

## In theater, diversity crucial but ever-elusive

Topic at the forefront of stage discussions, as exemplified by recent convention

By James Hebert AUG. 1, 2014



Illustration by CRISTINA BYVIK

The push for greater diversity in theater — of artists, of leadership and of works produced — has been a hot topic in stage circles for years.

But the issue seemed to reach a bit of a boil this summer — spurred in part by the Theatre Communications Group National Conference, which was held in San Diego for the first time. The theme for that June event — the biggest annual gathering for nonprofit American theater — was “Crossing Borders,” and many of its workshops and keynotes focused on how to address — or in some cases, simply to define — the need for greater diversity and inclusion.

Around the same time as the conference, an L.A.-based group of female playwrights calling themselves the Kilroys released a list of 46 new works by women, and challenged artistic directors to consider producing them.

The move was in part a response to a survey last year showing that in the 2013-14 season, only 16 percent of the plays produced by the nine League of Resident Theatres companies in Southern California were by women.

At the TCG conference, there seemed a general sense of heightened urgency about diversity — an air of, “Enough talk — let’s get this done.”

One symbol, perhaps, of a greater assertiveness among those seeking a more substantial presence in American theater was an idea that developed from meetings of the Asian and Pacific Islander affinity group, one of numerous such groups that gathered at TCG.

Whistles were passed out to attendees who wanted them — the idea being to make them literal “whistle-blowers” if they heard or saw anything they felt reflected bias.

“The whistles were a way to show solidarity, and to encourage people who are not used to speaking out to really think about it,” said Marie-Reine Velez, a producer and founder of L.A.-based Artists at Play who was involved in the discussions. “To think about what it means to have a voice.

“There was some push-back about actually using the whistles (at the conference). I think that came partly from being tired of having to police people. What we came up with was ‘For emergency use only’ ” — if there were a glaring example of a racist statement, for example.

Velez is not aware of an instance of a whistle actually being blown, but the idea did make a point, in a subtly but suitably theatrical way.

And yet there was online debate over whether meetings of the various affinity groups were themselves exclusionary in some ways.

### **Complicated questions**

That points to how complex the whole issue can be, and what kinds of delicate balances must be struck that serve both inclusion and the art of theater.

One thing’s for certain: Cultural diversity is transforming society whether theater is ready for it or not, so those who work in the discipline need to put it at the center of their thinking — and their doing — if they don’t want to be left behind.

“As the demographics of the U.S. become more diverse, the issues of equity and justice and equal opportunity will become more important to more people,” says Sam Woodhouse, co-founder and artistic director of San Diego Repertory Theatre.

Diversity, he notes, is “a big, giant, fat word that means a whole lot of things to different people — you can get into such a huge discussion (about it). But one entry point is privilege.

“Opportunity is a key word here. Equal playing field is a key (phrase).”



With a decades-long track record of getting new voices and faces — especially of Latino artists — onto its stages, the Rep has been a pioneer of diversity in San Diego and the region. Not to mention a model of how to build an audience around that mission.

Gilbert Castellanos (left) and Richard Montoya rehearse the first scenes of "Federal Jazz Project" at a San Diego Rep rehearsal. — Howard Lipin

“How have we done it? We do it,” Woodhouse says. “It’s a core value of what we believe in here. The doors are open. But it’s more than the doors are open — one makes a place at the table, and one pays people to be at the table.

“I do know that basically, having a workforce and a workplace and an audience that represents the diversity of the culture is essential to actually manifesting any commitment. (But) you have to do it.”

### ***Spectrum of diversity***

San Diego-area theaters approach diversity in many different ways, and there are multiple smaller companies whose missions are at least partly defined by the artists and audiences they serve, including Asian-American Repertory, the women-centered Moxie, the LGBT-focused Diversionary, the Latino-oriented Teatro Mascara Magica, and the African-American-centered Community Actors Theatre, Ira Aldridge Repertory Players and Common Ground Theatre.

Meanwhile, behind endeavoring to hire and program a wide range of artists and works, the city’s two biggest theaters have several diversity-minded programs. A sample:

**La Jolla Playhouse:** Resident-theater program, which has partnered the theater with Moxie, AART, Teatro Mascara Magica and others; and TCG’s Diversity & Inclusion Institute (of which the Playhouse is one of 20 members).

**Old Globe Theatre:** Community Voices, which provided opportunities for underserved communities to develop and stage their own stories; and the just-announced Globe for All, which will take Shakespeare into a diverse range of communities and venues.

While any effort toward diversity is a good start, it’s also important to look at the bigger picture, says Jacqueline Lawton, a playwright and TCG’s online curator for diversity and inclusion.

“You’re not just moving forward race, you also have to move forward gender and disability, all at the same time,” says Lawton, who is represented on the original Kilroy list of 300 plays by women. “It’s not really fair to say, ‘wait your turn, wait your turn,’ because nothing will ever advance.

“We’re also learning new strategies. So if you want to approach diversity and inclusion in your organization, one of the ways you do that is through your hiring practices. But if your top folks only know, say, white men or white women, how do you broaden that circle?”

### **Gauging progress**

BD Wong, the Tony Award-winning actor who is in La Jolla Playhouse’s production of the Chinese epic “The Orphan of Zhao” (closing Sunday), has been one of the most vocal advocates for Asian-American artists.

“I have a great deal of respect for the strides that have been taken, and continue to be taken,” says Wong, speaking of opportunities for Asian-Americans in theater. “But I know that as someone involved in this firsthand, it often feels like an unending battle that continues to regurgitate itself much more often than it should.

"I'm gauging what I'm saying to you right now, and I'm feeling a sense that maybe it's more negative than it needs to be. But I do kind of want to temper the celebration, because I don't feel a great sense of overwhelming change."

As it happens, the 2012 world premiere of the newly adapted "Zhao" in England sparked controversy over the fact that it had few actors of East Asian heritage. That was reminiscent of the controversy that erupted the same year at the Playhouse over similar issues concerning a production of "The Nightingale," which is set in China.



BD Wong (left), pictured with Marie-France Arcilla in "The Orphan of Zhao" at La Jolla Playhouse, says the effort to achieve greater opportunity for Asian-American artists "often feels like an unending battle." — Kevin Berne

Wong, though, said he was fully supportive of the Playhouse's response to that episode, which included an apology and a community forum. And nearly the entire "Zhao" cast at the Playhouse consisted of actors of Asian descent.

As difficult as it is to reach a consensus on how to approach diversity, it can be equally hard to gauge what kind of progress has been made.

Sylvia M'Lafi Thompson, a distinguished actor and teaching artist who has lived and worked in San Diego for more than 20 years, is encouraged by the fact that this year she landed a role at the Old Globe for the first time, in the play "Bethany" (a coup for a locally based actor). Before that, she also was cast in Lamb's Players Theatre's "Wit."

In both cases, the roles were not written for an actor of a specific race or ethnicity.

“Nobody was intimidated by my dreadlocks,” she says, comparing that to her difficulties landing roles in Washington, D.C., in the '80s. “Nobody was intimidated by my skin color. They just saw my acting.”

“San Diego has jumped leaps and bounds” in that respect, says Thompson, a onetime member of the San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture. Still, she laments what she sees as a shortage of roles for older women.

Claudio Raygoza, executive artistic director of Ion Theatre in Hillcrest, laments that “we don’t have more Latino actors being courted to do shows at the larger theaters,” and that “our own cultural stories are sometimes being handed over to directors who are not of our cultural background.” (Raygoza is the sole Latino artistic director of a regularly producing professional theater in San Diego.)

“I think people are trying to make inroads, I really do,” Raygoza says. “But I think diversity is not (something) you put in a petri dish and watch it grow. It has to be as natural as breathing. It’s not about programming, it’s not about reaching out to a particular audience. We’re all earthlings. The planet itself is diverse. As long as you focus on that, you can’t go wrong.”

<http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/aug/01/diversity-in-theater-san-diego-tcg/?#article-copy>



Sylvia M'Lafi Thompson as Toni and Crystal Ferrin as Jennifer with Carlo Albán (background) in Laura Marks' "Bethany" at The Old Globe.— Jim Cox