I’m a black actor. Here’s how inequality works when you’re not famous.

by Bear Bellinger on February 12, 2016

I walk into the theater; the director, his assistant, and an intern are seated behind a table. The music director is set up on my left to accompany me on piano. I say a pleasant hello, gather myself, check to make sure the music director knows my tempo, and began to sing:

"I'm a colored spade, a Negro, a black nigger..."

I'm auditioning for Hair, the groundbreaking rock musical on hippie culture, race, and sexuality during the late '60s. I'm asked to prepare Hud's song "Colored Spade," which is basically a list of every imaginable slur for black people. As I finish up, content with the line I had just walked between anger and pain, I look up at the four white faces staring back at me. The director stands up, smiling broadly, walks over to me, and says:

"Great, great job, Bear. I'd like for you to do it again. This time I want you to imagine if you were a black man and someone was saying all of these things to you."

I look down at my skin to reaffirm what I already know: Yup, I am still a black man. Here I am, yet again, the only black man in a sea of white faces, being asked by people with no reference point to have a "blacker" reaction, to respond more "authentically." I sang the song again. I won the role.

Another day in the life of a blacktor.

I have been a working actor in the Chicagoland area for seven years now. That includes time auditioning for, and performing in, anything from musicals to plays to variety shows to TV to movies. The one common denominator, in all this time, is that I am a black man constantly having to conform my blackness to what white people, mainly men, on the other side of the table believe to be true. These men have no ill intent in their ideas about or depictions of blackness; they also have no lived experience. And mine, as the only actual black person in the room, is almost never valued or understood.

The truth about actors is that we are a pretty, singularly, self-absorbed, and self-confident group. We have to believe we are the best at what we do in order to deal with the constant barrage of "no"s that we hear.

The flip side of that coin is that we have very little control over our circumstances. Directors, casting directors, and artistic directors have almost unimpeachable authority to hire whom they see fit, so talent and drive can take a back seat to a director's vision (read: too fat, too tall, not dark enough, looks like my ex). One way this can manifest is when directors begin to view you as "difficult to work with." This label can
cut your career short before it has even started.

When I talk about inequalities in the world of acting, I don't, often, talk about them in terms of the pure number of faces on the stage or screen. That is useful for a basic understanding of the issues; it covers the need for minorities to see representations of themselves in pop culture. Instead, I try to focus on explaining the importance of diversity behind the scenes. We need people of color in the driver's seats who can influence how minorities are depicted.

When Matt Damon tells a black woman that you do diversity "in the casting of the film," rather than in who is behind the camera, he fails to understand the basic premise that cultural diversity makes a difference in the depth of the characters being created.

A great actor can take a flat part and inject life into it. But the great roles, the revolutionary depictions, come from great actors getting to inhabit fully realized, three-dimensional characters. They come from a collaboration of multiple individuals to find the truth in a single perspective. When the dominant voice is always white, a dimension of depth is removed from the realm of possibility.

In that audition, the director, while already tripping over his words, believed he had a better understanding of how a black man would respond to having racial slurs hurled at him than the only black man in the room. He extended no question to bring us to a better understanding. And had I brought up this issue, I might not have been hired for being "too difficult." So I suppressed truth of experience. This is how the power dynamics work. This is how a great role can turn into a merely good one, and how a juicy minority role can fall into stereotype.

Another story: I'm doing a production of Miss Saigon at a large union theater in the Chicago area. We begin our first day of technical rehearsals onstage. The lights are framing us for the first time, the set is massive, and the orchestra sounds incredible. That first time onstage, with all the aspects of a production coming together (lights, costumes, sets, sound, props, etc.) is arguably the most beautiful moment for an actor next to the first audience; everything starts to make sense.

We, a group of men playing GIs during the Vietnam War, run onstage for the opening number and take our place across the expanse from a corresponding group of women playing Vietnamese prostitutes. We hit our mark and begin our overly macho, testosterone-fueled, and misogynistic ad libs at the women across from us:

"Hey, how 'bout you come home with me tonight?"

"How much?"

"You never been with a man like me!"

In the midst of this controlled chaos, from an actor two men over I hear, "Hey nigger!"
I stop in the middle of the stage. The rest of the men continue along our designated path.

Did I just hear that? Why did that white dude just call me "nigger"? I look to the rest of the men in the show; the only other black actor on the stage is continuing on. Well, Bear, no one else reacted; you must have misheard. I finish the scene.

I get upstairs to our dressing room and thumb a quick Facebook status, something to the effect of, "That moment when you're not sure if one of your fellow actors ad-libbed the n-word at you onstage." I jump back into the flow of the rehearsal, shaken but staying professional until, a few hours later, one of my fellow actors comes up to me after seeing my status and tells me, "I heard it too."

What do I do? Now that I know that it definitely happened, I'm livid. Why would you say that word? In what situation does that make sense? Do you realize how much violent baggage you are bringing out of a black man with that word? The fear? The rage?

I go to our stage manager, the first contact in all stage interactions, explain what happened in as calm a manner as I can muster, and head home as I'm told they will talk to him about it and make sure it doesn't happen again.

When I get home, I'm still seething. I send an email to the offending actor explaining, from my point of view, that it was unacceptable and that I would, from that point forward, not interact with him, at all, other than our professional obligations onstage. He replies with an expected apology, including his ideas that we live in a "too-PC world."

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You may believe that an absolute cutoff in communication is harsh. What about apology? What about forgiveness? Aren't these qualities you strive for? Yes, they are. But I fail sometimes too. And I would contend that until you have experienced the paralyzing terror of having that word yelled at you by a racist party intent upon your fear and bodily harm, you cannot understand how truly harmful that word can be to a person's psyche.

I write a note to my Facebook friends condemning a theater culture that would let this happen. I explain that these sorts of racially charged interactions happen regularly and that they have, multiple times, almost made me quit the business. I juxtapose the difficulty of getting cast in theater due to my color, since the canon historically ignores minorities, with the knowledge that when we do get cast, these are the types of situations we find ourselves in. I finish by remarking that my career will probably be hurt more for speaking out against this culture than that white actor's career will be hurt for calling me "nigger" on stage.

I get a call from the artistic director of the theater. He would like to meet and talk about it the next morning. My post on Facebook had made it a bigger deal. I get to the theater; we sit down in the midst of the chaos of daily setup and begin to talk,
"I thought we had fixed this," he says. "He sincerely apologized! What do you want me to do?"

I sit there stunned. Fixed? Fixed how? Nothing had been done. A halfway apology in which the actor excused himself since he believed we live in a "too-PC" world? What do I want you to do? Fire the actor! Can I say that?

I looked around the theater and realized there was not another black face besides my one fellow actor. There was no one, in any position of power or influence, who would immediately understand what kind of position I had been put in by this actor ad-libbing hate speech at me onstage. There was no one I could turn to comfortably and say, "Can I ask for this actor to be fired?" I was alone.

I sat in the dressing room directly next to that actor for the next four weeks of the production. Nothing was done. He wasn't fired. He lost no privileges. He wasn't even moved out of my dressing room. He had apologized, and that was enough. Had I reacted the way I wanted to, had I improvised the punch to his face that should have come next, I would have been fired. But that didn't matter.

Ad libs onstage are a tempestuous beast in an otherwise orderly world. They need to conform to the world of the show while not overshadowing it; there's a reason the script exists. If an actor's ad libs are not supporting the script's intention, he is being selfish, distracting, and a bad actor.

The show centers on the relationship between the American GIs and Vietnamese women. The way they were talked to, the way they were treated, is paramount to the tension of the play. We spent time in rehearsals talking through that relationship and the ugliness that existed within it. Though a show could, and should, be made concerning the tension between black and white GIs during the Vietnam War, this show had not been set up to do that.

I stayed on my own, distant and detached, for the run of the show. I spent most of my time sitting in the dark backstage in a lonely chair or on the stairs that led up to the dressing room. I couldn't be comfortable at work, but I wasn't yet strong enough to quit. Within a week the rest of the cast had forgotten about it and was back on friendly terms with the actor, but I could never be.

It is now two years later, and I am doing only my second full production since that incident. It took theater away from me. I had to vet every opportunity and organization with the idea of structural protection. I couldn't put myself in that position again.

When you look at this story, you might say, "But, Bear, you didn't ask for him to be fired. You didn't say what you wanted." And you would be right. I didn't. I was scared. It was my first time at this massive theater that held the future of one of my best options for gainful employment in Chicago. I had no obvious institutional support. And though it was a union show, I was a little non-union actor and had no idea how that worked. I had no protection. I had no one to speak for me.

Final story: I walk on set for one of my first on-camera jobs. It's a primetime television show. I'm slightly
nervous. Okay, I'm incredibly nervous. I've overprepared 10 different deliveries of my single line. I had, finally, gotten in front of one of the biggest casting agencies in Chicago — and I got cast! Just like that. It's one line, but I'm going to show them what I can do with it. I'm an actor!

I've meticulously trimmed my facial hair, but I also brought my razor, just in case they ask me to shave it all off. I have no idea where I'm supposed to be or what I'm supposed to be doing. It is a terrifying, massive machine, and I'm just a small cog to be plugged in without skipping a beat. Don't mess this up, Bear.

I'm playing a police officer. I wait around on set for a few hours, as expected, still practicing my only line and fiddling with my fake gun. I'm surrounded by career extras, who know exactly where they should be and what they should be doing, and a large group of real police officers earning some extra money on their day off while lending some credibility to the action. There are a few other minorities around — awesome! A guy who looks like he may be one of the directors for the day might be black, but I can't tell from a distance. All right, baby, we making it! That's one!

We begin to set up for the shot, and I'm told to follow a gentleman who's introduced as the "police consultant." I follow a mid-30s to 40s, fit white man, who walks with the obvious bearing of a trained police officer, as he leads me to a small room. It's just the two of us.

"Do you know how to shoot a gun?"

"Well ... yes. Not incredibly well. I've been out with a friend..."

"Answer the question."

"Uh ... yes."

"Draw your weapon."

I pull the pistol from its holster and point it toward him. He slaps it out of the way,

"Draw it like a man!"

I holster it and draw again. He forcefully, and without warning, half-hits/half-pushes me hard in my chest, simulating the kick from a gun. I'm stunned.

Did he just hit me?

"While you're in here with me, you'll fucking stand like a man; you're not gonna pull any of that pussy shit in here. I don't care what happens out there, but for the five minutes you're with me, you're mine. When you step foot on that screen wearing that uniform, you are representing each and every one of us who put our lives on the line every day. Now draw, push through, and point forward; lean into it, and stand strong like a man."
I'm a black actor. Here's how inequality works when you're not famous.

He jacks me in the chest again. Ow? Fuck you, man. I'm a solid human being, and this guy is hitting me with enough pressure to knock me over. Is this necessary? You know what? It's ... it's ok, Bear! This is what you do for TV, apparently.

Over the course of the next five minutes, with this officer giving me the quickest tutorial of how a trained professional draws a weapon and stands, he continues to aggressively hit my chest and berate me.

Mladen Antonov/AFP via Getty Images

Now, this is the summer of 2015. Black Lives Matter is in full effect, and the terror of minorities in the presence of the police is palpable. I was left alone in a small room, with a police officer yelling at me like a drill sergeant as he aggressively hit me in the chest. This is my blacktor's nightmare.

I did not sign up for anyone to attempt to physically intimidate and accost me in order to play this part. And I sure as hell didn't sign up for a cop to be yelling in my face with no witnesses.

Now, I don't fully blame this officer for this interaction. Strangely, I understand what he was doing and the importance of the depiction to him. He knows a certain way to impart the need to move and act a specific way as a police officer, and has presumably been teaching other officers for years. In essence, he's part of a larger system that taught him that aggressive tactics are needed for survival.

But I'm a trained actor. I'm not a recruit. I've learned to work with many weapons: knives, rapiers, broadswords, bowstaffs, etc. Never, in any of this training, did it prove necessary to physically assault me.

In the end, he got what he wanted out of me. I pulled the gun, placed my hands correctly, and leaned in as well as I could have hoped, given the minimal time I had with a weapon. The final shot looks amazing.

But was that abuse worth it? Where was the rest of the production team? How has a better system not been put in place to teach actors on set the proper way to draw and hold their weapons? It was grossly irresponsible to put a young black man alone in a room with an aggressive police officer and no supervision. I still worry about what might have happened.

So when we yell #OscarsSoWhite, I stand here thinking, "So is the rest of the industry." The inequality starts from the bottom and works its way to the top until it becomes fully institutionalized. And at that bottom level, where it begins, we don't even have the insulation of money to help withstand the burden. We have to worry about that next paycheck to eat.

I couldn't teach that white director that his concept of how black people respond to slurs ran counter to the truth of my life experience for fear of losing out on a job. When a white actor then used a slur with me onstage, I couldn't walk away or demand his job for fear of losing a necessary paycheck and future income. And when a cop physically assaulted me to teach me how to play a part, I couldn't exclaim my displeasure, as this was my big break.

http://www.vox.com/2016/2/12/10958356/working-black-actor
I was voiceless.

I'm getting stronger now. I've found a voice through writing, and I'm less concerned about whether casting directors or theaters want to blacklist me. I am more firmly rooted in who I am and what I will accept. I've realized that I can make a difference by speaking up for other actors who are still too scared to make waves.

But I could use some help.

In a more diverse environment, I believe we could be better. I believe this is something we can achieve. I believe this is something that would be advantageous to all of us, not just minorities. More support. More variety. More truth. And in the end, that's all we want to see reflected from our actors, right — truth?

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