Advancing Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Performing Arts Workforce

In her new book, *Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Performing Arts Workforce*, sociologist and professor Tobie Stein outlines the historic roots of racial discrimination and injustice in the performing arts and analyzes how arts professionals in marginalized groups have navigated the performing arts workplace over time.

Part academic journal and part advocacy, Stein’s book traces the origins of racial injustice in both our society at large and in the performing arts in particular while providing illuminating anecdotes and scenarios along the way. Included in her definition of workforce diversity are the employees, artists, board members, funders, educators, donors, audience and community members that make up the performing arts world today.

Stein writes: “I am compelled to write a book in which the social construction of race and its historical, social, psychological, economic and legal impact continues to play a starring role in perpetuating a White-dominated inequitable performing arts field.” Today, asserts Stein, the racial and ethnic demographic profile of the performing arts workforce is strikingly similar to that of 20 years ago with the majority of artists, arts managers, employees and board members identifying as White non-Hispanic.

As a sociologist who identifies as White, Stein was forced to examine her own role as the former director of the MFA program in performing arts management at Brooklyn College and whether there were structural barriers that were preventing Students of Color from attending her program and finding relevant careers as performing arts professionals. As part of that self-examination, Stein was successful at raising money from foundations to help provide paid internships for her Students of Color and helping to place those students with prominent arts organizations.

Stein argues that achieving true workforce diversity in the performing arts will engage multiple perspectives and help organizations be more creative, productive and representative of community interests. This fundamental change, she argues, will help create new audiences and funding sources and make these institutions less dependent on the largess of a small number of wealthy individuals and foundations. It may also promote increased creativity, make the workplace better and help heal the wounds that our society has over race and inequality.

One of the most fascinating parts of Stein’s book is a history of race and the performing arts from the 1600s to present day. The book traces the origin of African American theater and performance through Blackface Minstrelsy, the African American migration from the South, performing arts training at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, the Harlem Renaissance, the Apollo Theater, the Federal Theater Project, and the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, and it uses these illustrations as forerunners of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and the Dance Theatre of Harlem, two prominent African American dance troupes.

While outlining a number of useful solutions to achieving more diversity in performing arts organizations (e.g., paid internships, mentorships, structured networking), Stein argues that racial and ethnic diversity in the performing arts can only be achieved when diversity, equity and inclusion is considered essential to every organizational strategy and practice. And, in order for that to happen, People of Color must be at the center of each institution’s transformation. A cultural equity action plan helps. Diversity and Inclusion training helps. And, affinity groups help. But, the most important thing is changing recruitment
and hiring practices to include more candidates of color as well as changing the racial and ethnic diversity of our boards of directors.

This kind of real change will require that the leaders of our performing arts institutions are not only more socially and culturally aware, but that they insist on making the kinds of structural and systemic alterations in the status quo that are required to achieve that change. Creative and transformational leaders of all kinds will be necessary to break the historic cycle of racial and ethnic discrimination that Stein so expertly outlines in this compelling book.