

Seeing Change

BY TERESA EYRING

SINCE TCG'S 2012 STRATEGIC PLAN underscored diversity and inclusion as major priorities for the American theatre field, we've made progress by launching important new programs and sparking discussion on this timely and crucial topic. Many organizations across the country have joined the conversation, and we've all begun talking more about the importance of equity as well.

You may have seen on *American Theatre* magazine's website, americantheatre.org, the news about East West Players of Los Angeles's 51% Preparedness Plan for diversity in Southern California theatres and theatre organizations nationally. While the goals and timeline of the program may seem aggressive to some, I want to commend artistic director Tim Dang and his company for crafting the plan as part of their 2042: See Change initiative. It's a call to action. It's a challenge. It's a throwdown to the theatre field.

This grassroots and peer-driven proposal—you can read more about it on page 14—isn't waiting for some outside authority like TCG or the NEA or the NFL or the CIA to dictate a plan. It is one peer theatre saying to another, "I challenge you to be ready. I challenge you to be prepared. I challenge you to be radically relevant as we continue to experience a tectonic shift in our demographic landscape."

In essence, East West's Preparedness Plan asks theatres to sign on to work toward achieving a new balance—51 percent of artistic and production staffs will be women, people of color or people under the age of 35—by target year 2020. While these particular goals may not make sense or be achievable for many organizations, articulating them as a national challenge is a way of posing some important questions: If this is not the plan you adopt, then what *can* you do to set out in a bold new direction to achieve greater equity, diversity and inclusion for your organization? How will you back up your values with the action steps, deadlines and resources necessary to succeed?

Diversity is a core value and a centerpiece of TCG's current strategic plan, and we're working to provide theatres with tools and resources to be able to enact change in the ways that are most urgently needed. For instance, we believe that structural inequity exists not simply at the artistic and production levels, but on boards and in the leadership of organizations. One could argue that for true programmatic diversity, it's important that changes come at the governance level of our organizations. According to TCG's recent Governing Boards Survey, while there are as many women as men on the boards of our theatres, people of color are represented only at 11 percent.

And while there's a demographic transformation underway in our nation, that transformation is unevenly distributed—some communities have already hit the mark of being "majority minority," while others are experiencing a slower

AMERICAN THEATRE

A PUBLICATION OF THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

MARCH 2015 THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

rate of population shift. Accordingly, some theatres have been practicing diversity and inclusion at a mission level for years. Others are just beginning to develop greater awareness and to feel the need for change.

TCG is supporting diversity and inclusion efforts in the field in a number of ways. For instance, our Diversity and Inclusion Institute coaches theatres in the creation of action

This initiative is one peer theatre saying to another, "I challenge you to be ready, prepared and radically relevant as we continue to experience a tectonic shift in our demographic landscape."

plans specific to their equity, diversity and inclusion goals and to the communities they serve; and through a program of regular meetings and check-ins, we encourage theatres to hold each other accountable for their progress in diversifying both human resources and programming. Theatres are also meeting regionally to help fuel the momentum.

Identity, we must acknowledge, is both complex and intersectional. People identify in multiple ways, and it's important to allow individuals to *tell us* who they are. Rather than having a manager fill out boxes based on what they believe to be true, TCG is launching a demographic survey called "Represent," which asks individuals working in our theatres to self-identify in eight areas of identity. This tool will be enormously valuable to organizations seeking to understand the makeup of their staffs, without making unwarranted assumptions about who their colleagues really are. Through this process, some theatres will discover that they are more diverse than they knew. Or, at the very least, they will have real information from which to establish benchmarks and set more tangible goals.

At this year's SphinxCon, a meeting in Detroit to discuss solutions to the challenges surrounding diversity in the performing arts, I served on a panel responding to East West's Preparedness Plan, as did Gary Anderson, former TCG board member and artistic director of that city's Plowshares Theatre Company. Citing historical precedent, Anderson questioned whether any action plan will succeed without a series of incentives and/or penalties at a policy level. His words resonated with the audience, and there was discussion about what that might look like.

East West's plan is courageous and bold. For some theatres, its goals are quite achievable, because their artistic staffs are already more than 50 percent female or young. For others, it won't make sense as a starting point. But the commitment of this theatre to take a stand and challenge others is commendable. I appreciate the throwdown. 