

## Telling Their Stories: The Role of Documentary Theatre in Addressing International Graduate Student Challenges

[LEMAR O. ARCHER](#)

EMERSON COLLEGE

### ABSTRACT

*International graduate students often face challenges such as language barriers, financial limitations and cultural adjustment difficulties while pursuing higher education in the United States. This study examines how documentary theatre can be used as an arts-based research method to share these experiences and promote awareness, empathy, and institutional reflection. A devised documentary theatre performance incorporating multimodal storytelling and Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to engage audiences was presented at a northeastern liberal arts college. Audience responses were collected through post-performance surveys and a facilitated talkback session. Findings indicate that the performance increased audience understanding of international student challenges, evoked strong emotional responses and motivated attendees to consider actionable solutions. Audience-generated recommendations included*

*pedagogical adjustments, expanded employment opportunities, improved administrative support, and greater institutional advocacy. Although limited by its sample size, the study demonstrates the transformative potential of documentary theatre as a tool for engaging audiences in dialogue and to inspire collective responsibility for structural change. This research contributes to applied theatre scholarship and international education by highlighting performance as a powerful tool for illuminating marginalized experiences and fostering institutionally meaningful conversations.*

In 2021, my life changed forever. I left my birth country, Jamaica, to study in the United States as an international graduate student, embarking on a journey filled with immeasurable changes and challenges. During my commencement speech in May 2022 for my Master of Arts program, I shared:

This massive change affected me mentally, emotionally, physically, psychologically, and financially... I had heard a lot about depression but didn't quite understand it until I realized I was not doing okay - no motivation, loss of interest, overwhelming sadness, insomnia. After being tested and diagnosed by my doctor, I learned that I was experiencing major depression. This was a scary time for me, as I had always been okay and felt in control... This phase of my journey was the hardest and most difficult experience I have undergone thus far in my life.

From my experience enrolled in a U.S. northeastern liberal arts college, I encountered firsthand the various challenges international graduate students face during our transition. For me, these included language barriers, language discrimination, financial difficulties, healthcare access issues, and a lack of knowledge about available services. While one could say these difficulties can affect any student, navigating them as international students in an unfamiliar country amplifies their impact. These challenges disrupted my studies, increased my stress levels, and made me wonder whether my experiences were shared by my fellow international classmates.

I soon realized that they were. Upon a random field observation for

my Qualitative Research class at an International Graduate Welcome Dinner, I had a conversation with a group of female international students who I was meeting for the first time. This group of young women expressed their struggles with self-esteem, acculturation stress, struggling with positive or negative thoughts that impacting their sociocultural adjustment and the challenge of forming new friendships. One student confided that she felt pressured to fit into U.S. culture, while another worried about job prospects post-graduation. Our discussion revealed that many of us faced challenges unnoticed by those around us.

This realization led me to a critical observation: the average person, including my classmates, professors, staff members and other Americans was largely unaware of the deep struggles international graduate students face. Our challenges often remain invisible, unacknowledged, and misunderstood. I wanted to ensure these stories were shared in ways that provoke understanding and change, and I asked myself: *What better way to do so than through the power of theatre?* - particularly documentary theatre which is rooted in real testimony that offers a powerful medium for making hidden experiences visible.

This article explores the impact on audiences who attended *ACCULTURATION—American Dream: International Students' Nightmare*, a devised documentary theatre performance created to illuminate the lived realities of international graduate students. Using verbatim material, movement, multimedia and participatory elements informed by Theatre of the Oppressed, the performance invited audiences not only to witness these stories but to collectively reflect on them and consider pathways for change.

The purpose of this article is to evaluate how the performance shaped audience knowledge, emotional engagement, and willingness to take action. Through mixed-methods audience surveys and a facilitated talkback session, the study examines whether documentary theatre can function as a catalyst for institutional reflection, empathy and the development of more equitable support systems for international students. By focusing on audience response, this article highlights how applied performance can transform passive spectators into active participants in dialogue, advocacy and community change.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### *International Students in the U.S.*

Like me, a great number of tertiary level international students study outside their home country every year, making use of the expansive education and career opportunities. According to Akanwa (2015), historically international students have sought educational opportunities in countries other than their own with the intention of getting advanced education that is capable of making them exceptional among their peers upon returning home. International students continue to have a tremendous impact on the U.S. in all aspects. The United States is regarded as the top destination for international students worldwide. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2022), “over the years, the numbers of international students enrolling in the U.S. has been steadily increasing” (para. 9). According to Lyken-Segosebe (2017), “during their stay in the USA, international students create an impact both economically and educationally for their host country. U.S. colleges and universities depend on international students to contribute to diversity and culture of their campus and increase enrollments” (p. 66).

Despite the educational and economic potential international students have in the United States, they encounter a myriad of challenges during their stay. According to Lyken-Segosebe (2017), “international students generally tend to experience a magnification of common student problems coming to the American campus. These problems relate to their initial transition, academic life, social life, and psychological experiences” (p. 67).

Language proficiency is a primary challenge affecting both academic success and social integration. Low confidence in English fluency can lead to anxiety, isolation, and difficulty engaging in coursework (Chennamsetti, 2020; Rodríguez et al., 2019). Even when students meet language requirements, adapting to fast-paced lectures, idioms and academic writing expectations remains a hurdle (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019).

International students often struggle with different pedagogical styles and are sometimes mischaracterized as passive learners (Bjork et al., 2020). Adjusting to independent learning models, critical thinking expectations and faculty-student interactions can be difficult (Lyken-Segosebe, 2017). Beyond academics, international students frequently

experience cultural disorientation, social isolation, and financial stress (Rodríguez et al., 2019). Some also face racial and cultural discrimination, which negatively impacts their mental health and sense of belonging (Katsumoto & Bowman, 2021; Watson & Barton, 2020).

While existing research explores these challenges through traditional methodologies, arts-based research, in particular documentary theatre, offers an alternative approach that foregrounds lived experiences and fosters institutional awareness and change.

### ***Documentary and Devised Theatre as Tools for Social Justice and Advocacy***

The use of theatre as a medium for social commentary and advocacy has a long and impactful history. Documentary theatre, in particular, is a form of performance that constructs narratives from real-life interviews, transcripts, and archival materials to authentically reflect lived experiences (Odendahl-James, 2017). Since its rise in the 1930s, documentary theatre has served as a dynamic platform for activism, offering audiences a lens into underrepresented or overlooked realities (Gardner, 2021). In this study, documentary theatre was chosen as the primary form to amplify the voices of international graduate students, whose challenges often remain invisible within U.S. higher education institutions.

Documentary theatre encompasses a range of practices, including verbatim theatre, ethnodrama, and Theatre of Witness, all of which share a commitment to authentic representation and the elevation of marginalized narratives (Schipper, 2010). Scholars such as Parenteau (2017) highlight its potential as a form of investigative storytelling, where it brings artists to engage with individuals or communities to make discoveries and then through theatrical performances actively engages audiences into pressing discourse in the investigative process before, during, and after performance. By using direct testimony, these performances create heightened audience engagement and emotional impact. This is particularly relevant for international students, whose experiences with language barriers, cultural adjustment, and institutional inequities are rarely addressed through conventional research or institutional reports.

Within the broader framework of documentary theatre, this project integrates elements of *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO), a participatory theatre methodology designed to promote dialogue and social

transformation developed by Augusto Boal (2008). TO aims to transform passive spectators into active participants by inviting audiences to intervene, suggest solutions, and even step into roles during a performance to propose solutions to real-world problems. Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz (1994) describe TO techniques like Forum Theatre and Image Theatre as tools for challenging oppression through collective action. In this study, these interactive components are integrated to create opportunities for audiences to engage directly with international students' narratives and contribute ideas for institutional change.

Complementing these methodologies is *devised theatre*, a collaborative approach where performances are created through improvisation, storytelling, and ensemble-based development rather than a pre-written script (Oddey, 1994). Devises theatre is especially significant in the context of this project and is relevant to international students' narratives, as it enables them to shape their own stories rather than having them interpreted by an external playwright. Govan et al. (2007) emphasize devised theatre's capacity to serve as a community-driven tool for exploring social issues through collective storytelling, making it a fitting approach for capturing the collective and individual struggles of international students, ensuring that their voices remain central to the performance.

Bringing these methodologies together, this study leverages documentary theatre's commitment to authentic testimony, Theatre of the Oppressed's participatory activism, and devised theatre's collaborative creation to foreground the lived experiences of international graduate students. Scholars have demonstrated that audiences engage more deeply with real-life narratives when they are experienced theatrically rather than read in a report (Parenteau, 2017; Weltsek, 2021). This integrated approach positions theatre not only as a storytelling vehicle but as a catalyst for empathy, dialogue, and institutional reflection. Weltsek (2021) found that arts-based research helps participants explore their identities within a communal setting, reinforcing belonging and resilience. By situating these practices within the specific context of a U.S. liberal arts college, the study contributes to the growing body of arts-based research advocating for more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

## RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The ultimate goal of this study was to examine the impact of documentary and devised theatre in sharing international graduate students' stories, raising awareness of social justice issues, and inspiring institutional reflection and change. This study used a qualitative mixed methods design to examine audience responses to *ACCULTURATION—American Dream: International Students' Nightmare*, a devised documentary theatre performance about international graduate student experiences.

### ***Creative Process***

As part of my Qualitative Research course at Emerson College in Fall 2022, I conducted a preliminary study using field observations and interviews to identify challenges faced by international graduate students. Four interview participants were selected for diverse perspectives, represented different national backgrounds including, Nepal, China, Russia, and Belgium, and were enrolled in graduate programs in Strategic Marketing Communication, Film and Media Art, Interdisciplinary Studies, and Publishing and Writing.

Data were transcribed and analyzed using Saldana's (2016) qualitative coding method to identify recurring themes across responses. These themes, supported a field observation, formed the foundation for the devised documentary theatre performance.

Building on the preliminary research, I developed a devised documentary theatre piece as part of my Master of Fine Arts thesis project in Spring 2023. The creative process began with script development, which was initially designed to include all four interview participants from the interviews. However, due to scheduling conflicts, only two students participated. As a result, the script was adapted for a three-person performance, including myself. Over a three-week devising process and eight rehearsals, we co-created a script using interview excerpts, personal reflection, and improvisational exercises.

The performance incorporated Theatre of the Oppressed Techniques and Forum-style interaction to encourage critical engagement and audience participation. The final staged reading was performed before a live audience on May 3, 2023, including students, faculty, and staff from across departments.

During the performance there were interactive audience call-to-

action activities designed to engage viewers in discussion on in the challenges faced by international students. Through guided prompts, the audience reflected on their own experiences, discussed possible solutions, and contributed ideas to support international students. The activities culminated in a symbolic final engagement titled “Ripping the Burden,” inviting audience members to step onto the stage, share their collective insights and remove labeled papers posted on the actors that represented the struggles faced by international students. This participatory gesture embodied the project’s goal of moving audiences from awareness to empathy and, ultimately, to advocacy.

### ***Research Design***

To evaluate the effectiveness of the performance, data were collected through post-performance surveys and a facilitated talkback session. These methods enabled a multilayered understanding of how the performance influenced audience awareness, emotional engagement, and willingness to take action.

### ***Participants***

Twenty-five individuals attended the performance, including international and domestic students, faculty members, administrators, and staff from offices such as International Student Affairs and Student Success. Thirteen completed a post-performance survey, yielding a 52% response rate. Participation was voluntary, and no demographic information was collected beyond role affiliation.

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

#### **Talkback Session**

A facilitated talkback session followed the performance. Audience members shared reflections, proposed solutions, and asked questions about the experiences presented. I took written notes, capturing salient comments that contributed to thematic analysis.

#### **Audience Surveys**

Following the performance, audience members were invited to complete an anonymous survey designed to assess their emotional, cognitive, and reflective engagement with the theatrical event. The survey employed a mixed-methods structure, integrating Likert-scale

items, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended qualitative prompts to capture both measurable audience responses and rich narrative feedback.

This multi-layered survey design allowed for a holistic understanding of how audiences interpreted, felt, and responded to the performance. The combination of scaled data and open-ended reflections provided insight into not only the degree of impact but the specific theatrical and thematic elements that shaped audience engagement.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

The project adhered to ethical guidelines for qualitative and arts-based research. All audience members were informed that survey participation was voluntary and anonymous. No identifying information was collected, and data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

My analysis, based on post-performance surveys and the facilitated talkback session revealed several key themes related to audience awareness, emotional engagement, and motivation toward action. Consistent with literature on applied theatre and arts-based advocacy, the results demonstrate that documentary theatre can effectively illuminate complex issues, evoke emotional resonance and stimulate critical reflection among diverse audiences (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Thompson, 2012).

This discussion draws on a blended theoretical framework integrating critical pedagogy, narrative identity theory, and applied theatre performance theory. Together, these frameworks allow us to understand how the process of devising and performing real-life stories not only raises awareness but is a transformative act of learning and agency while moving audiences toward collective reflection and change.

Based on the data collected, the findings are organized into two primary categories: (1) the positive effects of the performance experience on the audience, which include audience quantitative survey findings, participatory theatre and the power of engagement,

the effects of multimodal aesthetics, and the validation and representation of international students; and (2) toward action through advocacy and institutional change, which includes advocacy for international students, adjusting curriculum and teaching strategies, prioritizing job opportunities for international students, and providing college support programs and outreach.

### ***Positive Effects of the Performance Experience on the Audience***

#### **Audience Quantitative Survey Findings**

To assess the impact of the performance, audience members completed a quantitative component of the survey that included several 5-point Likert-scale questions. Of the 25 attendees, 13 audience members responded to the post-performance survey. The following data were gathered:

**Table 1:** *What Extent Did the Performance Inspire You to Take Action?*

| <b>Rating scales</b> | <b>Description of scales</b> | <b>Number of Participants</b> |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 5                    | Extremely inspired           | 9                             |
| 4                    | Very inspired                | 3                             |
| 3                    | Moderately inspired          | 1                             |
| 2                    | Slightly inspired            | 0                             |
| 1                    | Not inspired                 | 0                             |
| <b>Total</b>         | -                            | 13                            |

When asked how inspired they felt to take action on the issues presented in the performance, the majority responded at the highest level. As shown in Table 1, nine respondents selected “5 - extremely inspired,” three selected “4,” and one selected “3.” No audience member selected ratings indicating low or no inspiration. While the sample size is modest, the consistency of high responses suggests the performance prompted meaningful reflection and action-oriented thinking an outcome aligned with Freire’s (2005) concept of praxis, in which reflection leads to transformative engagement.

**Table 2:** *How Did the Performance Impacted Your Knowledge of The Challenges Faced by International Graduate Students?*

| Rating scales | Description of scales  | Number of Participants |
|---------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 5             | Strong impact          | 10                     |
| 4             | Moderate–strong impact | 0                      |
| 3             | Moderate impact        | 2                      |
| 2             | Slight impact          | 1                      |
| 1             | No impact              | 0                      |
| <b>Total</b>  | -                      | 13                     |

When asked about their knowledge of international students' challenges, audience members reported increased understanding of the challenges facing international graduate students. As shown in Table 2, ten respondents rated the impact of the performance on their knowledge as "5 - strong impact," two selected "3," and one selected "2." These findings support the literature suggesting that documentary and participatory theatre can function as an accessible bridge between lived experience and public understanding (Aune, 2017; Parenteau, 2017).

**Table 3:** *What Issues Highlighted in This Performance Were Most Resonant?*

| Issue Identified                    | Number of Participants |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Language barriers                   | 8                      |
| Lack of job opportunities           | 8                      |
| Discrimination                      | 7                      |
| Limited knowledge of resources      | 7                      |
| Healthcare challenges               | 7                      |
| Adjustment to academic expectations | 5                      |

Note: Participants could select more than one issue; numbers indicate the amount of respondents endorsing each theme.

Audience members were also asked to identify the issues that resonated most with them. As shown in Table 3, the issues that

resonated most were language barriers and lack of job opportunities, both selected by eight participants. They were followed closely by concerns around discrimination, lack of knowledge on resources and systems, healthcare challenges, and academic adjustment. These responses reflect an increased recognition of several often overlooked or misunderstood aspects of international student life and affirm the value of narrative-based performance in making invisible struggles more visible (Parenteau, 2017; Weltsek, 2021).

### Participatory Theatre and the Power of Engagement

Audience members emphasized how the theatrical elements deepened their engagement, especially the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques embedded in the performance. Attendees particularly noted how the use of participatory theatre devices heightened their engagement with themes of the play. One audience member praised the interactive format saying, "I loved the direct communication with the audience, the invitation to come on stage, and the Q&A."

The Forum Theatre approach, where audience members actively engage in problem-solving, was particularly well received. One audience member said, "I thought the use of forum theatre as a device to connect with the audience made the work incredibly engaging." Audience members also appreciated peer discussions and emotional support during the event. One member said, "I listened to and supported a peer who was having an emotional reaction to the show." The inclusion of Forum Theatre and interactive call-to-action moments turned passive spectators into co-creators of dialogue and change, an approach central to both Boal's (2008) pedagogy of the oppressed and contemporary applied theatre practices.

The call-to-action segment, in which audience members brainstormed solutions, was frequently cited as a highlight. One member said, "SO IMPACTFUL!!!! Brainstorming ideas together and sharing them was brilliant!" Another said that "it activated the audience's thinking, exploring ways to transform the status quo and speak up." While another said, "to ask us to think and try to come up with ideas/solutions on the spot was extremely impactful." These responses embody Boal's pedagogy of the oppressed, in which spectators become "spect-actors," actively co-creating meaning, imagining solutions and creating moments of collective agency within the performance itself (Boal, 2008).

The post-show talkback session further deepened the engagement, prompting reflection beyond the immediate narrative into action. One participant noted, "It was a beautiful example of theatre moving beyond awareness into action and make us grapple with finding solutions and not just seeing your struggles and just walking away." Another remarked, "The requests to participate were a great reminder that it is not enough to just watch; we must take action."

Beyond awareness, the performance initiated ongoing discussions about institutional change: An audience member asserted that "it encouraged us to actively listen and engage with one another on continuing the conversation around how to better support and celebrate international students moving forward." These reactions embody what critical pedagogy demands of learning spaces: transformation, not just information (Freire, 2005).

### The Effects of Multimodal Aesthetics

The integration of multimedia, choreography, music, poetry, and recorded visuals significantly enhanced audience engagement. One audience member noted that "the blending of recorded visuals, printed text, and live performance was incredibly engaging."

For those new to theatre, the multimodal approach was especially impactful. One member said:

I'm a bit of a theater newbie, but from my perspective the rich variety of modalities was extremely effective. I've never seen so many elements, recorded scenes, dialogue, choreography, music, a fight scene woven together so seamlessly. It felt cohesive and like every modality used served to heighten a particular emotion.

This layered aesthetic approach supports applied performance theory, which values emotional resonance and symbolic representation as legitimate forms of knowledge production and community-building (Thompson, 2012). The diversity of theatrical modes amplified the story's emotional core, helping audiences both feel and understand the lived experiences being portrayed.

Overall, the play was described as "entertaining and thoughtful", "moving", "thought-provoking and challenging", "wonderfully poignant and educational", as well as "wide-ranging and impactful"

Even audience members familiar with international student

struggles found the performance deeply moving: One person stated that, "This was incredibly powerful. Even though I already knew about these challenges, seeing them portrayed this way made them feel urgent and real. I think every single person should see this." Another attendee noted the importance of storytelling in making complex issues accessible, saying, "the narrative playmaking was brilliant. I learned so much about the power of theatre to connect people across barriers."

One participant highlighted how the performance transformed their perception of theatre when they said "This was a reminder that 'good' theatre doesn't need high production value. The story had me on the edge of my seat."

### Validation and Representation of International Students

For international students in the audience, the performance provided a sense of validation and empowerment from seeing their realities mirrored on stage. One attendee reflected on the significance of witnessing their friend's moment of representation on stage saying, "I was honored to witness my friend experience this moment of empowerment." From the perspective of critical pedagogy, this act of representation is more than emotional affirmation; it is an awakening of critical consciousness, where individuals recognize their shared struggles (Freire, 2005). Another international student shared how the performance captured their personal struggles, saying, "The scenes about isolation and language barriers hit me the hardest because that's exactly what I have experienced." This articulation of recognition and self-identification aligns with narrative identity theory (Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1993), which emphasizes the power of storytelling to construct and affirm personal and collective identities. By witnessing their experiences performed publicly, international students were able to reconstruct their sense of belonging and agency within a community that often renders them invisible.

Even members of the college's Office of International Student Affairs acknowledged the play's importance in highlighting graduate student struggles. One member said that "the play did an excellent job voicing the challenges of international students." A staff member noted that graduate students, in particular, receive less structural support than undergraduates, saying, "The undergraduate population has more institutional support. This play helped expose that gap." These reactions demonstrate how documentary theatre can generate visibility

within administrative circles - bringing lived realities into public view, potentially influencing policy and programming, a clear example of theatre functioning as both cultural critique and institutional catalyst.

### ***Toward Action: Advocacy and Institutional Change***

The performance experience demonstrated significant potential in fostering dialogue and generating actionable solutions. Audience responses from the open-ended surveys and the talkback session, reinforce the performance's function as a space for critical consciousness and transformative pedagogy (Freire, 2005), where participants engage in collective dialogue to analyze systems of power and envision alternative futures.

#### **Advocacy for International Students**

Audience members emphasized the need for stronger collective advocacy at institutional and legislative levels. One staff member noted the challenge of advocating alone, saying, "I have many ideas for solutions, but it can be difficult to push for change as a single voice." Others stressed the importance of collective action: "It will take advocating as a unit to demand sustainable action for international students."

This framing of advocacy as a collaborative and systemic endeavor aligns with critical pedagogy's call for dialogical education, wherein all stakeholders including students, staff, faculty, must participate in co-creating more equitable institutions (Freire, 2005). A college staff member suggested that the Office of International Student Affairs collect student testimonies to present a strong case for change. They suggested that "a dedicated office should compile student voices and make a compelling argument to senior administrators." Additionally, a student proposed that domestic students could play a more active role in supporting their international peers, saying that "resident students should work together to find ways to advocate for their international peers." This further affirms how the performance prompted a shift from individual awareness to shared responsibility and collective empowerment.

#### **Adjusting Curriculum and Teaching Strategies**

Audience members suggested modifications to classroom practices to

support international students facing language barriers. One domestic graduate student recommended that educators and students normalize literacy checks in classrooms, "professors should create an environment where students feel comfortable asking for literacy checks or clarifications if they don't understand." Another American graduate student proposed implementing multi-modal teaching strategies to enhance accessibility to help students who may be struggling with the language barrier saying, "there should be multiple access points to instructions; visual, auditory, and embodied exercises to help those struggling with language." A further suggestion was to foster one-on-one interactions between students and professors to build stronger academic relationships. An audience member said, "Educators should have one on one conversations in the classroom, with students and lecturers to identify challenges and build bonds and build relationships outside the classroom." Such proposals reflect the influence of critical pedagogy, urging educators to move beyond traditional, monologic modes of instruction toward inclusive, student-centered learning environments Freire, 2005.

#### Prioritizing Job Opportunities for International Students

Financial hardship due to limited job opportunities was a major concern. Audience members suggested institutional changes to prioritize on-campus employment for international students. A domestic alumnus of the college argued that international students should be given preferential consideration for campus jobs, stating "There are so many opportunities for non-international students to work off campus. On-campus jobs should be prioritized for international students." Another audience member proposed that on-campus employment be guaranteed as part of the acceptance package for international students, "The college should guarantee an on-campus job for every international student upon acceptance."

Additionally, a domestic graduate student suggested that integrating fieldwork into graduate programs could provide financial and professional benefits. They said, "more opportunities for international students to gain fieldwork experience in their studies and build network in their field would ease financial burdens." Another audience member proposed that scholarships and graduate assistantships be expanded to support international students financially, "The university can give more scholarships and provide

graduate assistantships for international students. This would greatly reduce financial struggles." These conversations align with applied performance theory, positioning theatre as both a mirror for social realities and a catalyst for structural critique and change (Thompson, 2012).

### Providing College Support Programs and Outreach

Audience members emphasized the need for enhanced institutional support, including translation services, orientation adjustments, and administrative guidance. One suggestion was to incorporate performances like this documentary theatre piece into student and faculty orientations. They stated that "This is the kind of work that needs to be seen at the front end of college experiences."

Other audience members highlighted the need for translation services and administrative support, as many international students struggle with navigating bureaucratic processes. A graduate student noted how even domestic students find required paperwork confusing, saying that "workshops should help international students navigate required paperwork. These forms are confusing even for Americans." Additionally, one audience member suggested the creation of an International Student Canvas resource course to centralize and streamline access to information: "The college could create a dedicated online resource center/course could provide guidance on healthcare, visas, and frequently asked questions."

As applied performance theory reminds us, theatre thrives not only in the rehearsal room but in its ability to transform institutional practices and provoke lasting conversations. In this way, the performance served as a "rehearsal for revolution" (Boal, 2008, p. 136), equipping both students and staff with the tools and imagination to re-envision higher education structures and responsibilities.

These findings demonstrate that documentary theatre not only communicates the emotional and structural realities faced by international graduate students but also activates audiences as potential co-advocates within higher-education institutions.

### **LIMITATIONS**

A primary limitation of this research is the survey sample, which was relatively small. Only thirteen of the twenty-five audience members

completed the post-performance questionnaire. Although the responses revealed strong and consistent themes, the limited sample size constrains the generalizability of the quantitative results.

Most audience members completed the surveys directly after viewing the piece, meaning their responses likely captured the heightened emotional impact of the moment rather than long-term attitudinal or behavioral change. Future studies might incorporate follow-up surveys to assess the durability of audience reflection and action.

Given that all audience members were affiliated with a single northeastern U.S. liberal arts college, the findings should be interpreted as context specific. Institutional culture, student demographics, and available support systems vary considerably across higher-education environments. This familiarity with international students at the institution may have influenced audience responses.

The preliminary study included four interview participants from different countries, which does not fully represent the diverse international graduate student population at the college. Additionally, the study focused only on graduate students, limiting the breadth of perspectives. Students from other universities or national backgrounds (e.g., Europe, Africa, or South America) may face distinct challenges that were not fully explored.

Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful insight into the capacity of documentary and applied theatre as a storytelling and advocacy tool to foster awareness, empathy, and institutional dialogue. The findings lay important groundwork for future research with larger, more diverse audiences and across multiple institutional contexts.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this study offer insights into how theatre can serve as a powerful medium for storytelling. It demonstrates the significant potential of documentary theatre to deepen audience understanding of international graduate student experiences and to spark advocacy, and meaningful institutional reflection. The performance not only highlighted complex challenges, such as language discrimination, financial barriers, social isolation and limited access to resources, but also mobilized audience members to consider their own roles in

fostering a more inclusive academic environment. Even with a small sample size, the consistency and richness of the qualitative responses indicate that arts-based approaches can effectively humanize institutional issues that often remain invisible.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by highlighting the unique capacity of documentary and applied theatre as a transformative process amplifying marginalized voices, fostering empathy, prompting dialogue and encouraging participatory problem-solving. Beyond raising awareness, documentary theatre mobilizes communities toward action, offering international students a platform to express their lived experiences in ways that traditional research methods may not capture as effectively. By examining how documentary theatre conveys these experiences, this study contributes much-needed literature on international graduate student experiences - an area often overlooked in research, which predominantly focuses on undergraduates.

Moreover, the solutions proposed during the talkback session reveal how performance-based inquiry can inspire audiences to imagine new institutional possibilities. Suggestions ranged from expanding multimodal teaching strategies and improving administrative support to prioritizing on-campus jobs and enhancing orientation programs. While some recommendations may be aspirational given institutional or legal constraints, they nonetheless reflect a shift toward collective responsibility and advocacy, demonstrating how theatre can influence not only individual understanding but also institutional discourse.

While the effectiveness of documentary theatre in amplifying international student voices is evident, at the same time, real and lasting change requires institutional action. Documentary theatre can illuminate structural inequities, but it cannot resolve them alone. The insights offered by audience members underscore the need for institutions to re-evaluate policies, strengthen support services, and address the systemic gaps that disproportionately affect international graduate students. Implementing the recommendations raised through this performance would foster more inclusive learning environments and affirm the value of international students within the campus community.

By transforming lived experiences into shared performance, this study underscores that storytelling is not only an act of representation,

but also one of resistance, empathy and transformation. Audiences do not simply witness these stories, but they are invited to respond, reflect and participate in shaping the future. In telling their stories, international graduate students are not merely seen; they are heard, validated, and empowered to help shape the systems that shape them.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Archer, L. O. (2025). Telling their stories: The role of documentary theatre in addressing international graduate student challenges. *ArtsPraxis*, 12 (2), pp. 91-113.

## APPENDICES

1. A video recording of American Dream - An International Student's Nightmare can be accessed on [YouTube](#).
2. The script of American Dream - An International Student's Nightmare is [archived in the NYU Faculty Digital Archive with this issue of ArtsPraxis](#).

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## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Lemar O. Archer is a Jamaican-born theatre educator, director, choreographer, and actor based in Boston, MA. With over nine years of experience, he specializes in theatre education, multicultural learning, and youth empowerment. He previously taught and led arts programs in Jamaica and now serves as Drama Educator and Theatre Director in Massachusetts. Lemar holds an M.A. and M.F.A. in Theatre Education and Applied Theatre from Emerson College and a B.A. in Drama in Education from Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Art. His work in documentary theatre and advocacy amplifies marginalized voices through storytelling and institutional change.