Executive Summary:

African Americans have a long-standing and troublesome relationship with theater in the United States. This thesis explores what has happened in theater in the past for African Americans and what is currently happening in order to craft an initiative of change for future generations. It expands on existing literature by exploring the history of African Americans in theater and uncovering the gradual developments and shortcomings. Ethnographies and interviews reveal that work is being done in the theater world with the aims of seeing change but unfortunately, that work is not nearly enough for there to be equality for all people. Using these different methods of investigation to uncover the intricacies of the relationship between African Americans and the theater historically and in the present moment, a proposal for a future theater company is presented with the intention of alleviating some of the flaws in the current theater environment.

Introduction:

The origins of American theater can be traced back to Europe, specifically Great Britain.¹ When theater came to the United States, many traditions came with it. One of those traditions was dictating who within the society could see the different theatrical shows that were being produced. While all people of different backgrounds could see theater in England, in the United States, seeing theater was reserved for upper, middle and lower classes as long

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as they were white Americans. It was then that these white communities became the first in the country to reap the benefits of seeing and participating in theater as their black counterparts were left to create their own form of theater where they were accepted. Since theater was explicitly for white America, black Americans had to craft their own forms of performance. That started with reclaiming minstrelsy, a form of theater where working class, white men dressed up as plantation slaves and imitated black musical and dance forms, effectively neutering a race’s identity by limiting it to demeaning and fundamentally ludicrous stereotypes. As more and more black performers started to reclaim this tradition, their roles in the American theater canon began to expand past minstrelsy. Over the course of the nineteenth century, black performers moved into burlesque and vaudeville while also dabbling in the Broadway scene. These developments cannot be discredited. Despite the tumultuous relationship that black artists have with both the nation and the theater world, there has still been success. But there is still more to be done. Theater has the chance to benefit all people, and yet, only a portion of the population has access to it. That is why theater as a whole needs to change so that all people, regardless of one’s skin color, can benefit.

Methodology:

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5 These benefits can include but are not limited to improved reading proficiency, increased sense of self concept and motivation, higher levels of empathy and tolerance for others with dissimilar backgrounds, and overall improved academic performance (Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga 1999).
In order to understand what is currently happening for African Americans in theater, I used a number of different research methods to look at the different aspects of the theater world right now. One of those aspects involved looking at programs that are working to provide opportunities to African Americans in theater. People’s Place, a program in a major city in the United States, was a program that I chose to spend a month at observing them during their most exciting time of the year. Over the course of five weeks, the program puts on a 200-person show composed of everyday Americans that have little to no professional performing experience. By partnering with organizations from all over the city, they aim to not only have racial diversity in the room but also a diverse array of people from all different backgrounds and cultures. The goal of the program as a whole is to break down the barriers as to who is welcome to participate in theater and to open the doors to a huge off-Broadway theater. By asking people with no experience to perform on their largest stage, they are able to do that. Over the course of the summer, I was able to watch and ask questions about the process that People’s Place goes through in order to put up this show every year.

The second research method that I participated in relied on more personal conversations and interactions with people currently working in the theater business. Over the course of a month, I conducted interviews with professional, working black actors, asking them questions about their upbringing along with their experiences as actor of colors in a business that is homogenously white. By using my own personal contacts from previous theaters productions as well as the contacts of some of my mentors in the theater world, I was able to find and speak with eight different actors, four male and four female. The interviews allowed for an intimate and intense look into the experiences these eight African American actors go through regularly while also calling attention to the similarities between all of these actors with varying backgrounds within the theater world. The interviews highlighted the
holes within the theater world according to the opinions of these different actors. From there, I hoped to be able to come to a conclusion about what work is still needed in the theater world, specifically for African Americans.

While the previous segment of my research into what is currently happening in the theater world looked at interviews from a small subset of actors of color, the final segment looked at the opinions of audience members that were interviewed at a number of different Broadway and off-Broadway shows. These audience members were randomly chosen and asked a number of questions similar to those asked of the black actors. These questions looked at why they chose to come and see the particular show, when they started participating in theater, and what they hoped to see in the future for theater, whether those are actual shows or just general trends that they wanted to change or continue. From those interviews, I was able to analyze the responses and uncover certain trends that look at why people chose to see certain shows, which groups of people attend the theater, and what audiences want the future of theater to look like.

Major Findings:

**People’s Place**

People’s Place (PP) at the People’s Theater in New York City is providing opportunities for all people, particularly those that are often overlooked and forgotten about on the stage and in the audiences of major theaters in the city. Through their careful selection of staff that reflects the same people that are in the rehearsal room as well as choosing shows with topics and central themes that are relevant to the lives that we live now, the PP staff is able to create the best opportunities for those involved in each of their shows. Despite the influential and momentous work being done by this program, there are still questions that need to be addressed, both by the program itself and by any other programs that want to use them as a
template in the future. I found through my time there that there were a number of issues regarding what is important within the rehearsal room. There was a large discrepancy between the emphasis and the focus in the room being placed on the aesthetics of the show versus the collective experience for the community members. Furthermore, in a room that has so many people of all ages from all different backgrounds, there was often tension between the different age groups that needs to be resolved for future years or for future programs. I also question whether or not producing a large show, like People’s Place does every year, is the best choice when it comes to using resources. I think that further research needs to be done about whether a large show is the best for everyone involved. Needless to say, there is still work that needs to be done in order to perfect the People’s Place model for the community members involved. Nevertheless, despite its imperfections, People’s Place is doing successful work that most theater companies have only attempted to do in recent years and that is not something that cannot be overlooked.

Interviews with Actors

Over the course of the eight interviews that I conducted, it was very clear that each of the actors shared mostly similar opinions about the current theater world. The most commonly mentioned experiences across the different interviewees included the discovery of race that occurred within the theater world, the presence of the African American theater community, the necessity for black theater makers to create their own work in order to see their experiences respectfully told, and the importance of theater as compared to other art forms. Each of the actors talked about their different experiences with these different themes. In regards to the discovery of one’s race within the theater world, some noted that this happened extremely early. Others had the experience later in life, in more hostile and aggressive ways. One large difference that I noted amongst the responses was that when asked
about the African American community in the theater, the responses were gendered. I note in
the thesis that the four male actors were more likely to comment on the support that the
community can offer compared to the four female actors. The female actors mostly
commented on the success that has taken place in the most recent Broadway season and how
excited they were about that progress. But they did not comment on the actual African
American community and the strength or benefits that they have felt by being a part of it.
Some actors questioned whether or not this was because of the colorism that is present within
the theater world right now.

Regardless of the differences that were present in some of the responses, they all
agreed that theater offers something else that no other form of entertainment can. For one
male actor, it is the fact that “theater offers the once in a lifetime encounter with these [actors]
breathing the same air as you.” For him, you can see that in dance but it is not the same as
watching and performing a piece of theater. For one of the female actors, it offers her
opportunities to connect with and inspire people to do something that they may never have
done before seeing that piece of theater. When she is on stage, theater reflects life and
encourages a better way of living and looking at it. Theater is the human experience and it
allows you to be in a room and create a community with people that you may have never seen
before and will probably never see again. An audience can come into a space as total strangers
of all different walks of life with all different shades of skin and walk out having shared an
experience that was unique to that specific night and that specific audience.

*Interviews with Audience Members*

The conversations that I had with the working black actors allowed for insight into the
inner workings of what is currently taking place within the theater world. They are the ones
who really understand what is happening in the theater world because they are currently
working in the business. While these opinions were essential, I also wanted to take the
opportunity to talk to people who are currently interacting with the theater world in a
different way. Audience members have a very different perspective of what is taking place in
the business because they only see one side of it. By conducting interviews with
approximately one hundred different audience members, I hoped to uncover the differences
in opinions that are present between black and white audience members in order to come to a
holistic conclusion about what the future of African Americans in theater looks like.

I asked each audience member four different questions: when did they start
participating in theater, how often do they go to the theater, why did they choose to go to this
specific show, and what they hope to see for the future of theater. Each of the questions
elicited different responses from the black and white audience members interviewed. When
asked about when audience members started participating in theater, most white interviewees
responded that they began participation during the childhood. However, when b-
black audience members were asked, they most responded that they were introduced to theater
during their adulthood, significantly later in life than their white counterparts. When asked
about how often they attend the theater, most white people said they at-
tend the theater at
least once a year. On the other hand, most black people said that they do not attend the
theater often. The third question elicited similar results among black and white audience
members. When asked about why each audience member chose to attend the different shows,
all audience members claimed that general interest was the primary reason with access to
discounted tickets being the second biggest reason for attending the show. The final question
was the most opened-ended question. It asked what audience members wanted to see in the
future for theater. When compiling the different answers, there were a lot of responses that
were fit into the variables that were created. Those variables that people said that they wanted
to see in the future for theater were older shows or revivals, structural changes to the theaters, more experimental and innovative shows, increased accessibility to shows, more plays, more musicals, and diversity. The most popular responses were increased accessibility, more innovative shows, and diversity. However, in the case of diversity, mostly black audience members mentioned that they wanted to see more diversity on stage. Most white audience members did not mention diversity. Over the course of the interviews, it became very clear that there were similarities between the white and black populations interviewed, but there were also notable differences. In conjunction with the responses from the interviews with the black actors, my thesis was able to draw conclusions regarding what theater should look like for African Americans and what they want it to look like.

**Key Recommendations:**

Over the course of the last year through the work of my thesis, I have had the privilege of observing, working with, and asking questions of African Americans currently working and participating in the theater business. The opportunity has led to feelings of disappointment, frustration, and yet, at the same time, admiration and hope for the future. With the conversations I had and the observations I made in mind, I have created a template for a program that seeks to address and alleviate some of the current flaws within the theater world. This company will aim to integrate the different thoughts of the people I interviewed as well as build off of the work currently being done at People’s Place. This template is the beginning of a long journey towards creating the best outline for what the company will look like. The mission is to provide opportunities to learn, participate and see theater to African Americans, specifically younger generations. Hopefully, this company can help to increase the number of people interested in theater while at the same time preparing young generations of
theater makers of color to go out and tell their own stories in order to change the racial demographics of this industry.

The theater company will seek to serve 5th-8th graders at public schools in inner cities. The company will operate after-school as well as over the course of the summer. In both seasonal sessions, students will have the opportunity to take classes in the different areas of theater. These after-school sessions will take place three days every week and start at the end of the school day and go until 7PM each night. They will serve as safe spaces where students can come and get any help on their homework while also exploring in their classes. The summer program, on the other hand, allows students the opportunity to continue to hone their skills when they are not in school. This time will be solely focused on developing skills in the different areas of theater. Class times will be longer and there will be a final presentation at the end of the summer. This program will be held five days a week, Monday through Friday from 10AM to around 4PM. It is important to have both of these aspects of the theater company because they are able to compliment one another: the after-school sessions will offer academic support for the students while also giving them a taste of the different elements of theater. The summer sessions take those initial classes and expand on them over the course of five weeks. My thesis goes into more details regarding the logistics of the theater company and what I hope to see as well as achieve by starting up the company. I think that this company seeks to fill the different holes that my interview research revealed about the state of the theater world. I have also catered the template for the theater company to resolve some of the issues that I noted when I was observing People’s Place. Ultimately, I hope that the company will lead the ways towards change and equal opportunities for all people, regardless of the color of their skin.

Conclusion:
The relationship between theater and African Americans has been tumultuous. However, at the same time, it has been one of dedication and perseverance. This thesis has uncovered both of those principles while also potentially illuminating a potential solution for the current theater world. The theater company that I have crafted is not perfect, but it is a necessary first step towards achieving equality within the theater world right now. We all have the potential to make change and I aim for my thesis to serve as a reminder of that.
Work Cited:


