

When We Rebuild, Who Are We Rebuilding For?

Way back in 2019, I walked into The Alice at the Goodman Theatre for an annual two-day “[Erasing Racism](#)” workshop held by the League of Chicago Theatres. The tables were gilded with pipe cleaners and playdough to keep our hands busy while we discussed systemic racism (and every other *-ism* under the sun). The goal of this workshop was to “build a collective vision for a more just, equitable, diverse and inclusive theatre community.” Today, a global health crisis has the entire industry, not just Chicago, imagining a vision for the future and I’m left wondering “does EDI still make the cut?”

We can’t allow the work of dismantling inequitable systems to come to a halt along with everything else. They are still standing and may even strengthen as we make our way through this pandemic. If we do not move forward consciously, we will make these inequitable systems our foundation once again. We’ve certainly done it before and are starting to do it again. Stop for a second and look around at the ways in which our industry is already reverting back to a comfortable and quiet oppression.

Theatre companies are cutting costs and cutting positions, which is forcing out the marginalized and diverse members of our community. This is not necessarily the product of malice but rather a product of larger social inequity. Theatre companies have a higher turnover rate for supporting staff than they do for leadership. This means that as companies begin implementing EDI hiring practices, those supporting roles are usually the only opportunity. Now that support staff is the first to go. The most “expendable.”

This isn’t just affecting staff diversity, but the diversity of artists who will produce on the other end. Points of entry for rising voices in the industry are slamming shut. Many young artists first get their foot in the door as part-time staff or interns, positions which have been removed entirely. New plays are being cut from seasons in favor of more recognizable names and titles. Theatres that were once able to “pay in exposure” can’t even do that anymore. The artists left are going to be those with the privilege and the capital to wait this out.

Normal doesn’t exist anymore... and thank goodness! I find comfort in knowing that. *Normal* was only working for a lucky few. That’s why we’ve been having these break-out groups, panel discussions, and multi-day intensives. How are we going to make sure that we don’t rebuild what was broken to begin with? Dust off that workbook. Pull out your notes. Revisit the [HowlRound recording](#) of that one panel discussion. Now is the time to turn those conversations into action. I would like to propose that we think of the future not as some looming dark age, but as an opportunity for something better. There is no more “that’s not how things work,” because “how things work” just took a flying dive out the window. We get to have a say in how things are going to “work” from now on.