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Conscious Casting and Letting Playwrights Lead

Posted February 14, 2018

by David Valdes Greenwood

<http://howlround.com/conscious-casting-and-letting-playwrights-lead>

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Can a Japanese family be Mexican? That question was at the heart of an email exchange with a theatre doing one of my plays. It wasn't really a debate; the roles had already been cast. But the director wasn't trying to pull a fast one—in writing my play's character notes, I had sent mixed messages about what I valued and expected. And I know I'm not alone in still learning how to navigate this terrain.

The debates over so-called “color blind” and “color conscious” casting have been heated in recent years, especially when a theatre's decisions do not align with a playwright's wishes. Sometimes, a theatre contravenes the express indications of the author without permission (as happened to Lloyd Suh's *Jesus in India* (<http://www.playbill.com/article/university-cancels-production-of-jesus-in-india-after-playwright-voices-concern-over-casting-of-white-actors-com-371401>)); sometimes (as in the infamous 2017 *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/21/theater/a-black-actor-in-virginia-woolf-not-happening-albee-estate-says.html>)), a theatre makes a choice without permission because it feels that ethnicity is not specified, only to discover otherwise mid-stream.

More often, however, the shoe is on the author foot, so to speak. What should you, as a playwright, do when a theatre *does* ask if they can depart from your character descriptions, leaving you to determine how color- and gender-conscious the play must be? If you're a playwright whose writing is intentionally diverse, how do you decide when to draw firm lines in the sand and when to be open to interpretation?

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gender-conscious the play must be?”

A few years ago, I stopped writing race-neutral plays. Instead of waiting to see more diverse faces onstage, I wanted to help bring them into the spotlight. But this applied to more than race. As a mixed-ethnicity Cuban-American gay man, I was hungry for characters whose lives, like mine, were intersectional. Every play since has featured what I refer to as non-majority characters, often with specific ethnicities, races, orientations, and gender identities noted. (In some scripts, I have stipulated that the play may not be staged by an all-white cast without express permission.) I advocate for holistically conscious casting, not just of race and ethnicity, but of gender identity and expression.

The Japanese family I mentioned above shares a play with characters who are Latinx, mixed ethnicity, straight, gay, trans, and non-binary. Every theatre that has worked on the play has found its creative team wrestling with casting questions. Does trans mean trans only, or non-binary or genderqueer as well? What equals authenticity for the Cuban-American characters: being of Cuban descent specifically, or of any Latinx heritage, or (as Latinx people are racially diverse) simply being plausible? And when a character's intersectionality involves both race and gender identity, does it do harm to honor one more than the other?



Katurah Nelson and Delia Kropp in *Raggedy And* at Pride Films & Plays. Photo by Paul Goyette.

Questions like those can make a director's head spin. Too many playwrights have encountered people in casting who simply decide not to do the hard work of examining their choices in situations like these. The oldest dodge is to spout some variant of the argument that we don't require authenticity of experience for actors playing other parts,

the default example being murderers. That claim is true, but only to the extent that all theatre is a form of illusion: we go to a play knowing it is fictive. But that's too easy by half. Character *functions* do not come attended by the same weight of history represented by character *identities*. When a murderer is played by a (presumably) non-homicidal actor, that portrayal does not inherently come bundled with a society-deep backstory of stereotype, exclusion, legal injustice, and erasure. To acknowledge that theatre trades in pretense does not let us off the hook in confronting what our choices mean and how they further or limit our shared conversation. If a theatre has a request to make around the identities of your characters, you deserve to a more active intellectual exercise than a claim of "it's all pretend."

Perhaps the second-most common defense of casting adjustments has to do with a theatre's audition pool. Many an inclusive playwright has heard this line: "We want to do your show, but we do not have the population for it." Some artists argue that the question answers itself. **Michelle Tyrene Johnson**

(<http://www.michelletjohnson.com/playwright-michelle-tyrene-johnson.html>) asks, "If a theatre can't cast my play adequately, why are they doing it?" She adds, "I think that as a playwright of color, it's critical I stand firm on my casting."

For some pieces, it may well be that any debate around casting truly ended the moment the play was written. Playwright **Zahra A. Belyea** (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/zahra-belyea-4380694/>) explains, "I guess what I feel is that once the playwright gets the text to a point where it is able to be produced, the heavy lifting of character choice had been made." This is especially true when non-majority life experience is at the heart of the play.

A writer can't always predict what might challenge this choice. **Patrick Gabridge** (<http://www.gabridge.com/>) found himself in a unique situation when a South Korean theatre proposed doing his play *Distant Neighbors*, which included a Black character. "There's just no way that they're going to be able to find a Black actor—they're all going to be Koreans." This led him to consider adapting the text, but not simply for ease; he looked at how to "maintain the integrity of the script and the themes," which include trust and mistrust between neighbors, and the potency of human connection. Staging an American play on this topic in Korea at this moment is itself a powerful act, so the change merited consideration.

There are times when such latitude in casting is more organic. In an interview for **The Root** (<https://www.theroot.com/playwright-reacts-to-the-white-casting-of-mlk-in-the-mo-1790861704>), **Katori Hall** (<https://twitter.com/katorihall?lang=en&lang=en>) noted that a production of her play *Children of Killers* featured ethnically- and racially-diverse actors playing Rwandans to "drive home the major theme: that lines of identity were arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers, rendering signifiers of 'racial' identity unreliable." In her case, that was less a departure than a game plan. In seemingly dissimilar fashion, Jones, Belyea, Gabridge, and Hall are all making the case that from page to stage, it should be the playwrights who get to choose what casting means.

To make conscious choices sometimes involves confronting opposing values—and perhaps determining just what the high value is. **Melinda Lopez** (<http://www.melindalopez.com/1vbr2ewow5l1wu4wwc9sw9kr8ng743>), whose work often features Cuban-Americans and Cubans, notes that, "When you write a specific culture rather than 'Latinx generic,' people always freak out—and I get it, there just aren't a lot of Cuban American actors in Wyoming, for example. Even though I know the difference between a Puerto Rican actor or an actor of Mexican heritage—or an actor who has Argentinian heritage—I don't know that it's going to make or break my play." As she points out, "I would rather have the play being done" in a community rarely or never exposed to the viewpoints of artists and characters of color. In this case, inclusion of Latinx life becomes the high value over fidelity to a specific culture.

“When I define character identities more clearly in my cast lists, my goal is to yield more specific (and in turn more truthful) characters, while steering theatres away from the tendency to default to white, cisgender, and ability-typical actors for almost every role.”

That distinction comes up a lot for plays with people of color. My Japanese family has now been played by Japanese, Chinese, and Vietnamese actors. If the play was being performed in Tokyo, this might seem more glaring, but for majority American audiences, the top note that registers is the presence of an Asian family at all. This in turn raises competing issues: is it differently racist to cast non-Japanese Asian actors in the roles? Will not staging the play without Japanese actors add to Asian erasure? Every possible answer starts a new conversation.

Conscious casting is simply not a one-size-fits-all proposition. **Eleanor Burgess**

(<http://www.eleanorburgess.com/>) says of her process,

I think the right approach varies enormously from script to script. I have written plays where a character's heritage is central to the conversations they have and the actions they take—for those plays, alternative casting would make a mishmash of the dialogue and put an undue burden on actors to represent points of view that no longer make sense. For other plays, I've specified heritage partly to nudge/force theatres to cast in a way that reflects the modern world, but the characters' background isn't a plot point. It often represents something a little more abstract—a recent history of immigration; a position of relative comfort or discomfort; a unique source of insight or expectations.

A theatre may not be able to discern what a playwright deems absolutely core to the character as distinct from that which can be handled otherwise and still be thematically true. This means that playwright ownership of character descriptions is a powerful thing. When I define character identities more clearly in my cast lists, my goal is to yield more specific (and in turn more truthful) characters, while steering theatres away from the **tendency to default to white** (<http://howlround.com/why-diversity-is-encouraged-is-not-enough>), cisgender, and ability-typical actors for almost every role.



Averis I. Anderson and Manual Ortiz in *Raggedy And* at Pride Films & Plays. Photo by Paul Goyette.

But I'm still learning how to communicate these values. In the same script, while I was explicit about who could be cast in trans and non-binary roles, I was less concrete otherwise, simply noting that the stated character races and ethnicities were what I envisioned but were not firmly proscribed. The message I *intended* to send was, "Let's talk about diverse choices for these roles." But the message I *actually* sent was, "Make diverse choices as you see fit." When I expressed surprise about casting choices to one director, he rightly suggested that I needed to reframe my instructions to say what I really (and fully) meant: "Ask first; cast later."

So how did my Japanese family become Mexican? Beyond showing the diversity of America, the primary role of ethnicity for the family was in their struggle with the conservative opinions of elders back in the parent's country of origin when it came to the gayness of an American-born grandchild. This is a scenario that would resonate with many first- and second-generation immigrant families, including the Mexicans, who comprise a large part of that theatre's local population. As the director explained, the traditional bias against homosexuality remains common among older generations of Mexicans, influenced as they were by the Catholic tradition. This casting wasn't a meaningless choice, but a decision that still reflected the diversity of the world, while drawing a specific audience into the ideas of the play.

Learning as I go, and benefiting from the wisdom of my fellow scribes, I've landed on a quartet of useful mantras for playwrights as they champion diversity in their work:

- **Conscious Casting Starts with Conscious Writing**

I can't expect a theatre to commit to diversity if I don't, and my choices on the page must show both intent

and an awareness of meaning.

- **Commit to Choices, Not Reactions**

Should a theatre ask for casting adjustments, my answer should never be a mere reaction to the request, but a real choice about what the new representation says and does, and whether the play's integrity is preserved in the choosing.

- **Consider the High Value**

In the end, it's up to me to determine what is the high value and what is non-negotiable. Does a particular play hang on authenticity of identity, faithfulness to theme, audience exposure to new ideas or new worlds, or something else?

- **Set the terms of the debate**

If I really want theatres to cast consciously and make meaningful choices that reflect the high value of each play, I can and should be blunt about what I do or don't expect. It shows respect for my own work and gives them the right tools for doing their best.

Truly conscious casting requires that theatres and playwrights make the effort to be on the same page. As Burgess puts it, "The point is always to be thoughtful. Thoughtful about how to offer great roles to underrepresented actors, thoughtful about offering the audience a powerful experience, and thoughtful about casting actors in roles where they can *enliven*, rather than *fight*, the text."

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gwangung • 3 days ago

Oh, bravo. What a thoughtful consideration of casting and characters!

It's an issue that a lot of marginalized communities are also discussing (Asian American, etc.), so the answers are not cut and dried, but are evolving and developing. But let's think about them!

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

David Valdes Greenwood → gwangung • 3 days ago

Thanks, gwangung. I think when we start acknowledging, as you say, that "cut and dried" is going to remain elusive, we allow ourselves more latitude to dive into the thicket and really explore.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

Patrick Gabridge • 3 days ago

Great piece, David. Glad to be part of the discussion.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›

Pete Riesenberg • 3 days ago

“Does trans mean trans only, or non-binary or genderqueer as well?”

I was recently faced with this very question concerning the character of transgender woman. It was always my intention that the role be cast with someone who identifies as a woman. Preferably transgender actress, but a cisgender actress would be acceptable.

It never occurred to me that anyone would think that a cisgender man in drag would be appropriate but that was exactly with what I was confronted and after raising my objection was

appropriate, but that was exactly what I was concerned and after raising my objection was answered with, "Well, you should have put that in the character notes".

The note is now included that a man in drag is not the same thing as someone who identifies as a woman.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

David Valdes Greenwood → Pete Riesenberg · 2 days ago

The drag = trans equation is, sadly, still something to be unlearned for many, and I'm glad to hear you pushed back. There's no forward motion without interrogation of where we are now.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

Todd Schwartz · 2 days ago

I recently saw a production from a small, local company that featured a transgendered character, and the director had been able to find an actual transgender person to play the role. The problem was this person lacked the experience and skill set to pull off the demanding role. What should have been a powerful, socially relevant production that could help open the eyes of a rural audience to a new perspective and inspire them to grow as human beings was reduced to the uncomfortable experience of watching a poorly prepared actor fail to believably create the character they were cast (ostensibly because it was important to cast a trans actor in a trans role) to portray.

Rural communities need theater with diverse perspectives too. I'd argue they need it more. These small, relatively homogeneous communities desperately need opportunities to experience theater that will help them attain new perspectives on the world we share. But they often lack diverse populations, and without a multiplicity of skilled diverse actors to portray the multiplicity of diverse characters in socially relevant plays, theater companies striving to meet the needs of their community appear to be doomed to fail.

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LaPan · 2 days ago

Well written and thought out.

As a writer, I consider the ethnicity of the main characters (in respect to color) in their overall being. How they talk, how they might react to a situation and their relations amongst others. Color (and obvious ethnicity) is something that does affect everybody differently. There's really no way to act out of that without going all Dolezal (omg did I just make her a noun?).

However, I wouldn't hesitate to allow a cisgender to play a trans/gay character or vice-versa. Or a non-disabled person to play a disabled person (unless a quality disabled person is available). On a person of a different religion playing Christian, etc. Because, that's acting, right?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›




Todd Schwartz · 18 hours ago

An actor's job is to live within the given circumstances for the character they are portraying and to communicate that lived experience in the way that best serves the play. This is not an easy skill to master though non-actors tend to believe it is. Throughout history actors have been playing roles that were not within their realm of lived experience, but only now are people beginning to say that

There are some experiences that absolutely must have been lived by the actor in order for them to competently portray them before an audience.

As playwrights, I suppose you get to decide who you are writing for. You choose your audience, but you need to realize that there are many, many communities that might benefit from your plays and by imposing these restrictions you are refusing to give them a way to access your work. If there is a perspective you want to share with them, you will need to understand that the talent pool they have access to might not include an actor that meets your physical specifications. These are probably the communities that most need to be given opportunities to experience perspectives that are significantly different from their own. It's your choice, but you might want to think about that a bit.

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