

ALMANAC

#01

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ORGANIZING IN COMMUNITY

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“IN COMMUNITY” is an opt-in discussion group where members of the Playwrights Horizons community can unpack terms like “equity,” “diversity,” and “inclusion,” as well as dive into industry-wide debates over oppression and liberation. We – Ashley and Libby – have taken the lead on co-facilitating these dialogues since late April, when we hosted our inaugural session together.

The idea to start In Community came to us in January 2020, when we first joined the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Working Group (EDIWG) at Playwrights Horizons. Around the same time, two of our coworkers – Artistic Programs Manager Karl Baker Olson and Associate Director of Individual Giving Eva Rosa – began sharing resources they’d received through “Diversifying Our Organizations,” a training intensive sponsored by A.R.T./New York and facilitated by members of The Raben Group. With well-curated articles about social justice circulating throughout the company, we started daydreaming about “office hours” or “book clubs” – low-key occasions to gather, learn, ask questions, and “mess up” – that would give folks a chance to dive into these materials together. Systemic injustice, white fragility, and decolonization can be hard to talk about, but we wanted to find ways to process these issues and ideas with our colleagues. We also felt we had the skills to hold space for these kinds of conversations. Libby had served as a Program Manager and Facilitator with artEquity, in addition to designing curricula on equity, diversity, and inclusion at Oregon Shakespeare Festival and, more recently, advocating for social justice at Yale School of Drama, where Ashley had joined her in those efforts. Ashley had received training through artEquity and NYU, and in her capacity as a doctoral candidate at Yale, she had gotten to study theories and histories of exploitation and emancipation. We could do this, we thought. By the time February rolled around, we’d formulated a proposal and pitched it to the group. About a month later, we got the green light to go ahead. But then the city shut down.

During the early weeks of the pandemic, we wondered whether we should press pause and launch the group whenever everyone at Playwrights Horizons could gather in-person again. But we didn’t want to wait, so – with the support of company leadership – we gently modified our plans for Zoom, in the hopes that digital meetings might serve as a meaningful way for us to connect as we all sheltered at home. If the pandemic had never happened, these meetings would have happened in-person, during the workday, at Playwrights Horizons – likely on the fifth floor, in one of our rehearsal rooms – or at the Theater School downtown on Lafayette Avenue. Instead, we’ve convened every other week on our computers for 90 minutes at the end of the workday, distant and remote but in community nevertheless.

Since In Community launched, we’ve let the agendas take shape organically, in response to the aims and interests of those who’ve shown up. Throughout the lifetime of this brave space for celebrating difference as well as agreement, we’ve discussed inequity, privilege, power-sharing, and the term “BIPOC.” When protests against police violence erupted during the summer, we talked about our personal and collective commitments to action. When the letter “DEAR WHITE AMERICAN THEATER” was published, we read it out loud, line by line. When members of staff sought to launch affinity groups and learning spaces, we invited attendees to enter breakout rooms based around shared identities in order to lay some groundwork towards that goal.

Below, in the left column, you’ll find one of the agendas for a past session. We’re excited to share it in the spirit of transparency! Normally it lives in a restricted Google Drive folder, only open on our personal laptop screens during In Community meetings as a handy script for us to follow. Our hope here is to open up our process and offer some insights into our thinking. In the right column, you’ll find our annotations, which offer additional context about our goals, values, and strategies.

In Community
Agenda – Wednesday 8.19.20

Resources for Today’s Session:

- We See You, White American Theater: **Demands**
- Baltimore Center Stage: **Response to the We See You White American Theater Demands**
- Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) staff members at The Alliance of Resident Theatres/New York: **We Are A.R.T./ New York, and We Demand Better**
- The BIPOC Affinity Group at The Public Theater: **A Letter from the Margin**

Welcome/Introductions (10 min)

- First Name and Icebreaker Question (Drop into chat) (Ashley)
- Land Acknowledgment (Ashley)
 - “Playwrights Horizons acknowledges that our theater, located on the island of Manhahtaan (Mannahatta), is situated on land that is Lenapehoking, Homeland of the Lenape. We pay respect to the Lenape peoples, Lenape elders, and their ancestors, past, present and future.
 - As our theater’s work and community extends beyond this island, we acknowledge that the Northeast is the homeland of many Indigenous Nations. Playwrights Horizons pays respect to all Indigenous peoples who have stewarded this land throughout the generations, and to their ongoing contributions, culturally, intellectually, artistically and spiritually.”
 - Adrienne Wong of SpiderWebShow in Ontario has written this digital land acknowledgement:
 - “Since our activities are shared digitally to the internet, let’s also take a moment to consider the legacy of colonization embedded within the technologies, structures, and ways of thinking we use every day. We are using equipment and high speed internet not available in many indigenous communities. Even the technologies that are central to much of the art we [make] leaves significant carbon footprints, contributing to changing climates that disproportionately affect indigenous peoples worldwide. I invite you to join me in acknowledging all this as well as our shared responsibility: to make good of this time, and for each of us to consider our roles in reconciliation, decolonization, and allyship.”
 - Drop link in chat (<https://native-land.ca/>) and invite folx to share where they are presently situated

ASHLEY CHANG: A week before each session, we send an email to Playwrights Horizons’ entire Staff, Board, and Generation PH Leadership Committee (eventually we hope to find ways to include artists and audiences as well), sharing the resources that will be the basis for our discussion.

LIBBY PETERSON: We want to remove the myth of what might happen and what we might discuss. Transparency is key to getting as many people as possible around the table. People need to know what they’re signing up for.

ASHLEY: This week, we wanted to read a few of the anti-racist statements and letters that had originated at our peer theaters. The work of undoing oppression might look slightly different from place to place, but often there is much in common. So, well in advance, we wanted to let folks know we’d be digging into the activism taking place elsewhere, with the understanding that it might unlock important insights about ourselves and even build a sense of solidarity between arts administrators across the industry.

During introductions, we only ask for first names, rather than organizational titles, to take a momentary step away from traditional institutional hierarchies. We also ask a low-stress icebreaker question. Recent favorites include: Fruits or vegetables? Savory or sweet? Favorite season? When they’re done answering, we ask folks to “popcorn” the question over to someone else who hasn’t gone yet, which has worked well for us on Zoom.

This year, Playwrights Horizons began practicing native territory acknowledgement. Rooting ourselves in the history of the land, in the history of colonialism, and in the histories of the people who have lived and died here, is so crucial! We have to recognize past and ongoing harms, and situate ourselves in relation to them, if we want to disrupt systems of oppression and realize a more just future. We usually drop the text of this acknowledgement into the Zoom chat and ask for a volunteer to read it aloud. It’s important to us to make room for voices other than our own.

Since we’re gathering digitally, we have also adopted Adrienne Wong’s language about the privilege and power embedded in the technology we use to meet. While this acknowledgement has been such a gift, I’m hopeful that we as an institution can think critically about our particular relationship to technology, and about the relationship between technology and inequity, and come up with our own “digital land acknowledgement,” one that’s specific to Playwrights Horizons. I think the practice of acknowledgement needs to be personal in that way. It should reflect our values and commitments – and it should hold us accountable to them.

Lastly, we recently started sharing this resource, which makes it easy to learn more about native territories and the practice of acknowledgement. It’s so powerful to see where everyone is situated, not just geographically but culturally and historically as well.

- Review Agenda (Libby)
 - Greetings from Seaside, Oregon, the original lands of the Chinook people who are part of the Confederated Tribes of Siletz.
 - Please remember that you can continue with your video off or on. And as we move through the session, please adjust as you have need.
 - Agenda:
 - Welcome
 - Group Agreements Review
 - Mindfulness Exercise
 - Define Power Sharing
 - Personal Reflection
 - Small Group Discussion (splitting group in half)
 - Large Group Discussion (report outs and questions for the group)
 - Closing

LIBBY: Ashley and I take turns leading each section. It's important to model the movement of racial justice and shared leadership. We wanted folx to see a white person and a person of color working together. We wanted to uplift the power of women in leadership. This is an intentional space and we should be held accountable to our ideals. So often we see siloed efforts which don't actually build the Beloved Community that Martin Luther King Jr. talked about. The Beloved Community was King's vision for the future, which was brought about through reconciliation, love, and the communal, unrelenting pursuit of justice. The Beloved Community unifies all people, especially those at odds with one another, in service of a full expression and experience of humanity.

Group Agreements (5 min) (Ashley)

- Briefly review
- Lift up: "Be aware of your own power/influence/authority – you have the ability to either curtail or elevate the conversation"
- Anyone can use these in meetings, etc., or use this as a framework for coming up with your own with your coworkers.
- Ask for group sign off

ASHLEY: At every session, we take a few minutes to go over our "group agreements," a set of guidelines for respectful engagement that, according to facilitator Mistinguette Smith, help to disrupt inequity, shift how power is used, and foster mutual accountability. We want In Community to be a place where everyone's particular "social location" – the unique nexus of their collective identities (gender, race, age, occupation, etc.) – is present but their positional power checked. We need to be able to ensure that senior staff members, for example, leave room for others to speak. Being able to refer back to these agreements makes that easier.

Mindfulness Exercise (5 min) (Libby)

You can participate in this exercise with or without video.
 Take a moment to breathe. Give yourself three good cycles of breath.
 Take stock of your inner self.
 Notice what you're feeling.
 Notice what you're thinking about.
 Imagine a set of shelves. Take the feelings and thoughts that tug at your current attention and place them there. You can pick them back up afterwards, these shelves are simply a holding place.
 Begin to arrive into today's conversation.
 Pour into yourself the courage, honesty, and commitment. Take a deep breath. Root yourself into the earth. Find comfort. Find a secure footing.
 You have no place to be but here.
 When you're ready, come back to the group.

LIBBY: Often when we talk about issues of difference, we don't acknowledge the physical ease needed to enter into conversation and the way we carry tension. Each mindfulness exercise exists to bring calm and centeredness to the body and the mind. It serves as a pause for the group.

ASHLEY: It's such a gift to get to close our eyes and inhabit this moment of quiet and gentleness that gets us all in our bodies and in the present moment.

Power-Sharing Definition (5 min) (Ashley)

- Define "power"
 - Having influence, authority, privilege, or control over people and/or resources.
- Power can be distributed in these ways:
 - In the hands of one or two leaders within a top down/hierarchical model with authority-centered focus, reliance, and practices.
 - In the hands of many, sharing the responsibility of leadership and practicing a horizontal model with group-centered focus, reliance, and practices.
- Invite responses/questions.

LIBBY: Language is powerful and it is also ever-evolving. We want folx to have the words to discuss the issues. We want them to have something to point back to. It's also powerful for everyone to be rooted in the same concepts. We want to break it down and simplify.

Personal Reflection (5 min) (Libby)

- What does power sharing look like for you in your life? Here at Playwrights Horizons?

Small Group Discussion (40 min) (Ashley sets up, Ashley and Libby facilitate)

- Each group (two groups) will have 40 minutes for discussion. We will guide the conversation in these groups.
- Two questions for consideration: (Drop into chat)
 - What is your emotional response to these resources? How might that shape how you receive them?
 - What are the letter writers' strategies? Why might they have chosen them? How are power dynamics and power-sharing at play here?

Large Group Discussion (15 min) (Ashley guides, Libby supports)

- Share out your reflections.
- Questions for consideration: What themes are emerging? What are your reactions to / feelings about these reflections?

Closing (5 min) (Libby)

- Share a resource from Tools for Change:
- <https://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/SocialJustice/EquityInclusion/to%20equalize%20power.pdf>
 - Lift up: "We can make active choices to create the space for transformation."
 - Asks some important questions in support of individual growth and power balance. Speaks specifically to your personal role in redistributing power and interrupting your own problematic habits.
 - We're all responsible for the maintenance of power sharing, especially those with the power.
- Take a moment to reflect on this conversation. What learning will you take with you today? Return to your shelves. Pick back up those thoughts and feelings you noted before our session. If something is too burdensome or cumbersome, feel free to leave it behind. These shelves can also be a place of release. Thank you for joining us and for sharing your time with us.
- Next In Community: Monday, 8/31

ASHLEY: Especially when Libby and I lead with an initial offering, we always try to leave space for responses and questions from the group.

LIBBY: Personal reflection time serves as a pulse check for how something is landing on each individual. It's a moment to distill down a person's thoughts before jumping in together. It allows another way into the material.

ASHLEY: Big group conversations can be tricky, especially in Zoom, where you can't really read the energy of the room. We often break the large group into smaller subgroups, where it's (hopefully) less awkward and scary to speak up.

Of course, the risk with small groups is that, without a facilitator, microaggressions or other harms might go uninterrupted, especially when diving into resources revolving around "We See You, White American Theater," which was sure to bring up a range of feelings. This time, Libby and I served as moderators for the small groups. We didn't lead the conversations, but we were there to help lend it structure and offer reflections or questions if the discussions came to a pause.

During this session, we wanted the group – first in smaller subgroups and then altogether – to think about how their identities and lived experiences might have conditioned their responses to the various statements and letters we had all read in advance. We also wanted the group to consider why the letter writers did what they did in the way that they did them. Why use the language of "demands," for example? With what power structures were they contending? Or, why sign these letters as a collective? What is the power of a united voice?

LIBBY: Just like it is important to set the right tone at the top of the meeting, it is equally important to put a button on the conversation. Folx need the opportunity to release the tension they may be carrying and any issues/feelings it may have brought up for them. It's a way of caretaking and acknowledging the journey and end of the gathering.