

## Diversity and Theatre: An Interview with Valerie Ching, Jacqui Parker, and Candelaria Silva

In 2002, StageSource asked StageSource board members Valerie Ching, Jacqui Parker, and Candelaria Silva to comment on the broad topic of diversity and theatre. Valerie Ching is program director at Cultural Access Consortium, which provides technical support and resources that enable cultural institutions to make their activities accessible to deaf, blind, physically challenged, and other communities. Jacqui Parker is artistic director of Our Place Theatre Project, which works with professional and nonprofessional youth and adults, and producer of the annual African American Theatre Festival. Candelaria Silva is director of ACT Roxbury, the cultural economic development program of Madison Park Development Corp. Marc S. Miller, co-editor of *The Source*, conducted interviews with Ching, Parker, and Silva by e-mail.

### Who or what are we talking about when we talk about non-traditional hiring in the theatre?

**Valerie Ching:** People from communities who are not often represented in the performing arts workforce, including: people with disabilities (both visible and invisible); people with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds; individuals often ostracized by society due to poverty, past criminal record, substance abuse, etc.

**Candelaria Silva:** In my opinion, it is doing open casting whenever possible to let an actor's talent get them the role, as opposed to assuming that most roles need to be filled by white actors. A lot of times age and gender are predetermined and necessary, but ethnicity isn't always. People tend to hire people who look like themselves.

**Jacqui Parker:** From my point of view, we are talking about any minority group who is not traditionally seen in these roles. For example, many of the larger Equity theatre companies do not cast people of color in the classics, such as plays by Shakespeare, unless it is *Othello* (who is supposed to be black). Some plays should only be cast by a certain ethnic group because it tells their story. For example, I do not want to see an all-black version of *Playing for Time* any more than I wish to see an all-white version of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

### What are the most significant barriers to non-traditional hiring in the theatre?

**Valerie:** 1.) Organizations may be willing to consider a diverse pool of applicants but don't often have the structural/financial support to put this willingness into action by going through awareness trainings, instituting reasonable accommodations, and spending energy in cultivating relationships with community organizations that may be a resource for potential employees. 2.) Sometimes organizations are not willing: a lack of awareness or a lack of financial stability makes it challenging for them to take on anything (including staff time) that might result in additional costs.

**Jacqui:** Getting people to open their eyes and see new possibilities that will not harm, but rather, help their productions. Hollywood has discovered that by adding a person of color to their movies

they increase their audience size—though they still continue to cast people of color in roles that are negative.

**Candelaria:** Comfort level, inexperience with actors from other races/abilities, etc. Lack of experience with the local non-traditional acting community. Lack of knowledge about the fact that, for example, African-American actors can change their hair styles easily or that we come in a range of shades.

### How have you experienced such barriers in your own work in the theatre? In other words, how has who you look like on the outside affected the opportunities open to you in the theatre?

**Jacqui:** I remember going for a role as a nun and I called the director, whom I knew. He asked me why I wanted to audition for a role he would not cast me in because he did not see an African American playing the role and wanted to be up front with me. The funny thing was that I figured there must be at least one black nun in the world, so I never even thought of it as nontraditional casting. There are lots of stories like this.

**Candelaria:** I haven't experienced barriers because I don't act. As a producer and arts advocate, I have had to overcome a "wait and see" attitude or the fact that many of my colleagues on various boards and groups do not come to support ACT's work. They can't seem to find their way up into our community. I don't know if it's lack of familiarity, fear of safety, assumption that the production won't be worth their while, etc. Ditto for casting agents who have promised to come but have not yet made our productions.

### Non-traditional hiring can cover a lot, from physical abilities to race, sex, and class. How do the challenges to getting work in the theatre differ, depending on which "group" a person belongs to?

**Valerie:** This really depends on the type of work you are talking about. Casting, for instance, has its own challenges. Will a theatre hire a non-white actor for a role in a play about a family if some of the other family members are white? If a theatre hires a Deaf/hard-of-hearing actor (such as the ART [American Repertory Theatre] did in its 2002 production of *Uncle Vanya*), will the theatre be willing to pay for a professional interpreter?

Admin/crew positions involve other issues. If someone who uses a wheelchair wants to work as a box office manager, will a theatre company be willing to investigate building accessibility? What if someone with low vision wanted to work as a sound board operator? Would a theatre be willing to work to make this possible? What if someone with a mental illness wants to work as a wardrobe run crew member but needs to take medication at certain times of the day with food and needs to visit the hospital every week for blood tests? What will happen during 10 out of 12 rehearsals during tech week?

**Jacqui:** Nontraditional hiring does cover a lot of ground. I really cannot speak for the other groups as I am sure they have very specific challenges. But I must say that to think of being black or a woman as a challenge is something I am learning not to do. I decided a long time ago not to allow myself to feel less of a person because other companies were not hiring me for roles I would like to play. I became the artistic director of a company to produce plays that include persons of color.

**Candelaria:** I think the barriers are more intense for people with physical limitations, because many of us have a discomfort level with people with obvious physical limitations and/or are unfamiliar with these actors. I think the issues are similar when you go to the behind-the-scenes jobs (i.e., crew).

### **What can theatre companies and organizations like StageSource do to address the barriers?**

**Jacqui:** StageSource can continue to keep diversity on the agenda. We must continue to reach diverse artists and audiences until the Boston theatre community reflects the true diversity of the city. We must also increase minority subscribers who will feel a vested interest in what they are supporting and therefore have a voice.

**Valerie:** Theatres can broaden their view when hiring/casting. Organizations like StageSource can provide access to support resources. They can also collaborate on offering practical/useful workshops that provide theatres with tools they need to integrate an expanded definition of diversity into all that aspects of their work.

**Candelaria:** Throw the net wide on job openings, auditions, etc. Be as inclusive in programs and publications as possible and encourage special programs when that seems the most appropriate way to serve the community. Perhaps have a focus group with non-traditional actors to find out what their needs are and get their feedback on how included or excluded they feel.

Sometimes it can be a very simple thing that makes someone feel left out. I also find that some of the people who have made me feel excluded weren't the professional staff but were interns, office staff, etc. They have to be trained not to think that they can look at someone and determine their worth, role, etc.

### **What can the person seeking work in the theatre do to overcome the barriers?**

**Valerie:** Be persistent! Do your homework: make sure you have all the skills necessary to accomplish whatever job you are going after. And come prepared with ideas for solutions to obstacles faced by theatres.

**Jacqui:** There are not enough of us talking these days about changing the present lack of artists of color in the theatre in every aspect. For example, I have noticed for quite some time that there are no minority stage managers or designers. Artists need to develop skills in other areas of the theatre, which will allow them to be a part even when they are not working on stage.

**Candelaria:** I think you have to be dogged in your determination

to go after any and everything. I think you have to show up for things that you believe you can do even if the description doesn't include you. I think we have to learn how to ask for feedback—Why didn't I get this?—and how to accept it. We have to be less tender. A lot of times it's not personal; it's business. I think we have to have networks of friends, colleagues, and families to keep us grounded so that you can face the inevitable rejections that any artist faces. I also think we have to learn how to give feedback in a useful way to theatre companies about some ways they may have been able to do a more diverse production. Some of these things people just don't see.

### **What can individuals working in the theatre do to increase diversity and access in our profession?**

**Jacqui:** I have been saying for many years that the black church is not only financially sound but a willing participant of theatre. Very few theatre companies reach out to the black church. It is one of the greatest resources in communities throughout the city. When I was in *Having Our Say* at the New Repertory Theatre, the Myrtle Baptist Church in Newton purchased all of the seats for one night.

Our Place Theatre Project has been working for the last five years to develop artists of color. We pride ourselves on working with artists to develop a level of quality of their work that helps producers see them as actors first and foremost.

**Valerie:** Encourage your colleagues to take on the challenge! Those people with extensive experience can offer to mentor diverse individuals who wish to work in theatre.

**Candelaria:** Education, education, education! Especially for the behind-the-scenes jobs: a lot of people don't know about them. So many high school students are talented and don't know all the jobs that exist in the theatre and how to go about getting them. They think it's all about luck, and it's not all about luck.

### **What else needs to be done to increase diversity and access in our profession and who or what would do it? Specifically, what changes in government policies are needed?**

**Candelaria:** More funding for arts education. More grants for smaller organizations and training programs. More support for facilities upgrade.

**Valerie:** Funding support for training, accommodations.

**Jacqui:** Other things that I can think of at the moment are contacting minority politicians and community leaders. Include them in some of the town meetings or fundraisers for theatre, etc., so they can be better informed of their need to support the theatre communities for which they serve.

### **Finally, is there anything you'd like to add?**

**Candelaria:** Thanks for including me in this and for being willing to take Jacqui Parker's recommendation that I be involved with StageSource. Without her, I don't think I would necessarily have shown up on your radar. Thank you.

## Resources

*Diversity is central to the mission of the theatre companies and other organizations listed here. For more information, see The Source 2003-2004, which also contains information about a number of other resources relevant to improving diversity in the theatre. These, include, for example, All Children's Theatre, Arlington Children's Theatre, Asia on Stage, Concord Youth Theatre, Easton Children's Theatre, JM Productions and Children's Theatre, KidStage at the Children's Museum, and Q.E. 2 Players.*

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### ACT Roxbury

2201 Washington Street, #300  
Boston, MA 02119

617.541.3900, ext. 222  
Fax: 617.541.4900  
csilva@madison-park.org  
www.actroxbury.org

ACT Roxbury is the cultural economic development program of Madison Park Development Corp. Programs include Roxbury Film Festival, an annual performing arts event Roxbury in Motion, and sponsorship/production of one or two plays annually.

#### Contact

Candelaria Silva, Director

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### Asian American Resource Workshop

33 Harrison Avenue, 3rd Floor  
Boston, MA 02111

617.426.5313  
Fax: 617.542.4900  
workshop@aarw.org  
www.aarw.org

Located in Boston's Chinatown, the AARW is the largest organization in New England addressing issues from a pan-Asian perspective. The AARW presents or participates in workshops, forums, and conferences on current issues affecting Asian Americans; plans events that feature works by Asian American authors, artists, and musicians; acts as an information and referral services for public inquiries; and sells over 60 titles of Asian American literature.

#### Contact

Eun-Joung Lee

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### Bay State Council of the Blind

57 Grandview Avenue  
Watertown, MA 02472-1634

617.923.4519 or 617.926.9198  
Fax: 617.923.0004  
kimcharlson@earthlink.net  
www.acb.org/baystate

The council is a consumer advocacy organization working to expand opportunities and access to cultural and performing arts activities for people who are blind. It provides consultation on audio description, outreach, audience development, staff, and disability sensitivity training. Braille production services are also available.

#### Publications

*Making Theatre Accessible: A Guide to Audio Description in the Performing Arts* is available in regular print, large print, Braille, and computer disk (\$6).

#### Contact

Kim Charlson, Audio Description Coordinator

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### Cambridge Multicultural Arts Center

41 Second Street  
Cambridge, MA 02141

617.577.1400  
Fax: 617.577.0125  
office@cmacusa.org  
www.cmacusa.org

CMAC fosters cross-cultural understanding by producing a culturally diversified mix of visual and performing arts events designed to educate and dispel racial and ethnic stereotypes.

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### The Color of Film Collaborative, Inc.

P.O. Box 191901  
Roxbury MA 02119

617.445.6051  
l.n.simmons@att.net  
info@coloroffilm.org  
www.coloroffilm.org

TCOF's mission is to help develop, foster, and support independent filmmakers, videographers, and theatre professionals by providing an environment in which they can share and develop their ideas, their visions, and their work with their peers. It cosponsors the Roxbury Film Festival and other film and theatre events.

#### Publications

A resource book for people of color in the film and theatre communities will be produced in early 2003. Free to members.

#### Contact

Lisa Simmons

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### Cultural Access Consortium

50 Franklin Street, 4th Floor  
Boston, MA 02110

617.357.1864  
TTY: 617.338.8548  
Fax: 617.357.1870

jberk@culturalaccess.org  
www.culturalaccess.org

A nonprofit organization, CAC provides technical support and resources that enable cultural institutions to make their activities accessible to deaf, blind, physically challenged, and other communities. CAC's outreach initiatives also link arts organizations with human service agencies.

### **Publications**

Accessible events calendar available in print and on line; *Making Theatre Accessible: A Guide to Audio Description in the Performing Arts* (\$6); *Opening Doors to the Theatre: Creating Access for the Deaf-Blind Community* (Free)

### **Contact**

Judy Berk, Executive Director

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### **Diversity Laboratory Theatre**

53 Pleasant Street  
Lexington, MA 02421

781.861.8737  
Fax: 781.861.8737

Diversity Laboratory is a microcosm of what should be, ought to be, must be—both in composition of the members and of the content it produces.

### **Contact**

Stan Edelson, Artistic Director

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### **Escena Latina**

35 Ballard Street, #1  
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

617.524.5371  
ntorrescol@cs.com

This Latin American theatre group brings together Latino/a actors and community members interested in theatre interpreted in the Spanish language.

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### **Massachusetts Commission for the Blind**

88 Kingston Street  
Boston, MA 02111-2227

617.727.5550 or 800.392.6450  
TTY: 800.392.6556  
Fax: 617.626.7685  
joe.weisse@state.ma.us  
www.mass.gov/mcb

A state agency providing vocational, independent living, medical assistance, advocacy, and other benefits to legally blind residents of the Commonwealth. It provides information and referral services, publications, and other assistance to the general public.

### **Publications**

Quarterly newsletter and publications on blindness produced by other agencies and services (free)

### **Contact**

Joe Weisse, Public Information Officer

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### **Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing**

210 South Street, 5th Floor  
Boston, MA 02111  
*Other offices throughout Massachusetts*

617.695.7500  
TTY 617.695.7600  
Fax: 617.695.7599  
www.state.ma.us/mcdhh

MCDHH advocates for, provides, and coordinates public policies, regulations, and programs to provide full and equal opportunity for Deaf, late-deafened, and hard-of-hearing people in Massachusetts. It coordinates a statewide interpreter referral program and manages a fund that pays for the services of interpreters and CART Providers to enable communication access for many types of events in which other agencies are not legally responsible to pay.

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### **Massachusetts Office on Disability**

1 Ashburton Place, #1305  
Boston, MA 02108

617.727.7440  
TTY: 800.322.2020  
Fax: 617.727.0965  
www.state.ma.us/mod/

The office seeks to bring about full and equal participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life. It works to assure the advancement of legal rights and for the promotion of maximum opportunities, supportive services, accommodations, and accessibility in a manner that fosters dignity and self determination.

### **Publications**

*Disability Laws in Massachusetts; Financial and Technical Assistance for Municipalities and Home Modifications for Individuals; Disability Services System Report*

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### **Massachusetts State Association of the Deaf**

220 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148

781.388.9114  
TTY: 781.388.9115  
Fax: 781.388.9105  
msadeaf@aol.com  
www.msad.org

MSAD, a nonprofit organization, advocates for the rights of the deaf and hard-of-hearing persons so they can more fully participate in the civic, educational, social, cultural, and economic life of the Commonwealth. MSAD works in two key areas: service and advocacy.

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### **M. Harriet McCormack Center for the Arts at The Strand Theatre**

543 Columbia Road  
Dorchester, MA 02125

617.282.5239  
lcjones@strandtheatreboston.com  
www.strandtheatreboston.com

MCA/Strand Theater Boston has long been a leader in educating young people in the arts. It offers programs for children beginning at age 3 and continuing through the adult years.

#### **Contact**

Victoria Jones, Executive Director

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### **National Black Theatre Festival**

610 Coliseum Drive  
Winston-Salem, NC 27106

336.723.2266  
Fax: 336.723.2223  
ntbf@bellsouth.net  
www.nbtf.org

Held biennially, NBTF attracts more than 50,000 people over six days.

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### **Nontraditional Casting Project**

165 West 46th Street, 16th Floor  
New York, NY 10036

212.730.4750  
info@ntcp.org  
www.ntcp.org

NTCP advocates the full participation of artists of color and artists with disabilities through the strengthening of culturally specific and disability-specific institutions, as well as through expanding opportunities at institutions that primarily produce or present work based in a European tradition.

#### **Publications**

*Listening with an Open Eye*, a guide to working with deaf and hard-of-hearing actors, is available on the Web site. Artist Files/Online, a national talent bank of persons of color and persons with disabilities, is available to producers through the Web site and in binders in the office.

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### **Our Place Theatre Project**

c/o Urban Edge  
2010 Columbus Avenue  
Boston, MA 02119

617.541.2597 or 617.320.8978  
www.ourplacetheatreproject.org

Our Place Theatre Project works with professional and nonprofessional youth and adult members, providing a year-round theatre arts training program that helps members discover the common thread that weaves us all together as an art community while celebrating cultural differences.

#### **Contact**

Jacqui Parker, Artistic Director

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### **Mainstage at Roxbury Community College**

1234 Columbus Avenue  
Roxbury, MA 02120

617.541.5380  
mhughes@rcc.mass.edu  
www.rcc.mass.edu

Roxbury Community College strives to keep engaged dynamically with local schools and neighbors and to connect artistically with the Greater Boston communities to create a greater pool of artistic diversity. Key to this endeavor is Mainstage, the college's 500-seat theatre space with excellent sight lines. In the past two years, the college has formed artistic collaborations with ACT Roxbury, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Boston Ballet, MIT, and Emerson College, to name a few. It hosts weekend and after-school programs that include Taking Steps, an afternoon program for girls ages 11-14, and OrigiNation Dance Company, its in-house, community artists-in-residence company.

#### **Contact**

Marshall Hughes, Associate Dean/Director, Fine and Performing Arts

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### **Show of Hands Theatre Company**

c/o D.E.A.F. Inc./Rita Straubhaar  
215 Brighton Avenue  
Allston, MA 02134

617.254.4041 voice/TTY  
Rstraubh@DeafIncOnline.org

SOHTC's mission is to showcase Deaf culture and American Sign Language (ASL) by creating new ASL theatre works and adapting existing works into ASL that spotlight Deaf community's language, literature and diversity.

#### **Contact**

Rita Straubhaar, Cofounder

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## SAATH (South Asian American Theatre)

80 Cotting Street  
Medford, MA 02155

781-391-8967  
jsdesigner@mindspring.com  
www.saath.net (under construction)

SAATH is dedicated to raising awareness and appreciation of the South Asian community by showcasing themes, plays, and theatre artists of South Asia and its diaspora. As the word *saath* (Hindi for “together”) suggests, it works to collaborate with North America’s various theatrical, cultural, and religious communities in peaceful dialogue. SAATH resolves to confront all forms of fundamentalism dividing our world by race, religion, gender, class, or nation.

### Contact

John Mathew, Artistic Director (617.547.1778) or  
Judy Staicer, Managing Director (781.391.8967)

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## StageSource Diversity Initiative

88 Tremont Street, #714  
Boston, MA 02108

617.720.6066  
Fax: 617.720.4275  
info@stagesource.org  
www.stagesource.org

StageSource is a service organization providing leadership and resources to theatre artists and theatre companies throughout New England. StageSource unites the theatre community by addressing issues that affect us all. The Diversity Initiative strives to increase employment opportunities and community awareness for multicultural and physically challenged theatre artists. In addition, the initiative will continue to work with theatres and audiences on issues of access for underserved audiences.

### Contact

Jeff Poulos, Executive Director

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## Theater Offensive

539 Tremont Street, #408  
Boston, MA 02116

617.542.4214  
Fax: 617.292.9898  
info@thetheateroffensive.org  
www.thetheateroffensive.org

The Theater Offensive is a multicultural lesbian and gay production company. Its mission is to form the diverse realities of queer lives into art so bold it breaks through personal isolation and political orthodoxy to build honest, progressive community.

### Contact

Abe Rybeck, Artistic Director

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## VSA arts of Massachusetts

2 Boylston Street, #211  
Boston, MA 02116

617.350.7713  
Fax: 617.482.4298  
TTY: 617.350.6836  
vsamass@vsamass.org  
www.accessexpressed.net  
www.vsamass.org

VSA arts serves individuals with disabilities by creating opportunities for participation in the arts and the integration into the cultural and educational mainstream of Massachusetts communities.

### Publications

*AccessExpressed!* newsletter (free, 3 times a year); *AccessExpressed! New England: A Cultural Resources Directory* (\$10 per copy; lists over 300 accessible cultural venues); *Multi Arts Resources Guide* (resource book and open captioned set of videos) \$75

### Contact

Bonnie S. Kaplan, Director of Cultural Access

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## Wheelock Family Theatre

200 The Riverway  
Boston, MA 02215-4176

617.879.2147  
Fax: 617.566.7360  
cbaldwin@wheelock.edu  
www.wheelock.edu

Wheelock Family Theatre is an award-winning, professional theatre company. It pioneers in accessibility issues and is committed to intergenerational and colorful casting to reflect the diversity of the Greater Boston population. Its priority is to provide affordable, quality theatre for the whole family.

### Contact

Susan Kosoff and Jane Staab, Artistic Directors

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## Women in Film and Video/New England

50 Hunt Street  
Watertown, MA 02472

617.924.2766  
info@womeninfilmvideo.org  
www.wifvne.org

Women in Film and Video is a nonprofit, professional organization dedicated to providing education, programs, and information and to serving as a support system for women in film and video.

### Publications

WIFV/NE Wire: weekly, distributed via e-mail to members

### Contact

Rachelle Reinhart, Executive Director