



For some time, Black theatre artists have fought prejudice and helped ensure diversity and inclusion in the theatre ranks. Now it's time for white theatre professionals to join the fight.

# RACISM

**W**e're living in unprecedented times. Things that we were told were impossible are entirely possible and happening before our eyes. No, I don't mean the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm referring to the fact that America is dealing with its racism.

BY TAYLOR LEIGH LAMB



# IN THE THEATRE

Production still from National Black Theatre's *SWEET* featuring Maechi Aharanwa. | Photo by Peter Cooper, courtesy of National Black Theatre.

Following the harrowing on-camera murder of George Floyd by a police officer and three accomplices, as well as the countless other murders of Black people by police or white vigilantes, people flooded the streets, erupting into protest. Every state in America had protests in the wake of George Floyd's death.

One month later and many cities are *still* protesting. People on the ground are calling for defunding the police and defending Black life. And these calls for racial justice are reverberating elsewhere. Confederate statues are toppling. Racist brand names are being changed. CEOs are stepping down. The Dixie Chicks are now just The Chicks. A reckoning of prejudice and racial injustice is happening across all industries and our own industry is no exception. The privileged might have thought that theatre is a safe place, a liberal utopia, a place untouched by the racism in the rest of our society. But any Black artist (or frankly, anyone who understands institutional racism) could tell you that is definitely not the case. Theatre



Kathy A. Perkins is a lighting designer and theatre historian who was recently honored with the Wally Russell Professional Mentoring Award through USITT. Her prolific career includes lighting designs seen around the globe and extensive scholarship and editing work on the artists from the African Diaspora. | Photo Courtesy of Kathy A. Perkins

**"I'M EXHAUSTED WITH ALL OF THE ANTI-RACISM MEETINGS THAT RESULT IN NO ACTION, IN TOO MANY INSTANCES. THE PROBLEM IS CLEAR. YOU HAVE AN ALL WHITE STAFF IN MANY CASES. WHY DON'T YOU HIRE SOME BLACK PEOPLE? THAT'S THE BIGGEST WAY TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM. WE CAN SIT AND TALK ALL DAY LONG. IF THESE PLACES WERE COMMITTED, THEY WOULD DIVERSIFY THEIR STAFF. JUST HIRE SOME PEOPLE."**

—KATHY A. PERKINS, LIGHTING DESIGNER AND THEATRE HISTORIAN.

has a serious race problem, and we always have.

### **A Broken Record**

In the wake of calls for justice, theatres, most of which are predominantly white institutions, have been rushing to put out statements. They are "listening" and they are "learning." They "see us." The marketing departments are in overdrive, writing press releases or posting black squares on Instagram. But is it enough? Will this truly bring about the change in the theatre industry that is sorely needed? Or will we end up sliding right back into old habits, as we've done before? This is not the first time the theatre industry has purported to be dealing with its racism.

"It's nothing I haven't heard before. It's like a broken record as far as I'm concerned," says Kathy A. Perkins, lighting designer and theatre historian. She has worked in the theatre for decades, and has researched, studied, and written about Black people's roles in theatre. Although, this time, the results may turn out to be different, it is certainly not new. And we would be remiss not to note that theatres are finally admitting to issues that Black theatre artists have been calling attention to for decades. Why now? Did they learn something new? Perkins doesn't think so. "I don't buy into this thing about white people being awakened to their racism. They've always known about it; they're just being called out on it on a larger scale due to social media."

Perkins is certainly not alone in her

skepticism of this so-called "awakening." "I see a lot of words on the page," says David Stewart, production manager of Disney Parks Live Entertainment, "but I'm curious as to what actions are going to take place."

The actions taken by theatres, while we also try to make sense of how theatre will continue to exist in a COVID-19 world, will continue to evolve over the next several months. We will likely spend years observing how theatres adapt and whether or not we will usher in a new era, more committed to antiracism and equity.

In the meantime, how are Black artists responding to institutional racism in the theatre? Well, Black artists have already been doing the work.

This is incredibly evident in the work of Perkins, who is the 2020 recipient of USITT's Wally Russell Professional Mentoring Award. One of the clearest representations of institutional racism in the theatre is the lack of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) working in it. When theatres try to diversify, they tend to go for the most visible option: actors on stage. That means that the people who remain unseen—the backstage crew, the designers, etc.—tend to be mostly, if not entirely, white. Theatres will often claim this is due to a lack of Black designers, but Perkins knows that isn't true. "There's no shortage of Black designers," she says, and she has done the work to prove it. In 2012, she made a "Black Designers" Facebook group as

a place for people to come together, receive mentorship, and share news about jobs and resources. The group has more than 250 members. Additionally, Perkins has always left an institution with more BIPOC than when she found it, and tries her best to bring more people in whenever she can. If any theatre claims they are unable to find these Black designers, Perkins encourages them to email her.

Similarly, David Stewart has also long been working hard to provide more opportunities for Black people in the industry. Stewart is a co-creator of USITT's Gateway Program, a program that pairs students from underrepresented populations with a professional mentor as a way to help them navigate the industry. Stewart is also an advocate for the ways that institutions can make bringing more BIPOC into the industry a matter of policy. "If you are not actively creating antiracist policies, your policies are racist," he says. An antiracist policy he recommends is removing education requirements in job listings. "I don't need you to have a Master's degree in order to weld on my show," as well as making it so that a hiring pool cannot be homogenous—all the way to the final rounds of a hiring process, as opposed to just the initial search when the net is wide.

Black theatre artists who enter the industry have long been working to bring more Black people, as well as all folks of color, into the industry alongside them. Just as importantly, there are Black people who are not trying to make more space in white institutions, but instead are building culturally specific spaces just for Black people. One of those people is Jonathan McCrory, artistic director of the National Black Theatre. McCrory is also one of the co-founders of the Movement Theatre Company, a company that creates an artistic social movement by developing and producing new work by artists of color.

Like Perkins and Stewart, McCrory has his doubts about this current movement of acknowledging the institutional racism in the theatre, and worries we might be giving it more than its due. "No work has actually happened yet," he says. "Words alone do not mean something has shifted, or that anything new will happen in the wake of a statement." Besides, McCrory notes how many of these statements about antiracism don't get to the



David "dstew" Stewart is a production manager for Disney Parks Live Entertainment and co-founder of the Gateway Program for USITT. Stewart serves as co-chair of the USITT Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Network. | Photo courtesy of David "dstew" Stewart.

## "IF YOU ARE NOT ACTIVELY CREATING ANTIRACIST POLICIES, YOUR POLICIES ARE RACIST."

—DAVID STEWART, CO-CREATOR OF USITT'S GATEWAY PROGRAM

root of the issue. "Theatre was built off of the excess wealth of slavery," he says. "If it's built off of the excess wealth of slavery, how are you actually reckoning with that notion by itself?"

### Culturally Specific Art

If large institutions are failing to adequately address the root of their issues with racism, then perhaps it's time for Black artists to seek other ways to support their art. "The reckoning is carving out your own table inside of the system," says McCrory. Black artists have a long history of making culturally specific art, and yet there is no shortage of people who are critical of this choice. Some think that this will lead to a segregated future, one in which everybody only cares for art they can relate to. But Black theatre is expansive.

"Just like protest, just like song, just like art, [Black theatre] has always been a direct response and correlation to the present need of the individual who is also part of a collective," says McCrory. Black theatre is just as expansive as Black people and the various Black communities. If a Black artist chooses to focus their attention here, the opportunities for storytelling are limitless.

Maybe there is a space to do both. Black artists could continue to work within white institutions while also working with other Black artists to create culturally specific institutions. Why not? It's not like theatre artists ever really wear one

hat.

Garlia Cornelia Jones was initially drawn to theatre as a way to support Black people, which is evident in the projects she has chosen to be involved in. Jones is currently the line producer at The Public Theater and founding artistic director of BlackBoard Plays, a collective devoted to Black playwrights. She is a producer for Harlem9, a collaborative producing organization of Black theatre professionals from various backgrounds. While earning her bachelor's degree, she founded the Black Curtain, a group devoted to Black theatre.

She notes the important way Black theatre organizations engage with community. "We don't have to ask what the community needs as an outsider," she says. "We already know, not because we are psychic but because it is an ongoing exchange of 'I need this thing,' 'Oh here we go, we can offer this to you.'"

Culturally specific Black theatre is certainly something we should be celebrating and encouraging, but it's not the only thing. Jones thinks these types of organizations should exist while more institutions also need to be welcoming Black people into their ranks and telling their stories. "Having Black people [as] part of the table is a big deal," Jones says. "Where are the stories that show the range of Black life and the range of Black people as Americans, because that is what we are. These structures need to vary and allow for all people to be included in them.



Garlia Cornelia Jones is a writer, producer, and photographer who has worked to center Black voices in theatre for 20 years. Currently, she serves as Line Producer at The Public Theater. Learn more at [www.garliacornelia.com](http://www.garliacornelia.com) | Photo: Christine Jean Chambers.

And where I'm concerned, [they need to] allow Black artists to be included."

### Disrupting Systems

So, for the theatre institutions looking to go beyond the statements, what's the next step? An Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee? An antiracism committee?

Think bigger.

"I'm exhausted with all of the anti-racism meetings that result in no action, in too many instances," says Perkins. "The problem is clear. You have an all white staff in many cases. Why don't you hire some Black people? That's the biggest way to solve the problem. We can sit and talk all day long. If these places were committed, they would diversify their staff. Just hire some people"

Bringing in Black people, and not just one Black person who will then feel isolated as they deal with institutional racism, as Perkins notes, but many Black people, and many people of color is an important and necessary step in order to dismantle racism within these institutions. "If you're serious about

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—GARLIA CORNELIA JONES, LINE PRODUCER AT THE PUBLIC THEATER AND FOUNDING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF BLACKBOARD PLAYS

making changes, hire some Black people," says Perkins.

And if you're going to devote time to antiracism or EDI meetings? You need a budget for that, as Stewart recommends. "Far too often, this work falls on people of color and ED&I committees. They are oftentimes new to the work and they don't hold any power or any sway with upper management. I think oftentimes these organizations are like 'look, we have an ED&I Committee, and we made a statement. Our work here is done,' when they're not disrupting any systems." Disrupting systems is how we can radically change these institutions. If you are going to say you're committed to antiracism, your budget and hiring practices should show that commitment. Forcing the "antiracism work" to fall to the very few people of color in an institution, who

will not be paid more to do said work, perpetuates the same white supremacy these organizations claim to be fighting against.

However, despite the fact that this is not theatre's first time acknowledging its racism, and despite the fact that institutions should be doing more, there is hope that this moment can lead to change. COVID-19 has put a pause on live theatre, and thus we have been forced to sit at home and really evaluate how we will move forward, especially in an industry like ours that won't be quick to bounce back. "They're [leaders of these organizations] probably looking [and thinking] 'Oh my God, look at all these young people of all races out here in the street. They are the future of the American theatre,'" Perkins says.

Jones agrees, noting that the movement in the streets has caused a reckoning

### Amplifying Black Voices

David "dstew" Stewart launched Production on Deck, a resource sharing website designed "to curate a set of resources to help amplify the visibility of (primarily) people of color in the arts."

The site includes links to numerous databases of artists in all theatrical disciplines, resources for dispelling myths and reimaging our industry, and self-care resources for BIPOC artists. As Stewart writes, "For too long we have heard, 'Well, there just aren't any out there.' Or, 'We tried, but it just didn't work.' This site was built to remove all excuses for not being able to build a diverse and qualified staff at your organization."

Visit [www.productionondeck.com](http://www.productionondeck.com).

that has left no one untouched. “The same things are happening in publishing, the same things are happening in the fashion industry. White people can’t escape it. There is no escape. There is no way to allow this to go on for a month and say, ‘Okay, we’re done.’ That’s not what this is. Because it’s not just our industry, it’s everywhere. It’s the world.”

COVID-19 has changed our industry and the world forever. Now is the time to boldly go forward and create something new, rather than return to the ways that left so many people harmed. This looks like hiring more Black people and other people of color to work at all levels of the institution, from backstage to a creative team to playwrights to upper management. This looks like devoting actual resources to antiracism work instead of forcing Black people to perform free labor. This looks like monetarily supporting Black artistic institutions so that, as McCrory notes, they are not merely surviving but thriving. This looks like hiring Black people. That is stated twice on purpose, because as Perkins notes, it’s a very necessary step and yet organizations try to do everything but.

This is a real moment for change in our industry. But white theatre institutions and white theatre makers have to go beyond statements with no teeth. They have to commit. They have to do the work. Because Black artists have already been doing it for themselves, as well as other artists of color. They don’t need to change. They don’t need to do more than the work they have already been doing. The white stakeholders in this industry do.

“It’s been like 40 years of the same old struggle,” Perkins says. “I do what I can from where I am. I don’t see myself doing anything differently.”



*Taylor Leigh Lamb is a writer, theatre artist, and arts administrator from Virginia Beach, Virginia, currently based in Baltimore,*

*Maryland. She graduated from the University of Virginia in 2018. Taylor’s work has been featured in Argot Magazine and the Black Youth Project. Her play You Too? was a part of the 21st Century Voices: Emerging Plays festival at American Stage, and METLab’s Plays in Progress Festival. It*

After these interviews were conducted, We See You White American Theater, a collective of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color theatre-makers who came together to address the scope and pervasiveness of anti-Blackness and racism in the American theatre, released a list of demands. The recommendations from those who contributed to this article (hire more BIPOC, have a budget for EDI work, support culturally specific theatres, eliminate education requirements for production jobs, ensure a heterogenous pool of job applicants) are listed among the demands, as well as many others. You can read these demands at [www.weseeyouwat.com](http://www.weseeyouwat.com).

*can be read on NewPlayExchange. Taylor is a producer for the web series, Black Enough, which can be streamed on YouTube.*