
Changing Scenes: The Rise and Success of Diversity on Broadway

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Produced in Steffen Guenzel's Spring 2017 ENC 1102

Broadway is often regarded as the staple of American theater, known for its flashy, high-budget productions and high-quality performances. However, despite the widely held perception of theater as a place where anyone can find a home and the frequently touted messages of tolerance and inclusion, the center of American theater known as the Great White Way has traditionally been exactly that, falling into the same trend as many other forms of popular media: falling short in terms of representation of minority life experiences as main characters and focusing instead on the straight white man in a large majority of storylines. Conversations about representation of minority and marginalized groups becoming more and more prominent in recent years has prompted an examination of diversity on Broadway, both on and off-stage. Many reasons have been cited in the past as to why this idea of “diversity” is hard to fully embrace and execute in a profitable manner; however, with this analysis, I aim to identify the ways in which diversity has recently manifested on the Broadway stage, and call attention to the ways that they both succeed and fail in creating a more equal artistic space. The existence of diversity on Broadway is not an impossible ideal, but a nuanced subject that requires conscious thought, consideration, action, and engagement in order to achieve.

Pseudo-Diversity

In order to truly participate in the conversation about diversity in theater, it is first important to understand exactly what the term means. Dictionary.com defines diversity as, “1. The state or fact of being diverse; difference; unlikeness: diversity of opinion; 2. Variety; multiformity.” In the context of this paper, “diversity” refers to a variety of kinds of people both on and off the Broadway stage, extending from race, to gender, to sexuality, and beyond. Carla Stillwell, a writer for *HowlRound*, a knowledge commons in the theater community, analyzes the definition of diversity as follows:

The definition suggests that to achieve diversity, you have to accept difference as the rule and not the exception . . . Per the aforementioned definition, diversity at its core means that there are a variety of things that make up a whole that have different shapes, forms, and kinds. So I think it is safe to say that a state of being diverse can only be achieved if there is variety. We have attempted to achieve diversity by keeping most things in American theater culturally homogenous and adding a dash of difference. But the definition of the word diversity lets us know that this type of thinking is topsy-turvy.

The idea of diversity as simply a message to be sent or a problem that can be solved with a handful of unique characters not only fails to hold true to the definition of the word, but lacks the depth and understanding to truly fix the wildly disproportionate numbers of marginalized and minority peoples onstage. By adding what Stillwell calls “a dash of difference” to productions, many recent

Broadway productions have played into a phenomenon I have termed “pseudo-diversity,” in which productions boast warm and welcoming messages of inclusion and tolerance, but fail to go to the level necessary to truly open up the stories and productions to include a broader spectrum of people. Often, their messages and themes are toned down or understated in order to be more palatable or marketable to a wider audience; while well-intentioned, these productions fail to bring a true diverse state of being to Broadway.

Wicked is one such musical that embodies this idea of pseudo-diversity. The show, which opened in 2003, was nominated for ten Tony Awards in the 2004 season and is still running on Broadway today. It tells the story of the Land of Oz prior to Dorothy’s arrival in *The Wizard of Oz*, following the life of Elphaba, a girl born with green skin and magical abilities, and shows how she grew to become the Wicked Witch of the West seen in the 1939 film. The musical, a perky, bubbly, feel-good show with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz, is akin to something that Disney might produce, showing that the wicked witch isn’t truly as wicked as she was thought to be while crafting a glorious friendship between the two leading ladies despite their obvious differences. On the surface, *Wicked* presents itself as a valiant cry for tolerance and acceptance of those different from us, boasting two strong women leading the show, with their friendship at the helm, a supposed victory for gender equality on Broadway. However, a closer look at the source material reveals a very different tone.

Gregory Maguire’s *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* provides the source material for its musical counterpart, but the novel takes on a much different and much darker tone. In his adaptation, Maguire spends a lot more of his time focused on the political aspects of Oz, and uses his book and characters as a platform from which to explore gender and heteronormativity. Elphaba is presented as more of an androgynous being, and it is this trait that helps set her apart from her peers, rather than just her skin color. Additionally, the musical brings a different kind of attention to the story’s love triangle than the novel. The musical opts for the more heteronormative route with Elphaba and Glinda competing against each other for Fiyero’s affections, whereas the book portrays Glinda and Fiyero both, to some degree, pursuing Elphaba. The changes made to these plot details by the musical creative team alter the vital commentary and diverse range of characters presented in the novel, “taking the non-traditional Elphaba of the novel and transforming her non-conformity into a marketable narrative of the power of individuality and dissent from political and social codes, so long as one simultaneously maintains hegemonic gender roles” (Raab 248). This restructuring of the love triangle permits Elphaba and Glinda to fall into the trap of competing against each other for the same man, which ultimately forces a lot of tension on their own relationship, and leads their stories to end up deeply rooted around their feelings towards Fiyero, rather than their own personal journeys and discoveries. Much of the musical becomes centered on Elphaba’s journey into femininity—her friendship with Glinda grows out of Glinda’s insistence on helping to turn Elphaba into a more traditionally physically appealing woman, resulting in both of their personalities and appearances being heavily influenced by stereotypical characterizations of women. The show also places a heavy focus on the value of a woman in direct relation to her physical beauty by having Elphaba grow from an awkward outcast to a sultry, dark, attractive woman, despite her supposed wickedness. With this in mind, the claim that *Wicked* is a massive victory for women on the stage becomes a little less convincing, as its female characters are still

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largely pigeonholed into the same roles and held to the same standards that women have been forced into for years. Returning to Stillwell's discussion on diversity, genuine diversity as a state of being can only exist "as a rule and not an exception." In changing the things that make the novel adaptation of *Wicked* so unique and challenging to cultural norms, the musical takes away key factors that would have opened up its message to new heights in the name of maintaining marketability to the masses.

Other shows have fallen into similar traps in differing from their novels, such as the recent revival of *The Color Purple*. While being a great platform for artists of color to perform and share their story, and presenting great female characters overcoming adversity, the musical greatly underscored the romantic relationship between Shug Avery and Celie, to the point where it is almost indistinguishable (Collins-Hughes and Soloski). This relationship is not completely ignored; however, neither is it realized to its full potential, given how significant it is to Celie's development as a character and as a woman. While marketing *The Color Purple* as a work focusing on LGBT+ issues might draw away from the original intentions of the piece, underselling this particular aspect can leave audiences with a very different perception or understanding of the show. Like *Wicked*, *The Color Purple* chooses to only celebrate certain aspects of the diversity it could embody, leaving the same-sex relationship to be less overt and distinct to the audience. While the intent behind these pieces was strong, the lack of willingness to travel beyond what is considered a marketable level of diversity lessens the messages that are being sent to audiences.

Minority Driven Productions

Despite this trend towards almost-but-not-quite visions of diverse stories, the issue of equal representation on Broadway extends to the lack of diversity within actors' demographics. In 2016, the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag took off in response to the fact that no people of color were nominated for an Oscar that year. Later, when Tony Award season came around, #TonysSoBlack was the popular hashtag, and Broadway seemed to be significantly more equal in terms of racial representation (Ndounou) when, in reality, minority actors have never accounted for more than 25% of all working actors on Broadway stages. Most recently, in the 2014-15 season, minority actors only constituted 22% of all roles (*Ethnic Representation* 9). Broadway is an artistic space that should reflect the world around it, and with the U.S. Census putting minority populations at over 50% of New York City's population (*Ethnic Representation* 7), it is only logical that the on-stage diversity should roughly match the reality of this world.

One of the ways that more diversity can be brought to the stage is in the form of more stories and plays written for minority populations to perform. While some might fear these productions would struggle to profit as a result of their perceived "less marketable" points, like a focus on race or sexuality, many have seen wild amounts of success in recent years. For instance, the 2015 winner of the Tony Award for Best Musical was *Fun Home*, a musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's autobiography of the same name, detailing her experience as a lesbian and her relationship with her gay father. In a 2015 interview with Gordon Cox of *Variety Magazine*, Lisa Kron, who wrote the book for the musical, discusses the concerns held by herself and others involved in the creative development of *Fun Home*. Given the show's strong LGBT+ content, and the fact that the show was written and developed by two women, the "reflexive question was, 'Are people going to have a hard time with it?'" (Kron). The resounding success of the show both off and on Broadway, and its Tony award win, proved that this concern was unfounded.

Similarly, other minority-driven shows have found success despite the fear of low-ticket sales and poor reception. *In The Heights*, which opened on Broadway in 2008, tells the story of the Hispanic community of New York City's Washington Heights, focusing on their lives and aspirations, with a score that blends together hip hop, Latin influences, and contemporary musical theater sound. It stands as the longest running Latino-written and -acted production (Craft 51), a fact that

testifies to the significant lack of representation of Latino roles available onstage and behind the scenes on Broadway. Written to avoid tropes and to be honest to the people it was representing, *In The Heights* won the Tony Award for Best Musical after making the transition from its less than stellar off Broadway run to its eventual home at the Richard Rodgers Theatre (*Internet Broadway Database*). Acutely aware of the concerns regarding the show's profitability in an industry that frequently leaves shows losing money, *In the Heights* seemed unlikely to be a hit, due to its focus on a minority group and complete lack of star power or name recognition. However, the marketing strategies for *In The Heights* were carefully crafted in order to draw an audience, presenting the show in a "safer" and more comfortable way and appealing to a broader audience without ever compromising the message or the people portrayed in their show (Craft 54-56). While their marketing employed these strategies, however, the show itself remained true to the community it represented, intentionally subverting stereotypes and appealing to audiences far beyond the minority represented onstage, and creating a realistic and honest portrayal of the Hispanic community of Washington Heights.

Another show that has recently been hailed for its diverse cast is *Hamilton: An American Musical*, another musical from Lin-Manuel Miranda. A retelling of the life and times of Alexander Hamilton, *Hamilton* has been hailed for its unique cast, featuring people of color as the founding fathers of America, despite the fact that historically, these men were white. This show, infused with hip hop and rap influences similar to Miranda's earlier work with *In The Heights*, is written with the intent of casting minority actors.

One of the biggest issues with the implementation of minority-driven shows as a solution to

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the lack of diversity is simply a lack of truly diverse shows being written and produced. The diversity of Broadway should not just stop with the people portrayed onstage, as stressed by Broadway producer Ken Davenport in a blog entry published in 2015. Davenport believes that the best way to increase the degree of diversity on Broadway is to first expand the diversity of the creative teams on Broadway, as exemplified in productions such as *In The Heights*, *Hamilton*, *Waitress* (a new musical that boasts an all-female creative team), and Danai Gurira's new play, *Eclipsed*, which made history as the first play in the history of Broadway to be financed, written, performed, and directed entirely by black women (Ndounou). By increasing the variety of people writing, directing, casting, and

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Non-Traditional Casting

One of the other recent attempts at introducing higher levels of diversity and increasing minority numbers on the Broadway stage has come in the form of what's known as color-blind casting—alternatively, nontraditional casting—which refers to the practice of casting a show without regard to the "traditional" race of a character, intended to open up traditionally white roles to minority actors. Several shows in recent history have embraced this practice, casting actors such as Kyle Jean-Baptiste as Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, Taye Diggs as Hedwig in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, or Norm Lewis as the Phantom in *Phantom of the Opera*. However, nontraditional casting is not quite the ideal situation it might seem, and it isn't a practice widely implemented; in

the 2014-15 Broadway season, only 10.2% of all roles were cast non-traditionally, hovering just above the 10% average Broadway has been boasting for the last several years (*Ethnic Representation* 12). Additionally, it has been the source of a lot of controversy, and has often been used to justify taking roles away from actors of color, rather than expanding them. In particular, a 1990 Broadway production of *Miss Saigon*, in which a British actor was cast as a half-French and half-Vietnamese character, called the shortcomings of this practice to light, and ultimately required Actors Equity Association to weigh in on the highly debated issue. While casting a British actor in a role meant for a minority actor technically fell under the embraced idea of nontraditional casting, it was also antithetical to the very intent of the practice, since the ultimate goal was to increase the number of roles available to minority actors. While the final decision was to allow Jonathan Pryce to continue in the role, the stipulations that were then set forth were criticized for favoring minorities, and seemed to contradict anti-discrimination laws (Chen).

Other theater artists, such as *HowlRound's* Lavina Jadhvani and *American Theatre's* Teresa Eyring, have begun to advocate for a different approach more appropriately termed color-conscious casting. Believing there is no way to truly be “colorblind,” especially when casting a show, and given the ways in which colorblind casting fails to really protect minorities and effectively create more roles for them, the new approach instead asks directors to “intentionally consider the race and ethnicity of actors and the characters they play in order to oppose racism, honor and respect cultures, foster stronger productions, and contribute to a more equitable world” (Eyring). The intent here is to expand the conversation regarding race, and to help promote the awareness of the plight of minority actors on the Broadway stage, preserving the roles that hold race as a part of the character, while still expanding the possibilities for actors. Not only does this protect the artistic integrity of shows in which race plays a role in the character’s journey and portrayal, but it also offers protection to minority actors, helping to ensure that the number of potential roles for them is increasing, not decreasing.

The idea of diversity on Broadway and the ways it is expressed is an ongoing struggle that likely will continue for years to come. Despite the concerns, however, it is a wholly unfounded belief that shows featuring the stories of minority groups or marginalized people fail to bring in an audience or create an entertaining evening. There is no lack of talented actors who belong to a minority group; the real shortcoming is in the roles available to them. Through the implementation of practices such as color-conscious casting, and through the increased creation of minority driven shows, Broadway can open its arms to people of all races, genders, and sexualities. While great strides have been made, there is still an element of the tides to this trend, an ebb and flow to the quality of representation both onstage and off. The productions will not just appear overnight—they need to be supported, attended, and most importantly, created—so that they do not just disappear during another night. The decision to include more diverse stories and casts begin with the creative team, as well as the demand for these stories from the greater Broadway audience. These artists are out there, and it is only a matter of time until the Great White Way can truly be a place where everyone can find themselves.

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