

Mainstream Remix

Frank talk about casting, training
and presenting actors and works of color

INITIATED BY
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INTRODUCTION BY CARIDAD SVICH

HOW DO WE WRITE OUR COUNTRY? In a thousand years' time, what stories will convey to others who we were? For us practitioners, the burden of responsibility in the freely imaginative process of making art is to the work itself—to its honesty and range of expression. As citizens who make art, however, the choices we make in our work determine how we speak truth to power. Moreover, if we readily acknowledge as a culture that power is not a birthright but rather something granted (by common accord, to an individual or organization), then we are all accountable for how that power is managed and held in society.

Decisions do not just “happen.” Who is on stage? Which story is told? Where is the performance situated? Who is in the audience? These determine the politics of our art. By speaking about who is on stage, we are also necessarily speaking about how, where and why we respond as we do to the actor as the messenger (in voice and body) of culture.

In June '07, the national theatre alliance NoPassport and the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts (formerly the Non-Traditional Casting Project), in collaboration with Frank Hentschker and the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center

at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, presented a two-part panel entitled “Brownout,” about actor training, casting and the making of works reflective of diversity. The panel (initiated by Ephraim Lopez of the Alliance and myself, as founder of NoPassport) stemmed from a thread of impassioned virtual discussions on the NoPassport online mailing list. The subject was what appeared to be a white backlash—a seeming “brownout” of theatre practitioners of color (actors, writers, designers, directors, administrators, producers and critics) who've been cut off or isolated (in ways big and small, subtle and profound) from many U.S. theatres, precisely at this current moment when the majority of the population in the U.S. is becoming hybrid (brown, beige and points in between). Practitioners and educators spoke up with honesty, fearlessness and passion in the virtual discussion on the subjects of representation, ethnicity and the performance of “race” on American stages; the economic questions that determine art-making; diversity training; and the casually entrenched complacency of U.S. liberalism in the arts.

This panel stems from a significant and perhaps controversial claim that a white majority aesthetic continues

PANEL BIOGRAPHIES

Zakiyyah Alexander is a playwright and an actor who lives and works in New York City.

Daniel Banks is a director and choreographer who has worked extensively in the U.S. and abroad, and is currently full-time faculty in the Department of Undergraduate Drama, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University.

Debra Cardona is the dramaturg for Classical Theatre of Harlem and is currently on tour as an actor with the Trevor Nunn staging of *My Fair Lady*.

Stephanie Gilman is a director and teacher living in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Antonio Ocampo-Guzman is an actor, director and teacher originally from Colombia. He is based in Boston where he teaches at Northeastern University.

Eduardo Placer is a recent graduate from University of California–San Diego's MFA acting program. He resides in New York City.

Tlaloc Rivas is co-artistic director of the newly formed company Corps of Engineers. He has been a professional director, dramaturg, instructor and performer for more than 15 years and serves as an associate for a number of New York City–based companies.

Elsie Stark has more than 20 years of experience in production, as an agent and as a casting director with Stark Naked Productions.

to govern the programming at many of the country's major producing theatres. Although significant strides toward equal opportunity and access have been made, such strides do not fully reflect or encompass the great range of artistry, practice and concrete presence of the talent pool available to the U.S. theatre field.

Actors and practitioners of color often find themselves at work on the second and third stages at theatre companies where their "potential" can be developed over time. While there is nothing wrong with training and nurturing artists and keeping the development wheels turning, it is troubling when so many actors of diverse ethnicities find themselves relegated almost exclusively to the arena of never-ending development: their potential exercised but rarely granted full realization. In fact, although many of our finest actors are ready and able to tackle substantial leading roles on stage, outside of ethnic-specific parts, many still find themselves in tertiary and choral roles when it comes to a mainstream play.

The recent Broadway phenomenon of revisiting major U.S. theatre works from the 1950s—*Come Back, Little Sheba*; *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*—with accomplished TV and film stars of color is curiously indicative of how even stars of the caliber of S. Epatha Merkerson, Phylicia Rashad and Terrence Howard must find a paucity of challenging roles available to them, or at the very least demonstrates a creative hunger to interpret classic U.S. dramas. It is interesting that Raúl Esparza, currently in the Broadway revival of Pinter's *The Homecoming*, has circumvented the exoticised branding of leading U.S. Latino male actors, perhaps by sidestepping the playing of overtly identifiable Latino roles. The question, of course, is when our artists of diverse ethnicity are going to stop being asked to play constructed performances of "race" on stage and instead speak fully to the human condition.

Certainly one can argue that exciting music-theatre pieces such as Stew and Heidi Rodewald's *Passing Strange* and Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes's *In the Heights*—along with new writing by Mando Alvarado, Thomas Bradshaw, Eisa Davis, Marcus Gardley, Young Jean Lee, Kenneth Lin and Tarell Alvin McCraney—are building on pioneering work by artists who made their mark (and are still doing so) based, in part, on the so-called multicultural boom of U.S. theatre initiatives in the 1990s. Nev-

ertheless, open up a casting-call page and you can see a clear division between roles available for Anglo actors and "non-white" actors. Who has determined that "white" is the standard by which one is "not"?

In an effort toward inclusiveness, from which I think the well-intentioned term "non-white" springs, the paradigm of white dominance is nevertheless upheld. Actors called in for a role in a white play will always be seen as the non-white feature in an otherwise white world.

But let's not play Them Versus Us. We ask our theatres to reflect the communities surrounding them—but dare we not, rather, ask our theatres to reflect the world?

—*Sveich*

Part 1: Access and Diversity

DEBRA CARDONA: Do you think that what is most commonly portrayed on the stage and screen today is a balanced reflection of the cultural diversity in U.S. communities?

ZAKIYAH ALEXANDER: We're basically seeing a neutral picture right now, and that

picture has been a white one. What that means is that any love story or any story about people being people and doing ordinary things is somehow a white story. Everyone else must find their way into believing that that story can also be theirs. If we see people of color represented in the culture, we're often shown their struggles with their environment, or their inner turmoil with their families and their troubled lives—how difficult it is to be us.

Can that image of neutrality shift? I'm not sure it can just yet—I'm not sure that's a quick process. It can shift when the power and, possibly, the paradigms shift. I am often the only person of color in the theatre where I'm working on a given day. Until that really begins to shift, nothing else will.

What about the stories that do get onto our stages?

ALEXANDER: Usually there's one slot for *all* artists of color in any given theatre season. I think that slot is in some ways the "onus" slot, the slot of identity and truth and honor. That might be a necessary slot. But that limits the opportunities for other stories

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Zakiyyah Alexander



Daniel Banks



Debra Cardona



Stephanie Gilman

that involve people of color, not discussing their race at all but simply telling regular life stories.

DANIEL BANKS: A lot of these questions point to symptoms. It seems to me that we can run around trying to put out fires, but until we actually find out where the source of the problem is we're never going to have enough "diversity potion" to put out all those fires. One hundred years ago W.E.B. Du Bois was writing about double-consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and he was pointing out that there was a segment of the U.S. population at that time who had the privilege of looking at the country and culture through only one set of lenses—but that there *were* other lenses. Because he was writing about the color line, he was talking about the difference between people of African heritage and people of European heritage, and he was saying that people of African heritage had to look through multiple lenses—a double-consciousness. They had to be able to see themselves through their own eyes as well the eyes of the dominant culture in the country.

Now, as the country has diversified and there are many more subjective positions from which to view the world, one needs to have double-consciousness. Even if you belong to what is termed a "special interest" group—well, special according to whom? There's a way in which our language still confers entitled status to one group of people—not that it's always based specifically on skin color, but it's the dialectic through which we operate. There's one entitled group of people and then there are disenfranchised groups that have to fight against the entitlement. We have to work hard to make our language inclusive—it's wonderful to see that word replacing the term "diversity." We need to shift our language so that we're not constantly speaking from the optic of the dominant culture.

Language manifests our physical real-

ity in the world. As long we continue to use terms like "minority," as long as we continue to use language that pits one group against a norm, we're always going to have to go around with our bottle of Diversity Spritz in hand. We need to take a step back and recognize how much of this country still uses language in a manner that negates the potentiality and existence of other human beings. We're way too diverse a country for there to be any necessity for a monolithic dominant culture, both in our thinking and in our language.

TLALOC RIVAS: Resident theatres in this country were founded based on the communities that they served, which inevitably become monolithic: focusing on white, mainstream and distinctly American concerns. It's problematic, because we're in an era when everything is categorized into its proper place. Ethnicities and sexualities are compartmentalized. One day, you pick up *AM New York* on the subway, and you're reading about "Mexicans in New York"—so suddenly it's like, "Oh, that's what Mexicans are all about in New York." But I'm like, "Wait a minute. I'm an immigrant from Mexico—that article is not who *I* am." Mexican-Americans also have a diversity of their own.

That example is a problem not only in daily life but in how we try to communicate the diversity of our experiences with prospective theatre producers. Sometimes it even affects how we work as artists, too. We think, for example, "What kind of work do I want to do? What's my next story?" Ideally, you want the work to come from your passion, your heart—or perhaps there's a topic that's really kicking you in the gut. But then another idea comes in: "I want to write an epic, 30-character play that takes place during the post-Civil War Reconstruction, but I have to reduce it to three characters...and how do I do *that*?" That's what theatre artists are up against all the time, and we haven't

factored in the economic questions as well: "Who's going to see the work? Who's going to pay to see it?"

If issues of equity and diversity are addressed directly by a theatre or an audience, do you think that it could effect some change?

ALEXANDER: The conversation can happen in a very slow way. It doesn't have to be a radical movement, necessarily. Sometimes just writing a love story with two people of color is a radical action. It's radical, because we just don't see it and we haven't been given the opportunity to see it. Not even leading ladies on screen can be of color and tell a romantic comedy. A romantic comedy isn't even *about* anything, so we're not even up to that level of storytelling.

What about smaller theatres of color that are serving their audiences—what can they do?

RIVAS: They can (and should) do whatever they want—the sky's the limit. Being an artist of color—or whatever you want to call me tonight—if I am charged to direct for a specific community, then the attempt is to not only honor and celebrate that group but also to share and create a vast myriad of experiences that will touch anyone. When Shakespeare was writing plays for the Globe, he drew from sources from all over the world. Shakespeare, in a way, is my contemporary, my inspiration—sharing in the belief that one must create work for one's audiences. Wherever I've been—California, Seattle, Philadelphia—wherever I've lived...my audience is you. I believe I can direct anything: classical work, new work, hybrids, whatever. And yet, that ideal doesn't seem to be a two-way road when it comes to sitting down in a room with a person who will determine whether or not you get to helm a particular play that you feel passionate about.



Antonio Ocampo-Guzman



Eduardo Placer



Tlaloc Rivas



Elsie Stark

What can be done to put out all the diversity fires and get to the root of the problem?

ALEXANDER: One thing that can be done is for all writers to diversify their landscapes. Something as simple as a play set in New York: What does your New York look like? And be specific about it.

BANKS: I want to acknowledge that things have changed. Progress has been made, because of work by Sharon Jensen at the Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts, and open-minded agents and dramaturgs like Morgan Jenness who have supported amazing, phenomenal writers over the years. The

landscape *is* different. So, first, let's take stock in what progress has been made and how it's been made. That may inform how we can leverage more progress.

I'm going to guess that there are probably more university theatres across the country than LORT theatres. On the whole, universities tend to be a little bit more advanced in their thinking than our industries of film, television and theatre. At a university level, you have to butt elbows with social scientists and critical thinkers; there's diversity training at the university level; and there are a few theatres across the country that have diversity trainers come

in once or twice a year as corporations do. Very few theatres have diversity money for actually creating events specifically around changing the understanding of society, in the way that Credit Suisse does and Citibank does. Theatre's just lagging behind in terms of its business practices—and in raising this issue in a regulated way.

ALEXANDER: Change is inevitable. It's just happening at a slow pace. I've begun to think it's a change in who's going to be in power—who wants the power positions, and who wants to run a theatre and has a vision that is very inclusive class-wise and race-wise. I don't want to run a theatre, just yet. But as

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a playwright and a performer, I find it very difficult to be on the side that's waiting for someone to slot me, or to cast me.

RIVAS: I also want to acknowledge that this panel couldn't have happened 10 years ago. All of us have been part of an extraordinary surge of artists who came up in the 1990s and made their mark not only in the resident theatres, but at universities and teaching positions—even running our own theatres. What I'm concerned about is for that progress to continue. This country is undergoing so many changes right now that initiatives such as the Latino Theatre Initiative that used to be at the Mark Taper Forum feel even more necessary, because the belief that equal opportunities for artists of color have been reached in the American regional theatre simply isn't true.

We continually need to have opportunities for younger artists who are coming up—the generations to come—to feel they have a place at the table where their voices are heard. To make sure that the environments that exist in the universities—that wonderful utopia of audiences, communities, cross-cultural conversation—can expand to the professional theatre. We have to educate the theatre. Still. Constantly.

BANKS: And we have to look to those who have done so much and learn from them: the Negro Ensemble Company, El Teatro Campesino, Pregones, WOW Café, Laurie Carlos and Jessica Hagedorn. These organizations and artists (and so many more) have fought these fights, and younger artists need to know about them, because they will feel less isolated and less like they're fighting these fights for the first time. When we teach, for instance, we can insist that those histories are on the syllabus.

Part 2: Training and Casting

Do you think that theatre-training programs prepare their actors of color for more culturally specific work, outside of general classical training?

EDUARDO PLACER: Every training program is different. The goal for any actor in any training program is to become a better actor, despite race or ethnicity. For me, as an actor of color, training at the graduate school level was the most important thing I've done in my life. I have empowered myself to determine my own self-worth. I may look at a season on Playbill.com and ask, "Where the hell do I fit into that season?" But in a way, the question

doesn't matter, because I had an opportunity in grad school to play *Uncle Vanya*, *Richard III*, *Henry V*, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. No one can take that away from me—that's mine.

ANTONIO OCAMPO-GUZMAN: You are very lucky, because obviously you went to a very good training program. But as a trainer of actors, I've noticed that most training programs are very Eurocentric in their vision. They have no understanding of what it is like to be an artist of color, or an artist who is from a different country, or speaks with a different accent.

ELSIE STARK: Training programs for actors shouldn't be specific in regards to color. White, black, brown—it doesn't matter. The

"As long as we continue to use language that pits one group against a norm, we're always going to have to go around with our bottle of Diversity Spritz in hand."

minute you start to segregate yourself that way, you won't be considered a member of the mainstream.

There may be students whose professors may not know what to do with them. Maybe the department has to look at the professors they're hiring. I think the professors have to be more diversified. I'd like to see colleges holding up a standard where a majority of the professors who teach are working actors and professionals—not people in academia who haven't done anything within the mainstream in years.

OCAMPO-GUZMAN: What do you mean by "the mainstream"?

STARK: In the general market. In colleges, it's a utopia. It's a fantasy. It's a little world that is perfect, in a way. But the minute these young artists leave utopia, they have to confront the reality of getting a job. That means being *in* the mainstream, the thing that we fight. Actors of color are not included; they're not considered for roles that should have no color line. I would rather fight to be part of the general population. There's a double-edged sword to segregating. And at the same time, there's a positive side to hav-

ing theatre programs or theatres like those we have in New York—La Tea, Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, Pregones. It is a fertile proving ground for kids within those communities to be exposed to theatre.

STEPHANIE GILMAN: We have focused a lot on academia in this discussion, and I'd like to bring up a question of access: Who gets to go to these schools, specifically acting programs, and how much debt are they in?

I taught a student at a place called Working Classroom in Albuquerque, N.M. Her name is Lisandra, and she is a fabulous actor. She's Chicana. She lived on the street, lived in foster homes, and has had a tough life. She worked her way through community college and got to go to Working Classroom, which describes itself as a "street conservatory." But Lisandra's not going to go to Yale. Lisandra's not going to go to Juilliard. Lisandra can't afford to live in New York. Lisandra's never going to be seen for any of these things that I cast for. Not even a reading! How is someone like Lisandra going to be an actor in this business as it exists?

EDUARDO PLACER: Let me tell you of a magical place called UCSD. Kyle Donnelly runs the program. She's the head of acting. All the professors are working people in the profession. Fifty percent of the actors in the program are of color. We showcase with NYU and with Yale. I feel blessed to have been there. I think opportunities exist.

GILMAN: So Lisandra could audition there?

PLACER: She could totally audition there, and she could probably get in.

GILMAN: She could go for free?

PLACER: She could go for free. She could probably qualify for a fellowship that they have for students of color.

OCAMPO-GUZMAN: I know Lisandra. I also teach at Working Classroom. The thing is that we try to make people fit this "mainstream." A lot of these training programs ask people to get rid of their accents so that they can be mainstream. I get really pissed off and very confused: Am I training actors to be the most amazing artists they can be? Or am I training actors to get jobs in the mainstream? I know many Latino actors who have gone to amazing programs where they have shifted the way that they speak—and then they are not castable. You know, they look like the maid, but they don't sound like the maid.

I've been able to stay in this country for 15 years by being part of this circus called academia. I have seen a lot of people,

usually white, usually males, who have not worked in mainstream in a thousand years, pontificating about how you become an actor in New York. Lots of times they tell people that they're not going to get cast unless they get rid of their accent.

PLACER: But your difference is what makes you special and unique.

OCAMPO-GUZMAN: But can I get cast in the mainstream? Will you cast me in the mainstream because I sound like Ricky Ricardo?

STARK: I think you misinterpret what I meant by "mainstream." By mainstream, in general, I mean "in the industry." I'm not saying take away what makes you special, or diverse, or the flavor that you bring. Antonio Banderas is not having a problem getting cast with his accent. He's what he is.

But what is the whole point of training? What are you going to do with it? The reality is: It is tough. I tell young actors all the time that 80 percent of what you do has to be based in your talent and your training—but you better have another solid 20 percent that has a business head.

BANKS: We're using a lot of blanket terms

like "the industry" and "academia." I would feel more comfortable if we could not suggest that there's only one industry, [meaning] the commercial industry. There are also people who have made livings and lives out of doing noncommercial, community-based and applied theatre work—trained theatre professionals with real chops and real skills. There's more than one industry.

PLACER: I think part of the problem is the malaise of complacency of American liberalism in theatres. You know, because these are all progressive-minded people who think that they've done enough, or enough has been done. What we keep on crashing against is that that's not the case. There's so much that needs to be done. They give us one show and they think, "Well, now they're happy."

STARK: There is validation in the economic part of it—when a small company like Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre grows from this little nothing to what it is now. That's how the regional theatres started—as small theatres that get bigger and bigger and bigger. We haven't developed our audience within our communities as well as we should. But I think we're on a precipice right now where we can

take it a lot further. Diversity *is* in—it's on the cutting edge. It's hip to be Latino. It's hip to be black. Look at the texture of things that are being used in the industry. It's there. It's permeating. ☑

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Clockwise from top left: *The Cherry Orchard* (2007), Gwendolyn Mulamba, James J. Peck (2005), Laurel Schultz (2006) FAIR intern. Photos: David Cooper and Jenny Graham.



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