

Great River Shakespeare Festival's plan to address BIPOC DEMANDS FOR WHITE AMERICAN THEATER

Approved by the Board of Directors on January 25, 2021.

The mission of the Great River Shakespeare Festival (GRSF) is to enrich people's lives by producing dynamic, clearly understood productions of Shakespeare and other playwrights who celebrate the spoken word. Since our founding in 2003, we have always believed that great art is created by great people and that the mission of enriching lives requires us to educate ourselves about the full scope of the human experience and to have a balance of perspectives in the company on that experience. In June 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, GRSF released a statement about our position on #BlackLivesMatter and our commitment to improving our practices as a company to be a safer space for theater workers, audiences, and students who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). You can read that statement [HERE](#).

Also in June, a group of BIPOC theater professionals issued documents detailing longstanding industry practices that are harmful and a list of demands to improve those practices (details at <https://www.weseeyouwat.com/>). They asked each theater company to publish a plan to address their demands. We are grateful for the insight that these professionals have shared and look forward to a continued dialogue on how we can make the theater industry a more inclusive, diverse, and safe space for all who wish to contribute to the creation of art. Although our company produces theater in rural Minnesota, we engage and train theater workers from around the country who are or will be heavily involved in theatrical work in regional theaters, universities, Broadway, and the film and television industry. The work done by GRSF in Winona, MN ripples across the country.

Many of the BIPOC document demands spotlight the critical need for transparency. As a company, we need to be honest not only about the biases we hold philosophically about what, how, and whose art is produced, but also about such issues as our labor practices and how we manage time during rehearsals. While the demands have been set forth by BIPOC artists, they are not always about racism in theater but about the overall unhealthy work environment that theater can foster and how that environment often affects the most vulnerable people first: artists of color, young artists, interns, artists with disabilities, single parents, et al. Examining these demands has required that we turn a critical eye to not just the implicit biases of our predominantly white organization, but to the assumptions we hold about how theater is made in the first place. We have had to be honest and transparent with ourselves about the scale of our company, whose wellbeing or artistic vision has been prioritized in the past, and what we can realistically do to create sustainable changes for the future (while adhering to our mission and keeping within our budget constraints).

There is a lot we could say about the discussions we are having—which, as a text-based company, are extremely important to us—however, as an organization, what will make the most difference to our artists, audience, and community are the actions we will take including how we allocate our budget. It is also important to lay out our plans so that you, our community, can hold us accountable. These plans are all in the service of creating quality art and educational programs. None of this happens in a vacuum; we—artists, donors, administrators, and audience members—are working together to enrich the whole community (not just those who love theater or Shakespeare). We need you to help us make sure we are doing the work.

Therefore, we lay out A) our current practices, B) what we have accomplished since publishing our statement in June, and C) our goals for one year, three years, and five years from now. As with all growth processes, these goals are subject to change as we learn and adapt. This is intended to be a living document, not a static artifact.

A) The following practices are already a part of our established culture:

1. Artists are encouraged to perform in their own voice and cultural tradition as opposed to conforming to Standard American Dialect. When dialects are used, they are discussed in consultation with representatives of the culture being presented.
2. Land acknowledgments are given prior to every public performance from the stage at Winona State University.
3. We properly credit all artists involved with a production. When an artist is left out or credited incorrectly, we immediately make a correction and an apology, both privately and publicly.
4. Company leaders seek out artists of diverse perspectives. In our most recent production season, 22% of the company members were BIPOC and 59% female-identifying.
5. We hire costumers, hair and make-up artists who can accommodate and design for all body, skin, and hair types.
6. We offer accessible ticket prices to make entrance to shows possible for a variety of income levels.
7. We dedicate time in rehearsal schedule for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Allyship (IDEA) training with a paid external trainer.
8. We dedicate time in the rehearsal schedule for harassment and discrimination policy review to provide an awareness of and training against microaggressions.
9. We provide a transparent listing of board members and their affiliations on the GRSF website and publications.
10. Our highest paid staff member makes less than five times our lowest paid staff member.
11. We have begun and will continue to conduct more transparent hiring practices (including clear salary recommendations for postings) throughout the entire organization.

12. We do not offer executive packages and bonuses other than partial reimbursement for health insurance premiums as provided in our employee benefits handbook.
13. Security at the theater is affiliated with Winona State University which is not an armed police force.
14. GRSF is committed to hiring directors and department heads who are committed to supporting a safe workspace.
15. GRSF advocates for fair representation of BIPOC artists in the media and reviews.

B) Since June 2020, GRSF has:

1. Added a BIPOC artist to the leadership team. Dedicated company member, Melissa Maxwell, now serves as a Co-Associate Artistic Director.
2. Reserved time at weekly staff meetings for frank discussions dealing with equity and anti-racism.
3. Budgeted for annual Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Allyship (IDEA) training for year-round and seasonal staff, as well as board members.
4. Committed to selecting a play by a BIPOC artist as part of the mainstage offerings in Season 18 (2022). Often the "third" or non-Shakespeare play has a smaller budget than the two "big" Shakespeare plays, and is selected because it can be produced less expensively (requiring fewer actors, less scenery, and less complicated costumes). This will not be the case for this production.
5. Filled 2/3 of the vacated board seats with BIPOC community members as of October 2020.
6. Expanded our cultural awareness by studying Minnesota land and treaty history, instructing ourselves on racially insensitive language and holding weekly company-wide readings of new and classical works by predominantly Black and Indigenous writers.
7. Commissioned and produced an online reading of a one-act play from a Black playwright.

C) Moving forward, our future goals are as follows:

2021: One year from now, by December 2021, GRSF plans to have accomplished the following:

1. Partnered with an external organization to provide counseling for company members.
2. Incorporated anti-racist policies into the company handbook (similar to our current Harassment and Discrimination and Child Protection Policies but including intervention and disruption protocols for harmful moments). Incorporated review/training of this policy at the board and volunteer levels.

3. Created a process to identify what the difference is between a casual conversation v. one in which the expertise of a paid professional is needed for consultation.
4. Created a more equitable tech rehearsal schedule (adding an extra day of tech by removing a rehearsal day).
5. Committed to a hard “no more ideas” day so that changes in design do not place an undue burden on technicians and interns.
6. Committed to re-engaging company members who lost their jobs due to the Coronavirus pandemic. However, any available positions for non-returning members will be offered first to individuals who are BIPOC, who have a disability, or who are otherwise under-represented in our company. To this end, GRSF will keep track of offers made and offers accepted. Those who turn down offers will be asked to complete an anonymous survey to help us understand the issues keeping people from joining our company.
7. Provided budget compensation for the leader of GRSF’s BIPOC affinity group within the company.
8. Continued to diversify the racial makeup of our board.
9. Strengthened our land acknowledgments with feedback from a paid Indigenous consultant who will participate in the first day of rehearsal.
10. Expanded the diversity of the company by employing artists of Indigenous heritage and people who are disabled.
11. Helped BIPOC artists understand and navigate the union benefits programs (health, pension, and retirement savings options).
12. Designated space in the theater building for BIPOC artists to retreat and congregate.
13. Published and prominently displayed how the land the theater is located upon was acquired—from whom and by what means.
14. Required that leaders model healthy behaviors and practice self-care (re: work hours, time at Legion, etc.) and insured that a system is in place for leaders to frequently reinforce that health, wellness, and safety are priorities (e.g., making this concern an agenda item at regular staff meetings).
15. Insured that the board will affirm all incoming executive leadership hires are offered a salary that is equitable to that of the prior hire’s offer and consistent with those of executive leadership partners within the institution.
16. Completed a positional study of salary across the organization and identified areas of inequity. Highlighted where BIPOC and female-identified company members fall within the study.
17. Conducted an anonymous staff census to determine how company members identify rather than making assumptions for grant reporting.
18. Tracked longevity in the company to see if BIPOC and female-identifying members get re-engaged at a different rate than white males. Identified and addressed trends of people leaving.

2023: Three years from now, GRSF plans to have accomplished the following:

1. Established consistent programming to promote emerging playwrights (specifically artists of color).
2. Developed a plan to convert stipend internships to paid staff positions.
3. Eliminated two of the three "10 out of 12" rehearsals (those technical rehearsals which can run over a 12-hour period with two hours of meal breaks).
4. Developed meaningful, long-term relationships with BIPOC artists (especially directors, designers, and stage managers).
5. Developed a formal mentorship program for BIPOC interns and apprentices.
6. Diversified (and published) the list of institutions from which we recruit apprentices and interns.
7. Made conscious efforts to recruit BIPOC and other under-represented volunteers.

2025: Five years from now, GRSF plans to have accomplished the following:

1. A company membership comprised of 50% identifying as BIPOC.
2. A leadership-level team (executives, department heads—including designers, directors, stage managers—and senior members of the company) with 50% BIPOC representation with at least one being a full-time, year-round staff person who identifies as BIPOC.
3. The establishment of a consistent pattern of collaborating with Indigenous artists.
4. A completed study of consultant compensation to ensure that we are within industry standards.
5. The implementation of the internship payment plan from the 2023 plan goals.