

## Message From the President

December 3, 2015

These last few weeks have weighed on my mind, making me alternately distressed and hopeful in equal measure. It has been a time of horrific violence; yet the protestors on the streets, on campuses and everywhere in between have also made it possible to think of this as a transformational moment in our history.

As I write this, my own campus is working through what inclusion and diversity mean in productive, but quite difficult ways. In solidarity with students at Mizzou, Yale, and many other campuses, a group of Brown graduate students of color protested, students from the Africana Studies department conducted a teach-in, and made a list of demands of the university. The administration responded quickly with a Diversity Action Plan they had already been working on, which is currently being revised and re-imagined by students, faculty and staff. To be fair, there is as much distrust as enthusiasm and good will, but I choose to be hopeful. The push to radical inclusion will be a long road and one that will not progress evenly forward. At the end of the day, however, I do believe in institutions and more specifically, in productive, painful and often slow and frustrating institutional change. And that theatre and performance might help us find our way out the other side.

Here is why: the same week as the protests, our department staged *The Road Weeps*, *The Well Runs Dry* by playwright (and fellow faculty member) Marcus Gardley, directed by Kym Moore. The play follows changes in a community of Black mixed

blood and full blood Seminoles before and after the Civil War; a mythic story shot through with queer love, deep hatreds and long histories. The play comes to an end only when the characters allow themselves to weep. It takes a while after the well runs dry for the healing to begin, and, in that space of two and a half hours, a group of actors from various cultural backgrounds narrate the story. Although no one in the cast was Seminole, the majority of the actors were African American, Latinx, and Asian American. International actors and Anglo actors joined them onstage, telling this story while getting in touch with their own identities and the privileges that come with them. This type of casting is what I call coalitional casting because being onstage in these roles is not only an act of becoming a culturally different person, but an act of committing to the cause of telling a marginalized story; it is committing to doing the work it takes to get over one's trepidation over telling someone else's story. And it requires realizing that no single story is universal unless everyone's story is. It is ironic that this was also the week of Lloyd Suh's cancellation of Clarion University's *Jesus in India* because it did not feature South Asian actors. It is easy to take sides on either side of this debate. I will not do that here, as many others have done this with more subtlety and full knowledge of the situation than I have. Certainly, though, the situation underscores that we have a lot of work to do in terms of thinking about how we take on diversifying university theatres in collaboration with professional artists.

A week after this event, and after *Road Weeps* closed, our department held a campus forum on theatre and diversity. Rather quickly planned, and set for the Tuesday

before Thanksgiving, I anticipated a small crowd. But when a set of students I was working with informed me that 75 people had RSVPed for the event, I talked to the staff and I moved the event from a classroom to the theatre. We sat on a proscenium stage—about 100 of us faculty staff and students --and talked for two hours in a largely free form discussion. What became clear was that there was a rich desire by students and faculty alike to create welcoming spaces in the theatre and to diversify the repertoires of our seasons. Yet many students, particularly students who might be great allies (white and straight students who wish to support students of color and queer students) were paralyzed by the fear of “doing it wrong.” These students felt that they did not know how to open their spaces and invite people over without stumbling. If the students are scared of making an invitation, it is no surprise that the more complex issues that come with acting, directing and producing theatre written by playwrights of color was daunting. In the context of this fear, students of color voiced the importance of reaching out anyway and provided strategies for doing so even as they challenged that fraught word: diversity. Faculty encouraged students to take the risk of getting it wrong. It was a challenging conversation, with a lot of raw emotion, but it was also a good dialogue in which future directions showed themselves. I know that there will be more conversations, and more actions. (Thank you faculty, staff and students at Brown—you make the theatre a better place. )

What was striking to me about this conversation was not that it was original. It wasn't. It was a conversation I had had before at ATHE and in other professional

theatre settings—but it was much more honest. Rather than saying that there were no women/queer or authors of color in the pipeline, the students simply admitted that they that they did not know these plays and wanted to know them; instead of defending themselves as “good” allies and producers, Anglo and cisgendered students admitted their fears --in portraying characters different from themselves, in learning how to undo their privileges as cisgendered actors, in learning how to direct across difference (which includes people of color directing plays by other minoritarian cultures, as students and faculty honestly pointed out.) The openness of the conversation underscores a belief that held firm throughout our talk—that the university theatre CAN radically transform and be a model for the professional theater rather than the opposite. Unlike many in the professional theater and particularly older generations of artists, student theater makers, although sometimes awkward or less than ideally informed, do not seem to feel threatened by the increasing diversification of the US or its theatres. They welcome the change and this gives me hope. In this spirit, I ask that we quit asking students to serve the professional theater and ask instead that *they transform it*. ATHE can be a leader in this regard by supporting our work as faculty.

For many years ATHE has attempted to think about how to make the organization, and by extension, the field, a welcoming place for people of all backgrounds and identities. For most of that time, this has been a friendly conversation, and one that has seen real gains in the possibilities of the Association. But I am not sure we have gone as far as we want to yet. We may get enthused at the conference, but back

home, we run up against the conditions we face in our own institutions, where various pressures might mitigate against the diversity of our seasons, of our faculty and of our student populations. These pressures are both internal and external to the university: shrinking budgets, privatization of public institutions, and the need for departments to prove themselves viable through very limited metrics of success lead departments to make conservative choices to draw audiences and donors. Compounding this problem, fears about the economic value of undergraduate degrees in our fields often means that first generation students and students of color can't take the risk of delving into the arts. If students have not had access to theatre before college and do not feel it to be a welcoming space, they seem increasingly unlikely to walk through our doors. If students have to work three jobs, they can't be in rehearsal. Economic equity for college students goes hand in hand with diversification at the level of curriculum and season selection. This especially affects graduate education in the theater, particularly the MFA degree that is often not fully funded, thus barring access to professional training to low income students of all ethnic backgrounds and first generation students who cannot afford to take on debt. This means not only are these potential MFA students denied access to professional networks, but they also do not become future faculty, and the cycle of exclusion remains firmly in place. This problem is one that strikes close to home. At Brown, the faculty are currently working with a sympathetic administration and the transformation to create a debt free MFA, but it won't happen overnight. I am hopeful, again, that this drop in the bucket, along with many others, can make a splash. We also have work to do at the Ph.D. level in terms of student recruitment

and retention as well as faculty recruitment and hiring as our scholarly field has its own inherent biases as well. As ATHE, I hope we can support these types of transformational change at the level of advocacy within the association and as a bridge between educational theatre and the professional world.

We are entering a conversation at an interesting time. Over the past few years, there has been increasing attention to diversity, or perhaps the lack thereof, of U.S. professional theater. We have seen the rise of the Kilroys, a group of L.A. playwrights committed to gender parity for women and trans\* playwrights, the founding of the Latino Theatre Commons, the Asian American Performers Action Association and diversity initiatives in many other organizations such as TCG that have asked the US professional theater to do it differently. I think we can support these organizations and at the same time, make their work easier by transforming academic theatre.

Presently, moving toward this goal within ATHE takes many forms. On one hand, we hope to provide resources. We are currently working toward creating a database of plays by women, queer folks and people of color complete with pedagogical materials to accompany them. We must make these plays accessible for teachers who wish to diversify but to do not know where to begin, whose universities won't give them time to explore and who would like the support of experts in doing the work of curricular change. We also hope that these tools will encourage the wholesale transformation of university seasons by providing plays and materials

that will allow multicultural and multiethnic casts and production teams to produce plays that take on racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and transphobia as they culturally democratize the seasons of which they are a part.

We are also deeply committed to supporting the work of senior level administrators who may need additional resources for creating welcoming and inclusive spaces on their own campuses and face opposition, mistrust or confounding glances when they do so. We are working with the Leadership Institute to make this a reality.

In our everyday practices, we continue to work on programming and supporting true diversity—in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality and income status at future conferences. We are hopeful we can make a difference. The hard work of my colleagues Becky Prophet, Daniel Banks, Eunice Ferriera, Soyica Diggs Colbert, Kelly Howe, Christine Evans, Elaine Romero, Irma Mayorga, Noe Montez, Lisa Hagen Hall, Aaron Thomas, Harvey Young and many others make this possible.

One cannot of course, ride a wave of enthusiasm such that we can forget what is happening outside of our theatres and the gates of the university, where the systematic destruction of Black lives, by civilian and law enforcement alike makes it necessary to remind a populace that Black Lives Matter. We can however, try to make the very idea of violence anathema to our students, colleagues and audiences.