

When Black Women Speak

Ann C. James

Intimacy Coordinators of Color

When it comes to Black women in theater, duality is the prominent experience. We are met with oppressive environments where we are asked to be “resilient.” In that same experience, we band together in small groups across campuses and stages and rehearsal rooms and boardrooms to make communities of togetherness and joy bloom. Because that is how we roll.

In the Year of Our Lord 2024, how can we ensure Black women are getting what we need to survive the ebbs and flows of an industry that says it needs us but does not always provide brave spaces for us to create our work? For the sisters out there thriving, I commend you for making beautiful things under your control happen. I know theatre professionals are living the Black Experience and have found ways to ingest or deflect the intentional and unintentional harm being caused by others in their work environment. What can we create together as a standard of mental, physical, spiritual, and purpose-driven health for ourselves and for the generations who will follow their hearts into this complicated theatre landscape? I asked a few of my colleagues to chime in with what they feel we need to build a fertile and sustainable process built for us and by us. Here is what they shared with me.

Nicole Johnson is a firebrand in the New York City Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity space. She is the founder and director of *Harriet Tubman Effect* with a focus on corporate America, theater and higher education, curriculum design and diversity, equity, and inclusion. She commented:

In my experience as Director of *Harriet Tubman Effect*, I have witnessed Black women in the arts overextending themselves and struggling to set boundaries due to the pressures of unrealistic work expectations, workplace trauma and our industry's culture of meritocracy. In addition to the interpersonal and systemic stressors we experience, many of us are in a consistent back and forth about what choices align our values. Nonetheless, I have also seen our spiritual resilience help us rebuild time and time again. I have also seen many of us make decisions for our mental health to be in environments where we can work and heal at the same time.¹

From Regional Stage Director, Candis Jones:

¹ Nicole Johnson, Personal communication with the author.

Many of us are vacillating between many states right now: “WTF is happening”, “Girl we in a recession take that job”, “YESSS girl you booked the job!”, and “When is amateur night at the strip club?!”²

Along with ALL of the above, I’ve been flooded with many personal ideas I never gave the time of day. So, I’ve been falling back in love with my own impulses and devising.³

In tandem with Candis’ words, I spoke with my friend Kaja Dunn, Associate Professor at Carnegie Mellon University. She had this to say:

While there is always the noise of needing to advocate, being underestimated or overlooked, there’s also the joy that I inherited of my unique viewpoints, cultural inheritance and skill set which set me up to problem solve, have access to a multiplicity of creative gifts, a siblinghood, and a resiliency. Our culture is a multifaceted, deep, celebratory, brilliant gift.⁴

I really appreciate the mention of joy and creating our own work. It is not all bad. But when it gets tough Kelli Crump, a career theater educator who also acts professionally in the Detroit area opines:

Such a deep exhale. There's no great way to phrase it based on everyone's feedback. I'm exhausted, I feel invisible, I feel like all the zooms and workshops and all the aftermath of George Floyd have created this demonic Groundhog Day from hell.⁵

We are picked over for jobs, we are overqualified and still not good enough. It's as if we can't have individual stories. Where do Black women fit in on the national Arts landscape? So, I guess again, I'm exhausted and yet trying to persevere and hang on to hope to stay in this craft. It is my calling and I know I'm not alone in these thoughts and feelings.⁶

These frustrations are bearing on Black women and our health. I know of many high-profile Black women who are struggling physically, mentally, and spiritually with the choices they are making and the sacrifices they are incurring just to stay in the business they love.

One incredible Black woman I have had the absolute joy of working in community with is at present living with cancer and boldly posting her chemotherapy sessions online as she

² Candis C. Jones, Personal communication with the author.

³ Jones.

⁴ Kaja Dunn, Personal communication with the author.

⁵ Kelli Crump, Personal communication with the author.

⁶ Crump.

continues to be a university professor and serve multiple Broadway productions as a dialect coach. Her name is Dawn-Elin Fraser and she shared this with me:

In this moment, when the language is beseeching Black voices, but the behavior shows only interest in Black bodies, protecting your peace and emotional well-being is more important than any part or any gig, despite how prestigious it may be.⁷

Another is the truly gifted Cynthia Erivo, original cast member of *The Color Purple* on Broadway and now starring in the major motion picture version of the Broadway hit *Wicked* offered this imagery and I can't get it out of my head:

...it is like being a swan on still water, the feet are working tirelessly, and the body looks like it is calm. It is hard.⁸

Amen to that. These are brave thoughts, but how many of us are willing to pass on a good opportunity to save ourselves? How can we know when to walk away? Do we have to be activists just to stay in the game with a modicum of respect?

Tavia Jefferson is the founder of Cultural Coordinators worldwide. She trains people on how to navigate cultural differences and uplift consent-based storytelling. She offered the following:

Once again, Black women are taking on the task of reforming an entire industry just to ensure their peace of being seen in the space. We rarely set out to be activists but are often the first and only to step forward to initiate change.⁹

Change is inevitable and Rome was not built in a day. There is a sisterhood of Black women in The Arts who do not need validation. We need resources and opportunities to gather and laugh, cry, spread joy, and share ideas on how to face the world while remaining steadfast in our much-earned careers. The future may seem daunting at times, but I know I feel like I stand on the shoulders of my artistic ancestor sisters, and I am not about to let the whole industry continue to step over and around Black women without a fight.

Lauren Turner Hines, Producing Artistic Director of *No Dream Deferred* in New Orleans hits the nail on the head. This could be our future if we could only be seen, heard, and respected for who we really are. She says:

⁷ Dawn-Elin Fraser, Personal communication with the author.

⁸ Cynthia Erivo, Personal communication with the author.

⁹ Tavia Jefferson, Personal communication with the author.

Within Black Women in the arts is everything you need for culture to survive and thrive. We are the griots, producers, alchemists and curators of some of the most paradigm shifting art that you will experience. Now, close your eyes and imagine a world where Black Women do all that while being well-resourced, heard and valued. The possibility is mind-blowing, isn't it?¹⁰

It really, truly is.

Ann C. James is a Sensitivity Theatre Specialist. She made her debut as the first Black Intimacy Coordinator on Broadway for *Pass Over*. Broadway credits include: *Lempicka*, *Hamilton*, *Parade* (Tony Award 2023 For Best Revival) *Sweeney Todd*, *Heart of Rock and Roll*, *The Outsiders*, *Jelly's Last Jam*. Off-Broadway: *Sunset Baby*, *Jonah*, *White Girl in Danger*, *How to Defend Yourself*, *The Comeuppance*, *Evanston Salt Costs Climbing*, *My Broken Language*, *The Half-God of Rainfall*, *Here There are Blueberries*, *Life and Trust*, *The Lonely Few*. Tour: *Hamilton UK*. James' Company, Intimacy Coordinators of Color, was recently awarded a Special Citation from the OBIE Awards and The American Theatre Wing.

¹⁰ Lauren Turner Hines, Personal communication with the author.