

# If All the World's a Stage, Why Are Some Left Out of the Spotlight?

## Letter to the Editor

**Cris Eli Blak**  
*Playwright*

This is not a manifesto.

This is not a *Jerry Maguire*-esque moment in my life where all of the right thoughts and words line up perfectly, resulting in something that will not only change my life, but change the world around me. I cannot provide amazing facts and statistics; I will not put the academics or scholars to shame with my knowledge on the exact numbers when it comes to issues such as inclusivity and how many brown bodies have graced a Broadway stage. I will not wow you with my list of accomplishments or impressive degrees from a conservatory that only nine percent of people get into.

No, this is not that type of piece.

If anything, this is a cry for help.

The American theatre, on the surface-level, probably looks pretty inclusive and open to all people from all facets of life. Sure, there is the weekly revival of *The Music Man* but, hey, there's all those August Wilson plays too. *Hairspray* has some Black folks in it. Norm Lewis is well-respected, and don't dare forget about Audra McDonald. Oh, and *Hamilton*! There's a whole musical about The Temptations. So where is the lack of inclusivity? There seems to be diversity all around the few blocks that we hold as the standard of the American theatre. So what's the problem? How can it change for the future when it seems, at least at face-value, to be pretty clean-cut? What is your complaint? Personally, when I see Broadway I do not see diversity, at least not in the typical, aforementioned sense. I do not immediately equate Black bodies with Black respect or Black inclusion or Black notability, so the fact that there are a good number of people of color flexing their talents on the Great White Way could mean less to me. Unfortunately I do not see the framework of Broadway changing any time soon. We were promised diversity, more diverse stories from diverse storytellers, and while we had a good run of shows from Black playwrights - - those shows did not get the same attention and red carpet rollout as the newest revival of *The Music Man*. So many of the actions, ironically, feel performative. Even the "history-making" cast updates of people of color taking over popular roles feels disingenuous. Why should we celebrate something that should have been done a long time ago?

And my grievance or desire for change doesn't necessarily even lie within the Broadway-sphere because I know that there is a larger system at hand that stretches much farther than Times Square. My deepest desire for the future of theatre lies within the communities we rarely bring into the conversation, and the people who are rarely brought into these discussions and roundtables and lectures. I am speaking on those who will never be able to afford to see a Broadway show, but who have a fire and desire in their hearts to create something, the people who want to be artists but don't have adequate access to the arts. It could be because they go to a school that had to make budget cuts and arts departments tend to get the boot first, or they might leave school and go to a home where their hard-working parent or parents tell them that they need to do better than those who came before them, and art just isn't a viable option, not unless they want to continue living a life of disappointment and past-due bills and eviction notices taped to the front door. This is who I want the future of theatre to cater to. I have long said that the next Shakespeare may very well be a young Puerto Rican girl sitting in a public-school classroom with a head full of dreams and ideas but no idea or concept of how to reach and grasp onto them, to turn them into a reality, to unlock the potential that she has stored within her. And that is not that girl's fault. That is our fault. It is our fault because we have created a contradiction within the system of theatre —because let's be honest, that's what it is. This great contradiction lies in the fact that we generally hold art as a medium of expression, of freedom and truth. Artists are seen as the rebels, the restless creators. But at the same time it is a corporate industry, a business—one that has to keep the doors open and the rent paid—that has to serve a certain ticket-buying audience that does not at all look like the people living in the apartment complexes I was raised in. They thrive off of big names and merchandise. The medium of freedom and expression is, in the popular sense, locked into a single routine, generally playing it safe and pressing repeat to assure that the ground below them doesn't shake too much.

I repeat: this is a cry for help.

I was raised in Houston, Texas, under the love and care of a supportive single mother who always valued my creative side and didn't play the part of the parent who shot down my dreams whenever I offered them. Instead, she took early lunch breaks to come see my plays in elementary school, and sat in the audience multiple times to see my performances in high school (she being one of maybe ten people in the audience on any given night), all despite having worked a full day before. This support isn't enough in the long-run, though. In truth, the odds were stacked against me from birth. I was not raised in a theatre-going family. We couldn't afford Broadway tickets even if we wanted to. How can you plan a trip to see *CATS* when you're waiting for the food stamp money to hit? Theatre was not really on my radar for most of my life as an actual career choice because no one I knew was actively pursuing it, and even in high school, those who excelled in it started taking different routes, like the military. My high school's athletics department was much better funded than the theatre department and, as stated above, the physical support was rarely present in the seats. We were not given local awards for

our productions; we were not recognized. We didn't have elaborate sets or a live orchestra for our musicals. Due to my absolutely horrid SAT scores, any dream I had of going to an NYU, Juilliard, or Yale were cleanly flushed down the drain. I had good grades, sure, but those good grades came from a not-great public school so even those weren't very impressive. I knew I could write well but I knew no one was going to just give me a shot. My grandfather wasn't in the business, my family had no theatrical connections. No matter what they tell you, talent isn't all it takes. So I worked. I worked and paved my own path, and have consistently had to face the fiery breath of people who feel that I don't belong, that I don't fit in.

I use this personal anecdote to point out the problem with the American theatre, the one that I sincerely hope changes as we devise our future in this field. We cannot only let certain people in the doors based on biases that may or may not be conscious. The young man with torn shoes and a tattered shirt with no headshot to show may not have the same immediate appeal as Jessica from AMDA, but he may be able to outdance every other moving body in that audition room. But you have to give him a chance. Wasted talent is a curse that plagues many in this world and I believe that it is rarely their doing. The American theatre is an institution that locks people out without a second glance, that judges with no jury. This is a reason why I am a proponent for the continuation of virtual theatre remaining a prevalent force, or at least the ability to live stream. Though living through a global pandemic was anything but joyous, one thing that it allowed was for anyone to become an active participant in the creation of theatrical works. You could write a play, produce it yourself virtually, and stream it on Facebook or YouTube for anyone from anywhere to see. There was no "I don't live in New York" or "I am nowhere close to even a regional theatre." You had instant access and didn't need to ask for permission from any big suit that's more worried about a returned investment than telling any story. No, you could tell your own story, by your means, for an audience of your liking. New companies sprouted up, new festivals were founded, competitions were created; opportunities flooded the internet - - and this shows the beauty of what theatre can be, though one could still argue that even then, those who can't afford internet access were still shut out and placed at a disadvantage.

Theatre is not a niche designed for one kind of person. It is universal. It is an artform that has survived great challenges because it is resilient, it is intimate, it is unmatched; and it allows so many people to tell so many different stories and experiences. It is both an escape and a reflection of our world and there is no wrong way of doing it.

We are all players.

We are all the future. But we shouldn't have to fit a certain standard to receive an equal chance.

This is not a manifesto.

This is no longer a cry for help.

This is a call for action. Is anyone listening?