

You Have to Want It: Diversity in Ensemble Theatres

In 2015 [Haven Theatre Company](#) in Chicago, IL launched a program called [the Director's Haven](#), giving three directors at the earliest stages of their careers space to showcase their vision for the Chicago community. [Here](#), each of these artists to share their observations, experiences, and perspectives from their vantage points as directors at the very start of their professional journeys. —Josh Sobel

Within one week, I was asked the same question by six different theatre companies.

I'm an emerging director and I happen to be black. And when someone who is not a straight white male identifies themselves as an artist in Chicago you get one question: *How do I diversify my theatre's ensemble?*

The first thing I always ask in response to the ever-present question is, "Do you want it? Do you actually want diversity?" Nobody likes lip service. Of course, there are many benefits to a company having diversity in their ensemble. Diverse theatre ensembles are able to program a wider variety of stories, reach a wider audience, and can more accurately reflect the values of their company. If one of your values is "Community" and your work doesn't look like the people living in your community, something is wrong.

But with these perks come sacrifices from the ensemble. In an ensemble theatre company, often it's actors and other artists who hold the keys to what type of work is produced and which artists the company chooses to work with in the future. Oftentimes, these companies are made up of wonderfully talented white artists. They hit a brick wall, however, when they aren't willing to give up opportunities in order to grow diversity in their artistic family. It's important for the entire ensemble to agree that this is necessary, unanimously. If even one person doesn't understand the need, then none of your initiatives or programming aimed to diversify will serve your company.

And here's where we run into a problem.

I know companies that want to diversify as much as they want to eat their broccoli. They know it's good for them, but they're still dodging the fork.

I sat down with Max Truax, Artistic Director of Oracle Theatre in Chicago. I pitched him a production of *The Hairy Ape* with an all-male, all-black ensemble of six knowing that he was leading a company with a tremendously talented ensemble of white artists and one black actor. I thought about changing the pitch several times between my pitch to him and his pitch to the ensemble. "I could make the two women roles white, possibly?" He told me that I should stick with the vision I pitched him and he spoke with the ensemble. When he came back to me and told me that they were going to move forward with *The Hairy Ape* leading the season, my jaw was on the floor. One of the ensemble members told me, "No, no. It wasn't your vision that needed to change. We needed to change."



The Hairy Ape by Eugene O'Neill, directed by Monty Cole at Oracle Productions. Pictured (from left to right): Tony Santiago, Breon Arzell, Bradford Stevens, Michael Turrentine, Rasell Holt, Rashaad Hall, and Julian Parker. Photo by Joe Mazza.

From there, they set forth new by-laws for future productions. In *The Hairy Ape*, one ensemble member offered to create masks for the production (she had never created masks before and they were beautiful). Another ensemble member offered to hire a black ASL interpreter and work with captioning knowing that I wanted the production to be accessible. The company rallied around the production knowing that it fit their artistic aesthetic, goals, and values. They redefined what it meant to be an ensemble member.

Being an ensemble member doesn't actually mean you're acting or designing at least one show per season, does it? It means you believe in the mission of the company. You bleed for the mission of the company. You'll paint the walls of the theatre back to flat black. You'll help with strike. You'll volunteer as a box office associate. You'll sit in on a reading and provide notes. You'll find other people who might believe in the mission just as much as you.

Let's change the way we talk about belonging to a company. Let's make it mean more.

Or not. At the end of the day, if the ensemble decides that diversity and community isn't something the company is interested in pursuing, don't fake it. Sometimes the mission of a company is not as specific as a style or a value. Sometimes the aesthetic of a company is simply white artists producing work they want

to see. They're not my favorite productions, but they have an audience. I'd rather a company own that than follow a trend while huffing and puffing and rolling their eyes at growth inspired by diversity.

It's interesting being an emerging artist. You stand somewhere between the past and future. You've stood on the sidelines long enough to know what's established and why rules were created a certain way and you hope for a future that includes you. You don't hope for anything special, really. You hope for an even playing field.

You hope you're there because the community *wants* you there.