things we can teach our students: to engage in conversation. For, after all, what would the theatre be without moving, thoughtful, and impactful dialogue?