

BIPOC exclusion from Milwaukee's professional theatre organizations:

An inquiry into systemic change

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ABSTRACT

Arts organizations in the nonprofit sector often seek to create social change in their communities as a response to art rather than exclusively creating art for its entertainment value. As the United States continues to tackle and address racial inequities, the arts sector is not only responsible for evolving with society, but also crafting and depicting narratives many organizations hope will help positively impact society. In this sense, they should be leaders. This inquiry into racial representation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin's nonprofit theatre sector hopes to identify the unique qualities of the Milwaukee arts community, inclusive actions currently taking place, and areas for improvement. Using a grounded theory approach, interviews were conducted with local arts leaders and stakeholders. Based on the literature reviewed and data collected, these findings were used to assess initiatives currently in place and to formulate recommendations for addressing racial representation and creating meaningful organizational change.

Keywords: nonprofit theatre, equity and inclusion, organizational change, racial equity, Milwaukee WI

INTRODUCTION

On June 8th, 2020 in response to the civil unrest in the United States a collective of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) theatre makers created a national call to action titled “We See You White American Theatre” (“We See You W.A.T.”). Despite a global pandemic and a tumultuous election year, this call reached theatre makers across the country in a unique and powerful way. The COVID-19 crisis also created a year of forced reflection on business models and institutional practices as organizations fought for financial survival.

Diversity and inclusion are not new concepts to the performing arts world, but urgent financial and survival issues have often taken precedence over institutional and systemic change. Performing arts organizations have a unique opportunity to address social inequalities by diversifying their art, personnel, and organizational practices. It is my intention that this research and presentation of findings will assist performing arts organizations and exhibit how inclusive organizational practices can increase diverse participation, contribute to cultural equity, and meaningfully impact small and large communities beyond the artistic experience.

In 2013 Americans for the Arts defined Cultural Equity as:

“The values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people—including but not limited to those who have been historically underrepresented based on race/ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, socioeconomic status, geography, citizenship status, or religion—are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources” (Ogden, 2018, p. 2).

Racial Equity “is not just the absence of discrimination and inequities, but also the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures” (Race Reporting Guide, p.31-32). By applying justice and a little common sense to the values, policies, and practices of nonprofit theatre organizations, there is an opportunity to create positive change in a currently imbalanced system.

In 2018 Americans for the Arts unveiled the Arts + Social Impact Explorer, an interactive tool drawing from data across 26 different sectors to make it easier to explore how the arts permeate community life. Within the sector of Diversity, Access, Equity, and Inclusion they summarize that exposure to arts and media featuring characters or cultures representing socially disadvantaged groups can help reduce and eventually eliminate racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist, and other negative views (Americans for the Arts, 2019). By consulting related fields such as literary fiction, television, and film, and the relation of the viewer to the character; parallel conclusions can be drawn that the performing arts has the potential to reduce if not eliminate racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist, and other negative views through representation.

It is common knowledge that Milwaukee is racially segregated with significant racial disparities, but the data shows it is arguably the most racially segregated in the nation. In 2010, the US Census Bureau ranked Milwaukee the second most segregated city in the nation, on a 100-point scale, in Black-White racial segregation, only outranked by Detroit. In the 2013-2017 American Community Survey Five-year Estimates Milwaukee ranked first in Black-White racial segregation, with a numerical score of 79.8 out of 100 (Frey, 2018). Milwaukee is also the smallest, by population, to make the list of top 10 most segregated cities in the United States. Milwaukee has the highest dissimilarity index of any metropolitan area, .78, which “means 78 percent of black residents or 78 percent of other residents would have to move for Milwaukee’s neighborhoods to be demographically balanced” (Frey, n.p.). Comparative cities and impact on median income can be seen in appendix 2 and 3. The performing arts cannot solve Milwaukee’s racial inequities, but they can be a powerful tool in building acceptance of diverse perspectives and can help a community grow towards common respect and understanding of individuals dissimilar to themselves.

Utilizing the performing arts as a tool in an effort to reduce if not eliminate racist, sexist, and other negative representational views among the public is not the only reason to create an inclusive sector, it is also essential to the internal health of the organizations. Research shows that “a workplace that encourages diversity – not just of race, gender and culture – but also of thought, will inevitably foster more innovation” (Morris, 2018, p.305).

As an additional challenge to the performing arts in Milwaukee, the global pandemic of 2020 and 2021 had a significant impact on non-profit performing arts organizations in the United States. Due to decreased income, wide-spread event cancellations, and the legal and epidemiological barriers to gathering in-person, many organizations were forced to reevaluate their organizational practices. The long-term impact on the sector is yet to be known.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question established for this study is *How are nonprofit theatre organizations in Milwaukee, WI implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives and what additional practices can be utilized to create a more racially equitable performing arts sector?*

AUTHOR POSITIONALITY

As the author of this study, I do not claim to know or fully understand the lived experiences of historically and systemically marginalized communities included in this research. It is my hope that the research serves as a stepping-stone for the next generation of diverse thought leaders in the arts industry. It is my understanding that the collective approach to equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice is an urgent and evolving topic and this paper represents current understandings in 2021.

I grew up in a small town in rural New Hampshire with two parents who opened and operated a small business for my entire life. I grew up with a humble but comfortable upbringing and tried to find as much engagement with the arts that my location would allow. I was fortunate enough to have a dedicated theatre teacher in high school, a local community theatre to attend, and was able to occasionally travel to Boston, MA to see larger productions. It should be noted for the purpose of this study that I identify as a white, middle-class, cis-gendered, able-bodied female with a unique connection with different geographic theatre communities.

I resided in Minneapolis just three miles from where George Floyd was tragically murdered by police on May 25, 2020, and where momentum sparked 2020 Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations. I moved to Milwaukee between city curfews, amidst civil unrest at the end of May. I am not part of the BIPOC community but consider myself an ally to the Black Lives Matter movement and the cry for racial justice.

I have often observed how good intentions fail to translate to meaningful impact. I am inspired by those who work in the nonprofit arts sector and it is my hope that by outlining clear opportunities to create a more inclusive performing arts community it will result in meaningful change for Milwaukee. My academic and professional background is in theatre arts management and arts administration. As a young member of the nonprofit theatre leadership community, I have embraced the collective collaboration throughout the local and national sector in the past year. The COVID-19 crisis and the call for racial justice required collaboration on a variety of essential topics between leadership professionals. As a nonprofit performing arts leader in Milwaukee, I regularly share resources with individuals interviewed in this study; and share a working relationship beyond this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to best understand the complexities of diversifying the performing arts organizations in Milwaukee an inquiry into established and recent literature was needed. Specifically looking at the history of theatre and the diversification of Milwaukee, systemic exclusionary practices, organizational change, and recommendations for inclusionary, equitable industry standards. During this research four databases were used including JSTOR, Google Scholar, EBSCO, and UMN Libraries. The four areas of exploration in this literature review are Milwaukee history, Milwaukee theatre, engaging empathy in the performing arts, and defining diversity and desired change.

Who is Milwaukee?

In the 1830s White settlers arrived in the geographic area now known as Milwaukee, where a diverse array of Indigenous tribes was present including the Menominee, Ho-Chunk, Fox, Sauk, Ottawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi. Solomon Juneau, Byron Kilbourn, and George Walker are considered founders of the city now known as Milwaukee (Nelsen, 2020). Juneau became an early real estate developer towards the end of the fur trading years and became Milwaukee's first mayor in 1846. Kilbourn was a crooked and ruthless businessman who in collusion with the local surveyor, included Potawatomi land in the 1835 federal survey, allowing him to take control of the area just west of the river. Kilbourn became the mayor of Milwaukee in 1848.

This wave of settlers primarily came from New York and New England and began to plant a city and push out the Indigenous people. In 1860, both populations became quickly outnumbered by European immigrants, and German immigrants and their American-born children were the considerable majority for many decades, making Milwaukee the most German

big city in America. German culture helped feed the brewing industry in Milwaukee and by 1856 there were more than 24 breweries in Milwaukee, primarily German owned and operated (Grange, 2001).

Unlike most Eastern and Midwest industrial cities Milwaukee did not experience the First Great Migration of African Americans from the South. "In 1910, only 980 African Americans lived in Milwaukee, leaving the city 99.5% white. This number of African American residents doubled during the following decade and then tripled over the course of 1920s, reaching 7,501 by 1930." (Brunn, 2015, p. 1051). African Americans encountered unrelenting racism in the manufacturing sector and White Milwaukee "maintained a segregated society without trouble or fanfare: separate seating in movie theaters, refusal to serve black customers in downtown restaurants..." (p. 1052).

In the 1940s, Milwaukee was a city energized by World War II industrial labor beginning with military hardware such as torpedoes, tanks, and bomb casings; laborers in metal and machinery dominated the workforce until the 1970s. A delayed Second Migration, compared to other cities, in the 1960s brought Milwaukee from 2% black population to 20% by the mid-1970s, to 40% by the beginning of the twenty-first century (Smith, 2020). Milwaukee's population diversified much later than other industrial cities of the time, and the impacts of that delay are still felt today.

In 1967 one of the most memorable demonstrations against Milwaukee's systemic inequities began when nearly 200 NAACP Youth Council members marched from the North to South side of the city, crossing the 16th street viaduct in support of the open housing bill which outlawed housing discrimination. This continued for 200 more days as members marched across the city and were continually heckled and assaulted by angry white crowds which only ended by

the US Congress passing the Fair Housing Act, as part of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 (Smuckler).

Milwaukee not only holds the unfortunate title of “most segregated city”, in the last 10 years it has also been identified as the worst city in America for Black Americans and the worst place to raise Black children in the country (Levine, 2020, p. 22). The US Census estimates that in 2019 35.1% of the Milwaukee population identified as White (alone/not percent), indicating that approximately 65% of Milwaukee’s 590,157 residents identify as BIPOC (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

As Milwaukee grew and diversified, the performing arts on a national scale underwent changes. American arts organizations remained primarily Eurocentric and served middle- and upper-class White patrons until the 1960s (Kaiser, 2015). While Black theater productions were not a new concept, African American theater companies began to gain popularity in the 1960s in both coastal cities and Midwest urban areas. In 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* became the first original Broadway production to be created by an African American playwright and director. In July 1981, the Hansberry-Sands Theatre Company became the first professional Black theatre in Milwaukee, created as a direct response for Black professional theatre in the city.

Theatre in Milwaukee

Milwaukee is home to an array of performing arts organizations of different sizes, art forms, and histories. Standing along the river in downtown Milwaukee is America’s fourth oldest continuously operating theater – The Pabst Theatre, or more colloquially known as “The Pabst”. An opera house rebuilt in 1895, The Pabst was home to exclusively German-language performances for nearly 30 years, which was appropriate for a time when 70% of Milwaukee

was German (Grange, 2001). The producers eventually programmed English language performances beginning in 1918 when English-speaking populations began to grow, and sales began to decline.

In Milwaukee, Drama Incorporated entered the theatre scene in the late 1950s and then was later re-organized by the company in 1963 under the name Milwaukee Repertory Theatre. In 1968 Milwaukee Rep moved downtown into the Todd Wehr Theater which spurred new attendance and community participation. Throughout the next few decades many of Milwaukee's now existing theater companies came to be (see appendix 3).

In a collection of community data gathered by local theatre artist Michael Cotey, "Milwaukee Theatre: Playwrights - Race & Gender Representation 2000-2020", he identifies the racial and gender diversity makeup of the playwrights from six of Milwaukee's most prominent theatre producers from 2000 to 2020 (Cotey, 2020). At the same time, the 2010 census reported that Milwaukee residents are 44.6% White, 38.8% Black/African American, 18.8% Latino, and 4.3% Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). However, the combined playwright representation between 2000-2020 from these producers was 73% White Male, 17% White Female, 6% BIPOC Male, and 4% BIPOC Female (Cotey, 2020) – showing an unquestionable gap between who writes the stories we see performed, and who the community these organizations are created to serve.

It is true there has been progress through the last two decades, with the playwright representation in 2000-2005 being 80% White Male, 17% White Female, 2% BIPOC Male, and 1% BIPOC Female – although that progress is considered by many to be too little too late including the 2020 Milwaukee Coalition of BIPOC Artists who said "There is no more room for hiding behind tradition and 'the way it's done.'" in a recent news article (Coalition of BIPOC

Artists in Milwaukee, 2020). Milwaukee and the performing arts share a common history of segregated, exclusionary practice and both have beckoned for a new way of institutional practice, equitable representation, and the opportunity to join in a collective culture based in empathy and the human connection.

Engaging Empathy

Theatre and live performance are by nature activities that engage audiences in observation, thought, and/or reflection. The demonstrative nature of the form creates a vehicle for cultural change and an opportunity to create new or differing narratives than the status quo. As such, the performing arts can exercise viewers' empathy towards characters and story narratives. Suzanne Keen, Professor and English and Narrative expert, defines empathy as:

A vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect, can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading. Mirroring what a person might be expected to feel in that condition or context, empathy is thought to be a precursor to its semantic close relative, sympathy. (Keen, 2006, p. 3)

Every performance engages an audience by demonstrating an emotional state or condition. Through the performers used to create those narratives, and the narratives themselves, theatre can act as a catalyst for change in perspective or thought. Regardless of the desired impact, audiences will have engaged with the performance, and as such producers or performers should create intended impact instead of allowing for unintended consequences.

Arts Education research finds similar examples among youth with correlations between arts exposure and empathy and achievement. A 2019 investigation into the casual effects of arts education found that “in addition to these [students] exhibiting more-pronounced effects on writing achievement and compassion for others, these students demonstrate positive treatment

effects on school engagement, college aspirations, arts-facilitated empathy, disposition for arts transfer, and perceived value of the arts.” (Bowen & Kisida, 2019, pg. 16)

Defining Diversity & Desired Change

The first principle in the letter published by the We See You, White American Theater collective describes *equitable presence*. This letter was signed by over 300 BIPOC artists and artistic leaders from across the United States, including national leaders. By their definition *equitable presence* means a “bare minimum of 50% BIPOC representation across all tiers of theatre making on and off stage” (2020, n.p.). When examining diversity in theatre there are many points of consideration – playwright, characters, actors, directors, designers, technicians, administrative staff, board members, funders, as well as the related areas such as arts teachers, volunteers, and vendors. Homogenous leadership and thinking leads to the same result regardless of industry sector – a homogeneous lens.

Rick Lester, the late founder of TRG Arts, a national theatre resource organization, wrote,

Improved audience engagement encompasses every decision an organization makes—especially those influencing what we put on stage. It takes bold leadership from the top, not a well-meaning marketing manager filled with energy and optimism—and often no political clout—to change the course of an institution. It seems to me that if organizations want a different culture (in the broadest sense of the word) to notice, embrace, and become engaged with your work—the faces on your stage must reflect the faces you hope to attract into the venue. The faces in your offices and boardroom must also reflect this community. Your theater, gallery, or concert hall must become a center for gathering and activity—for all of your community. (Bernstein, 2014, p.358).

It is not only in the best interest for the constituents to create inclusive theatre. Even The Pabst, who performed exclusively German-language productions from 1895-1918, needed to start performing in English because of a decline in sales. As diversity marketer Daria Blackwell

eloquently stated “Merely identifying and targeting an ethnically diverse audience for your product is not enough to guarantee a successful campaign. Cultivating intercultural competencies is essential to the execution of multicultural marketing initiatives.” (Blackwell, 2005, p.53). This concept of inside-out evolution, changing the genuine core of your offering versus changing your marketing permission, is not new nor unique to the arts. Blackwell focuses her work on healthcare marketing, while arts engagement scholar Nina Simon, has nearly identical advice:

Changing the room means changing programming. If you think the experience you have to offer will be challenging, confounding, or off-putting for your audience of interest, you can't just build them a door and hope for the best. You are going to have to change what you actually offer to make it relevant, as opposed to just changing how you market it. (Simon, 2016, p.110)

In a five-year study, the D5 Coalition, a five-year coalition to advance philanthropy’s diversity, equity, and inclusion, found that “companies in the top quartile for racial and ethnic diversity are 35% more likely to outperform their respective national industry medians” and “companies in the top quartile for gender diversity are 15% more likely to outperform their respective national industry medians” (D5 Coalition, 2016, n.p.). In 2020 we know that making a genuine effort to include demographics that were historically excluded from the arts change needs to happen on a programming, personnel, and institutional level. In the words of James Baldwin, “Black people ignored the theater because theater had always ignored them” (Turner, 2014, p. 30).

Contributing Factors

The topic of this paper is not one-dimensional, and it is important to acknowledge related factors that are part of the larger quilt of representation in the arts. In the 1990s The United States saw a deep decline in funding for arts education. This gradual upheaval of arts programming left many schools, primarily those that serve low-income students and students of

color, without early participation in music, art, or the performing arts. Michael Kaiser identifies that today we have a growing generation that is “by and large, culturally illiterate with respect to classical repertory” (Kaiser, 2015, p.18). While he is citing the unfortunate decline in funding for arts education, he is also acknowledging a systemic problem of Eurocentric and White, male dominated literature.

A national 2018-2019 study by Theatre Communications Group, found that 57% of plays produced nationally were authored by men, 30% authored by women, and 13% co-authored. In the categories of “Revivals” and “Classics” men authored 70% and 88% respectively. Harold Bloom published *The Western Canon* in 1994 in which he “identified 26 ‘immortal’ authors, from Homer to William Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf. The book continued a fervent debate over what is great and who gets to decide that” (Gross, 2020, n.p.). The collection and recommendations of White-centric authors and narratives has gone questioned yet unchanged in all areas of literature, including drama, since then.

So, what might it mean for a new generation to grow up with a list of esteemed playwrights that has been reset through the lens of racial inclusion? It would take continued investment in both the arts and education sectors to find out. Early exposure to the arts is a leading factor in deciding to pursue the field. A young, diverse generation of artists can change the makeup of the faces on and off our stages, and the narratives of characters and stories told. In Jean E. Brody’s most recent edition of *The Routledge Companion to Arts Management* she wrote, “As the country becomes more diverse, arts institutions need to start to address future artists and audiences - a more racially diverse group.” (Brody, 2019, p.348).

The artists and arts workers are not alone in running the current nonprofit performing arts sector. When addressing industry, sector, or organizational change there is an important and

ever-present guiding factor – money. For some theatres, the ones that rely on earned revenue, the money and power it holds is in the hands of the audience members and prospective audience members. Is your product resonating with your consumers? For some theatres, the ones that rely on contributed revenue, the money and power it holds is in the hands of donors, funders, and the government. For the theaters in this study, all rely on a mixture of both earned and contributed revenue – a constant balancing act of constituent needs.

Opportunities for Evolution

Organizational and sector change is not an endeavor to be underestimated, humans are naturally averse to change so when considering opportunities of evolution, it was important to take a formalized approach. For the purpose of this study, John Kotter’s methodology of leading change as indicated in his “8 Steps to Transforming Your Organization” was implemented (Kotter, 2009). The steps are as follows:

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency
2. Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition
3. Creating a Vision
4. Communicating the Vision
5. Empowering Others to Act on the Vision
6. Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins
7. Consolidating Improvements and Producing Still More Change
8. Institutionalizing New Approaches

As mentioned above, the Black Lives Matter movement and the We See You Why American Theatre (WSYWAT) movement sparked a national conversation towards national change and established a sense of urgency (step 1). WSYWAT also created a powerful guiding coalition (step 2) of nationally and regionally respected signatories who collaborated on a combined effort to create a shared vision (step 3). WSYWAT also sparked regional conversations including a public call to action by Milwaukee BIPOC artists, creating a local

vision, and then clearly communicating that vision (step 4) through online media articles and publicly accessible websites.

Kotter's model is just one theory of organizational change and requires consensus on the progress and steps ahead from the collective participants. In Step 5: Empowering Others to Act on the Vision, he states that obstacles both can and must be removed and changing systems and processes takes place.

METHODOLOGY

A Grounded Theory method was selected for this study to discover a “unified theoretical explanation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 107) for opportunities to expand cultural representation where “theories may be present, but they are incomplete because they do not address potentially valuable variables or categories of interest” (Creswell, 2018, p. 87). The quantitative data referenced in the literature review, specifically *Milwaukee Theatre: Playwrights - Race & Gender Representation 2000-2020* (Cotey, 2020), partnered with the qualitative Grounded Theory approach allows for a multidimensional approach to understanding the current phenomenon. This study is inherently limited by the author's point of view and positionality as a white woman.

The research process was structured around seven qualitative interviews with participants and stakeholders in the Milwaukee nonprofit performance sector. In an attempt to triangulate the data collected with existing research, individuals from the six organizations included in Cotey's research were approached for interviews. Those individuals represent staff and stakeholders in positions of power, influence, and investment in their organization. These organizations share four specific characteristics, in addition to being included in Cotey's research.

1. All organizations are nonprofit theatres who produce their own seasons. A producing theatre is defined here as an organization that creates their own work, rather than hiring pre-created artwork to be presented.
2. All organizations are located within Milwaukee.
3. All organizations are affiliated with the United Performing Arts Fund (UPAF), the region's leading arts funder, and receive funding annually through partnership.
4. All organizations are established in the community and have existed for 20 or more years.

These six organizations include First Stage, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Milwaukee Chamber Theatre, Next Act Theatre, Renaissance Theaterworks, Skylight Music Theatre. In addition to these six organizations, two other stakeholders were identified to complete the interview pool. Interviews were conducted over Zoom video calls between May and July 2021 and lasted approximately one hour. Due to the small nature of the Milwaukee theatre community and in order to seek the most genuine, non-performative responses possible, the individuals and the positions they hold will remain anonymous and were notified as such prior to our conversations.

The same eight questions were posed in each of the stakeholder interviews, with subsequent questions included based on the conversation. The literature reviewed indicated that the Producers selected are likely in stages 5-8 of Kotter's Steps for Organizational Change, so that framing informed the semi-structured interviews and topics for further exploration. The purpose of these interview questions was to identify level of awareness and perspective on current racial representation, explore current practices and lived experiences, and uncover current opportunities, barriers, and visions for the future of the performing arts sector and its

participants. Each interview was transcribed and reviewed audibly and in text to address any vocalized nuance in the interview. During the review themes and tones were identified and responses to the standardized questions were charted visually to identify recurring and differing responses.

FINDINGS

To establish the baseline of the topic of discussion each interview began with the question “do you believe artwork, artists, and creators should represent similar racial demographics to the general geographic population?” Half of interviewees immediately answered “Yes” without hesitation, and half of interviewees paused to consider but inevitably all responded “Yes”. One individual elaborated by saying “especially in theatre. [Audiences] see themselves on stage, and they connect, and the experience becomes much more transformational”. One organizational leader pointed out that nonprofits have a unique responsibility to serve a larger population than a for profit business, “when the community is contributing, whether it be through taxes, donations, school partnerships, or otherwise the whole community deserves a seat at the table.”

Starting with Step 1 of Kotter’s Organizational Change Theory (Kotter, 2019, p. 61) each interviewee was asked “Do you hear or see a sense of urgency to diversify Milwaukee’s stages and arts organizations? and if so, where and how did you hear it?” Responses were primarily “Yes” with a qualifier of how that urgency may have changed or fluctuated in the past year. Three of seven interviewees responded that they had heard urgency from the acting community, citing the WSYWAT letter or individual workplace experiences such as employee dissatisfaction, complaints, or feedback. Two of seven interviewees referenced a document which identified theaters and leaders who had responded to the murder of George Floyd which

was circulated on Google Drive in the summer of 2020. That tracking document was perceived by those two interviewees as a way to shame organizations for not speaking up and a way to increase urgency.

Each person was asked if they had read the WSYWAT letter. Six of seven interviewees had read the letter. One interviewee had not heard of the letter or the coalition that formed to create it. Four of the six interviewees that had read it have not revisited it since their original reading in the summer of 2020. Two interviewees identified current organizational projects that were conceived as a direct response of that letter. One individual summarized their response by saying “I found there seems certainly to be some legitimate requests or things to consider and things to expand our awareness and perspective. But then there are other things that seemed sort of wholly impractical”. More than one respondent referenced the hurt, pain, or difficulty that it took to read and personally react to the letter to varying degrees. The respondents appeared to take the feedback personally and referenced guilt and empathy in their responses.

Depending on the individual interview the next five questions were asked in differing orders in hopes of prompting the most organic and forthcoming responses.

When asked “across all stakeholders and personnel in our sector, who do you consider ultimately responsible for diversifying our sector?” most respondents included a list of three or more roles including (in order of most popular response to least) Artistic Director, Executive/Managing Director, Board President, playwrights, and funders. Four interviewees stated that the entire staff is ultimately responsible for participating in and/or advancing racial diversity across the organization. One individual asked to specify the question between who is responsible for creating change as opposed to who is held responsible if change does not occur.

When asked to respond to either, the individual said everyone is responsible for creating change but ultimately staff leadership will be the “people to take the fall or be the changemakers”.

The question “What barriers exist for organizations attempting to diversify their organizations” was unanimously responded to with some variation of financial barrier to diversification. Five of Seven respondents described systemic or institutional structures that would need to be dismantled and rebuilt which requires time and labor, both increasingly expensive elements. A few examples include casting practices, union participation rules, hiring practices, organizational structures, staffing size, and community relationship building. Three of the seven interviewees discussed casting issues their organization had experienced with the current talent pool and level of training in the area. All three of those individuals vocalized a desire for there to be a more diverse talent pool and an artist community that “looks like us, like Wisconsin! All of Wisconsin!”.

When asked the opposing question, “What opportunities do you see that currently exist to increase diverse representation”, a variety of responses were given. Two organizational leaders took that opportunity to talk about specific programs in their organization including internships, playwrighting opportunities, and training programs that are either mission-based programs to increase diverse representation or they have seen an outcome of that program be diverse representation. Three interviewees discussed the 2020 pandemic shutdowns as an opportunity to rebuild in new ways including changing the way theatres hire artists and attract and engage audiences. At some point during their response five of seven individuals brought up education and/or youth theatre and engagement. The urgency of diversity within youth programming and for youth audiences was perceived as more important than for adult audiences.

After asking each interviewee to think critically about barriers and opportunities locally I asked them to zoom out their perspective and answer “How does your view of diversity in the arts in Milwaukee differ from the national average or other geographic regions?”. Most interviewees cited that their primary knowledge was strictly Milwaukee, Wisconsin, or Midwest-based. Four individuals mentioned that Milwaukee is considered “the most segregated city in America” or “one of the most segregated” and that fact may impact the diversity of the theatre sector. Half of individuals elaborated on the segregation of Milwaukee and historical racial tensions. Some respondents also mentioned how this has impacted the school system and left many students “siloes with people just like them”.

Each interview included a question about collaboration and standardized industry practices. For example, “How do you think collaboration and standardization may impact racial equity efforts?”. There were two major perspectives as a response. First was that collaboration was the most resourceful and time efficient way to make real change. The second was that organizations each need to have their own goals and initiatives and that no two organizations are the same. One individual elaborated that “There are so many strategies, all of them are very viable. We can go in many different directions. But if that happens, that's going to be a hindrance to [the cumulative effect]. So if we're able to narrow down, collectively, some things that we want to see strong movement and here's what that movement will look like. And the results of that, then I think we can better utilize the resources that we do have for that purpose. And from there if organizations want to go above and beyond that's their choice. But we're going to have more impact when we collectively state something.”

The final question I posed to each person was “What is your personal dream or vision or racial representation of Milwaukee stages for the future?”. Answers included “I guess, for that

movement to be successful, we would see substantial growth from black audience members.”

“Diversity expanded but within the practice and art of the theater, not imposed from a political bent”, “But my dream, like, you know I keep envisioning it just from a staff and a board it's like we're sitting in a meeting and everybody feels like they're not the only one in the room.”, “I want to look around a theatre and see a spectrum of humans rather than a blank or similarity”, “I dream that every young person that wants to be an actor feels there is a role for them to succeed in”.

DISCUSSION & ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to identify unique qualities of Milwaukee’s arts community, inclusive actions taking place, and areas for improvement to then assess diversity initiatives and make recommendations.

Milwaukee is a city heavily impacted by racial injustice, leaving the people and institutions divided both geographically and culturally. The city is not ultimately unique from other US urban areas in unequal opportunities for advancement and success for BIPOC communities. Despite disadvantages, Milwaukee is a city that is finding ways to talk about systemic racial injustice, finding new ways to connect between zip codes, across generations, and ethnicities including public discussions on equity, public demonstrations and statements of inequality, and programs intended to bring together different neighborhoods and communities. Ultimately, the city of Milwaukee and its racial makeup, historical trauma, and current endeavors cannot be summarized and defined within the context of this paper; the city flows with different people and ideologies constantly in flux and influenced by the people who choose to make it their home.

The city's arts and culture scene has been built to serve the audiences who know to request it. A multimillion-dollar theatre sector with deep roots serves a largely White and aging audience while the city is speckled with smaller organizations and niche groups of diverse artistic practices including fine art, dance, sculpture, public art, and multidisciplinary art. The pillars of the theatre community have historically excluded the voices and people of diverse perspectives and now are actively seeking internal and external changes in cultural representation.

All organizations and individuals addressed in this study are on different parts of their diversity and equity journeys. Milwaukee is tainted by a divided past but impacted and ultimately controlled by the actions and people of the present. The Milwaukee theatre community is overwhelmingly White and lacks diversity of perspectives, as such, the people, places, and purpose of the art form must adapt to a new generation and community of artists, creators, and audiences. In an industry built on communicating and empowering empathy, there has been too much focus on preserving antiquated leadership, ideals, and history within the performing arts and not enough investment in evolving to fit the current generations.

The desire for financial investment in organizational change was a consistent through line in all interviews. The focus seemed to be on the cost of time and personnel and the general human power required to recreate organizational practices, communicate them, and put them into practice. There was also a large focus on playwrights and who stories are written for and by in the theatre. With new works and new art comes financial investment – especially under the umbrella of a fair and equitable workplace where artists are compensated for their time and talent. Employee recruitment, staff training, and marketing were also cited as financial hurdles in

diversification. All aspects included in the work that was mentioned cost time, attention, and organization – three things that the nonprofit theatre sector often struggles with.

In general, it appears that the nonprofit theatre sector in Milwaukee is struggling with implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives, both in identifying the appropriate steps and implementing them. Some leaders have cited initiatives that have improved diversity statistics within their organizations, but they tend to be focused on making room for BIPOC individuals without asking those individuals what about our current sector is exclusionary and then acting on those responses. It is good to be aware of the history of racial tension in Milwaukee like it is good to be aware of how theatre used to operate in the 1960s. That does not mean that needs to be the reality of the world we live in today.

Of all the interviews I conducted, two were with individuals that identify as female. Both of whom cited during their interviews, unprompted, the great lengths the industry has come in gender equality. Although, the quantity in my interview pool and the tone in which they spoke signaled that gender equality remains a prevailing issue in the workplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After conducting this study, I have expanded my understanding of the role of primarily White institutions and current organizational leaders to diversify Milwaukee stages. The opening of the W.S.Y.W.A.T. statement is “We see you. We have always seen you. We have watched you pretend not to see us.” Change begins with understanding and as such, White institutions and those outside the BIPOC community need to see, hear, and respect the BIPOC community. With that respect comes an understanding that the artistic and organizational success of the BIPOC community may look different than historically White institutions and that we need to go beyond inviting new people into the room, we need to understand their rooms, and the rooms they wish

to build. Therefore, my first recommendation is for PWIs to engage in deep listening, active and ongoing conversations, and genuine allyship that is rooted in mission and shared outcomes.

My second recommendation is transparency and accountability for funding of diverse initiatives. Performative allyship has often helped White institutions in the press and media without making real change to the programming on stage. To add diversity of people and perspectives to theatre organizations, leadership must either raise additional money or remove historically White programming from their seasons and replace it with programming created by and representative of BIPOC culture. Organizations must be transparent with the community and donors about the resources they financially need, while being allies of the BIPOC community. Examples of this may be educating donors on a lesser-known play title in advance so they are equally as excited to support it as a play they've already seen or read, working with a funder to develop new plays with playwrights in their local area, or trying a new marketing technique to reach a new audience demographic. Additionally, funders need to be aware of performative allyship and the impact that their financial contributions have on representation in the performing arts community.

My third recommendation is the advancement of BIPOC voices as playwrights. While there is a need for BIPOC representation across all disciplines and jobs within the theatre industry the act of theatre begins with a story, a narrative in which a cast, company, and community listen and participate. By increasing the paid playwrighting opportunities in the United States and hiring, programming, and celebrating BIPOC playwrights, the world of the play and thus the world of the theatre can better reflect the community that it serves.

Lastly, there must be a unified intolerance for racism, prejudice, and performative allyship and a commitment for recognizing and fixing indecent actions. Accountability can be

found in many forms including public demonstration and legal action and can play out publicly or privately. It can also mean speaking up – whether it is in the lunchroom at the office or in the casting room – it is every person’s responsibility to speak up when they hear or see intolerance taking place. Long-term accountability also needs to be applied including taking leadership tenures and organizational trajectories into consideration when evaluating the programming and overall diversity initiatives of an organization. Institutional culture is built over time and if there are people or positions that are consistently creating barriers to diverse representation, they should be removed.

Advancing and including the BIPOC community in the theatre community is a collective responsibility – from the Board members to interns, and an effort that needs to be prioritized by White leadership in partnership with the BIPOC community. Setting and communicating short-term and long-term goals and visions can help that collective responsibility come to fruition. As a racially segregated and exclusionary sector, Milwaukee theatres must change and advance their actions to succeed and represent the community in which they were built to serve.

Limitations and Future Research

In this study I was limited by several factors including time and access to interviewees, lack of literature, and my own race and perspective. This study focused on the leadership perspective and status of the industry and, as such, perspectives of Black individuals were limited in my findings. It is my hope that these findings become one more steppingstone on the path towards a more inclusive and understanding future. That may or may not include identifying flaws, racism, or errors in my perspective during this time.

CONCLUSION

Theatre as an art form serves those who engage with it, from artists to patrons. Through inclusionary practices and re-envisioning of the nonprofit theatre sector through a multicultural lens we can empower the art form to reach a broader audience and make a larger impact on the community it serves. Milwaukee theatres need to make both artistic and financial changes to serve a more diverse population, not only an obligation to the community but also a necessity for the relevancy and fiscal success of these historically White institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic left arts institutions with additional questions and financial concerns but also opportunities to create new practices and a new environment. Organizations can be stronger and serve a larger population when they are collaborative and transparent with their community and that is what I see as possible for the nonprofit theatre community in Milwaukee.

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APPENDIX 1

Theatre Company Year of Incorporation

First Stage: 1987

Milwaukee Chamber Theatre: 1975

Milwaukee Repertory Theatre: 1954

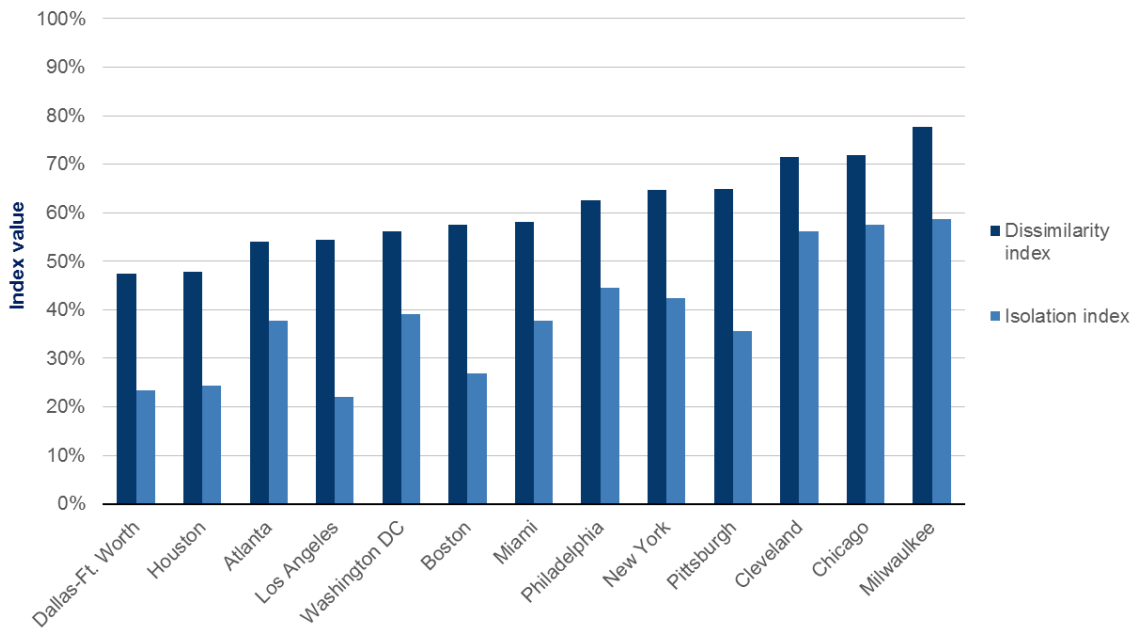
Next Act: 1990

Renaissance Theaterworks: 1993

Skylight Music Theater: 1959

APPENDIX 2

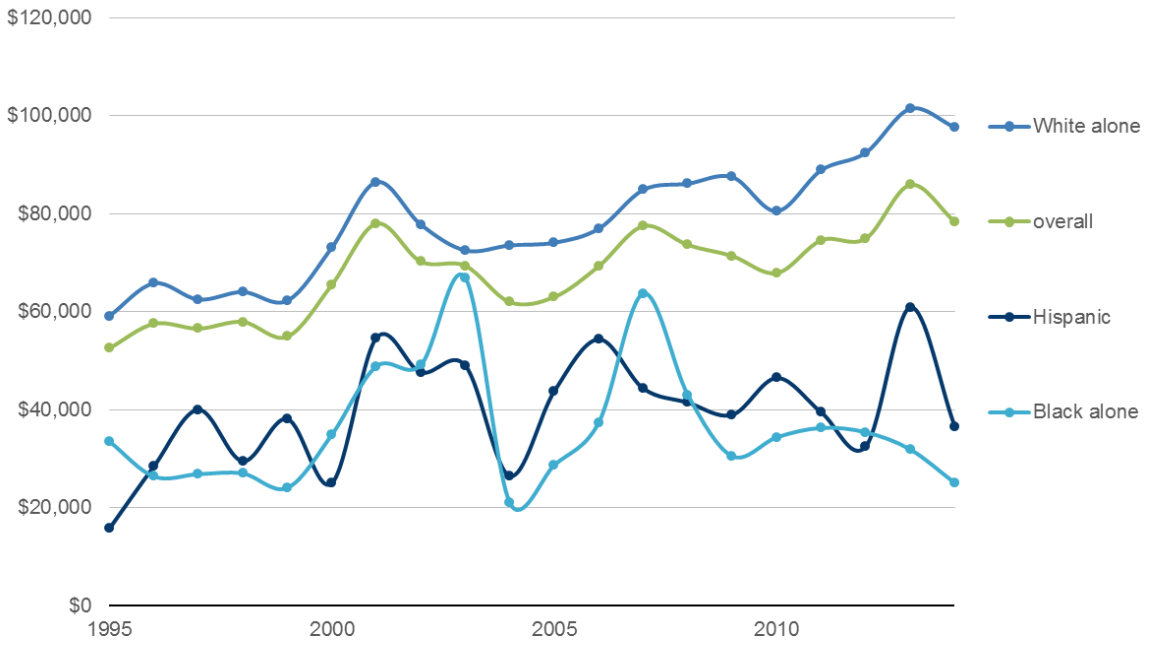
Segregation in Milwaukee, 2010



Source: *The End of the Segregated Century*, Edward Glaeser and Jacob Vigor, The Manhattan Institute, 2012

APPENDIX 3

Mean family income in Milwaukee by demographic group, 1995-2014



Source: March Current Population Survey, 1995-2014

BROOKINGS