

Theater Artists and Students Seek to Dismantle White Supremacy at Trinity Repertory Company

On May 15 a group affiliated with students of the Brown/Trinity MFA program and identified with the hashtag #dismantlebrowntinity staged a silent protest outside of Trinity Repertory Company as their critique of ongoing institutional racism of the theater.

Adrian Blount, a soon-to-be MFA in the Brown/Trinity program, and one of several organizers of the protest, says they organized around the goal of dismantling white supremacy, and chose the mantra “#dismantlebrowntinity,” after seeing several productions at Trinity Rep with directorial misrepresentation of black experiences, which perpetuated stereotypes and the erasure of bodies of color. While the protest specifically called attention to the problematic nature of Trinity’s current production of *Oklahoma!* and several of the theater’s race-related casting choices throughout past productions, Blount explains how the group’s larger aim is “to identify, investigate, and dismantle a framework that places whiteness at the center of every point of the theatrical process,” which the group refers to as white supremacy.

The protest consisted of around 10 people, with support from other members of Brown theater faculty, Theatre Arts and Performance Studies (TAPS) students and Trinity Repertory employees, standing outside the theater in the early afternoon holding signs such as “color-blindness is violence,” “stop racist caricature” and “my body will not be erased.” They distributed educational and satirical hand-outs to patrons, Trinity Staff, and some members of the *Oklahoma!* artistic team, including director, Richard Jenkins, according to a tumblr page created to highlight the group’s actions and thoughts. Blount says that spreading awareness about the problematic nature of the current production of *Oklahoma!* is the group’s first tactic in working toward their larger goals.

“I don’t think it’s a complete ignorance of violence toward people of color,” says Diane Exavier, MFA playwright in writing for performance at Brown. “My dissent comes in what I view as a continual failure by the theater to truly investigate the meeting points of historical and present day social contexts in the plays produced [at Trinity]. To me, this very simply speaks to an absence of dramaturgy: the kind of script analysis, social research and scholarship that would actually lead to a deep and considered exploration of what it really means to produce a canonical work like *Oklahoma!* in Providence in 2016,” she says.

The criticisms expressed related to *Oklahoma!* include the play being a celebration of settler colonialism. As well, the casting of the character Will Parker as a black man, a dim-witted dancing cowboy seeking the affection of the white woman Ado Annie, is in line with caricatures that were created and enforced by the black minstrel shows of the 19th century, where performers put on blackface and present caricatured representations of black people, which then turned into common archetypal tropes that continue to influence modern art and media. Additionally, in the satirical letter passed out as part of the action, the protesters also drew attention to the black male casting of the character of Jud, the town pariah, fitting racist conceptions of black bodies being perceived as “terrifying and beastly on sight,” and to the racist caricature of the Persian peddler Ali Hakim, being

played by a white man.

Background information around the racist stereotypes as they date through media were highlighted in the literature handed out as part of the protest. The pamphlet also highlighted how *Oklahoma!* is appropriated from the Cherokee nation playwright Lynn Riggs' play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which was a play that "paid homage to a culture that defines and informs his very existence," and which originally heavily referenced forced Native American removal, but was appropriated to be made more palatable for white audiences.

On the same day as the protest, artistic director of Trinity, Curt Columbus, published a statement in response on the Trinity website. The statement said that the casting choices in *Oklahoma!* are "not accidental, nor unconsidered, but is part of a larger conversation about race and justice that we have been having for many years at Trinity." Columbus writes that they did not want to ignore this dark side of the play. "Our production of *Oklahoma!* intentionally shines a light on this overlooked part of the story, to encourage our audience to consider the part that race and privilege have in the overarching American narrative."

In an open letter written in response to Columbus' statement, Trinity Rep intern Cathy Braxton, also involved in organizing the protest, questions, "What is the purpose of having brown bodies on stage perpetuating stereotypes without fully addressing where these stereotypes surfaced?" She writes about the need to have people of color invested in the socio-political climate regarding race, gender and class involved in the process of theater making, to no longer have whiteness systemically at the forefront silencing divergent perspectives and experiences. "White responsibility is not to take the narrative and forward it, but to make space for people of color to voice their own experiences and stories without the threat of imposed whiteness. White responsibility is to acknowledge the problematic nature of a piece and refuse to perpetuate and finance it."

Additional dialogue with some of the protest's organizers, as well as the writing published on their tumblr page, points to how the group has found that this framework of centering whiteness is not limited to *Oklahoma!* but has shown its face in many of its theater's productions and in various facets of the theater, such as in the staff working at Trinity Repertory, and in talkbacks after the performances. On the tumblr, Blount writes about her experiences with the theater while acting in their production *A Christmas Carol*. Blount says that *The Heidi Chronicles*, which was playing concurrently with *A Christmas Carol*, white-washed an intersectional framework in favor of a white feminist framework, rendering invisible the humanity and feminist identities and experiences of the black women actors in the production.

Blount also draws attention to how casting choices made around Mayella in the production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* meant the piece was not able to observe the racial injustices that it was meant to call attention to. "Trinity chose to 'complicate race,' by casting Mayella Violet Ewell as a black female playing a white female. Thus ignoring the historical lynchings of black men in that time period for being falsely accused of raping white woman. Black women were, and still are, fetishized by white men and to this day black women are very rarely given any justice when they are victims of rape." She also points out "the decision to produce a play about a white man who chooses to help out a black man falsely accused of rape is problematic in and of itself because it derails the issue that this white man is doing it so he has the moral high ground."

"Why is American theater, Trinity included, and theater-goers alike, in love with portrayals of late 19th

century and mid 20th century trivial narratives that are written in the safe and quiet rooms that block out the brutal violence against people of color happening at the same time? Why do we keep returning to the stories that have actively erased us in service to stages that sing about, celebrate and dance vivaciously to the tune of white, middle class enjoyment and pleasure?" writes Brown University TAPS PhD candidate Lily Mengesha in a letter of support for the movement.

Instead of having theater perpetuate existing socio-political violence, Exavier says that there is "an opportunity to actually treat theater as a space of challenge and exchange, a space to encounter difference and new knowledge. ...Don't be lazy, or don't rely on comfort, in your attempts to approach some of the most pertinent issues of our time."

The #dismantlebrownternity group's tumblr page can be found at dismantlebrownternity.tumblr.com.