

## **Race on Broadway: Views from Onstage and Behind the Curtain**

Heather Friedman  
Howard Community College

“It’s very normal that I’m typically the only black guy or one of two or three out of a team of 30+ people.”

- Black Broadway performer

Unfortunately, the response above typifies experiences of many Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) working in various aspects of Broadway productions, with a particular focus on racial inequality. This paper sets out to examine those experiences in greater depth. Recent scholarship (Hoffman 2020, Whitefield 2019) has investigated the deep roots of this inequality and its effects upon the sociology of Broadway productions, as well as the content and structure of plays themselves. Especially against backdrop of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement’s rise to prominence in 2020, however, there is a critical need to hear directly from Black, Indigenous and People of Color who have experienced racial inequities on Broadway directly. This paper reports on research sought to showcase those critical voices.

The research supporting this paper consisted of oral and written interviews with 30 current Broadway performers and creative team personnel including 15 men and 15 women ranging in age from early thirties to late fifties.<sup>1</sup> Five subjects were Caucasian, 18 were Black, one was Asian American, three were Latinx, one was Asian Mexican, and two identified as

---

<sup>1</sup> This research project could not have been done without several persons who graciously assisted me with this project. I would first like to thank Julia Salkin who put me in contact with several of the interviewees. Next, I would like to thank my parents and friends who provided me with moral support throughout entirety of this research project. Then, I would like to thank my cousin, Cheryl Segal, for graciously taking time out of her busy schedule to proofread my paper. Lastly, I would like to thank my professor, Dr. Matthew Van Hoose, who provided me with step-by-step guidance for conducting this research project.

persons of color (POC). Moreover, these persons have been active on Broadway and/or national tours, as well as experienced challenges within this business first-hand. Interviews, aside from those who opted to provide written responses via electronic mail, were conducted via Zoom. The number of questions asked was dependent upon venue (i.e., email versus Zoom), and several additional questions were posed to interviewees who performed in *Hamilton*. Questions addressed background in theatre, experiences on Broadway, in addition to topics pertaining to racial inequality within the Broadway community. Interviews lasted anywhere from thirty to ninety minutes.

These first-hand perspectives help to clarify historical and contemporary factors contributing to exclusion of non-white actors from Broadway productions, the potential impacts regarding recent resurgence of the BLM movement regarding promotion and expansion of diversity within Broadway casts, as well as additional efforts to address racial imbalance within Broadway productions. Below, I present three primary themes that emerged from interviewees' responses: (1) issues of casting and production leading to exclusion, tokenism, and insufficient support for BIPOC performers; (2) domination of creative teams as well as ownership of Broadway theaters by white people; and (3) interviewees' proposals to help identify and address racial inequities on Broadway in recent wake of the BLM movement. To protect confidentiality, actual names of interviewees have been replaced with single- or double-letter designators throughout the paper.

### **“80% of My Career I Have Felt Like the Token Black Person”: Lived Experiences of Racial Inequality on Broadway**

Interviewees shared very candid feedback regarding their experiences as BIPOC

Broadway performers, and it was predominantly negative. Upon inquiring about current state of Broadway, Interviewee Q commented, “I could count the number of black women who have directed on Broadway on one hand,” and, “Broadway is not necessarily the safest environment when it comes to race.” A different person, Interviewee DD, stated, “Racial Inequality is very much a daily occurrence on the Broadway stage,” and, “there are shows that negatively impact racial inequality ... one of the biggest culprits being *Book of Mormon* ... The unspoken rule is that no POC performer can ever play any of the elders because that would ‘confuse the plot.’” Interviewee Z added, “I’ve witnessed and experienced racial inequality on just about every show that I’ve worked on.”

“My last name has prevented me from getting certain opportunities,” remarked Interviewee B. Interviewee D shared, “It’s very normal that I’m typically the only black guy or one of two or three out of a team of 30+ people,” and in a similar manner, Interviewee AA remarked, “My experiences mainly come from being one of very few people of color in a cast.” Multiple interviewees characterized *Hamilton* as an exception that proved this general rule of exclusionary casting practices. Interviewee V shared, “When Lin-Manuel created it... I think he was specifically saying ‘I am telling the story of America but using the people that built it.’” Interviewee K, meanwhile, spoke to how these exclusionary patterns can create an actively hostile working environment for BIPOC performers: “I have seen Black members of my community within theatre be perceived by fellow cast members and also stage management as more frightening, as more violent, as more emotional, as more likely to fly off the handle.”

Based upon interviewees’ first-hand lived experiences concerning racial inequality on

Broadway, tokenism still persists today. Interviewee N stated, “I have noticed patterns in the way of tokenism ... 80% of my career I have felt like the token black person in any cast I’ve been in... It would be very clear that there was one black lead and one black person in the cast to cover that lead...That largely has been the thing that I’ve experienced.” Moreover, Interviewee R called attention to this same issue, noting, “I think there’s something to be said about tokenism and people putting in BIPOC artists just because they want to say that they are diverse versus actually allowing them to tell stories that have nothing to do with their race.” When white characters are cast in leading roles, this interviewee suggested, their whiteness is seldom a primary focus of their character’s arc or play’s broader plot, while it is quite the opposite for BIPOC performers. Interviewee BB reinforced this observation: “We can start with the disproportionate amount of lead roles that are only given to white actors. Sometimes that’s because they truly deserve the role. Other times, it’s because the powers that be are worried that a person of color won't sell tickets. Either that, or their mindset is too close minded to envision anyone of color in the role, even if they are absolutely perfect for it.”

An additional systemic disadvantage imposed upon BIPOC individuals deals with lack of proper skill set and equipment when preparing BIPOC actors/actresses for performances. Concerning the few Broadway performances casting BIPOC actors and/or actresses, many people supporting them backstage lack proper skills and equipment. This was evidenced by Interviewee O, who confided, “We just don’t hire enough women and men of color in hair and makeup departments of TV, film and Broadway.” The same individual added, “A hairstylist did not know how to do my hair and joked about needing a YouTube tutorial to carry out this task,” as well as, “The microphones had two color options: the peach ... and this one solid color for

black people.” Other related comments received included, “There isn’t a lot of education on how to do black hair on Broadway” from Interviewee E. “Typically, whenever I’m doing a show and have to deal with microphones ... they’re usually like a light brown, tan, to go with white skin ... I always have to request a black cord so that it matches with my hair ... and so it matches my color,” remarked Interviewee D. The same interviewee noted, “The hair people have no idea how to deal with my hair so I usually end up doing it myself or going to a barber and getting it done.”

### ***“White Domination of Broadway”: Racial Exclusion Among Audiences and Behind the Scenes***

With respect to second finding concerning demographics of creative teams, theatre ownership, and audiences, interviewees’ comments were numerous and overwhelmingly in agreement. According to Interviewee F, “If you look at it from the top down, every Broadway house is owned by a white family or a white organization. There are no theatre owners on Broadway who are of any color.” In addition, Interviewee X provided a response of, “The Broadway theatres are owned by three companies ... and they are all old white families.” Interviewee P commented, “There are not a lot of people of color in positions where they can create what shows are coming up next. So a lot of black Broadway shows are actually created and produced by white people...so when you do have a show that all of a sudden is being put up by people of color, that’s not a very typical thing.” Nearly the same opinion was expressed by Interviewee BB, who noted, “This issue is often perpetuated by the fact that the producers, writers, and creative teams are majority white. Until the producers, directors, choreographers,

casting directors, writing teams, and music directors of Broadway are more diverse and inclusive, the stories we see onstage will not fully represent the diversity of the world we live in.” Another participant serving as Interviewee V mentioned, “Almost every show I’ve done has been 95% white people, written by white people, produced by white people and a theatre owned by white people...” Analogous to other remarks, another individual said, “The creatives team is still all white, the people in charge are still all white, the people making the most money are still all white...” and, “...there needs to be more people of color brought into the creation process.” Interviewee CC added, “Even if you are telling a story with a predominately POC cast, if the people “in charge” of the show are not POC’s as well, I feel the show will lack authenticity down the line.” Interviewee Z, finally, reinforced this sentiment further, sharing, “I’ve been in the room with white creative teams that have written Black shows that refuse my input on making the show more authentic from a black person’s perspective.”

Yet another area in which BIPOC individuals directly experience racial inequality involves related issues of Broadway audiences and kinds of stories created to appeal to them. According to interviews conducted, it became evident that Broadway productions were geared towards Caucasian rather than non-white audiences and sensibilities. This position was expressed by Interviewee G, who stated, “For years and years and years the Broadway world has just been run by white people and I think that has been a disservice to Black people and any other person of color... that the stories aren’t as inclusive as they can be or as diverse as they can be.” In addition, this was supported by Interviewee X who said “You look out into the audiences and it’s just a sea of white people and a lot of gray hair.” Yet another corroborating quote was provided by Interviewee F, who said, “There is rarely marketing of shows to black

communities or to under-served communities.” Another supporting perspective reinforcing concept of a white majority controlling Broadway performances was expressed by Interviewee F, who remarked, “There are only two commercial producers of color in the entire Broadway industry... In all casting agencies and directors who cast Broadway shows there is only one as of one year ago. For successful directors or Tony-award winning directors, there are less than five.” Echoing these sentiments at an even broader level, Interviewee F remarked, “Racism is ingrained in the fabric of the institution of Broadway, it is innately racist.” Interviewee F added, “Broadway is a structure in America...ergo it’s racist because every single structure in America is like that.”

***“BLM has been a step in the right direction”: Standing Up for Greater Racial Equity on Broadway***

Concerning effects or reverberations of the BLM movement on Broadway, interviewees shared a number of insights regarding how Broadway can move toward greater racial equity. To begin, Interviewee U remarked, “Every single Broadway show like on the team is an equity and inclusion person and every single person is having equity and inclusion training...and that’s all because of the Black Lives Matter movement.” Another individual, Interviewee DD, responded, “BLM has been a step in the right direction. I think it has given POC performers a chance to step up and be heard, for us to be able to share our stories and ask for better treatment in our work spaces.” In light of increased sensitivity concerning race, enhanced awareness is now present. Interviewee E and Interviewee L contributed rich insights in this vein. Specifically, Interviewee E commented, “For our show we have a diversity therapist now and she’s a woman of color...She’s going to be there when we start rehearsals

again on site ... She's going to be leading diversity training with the entire cast." Similarly, Interviewee L shared, "I think there will be more racial bias training ... My friend in [anonymous show] told me that they basically have like a company manager that only stays in the room to make sure that the people of color are safe and not exposed to emotional harm and she navigates if something is not right before they even have to say anything."

Various suggestions were provided concerning additional efforts to address racial imbalance within Broadway productions. Interviewee AA expressed, "I think change has to start from the top. Of course, we should keep working to push for more diversity on the stage but that's only what's most visible. Those results must come from more diversity in producing, in casting, in directing, in writing, etc." Another constructive response was voiced by Interviewee CC, who stated, "I will always say that the only way to create racial equality within Broadway or theatre, in general, is to start from the top and work our way down." In a related manner, Interviewee CC suggested, "I think it is important Broadway and regional theaters take a deep look into who is creating and casting these 'diverse' shows, and see if it is being reflected in the art they are trying to create."

Even though this research project was largely qualitative in nature, it is striking to note 100% of 30 interviewees identified racism as a problem in Broadway. For confronting this problem, many interviewees mentioned promise of color-blind casting, which is defined as casting of performers without consideration regarding their skin color (Bee 2018). This helps enable more equitable casting of Broadway performances, thereby promoting racial equality. According to Interviewee H, the musical *Hamilton* "...opened more doors for blind casting," while Interviewee X noted "Shakespeare festivals were really the first to start doing

color-blind casting.” Another subject, Interviewee R, state, “I think *Hamilton* pushed the envelope in terms of visual representation but that doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s changed the course of the way in which other shows are including people.”

While data collected for this project did address original research questions, if provided the opportunity to further conduct research on this topic, I would like to investigate long-lasting, specific ways Broadway can be reshaped to be more inclusive of BIPOC at all levels. Such a study might take the form of in-depth case studies complemented by types of interviews conducted for this project to anonymously recommend potential remediation(s) for eliminating root cause(s) of racial inequality on Broadway. While some steps in the proper direction were mentioned, they predominantly appear to address symptoms rather than underlying sources of the issue. As demonstrated by generosity and insight of interviewees who contributed to this project, Broadway is essentially a reflection of broader patterns of racism within U.S. society. However, it has within itself the capacity to address real and longstanding problems with racial equality. Broadway leadership simply needs to listen and heed voices like those referenced within the foregoing pages.

## References

Bee, C. (2018, March 5). The Art of Colour Blind Casting on Broadway. *Medium*.

<https://medium.com/@courtneyboycety4.1213/the-art-of-colour-blind-casting-on-broadway-c687dac795f2>

Bernstein, Alice. 2005. "Philip Rose: a Broadway journey against racism." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 29 (1): 31-37.

[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A128705134/AONE?u=colu91149&sid=A](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A128705134/AONE?u=colu91149&sid=AONE&xid=ae25de43)

[ONE&xid=ae25de43](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A128705134/AONE?u=colu91149&sid=AONE&xid=ae25de43)

Chen, Angela. 2015. "From Vaudeville to Hamilton: Racial Minorities in Musicals." *JSTOR Daily*. <https://daily.jstor.org/vaudeville-hamilton-racial-minorities-musicals/>

Hoffman, W. (2020). *The Great White Way: Race and the Broadway Musical* (2nd ed.). Rutgers University Press.

Mafe, Diana Adesola. 2006. "Black women on Broadway: the duality of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*." *American Drama* 15 (2): 30-47.

[https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A147755577/AONE?u=colu91149&sid=A](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A147755577/AONE?u=colu91149&sid=AONE&xid=ba7f14ed)

[ONE&xid=ba7f14ed](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A147755577/AONE?u=colu91149&sid=AONE&xid=ba7f14ed)

Monteiro, Lyra D. 2016. "Review: Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*." *The Public Historian* 38 (1): 89-98. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26420757>

Walsh, Shannon. 2016. "Hamilton: An American Musical." *Theatre Journal* 68

(3): 457-459. [https://www-proquest-](https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.howardcc.edu/docview/1844321410/7CE5F4F698B74911P)

[com.libproxy.howardcc.edu/docview/1844321410/7CE5F4F698B74911P](https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.howardcc.edu/docview/1844321410/7CE5F4F698B74911P)

[Q/4?accountid=35779](https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.howardcc.edu/docview/1844321410/7CE5F4F698B74911P)

Whitfield, S. (Ed.). (2019). *Reframing the Musical: Race, Culture and Identity*.

Springer.