REFERENCE DOCUMENT – THE VOICES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR IN CONVERSATION MAY 2018

THIS DOCUMENT WAS CREATED OUT OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN SEVERAL STUDENTS OF COLOR INVOLVED IN THEATER ON CAMPUS, FACILITATED BY FACULTY MEMBER SHARIFFA ALI, IN MAY 2018. SINCE THEN, SOME THINGS IN THIS DOCUMENT HAVE CHANGED OR IMPROVED; OTHER CHALLENGES AND ISSUES HAVE COME UP. THE IDEAS EXPRESSED IN THIS DOCUMENT ARE THE IDEAS OF A PARTICULAR GROUP OF STUDENTS AT A PARTICULAR MOMENT IN TIME; NONETHELESS WE THINK YOU WILL FIND IT EXTREMELY USEFUL AS A REFERENCE DOCUMENT. WE SHARE THIS DOCUMENT WITH PROPOSING STUDENTS SO THAT ALL STUDENTS CAN HEAR THE VOICES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR WHILE THINKING ABOUT CREATING WORK FOR THE THEATER PROGRAM SEASON. THE ONLY REQUIREMENT FOR THE THEATER PROPOSALS IS THAT YOU READ THIS DOCUMENT THOROUGHLY AND THOUGHTFULLY.

“It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love and protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains”  — Assata Shakur

Despite the consensus that the environment of theater on Princeton’s campus is becoming more inclusive and accessible, we feel that many problems remain. Below are some of the most important ideas that arose during a conversation on May 27th 2018 amongst various Princeton students of color who are involved in theater on campus and facilitator Shariffa Ali.

Basic Principles:
Important things to keep in mind when having conversations about race, building a welcoming and equitable room, and entering new environments

- There are always multiple truths at play and everyone’s experience is valid
- Take time to know and build trust with the people amongst you
- We do not exist in a vacuum – acknowledge what people bring from beyond the room
- Vocalizing even the slightest discomforts must be encouraged and must not be held against anyone in anyway
- Make space for everyone to check in with their body and how they feel in the moment
- Try to notice things without making or placing any value judgment

Key Questions:
Guiding questions of the conversation and for further discussions

- What assumptions are we trying to break? What about the institution or theater culture on this campus are we trying to shift and to change?
- How can we begin to bring more of ourselves into the spaces we enter? Furthermore, how can we begin to make room for others, who are here already and who have not yet arrived, to bring more of themselves into the space?
- How do we make people of color feel listened to consistently and on a long-term basis?
General Disappointments with Princeton University as People Of Color:
- The culture of student entitlement and disconnect from things beyond oneself that encourages the prioritization of self and not things like anti-racist work
- We are often tempted to put prestige over actual people and focus on our own success/advancement before just sitting back and listening to others or embracing them
- There is a culture of valuing others only for their contributions and what they can do for us and how competent they are, rather than what one adds to a space as a human being with other people
- The institution has not adequately confronted the legacy of our connection to an institution of slavery and the perpetuation of racist ideology
- There is a fetishization of people who fit into ideas of diversity while still not creating an environment where people from underrepresented groups could thrive and feel comfortable in if they are able find a seat at the table
- We often witness a fellow student, or a faculty member, etc. say something problematic in the classroom or a rehearsal environment but in that instant feel as though we do not have the agency to say or do something about it

Our Greatest Issues and Challenges with theater on Princeton’s campus:
*What do we see that we don’t like and really name it, be bold and say what it is*

- On campus, musical theater in particular is overwhelmingly white and non-inclusive. (Note: This was in specific reference to Princeton’s Triangle club.)
- The past two seasons of the program in theater, while prioritizing artists of color, have been seen as tokenistic and often take on a burden of representation. Many students do not see artistic value in certain projects, writing them off as the “diverse show” there for “good looks.”
- There are restrictive mindsets about what “great theater” looks like on campus and often white-canonical theater still dominates what we deem as high quality work.
- Due to student turnover, every four years the extracurricular and academic system reboots and it often results in a loss of progress and growth. Each class year tends to start initiatives from scratch.
- There is a separation between the shows on campus that are western, traditional, all-white cast and the shows that are more explicitly ethnic-driven and really diverse. There is not really any integration – they're not really being intertwined in a kind of productive way.
- There is a hierarchy where you have shows that are incredibly exclusive because they cater to people who have a lot of experience (Like the Triangle Club). Additionally, there is very little space in a show’s rehearsal process (both theses and student groups) for training or learning to occur, so most shows cannot support the inclusion of less-experienced people.
- When some of us have conversations with white friends, especially those who do theater, we do not feel comfortable critiquing some of the things they say because we are afraid of appearing mean or standoffish.
- Sometimes spaces are not equipped to welcome all of us and all that we bring with us. As people, we carry the way that we were raised; we carry our experiences; we carry the things that we've seen, the places we've been, the things that we own. We carry all of this wherever we go, and the most visible theater spaces on campus often value only financially-stable white Western experiences.
Bold Proposals for Change:
The radical things that we might say and do to shift the things we take issue with

• Set attainable goals of representation numerically. These goals might be:
  − At minimum, gender parity must be reached in casts and production/creative teams.
  − For the next 10 seasons of student-run and department productions, all pre-written works must be by artists of color in the musical theater realm.
  − No more than two or three works by white people should occupy any theater group’s season.
  − Regarding Triangle’s writer model, half of the writers cannot be cis-men and no more than one third of the writing team can be white.
  − There can be no all-white cast in any theater production.

• Ideally there should be more transparency about how and why a season is chosen, so there is a greater understanding about a student group’s and the program’s priorities of equity and anti-racist work. This will help everyone see and hear why shows are being produced and hopefully build support of all work across the theater community.
  − We want to avoid, "Here's our season. Good luck. We're not going to tell you why you chose it." There will still be people who don't buy into it, but having something in place where everyone can see and hear the process would help counter the assumptions that a show was only chosen to be the “token race project.” This will hopefully make decision makers justify their choices to the greater community.

• Anti-Racist work has to feel important to every single person involved with theater on this campus at all times for real change to be there. This work must be urgent for ALL.
  − A pledge should be made upon taking a theater class, or registering as a certificate student, or running for the board of a student group, or participating in any student group’s show, etc. that race equity will be prioritized. Everyone has to be able to articulate why race equity is important to them and be excited about it.
  − Know that it's an honor to be able to cast diversely and/or bring a diverse group of people together to collaborate, not just a token and an optics thing

• We want theater professors and staff as well as student group leaders to be more approachable to new students in order to encourage people of color to participate. We have found direct, one-on-one contact with students to be most effective.

• We suggest a week-long retreat of discussions where ultimately a group of individuals who have a stake in these issues were to get together - faculty, staff and students - to name, and come up with radical sort of mission statement.
  − We would then share that mission statement with the wider Princeton institution, to better articulate some of the rhetoric around the reasons theater makers on campus have shifted casting practices, season selection and other priorities as we recognize ourselves as artists in a white supremacist institution that must do the work to decolonize our practices.
  − We need to write down our ideas around the change and shifting commitments towards anti-racism work to hold ourselves responsible and insist it becomes part of the lifeblood of the institution and ALL the theater we make on campus.

• Consider holding auditions in familiar spaces for underrepresented groups. It may even be best to hold group auditions to promote a supportive instead of intimidating culture.
To properly integrate people with no prior experience into a show, you need the time to work with everyone at their level. We must schedule all rehearsal processes with time built in for learning the vocabulary and skills necessary to do the work, so it becomes normalized to collaborate with people of all experience levels.

Each year, every person in the theater community should make “I am going to” statements to articulate one thing they will do to help anti-racist efforts in theater on campus. This will hold each individual accountable and make tangible change more easily accessible/achievable. It can also serve as a record/archive of the work done.

**Responsibilities of People of Color:**

- It's up to us, in the time that we have, to really make known our thoughts and feelings and also make clear proposals of how we would like the systems to operate differently.
- It's also up to us to make sure that we are passing on all the information we have to the people we have access to so that folks continue to show up.
- If you found a way in, drag other people with you.
- Given that theater is heavily relationship-based, personally reach out to others within our capacity on a consistent basis.