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How Chicago theater artists are diversifying the city's stages

From the downtown theater district to neighborhood storefronts, efforts are underway to make Chicago theater less uniformly white, thin, able-bodied, and gender-conforming.

By Zac Thompson

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When playwright Lucas Hnath's *Hillary and Clinton* opens at Victory Gardens Theater in April, it will be with an African-American actress, Cheryl Lynn Bruce, playing Hillary.

MICHAEL COURIER

The point of theater, according to Hamlet, is to hold a mirror up to nature. But all too often on Chicago's stages it seems like the mirror is being held up to the members of a yoga class in Lincoln Park. Strides have been made in recent years (just look at Broadway's hip-hop musical *Hamilton*, in which the Founding Fathers are played by black and Latino actors), but when it comes to casting, particularly of commercial and canonical work, the default setting is still thin, gender-conforming, able-bodied, and lily white. And it's high time for a change.

That's the feeling among theater artists seeking to expand representation of racial minorities and body types onstage. Part of their push for diversity has to do with providing more opportunities to performers who are tired of being shut out of roles because they don't fit a certain mold.

Local actress Harmony France, who says she's considered "curvy" by musical-theater standards, channeled some of that frustration in January, when she wrote a post on her personal blog detailing some of the harsh things she's heard during a decade of auditions—stuff like "lose some weight if you want a career" and "you're not believable as a love interest." She made a call for more inclusive casting and vowed to take back her body from an industry that, she wrote, has conditioned her to hate the way she looks. The post went viral on social media, particularly among people in the theater community.

"That was about me no longer obsessing over what they might want me to look like or what I need to change about myself," she says now. "I always had on my resumé 'Willing to change appearance,' which was my clever way of saying 'Willing to lose weight for this role.' But I've gotten to the point where what you see is what you get. I'm a normal-size woman. There is no reason I should feel like I need to lose some incredible amount of weight to be viable onstage." With that in mind, France announced earlier this month a new musical-theater venture, Firebrand Theatre (cofounded with fellow actress Danni Smith), dedicated to "employing and empowering women by expanding opportunities on and off the stage."



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SUN-TIMES MEDIA

She's not saying we need to throw out restrictions on casting altogether, especially when they're spelled out in the script. But "if the text does not require using white actors, for instance, maybe try to look outside of that race," France says. "Just because it's been done before that way doesn't mean we need to continue."

That, in a nutshell, is the philosophy of the Chicago Inclusion Project, a new organization that arranges diverse staged readings of works not usually known for their diversity (Sam Shepard's *True West* recast with Latino actors was a recent effort, produced in collaboration with the Hypocrites) and provides resources to performers as well as a goad to companies like Writers Theatre, TimeLine Theatre, and others seeking to diversify their offerings. The group's founder, Emjoy Gavino, said in an e-mail that the project was spawned by a fed-up feeling similar to France's.

Gavino is an Asian-American actress, but she found that she wasn't often considered for American roles. "I once had a director tell me they would put Asian art onstage or in the set dressing," she writes, "so they could justify putting me in the play, because they couldn't explain me being there otherwise."

When director Ron OJ Parson called her in to audition for Court Theatre's 2009 production of *Wait Until Dark*, the 1967 film version of which starred Audrey Hepburn, Gavino assumed she was there to fill some kind of quota. "There was no way they would cast an Asian-American actress in the Hepburn role at an Equity house," she says, "without it being a version set in Chinatown." But Parson did cast her, and for Gavino the experience was "eye-opening," allowing

her to see how much she had been limited and how much she was capable of. "It made me want more for myself," she says.



Chicago Inclusion Project founder Emjoy Gavino is an Asian-American actress, but she found that she wasn't often considered for American roles.

JOE MAZZA/BRAVE LUX

But there's more to inclusive-casting efforts than opening up jobs for actors. According to Gavino, the alternative is bad for business and does a disservice to audiences. "From a producing standpoint," she writes, "you are missing out on audiences who do not see themselves onstage and therefore do not think your organization is relevant. From an artistic standpoint, you are missing out on how universal your story can be."

Finding ways of making a script relevant and universal can be of special importance with old scripts at risk of going stale with familiarity, as in the case of Thornton Wilder's *The Matchmaker*, a romantic comedy and community-theater chestnut that served as inspiration for the musical *Hello, Dolly!* When director Henry Wishcamper undertook the job of staging a new revival of the play currently at Goodman Theatre, he didn't want to feel confined by past, all-white interpretations of its turn-of-the-century setting.

"Plays like *The Matchmaker* get categorized in our minds," he says, "and that categorization is limiting. There's something exciting to me about taking something that feels part of our heritage and that lives inside a single idea of what it can be, and showing people that it can very much be itself while being more than we had imagined it to be."

To that end, Wishcamper made his production look as diverse as the crowd you'd see in the Loop on any given workday. The title character, Dolly Levi, is played by a white actress, Kristine Nielsen. But the man she's trying to net, Horace Vandergelder, is played by Allen Gilmore, who's black. People of color fill a high percentage of the supporting roles, transgender performer Sydney Germaine has a big part, and, perhaps most noteworthy of all, Anita Hollander, an actress who lost one of her legs to cancer, appears in three separate roles.

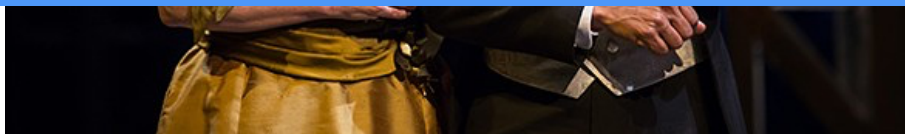
It's not just some kind of stunt. Wishcamper says it's a way of putting a modern gloss on the multicultural albeit mostly white world of the play and its all-embracing, share-the-wealth message. "We're not imposing anything on *The Matchmaker*," he says. "We're using it, like Wilder did originally, to look back in order to illuminate the present."

Wishcamper argues that the strategy also honors the playwright's allergy to realism, which he felt could be stultifying when defined too narrowly. In our own day, as Wishcamper points out, certain groups end up getting excised from historical plays in the name of historical accuracy. "Those choices are actually making realism less realistic," he says. "The families that my children go to school with are defined much differently than how a family is defined on an American stage."



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In director Henry Wishcamper's diverse production of *The Matchmaker*, the title character, Dolly Levi, is played by a white actress, Kristine Nielsen. The man she's trying to net, Horace Vandergelder, is played by Allen Gilmore, who's black.

LIZ LAUREN

Another recent example of imaginative casting in a classic work was Oracle Theatre's take on *The Hairy Ape*, Eugene O'Neill's 1922

expressionist drama about an Irish-American laborer who's treated worse than a caged beast by the ruling class and the police. The director of Oracle's production, Monty Cole, put black men in all the roles, drawing a potent parallel to current concerns about racial inequality and violence directed at young men of color.

Reading the play in the wake of Eric Garner's killing by police in 2014, Cole says, "I couldn't hear anyone but black men. That's the only way that script made sense to me in this time period." He cast African-American actors in the upper-crust roles too, he says, because he didn't want it to be about "what white people do to black people. Instead, this is how we all treat black men. This is how I treat black men, as a black man who comes from an upper-middle-class family."

The production retained O'Neill's indictment of class prejudice, while adding a contemporary facet that nevertheless was in keeping with a history of African-American reinterpretations of the playwright's work. The results felt at once radical and faithful to the original.

In his day job, Cole is the casting director at Victory Gardens Theater, where he applies his inclusive approach to new works in collaboration with artistic director Chay Yew. "It takes a little bit longer to cast our seasons here," he notes, "because Chay wants to always challenge who we see in our casts and who we put on our stage and what they look like."

Cole cites as an influence playwright Lucas Hnath's ideas about "stereoscopic theatricality"—a sense of fruitful dissonance between an audience's conception of a historical figure or literary character and how that person is presented onstage. It's especially relevant to Victory Gardens' next production, Hnath's own *Hillary and Clinton*, an alternate-universe account of the 2008 presidential election.

Cole found that an early reading with white actors took audiences out of the world of the play because they were expecting satirical impressions. "Then we cast it in one reading with all Latino actors," he says, "and it was the first time any of us actually heard the play because you were no longer trying to picture Hillary on the actor's face." When *Hillary and Clinton* opens at Victory Gardens in April, it will be with an African-American actress, Cheryl Lynn Bruce, playing Hillary.

Steppenwolf Theatre Company pulled off something similar last year in its production of David Adjmi's *Marie Antoinette*, which featured Alana Arenas, who's black, in the title role. In addition to supplying that sense of dissonance, Arenas's race subtly referenced the

Austrian-born queen's outsider status in France.



Michael Patrick Thornton, who is paralyzed in both legs, stars in the Gift Theatre's current production of *Richard III* at Steppenwolf's Garage Theatre.


CLAIRE DEMOS

On the other hand, sometimes the bold move is using an actor who actually has something in common with the character he's playing. Shakespeare's *Richard III* is probably the most famous disabled villain of all time, but before the Gift Theatre's current production at Steppenwolf's Garage Theatre, you'd be hard-pressed to find a professional version featuring a disabled actor in the title role.

Michael Patrick Thornton, who plays Richard in the Gift's show, remembers first encountering the play as an undergrad at the University of Iowa, some time before suffering the spinal stroke that left him paralyzed in both legs. A teacher gave him a copy of *Year of the King*, British actor Antony Sher's diary of his time preparing for the role.

"I remember reading it as an 18-year-old," Thornton says, "and I was just fascinated with his process. He filled up all these notebooks with drawings of spiders. I was like, 'Oh my God, I want to be that in-depth, too.'" Nowadays, though, he feels differently about it. "Knowing what I go through on a daily basis to get to work, I look back on that book and I'm like, 'Who gives a shit? Good for you, you drew some spiders.'"

What Thornton believes he brings to the role, by contrast, is a deeply personal understanding of the loneliness and need that Shakespeare taps into and that Thornton uses as motivation for Richard's villainy. "If every door I approach is closed in terms of finding love or acceptance by society," as Thornton puts it, "then what do you want me to do? I'm not going to sit in my room all day."

Thornton doesn't take a hard line on whether only disabled actors should play disabled characters because, after all, theater is about exercising imagination and empathy for the lives of others. Then again, the opportunities are so scarce already. "The representation of artists of color in the mainstream is absolutely abysmal, and that needs to change," he told me. "Having said that, disabled people would kill to have whatever terribly depressing paucity of numbers that percentage is. That's how far behind we are." 

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