

AMERICAN THEATRE

WINTER 2024

VOL 40, NO. 2

THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP



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THE PIPELINE

All Set to Succeed

**The diversification of theatre
design starts—but doesn't
end—with training.**

By **CRYSTAL PAUL**



"I got some hot grits over there on the stove. Why don't you give Carlos some?," says Madea, the titular character in Tyler Perry's *Madea's Family Reunion*, to a young woman who's being abused by her fiancé. Madea is suggesting the woman use the pot of grits as a weapon against her abuser.

When a choreographer referenced the scene to lighting design student Deandra Bromfield a few years ago, she wasn't urging Bromfield to vengeance but indicating the level of passion she hoped to convey in a Black History Month show at their arts high school. Bromfield understood the Madea reference immediately and took to the switchboard to bathe the stage in ambers and oranges. Their white design teacher, however, was surprised—he was not familiar with the *Madea* oeuvre.

"It's very important to just listen and hear people out, especially if you're not from that demographic," said Bromfield. "Even better: If you don't know, research."

Several other student artists also opted to work with Bromfield because they felt she understood their work best. This kind of understanding, Bromfield said, is why it's important that theatres consider diversity behind the scenes as well as onstage: to

represent different perspectives, to tell stories in more accurate ways, to make theatre more expansive.

Since the 2020 Black Lives Matter demonstrations and the open letter "We See You, White American Theater," there has been plenty of conversation about inequity and lack of diversity both on- and offstage. Theatres and theatremakers made promises of change and shows of support. Three-plus years later, theatre designers say that while they've seen more diversity on stages and in rehearsal rooms, the production side of theatre has been largely neglected. For years, designers of color have described difficulties getting hired for shows that aren't specifically about people of color,

feelings of isolation as the only or one of few designers of color on a show, and cultural misunderstandings or even outright hostile working environments.

Bromfield, for example, is the only Black student in the lighting design program at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, which she described as "very isolating."

When costume designer Harri Horsley, who serves as assistant professor of costume design at James Madison University

"People should think it's their duty, and not just the duty of Black people, to train people of color."



**Deandra
Bromfield**



**Darius
Evans**



**Stephanie Anne
Johnson**



**Porsche
McGovern**



**Xavier
Pierce**



**Jennifer
Zeyl**

and has been working in the field for 10 years, looks back on her time as a graduate student, she uses the exact same words: “Very isolating.” She also described the pressure of being one of the few Black queer designers in most of her academic and work spaces. Bromfield said she feels the same pressures today.

“I’m hyper-aware of the fact that I am the only Black person in this space,” said Bromfield. “It kind of gives me a feeling that I have to be on my Ps and Qs every single time and work way harder than anybody else does to make sure that I don’t slip up, because I’m the only person that looks like me.

“If I slip up,” she said, “it’s over.”

Since the 2020 “reckoning” brought many of these issues out into the open, new programs and fellowships have sprung up, joining existing programs for emerging designers of color, all in the hopes of creating a more equitable landscape for young designers

of color to learn and navigate some of the same difficulties faced by their predecessors. Designers of color have begun more concerted efforts to forge connections with each other, sharing experiences and resources. As leaders of some of these newer programs look to the future, they have hopes to expand their offerings, while others fear the door of opportunity, cracked open just a bit by recent conversations, has already begun to close.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

When Dr. Stephanie Anne Johnson talks about her 49 years as a lighting designer, she doesn’t use the word “isolating,” but it’s there, unspoken, in her stories about her all-white, all-male co-workers in the 1970s and early ’80s having trouble believing that she, a Black woman, was the designer in charge on a show. It’s clear when she talks about not taking union jobs 40 years ago because “it was hostile. These guys didn’t want me there,” she said.

The majority white male crews may not have wanted to work with her, but throughout her career, she said, Black women and white allies in the field helped her navigate these environments and find her footing in the industry. Johnson’s first job out of college was with a Black woman psychologist who hired her to light a play she had written. A few of her white male bosses over the years helped keep the hostility of crew members at bay, or simply offered encouragement and empathy for the challenges she faced as a Black woman in the industry. These allies vouched for her work and recommended her to others.

This, she said, is how the design field has always operated: on apprenticeships and personal associations. Working designers take newbies under their wings and mentor them, then launch them into the field bolstered by experience and professional connections. The problem, of course, is that most designers with clout have historically been white men. Lighting designer Shirley Prendergast became the first Black woman admitted to the United Scenic Art-

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A scene from Roundabout Theatre Company's production of "A Soldier's Play" in 2019, for which Allen Lee Hughes did the lighting.

ists labor union in 1969, but it wasn't until 1986, 17 years later, that designer Kathy Perkins, a Prendergast mentee, became the second. For decades in this sector of the industry, white men tended to mentor and recommend other white men within largely homogeneous networks.

That is why veteran lighting designer Allen Lee Hughes, 71, said the work of preparing the next generation of designers of color cannot fall solely to people of color.

"Every diversity program looks to Blacks for support," he said. "I think it helps for white people to train and work with people of color, because a team of just Blacks, in some cases, is easily dismissed. People should think it's their duty, and not just the duty of Black people, to train people of color. They don't get off scot-free."

That's the idea that Arena Stage founder Zelda Fichandler had when she launched a fellowship there in 1990 and named it in Hughes's honor. Now called the Allen Lee Hughes BIPOC Fellowship, it offers hands-on training to emerging theatremakers. After the 2020 protests, the fellowship has put a stronger focus on recruiting Black and Indigenous designers, specifically.

Johnson notes that people like Hughes—one of the first Black designers in the field—and the Black women who helped Johnson didn't just open doors for young Black designers. They also helped create an environment where designers of color feel welcome and supported, a place where they actually want to stay.

"It's critical," said Johnson. "I speak as an African American: It's important to be part of an African American network or networks, because that's where you're going to find your sus-

tenance and hopefully sustainable relationships that are going to get you somewhere."

Forging and maintaining relationships is part of what motivated freelance lighting designer and educator Jorge Arroyo and set designer Regina García to launch La Gente: The Latinx/é Theatre Production Network. At the height of the George Floyd protests, Arroyo and García put together a casual Zoom gathering of Latiné designers, technicians, and managers. As the group shared their experiences, they realized they had the ingredients to create more opportunity and visibility for Latiné designers and technicians. Out of that meeting came the idea for La Gente.

"In order for us to make change, we need to know each other, we need to support each other," said Arroyo. "When I can't do a job, I can send you the name of three amazing Latino lighting designers who are ready to jump in and do the work."

La Gente currently offers an online directory of designers spanning the country and touting a variety of expertise. Arroyo hopes that the network can eventually become something more by reaching out to emerging Latiné designers and connecting them with established Latiné designers who can help them forge a path into design work, or even connect with Latiné students who may have never thought of design as a career option.

"It's sad that we are the elders," said Arroyo, who is 50. "There should be those folks that are 65 and 70 in the field. And they're just not in the profession. They're just not there."

A PATHWAY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

When Mark Stanley was coming up as a white man in the very



Darius Evans is a lighting design student at Boston University. He participated in two sessions of the Studio School of Design's summer program.

white and very male design field of the 1970s and '80s, he said, there was very little awareness about the lack of diversity in design.

"No one ever thought twice about the fact that white men were mentoring younger white men to become lighting designers—it just was what it was," he said. "You kind of didn't look around to see what color everybody else was, or the fact that there weren't any women or almost no designers of color."

There were voices calling attention to the problem over the years, he said, but since the protests in 2020, there has been no way to miss the lack of diversity in the field. Everything that had been "swept under the rug," he said, came rushing out. That's when the idea for the Studio School of Design began to percolate.

Stanley, resident lighting designer at the New York City Ballet and head of the lighting design program at Boston University, and some of his colleagues were inspired by the New York Studio and Forum of Stage Design. Founded in the 1960s by costume, lighting, and set designer Lester Polakov, the studio brought fellow Broadway designers in to teach emerging designers (usually college graduates preparing for the entrance exam for the United Scenic Artists designers union) whenever they weren't working a show.

As they assembled a board and conversations continued, Stanley and Studio School co-founder Clifton Taylor realized the inequities start earlier in the pipeline. They reflected on the demographics of the students who came through their programs at BU and the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, respectively, and saw firsthand how the failure to engage students earlier in their education restricted the applicant pool.

"It's been pretty clear in the 20 years I've been teaching that there is no incoming talent other than mostly students coming from school systems that have theatre programs that are well-funded," Stanley said. "And, as you can imagine, the result of that is mostly white. One of the big problems was accessibility of training that

was holding back, or even blocking, the ability for young designers of color to feel like they had a place in this career."

So they turned their sights to high school. The Studio School of Design, incorporated in 2021, has now had two successful summer programs bringing in high school students from Title I schools in the New York area for tuition-free, hands-on education and training in lighting design.

When Deandra Bromfield and Darius Evans met at the Studio School's summer program in 2021, it was a game-changer. Neither had met another Black student interested in lighting design before, so they were excited to no longer be the only one in the room. They reveled in the course work and geeked out about lighting design, and now they are both enrolled in lighting design programs at the universities where Studio School founders Stanley and Taylor teach.

But there's still a long way to go. Not only is Bromfield the only Black student in her university lighting design program; Evans is also the only Black freshman in his.

"That speaks to the need of exactly what we're trying to change," said Stanley. "That's why Clifton and I are concentrating so much at the high school level, because students of color aren't even applying."

Bromfield is keenly aware that access to programs like hers are hard to come by for people of color, especially those from under-resourced socioeconomic backgrounds.

"The only reason that I was able to attend SSD was because it was free," she said. "If I had to pay money for classes during the summer, I would have never known half the stuff that I do now. I probably wouldn't have even applied to an art school to do lighting design had I not had those programs."

GETTING WORK

Teaching the next generation is only half the problem, according

to Jennifer Zeyl, artistic director at Seattle's Intiman Theatre. Zeyl led the launch of the STARFISH Project, which provides free after-school technical theatre training, mentorship, and hands-on experience to high school-aged students. The other part is making sure these young people can actually find work after they've been trained.

Finding work has been particularly hard for designers of color and women designers, points out lighting designer Porsche McGovern. That's partly why she began reporting the demographics of designers by pronoun at League of Resident Theatres establishments back in 2015.

"I knew I had a responsibility to tell people these numbers, because I often wondered if I had had these numbers when I first thought of this after undergrad, would I have gone to grad school?" McGovern wondered. "Or would I have been, at the time: Do I think I'm going to be one of the women designers who worked in LORT over those five years? I'm not saying that means that if there's a slim chance you shouldn't do it. But I have bills to pay. I had undergraduate debt."

A 2020 demographics survey by the United States Institute for Theatre Technology found that of approximately 1,770 respondents, people of color accounted for 13 percent of the staff at participating technical theatre organizations. The study also found that younger respondents tended to be "more racially diverse, with 17 percent of the 15-34 age group identifying as a person of color or multi-racial, compared to 14 percent of those in the 35-49 age group and 7 percent of those 65 and older."

Zeyl's solution: an associates arts degree program with an emphasis on Technical Theatre for Social Justice. Intiman partnered with Seattle Central College to create the program in 2019. The idea, said Zeyl, is to get technical theatre students out and working faster and with less student debt, making it more financially feasible for lower-income students to explore the field. Students who graduate from the associates degree program are also eligible to transfer to four-year programs.

"I think it's just unconscionable to be taking \$150,000 off a young person in order for them to practice something that, if they

had access and opportunity, they could work out in real time," she said. "I'm in education to cut the line."

One thing efforts like these can't offset is the drain of artists and potential mentors who have left the field in the last few years. In fact, McGovern herself isn't sure she's going to stay in design, citing the difficulty of getting work as a designer of color, and low pay when she does get it. She and other designers of color note that, even after the so-called "racial reckoning" of 2020, they still often get the call to work the few shows about people of color that theatres tend to put on for Black History Month or other cultural occasions, but their phones are silent the rest of the year.

Hughes said he's already seeing talented designers of all cultural backgrounds leaving the field because of the difficulty of making a living. One of his protégés, Xavier Pierce, began to reexamine his calling when stages went dark during the pandemic. When Pierce first set on the path to lighting design at Florida A&M University, he was struck by the lack of diversity. Then he found a flyer about the Hughes Fellowship program, and put it up on the front door of his bedroom, the photo of Allen Lee Hughes looking back at him every time he walked through the door for two years.

"I came to school for lighting, and I couldn't find anybody who kind of looked like me," he said. "The idea that theatre has a diversity problem is fucking insane. We tell stories about humanity."

He eventually applied to the fellowship and was personally mentored by Hughes himself. This was a game changer for Pierce, as it helped him make the necessary connections to work in the field. One of the first shows Pierce got to design was one that Hughes recommended him for because Hughes couldn't do it.

Soon Pierce was working full-time as a designer. But then the pandemic hit in 2020, and no amount of expertise, connections, luck, or prestige could rescue him or anyone else from unemployment. While Pierce eventually returned to the field, having found a renewed sense of purpose through moving closer to his family, plenty of others haven't.

This exodus of talented potential mentors couples with a looming sense that the doors to these opportunities are beginning to close as the momentum of 2020 fades. Some fear that real progress toward a more diverse theatre landscape will fade with it.

"Every 50 or so years, something happens and the doors open for a little bit. Then they close," said Jonah Bobilin, a lighting designer who is a member of Design Action, a coalition of theatre designers working to end racial inequities in American theatre. "This is something a lot of the older designers of color said in 2020: 'You need to get in where you can because the doors are going to close in two years or so.' And it's come to pass."

But lighting design student Darius Evans is hopeful that things will continue to change, even if he's unsure of what exactly the theatre landscape will look like by the time he graduates.

"The one thing I like about theatre is that there's always some sort of change," he said. "I want to be a part of that change, so that the next generation has a better time. I feel like even though we've acknowledged the problem, the problem hasn't gone away completely. So we need people who want to continue to change."

Dr. Stephanie Anne Johnson is celebrating almost 50 years as a lighting designer. She credits Black women and a few white allies with helping her find her footing in the industry at a time when she was often the only person of color on the production crew.



Photo courtesy of Stephanie Anne Johnson

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