

Theatre has always celebrated and reflected life. By its very nature, theatre reflects life, both good and bad. It brings the human condition to the forefront by exploring the varied and diverse individuals who make up our world. It has not always been a kind mirror reflecting the best of society, nor has it always been inclusive or provided opportunities for those without privilege. Historically, attending the theatre has often been an experience of the privileged class, and the telling of these stories has frequently fallen to those who did not have the right, knowledge, or sensitivity to tell them. As educators and artists, we have a responsibility to create an inclusive and safe space in the classroom, in production, and throughout the greater campus community while still challenging ourselves and our students to take risks and explore their creativity.

In much the same way that theatre has been an engine of diverse thought, we have only more recently begun to see significant strides toward making its creation a more diverse experience, where stories are represented and, whenever possible, told by those whose voices and experiences are connected to them. Academic institutions have faced many of the same challenges. We must recognize the importance and value of diversity not simply as an idea, but as an active part of how we teach.

Creating an inclusive curriculum that recognizes and celebrates cultural differences helps students feel that they have a voice in the classroom, on and behind the stage, and within their community. I believe this begins with actively listening to students. By listening to their experiences, perspectives, and needs, we can make thoughtful adjustments to our syllabi and create opportunities for a broader range of voices and cultural perspectives. Addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities and other challenges is equally important. Every student should have the tools and support needed to succeed.

Embracing diversity through intentional action creates a richer, more vibrant classroom experience. While these practices are necessary in every academic program, they are particularly important in theatre. Theatre artists are storytellers and creators of worlds. When we make space for diverse perspectives and experiences, the stories and worlds we create become richer, more vibrant, and more rewarding. For those of us working in the theatrical arts, making space for stories to be told by and with the voices that embody them deepens the experience for everyone involved. This is not always easy, but it is necessary. Creating an inclusive environment does not mean that we stop challenging students or asking them to take creative risks. In fact, I believe the opposite is true. Students are more willing to take risks when they know their voices are valued, and the classroom is a safe place to explore, fail, question, and grow.

Only through understanding, listening, and inclusive practices can we provide more opportunities to challenge ourselves and grow as students, educators, and artists. This is especially important in theatre, where students often embody characters and express ideas and cultures that differ from their own. That work requires thoughtful preparation and an understanding that exploring an experience is different from claiming ownership of it.

Creating a diverse and inclusive classroom is not static. It is ever-changing and dynamic. An educator cannot simply establish a set of practices and consider the work finished. We must continue to educate ourselves, listen, implement, evaluate, and adjust our approaches with each new class and each new group of students. If one approach is not working, we should not simply give up. We should ask why, listen to our students, and evolve our approach to meet their needs.

I want to end by sharing a life-altering experience that helped establish the foundation for my approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In 2010, I had the opportunity to design the scenic environment for the regional premiere of Danai Gurira's *Eclipsed*. This powerful play follows five Liberian women surviving the Second Liberian Civil War. It is an all-female cast of women of color. As a white male, it is easy to recognize that this was not my story to tell in my own words and that I did not have the cultural connection to the story that others did. In 2010, however, this wasn't a consideration discussed to the degree it is today. The greater theatrical community had not yet widely embraced the importance of equity and inclusion, and honestly, many of us did not fully "see" the significance at the time.

I applied for the scenic designer position and was awarded the job as part of a predominantly male and primarily white artistic and production team. The director, a white woman, was forward-thinking and stressed the importance of research and historical accuracy. We were challenged to do our homework, be respectful, and attempt to capture the essence of the story in each of our areas. We consulted with members of the Twin Cities Liberian community and backed up our choices with factual research. We worked hard, but we also understood that this was not a story being told in our voices.

At the time, I was very proud of my work and the production, which received excellent reviews. Over the next several years, however, my understanding of the experience changed. I began to recognize the importance of stories being told by those with the appropriate connection and voice to tell them. My pride in the production became complicated by questions about cultural appropriation and whether I should have accepted the opportunity to design the set in the first place. I began to understand that good intentions and extensive research do not automatically give someone the authority or experience to tell another person's story.

In 2016, *Eclipsed* had its Broadway debut, and I had the opportunity to meet Ms. Gurira at a fan convention where she was speaking. I congratulated her on the Broadway premiere. She was surprised I knew, and I told her I had designed the regional premiere six years earlier. She asked about my design, and I showed her images from my website. After looking at my work, she told me how much she liked it and how I had done the piece justice by capturing the essence and feel of the story. She said it was clear I had respected and researched the piece and that, while it wasn't my cultural experience, I approached it with understanding and reverence.

I am very proud of that moment, but what I value most about the experience is what it taught me. It taught me the importance of finding the right voices to give a story life, acknowledging my own privilege, and creating opportunities for voices other than my own. It also taught me that when I am given the responsibility of working through a voice that is not my own, I must approach that responsibility with respect and humility, gaining as much knowledge as I can before making assumptions.

I have carried this experience into my classroom, my work with colleagues, and my work within the greater community. I strive to include the unique voices that make up the world around us, listen to and respect differences, and empower voices other than my own. I also try to teach students that being inclusive does not mean being afraid of difficult conversations or avoiding

material because it may be unfamiliar. It means approaching that material with preparation, curiosity, respect, and a willingness to listen. Those practices create a more global perspective and, ultimately, more exciting and meaningful theatre.

We can promote cultural awareness, equitable access, respect, and understanding by valuing diversity. These values also align closely with the principles of a liberal arts education, where the sciences, arts, and humanities come together through a holistic educational experience. Over the past several years, we have seen the value of diverse experiences and of embracing individual uniqueness and challenges. These experiences make us better individuals, wiser, kinder, and more accepting of those around us.

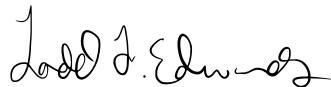
As educators, we have an opportunity—and a responsibility—to continue creating spaces where students feel seen, heard, challenged, and supported. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are not a destination or a statement we can simply make; they are practices that require continued reflection and action. I want to continue learning, listening, and adjusting my approach so that I can better serve my students and colleagues.

I would be honored to bring this approach to Carleton College and contribute to a community that values the exchange of ideas, individual voices, and the opportunities that come from learning alongside people whose experiences may differ from our own.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story with you.

I look forward to future conversations and the possibility of joining the Carleton College team.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Todd F. Edwards". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Todd F. Edwards