

Identity Matters. All. The. Time. Questions to Encourage Best Practices in Applied Theatre

[REBECCA BROWN ADELMAN](#)

[TRENT NORMAN](#)

[SAIRA YASMIN HAMIDI](#)

AFFINITY ARTS CONSULTING

ABSTRACT

As applied theatre practitioners we have the opportunity to foster work and dialogues as the demand and responsibility to talk about race is heightened in the U.S. Our decades of experience support that identity is always at play and must be addressed in our theatre work otherwise we are doing a disservice to the art and community. We feel the responsibility to be conscious of identity and intentional with it in order to make theatre that is accessible to all. We have found highlighting identity is an essential tool to create, engage, and practice skills in the dialogues we strive to inspire and in opportunities for transformation and growth. It connects us to probe “what ethical questions should artists and educators consider when navigating social justice and anti-racist topics?” Over our two plus decades of working together and

creating, performing, and facilitating interactive theatre performances on social justice and anti-racists topics, our experience has brought us to learn, time and time again, that identity and its impact matter.

While facilitating a performance about race at a conference in Boulder, Colorado, the predominately white audience was having a lively conversation that was infused with a colorblind ideology. Statements claiming “I treat everyone the same” and “I don’t see race” were very present during the session. The tenor of the conversation changed when a woman in the front row raised her hand to say, “If you do not see me as a Black woman, then you don’t see me at all.”

Our experience is that white people generally do not want to talk about racial identity. This is not uncommon, “In a colorblind world, whites, who are unlikely to experience the negative effects of race, can actively ignore the continued significance of racism in American society, justify the current social order, and feel more comfortable with their relative privileged standing in society. Racial-ethnic minorities however, who regularly experience the negative effects of race, experience colorblind ideologies differently. In a world that denies their racially marked experiences and outcomes, racial-ethnic minorities feel less comfortable, less invested...” (Fryberg and Stephens, 2010). Avoiding the history and impact of race does not make racism disappear. It is our belief that an ongoing self-interrogation of identity, particularly race, in all forms of theatre, is an important competency to have as much as the theatrical techniques themselves. By integrating the concept of identity into our practice, we have the ability to produce brave conversations and necessary dialogues.

The following experience underscores how identity continuously manifests in our applied theatre work. Furthermore, it exemplifies the potential for ongoing learning that stems from our responsive approach to facilitation. During the hot-seat¹ portion of a performance primarily addressing socio-economic status, a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) actor in the scene expressed frustration about the interactions they were having and muttered, “Argh. Fucking white

¹ Hot seating is a common drama strategy where a performer or participant in role answers questions from the audience or fellow participants who may or may not be in role (Clark, Dobson, Goode, & Neelands, 1997, p. 60).

people.” This unrehearsed moment changed the focus of the conversation away from socio-economic status to race. Audience members pushed the actor, who was still in character, to recant their statement. The actor defended their position and did not succumb to the pressure to apologize. Instead they owned their frustrated reaction based on their experiences of whiteness. We shifted focus and facilitated the impact of the moment within the larger context of race, campus climate, class, and how identity impacts our perceptions and experiences.

Clearly, the gritty, real, and raw experiences of people from different identities working their way through race needed further investigation. We created a performance called *F’N White People*. The new scene involved three friends (two BIPOC, one white) sharing their experiences on a predominantly white campus, where one of the BIPOC characters says the titular line. The scenario explores the impact of race from different perspectives while the characters navigate their emotions and struggle to stay engaged with each other. It also portrays the hard work required to maintain relationships.

We debuted *F’N White People* as a public performance. The title generated attention and its publicity was met with controversy and contention. Performance night had a packed house and included top university administrators. People attended expecting conflict. What the performance delivered was a deliberate dive into race while staying connected despite all the complicated emotions. The scene became one of our most requested on campus and in the community. In addition to providing opportunities for deeper dialogues on race, the performance had other impacts as well.

Coauthor Saira shares:

My first experience of the ensemble was at a public performance about transgender identities and their complexities. After the show, I approached one of the actors and introduced myself. I had heard of upcoming auditions and wanted to get a sense from him if it was going to be worth my time. We were both BIPOC actors trying to effect positive sociocultural change at the predominantly white institution. I asked him what the ensemble was like and whether it was just another campus theatre group of well-intended white liberals. He knew exactly what I meant. “Naw, we have a show called *F’N White People*,” he shared. I understood instantly that

this ensemble was different and wasn't afraid to address issues of whiteness and white supremacy. What I didn't know then was that it would soon become my new creative and political family.

We are applied theatre practitioners. Trent identifies as a Black man, Rebecca as a white woman, and Saira as a Desi woman. Our practices use the tools of theatre to explore concepts of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) with interactive trainings, workshops, and performances. Augusto Boal states:

I offer some proof that theatre is a weapon. A very efficient weapon...For this reason, the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theatre and utilize it for domination. In doing so, they change the very concept of what 'theatre' is. But the theatre can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative. (Boal, 1974)

As creatives, in the context of domination, we keep learning how to consider the larger implications of identity and its sociopolitical impacts when making theatre in order to bend our efforts towards liberation.

Rebecca and Trent formed The Interactive Theatre Project (ITP) in 1999 at the University of Colorado, Boulder and are the co-founders of Affinity Arts Consulting (AAC). We structured both organizations from a commitment to represent as many identities, seen and unseen, in the communities we practice. Our co-leadership design was intentional. We strive to share power and responsibility across our organizations, particularly with an ongoing awareness of our various identities and how they relate to who we are, who we serve and how we operate. That practice has profoundly influenced how we create and deliver for our audiences. There are many ethical questions we consider as we navigate social justice and anti-racist topics. In this paper, we will explore some questions we use in applied theatre to explore race. There are certainly more than we have included here.

HOW DOES IDENTITY MATTER?

We believe humans filter experiences through identity whether they are aware of it or not. That filtering processes information through our conscious and unconscious biases. Performance has the power to unearth unconscious biases by creating an emotional connection through dialogue or character or conflict. When some of those biases show up we are often surprised at the subtle and specific ways they manifest.

In a diversity training, Trent and Rebecca acted in ITP's scenario, *The Way It Is*, centering race and identity in a conflict between two characters. In the scene, an employee witnesses white colleagues touching a Black, female colleague's hair in the office break room. The concerned employee, played by Trent, approaches the supervisor, played by Rebecca, who, from her position of power and privilege, misses the context and cumulative impact of the incident. There was a moment when Trent inadvertently rests his foot on the rung of a chair as he spoke. The debrief with the audience afterwards went something like this:

"I found the employee to be incredibly aggressive," one person stated.

"He was totally out of line," another remarked.

"I cannot believe his hostility, especially toward his supervisor!" one exclaimed.

Trent remembers:

Audience members had significant issues with my character (and by extension, me) talking to my supervisor with my leg propped up on a chair. In particular, I remember one white male saying they found the action "completely inappropriate." The question and answer component became a discussion about the positioning of my foot. At one point someone remarked that I had my foot on the actual seat of the chair (which I did not) in order to intimidate and bully the supervisor. As the character, I fielded many questions about appropriate behavior, and as the actor, I felt the audience

was zeroing in on this one action. They were misinterpreting it, protecting the white woman from the Black man; losing sight of the larger context of a Black woman's hair being touched by white colleagues and the climate that allows for that to occur. The cultural history between Black men and white women had to be considered. Whether that is Rosewood in 1923 or Amy Cooper in Central Park in 2020, the dynamics of race and gender are hard to ignore in this interaction. I decided to show that the questions from the audience made a significant impact on the character's confidence and autonomy, stating, "maybe it really is time for me to leave this place and find another place to work."

Rebecca remembers:

As an actor, I was surprised at how protective people were of me and how angry they were at Trent's character. I also remember trying to figure out what exactly caused them to perceive him as so hostile since his demeanor was calm and soft spoken. As we reflect on this incident, my memory imagined his foot on the chair I was sitting in because the level to which people magnified that single, unrehearsed moment felt unwarranted. As I examine through a facilitator lens, I am struck by how much my own racial privilege protected me from the audience's interrogation. I did not experience a personal impact that needed to be worked through afterwards. What this performance taught me was how identity plays into even the smallest of actions and statements. It has led me down the path of awareness and curiosity about identity, especially around visible identities like race and gender expression, and their impact on everything.

The audience response to the subtle gesture by a Black man in the interaction with a white woman spoke volumes. When confronted with race, where a BIPOC is speaking about their experience and concern, the audience moved to protect whiteness. We purposefully highlight identity in performances and techniques, such as image theatre,² as a way for us to dig into the issues and experiences. We have even

² "In Image Theatre, performers form tableaux representing an oppressive situation, and spectators are invited to interpret and suggest changes to the tableaux" (*Britannica*, 2020).

intentionally incorporated the resting foot gesture into future performances of this piece.

SHOULD WE USE OUR OWN IDENTITIES TO ENGAGE WITH OTHERS?

Being informed about our own identities and how they impact others is an entryway to engagement. We believe that race is a social construct, not an innate behavioral or biological trait that has such significant distinctions as to create the divisions that exist. Our conceptions of race are based largely in psychological and behavioral influential patterns. Those patterns have meaning made by those who consume and are subject to interpretation. As artists, our role is not only to examine identity for others but for ourselves as well. Continuous self-reflection and self-awareness about our own identities is critical to engage productively and responsibly in this work. “As members of human communities, our identities are fundamentally constructed in relation to others and to the cultures in which we are embedded” (Bell, L. A, 2007, pp. 8-9). Learning about our identities helps us to understand the social structures of which we are a part. Additionally, it highlights which of our identities are in more proximity to power, and how we may use that positioning in our social justice work.

A framework we use is the Matrix of Oppression. The Matrix of Oppression gives examples of social identity categories such as race, sex, gender, religion, sexual orientation, class, ability, and age. Within the identity categories, there are examples of social groups and a further examination of the advantages and disadvantages afforded to members of each.

Social groups are afforded different status in the United States based on a multiplicity of historical, political, and social factors. These different statuses affect the abilities of people of the different groups to access needed resources. Some social group members are afforded an advantage, whereas other social groups are disadvantaged based on their social group memberships. (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007, p. 57)

Part of learning about identity is reflecting on our own identities and

understanding where we hold positions that feel undermined and unheard and, just as important, the places where we have privilege. In addition to our own lives and work experiences, *The Matrix of Oppression* has been a guiding tool for our own self-reflection and as a means for us to engage around identity. It is a foundational element of our applied theatre work.

HOW DO WE MANAGE THE INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY?

There is no quick fix. The answer is not necessarily to create more diverse characters and casts though this is desperately needed and no doubt deeper exploration will surface in the current climate. Going a bit deeper than adding or re-casting a character here or there in the journey is to keep the impact of identity in mind as we create, cast, and facilitate. In doing this, we must also acknowledge the timeframes we are given as well as the context while highlighting one or two elements of identity at a time.

Our piece entitled *Just Another Party* explores sexual assault. We performed this scene for first year student orientation at a predominantly white institution; presented biweekly, to upwards of 500 participants in each session. As producers, we were juggling a considerable amount of performances with the need for multiple actors of four per cast. We cast an actor who identified as a Latinx man in the role of Steve who is accused of committing sexual assault at a college party. Our intentions were to fulfill a demand as well as give a talented actor an opportunity to play a challenging role. We were not meaning to bring the intersection of race and sexual assault into the dialogue and yet, by our casting choice, that is exactly what we did. The BIPOC actor was cast opposite a white female actor. At the time, there was a lot of press and attention around the institution's football program, which was being investigated for sexual assault by some of its players. After the performance, the audience asked questions to the actors while they stayed in character. During the first several weeks, the first question without fail was asked to the BIPOC actor playing Steve, "Do you play for the football team?" This was always met with laughter from the crowd and, we observed, this question was never asked when a white actor played the same role. The participants used humor as a means to deflect from having real dialogue about sexual assault and all that was happening in the community.

We had to reassess. We came up with a strategy for how the actor would respond to the question around what it meant for a BIPOC student to attend a predominately white institution. Given an hour and fifteen minutes for the entire session and the large audience size, we could not effectively address both sexual assault and race and do them justice. We had to focus on sexual assault in this particular instance as the directive from the university. We remain cognizant of how time restraints limit us to addressing a small number of issues in a single session. To try and tackle too many dilutes the impact and has the ability to do more harm than good. As we moved forward with this specific project, we made sure that we did not cast a man of color in the alleged perpetrator role unless there was the time and ability to truly unpack what that meant.

The understanding of identity, its impact, and the intersectionality of identities creates more intentional work. To create and cast a performance addressing violence against women is a different experience if the perpetrator in that scenario is a white male or a BIPOC male. To cast a BIPOC man in a scene about violence against women particularly if the victim or survivor in the scenario is a white woman, one must understand the deep historical context of that choice and prepare to facilitate that as a larger conversation. Not doing so only perpetuates a historical and painful myth particularly about Black men as predators, hypersexual, and dangerous. Incidentally, when a white actor played Steve the audience's focus was on how the allegations would ruin his life.

To add another layer, it is important for us to incorporate multiple identities in our theatre pieces without the impact of those identities being the focal point, as means of representation. An ensemble member shared with us, "It would be nice to see a character who is gender nonconforming without that having to be discussed." As we create, we stay mindful of representing identity and how identities would impact the performed subject matter and vice versa. It feels like an important balancing act we continue to navigate as artists.

IS IT ARTISTICALLY NECESSARY TO THINK ABOUT IDENTITY?

In his Golden Globe acceptance speech for Best Actor in his role in the series *This Is Us*, Sterling K. Brown talks about "colorblind" casting

where identity is an afterthought or, if taken into consideration, is a means toward diversifying and also leans towards tokenism. Brown lauds the creator of the show Dan Fogelman and says, “You wrote a role for a Black man. That could only be played by a Black man.” He goes on to say, “I appreciate that I am being seen for who I am and being appreciated for who I am. And it makes it more difficult to dismiss me or to dismiss anyone who looks like me” (Victor, 2018). These words ring true as we strive to create theatre that shares stories of all human experience. We cannot authentically do that if we don’t think about how intricately identity shapes those situations and experiences and stories. Depending on how we can create our applied theatre performances, a devised context encourages performers to bring and use all elements of their identities into a piece. As writers, we tackle important social issues, create characters, and delve into the impact of a character’s racial identity that informs what happens and how the piece develops. We have learned from our own mistakes, that writing the characters first and then casting from a diverse pool is not always the best course. “The social identity development models help us anticipate and plan for the potential collision...of contradictory but strongly held worldviews among participants across social identity groups and also within social identity groups...these social identity development models also serve to remind us as facilitators,” and as theatre makers, “that we, too, have our own social identity perspectives that both characterize and limit our worldviews and from which we tend to generalize what we believe that participants...ought to do, feel, and think” (Adams, Jones, & Tatum, 2007, p. 406). By creating characters with identity in mind, we are able to make more accessible characters, move beyond stereotypes, and give audiences the opportunity to hear and engage with stories that are similar and different from their own. As white American Theatre is being called to action and challenged to change by organizations such as The Ground We Stand On, we can move forward and create theatre that is truly representative of many lived experiences and not just through the lens of a particular privileged group.

HOW CAN WE BUILD AWARENESS AROUND IDENTITY?

It feels important for us to help people acknowledge identity in order to speak about it. As previously mentioned it has become clear from our

experience, that we are always processing through identity whether we are conscious of it or not. We have also discovered that talking about the concept of identity does not allow people to experience its impact. It seems we have to experience identity from an emotional framework and not only from a logical perspective. We were curious how we could use our theatrical techniques as a means to emphasize the feeling response that comes up around identity. Years ago, Trent and Rebecca were conducting a facilitation workshop in West Virginia and tried an experiment. We took a set of blanket statements that seem to be standard, rationalized responses around race and other identities. For example, “Not everything is about race” and “I have the right to wear whatever I want.” One of us made the statement and then the other repeated it trying to replicate the same tone, inflection, and gesture. We then asked the participants to react and highlight the differences.

This short and simple exercise brought up a lot for people similar in some ways to the gesture of the aforementioned foot on the chair “incident.” It was interesting to hear people say things like, “When Trent said it, I felt...” and “When Rebecca said it, I felt...” By encouraging the participants to explore their reactions and feelings without judgments heightened their awareness around identity.

“The switch” is another interactive technique we use in our performances as a vehicle to highlight the impact of identity. Our performance entitled *Let Me Out*, written by a member of our theatre ensemble, captures his experience and struggle as a gay man wanting to openly express his love for his partner without fear. In the performance the two men kiss. After the performance, when we are facilitating the interactive components, we replay the moment of the kiss and have people share their reactions and feelings. Then we incorporate the switch and replace the male identified actors with two female identified actors. The female identified actors repeat a few lines of the original dialogue and then kiss. We ask the audience for reactions and responses. One particularly profound moment was when an audience member responded, “Oh my god. It’s different. I don’t want it to be, but it is.” This moment enabled a vulnerable and heartfelt dialogue among the group where a deeper exploration of homophobia and heterosexism was examined.

Most participants do not want to believe that they harbor

prejudices about groups of people. Confronting these prejudices in themselves and others is difficult. Participants need to open themselves up to the discomfort and uncertainty of questioning what is familiar, comfortable, and unquestioned. (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007, p. 52)

Applied theatre is a vehicle to allow us to have honest reactions, without shame, and be able to voice them aloud. It is a significant approach to challenge our belief systems and build empathy for others.

WHAT OTHER ETHICAL QUESTIONS SHOULD WE CONSIDER?

There certainly is more to consider as we continue to navigate social justice and anti-racist issues. The more we ask ethical questions about social justice and how to be anti-racist in our work, the more that will be uncovered. As our consciousness around identity grows, its impact continues to be felt. For example, the emotional labor of performing these interactive, socially charged scenes on actors and facilitators from marginalized identities is significant. As one of our ensemble members once expressed to us, “I can de-role my character but I can’t de-role my Blackness.” Thus we need to question how to further support and equitably compensate for the work being done. We need to examine, form, and institute better support systems for applied theatre, and all theatre, to be truly inclusive. As the Broadway actor Jelani Alladin states in a *New York Times* interview, “Each person’s experience with the systematic racism of the Great White Way is unique. They are all valid. They must all be communicated, in hopes of successful and inclusive collaboration led with care. It is possible” (interviewed by Michael Paulson, June 10, 2020). Thus, more questions need to be asked of ourselves and more examination of our own identities around where we hold and do not hold privilege, needs to be done so that we work our applied theatre methods with a form of care.

**SHOULD WE PERSONALLY BE DOING THE SOCIAL JUSTICE
AND ANTI-RACIST WORK THAT WE HOPE TO INSPIRE OTHERS
TO DO WITH OUR APPLIED THEATRE PERFORMANCES?**

The answer here is quite simple. Yes.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Authors Trent Norman and Rebecca Brown Adelman, were co-founders and co-directors of The Interactive Theatre Project at the University of Colorado at Boulder from 1999-2015. They are founding partners of Affinity Arts Consulting. They have created, written, directed, produced and facilitated hundreds of interactive theatre performances addressing social justice and community issues. They were awarded the NYU Swortzell Award for Innovation in applied theatre in 2016. During this time of stay at home orders and civil unrest, they have translated their in-person interactive training format to be delivered via Zoom and have been offering webinars on race.

Saira Yasmin Hamidi is a performer and longtime ensemble member of the Interactive Theatre Project, which is now the Affinity Arts Consulting ensemble. She is a community organizer working toward health equity, in the most comprehensive of definitions, for all people in Colorado.