

VULTURE

BUILDING TRUST AFTER INCLUSIVITY FAILED: LESSONS FOR THE THEATER

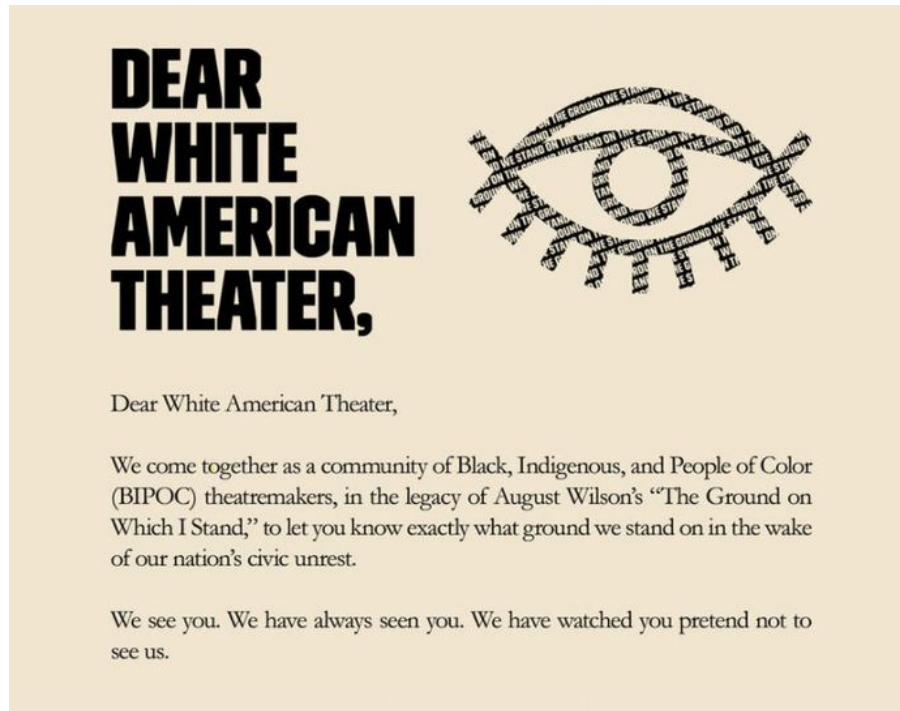


Photo: We See You White American Theater

By [Helen Shaw](#)
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Full Article: <https://www.vulture.com/2020/06/race-whiteness-black-lives-matter-lessons-for-theater.html>

The theater is an iceberg. An audience only ever sees the one surface facet; we sense but do not see the laboring hulk just beneath. And theater organizations are icebergs too. Below each public-facing performance, there's a gigantic mass of administration and funding and marketing and programming. That hidden part, down in the cold water, can be difficult to grasp, let alone call to account.

Not anymore. In less than two days, over 63,000 people have signed a [change.org](#) petition called "[demand change for BIPOC theatremakers](#)," asserting the rights and anger of black and

indigenous people and those of color in an industry that has often talked about inclusion while failing to meaningfully diversify. The petition's attached [statement](#) is a ringing condemnation of producers, critics, unions, marketers, development departments, everyone in "this house of cards built on white fragility and supremacy." After the huge collective actions in the streets protesting police brutality and anti-blackness in civil society, the field has turned, inevitably, to cast the beam out of its own eye.

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So what can the field not just learn but *do*? Given the years of promise-making and promise-breaking, where are the paths forward? There clearly needs to be restructuring. Suddenly, after decades of inaction, theaters are casting around for models they can imitate.

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And this is the kernel of all anti-racism work: reallocating power. In commercial contexts, it's difficult to imagine the kind of surrender that came up in every conversation I had. How, exactly, would that work in for-profit Broadway? But in the nonprofit sector, it does happen. The small but mighty Off-Off Broadway space JACK was Alec Duffy's baby, but after theatrical programming in response to Eric Garner's 2014 murder and then Michael Brown's death the following month, he realized that having a white male in the chief position was deeply problematic. So the theater applied for a grant for a co-director; Jordana De La Cruz and he are now co-artistic directors. The proof is there. There is a way for white leaders to dethrone themselves and grow in power – since true power flows from living your values.

Learning and unlearning in public can be embarrassing and painful. "This work requires thick skin," says Ybarra, "and deep humility. When somebody comes and tells you 'This is a problem,' or 'What you said is problematic,' it is one of the hardest things to understand – but you can receive that as a gift, like, 'Oh, somebody just turned on a light.'" More and more people do at least seem to be seeing that light. De La Cruz described white protesters rallying around black ones, protecting them from the police, keeping them both spiritually and physically at the rally's center. At past protests, she remembers needing to ask for that protection; now, white allies do it as a matter of course. The vocabulary of the anti-racism movement is spreading

too – and change follows language. “I don’t feel alone in using the language of anti-racism and anti-oppression and white supremacy anymore,” says Ybarra.

And in a pandemic-struck sector, in which almost all theater people are reeling from realizing their work is “inessential,” JACK and its board have the capacity to simply pivot to providing what is essential. In March, De La Cruz and Duffy [turned the keys over](#) to a mutual-aid organization that needed a space for food distribution. It cannot be a coincidence that flexibility in structure has led to resilience in mission. And even the aesthetic mission has been recharged. De La Cruz compares where she is on June 3 with where she was two weeks prior: “Many of us had to grapple with our life’s purpose – when theater is considered nonessential, that shook me to my core,” she says. “But the difference between a month ago versus now is that I realized, at the end of the day, there will be stories that need to be told about *this*.”

And if anyone’s still worried that theater doesn’t have a place in the revolution, she has an answer. The last show she directed was *TJ Loves Sally 4 Ever*, which closed at JACK on February 29. At the end of that play, the actors show us an archway onstage (they break apart a wall to reveal it) and tell us that there’s a heavenly future on the other side. But to enter, each audience member must choose to deliberately enter a paradise that is equal for all. “I’m so grateful that’s the last show I worked on,” she says. “The message of that show is about collective freedom and liberation. It’s your choice to move to the future. People of color are not stopping you; they aren’t the ones saying you can or can’t join us. It’s up to you.” Art can be our silent companion, the accompanying thought as we move through the world. And so as De La Cruz has been protesting as much as she feels physically able, the message of the play “has been in my body. It’s allowed me to be more active on the streets. People showing up is giving me the strength to keep moving on.” The play and the protests are one and the same, she says. “We don’t move to the future in pieces.”