



## Compounding Diversity

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For years our field has been struggling with organizational issues relating to race and ethnicity (and more recently to sexual orientation, physical ability and other issues). We have seen the creation of the Non-Traditional Casting Project and admired the extraordinary leadership of its director, Sharon Jensen; we have heard the impassioned challenges to complacency by August Wilson and gathered hungrily to hear the wise counsel of Donna Walker-Kuhne. Slowly but surely, we have experienced growing diversity in many manifestations?increasing visibility for writers of color, advances in diverse casting, audiences that increasingly resemble the heterogeneous communities in which we live and do our work. None of us can contend that we have made these advances quickly or fully enough, and we still have far, far to go.

This approach is only half the story. In our focus on diversifying individual theatres, we have perhaps paid less attention to creating a diverse array of individually strong organizations, a distinction suggested by David Brooks in the Sept. '03 *Atlantic Monthly*, where he challenges America's commitment to traditional notions of diversity: Maybe it's time to admit the obvious. We don't really care all that much about diversity in America...There are limits to how diverse any community can or should be. I've come to think that it is not useful to try to hammer diversity into every neighborhood and institution in the United States...It's probably better to think about diverse lives, not diverse institutions. Human beings, if they are to live well, will have to move through a series of institutions and environments, which may be individually homogenous, but taken together will offer diverse experiences. Indeed, in a field extensively populated by European heritage-based theatres, there are still comparatively few full-time professional theatres of color (much less theatres dedicated to the gay/lesbian community or to the community of people with disabilities). Even the largest of these institutions of color work with a fraction of the resources their white counterparts command, and few can be described as fiscally stable and

growing.

Why should this be so? Indeed, has (as some have suggested) the very model of larger white theatres?positing structures and financial assumptions that may not be culturally transferable?been complicit in the creation of stress? What does it mean to capitalize a theatre in a community where subscriptions are not a viable strategy? Especially as theatres rely increasingly on individual contributions, what does the future hold for organizations serving communities without a tradition of arts giving? At an African Grove Institute for the Arts meeting in Los Angeles, Keryl McCord said, "People ask why we don't 'give back.' We do give back. We give to our parents and grandparents, who used all their savings to put us through school. Giving to the arts is a third-generation, middle-class activity, and we are only now in the first generation of an African-American middle class." Without such a donor base, how will these theatres survive to see that generation emerge?

With these kinds of questions in mind, and at the special urging of Ron Himes of St. Louis Black Repertory Company, TCG assembled a group of leaders from 21 theatres last September to tackle these questions. The meeting at White Oak Plantation in Yulee, Fla., encompassed three days of rich financial analysis led by Zannie Voss, and organizational and artistic discussions masterfully moderated by Diane Burbie of Los Angeles. The meeting proved to be a fascinating lesson in how the very term "theatre of color" masks real differences between specific communities and their theatres. Topics ranged from how different historical origins impacted existing theatre literature, to ongoing frustrations with employment opportunities, to the lack of capitalization and infrastructure, and more?pressures sometimes unique to theatres of color but very much in keeping with the challenges facing all theatres around the country.

What will we make of all this? I don't know yet: Clearly the White Oak meeting is a first step, and much remains for us to figure out. But I do know this?I know that we are committed to bringing this group together again and to utilizing the data in Sato's report to formulate clear programs and strategies. I know that the dedication, the passion, the ardor of all the meeting participants?from the venerable Woodie King, whose four-decade career is a thrilling testament to the power of theatre and creativity, to young leaders like Grace Lee at 2G, who is exploring vibrant new paths?are indispensable to our field. These intangible assets, while they cannot be measured on balance sheets, will be a pivotal part of ensuring the survival of theatres of color. And I know that we, as a community, must realize this is not an either/or issue: It is time to strengthen and diversify the entire landscape as well as individual theatres. And all of us (and I do mean all) must be open to thinking in new ways, behaving in new ways, extending ourselves in new ways.

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