

# UC Irvine

## UC Irvine Previously Published Works

### Title

ReCreating the Stage, A Roundtable for Our New Reality

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3zn7v4t6>

### Authors

Lopez Vargas, Jesus

Keasberry-Vnuk, Jessica

Punzal, Elijah

### Publication Date

2020-11-02

### Supplemental Material

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3zn7v4t6#supplemental>

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# **RE- CREATING** the *A Roundtable for our New Reality* **STAGE**

## **Program Report & Journalistic Findings**

*Summer 2020*

written by

Jesús López Vargas

Jessica Keasberry-Vnuk

Elijah Punzal

*produced by K.B. Theatre Company*

## **INDEX**

<b><u>Introduction to the Program</u></b>	<i>pg. 3</i>
The What: Our Program's Goal	<i>pg. 5</i>
The Why: Background & Format of our Program	<i>pg. 5</i>
The How: Description on our 3 Types of Events	<i>pg. 6</i>
Outreach & Engagement Methods	<i>pg. 9</i>
The Questionnaire: Attendee's Identities, Experience Levels & Experience with Inclusivity & Accessibility	<i>pg. 10</i>
Guest Artist Selection	<i>pg. 11</i>
<b><u>The Panels: Observations &amp; Items to Consider</u></b>	<i>pg. 13</i>
<b><u>Our Findings: A Roundtable for Our New Reality</u></b>	<i>pg. 15</i>
1) <b>Redefining the Seats at the Table</b>	<i>pg. 15</i>
<i>Placing BI-POC in Decision-Making Positions</i>	
2) <b>Embracing Change</b>	<i>pg. 16</i>
<i>Finding Strength in Discomfort while Dismantling         White Supremacy Culture</i>	
3a) <b>Organizational Sustainability</b>	<i>pg. 17</i>
<i>For our Stages &amp; our Industry</i>	
3b) <b>Individual Sustainability</b>	<i>pg. 20</i>
<i>For our People &amp; Communities</i>	
4) <b>Organizational Care</b>	<i>pg. 22</i>
<i>Restructuring of Resources, Teams &amp; Content</i>	
5) <b>Gender Equity &amp; Education</b>	<i>pg. 23</i>
<i>Anti-Discrimination, Justice, Respect &amp; Education</i>	
6) <b>Activating our Responses</b>	<i>pg. 24</i>
<i>Welcoming Open Communication</i>	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<i>pg. 25</i>
<b><u>The Affinity Spaces</u></b>	<i>pg. 27</i>
Why Affinity Spaces? Their Importance in our Communities	<i>pg. 27</i>
Recommendations on How to Run Affinity Spaces	<i>pg. 28</i>
<b><u>Concluding Statement to the Summer Program</u></b>	<i>pg. 32</i>

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE PROGRAM**

*Recreating the Stage (RCS), a Roundtable for our New Reality* was a virtual, nationwide, and free summer program produced & organized by K.B. Theater Company members & collaborators. Hosted over the video conferencing platform Zoom between July 11th, 2020 and August 15th, 2020, this program was predominantly aimed at undergraduate/graduate-level students and young industry professionals in the United States who lost their internships, apprenticeships & summer work opportunities due to the COVID-19 crisis. Our program consisted of 1) industry-focused panels of both up-and-coming & established industry professionals as well as 2) creative workshops centered around the collaborative nature of theater making & storytelling. Our program also aimed to collect qualitative & quantitative research in the areas of inclusivity & accessibility in educational & professional theater institutions by 3) hosting various affinity spaces. These affinity spaces were closed to the general public and open only to 30 applicants who sought to be part of difficult yet paramount conversations regarding various marginalized groups within the American theater community.

Our research packet is based on information gathered from the following formats in our panels, workshops and affinity spaces: open discussions with guest artists, question-based public & private conversations, individual's empirical narratives, breakout sessions, post-event dialogues & anonymous conversations held within our five affinity spaces. It is important to note that this is an informative research report about RCS' run over June-August, and the experience-based information within this package is **not** definitive and should **not** be considered as the only answer to our American theater community's issues. Our findings and observations carried out throughout the program can be found on page 15 of this report.

The project was made possible thanks to an *Inclusivity Excellence Fellowship* awarded in May 2020 by the University of California, Irvine (UCI) to our Managing Director, Jesús López Vargas. Later, in July 2020, the project was also awarded the *Creating Art in Challenging Times Award* by the Drama Department of the UCI Claire Trevor School of the Arts. Both of these awards made it possible for each member of the team to be paid for their work—most of whom were undergraduate or graduate students of drama who lost their Summer work opportunities. The awards also allowed us to pay a stipend to all professional guest artists who participated in the program. Lastly, we were also able to hire Roslyn Sotero, a professional social worker, educator and facilitator, who trained the team on how to adequately facilitate

both physical and digital spaces in order to assist the dismantling of white-supremacy culture commonly present in our spaces.

The following chart lists all the members of our team, their roles, and their experience levels. For transparency purposes, each member of the leadership team was paid according to their work and experience level, from \$200 - 500 for 20 - 35 hours of work. Both executive producers were paid \$300 for ~400hrs. of work:

RECREATING THE STAGE		
LEADERSHIPS & PRODUCING TEAM		
TITLE/ROLE	NAME	EXPERIENCE LEVEL
Executive Producer / KB Founder & Managing Director	Jesús E. López Vargas	Professional Experience, MFA Student
Executive Producer / KB Founder & Artistic Director	Stephanie Carrillo	MFA Student
Producer / KB Associate Theater Director	Kezia Waters	Professional Experience, MFA Student
KB Founder & Outreach Director	Nancy Batres	Professional Experience, BFA Degree
KB Founder & General Manager	Merle DeWitt III	Professional Experience, MFA Student
Associate Producer	Jessica Keasberry-Vnuk	Professional Experience, BA Degree
Cultural Consultant & Associate Producer	Elijah Punzal	Professional Experience, BA Degree
Assistant Associate Producer	Meghan Minguez-Marshall	BA Degree
American Sign Language Interpreter & Consultant	Molly McHargue O'Donnell	Professional Experience, BA Student
Associate Creative	Brandon Ray Alba	BFA Degree, Ind. Educator
Cultural Consultant & Group Facilitation Trainer	Roslyn Cecilia Sotero	Professional Experience ( <i>no studies in Theater</i> )
Affinity Space Facilitator	Kelley Ho	Professional Experience, BA Degree
Affinity Space Facilitator	Elisa Alvarez	Professional Experience, BA Degree
Affinity Space Facilitator	Ezra Anisman	Professional Experience, MFA Student

### **THE WHAT: Our Program's Goals**

**Re-Creating the Stage, a Roundtable for our New Reality** was produced with the following goals in mind:

- To offer a free & accessible informative service to young professionals within the theater community, especially to those who lost professional work, fellowships, internships & training opportunities for the 2020 summer.
- To offer a conversation-based program to our young attendees, which would foster the importance of informal teaching. For our attendees to hear from young<sup>1</sup> active artists of our industry outside of the traditional classroom setting.
- To offer a transparent program grounded in nourishing diversity through creating a platform by Black, Indigenous & People of Color (BI-POC) community members *for* fellow BI-POC artists to speak honestly and openly about their experiences in the industry of theater in America.
- To practice & encourage the dismantling of white supremacy culture commonly present in theatrical work, academic & social spaces. We also aim to strengthen and equip our youth with tools & strategies in order to recognize & challenge systematic oppression not only within our industry but also in our society.
- To gather information & perspectives from our community in order to help find solutions to current issues, sharing with one another the necessary tools that can help us challenge the current damaging norms surrounding our academic, working & living spaces.
- To strengthen the values of respect, collaboration, inclusion & community. To encourage and foster conversations & discussions that have been absent from the mainstream spaces of the American theater community.

### **THE WHY: Background & Format of our Program**

The idea for this program came about in early May 2020 during a leadership meeting for a university-level drama group at the University of California, Irvine named Brown Bag Theater Company (BBTC) - a producing company & culture group that works to foster the Latinx community and their art in

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this report, we implement the term "young"; this term refers to an individual's experience level within the industry of theater and not only refers to an individual's age.

Southern California. At this meeting, current members of the group (ages ranging 18 - 40) mentioned that many opportunities for theater makers had come about since the U.S. went into lockdown in mid-March, yet none of these had been made accessible to young members of our community. The term “inaccessible” referred to how these various opportunities were led by older theater makers who were not knowledgeable of new formats to produce theater and thus their information was irrelevant to our theater makers. It was also mentioned that the events felt rushed and that too many of the attendees, panelists, hosts and presenters did not represent the BI-POC community, limiting the conversation.

Then managing director of BBTC, Jesús López, approached K.B. Theatre Company and other collaborators, and they began the development phase for a possible Summer program offered for free to the entire nation, in an effort to counter some of the issues listed above. Throughout May, and with the mentorship of Joel Veenstra (Head of Stage Management at UCI), the group applied for the *IE Fellowship* through which Jesús was able to fund the program and move forward producing its events. Thus the programming began, with the scheduling of 8 public panels, 2 public workshops, and 5 affinity spaces (closed to the public, but open to those who applied) within the course of 6 weeks during July & August 2020. All of these events took place digitally over Zoom meetings. Otter AI was the software used to transcribe all events and ASL/English interpreters were hired to interpret at each panel & workshop. In total, 24 theater professionals were brought into the team as panelists & workshop hosts, each representing their own areas of expertise. All industry professionals were paid a small stipend for their time.

### **THE HOW: Description on our 3 Types of Events**

1. **Panels.** We hosted a total of eight panels over the Summer, each lasting 60-90 minutes, each welcoming 2-3 guest professionals. We spent 4 weeks of our pre-production period in May/June choosing the most appropriate pool of artists to invite, aiming to find a variety of backgrounds (both cultural and vocational), a variety of professional “levels” (meaning past and current responsibility levels and positions held within the industry), as well as a variety of training & education (some of our panelists did not attend a higher-level education institution for theater, and some had education outside of the United States). The guests were given a short list of 5-8 questions that the moderator would then prompt during the event, as well as 10-20 questions chosen from submissions of the individuals that had signed up to attend each panel. For the most

part, 2-5 of these questions would actually be used during the duration of the event, as the conversations shifted and evolved naturally throughout our panels, each turn freely taken by our guests as the conversation developed. More details regarding panels can be found on page 13.

The host/moderators for four of these panels was Kezia Waters (KB's Associate Theater Director & RCS' Producer). RCS' executive producers Stephanie Carrillo (KB's Artistic Director) & Jesús López (KB's Managing Director) each hosted two panels. Below is a list of our panelists:

RECREATING THE STAGE		
PANELISTS		
EXPERIENCE		NAME
<i>WEEK #1   ACTORS &amp; PERFORMERS, hosted by Kezia Waters</i>		
P.1	Actor (Musicals)	Linedy Genao
	Actor (Straight Theater, Film, Devised)	Chris Mansa
	Actor, Director, Writer, Educator/Coach	Terrell Donnell Sledge
P.2	Actor (Straight Theater)	Elbert Joseph (EJ)
	Performance Artists, Dancer, Choreographer	Laura Rodriguez (LROD)
<i>WEEK #2   DIRECTORS, hosted by Stephanie Carrillo</i>		
P.3	Theater Director	José Carrasquillo
	Theater Director & University Educator	Rebecca Rivas
	Theater & Film Director	Mei Ann Teo
<i>WEEK #3   TECHNICIANS, PRODUCERS &amp; MANAGERS, hosted by Jesús López</i>		
P.4	Producer & Administrator	Michaela Bulkley
	Technician, Stage Artists, High School Educator	Veronica Hernandez
	Project & Stage Manager & Educator	Ross Jackson
<i>WEEK 4   PRODUCERS &amp; INDUSTRY LEADERS, hosted by Kezia Waters &amp; Stephanie Carrillo</i>		
P.5	Playwright & Director	Jeffrey Lo
	Director, Producer & Leader	Arpita Mukherjee



	Casting Director & Leader	Víctor Elan Vázquez
P.6	Director & Producer	Patrice Amon
	Producer	Armando Huipe
WEEK #5   DESIGNERS, hosted by Jesús López & Kezia Waters		
P.7	Sound Designer	Melanie Chen Cole
	Lighting Designer	Sherrice Mojgani
	Projections & Media Designer	David Murakami
P.8	Costume Designer & Crafts	Valarie Sue Henry
	Costume Designer, Set Designer, Graphic Artist	Ramaj Jamar

2. **Workshops.** We hosted two creative workshops over the Summer. The first workshop aimed to showcase a young playwright's tips navigating the industry and the devising process. The second workshop highlighted the importance of artistic collaboration within our community's creative processes—from the writing process all the way through tech weeks—as well as the need to tell difficult subject matter through art. Below is a list of our invited workshops hosts:

RECREATING THE STAGE		
WORKSHOP HOSTS		
EXPERIENCE DESCRIPTION		NAME
WEEK #6   WORKSHOP ON DEVSING		
W.1	Playwright & Writer	Andrew Sianez-De La O
WEEK #6   WORKSHOP ON COLLABORATION		
W.2	Experimental Video Artist & Performer	Ryan Trecartin
	Performer, Deviser, Theater Director	Kezia Waters

3. **Affinity Spaces.** We hosted a total of 5 Affinity Spaces for the community over the summer. These spaces were described as “fluid safe spaces for individuals that share similar passions and backgrounds to openly and respectfully converse about various topics.” Each space was moderated by two trained individuals, and information on the moderators can be found at

kbtheatre.org. A more in-depth description on our affinity spaces can be found on page 27 of this report.

This report will discuss our findings from the conversations generated during our affinity spaces, detailing attendance observations and overall program feedback (more information on this can be found on page 8). We will also share tips on how to facilitate affinity spaces as informed by our collective experiences. We strongly believe that all professional and academic institutions operating in theater and performance would benefit from creating and organizing affinity spaces or other similar events because they provide an opportunity for community members to engage in necessary and nuanced conversations. We also believe that care and responsibility are integral to affinity space facilitation, as these spaces can be healing and transformative within a given community.

### **Outreach/Engagement Methods**

For our outreach and engagement methods, we heavily relied on social media due to the short period of time that we had to promote the program. We relied on cultural groups within Facebook - for example the **Theater Folx of Color** group which currently has more than ten thousand members - as well as the help of established organizations such as American Theatre Magazine, USITT, Cornerstone Theater Company, and multiple academic institutions across the country that shared our information and invitations through their social media platforms. We also encouraged our team members, attendees, and invited guests to share information on their social media platforms if they were inclined to. Most of the online activity was shared through K.B. Theater Company's Instagram page, Facebook page, and the company's website which was led by Jesús López (KB's Managing Director), Stephanie Carrillo (KB's Artistic Director), Kezia Waters (KB's Associate Theater Director), and Meghan Minguez-Marshall (Assistant Associate Producer).

Our team aimed to reach individuals that would otherwise not find these opportunities in their smaller cities or towns, and hundreds of email invitations and requests were also sent specifically to higher level institutions (universities as well as colleges, both public and independent). This outreach strategy was led by Jessica Keasberry (Associate Producer), Elijah Punzal (Cultural Consultant & Outreach Assistant), and Nancy Batres (KB's Outreach Director).

## *The Questionnaire: Attendees' Identities, Experience Levels & Experience with Inclusivity & Accessibility*

In order to sign up for any of our events, our attendees were asked to answer a questionnaire that would help us gather empirical data regarding inclusivity & accessibility within the theater community. Below is some relevant information we were able to gather regarding each attendees' identities & experiences; in total we received 139 responses. About 44.6% of those who attended were young professionals who lost internships, apprenticeships, fellowships & professional work due to COVID19. Figure A below presents these responses visually.

The racial and ethnic demographics of our attendees are as follows: 43.9% of our attendees identify as White-European Descent, 37.1% of our attendees identify as Latinx / Hispanic, 9.1% Black / African American, 8.3% East Asian, 5.3% South East Asian, and 16.9% of our attendees identified within one of these identities: North American Indian, Central American

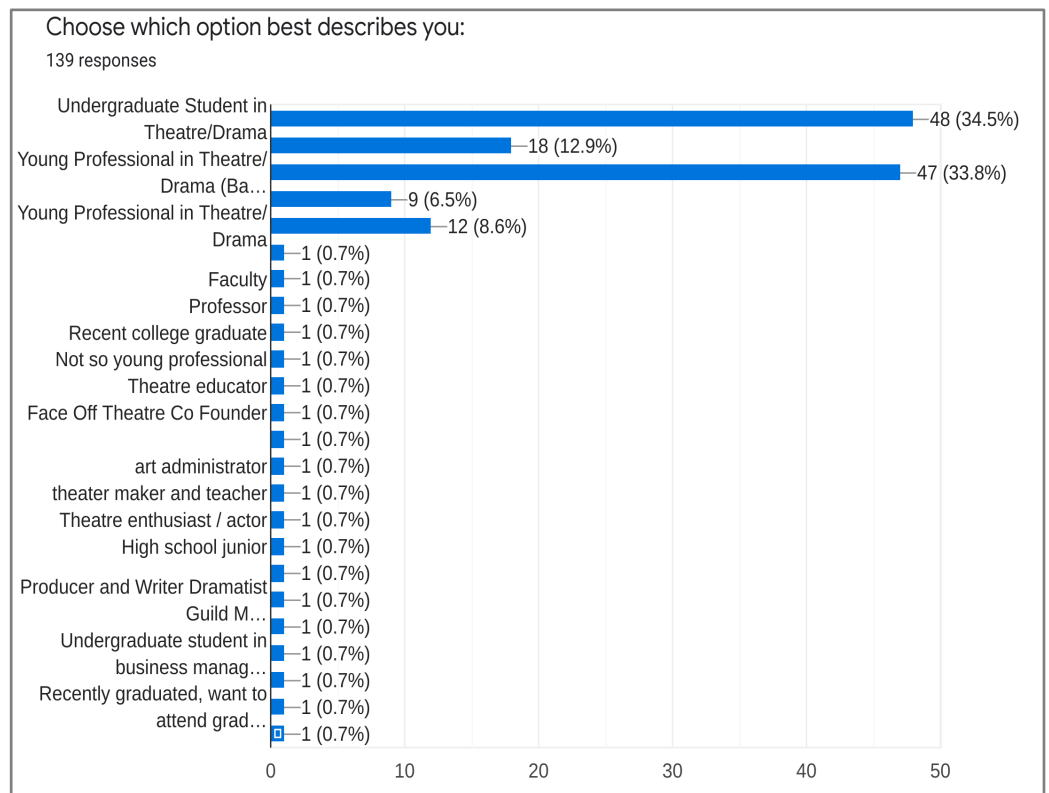


FIGURE A

Indian, South American Indian, Pacific Islander, Indian, Middle Eastern, African, White - North African, Caribbean (Jamaican), Philipinx. We would like to honor and note that one individual identified as ADOS (American Descendant of Slaves).

As this project is mostly led by active members of the Latinx theater community, we want to acknowledge that the networks and outreach conducted by our leadership informed the large participation of Latinx-identifying attendants.

Below are a few more relevant statistics collected from our sign-up questionnaire:

- 9.7% of our attendees identify as part of the disabled community, and 1.4% of our attendees have developmental disabilities.
- 49.3% of our attendees identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community.
- Out of 118 responses, 100 identify as cisgender. The other 18 responses consist of the following identities: two-spirited, nonbinary, gender-flux & non-binary trans.
  - The vast majority of individuals who identified as cisgender did not know the meaning of the term “cisgender”, and thus wrote female or male in their responses. Many individuals whose sexuality identifies with “gay” wrote this answer for their gender. **It is clear through these responses that an alarming number of our community does not know the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation, and thus we want to encourage all of our communities to educate themselves and each other on the differences between gender and sexual orientation, as these are both important aspects of our daily personal and social lives.** More on this item can be found on page 23, “Gender Equity & Education”.
- 57.9% of our attendees find that academia and education in the field of Drama & the Performing Arts are inaccessible. Other answers varied from “...not accessible for mental disabilities”, “...I am unsure”, “[accessible] to certain communities...”, “depends on the program/institution”, “not in costume design” & “it is accessible in the sense that I have to go out of my way to find [accessibility]”. 27.1% of individuals *do* find our academia & education to be accessible.
- **74% of our attendees note that they have experienced discrimination and micro aggressions in both academic and professional settings of drama and the performing arts.** 22.1% have not. The remaining 3.9% of the responses range from “I try not to let it bother me...”, “gender discrimination in salary”, and “it is hard to say, and I think that it is a result of my desire to not be a victim,” amongst others.

### **Guest Artist Selection**

About half of our guests were invited by the team due to previously established personal & professional relationships. Out of our 24 panelists and workshop hosts, 15 of these artists had such relationships with at least one member of our team, while the other 14 artists were found via recommendations from

mentors and colleagues in the industry or through research in their area of expertise. The team voted on who would be best suited for each panel in order to find a balance in representation of gender, ethnicity, cultural background, experience level & personality. In total 13 of our guests identified as male, 10 identified as female, one of our guests identified as gender queer, and 8 of our guests identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Two out of our 24 guests identify as white.

Through this report, please know that to identify as “white” only references to one’s skin color, not to one’s ethnicity nor one’s nationality. For example, a woman from Mexico can be *white*, which means she has white skin. Mexico is a territory that was conquered by white conquerors in the early 1500’s, and thus many people in this country are actually white.

## **THE PANELS: Observations & Items to Consider**

The team putting together this summer program intended for most of our research to take place during the affinity space discussions; however, the information gathered throughout the panels brought up and dissected many issues regarding the practice and culture of American theater. In order to keep conversations confidential and maintain the safety of our guests, we have decided *not* to offer the name of the panelist when referencing specific quotes or topics. We will, however, include some parts of the conversations as well as some important quotes that received the most reactions and follow up dialogue from the attendees, moderators, and fellow panelists.

A large part of our research - carried out by Elijah Punzal - consisted in observing and noting the behavior of both our guests and our attendees, and this observational research was conducted given the rise of virtual theater programs and events. Our findings are as follows:

1. People who attended multiple panels grew more and more comfortable with each event, easily identifiable through their body language. At the top of each panel, the moderator would encourage everyone in the room to treat the space casually/informally and to engage through clapping, facial expressions, snapping, etc. At first, it was difficult for individuals to engage “loudly” due to the requirement for attendants to be on audio mute; however, by having our team members model and encourage these physical affirmations and behaviors, the formality of the events shed away and became more accessible and engaging.
2. Given that Zoom was the video conferencing platform where we conducted the events, both panelists and attendees would utilize Zoom-specific mechanics like reactions or the text box feature to affirm speakers, provide questions, or communicate between one another.
3. Male-identifying guests spoke the most, 13 times more in total for the whole summer. At three of our panels, three different male guests noted this out loud themselves.
4. Synchronous attendance also lowered over the summer - more and more individuals began to watch the panels asynchronously during the 7 days following each live event.
5. Due to the nature of our current world, it was normal for our guest panelists to note the presence of pets and family members throughout the events. From our attendees’ reactions, the “interruptions” of children and pets seemed to be celebrated, embracing the informality of the events.

Throughout this project, feedback from attendees pointed out that the conventions of RCS were different from similar programs of its type, and we have noticed that the quality of conversations was favored by those attending. We have taken into consideration what was noted to be favorable, and we would like to offer the following recommendations in the case of creating an event or program similar to RCS:

1. Be sensitive to the questions and topics programmed, but do *not* beat around the bush when it comes to how questions are worded. Be clear. Make these questions available to the guests at least 2 weeks prior to the event and invite them to have a say on how these questions are worded during the event, or if they would prefer to omit certain questions.
2. Avoid questions that purposely lead the guests to provide answers that benefit the group programming the event. Do choose questions that challenge the institution/group organizing the event, do not be afraid of feedback to occur live. Trust that your guests will handle this feedback with care.
3. **Find comfort in discomfort.** Allow panels and/or Q&A's to flow naturally, allowing silences to happen without a need to fill them with words; silence is normal, and it is okay. If you embrace this silence, your attendees will too.
4. Allow and encourage guests to ask their own questions to fellow panelists, letting the conversation develop on their own.
5. Especially when using digital platforms such as Zoom, we recommend staying away from the lecture/webinar style, which tends to encourage power dynamics and a supremacy structure. Use informal conversational styles. Do not forget that the artists invited to talk are not your *only* guests, your attendees/audience members are also your guests, so allow them to feel as such. Encourage video feeds to remain on and allow for the chat rooms to be a place of engagement. Webinars are highly discouraged, as they are neither dynamic nor accessible. For disruptions, have a trained team available to remove disruptors if present.
6. Always provide an ASL/English interpreter team to be present in the space, do not assume who your attendees will be. And if possible, incorporate closed captioning services/software as well.

## **OUR FINDINGS:** *A Roundtable for Our New Reality*

It is important to reiterate that all the information found in these sections are all based on experience, guest feedback (both artists and attendees), conversations & discussions. The information presented as “findings” and “recommendations” is not to be considered as the solutions to general issues and challenges found within our industry. For this section our team opted to for a journalistic writing approach, in order to best express our collective findings from the summer program. With that being said, below are our main findings of the summer, how we collectively see the industry moving forward after this transitional period, and the paths through which we believe we can achieve this more equitable future:

### **1. Redefining the Seats at the Table:** *Placing BI-POC in Decision-Making Positions*

A metaphor that kept finding itself into our panels and side conversations was that of “*who is sitting at the leadership table*” in our academic institutions and theater organizations? When talking about the ‘*seats at the table*,’ we are talking about the individuals who have the final say in monetary and artistic direction for these organizations. These are the people who have the networking capacity and influence to govern resource allocation, those who have hiring and casting power, and most importantly, those who make the decisions for season selection—thus controlling which stories are being told in a given year. The answer to the question is easy: **BI-POC individuals are not always welcomed to sit at these tables.** And the few who *have* sat at these tables have had to strive further than fellow white professionals in order to have a say in the decision-making process.

When looking at the demographics within and around areas of some of these organizations and institutions, it must be understood that the seats available for BI-POC voices *need* to match BI-POC’s presence within the community. It was brought up on various of our panels that “the tables” do not simply need to keep growing; *adding* seats for BI-POC individuals on existing leadership positions is only a bandage solution. Instead, BI-POC individuals need to replace some of the existing leadership. As a community, we should be redefining “the table” during these times of transition and question the presence of (in)visible



whiteness in order to enact meaningful change (similar to the work being done by [We See You While American Theater](#)). Exclusion - at any level - will no longer be tolerated.

Lastly, we must understand that a large part of the problem lies in our current **perception** of 1) how the leadership is structured, 2) how these decision-making processes are linked so closely to the dismantling of white supremacy culture, and 3) the presence of sustainability in our artistic community.

## **2.Embracing Change:** *Finding Strength in Discomfort while Dismantling White Supremacy Culture*

White supremacy culture is rooted on individuals with power fearing the loss of said power, using tactics that affect those around them in order to maintain it. This culture is ingrained in the American way of life, philosophies, traditions, communications, socialization, and expectations, and thus it heavily takes a toll on our theater community and processes. The characteristics of white supremacy culture are found in most countries that have been historically conquered by European powers, not just the United States. Additionally, it is **not** only white individuals that form part of this culture, as BI-POC individuals have also internalized white supremacy culture by growing up in an environment that is built upon such culture and ideals. It affects all of us (see the *Sustainability* sections, page 17 - 20 for more information regarding how white supremacy culture affects all of us). It is important to note that this is *not* a new phenomenon; it has been present for hundreds of years. Some examples of white supremacy culture ingrained in our theater community can be found below, using as a reference the content provided by *dismantlingracism.org* and conversations had during our summer program. These characteristics affect all members of our society, yet they affect marginalized individuals the most, for they have the least resources and tools available in order to adapt:

- a. **A Sense of Urgency;** the fast-paced culture and the pressure fostered and encouraged in production meetings, technical rehearsals, load-ins and load-outs, and in the rehearsal process.
- b. **Fear of Open Conflict;** emphasis on politeness and *tone-policing* (choosing to negate the other's point of view due to its differing expression), instead of welcoming expression and awareness from our team members. People express

themselves differently since we share different methods of communication due to the fact that we all come from various backgrounds and cultures.

- c. **Perfectionism**; the current expectations highlight inadequacies and failures instead of appreciation, feedback intake, and identification of improvement practices. This is a large cause of stress and avoidance of risk-taking, causing stasis instead of progress within an organization.
- d. **Quantity Over Quality**; the idea that the more we produce, the more there is to sell, causing us to skip over details that negatively affect certain community members. We currently focus on the end product instead of the process.
- e. **Only-One-Way Mentality**; such as the creation of rigid production schedules, instead of flexible schedules that take into consideration the specific needs of each process. The fear, refusal or excusing of restructuring current “working” systems with methods that best benefit all members of a team.

Being aware of some of these characteristics of our culture, what are ways in which we can move forward? The first step is to embrace change, which is a difficult process and often generates feelings of discomfort. However, we should not shy away from discomfort because it creates new avenues for dialogue and generates awareness for issues outside of oneself. Individuals who hold privilege within our society are now finding themselves experiencing and voicing their levels of discomfort. And yet, it is equally important to note that **people who have historically experienced less privilege and safety in our country have lived in constant fear and discomfort all their lives**. These two are different types of discomfort; one comes from a place of newly-found consciousness - empathy, guilt, awareness - while the other comes from the continuous fear for one’s safety. In this process, we must encourage those newly finding this discomfort to take the time and responsibility in educating themselves instead of expecting those around them to pass on the knowledge.

### **3a. Organizational Sustainability:** *For our Stages & our Industry*

The term “sustainability” was often brought up during discussions at our panels, workshops & affinity spaces, and it was used when referring to sustainability within the industry,

within individuals, and towards the planet and future generations. Sustainability is defined as “the ability of being able to continue over a period of time.” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>).

**Now, how does sustainability relate to diversity?** Most organizations program their seasons to please their most loyal consumers: the older white generations (according to the Broadway League & Playbill.com only [31.7%](#) of national audience members were non-white for the 2018-2019 Broadway season). A common anxiety that leaders have is the fact that their audience is static, even when implementing outreach and development programs. One of the problems lies in that the current seasons simply do not appeal to newer audiences because they do not represent their views nor their experiences. But that is only one of the many issues. Why are we underestimating our current and future audiences?

One of our directing panelists used an example of one highly regarded theatre that no long ago chose to put on a season of all white male playwrights. The result was their audience telling them how tired they were of the same old stories and even going so far to ask, “Just how many *Our Towns* do we have to watch?” We often see the opposite occurring as well, when white-led theaters attempt to tell “new stories from the marginalized”, but then end up exercising **tokenization**.

These cases of tokenization were clearly displayed in how our directing & acting panelists described feeling like some of their work had been treated like “the flavor of the month”. The term “white gaze” is not recent, and if there is anything we have learned from our directing panel, it is that there is a very different way we take in white work. If there is a play in our lap that is not written by a white male playwright, it is coined as an ‘issue play’ because we’re already questioning it. This causes our society to have a reductive gaze when viewing cultural work rather than the expansive gaze when viewing work from white male playwrights. Meaning that when seeing a play revolving around a specific ethnicity, we connect specific traits to the overarching “race”, and it becomes a stereotype. Whether or not you agree with the need to appeal to a larger audience, it is a fact that the majority of our current season selections are not sustainable for us as an artistic community because we continuously perpetuate stereotypes and thus deter and alienate new audiences. (More on this on Organizational Care, page 22).

In order to sustain ourselves as an artistic industry, we must invest in telling diverse stories and placing diverse individuals to hold those “seats at the table.” (see Redefining Seats at the Table

section for clarification, page 15). When asked why this metaphor has so much power over us, one of our guest directors shared with us a response from a colleague: “If you do not have a seat on the table, you are on the menu”. This relates to our main point that BI-POC individuals are exhausted of having their stories and experiences being tokenized. However, why is this perception of the table so powerful - why does it leave such a lasting impression on all who hear it - and where do we go from here? Our directing panelists have different takes on this.

One panelist recalled a time where he was literally sitting at a table with fellow BI-POC collaborators, including some Pulitzer Prize winners, and they were discussing the need to continue fighting for their place at the ‘table.’ It is incredible how BI-POC individuals who have already been awarded such prestige for their work still feel excluded from the shaping of our communities. The panelist in question went on to ask why they were even fighting for a spot at the ‘table’ when they could create their own ‘table.’ If BI-POC people are *not* welcomed at these “tables”, then why should BI-POC people be a part of these organizations at any level?

We see this mindset of “breaking off from the pack” on an organizational and institutional level, but does this successfully create diversity if we continue to break off into separate groups and organizations? It may foster new stories to be told *now* but it does not appear very sustainable if the main goal is to foster diversity together. It takes away diverse individuals and resources from organizations that may need them the most and may not effectively reshape our academic institutions for future generations. Because so many of us dream of starting our own theatre companies, we must ask ourselves how we as a community can continue to share these resources between one another. When looking at certain large cities that have a multitude of theatre-producing entities accompanied by strong economic support, just imagine what could be accomplished if resources were distributed to the community on an even grander scale.

It is important to note that the panelist that brought up the quote: “If you do not have a seat on the table, you are on the menu,” was quick to state that this was *not* a sustainable notion and must be dismantled. The perception of this ‘table’ is rooted in the scarcity mindset, and this belief is pervasive in our industry by how we view and utilize time, labor, and money. As collaborators, it is time for us to be more resourceful and more respectful to our organizational and individual sustainability.

This dormant period from the fast-paced environment that has defined our community for so long has allowed us to ask: “Why are we [jumping to virtual formats]? Is it because we are dealing with our own existentialism? Why *are* we in this field?” During this transitional period, we have started to see some organizations and institutions using their current resources on reimagining and restructuring their processes, instead of simply “re-opening” and continuing detrimental practices and teachings. The concept that we can “come back better & stronger” is a mindset that needs to be adopted not *only* by our leaders, but by each member of our theater community.

As one of our guests eloquently said as their last statement: “Know what you are addicted to. We are addicted to growth and only measure value in growth.... We must think about how we make and *why* we make....” We must start being aware of our habits in order to find new ways to proceed in a way that is safe for our future generations. As in every initiative, it is important to know the **why** behind your decisions and your organizations’ decisions. Investing in these diverse backgrounds and perspectives lead us as an arts community to greater sustainability. Investing in these future seat holders at the “table” means an investment for future season selections to produce stories that better represent and engage audiences across communities—inside and outside the arts.

### **3b. Individual Sustainability:** *For our People & Communities*

As our organizations work on diversifying their season selections, it is easy to ask ourselves: “Why are we contributing to our own consumption?” If most of our audiences are tired of seeing the same stories on our stages, then we are most likely getting tired of telling them. This sentiment was brought up specifically on an institutional level during our management panel, and the need for creatives to insert themselves into their academic institution’s season selection committee was prevalent. Multiple panelists recalled needing to find the “loopholes” within their institutions when their desire or request to be included in the season selection process was ignored; more often than not, they had to go through these loopholes in order to produce new work themselves as there are very narrow avenues to putting new stories on stage.

More so than ever in this dormant period, most of us are asking ourselves: “what is going to sustain me other than the fact that my artistry has been given by someone else?”, what will happen to us if those who funded and supported our art no longer are able to? We spend so much time creating art, that we often forget all the steps needed to share this art and make its process sustainable for ourselves. As one of our guests said: “Enjoy your time *away* from the theatre as much as you enjoy your time in the theatre. The more focus you put on yourself *away* from the theatre the better you are able to be in the theatre/events/film.” Our skills as collaborators are applicable to so many other occupations and like many of our panelists, we have had to get creative in our job searches this year. Hopefully, with this mindset, our time away from the industry will only make us stronger as artists when we come back.

In terms of individual sustainability on the job, our conversations this summer were focused mostly on the fiscal responsibilities of young artists and the resources available to them. One panelist mentioned that current students have the ability to contact unions that they may want to join in the near future and ask for help in funding certain opportunities. This specific panelist used the *Stage Managers Association* as an example of an organization that has funds set aside for these purposes. Many of our RCS members and attendees agreed that this would have been helpful to know during their earlier academic experience.

Some resources - such as union information, fiscal responsibility, legal representations, etc. - are currently not taught in a classroom setting due to our priorities in theater highlighting practical exercise and theory (*the product*), instead of the basic needs of individuals within our society (*our sustainability, safety & health*). For the most part, young individuals are told to “work hard and manage, as that is the only way to make it in an industry”, which only strengthens the toxicity of our current American theater culture. We are currently asking our students to focus only on the exercise of their chosen medium (and only on their chosen medium) instead of exposing them to a process through which one can make and develop art, sustainably within our industry and society. There are very few classes taught at our art colleges and universities regarding personal financial sustainability, development & outreach, producing new works, financing new works, etc.

The live entertainment industry is responsible for an incredible amount of waste - both physical waste of material and the waste of energy. Coming up with new methods is not the end of the journey, as transitioning from past activities requires everyone to keep each other steady as we adapt. Accountability plays a large part in this redefining of our culture. Holding each other accountable on our actions and decisions, not only at the organizational level but at the individual level, allows for a community that is both transparent and ever-growing.

#### 4. Organizational Care: *Restructuring of Resources, Teams & Content*

It is quite common in our industry for organizations and institutions to place BI-POC individuals in certain positions within the organization due to their heritage, ethnicities and identities. Many of our team members, guests and attendees have experienced leaders and supervisors asking them to *not* only focus on their daily tasks at work, but to also assist as representatives, consultants, facilitators, etc. of marginalized groups in meetings, rehearsals, events, communications, etc. This is a dangerous problem for various reasons. **One's heritage and identities do not inherently qualify individuals to be cultural representatives nor consultants. Placing inexperienced people in these positions an organization runs the risk of encouraging misrepresentation and misinformation**, negatively affecting the process and the art. This type of work also tends to have an emotional toll on individuals (*emotional labor*) - which can then manifest physically, affecting one's health - especially when individuals are not experienced nor equipped to handle these sensitive topics. Individuals being asked to do extra labor should be **compensated** for their time, energy and efforts.

We encourage institutions and organizations to rearrange their resources in order to better serve their goals, communities, employees and projects. And if resources are unavailable to fulfill these important needs, we caution organizations to reconsider their intentions and impacts when attempting to put BI-POC stories in their stages. Sharing the right story the *wrong* way could have a negative impact even when backed by good intentions.

## 5. Gender Equity & Education: *Anti-Discrimination, Justice, Respect & Education*

Intention, as we mentioned, does not excuse disrespectful or degrading language and actions. We often forget the negative impact that some of us have on each other on a daily basis, regardless of intention, and how little organizational attention and education is given to recurring cases of gender inequity. During these times of awareness, we must come to the realization that an organization *cannot* stand for diversity and inclusion without also breaking down the reality that is gender inequity. Microaggressions occur not only in cultural contexts, but also on instances relating to gender.

While we did not go into depth regarding gender equity in our panels, we did see the toll that these microaggressions took on some of our female identifying panelists, especially those working in the administrative and technical fields. The fact that these instances occur as microaggressions makes it difficult for them to be acknowledged, even by those being affected by them. One of our guests said that it is important to “[give] each other a space to check in if we see something happening so we know it’s not just in our heads, [this] gives us the power to address it.” As responsible community members, we must allow for open spaces to address these issues in order to support every member of our groups.

It is also important, especially for educational institutions, to assist in the teachings of gender education - promoting awareness and equity as part of our training to join the professional sector. Through RCS this summer we discovered that a large majority of individuals, regardless of generation, still do not recognize the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation. Taking a look at these results, it is clear why discrimination based on gender still continues today. We are not having enough conversations relating to this incredibly important aspect of everyone’s day-to-day identity. And although gender education is everyone’s responsibility, it shouldn’t have to fall on each individual to teach themselves about gender and sexuality, especially when it is such a sensitive subject for so many. We must find ways to implement these topics into our educational curriculums. **Ignorance - nor intention - cannot be excuses for disrespect within members of our community.** We are asking our American theater community to further engage in these conversations - whether it be through creative programming, outreach, required training, etc., which leads us to our last point.



## 6. Activating our Responses: *Welcoming Open Communication*

Towards the beginning of our panels we saw many theatres come out with statements of support for the **We See You White American Theatre** movement. It is interesting to evaluate the performative response versus actionable response from these organizations. A statement may be a good first step, but if actionable responses are not followed through, then the statement could be purely performative, made without any meaningful changes. As an example, actionable responses from this movement have taken the shape of institutions/organizations coming out with their own edition of affinity spaces or offering cultural training to their organization's staff and/or student body, both of which are honorable first steps. The foundation of these actions and the making of *Re-Creating the Stage* was and is to open up a dialogue, which is the beginning of what can become a more equitable culture.

Another actionable response that does not require the immediate expenditure of our resources is the implementation of new methods to practice open communication. Whether it be in an educational institution or a professional company, if both the supervisor and the subordinate cannot communicate with one another transparently and without fear of repercussion - without the presence of accountability - then the trail of information fails. We ask those in positions of authority to avoid reprimanding individuals who voice their concerns, criticisms or opinions when they differ from one's own. Additionally, we advise to welcome open conflict—acknowledging that it may seem like a daunting task given that “conflict” has a primarily negative connotation. If we, as a community, continue to avoid open conflict, we will unfortunately carry onward but *not* forward and continue to disregard the voices of the marginalized.

If one's organization or institution is doing the work to promote equality, then, in the words of one of our panelists, we still “shouldn't deny ourselves perfection for the sake of comfort.” One panelist used his search for a graduate school as an example to describe how every school he researched belongs to a level of anti-blackness, and due to this, he was in search for the one with the *lowest* level of anti-blackness in order to maintain himself. On a similar note, recent cultural/diversity training completed by K.B. Theatre members in their affiliated institutions have revealed that there is still much more diversity and inclusion that needs to be

done to meet the needs of their students. If you are a faculty or staff member at a school or university reading this, we assume these sentiments are not what you want your institution to give to prospective students. We encourage everyone to take a moment with their current students to ask them why this might be the case and find actionable solutions. In an effort to promote accessibility, we also recommend current institution and organization leadership to compile resources such as: guests in the classrooms who actively work in their fields, unions of our industry, training in contracts and legal representation, idea/project pitching, business management and administration, economics, and the forming and maintaining of non-profit and for-profit organizations.

At one of RCS's panels, one of our guests interestingly mentioned that the word 'inclusive' is exclusive in itself, for it says: "you don't belong here but we're going to include you anyway." This tells us that there is no perfect solution to this imperfect problem, so we must throw away any blanket approaches. Nonetheless, we must learn from experiences and figure out how to support the community at hand as institutions, companies, employees, professors, co-workers, and leaders. We leave you with a reiteration to encourage and learn these uncomfortable conversations, welcome all feedback, and start finding these necessary actionable steps that will strengthen the American theater culture.

## Conclusion

It was empowering, liberating, and healing to experience constant accountability throughout the summer, without anyone expressing shame. We made it clear at the top of each event and followed through with the expectation that the environment would be open, that everyone was a guest and would feel welcomed, and that we would practice accountability if language was used in unfavorable or harmful ways. Watching mutual healing occur so openly in a group setting was discomfoting at first - especially since the vast majority of us grew up to avoid and even *prevent* confrontation. Yet, by the end of each event, a sense of levity was shared and openly communicated between the majority. Language is powerful, and thus language can be damaging. Yet, language also has the ability to heal. We encourage all leaders and community members to use language - to use communication - in order to heal as a community. In the words

of one of our panelists: “Whatever you are doing you are directing yourself toward something.  
What do you want to be able to say you did with your time?”

## **THE AFFINITY SPACES**

The term “affinity space” was first introduced by James Paul Gee around 2004/2005. Today there are many definitions, uses, and benefits to affinity spaces as they have adapted by various subcultures. For K.B. Theatre Company and the purposes for our 2020 summer events, affinity spaces are defined as **“fluid safe places for individuals that share similar passions & background to openly and respectfully converse about various topics, through a digital format.”** Affinity spaces are not necessarily goal-oriented, but for our program we decided to host affinity spaces with the following three goals:

1. To host a safe space for people in the theatre community who share similar backgrounds and experiences in order to speak amongst themselves about specific topics regarding inclusion in educational institutions & professional workplaces.
2. To collect quantitative data - anonymously, in the form of open discussions - regarding how inclusion is sometimes “preached” but is not actively implemented in our educational institutions and professional workplaces.
3. To have open discussions about which steps we believe must be taken to adequately improve inclusivity & accessibility within our communities across the nation.

### **Why Affinity Spaces? Their Importance in our Communities**

About half of our leadership team members have experienced affinity spaces in the past, each in varying forms and structure. Those who had shared these experiences agreed that these spaces had a healing quality to them. As we ventured into programming and producing our summer events, we agreed that by hosting affinity spaces not only would we be able to have these difficult conversations with our communities in a safe environment, but we would also be able to offer a service that was both healing and rewarding for those participating. It was decided early on that each affinity space would be created for a specific community, due to the cultural tragedies taking place in our nation. By separating each space, we were able to provide a safer, more accessible environment for our guests.

The 5 different affinity spaces that we hosted were created for the following communities:

- 1) The Latinx Community,
- 2) The Black Community,
- 3) The Asian & Pacific Islander Community,

- 4) Womxn Identifying Individuals,
- 5) The LGBTQIA+ Community.

It is important to note that some people share multiple of these identities, for example our Afro-Latinx individuals, who were welcome to participate in both the Latinx Community and the Black Community affinity spaces. It was thanks to our cultural consultant and lead facilitator, Roslyn Cecilia, that we were made aware that in many cases it is difficult for individuals who exist with various identities to choose which event to join, depending on how events are advertised. It is important for everyone who hosts affinity spaces of this nature to promote these events taking this into consideration and welcome each individual to participate in whichever space(s) they feel comfortable joining.

### **Recommendations on How to Run Affinity Spaces**

**The *Re-Creating the Stage* team encourages all educational institutions in the US to host affinity spaces in the near future, as these events can be extremely beneficial for everyone involved.** If run adequately, they provide an opportunity for community members to openly talk about their experiences (both positive and negative), which is both healing and progressive for the community at large. Preparing and facilitating these sensitive spaces, however, requires a lot of consciousness, care & transparency. This section offers recommendations that our team learned through this experience, in order for affinity spaces to be handled safely, especially for institutions in which the marginalized communities are also the minority:

#### **1. Facilitation**

- a. There *always* needs to be at least 2 facilitators, in case content triggers one of the facilitators the other can take over - using each other as a support system. Having 2 facilitators also offers different perspectives when starting up conversations. We also recommend not having more than 3 facilitators in the room.
- b. The facilitators chosen need to be as diverse and complementary to each other. For example, in an affinity space specifically aimed for the Latinx Community, we recommend the two facilitators are of different gender, age, and ethnicity, especially since the Latinx Community is so broad when it comes to our ethnicity.

- c. The facilitators need to be adequately trained to moderate and facilitate conversations that touch on sensitive issues. Failing to train facilitators puts the safety and vulnerability of all participants and facilitators at risk. Training includes communication tactics, vocabulary to rely on and avoid, exit strategies, etc. Our group received facilitation training from Roslyn Cecilia, her contact information can be found at her website: [roslyncecilia.weebly.com/educator--facilitator](http://roslyncecilia.weebly.com/educator--facilitator)

## 2. Community Agreements

- a. It is of great importance when hosting affinity spaces that the organizing team creates and makes available a set of community agreements for all of those seeking to participate. The community agreements need to be read by participants before entering the space, and they also need to be re-introduced and explained by the facilitation team at the top of each affinity space session.
- b. Facilitators must offer clarification for any of the agreements, in case that any participant has questions and requires clarification on vocabulary or connotation. The facilitators must be familiar enough with these agreements in order to further elaborate on them.
- c. Each participant must agree to these agreements at the top of the session, and anybody who does not fully commit to complying with these agreements must be welcome to express so. If a participant would like to rephrase a community agreement and everyone involved agrees with the change, the team may carry on. Participants who disagree are welcome to leave the space.
- d. The following were our community agreements for the summer, composed by our cultural consultant Elijah Punzal. We welcome any institution to use these community agreements and/or to create their own, as community agreements depend strongly on each space and its specific needs:
  - i. Respect the names and pronouns of the participants and the facilitators.
  - ii. Respect the intentions and goals of the space.
  - iii. Assume good intent and correct with care.
  - iv. Use content warnings around sensitive content.
  - v. Challenge the notion of a monolithic identity. Even in a community of shared identity, please understand and respect that everyone has different lived experiences.

- vi. Use “I statements” when speaking from your perspective, avoid “we statements.”
- vii. “Fill Space, Leave Space”: be aware of your presence and contributions to a conversation.
- viii. Be gracious and patient in the event of technological issues (*this agreement is specific to digital platforms*).
- ix. Practice online etiquette; refrain from conducting, displaying or verbalizing inappropriate behavior (*this agreement is specific to digital platforms*).

### 3. **Clear & Transparent Goals**

- a. As part of the information that needs to be provided to possible participants, one needs to be transparent about the goals and intentions of each affinity space. Some affinity spaces can be organized by the community for the community, with the simple goal of providing a safe space for individuals to share their thoughts regarding a specific topic. For example, our team’s affinity spaces had the clear goal of discussing the topics of inclusivity and accessibility, specifically to search for solutions to common issues in the American theater community. Some devising entities have also used affinity spaces to gather data on specific topics within a community for a group of writers to begin formatting a play. Regardless of the intention, these goals need to be transparently communicated to all the participants.

### 4. **Flexibility & Exit Strategies**

- a. This aspect is one of the most important needs to consider. Both the space agreements and the facilitators need to offer exit strategies and the use content warnings for the affinity spaces. Content warnings can be framed in various ways. Participants must be encouraged to say the words “content warning” or “sensitivity warning” (or others) before sharing sensitive information, anecdotes, or opinions. And in this same fashion, if participants are affected by others’ words, they can be welcomed to voice a reaction such as “ouch” or “yellow flag” in order to note that a statement might have been sensitive. If person A voices a reaction such as “ouch” this does not mean that the statement made by person B needs to be interrupted. Instead, the facilitator must acknowledge person A’s reaction out loud and then invite them to comment on their reaction after person B finished their statements, if they feel inclined to.

- b. Part of flexibility and exit strategies also lies in each guest's agreement to participate at any point of the space. Basically, it needs to be explained to all present in the room that anybody is welcomed to exit the space at any point without the need to explain or excuse their decision.
- c. Lastly, it needs to be agreed by everyone participating that everyone's reactions in the space must remain in the space, thus whatever happens in the space, stays in the space. Respect is key.



## **CONCLUDING STATEMENT TO THE SUMMER PROGRAM**

- *Stephanie Carrillo & Jesús López Vargas*

COVID-19 was the unfortunate catalyst that forced a true & much needed pause in theater and the theater educational system. This summer, K.B. Theatre Company hosted some brilliant pioneers who were generous with their wisdom—and sometimes painstakingly honest—in order to fill this pause and its innate anxiety. This was all done in an effort to connect our various communities and to have difficult, mutually-understanding conversations to seek a better future.

Marginalized communities are so used to resilience, they have continued to thrive in silence and in the back of mainstream society. Through this program, however, there was nobody sitting alone in the back. Seeing so many faces that looked like home, united in the same space, soaking up information that is not always accessible within their educational settings—that was a rare glimpse of what every classroom should emulate. That is a new standard that our youth is demanding. We were told by academia and white theater that this type of structure was unachievable. And yet, led by a team of young theater makers, we saw it take place. Nobody was “preaching” diversity & inclusion, because *who* we were, for those 2 to 4 hours a week, *that* was diversity & inclusion. That was unity.

This summer’s experience and our conversations are a strong testament that at the rate that we create, the theatre industry better get on board or get out of the way. This is the future of American theatre. We, they, us. A new reality is being built and it holds each of us accountable. We are ready to press ‘play’.