

Data-Based Analysis of Diversity and Equity in Theatre for Young Audience Companies

[MATT OMASTA](#)

[AUBREY FELTY](#)

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

There is an urgent need for Theatres for Young Audiences to produce plays that share the stories and experiences of people of color and to ensure works by playwrights of color are produced regularly, but data suggests that this is often not the case. This article draws on data from a comprehensive survey of artistic, business, and education leaders in the field to consider how it might inform the important discussions (and hopefully actions) taking place in the field regarding equity and inclusion, especially those exploring race and anti-racism.

To better understand the landscape of the TYA field, I (Matt) conducted a comprehensive survey of the artistic, business, and education leaders of TYA theatres affiliated with TYA/USA (Omasta, 2019). It achieved a remarkable response rate; leaders from 97% of the 61 eligible theatres participated. Together, Aubrey and I published further details from the survey (Omasta & Felty, 2021) exploring how three influential circumstances—theatres' budget sizes, their geographic locations, and their longevity—intersect with, and perhaps affect, other circumstances as well as the perspectives and beliefs of their leaders.

The data in the report is copious and covers a wide range of topics related to contemporary TYA practices and thinking. In fact, the volume of data prohibits a single comprehensive analysis of every subject covered. It does, however, enable scholars and practitioners to analyze detailed data regarding topics that may be relevant to their own work, and we urge them to do so. The report is available as a digital-only appendix to Volume 8 Issue 2 of *ArtsPraxis* and can be accessed here: [Perspectives of Theatre for Young Audiences Companies' Leaders by Budget, Region, and Longevity](#).

In this article, we offer an example of one way the survey data can be studied. Specifically, we analyze a topic relevant to everyone involved in Theatre for Young Audiences: how the data might inform the important discussions (and hopefully actions) taking place in the field regarding equity and inclusion, especially those exploring race and anti-racism.

THE NEED FOR EQUITY

There is an urgent need for Theatres for Young Audiences to produce plays that share the stories and experiences of people of color, to ensure works by playwrights of color are produced regularly, and to move toward equity in general. All children must see themselves represented on stage; as Lorenzo Garcia once observed, a child (or adult) might think: "If theatre's not about me, then maybe it's not for me" (Saldaña, 1991). Clearly explicating the situation, Nutting (2017), who expands the call for equity to include people who are differently abled, observes, "now more than ever, we need to think carefully about how the diversity of our country is reflected on our stages and in our

staff, faculty, and artists” (pg. 5).

The many reasons this representation is essential are likely familiar to readers of this article, and a discussion of the many reasons is beyond the scope of this piece. Those interested in learning more about the need for equitable representation might consult sources such as Esquivel (2019), Kelly (2019), Kramer (2001); Sandberg-Zakian (2008), Schroeder-Arce (2008), among others.

The Lack of Equity

Despite the need for TYA productions to represent the diversity of American youth, they largely do not do so. Ruggiero & Uhls (2019) conducted an analysis of 248 TYA productions in the 2018-19 season and found that only 19% of the plays TYA theatres produced were “culturally-specific productions,” which they defined as plays in which “people of color characters / communities / cultures were essential to the story’s narrative” (p. 15). Furthermore, only 20% of the plays performed during the 2018-19 season were written by playwrights of color, and only 15% were directed by directors of color¹ (Ruggiero & Uhls, 2019, pp. 10-12).

Scholars have theorized why this might be the case. For example, Schroeder-Arce (2008) suggests financial challenges might play a role, writing, “many TYA companies continue to struggle with the financial aspects of selling shows they perceive as culturally specific (non-white). Whether this is a perception or a reality, ‘Latino plays’ are missing in the seasons of many major TYA companies” (pg. 7). I (Matt) have previously theorized that in the “turbulent political climate in the United States,” a complex social contract between TYA companies and their constituents may obligate TYA companies in some communities to “both mark and mask their efforts to educate about diversity” (Omasta, 2009, p. 109). Much scholarship regarding the lack of diversity in TYA productions, however, is primarily theoretical.

¹ Interestingly, Ruggiero & Uhls (2019) also found that 37% of the roles in plays produced during the 2018-19 season were played by actors of color; that is, the number of performers of color is notably higher than might be expected based on the percentage of the U.S. population that identifies as people of color (24.5%). This is an interesting finding that raises questions about the ways in which a field led primarily by individuals who identify as white and in which directors and playwrights of color are underrepresented is much more likely to employ people of color in public-facing roles such as actors. This is an area ripe for future research.

OUR APPROACH

This article offers a data-based analysis of how the material circumstances of TYA companies, including the demographics and ideologies of their leaders, may contribute to inequity regarding TYA productions featuring the experiences of people of color. This type of analysis is relatively rare in our field. As I (Matt) discuss in greater detail elsewhere (Omasta, 2022), I believe our field “should look for ways in which quantitative work can supplement—not supplant—qualitative, theoretical, historiographic, and other investigations.” We accept the post-positivist tenet that theories can never be proven “true” (see Popper, 1959). Furthermore, we acknowledge that this article analyzes data from a project not originally intended to explore the topic at hand in depth; our analyses of the data offer possibilities rather than formal assertions.

We also note that while our study focuses on how and why certain types of plays may appear in TYA companies’ seasons, it is not enough to simply consider how often TYA plays featuring characters and stories of people of color are produced, or why. These productions must also promote an anti-racist, pro-inclusive agenda. Fatkin, in a thesis from 1978, argued that (some) TYA plays closely examined racism and tolerance in an “attempt to show young people the causes and negative effects of racism” (p. iii). Over time, however, scholars’ analyses of the way race and ethnicity are addressed in TYA have become more complex. Twenty years ago, for example, Kramer’s (2001) analysis of programming at three professional TYA companies suggested that while “some programs” at theatres embraced diversity, others “reinforced dominant ideologies” (p. iii). Even when plays are intended to promote holistic and positive depictions of the experiences of characters of color, Garcia (2011) notes that this does not always happen. For example, he asserts that even as the canon of Latinx TYA plays expands, some of these plays may reinforce racial stereotypes. He sees a “push to make the experiences of Latino youth in the U.S. far less ‘diverse’” (p. 307). Once again, while it is important to keep such things in mind, investigation of this nature is beyond the scope of this article.

MORE ON METHODOLOGY

The survey introduced above (Omasta, 2019) employed a cross-sectional census design (Barr, 2004; Fricker Jr, 2008; Groves et al., 2009). The research team sent questionnaires developed specifically for each type of leader (artistic, business, and education) and an additional questionnaire for participants who led in more than one area. I (Matt) drafted most questions in collaboration with TYA/USA, which commissioned the original report (Omasta, 2019), and based additional questions on those posed in previous surveys of the field (vanTassel, 1969; Blackwell, 2008). The research team collected data using Qualtrics and analyzed it with SPSS statistical software. For further technical details regarding methodology, see Omasta (2019).

The most recent report (Omasta & Felty, 2021) compared data from theatres in three ways. First, we compared theatres based on their total annual operating budgets during their 2017-18 seasons. The four budget categories were:

Category A: Budgets Under \$250,000

Category B: Budgets Between \$250,000 – \$999,999

Category C: Budgets Between \$1 million – \$2.99 million

Category D: Budgets of \$3 million and above

Next, we compared theatres based on their geographical region, using the four primary regions established by the U.S. Census Bureau: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West.² Finally, we compared theatres in three groups based on longevity: those founded in 1979 or earlier; between 1980-1999, and in 2000 or later. The percentage of respondents within each group is indicated in Table 1.

² States in the Northeast include CT, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, and VT. The Midwest includes IN, IA, IL, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, and WI. The South includes AL, AR, DE, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, and WV. The West includes AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA, and WY.

Budget Size			
Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
23%	22%	32%	23%
Region			
North-east	Midwest	South	West
15%	29%	41%	15%
Year Founded			
Before 1980	1980-1999	2000 & Later	
36%	30%	34%	

Table 1. Percentages of participating theatres by budget size, region, and year founded. *N* = 59.

HOW DATA CAN HELP EXPLAIN POTENTIAL UNDERLYING CAUSES

In this section, we contextualize, share, and summarize selected survey data, noting areas which we will return to in the following analysis. Please refer to Omasta & Felty (2021) for additional detail on these and many other topics.

Who Makes the Decisions?—Theatre Leader Demographics

Many factors contribute to the lack of equitable participation and representation of people of color in both the TYA field and theatre, more broadly. One possible factor is the demographic makeup of theatrical leadership teams and board members, who in most cases identify as white. Before turning to TYA specifically, we discuss the work of Bandhu & Kim (2021) who report the demographics of artists and leaders employed in non-profit New York City theatres. While this geographically clustered group of theatres for general audiences clearly differs in many ways from TYA theatres nationwide, it is one of few statistical projects of this nature to offer any point of comparison. For contextual purposes, the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.) reports that people of color constituted 24.5% of U.S. population in 2018. Despite this, Bandhu & Kim (2021) found that only 12% of the board members

at the theatres they examined during the 2018-19 season identified as people color. Most strikingly, zero percent of artistic directors at NYC's largest non-profit theatre companies identified as people of color (p. 28). Such statistics lead the authors to ask: "How else to explain that almost every single person who has power in NYC theatre is a white person if not by a process of systemic exclusion of people of color?" (p. 28). If the people charged with determining what plays should be produced are extremely homogenous, we must consider if factors such as unconscious bias³ may be at play. We turn to data from our survey to explore this possibility later in this article.

TYA Leader Demographics

With this in mind, we next turn to the demographics of leaders in the TYA field, nationwide. The data from our project (Omasta & Felty, 2021) reveal that the lack of diversity Bandhu & Kim (2021) discussed in New York City non-profit theatres is largely echoed in our own field. Indeed, our survey revealed that while there are minor differences in the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the leaders associated with theatres of various budget sizes, regions, and longevities (see Table 2), the individuals who make up the leadership of TYA companies nationwide are relatively homogenous. Specifically, we found that the artistic, business, and education leaders of U.S. TYA companies primarily identified as white (93%) women (64%).

³ David Stewart suggests "unconscious bias" may play a role when theatres hire staff (Lampert-Greaux, 2020), and Grady (2000) asserts that it is "easy ... to act our unconscious bias" in settings such as drama classrooms. For more information on unconscious bias, see sources such as Moule (2009).

Budget Size			
Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
0%	4%	15%	4%
Region			
North-east	Midwest	South	West
19%	0%	7%	11%
Year Founded			
Before 1980	1980-1999	2000 & Later	
6%	13%	3%	

Table2. Percentage of leaders at TYA theatre of various types who identify as people of color. Overall $N = 111$. Among all respondents (regardless of theatre type), 7% of leaders identified as people of color.

This means that only 7% of participating leaders identified as people of color. The leaders of theatres in some categories were exclusively white; specifically, none of the respondents at category A theatres or theatres located in the Midwest identified as people of color. None of the participants (at any type of theatre) identified as American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; or Native Hawaiian of Pacific Islander. Given that 24.5% of the U.S. population identified as people of color in 2018 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), the percentage of leaders of color at TYA companies would need to more than triple for this group of leaders to be more representative of the general population. This lack of diversity is not new; twenty years ago, Kramer (2001, pg. 69) noted that this challenge had existed for at least ten years prior (1991), and it seems likely that this may have been the case throughout the history of the field.

The leaders of color who did participate tended to work in education roles (often, but not always, lower paid and less influential positions than the other leaders surveyed), and sometimes in artistic roles. Leaders of color were much more likely to work with category C theatres, theatres founded between 1980-1999, and theatres located in the Northeast. While our field must pursue inclusivity generally, this is particularly true regarding leadership roles in professional companies.

SELECTED DATA

We should consider if, why, and how the homogenous makeup of TYA leaders might contribute to the relative lack of diversity regarding culturally specific productions and plays written by playwrights of color that was revealed by Ruggiero & Uhls (2019). Though the survey asked TYA leaders about many topics, it generally did not specifically ask questions exclusively about diversity or racial equity. Nevertheless, several questions provided opportunities for leaders to indicate, among other factors, the relative significance of equity and inclusion in their work.

Below, we share specific data from our report (Omasta & Felty, 2021) that leaders participating in the survey provided that may relate to this topic. In each section, we share data in its raw form and briefly summarize it, pointing out findings that we will return to in our eventual analysis of how the data speaks to the questions of inclusivity raised thus far.

Season Selection

One topic directly related to the representation of diversity on stage is season selection. As such, the first factor we report on is the relative importance artistic leaders assigned to eight potentially relevant season selection criteria. Leaders rated each criterion on a scale where 1 indicated “not at all important” and 4 indicated “very important.” Their responses are depicted in Tables 3-5.

The criterion “titles that tell the stories of marginalized people” generally ranked highly, with a mean score of 3.0 (“Important”) or greater at all theatres except Category A theatres. This is an example of a way in which theatre leaders tended to indicate that including diverse and representative plays in their seasons was important when they were explicitly asked about the importance of doing so, a topic we will return to in our later discussion.

It is also noteworthy that selecting plays with “recognizable titles” was a much more important criterion for artistic leaders at category C and D theatres than it was for leaders at category A & B theatres (and it was especially important at the largest-budget theatres). This is another data point we will discuss in our later analysis.

CATEGORY A	CATEGORY B	Color Key
Artistic Experimentation (3.38)	Current Issues (3.30)	
Available Talent (3.33)	TIE: Various Age Groups;	
Original Material (3.08)	Artistic Experimentation; Stories of	
Stories of Marginalized (2.92)	Marginalized (3.10)	
Various Age Groups (2.83)	Available Talent (2.80)	
Current Issues (2.42)	TIE: High Revenue;	
High Revenue (2.38)	Original Material (2.70)	
Recognizable Titles (1.92)	Recognizable Titles (2.60)	
CATEGORY C	CATEGORY D	
Various Age Groups (3.38)	Various Age Groups (3.69)	
Stories of Marginalized (3.31)	TIE: High Revenue;	
	Stories of Marginalized (3.62)	
TIE: High Revenue; Recognizable Titles;	TIE: Recognizable Titles; Current Issues	
Artistic Experimentation (3.19)	(3.54)	
Current Issues (3.00)	Artistic Experimentation (3.46)	
Original Material (2.31)	Available Talent (2.77)	
Available Talent (2.25)	Original Material (2.62)	

Table 3. Mean importance of various season selection criteria, by theatre budget size. $N = 55$.

Tables 3 – 5 use summary terms. Since the exact wording of the criteria matter, they are indicated here in full:

- “Including plays expected to generate high revenue/sales” (HIGH REVENUE)
- “Including plays with recognizable titles” (RECOGNIZABLE TITLES)
- “Including a certain number of productions each year for specific age groups” (VARIOUS AGE GROUPS)
- “Including plays that provide opportunities for artistic experimentation and innovation” (ARTISTIC EXPERIMENTATION)
- “Including plays that respond to current issues and events” (CURRENT ISSUES)
- “Including titles that tell the stories of marginalized people” (STORIES OF MARGINALIZED)
- “Including plays that are appropriate for the talent of actors available in the theatre’s ensemble or region” (AVAILABLE TALENT)

NORTHEAST	MIDWEST
Artistic Experimentation (3.75)	TIE: Various Age Groups;
Stories of Marginalized (3.43)	Artistic Experimentation (3.29)
TIE: Various Age Groups;	TIE: High Revenue;
Current Issues (3.14)	Stories of Marginalized (3.06)
Original Material (3.13)	Current Issues (2.94)
Available Talent (2.57)	Available Talent (2.88)
High Revenue (2.50)	TIE: Recognizable Titles;
Recognizable Titles (1.86)	Original Material (2.82)
SOUTH	WEST
TIE: Artistic Experimentation;	Various Age Groups (3.56)
Stories of Marginalized (3.38)	TIE: Recognizable Titles;
TIE: Various Age Groups;	Stories of Marginalized (3.33)
Current Issues (3.19)	High Revenue (3.22)
TIE: High Revenue;	Current Issues (3.11)
Recognizable Titles (3.00)	Artistic Experimentation (2.78)
Available Talent (2.95)	Available Talent (2.33)
Original Material (2.62)	Original Material (2.00)

Table 4. Mean importance of various season selection criteria, by theatre region. *N* = 55.

Because these tables are somewhat complex, we include several indicators of importance to help us understand the data: the eight criteria are presented in order from greatest to least mean importance for each theatre type; the mean rating of each criterion is indicated; and the color scheme helps visually compare mean ratings.

These multiple ways of viewing the data can be helpful given the fact that criteria received different mean ratings even in cases when they were ranked similarly. For example, while both category C & D theatre leaders collectively rated “including a certain number of productions each year for specific age groups” as the most important criterion, category D leaders collectively rated this criterion as more important than category C leaders did.

BEFORE 1980	1980-1999	2000 AND LATER
Stories of Marginalized (3.45)	Various Age Groups (3.56)	Artistic Experimentation (3.21)
TIE: High Revenue;	Artistic Experimentation (3.38)	TIE: Stories of Marginalized;
Various Age Groups;	Stories of Marginalized (3.31)	Available Talent (3.06)
Artistic Experimentation;	Current Issues (3.19)	Various Age Groups (2.94)
Current Issues (3.35)	High Revenue (3.13)	Original Material (2.74)
Recognizable Titles (3.25)	Recognizable Titles (3.00)	Current Issues (2.72)
Available Talent (2.75)	Original Material (2.62)	High Revenue (2.47)
Original Material (2.60)	Available Talent (2.5)	Recognizable Titles (2.28)

Table 5. Mean importance of various season selection criteria, by theatre founding. *N* = 55.

Adaptations

As indicated in Table 6, larger-budget theatres generally produced much greater percentages of adaptations than the smallest-budget theatres. In fact, there was a positive correlation between theatre budget size and percentage of adaptations offered: the larger the budget, the greater the percentage of adaptations produced. The relative percentage of adaptations produced is another factor we consider in our analysis below.

		Budget Size			
Show Type	Overall	Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
Adaptations	39%	20%	41%	46%	50%
Musicals	30%	11%	24%	42%	38%
World Premieres	27%	39%	23%	23%	20%
		Region			
Show Type	North-east	Midwest	South	West	
Adaptations	19%	39%	42%	48%	
Musicals	16%	39%	30%	26%	
World Premieres	12%	32%	27%	30%	
		Year Founded			
Show Type	Before 1980	1980-1999	2000 & Later		
Adaptations	55%	37%	25%		
Musicals	37%	40%	14%		
World Premieres	20%	23%	37%		

Table 6. Mean percentages of productions of different types, by theatre budget size, region, and year founded. Overall $N = 57$.

Leader Priorities

Another question that offered a perspective on the relative importance of diversity to TYA theatre leaders asked all theatre leaders (artistic, business, and education) to rate their level of agreement with several statements regarding priorities. The statements were:

“In general, it is important that the shows my theatre presents and/or produces...”

- “...demonstrate aesthetic excellence.”
- “...are highly entertaining.”
- “...align with school curricula.”
- “...address social issues and diversity.”

Leaders rated their agreement on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree); their responses are summarized in Table 7.

Leaders from theatres of all budget sizes, regions, and longevities responded similarly. The highest-rated priority among all groups was “aesthetic excellence,” and the lowest among all groups was “alignment with school curricula.” In most cases, leaders rated “social issues and diversity” second-most important, followed by “highly entertaining”; the import of these middle values was reversed at category A theatres and those founded since 2000. This data again suggests that leaders indicate that diversity is a relatively important priority when explicitly asked about it.

		Budget Size			
	Overall	Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
Aesthetic Excellence	3.83	3.72	3.81	3.81	3.90
Highly Entertaining	3.40	3.39	3.46	3.48	3.26
Align School Curricula	2.75	2.50	2.77	2.88	2.71
Social Issues & Diversity	3.55	3.28	3.50	3.57	3.68

Table 7 – Part 1 of 2. Leader ratings of the importance of various aspects of shows produced. *N* = 121.

	Region			
	North-east	Midwest	South	West
Aesthetic Excellence	3.94	3.92	3.74	3.75
Highly Entertaining	3.56	3.33	3.40	3.35
Align School Curricula	2.39	2.86	2.83	2.70
Social Issues & Diversity	3.61	3.58	3.47	3.60
	Year Founded			
	Before 1980	1980-1999	2000 & Later	
Aesthetic Excellence	3.80	3.85	3.83	
Highly Entertaining	3.22	3.50	3.56	
Align School Curricula	2.90	2.71	2.58	
Social Issues & Diversity	3.61	3.59	3.42	

Table 7 – Part 2 of 2. Leader ratings of the importance of various aspects of shows produced. *N* = 121.

Qualities of Quality

One of the most interesting questions in terms of our analysis was an open-ended question that asked leaders to discuss their perceptions of what constitutes “quality” work. The survey asked: “How would you define ‘quality’ as in ‘quality TYA’?” We then coded the responses to identify recurring patterns. We identified 18 “qualities of quality” mentioned by the 122 leaders who responded to this question and present them below in order from the most frequently mentioned to the least.⁴

⁴ It is important to note that, given the way the data were collected, the fact that a leader did not mention any particular quality does not necessarily imply that they do not value it. The survey did not present leaders with a comprehensive list of qualities to respond to, so they did not see and dismiss any particular value.

Artistic Excellence (49%)
Respectful of Young People (25%)
Relevant (19%)
Engaging (16%)
Created by Trained Professionals (13%)
Inclusive / Accessible (11%)
Challenging (9%)
Innovative (8%)
Imaginative (7%)
Inspiring (7%)
Pedagogically Excellent (7%)
Thought Provoking (7%)
Age Appropriate (6%)
Original (6%)
Appealing to All Ages (4%)
Empathy-Promoting (4%)
Empowering (2%)
Enjoyable (2%)

Table 8 reports the percentage of leaders from theatres of various types who mentioned each of the qualities above; there was relatively minor variance in responses. Leaders from theatres of all budget sizes, regions, and longevities were most likely to mention “Artistic Excellence” followed by “Respectful of Young People.”

		Budget Size			
	Overall	Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
Artistically Excellent	49%	33%	42%	62%	44%
Respects Young People	25%	24%	42%	14%	38%
Relevant	13%	12%	17%	16%	14%
Engaging	16%	24%	13%	27%	7%
Created by Trained Prof.	11%	12%	17%	14%	7%
Inclusive / Accessible	19%	18%	21%	16%	31%
Challenging	8%	24%	0%	5%	14%
Innovative	7%	12%	4%	5%	7%
Imaginative	7%	12%	4%	11%	0%
Inspiring	6%	0%	4%	11%	7%
Pedagogically Excellent	7%	12%	0%	11%	7%
Thought Provoking	4%	6%	4%	2%	3%
Age Appropriate	7%	6%	4%	8%	10%
Original	2%	0%	4%	0%	0%
Appealing to All Ages	6%	0%	0%	10%	9%
Empathy-Promoting	9%	0%	4%	14%	13%
Empowering	4%	0%	8%	5%	3%
Enjoyable	2%	0%	0%	5%	0%

Table 8 – Part 1 of 3. Percentages of leaders mentioning various “qualities of quality.” N = 122.

	Region			
	North-east	Midwest	South	West
Artistically Excellent	59%	50%	59%	47%
Respects Young People	41%	29%	20%	32%
Relevant	18%	12%	17%	11%
Engaging	12%	21%	20%	11%
Created by Trained Prof.	6%	15%	17%	0%
Inclusive / Accessible	18%	35%	10%	21%
Challenging	18%	12%	7%	0%
Innovative	12%	12%	5%	5%
Imaginative	6%	6%	10%	5%
Inspiring	12%	9%	5%	0%
Pedagogically Excellent	18%	12%	5%	0%
Thought Provoking	12%	3%	5%	0%
Age Appropriate	0%	12%	5%	11%
Original	12%	0%	0%	0%
Appealing to All Ages	6%	12%	2%	5%
Empathy-Promoting	0%	15%	7%	16%
Empowering	0%	6%	5%	5%
Enjoyable	0%	0%	2%	5%

Table 8 – Part 2 of 3. Percentages of leaders mentioning various “qualities of quality.” N = 122.

	Year Founded		
	Before 1980	1980-1999	2000 & Later
Artistically Excellent	56%	63%	42%
Respects Young People	29%	27%	27%
Relevant	6%	17%	24%
Engaging	15%	20%	18%
Created by Trained Prof.	10%	13%	12%
Inclusive / Accessible	21%	33%	9%
Challenging	6%	13%	9%
Innovative	4%	13%	9%
Imaginative	6%	7%	9%
Inspiring	6%	3%	9%
Pedagogically Excellent	8%	10%	6%
Thought Provoking	2%	7%	6%
Age Appropriate	10%	3%	6%
Original	0%	3%	3%
Appealing to All Ages	8%	10%	0%
Empathy-Promoting	19%	7%	0%
Empowering	8%	3%	0%
Enjoyable	2%	3%	0%

Table 8 – Part 3 of 3. Percentages of leaders mentioning various “qualities of quality.” *N* = 122.

ANALYSIS

Despite the need for TYA productions to represent the diversity of American youth, they often do not do so to a significant degree. As discussed, only 19% of TYA plays produced in the 2018-19 season were those in which “people of color characters / communities / cultures were essential to the story’s narrative” (Ruggiero & Uhls, 2019, p.15). It is important to explore why this might be, in hopes that learning more about the possible causes might help the field diversify its productions.

As we pointed to several times in the Data section above, TYA leaders tended to indicate that addressing diversity-related issues was important when the survey explicitly asked them about this topic. For example, most artistic leaders indicated that “telling the stories of marginalized communities” was an important factor during season selection, especially at larger-budget theatres and those located in the South and West (see tables 3, 4, and 5). Nutting (2017) states, “as artists and arts administrators, we want to believe that we are truly inclusive of everyone. For many of us, it is why we do what we do and why we believe in the power of the arts to be a catalyst for change as a pathway to common ground and understanding” (pg. 4). Leaders’ responses to some survey questions seem to suggest that such plays would be well represented in theatres’ seasons, but the data indicates that this is not the case.

Further, when explicitly asked to rate how important it was for their theatres to “address social issues and diversity” in their productions, leaders of all types of theatres generally rated this as quite important (overall mean rating of 3.55 of 4.0). It is true that leaders of all theatre types rated producing shows with “aesthetic excellence” as somewhat more important than addressing social issues and diversity (the overall mean for aesthetic excellence was 3.83). At the same time, they consistently rated addressing social issues and diversity to be much more important than aligning their productions with school curricula (overall mean 2.75) and (except for the leaders of the newest and smallest-budget theatres) TYA leaders collectively rated addressing social issues and diversity as more important than producing “highly entertaining” shows (overall mean 3.4). This again suggests that diversity is important to TYA leaders, and that we might expect to see greater diversity on stage.

However, and perhaps critically, when asked an open-ended

question about what constitutes the qualities of “quality TYA” (without an explicit prompt referencing diversity or any other quality), very few leaders mentioned that quality TYA should address diversity. As revealed in Table 8, only 11% of leaders mentioned qualities related to the broad category of inclusivity and accessibility.⁵ This may suggest that while most respondents truly valued diversity, it was not among the first things that came to mind when they considered what constitutes quality TYA. Whatever the reason for this, this finding suggests one reason why the TYA plays produced are less likely to feature stories of people of color or to be written by playwrights of color.

Another possible factor to consider is related to Ruggiero & Uhls’s (2019) finding that 23% of productions in the 2018-19 season were productions of just 17 plays that the researchers deemed “popular titles.” Furthermore, only 12% of these popular titles were culturally specific productions (p. 16). In other words, nearly a quarter of the shows produced were of popular titles which were very unlikely to feature the stories of people of color.

Unfortunately, Ruggiero & Uhls (2019) do not include a list of the “popular” titles (which were unlikely to feature stories of people of color) in their report, so we cannot be certain if these popular titles were also “recognizable titles” (the term used in our survey). It seems likely, however, that this is the case. We suspect this is the case because 90% percent of the “popular” titles in the Ruggiero & Uhls (2019) report were adaptations (p. 16). Our present study found that, on average, artistic leaders at larger-budget theatres indicated that it was important for them to select plays with recognizable titles for their seasons. If larger theatres value producing popular adaptations, and these plays are unlikely to be culturally specific, it may be unsurprising that relatively few productions of the shows produced in the 2018-19 season featured people of color or their communities and cultures. Thus, a second possible contributor to the challenge of lower representation of people of color in TYA productions is a focus on

⁵ Furthermore, many of the comments in this category referred to inclusivity in terms of TYA productions being physically accessible for patrons with physical or other disabilities, rather than inclusivity in terms of racial/ethnic diversity. Accessibility for people who are differently-abled is certainly important, but for the purposes of this article, it should be noted that references to inclusivity in terms of racial/ethnic diversity were quite rare.

popular/recognizable titles at larger theatre.

A confounding finding in this survey related to the above discussion is that theatre leaders generally rated telling the stories of “marginalized people” as more important than selecting recognizable titles for their seasons. While not all stories of marginalized people are those of people of color, we note that people of color have been marginalized throughout U.S. history. As such, TYA leaders’ stated interest in telling the stories of marginalized people suggests that a greater number of productions featuring characters of color and stories of their communities should be being produced, but it appears that this is not the case.

In this discussion we have offered some possibilities that may contribute to lack of equitable representation of people of color and productions by playwrights of color in the TYA field, though we cannot make any definitive claims. It is possible that unconscious biases among theatre leaders (93% of whom identify as white) may be at play during season selection. It is possible that an emphasis on producing recognizable titles at larger budget theatres plays a role (and it may logically follow that leaders at these theatres feel they must produce such titles in order to sustain their large organizations, which may be the case). It is possible that entirely different factors, which we could not identify based on the limited data from our survey, play a significant role in this challenging situation. Regardless of the reason, the fact remains that inequities exist in our field, presenting us both an imperative and opportunities to address them.

MOVING FORWARD

Much (though not enough) has changed in the U.S. climate since this survey was conducted. The Black Lives Matter movement, the Stop AAPI Hate movement, the “We see you, White American theatre” letter and theatres’ responses to it (see Myer, 2021), recurring media coverage of police violence toward people of color, and other factors have led to increased urgency in national conversations, including those in our field, regarding the dismantling of white hegemony and the promotion of anti-racist policies and thinking.

In 2020, BIPOC in TYA offered “an invitation for the field of TYA to answer the calls for racial justice and transformation” in their Anti-Racist & Anti-Oppressive Futures for Theatre for Young Audiences: An

Interactive Guide. Over fifty TYA companies and ninety independent artists and administrators pledged to work through the guide and conduct check-ins with the BIPOC in TYA group about their progress. Over 450 individuals participated in TYA/USA's "Listen, Learn, Lead: Antiracism in TYA" webinar series that featured numerous perspectives on how people working in our field can pursue equity and inclusivity.

This intensified focus on the problem at hand may drive tangible change in TYA moving forward. Indeed, some writers have begun exploring and documenting how theatre practitioners might strive to promote anti-racism in their work in our field. This may be through work as TYA directors (e.g., Kiley, 2020), or through work directly with youth, such as through the creation of theatrical work exploring cultural assumptions and promoting inclusivity (e.g., Chakrabarty, 2011; Rajendran, 2016) and employing pedagogical methods such as process drama through social/racial-justice oriented lenses (e.g., Streeter, 2020). *Howlround* has created an entire series of essays dedicated to advancing work in Latinx and Latin American TYA (see Schroeder-Arce, 2019). The 2021 virtual TYA/USA conference has repeatedly featured sessions addressing how practitioners in the field address anti-racism. We hope that both practical and scholarly efforts such as these (which are just a few of many) will lead toward a more equitable future in all aspects of the field. We hope the field will grow and benefit from greater inclusion of people of color in terms of stories told and the people who help tell them.

It is also important that we track and measure any progress the field makes. Studies such as this one and the work of Ruggiero & Uhls must be conducted regularly and should intensify their focus on issues of equity, specifically. While anecdotal evidence and positive conversations about change are important, we believe it is imperative that future empirical research explore all aspects of inclusion, diversity, equity, and access in our field to help track our accountability efforts over time.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Matt Omasta is Professor of Theatre Arts and Associate Dean of the Caine College of the Arts at Utah State University. His publications include co-author/editorship of *Playwriting and Young Audiences* (Intellect), *Impacting Theatre Audiences: Methods for Studying Change* (Routledge), *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life* (SAGE), and *Play, Performance, and Identity* (Routledge). His articles appear in *Youth Theatre Journal*, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, *Theatre Topics*, *TYA Today*, *the International Journal of Education and the Arts*, *Arts Education Policy Review*, *Performance Matters*, *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, and others.

Aubrey Felty is a senior from Dallas, Texas pursuing a B.F.A. in Theatre Education and a minor in Family and Human Development at Utah State University. She has presented her work at the American Alliance for Theatre and Education and International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network conferences. She is a member of the Honors Program and was recognized as the Caine College of the Arts Scholar of the Year in 2020.