

Building an Inclusive Curriculum for Theatre and Drama Students

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Faculty Communities for Inclusive Teaching, 2016

Project Overview

- Faculty members gathered to discuss new plays by playwrights of color. We discussed ways to incorporate work by writers of color in our curriculum and issues of creating a diverse and inclusive department.
- We discussed the plays, but we also discussed a series of CRLT workshops in which we were all participants. We discussed the tools that our area could offer colleagues in our department in embracing texts and practices that nurture diversity and inclusiveness.

Participants

- E.J. Westlake (Theatre & Drama, English)
- José Casas (Theatre & Drama)
- Anita Gonzalez (Theatre & Drama)
- Ashley Lucas (Theatre & Drama, Residential College)
- Mbala Nkanga (Theatre & Drama)
- Leigh Woods (Theatre & Drama)

Faculty have affiliations with the Center for World Performance Studies, LACS, Romance Languages, DAAS, American Culture,

Resources

David Henry Hwang – *Chinglish* and *Yellowface*
Lynn Nottage – *Intimate Apparel* and *Fabulation*
Nilo Cruz – *Sotto Voce*
Branden Jacobs-Jenkins – *An Octoroon*
Coval and Goodwin – *This is Modern Art*
Yussef El Guindi – *Jihad Jones and Kalashnikov Babes*
Young Jean Lee – *Straight White Men*

Next Steps

- Examine our syllabi to see how we can include more plays by playwrights of color.
- Find more plays to read and discuss.
- Present our ideas to the other areas in our department in order to consider how actors, directors, and designers might benefit from knowing about such contemporary work.
- Encourage our colleagues to stage more plays by people of color.

Key Insights / New Questions

- “As we began our reading, I saw a social media post by a former student who is trans. He remarked that he thought it was clear that he was trans, and yet his classmates seemed to be oblivious. A classmate wrote a play using trans characters in a way he found offensive. He talked about feeling angry, but also not feeling safe to say something about it. Several of the plays we read involved playwrights struggling with a racist discipline, and I reflected on the ways in which these plays could be instructive to faculty and possibly helpful to students feeling isolated and stereotyped. The plays could give us openings to engage in discussions about inclusiveness in the classroom.”
- “How diverse cultural plays utilize similar strategies such as demonstrating how the Hollywood film industry stereotypes ethnic communities in casting (*Yellow Face* and *Jihad Jones and Kalashnikov Babes*)”
- “How the multicultural plays should be taught to all students so that they have fluency in all of contemporary theatre.”
- “The courses I teach are canonical, but I’ll look forward to the chance to draw Lynn Nottage’s *Intimate Apparel* into a future syllabus. I’d never read anything by her before, though had heard of *Ruined*, and was glad to be made aware of a play that, in my opinion, rivals the plays of August Wilson in lyricism, evocative quality, and nuanced treatment of interracial issues. Henry David Hwang’s *Chinglish* would also lend itself well to a discussion of problems of translation, and more generally, the challenges of communicating across and between cultures.”
- “The main thing I took from our discussion of the plays, and more importantly of the issues that attach to them, is that we can make our students aware of the restrictions imposed by Eurocentrism. I’ve talked about this more in this semester of Theatre History I than I ever have before, and have assigned students to report in the spirit of “Widening the Circle,” as it says in my T321 syllabus, to include plays derived from, or rough-equivalent to, plays already in the syllabus. The students have responded warmly to these reports, and the discussions they foster.”
- “The issues we discussed run deep and will take a mixture of persistence and advocacy to overcome the ingrained nature of the canonical thinking that is bred by our affiliations (such as they are) with the commercial theatre. On the other hand, the commercial theatre has spawned the plays we read and discussed, and is itself permeable in ways we can put our students in a position to influence.”

Generally:

Traditional theatre repertoire include few plays by people of color and have few interesting roles for actors of color. Often, this results in the exclusion of artists of color from many theatre programs – issues of providing roles, using narrow sets of standards for judging applicants, and the lack of diversity causing students of color to reject a program as an option.

Students of color who do choose a program that is predominantly white, have few options in terms of roles, feel marginalized in courses where the syllabus is made up of mostly plays by white men, and feel unsafe sharing their perspectives in classes of mostly white students.

Artifacts



Chris Myers, Danny Wolohan, and Amber Gray in *An Octoroon* by Brandon Jacobs-Jenkins. Soho Rep

Viola Davis as Esther and Lauren Vélez as Mamie in the original off-Broadway production of Lynn Nottage’s *Intimate Apparel*, directed by Daniel Sullivan.



Stephen Pucci, Jennifer Lim, Gary Wilmes, Angela Lin and Larry Lei Zhang in the play *Chinglish* by David Henry Hwang on Broadway.



Franca Sofia Barchiesi and Andhy Mendez in *Sotto Voce* by Nilo Cruz at Theatre for the New City.