

LAINE

THEATRE ARTS

CULTURAL APPRECIATION RESOURCE
2023

APPRECIATING CULTURE IN TEACHING, CASTING AND PRODUCTION

This guide aims to support you in upholding best practice when tackling culturally sensitive issues within your work at Laine. We understand that everything we do is attached to a culture, and that stereotypes exist everywhere, but that in order to create unity as teachers and creatives working towards the common goal of preparing young people for a career in the theatre industry, we need to understand the difference between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation in order to avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes in the work we do.

It is also important that as a College, we keep abreast of important debates currently occurring within the industry; particularly those which are focussing on the ethics of casting where with a character being depicted is written as possessing one or more protected characteristic/s (race, sexual orientation, religion, etc). At Laine, we choose to follow best industry practice to ensure our students have the broadest theatrical education possible; ultimately helping them to become thoughtful and flexible young performers.

This resource is applicable to all staff and creatives working with students of all ages and at all levels of training at the College. It will be reviewed and updated as often as necessary by the Access and Participation Forum, which comprises four industry representatives of under-represented groups in Higher Education and four student representatives, alongside members of the Senior Management Committee. If users of this guide have any immediate questions or suggestions for change, please contact either Jo Black or Rebecca Elliott-Moore in the first instance.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Cultural appropriation is the improper adoption or exploitation of aspects of a culture or external community without understanding their value and importance. Cultural appropriation is most likely to be harmful when aspects of a culture belonging to underrepresented or marginalized groups that have been oppressed or exploited in other ways are borrowed without the borrower seeking to educate themselves enough to ensure they can discuss/depict and credit those aspects with authenticity and respect.

In musical theatre, cultural appropriation is defined as the inappropriate borrowing, imitation, or misrepresentation of elements such as music, dance, costumes, language, or narratives from a culture different from that of the creators or performers, resulting in the distortion or degradation of the original culture's significance.

As an example

Some people believe that the portrayal of Vietnamese characters in *Miss Saigon* falls into the category of cultural appropriation. Certain audiences have felt that the show perpetuates stereotypes and fails to accurately represent the complexities of Vietnamese culture, sacrificing truth in favour of dramatic effect.

CULTURAL APPRECIATION

Cultural appreciation is the respectful, culturally informed and credited use of elements from an external community or culture.

As an example

It is generally agreed that *Hamilton* appreciates culture rather than appropriating it by respectfully and authentically incorporating elements of hip-hop, R&B, and other musical styles into its storytelling. The show acknowledges and pays homage to the contributions of African American and immigrant communities in shaping American history, without exploiting or misrepresenting their experiences. The creators of *Hamilton* collaborated with artists from different cultural backgrounds to ensure accurate and respectful representation, demonstrating a genuine appreciation for the cultures being portrayed.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

Industry Practice

In the theatre industry, best practice encourages all creatives, including producers, directors, actors, musicians, choreographers, and costume designers, to undergo mandatory cultural sensitivity training. This training focusses on understanding the nuances of cultural appropriation, the impact it can have on communities, and how to approach diverse cultural content with respect and authenticity. This may take the form of workshops and seminars on cultural appreciation, inviting experts from various cultural backgrounds to share their perspectives and experiences. These sessions serve to encourage an open dialogue between the cast and creative team and create a safe space for questions and discussions relating to cultural representation in musical theatre.

Laine Theatre Arts seeks to provide similar training to all staff training through CPD days, and further training can be available by request to the Senior Management Committee.

Project Research and Consultation

When working on a specific project, whether it be in class or in rehearsal for performance, the class teacher/ lecturer or creative must conduct thorough research into that culture prior to incorporating elements from a specific culture into their lesson or performance context. This research should involve consultation with individuals from the culture in question, seeking their guidance to ensure the accurate portrayal of cultural aspects.

The industry representative members of the Laine Theatre Arts Access and Participation Forum can provide advice on appropriate representation, language usage, costume, and the handling of other specific cultural elements in theatre contexts. They can be contacted through Jo Black at joblack@laine-theatre-arts.co.uk.

Representation and Casting

Some feel strongly that an actor cannot fully relate to the context and lived experience of a character (and therefore avoid misrepresentation) if they are not from the same race or culture as that character, or if they do not share the character's protected characteristics (i.e. a character is written as gay and Jewish, but the actor portraying the character is not).

It is perhaps more generally agreed that no binary answer currently exists where this question is concerned: some roles may require actors to have lived experience of a particular kind in order for the portrayal of a role to be truthful, and some do not. Identifying 'where the line is' in respect of casting according to lived experience is still under heavy debate within the industry, especially in works that seek to portray the lives of real people, or groups of people who exist or have existed in history. The Sharks in *West Side Story*, for instance, are based on the real-life Puerto Rican immigrants who came to New York City during The Great Migration. Current industry best practice suggests that every effort should be made to cast actors whose lived experiences are translatable to those of the character or group of characters in question but that actors from other backgrounds may play these characters, so long as the real-life backgrounds of these imaginary characters have been thoroughly researched, and that the research is used to inform the way in which the Sharks are represented within the production.

In a college performance setting, it may not be possible to cast students who have lived experience of a particular cultural background or protected characteristic in a role. This could be either because such diversity does not exist within the company, or because it would be inappropriate for other reasons to cast them. By following the *West Side Story* example, we ensure that research and preparation are placed at the forefront of our approach to respecting other cultures regardless of actual lived experience. This should involve exploration of the character's heritage, the social, political and historical context of the piece, and its cultural significance within musical theatre landscape.

If a role is entirely fictional, and the character's race or culture is not consequential to the dramatic narrative, the casting of that role can be more flexible. In this instance there is more opportunity for the modernisation and diversification of a piece.

Rehearsing

In rehearsals, actors need to be provided with adequate training and the right resources to help them portray the cultural elements of a role authentically. They should feel confident and well-guided in their personal research and safe to share their own unique lived experiences with others in a company setting. Educating students on the principles of Global Theatre will also help them to understand how diverse cultures and perspectives can add value, inspiration, and influence to the rehearsal process, and encourage them to ask questions around culture. Directors and choreographers should be open to sharing their approaches to areas of cultural sensitivity with a company.

Teaching

Similarly, teachers should also be respectful of the cultures they reference, and able to provide appropriate context to help students understand the significance, history and influence of a culture's traditions. This might cover language, music, religion, traditions, customs, or other belief systems. It is good practice to reference pioneering practitioners from the culture you are exploring in your discussions with students. Be prepared with extra resources to offer students who wish to continue research in their own time.

Collaboration and Partnerships

As teachers and creatives, collaboration is part of our everyday way of working. Fostering collaborative relationships with artists and organisations from diverse cultural backgrounds can offer valuable insight, promote understanding, and lead to a more authentic and respectful representation of culture in musical theatre. Don't be afraid to reach out to others with different lived experiences in order to gain further understanding of someone else's culture, but always do your own research, too.

Tokenism versus Representation

On the surface, diverse representation and tokenism may look the same: both will result in something that looks like an equal representation of people and a mixture of cultural or racial backgrounds, however the agenda and intention behind the end result is what separates tokenism from true diverse representation.

Diverse representation recognises that individuals with diverse backgrounds enrich and add wisdom to conversations. It emphasises the idea that the dissimilarities in expertise and opinions are distinctly valuable. An individual from a less advantaged socio-economic background, for instance, can provide a unique perspective on financial accessibility that might not occur to those who have always been financially secure.

Tokenism does not acknowledge perspectives or value them. Creating a diverse cast, for instance, solely because you want people who look different is tokenism because the intention is either aesthetic or to appear diverse and/or inclusive, not because you value the diversity or lived experience of those performers.

EXAMPLES OF TOKENISM:

Casting:

Casting diverse performers when they are not ready or prepared for a role, but their diversity ticks a box.

Peers:

Claiming that a particular performer 'only got the role because they are Black'.

Popular Culture:

Mimicking cultural traditions for fun or for a fashion trend.

Teaching and Learning:

- Only referring to the diverse students in the room when teaching about diverse cultures.
- Using material from a diverse background/ ethnicity with no acknowledgment or reference to the context and culture from which the material came.
- Choosing a Global Majority student to lead in a role they are not prepared or ready for, just to appear inclusive.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE – OPENING UP THE 'CULTURE CONVERSATION'

1. Celebrating other cultures while respecting their linguistic identity and traditions:

Look at how language and inflection span race as well as different socioeconomic classes, and how the intentions behind how certain words, phrases, vocal patterns, and false accents can translate as harmful. Go through personal and vicarious experiences of this behaviour with the class by asking students to share stories.

2. Social and emotional influences

Open up a conversation with students that invites them to look at the social and emotional connections to culture that they experience in their own lives.

3. Understanding the reality behind media representation:

Examine musicals, film, literature, music, and other art forms with a strong emphasis on language, as well as the way in which popular fashion has impacted their perception of cultural appropriation. Then encourage curiosity through a discussion exploring how diverse cultures are represented in all forms of media.

SUMMARY - QUICK CHECKLIST FOR TEACHERS AND CREATIVES

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If you are unsure about or questioning your approach to the cultural significance of creative material, try asking yourself the following questions:

- Is the material offensive to any race, religion, culture, belief, or group of people?-
- Does it mock/make fun of/or represent a certain group of people/culture/belief in any way?
- Does it reinforce stereotypes?
- Did people from the other culture endure negative experiences that people from your culture have not?
- Are you using the material just because it is a trend?
- Did your friend, who is part of the culture it originated from, tell you that they don't mind if you use it because it doesn't offend them? Does this mean it doesn't matter?

If your answer to any of these questions is 'yes', then you shouldn't do it. Even if one person isn't offended, it doesn't mean others won't be.

END NOTE

By implementing these guidelines, we aim to create a more inclusive and respectful environment in musical theatre, where diverse cultures are celebrated and portrayed with authenticity and sensitivity. It is critical for students to understand cultures different from their own and be able to appreciate—not appropriate them. This means we should not shy away from having these challenging conversations in the classroom.

If you need any further support in order to implement these guidelines, please contact your line manager. Any further questions that arise relating to matters of cultural sensitivity, please feel free to direct them to the A&P Forum via Jo Black.

Policy reviewed November 2023. Date of next review November 2024